



HOW TO BE
Good

a contemporary romance
Chace Verity

HOW TO BE GOOD

CHACE VERITY

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dearest readers,

I often want to write something sentimental at the beginning of my books, but I find myself unable to come up with the same energy for this note. This book has gone through a significant number of changes since its inception in 2017, and so have I.

Rian and Darrell will end this book on paths that allow them to have their best possible happy endings. I don't know if I'm on that path yet, but I'm trying.

Life is so uncertain, but romance is a fun escape. I hope this book gives you an escape and maybe a little bit of hope that you can achieve your own happy ending, whatever that might mean for you.

Best,

Chace “president of the Go Fuck Yourself, _____
Club” Verity

CONTENT NOTES

This book has:

- a queer character afraid to come out of the closet
- stalking and harassment from an estranged parent
- a side character with dementia
- multiple references to domestic abuse
- brief references to rape, racism, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse

Chapters with sexually explicit content are noted with an asterisk (*).



IT TURNS OUT I DON'T LOOK GOOD IN SPANDEX.

The Goodwins are blessed (cursed?) with skinny legs that go up to our eyeballs. It's impossible to get any sort of muscle definition. Probably because of our genetic aversion to gyms.

But superheroes wear spandex, so I'm rocking the bright red fabric with a matching mullet wig. There's also a large 'R' sewn onto the front of what is essentially my uncomfortable pajamas. A black cape conceals the mic around my neck.

Vera hands me the finishing touch to my outfit—my signature loafers covered in gold sequins. These bad boys shine so much, the entire state of New York can see me coming from a mile away.

"You look horrible," Vera laughs as she holds a cigarette between her pale, tobacco-stained fingers.

"Perfect." I hand her a small camera attached to a selfie stick. "This is for you. Let's go save the day."

My silver-haired sixty-year-old makeup artist doesn't mind pulling double duty, but our professional camerawoman who is half her age, Felicity, grumbles as she tests the sound equipment. Not a trace of her lovely dark hair can be seen under her baseball cap, which isn't going anywhere thanks to

the bulky headphones. I check the camera strapped to my wrist by filming Felicity and admiring the way the dressing room lights bounce off her tawny brown skin.

Taping segments for *Burning the Midnight Oil with Rian Goodwin* is the best when as few crewpeople are involved as possible. I have the resources to make a blockbuster-quality film each week, but operating with the budget of a high school film class forces us to be exceptionally creative. Viewers talk on social media about these segments months after they've aired since they're that memorable.

With my current contract expiring in the spring, I need to bring some amazing ratings to the table. Something to prove to the studio I'm worth keeping. Something that will make them consider me for an earlier time slot in the future. Only so many people can stay up until 12:35 at night.

Once we're ready, we march down the street outside of the studio. It's an early October Tuesday afternoon, not too crowded. Unseasonably warm. Or maybe it's the unbreathable spandex.

"Citizens of New York City!" I shout in my best attempt at a brassy voice. "It is I, Super-Rian! Who needs to be rescued?"

People gape at us, and several dash away from the camera. A few folks snap pictures on their phones. I stop in front of a pretty twenty-something taking a video of me.

"You seem to be plagued by this electronic device," I tease her. She giggles. This is a perk of being a celebrity—even if I'm not too attractive with my long, pale, freckled face, I still get to talk to ridiculously hot people.

A pang of loneliness sweeps through me as I flirt with her, careful to keep an appropriate physical distance. Talking is all

I really can do with people. It's hard for me to find someone I connect with enough to ask them on a date. I don't know why. Vera thinks I have high standards. Felicity says I'm still getting over my ex-wife.

Maybe they're both right.

I move down the street to continue filming once I get bored of Pretty Girl. I stop at a hot dog truck and offer to help the sunburned man covered in grease. He makes me buy a hot dog from him. Ugh. I mean, it's delicious, but it's not quite entertaining enough for television.

As I scarf it down, I spot some people outside a coffee shop down the block.

"Someone's gotta be in distress," I say to the camera, my mouth still full. "Away we go!"

I hold my arms out in front of me and pretend to fly to the coffee shop. I "land" in front of the patio with my hands on my hips and feet shoulder-length apart.

"Fellow citizens, Super-Rian has arrived to help!"

Most people recognize me instantly. Some clap. Others get up with their beverages and head inside. My eyes land on an Asian woman and a teenage girl sitting nearby. Books and papers are spread all over their table.

I waltz over to them and address the woman. "Ma'am, you look distressed. How can I help you? Name it—I can do it all. I can rescue your keys from a locked car, defeat radioactive enemies, spin around the world fast enough to make time go backwards."

She laughs and tucks a lock of jet black hair behind her ear. The girl (her daughter, I presume, since they look alike)

frowns at me. I tilt my head and stare back at her, putting on my best shocked face.

I have zero idea how to act around teenagers, honestly. They're more than half my age and thrice as mystifying. Totally intimidating.

"What?" I run my hand along my jaw. "You don't believe me?"

"Do you know anything about Shakespeare?" the teenager asks.

"Why, yes, I do." I puff my chest out with pride. I actually do have a master's in theater. "Consider me an expert. You're looking at the man who was the first person to do an all-superhero version of *King Lear* from our secret hideout in the sky."

She blinks a few times, the cameras reflecting in her large eyes. I'm not sure if she realizes this whole thing is an act. "Can you help me come up with a topic for my essay?"

"Why certainly!" I look to the table next to us and put a hand on one of their chairs. Those people have probably snapped a million unflattering shots of my flat ass, judging where their phones are positioned. "May I borrow this chair? It's an important tool to save the day."

They laugh and motion for me to take it. I sit next to the girl with the chair turned around and my arms propped on the back. You know. The cool, awkward high school teacher position.

Up close, I notice the girl has little daisies painted on her nails. They match her earrings. Even her pen has a fake daisy on the end.

“All right, Daisy,” I say. “Let’s do this. What sort of topic do you need?”

“My name’s not Daisy.”

“Sorry. What should I call you then, citizen?”

“Mari.”

I realize her mother has conveniently scooted out of the cameras’ vision with her coffee close to her chest. She’s watching me with a tight, weary smile. It looks like she has been trapped in this discussion with Mari for too long.

“All right, Mari,” I start again. “What sort of topic do you need?”

“One that will get me an A on this paper, otherwise I’m going to have a C on my report card.”

“You’ll get that A. I guarantee it. What play do you have to do a topic on?”

Mari groans and slumps in her chair. “All of them.”

“All of them? Even *The Comedy of Errors*?”

My voice squeaks as I momentarily forget I’m doing a character. I’m not sure what my expression is, but it makes Felicity and Vera laugh. A few other peals of glee ripple behind me.

Mari sits up straight. A spark of interest dances in her dark eyes. “What’s wrong with *The Comedy of Errors*? We didn’t read that one in class.”

“That’s because it’s the worst play.”

Flashbacks of staging that monstrosity during college come to mind. All the plays I starred in did well except that

one. I think the audience only laughed at our jokes because we looked so pitiful.

“It’s a play that has two sets of twins. That’s it. That’s the only remarkable thing about it.” I take my mullet wig off and give my brown curls a chance to breathe. This makes Mari’s mother giggle.

“Could that be a topic idea?” Mari asks, taking notes with her adorable daisy pen. “Why *The Comedy of Errors* is the worst of Shakespeare’s works?”

“Heck yes.” I put the wig back on. “It’s shallow and lacking in Shakespeare’s signature thematic works. Weak characterization.”

“Wow, Mr. Goodwin, you’re a lot smarter than you appear on TV.”

Everyone dies at this. Even I can’t stifle my chuckle.

“What do you mean? I’m not on television. I’m Super-Rian. I soar skyscrapers and swim underwater for hours at a time.” I lean in and whisper loudly, “Don’t you know you’re supposed to protect my secret identity?”

Mari looks down at my feet. “I don’t think you’re doing a good job with those shoes on. Don’t only old people wear loafers? How old are you?”

“I have no idea what you mean, fair citizen. These are my Super Shoes. They help me momentarily blind foes and walk super fast.” I clear my throat. “As for your other question, I’m thirty-nine.”

“Okay.” Her tone suggests pure disbelief. “Why else is *The Comedy of Errors* the worst play?”

“Read it yourself, and you will see.”

You have to have a Ph.D in Shakespeare to get most of the dick jokes in that play. But I'm not about to say that to a minor.

Mari groans. "My essay is due tomorrow. I don't have time to read it."

I hang my head low, unable to suppress my laughter. That is such a thing I would have done when I was her age. Plus, she said it so shamelessly. That's comedy gold.

Her mother says something to her in Korean. Mari fires back a retort in a mix of grunts and English. Their annoyed tones are universally understood, leaving the crowd around us in stitches.

This is probably a good time to leave.

I get up from my chair and grab someone's phone from them. "Mari, allow me to introduce you to one of my sidekicks—the Internet."

She pulls out her own phone. "I know what it is. I only have two gigs of data I can use each month, though."

"Isn't that a lot?" I ask, handing the phone back to the person I swiped it from.

"Not even. This place doesn't have free Wi-Fi." Mari sighs. "Can't you just tell me what to write?"

"Your teacher will watch this on TV. Won't they know you had, uh, some assistance?"

"Mr. Stanley always tells us we should use our brains to find a solution. You're a solution."

Stanley. What an unfortunate last name. Or first name. I hope he's not one of those "hip" teachers who goes by his first name. He probably is.

He's also probably old. Stuffy. Throws a tantrum when Shakespeare plagiarism theories are brought up.

Definitely not my type. I like guys who don't treat the classics like the be-all and end-all of literature. Give me a hunk reading manga while watching *Magic Mike XXL* at midnight in his sweatpants, please.

"You're putting a lot of faith in someone who hurls meteors into the sun every other day," I tell her.

"You said you'd get me an A." Mari waggles her eyebrows. "Guaranteed."

This girl. She's so funny.

The audience agrees with me when the segment airs the following week. The montage of me in various states of disarray while discussing the play with her is the icing to the sweet, delicious cake that is this video. Mari shines in the segment, more than my shoes. I'm glad her mother was fine with us filming her.

Once the audience's clapping finally dies down, I move to the spot where I do my closing monologue. I can't remove the huge smile plastered on my face.

"Well, Mari, if you're watching, I hope you'll let us know about that A you got. The very handsome and intelligent Super-Rian has been dying to find out."

More cheers from the audience. Our band, The Velvet Fighters, adds to the great atmosphere with their playful jazz. I love this job so much.

We tape at six-thirty in the evening, finish by eight, and either have meetings about the next night's show for a few hours after or just party. I usually go home in a taxi after the East Coast has seen the newest episode.

The natural high running through my blood tonight wears off once I'm on my way home. Like most people, I ruin my good mood by browsing social media.

After the segment aired, Mari publicly messaged the show's official account on SuddenPic about how she got a D on her paper. A fucking D!

She messaged only thirty minutes ago, but it's already gotten around 5000 'likes.' She allegedly didn't have strong enough evidence to support her essay topic, according to Mr. Stanley.

What the hell does Mr. Stanley know? *The Comedy of Errors* is the worst. If he talked to me in person, he would change his mind. Of course, he might change his mind anyway if he saw me in person. Another perk of being a celebrity—people love to suck up.

My sour mood improves once I realize I have my next segment just waiting to be filmed.

I follow Mari on SuddenPic and wait for her to follow me back. It only takes a couple of minutes. Seriously. It's after two in the morning. What is she still doing up?

She private messages me first. *OMG. Can you believe I got a D?*

No gushing about being followed by the great Rian Goodwin. Okay. My ego is only slightly deflated.

What school do you go to? I ask her. *I want to talk to Mr. Stanley.*

Lol if you're sure you want to. He's not the type to change his mind. He doesn't even believe in extra credit!! T_T

Definitely old. Definitely curmudgeonly. Ugh.

That's okay. I'm great around old people. One of my more popular taped segments was the time I served lunch at a retirement home (thank you, impromptu butterscotch pudding wrestling).

Super-Rian is not giving up on getting that A for Mari.

I put on the costume again a few days later before I "fly" into the school at the ungodly hour of seven AM with Vera and Felicity at my side. First bell is at 8:15. The school administration gave us permission to film until 7:45, when students start showing up.

Fastest taping ever. I hope we get enough material to make a full segment out of it.

The principal decked in a bright red blazer and an excessive amount of makeup, Mrs. Enns, eagerly escorts me to Mr. Stanley's room. Handwritten quotes cover his door. I don't have my reading glasses, but the handwriting is neat with loops.

Mrs. Enns insists I can go on in, but I knock anyway as I enter. Superheroes aren't rude. Except for Iron Man. I'm rich, but I'm not Tony Stark wealthy. Can't get away with being an asshole when I don't even own a yacht. Not that I want to be *that* self-conceited.

But I am a tiny bit vain. Not many people have my work integrity and sheer audacity to go the distance for a laugh. It takes an honest spine of steel to prance into an old geezer's classroom while wearing an outfit that would make Joel Schumacher's Batman blush.

"Mr. Stanley? It is I, Super-Rian!"

But it's not a crotchety elder waiting for me.

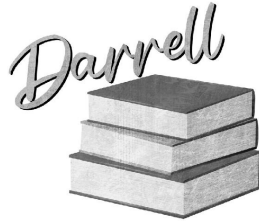
A man in his twenties or thirties in a burgundy V-neck cardigan looks up from the book he's reading at his desk. His black beard is cropped close to his face, pairing smartly with his clean cut low fade. There's not a speck of makeup on him—his dark brown skin is naturally flawless.

His gaze lands on me, and I can't handle how gorgeous his intense, dark eyes are behind his glasses. I instead glance at the book he's reading.

Oh my God, it's *Naruto*.

Fuck me.

I'm in front of the hottest guy I've ever seen in my life, and I'm wearing spandex.



THERE IS A CERTAIN HELL CELEBRITIES BRING INTO THE LIVES of everyone else just trying to survive. People with status and money act like they are doing the poor a favor by just existing. If they dare to grace us with their presence, they think we should bow before to them.

When Rian Goodwin skips into my classroom with his cameras and spandex as bright as the flames of hell, I acutely become aware that this is the second time he has tried to ruin my life.

Fucking late night entertainers with their sunny smiles.

I steel myself as I finally meet his impressive, curious brown eyes. Though I'm close to six feet, Rian still has a few inches over me. The difference is...compelling.

How tall is he? I should look it up later.

Not that I actually wanna know.

“Am I supposed to say something now?” I ask. “I’ve never been interviewed before. This seems like a terrible idea, and I’m only doing it because Mari asked me to.”

Rian jerks his head back in surprise. Good. I have effectively established that I’m not a pushover.

The rich and powerful might think they have nerves of titanium, but they've never met a public high school teacher. We battle a circus of teenagers desperate to prove their independence and an education board always looking to make cuts. There is no one tougher than us.

I glance at the principal. Mrs. Enns wears a polite smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. The expression is familiar enough—my boss is going to let me have it later. However, nothing she can say will make me regret this moment.

What I do regret is the way my traitorous heart flips when Rian squeaks out a pathetic laugh. The first time I saw him on television—the first time he tried to ruin me—my jaw went weak over a similar display of embarrassment.

“Sorry,” he says. “It’s still early in the morning. Let me try this again.”

He ducks out of my classroom and “flies” back in.

“You’re Mari’s teacher, correct?” Rian asks, as if he didn’t just see me. Shameless. Utterly shameless.

I set my book down and rise from my desk. While I’m not overly thrilled about the idea of touching a celebrity who is only here to use my student’s image to enhance his ratings, I extend my hand out to him.

It takes everything in me not to laugh when I realize how sweaty he is. Is he actually nervous?

“Darrell Stanley,” I say.

“May I call you Darrell, Mr. Stanley?” Rian lets go of me and thrusts his hands on his hips. Up close, I realize the curve of his lean body is...strangely enticing. Ugh. “You can call me Super-Rian.”

“Sure,” I automatically reply, too distracted by his figure to realize I should have said no.

Okay. Time to gather myself. While it’s no secret among my students or the faculty that I’m gay, the last thing I need is to openly ogle some pale, freckly guy in a mullet wig who thinks he’s a big deal because he tells jokes.

They’re not even good jokes. Why do people laugh at them? That group of people, tragically, includes me.

I’m not going to let Richie Moneybags here see that. He’s not going to take advantage of me or my students.

Celebrities aren’t trustworthy.

“You gave Mari a D on her exceptional paper.” Rian puffs out his chest. “I’m here to right the wrongs that have been committed.”

Here we go. I fold my arms across my chest. “Did you *read* her paper?”

“No, but she received help from a handsome source.”

My gaze roves from his face to his sequin-covered loafers. There is nothing conventionally attractive about this celebrity or his sense of fashion, but he has a kind of earnest charm that’s hard to ignore.

When the cameras are away, what is Rian Goodwin actually like?

“I don’t believe Mari wrote much of a paper on her own,” I respond. “Her evidence was opinion-based with no concrete support from the text. The point of the assignment was to practice using primary sources in research. The paper she turned in cited your opinion, a secondary source.”

Rian runs his long, slender fingers through his wig. “Her topic was how *The Comedy of Errors* is the worst Shakespeare play. The text itself is all the support she needs.”

“You want to debate Shakespeare? Fine. Let’s debate.” I clear my throat. “First of all, *The Two Gentleman of Verona* is the worst play.”

“Uh, which one was that?”

One of the camera operators snorts. Mrs. Enns bites her lip, shooting me a stern look.

“The one where Proteus attempts to rape Silvia and is quickly forgiven by Valentine,” I answer, disregarding my boss’s warning.

“Oh, right.” Rian rubs the back of his neck. “But we can’t talk about sexual assault on the show.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Why not? Would you prefer to discuss anti-Blackness in *Othello*?”

“It’s, uh, not funny,” he explains quietly. “While I’m personally always down for deconstructing Shakespeare, we’re doing a comedy segment right now.”

“I wouldn’t really call any of the segments you do funny,” I fire back with all the confidence I can muster.

Rian’s jaw drops, allowing me to see the wide range of his perfectly polished teeth. His camera operators burst into laughter.

I glance at Mrs. Enns. She has paled quite considerably. I’ll definitely never hear the end of it this week.

“Humor is subjective, I suppose,” Rian finally says after slipping back into his superhero facade. “But you must

understand something important. I—the great Super-Rian—promised Mari an A. I must get her that A.”

A sigh rolls out of me, causing my glasses to slip down my nose. I push them back up. “If I give Mari an A for writing a paper that went outside the intended assignment’s purpose, then I would have to give every student who didn’t follow directions an A.”

“Yes! A’s for everyone!” Rian beams. “That would be a great surprise for all the kids.”

Yeah, whatever. Were we having a conversation about money and giving everyone a basic income, I guarantee the multi-millionaire before me would be against it. He’d go on a spiel about how unfair it is toward everyone who “works” for their money.

If everyone got paid money unconditionally, though, I wouldn’t have to stress about making sure my students earned A’s. I’d be able to let them learn exactly what they wanted to learn. Education could once again be a source of joy for people instead of a requirement to maybe—just maybe—escape poverty.

I gesture to the jungle of desks. “And what will the students who didn’t follow directions learn from this?”

I have somewhere between thirty and thirty-four students a class. The school board only gives me twenty-eight desks. Often, it’s not a problem because several students miss class frequently. Some work part-time jobs. Some are chronically ill. Some have been failed by society too much already in their young lives to care about school.

How many absences will I have to record this morning? Will today be the day I get a call that Zeke has been arrested?

Will I find out Marley had to go back to the hospital and that his mom is about to lose her job because she's trying to take care of him?

“Grades are meaningless in the grand scheme of things, but homework has real-world applications,” I continue. “Building an argument from a primary source helps my kids develop their critical thinking skills when presented with information. The world wants to take advantage of them, and I don't want them to leave my classroom without the necessary tools for survival. What are *you* teaching them with this stunt?”

Rian's crew breaks into another round of snickers. He shoots them a glare and mutters something.

“Mr. Stanley has a point.” The older woman pats his shoulder. “I think you need to call this segment a bust.”

“No, I can't.” Rian squares his shoulders and looks me directly in the eyes. “I promised Mari that A.”

Why is he hung up on this? Is there a sliver of actual decency to him that cares about a lower middle-class teenage girl's grades?

The desire to know how fully Rian could burn me by bringing me into his ritzy stratosphere overwhelms my senses.

“Perhaps we can work out an agreement to get Mari some extra credit,” I find myself suggesting, unable to break eye contact.

Hope colors Rian's widening smile. “Yeah?”

“But answer me a question first, all right?” I study his expression while I talk, hoping some kind of truth will be revealed. One that will let me end this interaction with faith in

at least one celebrity. “Are you only doing this for ratings? I’m not interested in helping a student just to boost your platform.”

He gestures to his cameras. “These are my friends who happen to be recording my every heroic action. If the results end up on television...”

This clown. He’s a jester to the end, isn’t he?

“I’m serious, Mr. Goodwin.” I emphasize the “mister” part, much in the same way I do when I talk to a parent who’s acting more immature than their kid. “Mari’s a bright student who needs help focusing and finding something that interests her. More importantly, she’s a teenager. If you’re relying on a teenager to get you views, you need to find funnier segments.”

Silence sweeps through the room. Mrs. Enns looks more humiliated than the time I told our superintendent he should stop using school funds to get his balls waxed.

Rian covers the cameras with his hands and turns to Mrs. Enns. “Can you help me?”

She brings her thumb to her teeth and says nothing. Probably too pissed off at me to do anything but scream.

I wish this shitshow would hurry up and come to an end.

“Want my boss to threaten my job so your segment can succeed?” I ask. “That’s real classy, Mr. Goodwin.”

“No!” Rian brings his hands together to form an X. His crew turns off their cameras. “I came here to get an A for Mari, hopefully in an entertaining manner. The whole country knows she didn’t do well on her paper because she posted the bad news on social media. Everyone wants justice for Mari.”

Ridiculous. Ten years from now, she won’t remember this actual assignment. No one remembers the work they did in

high school, only what they learned from it.

I want Mari to learn. If she starts applying herself, she might find something that excites her. She comes to school almost every day, but she has no interest in anything. The way she tries to hide herself in her oversized hoodie breaks my heart.

She doesn't deserve to live in the shadows, afraid of the sun. That abyss is a place I call home, not one I would personally recommend to anyone.

Doing this segment and putting myself out there in sunlight is truthfully risky, but when I heard it was Rian Goodwin of all people who wanted to meet with me...

He's the one celebrity I would risk incurring my father's wrath for. It's not likely he'll find out, anyway.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "If Mari really wants to change her grade, I'd be willing to let her redo the assignment, but I'd rather she come to me about it. Not you. I'm not here to help your image."

"This isn't about my image." Rian's voice quivers while he speaks. Something about it makes me want to believe him. "I genuinely want to help Mari. She's a funny kid. Isn't it possible to want to create funny entertainment *and* get Mari the A she needs?"

There are maybe ten inches between us, but right now, it feels like we are standing a mile apart with no hopes of closing the gap.

It's good we have this distance. Just because I was momentarily distracted by the presence of a goofy, oddly cute celebrity doesn't mean I actually deserve to feel the fires he brings with him.

“There’s more to me than fake mullets and shiny loafers,” Rian whispers with his chiseled cheeks almost as red as his spandex. “Believe me.”

Fuck.

I better not fall for that bullshit.

Mrs. Enns steps in between us. “Mr. Goodwin, might I suggest an alternative for a follow-up to Super-Rian’s, ah, failed rescue?”

I glare at her. What is she about to do to me?

“Mr. Stanley’s homeroom class has an ongoing community service project to collect donations for women’s shelters,” Mrs. Enns explains.

Oh. No. She. Is. Not.

Rian gapes at me. I cover my eyes with my hand.

This is the last thing I wanted to happen.

Mrs. Enns continues. “Every third Saturday of the month, they gather to package the donations and deliver them. Perhaps Super-Rian can join the class for their next event? That will give us time to get permission slips from the students’ parents so they can be filmed. And maybe by that time, Mr. Stanley will have allowed Mari—and other students in need—to redo their papers.”

Rian’s bright, eager expression suggests he loves this idea. No. Absolutely not. I don’t want my community service to be television fodder.

I don’t want my father to see me on television and take credit for raising a charitable child. I don’t want him to think that abandoning Mama and me instilled some kind of good character in me, the kind of values that money can’t buy.

Money.

I peek at Rian while he asks one of the camera operators for his phone. This guy is rich. If he is going to use me, then perhaps I should also use him. It's not like my boss is going to give me a choice.

"It would seem I can make some time to film on that Saturday," Rian says. "If, uh, this proposal is okay with you, Mr. Teacher."

"Only because I assume you are going to bring an exceptionally sizeable donation for the women's shelters." I bite the inside of my cheek. It feels disgusting to ask for money like that, but it's not the first time I have had to swallow my pride. "I'll give you a list of items we need."

"Of course!" Rian punctuates his pledge with a laugh. It sounds so awkward. Nothing like the infectious hyena cry that he breaks into on television. "I'll bring anything you need. I'm looking forward to performing great heroic feats with you and the students next weekend."

"The best superpower is money." I turn to the whiteboard and pick up a dry-erase marker. "Batman and Iron Man understand this."

Rian scoffs. "For someone who reads fine literature, I expected you would know the *real* best superpower."

I glance at Rian over my shoulder. What nonsense is he going on about?

He points to the *Naruto* book on my desk. "One cannot help but tremble before the might of Sasuke's Chidori jutsu."

Oh, no. Rian Goodwin reads manga. I'm fucking *weak* for nerds.

My lips betray me by curving upward. Rian rewards me with a smile that looks genuine.

It'd be nice if it was real. And it'd be nice if...

The bell rings, effectively saving me from thinking more dangerous thoughts.

"I should escort you outside before the students overwhelm you," Mrs. Enns offers. "Let me show you the side exit."

"Yes, thank you," Rian replies. "And thank you for your time, Darrell. I appreciate it."

"Looks like I'll have to school you on the superiority of Naruto's Rasengan some other time," I catch myself saying. "See you next weekend."

Ugh, why does my heart have to flutter at the prospect of meeting Rian Goodwin again?



DESPITE MY ATTEMPTS TO KEEP MY NEXT HIGH SCHOOL appearance a secret, I'm no match for the power of teenagers on social media. Within hours of my failed interview, a video of Darrell explaining what happened earlier in the morning emerges. People who claim to be journalists by inserting screenshots of social media posts into news articles are quick to "write" about my next Super-Rian segment.

At least there aren't any public videos of me in spandex, blushing a deep red before Darrell Stanley and his ludicrously attractive scowl.

What a humiliating morning. Some celebrities can shrug off embarrassing encounters, but my ridiculous brain staples my mistakes to my side.

Mari sends me a message later in the day. I expect it to be her thanking me for getting her a chance to re-do her paper.

How come you didn't get me an A? she instead asks.

I hold back my laugh. Maybe I shouldn't have checked my messages during a meeting.

I tried, I write back. Mr. Stanley is unforgiving. Make sure to write your paper correctly this time. You should have told

me it was about using primary sources. I still think The Comedy of Errors is the worst.

Mari replies instantly. *Can you send me passages that are bad?*

This girl. I love her gumption.

I'm in a meeting about tonight's show. Besides, shouldn't you do your own work?

Her reply is a sad cat emoji.

I can't help cackling out loud this time.

“What are you doing, Rian?” The writer closest to me, Nina, pokes me with her pen. “You're not paying attention to us.”

“Sorry. Mari's messaging me. She's mad I didn't get her that A.”

A few modest chuckles ripple through the room.

“Still talking to her, huh?” The lead writer, Lynette, jots something in her notebook. “Okay, look, as I was saying, I think we should work this morning's interview into tonight's show.”

I groan. “How? There's nothing funny we recorded.”

“No, no, we don't have to show the footage. Or, well, not all of it.” Lynette unlocks her tablet. “Since everyone already knows you're going to help the students out with their charity thing, we could do a ‘Being Lectured by My Mom’ segment. She could nag at you for wasting Mr. Stanley's time, and we'll have pictures from this morning imposed in the corner while she talks.”

Sigh. I hate to admit it, but that's actually a good idea.

The audience goes feral when my mom shames me on public television. It's always been the show's way to deal with awkward news, like when my divorce was announced. People love my mom's hard Minnesotan accent when she opens with, "Oh, Adrian, what have you done now?"

"Do we *have* to show the pictures?" I ask.

"You're funny when you're embarrassed." Nina grins. "But we don't have to."

As much as I really, really don't want to relive the vivid memories of being humiliated, it probably *would* enhance the segment. The very best kind of humor is self-deprecation.

I refresh SuddenPic. No new messages from Mari.

"Show only me, okay?" I plead. "Leave Darrell out of this. Er, Mr. Stanley. He doesn't strike me as the type to like much attention. When I go to help the students out, I'll just focus on the kids."

Another writer, Thom, shoots me a bewildered glare. "But everyone wants to know who Mr. Stanley is. You have to get an interview with him."

I shrug and hope my warm cheeks don't look as pink as they feel. "I'd rather focus on what's going to be funnier for the show. Mr. Stanley isn't the kind of guy who makes people look for an oxygen mask because they've been laughing so hard."

No, he just makes grown pansexual men like myself want to lie down on the floor and cry because he's so fucking hot.

Lynette turns her tablet to me. "He might not be funny, but you're hilarious when you're up against him."

The table breaks up as they watch the video of me floundering before him. I laugh with them, but I can't get over how much Darrell has a face that'd be perfect for movies. So firm with a gentle hint of nerdiness to him.

Why am I so hung up on his looks?!

Maybe I should just go out on a date. Most people have rebounds after a divorce, don't they? My lusting after someone should be a sign that I'm ready to date again, right?

Once the meeting ends, I call my mother while marching down the hallway.

"Adrian!"

Her bright voice cheers me up. It's almost enough to make me forget about the festering wound in my side. Almost.

"Hi, Mom." I try to sound casual and waltz into my dressing room, leaving the door open behind me. I rarely need any actual privacy. Anyone in the crew is always welcomed to visit me, but people quit dropping in once they realized that means actually being near me. "What are you doing? Are you gonna be busy in a few hours?"

"Oh, Adrian, what have you done now?"

I bite back my chuckle. She's been on television enough to know what's going on. Well, her voice has, anyway.

"It's nothing terrible," I explain. "No broken bones or break-ups."

She sighs. "I don't like you being out there by yourself."

"I've told you lots of times that you can move here to New York. I'm dying to have hotdish more than once a year."

“And leave the mini-golf club’s minutes in Suzanne Baker’s hands? No.”

I flop onto the couch. “Mrs. Baker hasn’t challenged you for your secretaryship?”

“That pruny gum-chewer has a better chance of joining the Vikings as a quarterback than taking my spot.”

“Oh, someone is extra saucy today.” My grin stretches from one ear to the other. Despite all the miles between us, I feel like I’m at home. Pretty sure Mom is holding a cigarette in one hand and ambling around her property, checking the bird feeders for signs of squirrely thieves. “You sound like you could really devastate me on television tonight.”

“Not before you tell me what you did.”

It doesn’t take long to catch Mom up to speed. We talk every day, and she never misses an episode of my show. The only thing I leave out in my recap is my frustrating attraction to a certain teacher.

Nobody knows I’m into more than women. I don’t need to stay in the closet, but it’s easier if everyone assumes I’m straight.

But what if Darrell is into men...?

I shake away the thought. “What do you say, Mom? Wanna chat again later with a million people as our witnesses?”

“Sure, sure.” Mom grumbles. “You know I like helping you, but when are you going to call me about something more interesting?”

I laugh. “What do you mean?”

“You haven’t gone on a single date since Adaline. When are you getting back out there? When am I getting

grandchildren?”

Ugh. This old song and dance again.

I change the subject by asking Mom about her Halloween plans. While she talks, my anxious brain forces me to take a walk through the calendar of my life. It's been two years since Adaline left me. Six months since our divorce was finalized.

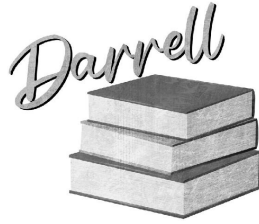
Adaline and I are still friends, but I couldn't give up my work to make time for her. We married during an era where my career was really beginning to take off. Even on the nights where I didn't to stay up until three or four in the mornings to work on the show, I would go party just to network.

In the end, it turned out we didn't actually know each other. When Adaline suggested a divorce, she told me she could only see the Rian Goodwin who made people laugh on television.

That Rian is a wonderful guy, but is the entertainer all who you really are?

I'm more than him, but I don't know how to make anyone else see that. If my own wife couldn't find the real Rian, what hope do I have to make anyone else see who I am?

Maybe I'm lusting after Darrell, but I'm still not ready to date. This is a fact that won't change anytime soon.



THE DREADED SATURDAY ARRIVES IN WHAT FEELS LIKE THE blink of an eye.

My students, as one can imagine, are beyond hyped about being on television. Nearly everyone has shown up with videos, songs, raps, and routines to show the camera. It's been difficult to remind them all morning that the film crew is only interested in our charity work. I can't blame them for hoping today's taping could be their big break, of course, but none of them understand that these celebrities aren't genuinely interested in normal folks like us.

The only one who hasn't prepared anything is Mari, which doesn't surprise me. Mari is one of my more withdrawn students. She has her fair share of outbursts in class when she finds assignments confusing, but she's pretty quiet otherwise and never seems passionate about anything she's taught. I know Shakespeare and Chaucer aren't riveting subjects to most teenagers, but other teachers have noted Mari's apathy toward their classes.

Mari has no goals in life, which is fine since no young adult should be expected to know what they're doing, but it's concerning that she has no desire to explore potential interests.

No matter how much the other teachers and I encourage her, Mari keeps her eyes low and her shoulders slumped.

I'd give nearly anything to see Mari discover the world around her. She could shine if she wanted to.

When the *Burning the Midnight Oil* army shows up with their battalion of security guards, cameras, and technical equipment, the students burst into a new wave of excitement. They're eager to provide feedback about the best places in our run-down cafeteria to film. Some of them offer to help carry the equipment.

Warmth swells through me. The teens are so proud of themselves and their work. As much as I hate the reality that we're only being filmed to boost some television show's ratings, there are no words for how wonderful the students look when they shine.

Frost sets in once someone announces that Rian Goodwin has arrived with the trucks. Filming apparently starts with that proclamation, seeing how a hoard of cameras dash outside. The students follow with all the enthusiasm of a three-ring circus.

A crowd of spectators has gathered around the school's perimeter. Hired security guards patrol the vicinity. Six semi-trailers take up most of the parking lot.

Yeesh, this whole thing is bigger than I imagined it would be. My mother is going to be upset she wasn't here for this filming. She *loves* Rian.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, trying not to glare as my father creeps into my mind. What if he sees this segment on television? What will I do if he tries to contact me?

The dark thoughts disappear as spectators and students alike burst into cheer. Rian, in his ridiculous spandex superhero duds, emerges from the back of a truck. He dramatically swings his arms around, showing off the treasure inside—pallets of toiletries, hygiene products, clothing, diapers, and non-perishable foods.

Nothing about this event is subtle. It's totally all for ratings.

It disgusts me how much I want to smile when Rian, with his goofy sequin-covered loafers and confident grin, catches my gaze.

To my surprise, Mari calls out Rian's name and rushes to his side.

He greets her with a high five. "Remember, my name is Super-Rian. Not Rian. Definitely not Adrian, if anyone from Minnesota asks. It is so good to see you again, citizen. How do your academics fare?"

Mari glances at the camera, then she thrusts her hands on her hips. "I got an A, no thanks to you."

"An A! Way to go!" Rian holds his hand out for another high five, but his smile crumbles. "Wait. What do you mean by that? Didn't I help you?"

"Barely." Mari tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, craning her neck to maintain eye contact. She probably doesn't cross the five feet mark, and the 6'4" late night host looks like the Empire State Building next to her. "I had to do two papers because of you instead of one. I probably would have been fine on my own."

Is this really the same Mari Jin who wears oversized hoodies to school and tries to hide herself in them?

“Would you?” Rian folds his arms across his chest. “You seemed quite distressed when I arrived.”

“I was only stressed out because my paper was due the next day. Haven’t you ever gone to school? Are you filming us the whole time today?”

Mari waves to the cameras. Curiosity sparkles in her expression.

What the hell is going on?

Rian flails his arms around some more in some poor attempt to look like a comic book character. “I’m quite excited to show the world how Mr. Stanley’s class bundles these packages for the women’s shelters!”

The cameras turn to the students and myself. They scream and holler with all the energy only teenagers possess.

I press my lips together and keep my gaze focused on Rian. What about him makes people open up?

He did the exact same thing with my mother.

The director motions for everyone to go inside. Mari and Rian lead the entourage to our makeshift base of operations. The students disperse to their assigned area.

“Each table is a station,” Mari explains loudly. It’s hard to believe the shy daisy has embraced her new role as Rian’s tour guide. “At this one, we go through our inventory and determine how we’re going to bundle our stuff. Each shelter has different recommendations for what kind of packages they prefer to receive. Like, they could get a big clothing donation from someone else, right? Then they don’t need as many clothes from us, but they might be critically low on tampons.”

After Mari finishes her tour, Rian turns to the camera. “Well, here I thought *I* was the superhero.”

No one laughs. Rian’s face wrinkles in a tormentingly adorable way as he realizes his joke failed, and my heart does its traitorous thing again.

Rian clears his throat and faces the students. “I’m impressed by all of you. Of course, it would seem I brought far too many supplies for us to sort by ourselves. Should I call some of my superhero friends and have them join us today?”

The teenagers fall into a wide-eyed silence, but excitement visibly vibrates through their bodies.

Ugh. Are more celebrities showing up? That’s just what I need. More rich and famous people using poor teenagers for clout.

The brief quiet becomes a distant memory once Rian opens the cafeteria door. A dozen celebrities—athletes, singers, and Broadway stars—glide into the vicinity decked in capes. No spandex or mullets for them. They have some pride to maintain, apparently.

As to be expected, my students lose their cool. They abandon their stations and rush to greet the stars. Hell, a tiny of part me is excited to see my roommate Joaquín’s favorite basketball player in person.

After a bunch of selfies, everyone finally starts working. The atmosphere is warm, but my blood runs cold as a mini-crew approaches me, complete with some cameras and one of those standing lights. A woman holds a microphone out to me.

“Hello, Mr. Stanley. My name is Nina. I’m one of the writers for the show.” She inches closer to me. “Can I ask you

a few questions? How long have you been heading this community service project?"

I stifle the urge to roll my eyes. Apparently, I'm getting interviewed whether I want to or not. "About eight years now."

"What made you want to start it?" Nina asks.

Hmm. Should I tell her that I was going through a mental breakdown back then? It was my first year of teaching, and my mother's health had started to fail after years of substance abuse from trying to forget about the way my father battered her. My passion for giving back to the shelters that helped Mama and me came from a desperate need to feel in control about something.

Nah.

"I've been teaching here since I was twenty-six," I respond, slowly and carefully. "What I quickly learned is that most students here aren't financially well off, but they are always willing to support each other and our community. Every year, I get a new set of students with generous hearts, ready to donate their time and energy. Even when they have nothing, they are ready to part with half."

There. That's one way of truthfully answering the question without actually answering it. There has to be a good sound bite or two she can use.

It's not like she actually cares about me. Not that I want her to. Don't need anyone putting me under the microscope.

Nina asks me a few more questions. She fortunately keeps the interview short.

However, as soon as her crew moseys over to Jocelyn and Little C's station, another irritation approaches me.

Rian doesn't bring any cameras with him. They're all pointed somewhere else. This fact, though, doesn't make me trust his intentions.

Why would a celebrity want to talk to a high school teacher?

"What do you think?" The showmanship bravado in Rian's voice is gone. Some of his makeup has worn off, and sweat drips from his wig's sideburns. He almost seems like an Average Joe. "This is a great afternoon for the kids and the women's shelters, don't you think?"

"Sure." I lean against the wall. "I appreciate that you've done this, but you're just doing it for ratings, aren't you?"

The cheer in Rian's face dissipates. "It's not just ratings. I like being charitable. Not to mention Mari finally got that A. I kept my promise to her."

Sure, Richie. I definitely believe that you have Mari's best interest in mind.

I nod to his crew. "If you're really being charitable, why film this at all? You and the other famous people wouldn't be here if there wasn't a camera. Every single one of us in this room knows it."

Rian gapes at me. For a man who makes his living talking, he seems to have forgotten what words are. Good. He can afford to be taken down a peg or two.

An awkward chuckle rolls out of Rian after several moments. "Can't you give me some credit? I know I'm not your student, but I wouldn't mind getting some praise from a well-respected teacher."

He wants *what?*!

“Why do you want my approval?” I avert my gaze, pretending to be very interested in what Simone is doing with that one singer who remixes operas. My chest has the nerve to be tight right now, but I’m damn sure not going to let Mr. Moneybags see that. “You’re going to have a feel-good video to air on your show, and then you’ll be done with Mari and my class.”

There. That will shut him up. Possibly make him walk away from me forever.

Rian doesn’t leave. Instead, he mirrors my stance and leans against the wall. A masochistic part of me wants to sneak a peek at his expression.

“So, uh, you do this every month?” Rian asks. “Teachers don’t have much time. Your, er, spouse doesn’t mind you giving up your Saturdays?”

My spouse?

I finally look at him. Rian seems to be sweating even more now.

He flashes me a nervous grin. “I know. Those years of practicing perfect diction in college have really paid off.”

It takes everything inside me not to return his smile.

“I’m not married.” I clench my jaw, trying not to read too heavily into the way Rian arches his eyebrow. There’s no way he’s actually interested in my private life. “Even if I was, I’d expect my partner to understand this cause means a lot to me and that I enjoy my time with my students. My ideal theoretical spouse will pick up the students’ lunch for me while I’m here instead of me spending an extra ten dollars to get it delivered. We could put that saved money toward more donations.”

“Oh.” Rian removes his wig. “That’s a really nice picture you’ve painted. Something you’ve thought about a lot, huh?”

I just stare at him.

He runs his hand through his drenched curls. “Should your theoretical spouse also be into *Naruto*?”

What the hell is his angle? Why does it feel like there’s lightning in my chest?

Slowly, carefully, I respond. “It wouldn’t hurt if *he* was. Or *One Piece*.”

Rian bites his lower lip. For one breath, I forget the socioeconomic gap between us.

It’s almost a shame I won’t see him again after today.



WE AIR THE CHARITY SEGMENT THE NIGHT BEFORE Halloween. It's an instant hit with our audience, and social media ripples with praise for all the students and celebrities involved. I stay up until nearly dawn, celebrating with my crew.

I definitely don't go to bed wishing I could see Darrell's reaction to everything. Nope. Not me.

When I check my messages the following afternoon, I have a bunch of lovely congratulations from my friends and acquaintances. I also have a private message from Mari.

What are you doing tonight? You don't have a show right? she asks. *You owe me boba and I know a place with free wifi*

I read the message five times to ascertain the strand of words does, in fact, say what it says.

Even while I tap out my response, it feels like I'm still dreaming. *I don't recall promising you boba. Also, it's Halloween. I have plans. Don't you have plans?*

Our agendas probably aren't too different. I need to go to a studio party in a silly costume to win the love of my colleagues. Mari surely has to attend a school party in a silly costume to win the love of her peers.

Mari's answer is quick. *If you want me to give you advice about your love life, my fee is one boba tea :)*

God, what is she going on about?

I don't need advice, I reply. Thanks for the offer. What makes you think I need any help with my love life?

The next message from Mari includes a picture of a cafe. *We can meet here and talk about Mr. Stanley*

Talk about *who*? Why does she think I want to talk about Darrell?

I scratch my chest and roll out of bed. Now that the segment has been aired, Darrell and Mari should both be ancient history.

Of course, considering all Mari has done for me, I at least owe her some tea. According to the internet, the cafe where she wants to meet is on my way to the studio party...

I'll buy you some boba, I write. But we're not talking about my love life.

I don't receive anything for nothing, she responds. We're gonna talk about how much you wanna smooch Mr. Stanley since you're buying me boba

God. What am I getting myself into?

Around six, I arrive at the cafe. Few people are here, as to be expected on a Saturday Halloween. A small group of twenty-somethings occupy the sofas in the corner. An elderly couple have a table by the window furthest from the entrance. There appears to be only one person running the counter.

No Mari.

I check my phone. Should I message her to let her know I'm here? Is it weird to have tea with a fifteen-year-old I'm not related to?

Thankfully, no one here will recognize me. My Halloween costume is a perfect disguise—a shiny suit jacket with no shirt underneath, matching sparkling tight pants, enough makeup to hide my freckles, a waist-length black wig, and a karaoke microphone.

“What are you supposed to be, Mr. Goodwin?” a familiar, almost judgmental voice behind me asks.

I spin around on my heel and find myself smiling once I face my tea companion. Mari's decked in an adorable pink cat costume. Whiskers have been painted along her cheeks, and crimson glitter dots the edges of her sharp eyeliner.

“I'm heavy metal Brendon Urie.” I press the button on my microphone, which is connected to my phone's music app. A terribly sublime mashup of “High Hopes” and “Aces High” blares from my gadget.

Mari's ensuing lack of laughter pierces me like a poison-tipped arrow. All right. It's fine. She's a high school student. Maybe she's too young to know who Iron Maiden is.

I shut the microphone off. “How did you know it was me, anyway?”

She points to my sequin-covered loafers. “You're a celebrity. Don't you own any other shoes?”

“Of course I do.” I huff. “They're shiny like my outfit. Don't they look good?”

“Gold doesn't match silver. You're also supposed to wear something you normally wouldn't. That's the point of a costume.” Mari brings her oversized furry paws to her cheeks.

“See? I can only wear these during anime conventions and Halloween.”

“How do you drink boba with those bad boys? No opposable thumbs.” I nod toward the counter. “What do you want?”

“A large brown sugar!” Mari grabs me by the sleeve and drags me to the barista. “And get one for yourself. I bet you’ve never had boba from here before. The brown sugar pearls take over four hours to make, so you can only order this kind of boba in the evening.”

“No kidding?” I gesture to the barista that we’ll take two. “You want anything to eat?”

“Can we have rolled ice cream?” Mari points to a menu item. “It’s really good, I promise. I’ll make sure my advice to you is worth the price.”

I shake my head. “I told you that I don’t need your advice.”

“Mr. Goodwin, there’s no way you’re going to win my teacher’s heart if you keep wearing those shoes. If you’re not adventurous with your fashion, you-know-who is going to keep thinking you’re boring.”

By now, I’ve noticed the few customers present are staring at us.

“Hey, there might not be many people here,” I whisper, “but I’d appreciate it if you didn’t broadcast my private life.”

Mari gasps. “You *do* want my help!”

An exasperated groan escapes me. I make eye contact with the barista and try to look unbothered. “Please add two rolled ice creams to our order. What’s the total?”

While I squeeze out my wallet from the tight confines of my ludicrous pants, Mari's words dance in my ears.

I glance at her after I finish paying. "Does Darrell think I'm boring?"

"He hasn't said you're exciting or fun." Mari shrugs. "One can infer from the lack of such comments that he thinks you're kind of boring."

"Infer. You're not great at following directions for papers, but you're sure smart, aren't you?"

Mari sticks her tongue out at me and grabs a few napkins. She drops them as she heads to a table.

I pick them up for her. "See, you have no grip with those kitten mittens. How are you going to drink your tea or eat your ice cream?"

Mari sits down at a table away from the other guests and removes her gloves. "Step into my office, Mr. Goodwin."

"This is a nice place you have here," I remark as I sit across from her. "Spacious. The property taxes are probably modest in this neighborhood. Is this table made out of real wood?"

"Only the best for my most important client." Mari gets out her phone. A wave of glee rolls through me since Mari finally seems to be joking with me. "I've come up with a list of ideas for getting you with Mr. Stanley."

Oh, geez. Mari's serious. God, please say my powder is thick enough to hide my burning cheeks.

"First of all, am I *not* your first client?" I set my microphone on the table. "How often do you try to fix people's love lives, and how often have you been successful?"

“My mother is dating a guy I suggested she swipe right on. They’ve been together for three months.”

“Your mother, huh? That’s a valid source.” I lean back in the chair and stretch out my legs. “Why do you think I’m interested in your teacher? Bold of you to assume I even like guys.”

Mari stares at me. “You’re dressed up as Brendon Urie, an openly pansexual idol, and you didn’t deny being queer in our messages earlier. Most alloromantic heterosexual men would have asserted their profound attraction to women right away.”

Nothing gets by her, does it?

I fuss with my fake hair, trying to get every strand off my sweaty neck. “Let’s say you’re right. Let’s say I’m also pansexual—”

“Your secrets are safe with me, Mr. Goodwin. I wouldn’t dare breach the client confidentiality agreement.”

For some reason, relief washes over me.

Is it weird to trust a teenager I barely know to keep my sexuality away from the press? Not even my ex-wife knows about this facet of me. Why do I feel some kind of camaraderie with Mari?

The barista drops off our order. Mari’s expression explodes with glee once she sees our treats. Her smile stretches from ear-to-ear as she takes a picture of the caramel-colored bubble tea and strawberry-topped dessert.

It’s hard not to smile. Is this ribbon of joy coiling in my heart how Darrell feels around his students all the time?

“I won’t mention you in this SuddenPic post, in case you’re worried about your privacy.” Mari flashes her phone

screen at me. “Let’s get down to business. Mr. Stanley doesn’t have any social media, so you’re going to have to work on your in-person impressions.”

I laugh and take a sip of my sweet drink. It’s delicious, but I better not consume too much. Since I don’t drink alcohol, I’ll be nursing soda at the party all night. I’m already destined to have a sugar hangover tomorrow.

“What makes you think I have any interest in your teacher?” I ask.

Mari plucks a strawberry off her ice cream and pops it in her mouth. “When we were organizing the donations, you kept staring at him. Once you got the nerve to talk to him, you got little hearts in your eyes”

“I did not!” I jab my spoon into the ice cream container, destroying the beautiful, flowery-shaped dessert.

“He was the only person you searched for.” Mari brings her straw to her lips. “We had all these *actually* hot people in the cafeteria that you invited, but you kept looking for him like a dog looking for his owner.”

“What does ‘*actually* hot’ mean?”

“Don’t change the subject.” Mari wags her finger at me. “But you like how Mr. Stanley looks, don’t you, Mr. Goodwin?”

I stick a large spoonful of ice cream in my mouth. How do I tell her that when I’m near that manga-reading, cardigan-wearing hunk, I want to melt into a puddle for him to step in?

“He *is* pleasing to the eyes,” I finally respond carefully. “But there isn’t any chemistry between us. It’s a futile effort to pursue him.”

“Is it?” Mari taps something on her phone, then she slides the device to me. “Watch that video. I filmed it yesterday morning.”

The video is dark, but I quickly figure out it was taken in Darrell’s classroom. The TV is on; I spy my awful spandex right away. Kids laugh over the noise of the donations segment playing. The camera slowly zooms in on Darrell at his desk.

His grin is as wide as Mari’s had been when the boba was delivered. Even with such a poor quality video, his brilliant smile stands out.

“See that?” Mari asks. “Mr. Stanley is smitten with you.”

I push the phone back to her. “He’s just proud of you and the other students.”

“Nah.” She sips her drink. “He didn’t make us do any warm-up exercises or teach anything yesterday. He let us watch that segment as many times as we wanted. That’s not like Mr. Stanley at all.”

“Relaxing is a perfectly normal way to celebrate being on national television.”

The day after the first time I appeared on television, I lounged in bed with Adaline for nine hours and eventually proposed to her before we got up to make supper. She played one of her many video games while I dissected Bob Newhart’s memoir. That was the only day we spent such a long period of time alone.

I didn’t have to worry about the next segment or rushing to catch lunch with a producer. After my first skit on television aired, that seemed to be victory enough for my career.

Little did I know that the goalposts would be moved. Little did I know that they would always keep moving.

God, what am I doing here? The idea of romance is impossible as it is. To even toy with the idea of winning the affections of a gorgeous, caring man is absurd.

“Why do you want to set me up with your teacher?” I ask. “Are you just looking for an excuse to hang out with a celebrity?”

“I just think you’re meant to be.” Mari takes another sip of her boba. “You’re not really a celebrity up close, anyway. I prefer to think of you as my client.”

“Huh?” I break into laughter. “What does *that* mean?”

“You’re kind of dorky. Celebrities should be glamorous.” Mari stands up suddenly and grabs her belongings, as well as her drink and ice cream. “Anyway, I have to go. You should stay and finish your boba. Bye! We’ll have another consultation soon.”

I sit up straight in my seat. “Wait, what? What are you—”

She darts out of the cafe with all the spring of youth in her steps. Though, in all fairness, even if I were twenty-four years younger, I doubt I could be that energetic.

Well, almost twenty-five. Milestone birthday is in a few weeks.

Soon, I’ll be a flourishing forty-year-old flower at the height of my career. Only one divorce in my Wikipedia page. Biggest personal scandal was breaking my elbow by trying to imitate Tony Hawk if he was a Roombaboarder instead of a skateboarder.

Well, maybe my caustic remarks about the sperm donor most people would call my absentee father causes a ruffle when someone dares to ask me about him, but hey, that’s still not bad for a comedian.

Romance? I'm fine without it. Sorry to disappoint you, imaginary Mari I'm talking to.

I take another sip of my boba and amble toward the counter. The barista greets me with a smile.

“Hey, that teenager who was just here—does she come to this cafe a lot?” I ask. “Would it be possible to leave a gift card for her to use?”

“Oh, uh, maybe.” The barista frowns. She glances over my shoulder. There must be another customer behind me. “Like you're going to buy it, and she can just pick it up?”

“Yeah! Could you hold on to it for her if I give you her name?” I open my phone. “Let me find out what Mari's last name is.”

“Jin,” says a familiar, rich, silky voice behind me. “What are you doing having bubble tea with my student, Mr. Goodwin?”

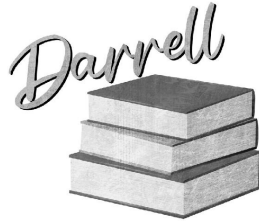
I nearly jump out of my tight pants as I realize who's talking. Did Mari plan this?!

I lean heavily against the counter as I turn to face Darrell.

Even stern, serious teachers dress up for Halloween. He practically glows in the blue, decorative military uniform. He's definitely a *Fullmetal Alchemist* character—probably Maes Hughes since the glasses and facial hair match.

Oh, God. He's so hot.

And I'm dressed like heavy metal Brendon Urie.



IT'S HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHAT'S MORE FRUSTRATING—HOW endearingly attractive Rian is in his sparkly outfit, or the fact he's somehow invaded my personal space again. First my classroom, then the rest of my school, and now the cafe where my book club meets.

Why is a rich celebrity dressed as some kind of Alice Cooper in a distinctly middle-class cafe? Mari had whooshed passed me when I entered, so they must have been here together. But why?

I cringe, remembering Miss Jin's unusual curiosity about my social life yesterday. She wouldn't leave my class until I confirmed that, yes, the book club meeting was still happening. While the students are always invited to attend, they never do. What teenager wants to spend their Saturday nights discussing books with a bunch of teachers?

Is it possible Rian asked Mari to arrange an "accidental" encounter? The idea stirs something in my stomach.

Please let that something be disgust. Don't be delight.

Rian exhales slowly with his teeth clenched tight. "Hello, Darrell. You recognized me despite my great costume?"

I point to his loafers.

“Maybe Mari was right,” Rian mutters. “Hey, it’s a good thing we were both able to recognize each other in our outstanding costumes. You’re Lieutenant Colonel Hughes, right? Love him. Uh, yeah, could you imagine if you didn’t know it was me standing here, and then you started shit-talking about me to the barista while I was here? It would have been like *Much Ado About Nothing*.”

He knows a lot about *Fullmetal Alchemist* and Shakespeare. Why is this nerd trying to break my iron-clad resolve to hate him? Rian’s probably just trying to show off his knowledge to me. According to Wikipedia, he has a master’s in theater.

Not that I was looking him up.

The barista leans forward. “Excuse me. How much did you want the gift card for?”

Dammit. I need to stop almost admiring Rian and focus on the facts. It’s outright weird for a grown adult to buy things for a teenaged girl.

I fold my arms across my chest. “Why were you here with Mari, and why are you buying her a gift card? You’re not trying to date her, are you? She’s fifteen.”

“Not at all!” Rian fans his glistening neck with his hand. “That’s the last thing I need *anyone* to think I’m doing with Mari. I just bought her some boba to thank her for helping out with the show. Can I buy you something to thank you as well? Our segment really was a big hit thanks to your class.”

There is not enough money in the world to scrub the well-meaning texts that blew up my phone while the segment aired. A ton of people were suddenly thrilled to be my friend or my family—folks who had dropped me off their radar for years.

According to Joaquín, I've been mentioned a lot on our mutual friends' social media. The only people who aren't trying to capitalize on my fifteen minutes in the spotlight are my roommates and my mother.

And my father.

I'm so glad he hasn't had the nerve to publicly acknowledge the segment. Yes, some messed up part of me has been snooping through his social media to see if he's said anything. Yes, I hate myself a lot right now.

Rian fiddles with the top button of his jacket. He doesn't seem to be wearing a shirt. The more he touches his button, the more I wish I could see the smooth expanse of skin hiding underneath.

I might hate myself right now, but I don't totally hate the view.

I shake my head. "I don't need anything from you."

"Come on. It's the least I could do for you." Rian turns to the barista. "Put however much is necessary on the card for someone to buy boba every day for the rest of the semester. I'm a comedian. I can't do math."

Fuck. It's hard not to laugh. Especially when the barista herself cracks up while she rings in the order.

Rian checks his phone, smiling to himself. He must be so pleased with his gag. Ugh. These late night entertainers and their cute mouths.

Some part of me suddenly wants to like Rian.

"You're really not doing anything weird with Mari?" I ask slowly.

Rian looks up from his phone. “I promise! In fact, Mari was trying to give me advice about winning someone else’s heart. She’s a bit of a matchmaker, huh?”

Is she? And who is this someone else? Mari’s not trying to set *me* up with Rian, is she?

The notion causes a surprised titter to escape me. I lower my head, suddenly embarrassed to look at Rian.

Despite not wanting to face him, I eventually do. Rian’s bright brown eyes are framed by thick, gorgeous, black eyeliner. His warm expression borders on seductive.

I’ve got to stop thinking about how hot this guy is.

“Mari usually keeps to herself.” I glance at the couches in the corner. No one else from the book club has shown up yet. Good. No one’s present to give me hell later for being so awkward. “It’s surprising that she’s taken such an interest in you. She’s quite apathetic about the school curriculum.”

Rian runs his hand up the lapel of his jacket. “That’s how I was at her age. I was a terrible student in high school. College was way better because I had theater.”

I nod. Should I talk about what I was like in high school? Should the topic stay centered on Mari?

Why am I even talking to someone so upper crust?

The barista waves to Rian. “I have your total, sir, if you’re ready to pay.”

Rian holds his hand out to me. “May I please buy you something? I really owe you a lot.”

Sigh. Well, if Mr. Moneybags is so eager to show off the fact he’s rich, who am I to turn down a freebie?

I muster my best nonchalant voice. “What about a tray of cookies for my book club?”

The startled quirk of Rian’s eyebrows is enough to make me momentarily forget what a cookie even is.

“You have a book club?” he asks while gesturing for the barista to add the request to his order.

“We meet here every last Saturday of the month.”

Some kind of epiphany washes over Rian’s face. “That explains why Mari suddenly bolted. Why couldn’t she have arranged this chance encounter when I don’t look like a stretched out ball of steel wool?”

I bury my face behind my hands. Jesus. *Mari* planned for Rian and me to meet. What was that girl thinking?

Nope. Not going to contemplate her intentions.

And I’m definitely not going to laugh at Rian’s quip, however much I want to. It’s time for me to take charge of the conversation again and show how in control of everything I am.

I reach into my pocket. My costume doesn’t allow me to carry around the messenger bag I usually store my books in, so I sewed a pocket into the skirt of my long jacket. Every outfit should have a book pocket, actually.

“We mostly read young adult books since we’re all high school teachers.” I pull out Jason Reynolds’s latest book. “Since it’s Halloween, we decided to dress up as characters from *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*. You’re right—I’m Hughes.”

“Really?” Rian’s teeth practically sparkle as his smile broadens. “Your entire group is doing a theme costume? I’m

so jealous.”

I open the book and pull out a long strip of pictures. Each print is a screenshot of the character’s daughter, Elicia.

Rian laughs and throws his head back. “That’s amazing! You nailed it.”

Pleasure sweeps through me as I slip the pictures back into the book. For a celebrity, this guy really isn’t so bad. “You like *Fullmetal Alchemist* as well as *Naruto*, huh?”

“And *One Piece*,” he adds quickly.

That’s...an interesting throwback to our last conversation.

Is there any chance Rian Goodwin of late night television is queer? I know he used to be married to a woman, but that doesn’t automatically make him disinterested in men.

Rian pays for his order. He turns to me with the gift card. “You can give this to Mari for me, can’t you?”

I take it from him. Our fingers brush against each other, and it’s hard not to dwell on that fact. “This isn’t some publicity ploy, is it?”

“No!” Rian holds his arms out. “Do you see any cameras? The only microphone I have is this one I’m holding. By the way, do you want to hear my new single?”

He presses a button before I have time to say no. Some nightmare cacophony that could technically be defined as music blares from the microphone. Ten painful seconds pass before he flicks it off.

“I’m heavy metal Brendon Urie,” he explains.

“Are you?” I take out my wallet and slide the gift card in it. “I thought you were Alice Cooper. Those dark circles under

your eyes aren't makeup?"

Rian chuckles. "I get, like, four hours of sleep during the week. These dark circles aren't going anywhere." He pats his cheek. "I initially wanted to dress up as Inosuke from *Demon Slayer* since a boar mask would hide my sleep deprivation, but alas, I fear my abs would be *too* sexy for Halloween. Gotta keep the attractiveness to a legal limit, you know?"

Great. He's a giant nerd, and my eyeballs want to see what he looks like without the jacket.

This is the third time Rian Goodwin has tried to ruin my life.

Maybe I should let him ruin me a bit? Am I a fool for thinking there might be something happening between us?

My mouth opens before my brain reaches a decision. "Are you doing anything tonight besides having boba with high school students?"

Rian meets my gaze. This time, I let myself smile.

"You're welcome to join the book club if you aren't busy." I nod to the couches. "We could pass you off as a modern day Envy. You might like the YA we're talking about this month. Jason Reynolds is a favorite of mine."

A ding interrupts my invitation. Rian holds up his phone and flashes me a shaky grin. "I actually have to leave for a boring shindig at the studio. But thank you for the offer. I appreciate it."

My smile melts as a pang of regret wells through me. Of course Richie Moneybags doesn't want to spend his Halloween with a bunch of normal people. I shouldn't have opened my damn mouth.

“Thanks for the cookies,” I manage to say. “I’ll make sure Mari gets the gift card. Stay out of trouble, all right?”

“Worried about me?”

He wishes!

I hold my book close to my chest. “The teens look up to you, Mr. Goodwin. They really admire a Minnesota-born goofball who rose from nothing and made a name for himself. I’d like to keep my illusion that you’re a decent role model for my students.”

And that you might not be a terrible person, as far as public personalities go.

Rian blinks. “Are you praising me? Do *you* approve of me?”

This again.

“I don’t know why you care about my approval, but if you want a letter grade from me, you’re at a C-.” I point to his phone. “Don’t you have some place to be?”

He keeps his gaze on me. It’s quiet, yet intense, and I can’t tell if I hate the way he looks at me. “What do I have to do to get an A+?”

“I’ll let you know next time we meet.”

Wait. What did I just say?

Fortunately, Rian looks as surprised as I feel. He rubs his chest. “And, uh, when are we meeting again?”

Does he actually want to see me again?

Is it worth my energy to offer my number? Rian Goodwin should just go hang out with his kind at the party that’s filled with Prada purses and Gucci belts. He doesn’t want to be

around teachers who have to share an apartment with three other people to pay for their bills.

He doesn't want to be around someone who has a complicated family.

Right?

His phone starts ringing, effectively answering all of my questions. He mumbles a quick apology and darts out the door.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to squash the physical symptoms of humiliation. Why did I let myself even toy with the possibility of seeing a celebrity again? That was a ridiculous fantasy.

Whatever. All I need to focus on right now is my book club. I'm done with Rian Goodwin forever.

Forever.



OH, GOD. WHY AM I ACTING LIKE A WEIRDO?

I half-heartedly answer my cab driver's zillion questions and mentally dwell in the Greek tragedy that is known as the past fifteen minutes of my life.

Why was I tempted by Darrell and his book club? It's ludicrous to pretend I have time for a non-celebrity friend. I barely even hang out with my fellow comedians. Most days, my social circle is the crew for my show.

Is it because his shoulders are so divinely broad? Why does he look so good when he smiles? Why can't I get him out of my mind?

I take a deep breath and try to calm down. Moments ago, I was content in my single life. I'm *still* content.

What I'm experiencing is lust because I'm apparently attracted to nerds who could break my neck with their elegant glare alone. It's fine to experience lust. It's fine to have a lot of confusing hormones rushing through my body with the same intensity as the Amazon river.

This lust will fade as soon as I'm at the studio party. I'll be too busy networking and dodging an alarming number of cocaine offers to think about Darrell.

My phone lights up with a new SuddenPic notification. It's a private message from Mari.

How did your date with Mr. Stanley go? =^.^=

That wasn't a date, I reply. You should have given me a heads up he would be at the cafe. I would have dressed better.

She answers me quickly. *Why are you so concerned with how you look if you aren't interested in Mr. Stanley?*

This girl. I sigh as I tap out my response. *Your teacher has a gift for you from me. Make sure you get it from him. Thanks for introducing me to the cafe.*

I don't take gifts, she says, but I will take a retainer fee as your love life counselor

I decide not to answer her. No need to give her ammunition for this matchmaking plot she's cooking up.

But it's hard not to think about Darrell during the rest of my ride. The hint of apple and cinnamon in his cologne that makes him smell like fall, his attention to detail in his costume, the way he always seems to have reading material with him... It's unfair that a man can have so many attractive traits.

What kind of qualities does he like in a man besides a deep love for *Naruto* and *One Piece*?

What do I have to do to get an A+ in his book?

AS SOON AS I enter the den of strobe lights, hazers, and techno remixes of Halloween songs, Darrell quickly dissipates from my thoughts.

I've heard that Hollywood parties are wild, but I doubt they can ever reach the absurdity of a New York television studio party. Most people here are overworked and desperate to go hard when they have the chance to let loose. Drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol are everywhere. Hell, the waterfall decoration by the refreshments is gushing out vodka.

The best thing about being one of the few sober people at a party is inebriated folks find me exceptionally funny. Producers and fellow B-list celebrities break up like hyenas at my lousy costume, even before I tell them who I am. Network advertisers cling to my every word as I thrill them with tales of my exhausted mother accidentally leaving me at the store when I was a kid. Forgetting a kid once is a tragedy, but forgetting me enough times that the cashiers started asking her if she knew where I was is hysterical.

My ego swells as the night progresses. Once I am brimming with confidence, I tie my fake hair up in a ponytail and get ready for business. It takes a lot of courage to approach two incredibly handsome and incredibly rich celebrities.

It's worse when one of the said handsome and rich celebrities is my ex-brother-in-law.

Adaline and I didn't part on poor terms, but ever since our separation, I've made it a point to keep my distance from the Polinsky hotel heirs. Except for Adaline, the Polinskys are notorious for getting turned into memes from the strange shit they say while intoxicated, such as the eldest son's musings about how only poor people believe in Sasquatch. They're the kind of family I wanted to avoid even while I was one of them.

Stephen is here with philanthropic fashionista Jayden-James Hancock, who I desperately want on my show. Stephen

wouldn't be bad to recruit, either, but I'm not sure I personally could stand to be around him for longer than ten minutes. Besides, Jayden-James would be way funnier to have. We could do a makeover sketch, except it'd be *me* updating his wardrobe.

The Goodwins have always been Pasty—capitalization required to sufficiently encompass how white I am. Clothes have never mattered to us when we look terrible in everything. One can only imagine what fashion suggestions I'd have for the king of style.

I unbutton my jacket, exposing the flat slab of marble some might call my chest.

Burning the Midnight Oil ranks high in late night television ratings, but we're never number one. If I can get Jayden-James, we'd secure that top spot.

Everything I do is for my show.

Before I approach Jayden-James, I grab someone's appetizer off their plate—some kind of bacon-wrapped cheesy thing—and tuck it into my breast pocket. It sticks out just enough to look like a boutonnière from the distance.

Jayden-James and Stephen are hanging out in a corner. They're the only two celebrities not in costume, but they look incredible in their floral suits. Jayden-James's black twists have bronze tips, pairing with the glittery makeup that highlights the glow of his light brown skin. A lock of Stephen's auburn hair hovers close to his pink mouth, inviting people to check out the perfect amount of scruff growing along his tanned jaw.

Yes, it's wildly annoying that my douchey ex-brother-in-law is hot.

I sidle up close to them. “Hey, I think you guys got the wrong party. This party is for millionaires, not billionaires.”

“Adrian!” Stephen holds up his glass up me. This bro uses everyone’s full first name, like nicknames are something only peasants have. “We like to see how the poor live from time to time.”

Jayden-James rolls his eyes. He doesn’t look galvanized by his friend’s joke, but he seems equally unimpressed by my presence. He’ll be a hard one to win over.

Despite the fact I’m pretty sure I’m at least fourteen inches taller than Jayden-James, he has the air of a giant. It’s intimidating.

I hold out my microphone. “How do you do? I’m heavy metal Brendon Urie. The music is too loud to play my song for you, but trust me, it gives everyone ear blisters.”

Stephen chuckles. “Hey, your show is killing it lately. I love watching it.”

I waggle my eyebrows. “You could do more than watch. You could be on it. Both of you.”

“Holy shit!” Stephen gasps. “Really? You never invited me while we were brothers.”

He says, like we were ever close. We only saw each other at holidays. Polinsky festivities were generally a quick dinner before everyone got wasted and started yelling at each other.

Being the lone sober person in that family sucked, but I did mine a few gems from them in their colorful expressions of affection.

Jayden-James studies me carefully. “Is that bacon in your pocket?”

“You don’t have a bacon pocket?” I pretend to scrutinize his outfit. “This is the latest trendy accessory in Paris.”

A smile slowly unravels across the fashionista’s face.

I know that kind of smile. I have his attention. He’s curious about me and what I can offer him.

This is where I shine best—surrounded by people who all want to further their status and careers. We all have moving goalposts that consume our every waking thought.

I don’t belong in Darrell’s world filled with soft things like book clubs and inspiring teenagers.

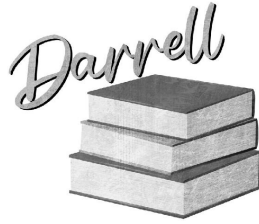
As the night continues, Darrell lingers in my mind. The strobe lights, loud eighties rock music, vodka waterfall, and people overreacting with laughter at my lousy costume do nothing to distract me. The only thing I can think about is how much I wish I had stayed with Darrell at the cafe.

This party should be one of the best events I’ll attend all year. I should be vibrating with all the opportunities before me. Jayden-James and I have made a connection. The vice-president of the studio wants to meet with me for lunch later this week. If I keep showing the room my charm, I’ll have guests on the show and business luncheons every day for months to come.

For the first time in years, though, I can barely see the goalposts for my career. All I can see is Darrell’s stunning grin.

I sneak into the bathroom, desperate to escape the noise and flashy lights. A few executives are crouched over the sink. They invite me to join them in whatever they’re snorting.

I wish I had just gone to the book club meeting.



THE FOLLOWING MONDAY AFTER MY ENCOUNTER WITH RIAN starts the same as it always does—with one of my roommates heckling me as I come back from my morning jog.

“Oh, Future Olympic Medalist is here.” Joaquín hands me a plate with a lukewarm breakfast sandwich on it and kisses me on the cheek. “You bring pride to this country with your continued dedication to showing that cold pavement who’s boss.”

I slip him a grin. “There’s nothing wrong with running. You’re welcome to join me.”

Joaquín’s wrinkled expression suggests he’d rather lick the sidewalk. “Who’s gonna have breakfast ready for you if I go out with you? The gremlins? They don’t even know what breakfast is.”

He’s right. In our tiny two-bedroom apartment, all four of us are rarely together. Joaquín and I share one room, and Troy and Andy share the other.

Troy and Andy are a couple who work night shifts at Madison Square Garden together as security, so they’re usually in bed until noon. This allows Joaquín and I some breathing room to get ready for work. We have the same

schedule for the most part. He's a special education teacher for an elementary school in this district.

While I scarf down my breakfast, Joaquín leans against the kitchen counter. He picks at a dried stain on his apron. "So, what's the deal with you and Rian Goodwin?"

I glare at him. "Why are you bringing him up?"

Joaquín arches a carefully chiseled eyebrow. My roommate prides himself on his appearance. With his flawless golden brown skin, perfectly curled black hair, smooth jawline, manicured nails, and tight button-down shirts, he is easily the most attractive person in our apartment.

Someone like Joaquín is gorgeous. The kind of person who could grab Rian Goodwin's attention. Not someone like me who rotates through the same six cardigans all school year.

"You don't check the news before you go out running, do you?" Joaquín gestures to the tablet on the counter. "Pictures of celebrities in their Halloween costumes are dominating the headlines. Someone took a photo of Rian Goodwin in his Alice Cooper outfit. And *you* were there."

Fuck.

I make a chewing gesture, but there's not actually anything in my mouth. "He wasn't Alice Cooper. He was heavy metal Brendon Urie."

"Who?" Joaquín blinks. "Anyway. Don't worry about your privacy—whoever posted the pictures blurred out your face. However, *I* would recognize that Maes Hughes getup from anywhere after you spent all summer sewing it together."

At least there's a silver lining. My father doesn't know what a total geek his bastard son is.

I bring the sandwich to my lips. “I just happened to run into Mr. Goodwin at the cafe before the book club meeting. We chatted for a few minutes. That’s it.”

“Mr. Goodwin?” Joaquín thrusts his hands on his hips. “It wouldn’t kill you to let yourself have some interest in a man for once, you know. You haven’t gone on a date for almost a year. Is your dating profile even active?”

“You and I both know I have no desire to fawn over a guy on television who looks like a dirty mop and has more money than our district’s budget.” I set the half-eaten sandwich down. “I need to shower. I’ll finish eating before I leave. Thanks for breakfast.”

A grumble seeps out of Joaquín. “You’re welcome, Mr. Gold Medal for Emotional Avoidance.”

Those words stop me in the doorway, but only briefly.

HOMEROOM IS CALM AND ORDERLY, as usual. Easiest class of the day. Most of the students are still half-asleep as they chatter amongst themselves. Some sip on iced coffee from fast-food joints. A couple of troopers power through homework they should have done over the weekend. A few desks remain empty, even though first period is about to start.

Mari sits in the back, as usual. By herself, as usual. With a stormy cloud over her head as she doodles in her journal. As usual.

I miss the starry-eyed teenager that hung around Rian a couple of weekends ago. Would talking about Mr. Moneybags bring back that curious, mischievous student?

As the bell rings and the students start darting out, I call for Mari to visit me.

“Hey.” I flash her a smile. “You know I extend invitations to the book club so you kids can come talk about books, right? Not try to arrange meetings with celebrities?”

Mari’s cheeks flush as she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. She keeps her gaze pointed at the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re forgiven, as long as you don’t do it again.” I reach for my wallet. “What was the point of the encounter? Are you wanting us to become friends or something?”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles.

“You’re not in trouble.” I hand her the gift card. “Mr. Goodwin got this for you. It’s a token of his appreciation.”

A vexed glare crosses Mari’s face when she looks at the card. It’s the same expression she dons when I remind her about an English assignment.

She takes the card. “Did he say that exact string of words? Nothing else?”

I drag my thumb along the corner of my closest book and study Mari’s stance. She seems a little taller, a little more like she’s breaking out of her shell.

“What else would he say?” I ask.

Mari meets my gaze. “I can’t say. It’s a secret.”

A secret. One that’s powerful enough to change her whole demeanor. For fuck’s sake. Does *she* have feelings for him? Ugh. There’s nothing wrong with a teenager experiencing an attraction to an older celebrity, but if she’s trying to act on it...

“Don’t worry.” Mari tucks the gift card into her daisy-covered pencil case. “This isn’t some *Romeo and Juliet* secret. Or *Macbeth*.”

“*Macbeth*? Have you murdered someone?”

She bites her lip. Her eyes shake as she looks around the room. Kids for first period have started filing in. “Isn’t that whole play about people lying and how it’s bad to keep secrets?”

Wait a minute. Did my usually disengaged student just make a reference to something we read in class?

There is no force in this universe that can stop the way my lips curve upward. “Is that what you took away from *Macbeth*, Miss Jin? That would have been a great idea for a paper.”

Her eyebrows jump up, and her mouth forms a little circle. It’s a look I’m familiar with—the lightbulb moment where these kids realize they’re learning. Not memorizing facts to get them passing grades on standardized tests, but *learning*.

That surprised expression always reminds me why I’m a teacher.

My smile widens. “You should hurry up. Wouldn’t want you to be late for your next class.”

“I won’t be late.” Mari holds her books and pencil case close to her chest. “Um, can I ask you one last question?”

“Sure.”

She drops her voice to a whisper. “Would you be interested in seeing Mr. Goodwin again? As friends? Or something?”

The ballooning joy in me deflates. I try to reel in my sigh, but I completely fail.

No, I’m not interested in seeing some late night talk show host again. There’s no room for charming, cute millionaires in my life. The last thing I want to do is open my heart to

someone who had my father on his show and treated that asshole like royalty.

...not that Rian knew that, I guess.

I peer into Mari's hopeful eyes, and then I glance at the other students in the room. Some of them have started answering the warm-ups on the whiteboard. The others are watching a dance video that's popular on SuddenPic and bopping along to it. Ever since Rian and the other celebrities came to visit, the whole school seems flush with creativity and dreams.

There's a Rian Goodwin that is capable of inspiring these kids. I wouldn't mind seeing more of *that* man.

But I'm not telling Mari that.

"No," I finally reply. "You should go."

A pout graces her face. She shuffles out of the room, breaking my heart just a little. It had been so nice to see a cheerful Mari.

I hope I didn't just make a mistake.



THE NATURAL POST-PARTY HIGH FROM SUCCESSFULLY MAKING new connections carries me through the next few days. I flit like a long-legged hummingbird between frantic group chats with my writers and in-person meetings with various suits. The week quickly shapes up to be a very good one for the show.

The endorphin crash comes Wednesday evening.

It happens while I wait for Vera in my dressing room. On Wednesdays, I host a livestream before we tape that evening's show. Felicity films me while I show my audience some behind-the-scenes stuff for the show.

Today, I'm gonna ramble about the makeup process while Vera goes to town on me. She's been a makeup artist for as long as I've been alive, so she's not nervous about being filmed. She's just mad she can't smoke while we're on air (hence her going outside for one more cigarette before we start).

This will also be a great chance to show off my greatest prized possession—a snapshot of my mother from fourteen years ago. In the picture, she's pulling a Christmas turkey out of the oven with a cigarette in her mouth. I keep the image taped to my mirror because it never fails to make me smile.

Sometime between Felicity checking the camera's battery and me getting a message from Nina that Jayden-James still hasn't agreed to appear on the show, exhaustion overwhelms me.

I squirm in my makeup chair. "Why am I doing this?"

"The livestream?" Felicity looks up at me. "You always do it."

"Why am I not taking a nap?"

"I've never seen you take a nap. Do you know how to do that?"

"Technically, I do, though I guess it's been at least seven years since I tried." I jump to my feet. "I'm tired and don't want to be here."

"None of us want to be here. We all want to be home."

I arrange the various powders and blemish sticks on the counter. Vera will kick my ass later for messing up her things, but I can't afford to fidget with my suit and get it wrinkled. "What do you do at home?"

Felicity stares at me. "You're asking what I do at home?"

"Yeah." I pick up a can of hairspray. The list of chemicals on the side is long. Hard to believe I accidentally breathe in this stuff every day. "This job isn't your whole life, right? You have, like, a girlfriend or anything?"

She holds the camera in her lap. "Well, I'm single right now, but I do have a roommate. We go to the movies or grab some drinks at the club near our place. On the weekends, I take the train into New Jersey and visit my parents."

I listen to her raptly, waiting for her to deliver the life-changing bit of wisdom my soul is suddenly craving. Some

part of my weary brain genuinely believes Felicity has a cure for my fatigue.

Despite her being nearly ten years younger than me, I've always admired Felicity. When Felicity first joined the show, she hadn't come out as transgender yet. Now she wears trans pride pins on her lapel and rainbow baseball caps. She looks much happier since she started being open about her real self.

...

Why do I care about that facet of her right now?

My phone buzzes with a new message from the executive producer. He wants to know if I have time to grab a late dinner with the vice-president of the studio, around ten or so.

Of course I do, I respond while losing more of my vitality with each letter I type. No matter how exhausted I am, though, I can't turn down the chance to dine with top brass. If I'm in the vice-president's graces, I could possibly land the earlier time slot when Sean McCarthy retires.

Not that I know for a fact he's retiring anytime soon. But there are rumors. Rumors capable of making me dream big.

Since the vice-president is a party animal, I probably won't be getting home until nearly dawn. That's probably what time Darrell wakes up. He probably has an herbal garden he tends to in his kitchen window before he cooks a wholesome breakfast while wearing a terrycloth robe.

The image delights me, but I quickly shake my head and pull myself back into reality. It's pointless to think about Darrell. I'm literally never going to see him again.

"Are you all right?" Felicity asks. "You could cancel the livestream if you need to nap. I promise I won't film. Unless you want me to."

I grin. “Oh, you would love the chance to video me drooling all over myself.”

“What’s wrong, then?” Felicity tips her head to the side. “You can talk to me if something is bothering you.”

“Nothing is bothering me.”

Nothing except that since I’ve imagined Darrell in a terrycloth robe, I want to know what he would look like on his bed with his thick legs spread apart, inviting me to undress him.

Goddammit, imagination, quit it!

I tug the collar of my shirt. Could I tell Felicity that I’m stuck on a guy? No. Absolutely not.

Why can’t I bring myself to be open about my sexuality with someone I know is queer and won’t judge me? Coming out to a teenager I barely know was surprisingly easy, but I can’t bring myself to be honest with a trusted coworker.

Why?

“Where’s Vera? That cigarette is taking too long.” I check the LED clock hanging on the wall. “The livestream needs to happen soon. We have to start filming in forty minutes.”

“I’ll find her.” Felicity hops up and sets the camera in her chair. “You want me to bring a coffee or anything back for you?”

“No, that’s okay. Lynette will have my usual ready for me.”

As soon as Felicity leaves the room, my phone rings. I answer without checking who it is. Rarely do I get a call at this hour from someone I can afford to ignore.

“Hello?” I wander over to my sofa and pick up the notes for tonight’s talking points.

“Hey, you,” a low, husky voice curls into my ear.

Once upon a time, that greeting would have caused me to drop my clipboard. I would have made sure nothing interrupted me for the next few minutes.

Now, I keep reading my notes.

“Hi, Adaline.” I flip the page. My guest is a member of a Korean boyband. The rest of the members will show up later as a “surprise” when our regular band “falls ill” to promote their new song. “I’m going to livestream soon, so I don’t have long to talk. I sadly won’t be able to hear about the fun raid you’re planning in whatever game you’re playing right now.”

“That’s nothing new.”

Those few words make me even more tired. I toss the clipboard aside and flop on the couch. Wrinkles be damned. Vera can probably fix it later.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “I saw Stephen the other night.”

“I heard. I called because I want to sell the cabin, but your name is also on the deed.”

Ah, the secluded lodge overlooking Cayuga Lake we bought to use as a weekend getaway. The ideal destination where we would turn off our gadgets and focus only on each other.

We used the place ourselves twice. Mostly, I gave colleagues keys to the place so they could have a romantic weekend with their significant other.

Gosh, I love reminders of how much I failed my personal life.

I stare at the clipboard. It's okay. I'm exactly where I want to be.

"Do I need to sign some document saying you can do whatever you want with the place?" I ask. "Tell me what my favorite ex-wife needs. My lawyers are fast."

"I'd prefer if you can find time to come over this week instead of us messing with assistants or lawyers." Adaline sighs. "You're not working too hard, are you?"

"No more than usual." I rub my eyes. "You're appearing in a new movie, aren't you? Big role? I saw that Hana Stone and Gerald Lafontaine are going to be in it too."

"Just a couple of scenes."

"Only a couple of scenes?" I laugh. "That's pretty exciting. Want to come on the show? A hotel heiress with a blossoming movie career would be more exciting to talk to than Mr. Long-winded Lafontaine. We could trash talk your dickbag ex-husband."

Adaline's signature dry cackle comforts me.

If I had given her more time, I could hear it every day. Not that I'm still in love with her. In hindsight, I'm not overly sure if I ever loved her the way she deserved to be loved.

I loved having someone to come home to. I loved the way she celebrated all my victories with me. The thing I miss most about Adaline was the way she used to look at me like I was capable of conquering the world, which is a poor foundation for a relationship.

What did she ever see in me? What did I ever give her that she was willing to hop into holy matrimony and a few mortgages with me? Was there a Rian Goodwin that she had hoped to meet?

That Rian is a wonderful guy, but is the entertainer all who you really are?

The echoes of our separation kill the last little bit of energy I had.

I sit up straight to keep myself awake. “Let me look at my schedule. I think I have time Saturday to meet you. I’ll message you after tonight’s show. You can take your time responding if you’re busy in your vampire game.”

“I’m not playing that one anymore. But yes, that sounds good. Take care of yourself.”

“I always do.”

We hang up. I scroll through my calendar for the week. As I suspected, my Saturday is quite free.

Before I can metaphorically pencil in a reminder to meet Adaline, my phone buzzes again. This time, it’s the group chat with the writers. Lynette wants to know if I’d be open to going to a party Saturday night. Jayden-James Hancock is supposed to be there.

Another party. Another chance to network. Another opportunity to woo Jayden-James.

The prospect should excite me, but it doesn’t.

I stare at my phone screen. My fingers idly load SuddenPic.

Despite knowing I shouldn’t think about excruciatingly hot teachers, my thoughts drift to Darrell. He organizes donations for women’s shelters every third Saturday of the month, and he meets up with his book club on the last Saturday. What does he do on the first Saturday of each month? The second? The fourth on the rare occasion there are five weekends?

The idea of learning more about Darrell erases the fatigue in my bones.

Lynette messages again, but I don't bother reading it. I'll respond later.

I open my private message with Mari. She hasn't talked to me since Halloween. Which means she hasn't forced any further matchmaking shenanigans on me.

It doesn't mean that she has given up, either.

Something light and hopeful swims through my veins as I message Mari. *Do you think there is any way I can meet your teacher on a day where I'm wearing normal clothes?*

Like the incredible social media prodigy she is, Mari replies within a few moments. *OMG YES!!!*

For the first time in years, my career goalposts are in my peripheral vision. All I can see before me is Darrell's soft, amused smile.

I don't have time for romance. Definitely not.

However, it wouldn't hurt to find out what I can do to get an A+.



USUALLY, I EAT LUNCH WITH OTHER TEACHERS. TODAY, I'M on lunch monitor duty, so I wolf down a quick bite in my classroom during my free period. Eating a mere three hours after one of Joaquín's amazing breakfasts isn't my favorite. I like my meals to be perfectly spaced out. Makes everything digest smoother.

I also don't like taking phone calls while I eat, but everything about today seems to be against me. It's a habit of mine to answer my phone every time I hear it ring. Can't stand the idea of leaving a student or their parent in need because I wanted to be unbothered.

"Hello, Darrell Stanley speaking." I lean back in my chair, staring at my half-eaten BLT with extra bacon and some surprisingly awesome quinoa spread Joaquín insisted I use.

"Darrell?" A gruff, uncomfortable voice breaks through the other side and shrivels my stomach into a walnut. "Hey, buddy, how are you doing?"

Fuck. I'd recognize this asshole from anywhere, especially by the patronizing way he says *buddy*. "How'd you get my number?"

"From your mother. You should have told me you had changed your number."

I crumple the rest of my sandwich and my napkins into one large, awkward ball. No chance my appetite is going to come back anytime soon. “I changed my number six years ago, Gerry.”

My father does *not* get the honor of hearing me call him Papa or anything. The only reason I don’t currently have a restraining order against him is that he pays for Mama’s medical bills. The bills she has *because* he broke her.

“What are you bothering Mama for? And me, for that matter?”

“Don’t be that way,” he grumbles. “You’ve been on the news. You went viral.”

“Okay.” I toss my lunch into the wastebasket under my desk, waiting for his ulterior motive to shine through his bullshit.

“Okay?” Gerry forces out an awkward chuckle. Must kill him to act like a human. “You’re doing so well! I knew you’d grow up to be an ol’ chip off the block. I’m proud of you, Darrell. I’m curious about something—are you going to keep appearing on Rian Goodwin’s show?”

The urge to toss the part of my lunch I already ate wells through me. “Why do you care?”

“Well, son, I just need to have all the facts. I love you, but it might not be a good idea if you’re in the spotlight too much, you know? But if you decide you’re going to be out there, well, then, I just want to be prepared.”

There it is. The real reason my weasel of a father would reach out to me personally. That bastard is terrified people are going to figure out his dirty little secret.

Love. Hah!

Mari sticks her head into my room. “Mr. Stanley?”

Shit. I hold up one finger. She waits by the door.

I keep my teeth clenched and my shoulders square as I talk, trying not to spiral into seething, uncontrollable anger. “I’m busy doing teacher stuff, Gerry. Don’t worry about me. I’m quite content with my current life.”

I hang up the phone and exhale as slowly as possible, hoping Mari can’t hear the tempest tucked into my breath.

“What’s up?” I motion for her to step inside. “Where are you supposed to be? I know it’s not here.”

“I’m allowed to talk to you.” Mari tucks her chin to her chest and shows me a teacher’s laminated hall pass. “We aren’t doing anything important in biology today. I told Ms. Fitcher I have a question about the homework assignment in this class.”

Mari Jin? Asking about homework? Incredible.

“Okay.” I sit up straight, desperate to look like a confident teacher. My hands tremble as I clasp them together on my lap. “Hit me.”

“Actually, I don’t have a question about the homework.” Mari snaps her gaze to me. Her eyes grow wide with hope and curiosity. “I have a question about Mr. Goodwin.”

Ugh.

Mr. Celebrity Goodwin. Would he ever abandon his son? Does he have a secret baby somewhere?

I press my lips together and gesture for her to go on.

“Do you still go jogging by the bodega that sells those really yummy vanilla-covered pretzels?” Mari takes out her phone from her daisy pencil case. “What time do you think

you will pass it on Saturday morning, and can you stay there for a while?”

I bring my hand to my forehead, regretting my openness about my extracurricular activities. Teenagers soak up irrelevant information like sponges. “What does this have to do with Mr. Goodwin?”

“Saturday mornings are his only free time. I thought you two could hang out at that bodega and get some pretzels and coffee. Maybe pet the cat there? That sounds like something you’d like.”

That *is* something I would like, but there’s no way a celebrity like Rian would go inside a bodega. He probably gets gourmet coffee delivered to his pristine penthouse. Lounges around the house in his silk pajamas until it’s time to go be funny.

Not that I think he’s funny.

Okay. He’s kind of funny. Only a little.

“Mari, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but...”

She blinks. “But what? Mr. Goodwin wants to see you.”

What a strange sentence to hear. I just got off the phone with one millionaire who wants nothing to do with me to find out a different millionaire would like to enter my orbit.

Why does Rian want to see me? I’m not sure if he is romantically or sexually interested in me, but he *does* seem drawn to me.

I stare at my phone for a few seconds. My father’s words still linger in the air.

Maybe I want gangly Rian and his dorky smile to ruin my life a little, regardless of what his agenda is.

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, I get up at five in the fucking morning.

Like a fool, I had arranged to meet Rian around six. I never run *this* early on the weekends. Why did I set myself up for so much pain?

Joaquín rolls over in his bed and mumbles something while I silence my alarm.

He's why. I didn't want the roommate to wake up and find me using a clay face mask before a run. Joaquín would wake the others, and then they would all hound me for details. They'd never believe me when I tell them this isn't a date. It's just meeting someone who is rich and famous at the bodega. I want to look my best in case the paparazzi takes photos of us.

Really. I'm still going for a run. Today, I'll have a quick pit stop at the bodega. That's all.

And maybe I will wear shorts that show off my well-developed calves.

Despite knowing very well this isn't a date, my heart still thumps when I get close to the bodega and spot a curly-haired, pale guy wearing sunglasses and a privacy face mask outside.

I slow my pace and take out my earbuds, unsure if that's actually Rian. He's not sporting his sequin shoes, and a lot of people around here wear hoodies, sweatpants, and hightops to the store. And almost everybody stands in the way while checking their phones and drinking their coffee.

But it has to be him. He's *so* tall. And a few people inside the bodega seem to have their attention on the guy.

I gather the courage to stop in front of the man in sunglasses. He looks up from his phone and drops his coffee. Then, he stumbles to the ground in a vain attempt to catch his cup. Liquid goes all over him.

This is definitely Rian.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to laugh. “Are you okay?”

“Darrell!” Rian clutches his chest and removes his mask. He stays on his knees while he talks to me, a gesture that tightens my stomach. “Fancy running into you here. How do you like my new outerwear inspired by Jackson Pollock?”

My nostrils flare as I beg my body not to react to his corny joke.

Rian flashes me a wide smile while he picks up his empty coffee cup. Something about his easiness makes me extend my hand out toward him.

It’s perfectly normal to hold someone’s hand to help them. I touch a lot of people in my line of work—handshakes, high fives, fist bumps, etc. Helping Rian doesn’t mean anything.

The gentle way Rian rests his hand on my arm once he’s standing, however, causes a shiver to run up my spine. Neither of us let go right away, either. His fingers linger by my sleeve, as though he’s prepared to catch me in case it’s my turn to fall.

The small gesture shouldn’t make my heart race, but it does.

“Thanks,” Rian finally says, still standing close to me.

I don’t make an effort to put distance between us. “I would have thought you’d still be asleep at this hour. Didn’t know late night television hosts got up before noon.”

Rian chuckles. “Ordinarily, I’d still be asleep. However, I had a very important meeting here.”

“I see.”

Am I just a meeting? Rian wanted to see me for business purposes? Damn. I should have known.

“Are you still jogging?” Rian tosses his cup in the recycle bin. “Can I buy you a coffee or something after? I’d ask to join you, but I think we all know my legs aren’t good for anything. I’m just going to end up on my knees again.”

I tilt my head to the side. Does he realize what he just said?

A veil of pink drapes over Rian’s face a moment later.

Heh.

“Why do you want to have coffee with me?” I ask.

“Why not?” Rian shrugs, pulling out a napkin from his pocket. “I have spilled coffee all over me and still require caffeine to get me through these foreign hours I’m not used to. And aren’t you here, anyway, because you knew I wanted to see you? Do you not like coffee? Want tea instead? Some kind of electrolyte-filled water smoothie thing? Boba? Can we have boba at this hour?”

Is... Is he nervous?

“You really talk a lot.” I shake my head. Maybe this—whatever it is—is a mistake.

Rian winks at me and clicks his tongue. “It’s how I make my living.”

Dammit. Why is his dorkiness so cute?

My lips twitch, despite my earnest wishes. “You remind me of my students when you talk. When they write papers, they go out of their ways to construct lengthy sentences to meet their word count goal.”

Rian laughs. “I was so good at bullshitting my way through English papers in school. I could come give a lecture, if you want—*Stuffing the Paper You’re Writing at Midnight with Superfluous Sentiments*. Great topic, right?”

There we go. The real reason Rian wanted to see me is surfacing. He probably wants to film at the school again.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, cursing myself for thinking anything else could have been the answer. “No. And I’ll pass on the coffee.”

Rian wipes his hands with the napkin. “How come, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“If you want to hang out with me to get an idea for your next segment or whatever, you’re wasting your time.” I fiddle with my earbuds, getting ready to wear them again. There has to be a perfect Ariana Grande song to drown my silly hopes in while I go home.

“That’s not why I’m here.” Rian tosses the napkin in the trash. “I just want to have coffee with you.”

I glance into his eyes, hoping to find some hint he’s lying. But I just see worry.

“Do you really think I want something out of you?” Rian asks.

Something about his question sparks a fire inside me.

“Yes.” I gesture to the space between us. “You’re wearing two hundred dollar sweatpants, and I grabbed my shorts for a

couple of bucks at the thrift store. You can summon NBA players at the drop of a hat to help with charity, and I can't always get a substitute teacher when I'm sick. We don't live in the same world."

Rian's mouth moves, but he doesn't actually say anything. My words seem to have actually hit him.

Good.

I continue, riding the flame until it fizzles out. "You benefited greatly from my class. Why would you want to associate with me except to improve your image or boost your ratings?"

"That's not it at all!" Rian works his jaw and glares at the sky. He meets my gaze again after a moment. "When you invited me to your book club's meeting, I was genuinely sad I had other plans. It seemed so fun. Why did you even invite me in the first place if you don't trust me?"

Because I wanted to keep staring at you in those tight pants.

I slip one bud into my ear. "Because I had control of that situation. The other members of the book club wouldn't have posted about it on social media. Who's to say this coffee invitation isn't going to end with a spy you planted posting on TMZ about how the great Rian Goodwin is still humbling himself by befriending a public school teacher?"

The frown on Rian's face is sharp enough to trim my beard.

Here it is. The moment where he'll reveal his true colors. The moment where I'm proven right that all celebrities don't want to be around people like me.

Rian's expression softens. "You said the next time we meet, you would tell me how to get an A+. I'm dying to know."

What? This again?

I inhale slowly. "I did promise you that. Teachers should keep their promise."

For some reason, Rian smiles. The particular gleam of his teeth steals my breath.

"So you'll have coffee with me?" he asks.

"Maybe you should first establish what you want an A+ in." I lick my lips, but my tongue is so dry that it doesn't do anything. "Do you want my approval that you're a decent human being? Do good deeds. Don't do it for ratings. Don't even do it because you want praise from some random teacher. Do it because you're able to help. Show the kids in my class that people can be altruistic without an ulterior motive."

Show me that my ridiculous crush on you isn't something to cringe over.

No! I don't have a crush on him. Nope. Nope. Nope.

Rian's grin broadens. "Good deeds? I can do that."

Ugh.

Fine. I have a crush on Rian Goodwin. Whatever. Lots of people get thirsty over celebrities all the time.

The way he stares at me, though, like I'm the only person in this city... It makes me forget he's featured on a billboard in Times Square.

It makes me want him in ways I shouldn't.



MARI AND I MEET AFTER SCHOOL ON MONDAY TO GO OVER the disaster that was Saturday. Mondays are my busiest days. I have a whole week's worth of shows to prepare and a weekend's worth of news to mine for gags.

But I can't get Darrell out of my mind. At all. While I signed away property to Adaline, I wondered if Darrell ever took trips to the lake. Even while I met with the network's vice-president and charmed him with my unused segment ideas, I wished it was Darrell's laughter ringing in my ears instead.

Attraction/lust/whatever this feeling is drives me to steal an hour away from the studio instead of locking the writers in a meeting.

The boba cafe is much busier than the last time I came in, but it's easy to spot Mari in the sea of customers. Not only has she claimed the table we sat at previously, she's also sporting a cute blue scarf with daisies printed on it. Two bubble teas wait for us.

People don't recognize me as I wade through them. I haven't yet changed into tonight's suit, my sequin-covered loafers have been swapped for some oxfords that are void of

any personality, and I threw on a baseball cap and sunglasses before I left the studio.

The disgusted look Mari gives me when I sit down is SuddenPic-worthy.

I snort, trying to hold back my laugh. “What? You already knew I’m not glamorous.”

“That’s how my mom’s boyfriend dresses.” Mari brings her drink to her lips. “You dress like an old white guy who wants to look young with those skinny jeans and that hoodie.”

Wow, she really holds nothing back. Her remarks bite, but the straightforward way she expresses them is hilarious and refreshing.

“Is your mom’s boyfriend super old?” I remove my sunglasses and lean back in my seat. “I’m turning forty later this month.”

“He’s somewhere in his forties. He makes fun of me for being on my phone a lot and brags about how he didn’t grow up with a smartphone.” Mari rolls her eyes. “Then he gets on his tablet and plays slot machine games for two hours.”

“You like him?” I cross my ankles together. These tables were not made for people with mile-long legs. It’s hard to get comfortable.

“He’s okay.” Mari shrugs. “Mom’s happy with him.”

“That’s probably what really matters.” I pick up my boba. It’s light green with dark tapioca pearls. “Thanks for getting our drinks already. No snacks?”

“You didn’t say you wanted a snack.”

“You have a point.”

Not like I'm hungry, anyway. Most of my actual eating gets done after the show is over, when all my nerves have settled.

Still, it would have been nice to share some rolled ice cream or something with Mari. It makes her happy, and I can always buy her more gift cards.

I take a sip of my drink. It's so sweet. "What kind of boba is this?"

"Avocado."

"Really?" I chew on the pearls. "Doesn't taste like a vegetable."

Mari stares at me. "Avocados aren't vegetables."

"Since when?"

She sits up straight in her chair and takes out a notebook. To no one's surprise, it's covered with daisy stickers.

"I spent all day working on ideas for good deeds you can do to impress Mr. Stanley," she announces while flipping through the pages.

"*All* day? You didn't slack off in class to work on this, did you? I need you to find out what else isn't a vegetable for me since I'm apparently inept in the produce department."

"I'm your romance broker. That's more important than boring literature and useless math formulas."

Romance broker.

She's so much funnier than me. What am I gonna do when the rest of the world figures it out?

Any fatigue I had disappears as I take another sip of my boba. A dash of this wakes me up better than a cup of coffee,

apparently. To be fair, though, coffee might be more effective when I'm not spilling it all over myself.

“You should keep your grades up.” I set my drink down. “But since you already came up with a list, it would be untoward of me if I didn't listen.”

Mari flashes me a pleased grin. “You could pay for the person behind you every time you get coffee or boba, adopt a pit bull from the animal shelter, volunteer at the soup kitchen, offer to baby-sit for friends who have young kids so they can have a free night, compliment everyone you see...”

The excitement in her eyes compels me to hang on her every word. It's much different than listening to my writers spitball segment or guest ideas. Her list is long, but all of her suggestions are unique and sweet. Did a lot of these ideas come to mind because of Darrell? A man who values charity as much as him must have a significant influence on his students.

How big is his heart? Is there any room for me?

Do I have any right to fight for his attention?

“And then I have saved the best idea for last.” Mari turns to the next page in her notebook. “It's a big, romantic gesture as well as a good deed.”

“Is that possible?” I lean forward and rest my chin on my hands.

“It is if your love interest is a teacher in a public school with little funding.” Mari holds up her notebook. “You should fulfill the wishlist for his classroom. I have the link I can send you. You're rich, right? You can buy everything.”

“Wishlist?” I arch an eyebrow. “Like, he has stuff he wants for his classroom? And I could just send it all to him?”

Mari drums her fingers along the notebook and nods enthusiastically. Her large eyes have grown even bigger with elation.

This idea, admittedly, intrigues me more than the others. It feels *right*. Darrell gives so much to others, but how often do people give to him?

I pull out my phone. “Send me the link.”

“Yes!”

Once I have it, I peruse the wishlist. It’s long, but the items are all so modest—dry-erase markers, pens, pencils, staples, tissues, hand sanitizer, young adult books, and so forth.

My excitement slowly starts to die as I roughly add up the prices. The total cost to change the rest of the school year for Darrell would be less than one of my paychecks.

We really live in different worlds, don’t we?

A low, exasperated groan rolls out of me. “I don’t think I’ve been getting enough sleep lately. I must be in some kind of fever dream if I really believe I can impress your teacher.”

She frowns. “You’ve already impressed him, Mr. Goodwin. You just suck at telling him you like him.”

The cafe grows noisier. One of the alarms on my phone buzzes, letting me know I need to leave in fifteen minutes. Irritation worms its way under my skin and makes me itchy all over.

“He’s not impressed.” I scratch the back of my neck. “If you had witnessed our conversation the other day, you would be withdrawing yourself from my case. Unless you *were* there? Hiding in a trash can or behind a telephone pole?”

“You’re so dramatic.” Mari tucks her notebook into her bag.

Why is she wasting her time hanging out with me? Playing matchmaker can’t be *that* interesting.

I glance at my phone. The wishlist site is still open. Darrell’s words from Saturday come to mind.

Do good deeds. Don’t do it for ratings. Don’t even do it because you’re wanting praise from some random teacher. Do it because you’re able to help.

Mari claims Darrell is already impressed with me, but I find that hard to believe. When I think about the whole situation, it’s apparent there isn’t any way to do a good deed without wanting something from it.

I want Darrell. I don’t quite know how I want him, but I want him. However, if I follow any of Mari’s suggestions, it’s going to be obvious I’m doing them for Darrell’s approval, which will make him distrust me more.

Sigh.

I quickly buy everything on the wishlist, but I make sure the sender’s name is listed as anonymous. Then, I close the website.

It’s time to give up on him. For real.

While I finish my silent farewell to Mr. Hot and Kind Teacher, Mari taps away furiously at her phone.

“Playing a game?” I ask, maintaining my title as the world’s greatest conversationalist around everyone except teenagers.

“No.” Mari keeps her focus on her phone. “Debating a loser on SuddenPic.”

“Are you telling me there are more losers besides myself on the Internet?” I take a sip of my drink. “What’s the debate about?”

“Nothing you’d understand.”

“Try me. I run my own social media. I know the thrill of being followed by someone you admire and the terror of trying to actually turn a mutualship into a friendship.”

Mari continues typing. “He’s just one of your standard memelords who thinks girls wear makeup to hide something and calls everyone a simp if they express any positive feelings. He trolls a beauty vlogger I follow and claims the community cheats by streaming her videos to increase her view count. Right now, he’s mad that she hasn’t been demonetized after she made a video saying all men should try buying makeup for themselves just once.”

“*Huh*. You’re right. I don’t understand.” I grin. “Are you winning the debate?”

“I always win.” She juts out her lower lip. “Well, I always win on SuddenPic. I can’t seem to win in school.”

“Is it because your classes are boring? I struggled in high school myself.”

Mari sets her phone down. “So boring! I don’t want to be a professional bubble-filler.”

A confused laugh slips out of me. “Excuse me?”

“We have to do those standardized tests where you fill in the bubbles.” Mari fiddles with a lock of her dark hair. “That’s all we do, so I think they want us to become bubble-fillers.”

I bite back my chortle. “What do you want to be?”

Another alarm goes off on my phone. Seven more minutes before I have to leave.

Mari's fingers work their way down to her scarf. "I don't know."

"That's okay. You're fifteen. You have lots of time to figure it out."

"Doesn't feel like it," she mumbles. "How old were you when you realized you wanted to be a whatever you are?"

"Comedian."

Sheesh, does she really not understand my profession?

I take a long drink while I formulate my answer. My whole life passes before me in flashes. Lots of crowds, some uncertain titters during college plays, plenty of hecklers during my first solo performances.

Adaline, gazing at me in the comedy club as if I was a revolution.

Darrell, telling me to do better.

"I'm not sure when I became set on this specific line of work," I reply. "But I remember the day I discovered I was good at performing and wanted to entertain people for a living. It happened while I was clowning around during class. My twelfth grade teacher promptly sent me to the principal's office, but those laughs from my peers were infectious. After that day, I started reading everything I could to get ideas for jokes and asking people questions about what they find humorous. I was practically obsessed with learning how to be funnier. I used to fill up notebooks with stand-up routine ideas."

Mari doesn't interrupt me while I talk. Her dark, hopeful eyes are fixed on me, and her mouth is parted ever so slightly. This is the quietest she's been around me.

I gesture to her phone. "You like makeup?"

She nods. "But Mom doesn't let me buy anything except moisturizer and BB cream since I don't make my own money yet."

"You think you might want to become a makeup artist?"

"Maybe."

I don't know why something fuzzy and warm flutters through me when I talk to Mari about her goals, but I can't help smiling.

"I watched your livestream last week where you were getting your makeup done." Mari leans forward and squints, like she's scrutinizing me. "You didn't talk much about what actual brands you use. Vera said you use a very light foundation and powder. You're not wearing any now, right? You don't have the golden hue you usually have on TV, and you have way more freckles."

"No, I'll get my makeup done as soon as I return to the studio." I drape an arm across the back of my chair. "Say, why don't you visit the set sometime? You could talk to Vera personally and find out what brands I use. I have no clue what magic she uses to keep my pale skin from blinding the audience."

Mari's eyes practically pop out of her head. "Really?! I could see your set?"

"Sure." My smile widens, and my ego starts to swell. "It'd be fun. Have your mom escort you. She can bring her

boyfriend. We could see which of us is the bigger embodiment of a fashion faux pas.”

“That’d be awesome!” Mari clasps her hands together.
“Can I come when there’s a famous celebrity?”

Annnnnnd there goes my ego. How foolish I was to think this teen would allow me a few moments to rest on my laurels.

Still, Mari’s excitement leaves me in a good mood. It makes me wonder when Darrell realized he wanted to be a teacher. He’s so passionate about it. What was the moment that changed his life?

Ugh, stop it, me! There’s no point in thinking about Darrell. No point in thinking about his thighs that I want to get crushed between or the way his smile leaves me needing more.

My alarm buzzes, reminding me that Darrell and I are in two different worlds.



MAMA LOOKS UP FROM HER PUZZLE. “DID YOUR DADDY EVER call you?”

A groan rolls out of me. How do I answer her?

I’ve gone to see Mama plenty of times since my father called me, but I haven’t asked her why she gave him my number. No point in opening up that can of worms. Sometimes, she doesn’t remember who my father is or how he broke her. The rest of the times, she’s busy pushing me to reconcile with him.

Part of me always hopes if I don’t bring him up, Gerry will become a distant memory for both of us.

“Does it matter?” I ask.

She picks up a puzzle piece. “It’s about time you two had lunch together.”

“We’ve gone over this a hundred times. Gerry doesn’t want anything to do with me.” I lean back in my chair. “And I don’t want anything to do with him. Or celebrities, for that matter.”

Mama frowns, but her gaze remains on the puzzle. Her voice is steady, almost empty, as she says, “He’s your family.”

“No, he isn’t. *You* are. You’re all I need, Mama.”

“Who is going to be your family when I’m gone?”

Her words stab me in the chest, but I refuse to let her know that. “And where do you think you’re going? You got somewhere important to be?”

She goes back to snapping puzzle pieces together. I doubt she’s thinking about what I said. Even before her health started failing, she never listened to me.

Truthfully, I don’t know what goes on in her brain anymore. Most of my visits with her are good, but there are days where she sounds like someone else’s mother. Someone who grew up in the suburbs with a white picket fence and no past due bills. Someone who never had to stay in her apartment with the curtains closed all day so no one would see the great Gerald Lafontaine with his side dish.

I glance at the dingy, stained shawl around Mama’s shoulders. Lately, she won’t wear anything else. The shawl had been a gift from my first paycheck. It had once been a bright purple piece of fabric, the sort of accessory that turned Mama into a vibrant flower, even when she was deep in a depression funk or fighting a particularly bad battle with the bottle.

Now they’re both gray.

I grab Mama’s hand and squeeze it tightly. We have nearly the same shade of dark brown skin, but there are a lot of silver scars on hers. Evidence of the hard life she went through.

Does she still have a hard life? This facility is nice and helps her out a lot, but is her suffering over? Physically, yes, but mentally...?

“You’re going to bend the piece,” Mama whines. “Let go.”

“Sorry.” I adhere to her request. “Just wanted to hold your hand.”

She gifts me a small smile before returning to her puzzle. It’s enough to cause my heart to grow tenfold.

“You know, Mama, I think there’s a guy who’s interested in me, but he hasn’t told me outright in what way.” I glance at her television. *Wheel of Fortune* is on. I have to get out of here by the time *Jeopardy!* comes on since she watches that with Mrs. Florence down the hall. “What should I do with him?”

Talking to Mama about men is usually awkward, but it’s not bad. For all the hardships Mama and I went through, she never fussed over my sexuality. I’m not sure if I ever officially came out to her. I think we just both knew that I was gay by the time I turned sixteen and begged for bookstore money so I could talk to the handsome cashier.

“Do you like him?” she asks.

My heart races, recalling the way Rian’s suit framed his hips so exquisitely in last night’s show. For some awful reason, I couldn’t sleep until I finished watching his closing monologue. Teachers shouldn’t stay up that late. Not because they’re horny over a comedian.

Every time I yawned today, I thought of Rian.

Should I tell Mama that the guy in question is him? The whole reason I even started watching Rian’s show was because he had done a segment here. My mother had been stoked about meeting him and appearing on television for a few seconds. Wouldn’t she like to know about the way Rian gets adorably embarrassed by his failed jokes? Or the way his brown eyes sparkle when he talks to someone? Or his strange

determination to get an A+ in my book? Or that he's into *Naruto*?

"A little," I finally reply.

Mama clicks a puzzle piece into place. "Then you should go out with him. You've only had a few boyfriends. And I've never met any of them."

She says that with the same detached tone she uses when she talks about my father. Blech. Guess it was too much to hope that she'd gush for details about my mystery crush.

Jesus, I wish I would stop thinking about Rian so much. It's been a long time since I've had feelings for someone, and it's quite annoying that my dick decided to latch onto the first famous person to show me any kind of affection.

This crush is nonsense. I'll just ride out my feelings and then get over it. Rian probably doesn't actually like me in a way that I would like him to.

My pocket starts ringing. Dread makes my fingers heavy as I fumble for my phone.

"Sorry, Mama, let me see who this is."

My eyebrows jump straight off my forehead when I see Joaquín's name on the screen. Someone must have died. He has *never* called me.

"Hello?" I answer.

If my mother is upset with me for interrupting our time together, she doesn't show it. Her attention is on her puzzle.

My heart shatters in the split second where I realize another piece of my mother is fading away. In the past, she would have snatched the phone out of my hand.

“Are you fucking Rian Goodwin?” Joaquín spits out his question. “Or have you found a sugar daddy somewhere else? Are you open to sharing?”

Irritation swallows all the other negative feelings inside me. Why is he calling about Rian out of the blue?

“What the shit are you going on about?” I mouth an apology to Mama for my language, even though she doesn’t see it. “You scared me by calling so suddenly. I’m pretty sure what you asked is none of your business, regardless of what my answer is.”

Why would Joaquín call so suddenly? Did the media publish a picture of Rian and me outside the bodega? That was days ago.

Joaquín cackles. *Cackles.*

“What?” I ask.

“Troy and Andy can’t get out of their room right now, because there are about a zillion packages here for you.” Joaquín said. “I have to play leapfrog to get to the kitchen.”

What? Why is nothing coming out of my roommate’s mouth making any sense?

“Do you want to say that again in a way I can understand?”

“A truckload of boxes showed up,” Joaquín explains. “They’re all addressed to you. Can I open one? I’m dying to know what your mystery lover is trying to woo you with. I hope it’s dark chocolate from Sweden.”

A conversation from earlier in the week flashes through me. Mari had approached me after school and said her mother

wanted the link to the classroom wishlist. I had e-mailed it to Mrs. Jin and promptly forgot about it.

Mari's family wouldn't have the kind of money to buy more than some tissue boxes.

"Open one," I say slowly. Mama still isn't paying attention to me. I wish she was.

My roommate is silent for a breath. Then, excitement colors his voice as he shouts, "Dry-erase markers! Hundreds of them! I'm keeping this for my classroom."

Rian.

I tug at the collar of my cardigan, regretting my decision to wear so many layers.

Is this his idea of a good deed? Is he trying to make a point that he can commit acts of kindness without an agenda? But there's totally a motive here.

He's trying to impress me.

And it's working, dammit.

I look at Mama. All sorts of fuzzy, yet painful memories rush through me. Being told to keep my voice low whenever Gerry came to visit us. Being pulled aside by Gerry's mother and grandmother while out shopping and being ordered to never tell anyone who my father is. Bouncing from one women's shelter to the other while Mama fought for a restraining order. Privately begging Gerry to give me a little bit of money so Mama could go to rehab.

I've had a very hard life.

It'd be nice to have some fun, for once.

It'd be nice if Rian also wanted to have some fun.

“Don’t you dare open another box,” I tell Joaquín. “Those are *my* gifts. I’ll be home soon. It’s almost *Jeopardy!* time.”

Mama’s face lights up at the mention of her favorite quiz show.

I end the call and smile back. “That’s right. Mrs. Florence is gonna be here soon to kick me out. Hey, do you remember that guy we talked about a moment ago? The one you said I should go out with?”

“What about him?”

I take Mama’s hand and run my thumb along her knuckles. “I’ve decided to take your advice. I’ll go out with him. Only if he asks me out first, though. I’m not putting myself out there for a guy I’m not sure actually likes me.”

There. I can’t break a promise I made with Mama.

“And you’ll bring him to meet me?” she asks.

I work my jaw, unable to find the words I need. There’s no way a fling with Rian Goodwin would be serious enough to merit introducing him to the most important person in my life, even though they have technically already met.

But it would be nice to be surprised.



MARI ENDS UP VISITING ME THE FOLLOWING MONDAY WITH her family. I meet them at the entrance to the studio a couple of hours before taping starts. Her mother—Sarah—and I formally introduce ourselves to each other, and I get the pleasure of meeting her boyfriend, Tom.

“Mari says that you’re a terrible dresser, Tom,” I quip as we shake hands. “But I don’t see anything wrong with what you’re wearing?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, is there?” Tom grins. He’s rocking a blue flannel shirt, denim jeans, and turquoise running shoes. “You dress quite well, too, despite what Mari says.”

“Does she trash talk my fashion to you?” I step back and hold my hands out, allowing everyone to inhale the magnificence of my skinny jeans, green polo shirt with reading glasses clipped haphazardly to the collar, and a black baseball cap. “We are shining stallions in a world of dreariness!”

Mari groans and points to my loafers. “Why do you wear *those* all the time?”

“The first rule of fashion: never get rid of perfection.” I wave to the security and head for the elevator with my visitors.

“This is our state-of-the-art tube technology. Anyone with a heart condition shouldn’t ride this bad boy.”

Sarah and Tom laugh. Mari rolls her eyes.

The impassive Mari morphs into a giddy teenager as soon as we reach the set. Before I can even start my prepared jokes about what goes on behind-the-scenes, Mari darts to the camera Felicity is setting up.

“Why are there so many kinds of cameras?” Mari takes out a notebook and daisy-topped pen from her bag. “Which one is the most important? Did you have to go to college for this? I remember seeing you before. Do you only work on Mr. Goodwin’s show?”

Felicity starts answering her questions, but she shoots us a pleading look to save her from the unexpected interview.

I glance at Sarah and Tom. “I guess you’re used to Mari leading tours.”

Tom snaps pictures of the set while ignoring my remark.

Sarah dons that familiar tight-lipped smile she gave me when I was doing the Super-Rian segment with Mari. “Only when she’s interested. She hasn’t talked about anything except coming here since you invited her.”

“Really? I was under the impression she didn’t like me much.”

“Quite the opposite.” The curve of Sarah’s lips widens, allowing a more genuine smile to flourish. “Ever since she met you, not a single day has gone by where she hasn’t talked about you.”

“Is that so?”

I avert my gaze, unable to process why that remark makes me happy. My eyes eventually land on Mari, who is now interviewing the audio director with equal zest. The way she scribbles in her notebook sends me back to high school—back when I created scrapbooks with comics I ripped out of newspapers and pages pulled from trashed joke books.

Those scrapbooks are still at my mom’s house. Somewhere in the mess of glue and papers is a teenager who wasn’t worried about goalposts. Young Rian just wanted to absorb everything funny.

If Mari is experiencing similar feelings of wonder, I envy her. I also envy her lack of lower back pain if she sneezes too hard.

I check the time. I need to be powdered and dressed soon. So much for a traditional tour.

“Mari!” I waltz close to her and her newest subject, one of the lighting stagehands. “Want to see the dressing room? Vera said you can explore her makeup kit.”

Mari zooms to my side in an instant.

I let Vera do all the chatting with Mari and her family while I privately get changed in one of the offices. When I return to my dressing room, I find the writers and some of the producers have infiltrated the space. Gift baskets have appeared, as have T-shirts with the studio logo on them. Tom didn’t hesitate to throw on one of the T-shirts over his flannel.

Despite being the star of the show and the whole reason we’re even gathered, no one pays attention to me. Vera continues to spill her life story to Mari as she starts my makeup. The writers and producers praise Mari’s mother for

allowing such a successful segment to air. Tom takes pictures of everything but me.

We end the tour by returning to the set. With a few minutes remaining before the studio audience files in, I slide into my spot behind the desk and gesture to the couch.

“Let *me* interview you, Miss Questionnaire.” I fiddle with my cards containing tonight’s notes and catch Lynette’s gaze. She holds up her thumb, waiting for me to give my signal. I nod.

Lynette disappears behind the curtain as Mari takes a seat next to me. Tom and Sarah are both quick to take photos of us.

“Mari, it’s great to see you,” I start, putting on my best host visage. “What did you think of the studio?”

“I only saw your set and some boring elevator,” Mari replies. “I didn’t get to see anything else.”

Sarah hides her face behind her new T-shirt.

“Ah, you remain difficult to please.” I run my hand through my curls, grinning. “What else do you want to see?”

Mari opens her notebook to a page filled with questions. “Is there a cafeteria?”

“There is. It’s pretty great. We’ll have lunch there sometime. They don’t have boba or rolled ice cream, though.”

Her frown suggests her interest in the cafeteria has diminished.

“What else do we need to add to the tour?” I lean back in my chair. “You want to see some of the other shows? The president’s office? Even I haven’t been there, but I hear his desk is made of solid gold. We could break in and find out.

They can't arrest me for trespassing if I'm with a juvenile. I think."

"Can I come back?" Mari asks, her voice low and unsure. "You make it sound like I can come back."

I tilt my head to the side. Where did the Mari I know go? "Of course you can come back. You can visit any time you want. Er, well, as long as you give me a heads up and don't mind potentially being dragged into a boring meeting with the sponsors."

The spark in Mari's eyes returns. "What happens in a meeting with the sponsors?"

Before I can answer, my planned surprise for Mari slips through the curtains. My dear ex-brother-in-law, who has decided to show up in a cowboy outfit, takes a seat next to Mari. He slings his arm over the back of the couch and waits for her to turn her head.

Mari screams with delight when she realizes who has joined her. The crew and Mari's family breaks into laughter.

"So this is the famous Mari Jin." Stephen tips his hat to her. "Howdy, milady."

"Ahh! Mr. Goodwin, you actually brought a real celebrity!"

A real celebrity. Sigh. My ego has taken a hit today, for sure, but it's nice to see Mari being showered with attention.

Mari whips out her phone. "Mr. Polinsky, you'll do a selfie with me, won't you?"

"Shoot yeah." Stephen wraps his arm around her shoulder and squeezes in close to her. Something about the way he touches her makes me want to spritz him with water. He's not

the kind of guy to mess with teenagers, but it doesn't mean I want his grimy paws on Mari. "Make sure you get my good side."

"What's with the *Hey Dude* getup?" I send Stephen my finest glare after Mari takes the selfie and busies herself with her phone. "Are you gonna yippie-ti-yi-yay somewhere after the show?"

He gets my message right away and lets go of her.

"That sounds like a question for tonight's taping," Stephen says. "You don't like my threads?"

"I think you look great," Mari gushes.

Her approval of his outfit irritates me further. I open my mouth, ready to take Stephen down a peg. "Only country singers should wear big belt buckles and dead animals."

"These are synthetic snakeskin boots," Stephen protests. "And hey, you nailed it. I'm putting out a country single! It's called 'Howdy, Milady.'"

I grab my glasses and study my notecards. It's true. What the hell?

When Adaline started acting, it made sense because she is gorgeous and able to make grown men cry by turning her head away from them. Stephen, who causes diamonds to shatter when he drunkenly croons Christmas jingles, is the last person in the Polinsky conglomerate to attempt a career as a musician. Either he's bored, or he's trying to impress a woman.

A woman. Of course. Adaline's brothers are all notorious womanizers. Stephen plows through them, despite being stuck on a certain member of the Hancock-Strauss family.

I lean back in my chair. “Hey, did you ever finally get the nerve to ask you-know-who’s sister out on a date?”

It’s Stephen’s turn to glare at me. Heh heh.

Mari looks up at him. “Do you need help getting with someone? I’m a great matchmaker. My clientele is very exclusive.”

Wait, this is about to backfire terribly.

“Sorry, pals!” I tap my watch. “We have to get ready for the taping. You’re going to stick around for that, aren’t you?”

Mari nods. “Is someone else coming? You usually have two guests—one musical.”

“You’ll have to wait and see.” I throw her a wink. “If you like budding country singers, you’re going to like the established pop singer who’s playing with the Velvet Fighters tonight.”

“And I’m going to join them,” Stephen adds.

She breaks into a bright, excited smile. Mari’s giddiness is enough to make me overlook Stephen’s remark. It’d be nice to make her happy like this all the time.

Is this how Darrell feels around his students?

Wait. I shouldn’t be thinking about Darrell. I’m over him. Totally. Completely.

A pang of sadness strikes me as I say goodbye to Mari and her family. If Mari doesn’t want to come back to the studio, this will be my last time seeing her. Since I’ve given up on Darrell, I’ll have to decline future meetings with my romance broker.

Before we start filming, Stephen catches me backstage.

“Hey, you were really great around Mari.” Stephen pats me on the shoulder. “You’re really dedicated to improving your image, aren’t you? I respect that.”

I chuckle in an attempt to keep myself from smacking him. “What does that mean? I’m not improving my image. I’m just letting a teenager see what the studio is like.”

“Oh, you don’t have to pretend.” Stephen grins. “You can be honest with me. We all know you’re only concerned with your ratings.”

Fire spreads through my bloodstream. Though it’s inappropriate to potentially piss off a guest right before a show starts, I can’t help what flies out of my mouth. “Fuck off, Sheriff Stephen.”

Stephen stares at me with his jaw agape.

The Velvet Fighters’ opening notes fall on us like manna from the heavens, and the stage manager alerts us to go on standby.

Finally. I can get a few minutes away from him. I’ll just bullshit my way through this interview and deftly lock myself in an office after the taping.

Maybe I can’t prove to Darrell, Adaline, Stephen, or anyone in the world that I’m more than the entertainer on television, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let anyone assume I’m just using Mari for ratings.

When I sit down at my desk after my opening, an unfamiliar object greets me. A journal has appeared beside my notecards. A sticky note attached to it catches my eye. I put on my reading glasses, almost forgetting that we’re filming.

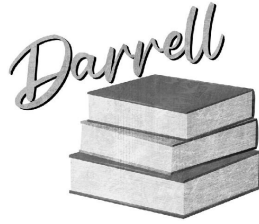
This is an early birthday present. I didn’t see any notebooks in your dressing room, so I figured you should have

*one in case a good idea for a joke comes to mind. Sincerely,
your romance broker.*

Oh, Mari. The gesture is touching enough, but the bubble tea stickers covering the black journal make me misty-eyed.

I long ago abandoned paper in favor of recording everything on my phone. Am I going to do anything with this notebook?

Since Mari gave it to me, I'll have to find a use.



IT DOESN'T TAKE THE STUDENTS AND OTHER TEACHERS VERY long to figure out who filled my classroom with brand new YA books and graphic novels, a computer for the kids to use, and a closet full of supplies.

I had to take a taxi to work today because of the sheer amount of boxes. There was too much stuff for me to unpack by myself. My homeroom is more than happy to help me set up everything and gush about Rian.

“If Rian bought us all this stuff, that means he’s gonna come back to visit us, right?” Jocelyn asks.

I rub the back of my neck. “Well, I don’t know for sure that it was Mr. Goodwin, but—”

“It has to be him!” Little C exclaims. “He likes us. Hey, maybe we’ll all get invited on his show. I wanna see the studio.”

Mari clears her throat as she inspects a Dahlia Adler book. “Actually, I got a studio tour yesterday. It was so cool!”

The classroom explodes like the Fourth of July with questions for Mari. Mari’s face shines with excitement as she shares her behind-the-scenes experience.

She's changed so much since she met Rian. She's as bright and cheerful as the daisies she loves. The passionate way she gushes about Rian's makeup artist is worth an A+ alone.

The desire to see Rian again consumes every cell in my body, but I have to wait for him first. *He* has to tell me that he wants to see *me*.

BY THE TIME Saturday morning rolls around, I don't know if I can wait any longer for Rian to make the next move.

This will-he-won't-he game was fun in college, but it's just pure torture at my age. I'm ninety percent sure Rian's attracted to me. I know for a fact I am drawn to him, despite also knowing that's an awful idea.

How can I get a hold of Rian without using Mari?

A groan rolls through me as I realize I need to make a SuddenPic profile.

Joaquín looks over at me. "What?"

We're both still in our respective beds, just chilling on our phones. I haven't even gone running yet because I lose my balance when I think about Rian.

I'm so mad at myself for having it so bad for him.

"I am about to break my social media hiatus," I grumble as I click over to SuddenPic.

Joaquín sits up straight. "Are you finally going to bang Rian Goodwin? If I had a rich, attractive man send me school supplies, I would have been at his door in nothing but a pair of high heels that same night."

“No!” I cringe, trying not to picture my roommate naked. “But, uh, maybe if we could have coffee or something together, that would be all right. Besides, we still don’t know for sure that he sent all that stuff.”

“Are you kidding me? Who else has the means to fulfill your wishlist in a few minutes?”

I glance at Joaquín’s DVD shelf. Somewhere in there is a Gerald Lafontaine classic he fished out of a bargain bin.

Not that my father would ever do something nice for me.

But Rian would. And did. He’s different from the other celebrities, isn’t he? He’s more than the awkward, quirky guy on television.

After making the dullest SuddenPic profile ever with the least goofy selfie I could locate, I follow Rian. Of course, he has to follow me back in order for me to private message him. I highly doubt something of his social status bothers to check his followers.

I’m totally wasting my time on a long shot, aren’t I?

Late in the afternoon, though, an unfamiliar notification sounds through the room. I check my phone, and I immediately hit pause on my show when I realize what’s going on.

I have a new follower on SuddenPic and a private message.

Is this THE Darrell Stanley?

Holy shit. Rian actually noticed me.

My throat goes dry while I try to compose a calm, relaxed message. *If you need proof, I can provide it. Call me when*

you're not busy. Not doing anything today but lesson plans and watching anime.

I end the message with my phone number, and then I hide under my blanket.

What have I done?! Did I really just give my phone number to a celebrity? To a celebrity I legit have a crush on?

Though I go back to *Demon Slayer*, my mind and my heart are unable to stop racing. So glad no one else is home right now so I can be embarrassed by my actions by myself. Maybe it's not too early to open up a bottle of wine.

Just as I get up from the couch to drown my foolishness, my phone starts ringing. And the number isn't saved in my contacts.

The world around me vanishes as I stare at my screen. The only thing that exists in this moment is my sweat-inducing fear that I'm setting myself up for heartbreak.

Finally, I answer the phone. "Rian?"

No one says anything, but I can hear breathing. Weird.

"Rian?" I clench my jaw, trying not to swear. Did I just get worked up over a wrong number? "Hello?"

"Sorry!"

He sounds less energetic over the phone, but it's definitely Rian Goodwin talking to me.

"Hi, Darrell. It's great to hear from you."

"Yeah." I rub the back of my neck. For some reason, I wish I was wearing more than boxers and a stained tank top. "I'm surprised you noticed I followed you on SuddenPic. I couldn't wait any longer to talk to you."

“Really?”

Ugh. I sound too desperate. “This will just take a moment, but I wanted to thank you properly for the donations. It *was* you, right? It had to be you.”

Rian pretty much squeals. His excited burst of delight eases my nerves. “It was me. I hope it helps.”

“It does. A lot.” I swallow hard and hope no one suddenly comes home to find me taking the biggest leap of my life. “Most of the kids can’t afford to bring their own stuff, so I provide as much as possible. I don’t know what you want with my classroom besides a good image, but it’s hard to turn down school supplies. I don’t know what you want with me, either, for that matter.”

There. That’ll leave an opening for Rian to ask me out. If that’s what he wants to do.

I hope it is.

“What else do you need?” Rian’s voice has grown serious. “Or what do they need?”

That’s not what you’re supposed to say.

Apprehension makes a painful home in my neck and shoulders. “Don’t worry about that. You’ve done a lot already.”

What can I say to make him ask me out?

Mari’s brilliant smile comes to mind.

I exhale slowly. “If you want to know, you’ve got your arbitrary A+.”

“What?!” Rian breaks into laughter. This particular expression of happiness causes my stomach to tighten with

anxiety. “School supplies get me top marks? I would have bought out an entire paper factory for you when we first met had I known.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Why is this so hard? “No, the school supplies were still just a good deed to win my approval.”

“Huh? What the hell did I do to get an A+?”

Is there any chance he doesn’t know about what a positive effect he’s had on Mari? Maybe I shouldn’t tell him, then. I’d very much like for him to keep inspiring Mari, even if he doesn’t want to go out with me.

Oh, God. I want him to go out with me.

“Does it matter?” I chew on my lower lip. Should I just ask him out myself? No, that’s too forward. Rian probably gets a hundred date invitations from his fans every hour. “It’s better if you don’t know.”

“But I want to know. I don’t have long before I need to go back to the set. This gold astronaut costume I’m stuck in is getting really hot.”

Though my insides are shaking like leaves in a storm, I can’t help being amused by the mental picture.

“Astronaut?” I grin. “What are you filming?”

“Something fabulous for my birthday.”

His birthday is the thirteenth of this month, if memory serves me right. It’s been about two hours since I last looked at his Wiki page.

Rian sounds more like a charming, suave entertainer as he talks about work. “The segment we’re filming is a surreal mixture of art and comedy. It’s going to be a vignette of me

through the years celebrating my birthday, but something catastrophic happens to me each time I'm around cake. I was dressed like a baby earlier, for example, and someone dropped the cake on my head."

My smile never leaves my face while he rambles. He's so passionate about his job.

Rian continues. "For my fortieth birthday, I'm floating in space with cake. I'll have to make the decision to cut the tether to save one of us. Now, our budget is big, but it's not 'Actually Send Rian to Space' enormous. So I'm about to do a shot where I'm dangling from a harness with a green screen behind me. My astronaut costume is at least gold."

A chuckle escapes me. "Sounds like it matches your loafers."

"Oh, I'm wearing those bad boys in every scene."

I want to see those ugly sequin-covered shoes in person. I want to see Rian. So bad.

My desires take over the thinking for me. "Are you going to wear them when we go out on a date?"

There. The words are out. I can't stuff them back in my mouth, no matter how much I want to.

Silence falls between us. I count the seconds in my head, afraid of the way my heart is about to start hurting.

He's going to tell me he only likes women. He's going to reject me, probably while laughing at me for thinking I had a chance with him.

"Are we going on a date?" Rian asks.

To my shock, he sounds delighted.

“Uh...” I stare at my television. Tanjiro and Nezuko are locked in a battle with a demon. I wish they could squash the anxiety preventing me from thinking clearly. “Well...”

“Are you as interested in me as I am in you?”

Wait. Did he just say that? Hope glitters along the edges of my frayed nerves.

“I am very interested in you.” I kiss my last sliver of pride goodbye. “But what way do you mean? I already told you that I don’t want to be a part of some scheme to boost your image.”

Rian sighs. “I have no image to elevate, and I’m not interested in using you. Let me be real with you, okay? I’m a closeted pansexual man who has been hardcore into you since we met. I very much want to go out with you.”

“Really?”

Can’t believe I studied literature in college I worked my ass off to pay for and became a well-read English teacher just so I could eke out a two-syllable response to a cute guy’s confession.

“Really.” Rian punctuates his affirmation with a soft laugh. “I know. You’re probably picturing a shiny stick of butter trying to woo you. Totally not attractive. But I need you to believe me when I say that I don’t want to hang around you as a publicity stunt. I want to see you because you’re the hottest person I’ve ever laid eyes on, and I think we could have fun talking about *Naruto*.”

I close my eyes and hold my breath. What can I say that isn’t just a bunch of happy screaming?

Every negative feeling inside me has been replaced with pure glee. “I don’t know why you’d go out with a boring

teacher, but I want to see you. Let's go out as soon as possible."

"Tomorrow morning? Coffee somewhere?" Rian asks.

He wants to go somewhere in public? Didn't he just say that he's in the closet?

"I could do tomorrow." I rub my chest. "Won't you be asleep, Mr. Late Night Television?"

"I'll wake up for you. I woke up for you when we met at the bodega, didn't I?"

Though Rian might be dressed like an astronaut, I'm the one who feels like he's floating in space.

And then I crash to the earth when I realize that going out with Rian means getting photographed by the paparazzi.

Will it be possible to keep what I'm starting with Rian away from my father's radar?



I THINK I'VE HAD TEN HOURS OF SLEEP THIS WEEK, BUT I don't care because *I am going out with Darrell Stanley.*

Since Vera already knows I'm talking to someone, I don't hesitate to videocall her after I get out of the shower. Vera claims it's impossible to snooze past five in the morning once you've turned sixty.

"Christ, Rian, tell me you're wearing a towel." She sets her phone down. When she picks it back up, she has a lit cigarette in her hand. "Those perky nipples could poke someone's eye out."

"Of course I'm wearing a towel." I walk into the second bedroom that I've converted into a closet. My apartment is filled with clothes I never wear, but I'm not one to turn down gifts from sponsors or friends. "What should I wear to meet someone at a coffee shop?"

Vera snorts. "Another outfit? Was she not impressed with your casual jogging attire I put together for you last weekend?"

I work my jaw. Do I dare tell Vera that she's using the wrong pronouns? Can I trust Vera to keep this part of me a secret?

How long can I really stay closeted, anyway? Why do I even care at this point? In the past, I never dated anyone except women, so I never felt the need to tell anyone I'm pansexual. Didn't want to deal with anyone calling my feelings fake.

Now that I'm going on my first date with a guy...

Vera sticks a pin in the balloon of self-doubt I was blowing up. "It's cold outside. Let's see what scarves you have. It'll help hide your long neck."

"I'm a Goodwin. Every part of me is long." I amble to the scarf rack. "Why does my neck need to be covered up?"

"It'll help to hide any bite marks you might come home with. Keep them low so I can hide them with makeup easier on Monday."

I stop in my tracks. "It's just coffee!"

Vera shrugs.

The idea of Darrell's teeth along my skin hadn't quite crossed my mind before, but it's a tantalizing idea. Still, I'm almost forty. I'm too old for hickeys.

God, what if this date *does* escalate past coffee and a light conversation? Our hands could brush against each other under the table. Our fingers could slowly intertwine, or he could rest his hand on my thigh. Darrell's eyes could shift to sultry, prompting me to ask if we should get a second cup back at my place.

Should I get the housekeeper over here while I'm out? Should I get condoms and lube delivered discreetly? Do I know such a service? Do I even know how to have sex anymore?

Calm down, Rian.

Darrell doesn't seem like the type to jump into bed. Hell, I don't take my pants off quickly except when I need to change outfits during commercial breaks. Darrell's probably the kind of guy who likes a long, proper courtship before he even kisses someone.

The thought makes my heart flip. It's going to be exciting to find out what sort of pace Darrell likes.

After a little more squabbling with Vera, I end up leaving my apartment dressed like a Tweety Bird who has just decided to become a lumberjack—navy denim jeans, yellow plaid shirt, yellow beanie, and black boots that match my black denim jacket. No scarf, because I'm not afraid of showing off my long neck. Not like I'm going to do anything to make me hide it.

I message the housekeeper and ask her to come over only because I was due for a cleaning. No one needs to have bagel crumbs and discarded sketch ideas scattered all over their kitchen.

The coffee shop Darrell chose is booming with business when I arrive. I guess it's true that Little Italy never sleeps.

Despite not wearing my loafers and hiding most of my curls, several people recognize me right away. I text Darrell and let him know I've arrived, then I start greeting everyone who wants a few seconds with me.

"Please don't post this on social media without a filter," I joke with a family. "I don't have on any makeup, and I only got three hours of sleep last night."

The elderly woman at the table gasps. "You should sleep more. You're going to make your mother worry. How is she

doing? Does she still meet with her mini-golf club?”

The reference to my mother makes me smile. The public hasn't seen her, but they've heard her voice enough to make her a familiar figure. If people had to choose between me and her, they'd probably pick her, and I can't blame them for that.

Growing up, it was just my mother and me. We only saw the other Goodwins during Christmas since most of them never got over Mom's decision to raise me by herself. There's something wonderful about so many people inviting us both into their homes now.

“They still get together, but it's too cold for mini-golf now.” I pat the elderly woman on the shoulder. “They just play checkers and eat squeaky cheese.”

I turn to the kid waiting for a selfie. As she snaps the picture, I realize Darrell is sitting at a table in the corner with some manga and two cups of coffee. He must know I'm here, but he's not facing the commotion.

Yikes. Is he annoyed?

I finish up the selfies and handshakes, then I hurry to join him. People look at us for a few seconds as I slide into the chair opposite Darrell, but they go back to their own business soon enough. It's New York. Plenty of celebrities to go around.

“Hi, sorry I'm a little late.” I remove my beanie. “I, uh...”

Darrell looks up from his book with an arched eyebrow. “You technically arrived on time. It just took you a few extra minutes to find me.”

I bury my face in my hands and mumble another apology. After a second, I peek through my fingers.

Somehow, Darrell has shown up looking hotter than ever. His orange sweater clings tightly to his body, and his beard has some wiry scruff to it for once. He smells like the essence of fall with his apple and cinnamon cologne. Maybe there are some notes of honey too?

My gaze lingers on the knitted golden scarf around his neck. Did he wear it because it's cold, or is there another reason for it?

I clear my throat and glance at the cup closest to me. "What kind of coffee did you get?"

"Americano." He gestures to the creamer and sugar packets on the table. "If you want to jazz it up with creamer or something, you'll have to go back to the counter."

"Oh, I'll drink it straight. Thanks." I take a sip. It's still hot and delicious. The best I ever had, even, though the visuals before me are probably enhancing the taste. "Do you come here often?"

"No, this is my first time here. I thought a place in this neighborhood would be more your style." He rubs the back of his neck. His expression turns adorably sheepish as he bites his lip. "I didn't know it'd be so crowded at this hour. I should have researched better. It's not exactly your fault you're late."

He's so cute. I want to melt.

I flash him a smile. "Do you struggle with apologies? Not that you have to apologize since I should have explained to everyone I had someone to meet, but it sounds like you're trying to say sorry."

A scowl I'm familiar with crosses Darrell. It does little to diminish my growing cheer. There is no other man in the

world who can make my pulse race just by narrowing his intense eyes and pressing his gorgeous lips together.

Darrell sets his book on top of the small stack. The books are earlier volumes of *Naruto*, complete with tell-tale signs of love from the worn corners and creased spines. He could have just as easily pulled these from my own personal library.

I take another sip. “Do you always bring books on dates?”

“If we have a shared interest, yes.” Darrell wraps his hands around his cup. “Thought you would prefer manga over romance, although I firmly believe everyone should read Talia Hibbert. Reading gives us something to do in case we run out of things to talk about.”

I grin. “Do you often run out of things to talk about?”

He nods.

“Great news—you’ll never run out of things to talk about with me.” I waggle my eyebrows. “I have no idea how to shut up.”

“I’ve noticed. I’m beginning to wonder if this conversation would be better on your couch. And I don’t mean the one you have at home. Are you nervous about being out in public with me?”

His pointed comment causes my mouth to come to a grinding halt.

He’s probably right to feel that way. It’s impossible for me to turn off my host persona when I’m trying to get to know someone better. Well before I took over for my predecessor five years ago, I filled in for other talk show hosts and sometimes invited guests on stage during my years of stand-up. I even recorded pre-show interviews for my college plays.

Half of my life has been spent refining this part of me.

“I’m not nervous about what other people think about us being together.” My cheeks grow noticeably hotter than my beverage. “I’m really awkward at normal conversation. You should have been there when my ex-wife announced she wanted a divorce. I sat down with her on the couch, handed her some coffee, and then the Velvet Fighters started playing.”

Darrell stares at me, blinking enough times to make me notice how much personality his short eyelashes have.

Was it weird to bring up Adaline?

“Are we talking about our past already?” Darrell mutters.

Oh, God. It’s weird. I should have messaged Mari last night and asked for her conversation tips.

He drums his fingers along the table, avoiding my eyes. “You don’t really talk about yourself on your show. If you share a personal anecdote, it’s either a one-line response bouncing off something your guest said, or it’s masked by the sound of your mother asking why you would do such a thing.”

“Is the key to a normal conversation to talk about myself?” I sit sideways in my chair and lean against the wall, letting my legs stretch out a bit without bothering anyone. “Should I keep talking about my ex-wife?”

“Maybe not her specifically.” Darrell’s tone is suddenly soft, almost shy. “I’m just curious about you.”

Darrell really does like me, doesn’t he? What did I do to deserve such an amazing man’s attention?

“It’s a shame that the best way to move forward now is for me to talk about me.” I twirl a lock of hair around my finger and wink. I keep my voice low, but playful. “Because it

sounds like you have been paying attention to me and my show. I'm dying to know why a guy who said none of my segments are funny watches me so closely."

The sharp glare that crosses Darrell's face tightens my chest. Did I go too far with teasing him? Was I too presumptive? I quickly start downing the rest of my drink.

"I maintain my opinion your segments aren't funny." Darrell props his elbow on the table and rests his chin in his hand. His piercing eyes meets mine as the faintest smile ghosts his lips. "You yourself are kind of funny. You're like a paper doll. I'm continuously impressed you don't blow away when a breeze rolls through your outdoor segments."

Paper doll. I nearly choke on my drink. Some of theAmericano dribbles out of me, promising me it'll do everything in its power to keep me from looking remotely attractive. A few cafe patrons snap pictures of me and my graceful social skills.

I wipe my mouth with a napkin, laughing. "Please talk a little quieter. If anyone around us hears you, they'll want you to host my show instead of me."

Darrell's smile widens. His eyes never leave me while I clean up my mess, making me more flustered.

The audacity of this man. How dare he be so damn charming with his humorous remarks and quiet gazes that make me feel like we're the only two people in the world!

"Don't you know that's why I wear my shiny shoes?" I fold my used napkin and slip it under my cup's saucer. We all know I'm blushing, so I don't dare to break eye contact with Darrell. "Each sequin weighs about half a pound. My loafers keep me grounded."

However drawn I am to Darrell's judgmental frowns and downturned lips, I'm just as enamored by the easygoing, flirty teacher before me. For every second that Darrell keeps smiling at me, the more I want nothing in my life except for this moment to never end.

"Want another cup?" Darrell eases out of his chair. "I could use a refill."

"Could I just get a water instead?" I run my hand along my chin that's still sticky. I'm too irresponsible for big people beverages before noon, apparently. "Hey, hold on. I should be paying. You bought the first round."

Darrell grabs our cups. "And risk you spending twenty minutes talking to your fans? Besides, I think I can afford a water."

I bury my face in my hands. "Sorry."

"It's fine. You like being a celebrity, don't you?"

"Huh?" I wipe my chin again, determined to maintain *some* integrity. It fails. "Yeah, it's fun. I get to entertain people, people give me lots of compliments, and my mom calls me every day to tell me all the Baxter, Minnesota gossip instead of worrying if I'm able to pay my bills. The only downside is that literally everyone in the world has seen my ugly driver's license photo since it went viral."

It's so horrible that we air it on the show anytime we play the game where I'm not allowed to laugh for five minutes. The picture attached to my government-issued piece of plastic always makes me lose.

He chuckles. "Yeah, I've seen it. I'll bring some extra napkins too."

"Thanks."

Once he heads for the counter, I check my phone. I doubt I have many messages. Most people know I'm usually asleep at this hour. Still, curiosity kills the comedian.

Great. The group chat with the writers has exploded. Apparently, the original main guest for my birthday episode has checked into rehab. Good for her, of course. Asking for help isn't easy, even for celebrities.

But I need to find a replacement as soon as possible. *That* sucks. We have a multitude of options, sure, but viewers don't turn in if it's someone they're not excited about.

A new message from Lynette flashes across the screen.

Jayden-James's assistant just called me! She says he wants to talk about guesting!

Wait. Wait. Wait.

Could I actually get *the* Jayden-James Hancock on my birthday episode? Our ratings would explode. I could become a real contender for the 11:35 time slot in a few years.

Darrell returns, slipping back into his chair quietly. I flash him a grin as I ask Lynette to call me later.

"Thanks for the water." I set my phone down and grab the bottle from Darrell. Our fingers brush against each for the briefest of seconds, but it's enough to stir my earlier fantasies.

For someone who is about to turn forty, the merest physical contact sure has me feeling twenty again.

"No problem." Darrell gestures to my phone. "You have another message."

I check it and instantly wish I hadn't.

Jayden-James is inviting us to brunch at his place! Put some pants on! Fancy ones, please

“Is there a problem?” Darrell asks. “Your face says there is.”

I gnash my teeth together. “One of my guests had to drop out, so I need to woo someone else to join. In person.”

Hardness sets into Darrell’s expression. All traces of his earlier humor turn into a distant memory.

“I’m sorry.” I spring to my feet. “Could we meet again? I want to have the chance to properly prove I’m too boring to keep meeting.”

I want to prove I’m more than that guy in the suit and sequins you see on TV.

Darrell glances around the cafe for a moment before he responds. “Only if you pick the spot next time. Maybe somewhere with less people.”

“My place?” I pull the beanie over my curls. “No one is ever there. Not even me.”

He tilts his head to the side. “That’d be fine.”

The world around me stops as I process the implication of what I’ve just offered, and a fire sparks in my chest.

“Really?” I grip the water bottle. “You realize I actually have to be there, right? It’s not fun to come to my apartment alone and peruse my sock drawer while I juggle bowling pins on the street.”

“Can you actually juggle bowling pins?” Darrell asks.

“I can juggle one a time really well.”

“Well, the only reason I want to come over is to see what you read.” Darrell picks up a book. “If your library is boring, I’ll leave right away.”

His stern face suggests he’s not kidding, but I can’t help laughing. Here I was, thinking he thought I was only interested in sex, and he just wants to see my library.

I’ve never been judged by an English literature teacher. The prospect is as exciting as sex. In fact, the prospect of a night with Darrell is just as exciting as brunch with a billionaire who could boost my ratings.

Is there any way I can chase after both Darrell and my career goals?



BY THE TIME I GET HOME FROM MY BRIEF FIRST DATE WITH Rian, a picture of us has already been posted online. The photo focuses on Rian's wide smile, and the caption compliments his fashion choices. While I'm in the frame, only my arms can be seen. Most people wouldn't know it's me.

Well, it probably won't take the students or my roommates long to figure it out. They'd recognize one of my cardigans from anywhere.

Hopefully, that's the only picture that gets posted. It's still hard to believe that Rian wanted our first date to be in public. I had always figured that celebrities preferred to meet in a hotel somewhere, especially with someone who might cause a scandal. Like a public school teacher that lives paycheck to paycheck.

...who is also Hollywood actor Gerald Lafontaine's secret son.

I set my books down on the kitchen counter and open the fridge. To my disappointment, there aren't any leftovers from breakfast or lunch. Joaquín usually makes food for me if I'm not home on Saturdays. He cooks; I do the dishes when I get home. If Troy or Andy made something, I usually clean up for

them while I'm at it. They tend to declutter the living room for me since I'm prone to leaving my books or lesson plans there.

Our cramped apartment has a good system. We take care of each other pretty well.

Actually, now that I look at the sink, there aren't any dishes in it.

I peer in my room. No Joaquín. His bed is tidy, and there's a lingering waft of cologne. Guess he had a man to see too.

Damn. I had kind of wanted to talk about *my* date.

Should I text him? No. It'd be ridiculous to actually type out what had just transpired. *I had coffee with Rian Goodwin. We're going to have a second date at his place. Did you know that he blushes easily without all that TV makeup?*

I bite my lip, curious about what all I'm going to see at Rian's place. While I *am* interested in his library, I'm around books literally every day of my life.

It could be a lot of fun to see what Rian looks like without clothes. To hear what he sounds like when his cock is getting teased. To learn what he feels like beneath me after I've finished blowing his mind.

We're definitely going to have sex at his place, aren't we? Why else would he invite me there? Will we fuck as quickly as possible, or will we take our time and indulge in all the physical releases we both need?

My own dick springs to life as I imagine the possibilities. I close the door to my room and lock it. Joaquín won't be home anytime soon, surely. And I probably won't need much time with myself. Not when I'm thinking about Rian getting down on his knees and telling some bad joke before he sucks me off with his gorgeous mouth.

I chuckle as I undo my belt. Rian's totally the type to talk during sex. My stomach flutters as I think about what possible quips Mr. Entertainer will have as he gets naked.

We'll probably laugh a lot while we fuck.

Why is that thought such a turn-on?

Before I can slip off my pants, my phone starts ringing. I curse myself as I rummage through my cardigan pockets for it. No amount of horniness can cancel out my inability to ignore my phone.

But what if it's Rian? What if he's done with his meeting? What if he can't stop thinking about me and wants to meet up as soon as possible so we can give in to pleasure?

Jesus, I can't believe how much I want that goofball.

As I stare at the number on the screen, any interest in masturbation dies.

I hadn't saved *him* as a contact, but I remember his unique area code. Somewhere in California, probably.

Why is my father calling me?

The impulse to ignore jumps through me, but I can't. Not when he's paying Mama's bills. If I upset him and he cuts her off, then I'll have to fight like a dog to take him to court. And I'll probably lose because I can't afford a good lawyer.

If only I made more money. If only I could take care of Mama by myself.

I answer, but I don't say anything right away. I just kick off my pants and look for some comfortable sweats to lounge in. After being a proud fool who paid for a few expensive coffees, I don't have money to go out and do anything else today.

Going to spend the rest of the weekend watching anime, grading papers, and eating peanut butter sandwiches.

Maybe I'll crack open the cheap vodka in the back of the fridge after I talk to Gerry.

"Darrell?" My father's gruff voice causes me to flinch. "You're there, right?"

"Yeah," I reply.

"Hey, buddy!"

I silently gag as I grab some gray sweats from my drawer. "Why are you calling?"

"Now, now, there's no need to talk to your old man that way."

Is he kidding me?!

"My apologies, *Gerry*." I grit my teeth and slide into my sweats. "Wherefore didst thee calleth me?"

"Acting like a comedian now that you've been hanging out with one?" Gerry asks in a low, pointed voice.

His question chills me to the point that I nearly drop my phone. "Excuse me?"

"You were spotted at a coffee shop in Little Italy with Rian Goodwin this morning." Gerry clears his throat. "Are you planning to be on his show again? Last time we talked, you had said you had no interest in the spotlight."

"Rian and I were just talking."

And laughing. And having fun.

A ribbon of desire to see Rian again wraps around my heart.

Wait. The only photo posted of us that I found was one where I was barely visible. There's no way my father would know what kind of clothes I own.

“How did you know I met with Rian earlier?”

“Well, I have to confess something important.”

That ribbon of desire morphs into a strand of broken glass and pricks me. Pain radiates through my chest as I wait for Gerry to keep talking.

“You see, son, ever since you made ripples in the news, I've been keeping an eye on you.”

“Excuse me?” The glass sinks in deeper and starts ripping my heart apart. “An eye? From Hollywood? Aren't you busy filming a movie with Hana Stone?”

“Oh, I'm still here. But...”

Dammit. He's got one of his goons following me. Glad I didn't have lunch yet.

“Why are you sticking your nose into my business?” I stomp over to Joaquín's DVD shelf and start scanning the titles. “I'm not going to out myself as your illegitimate son. Don't fucking worry about it.”

“Oh, hey, buddy, don't be that way.” God, I wish I could reach through the phone and strangle Gerry's saccharine voice. “I just want to be prepared if you're going to be spotted in public with someone of Rian's status. It's fine if you're chasing some attention, but if people start looking at you and thinking that you seem familiar...”

“What? You want to send me money so I can get some plastic surgery?”

I finally find the movie I wanted and grab the case. My father's face encompasses the whole cover. His horrific, asshole face.

The same face that I will have in twenty years.

“Not at all!” Gerry lets out the most insincere guffaw. “You should know I'm proud you inherited so many of my strong features. But it's going to be difficult to get my wife and the public to understand that I have a son from out of nowhere.”

I throw the DVD on the floor and step on it. It's the twenty-first century. Absolutely no one gives a damn if a man has a child out of wedlock. His wife and their kids—my mildly famous half-siblings—will get over it. Gerry's just afraid that what he did to Mama will get unearthed. Someone doing a background check on me will eventually find the police reports and court records.

But...

I'm also afraid of what will happen if Gerry's past as an abuser gets exposed. People may cancel Gerald Lafontaine from pop culture, but they can't erase his inherently vile spirit. I know what he did to Mama with his fists and money.

He's capable of so much harm.

“Don't worry. I'll only meet Rian in private from now on. You'll get your wish. I have no desire to upend my life with a multitude of cameras. Is there anything else you want to discuss?” I pick up the bent case and pry it open. The shattered disc fragments reflect my broken self. “I've got some papers to grade.”

I can practically taste the satisfaction in my father's voice as he says, “Darrell, my son, you're such a good teacher and

role model. It should stay that way.”

The meaning of his last sentence comes across loud and clear.

When the call ends, I do the only thing I can do—I scream.



THE VELVET FIGHTERS'S USUAL OPENING NUMBER SINGS OVER the roaring applause as the announcer introduces me. I burst through the curtain and wave to my eager audience.

“Hello! Good evening!” I blow kisses to the camera in front of me. Felicity mouths the word “gross”—I cherish her grimaces that usually only I can see. “You’re never going to believe what day it is.”

On cue, the audience yells, “Your birthday!”

I feign surprise. “Oh, wow. You all know already. Okay. Well, there’s probably going to be a cake with sparkling candles, right? And you’re all going to sing to me?”

I rub my hands and look around. As expected, no cake or sparkling candles come out. The audience, as they have been instructed, falls silent.

The executive producer steps onto the stage and whispers something in my ear before stepping away. This guy only cares about looking good on TV. He’ll use any chance he has to make a cameo.

“Oh, I’ve been informed that I need to proceed with my opening monologue.” I adjust my tie. “No cake. Okay, that’s how it’s going to be today.”

The audience laughs without any instructions. From here, they're allowed to be as loud or as quiet as they want.

After my opening monologue, we start filming my interview with Jayden-James. Holy shit, I still can't believe we actually got *the* Jayden-James Hancock.

I introduce him, the audience goes wild as he shyly saunters onto the set, and we shake hands. Jayden-James is truly a fashion icon—he's wearing a simple black T-shirt and black jeans, but his studded, glittery, rainbow jacket puts my expensive tailored suit to shame.

“That is quite the apparel you're sporting there,” I joke as I take my spot behind the desk. He sits down on the couch and flashes me a small, amused smile. “Did a biker gang and the cast of *My Little Pony* have a baby?”

“Do you want me to make one for you?” he asks. “They'd go well with your shoes.”

The audience laughs. I stick out my leg so everyone can see my loafer.

“Do you have a problem with my shoes?” I gesture to my foot. “I've always wanted an industry professional's opinion on these bad boys.”

“They're interesting.” Jayden-James scoots further down the couch. “Better viewed from a distance.”

I chuckle and hide my leg behind the desk. “Wait, come back.”

We chat for a while about his new fashion line for college students and the student loan crisis. Then an army of clothing racks rolls onto the set.

“Hey, you don’t mind if I give you a makeover, right?” I climb out of my seat. “I brought a few things from home.”

By a few things, I mean my entire wardrobe—spandex, wigs, skinny jeans, holey shirts from college, boxer-briefs, everything except my shoes. The crew purchased a dozen cheap knockoffs of my signature loafers so Jayden-James couldn’t get out of wearing the eyesores.

Jayden-James scrunches his nose. “You actually own these?”

His genuine disgust almost breaks me. He knew about the sketch idea, but we didn’t script any lines for him. We figured his natural reactions would be best, and they definitely are.

“Aren’t they great?” I grab the first thing I see—the coffee-stained hoodie from one of the many times I humiliated myself in front of Darrell. A flush of heat climbs up my neck as I realize Darrell might watch this later. “The dry cleaners couldn’t do anything for my accident, but I think it adds some character, don’t you agree?”

The last of Jayden-James’s reserved demeanor disappears as he goes through my wardrobe. “You aren’t dating anyone, are you?”

The creeping flush wraps itself around my entire body and squeezes until steam leaks out of my ears. Oh, God. *Are* these clothes unsuitable for dates?

We continue with the shenanigans, Jayden-James puts up with my terrible outfit ideas, and the whole audience practically screams with delight the entire time. The rest of the show is just as much of a hit, including the filmed segment. And, of course, an enormous cake for me to actually enjoy is rolled out at the very end. Everyone in the audience gets to go

home with a replica mini-cake (a better idea than last year's coffee mugs with my horrific driver's license photo on it).

After the taping is over, I head back to my dressing room. The studio has a birthday party planned for me at a nearby restaurant, one I'm stoked about. Lots of friends, colleagues, and network executives will probably swing by for a drink. Birthdays are a great reminder of how fun it is to be a celebrity.

To my surprise, my dressing room isn't empty.

I lean against the door after I close it, taking in the stunning woman splayed across my couch. Long, chestnut brown hair spills close to the ground as Adaline lounges in the dressing room like we're still married. Unlike her heehaw brother, Adaline's latest fashion aesthetic pays homage to the 1950's with her wide circle skirt and a crimson sweater that highlights the pink hues of her pale skin.

It's been a long time since she's been in my part of the universe. We've been meeting at her place or in the courtroom since we separated.

"I'm used to an old lady wearing cigarette smoke when I come in here, not a young heiress decked in pearls." I leave the door unlocked as I step away from it. If Adaline had wanted privacy, she would have arranged a meeting at her place. "What brings you here on this blessed anniversary of the day my mother kicked me out of her uterus?"

"Oh, I'm not that young." Adaline sits up straight. "I'll be kissing forty soon myself."

"Kissing forty men, maybe." I meander to the vanity. "You, however, are ageless. Just look at your outfit. You bought those kitten heels in 1952 yourself, didn't you?"

Adaline shakes her head. “How long can you give me?”

“For what?” I start removing my makeup with a wipe.
“Did something go wrong with selling the cabin?”

“I have a business proposal for you.”

I lose interest in cleaning my face as I catch Adaline’s eyes in the mirror’s reflection. Those amber beauties stare at me like I’m capable of conquering the world.

It’s a look I have missed seeing.

Adaline crosses her legs. “Acting is fun, but it’s not something that’s going to work for me long-term. Ageism and sexism in Hollywood and all that.”

“Fucking patriarchy.”

“Fucking patriarchy,” she echoes with a wry smile. “But an opportunity has fallen into my lap to become a producer for made-for-television movies, among other things.”

I lean against the vanity, facing her. “That’s pretty cool. Do you want me to write some scripts or something? I’m not sure I’m cut out for those Christmas movies where a prince in disguise woos the small town veterinarian after she cures his dog’s cancer.”

“I thought we could do more than Christmas movies.”

“Chanukah movies? Probably should hire your uncle to write those scripts, not this ex-Evangelical Minnesotan who is still a tiny bit afraid of Jesus. If he’s real, he has a *lot* of dirt on me.”

A secret sparkles in Adaline’s eyes as she keeps smiling. Her expression alone causes my skin to tingle.

“Out with it,” I plead. “You know I’m impatient.”

“You’ve been doing a lot of wonderful things lately,” Adaline says. “Stephen was telling me about how you’re mentoring the teenager from your Super-Rian segment.”

“Mentoring?” I scoff. *That’s* a fancy word. One that should never be used in the same sentence as me. “It’s not like that with Mari.”

“If you say so.” Adaline fiddles with her bracelet. “In any case, you’re doing all sorts of things for your career.”

A sudden storm drowns the budding flowers of anticipation.

“That’s *not* what’s going on with Mari.” I cut her a glare. “Whatever you heard from Stephen is false. She’s helping me with—”

The thought of Darrell causes me to bite my lip. Coming out to my ex-wife might be safe, but the idea of talking about Darrell when everything is still so uncertain is more terrifying than letting a tarantula stick its leg in my mouth.

Adaline smirks. “When I was offered the chance to buy a television network, I knew I needed someone determined to make memorable, top quality content. That’s why I’m turning to the most determined man I’ve ever met to be the network’s CEO.”

Wait. Did she just say CEO? I gape at her, at a total loss for words.

“You don’t have to make a decision tonight. It’s not one I would want you to rush to say yes to.” Adaline glances around the dressing room. “Your contract here ends in the spring, right? I can’t say it would be wise to continue doing this show while creating new shows, but you’re not a man who’s fond of sleeping.”

“Creating new shows?” I blink. “What kind of shows?”

“Whatever you think would be entertaining. Funny stuff, heartwarming fluff, all of it.” Adaline flashes me a smile. This one is sweet, a reminder of what used to exist between us. “We weren’t a good married couple, but I think with your brains and my money, we could be excellent business partners. We could even call the network after you. Goodwin TV? Rian Revolution?”

My heart thumps at the idea of having a television channel. That’s huge. That’s something none of my peers have.

I fold my arms across my chest and remind myself to breathe. “Where are you getting this network from, exactly?”

“Laytonpolis Productions is deep in the red and looking to sell off some assets. Starship Engine TV is one of said assets.”

“Isn’t it risky to run a television network in this age of streaming?”

“So we’ll stream as well.” Adaline stands up. “Your image is popular enough now that we could gather quite the following. Think about it, all right? We should have brunch soon to talk more details. This weekend?”

She kisses me on the cheek, wishes me a happy birthday, and leaves me alone with those three little letters dancing in my head.

CEO. The CEO of an entertainment revolution. A successful channel would cement my legacy.

The goalposts in my imagination twinkle. They’re the furthest they’ve ever been. Is it possible to catch up to them?

My phone buzzes. Ack. Probably the crew wondering when we’re going to head to the restaurant.

For the second time tonight, I'm surprised. It's Darrell.

Happy birthday, Rian! I'm sure you're busy, but I wanted to let you know I'm thinking of you.

Those few words galvanize me. My mind spirals with possible responses as I pounce to the door and lock it. It's rude to keep everyone waiting, yes, but I need a few moments alone.

Ugh, where's my romance broker when I'm in utter peril like this? What kind of message could I send that would let Darrell know I'm dying to find out what else he's thinking about?

Mari's patented eye roll flutters in my mind. She'd probably just tell me to be honest.

Worth a try.

Thank you! I type. What else are you thinking about? I'm dying to know.

With my newfound nerves of steel, I press send. I'm soon rewarded with a most delightful response.

I guess I'm thinking about when you are going to invite me to your apartment for our second date.

I jump up and down, moving in sync with the butterflies in my stomach. My head bumps the ceiling during my celebration, but I don't feel a thing. Darrell still wants to see me!

My fingers fly as I check my schedule. Saturday. Even if Adaline wants brunch on Saturday to talk more about this network idea, I have the whole evening free. Surely I can party hard enough tonight to avoid any new activity invitations for a week.

What about Saturday? I ask. *I know it's the third Saturday of the month, so you'll be busy during the day, but maybe we could have dinner after that?*

He replies. *Good memory. That works.*

Yes! Being straightforward actually has its benefits! I can't wait to tell Mari.

Another set of goalposts pops up in my head. Darrell stands between them instead of the vague career dreams blob that hangs out with the existing poles.

However, the goalposts are on opposite sides of the field, and I'm on the fifty-yard line. It's impossible to run to both, isn't it?

Another message pops up on my phone from Darrell. *Don't you dare buy a bunch of new books in order to impress me when I inspect your library.*

I laugh and promise him I won't. The sublimity filling every ounce of my being reaches its apex as an idea dawns on me to make this Saturday especially special.

Fuck it. These goalposts are in *my* imagination. I can move them closer to each other. Look, I just did it. Ta-da!

I can pursue both Darrell *and* my legacy.



I HATE MY FATHER FOR MAKING ME TERRIFIED OF GOING anywhere. Even here in the school cafeteria, working with the students on this month's donations to the women's shelter, I keep looking up. Keep looking for some sign that my father has people following me.

With Thanksgiving around the corner, the students have been focused on collecting the trappings for a perfect holiday meal. They're working hard. They're laughing and having fun, but they're also devoted to helping others. The third Saturday of the month means as much to them as it does to me.

I don't want them to feel unsafe.

Should I cancel my date tonight? Aren't there easier people to date? This is New York City. The dating pool for gay men is as wide as Lake Erie, despite what Joaquín might say.

Jocelyn and Butterfly approach me with their binders. They're in charge of packaging and labeling individualized donation boxes.

"Need to print something off at the library?" I reach into my pocket for the keys.

Butterfly breaks into a fit of giggles. "No, the pizza's here."

“What’s funny about pizza?” I check the time on my phone. The food arrived a little earlier than it usually does. “I gave Mari and Little C the money to pay for it. Was it not enough?”

Jocelyn hugs her binder close to her chest. “Mr. Stanley, you should see the pizza guy.”

My pathetically small appetite vanishes. Is there something off about him? Is he one of my father’s goons?

“Did Mari and Little C already go out?” I ask as I head for the door. Dammit, I shouldn’t have let the students get the pizza by themselves. What if one of my father’s creeps is harassing them?

The second I’m outside, my fears die. The jittery anxiety I’ve been nursing all day melts with the brilliance of the fall sun and the pizza guy’s smile.

The tall, pale pizza guy with curly brown hair and gold sequin shoes.

He shouldn’t be here. Someone’s going to report it to my father, somehow.

But the sight of Rian in a pizza shop uniform fills me with unprecedented joy.

The students surround Rian, pummeling him with questions and greetings. They’re all stoked to see him. He tosses me a wink before he heads inside with the teens.

The only student who stays outside with me is Mari.

She hands me the envelope of money. “Mr. Goodwin paid for today’s lunch.”

Warmth swells through my chest as I tuck the envelope into my wallet. “Did you help him make this happen?”

Mari's pressed lips and playful eyes confirm my suspicion.

The students are all over Rian during lunch. He's more than happy to check out their videos and skit ideas. A wide, sincere smile stays plastered on his face the whole time, except when someone mentions Stephen Polinsky's new song. Rian's apparently not a fan of "Howdy, Milady."

While the teens get back to work, I finally get a moment to grab Rian by the sleeve and steal a few minutes with him in the hallway. His goofy, gorgeous smile remains, even when I'm trying to muster my best scowl.

How come he looks so cute in this attire? The black polo shirt and matching baseball cap suits him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"You don't mind having both lunch and dinner with me, do you?" Rian rubs the back of his neck. "You complained about the delivery fee the last time I was here with the kids. Thought I'd save you a few bucks."

"No, I don't mind." I fold my arms across my chest. "It's great to see you. I just... What if someone saw you?"

"Who cares?" Rian's bright expression flattens. "Wait. Do you think I'm doing this as a publicity stunt? That's not what this is. I promise."

What do I say? Yes, I'm worried about cameras, but not for the reason he thinks.

"I just wanted to see you as soon as I could," Rian says in a low voice. "As Celine Dion might ask, is that all right?"

I bite my lip. He's genuinely interested in me, isn't he?

I just want to have some fun with Rian Goodwin. My father's cloud shouldn't stop me.

“Are you going to wear that for our date?” I gesture to his outfit. I’m not exactly dressed for this evening, either. Just sporting some old jeans and a white button-down shirt. Hadn’t expected my six o’clock date to start at noon.

Rian snorts. “Did you watch the episode that aired on my birthday? Jayden-James Hancock said I don’t own anything sexy. I figured if I can’t be sexy, I might as well be funny. Is it working?”

“I suppose.” I grin. “When I was planning a date with the oddly attractive host of *Burning the Midnight Oil*, I had expected a suit and tie.”

“Oddly attractive?” Hope shimmers in Rian’s playful smile. “Does that mean you like him?”

Very much.

“I wouldn’t go that far yet.” The urge to step closer to him ripples through me, but I maintain my position. If I touch him now, I won’t want to stop. “Still have to browse his library.”

Rian adjusts his cap. “You have no idea how excited for this inspection I am. You should hear the sweeping aria singing through my veins right now. Not even ‘Largo al factotum’ could compare to it. So, do you want to go straight to my place after this? Who cares what we’re wearing?”

He wants me. I want him.

That’s going to be enough to overcome my fears of being seen with him.

“You’re right.” I stifle my laugh. “No point in fussing over appearances when our first meeting had you in spandex and a mullet.”

“Ah, Super-Rian has come back to haunt me.”

TRUE TO MY WORD, the first thing I do when we get to Rian's place later in the day is head for his living room. After kicking off my shoes, of course.

Rian follows me. His library is massive—wall-to-wall shelves with almost no room for new books. The books are the most interesting part of this room. Sure, there's a desk with some clutter and a big screen TV mounted to the wall, but the rest of the room is void of any personality. No awards, no photographs, no art.

“Find anything you like?” Rian flips through a notebook on his desk. “Can't believe I dropped the names of everyone who lives here, but it's my books that make you excited.”

“You have an enormous selection.” I scrutinize the titles. Good mixture of fiction and non-fiction, but none of them seem like something the Rian I know would read. Every single volume is in pristine condition. Not one cracked spine in the vicinity. “Where are the books you actually read?”

Rian's ensuing squeaky howl and increasingly pink cheeks validates my suspicions this library is for show only. I wag my finger at him.

“My bedroom.” Rian fiddles with a pen on his desk. “How did you know I haven't gotten around to reading these?”

“No fingerprints on the matte covers. Plus, there's not a single manga here.”

“Hah! Well, these are all books I buy at the airport before catching a flight. Sometimes I open a page, but then I listen to an audiobook instead. Easier for me to take notes when there's something that catches my attention.”

“Where's your room?”

I start down the hallway before he can say anything. The eggshell white walls are empty except for a thermostat. Rian really wasn't joking when he said he's never home. He only seems to work and occasionally find time for a dull high school teacher.

Does this lifestyle make him happy?

“Right here,” Rian says, catching up to me. “Last room. I hate exercising, so I chose a room that would force me to stretch my hamstrings a bit before I leave my place. I must confess, I didn't expect you to want to see my room so quickly.”

A chuckle rolls out of me. “It's your bookshelf I want to see, remember?”

His real library doesn't disappoint me in the least. A whole corner of the master bedroom is dedicated to stacks of manga from different series. There are also several memoirs from comedians with bent edges and colorful sticky notes peeking out from the pages.

I pick up the manga closest to his king-sized bed. This volume of *Naruto* resembles mine—worn, a little torn, well-loved.

I glance at the bed again. I've never seen one of these in person. What does a single person do with all that space?

Does Rian hope to fill that space with me? Even if for just one night?

I turn my gaze to him. He's watching me from the doorway with his arms close to his side and his mouth closed. His tight, quiet stance is nothing like the confident late night entertainer on TV.

Him being nervous makes me nervous, even though I shouldn't be. It's just sex.

"You have a nice library," I comment. "Matches my own in a lot of ways, but you could use some more shoujo titles. Do you read much besides graphic novels and biographies? I can give you a list of recommendations for practically every genre."

Great. Now I'm babbling, just like Rian does. It's cute when he does it, but it has to be annoying from me. Why am I talking so much? Why am I overthinking everything?

Rian runs his hand through his curls. "I like reading a little bit of everything, but it's hard to focus on words. My mind drifts. Either I find something humorous in the book that makes me want to tear it apart and study it, or a line won't land the right way with me, so I think of ways it could be better."

I set his book down, not wanting to get sweat on it. Listening to him talk about his brain process makes my body want him even more. Rian's so dedicated to his craft.

"I can't even watch television like I used to." Rian scratches the edge of his door, avoiding eye contact with me. "When someone is funny in a show or in a movie, I want to analyze their every action and inflection. Most media I consume, I use to better my work. Manga is the only thing that shuts my brain off. Which doesn't make sense, of course, because manga can be very funny. But if I open *Naruto* or something, I stop thinking. I just absorb what's going on. It's the only way I can relax. Sounds dorky, I know."

A fire starts in my brain as I realize what's actually going on with me. While I very much would like to help Rian find

other ways to relax, I also want to keep listening to him. I just want to spend time with Rian.

I want as much of him as I can get.

He clears his throat. “So, uh, my library...”

“I like it.” The words flow out of me. “I like you, too, although I still don’t understand why you’re interested in me.”

Rian bites his lip. The way his teeth cling to that velvet slip causes the fire in my head to travel downward. Courage guides my feet forward, closer to him.

“Are you kidding?” Rian rests his hand on the side of my arm. The fire in me screams for more. “My dear prince of sweaters, if you didn’t like my library, I was going to burn all the books and replace everything until I made a library that you approved of.”

“That defeats the purpose of investigating your library.” I arch an eyebrow. “I don’t want to fall for some guy you’re pretending to be. The real Rian Goodwin seems to be my style. Just let me get to know him.”

A bright smile spreads across his face. He slides his arm around my shoulders. I cautiously rest my hands on his chest, frightened and excited about what’s going to happen next.

“Sorry, I’m not good at this.” Rian’s voice is low, careful. “Probably should take your advice and read some romances. All I know is that when I really am into someone, I’ll do whatever it takes to get them to look at me.”

Every part of me vibrates with pure need as he makes his confession. This is the hundredth time Rian Goodwin has tried to ruin my life.

And this time, I’m going to let him.

“I’m looking at you.” I lean in, perilously close to his lips. “I’ve been looking at you for longer than you think.”

He tilts his head to the side. Our lips are touching now, but barely. “Have you?”

Each infinitesimal movement of his fingers along me sends bolts of lightning through me. Never in my life have I wanted to kiss a man so much.

The first time I ever saw Rian Goodwin on TV was when he did a special visiting my mother’s nursing home. I had watched the episode to see what sort of man wanted to use Mama and her friends for ratings.

But he had brought her so much joy. He had brought a smile to *everyone’s* faces that day.

My lips quirk upward as I recall the episode he did the next night. “That eating spaghetti on a rollercoaster stunt you did a couple of years ago was funny. You’re the only person I ever found sexy while drenched in tomato sauce.”

There is nothing either of us can do to prevent ourselves from laughing, even while we finally kiss.

I had spent so much time fantasizing about us laughing while having sex. Not once had I imagined us kissing. I certainly hadn’t expected to find myself in the midst of the most perfect kiss—everything about the moment is full of warmth and ease.

Several minutes pass in perfect bliss. Our hands rove, but our lips never leave each other. Rian’s mouth is softer than anything I’ve ever touched before. I never want to leave such a masterpiece.

Best of all, it’s just us here. No one watching. Keeping whatever we are behind closed doors is the smartest thing

either of us could do.

The moment ends when Rian's phone starts ringing.

“Oops.” Rian steps back. His sparkling eyes, swollen lips, and pink cheeks etch themselves into my memory. He's so gorgeous. “I told people I'd be busy tonight, but I guess our date technically started early.”

I huff. “Not my fault. You showed up at noon for a six o'clock dinner.”

“Forgive me,” he whimpers. “Let me resolve whatever the issue is with my producers, and I'll turn my phone off.”

“Sure. Should I order food for us? It's probably past five now.”

“That'd be awesome. Get whatever you like. I'm not picky. And of course, I'll pay. I'll leave my credit card on the counter.” He rests his thumb on my lip. “Then while we're waiting for the delivery, we can read manga. Or kiss some more?”

This nerd. I grin. “I like both.”

He kisses me once more, and then he steps out of the room with his phone. Though I don't understand the details of his conversation, I can hear how animated he is when he talks. Whatever he's discussing, he's excited.

Rian really likes being a celebrity. He's just so...open.

Will he be okay with a secret relationship?



WHY DID ANYONE NEED ME AS I WAS MAKING OUT WITH THE hottest person I've been with?! Life is so unfair.

While I talk to a producer about some meeting he wants to set up next week, I fish out a credit card from my wallet and set it on the kitchen counter. As the conversation continues, I wander into the living room.

My new notebook lies on my desk, waiting for me to do something with it. All the pages are blank and full of possibilities. Too many possibilities, really. A completely empty notebook has always unsettled me. It needs a purpose.

I uncap a pen. Mari and the rest of Darrell's ambitious students come to mind.

Could there be a place for them in a network run by me? It'd help them, and I suspect Darrell would also be pleased if I created content where teens could shine.

As the conversation continues, I doodle the words that will serve as my guiding light to winning Darrell's heart and propelling me to the top of the entertainment world—*Revolution.*

After I get off the phone with my boss, the door buzzes.

“Is that the food?” I ask Darrell, who’s lounging on my couch with *Hunter x Hunter* in his hands. “Already?”

He doesn’t look up from the book as he replies, “You’ve been talking for forty minutes.”

Shit.

“God, I’m sorry. I’m so bad at dates.” I toss Darrell my phone. “Here, throw my connection to the outside world into the toilet. Tonight, you are my world.”

He catches the device. “It’s okay. Work happens. I always answer my phone, too, no matter who calls.”

I flash him a grateful smile. My phone dings, letting me know I have a text message.

Darrell frowns as he glances at my screen. “Does Mari know we’re on a date? Why is she asking if you need help with talking to me?”

I swipe my phone back. “I gotta let the delivery guy in.”

Once the food’s safely in the kitchen, I send a quick reply to Mari, assuring her everything is fine and promise to message her in the morning. The last thing I see on my phone before I turn it off is a happy cat emoji from her.

Darrell opens the boxes stuffed with delicious Chinese food. “Hope you like a little bit of everything, because I didn’t know what to order.”

“I sure do.” I grab plates out of the cabinet. “You want forks, or do you use chopsticks?”

“Chopsticks.”

“Oh, you have such finesse. I’m jealous.” I swing the fridge door open and realize I haven’t stocked it with anything

at all. Excellent. I'm such a wonderful host. "If you're not interested in filtered water, I'm going to have to run to the store real fast."

"I've seen you run on your show." Darrell starts plating the food. "You're terrible at it, and no one would call that speed you move at fast."

"True enough. My legs aren't good for anything except standing." I shut the fridge close. *And kneeling*, I want to add, but I'm not overly confident in my oral skills. "You don't want beer or something? I don't drink alcohol, but I love getting any chance I can to show off the horrible picture the DMV took of me."

"Water's fine." Darrell sets the full plate on the counter next to me. "Eat. You hardly touched lunch earlier."

Yeah, I guess it was hard to dine on pizza when the kids wanted to know all about how many NBA players I'm friends with, or what's the most amount of money I've ever had in the bank—a number I did not disclose. They groaned when I told them I'd rather count friends than dollars.

I pour water for both of us. "I've never met anyone who can be so caring while glaring at me."

"It's the teacher in me. We have to be firm while trying to steer the kids into making good decisions." Darrell takes the water from me. "You don't drink alcohol at all?"

"Nah."

We bring our dinner into the living room and get comfy on the couch.

"How come?" Darrell asks as he scoops up some fried tofu. "If you want to tell. You don't have to."

“I’m not hiding any kind of tragic backstory.” I chuckle between bites of food. “Alcohol’s just never done anything for me but give me a headache. As you can imagine, the industry I’m in is rampant with alcohol and drug abuse. Even before I was ever on television, I met some comedians who swore they couldn’t write a decent act without a little tequila or some white powder. It’s just easier for me to stay sober and make sure my buddies aren’t going too hard.”

Darrell’s lips quirk. “You mother people at parties?”

“Kind of. I’m a tall, elegant mama bird, but I’m also a vulture looking for funny lines to mine.” I resist the urge to do my best crow impression, figuring spraying rice everywhere won’t score me any future kisses. “You drink?”

“In moderation.” Darrell’s jaw tightens. His eyes seem very interested in his food, but he’s not touching any of it. “I wish I could say I don’t have a tragic backstory, but alcoholism runs in my family. While I don’t think I have a problem, I limit myself to two drinks a night when I imbibe.”

Ah. I chew on my food slowly, unsure of what to say. *Sorry? Good for you?* No response seems adequate enough.

Food is always the easiest way to get people to open up. The interviews I do on the show reveal nothing compared to the truths that are exposed when people are chowing down. There’s a reason most of my meetings take place during some kind of meal. Even when I’m in the office with my crew, we bring in doughnuts or cookies.

Still, as much of a conversationalist as I am, I’m not great at conveying the sentiments brewing in my chest when someone is vulnerable.

Unless... Is this another moment where being straightforward would work?

“I understand,” I say carefully, awkwardly. “I’m touched you shared such a secret.”

Darrell dips his egg roll in some sauce. “Figured it would be best if you knew now. My family’s history ties in with my interest in the women’s shelters too.”

“Yeah?” I take a sip of water and gesture for him to keep talking.

He takes my cue. “My dad was an asshole, and my mother drank to escape. She and I bounced from shelter to shelter for a while when I was a kid. Couldn’t live with my dad, but we also couldn’t stay in one place too long since most shelters require sobriety. Still, a lot of people helped us. I owe those shelters more than I can ever give them.”

His tone is low and even while he talks. It’s a story I can tell that he has repeated multiple times. It’s a story that must still hurt to share since he won’t look up from his plate.

Oh, Darrell.

We both eat in silence for a couple of minutes while I digest his story.

“You’re really admirable, you know that?” I finally say. “Your dad was a jerk, and you grew up to be a good person. Not everyone can say that.”

Darrell takes a long drink of water before he speaks again. “You understand now why I’m interested in people who can be an outstanding role model for my students, right? I’m not the only kid who had a rough childhood. And, well, if I may be blunt, I read in a few of your interviews that your father wasn’t around when you grew up. Look at how you turned out.”

“Still isn’t around.” I mentally flip a bird to the faceless sperm donor. “But my invisible father isn’t why I grew up to be so visible. I’m not on television in hopes of getting attention from him.”

“No, but it couldn’t have been easy to grow up knowing one of your parents didn’t love you enough to stay. I know it hurt me a lot. Still does.”

I shove a spoonful of rice in my mouth, nodding slowly. Growing up with my mom was fun, but I can never erase the memory of the heartbreak in her eyes when I first started asking about my father.

“Fractured relationships have a deep impact on everyone, but for kids and teens, the pain can be unbearable since they haven’t properly developed a toolkit of coping methods.” Darrell works his jaw. “Some of my students don’t have a positive adult influence in their lives outside of school. It’s important to me that I surround myself with people they can look up to.”

I set my plate aside and curl up with my knees close to my chest. Fatigue has started to set in, making it harder to eat. “I do hope you aren’t calling me a role model. As much as I wish I could be one, we all know I could never compare to a force like yourself.”

Darrell sets down his chopsticks. “You’ve done a lot of good deeds lately, though, don’t you think?”

“Like bringing pizza?” I laugh. “That wasn’t a good deed just to do a good deed. That was me wanting to impress you. Nothing that would get me an A+ by your standards. Speaking of which, you never told me how I earned an A+. Do I still have that grade?”

A mystifying blend of amusement and dismay colors Darrell's chuckle. "You really don't know, do you?"

"Tell me," I whine. "I've been waiting forever to find out."

Darrell stands up, shaking his head. He takes my plate and ambles into the kitchen.

"Just leave the dishes on the counter," I call. "I'll get hungry again later."

"Are you kidding me?! Don't you know about bacteria growing if you leave food out?"

The squeak in his voice as he admonishes me knocks me off the couch. This might be the first time I've heard him be anything except composed.

Wings sprout along my heart and help me to my feet. Each new thing I discover about Darrell leaves me more enamored. I want to know everything about him—his likes, his pet peeves, what anime he's been watching.

A pang of sorrow ripples through me as I realize this date won't last long enough for me to satisfy my cravings. *I* can stay up all night once I get another cup of coffee in me, but I doubt Darrell will be able to match my stamina.

As I walk into the kitchen and take in the glorious sight of Darrell's disgust while he puts the leftovers in the fridge, my stomach tightens. How can one man look so attractive, no matter what expression he wears? His pinched brow and wrinkled nose are utter perfection.

The longer I study Darrell, the more I want to discover what kind of stamina Darrell has.

"If it helps you be less grossed out, I almost never eat at home." I lean against the counter. "I keep bagels and cream

cheese here. That's about it."

Darrell peers at me over his glasses. His forehead becomes dramatically more smooth as a glint twinkles in his eyes. "It helps. I was going to be upset if I had found a really great guy, and then it turns out he invites parasites to live in his stomach."

I laugh. "I'm trying to work up the nerve to kiss you again, but I can't create a romantic atmosphere if you're going to make me worry about my intestines. You think I'm great?"

"Pretty sure I established that earlier in the bedroom."

All right, Rian. Here we go. This is where we can set the tone for the rest of the evening. We can talk until Darrell gets tired, or we can find other ways to give our mouths some exercise.

My body wants to show Darrell how serious I can be. A confident, hard persona will surely make Darrell forget any awkward, unsexy conversations between us.

But while my brain wants to be Don Juan, I sound more like Don Knotts as I ask, "Maybe we could, uh, establish some other stuff in the bedroom?"

Darrell bites his lip, but a titter sneaks through his teeth anyway.

I bring my hands to my burning face. "Sorry. I swear I've done this dance before. It's just been so long since I've been this into someone, and you're so magnificent, and—"

He wraps his arms around me. My nerves quieten with his touch. As soon as I stop rambling, his lips meet mine.

Our first kiss was filled with soft laughter and gentle caresses. This one is no different.

It turns out this is the kind of kissing I'm really into. Each second I spend with my lips on Darrell's mouth, a new sonata gets inked in my heart.

Does Darrell enjoy this kind of kissing? Does he want something else from me? Would he prefer a man well-versed in dirty talk or someone who drops to their knees and takes charge?

His earlier words soon burst through my cloud of doubt.

The real Rian Goodwin seems to be my style.

An ocean of awe sweeps through me. I sink into the moment, enjoying each little gesture. His mouth soon trails its way down my neck. I tilt my head back, letting him take as much of me as he wants. The way he nips at me is playful, easy.

He doesn't seem to be in a rush. Neither am I.

Our mouths never leave each other as we fumble into my bedroom. We bump into a wall along the way, which causes us to giggle, but our lips stay connected. Laughter warms up the room in ways central heating never could.

I tug at my polo. "Wanna see how much of a paper doll I am underneath this blend of polyester and cotton?"

Darrell eases into my bed, propping himself on his elbows. "I've got a pretty good idea from some of the outfits I've seen you in."

"Be honest." I thrust my hands on my hips. "Heavy metal Brendon Urie. Hot or not?"

"I liked the tight pants." Darrell grins. "Watching you leave the cafe that night was interesting. You have the kind of ass I'm into."

The fire in my stomach crashes into my cheeks. “Do I? I wasn’t even aware I had one.”

“You do.” He eyes me up and down. He spreads his legs ever so slightly, allowing me the chance to gaze upon his thick thighs in those incredible jeans. “It’s perfect for fucking until you can’t walk the next morning.”

Oh, this side of Darrell is very, very exciting. And I know he can tell how hard I am right now. Even if I were in loose sweatpants, he’d be able to see my skyscraper erection.

I swallow, trying not to look too nervous. “I’m, uh, very interested in that idea.”

“Are you?”

Darrell pats his legs, inviting me to climb on top of him. His own cock rubs against my groin as we settle into another kiss. His hard body beneath me and his soft lips against mine feel better than anything I could have ever imagined.

Our shirts eventually come off. Lips find new parts of our torsos to explore. Low, pleased sighs ring through the room.

He brings his hand to the band of my pants, and I’m unable to hold back my gasp.

It’s going to happen, isn’t it? We’re going to actually have sex, aren’t we?

I bring my fingers to his wrist. He stops at once.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Oh, yes. Just nervous, honestly.” I rub the back of my neck. “It’s really been a long time. I bought lube and condoms yesterday in case we did something intimate, but, uh, I guess I never pictured it in detail.”

I expect him to laugh. He doesn't. Instead, he kisses the corner of my jaw.

“That’s okay. We’ll go at your pace.” Darrell gently runs his fingers through my hair. He gazes at me with those intense eyes that always leave me under his spell. “What do you want to do? If you want to stop, that’s okay.”

I nuzzle the side of his head. “Let’s keep going.”

We don’t laugh as the rest of our clothes come off. We exchange a lot of reassuring smiles and other lovely gestures that promise to make our first time together unforgettable.

As he slathers his swollen, gorgeous cock in a generous amount of lube, I pray that this won’t be the last time we are together.

His fingers, his cock, him—he sends me to new heights I’ve never known before. The physical act alone is breathtaking, but doing something like this with *Darrell*...

Well, let’s say my stamina is worse than his in this regard.

We collapse into a hot, sticky, wonderful mess after both of us reach our climax. Darrell peppers tiny kisses all over my face. My mouth eventually meets his.

Nothing exists except us.

After a long, tender cuddle session, Darrell murmurs, “Was this date everything you wanted?”

I wrap my arms around him and hold him as tight as I possibly can with my puny muscles. “It was with you, so yes.”

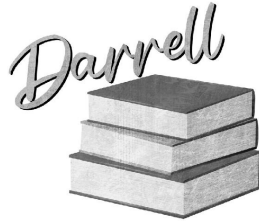
The small, bashful smile he gives me is divine.

For a little while, I am capable of ignoring the goalposts.

But as the night goes on and Darrell starts talking about going home, I don't beg him to stay. I let him go—after kissing him several more times and paying for his cab ride, of course—and rush to check my phone once he's gone.

Good thing I waited to look until after he left. My ex-wife and potential future business partner left a most alluring voicemail.

Hi, Rian, do you want to get lunch tomorrow and talk more about the network idea?



THE CAB RIDE HOME GOES BY IN A BREEZE. TIME MOVES differently when you're busy recalling the greatest sex you ever had. It's funny we didn't laugh as much during the actual event as I thought we would.

But every moment had still been wonderful.

Ugh, I miss Rian already. Maybe I should have asked to stay over? I think he would have let me, but he didn't put up a fight when I suggested going home.

What's the protocol for dating celebrities? That wasn't just a one-time thing, was it? It couldn't have been.

Joaquín is still up when I walk inside my apartment. He's got a movie playing in the living room, but his face is buried in his phone's glow.

"Hey," I say, as casually and comfortably as someone with a heart competing in a triathlon can muster. "Troy and Andy at work?"

"Yeah. They've got Tuesday and Wednesday off this week." Joaquín looks up from his phone. "Oh my God, you went out without a sweater or jacket? Aren't you cold? Anyway, I was thinking I'd make us a nice dinner one of those

nights? It's been so long since the four of us ate. Bean and corn enchiladas with tortilla soup? Extra cilantro for you."

"That would be awesome."

It really has been a long time since I spent any quality time with my roommates. I'm usually the busiest out of us since I've got some much going on outside of work—Mama, the book club, helping the women's shelters, and so forth.

And now with Rian in the picture...

He *is* in the picture, isn't he?

Disgust and horror ripple through me as I stare at my roommate. I'm going to have to do something that I hate doing.

I'm going to have to talk about my feelings.

"What?" Joaquín runs his fingers along his chin. "Do I have something on my face?"

I plop down on the couch next to Joaquín. "No. I have, uh, a development."

"A development?" He lifts a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Why do I get the feeling you're not talking about a professional development?"

An eternity passes before I can bring myself to say anything. Terror digs a tunnel from my heart to the tip of my tongue as I finally grumble the words I never thought I'd say. "I had a date."

Joaquín drops his phone on the floor, as well as his jaw. "Was said date with Rian Fucking Goodwin?"

More like Rian Good-At-Fucking-Win.

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “We spent the evening together, and I think we both have a lot of...”

“Feelings?” Joaquín leaps to his feet. “Oh my God. Oh my God. Where is the vodka? We need to celebrate. What are you doing here instead of frolicking in his Texas King bed?”

“He doesn’t have a Texas King.” I scratch the back of my neck, recalling how amazing he looked splayed out on his bed, naked and blushing. “It’s pretty big, but not that large.”

Joaquín claps his hands. “So you *have* seen his bed. And judging by your glare, I am going to assume you did more than look at it. Oh my God, you slept with a *celebrity*.”

Why does my face always betray me?! Fine, it’s not weird for my roommate to know that I slept with Rian. I’d rather listen to Joaquín’s dirty jokes than be interrogated about the emotional aspects.

But isn’t that what I need to talk about?

I pinch the bridge of my nose, pushing my glasses up. The haphazard way my spectacles sit on my face messes with my vision. But it’s easier to face Joaquín when the details of his smarmy expression are blurred.

“How do you know when you’re officially dating someone?” I ask. “You’ve been through enough boyfriends to be an expert on this by now, surely.”

Joaquín cackles while picking his phone up from the floor. “You are *bold*, Lover. Coming to me for advice while putting me down.”

If we weren’t close friends, I’d apologize. But since Joaquín and I have known each other since we were starving college students, I know he’s not actually hurt. Part of me

thinks Joaquín enjoys his bad luck with men, since terrible dates make for great stories.

Guilt ripples through me as I realize it's been too long since I last listened to a Joaquín story.

He joins me on the couch once again. “So, you two obviously did enough stuff to make you think that you're dating. But you're not sure.”

“Right.”

“Why don't you send him a text and ask? Or call him, if you're feeling extra adventurous.”

Send him a text. Sure. That sounds like a perfectly reasonable and adult thing to do. Mr. Late Night Television is probably still awake. It would be nice to see a *yes* from him.

But the thought of getting anything except a *yes* chills my organs.

This time, I jump to my feet. “Nope. Not doing that. Are you hungry? I'll make us a snack.”

“Oh, we're going to continue to avoid emotional confrontation.” Joaquín follows me into the kitchen. “I see. Well, yes, I'll take a snack. Something light. Oh, but I want something sweet too.”

I browse through the cabinets. “Popcorn? We have enough brown sugar to caramelize it.”

“Perfect. We should have some leftover almonds we can throw in.” Joaquín sets a frying pan on the stovetop and grabs the coconut oil.

I huff. “I said I'd make it.”

“You’re not as good at cooking as I am.” He tosses me an air kiss. “Plus, I want to hear more about your date. This pedestrian popcorn can’t be as interesting as the 24k gold champagne and caviar your rich boyfriend showered you with.”

I snort. Despite knowing that Rian is, indeed, a millionaire, I can’t picture him eating anything fancier than French fries with some kind of truffle seasoning. Even the Chinese food we had earlier was from a cheap, hole-in-the-wall establishment—a good place, of course, but probably not the sort of joint celebrities frequent.

“We didn’t have anything like that.” I pour out enough kernels for us and hand the cup to Joaquín.

He turns on the burner. “What *did* you do on your date? Am I going to see pictures of you two at the Four Seasons online? And I don’t mean the landscaping kind.”

My chilled organs become completely cased in ice. If Rian and I are actually dating, I’ll have to tell him about my father. They aren’t colleagues, exactly, but they’ve met before. They’ll likely meet again.

But that’s so messy. Should I just end things before we get too serious? It’ll hurt, but that pain will pale in comparison to the damage my father could cause.

I scratch the back of my neck, aware of how hot my ears have become. “Rian showed up at the school while I was with the students, so we went to his place afterward.”

Joaquín glances at me. “The school?”

“Yeah.” A smile gradually unfurls across my face as memories of the afternoon resurface. “He had borrowed an outfit from the pizza shop and brought our lunch to us. The

kids were ecstatic to see him, and it saved me the delivery fee.”

I brace myself for some sassy remark, but Joaquín just keeps staring at me. There’s not a trace of humor in the corner of his mouth, and his nostrils have flared to the point that I think I’ve said something wrong.

“What?” I ask.

“My God. I think Rian might be the one for you.” Joaquín gestures to my pocket. “Quit avoiding your feelings and get your phone out. Call him right now and make sure you’re locked in as his man. Any guy who buys you school supplies and brings pizza for your students is the one *you* want.”

Rian might be the one for you.

Those words are so, so scary.

I force out a laugh. “I’m not avoiding anything. We’re just going at a pace that works for us. I don’t even want a boyfriend right now. Come on, enough about me. Are you talking to anyone on that dating site these days?”

“Oh, I’m always talking to someone. Anyone good? That’s another question.”

I listen to Joaquín ramble about the scorching trash he wants to bang, but his words keep echoing through my heart.

Rian might be the one for you.

What will I do if that’s true?



SLEEP COMES IN SMALL PARCELS ALL NIGHT LONG. EVERY TIME I start to fall into a deep sleep, my brain wakes me up with an idea for a show pitch or my heart spins with the memory of Darrell's skin against mine. I check my phone frequently to make sure I haven't slept through an alarm.

When noon finally arrives, I roll into an Upper-East Manhattan restaurant sporting the darkest pair of sunglasses I own. Horrid tabloid snapshots don't bother me since the funnier I look, the better, but I figure Adaline doesn't deserve to be photographed with a red-eyed gremlin.

Speaking of Adaline, she's late, which is unlike her. I guess if your family owns the hotel the restaurant is in, you're allowed to bend a few reservations.

I've been to this place enough that the server brings me a virgin mimosa while I wait for my companion. This place is too ritzy to serve plain ol' orange juice. Were I to come here with Mari, I'd have to order a Shirley Temple with gold flakes in it for her.

How is my romance broker doing anyway? Should I tell her last night's date went well? Withholding all of the details, of course.

What about Darrell? How is he?

God, I'm dying to call him. As much as I wish I could listen to his deep, rich voice go on about this month's book club read, I should give him some distance. It'd be too needy to talk to him right after we had just seen each other, wouldn't it?

I'll just gush to Mari via SuddenPic private messages.

Last night went really well! I think we're going to see each other again soon.

Her reply causes me to spill my virgin mimosa all over my lap. !!! *Is the Darian ship officially sailing?*

I dab my knees with a cloth napkin. *Darian? Who is Darian?*

Darrell + Rian, she says. Goodley and Stanwin are terrible ship names. Darian is cute

The nonplussed server brings me an extra napkin and another virgin mimosa.

"Thanks." I flash her my brightest, sheepish smile. "I guess this is why I shouldn't wear white after Labor Day, huh? I'm almost guaranteed to make a mess."

She gives me a polite chuckle and walks away.

I send Mari another message. *I don't know if we're officially sailing. Are you writing real people fic about us? I hope not.*

You know what RPF is? she asks.

I titter as I navigate my next response. I've always wanted to do a weekly segment where I read the RPF folks write about me, but the censors would have a heart attack based on the content warnings alone.

Do you think people don't write fic about me? I ask.

A string of disgusted emojis fills my screen. *Ewww people write RPF about you? You're not even handsome*

Ah, my ego. It doth be bruised.

Before I can defend myself, Mari sends me another message. *When are you filming your next segment? Can I come watch?*

The corners of my mouth quirk as another opportunity to see Mari manifests.

Sure, Vera and Felicity wouldn't mind having you around, I reply. But you better not upstage me. We both know you're way funnier than me.

Mari rewards me with a million hearts.

I glance up in time to spy Adaline waltzing my way. Not a trace of remorse or panic on her face. The Polinsky way, of course.

Have to go now, I tell Mari. We'll arrange a filming around your schedule soon.

I set my phone down and wave to Adaline.

She takes the seat across from me. The collar of her rockabilly dress has a large, turquoise bee brooch pinned to it. "Hi, Rian. Been waiting long?"

"Not terribly long." I stand up and show Adaline my streaked pants. "Think Jayden-James will approve?"

A low, husky laugh ripples out of her. It's a genuine display of affection. Adaline always found me funny. It definitely wasn't my face that made her attend every single one of my stand-up shows before we started dating.

“Why were you late?” I ask, sitting back down.

“I’m practicing being lackadaisical.”

“That doesn’t sound like you. Stayed up too late raiding a prehistoric alien casino in one of your games?”

Adaline throws me a wink. “At least it’s just my ex-husband I’m meeting.”

“Fair.”

She looks around the room. “I see Stephen isn’t here yet.”

I hold back my groan. “Mr. Giddy Up is joining us?”

“He wants to help. You know he has so many ideas.”

Adaline flags down the server. “It might be good if Stephen busied himself with something besides women and alcohol. Do you know he released this single to impress Teresa?”

“I sort of suspected as much, but hasn’t he been photographed with that Berkley model?”

“His newest rebound.” Adaline sighs. “Much to his shock, Teresa isn’t into country music.”

Ah, another instance where Stephen fails to do research about something and just goes with what he thinks would be romantic.

Whatever. Who cares if he shows up? He’ll probably bow out of this meal once he realizes he has to be serious about something.

The server brings Adaline her usual, a fuzzy navel. Adaline orders some fancy-sounding salad, and I copy her since I don’t actually care what I eat. As long as I have some nutrients in my body, I’m good.

Once we’re alone, Adaline takes out her tablet.

I sip my drink. “What’s this meeting about?”

“No contracts, if you’re worried about commitment. I just wanted to show you some figures I pulled up. I’m sure you’re aware of the numbers associated with the Big Three, but perhaps you’re not familiar with the rankings and statistics for cable channels.”

Adaline impresses me with her array of charts and graphs, all filled with information I wouldn’t have thought to research on my own. In turn, I show her the gaps in television content in terms of diversity that I’ve been reading about. Gaps that I’d like to see filled by creating a team of underrepresented creatives. I hire women—especially women of color—where possible, but I know I need to do more. Much more.

Still, one word rings through my ear while we talk.

Commitment.

Is Darrell interested in—to borrow Mari’s phrasing—sailing this ship? Is sex a sign that he wants to be serious, or was last night pretty casual for him?

Oh, I want to talk to him. I want to know everything he’s thinking.

He said he likes the real Rian Goodwin. Does he like impatient, infatuated paper dolls?

I fire him a text while Adaline and I eat. *What are you doing today? Can we meet to talk?*

Is this a bad talk? Darrell asks a few minutes later. *If it’s bad, you can just text me. I don’t like putting on pants in order to get bad news.*

I resist the urge to make some corny joke about how I don’t like putting on pants to get good news. *No, no. Not bad at all! I just miss you and want to see you.*

“Who are you messaging?” Adaline asks. “You never do business with someone else while you’re in a meeting.”

“Sorry!”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Uh...”

My whole body grows hot as I look up and find Adaline studying me with fascination. The smug satisfaction pursed in her lips suggests she knows my text affair is personal.

It’d be silly to pretend she’s wrong. She’s great at sizing people up.

That’s why I have to take her offer seriously. She believes I could be a good CEO. If anyone else had come to me with an offer to run my own network, I would have laughed at them.

Because it was Adaline, I’m starting to believe I could be a good CEO.

“You don’t have to tell me.” Adaline plucks a cherry tomato from her salad. “It’s sweet to see you looking like this fruit.”

“That’s a fruit? Hey, did you know avocados are a fruit?”

“Definitely changing the subject.” She sticks the tomato in her mouth. “You acted like this when we first started dating, except you’re not bumblin’ as much.”

A laugh escapes me. “Should have seen me last night.”

Whoops.

Adaline arches an eyebrow.

I bury my face behind my hands. “Let me wrap this conversation up real quick, and I promise I will focus only on you for the rest of our meal.”

She chuckles softly. “It wouldn’t kill you to put your personal matters first every now and then.”

Though her tone is light, I can’t help getting stung by her words. She knows better than anyone how absorbed I get in my work.

A mistake that I hope I won’t repeat with Darrell.

At that moment, Stephen swaggers over to us. The ten gallon hat and rhinestone jacket aren’t a shock, but the stack of papers in his hands is a weird accessory.

“Hey, y’all!” Stephen ruffles my hair before taking a seat next to Adaline. “Check this out. I spent all week watching Starship Engine TV and took a few notes on their current programs.”

Wait a minute. Did Stephen Polinsky just insinuate that he did some legitimate work?

This meeting could be very interesting.

My phone buzzes. I check it one last time before putting it away.

I’m not doing anything today besides grading papers. We can talk whenever.

I FIND myself outside Darrell’s apartment building after lunch. Little sparks of delight pulse through me as he buzzes me in. Those sparks erupt into fireworks when I finally lay eyes on the cardigan-wearing hunk.

“Hi,” I say with all the eloquence of a man who sewed together Hamlet’s seven soliloquies for his master’s thesis.

Darrell gestures for me to step inside.

His apartment is much smaller than mine, but it's so full of character. The first thing I notice when he answers the door is the menagerie of pictures behind him. Nearly every inch of the hallway is covered in family portraits and classroom photos, although I don't spy a certain handsome teacher in many of them.

Still—Darrell and his roommates make the apartment look like an actual home.

“What's up?” Darrell asks as we shuffle down the hallway. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Do you like me?” I blurt out, removing my sunglasses.

Oh, why the hell am I like this? Charming, capable in front of a camera. Motivated, passionate during meetings. Useless, sweaty in front of a guy I adore.

Darrell frowns. “I think last night speaks for itself.”

“Yeah, but...” I toy with the arm of my shades, unable to look at Darrell. “I mean, like, what did last night mean to you?”

The scowl disappears quickly. An expression I can't decipher takes its place. His slack jaw and ensuing silence suggest he hadn't prepared for such a question.

I fill the quiet. “I hope it doesn't sound like I'm interviewing you. I just think you're really great, and I'd like to keep seeing you. Only you.”

My stomach does a cartwheel as soon as my confession is in the open. Thank goodness my lunch was relatively light.

“Do you?” Darrell leans against the wall. Doubt drapes across his face.

“Yes!” I clip my glasses to my shirt. My mouth continues doing what it does best. “I know celebrities have a reputation for swimming in oodles of cash, champagne, and sex, but I’m not like that. Well, er, I guess that’s kind of a lie. I *do* have money. But you know I don’t drink, and I actually don’t have a lot of sex. I don’t even go on dates. What we did last night was a huge deal for me. I don’t want you to think I was just looking to get laid.”

Darrell works his jaw, staring at the floor like the linoleum is about to do a magic show.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to get serious,” I tack on. Why shut up when I could keep talking? I should get that tattooed to my forehead so people know what kind of trouble they’re getting into. “But if you feel what I feel, then I want to pursue this relationship to its maximum potential.”

I pause, mostly to catch my breath. Darrell utilizes this respite well. He grabs me by the sleeve and tugs me toward him.

He rests his hands on my chest. Being close to him makes me forget how to talk.

His voice is low while he speaks. “I do like you. You’re funny, and you have a more generous personality than you think you do.”

Pleasure lifts me into the air as I register his compliments, though I don’t quite understand the generous personality part.

Darrell meets my gaze. “Are you really in a place to be in a committed relationship with me? Even if I come with some complications?”

Back to the ground I go! Thanks, gravity.

“What makes you think I’m not?” I circle my thumbs along his jaw, wanting to memorize to every strand of hair in his untrimmed beard. “My divorce was finalized months ago. Did you see some article online about me having lunch with Adaline or something? That was for business, I assure you. Romance is dead between us.”

He shakes his head. “That’s not what I’m trying to say.”

Even if I come with some complications.

“What complications do you mean?” I blink. “Like, that you’re a teacher and need to wake up early, which is a schedule wildly mystifying to me? Or do you mean about me not exactly being out of the closet, whereas you’re open?”

Oh, no. I haven’t thought this far ahead with the whole reckless confession thing. Am I ready to come out to my fans? To my mother?

Darrell stares at me for a long moment. It’s hard to decipher what his trembling lips mean. Is he scared of something?

I don’t want him to be afraid of anything. I have enough money and popularity to protect him from anything, don’t I?

I...really want to protect him. My throat goes dry as I realize that I might be more ready to embark on scary adventures than I thought I was.

“Teacher, yes,” he finally says. “I’m a teacher. When you film your show, I’m usually just coming home from work or from visiting my mother. I always have a mountain of reports to grade. You’ll be horrified if you come into the kitchen for coffee, by the way. Papers and empty mugs everywhere.”

He’s worried about the different schedules. Okay. That’s something I can easily work with.

“Can’t be any worse than the break room at the studio.” I chuckle and bring my mouth close to his. “Look, if you give me a chance, I promise I’ll find time for you. We can keep the relationship a secret, if you’re worried that I’m dating you for the attention or something. If you want to be open, I’ll get on television tomorrow and tell everyone I’m off the market.”

There. I said it.

But why am I so scared?

Darrell leans in and kisses me lightly. I return the affection, willing my hopes to be felt in my touch.

After a moment, he pulls away. He doesn’t look like a guy who just entered a relationship. The veil of doubt still covers his face.

“Can *you* really do a secret relationship?” Darrell bites his lip. A strange wave of relief crashes into me. “Maybe we should just take it one day at a time for now. Something casual.”

That...is not quite the answer I wanted to hear. But I have to respect his concerns. They’re valid. And it’ll give me more time to figure out how to tell America that I’m pansexual.

“That’s fine.” I wrap my arms around him and hug him. “I’ll go at your pace.”

“Nice throwback to last night,” he mumbles, hugging me back. “What are you doing for Thanksgiving this year? Going to see your mom?”

Ah, right. The holidays are upon us. That’s something normal humans are usually aware of.

“Not this year,” I answer. “I’m going to spend Christmas with her. Why do you ask?”

“You having dinner anywhere?” Darrell drums his fingers along my chest. “Just because we’re not official doesn’t mean I want you spending Thanksgiving alone. You can come eat with my mom and me if you want.”

The easy way he extends his invitation makes me even more desperate to prove I want only him. How can this guy claim I have a generous personality when he’s worried about a popular comedian being alone during some weird tradition where everyone eats turkey or tofurkey?

I can be a good boyfriend, can’t I? My relationship with Adaline crashed and burned, but I can rise from the ashes of my mistakes.

Any second I’m not busy with work, I will devote to Darrell.



OKAY. I DIDN'T TELL RIAN THE FULL TRUTH. THAT WAS probably bad.

But if he's willing to see me in private, then we can avoid the paparazzi altogether. No need to tell him who my father is. No need to make him quickly dump me.

But what in the world had possessed me when I invited Rian to have Thanksgiving with Mama and me?!

I just...really wanted to spend more time with him, I guess. He had opened up so beautifully the day he told me he wanted to be an item. Genuine passion and affection had shimmered through his handsome visage.

For a little while, I want to feel like I deserve such a companion in my life.

And for once, I want to bring a man to meet my mother. Even though I've only told her that the man is Rian Goodwin, not someone who makes me forget how scary life is.

But she was pretty stoked to hear that her favorite late night entertainer was going to have dinner with us.

"Where's Rian?" Mama asks as she changes her hat again. She only owns two church hats, but she can't make up her mind on which to where—the dingy hat that matches the

shawl I gave her, or the slightly less dingy hat that doesn't match?

Hard to believe she's making such a fuss over her appearances. She never dresses up for me.

"Which one of us is your son?" I fake a pout. "You got me here."

"I want to see Rian."

"He'll be here, Mama." I check my phone to see if there are any messages from him. None. "Don't worry."

Shit. What will I do if he doesn't show up? A nursing home makes for good entertainment on television, but it's not exactly a ritzy place for a celebrity to spend their holiday.

A distant scream catches my ear. Bad scream? Or... excited-to-see-someone-famous scream?

I head into the hallway to investigate. A vibrant clamor draws me to the common residential area.

Much to my relief, the source of the noise is Rian.

He's playing checkers with an elderly gentleman while taking selfies with some visiting kids. A small, but ecstatic crowd has gathered around him. Most of the nursing staff have gathered, snapping pictures on their phone.

One of the nurses sees me and hurries to my side. For some reason, she has a pie from a bakery in her arms. "Oh, thank you again for inviting Rian Goodwin here! He's such a sweetie."

A wisp of warmth coils in my chest. Yeah, I guess that describes him.

The nurse hands me the pie. “When he first signed in, he asked if there was anything he could do for us. He offered to bring in more food for the cafeteria! We declined, of course, but you have such a generous friend. Rian’s talked to almost everyone out here for the last half hour. He brought this, by the way. Maybe you should take it.”

“That sounds like him. He likes being a celebrity.” I glance at the pie, aware of the pit that’s suddenly taking space in my stomach. Not because it’s pumpkin pie. I like that.

No, I think I’ve made a poor decision inviting Rian here.

Nothing wrong with Rian enjoying a photo op with his fans, but one of them is most certainly going to post about it online.

What if my father or one of his goons sees where Rian is and connects the dots?

Even casually dating isn’t going to work, is it?

Rian finally notices me. He waves, getting up from the chair. “I promise I’ll be back later for a rematch, Beverly. Can’t believe how well you *smoked* me.” He glances around the room. “Sorry, everyone, I need to go visit my, uh, friend.”

Rian shakes hands with several people on his way to me. Now that he’s not covered by fans, I can tell he’s dressed to the nines today. Every time I’ve ever met him, he’s worn something casual or a costume. Today, he’s sporting a dark navy suit with a silver tie and a long, black coat with a feathered collar. Ebony oxfords instead of his sequin shoes. Even his curls seem to be styled with some kind of wax.

He’s fucking gorgeous.

Did he dress up that much to see my mother?

Why did I wear one of my boring cardigans and some khakis?

He flashes me a sheepish smile and causes my heart to skip a beat. “Sorry about getting distracted. I see my pie has somehow found you. When did I even lose that? Hey, did you know I did a show here a couple of years ago? It started with me serving lunch to the residents, and then it ended with me getting covered in butterscotch pudding ‘cause it seemed like a great idea to wrestle someone twice my age in food items.”

“I know.” I lead him down the hallway. “You’ve also met my mom before.”

“What?”

We stop outside Mama’s room, and I peer inside. She settled on the hat that matches her shawl and is waiting by her puzzle table. Even though she could have worn the better hat with a newer shawl, she’s determined to show off that old, raggedy gift from my first ever check.

Why is she so good at making me tear up?

I rub my eyes. “I told you that I’ve been looking at you for longer than you think. When you came to visit awhile back, my mother was so excited about being on television. She had recently moved into this facility, and she wasn’t adjusting well. You really cheered her up. I was scared to see her on television, but I couldn’t stop watching your show after her appearance. You’re really...”

“Why were you scared?” Rian’s voice quavers while he uses the hand sanitizer pump outside Mama’s room. “I didn’t make her look silly, did I? Not a gorgeous dame like that stunner I see in there.”

Oh, Rian.

I gesture for him to enter. Rian practically glides as he does so, impossibly tall and handsome.

Mama doesn't react to him at all. Panic ripples through my rib cage. What if she's suddenly spaced out? What if she doesn't even know who Rian is right this second?

Rian bows before her. "Hello, ma'am. We meet again. Do you remember me?"

A capricious curl springs to Mama's lips. "Didn't recognize you without your shiny shoes, Pudding."

Pudding.

She recognizes him. Thank goodness.

"Mama, you know Rian, right?" I stand behind Rian while he shakes her hand. "He brought pie."

"Is he gonna swim in it? I don't think I've seen him eat anything normally." Mama holds Rian's hand close to her, patting his knuckles. The way Rian beams suggests he likes the affection. "You played in all that cake recently. What a waste."

Rian chuckles. "Eating normally isn't funny."

"It is if you've ever seen my boy at a buffet." Mama shakes her head. A pinch of panic makes my pulse jump. Where is she going with this? "Darrell goes home with so many barbecue stains in his beard."

"Mama!"

Even though I'm completely mortified, I can't help laughing. The way Mama titters with utter gaiety at her remark makes me howl harder.

Rian's grin broadens. "Do you have a lot of embarrassing Darrell stories? I definitely want to hear them all."

I shoot him a glare, but his question doesn't actually bother me. In fact, the prospect of Rian learning everything about me is...nice. Sort of.

"Did you talk to your ma today?" Mama asks, as if she knows Rian's mom personally. "How is she?"

Delight radiates from every inch of Rian while he replies. "Oh, yes, I called her before coming over here. She caught me up on all the drama back home—Jocelyn cheated during cards, and Perry is building a shed inside his existing shed. He's so silly."

"So silly," Mama echoes. "You hear that, Darrell? Gerry is building a shed."

"Perry," I snap. "Not Gerry. Perry."

Shit, shit, shit. I need to change the subject. Definitely not ready for Rian to learn *everything* about me.

But I wish I could let him. He already gets along so well with Mama. I haven't seen her so alert in ages.

I wish I could have a normal relationship with Rian where I don't have to hide in fear.



THE TENDER THANKSGIVING OUTING WITH THE STANLEYS lingers in my head as Christmas rolls around and I find myself holed up at home with my mother.

We elected not to visit the other Goodwins this year with all the heavy snow. That’s the best part of Minnesota, really—the weather will always give us an excuse to ignore the relatives we don’t really feel comfortable around.

It’s hard to believe it’s Christmas already. Time has never flown so quickly. It’s great when it’s one of the six days of the week I don’t see Darrell, but I hate that it doesn’t stop when I’m having my weekly date with him. I can’t seem to get enough of our evenings filled with delicious food, fun manga, and generous amounts of physical contact. We chat daily (he has started sending me good night texts when he wakes up), but it’s never as exciting as actually being together and feeling which soft cardigan has been honored to grace his body.

Are all casual relationships this torturous on the heart?

Mom hums as she enters the living room. She sits down on the couch next to me and pats my back. “Hotdish is in the oven! Beef, tater tots, canned vegetables, cheese, some kinna soup, the only two Goodwins who aren’t into drama—what else does anyone need for Christmas?”

We also decided to just make a classic Minnesota hotdish for our holiday supper.

“Please don’t pretend you aren’t interested in the drama.” I chuckle. My marriage with Adaline had proved very exciting for my mother since the Polinskys are an eternal fountain of gossip fodder. Those two used to talk for hours out on the porch. “But I can’t think of anything else I need.”

Except for a boyfriend.

I turn away from the television and check my phone. No new messages from Darrell. He must be busy with his mother.

Not like I’ve had the courage to text him or anything.

The past twenty-four hours since I last saw Darrell have been torturous. I had dropped by his place to give him his gift (complete set of *Demon Slayer* manga that’s been translated so far since he’s only watched the anime) before I went to the airport, and, well, let’s just say the gift he gave me was far better.

Ugh, I can’t stop thinking about the warmth of his hands and the magical way he still wears fall-smelling cologne when it’s winter. Last thing I need is to get horny and hide in my room to jack off. I’m forty, not fourteen.

Desperate for a distraction, I furiously jot down my thoughts about the current program I’m watching. I’ve spent all day studying Starship Engine TV. Stephen’s observations on its current lineup aren’t too far off from my own. The existing channel is a mess that just seems to air whatever it feels like. A Christmas-themed murder mystery documentary right after a feel-good romcom? Yikes. No wonder this channel is failing.

I haven't quite settled on what I would like Revolution's core demographic to be. Fans of comedy, for sure, but Adaline thinks we need to be more specific in our proposal if we want Laytonpolis to sell to us. We aren't the only people interested in picking up a network.

"Do you want some more coffee?" Mom asks.

"I'll get it. You should relax. Watch this terrible TV with me."

"Relax?" She snorts and picks up her pack of cigarettes. "Big talk from someone who brought homework with him. Are all these notes for a standup special?"

I scratch the back of my neck. "No, Adaline and I are working on something else."

"Adaline?" Shock tinges Mom's voice. "How's my favorite ex-daughter-in-law doing?"

Mom is too polite to use the real interrogative word written in the fine lines of her suspicious expression.

I drop my pen and bring my hands to my face. "We're not back together, if that's what you're thinking."

"Oh." Mom lights her cigarette. "Adrian, it's not good for you to only worry about work. You used to dream about being married and having kids. What happened to that?"

Irritation rolls through me. "And it's not good for you to smoke."

"I know." She playfully flips me the bird. I blow her a kiss. "Have you even gone out with anyone since Adaline?"

I glance at my phone again.

Should I tell her about Darrell? We're not in a committed relationship, so does it matter? We're *casual*.

But I've met his mother, and I... I want him to meet Mom sometime.

What would my mother think about me seeing a man? Could this (not very devout) Evangelical Minnesotan ever approve of a queer child? She's already clearly concerned that I'm not living up to her image of a son who breeds the next generation of spindly Goodwins.

But wouldn't Mom support me if I never lived up to her image? Wouldn't she be okay if I ended up with a man who I cared deeply about? Surely, the woman who raised me alone after being ditched by an utter coward could be a safe place.

Ah, if only Mari was here to help me find the right words.

"I've been seeing someone." The words tumble out of me slowly, sapping every bit of moisture from my tongue in the process. "It's nothing serious right now, but we've gone out several times."

This revelation causes Mom's eyes to grow wide with interest. "What are you doing working here instead of spending time with her?! It's Christmas! You should be with her."

Okay, here goes. I can do this. If I can show my underwear on television, I can tell my mom she's using the wrong pronouns.

My mouth opens, but not a single syllable manifests.

Mom pinches my arm. "You know I'm right. Stop working and call her up right now. Get her to video chat with me. Let me see if she is pretty. Wait, she's a celebrity, right? I haven't washed my hair today."

Mortification keeps me stiller than a statue. I'm both upset that I can't bring myself to come out to my own mother and horrified that she's already building a fantasy about the kind of person she thinks I'd date.

Can I ever be the son my mom wants to see?

"I should check on the hotdish." I stand up, knowing very well there is nothing to check. "I'll bring us both some coffee."

"Liar." Mom flicks her ashes into a nearby ceramic dish. "But I'll take that coffee. Brew something fresh."

I jump into the kitchen within a blink of a second. A box on the table catches my eye as I start the coffee machine.

Mom had gathered all my scrapbooks for me, per my request, before I arrived. They're coming back to New York with me. Hanging around Mari and her extensive note-taking has made me nostalgic for my own days of passionate research. There might be some gems in here that could I use for the show. Mari might also enjoy perusing my bounded memories.

I idly flip through one book. The pages are filled with pasted jokes from bargain bin books and newspaper articles about Johnny Carson and Richard Pryor. My handwriting decorates the empty spaces. In the loose, sloppy penmanship lies an ocean of awe.

These scrapbooks were made by a Rian who didn't worry about goalposts. They were crafted with love by a teenager who thought the worst thing in life was waking up early to go to church (I always was a night owl).

Past me had no idea present me would be famous, rich, and the textbook definition of modest. The only thing past me

knew was that I had a hunger, one that might not ever be satisfied. A hunger to be funny, a hunger to kiss people of all genders.

My throat tightens as a familiar ghost revisits me.

That Rian is a wonderful guy, but is the entertainer all who you really are?

It's hard to show anyone the real Rian. I don't even know if I know who that guy is. Darrell claims he likes the real me, but I'm not good enough to be his boyfriend.

Is it really the different schedules that have him concerned? Does he not believe I would make time for him? Is he afraid I wouldn't come out of the closet for him?

If he was by my side, I would release a blockbuster film proclaiming how much I love kissing him and feeling the scruff of his beard.

But it's not right to have such a thought. I have to be the complete opposite of a coward by myself.

Can I ever be good enough for Darrell?

My phone finds its way into my hand again. Still no new messages from him. What is he doing? Am I allowed to find out?

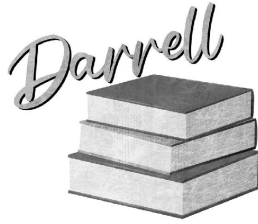
Would it be okay if the real Rian turns out to be something of a needy mess? Will Darrell still like me if I send him a sappy text or two?

I hope so, because I think I'm going to explode from trying to pretend I'm capable of going an entire day without talking to him.

How are your holidays going? I miss you so much. Yuletide hotdish seems so dull without you here to enjoy it.

His instantaneous reply brings the biggest smile to my face.

Hotdish???



THE LONGER I KEEP OCCASIONALLY SEEING RIAN, THE MORE IT hurts to be separated from him.

It's so hard to make our schedules work. If we could go out in public, I could meet him during the week for a quick dinner or coffee. Saturday nights are the only time we can get together, but those evenings aren't ever long enough.

As January wraps us up in blistering winds and equally brutal standardized testing prep season, the days between dates begin to feel longer. No matter how much I bury myself in my book club or volunteer work, I can't stop thinking about Rian.

Worse, I think Rian likes me as much as I like him. Which makes me want him even more.

But I can't fall in love with him. I just can't. Not when a dark, stormy cloud shaped like my father taints my heart.

On one Friday, Mari pokes her head in my class after school. Her eyes are bright, and her smile is infectious. The cloud in my chest disperses. For now.

"Hello, Miss Jin." I lean back in my chair. "Come in. What brings you by? Stuck on a paper? I'm pretty good at everything."

New semester. She's still in my homeroom, but she doesn't have English with me anymore.

She practically skips into the room. "No, I understand all my assignments. In fact, I've already finished my first history paper. It's not even due until next week."

Mari Jin? Finishing an assignment early? This is a miracle.

"That's what I like to hear!" I clap. "Do you need help submitting it online?"

"Actually, I wanted to know if I could get some extra credit."

"Extra credit?" I raise an eyebrow. "For what? I can't give you points on another teacher's paper."

Mari pouts and fiddles with her daisy scarf. "But I'm going to spend my whole Saturday learning. Shouldn't that count for something?"

"What are you learning?"

Mari's smile returns. "I'm going to watch Mr. Goodwin film one of his segments tomorrow. So I'll get to see his craft in action. That's history, right?"

Should have known Rian was involved. Still, my brain hums with delight just thinking about him.

"I'm still not your history teacher," I reply.

"But this is huge."

"Nice try, Mari."

She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. "Do you want to come watch with me? My mother and her boyfriend can't make it. They trust Mr. Goodwin enough, but they'd be happier if I had a real adult with me."

I bite my lip, but an amused snort still escapes me.

It *would* be fun to watch Rian work. Just listening to him spout ideas is mesmerizing. The way he rambles about lighting tricks to enhance background jokes in segments is more exciting than anything Shakespeare could ever write. No doubt, Rian shines more brilliantly than the sun when he's making a gag come to life.

But Gerald Lafontaine's dark cloud would still be there. Rian's segments are usually filmed outdoors. Someone would see me there.

I clear my throat. "Unfortunately, I'm busy tomorrow."

Not a complete lie. I have to go for a jog and trim my beard afterward. Vital things, really.

Mari juts out her lower lip again. "Please?"

"Sorry, but I can't." My brow stitches together as Mari's dour expression sets off alarms. "Is there a different reason you want me to be there?"

"Well..."

There it is. The number one word I hear from teenagers. *Well.*

"Well?" I fold my arms across my chest.

"My mom doesn't want me to go at all. She's not stopping me, but she doesn't really want me to go." Mari uncaps a dry-erase marker and starts doodling on the whiteboard. "She thinks I'm gonna get ideas and try to become famous."

I watch the loopy edges of a flower come to life while studying Mari's body language. The way she's avoiding eye contact and trembling is quite concerning. "Your mom doesn't want you to be famous?"

“Every time I talk to her about something I want to do, she shuts it down.” Mari adds a stem to her flower. “I thought, maybe, if you came with me, you could see that I’m serious about what I want to do. Then you could talk to my mom, and —”

“And what exactly is it that you want to do?”

Mari closes the cap. The blue daisy smiles at us, the only visibly happy thing currently in the room.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I think I’m going to go home. Thanks for talking to me!”

Before I can stop her, she dashes out of the room.

Crap. I said the wrong thing to her. Would she have opened up to Rian? What would he have said?

While I navigate my phone to shoot Rian a text, a call interrupts my train of thought.

Great. Not that I have his number saved, but it’s the storm cloud. Just what I needed.

“What?” I answer, not giving an iota of a fuck about respectability.

“Hey, buddy, I just wanted to give you a call. Is that so wrong?”

“Your calls seem to come with probes into my personal life.” I rise from my desk and close the door. “What do you want, Gerry?”

He chuckles. “Haven’t seen you with Rian Goodwin lately. Ended your friendship with him?”

A knife wedges into my brain as I process my father’s words. The searing pain shoots from my head to my toes.

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Well, it’s just strange that my men keep reporting you going to his apartment building. What’s a teacher doing in such a ritzy place?”

The world around me goes white. I’m still being followed. Holy shit.

“You see, I have a movie coming out that I’ll need to do publicity for next month.” Every treble of Gerry’s disgustingly sweet voice pricks my eardrum. “Rian’s show wants either me or Hana on there. Now, I’ve been on *Burning the Midnight Oil* before, but if Rian’s become familiar with your face, then I have some concerns. Should I send Miss Stone?”

Concerns.

“I’m not seeing Rian,” I snap. “I’m also not seeing a check from you to make up for this time you’re wasting stalking me.”

“Hey, calm down, buddy. I’m just trying to understand the big picture.”

My eyes wander to Mari’s doodle. God, I wish I was a flower in a field somewhere, blissfully free.

“What does it matter if I’m seeing him?” I keep my attention on the daisy. Keep trying to picture a meadow where dark clouds and rain aren’t welcomed. “The only people who know are the creeps you send.”

“And your mother.”

My heart drops as I register the new, confident tone to Gerry’s words. Like he’s about to send a bolt of lightning down to fry me.

“Talked to her over the holidays, you know.” Gerry breaks into laughter. “My boy, she told me you brought Rian around for Thanksgiving.”

“You’re not supposed to be talking to Mama!” I punch the whiteboard, careful not to hurt Mari’s flower. “You pay for her bills, and we shut up. That’s the deal.”

His voice hardens. “Your mother isn’t getting so good at remembering what she’s supposed to do these days. I’ve been thinking about transferring her to a different nursing home. Somewhere where she can receive better care.”

This fucking asshole. My mother is losing her memory, and he’s worried about how it will affect him. I can’t believe I share blood with someone so disgusting.

“You mean somewhere more private?” I claw at the board, smearing the weekly self-care reminders I keep in the corner. “You’re trying to isolate her, aren’t you? I won’t let you do that. Mama needs her friends. She needs familiarity.”

The whole time I go off, though, I can’t help but thinking about how little control of the situation I have. I don’t have the means to go to a lawyer to stop Gerry from moving her. Not when Gerry is footing the bill for her care in the first place.

Legally, my father can’t move her. A restraining order keeps him from physically going near her. But if he stops paying her bills, then the facility will kick her out.

I’m not capable of taking care of my mother. She needs constant surveillance and a plethora of medication. Gerry knows this. He’ll use that information to get me to agree to a nursing home where she won’t be allowed to interact with other people.

He'll crush her spirit, and I'll continue being helpless because I'm poor and weak.

It's obvious that it no longer matters if I keep seeing Rian in private. I can stay single the rest of my life, but Gerry will still find a way to fuck with Mama and me because our mere existence is a threat to him.

I have no control of this situation, do I?

"Just be good for now, buddy," my father has the audacity to say. "I'll call you again soon."

Gerry hangs up before I can scream. Not that anything that came out of my mouth would ever change anything with him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I lose myself in the stormy clouds for several minutes. Rain falls on my face while I try to figure out what to do.

Eventually, the sun peeks through the darkness in the form of a text from Rian.

Just thought I would let you know that Mari asked if she could come to the studio. I said yes, but then she changed her mind. Said she needed to finish her essay. Something about her seems off. Is she okay?

His warm words pull me back into a world where I have some control.

As I shift into my teacher role, a sense of ease melts the tension in my body. I'm an expert at handling my students. Whatever is going on with her, it will be taken care of.

That's funny, I reply. She told me she had finished it already

It takes him a minute to answer. *Really? I'll see if I can get her to talk to me tomorrow. If she doesn't want to, then I will be more than happy to entertain her with unending bad jokes.*

I wipe my face, relieved that I can rely on Rian to take care of Mari. He's such a great, sweet man.

What if...

What if I can rely on him in other areas?



“WHY ARE WE AT A BUS STATION?” MARI WRINKLES HER NOSE.
“It smells.”

“Not all segments are glamorous to film.” I strap a mini-camera to my wrist. “Sorry. The segment will be funny, I promise.”

Felicity adjusts the headphones hooked to her audio monitoring equipment. “You don’t like stale cigarettes?”

Mari gags.

“Am I allowed to smoke?” Vera asks.

“You can’t smoke inside the station,” Mari informs her.
“Also, it’s bad for you.”

Vera sighs. “Rian *would* hang out with the one teenager who doesn’t smoke. Come on. Let’s finish doing his makeup. Our prince shouldn’t be seen in public with any blemishes.”

All the disgust etched in Mari’s face disappears. She rifles through Vera’s makeup kit, hanging on to her every word as Vera instructs her for my regal makeover.

A ribbon of pride unfurls inside me when Mari brings the foundation sponge to my cheek. The universe glitters in her excited eyes.

I can't wait to tell Darrell about this moment later. I also can't wait to smooch him. We have a date planned at my place this evening. He has clearance into my building and knows the passcode to my place, so he's heading over early to start dinner.

That's right! He's cooking dinner for me!

Has food ever been so exciting?

Mari holds up the compact mirror once she's finished.
"What do you think?"

I chuckle. "Do princes have such rosy cheeks?"

"You said you wanted a storybook look," Vera interrupts.
"Besides, if your face is already red, no one will be able to tell you're embarrassed when this stunt inevitably fails."

"Fails?!" I grab my crown and start sliding into my character. "There is no way this is going to fail. I'm Prince Rian of Baxterlandia, heir to the throne and an acreage of incredibly fluffy cats."

Mari presses her lips together. "No one is going to believe royalty wears such ugly shoes."

I point to my sequin loafers. "These are my nation's greatest treasures. I will not stand for such slander to be spoken of these priceless heirlooms."

The collective groan that ripples through my crew should win an Oscar, honestly.

Once everything is set up, we start filming *The Daring Chronicles of Prince Rian*. The premise is an arrogant royal has decided to run away from his stuffy palace and live like a commoner, but he can't figure out what to do once he arrives

in New York City. Cue exasperated expressions from everyone forced to deal with him.

We take a break after a couple of hours to touch up my makeup and change the camera batteries. And let Vera sneak out for a smoke, of course.

“Are you having fun?” I ask Mari as she applies powder to my face.

“Yeah,” Mari replies in the world’s most unenthusiastic voice.

“You sure? I’m way more excited when the hygienist asks me if I’m ready for my fluoride rinse.”

She doesn’t react. While I no longer expect Mari to be amused by my jokes, her neutral expression stabs me right in the chest. I deserve at least an eye roll for that quip.

Her messages yesterday had been weird too. What’s going on with her? Is it something I can help with?

“Now,” I start. “I heard a rumor from a reliable source that you actually had finished your—”

“Yes, I lied!” Mari swats my nose with the bristles of her brush. “Er, sorry. It’s just... I was mad at Mom and didn’t want to go home.”

I sniffle, trying not to sneeze. Thanks, powder dancing in my nostrils. “What were you mad about?”

“Mom doesn’t want me to be here. She’s letting me be here, but she thinks I’m wasting my time.” Mari swipes the brush along my forehead. “I want to start a vlog, but Mom won’t let me have one. This sucks! After today, I’m gonna know so much more about angles and makeshift lighting techniques!”

Oh. That's quite a problem. One I'm not sure I have a solution for.

What would Darrell do here?

Mari continues. "I filmed a video of me examining the products in a beauty store and uploaded it, but Mom found out and made me take it down."

I keep my face still so as not to disrupt Mari and speak carefully. "Why doesn't she want you to start a vlog? A lot of your classmates have one."

A heavy sigh rolls out of Mari, one that is colored with fatigue and irritation. "She's worried about online perverts because I'm underage and pretty."

A wad of saliva slithers down my throat, and I nearly choke on it. God, that was straightforward. I don't expect anything less of Mari, of course.

"I don't blame her," Felicity interjects. "Lot of gross people out there."

"I can't help that they're there!" Mari packs the powder brush neatly back into its place in the kit. "At this rate, I'm going to have to wait until I'm eighteen to do anything meaningful with my life. I'll be too old to be successful then."

"That's not true." I stifle my chuckle, but a titter escapes me anyway. "I didn't get my real break until my mid-twenties when someone in a nightclub found my 'Shakespeare Joins the Backstreet Boys' bit funny enough to sign me. Even then, I wasn't too old. Whether you're eighteen or eighty, you can start succeeding at any time."

Mari stares at me in disbelief. Her lips remain stitched together in a thin line.

Oh, this sweet girl just wants to conquer the world. I understand that feeling. It's frustrating when you can't actively work on your dreams.

What can I do to make her smile again?

I pat her arm gingerly. "Come on. What do you say we finish filming, then we go back to the studio? I'll show you what I was doing when I was in high school. We can even get boba delivered. Vera's probably never had it before. I'm dying to try the watermelon flavor. Your mom won't mind if you stay out a little longer, will she? Call her and ask."

The word "boba" spins Mari's frown into a hopeful smile. It's impossible to resist mirroring her expression.

I CARRY the warm fuzzies with me on my way home—after making sure Mari's mom picked her up. The Velvet Fighters' newest single blasts in my ears, lifting my spirits even higher. I'm two seconds away from physically divorcing gravity by the time I reach my apartment.

My apartment. Where Darrell is waiting. With food that he made.

Eee!

Darrell greets me at the entrance, rocking a tight, black T-shirt that shows off his thick arms. His beard has been neatly trimmed, and the edges of his fade have been touched up. His smile is as wide as the Atlantic Ocean.

My brain forgets how to say hi. It's too busy talking to my heart, wondering if it's too soon to be in love yet.

I think I'm at least a little bit in love. That's okay, right? Like ten percent? That's pretty harmless.

“Don’t just stand there forever. This is your home.” Darrell peeks into the hallway before tugging me inside. “You dork.”

As soon as the door is shut, Darrell helps me take my jacket off. In the process, he narrows the gap between us. His strong hands find their way to my neck; his soft lips on mine. The heat of his body is familiar, but it’s still as exciting as our first kiss. It’s easy to sink into his touch and lose myself in our little world.

My earlier guess was wrong. I’m twenty percent in love. That’s still pretty safe, right? If Darrell never wants us to be together, I can survive on twenty percent.

The idea of us never actually getting into a more serious relationship, however, causes me to flinch.

Darrell breaks the kiss. He runs his hands up and down my arms. “Cold? Let’s go into the living room. I’ve got blankets, and dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“What did you make?” I break into a smile. “I’ve been thinking about this all day.”

“Well, you were raving about your mom’s hotdish the other night, so I thought I’d try it myself.” Darrell guides me to the living room, holding me by the cuff of my sleeve. “I’m still skeptical about throwing all of that stuff into one pan, but I guess I’ll try anything once.”

I gasp. “Hotdish?! Really? The dish fit for the gods? With tater tots and everything?”

“How could I forget the tater tots? That’s the most important part, don’t you know?” Darrell grins, obviously proud of what has to be the worst Minnesotan accent ever.

I fall onto the couch, laughing. Darrell plops down as well, wrapping his arms around me.

All right, maybe I'm thirty percent in love. That's still fine.

"How was your mom?" I ask. "You saw her this morning, right?"

"She's good." A storm dances on the edge of his clenched jaw and flared nostrils. "She talked about you."

"Oh?"

There's an untold story attached to that last sentence, one that causes me to sit straight up. Does his mom know we've been seeing each other? Does she also think I'm not good enough to be his boyfriend? Did she suggest lacing the hotdish with arsenic to get rid of me? It's the perfect crime because everyone knows I can't resist hotdish.

Whatever the story is, Darrell makes it clear he's not going to share by shifting subjects. "How was filming?"

"It was fun." I rub my cheeks. I washed up before heading over here, but some of the storybook prince blush might be permanently attached. "Mari did my makeup today."

Her name breaks up the cluster of clouds. "Did she enjoy herself?"

"I think so, but she also didn't seem like the Mari I know today." I trace my nail along Darrell's palm. "She seems to have something going on at home."

"So it seems. Hopefully things will work out soon. I bet today was good for Mari's spirits." Darrell's voice grows soft. "She's been a great student lately, you know? Her grades have improved significantly since she met you. She pays attention in class and turns in her assignments on time. Mari even checks with me to make sure she understands the directions. Her other teachers have noticed a dramatic improvement too."

That's...so, so wonderful to hear. All the praise for Mari stuns me into silence.

Darrell hugs me close. "You're a great influence on her."

"No way." Heat flashes through me, waking my vocal cords. "She's a smart kid. You're probably just finally teaching something that interests her. No offense, but only old guys like us are into Shakespeare."

Darrell shakes his head. "You really don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

He keeps shaking his head. Genuine amusement glitters in his smile. "The kids keep asking if you're going to show up again to volunteer. You think you can make it to the next meeting?"

"Of course!" I exclaim, whilst mentally reviewing my calendar. Pretty sure I don't have anything lined up for that Saturday morning. Adaline, Stephen, and I have been keeping our planning parties to late lunches only. "Any Saturday I'm not busy, I'll gladly spend with you."

"Yeah?"

The oven buzzer goes off, prompting Darrell to spring to his feet. I follow him and the heavenly aroma of potatoes and cheese into the kitchen.

My love-o-meter rises another tick as Darrell sets the hotdish on the stovetop. His brow is furrowed, but there's still a smile dancing on his face. This moment is so domestic, so lovely.

"This is really all you eat for this meal?" Darrell inspects the casserole dish. "No sides? What about a salad?"

A hearty laugh rolls out of me. “Salads are pretentious when you’ve got all the vegetables you need right there in that bad boy.”

“I was afraid you’d say that.” He opens the fridge. “We’re going to have salad. You see? You can use this device to store produce, just in case you need to magic up an emergency side.”

“Did you buy me groceries?!”

“You lent me your credit card to buy stuff for tonight. I figured while I was out, I’d show you what you can store in here besides leftover iced coffee. Asked my vegan roommate for recs.”

I wrap my arms around him from behind. My fridge is stocked with all sorts of healthy-looking things. Fruits, lettuce, soy protein shakes, aloe water.

“You know how long it’s been since I’ve seen something green inside here?”

Darrell shakes his head. “The food’s gonna grow cold if we try to stand here and reminiscence about 2006.”

I bury my face in the crook of his neck. My whole body is shaking with laughter at this point. A hot man delivering lethal blows in a deadpan tone is my number one turn on, I swear.

He closes the fridge and rests his hands on top of mine. “Glad all it takes to please my Saturday boyfriend is some hotdish and a few jokes.”

My heart trips over the word *boyfriend*. I stop laughing and slowly raise my head. Darrell bites his lip, not quite making an effort to meet my eyes.

I hug him closer. “Saturday boyfriend? What about the rest of the week?”

“What about it?” he mutters. “Saturdays seem to be the only times that work for us.”

I spin him around and gently press him against the refrigerator. He finally meets my eyes. The way he trembles tightens every fiber in my body.

This moment is pivotal. I wish I had studied romance a little more. I need the perfect words. Something the ideal lover would say.

The real Rian Goodwin seems to be my style.

Maybe this goofy comedian with bad pick-up lines is enough for Darrell?

I bring my hand to his cheek. “So what if we only meet on Saturdays? I could kiss you hard enough to make you remember me the rest of the week, you know.”

Darrell rewards me with a soft chuckle.

“Don’t you know I think about you constantly?” I lean in, tantalizingly close to his mouth. “I can’t promise you a date every Saturday, but I can promise I’ll call every morning, afternoon, and evening. When I have a spare hour during the week, I’ll run to you and kiss you. Well, not actually run. Fuck that. *You’re* the jogger in this potential relationship.”

His chuckle grows softer. “Yeah, okay. I guess I can accept that. I’ll do all the physical exercise in this relationship if you do the mental gymnastics for us. I... I come with complications, you know?”

Oh my God.

He said yes.

I've finally reached one end of the football field.

We seal our new relationship with the longest kiss. It is Darrell's lips that keep me grounded, because I have stopped believing in gravity. The only thing I believe in this moment is Darrell and the goalpost he's touching.

But wait.

"Complications?" I tilt my head to the side. "Is this not about our different schedules? What's complicated about you? Wanting to be with you has been the easiest—"

Oh. I'm not out of the closet to anyone but him and Mari. Most people around Darrell probably know his sexuality.

What should I say that will reassure him?

Darrell rests a hand on my wrist. "Let's eat."

"But you're going on about complications?" I blink. "What's going on?"

"I'll tell you when I'm ready. I assume hotdish is best while it's still hot."

What...

What does Darrell want to tell me?

And why am I too afraid to press him for answers?



DESPITE US NOW OFFICIALLY DATING, I HAVEN'T SEEN MUCH more of Rian. He has some vague project he's working on when he's not busy with *Burning the Midnight Oil*. True to his word, he calls me several times a day, but we rarely meet except for our usual Saturday night dates watching the Chūnin Exams arc in *Naruto* or the newest episode of *Demon Slayer*.

Which is fine. Less chance of us getting caught by cameras. Despite convincing myself that I trust Rian enough to tell him about my father, I still haven't. At this point, I'm not sure if anything will change if I tell him.

But I'm getting tired of holding it in.

It's exhausting to keep looking over my shoulder when I go out in public. I call the nursing home every morning when I wake up to check on Mama, and I bolt to visit her after school to see with my own eyes that she's still there.

It's...a lot.

My phone rings while I get ready for school. Rian. We usually text a bit when I first wake up, but he never calls me this early. Joaquín cuts me a knowing wink as I answer. I gesture for him to mind his own beeswax.

“Hey,” I say. “Have you not gone to sleep yet? It’s almost six-thirty.”

“How could I go to bed without talking to the Adonis of New York City?” Rian bursts into laughter.

His cheerfulness both lifts me up and makes me want to go back to bed. My whole life has been spent in fear. I should be used to it, but every time I hear the sunshine in Rian’s voice, I realize how fatigued I am.

I want to tell him everything. I don’t want to be alone in this mess anymore.

Why is it so hard to admit that?

“Did I catch you at a bad time? Do you need to go?” Rian asks.

“No, no!” I grab my wallet, keys, and ID badge off the nightstand. “I’m almost ready. Still have a few minutes before I need to leave.”

“Good. A few minutes of your voice is all I need. Darrell, my dear, what color cardigan are you wearing to work today?”

I glance down, unable to stop my smile, although it hurts to move my facial muscles. “Dark orange.”

“Perfect.” Rian’s voice curls in my ear, stirring my imagination with ideas of what he’s wearing.

Despite sleeping over at his place a few times, I still haven’t seen what he looks like when he goes to bed. When I crash there, he puts on his reading glasses and moves to his desk.

“It’s Valentine’s Day,” Rian says. “I know it’s Friday, but do you think we can start our Saturday date a little early?”

“Oh?” I avoid Joaquín’s bright, nosy expression as I check myself in the mirror. “You want me to come over tonight?”

“I do, but I also want you to come to the studio and watch tonight’s taping.”

The invitation freezes me in place. He wants me to see him? In public?

Rian continues. “I have a special segment I do every year for this blessed day dedicated to buying expensive roses and wasteful paper cards. Have you seen it? We bring out a giant roulette wheel with names pulled from the audience members. I spin it, and whoever wins gets a chance to kiss me—or kick me. The choice is theirs.”

I force out a chuckle. Yeah, I’ve seen the segment. As far as I know, everyone has chosen to kick him.

My chatterbox boyfriend keeps going. “Since I’m spoken for this year, I thought you should be present in case some smoking hot babe decides to smooch me.”

“You really want me there?” I scratch the back of my neck. “It’s fine if you get kissed on television. I know it won’t mean anything from a stranger.”

Joaquín’s exaggerated gasp makes me toss him a different kind of gesture.

“It’s Valentine’s Day!” Rian’s voice is so, so animated and borderline delirious. This guy really needs to catch some z’s. “I want my boyfriend there! Even if people don’t know who you are, I want you near. What do you say?”

His absurd words fill me with confidence and hope.

I *can* trust him. I *can* lean on him. If I have to be harassed by father, I don’t have to be alone.

Tonight. Tonight will be the night I stop hiding from my emotions.

A SPECIAL SEAT is saved for me in the front row, off to the side where the camera doesn't film audience reactions. I get to watch the magic of Rian in his element up close.

Rian is more dazzling than usual, but maybe I'm distracted by his hideous sequin suit that matches his signature loafers. Still, he is captivating when he's performs for a live crowd. His jokes and stunts keep everyone laughing.

In between those laughs, he looks my way with the most handsome smile etched on his face.

I can't even remember who the celebrity guest is or what music the Velvet Fighters played because my heart is under Rian's spell. I barely register the existence of the elderly woman who won the roulette wheel spin and opted to kick my boyfriend.

All I can see is Rian Goodwin.

The set manager escorts me to Rian's dressing room after the filming is over. Apparently, the star of the show has to have a quick meeting with his writers.

Fortunately, being around the set manager is not entirely uncomfortable. He chats with me about the show and the Super Rian segments from the fall. He assumes I'm there as Rian's friend. Drops a few hints that the crew would like to film with the kids again, suggestions that I easily pretend I don't hear.

Once I'm left alone in Rian's dressing room, it occurs to me that *this* is my first time visiting his home.

His apartment is just a place where he stores his clothes. But here is where he displays his awards on the walls. A picture of his mother is taped to the mirror (she looks like she's as tall as him). There are oodles of snacks in a basket, and the mini-fridge is stocked with pop, water, yogurt, and string cheese. The coffee table is covered in a mess of charts, writing utensils, and a notebook decorated in bubble tea stickers.

It even smells like a home. A mixture of cologne, coffee, smoke, and makeup powder lingers in the air. Traces of Rian and his studio family.

I sit down on the couch, which has that comfortable, used feeling. A few pictures of Rian with various celebrities have also been hung.

The masochist inside me looks for my father, but Rian doesn't seem interested in actors. The images he's chosen all have geriatric comedians—his role models, I suppose.

Rian finally enters the dressing room. I greet him with a wave.

“Sorry that took a hot minute.” Rian locks the door behind him. “Usually, it's my writers begging me to make the post-show meeting quick. It was strange to be the one trying to rush through it. Did you enjoy the taping? You appeared to be quite delighted when I got kicked by that granny.”

I slip him a grin. “Ordinarily I'd be offended when my boyfriend gets Chuck Norris'd in the shin, but you seemed to ask for it.”

“Why does no one ever want to kiss me?” Rian meanders to the couch, loosening his tie. “You're the only one, it seems.

Maybe you should get yourself checked out by a doctor. There might be a parasite in your brain.”

Though he’s still in the eyesore of a suit, I can’t get over how marvelous he looks. The closer he gets to me, the more I’m fascinated by how glamorous and confident Rian is.

He’s a safe place, isn’t he?

He sits down next to me. My arms find their way around him, desperate to feel the sun’s warmth.

“Hope you don’t mind I took myself on a tour of your place,” I say. “This is your real home, isn’t it?”

Rian glances around and flashes me a bashful smile. “Yeah, you’re not wrong.”

I bring my thumb to his jaw. The stage makeup covers most of his freckles from a distance, but I can see them when I’m this close to him. It’s hard to hide anything, really, when you’re close enough to touch someone.

Can Rian see that I’m hiding a secret when he’s near me? I really need to come clean.

“What are we going to do tonight?” I ask, mentally preparing myself for the talk we need to have.

Rian lets his fingers drag down his chest before unbuttoning his blazer. Something about the way he gazes at me with his determined eyes makes all the blood in my head travel south.

“You, of course,” he replies.

“Me?”

“You.”

He brings his mouth to mine. The second I get a taste of his soft lips and minty breath, I can't help returning the kiss.

"You," Rian repeats. His lips travel down my chin and neck, sending all sorts of wonderful thrills through my tired body. "I've been so busy. I'm going to make sure you get all the attention you deserve."

"Here?!" I squeak.

Rian chuckles and lets his hand rove down to my growing crotch. "Here. What do you say? I've missed you so much. I need you now."

Christ. Never before has he looked so... So... Powerful. Capable. Trustworthy.

"Maybe a little bit of fun," I mumble.

He squeezes me gently before sinking to the floor. My cock becomes rock solid as Rian spreads my legs apart and takes a place between them.

"Let's have some fun here, then we can go home and fuck all night." Rian's fingers drum along my thighs. His labored breath stirs a desire in me to hear him pant. "And we can play all day tomorrow."

Oh, Rian. I want to surrender to him. I want to be completely helpless in his grasp.

I want him to take care of me.

I bury my fingers in his curls and bring his face closer to my crotch. Time whirls by us in a blur as he undoes my belt buckle, pushes aside the material of my boxers, and takes my cock in his hot, wet mouth.

The incredible sensation elicits a moan from me, perhaps a bit louder than I wanted. But Rian only smiles before taking in

more of my length.

“Don’t think you’ve ever been this eager to suck my dick,” I mumble while stroking his hair. “You haven’t even stopped to tell a joke.”

Rian lets go of me and looks up at me. “I don’t feel the need to be an entertainer. Right now, I’m your boyfriend. I’m the man responsible for giving you the biggest orgasm of your life.”

Fuck.

I yield to him, completely.

He takes as much of me as I can. Under his thumb, under his tongue, I am all his. Every needy ministrations from him results in a blissful groan from me. The hungry way he swallows every drop of my cum causes me to float in a nirvana I never thought I could achieve.

I trust him. I trust him. I trust him.

Rian pulls away from me and unzips his pants. Traces of his makeup have been left on my boxers, and his dreamy eyes have glazed over.

Lust consumes me as he starts jerking himself off. Part of me wants to get on the floor and help him; the rest of me wants to watch this show. It’s obvious Rian *wants* me to watch as he meets my gaze.

The king of entertainment is giving me something only I can have. Never before have I ever felt more like I belong somewhere.

I think Rian *is* the one for me. I think... I think I love him.

The intense euphoria gets interrupted by a buzzing phone. I instantly crash back to reality.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Rian grumbles. He stops masturbating and fumbles through his pockets. “Couldn’t they have waited five more minutes?”

“You don’t have to answer,” I mutter, knowing that he will.

“It’s probably nothing important, but I’d rather get the call out of the way now. Remind me to sanitize my phone after.”

I tuck my dick back into my boxers. Whatever hormone-fueled high I was riding is over. At least we can go back to his place later and properly enjoy ourselves.

Rian adjusts himself and answers his phone. “Hi, Adaline.”

Ugh. His ex-wife. Of all people. Why is he talking to her?

I look away, pretending to be interested in the quilted blanket draped over the couch.

“What can I do for you?” Rian clears his throat. “Uh-huh? Is that right? Oh, should we?”

His tone gradually changes from inconvenienced to perky. The more he talks, the more it becomes obvious he is planning something with Adaline.

As soon as he hangs up, he throws himself on the couch and snuggles close to me. I let him hug me, but I don’t reciprocate his touch.

What bad news is he about to break?

“I need to go to a party,” Rian announces in a sheepish voice. “Tonight.”

Tonight. Valentine’s Day. After he made a big fuss of us being together.

What the fuck?

“I know what you’re thinking.” He peppers my cheek with tiny kisses. “Look, I’m not seeing my ex socially. That was a business call. We’re working on something huge together—something that’s going to change the world. I’m building a platform that is going to boost young creatives. People like Mari and the other students in your class. The party is where I need to make some vital networking connections.”

Mari’s name softens the panic building in my chest. I finally turn to Rian.

“Do you want to come?” Rian asks. “It’s an East Coast wrap party for the movie *Adaline’s* in. Hana Stone and Gerald Lafontaine are gonna be there. They’re pretty big deals. Hana’s even going to be on the show next week.”

NOPE.

I have made a hideous mistake of getting into a relationship with Rian. And trusting him.

He’s a celebrity. The rich will always prioritize their money, their images, their careers. If I tell Rian that Gerald Lafontaine is stalking and threatening me, he is going to ghost me so fast, I won’t be sure if we actually ever were an item.

I have to end things with Rian, even though doing so is going to shatter my heart.

I rise to my feet and fix my belt buckle. “I’m good. Enjoy your party. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Rian grabs my sleeve. “I’m so sorry. Do you want to go to my place and wait for me? I promise I’ll only be a couple of hours. And then I’ll be all yours.”

After an agonizingly long moment, I muster the hardest reply of my life. “I need to be alone right now.”



I NEED TO BE ALONE RIGHT NOW.

Despite my pleas to get Darrell to talk to me, he leaves the studio by himself.

Okay. Fine. We're in a fight. That's fair. I deserve it.

I swear I'll make it up to him.

The party, at least, is a resounding success. I can't stop humming with delight when I show up to Darrell's place the next morning with some apology cupcakes from a nearby bakery. The potential sponsors Adaline wanted me to meet were hooked by our proposal.

I'll explain everything to Darrell, and we'll be okay. I'll buy him everything he wants. All my Sunday plans have been canceled for him. We can spend all weekend at my place watching anime and eating good food.

But he doesn't answer my buzz, nor does he read any of my text messages.

One of his roommates eventually meets me outside of the apartment and takes the cupcakes. The well-dressed man seems as mystified as I am about the situation.

Okay. I guess Darrell needs time.

That's fine. We're going to be fine. I'm going to make "this" work. A few days of radio silence have never ruined my life.

I can do it. I can wait for Darrell. I can chase these goalposts. I can make all my dreams come true. I am capable of conquering the whole world. I *am* a revolution.

I repeat those sentences ad nauseam as I gear up to start Wednesday's livestream.

Felicity suggested we show our fans how a meeting with the writers goes. Nina, Lynette, and the rest of the gang have slugged on more makeup than there are molecules in the air. They're usually the kind of people who wear pajama pants to the office when they're hungover. It's hard to look at their dolled up faces without laughing.

"Are you ready?" I ask everyone, sliding into my chair at the head of the table.

We start the stream. I open up by introducing everyone and explaining what, exactly, the writers do for the show since not everything is scripted. While I brag about my crew's intellectual prowess, I wonder how many of them will come to the new network with me. Their contracts are with me, but it doesn't mean they'll want to leave an already established studio.

They'll follow me, won't they? The writers, the directors, the camera operators, Vera... We're a team. I could find so many places for them in the new network. I need them to succeed.

Perhaps it's time to start putting out some feelers.

After the stream is over, Felicity and I head to the set together. She needs check her equipment, but I'm already

dressed and ready to film. The studio audience hasn't filed in yet.

No better time than now to bother her.

"How's life been?" I ask her. "You don't seem as grouchy."

Felicity shoots me a glare. "What does that mean?"

I wave an apology. "You just seem happier! There's a nice spring to your step these days."

She doesn't answer me. Her lips twitch as she adjusts the camera closest to my desk, and a pink tint nestles in her cheeks.

"You like working here, right?" I fiddle with the glasses clipped to my shirt. "With me?"

The rosy cheeks disappear. Terror flashes across Felicity's face. "Yes?"

"Oh! Sorry!" I pat her shoulder. "You're not getting fired or anything. I just was wondering if you're happy working for me."

"I'm happy enough." She arches an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

I lean in close. "When are you free? We should meet up for lunch sometime and talk about possible new business opportunities."

Felicity repeats the last few words to herself. "You sure I'm not getting fired?"

"Far from it."

"Saturday?" She shrugs. "I have another show I film during the week, you know."

“I do hope you’re more fond of night time talk show hosts than the morning ones.” I grin. “Saturday it is! You don’t mind if Vera joins us, right? I’m sure she won’t be busy then.”

As soon as we agree upon the time and place, I realize I have made a horrific mistake. Saturdays are supposed to be with Darrell. Even though we’re fighting, I need to set some time aside for him.

Shit.

Okay, no problem. I’ll just make it lunch with them instead of dinner.

Wait, no. Stephen invited me to the online release party for his new, god-awful country song.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Maybe Darrell won’t mind if we do a Sunday date? He’ll be talking to me again by then, won’t he?

But am I doing something Sunday? Brunch with an executive? It’s rare to not have a Sunday brunch slot filled.

I head for my dressing room and spend some alone time with my phone, analyzing my schedule. If I arrange my rides carefully, I could swing by Darrell’s place between lunch and Stephen’s release party. There’d be enough time for us to kiss, maybe bang if his roommates aren’t home.

He...wants to see me on Saturday, doesn’t he?

I send him a message, asking just that. I make sure to emphasize how eager I am to make up with him. He doesn’t respond right away, but his immediate silence doesn’t worry me. He’s probably busy tutoring a student or two.

My heart flutters at the image of Darrell sacrificing his precious free time to better his students.

He'll forgive me, won't he? What would I do without the sweetest, hottest nerd in existence?

The stage manager opens the door, alerting me to be on standby in five. I set my phone on the couch. No point in carrying it with me. The reality cooking show chef I'm interviewing tonight will probably disapprove of me checking my messages while we make gourmet baked beans.

Tonight's filming passes by quickly. Both the audience and my guest leave in a good mood. The writers even smile when I ask them to stay for a bit to work on tomorrow's sketch.

When I return to my dressing room, I check my messages. Nothing from Darrell. Mom texted me. So did Adaline. Stephen, the producers, everyone but Darrell sent me something.

Why... Why won't he answer me?

Panic laces itself around my neck as I call him. To my relief, he answers after a few rings.

"There you are!" I waltz over to the vanity and start removing my makeup. "I was worried since I hadn't heard from you."

"Yeah."

The frost in Darrell's voice travels through his phone, straight into my veins. I set the wipe down. Even when we first met and Darrell didn't trust me, he didn't have such a cold tone.

I ease into my chair, keeping an eye on the door in the reflection of the mirror. I didn't lock it. Didn't think I'd need to. Not sure my shaky ankles are strong enough now to make it to the door.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.” I bite my lip. “We’re a couple. We should communicate as much as possible.”

He takes a moment to reply. “I don’t think this is working out. Us. The whole couple thing you’re alluding to.”

Us.

The frost settled in my veins freezes the last bit of blood swimming through me. My whole body might as well drift in the Arctic Circle and serve as an icy path for polar bears returning to the Hudson Bay.

I press the phone against my ear, as if that will bring us closer together. “Hey, I know I’ve been busy, but I swear I’m devoting every free moment to you.”

“It’s not just about how busy you are.” Darrell huffs. “It’s the fact I don’t know if I can rely on you.”

Rely on me?

“What do you mean?” My throat tightens. “You can trust me. I’m not always going to be this busy. What are you doing? I’ll cancel my meeting with the writers and come to you. Let’s talk.”

“I don’t want to see you.”

My gaze veers from the door to my own reflection. The scared, pale, freckled boy staring back at me is not a stranger. I met him back when Adaline told me she wanted a divorce.

That Rian is a wonderful guy, but is the entertainer all who you really are?

The real Rian Goodwin seems to be my style.

Whoever the real me is, he isn't good enough to be in a relationship with anyone.

My heart shatters into tiny, unfixable pieces as it realizes it's futile to fight for Darrell. At this point, even my dedicated romance broker would tell me to give up on this set of goalposts.

"I've lost my A+, huh?" I mumble. "What's my grade now?"

"Rian..." The defeated waver in Darrell's voice causes my stomach to flop. "If you'd quit worrying about your grades, you'd probably be happier."

The call ends, but I keep my phone to my ear, fooling myself into thinking the relationship isn't over until I lower my hand.

After a few minutes, a light knock pulls me out of my trance.

"Come in," I call.

Lynette pokes her head into the room. "We're ready whenever you are."

Ready? Am I in any shape to be funny?

Well, I just ruined my relationship for my career. It wouldn't do anyone any favors if I stayed here and moped over Darrell.

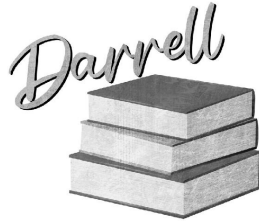
I finally set my phone down on the vanity. "I'll just change really quickly and be there in a couple of minutes."

"Got it!"

As soon as Lynette closes the door, I start unbuttoning my jacket while staring at my ugly mug in the mirror.

I have to work even harder now to install confidence in my crew so they'll follow me. I *have* to make Revolution come to life.

It'll never be as great as Darrell Stanley, but it'll be something.



IT FEELS LIKE YEARS UNTIL SPRING FINALLY ARRIVES.

Despite breaking up with Rian, I don't feel any better. I'm not any less paranoid. Gerry hasn't contacted me, yes, but that doesn't mean he has told his clowns to stop following me. Doesn't mean he won't pull his financial support.

All that's happened is I don't have a goofball to cheer me up with silly jokes when I'm stressed, nor do I have anyone to talk about the latest episode of *Demon Slayer* with.

I'm alone. Always have been. Always will be.

That's fine. I just want to focus on being a good teacher and a decent role model for my students.

The bell rings, signaling the start of homeroom. The teens continue chattering and playing videos on their phones while I take attendance. I'm about to tell them to knock it off when I notice Mari is absent.

That's weird. Even when she wasn't interested in learning, she would at least show up every day. She must be sick.

Mrs. Jin will probably email me soon enough to let me know. A day or two out won't hurt Mari's grades. According to her other teachers, she's been doing well in her assignments.

Mari still talks about Rian all the time, which is the only way I find out anything about him these days. I've quit watching his show, and I've quit social media. My roommates know not to talk about Rian, even though they don't know why I've stopped seeing him.

Lately, Rian's been too busy to meet with Mari for bubble tea, much to her dismay. It's better for her to find out sooner than later how disappointing celebrities are. For five seconds of my life, I thought Rian might be different.

He's not.

The school day passes without me hearing anything from Mrs. Jin. I ask a few students if they've seen anything on social media from Mari, but they report she hasn't been active all day.

Poor Mari. She must be really ill.

Once I'm home, I settle into the kitchen to grade papers. Joaquín sits at the table with me to send progress reports to his students' guardians. We chat with Troy and Andy for a bit before the two leave for work.

Everything is normal, except my heart cannot calm down at all. That useless, anxious ticker hasn't experienced a moment of peace since Valentine's Day, but today it's extra jumpy. Mari's absence keeps burrowing a hole in my thoughts.

I send Mrs. Jin an email to make sure everything is okay and pass along what we learned today.

"I have a date tonight, so you're on your own for supper," Joaquín says.

"That's cool." I open the students' portal website on my laptop. "Who are you seeing?"

“Some gym bro named Hayden. Not very interesting to talk to, but he can deadlift a Shake Shack.” Joaquín waggles his eyebrows. “We’re meeting at his gym around eight. What do you think I should wear?”

I snort. “Sounds like you’re working out for a date. Do you need to borrow some clothes from me?”

“Ew, are we working out?”

Joaquín’s exasperated sigh makes me think of Rian, who gets a rash when someone on his show suggests a fitness regime.

“Maybe you’ll get lucky, and he’ll lead you in a sensual yoga class.” I check the forums to see if anyone has posted a question about the upcoming final paper. A few folks have. “But you’re welcome to raid my closet.”

“Oh my God, I’m making a huge mistake, aren’t I? Well, I’ll just take a quick peek at your activewear. My dick enjoys bad decisions.”

As soon as Joaquín leaves the kitchen, my phone rings. The first buzz causes my lungs to shrivel in terror, but I’m able to start breathing again once I see Mrs. Jin’s name on the screen.

Weird. She could have just emailed me back.

I answer the call while reading one of the forum questions. “Hello, Darrell Stanley speaking.”

“Mari didn’t go to school?! But she’s not been here all day!”

The screen in front of me blurs while I process Mrs. Jin’s remarks. “You don’t know where Mari is?”

“No!”

The panic threaded through Mrs. Jin's high-pitched screech causes my heart to freeze.

There are several kinds of calls every teacher dreads to hear. A student has died, a student has been arrested, a student has gone missing... I've had several of those calls over my career. Each one is just as scary as the one before it.

But I'm a teacher. I have a plan.

"Let's find her." I swallow hard. "Let me call the rest of her teachers, and you reach out to any friends or relatives she might be with, okay? When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last night." Mrs. Jin sobs. "We had a fight over her makeup, and she went to bed. I thought she left for school early this morning, but then she never came home. She hasn't answered my messages all day."

A runaway. That's usually the easiest to deal with out of all the terrible scenarios. Plenty of my students have taken off for a few days and returned safely.

But those students usually have connections and a history of disappearing. They can get by couch-surfing at a friend's or hiding out in an abandoned apartment. Even if they're with some seedy people, those teenagers know how to survive.

Mari doesn't have that kind of history. I don't know if Mari will be okay all by herself.

I rub my chest, hoping my voice won't reveal my fears. "I understand. Let's make some calls. Call all your relatives you have in the city, including your boyfriend's family. I will get in touch with you in twenty minutes, all right? If neither of us have found Mari, I'll go with you to the police station."

"All right."

We hang up. Of course, I know from experience that the police won't actually do much for a teenager who has run away. Society has historically neglected the vast majority of my teens, especially the ones who aren't white. Half the times, that's why the kids bounce in the first place.

I start placing calls with Mari's other teachers. Like me, none of them have heard from her today. Shit.

Would she have reached out to Rian? Would he know where she is?

No. I shouldn't bother him. He's probably too busy.

As I look for Mrs. Enns' phone number, Joaquín walks back into the kitchen, holding up a tank top and some shorts.

"Do these reveal too much?" he asks. "I don't have enough time to wax my—what's going on? Haven't seen a scowl like that since Netflix canceled *Tuca & Bertie*."

I remove my glasses and clean the lenses with my shirt, unsure about what I should say. Joaquín teaches at a different school and has plans for tonight. There's probably no point in burdening him with my problems.

He keeps staring at me. Though I can't see that well, I can tell the edges of his mouth are downturned. "Darrell, would you open up for once in your life?"

"One of my students is missing!" I snap. "Don't fucking worry about me!"

Joaquín stands there for a moment, then he throws the clothes on the ground. "Don't tell me what I'm allowed to be worried about. Get over yourself for a moment and tell me what you need me to do."

“Nothing.” I put my glasses back on. “I’ll handle it myself.”

He rolls his eyes and grabs his phone. “This isn’t the time to play Mr. Tough-Stoic-City-Guy. You don’t know where a student is, and that’s scary. If they’re in danger, the first twenty-four hours of their disappearance is where we’re going to gather the most clues. How long have they been missing? Who is it? I’ll send a picture to Troy and Andy since they know every security company in the city. If your student is in a monitored building, they’ll be found.”

I gape at him while he taps furiously on the screen. “What are you doing?”

“Canceling my date, duh.” Joaquín glares at me. “I’m going to help you. Put on a coat. We’re going to hit the streets.”

Why...

“Why would you do that?” My throat and eyeballs burn while I try to digest what’s happening. “Why would you do that for a student you don’t know? Why would Troy and Andy help?”

Joaquín sits down next to me and takes my hand. “I think you’re the only person in this apartment who doesn’t understand that we are a family. We love you, even when you keep yourself closed off. You’re not alone. But even if I hated you, I would still tell you to put on a damn coat. A teenager is out there, probably scared and afraid to ask for help like you are. Please, Darrell, start asking for help. Stop dealing with your problems by yourself. Stop assuming you know what’s going on in other people’s minds.”

Fuck. He's right. I need every bit of help I can get with Mari.

As for myself... No, I need to focus on Mari right now.

"Grab my coat for me, will you?" I ask. "And the backup battery for my phone."

"You got it."

Before he gets up, I squeeze his hand. Joaquín's bright smile fills me with hope.

Once he leaves the kitchen again, I scroll through my contacts until I get to the person I had many, many assumptions about.

Rian.



THE BEST WAY TO GET OVER HEARTBREAK IS TO THROW MYSELF into my work. Fortunately, there is no shortage of things to do.

As contract negotiation season approaches, my life becomes equally divided between cameras and meetings. Though there haven't been any official announcements about buying Starship Engine TV, most people around me have heard a whisper or two. Even my comedy club colleagues who haven't seen me in forever have figured out I'm up to something.

All the work I've been putting into the network has been paying off. To my delight, most of my crew supports Revolution. I'll have a sturdy team with me when we jump ship from our current home.

Although, the vice-president of the studio has hinted the 11:35 time slot will open in two years. I'm apparently the only successor that makes sense to fill said opening...

Could I be a CEO *and* a late night talk show host? It's not like I have any other obligations in my life. As long as I call Mom every day for a few minutes and find out what the belle of Baxter is up to, I'm good.

Darrell hasn't messaged me once since we broke up. I've started to text him so many apologies, but I wind up deleting

everything. We weren't meant to be together.

It's not like I miss him that much, anyway. I don't miss his cardigan sweaters, the way his lips curl when he tells a joke he's pleased with, his habit of carrying around a minimum of two books at all times, how delicious his hotdish is, or his incredible ability to turn me inside out.

There are so many positives to being single again. Don't have to worry about coming out. I can just live in the closet for everyone and continue the super heterosexual facade. Don't have to ensure there aren't paparazzi around when I go out since I'm not hiding a man now.

Darrell wasn't suited to date a celebrity, anyway. He likes being private.

Right! This breakup was for the best.

If I keep telling myself that, maybe it will come true.

"Are you okay?" Nina taps my arm. "Dozing off there?"

"What? No." I rub my eyes, careful not to smudge my makeup. Vera can retouch my face, but it'd be terrible to get foundation on my sleeves. "Just was, uh, thinking about which word is funnier for this skit. 'Shlaboozled' or 'bidoozied?'"

The writers stare at me in collective disbelief.

I shrug. "Keep going. What were you saying, Lynette?"

Lynette keeps pitching her idea to shave off a couple of minutes for tonight's taping, but my phone starts buzzing. I check it, expecting it to be either Adaline or Stephen.

My brain forgets how to work when I realize it's Darrell.

"Hold on." I scramble to my feet. "Let me take this call real quick."

The second I'm outside the office, I answer the phone. I don't even get a second to say hello before Darrell's deep, rich timbre turns my world upside down.

As good as it is to hear my ex-boyfriend's voice, the concern laced around the way he says my name is unsettling.

"Hi," I mutter. "What's going on?"

"Have you talked to Mari today?"

Mari?

I lean against the wall, hoping the writers don't comically have their ears pressed to the other side. "No, I haven't. Why do you ask?"

"Shit." Darrell mumbles something for a second. It sounds like he's talking to someone else. "Do you know anything about where she might be?"

"Huh?" Panic starts to set in my bones. *No one* should ever ask *me* anyone's location. I can barely figure out where I'm at half the times. "What's going on?"

Darrell's sigh is punctuated with another curse word. "Mari didn't show up for school today. Her mother called me a little bit ago, saying she hasn't seen Mari all day. They had a fight last night."

What?!

I stand up straight. My hands shake as visions of daisies flash through me. "Did you call her? Check her SuddenPic? I haven't looked at it today, but yesterday, she was posting dog memes. She seemed okay."

"Nothing new on SuddenPic." Darrell pauses. "She's not answering her phone. Mrs. Jin and I are going to head to the

police station, and my roommate is putting together a street search team. Do you have any idea where Mari might be?”

The first thing that comes to mind is the place where Mari and I get boba. It’s a safe haven with pleasant memories.

“I’ll check the cafe where your book club meets.” I rest my hand on the doorknob. “It’s close to the studio. Call me immediately if Mari shows up.”

“Don’t you need to—” Darrell pauses. “Thank you. I will.”

He ends the call.

I burst into the office. “I gotta go.”

The conversation in the room dies immediately. Lynette looks up from her laptop. “Go? Where are you going? Filming starts in thirty.”

“Something more important has come up.” I shove my phone in my pocket, scarcely believing the words tumbling out of my mouth. “I can’t do the show tonight.”

Lynette jumps up from her chair. “Are you kidding me?!”

“Nope.”

“Who is going to host if you’re not here?” Nina frowns. “It’s too late to get a replacement.”

“You’re telling me there’s not one C-list celebrity loitering in this major television network, waiting for their turn to shine?” I grab one of the writers’ coats hanging on the wall. “I’m borrowing this.”

A swarm of crew members—writers, producers, the stage manager—follow me as I make my dramatic escape from the studio, but it’s easy to ignore their protests. Daisies and bubble tea float in my head. Desperation to hear Mari insult me for

wearing my sequin loafers in public motivates me to overcome all obstacles.

My lifelong aversion to exercise takes a vacation as I hoof the six blocks to the cafe. Tons of people recognize me and try to stop me, but I charge by them. If anyone curses me out for being one of those asshole Rockefeller Center joggers, their swears fail to reach my ears.

Why would Mari run away? Why would she ignore her phone?

Breathing proves to be a whole new ordeal by the time I reach the cafe. I gasp for air as I look around. A few customers snap pictures of me, but none of them are Mari.

Where is she?

I wobble over to the barista, who I recognize from a few previous visits. She greets me politely.

“Have you seen Mari?” I struggle to keep my voice low. I want to shout the question as loud as possible, all the way until God and whoever else is up there hear it. “Did she come to the cafe today?”

The barista shakes her head. Shit.

I grab a napkin and motion for the barista to lend me her pen, then I scribble down my phone number. “If she comes in tonight, call me at once.”

Whatever the barista’s reaction might be, I never see it. The second she has my number, I head out the door, scrambling to think of other places Mari might be.

She’s never talked about having friends at school. They like her, and she likes them, but she never hangs out with

anyone. I'm not even sure if she even has any to turn to outside of social media.

Well, she has me. I'm her friend. She knows that, doesn't she? She might be embarrassed to call me her friend, but I'm certainly closer to her than I am to some of the folks in the industry I've known for twenty years.

If Mari doesn't have her phone turned on, then she must be alone right now. Where do lonely runaways go to? Where do smart, funny, meticulous researchers go when they need to escape? Does she have one of her notebooks with her now? Is she jotting down her thoughts, or is she observing her surroundings carefully like she did when we were filming at the bus station together?

Wait.

The bus station!

My feet guide me the additional ten blocks to the station. Adrenaline and the chance to see Mari keeps me from collapsing in the middle of the street. More people take pictures and videos of me as I go by. They ask questions, but I ignore them.

I'm not an entertainer right now. I don't know who I am, but the idea of posing for a selfie or giving an autograph while Mari's missing makes my skin crawl.

I finally reach the bus station. Fewer fans are here. Most people present are just concerned with getting home. Or leaving home.

A steamroller flattens my heart as I search every inch of the station. No sweet, ambitious teenagers scribbling in their notebooks. I get a worker to check the women's bathrooms for me, but that ends in failure.

I take out my phone. A hundred missed messages and calls, but nothing from Darrell or anyone tied to Mari.

Maybe Mom has an idea.

As I start to dial her number, a flash of dark hair in the corner catches my eye.

My flattened heart inflates to ten times its usual size when I realize the young woman on the bench near me is, indeed, Mari. It becomes so full, it's hard for my lungs to have room to exist.

I shout her name and dash to her side. She slowly glances up at me. Her beautiful eyes are large and shimmering with uncertainty.

"Mr. Goodwin?" All Mari has on her person is a small backpack. She hugs it close to her chest. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, of course!"

My heart explodes as I throw my arms around her. The rest of me crumbles the moment she leans into me. Hot tears flow out of me for the first time in years. I can't even remember the last time I actually cried. Tears have welled up during past situations, but I always fought them off with a joke.

Right now, I don't remember how to be funny. I don't know anything except that I'm so damned glad Mari is in my arms.

Mari eventually squirms away from me, sniffing. I let go of her, but I take a seat next to her on the bench.

"Your makeup is ruined," she whispers after a few seconds.

I chuckle, wiping my cheeks. "That's okay."

There are no follow up remarks. We simply sit in silence. The world around us moves the same as it always does, but we are still. Still and fragile.

After a minute, I start the most important interview of my life.

I turn to her. “Where are you planning to go?”

“Atlanta,” she replies matter-of-factly. “Cheaper to go there than Los Angeles. I have an online friend who lives there who has her own apartment. I was gonna message her when I got there. She’d let me stay with her until I got a job. I probably could work with her since she’s a server at a restaurant.”

Not a surprise to hear Mari had a plan. “And why do you want to leave?”

“It’s not that I *want* to leave.” She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. “But it doesn’t seem like I have any other choice.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Mom doesn’t let me do anything.” Mari fiddles with the zipper on her backpack. “Says I have to wait. Wait for makeup, wait to start a vlog, wait to spend my savings, wait to do anything to achieve my dreams.”

An undercurrent of nausea rolls through me as I realize I hadn’t taken her concerns seriously last time we met. She had been sad then, and I had chalked it up to some blend of teenage angst and general impatience.

I should have tried harder to get her to talk to me.

I don’t know if I can rely on you.

Christ, my assumptions and self-absorbedness are probably why Darrell broke up with me.

“And what are your dreams?” I ask.

“I want to do what you do.”

My stomach twists into a tight knot. “Huh?”

She stares at the ground. “You make people happy. I want to do that. I want to be good like you.”

Another knot forms, this time in my throat. The lump prevents me from responding. To hear those words from the teenager who constantly seemed disgusted by my fashion and disappointed in my social skills...

It means everything.

“Leaving seems easier, you know?” Mari keeps her gaze low. “If I start a new life, I’ll have more freedom.”

I eke out a pathetic response. “Being on your own is hard. I was a wreck my first year away from home.”

“It has to be better than fighting with my mom all the time.”

Oh.

Mari bites her lower lip. Her dry, chapped mouth has seen better days. The longer I look at her, the more I realize how physically stressed out she is with her red-rimmed eyes and chewed up nails.

Darrell’s words from what feels like a long time ago come to mind. Something about how hard it is for younger people to cope with fractured relationships.

Mari just needs help dealing with a hard situation. I’m no role model when it comes to coping with my own shit, but I

understand the hunger that comes with chasing goalposts.

And I understand how easy it is to ruin precious bonds with that drive. If I can't do anything else for her, I can help her keep her relationships intact.

I sling my arm around Mari. She leans against me, still hiding her face from me.

“Would it help if I talked to your mom?” I keep my voice low and gentle. “I'd do anything to keep you here in New York.”

She finally looks up at me. “You would?”

“You're a lot of fun to hang out with, don't you know?” A burst of warmth suffuses through me. “You give me better fashion advice than my stylist, you're funnier than my writers, and you have so much promise for the future.”

The corners of Mari's lips slowly curve upward. “Really?”

I grin along with her. It's my first smile that's felt genuine in weeks.

“You're so dedicated to your research.” I gesture to her backpack. “Somewhere in that bag is a notebook, I'm sure of it. Probably covered in daisy stickers.”

Mari nods, that sweet smile still gracing her face.

“With that much passion brimming through you, you're guaranteed to conquer the world.” Butterflies flutter in my chest as I imagine the future. “I'd like to help you learn everything you need to know about entertainment.”

“Like, you're gonna be my mentor?!” She jumps to her feet, drops her backpack on the ground, and fist bumps the air. “Finally!”

Finally?

My grin widens. I fold my arms across my chest, admiring my brand new mentee. The thrill of forming a new television network is a shadow compared to the delight currently tap-dancing in my blood.

Mari's glee is ephemeral. Gravity gradually tugs her lips downward.

"What about my mom?" She swoops down and picks up her backpack. "She's *really* never going to let me do anything now. I'm going to be grounded until I'm eighteen."

I take out my phone. "Let's try talking to her."

Good like you.

I wish I knew what that meant.



THE REUNION AT MARI'S PLACE IS LOUD, BUT SWEET. LOTS OF crying between Mari and her mother. Lots of hugging. Lots of talking.

Lots of me unsuccessfully keeping my eyes off Rian. He has the nerve to look gorgeous while he discusses Mari's dreams with her folks. His hair is a wreck, his suit is wrinkled, and makeup has gotten all over his coat.

But he shines like the sun with his enthusiasm for Mari's potential and his hopes for Mrs. Jin to let her daughter explore her creative interests.

There's a tranquil, warm vibe in the air by the time Rian and I leave their apartment. My heart skips a beat when Rian flashes me a smile as we enter the elevator.

The elevator has mirror walls, so no matter which way I look, I see Rian. The tall, gangly, handsome celebrity I think about constantly. When the doors shut, forcing us into close proximity, the familiar blend of coffee and powder tickles my nostrils.

For some reason, I start smiling too. Being around him again is nice, I guess. Just for a moment.

He clears his throat and presses the first floor button. “I’m, uh, glad Mari’s home.”

I lean against the wall opposite Rian, preferring to stare at the real deal. It’s kind of nice to see my easygoing reflection too. Been a long time since I’ve felt a weight fall off my shoulders.

Did I ever look like this while we were dating, or did my father’s clouds keep me despondent? How long until this good mood disappears?

It’s so hard to stop smiling. I keep looking at Rian, this adorable dork who has proven he really and truly is trustworthy. When I called him earlier, I knew he had to get ready to do his show. I had expected him to tell me good luck and hang up. As a guy who strives to get an A+ in life, Rian Goodwin would never miss work.

But he told the studio they were on their own and went to find Mari.

I really did fall in love with the right one for me.

“Thanks for helping,” I say. “You had to ditch your filming, didn’t you? I never thought you would do such a thing.”

“Yeah.” Rian rubs the back of his neck. The grin returns to his increasingly pink face. “Even I surprised myself today. Um, how have you been?”

Miserable. Especially without you.

“Everything’s fine.” I study the wrinkles around the corner of his mouth. He’s probably had those beautiful laugh lines since he was a baby. “I’m good.”

“Are you?”

“I’m just happy to have Mari back.”

We keep smiling during the rest of the elevator ride. Neither of us say anything. We just seem to be enjoying each other’s company. It’s almost like we never broke up.

However, there’s no way we’ll ever get back together. It’s been over a month since I ended things with him. For celebrities, that’s a lifetime. Rian’s moved on by now.

Outside, I check the immediate vicinity. A few folks smoking and chatting, but no one seems to be looking at us. Or spying on us.

“I wish I knew what it meant to be good,” Rian remarks quietly, almost as if to himself.

Huh?

“What was that?” I ask.

“Ah, nothing. It’s time for me to face the music at the studio.” Rian lets out a slow exhale. “Which taxi will be the first to swallow its dignity and associate itself with me?”

I chuckle. “Thank you again for your help.”

“Of course.” Rian presses his lips together. “Um, do you want a ride home?”

I consider his offer. Walking to my place from here isn’t usually a problem. But it would be nice to bask in his warm glow for a little longer.

But we’re also not together! If I stay close to him for much longer, I’m liable to grow horny and reckless. Or worse, I might confess some feelings.

“It’s fine. I’m all right to walk from here.” I shove my hands in my pockets. “Uh, I guess I’ll be seeing you.”

“Will you?”

Doubt colors Rian’s voice, but his eyes are wide and almost hopeful. That could just be me projecting, because I want to tell him how empty Saturdays feel. Then, I want to apologize for not trusting him enough.

But it’s for the best that I keep my mouth closed. I think I’m too damaged to ever date anyone, much less a celebrity. Rian doesn’t live in fear of his absentee father. In fact, he barely thinks of him.

Gerry’s cloud will always rain over my head. Even if he passed away tomorrow, he has relatives who would want to protect his image. His mother, his wife, his children the public know about. People I’ve never met who are probably just as dangerous as him, if not more so.

Rian deserves someone who can join him on the red carpet, someone that he can brag about on his show. That someone isn’t me.

“You studied Shakespeare,” I finally say. ““If we do meet again, why, we shall smile. If not, why then this parting was well made.””

“I much prefer ‘parting is such sweet sorrow.’”

If I could confidently see Rian again tomorrow, then so would I.

My heart crumbles as I walk away.

Going home takes longer than it usually would, but calling people to catch them up on the Mari situation is distracting. My feet might also be dragging because I’m dreading going home to Joaquín.

Stop dealing with your problems by yourself.

He had dropped some pretty heavy words earlier. We probably need to talk about that.

What will I tell him? He wants me to open up, and I don't think I can. After his earlier actions, I know I can trust Joaquín enough to tell him my problems, but what's the point? My issues can't be resolved by him. We don't share a two-bedroom apartment with Andy and Troy because the four of us love being in each other's bubbles—we do it because we're broke.

Of course, Joaquín had the idea to reach out to our roommates' security contacts for our search. That wasn't something that would have crossed my mind. Maybe he has a solution to my problems hidden inside him?

Probably not.

But would it hurt to try to open up? Why do I keep trying to do this alone? I'm drained from the constant worry, and I hate pretending I'm not heartbroken over Rian. The most promising relationship of my life flopped because of my issues with my father. My junk with Gerry is going to keep me from the man I love.

This shit sucks, and I can't fucking bring myself to talk about it with anyone. Not even Mama, who would understand better than anyone if she could stay lucid long enough to hear me out.

Am I going to be alone forever? Is this the only life Gerald Lafontaine's secret son can have?

I just want to be Darrell Stanley, tenth grade English literature teacher. I want to take care of my mother. I want to be a good friend to my roommates. I want to help others in need. I want to be someone my students can rely on.

I want to show everyone that I can shine like a star.

What do I have to do to become as radiant as Rian?

My phone starts buzzing as soon as I get home. I stare at the number marring my screen, in disbelief Gerry has the nerve to call me now.

He couldn't wait until I had taken off my shoes to let me know that his vultures saw me with Rian? Did the spies fail to mention we were dealing with a missing student?

I stand in the foyer and stare at the photos covering the hallway. Most of the pictures are of my roommates, their families, and their friends. Only a few images have me in them since I've spent my whole life avoiding the camera.

Didn't even take a selfie with Rian while we were together, so I don't have any personal mementos of our brief relationship.

Gerald Lafontaine has robbed me of so much. If I ever want to be my own star, I need to escape from his clutches. For good.

Joaquín emerges from the kitchen, already dressed for bed. "You're back! Are you hungry? You haven't eaten yet, right? I'll make us some wraps. Hey, what's going on? Why are you just standing there?"

I stare at my phone.

What if I just...don't answer this call? I don't know what the perfect way to protect Mama and myself entails, but it can't involve talking to my father who is only concerned with his image.

Joaquín steps closer to me. "Are you okay?"

“No,” I whisper. A fire starts in my throat as I try to figure how much I want to reveal. Part of me is afraid if I say too much now, Joaquín will think I’ve snapped.

Stop.

I can trust him. I have to let myself trust him.

He’s my best friend. My family. I don’t want to lose him by continuously pushing him away.

“I have a problem.” I hold up my phone, which has stopped buzzing, but my hand is still shaking. “This problem is the whole reason I couldn’t make things work with Rian. And after seeing Rian again tonight, I want this problem to go away forever. But it’s going to take a long time to explain everything. Will you hear me out? Please?”

Joaquín breaks into a reassuring smile. “Okay. I’ll make us wraps *and* coffee. Who cares if we’re a little tired in the morning? Let’s talk. Let’s see what we can do to get you back with Rian.”

Back with Rian? That’s not what I...

Fuck it.

That’s what I want. I want my father to leave Mama and me alone forever, and I want Rian back.

I want to be Darrell Stanley, tenth grade English literature teacher and Rian Goodwin’s shining star.



THE WRITERS OF *BURNING THE MIDNIGHT OIL* ARE QUICK TO forgive me once I explain everything, but the producers and other bigwigs take a bit longer to smooth over. Eventually, everything is okay. Well, everything but my upcoming paycheck. But that's not going to break me.

What's going to break me is the memory of Darrell's long, despondent expression as he quoted Shakespeare to me.

He had glimmered while we were in the elevator. His visage had sparkled with such affection that I thought he would give me some time to properly apologize for messing up. Then he turned cold and serious once we were outside Mari's apartment building.

Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned work. Maybe I should have let the fire at the studio rage a little longer—some sort of gesture to prove that I'm someone Darrell can rely on.

Would he ever want me back?

Unable to sleep, I spend the night in my living room, drafting skit ideas. My thoughts drift to my goalposts and Shakespeare. The protagonists in his plays often met their end because of too much ambition. Ambition moves the story, but it is never a virtue to be praised.

How much more do I really need in life? How long until I break my neck in vain-glory? I make people laugh for a living—it's my dream job. I'm on television five nights a week and have more money than I know what to do with.

My pulse races, recalling my earlier excitement about becoming Mari's mentor. It's probably a terrible idea, but dammit, I want this role. She genuinely will take over the world with her determination.

Darrell must feel like this all the time with his students. One only needs to have a single conversation with him to understand how much he admires his kids and wants to help them grow. His legacy is cemented in the lessons he provides.

Do I really need to work this hard for a network to call my own? What if I spend the rest of my life wondering if things could have worked out with Darrell if I hadn't chased goalposts?

My phone goes off. My mother's picture lights up my screen. The clock in the corner surprises me.

How is it seven in the morning already? And why is my mother calling me at this hour?

"Hi, Mom." I remove my reading glasses and rise from the desk. "What's going on?"

"I'm asking you that, Adrian Joseph Goodwin!"

Yikes. Full name. I can practically smell the stress cigarette in Mom's mouth.

"You weren't on the show last night, and you never answered my calls!" Mom drops a few, perfectly chosen curse words. "Are you in the hospital? Do I need to fly out there?"

Did she call me? Oh, no. It must have gotten lost amidst the tempest of everyone else in the world contacting me.

“I’m fine. Sorry for worrying you.” I throw myself onto the couch. Instantly, my body turns into an immovable boulder. Okay, maybe I’m more tired than I thought I was.

“What happened?” she asks.

“You know that teenager from the Super Rian segments? Mari? She ran away, and I needed to find her.”

“Oh, hell. Did you?”

“I did.” Relief ripples through me all over again, recalling the sight of Mari at the bus station. “I was so scared, Mom. When Darrell called me—”

“Who?”

“Mari’s teacher.”

And the man I want to spend the rest of my life deconstructing *Naruto* arcs with. Tears well in my eyes as I stare at the ceiling and listen to my mother’s concerned grumbles.

Keeping my heartbreak from her has been miserable. I have to lie to her every time we talk when she asks how I am.

She was my whole life before I came to the Big Apple. Mom is the most important person to me. I want to be honest with her about who I am, but what will I do if she disowns me over my sexuality? She wants me to get married to a beautiful woman and provide her with grandchildren.

And I want Darrell.

If I lose both Darrell and my mother, I won’t be able to smile ever again.

Why am I such a coward when I—a rich, white cis guy—am in the safest possible position to come out? Why did I have to inherit this aspect from my father? I don't want to be anything like him.

Why am I letting my sperm donor bother me when I promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn't think about him?

A conversation from the first time Darrell was here echoes in my quivering heart.

You understand now why I'm interested in people who can be an outstanding role model for my students, right?

That's exactly what I want. I want to be a role model for everyone hurting over their deadbeat parents. I want to be the man Darrell can be proud to be around.

That means I have to stop being afraid.

I interrupt Mom's story about the time Rita from the Christmas store's dog ran away. "Wait. I need to be honest with you about something."

She stops on a dime. "What is it? I knew something was wrong with you. You've not been as funny on your show lately."

Wait. Why is she just now telling me this? No, my performance isn't important right this second.

"It's about Darrell."

I grab the blanket draped over the couch. Might as well be in prime condition for crying myself to sleep. Can't see how else this conversation will end.

"What about him?" Mom asks.

“He’s more than Mari’s teacher to me.” I cover myself up with the blanket, wishing Darrell was here to hug me instead of this sheet of fleece. “I care about him a lot. Like, immensely.”

“He’s your friend?” The lilt of Mom’s voice suggests she knows that’s not what I mean. Unfortunately, I can’t tell how she wants me to answer.

“Not exactly,” I mumble. The tears leak out of my eyes, and snot drips down my nose. Only ugly displays of pain allowed here. “Darrell and I were dating for a while. He’s... I’m... I’m queer, Mom.”

Every second of her ensuing silence makes me cry more. What will I do without her if she hates me?

“Oh, Adrian.”

The soft way she whispers my name startles me. I’m used to a concerned, sometimes disappointed tone from her. But those few syllables came out so delicately.

A thread of hope wraps itself around my heart. I wipe my nose, trying to calm down.

“You’re my son,” Mom adds. “I love you. I love the people you love. And I never want you to go through a hard time alone, don’t you know? Tell me what’s been going on. Everything.”

Just kidding. The crying starts again, but these fresh tears are products of pure, utter relief.

As Mom’s words echo through me, my conversation with Darrell in the elevator pushes to the front of my memory. The way he refused to talk about himself meant something, didn’t it? He’s been going through a hard time, and I made it difficult for him to trust me enough to say so.

I love Darrell. I don't want him to be alone through whatever is going on.

The goalposts in my head crumble as I realize what I need to do.

AFTER FRIDAY'S SHOW, I head over to Adaline's place, an extravagant penthouse that once had my name attached to the paperwork. She had informed me she was throwing a party, but she had neglected to tell me it was a themed one. A zoo of animals standing on two legs greets me when I arrive. Fortunately, I naturally resemble a giraffe, so I don't stick out too much in my pin-striped suit.

I wade through the crowd of diamond-studded celebrities and people with thicker wallets than hearts. Turning down vodka shots is easy; turning down conversations is harder.

I eventually find Adaline the Tiger in the dining room. She waves to me with her big paws. The table has been moved out and replaced with a small stage. To no one's surprise, Stephen the Zookeeper is on the stage with his acoustic guitar, surrounded by women who think he's talented. Can't have a Polinsky party unless he's the center of attention at some point.

"Thank you for coming to my show," Stephen shouts, despite being next to a microphone. "I think you're gonna enjoy this number."

Ugh. When the hell did he learn to play the guitar?

Stephen plucks a few strings, the opening notes to his single. Then he stops. He stands up and takes a bow.

"Thank you for coming!" He bows again. "I'll be here all week!"

Dammit. Even I find myself laughing at that gag. Great. Pretty sure he saw that.

Adaline gestures for me to follow her to a balcony. Once we're outside, Adaline removes her tiger ears. Though it was warm during the day, the spring night air is quite chilly.

My shivers will hopefully mask my nervousness.

"Why didn't you dress up?" she asks.

"You didn't tell me this was a costume party."

"I did when I invited you the other day." Adaline runs her hand through her hair. Sweat drips down the side of her face. "Maybe full tiger face makeup was a terrible idea."

Oh. Maybe It had just happened the day Mari ran away, the one day I didn't care to check my messages.

I tuck my phone back in my pocket. "Look, we need to talk about something important."

Adaline raises an eyebrow. "Is this what it's like to be on this end of the conversation?"

"Yeah." I bite my lower lip. "Sorry."

"Well, go on."

I glance at the view. Back in Minnesota, I'd be looking at a sky full of stars. Here in New York, the stars are brilliantly lit towers that don't know the meaning of rest. Both sights never cease to amaze me.

With such inspiration around me, is it any wonder I could never slow down?

I take a deep breath and make my confession as I exhale. "You have to get another CEO."

Reading Adaline's expression proves difficult. The tiger painted on her face is fierce with its narrowed brow and snarling display of teeth.

"What do you mean?" she asks calmly, sweetly.

I step closer to her, desperate to read her feelings. "I can't do Revolution anymore."

"Oh."

Her lips quirk. Does that mean she's angry? Disappointed? Both?

"How come?" she asks. "You've clearly found something better than a television network, but I can't imagine what offer is more compelling."

I take another deep breath. This confession is even harder to reveal, but Adaline deserves the truth. My ambition destroyed our relationship.

"I'm in love with someone," I say. "And I'm going to pursue him."

Adaline's lips curl into a mischievous smile. "Him?"

"Him."

I stare at my ex-wife for an obscenely long moment of time. More than any human could possibly be comfortable with, but Adaline handles prolonged eye contact like a champion. Talking to her is so easy and wonderful.

Is it possible for us to be friends until all the lights in New York fade away? Possible to trust each other until the stars over Minnesota burn out?

"And you're giving up a television network for him?" she asks.

Lava spreads through my body. If one had to put it so neatly, yes. That's what's happening.

"I don't know if I can get him back." I loosen my tie and undo the top button of my shirt. "But it's worth trying. Sorry. I know we put so much work into everything, but I think he's going to make me happier than this sordid attempt at securing my legacy."

Adaline takes my hand and squeezes a few fingers gently. "I'm proud of you."

"Really?" I tilt my head to the side. "It's perfectly fine to kick the shit out of me right now, if you want."

"Absolutely not." She lets go of me. "Everyone should pursue what makes them happy. If it's work, that's wonderful. If it's romance, that's also wonderful."

I pull her into a hug.

She rests her hands on my chest. "Not too close there, Rian. I can't have you ruining my makeup."

"Right, sorry." I pat her on top of the head. "Thank you for understanding. And I'm really sorry. I promise I'll go with you to speak to all the—"

"Don't apologize." Adaline shakes her head. "But I wonder if all the work we've done will go to waste. So many people have expressed interest in joining us because of *you*. They want to back a face everyone recognizes, a brand."

A name everyone recognizes. A brand.

My gaze turns to the door. Behind that frosted glass is a dining room full of people being entertained by a billionaire who draws people in with a wink alone. He oozes charisma, much to my chagrin.

A wide demographic of people know Stephen Polinsky and his irritating shenanigans.

Ugh.

“I don’t think you’ll have to look far for a new CEO.”



CAN WE MEET TODAY?

Rian's message graces my phone quietly.

I look up at Mama, who is concentrating on her puzzle. Joaquín sits across from her, watching the weekly NBA highlights on his tablet.

We've been with Mama all day; it's Saturday, and neither of us have to be anywhere. Ever since I told Joaquín about Gerry, we've been trying to make a plan to protect her. It's obvious that I need to stop relying on my father's money, but social security and disability benefits alone won't cover Mama's bills. The staff here suggested I move her out of the city to a cheaper facility, but I'm afraid of being too far away from her. And there's no way I can afford to quit my job and move with her.

The situation is hopeless, but Rian's text briefly makes me forget about the abyss I'm drowning in.

Why? I ask.

I don't want things to be left unresolved between us.

Warmth bursts in my cheeks as I mull over the implications of that sentence. Rian's too busy to see people for no reason. He has an *intention*.

Is it possible he wants to get back together with me? Does he want me as much as I want him?

But I had wanted to resolve my personal matters first before pursuing Rian. I had wanted to stand brightly by myself without a trace of stormy clouds.

I read his message again.

Opening up to Joaquín hasn't ended terribly. He's here with me now, trying to help me. He still thinks of me as family. Hell, he even started the Go Fuck Yourself, Gerald Lafontaine Club in our apartment. It involves a lot of yelling, and it's the funnest club I've ever joined.

“Hey, Mama?”

She looks at me with clear, focused eyes. My heart skips a beat as I work up the nerve to ask for her opinion.

“Would you be mad if I went to see Rian for a bit?” I ask. She knows I stopped talking to him, but she doesn't know the details, nor has she pressed me for any. “He wants to talk.”

Joaquín doesn't glance up from his tablet, but the heat of his smirk makes me want to turn on the air conditioner.

Mama's face lights up when I say Rian's name. “Are you going to get bring him back here with you?”

“I don't know. You know celebrities like him are busy.”

“You should go see him and tell him to come visit.”

Joaquín finally meets my gaze. “I want him to visit our place too. Maybe he has a hot, wealthy gay friend he could bring.”

I shoot my roommate a glare. “What happened to Hayden?”

If I'm not mistaken, a blush actually creeps into Joaquín's cheeks. He turns back to his tablet.

Well. Rian's Mama-approved. And Joaquín-approved.

Maybe it's okay if I go to Rian, complications and all.

WE END up getting together that evening, at the cafe where my book club meets. Rian apparently loves this place now. He's already waiting for me with a half-finished bubble tea by the time I arrive. Though he's dressed casually and sporting a privacy mask, it's still pretty obvious the curly-haired person stretching their spaghetti noodle legs in the corner is Rian Goodwin.

Apprehension slithers up my spine as I start analyzing everyone else in the mostly empty cafe. Though I have resolved to get rid of Gerry, it doesn't mean it's completely safe for me to be seen with Rian.

Rian jumps up when he notices me and dashes to my side, stumbling as he screeches to a halt. "Hi! What can I get you? I'm buying your beverage. No protests allowed." He turns to the barista. "Can I have another strawberry boba?"

Hope flutters in my chest as I drink in his sheer ridiculousness. "Regular large coffee, please."

Once we're seated with our items, Rian removes his mask. My focus goes to his long jawline I used to pepper with kisses, and doubt drops anchor in my stomach. Has anyone else been worshiping the crook of his neck?

I shift my gaze to the manila envelope on the table.

"I'm so glad you're here." Rian takes a sip from his first bubble tea. "I wanted to see you earlier, but I had to finish an

important meeting.”

“With Adaline?” I ask, suddenly overwhelmed by panic. What if Rian got back together with his ex since his cruel, immature boyfriend had tossed him aside? That’s exactly the kind of romance novel I would want to read, but I desperately don’t want to be a side character right now.

“No, but I saw her last night.”

My heart starts sinking, slowly on its way to join the stomach anchor. Why did I bother coming here?

Rian flashes me a smile. “It’s spring, but you still smell like fall. I love that.”

Wait. What?

I stare at him, trying to detect the meaning behind his words. Is he making fun of me?

“I also love your burgundy cardigan.” Rian’s grin disappears. His eyes lack their usual merriment, which makes my toes curl with anticipation of what he’s about to say. “And I love the way your jaw sets when you’re concerned, like you are now. I love the way you puff your chest with pride when you talk about your students. I love you so much, Darrell, that I am going to spend the rest of my life regretting it if I don’t try to win you back.”

He... He really said all that.

I can’t tear my gaze away from his hard, serious expression. But I also can’t make my vocal cords work. Even though I had come here with every intention of letting Rian know my feelings, I hadn’t expected such an open confession from him.

He breaks into laughter. The familiar sound relaxes me. With anyone else, I'd sling coffee in his face and stomp away.

But Rian wouldn't use his favorite tool to hurt someone.

"Sorry," he says between chuckles. "I just can't believe how amazing it feels to finally say that."

My heart sprouts wings and flits back to where it belongs in my chest.

"Oh, I know this is sudden!" Rian fiddles with the straw of his drink. "I'm sorry. But you have to believe me about everything. My life is a shade of what it used to be. The day Mari ran away, I realized I had my priorities all wrong. I'm as far as I need to be, professionally. I'm going to keep losing the people I love if I try to be the best in my career. You yourself told me that I needed to worry less about my grades."

A smile starts to spread across my face. "Maybe."

"So here I am." Rian pushes the thick envelope toward me. "I've given up my project with Adaline. I just renewed my contract with the studio. Gonna stay exactly where I am for two more years."

"Exactly where you are?" I push my untouched coffee to the left and pick up the envelope. Dozens of papers are inside.

"Yeah, at *Burning the Midnight Oil*." He rubs the back of his neck and lowers his voice. "Don't go spreading the word yet, but I'll be getting the 11:35 time slot. *Good Night with Sean McCarthy* will be *Good Night with Rian Goodwin* when Sean retires."

I leave the papers where they are. No need to check. I trust him.

That's why I need to open up, even though this is going to destroy my soul if Rian doesn't believe me.

"Congratulations!" My smile broadens as I hand the envelope back. "That's huge. I'm excited for you."

His cheeks turn a cute shade of pink, highlighting his even more adorable freckles. "Thank you."

I rest my hands on my lap. "My father is Gerald Lafontaine."

Rian's bashfulness gradually shifts to bewilderment as my declaration lingers in the air.

Silence falls between us for far longer than I would have liked. I stare at him, trying to mentally channel my trauma to him so I don't have to say anything out loud. He already has some pieces. Maybe he can figure it out himself.

"What?" Rian blinks. "The actor? Who Adaline just did a movie with?"

"Yes."

Rian studies me for a moment, then his eyes grow wide. Joaquín had given me that same look when I told him the other night. That look where they're mentally picturing the rich actor from movie posters and realizing, yes, there's a strong resemblance to the barely-above-the-poverty-line teacher before them.

Horror creeps into Rian's expression. "Gerald Lafontaine is your father? The asshole who used to beat your sweet mother in front of you?"

"He is." I chew on my lip for a second while I think of the best way to navigate these murky waters. Despite feeling like I am swimming across the ocean without a life jacket, my

mouth and throat are superbly dry. “But Gerry doesn’t want anyone to know who I am. He started threatening me when he saw me on television.”

Rian covers his mouth with his hands. “Because of me.”

“Well, yes, I guess.” I run my finger along the rim of my mug. “It’s not your fault he threatened me while we were dating. He’s a bad person, and I’m sorry I didn’t trust you enough to tell you what was going on. I broke up with you because of my father—I was afraid of him and what he would do to Mama since he pays for her medical bills. And, well, some part of me worried that you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Darrell...”

Rian rests his head on the table, hiding his face behind his arms. The urge to thread my fingers through his soft curls is strong, but I resist.

He sits up straight and takes a long drink from his bubble tea, finishing it off except for a few pearls. He sets the cup down. “I’m so sorry I was too absorbed in my work. If I had spent more time with you, maybe you would have let me in.”

I finally pick up my coffee and bring it to my lips. “You don’t need to apologize for my trust issues.”

“I’m apologizing for leaving you alone.” Rian gestures to his phone. “I spoke to my mother yesterday, and when I came out to her about my queerness, she told me that she didn’t want me to go through a hard time alone. When she said that, I finally figured out where I had messed up with you.”

“Wait.” I set my cup down without taking a sip. “You came out to your mother?”

A wry chuckle tumbles out of him. “Way late, yes, but I did. However, that’s not the point. You had something horrific

happen to you, and you didn't think I was someone you could rely on, especially when I had the audacity to invite you to the same party as your abuser. When I invited you, you should have been able to tell me the truth then. But you were scared and felt alone. That's *terrible*. I don't you to be alone. Ever."

Rian's sincerity shines in his words. The need to touch him consumes my every thought. After a lifetime of only finding validation for my pain through books and anime, it's difficult to hear people use such sweet words about me.

I had come here, hoping Rian would take me back with all of my complications. It sounds like he actually might. Somehow, this feels unreal.

If I could just rest a finger on his palm, maybe his warmth would assure me that it's okay to tell him how much I want to be his shining star.

Rian leans back and slings his arm over the chair next to him. It'd be easy for me to slide into that spot. Easy to rest my head on his shoulder and leisurely drink my tepid coffee. Easy for me to go back to that blissful minute on Valentine's Day where I felt like I belonged somewhere.

But the stormy clouds...

"Your father's left you alone since we broke up, right?"
Rian sighs. "Maybe we can't work out, after all."

No.

I can't give up here.

My heart goes into overdrive as I rise to my feet.
"Actually, he hasn't."

Rian gapes at me with his jaw dropped open. It practically scrapes the table as I settle into the chair next to him.

Though I'm next to Rian, I refrain from touching him. But being this close to the sun is exactly what I needed to put the clouds behind me. Being able to count the individual freckles across his nose while soaking in his body heat and the scent of his shampoo is soothing.

I can tell Rian anything.

"He still calls me," I whisper quietly while scanning the cafe. Less people in here now than when I came in. No one seems to have a camera pointed toward us. "My father's threatening to move Mama since she's losing more of her memory. He's afraid she'll start talking about him. And I can't afford to take care of her without his financial support."

Rian drapes his arm across my shoulder. His hand squeezes my arm lightly, calming my racing heart.

God, it feels so damn good to be held by him again. I thread my fingers through his, not caring about who sees us. Rian doesn't seem to be worried either.

Even if we can't get back together, at least I can have this moment.

"Now you know everything and how much of a wreck I am," I say. "Well, almost everything."

Rian rests his head against mine. "What else should I know?"

Though he hasn't filmed a show today, faint traces of makeup powder hit my nostrils. He'll always smell like a star, won't he? How wonderful.

I press a kiss to the corner of his jaw. "You should know how much I love you. I'm sorry I'm such a mess. And I'm sorry I didn't open up sooner. I love you so much, and I am

ready to do what it takes to be with you. If you want me with all of my complications, that is.”

Rian rewards my confession with the widest, brightest smile I’ve ever seen, one that makes me fall harder for him.

Desire swells me through me for something real to capture this moment, this blink of time where I’ve revealed everything.

Before he can answer me, I pull out my phone. “Can we take a selfie?”

“Huh?” Rian breaks into a gentle laughter. “You’re *now* asking for a selfie? That’s usually a first meeting thing with me.”

“Please?”

“Yes.” Rian holds me close to him. “And yes, I want you. Christ, you think a wimpy nerd like me can turn down a smoking hot jogging god like you?”

He...

My hands shake from giddiness as I angle my phone for a picture. He swipes my phone from me.

“Don’t you know I always carry a selfie stick with me?” He winks and points to his arm, eliciting a chuckle from me.

Before he can click the shutter button, a call comes through. The eye-searing string of numbers demolishes my spirits.

“Shit, that’s my father,” I mumble. “Guess we couldn’t even get one picture together before he ruined things. Where the fuck are his goons watching from? Doesn’t seem to be anyone in this cafe spying on us.”

“Lots of explanations for that. Trust me, paparazzi invaded my life quite a bit when I was a part of the Polinsky family.” Rian pulls away from me, still holding my phone. “But this is your father? You trust me, right?”

Rian’s thumb hovers over the green button.

He’s going to talk to Gerry?!

My gut instinct tells me to smack my phone out of his hand, but...

I trust Rian, and I need help. If there’s anyone who might be able to scare my father, it’s the number one late night talk show host.

I nod. “Yes. I trust you.”

Rian accepts the call. “Hi, Gerald. This is Rian Goodwin. Glad you called, because I’m here to tell you to leave my boyfriend and his amazing mother alone. *I’ll* be taking care of the bills from now on. I’m also going to hire security to keep you from physically going near either of them. And if Darrell wants to press charges against you for stalking him, I will gladly introduce him to my team of highly capable lawyers. They’d probably love to shred you in court once they hear about everything you’ve done. And I do mean everything.”

Oh my God. *Rian*.

He hangs up and hands my phone back to me with a small, smug grin on his handsome face.

I exhale sharply, trying to process the situation. “You don’t have to pay for my mother—”

“One second.” He hands my phone back to me and grabs his own. “I need to call someone at the nursing home to see what kind of security they’ll allow me to set up. Oh, I

probably should set up the billing while I'm at it. And then I guess I should send a heads up to my lawyers. Good thing I don't need to do anything tonight. Actually, I don't have anything to do on Saturdays from now on. Since we're back together, you can help me fill the void."

Huh?

Rian gestures to the manila envelope. "There's a new clause in my contract. If the studio wants to keep me for seven years, they have to leave me alone on Saturdays. No tapings, no texts from the producers or writers, nothing. Do you still need a pizza delivery boy on the third Saturday of every month? I could use a part-time job."

Holy shit.

Rian's words aren't empty—they're promises. He'll protect Mama. He'll protect me.

And he wants to be with me.

I bite back my tears. For the first time in my life, everything feels like it's going to be okay.

Now I can start to shine.

"Wait a minute." I wave my phone in front of his face. "We still have a selfie to take."



GETTING BACK TOGETHER WITH DARRELL IS A DREAM COME true.

As he said, it has its complications, but I will give everything I have to protect him. The first few weeks back together were spent meeting with banks, healthcare workers, social workers, lawyers, and private security companies with top-of-the-line cameras and alarms. Didn't exactly leave a lot of room for romantic dates since I also had the genius idea to plan a new format for *Burning the Midnight Oil*.

Dropping Revolution left me with time to examine ways my show could grow. After visiting Darrell's students again, with pizza in hand, the perfect idea came to me.

It took a bit of grand-standing to get the producers, the director, and the writers on board with my novel initiative—using our show's platform to boost new creatives in this field. Specifically, bringing teenagers and young adults with promising vlogs to the show.

Just having them guest wouldn't do, though. The best way to help aspiring entertainers is to let them entertain. And what's the most entertaining position on the show?

The host, of course.

Every Friday, we'll have a guest host. I'll be there to shadow them, but they'll take the spotlight. The idea is risky, but it's the most profound way I can think of to become the role model I want to be.

The launch of this format happens in late April, after everyone's spring breaks are over. The summer will be a test drive. During the August hiatus, we can assess the results and plan any needed changes or nix the idea completely.

But I want it to work. The idea of bolstering my junior colleagues' careers is exhilarating. And it gives me a chance to hang out with my favorite teenager and listen to her recommendations for people to invite.

Said teenager is also, incidentally, the first host of the new guest format. There was no other way I could picture kicking off such potential chaos. The main topic of tonight's interview with Mari is going to be one of the scariest things I've ever done, but I have to do it.

I want the whole world to know who the real Rian Goodwin is.

Mari and I wave excitedly to each other off-stage when the Velvet Fighters play the show's theme. She whispers good luck to me as I pop through the curtain, as if I've never been on television before.

I start my opening monologue with a smile bright enough to be used as a Batman signal.

"Wow, you folks look extra excited tonight." I rub my hands together. "Let me guess. You heard about this new thing we're trying, haven't you?"

Their enthusiastic cheer lifts my spirits even higher. This idea might really and truly work.

“That’s great!” I clap with the audience. “For anyone who hasn’t heard, I’ll explain. On Fridays, there’s going to be a guest host. I’ll still be here for the opening monologue, but I mostly plan to hang on the couch and finally catch a few winks while someone else does my job. Have you seen the dark circles under my eyes these days? Yikes.”

A ripple of laughter fills the room. I scan the front row for Darrell, who is supposed to be here, but I don’t see him. Disappointment crashes into me, but I force myself to keep smiling. Wouldn’t he have messaged me if he was running late?

Did he... Did he decide he didn’t want to be here when I come out of the closet on television? I told him I was only going to talk about my sexuality, not about our relationship. As much as I would love to brag to my audience about how great Darrell is, I have no plans to put him in the limelight.

Is he afraid his father will retaliate somehow? Does he not trust me to protect him?

Ugh. I have to stop thinking about Darrell. Mari deserves my full attention right now. It’s what Darrell would want—me helping his student do her best to shine.

I also wouldn’t have met Darrell without her.

“I’m pleased to announce that the first guest host is a dear friend of mine.” A lump forms in my throat as I reflect on the last several months. “We go out for boba a lot, and she always has good fashion advice for me. Best of all, you already know her! Please, give it up for Mari Jin!”

The whole studio practically shakes with applause and whistles as Mari darts from behind the curtain. Her hair is tied

in a pretty braid with some daisy clips tucked in the dark silk. Her nails also have daisy prints.

Pride swells through me as she waves to me before she turns to the audience.

“Hi, Mari.” I flash her a smile. “Are you excited about tonight?”

“Yes!” Mari keeps waving to the audience. I gesture for her to face Felicity’s camera. “Sorry.”

“No worries. They always edit out my mistakes, but I promise I mess up a lot.” I straighten my tie. “You’d never guess, though, would you?”

Mari just stares at me with that charmingly judgmental expression of hers. We have planned this moment, but it’s still difficult to keep a straight face. The audience is now watching a brief reel clip of my numerous blunders, including the fall that broke my elbow. The montage will be superimposed next to Mari and me on TV.

Once the clip is over, I let go of my tie. That’s the cue for Mari to take over. We scripted this opening, but we left Mari’s lines a bit vague. *Mari says something about how it’s a good thing she’s taking over tonight* type of thing.

She just keeps staring at me.

“What?” I fold my arms across my chest. “You okay?”

“Why did you say that earlier?” she asks.

“Huh? Say what?”

A hesitant titter rolls through the audience. I glance at the producers and stage manager off to the side. They look just as confused as I feel. Are we going to have to reshoot this opening? That’s going to kill the vibe.

“You said I give you good fashion advice.” Mari points to my shoes. “But you keep wearing those things?”

The audience erupts with laughter. Relief sweeps through the producers. I nearly fall over myself, but I manage to keep it together.

I knew bringing Mari to the show was going to be a great idea. She’s the perfect first guest. I’m so glad her mom said yes.

I’m also glad they’ve been getting along better. Sarah’s agreed to let Mari start a vlog. No episodes have gone live yet, but Mari better believe I’ll be the first person to like and subscribe.

“What’s wrong with these bad boys?” I lift my leg up so everyone can see my sequin loafer. “They’re the most fashionable part about me.”

“Mr. Goodwin, please.”

I’m supposed to end the monologue, but the sincerity laced in Mari’s barb causes me to double over. How is this girl so funny?

Mari, like the queen she is, turns to the camera and waves. “I’m Mari Jin! I’ll be your host tonight on *Burning the Midnight Oil!*”

Oh, that’s a perfect start to the show. Mari is perfect. She is definitely going to conquer the world.

The crew starts setting the cameras up for the interview segment. Vera touches up both mine and Mari’s makeup while we wait.

I check the front row again. Still no Darrell. Dammit.

“Great job, kid,” Vera mutters. “You’re funnier than Rian.”

“Yes, she is,” I comment, maybe a bit too cheerfully so as to mask the brewing panic in my chest. “And not even nervous! I’m amazed.”

Where. Is. Darrell?

“I’m nervous.” Mari flips through her notecards. “But, Mr. Goodwin, if I’m going to start a makeup vlog, I can’t have people thinking I condone those loafers. They have to trust my taste.”

Ah, Mari. I hope she never changes.

Okay. I have to stop thinking about Darrell for real now. Mari needs me.

A couple of minutes later, we start the guest interview. The Velvet Fighters’ upbeat jazz welcomes us back to filming.

I hover off to the side and fiddle with my cufflinks, waiting for my cue to enter. Mari’s on stage by herself for this, behind my desk. She glows like the morning sun with her cheerfulness as she waves to everyone.

It’s a shame that Darrell can’t see this in person. He’d be so proud of her.

He’ll watch the broadcast, at least.

“Welcome to *Burning the Midnight Oil with Mari Jin!*” Mari grabs her notecards. She keeps her gaze focused on Felicity’s camera, just as she was instructed to do. “But I’m sad to announce that we don’t have a celebrity to interview tonight.”

There’s my cue. I poke my head out from behind the curtains and loudly whisper, “Mari! What about me?”

She gapes at me. “Oh! We could interview you instead of a celebrity. That’s a good idea.”

The audience eats this banter up, much to my delight. The crew looks equally pleased with how everything is proceeding.

Great, that'll make the scary part of this interview a little easier to get through. While I have utmost confidence in Mari, I'm not so sure coming out as pansexual is going to go over well with everyone in the nation.

But I have to do it. I called my mom yesterday and told her what I was gonna do. Told Felicity and Vera. Told the writers.

They support me wholeheartedly. That's more than some people ever get.

I take my place on the couch. It's strange to be on this side of the stage. Not terrible, but strange.

"You know, Mari, I'm a celebrity."

"If you say so." Mari holds up her notecards while the audience laughs. "Welcome to my show, Mr. Goodwin. Good to have you here. What new projects are you working on?"

"Well, this one, basically." I cross my legs. "I thought it'd be great to get more young creatives like yourself out there where people can see how funny and entertaining you are."

Mari smiles. "Okay, but that's not really you doing work, is it? It seems to me like I'm doing all the labor."

I bring my finger to my lips.

She proceeds with the next question. She came up with most of the questions herself once we agreed on the main focus of our interview. "What do you have going on outside the show? I've seen you around my school a lot lately."

"Oh, I was hoping you hadn't seen me!"

“Stop wearing those eyesores in public.” She points to my shoes. “Anyone can see you from a mile away.”

That bit was planned, but it still cracks me up. Once I recover, I sit up straight. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what it means to be a good role model. This new weekly segment is meant to open doors for promising entertainers. But I can’t just invite people without seeing what they’re capable of, right?”

Mari nods. “Being on this side of the desk doesn’t make you any less of a chatterbox, does it?”

“I guess not.” I toss the audience a wink. “You lot are stuck listening to my incredibly riveting stories forever.”

A mix of chuckles and fake groans sweeps through the studio. Well, I hope they’re fake.

“So, as I was saying, I need to see what young adults are capable of before bringing them on the show.” I turn back to Mari. “But they need access to tools to get themselves out there, right? So I’m helping your school start a technology club. Computers, tablets, cameras, unlimited Internet bandwidth, whatever you all need to develop killer vlogs.”

Mari’s eyes widen with genuine interest. “Faster Wi-Fi?”

I snort. That question wasn’t planned. “Yes. Faster Wi-Fi.”

“That’s so cool!”

We pause to let the audience cheer. Mari veers her gaze away from me and scribbles something on the back of her notecard.

For a moment, despite being surrounded by fans and cameras, I feel alone. The next part of my life is about to start. My name will be in the news all weekend. Other talk show hosts will probably reference this moment on Monday.

The lights grow brighter, hotter. I run my thumb along my cufflinks, painfully aware of the perspiration dripping down my face.

Couldn't Darrell have at least messaged me that he wouldn't be here?

Finally, Mari glimpses at me. "What else are you doing at my school?"

Okay. Here goes.

I cross my legs. "Giving more money to be used for the other extracurricular activities at your school. It's a real shame how underfunded some of them are. Teenagers deserve spaces to explore and grow into their real selves. Music, art, debate..."

Mari brings her pen to her mouth. "What about the Gay-Straight Alliance?"

"That too!"

Another round of cheers. At this point, I quit looking at the audience. If I catch one disapproving frown, I might spontaneously combust.

It's safer to keep my eyes on Mari. She is an oasis in this endless desert of uncertainty.

"Speaking of the GSA, I've been admiring your cufflinks." Mari gestures to me.

I stretch out my arms. "You like these bad boys?"

"Yes, but does everything have to be a 'bad boy' with you? You need some new catchphrases."

A roar of approval sweeps through the studio.

While I feign a bruised ego (okay, maybe I'm a little worried the audience genuinely thinks my catchphrases are tired), Mari waves Felicity over.

“Can we get a close-up of Mr. Goodwin’s cufflinks?” Mari claps for me. “Those little flags are the pansexuality colors, aren’t they?”

“That’s right.”

Felicity slips me a grin while she films the strips of pink, yellow, and blue. Her smile comforts me, almost like she’s telling me I’m not alone.

Felicity, Mari... I glance off to the side, toward Vera and the writers.

Right. I’m not alone. There are tons of oases in this desert. Whatever’s going on with Darrell, I’ll figure it out later.

Tonight is about me opening up.

I turn to the audience. To hell with any of them who might be disgusted with my next statement.

But, to my surprise, there is an array of hopeful expressions and wide smiles greeting me even before I say, “*I’m pansexual.*”

My fans celebrate with a full course of applause and whistles.

The heat in the studio is no longer oppressive. Instead, there is pure warmth and magic floating in the air. It is the happiest I have felt all day.

The bubbling joy proves to be ephemeral once I start longing for Darrell’s presence.

Mari starts the interview again and saves me from sinking into an emotional sandpit. “That’s so cool! So, you’re interested in all kinds of people, huh? Regardless of gender?”

“Right.” I rub the back of my neck. “Took me a while to figure it out, but one day, I realized I just had way too many New Kids on the Block posters in my bedroom to be straight. Do you know who they are?”

“Not at all,” Mari replies. “So, when are you going to introduce us to your boyfriend?”

I break into laughter. Not the hearty guffaw or wheezy howl I usually have. This flustered chuckle is drenched in confusion.

Boyfriend? That’s not in Mari’s notecards, and I told her not to talk about Darrell in order to respect his privacy. We’re supposed to talk about the website where other people can apply to become a guest host. Then, we’re supposed to discuss activities I might like to do as a guest.

I stare at Mari with the world’s most awkward grin plastered across my mug. Why isn’t she looking at me or cluing me in on her joke? Why is she just looking at the audience? Why is the crowd screaming so much?

Why...are the cameras turning to the audience?

I follow Mari’s gaze. The cheers, the lights, and the cameras fade into the background as I discover what’s so interesting in the fifth row.

Darrell.

He’s standing in the middle of the row, sporting a smile stretched from ear to ear and a T-shirt. The white tee has my horrific driver’s license photograph on it and *I love my boyfriend* written along the top.

He's...really doing this, isn't he? Knowing his father will see? He trusts me enough to protect him, doesn't he?

When I meet Darrell's gorgeous, shimmering eyes, his smile broadens.

I bury my face behind my hands. The scorching heat of my cheeks against my palms grounds me to reality.

Everyone here knows how queer I am, and they know who I'm wildly in love with.

I peek through my fingers, dying to know what Mari is doing. She holds her notecard up just enough so only I can see (with my blurry vision) what's written—*I'm still your romance broker.*

Delight colors my laugh now. All of this is actually happening.

“I can't believe you're dating my homeroom teacher, Mr. Goodwin.” Mari wrinkles her nose. “I can't even get extra credit for doing this show because I'm not in his English class this semester.”

While a few cameras are still pointed at him, Darrell shakes his head.

“Do you need a superhero to help you with getting extra credit in your other classes?” I waggle my eyebrows. “I know a great guy. He has a cute mullet.”

“Ugh, no thanks! I had to do so much extra homework because of Super Rian.”

The rest of the interview goes as planned, except I have a hard time taking my gaze off the audience. Everyone around Darrell snaps pictures on their phones while a crew member

escorts him backstage. The news of our relationship will go viral before this taping is even over.

Why did he go public? I would have been fine keeping things discreet for him.

The second we break for a few minutes, I zoom to greet Darrell in my dressing room. He waves to me, still grinning like the world is dependent on his radiant smile to generate electricity.

I stumble as I approach him. Darrell's quick to catch me. Though I recover my balance, he continues to hold me.

Being touched by him is so, so wonderful. The softness of the moment causes tears to prick my eyes.

"What the fuck?" I can't help laughing again, though one tear still escapes me. "I told you that we could have a private relationship. Aren't you worried about your father?"

"That's not what I want." Darrell squeezes my arms. "I want to be with the real Rian Goodwin."

I gape at him, suddenly unsure where he's going with this.

Darrell continues. "You, my dear paper doll, love being a celebrity. I've known this since I met you. You're the real deal, whether you're in front of a camera or not. You're funny, charming, clumsy, kind to your fans, and determined to better this world. A star like you needs someone who is going to enhance your natural glow. And I am not going to let my father stop me from being that someone."

You're the real deal whether you're in front of a camera or not.

The sincerity of his words frees me from the ghost that's haunted me for over two years. I hold him as close as possible

and try not to wail. He kisses my chin so gently and tenderly that I shed another tear anyway.

It's amazing no one has yelled at me to go back on the stage.

Wait! Mari's still out there!

I pull away from Darrell. "I have to work. Shit, shit, shit. I'm so sorry. I'm already screwing up this relationship."

"You aren't screwing anything up." He brings his lips close to mine. "I'm the one who intruded on your show, actually."

"How did you even plan that?" I whisper. "And who made your hideous shirt?"

"Your makeup artist designed this thing you might call a 'bad boy.'" Darrell chuckles. "And Mari asked the crew for help once I told her I wanted to do something flashy. She's apparently befriended them during the course of her visits here."

"I should have known."

The gap between us closes. The kiss is light, long, and filled with laughter. It's perfectly us.

Us.

EPILOGUE



THE OCEAN OF NAVY BLUE GRADUATION GOWNS IN THE LOBBY is both a welcomed and a heart-wrenching sight. Saying goodbye to the young adults I've had the honor of teaching—even the ones who constantly butted heads with me—is never easy. Not to mention the fact that not all of my students make it to this point.

As I fix Little C's tie for him, we chat about his interview he has coming up at a hardware store. He's decided to work part-time jobs to fund an album he wants to record. His graduation cap has his social media information bedazzled on it in rhinestones.

The first time I met him, back when he was actually little and not the giant he's grown into, he had a couple of buddies who had also wanted to make music with him. They had to make difficult survival decisions. Neither of us say their names right now, but I suspect we're both thinking of them.

I never stop thinking about any of my students, really. Everyone I made a connection with sticks with me. Sometimes I'll see an advertisement for a university and swell with pride, remembering how Jocelyn graduated early and got a full ride to Columbia. When I pass a hospital, I wonder how Marley is

doing in his virtual academy since it became too hard for him to attend school physically.

I hope I've taught my students a few skills they need to be the best version of themselves, no matter how brief our time together was. For some of them, it'll take a while to realize what their potential is. It took me thirty-four years to finally feel like I had found the right path.

The past couple of years since I stopped answering my father's calls has been quite a rollercoaster ride. Rian has done an incredible job in making sure my mother is cared for and that I'm safe. The media doesn't seem to know whose son I am. I'm always labeled Rian Goodwin's non-celebrity boyfriend, which is quite fine with me.

Gerry stopped trying to contact me after a few back-and-forths with Rian's lawyers. I haven't been burdened by my father's clouds in months. I'm starting to doubt Gerry'll ever have the nerve to come for me again.

But if he does, I have support. I have Rian. I also have Joaquín, Troy, and Andy. Though I've moved in with Rian by now, the four of us get together weekly for dinner and drinks. Their new roommate, Hayden, joins us sometimes.

Joaquín stares at this beefy new roommate a lot, often with his eyebrows arched in interest. I'm waiting for the day *that* mess shows up in the group chat. But I'm ready to return the favor for Joaquín and help him with his problems.

Opening up and asking for help has changed my life.

Something I've started emphasizing in my lessons is the importance of asking for help. I offer my students ample amount of extra credit upfront these days just so it's easier to reach out.

This world is still determined to crush them, but I need to prove to them they aren't alone.

After spending an hour to help some of my guys look sharp, I head for the auditorium. The venue is already full of eager families and friends. Lots of banners, streamers, and noisemakers in sight—even though we asked for no air horns.

This is a happy day. It hurts knowing I won't see most of the graduating students again, but this is a happy day. Everyone present can celebrate just getting here. Tomorrow, the next chapter begins.

I check my watch. Ten minutes before the students start filing in. I glance at the stage, where most of the speakers have gathered. The only one missing is Rian, but he's waiting to appear until it's time for him to speak so as not to hog all the attention.

It was only fitting for the school to ask Rian to give a speech on the same day of Mari's graduation. He probably would have shown up here with a prepared monologue even if they hadn't. No one is more proud of the honor roll makeup vlogger than him.

I sneak away to Rian's private room to check on him. The venue placed him in what's essentially a refurbished closet, but it has a mirror and some seating. That's all Rian really needs.

Rian greets me from the couch when I enter, but he doesn't look up from his tablet. The way he's tapping suggests he's working, not leisurely killing time.

My poor boyfriend looks absolutely drained. *Burning the Midnight Oil with Rian Goodwin* ended last night on a high note, complete with a special in-person appearance from his

mother. I stayed with the Goodwins at the studio wrap party for a while, but they were only just coming home when I woke up at five. Rian's mother was apparently the hit of the party.

She's planning on having lunch with my mother in a little bit. The two hit it off as friends the first time they met, due to their hobby of sharing embarrassing stories about their sons.

My family has grown so much. Rian, our mothers, my old roommates, my students... My life is so full and wonderful.

"Glad I didn't find you passed out." I close the door behind me. "But I thought you were done with your speech."

"Ten minutes is both too long and not enough. I have to make sure every word counts." Rian sighs. "My dreams of breaking into the motivation talk industry might suffer a setback if I bungle this."

"You've got this, doll." I eye his sequin-covered graduation cap and gown hanging in the corner. He also has his signature loafers on standby. "Are you really wearing that? You could have just brought a suit. Like me and almost everyone else on the faculty, really."

"I'm here to send these teenagers off into the world." Rian sets his tablet down and takes off his reading glasses. "But it's imperative I do it while looking as ridiculous as possible. I have an image to protect. Since you're here, I guess that means I should start my makeup. Vera didn't want to come today. She had a few too many drinks and cigarettes with Mom."

"But your mother seemed fine this morning when I spoke with her?"

"Don't try to out-party a Minnesota woman."

Rian breaks into laughter and grabs his makeup pouch. While he gets ready, I scroll through his notes. It's a lovely

speech about the dangers of working too hard, complete with endless jabs at himself. He starts it by talking about how terrible he looks in spandex and ends it by asking the students not to ignore the important people in their lives while they chase their dreams.

The straightforward title of the speech, however, brings a smile to my face.

How to Be Good.

A+, my love. A+.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chace Verity (she/they) is publishing queer as heck stories with a strong romantic focus, although queer friendships and found families are important too. Chace prefers to write fantasy but dabbles in contemporary and historical fiction as well. An American citizen & Canadian permanent resident, Chace will probably never be able to call a gallon of milk a “four-liter.”

Subscribe to their newsletter to keep up with the latest updates!

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