

CHU'S RESTAURANT Book



JACKIE LAU



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THE  
*Sitcom*  
STAR

JACKIE LAU

# The Sitcom Star

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Chu's Restaurant, Book 1

Jackie Lau

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## Meet Adrian and Maddie...

Adrian Ma hasn't seen his childhood crush in years—until she appears on his TV screen.

Maddie Ng, the co-creator and star of *Chu's Restaurant*, clearly has a different life from Adrian, an easygoing web developer who spends his free time hanging out with friends, babysitting his nephew, and eating fried chicken. Sure, it might not be Hollywood, but Maddie's gorgeous face appears in ads for Canada's hit sitcom all over Toronto.

He doesn't expect to see her in real life.

He certainly doesn't expect to spill bubble tea all over her.

Their chance encounter leads to him teaching an overworked Maddie how to relax, and to his surprise, the attraction isn't one-sided.

Yet as things heat up between them, Adrian wonders how long this can last. He wants to be the man who loves and supports her behind the scenes, but he's not sure that's possible.

After all, she's Maddie Ng, and he's just a regular guy.

*Content note: COVID-19*



# Chu's Restaurant

Did you enjoy *Schitt's Creek* and *Kim's Convenience*? You'll love *Chu's Restaurant*, the new Canadian sitcom about a multigenerational family that runs a Chinese restaurant in small-town Ontario. The first season is now available in the US on Netflix. The second season, which has aired in Canada, will be here soon.

—Theo Roth, *Stream This* (June 2022)

# Chapter 1

Maddie Ng sure has been busy. She's the star of *Chu's Restaurant*, which was recently renewed for a third season, and she also co-created the series and serves as showrunner.

"As soon as filming wrapped up on the second season," she tells me, "I flew to New York for a guest appearance on another show. I like being busy, though I've developed a bit of a tremor," she jokes, holding up her arms. "You see what I mean?"

Between all her projects, Maddie Ng still found time to talk to me at a café in the Distillery District, and she looks as poised as she does onscreen.

—Rosalind O, *YYZist*

“SO,” NOAH SAID, “WHAT have you all been watching lately?”

“Between diapers and feedings and trying to catch a few hours of sleep,” Sydney said, “I don’t have time to watch much of anything. Certainly nothing that requires concentration. But I’ve managed a few episodes of *Chu’s Restaurant*.”

“Yeah? I like that one.”

Adrian Ma sipped his beer and looked around the patio at his friends. Back in the day, a night of drinks at a bar with Noah, Devon, and Sydney—friends from university—would have been a common occurrence, but it was rare for them all to be hanging out like this now. Devon and Sydney were married and had a baby girl, and this was the first time Adrian had seen them out together in ages. Sydney was texting the babysitter every twenty minutes.

In addition to the ways his friends’ personal lives had changed, there was the way the world had changed. This bar hadn’t been chosen for its beer selection but for its surprisingly unbusy patio, and it was perfect patio weather tonight.

“Have you seen it, Adrian?” Noah asked.

“Yeah.” He’d watched it all. The Season 2 finale had been a few weeks ago. “Actually, I went to school with Maddie Ng.”

“Seriously?” Sydney said. “You went to school with the star of *Chu’s Restaurant*?”

“Sure did.” Adrian smiled when his friend’s eyes widened. “But I haven’t seen her in twenty years. We went to the same elementary school, but she attended a different high school than me, for their arts program.”

He hadn’t known what she’d been up to—he hadn’t been able to find her on Facebook—until he’d seen a huge ad for *Chu’s Restaurant* at Eglinton Station, right before it premiered. He’d stopped in his tracks, and a man in a suit had knocked into him and sworn.

Of course, he’d had to watch it. Because *Maddie Ng*.

“Did you, like, know she’d be famous?” Sydney asked.

Adrian leaned back in his chair. “I can’t say I’m surprised. She was always...intense. When she knew what she wanted, she made sure she was the very best at it.”

Unlike him. He’d coasted during school. He could get decent enough marks without trying too hard, so that was what he did. Occasionally, his parents would get annoyed with him for not doing better, but they’d never been truly angry.

In university, he hadn’t been able to coast quite as much. He’d needed to learn to actually study, but he hadn’t worried about it a lot, even if he was below average in his class. He just needed to graduate, get a half-decent job. His attitude had irked his last serious girlfriend. He was definitely a “work to live” kind of guy, and Maddie, he imagined, wasn’t like that.

He'd been a little in awe of thirteen-year-old Maddie's intensity.

"It's not like she's super famous," Noah said. "She's Canadian famous, not Hollywood famous."

Obviously, that wasn't an insult, but Adrian felt slightly offended on Maddie's behalf.

"But it's on Netflix now," Sydney said. "Apparently, it's popular in the US, and someone came up with a name for fans of the show. *Chuties*." She rolled her eyes. "Isn't that silly?"

Devon nodded his agreement as he put his arm around his wife's shoulders. Sydney probably did ninety percent of the talking in their marriage, but Devon seemed to like it that way. They'd been together since their first week of university.

Adrian on the other hand? Well, he'd had relationships, but it had been three years since his last one had ended.

"Maybe she'll be like Simu Liu," Sydney said. "The next Marvel superhero."

"If that's what she wants, I assume she'll be able to get it." But Adrian had a feeling that wasn't Maddie's goal, though it wasn't like he knew the person she was today. Maybe because he was a bit tipsy, he admitted, "I had a crush on her."

He remembered the skits they'd had to do for French class, something she'd taken way more seriously than anyone else in their class. They'd been partners once, and she'd shot down his ideas, but then he'd come up with something she'd liked, and she'd looked at him like he was *amazing*. He still

remembered how that felt...and he still found her pretty attractive when he saw her onscreen.

“Aww,” Noah said, clasping his hands together. “How cute.”

“Do you have any pictures?” Sydney asked. “I want to see what little Maddie Ng looked like.”

“Grade eight yearbook.” Adrian had cracked it open for the first time in years after watching the first episode of *Chu’s Restaurant*. “She’s also in a few of my class photos—we were in the same class for three or four years—but my mom has those. If I show you, do *not* post anything online.”

“Of course not. I promise.” Sydney crossed her fingers. “What time is it?”

“Time to relieve the babysitter,” Devon said.

“Oh, shit!” Sydney said. “I mean... Oh, damn! No, that’s still not right...Oh, dumpling!”

“You can swear around me,” Adrian said, laughing. “My ears are hardly delicate.”

“I know, but I’m trying to train myself out of it, now that Sadie is six months old. I’m starting to worry about her copying what I say. Her first word needs to be something appropriate.”

Sydney and Devon headed off, and Adrian and Noah sat on the patio for a little while longer before leaving at ten thirty, which was early compared to how late they would have once stayed out.

Adrian didn't feel like going home yet, so he decided to walk a bit before getting on the subway. It was humid and still warm out, despite the late hour, but without the oppressive sun of earlier and... *Ooh*.

He stopped in front of one of the many bubble tea shops in the city, suddenly thinking that bubble tea would be the perfect companion as he ambled down the streets.

He put on his mask and stepped inside.



*Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life.*

Those words echoed in Maddie Ng's head as she walked down the street in downtown Toronto. She wasn't sure who'd said that or when she'd first heard it, but whoever it was? They were a damn liar.

Maddie *loved* her career. She really did. She wouldn't trade her current life for anything, but it was also hard work.

*Chu's Restaurant* had been picked up in late 2019 for a thirteen-episode season. Then COVID-19 had happened, and there was the added complication of filming during the pandemic and running the writers' room online. Earlier in 2022, there had been a week when she'd slept a grand total of twelve hours.

She got tired just thinking about it.

But Season 3 would be a little different. Jen Fu was taking full showrunner duties for the next season—at Jen's insistence,

of course. Maddie never would have suggested it herself, but Jen was getting concerned about Maddie's lack of sleep and serious caffeine addiction. And when Maddie had mentioned that sometimes her hands started shaking for no reason and her heart started racing—also for no reason—Jen had put her foot down.

Maddie had continued to protest. She was fine. Filming a season of the show took three months, give or take, and that's when she was the busiest. She could stockpile her sleep in the months before that.

Jen, of course, had protested that it didn't work like that. You couldn't just sleep twelve hours a day for three months, then not sleep at all for the next three months.

Maddie knew this, but she was used to attempting the impossible. To not listening when people told her she couldn't do something.

Then Jen had really made her case. *Chu's Restaurant* could not afford for Maddie to collapse from exhaustion or burn out. By trying to do everything, she was risking the show.

It was Jen's trump card.

Because Maddie would never do anything to risk the show.

So, although she didn't like giving up some of the hats she was wearing, she conceded it was for the best, and she did trust Jen, whom she'd known since meeting her at the Toronto Fringe Festival ten years ago.



Work would soon begin on the scripts for Season 3, and Maddie wouldn't be heavily involved. It was weird. She kept feeling like she was supposed to be doing something, but the only thing she was supposed to be doing was relaxing, as Jen had ordered.

The problem was that Maddie was used to hustling. *Relaxing? What's that?* Much as she needed this break, she was having trouble adjusting. But although she was terrible at relaxing, she refused to fail, and so this morning—her third day with no commitments—she'd created a detailed list of everything she could do to relax. *Take nap. Buy something useless online. Watch four hours of TV, and not as research.*

She'd ended up watching several hours of nature documentaries, hoping they'd be soothing. In fact, they'd led to her second nap. So, for two of the TV-watching hours, she'd also been napping.

Yay for multi-tasking!

But she didn't need to be multi-tasking, and maybe she shouldn't be making lists to tell her how to relax. There was something comforting in a list, though. Maddie had made her first list at the age of five. It hadn't been a "to do" list, but merely a list of animals at the zoo, and most of the words had been spelled wrong. She'd been so proud of it.

However, sometimes Maddie didn't know what to do without her lists now. They made her feel safe, and they were just part of her daily life.

Or maybe the problem was that her list for today simply hadn't been long enough? Maybe that was why she'd felt restless at ten in the evening and decided to go for a walk?

But walking had always helped Maddie, and as she passed streetlight after streetlight, the buzzing in her brain began to recede. Perhaps she needed to do more walking in the next few weeks. Would ten kilometers a day would be a good start? Or was it a bad idea to put a number on it?

Her brain was whirring again. Relaxation shouldn't make her feel so agitated, and oh God, why was she so bad at this?

If there was one thing Maddie Ng didn't like, it was being bad at something. That had always been unacceptable to her and—

Someone stepped out of a bubble tea shop, right in front of her, and the next thing she knew, she was covered in taro milk tea and tapioca.

“Shit!” she cried.

## Chapter 2

@asiandude888: I still can't believe Chuties caught on. I thought of it while high. It's not as good as Kimbits.

@theicecreamfiend: I like it!

MADDIE WAS USUALLY GOOD at maintaining her composure in public, no matter what happened, but then again, she wasn't used to getting soaked in cool purple liquid—why did it have to be *purple*?

“Oh my God. I'm so sorry,” said the man in front of her. “Let me get you some napkins.”

“No, no,” she said, “it's fine. I don't live too far from here.” It was an accident, she understood. She wasn't mad at him; she just wanted to get out of this situation and be alone.

But then he said the absolute worst thing possible.

“Maddie Ng? Oh my God, is that you?”

Yep, this was a nightmare.

She’d been recognized, presumably by someone who watched *Chu’s Restaurant*—she was still getting used to that—and right now, she wasn’t in the mood. But even as she tensed, she pasted on a smile and—

“Remember me?” he asked.

Okay, that wasn’t what she’d expected him to say.

She took in the handsome man in front of her, who wasn’t covered in milk tea. Lucky him. He was East Asian, a few inches taller than her. He had a charming smile and dimples, and she really couldn’t place him, but there *was* something rather familiar about that smile.

Then he said the name of her elementary school, and she was instantly on alert. How did he know that?

*Oh.* He must have gone to school with her.

She squinted, as if that would help her place him, and for some reason, it did. Memories of a short, scrawny kid came back to her.

“Adrian Ma?” she said tentatively.

He grinned wider, and she couldn’t help herself from smiling back.

Yes, she did remember him. They’d done a French skit together in grade eight. She also remembered him forgetting they had a math test until the teacher started handing out the

papers, then shrugging as though it was no big deal and getting ninety-one.

She didn't know why she remembered what mark Adrian Ma had gotten on a math test in grade eight, but sometimes her brain filed away useless information.

Like the fact that she'd gotten ninety-four on that test.

He'd been a bit of an easygoing slacker, from what she recalled. And now, here he was, all grown up and holding a mostly empty bubble tea cup.

"I really am sorry." His voice was lower than it had been at thirteen. "I just stepped out the door...and there you were. My fault for not looking where I was going. Here, you can take my shirt. I have another one on underneath." He lifted up the hem of his blue polo shirt, revealing a slice of white T-shirt, the sort men sometimes wore as undershirts.

Well, that really wasn't necessary, but she was struggling to say those words, even though he wasn't showing her anything other than white fabric. Something about the action of this man removing a shirt was appealing.

"I'll buy you something, as an apology." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "There's another bubble tea place down there, and they share the space with a Taiwanese fried chicken shop. They have a small patio. I'll buy you whatever you want. I mean..." He scratched the back of his neck. "If that would interest you."

This wasn't the sort of thing that Maddie normally did. A dude she barely knew was offering to get her bubble tea and fried chicken? Yet somehow, she found herself going with the flow and saying "Yes," as though she was doing improv. Lately, she'd had to say no a lot so she didn't overcommit herself, but for once, she actually had time.

They headed down the street, putting on their masks as they stepped inside—luckily, hers had remained dry in her purse. She usually wore it indoors when she was away from home, unless she was with her family or on camera. Adrian asked what she wanted, and she told him, then took his shirt and went to the washroom to change. The polo shirt was a little loose on her, but not too bad.

By the time she exited the washroom, their bubble tea was almost ready. They took their cups and grabbed a seat outside. The patio was beside the restaurant, since it was on the corner. Not too busy, which was nice; there were a couple of drunk twenty-year-olds, but that was it. She put her cup in front of one chair at a four-person table, and Adrian sat diagonally from her.

"So," he said, after a sip of his bubble tea. "I didn't spill this one on you, which is a good start. What've you been up to for the last twenty years?"

From that crooked grin, he clearly knew what she'd been doing recently.

"I have this show. You may have heard of it."

He rocked back in his chair. “Might have. I always knew you’d do something cool. There was no ‘most likely to succeed’ in our grade eight yearbook, but I would have voted for you.”

It sounded honest, as if he really had thought that.

It wasn’t like that with everyone. Some people said, *I always knew you’d make it*, not remembering—or purposely ignoring—that they’d told her a few years earlier to quit the entertainment business and go to law school.

*Mom and Dad, I’m looking at you.*

“Why?” she blurted out.

“Because.” He shrugged. “You were determined. A hard worker, unlike me.”

“What do you do now?”

“Went to U of T. Got a degree, work as a web developer.”

“Married? Someone special?”

He shook his head.

Geez, what was wrong with her today? *Someone special...* what was that? And what was with the weird bloom of pleasure in her chest when he said he was single? It didn’t make any sense.

Maddie wasn’t “on” today like she usually was in public, but maybe that was okay. It was just Adrian Ma, that slouching kid who was constantly pushing his hair out of his eyes, except his

hair was shorter now. His posture was better as well, but he still carried himself in a laidback manner.

Maybe because he was from her past, before anyone knew her name...maybe that was what made it easier to let down her guard. It didn't seem like he wanted anything from her, the way that some people did these days.

“Have you started filming the third season?” He shook his head with a smile. “I can't believe I'm asking you that. Kinda surreal.”

“Yeah, it sort of is for me, too.” She paused. “No, not yet. I'm doing this weird thing called taking a break. I'm under strict orders—”

“From who?”

“My friend Jen. I'm under strict orders to relax and actually get at least six hours of sleep every night for the next month.”

“Well, this counts as relaxing, don't you think?” Adrian spread out his arms, just as their popcorn chicken was brought over. “Thank you,” he said to the server.

“This looks so good,” Maddie said, practically salivating.

Really, what was better than fried chicken?

Food (and caffeine) had mostly become fuel for her in the past few years. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so excited to eat something.

Maddie picked up a piece of popcorn chicken, took a bite... and enjoyed herself for about two seconds before she realized



that the chicken was really fucking hot. She gulped her brown sugar milk tea to cool her mouth, then ended up choking on some tapioca.

It felt like she was in a farce.

“You okay?” Adrian asked in concern.

She nodded, held up a finger, and turned away from him as she inelegantly swallowed everything in her mouth without needing to spit out the hot chicken.

“I’m fine,” she croaked. “I mean, I’m not entirely fine. I was probably close to having a breakdown, and I don’t know how to relax.” Why was she telling him all this? “I feel guilty when I do nothing for a day. I make *lists* of things I should do to relax.”

He laughed, but not in a mean way. “What will you put on your list for tomorrow?”

“I’m thinking a reality dating show? Not sure which one yet.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Nah, just haven’t seen one in about ten years.”

“But do you actually *want* to?”

“I don’t really know what I want, what I like,” she said. “Professionally, I do, and it’s hard for me to separate that from my private life, especially when for so long, chasing my dreams was my hobby. It was what I did when I had twenty minutes of free time. Now, I’m living my dream and I feel

ungrateful, but I really was so exhausted, and drinking triple espressos all the time and...”

She almost rested her head on the table. She shouldn't be talking like this with someone she hadn't seen in years, someone she hardly knew, and she didn't want her overworked state interfering with their conversation.

He shrugged. “I don't, personally, know what that feels like, but I can understand.”

“What do you like to do for fun?” she asked.

“Well. I like just hanging out and having a drink—alcoholic or otherwise—on a nice night.” He gestured around them. “Videogames.”

“They make me too obsessive and competitive.”

“There are gentle videogames.”

“Gentle?”

“Like, farming and gardening ones. My friend Devon enjoys them. I could ask him for advice?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“And food, I like food.” As if to emphasize his point, Adrian popped a piece of chicken in his mouth, and unlike Maddie a few minutes ago, he didn't appear to burn himself. She watched his throat as he swallowed.

Tentatively, she tried another piece of chicken, closing her eyes and attempting to enjoy it as much as possible.

*Mmm.*

It felt like it had been years since she'd tasted chicken like this.

When she opened her eyes, Adrian was looking at her oddly. A look she couldn't decipher. Then he shook his head, as if to clear it.

"Yeah," he said, "I like food. Going out, wandering the city. Since the pandemic started, my social life hasn't been the same as it was before, but it's all good."

"You just wander? Without a destination in mind?"

"Sometimes, yeah. Does that sound weird to you?"

"A little."

"It's about the journey, not the destination."

"Right," she said.

"You sound skeptical."

"Well, maybe I'll put it on my list for tomorrow."

"In addition to reality dating shows."

"Yep, right below it."

"Did you have 'getting drenched in taro milk tea by some guy from your elementary school' on your list for today?"

"Oh, totally," she said. "This is all going according to plan." She put a finger to her chin. "Except it was supposed to be oolong milk tea. None of this purple business." She pointed at his half-full cup. "And you got coconut jelly *and* pearls."

“The one I spilled on you only had pearls. I just decided to go all-out with my replacement.” He sipped his drink. “I feel the need to apologize again. Afterward, you looked like it was...the last thing in the world you needed.” He paused, serious for a moment before his mouth quirked into a smile. “But now, I hear it was all part of your master plan, for whatever reason. Like, research for a scene in a yet-to-be-announced rom-com you’re starring in. Or writing.”

“Research?”

“Yeah,” he said. “For an incident involving bubble tea. Maybe you thought getting it spilled on you would result in some, I don’t know, inspiration.”

“Please. I don’t need to resort to such extremes. I have an excellent imagination.”

She finished her last piece of popcorn chicken, as did Adrian. He threw their containers in the trash and didn’t sit back down at the table, just picked up his nearly finished bubble tea. Her gaze tracked the movement of his arm, and she idly thought that the gentle swell of his bicep was rather nice.

It was still a bit hard to believe this was Adrian, the boy she’d known all those years ago. He did have some similarities with his younger self, but he certainly hadn’t looked like *this*. He hadn’t had the broad shoulders, the arm muscles, the sharp jawline.

“Anyway,” he said, “it was nice to run into you. I mean...it wasn’t nice that I literally ran into you, but it was good to see you again.”

“You, too,” she said automatically.

“If you’d ever like help with relaxing, I do consider myself an expert. How about I give you my number and you can text me if you need help?”

“Sure.” She pulled out her phone, and he dictated his number.

“You want me to walk you to the subway?”

“No, no, I’m good.” She stood up. “Oh, crap, your shirt!”

“Don’t worry about it. You keep it.”

And with those parting words, Adrian turned the corner and vanished.

Maddie ambled—yes, ambled rather than speed-walked—down the sidewalk to her building. She’d actually done something spontaneous and unproductive: fried chicken and bubble tea after 10 p.m. Something that hadn’t been on her list.

Huh.

She had four more weeks before she flew out to Vancouver to be a guest judge on a baking show, plus a few other appearances. Four more weeks to fill.

Maybe she would text Adrian.

But it had nothing to do with her admiration of his arms or his easy smile. Nope, absolutely nothing to do with that.

## Chapter 3

When I ask Maddie Ng whether the Chus are based on her own family, she hesitates for a second before laughing. “No, definitely not.”

—Phillip Chin, *Asians Onscreen*

AROUND NINE THIRTY ON Saturday morning, Adrian Ma slowly regained consciousness.

He'd had a little to drink last night, but not a ton. Certainly not enough to make him hungover, nor enough to explain his ridiculous behavior.

He buried his head under the pillow and hit the pillow with his fist.

God, he couldn't believe he'd spilled taro milk tea all over Maddie Ng, as if he was Hugh Grant spilling orange juice on Julia Roberts. It was just like *Notting Hill*, aside from the fact

that he didn't have a bookstore or floppy brown hair or a weird roommate.

And she hadn't kissed him afterward.

*I wish she had.*

Twenty years later, he still liked her. She was the same Maddie Ng—as in, rather different from the character she was known for playing on TV—but all grown up. He was even more attracted to her when he saw her up close than when he came across big ads with her face on them.

It didn't matter, though. She was clearly far, far out of his league. It wasn't that he was down on himself; it was just a statement of fact. If that was true of Janine—who'd said almost those exact words when she dumped him—then it was definitely true of Maddie.

And he'd given her his number? How embarrassing, even if he hadn't implied that he wanted her *like that*.

At least, he hoped he hadn't sounded at all suggestive. He hoped he hadn't made her uncomfortable. But they'd gotten along reasonably well while they were eating...so he thought?

When he'd first dumped his drink on her, she'd honestly looked like she was about to cry, like that little accident had put her over the edge. Given he hadn't seen her in years and didn't know her well, he hadn't wanted to mention her expression, which he suspected had something to do with her being severely overworked. There were also circles under her eyes, and the tension in her body had been evident.

But she'd seemed to enjoy his impromptu suggestion of late-night food and bubble tea on the patio—and she'd appeared less tense as they started eating. He'd enjoyed himself, too, and it wasn't just the novelty of seeing her again, now that she was famous.

And she'd *worn his shirt*.

There was something rather intimate about that, and he couldn't help wondering whether she'd toss it as soon as she got home or keep it to wear about the house or...

He really needed to stop thinking about Maddie Ng in his shirt, but he couldn't help himself from going to his closet and pulling out a box from the top shelf—a box of childhood memories. He flipped to his grade eight yearbook and ran his finger over a picture of thirteen-year-old Maddie Ng. She'd had braces then, and her hair was pushed back with a headband. These pages of the yearbook were in black and white, but he remembered that headband—it had been red. He might not have been detail-oriented when it came to his schoolwork, but little things about Maddie had stuck in his mind.

Adrian picked up his phone and opened the group chat he had with Sydney, Devon, and Noah. He took a photo of the yearbook page and sent it, then started typing.

### *The Most Awesomest Group Chat*

ADRIAN: *You won't believe what happened. I*



*saw Maddie Ng last night.*

ADRIAN: *Well, technically, I didn't see her at first. I walked into her with my bubble tea and spilled it all over her.*

NOAH: *hahaha*

SYDNEY: *OMG ARE YOU SERIOUS????*

SYDNEY: *I must have magical powers.*

ADRIAN: *Magical powers?*

SYDNEY: *Yeah! I brought up the show, you said she was your childhood crush, and then you saw her! I, like, willed it into existence. Or maybe it's a sign?*

NOAH: *A sign that Adrian is a clumsy ass?*

SYDNEY: *A sign that he's in a Canadian remake of Notting Hill!*

SYDNEY: *Shit. Literally. Sadie had a poop explosion. Might be a while.*

Sydney had probably been up for hours, whereas Adrian was...oh, crap! He needed to place the dim sum order and head to his parents' house in Markham.



Adrian used to go out for dim sum with his family every month. They'd alternated between two restaurants, one in Scarborough and one in Markham—the former was his father's favorite, and the latter was his mother's favorite.

But then, when the pandemic had hit, a bunch of things had happened.

First of all, his sister and her son had moved back in with their parents. Colleen had recently gone back to work after her year-long maternity leave, and her job had switched to remote—as had Adrian's—but that didn't solve her childcare issue. She needed someone to look after Ryder during the day, since she was unable to do her job while looking after him. So, Adrian had also moved back home to help his parents and sister...and because being alone for weeks at a time had been a struggle for him.

Until June of 2021, there'd been five of them living under one roof, and on occasion, Adrian would pick up a big dim sum order from his mother's favorite dim sum restaurant, the other restaurant having closed fairly early on in the pandemic.

Adrian and his sister no longer lived with their parents. They saw each other about twice a month, and they continued to get takeout and eat at their parents' home.

When he arrived at his childhood house with the food in the trunk, Ryder and Colleen were outside. Ryder was now three. Fortunately, he no longer acted like he was magnetically attracted to the road. He used to run straight toward the road whenever he was outside, and if you started chasing him, he'd run faster. Just making sure he didn't get hit by a car had been exhausting, and on multiple occasions, he'd thrown tantrums because he hadn't been allowed to run into traffic. One time, about a year ago, he'd been particularly upset because he'd "wanted to meet the truck."

Today, he seemed content to play on the grass. He was holding a blue ball and spinning around in circles, but he stopped when Adrian got out of the car.

"Uncle Adrian," he said. "I got a new ball!"

"Wow," Adrian said as he grabbed the bags of food. "That's a big one."

"I can kick it." Ryder put the ball on the grass, wound up for a big kick, missed, and fell onto the ground. But he was up again a moment later.

"Hey, Adrian," Colleen said. "I hope you brought turnip cakes this time. None of this 'turnip cakes are the worst food at dim sum, yuck' business."

Ryder laughed at her exaggerated *yuck*.

"Just for you," Adrian said. "As long as you don't try to force them on me."

“I would never,” Colleen said sweetly. “They’re wasted on you.”

“I don’t like turnip cakes,” Ryder announced, although he’d liked them the last time Adrian had brought them for Saturday dim sum.

“That’s okay,” Colleen said. “You don’t have to eat any. More for me.”

Adrian headed inside with the food and greeted his mother. She started making tea, and Dad helped him lay out the containers of dim sum on the dining room table. Before the pandemic, Adrian would never have eaten dim sum at home; dim sum was something you ate at a loud, crowded restaurant. But takeout with his family had become part of his new normal.

Mom tried to stuff a bunch of bills into Adrian’s hand. “For the dim sum.”

“No, no,” he said, “you shouldn’t.”

Last month, Dad had given him money for the food, and Mom had also given him enough money to cover the food. So, this wasn’t necessary, but they did their song and dance of insisting and refusing until Adrian finally acquiesced.

“Good,” Mom said. “You can use the money for a date.”

“A date?” he sputtered.

“What’s so weird about you dating?”

Well, there was nothing weird about the idea, even if he hadn't had a date since early 2020. The weird part was his mother bringing it up. Some mothers might regularly ask their thirty-three-year-old sons about such things, but his rarely did.

"Nothing," he said.

She eyed him suspiciously. "Are you dating someone and not telling me?"

"No."

"You'll tell me when you're ready."

But he really wasn't seeing anyone! Sure, he'd given a woman his number yesterday—after spilling a drink on her—but the woman in question was Maddie freaking Ng, and the chances of her texting him were vanishingly small.

Adrian couldn't help smiling as he thought of her sitting at the table with him, eating popcorn chicken and drinking bubble tea. It had been surprisingly nice and normal, even if they hadn't seen each other since grade eight and she was now a star.

"Yes, you definitely have someone," Mom said.

"I don't."

Just then, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Is that her?" Mom asked as he took out his phone.

"No, it's..."

Holy shit. It was from a number that wasn't in his contacts.  
*Hi, this is Maddie...*

She'd actually texted him!

Mom was smirking, but he didn't care.

"I'll set out the plates," she said. "You'll join us in a couple of minutes, yes?"

He nodded and read the text.

*It was great to catch up last night. I was wondering if you're free tomorrow?*

*Sure*, he replied. The only things on his agenda were doing a load of laundry and preparing a few lunches for the week. *What did you have in mind?*

After responding, he wondered if he'd come across as too eager because he'd texted back immediately. He hadn't been able to help himself; he was just excited to hear from her.

She didn't leave him waiting.

*Well, you said you could help me with relaxing...*

He couldn't stop himself from imagining Maddie saying that in a flirty way, even though he was sure she didn't mean that. Couldn't stop imagining her lying beside him in bed, wrapped up in his shirt, her head on his shoulder.

But she just needed help living life a little differently than she usually did. By texting him, she was simply being practical, right?

He no longer felt embarrassed about giving her his number.

*Of course*, he said, an idea coming to mind. *Meet me outside Union Station at 10, okay? Bring sunscreen and wear*

*comfortable shoes.*

*What are we doing?*

*That's for me to know and you to find out.*

Keeping Maddie in the dark about his plans would probably get under her skin a little, and he imagined her scrunching up her nose in a cute way.

When he sat down at the dining room table, he was still grinning.

“What are you smiling at?” Colleen asked.

“Aren't I allowed to just smile?” Adrian said. It wasn't like smiling was a rarity for him.

“He has a girlfriend,” Mom said.

“I do not.”

Colleen nodded sagely, as though, as his big sister, she could see through his lies.

But he wasn't lying.

“Does your girlfriend have lots of Lego?” Ryder asked the important questions in life.

“Uh, no,” Adrian replied, reaching for the har gow.

“Ha!” Colleen pointed at him. “You have a girlfriend. You admitted it.”

“Did not.”

“You were certainly thinking of someone in particular.”

That much was true. He'd been thinking of Maddie, of course, and figured it unlikely that she had a Lego collection.

He didn't bother denying it. Anything he said would be used against him by his sister.

Dad looked at him and nodded. He'd take pity on Adrian and change the conversation—that was the way his family worked.

“Your mother and I started watching *Chu's Restaurant*. You said the girl who plays Waverly went to your school, right?”

Adrian started hacking on his har gow. Of all the topics that Dad could have brought up—the weather, work, how his geraniums were doing this year—he'd gone with *Chu's Restaurant*. A show that reminded Adrian of his family more than any other TV family he'd ever seen, which was part of the reason he liked it.

He'd just prefer to talk about something else, anything else, at this very moment.

“She did,” he croaked at last.

“She's very pretty,” Mom said.

Adrian kept coughing. He wasn't sure how he was going to survive this conversation.

“Have you seen her since then?” Dad asked.

“No.” This time, he was actually lying, but nobody called him on it...whereas they'd been suspicious when he'd been telling the truth.

Funny how that worked.



The rest of the meal was less eventful—aside from Ryder spilling his tea on Colleen’s half-eaten turnip cake—and Adrian managed not to think about Maddie. Not until he was driving home and considering his plans for tomorrow.

Crap. Maddie wouldn’t think they were too date-like, would she?

Because he knew this was *not* a date.

# From Wikipedia

*Chu's Restaurant* is a Canadian television sitcom about the Chu family. It's set in the fictional town of Frankfurt, Ontario. The series was created by Jen Fu and Maddie Ng, who also stars as Waverly, the youngest of the Chu siblings.

*Chu's Restaurant* debuted in 2021, and it received critical acclaim and won numerous Canadian Screen Awards for its first season.

It has been renewed for a third season, which will air in 2023.

## **Synopsis**

The life of Waverly Yu (Maddie Ng), wife of a wealthy Toronto hedge fund manager, is upended when her husband is arrested for fraud. With nowhere else to go and all her assets seized, she heads to her hometown of Frankfurt.

Her family runs Frankfurt's Chinese restaurant, and her parents, Wincent and Lindy Chu (Roger Fung and Lori Lam), have recently retired, leaving the management of the restaurant to her brother, Mike (Cameron Ong). In desperate need of cash, Waverly starts working at the restaurant, something she swore she'd never do, and struggles with readjusting to small-town life.

## Cast and Characters

### Main

- Maddie Ng as Waverly Yu (née Chu), 28 at the start of the series. Toronto socialite. Likes city life, parties, fine dining, and fashion. Hasn't been back to Frankfurt in ten years.
- Cameron Ong as Mike Chu, Waverly's brother. 30 at the start of the series. New manager of Chu's Restaurant. Has many ideas for reinventing the restaurant, ranging from goofy to sensible, and also acts as family peacemaker.
- Justine Hsu as Paula Chu, Waverly's sister. 32 at the start of the series. Grumpy lesbian plumber. Mostly communicates in grunts. In love with Chelsey, the owner of a nearby craft brewery but refuses to say anything to her.

- Lori Lam as Lindy Chu, Waverly's mom. After years of sixty-hour weeks, she has no idea what to do without work and is always trying new hobbies. Grew up in Hong Kong and came to Canada with her husband in her late twenties. 61 at the start of the series.
- Roger Fung as Wincent Chu, Waverly's father. More outgoing than his wife. Likes hockey, dad jokes, and the outdoors. Thinks "Chu's Chinese Chuisene" is an extremely clever name. 62 at the start of the series.
- Jimmy Poon as Gung Gung, Lindy's father. Age unknown, but probably pushing ninety. A man of few words, though he occasionally displays startling knowledge or insight, gleaned from a past that nobody seems to know anything about.
- Ethan Park as Maxwell Kim (main season 3; recurring season 2). Wanting a change after his custom hot sauce business failed, he threw a dart at a map to decide where to move. It landed on Frankfurt, Ontario. Now runs the town's taxi service. Handsome but not terribly intelligent. Love interest of Waverly.

## Recurring

- Lydia Richardson as Chelsey Wood, the perky owner of Frankie's Brews. Oblivious to Paula's interest in her.
- Dan Wilkerson as Clint Montgomery (Season 1). Wealthy businessman who vacations in the area.
- Gary Gigone as Rodney Laurent, the mayor of Frankfurt and Wincent's best friend. Also runs the town's tourist information booth, which is rarely open.
- Karen Li as Allyson, a waitress at Chu's Restaurant.
- Nita Johansson as Dimple, Waverly's high school nemesis and owner of the town's bakery.
- Eva Manners as Debra, a talkative neighbor of the Chus. Always getting on Lindy's nerves.
- Rocky Elliot as Timothy, Debra's slightly less talkative husband.
- Connor Lucas Bolt as a fictionalized version of himself, an NHL player who returns to his hometown after retiring from professional hockey.



# The Asian Canadian Himbo

The phrase “hit Canadian sitcom” would have once been used only as a joke. But thanks to shows like *Schitt's Creek*, *Kim's Convenience*, and *Chu's Restaurant*, that's no longer true.

*Chu's Restaurant* was a success in Canada in its first season, and its charm—and audience—grew even more in the second.

Part of that is definitely due to Maxwell Kim, played by Ethan Park.

In the first season, Waverly—and yes, she was named for a character in *The Joy Luck Club*, as addressed in Season 1, Episode 4—divorces her lying, cheating husband. She later has a love interest in the form of Clint Montgomery. Clint owns a cottage near the small town of Frankfurt, and he proposes to Waverly, offering to take her to New York.

In a touching season finale, Waverly turns him down and decides to stay with her family in Frankfurt, Ontario, the small town to which she'd once vowed never to return.

The second season begins with Max's arrival in Frankfurt after the failure of his hot sauce business. Not surprising, given his complete lack of common sense and business acumen.

But what he lacks in brains, he makes up for in charm and, well, looks.

Unknown to most Canadians before his role in *Chu's Restaurant*, Ethan Park now has a group of very loyal fans, who are thrilled by the recent announcement that he's been added to the main cast for the third season. A tweet about how he should star in a rom-com went viral last week, the day after I, coincidentally, talked to him about how he became a heartthrob and which hair products he uses. (Yes, he spills the details!)

—Rosalind O, *YYZist*



## Chapter 4

@eleanoraomg: Maddie Ng and Ethan Park are SO cute together. I hope they become a couple in real life, like Hyun Bin and Son Ye-Jin.

MAYBE THIS WAS A mistake.

Maddie stood outside Union Station, large sunglasses on her face, as she waited for Adrian. It was a bright, sunny day, and she was clad in shorts and a tank top, sunscreen on her exposed skin.

This was a small thing, right? Just spending the day with someone. No need to overthink it; it didn't *mean* anything.

Well, she supposed it did. It meant she was tired of her method of taking time off, which involved making a list of random things in the morning and crossing them off as she did them. Yesterday she had, indeed, tried two different reality dating shows, and it turned out that they really weren't her

thing. No shame to anyone who enjoyed them, but...no. She'd also attempted to bake bread, which apparently some people did for fun.

There'd been one item on her list that she hadn't crossed off: *Get high*. She'd been too chickenshit to go to one of the many cannabis dispensaries that had popped up around the city in the last couple of years and buy gummies, perhaps owing to her harrowing experience with "special" cupcakes at a summer theater festival many years ago.

So today, she was doing something different. Letting someone else take the reins, even if that was a little terrifying. She had only one thing on her list: *Hang out with Adrian*.

Who was now five minutes late.

It was only five minutes, but that was enough to make her second-guess her decision. She could have wandered the city by herself or watched a movie or—

"Hey."

She shrieked and dropped her purse before realizing it was Adrian.

Okay, maybe she was a bit high-strung.

Adrian didn't seem bothered. "Good thing you weren't carrying bubble tea. You probably would have spilled it all over me."

"And you would have deserved it."

He shrugged with a little half smile that was more appealing than it ought to be. “I suppose I would have.”

He started walking south, and she followed him.

“Where are we going?” she asked, though she wasn’t sure he’d tell her. Perhaps he was going to leave her in suspense, and then she’d obsess over it.

But he replied, “The island.”

“I haven’t been there in years.”

He slowed his pace. “Is it okay with you?”

Going to the Toronto Islands conjured up images of swan boats and a petting zoo. She wasn’t sure exactly what he intended to do there, but knowing where they were going did make her feel less anxious.

“Sure,” she said.

He flashed her a smile. “Excellent.”

They spoke about their week as they headed to the ferry terminal, and she insisted on paying for the tickets to Centre Island. Since it was rather busy, she put on her face mask, which had the added benefit of making it difficult for people to recognize her.

“We gotta stand outside, at the back of the boat,” Adrian said as they filed onto the ferry.

The ferry began making its way toward Centre Island. Maddie had forgotten just how nice this view of the Toronto skyline was, the CN Tower and other buildings visible across

the water. She unlocked her phone and snapped a few pictures. The cool breeze was pleasant on her skin.

“Want me to take a picture of you?” Adrian asked.

“Yes,” she replied, just because she was determined to live her life a little more like she was doing improv. She didn’t *need* a picture of her crowded amongst the other passengers on the boat, but why not?

She handed over her phone, and he took a picture. Then she gestured him toward her.

“Let’s take a selfie together,” she said.

Her suggestion felt a little like “yes, and...” That was a staple of improv, and it was also useful when brainstorming ideas in the writers’ room, but thinking about it in her personal life was new.

They had to stand very close to both appear in the frame, and it was the nearest she’d been to him. It made her slightly out of sorts, and she wasn’t sure what to say to him afterward.

Fortunately, it wasn’t as weird once they got to Centre Island. They wandered around the amusement park, where the squeals and laughs of children filled the air. Then they walked out to the pier and looked at the vast lake, so large that she couldn’t see the other side. A few sailboats were out, and sunlight glittered on the water.

“It’s hard to believe we’re in Toronto right now,” she said.

“Yeah, it really is.”

“Thanks for taking me here today. If I weren’t here, I’d probably be, I don’t know, trying to bake bread again. This is better.”

He chuckled. “You’re welcome. The bread baking didn’t go so well?”

“My dough didn’t rise properly.” Sometimes, she hated admitting that she wasn’t good at something, but it didn’t seem like a big deal right now.

“My sister tried to make bread a bunch of times in 2020, when the stores were selling out of flour and yeast. After she made a terrible loaf, I challenged her to a bake-off.” He shrugged. “I lost.”

“Yeah? What happened?”

“She’s more competitive than me, and the possibility of losing to her younger brother made her up her game. Her loaf was really good, and it had great crumb structure or whatever you call it. My parents were the official judges, but even I admitted she won.” He looked behind them. “How do you feel about renting a tandem bicycle?”

“I haven’t ridden a bike in years.”

“We don’t—”

“No, let’s do it.” She’d go with the flow. If she struggled, like they both had with baking bread, it wasn’t a big deal, right? She could be easygoing about things, like Adrian.

He took the front of the bike and she took the rear. It was a few minutes before they got the hang of it, but then they were

off, going...she had no idea where.

And that was okay. She didn't have to know. That was a weird feeling for her—not having plans and contingencies, not having anything to worry about—but it was the truth. She could simply be in the present, which was another principle of improv. Besides, there was only so far they could go; it wasn't like the islands were huge. She'd try her best to relax and observe her surroundings.

They crossed bridges and visited a few different islands, some with houses. She wondered what it would be like to live here, separate from downtown, yet so close. They passed a playground that was meant to look like a little pirate ship, complete with a skull-and-crossbones flag. And as they cycled on, Maddie had the thought that a tandem bicycle was rather... romantic.

But this wasn't a romantic trip. They were simply friends.

Friendships had been a bit of a sore spot for her lately. She got along with everyone on *Chu's Restaurant*, and she and Jen were pretty close. But an actress she'd considered a good friend hadn't been able to cope when Maddie had gotten her big break. Given the racist comments her so-called friend had later made online, Maddie was horrified that she'd ever told this person anything.

It was hard to make new friends when you were so damn busy, and now that she wasn't spending time with other people through work, she'd been feeling rather lonely.

“We'll stop just up ahead,” Adrian said.

They managed to bring the bike to a stop without any disasters, and he opened his knapsack and set up a picnic blanket on a grassy area under a tree, a safe distance from a gaggle of Canada geese.

Picnic. Also romantic. Neither of them had made any mention of it being a date, though, and the picnic blanket had dinosaurs on it, so...

“I let my nephew pick it out,” Adrian said. “Let’s lie back and stare up at the sky.”

She thought he was joking. Lie on your back and watch the clouds? Wasn’t that something people only did in books?

But then she realized he was serious.

“Or we could play Frisbee,” he said, “and I’ve got food, if you’re hungry.” He rummaged through the knapsack and took out a container of grapes and... “Oops.”

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“I made some wraps with cream cheese, turkey, tomato, and spinach, but they’re squished. They should taste fine, though.” He held up a clear plastic bag.

Okay, maybe it wasn’t romantic if the food looked like it had been run over by a truck, but as promised, they did taste good. He’d also brought grapes and egg tarts.

Her phone buzzed. Jen had sent her an article about Asian himbos that focused on Ethan Park and the character, Maxwell Kim, he played on *Chu’s Restaurant*. She could read that later.

*What are you doing today?* Jen asked.

*Having a picnic on the island.*

*With who??*

Maddie didn't want to get into that now. When she turned toward Adrian, he was smiling as he nibbled his egg tart, and it was like... Season 2, Episode 11. When Max had invited Waverly on a hike to see a "cool tree" just outside of town, and Waverly, smitten, had accepted the invite. She'd worn "practical heels," aka heels that were less than two inches.

She shook her head. Why was she thinking about that episode?

Adrian didn't have much resemblance to Ethan Park, other than being an Asian guy of roughly the same age, but...

He turned toward her, and her pulse sped up.

"Anything important?" he asked, gesturing at her phone.

"Nope, just an article about Ethan."

A strange expression flitted across Adrian's face, but then his features smoothed out and he smiled again, looking at her like...

*Like the way Max looked at Waverly.*

No, she must be imagining it.

Though he really was nice to look at, which she'd noticed on Friday night, but it had been dark out, and with that ever-present smile, Adrian seemed more like a daylight-and-sunshine kind of person. Yet even though he often smiled, that



didn't dim its impact, and for some reason, she was more affected by his proximity today.

After they finished eating, Adrian lay back and looked at the sky. Maddie lay as far away from him as possible on the dinosaur picnic blanket—she was perturbed by her reaction to his body—and looked upward. “Do you ever search for shapes in the clouds?”

“That’s too much work,” he joked.

She decided to close her eyes and focus on what she could hear, since she needed to focus on *something*. She couldn't just let her mind be blank, although it *was* a little quieter than usual.

There was a dog barking. Children shrieking as they played in the distance. An air...plane...



When Maddie opened her eyes, there was blue sky above her. Sky, rather than the ceiling of her bedroom.

Right. She was having a picnic with Adrian Ma and she'd fallen asleep.

She sat up. “How long was I out?”

Adrian looked up from his phone. “Just forty-five minutes.”

“Forty-five minutes! That’s a long time for an unscheduled nap.”

“Do you usually schedule your naps?”

“I put them on my to-do list, yeah.”

Maybe that wasn't something normal people did. But while Adrian did appear amused, he didn't seem appalled or anything like that. He didn't think she was a complete weirdo.

“I guess I'm doing a good job at teaching you to relax,” he said. “You were so relaxed you took an unplanned nap.”

Huh. Maybe part of the reason her mind had seemed quiet was...because of him?

“Want to play Frisbee now?” he asked.

“Sure.” She wasn't saying that just because she'd resolved to go with the flow. Getting off this blanket and moving around did seem like a good idea, even if she hadn't thrown a Frisbee since elementary school. She vaguely remembered doing ultimate Frisbee in phys ed class in grade eight.

But surely throwing a Frisbee wasn't too difficult. She'd ridden a bike for the first time in years today, and that had been okay.

Adrian jogged a short distance away from her, Frisbee in hand, and she took a few steps away from the picnic blanket.

“Ready?” he asked.

When she nodded, he threw the Frisbee in her direction, and it sailed up, up... She reached for it, just above her head, and made the catch.

See? This wasn't going too badly.

Except now it was her turn to throw. She looked at the flying disc in her hand and promptly forgot everything she'd ever known about throwing.

She threw with her right hand, didn't she?

Okay, that was a good start, but was she supposed to stand with her right foot in front or behind?

Deciding the former was probably correct, she flung the Frisbee as hard as she could in Adrian's general direction.

At least, that was her intention.

But he didn't even bother trying to catch it because she'd thrown it at practically a ninety-degree angle, almost straight to her right. It hit a tree trunk and fell to the ground.

She tried not to feel too embarrassed, shaking her arms and bouncing on her feet in an attempt to loosen up. Then she headed toward the tree, picked up the Frisbee, and returned to where she'd been standing before.

She could do this. But maybe she'd gotten her stance wrong last time, so she put her right foot behind and flicked her wrist.

The Frisbee went flying in the other direction...but it still wasn't the right direction. No, it ended up stuck in the branches of an oak tree.

"Oh my God, I'm so bad at this," she said, putting her hands to her cheeks.

Adrian hurried to the tree, jumped up to smack the branch, and the Frisbee tumbled down to the ground. His fluid

movements were mesmerizing.

“Can I show you?” he asked.

When she nodded, he walked over to her. He demonstrated how to stand, and she ought to be paying attention to his technique as he tossed the Frisbee smoothly, straight in front of him, but for some reason, she was staring at his arm instead. In fact, she was momentarily unable to tear her gaze away, and when she looked at his face, that didn't help. She couldn't help noticing the playful tilt of his lips, and then she got lost in his dark eyes.

Maddie swallowed hard, her face heating.

She still hadn't regained full control of her body. What was wrong with her? It wasn't like she usually had trouble thinking straight when she was around good-looking men. For God's sake, she acted next to Ethan Park, who had tons of people salivating over his Instagram pictures, and she'd never forgotten her lines.

Well, that wasn't true. She'd forgotten them a few times, but that was the week she'd only gotten twelve hours of sleep, so there was a good explanation.

Adrian jogged to the Frisbee and tossed it to her. It was a perfect throw, right about shoulder level, and she reached out to grab it, but somehow the Frisbee went through her hands, landing on the grass behind her.

She picked it up and was about to attempt a throw when Adrian placed a hand on her shoulder. His touch warmed her

skin even further. He adjusted her position slightly, and she forgot to breathe. If he moved just a little, he could pull her into his arms...

“Sorry,” he said, stepping back, “I should have asked if I could touch you.”

“It’s fine,” she croaked.

She threw the Frisbee, and it was an improvement over her earlier attempts, though the disc wasn’t flat and started veering to the right. Adrian sprinted toward it—wow, he looked good when he was running—and jumped, catching the Frisbee just as it started to fall.

He threw it back to her. Another perfect throw, and once again, she failed to catch it.

“I really am bad at this,” she said, but she didn’t feel as frustrated as she had when her dough hadn’t risen properly. Actually, there was something nice about the fact that she wasn’t great at this and didn’t need to be.

Besides, she enjoyed simply watching him move around. Perhaps part of the reason for her poor performance was that she kept getting distracted.

“I’m sure you’ll get better with practice,” Adrian said.

“Yeah, probably.”

Her next throw was pretty good, but a little too far to the right and....

*Oh, shit.*

## Chapter 5

There's been a lot of buzz about *Chu's Restaurant*, now streaming on Netflix. This Canadian sitcom thinks it's new and different, but it really isn't. It's just a regular sitcom, set in a small-town Chinese restaurant, and I can't say I'm a fan of this trend of forced diversity. Why does anyone watch this, aside from Maddie Ng's family and friends? It's beyond me.

—Some Dude on Some Website

Comments: 484

“HOLD ON A SECOND,” Jen said between laughs. “This guy fed you a lunch of smushed sandwiches? Then you had a nap, played Frisbee, and got run off the island by Canada geese after you hit one?”

Maddie wrinkled her nose and reached for a piece of maki. It was Tuesday, and they were sitting on a Queen Street patio for lunch. “I just barely hit the goose, and then they wouldn’t leave us alone. I swear, those things are vicious.”

“Sounds like a great date.”

“It wasn’t a date, like I told you,” Maddie said. “We were just spending time together. And it really was nice on the island. I enjoyed myself, aside from the goose incident.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“He’s teaching me how to relax.”

Jen tilted her head. “You do seem slightly more relaxed than the last time I saw you. Maybe it’s working. What did you do yesterday?”

“I taught myself to crochet and made bread that rose properly.”

“You taught yourself to crochet in one day?”

“The basics, yeah,” Maddie said. “I’m apparently better at crocheting than Frisbee.”

“And you mostly stayed off the internet?”

“Well...”

Maddie had still spent a little time online, reading that irritating review of *Chu’s Restaurant* and the responses, of which there had been *a lot*.

The review had since been taken down thanks to the backlash.

There wasn't anything wrong with negative reviews, of course. Not everyone had to like everything. But that review, with phrases like "forced diversity" had certainly been something.

Sometimes it was hard to stay sane in this business. That was the issue with being noticed. Back when she'd had small roles in Canadian indie films and the occasional commercial, plus a few writing gigs, nobody paid a great deal of attention to her.

Now, people did.

Maddie was an Asian actress, and she'd created a series with an entirely Asian main cast...and sometimes, that made people angry.

She had to be careful not to let it get to her, and for the most part, she was too busy to dwell on it. Plus, lots of people really did love the show. Many fans had told her how much they loved the Chus, some saying it reminded them of their own families, which brought up rather complicated feelings for Maddie. The family had been partly wish fulfillment for her. She'd never known either of her grandfathers; she barely talked to her sister.

Some people even loved the show enough to write fanfiction. There were 541 works of fanfiction on AO3 for *Chu's Restaurant*, last she'd checked. Not that she'd read any of them, but she'd looked out of curiosity. There was lots of Waverly/Max fanfic; the next most popular pairing seemed to be Mike/Max, followed by Paula/Chelsey.



It was amazing that she got to create this kind of show. It still thrilled her to bits that she was literally being paid for the project of her dreams, a sitcom about people who looked like her.

“So,” Jen said, “back to Adrian. Do you *want* to date him?”

“You know I’m not interested in dating right now.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

Jen was smirking, and Maddie was tempted to throw an edamame bean at her friend.

“You’re not looking quite so relaxed anymore,” Jen observed.

“How’s Leena?”

“No changing the conversation by talking about my wife. We’re talking about *you*.”

“I haven’t dated since Harley.” Maddie’s ex—who’d worked in television for longer than she had—hadn’t been able to deal with her nascent fame, the possibility of her becoming more well-known than he was, and that had discouraged her from looking for someone else. She didn’t want to deal with another man who couldn’t handle her success. Besides, she hadn’t had much time for dating. “I haven’t started a relationship since before the pandemic and *Chu’s Restaurant*. It’s different now. I can’t just, like, going on a dating site. At least, I don’t think it’s the best idea.”

“Maybe not. That’s why Adrian is perfect.” Jen waggled her eyebrows. “Come on, have some fun. Who says you have to

commit to a relationship?”

Hmm. Maybe Maddie could spend a little more time with Adrian and see what happened. She wouldn't say anything to him yet; she could just see how things progressed.

She wasn't usually good with a “wait and see” approach, but she'd been trying to do more of that lately.



### *The Most Awesomest Group Chat*

*SYDNEY: I still can't believe you had a picnic on the island with Maddie Ng.*

*NOAH: I still can't believe she hit a goose.*

*ADRIAN: You can't share this story, just like you can't share the yearbook pic. I don't want some rumor spreading about Maddie Ng hitting a goose.*

*SYDNEY: Don't worry, I'll just tell Sadie.*

*ADRIAN: I don't trust Sadie. I bet she's in an infant spy network. That stuffed elephant is probably a secret communication device.*

*DEVON: Personally, I'm more suspicious of the*

*koala. He's the shady one.*

SYDNEY: *Will you see Maddie Ng again?*

Adrian had spent the past half hour alternating between scrolling through Netflix and looking at his phone. Quality way to spend a Wednesday evening.

*Was* he going to see Maddie again? They hadn't talked about it on the ferry ride back. They'd been a bit too caught up in the whole goose fiasco.

He decided to text her.

ADRIAN: *As your relaxation coach, I'm expecting a mid-week report.*

MADDIE: *I learned how to crochet.*

ADRIAN: *You know what this reminds me of? Lindy trying to find a hobby.*

MADDIE: *Unlike her, I have yet to try quilling, curling, fishing, and trolling people on Twitter.*

MADDIE: *Though I did try a gardening videogame, as you recommended.*

ADRIAN: *Doing your homework, I see.*

MADDIE: *Why wouldn't you do your homework?? Anyway, the game is good, but I still think I'm a bit too competitive about it.*

ADRIAN: *You want to hang out this weekend?*

His heart thumped a little quickly after he sent that text, and he stared at the screen, waiting for a response. He couldn't seem to help it where Maddie was concerned. The girl he'd had a crush on all those years ago...and now she was all grown up. On Sunday, it had been an effort not to stare at her in that striped tank top. Her bare shoulders, the hint of cleavage. How had he managed to touch her without combusting? He still wasn't sure.

When he received her next text, he pumped his fist. He was in the privacy of his apartment, after all; nobody could see him.

MADDIE: *Saturday?*

ADRIAN: *Works for me. How about we meet mid-afternoon and just wander. See where life takes us.*

MADDIE: *How terrifying*

ADRIAN: *Aw, don't be scared. You'll be with me.*

Crap. Was that too much? Was it flirty?

Adrian didn't usually obsess over his words, wasn't the kind of person who bothered second-guessing himself, but he couldn't help doing it with Maddie. She had a freaking TV show, for God's sake.

When they were hanging out, it wasn't weird, but he couldn't help thinking of that now.

MADDIE: *How is that supposed to be reassuring? You're the person who dumped taro milk tea all over me.*

ADRIAN: *I didn't DUMP it. It was an accident.*

MADDIE: *Don't worry, I know ;)*

MADDIE: *See you on Saturday at three? Just tell me where to meet you.*

He couldn't help smiling as he typed a response. He had a *not-a-date* with Maddie Ng on Saturday. His thirteen-year-old self would have been very impressed.

Since she was on his mind, and since he had no idea what to watch on Netflix, he started rewatching *Chu's Restaurant*. In some ways, it was hard to believe that the Maddie onscreen was the same Maddie he'd seen on the weekend. Just the way

that she held herself when she played Waverly was completely different; she was a good actress.

In the first episode, “The Sign,” Waverly’s life fell apart and she had to leave her Toronto penthouse. When her friends refused to take her in, she turned up in Frankfurt, just as Mike was in the process of taking down the “Chu’s Chinese Chuisene” sign and replacing it with a sign that said “Chu’s Restaurant.” Although Waverly never wanted to return to Frankfurt—her family had visited her in Toronto every year, but she refused to spend even a few hours in her hometown—she was distraught that even in Frankfurt, things changed, and it was a little different from the town she left. For example, there was now a brewery called Frankie’s, and every single beer label had a picture of frankfurters. Plus, the town hall had been renovated to look slightly less phallic. (Emphasis on *slightly*.)

Adrian thought about how much work must have gone into making a single twenty-two-minute episode. You’d devote so much time to making a season that people could watch in less than five hours. What would that be like? How many takes were required to get everything perfect?

Definitely not his thing, but he wanted to see Maddie at work one day. She was brilliant onscreen. Magnetic. And he loved the world that she’d help to create.

He imagined telling his thirteen-year-old self that in 2022, Maddie Ng would have her own TV show—a show that started airing during a global pandemic.

His younger self wouldn't have known what to do with any of that information.

## Jimmy Poon: “It’s Never Too Late”

Most people don’t become famous at the age of eighty-six.

But most people aren’t Jimmy Poon.

“Famous?” He chuckles. “I’m not sure I’d call myself famous.”

Poon was born in Hong Kong and came to Canada in 1970 with his wife. They wanted a better future for their young children. He worked for thirty years as a mechanical engineer, and when he retired in 2001, his daughter encouraged him to pursue his childhood dream of being an actor, something he’d first admitted to his family the previous year.

“She signed me up for acting classes without my knowledge,” he says. “So sneaky! I enjoyed the classes, but I didn’t imagine it would lead anywhere. How many roles are there for elderly Asian men in North America? And why would anyone pick me over James Hong?”

Poon had his first role in a TV movie at the age of seventy-one.



“I only had two lines,” he says, “but it was very exciting. I guess it’s never too late to have your dreams come true.”

From there, Poon appeared in a handful of Canadian films and TV shows. One of those was a Christmas TV movie in which Maddie Ng played the heroine’s sister.

“And she told me”—he pauses to laugh—“that she was developing a TV show with an experienced showrunner, and she’d write a part just for me. I didn’t believe her. Well, I believed she was working on it, but so many people are working on TV shows that never get picked up, and I couldn’t imagine someone actually writing a part for Jimmy Poon. That sounds like something that happens to Michelle Yeoh. But several months later, Maddie called me up and told me about *Chu’s Restaurant*.”

Poon plays Gung Gung, the maternal grandfather of Waverly Yu, Maddie Ng’s character. He spends much of his time sitting on the porch or at the back of the restaurant, but occasionally, he displays some incredible, unexpected skill. In the first season, he shows the neighbor’s kid how to use a slingshot and hits a walnut from 30 m away. When his family thinks it’s a fluke, he does it again. He also juggles knives and plays a sonata on the piano at a talent show.

No one knows how he learned to do any of those things.

“Yes, it’s played for laughs,” Maddie Ng says, “but it’s something that many people in Asian immigrant families can relate to. There are often large parts of our family history that nobody talks about.”

—Phillip Chin, *Asians Onscreen*

## Chapter 6

@daninphilly: Apparently Season 2 of Chu's Restaurant isn't on Netflix yet?? I know Canadians can watch it elsewhere, but I tried and it won't let me. Geo-restrictions suck.

@notthatasiangirl: Have you never heard of VPNs?

@notthatasiangirl: Or you can just wait another week.

AS SHE HEADED TO Osgoode Station, Maddie Ng felt nervous.

She shouldn't be. She wasn't performing. Nothing was riding on this.

But meeting a guy for a casual walk and having no idea where that would take them...it was outside her usual

experience.

When she saw Adrian waiting for her at the corner, it felt like her heart both sped up and slowed down at the same time, which shouldn't be possible. He was wearing khaki shorts and a black T-shirt, hands slung in his pockets. He hadn't noticed her yet; he was smiling at a street musician playing the saxophone. There was something about his easy smile and broad shoulders that felt comforting, reassuring.

Maddie had gotten pretty good at reading people over the years, and Adrian, she figured, wasn't the sort of guy whose demeanor changed much in different situations. He was never acting or playing a part. He just...was. She found it refreshing.

But at the same time, the curve of his back, his arms—maybe even his ass?—made excitement pump through her veins.

“Hey,” she said, coming to stand beside him.

“Hey,” he said. “Shall we?”

He started walking west. It was a cloudy Saturday afternoon—though Maddie still wore her sunglasses—and the sidewalks were a little busy, but not as busy as they sometimes were.

“So we're just...walking? Wherever?” she asked.

“Mm-hmm. If you see anywhere you want to stop, let me know.”

She nodded.

“You don’t have to walk quite that fast,” he said. “It’s not a race. Stop, smell the roses or the—Oh, God. What *is* that?”

He lifted his shirt to cover his nose, and she laughed as she pointed to an overflowing trash bin. She was still wearing her face mask, which had the benefit of reducing some of the odors.

Once again, it felt like her heart was speeding up and slowing down at the same time. His expression was making her laugh and relax, but when he’d lifted his shirt, it had revealed a tiny slice of skin—apparently, he wasn’t wearing a white T-shirt underneath today. There was something particularly enticing about that tiny bit of skin that was usually hidden, and she curled her fingers into a fist so she didn’t reach out and caress him.

They passed by a bunch of stores, many of them big chains, and when they got to Spadina, Maddie said, “Let’s go to Graffiti Alley.” She always enjoyed looking at street art, but she’d completely forgotten about the existence of this place.

“Sure,” Adrian said.

Some of the art was different from what she remembered, but the building with all the fish looked the same—that had always been her favorite.

Back in the day, she might have posted a picture on social media, but now her accounts were much sparser and more curated. Whenever she posted something, there was a flurry of likes and comments.

Many people were taking photos, but she and Adrian didn't. They just paused now and then to study something closer and point out what they liked, without preserving the memory for later.

They went back up to Queen and continued walking, until Maddie came to a stop outside an ice cream shop. "I've heard of this one before, maybe on *YYZist*?"

"Yeah, it's pretty good," Adrian said. "The owners are Filipino and they have lots of interesting flavors. You want to go?"

The idea of an unplanned ice cream stop caught her a little off guard. If she wanted a treat, she purposely went out to get it. She didn't just wander down Queen Street and think, *Ooh, let's go in*. She didn't normally have the time for an afternoon like this.

But she did now.

They'd have to wait in line outside before going in, though—it was busy. Adrian put on his mask as they studied the list of flavors on the chalkboard outside the shop. There were so many promising ones, and it seemed impossible to choose. Double chocolate brownie, raspberry pandan, calamansi pie, ube, rosemary brown butter... Trying to figure out what to get helped to pass the time, but she was still slightly peeved by the long line.

"I promise, it's worth it," Adrian said, as she leaned to the side to see how many people were in front of them.

When they finally made it inside ten minutes later, Maddie exhaled in relief. She slipped her sunglasses up to see the menu and prices. A double scoop sounded good to her or... ooh! They served halo-halo, which she'd never had before. It came with a scoop of ube ice cream on top, and that was one of the flavors she wanted to get.

Adrian ordered double chocolate brownie and calamansi pie in a sugar cone. When Maddie ordered her halo-halo, the server looked at her a little oddly. Perhaps she recognized Maddie, but she didn't say anything.

And...shit. Adrian was already paying—Maddie hadn't intended to let him do that. She'd have to be more on the ball next time.

The server placed the clear plastic cup, topped with purple ice cream, on the counter.

“Thank you so much,” Maddie said, reaching for her halo-halo.

The ice cream shop was across the street from Trinity Bellwoods Park. They found a patch of grass a few meters from anyone else, took off their masks, and started eating.

The ube ice cream was creamy and delicious. She wasn't sure what all the things in her cup were, but there were lots of different colors, and it was rather exciting. With her spoon, she picked up some ice cream and a green cube of something-or-other, then looked over at Adrian...and forgot to put the spoon in her mouth.

He was licking his calamansi pie ice cream, valiantly trying to stop it from dripping, and she couldn't help herself from staring at his tongue. Imagining other things he could lick.

She made a strange noise in the back of her throat.

"Is everything okay?" Adrian asked.

"Yep, everything's great!" She shoved her spoon into her mouth, finally remembering that she had food to eat, too.

Dear God. She really did find him attractive.

And they were eating ice cream together in a park, and it was rather perfect. The halo-halo was very good. She could imagine Mike serving it at Chu's Restaurant. The sign said "Chinese and Canadian Cuisine" but it was the only restaurant in Frankfurt that served Asian food, and Mike had also tried putting pad Thai and teriyaki chicken on the menu.

Okay, maybe she shouldn't be thinking about this, but...

No. It was just who she was. She tried to spin things into stories. And it was simply a casual thought; it wasn't like she was working.

"Something wrong?" Adrian asked.

Oh. She must have been frowning.

"No." She paused. By the end, Harley hadn't been able to stand any conversation about the show; he'd complained she was rubbing her success in his face. But she wouldn't let that memory stop her now. "Just thinking of how to work halo-halo



into *Chu's Restaurant*. I can't help it, though I'm not going to be writing for the next season."

That made her sad, but she knew it was for the best.

"You aren't?" he said.

"I'm trying to avoid having a mental breakdown. When we were filming Season 2, we had some delays due to Omicron—we were supposed to be done before the end of 2021, but we weren't. Once we were back on set, there was a week when I literally slept all of twelve hours in seven days. That's not sustainable."

"No shit."

"But I'm a bit of a control freak," she said, "and it's tough to let go. Plus, I'm very lucky, you know? How many Asian women get this kind of opportunity? I feel like I can't complain about anything, and I have to do it all while I can."

"It wasn't an accident you got this opportunity, Maddie. Even in grade eight, I remember you being very talented and determined."

She shook her head. She appreciated his faith in her, and she appreciated that he didn't seem to be jealous or trying to use her for professional connections. They weren't dating—yet—but she supposed it was one of the benefits of dating someone who wasn't at all involved in the entertainment industry.

He was wrong about this, though.

"Don't sell yourself short—" he began.

“I’m not selling myself short,” she said. “I’m good, yeah, but so are many other people. Luck is part of it. Not everyone is in the right place at the right time. Like, I think of what opportunities Jimmy Poon would have had in Canada when he was my age...it’s not the same.”

Adrian tilted his head to the side. “I’m sure you’re right. I admit I don’t know much about these things. But you’re still allowed to struggle when you’re sleeping less than two hours a night.”

“It was more like I pulled three all-nighters and slept three hours the other nights.”

“I wouldn’t be able to cope with that. At all. I’m sure I wouldn’t remember any of my lines. I need my beauty rest.”

He said the last part in a joking manner, but Maddie’s skin prickled with awareness. She wanted to tell him that he really was a beautiful man, and he scrambled her mind more than Ethan Park ever did. With Ethan—who’d recently appeared on a list of “Ten Hottest Canadian Men”—she could objectively see how each of his features was stunning, but with Adrian, she couldn’t break it down quite as easily. He just did something to her. Something she hadn’t felt in a long time.

She slid her spoon into her mouth, biting down on something expected.

“Huh. There’s corn in here,” she said.

“Yeah, I think I’ve had halo-halo with corn before. I live near a Filipino area, so I’ve had it at a few different places.”

“Not sure I’m a fan of the corn, but everything else is really good.”

Adrian had finished his ice cream—thank God she didn’t have to watch him lick anything now—and it took her another minute to finish her food. Then they walked down the path, passing families having picnics and young adults playing Spikeball. Maddie thought she was doing a good job of ambling along rather than hurrying to her destination... because she didn’t know what her destination was, and that was okay.

“Let’s sit here,” she said when they came across a bench a little way off the path. It wasn’t near anyone else, and it faced some trees. Perfect.

*What do you think is going to happen, Maddie?*

They sat down, and she felt more nervous than she usually would before an audition. Before she’d been on a late-night show last month.

But today had been going well, and she wanted more with Adrian, didn’t she? She’d been in “wait and see” mode before, after her conversation with Jen, but the more time they spent together, the more she liked him—and he was nothing like her ex.

She could say something, right?

But when Adrian’s phone buzzed a bunch of times, she lost her nerve.



*The Most Awesomest Group Chat*

SYDNEY: *Adrian, I just noticed something. You said you had fried chicken with Maddie Ng the other weekend, am I right? And you didn't post any pictures of your food??*

NOAH: *Interesting you forgot.*

SYDNEY: *Shocking, to be honest.*

Yep, Adrian's friends were teasing him again.

He didn't need to reply now. He slid his phone back in his pocket.

"If it's important, you can answer. I don't mind," Maddie said.

It was still slightly surreal that he was hanging out with Maddie Ng. He thought he'd done a good job of acting normal around her, though. Even if she was wearing a tank top and jean shorts today that...well.

She looked more than *good* in them. His throat had gone completely dry when she'd been walking in front of him and he'd gotten a tempting view of her ass.

"Nah, it's not important," he said. "My friends were just asking why I didn't post pictures from the time we had fried

chicken and bubble tea together.”

Maddie looked slightly alarmed.

“Not pictures of you,” he rushed to clarify, “but the fried chicken. Since I have a fried chicken Instagram account.” He took out his phone again and showed her his Instagram, to prove he wasn’t just making shit up.

He had two thousand followers, and he only posted photos of fried chicken. Or, occasionally, him eating fried chicken, all from restaurants in the Toronto area. Someday, he hoped to post pictures from other cities, but he hadn’t traveled since 2019, and he’d started the account in the summer of 2020.

As he handed over his phone to Maddie, he felt a bit embarrassed. She had an Instagram account with pictures of her on set, on magazine covers, etc. Even a photo of her on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. She had over three hundred thousand followers.

He had an account about fried chicken.

“This is amazing,” she said.

He managed a smile but still felt slightly weird about it. He wouldn’t in front of anyone else, but...

Okay, he needed to stop thinking like that. She was here with him, right? It wasn’t like any of his thirteen-year-old self’s fantasies were going to come true, but she liked hanging out with him as a friend. He didn’t usually feel so self-conscious in front of another person, but Maddie Ng was different. Had always been different.

The other day, he'd been wasting time online, and he'd come across some people arguing about whether she was attractive. People said she wasn't as thin and fair-skinned as most C-drama stars, and there had been an irritating argument about the shape of her eyes, which were apparently not large enough. One person thought she should get double eyelid surgery.

Adrian wasn't normally quick to anger, but those forum posts had nearly done him in. The way people were picking her apart when she was so talented—that body-swap episode, for example—and beautiful and sexy. He couldn't help recalling when she'd slid a spoonful of purple ice cream into her mouth and...

He snapped his attention back to his phone.

"Is this a fried chicken sandwich with vanilla ice cream?" she asked.

"It is." He was impressed with himself for managing two coherent syllables.

"I can't decide whether that's amazing or horrifying. I kind of want to try it."

"We could go now if you want."

She laughed, and it warmed something inside him.

"No," she said, biting her lip. "I've been trying to say yes to more things recently, but this time, it's a no. I literally just had ice cream."

"Eating ice cream twice in an afternoon is against the rules?"

“Of course.”

“Whose rules are these?” he asked. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“You know how sometimes you don’t know a rule exists until you’re presented with an opportunity to break it?”

“Uh, I can’t say I do.”

“Since I can’t have a chicken-and-ice-cream sandwich today \_\_\_”

“Due to some totally arbitrary ‘rule.’” He made air quotes.

“Tell me what it was like.”

“Better than I expected. The different components complemented each other surprisingly well. You can even make it into a double-decker sandwich for an extra five bucks.”

“Wow. That sounds intense. Are you suggesting we share one of those?”

Was she saying that in a flirty way?

Surely it was his imagination.

“Look!” she said.

Disoriented, it took him a few seconds to figure out what she was pointing at.

A white squirrel.

“I’ve never seen one before,” she whispered.

“Why are you whispering?”

“So we don’t make it self-conscious and scare it away.”

“Do you think squirrels understand English? Actually, if this one spends a lot of time in Trinity Bellwoods, it probably does. It might understand half a dozen languages.”

It was hardly a witty comment, but she laughed, and he smiled on the inside. *Maddie thinks I’m funny.* She was sitting so close to him, and he wished he could put his arm around her. What he would give to be able to pull her close and just kiss the top of her head...

She took a few pictures of the squirrel before it scampered into the bushes. “Had you seen one before?”

“Many years ago, yeah.”

They stayed on the bench for a few minutes, and when no more white squirrels made an appearance, Maddie suggested they continue walking.

On Grace Street, she said, “Thanks for spending the afternoon with me. How would you rate my efforts at relaxing?”

“Ten out of ten,” he said automatically.

She preened, the way Waverly Yu might.

“But you still have a ways to go,” he added. He didn’t want to suggest that he had nothing else to teach her, because then she might decide she was done with him.

“I do?”

“Yeah. Don’t you want bonus marks?”



She considered this for a moment. “Are you free on Friday night?”

“I...sorry, I made plans with friends.”

He practically kicked himself after saying that. He could have tried to reschedule with his friends, or attempted to fit everything into one evening.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just having drinks at the bar while the weather’s nice and we can hang out on the patio.”

“I could come with you. I mean, if your friends wouldn’t mind. If it would be awkward, that’s totally okay, I—”

“No, no, they would *love* to meet you.” Okay, maybe that sounded slightly ominous.

“What have you told your friends about me?”

“That we went to school together and I spilled bubble tea on you, but don’t worry, I’m sure they haven’t sold the story to tabloids.” Was that something that could happen to Maddie? Was she famous enough? He had no idea. “I’ll make sure they’re not too weird about it. As best I can.”

“Alright. Let’s do it,” she said. “Are these friends you know from work? Or a fried chicken club, perhaps?”

He chuckled. “We met at university.”

“Do you keep in touch with anyone I’d know?”

“I still talk to a few people from high school, but none of them went to our elementary school. You?”

She shook her head.

When they reached Christie Station, he asked if she was getting on the subway, but she said she had a few stores in the area to visit. He almost asked if she wanted company, but since she didn't offer, he figured it was best not to ask. Then she opened her mouth, and he wondered if maybe she was going to invite him after all.

God, she turned him inside out, in a way no one else did.

“Bye,” she said. “See you Friday.”

He waved at her before putting on his mask and heading into the subway station.

She was all he could think about on the ride home.

## Chapter 7

*Chu's Restaurant* fans! Have you ever wished you could have a cold beer from Frankie's Brews? Well, now you can! Through a partnership with Hollywood North Brewing Company, Frankie's Ultimate Classic Kölsch will be available this August.



*The Most Awesomest Group Chat*

ADRIAN: *Would it be okay if I ask Maddie to join us this Friday?*

SYDNEY: *OMG ARE YOU SERIOUS*

NOAH: *Are you two dating???*

ADRIAN: *No*

ADRIAN: *So is that okay?*

NOAH: *Of course*

SYDNEY: *Yes!! I want to meet her.*

ADRIAN: *You have to promise not to freak out.*

SYDNEY: *It's tough to get my brain to act normally when Sadie is teething. But I will try.*

SYDNEY: *My husband, on the other hand... I make no promises.*

DEVON: *Excited is my middle name. I will squee so much! I'm bouncing off the walls.*

NOAH: *hahaha*

NOAH: *You can barely manage a smile.*

SYDNEY: *He's actually cracking a smile right now. Sort of. Let me take a picture.*

SYDNEY: *Sorry, he's camera shy. He's holding a*

*pillow in front of his face.*

NOAH: *Adrian, don't worry, I won't freak out.  
Unless she brings Ethan Park.*

Adrian had considered not telling his friends about Maddie in advance, then figured that would be a mistake. Maybe they'd act even weirder if they didn't have a head's up.

Unfortunately, Sydney and Devon's babysitter had tested positive for COVID-19, and Devon wasn't able to come out because he had to stay with Sadie (and would probably play Stardew Valley once she fell asleep). Currently, it was just Adrian, Sydney, and Noah sitting around the table with their beers. Maddie wasn't here yet, but she should arrive any minute.

Adrian kept looking at his phone, half convinced she'd cancel and his friends would think he'd hallucinated all his encounters with Maddie...or invented them to make himself sound cool. Not that he had a history of doing such things, but still.

But then she appeared on the patio, wearing jeans and some kind of clingy red sleeveless shirt. It hugged her breasts, and he had to force himself not to stare. She took a seat at the table, between Adrian and Noah.

"Hi, I'm Maddie," she said.

Perhaps, once upon a time, she would have shaken hands, but handshakes had mostly disappeared in Adrian's world

during the pandemic.

“I know,” Sydney said.

Adrian chuckled, possibly because he was nervous.

“What?” Sydney asked. “Was I supposed to pretend I didn’t know who she was?”

The server came around, and Maddie ordered some beer.

“Sorry, there are no beers from Frankie’s Brews on tap,” Noah said.

Adrian couldn’t help groaning. Was this what Maddie had expected of tonight?

“I’d love to find Frankie’s Ultimate Classic Kölsch,” Sydney said. “You could get a brewery to make it. You know how you can buy Poppers Golden Lager from *Letterkenny*?”

“I’m sure Maddie doesn’t need advice,” Adrian said.

“Actually,” Maddie jumped in, “you’ll be able to get it at the LCBO soon.”

“Wait, are you serious?” Sydney said, loudly enough that it drew a few glances from other tables. “Is this secret news? Can I tell people?”

“There was a press release a few weeks ago.”

“Will the labels be the same? With frankfurters on them?”

“Of course.”

Maddie’s beer arrived, and she took a sip.

“I love the show, by the way,” Sydney said. “I couldn’t believe it when Adrian said he had a crush on you back in elementary school.”

Adrian managed not to spit his drink all over the table. Barely.

“Sydney,” he hissed.

“Oh, sh—Oops.” Sydney covered her mouth. “Did you not know? I assumed he’d told you. Or he’d made it so obvious when he was thirteen that it was impossible to miss.”

Adrian tried not to look as horrified as he felt. Usually, it was easier to laugh things off, but then again, his friends weren’t usually revealing his grade-school crushes. It wouldn’t have bothered him so much...if he didn’t still like Maddie.

“Is that true?” Maddie asked him. He couldn’t quite read her expression.

Sydney was *so* going to pay for this later. How, he wasn’t sure, but he’d think of something. Maybe he’d buy Sadie the world’s loudest and most annoying toy.

For now, he shrugged. Pretended he was a laidback guy. “Might have.”

“But you didn’t ask me to slow dance. Remember the school dances in the gym? We had a few. They played NSYNC and stuff like that.” Maddie started singing a few lines of “This I Promise You”—naturally, she had a lovely voice—and Noah and Sydney cracked up.

“Would you have said yes?” Noah asked Maddie.

Adrian didn't know why he cared quite so much about the answer to this question. It was just a hypothetical question about life twenty years ago, before he'd had to shave or get a job. And yet...

"Probably," she said.

Noah hooted.

And Adrian felt the pleasure of that single word seeping into his veins. *Probably*.

"You know what else I remember?" Maddie said. "School pictures. One year, you wanted spiky hair, but your mom wouldn't let you use gel, so right before the pictures, you went to the washroom and spiked your hair with water." Her eyes danced as she looked at him.

"Yeah, that was grade six," he said, swallowing. "My mom wasn't very happy with me. When my grandma asked about school pictures that year, Mom told her they didn't turn out."

"I bet you looked cute," Sydney said.

"Cool," Adrian corrected. "Very cool, not *cute*." He shuddered in an exaggerated fashion.

A few minutes later, Maddie headed to the washroom, and Adrian turned to Sydney.

"I can't believe you told her that!" he said.

"I honestly thought she knew," Sydney said.

"Well, she didn't. Why would I have mentioned it?"

"You think it'll interfere with your plans to seduce her?"



“Sydney!”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Noah said. “She seems to like you. I mean, she’s willingly hanging out with us for an evening rather than, I don’t know.” He gestured vaguely in the air. “Whatever TV-star things she could be doing.”

“But seriously,” Sydney said. “I do like her. She’s surprisingly normal. Logically, I knew she wouldn’t act like Waverly, but because that’s the only role I’ve seen her play, that’s sort of what I envisioned in my mind, you know? I think she’s into you, Adrian.”

The fact that both of his friends seemed to believe that? It was promising, but he still felt agitated. “Could you guys just, like, be cool?”

“Of course. I’ll head to the washroom and…” Sydney slid her fingers through her bob. “Put some water in my hair to make it spiky. Then I’ll be *very* cool.”

Noah laughed, and Adrian mock-glared at his friends.

When Maddie returned from the washroom, Sydney said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” Maddie said.

Adrian braced himself.

But Sydney didn’t embarrass him further. “Is it a pain in the ass wearing heels all the time when you play Waverly?”

“Yeah, next time I write a character for myself, I’ll make sure that wearing flats is part of her personality.” Maddie

looked over at Adrian and smiled.

Oh, yeah. He definitely still had a big crush on her, and she'd spent a fair of time with him in the past few weeks.

Maybe that really did mean something.



“That was fun,” Maddie said as they left the bar just before eleven.

“Yeah? You sure it was okay?” Adrian asked.

“I hadn’t done anything like that in a long time. Hanging out with a bunch of people I’m not working with.”

“Is it strange when you’re asked about the show?”

“I like hearing that people enjoyed it,” Maddie said. “I mean, that’s what makes it all worthwhile. The fans. You don’t need to avoid asking me questions about it. I don’t mind.”

Yes, he’d avoided asking too much about it because he was afraid it might be weird. “Do you want to do movies? Or do you prefer TV?”

“I love the immersive experience of going to the movie theater, but there’s something about a TV show that people tune into every week—”

“Or binge all at once.”

“Yeah. Either way, there’s something about characters you keep coming back to, over and over. Characters whose familiar antics can be a comfort, and it can bring people together.” She

paused. “My mom and I have never been close, but she’d regularly hang out in the living room when I watched *Gilmore Girls* as a teen, even if she’d never admit to liking it.”

He nodded. They were ambling down Bloor Street, toward the subway. He wanted to walk slowly so he could spend more time with her.

“It’s still early,” she said, “and you know what I want to do? Sit in a park late at night. Something else I haven’t done in ages.”

He grinned. “Look at you, being spontaneous. Christie Pits?”

He couldn’t help recalling the last time he’d been out with his friends and hadn’t felt like going home right afterward. He’d bought himself some bubble tea, then literally run into Maddie.

And now, here they were.

The park was rather busy. There were groups of people covertly drinking, smoking up. Someone had a banjo and was trying to get their friends to sing along.

Maddie led him to a spot on the slope of the hill that wasn’t too close to anyone. He told himself that didn’t *mean* anything, but his heart was still thumping quickly.

“The weirdest part about my success,” she said, “is how it’s changed things with my family.”

“How so?”

“You remember my sister, Kathryn?”

Adrian had a vague memory of a girl two years older than them, one with long black hair and glasses. “Yeah. She was a year behind Colleen.”

“She was always the favorite. We were both good students, but she was interested in the *right* sort of things, unlike me. I was the artsy-fartsy one; she liked science. She’s a doctor now. For years, my parents would only brag about her, and they told me to go back to school and get a sensible degree.”

“Like what?”

“Law was their main suggestion, since I have no science background.” She made a face. “Before *Chu’s Restaurant*, I had a bunch of acting jobs, but I also did freelance copyediting and data entry so I could pay my bills. When I told my parents about the show, they were skeptical anything would come of it. Then it kept getting bigger and bigger, and they started bragging to *all* their friends and acquaintances.” She looked down at the grass. “In a way, it was nice, because they’d never been proud of me like that before, but when Mom told my auntie that she always knew I’d make it, it was like she was rewriting history.”

“Yeah, I could see how that would be frustrating.”

“And Kathryn doesn’t know how to deal with our parents bragging more about me than her. I know many people have more serious problems, but...”

“Hey,” he said. “I might not know exactly what it’s like—my parents never played favorites—”

“Not at all?”

He shook his head. “At some point, I started wondering if that meant *I* was the favorite and just couldn’t see it, but Colleen said she never felt like they had favorites, either.”

“It can really fuck up sibling relationships.”

“I can imagine. I’m lucky that Colleen and I get along. We all lived together at my parents’ house for a good part of 2020 and the first half of 2021.”

Maddie shuddered. “That much time with my family? It would be my worst nightmare.”

“It was fine for us. We were all able to work from home, fortunately. I did the shopping, and we helped Colleen look after Ryder. Even though there were occasional issues, it was for the best. I know we were lucky. I’m sorry your family isn’t like mine.”

Maddie might be a sitcom star, but she had the same kind of problems that other people did. A little different, in some ways, but fundamentally the same. This conversation, for example, was awfully similar to some of the things that Devon had said over the years.

As Adrian sat with Maddie in the park, after a few beers with his friends, he couldn’t help thinking that maybe he could fit into her life. He hadn’t seen it as possible, had imagined she was too good for him, but when it came down to it, they were two people who got along and—

“So, you had a crush on me?” Maddie asked with a crooked smile.

Embarrassment took over his thoughts once more, but he tried not to let it show. The darkness worked to his advantage.

But he didn’t need to be embarrassed, right? It was a crush he’d had back in the day—she didn’t know any more than that.

Maybe he’d tell her, though.

He was just a guy, with a job that didn’t mean much to him and a family that did. Just a guy with an Instagram account dedicated to fried chicken.

But he was someone she could talk to, someone who could make her smile. In the park at night, with people laughing and chatting in the distance, it all seemed possible.

“I did,” he said.

Before he could add anything else, she asked, quietly, “What about now?”

It wasn’t like he’d never gotten over his childhood crush; he’d had modestly successful relationships in the intervening years, even if the last one had ended on a sour note. He’d occasionally wondered what Maddie was up to, but that was all.

Though he was spending time with her again, and...

“I want you now, too,” he said.

## Chapter 8

I ask Maddie Ng a question that I'm sure has been on many people's minds. "What was it like to kiss Ethan Park?"

She laughs. "No complaints, that's all I'll say."

—Rosalind O, *YYZist*

A MONTH AGO, MADDIE had sat across from Stephen freaking Colbert. It was still hard to believe, after all the time she'd spent watching *The Colbert Report* in university. Naturally, she'd been nervous, especially since she knew tons of people would watch that interview, but she was used to dealing with nerves.

She'd kicked ass.

Yet as nervous as she'd been then, it hadn't been as bad as when she'd asked Adrian that question, her voice shaking

slightly. *What about now?*

When he confirmed what she'd secretly suspected, her heart bloomed with joy.

She shifted closer to him and leaned in, ever so slowly, savoring the anticipation. She slid her hand up the side of his face, her fingers in his hair, her thumb stroking his earlobe.

“Adrian,” she whispered.

Then she kissed him, winding her arms around him to pull him closer. She kissed him as though it was the only thing she wanted, and in this moment, that was the truth.

She just wanted *him*.

It wasn't something she'd planned out, something she'd put on any list.

It simply was.

He kissed her back, no longer a boy who spiked his hair with water for school pictures, but a man who knew exactly how to kiss. Exactly how to kiss *her*. Everything he did, it felt like it was designed to drive her even crazier. The way his lips slid over her neck, making her arch her head back, before claiming her mouth once more. The way he pulled her onto his lap, his hands kneading her ass.

His erection was firm between her thighs, and she did want that. Eventually. But for tonight, they could just kiss.

“Mmm... Maddie...” he murmured.



It was different from how he'd ever said her name before. Low and rough, and the only reason she could hear it was because she was so, so close to him, their limbs entwined, his lips an inch from her ear.

Yes. Perfect.

Unlike the last time she'd kissed a guy, she didn't have to worry about how it looked for the cameras. That wasn't really a kiss—it was work.

This? It was all for her, and it didn't need to look appropriate for an audience.

Tonight felt like a dream, yet also more real than anything that had happened to her in ages.

“Hey,” he whispered an indeterminate amount of time later. He smiled at her fondly. “What do you want to do now?”

Although Maddie's body was buzzing with desire, she'd always had to ease into intimacy. There was nothing wrong with sleeping with someone you'd just kissed for the first time, but it wasn't for her. She did want to spend more time with Adrian, though.

So she said the first thing that came to mind. “Let's go out for fried chicken.”

He looked momentarily disoriented—she hoped he was dazed because of the kiss—but soon recovered. “Sure. Where do you want to go?”

“Well, you're the expert. What's open around here at this time? The place that serves chicken sandwiches with ice

cream, perhaps?”

For some reason, those sandwiches sounded like a very good idea right now. It wasn't because she was drunk—she'd only had two beers—although she did feel rather giggly.

Maybe she was drunk on kisses.

“It is, actually.” He stood up, carrying her with him before setting her feet on the ground, and then he kissed her one more time before taking her hand and leading her east, toward this magical fried chicken place.

He continued to hold her hand as they walked; she was acutely aware of that point of contact, the warmth of his slightly larger hand. They didn't talk about the hand-holding business, or anything else about the two of them, though. Everything seemed a touch fragile, and she didn't want to discuss it more and ruin the spell.

He'd liked her then.

He liked her now.

For tonight, that was enough.

Usually, when she was buzzing with energy, it was related to a burst of creativity. Solving some kind of problem that had eluded her. But right now, she was just *present*, and she hadn't needed to tell herself to treat tonight like improv; it felt natural.

At the restaurant, they put on their masks and waited behind a group of young men who appeared to be stoned. There was not one, but two chicken ice cream sandwich options. The

“regular” one with vanilla ice cream, and the “maple deluxe” with maple bourbon ice cream, drizzled with maple syrup. Deciding the latter was a bit too much for her, Maddie chose the regular one, but Adrian decided to try something new.

They placed their orders and waited outside on the patio.

“Hey.” A guy approached their table but didn’t come too close. He’d just picked up his order in a paper bag. “You know who you look like? That chick on *Chu’s Restaurant*.”

“I get that a lot,” Maddie said, deadpan.

“Yeah, I imagine you do. Is it annoying?”

“Nah, I take it as a compliment.”

“Your nose is different, though.”

“It is. I agree.”

Adrian waited until the man had crossed the street before laughing.

“I can’t believe you kept a straight face,” he said.

She shrugged. “First time that’s happened to me. Apparently, I don’t look enough like myself. Although, to be fair, my makeup is different on the show.”

“Order twenty-seven?” A man wearing a T-shirt with a chicken on it walked out the door.

“Over here,” Adrian held up a hand.

The sandwiches were brought to their table, along with two pairs of disposable gloves.

Maddie hurriedly took a picture of her sandwich—she couldn't order something like this and not take a picture. Adrian did the same. She might have spent more time trying different angles and settings, but ice cream couldn't wait forever. Deciding it would feel weird to eat a sandwich while wearing gloves, she used a little hand sanitizer instead, picked up her food, and dug in.

It was really good fried chicken. The toasted bun and ice cream were also good, and in combination, well, it was a mess, as she'd known it would be. How the heck were you supposed to eat this?

In the end, she opted to dispense with the bun, grabbed some plastic cutlery, and ate the fried chicken and ice cream as though it was a waffle with ice cream.

“How's the maple bourbon?” she asked Adrian.

Ice cream dribbled down his chin, and he looked fucking adorable.

“It's excellent.” He took the spoon from her cutlery set, picked up a bite of ice cream, and held it to her mouth.

“That is really good. I'll have to get that next time.”

*Next time.*

Wait. Would there be a next time?

She wanted there to be more late evenings with Adrian, whether or not they were accompanied by ice cream and fried chicken, separately or in combination.

She licked her lips, not missing the way his gaze zeroed in on her mouth.

“Goddammit,” he muttered.

“Some bothering you?” she asked innocently.

He looked up at the sky. “You’ll be the end of me.”

“I know,” she said, once again with faux innocence. “But you better keep eating before it all melts.”

He picked up his sandwich and did his best, ice cream dripping down the sides of the chicken and bun. She, on the other hand, was still using her fork and knife, and sitting here on this patio on a warm summer night with Adrian...well, it made her smile goofily, like all was right with the world, even if she was eating a food that some people would say was an abomination.

After they finished eating and cleaned themselves up, he asked where she lived and whether she wanted him to walk her home.

“Sure,” she said, “but you’re not coming up, just so you know.”

“I didn’t expect to.”

She leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek before they started in the direction of her building. “I think I’ll put that picture on my Instagram. The one of the sandwich. Would you mind if I tagged you?”

“Go ahead.”

“Oh, shit.” She stopped on the sidewalk and gestured between them. “I haven’t kissed anyone—outside of work—since before COVID. Just so you know, I did a rapid test today, because I knew I was meeting people later. It was negative.”

“I do my best to be safe, too,” he said. “I had it once, at the beginning of this year. It wasn’t too bad, but I know next time, it could be different.”

Maddie began walking again. “Before” for her was not just before COVID, but also before the show. It was weird that something terrible had coincided with her big break.

Her world would never be the same again.

And right now, she just felt lucky to be in this moment with Adrian.



“That’s adorable,” Jen said to Maddie.

They were on a video call, and Maddie had finished relaying the details of last night. Not every detail, of course, but Jen got the picture.

“But that sandwich is just *wrong*,” Jen added.

“Oh, come on,” Maddie said. “Live a little.”

Jen guffawed. “I can’t believe you’re the one who’s saying that to me. Look at you now! Having impromptu kisses in the park and late-night fried chicken. Seriously, the only reason

you thought eating that sandwich was a good idea was because you're high on love.”

*Love.*

That made Maddie pause. It was too big of a feeling for someone she'd only reconnected with two weeks ago. What, exactly, did Adrian want? What did *she* want?

For so long, she'd focused on her career at the expense of everything else. She'd run on hope and hard work. She wasn't entirely sure she knew how to have a relationship—and maybe it was too early to be thinking about that. They needed to get to know each other better.

And she couldn't forget what had happened with Harley. Adrian seemed completely different from her ex, but still, her past made her cautious. Not everyone showed their true colors right away, and Harley had initially been a supportive partner. But he'd stopped being supportive when he felt like she was outshining him. Some men couldn't handle an ambitious woman who was starting to reap the rewards of what she'd sowed.

Yet despite her slight anxieties about where this was going, she was content to just see how the next few weeks went.

Adrian was rubbing off on her. She felt relaxed, and she was only drinking two cups of coffee a day...and she wasn't getting random twitches. Nor did she have nights with less than six hours of sleep. And when her heart started racing, it always had something to do with Adrian.

Yep, Maddie Ng was doing just fine. For now.



## In Conversation: Justine Hsu

Justine Hsu is all smiles.

“Look, I just can’t help it,” she says. “I’m living my dream.”

Hsu is most famous for her role as the oldest of the Chu siblings on *Chu’s Restaurant*. Paula Chu, a grouchy plumber, spends most of her time scowling, but she has a soft spot for the woman who owns Frankie’s Brews. Season 2 of the sitcom is now available on Netflix.

“Growing up,” Hsu tells me, “I can’t say I really saw characters like me on screen: fat, butch Asian lesbians. I can’t imagine telling thirteen-year-old Justine that one day, this would be my life. I’m so thankful.”

Hsu grew up in the Toronto area, the middle child of Taiwanese immigrants. “I was definitely a theater kid. Actually, I realized I was gay the same year I realized I wanted to be an actor: when I was eight. My parents were more upset about the acting business than the fact that I liked girls, to be honest. My mother said she was relieved she didn’t need to

give me a sex talk since I wasn't going to get pregnant—not that she gave my straight siblings a sex talk, either.” She laughs. “It’s all good. Mom’s my biggest fan now.”

Hsu’s first role—not counting her stint as a nativity goat at the age of five—was the nurse in a high school production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Until she was cast on *Chu’s Restaurant*, she worked full-time at a catering company, with the occasional acting gig.

“Have you seen *Party Down*?” she asks. “Well, it wasn’t like that. At all.”

Unlike her character on *Chu’s Restaurant*, Hsu is known for being a sharp dresser, and she gushes over her new blazer and frames. She has an excitable, infectious energy, and when I ask her what she’s watching right now, she’s effusive about her love for the new *A League of Their Own* series.

Jen Fu, one of the co-creators of *Chu’s Restaurant*, is similarly effusive about Hsu’s audition.

“Within seconds,” Fu says, “we knew. We had to have her on the show.”

Hsu admits that before she got the role, the lack of opportunities was wearing on her—she hadn’t had an acting job in well over a year—and she’d considered quitting the business.

“That call...it happened at just the right time for me.”

—AJ Matsui, *Queer Can*



## Chapter 9

@maddieng: Fried chicken (and ice cream!) sandwich with my friend @friedchickenintoronto

@porkbun32: Looks like something Mike would try to sell at Chu's Restaurant, maybe with a little hoisin sauce.

@tbayscientist: That's disgusting. People actually eat this??

@notthatasiangirl: I love you in Chu's Restaurant. When is Season 3 coming?

@itsbrett67: Check your dms

WHEN MADDIE GOT OUT of her Uber near Bathurst and Wilson, Adrian sucked in a breath. She was wearing a blue

and white floral sundress, sunglasses, and a floppy sunhat, and she looked stunning. The dress hugged her waist and hips, then flared out, ending around her knees.

He couldn't believe he'd actually kissed this woman, but Friday night hadn't been a dream. He had two hundred new Instagram followers to show for it, thanks to Maddie's post.

But the time in the park, the kiss...those memories were just for them.

"Hey," he managed to croak out. "You get here okay?"

She took off her hat and mask. "Yep, no problem."

He lived about a fifteen-minute walk away, and as he looked at her now, he couldn't help wondering if he'd get to bring her home today, slide the sundress over her head, watch it pool on his floor.

Not that he expected it, but he couldn't stop those images from running through his head.

"So, which way?" Maddie asked.

Right. They were supposed to eat at one of the Filipino restaurants nearby.

"Okay, so these are the options..."

"Oh, look!" She pointed at the bus stop. There was a picture...of her. Well, of the main cast of *Chu's Restaurant*, Waverly Yu standing in the front, hand under her chin, designer purse tucked under her other arm.

It wasn't like he'd forgotten who she was, but he'd been thinking of her more as Maddie, who'd gone to school with him many years ago, not as Maddie Ng, sitcom star and creator.

She laughed. "Take a picture of me with it."

He pulled out his phone. Maddie struck the same pose and expression as in the ad, when she was playing Waverly, and... How had he kissed her? How was that real?

He snapped a few photos and was about to send one to her when someone said, "Hey, you really are Waverly Yu, right? I mean, the actress, Maddie Ng."

"Yep, that's me."

Unlike the guy at the chicken place, this young Asian man actually thought it was her, not just someone who looked like her.

"Love the show," the man said. "My mom loves it, too—we watch it together. Could I take a picture with you?"

"Of course."

Maddie moved to one side of the ad. The man stood on the other side and held his phone toward Adrian. "Could you take it for me?"

Adrian took a couple of pictures, and the man thanked him before heading on his way.

Seriously, she'd just been recognized in public! What was she doing with Adrian? Surely many men—including ones

who were much more successful than him—would be interested in her. At one point in his life, such a thing might not have bothered him, but it was a sore point now, after the way his last relationship had ended.

However, he didn't have much time to ponder that because his phone started ringing. It was probably junk, but he looked at the screen just in case.

His sister.

“Hi, Colleen,” he answered.

“Hey. Are you home?”

“No, but I'm nearby. Why?”

“Meredith is...well...she's having a crisis, and I need to go to her. Would you be able to look after Ryder for a few hours?”

Meredith was Colleen's best friend, and although Adrian didn't know all the details, he knew Meredith hadn't had an easy time of it in the past few years.

Being asked for emergency babysitting was rare, and he loved spending time with his nephew, so he usually wouldn't give it a second thought, but he hesitated. Maddie had *just* gotten here, and they were supposed to have lunch.

“If you're busy...” Colleen began.

But she didn't have many options, and Adrian was nearer to her than Mom and Dad.

*And what chance do you really have with Maddie anyway?* a little voice in his head said. *Sure, you kissed once, but is it going to go any further?*

Yes, she'd come up to see him, but on Friday night, it had been like they were under a spell, and now, in the harsh sunlight...

God, she was beautiful.

"Just a sec," Adrian said to Colleen. He lowered his phone and turned to Maddie. "My sister needs me to babysit because her best friend has an emergency. I'm really sorry. You can stick around if you like or—"

"Sure," she said, "as long as you don't mind."

He raised his phone to his ear. "Yeah, it's fine. If my friend's there, would that be okay with you?"

"Yeah. I trust you," Colleen said. "I'll be over in less than half an hour, okay? Thank you so much."

He ended the call. "We need to go back to my place, but we can have some food delivered, if that's okay with you? And really, stay as long or as short as you like."

At his apartment, he and Maddie only had time to place an order from the lechon restaurant before Colleen and Ryder were at the door.

"Uncle Adrian!" Ryder said. "I have a new knapsack!" With some effort, he got his arms out of the straps of his Peppa Pig knapsack and proudly showed it to Adrian.



“Looks great, buddy,” Adrian said.

“He hasn’t eaten lunch yet,” Colleen said, “but there’s some food in his backpack and—oh, you look familiar.” She glanced at Maddie before turning back to Adrian. “He can nap in the stroller. I’ll try not to be too long.”

“It’s fine,” Adrian said. “You go. I’ve got this.”

“Got what?” Ryder asked.

“Your cool Peppa Pig knapsack.” Adrian lifted it up, and when Ryder jumped up to grab it back, Adrian let him have it.

Colleen left, and Adrian took off Ryder’s shoes.

“Who’s that?” Ryder asked, pointing at Maddie.

“This is my friend Maddie.”

“Does she live here?”

“No, she doesn’t,” Adrian said. “She’s just visiting. Like you.”

“Is she going to play with us?”

“If she wants to.”

Ryder frowned and closed one eye as he considered this. Then he said, “Gigi has to pee.”

He struggled with the zipper on his knapsack, and Adrian helped him with it. Ryder took out his stuffed giraffe—the aforementioned Gigi—and headed toward the TV.

This was not how Adrian had envisioned today going. He’d imagined eating lunch with Maddie and doing a little more

kissing at some point. He hadn't imagined taking a picture of her with a fan, then watching a giraffe pee on his TV, because apparently that's where giraffes peed.

Oh, dear. Why was Gigi being stabbed now?



This certainly wasn't what Maddie had anticipated when she'd put on her new sundress. She'd felt almost guilty when she'd bought it—it wasn't the sort of thing she'd wear for *Chu Restaurant*-related appearances. It was casual, but not cheap, and spending money on casual clothes felt weird. Though she didn't make as much as her parents assumed (ha!) she could afford to buy such things on occasion now, yet it was a struggle to get used to it.

While this wasn't what she'd anticipated, she was still spending time with Adrian...and his nephew. And her heart warmed at seeing Adrian and Ryder together.

In the past several years, Maddie had been around few small children. Her sister didn't have kids, much to the disappointment of their parents, who made not-so-subtle hints about grandchildren. Back in high school, Maddie had babysat, but her regulars had all been older than Ryder. He was a whirlwind of motion and moved on to a new activity every five minutes. He'd been here for barely half an hour, and already tons of things had happened.

For starters, Gigi had relieved herself on the TV before being stabbed repeatedly with a red crayon. Maddie hadn't

understood Ryder's explanation, but apparently the stabbing was actually Gigi getting a vaccine—Adrian seemed to have no trouble understanding his nephew, and it was clear they'd spent a fair bit of time together.

After getting vaccinated by a crayon, Ryder had started crying because the giraffe had a red mark on her. Ryder had assumed it was blood and he'd hurt his giraffe. Adrian had washed off the crayon—apparently, there were washable crayons now—and then Ryder had snuggled the giraffe to make her feel better, before insisting that Adrian put a Band-Aid on Gigi. Ryder had been upset that Adrian didn't have dinosaur bandages, but grudgingly accepted a plain Band-Aid for his plushie friend. It appeared that snuggles and vaccines made giraffes pee, because Gigi had to pee again, this time on the couch. There were even sound effects. After this, Gigi needed to stay home from daycare because she was sick, and Ryder asked Adrian to read a book, pulling two picture books out of his Peppa Pig knapsack.

That all took a mere half an hour. Maddie was used to busy days, but this looked exhausting even to her.

It was also highly entertaining. Adrian was calm and unflappable with Ryder, in a way that Maddie didn't remember her own parents being with her. She spoke to Ryder, too, but he was clearly more comfortable around Uncle Adrian.

Adrian's phone buzzed and he looked down. "Maddie, could you do me a favor and grab the food from downstairs? I've already tipped the delivery person on the app."

“Sure thing.”

Maddie gave the delivery woman an extra cash tip, then brought the food upstairs. She opened up the containers on the small dining room table as Adrian finished reading the book to Ryder.

“Let’s wash your hands before lunch, okay?” Adrian said.

Ryder ran to the washroom—he rarely seemed to walk anywhere—and out of the corner of her eye, Maddie could see Adrian lift his nephew up and turn on the water. It caused a pang in her chest.

It wasn’t her maternal instincts kicking in. She just liked seeing families who clearly loved each other and could express it.

In the interviews she’d done about *Chu’s Restaurant*, she’d never mentioned that certain aspects of the show were wish fulfillment. Parents who loved all their children equally, more or less—even if one of them had abandoned them for the big city, refusing to visit her hometown for years. A family that, while not perfect, ultimately cared for each other.

It wasn’t like Maddie’s parents were terrible, but she couldn’t say she was close to them, and she and Kathryn had never been close, either.

Yes, her life had become more exciting and glamorous in the past couple of years. (Okay, the process wasn’t always glamorous, but seeing your show on Netflix? People recognizing you in public? Famous people wanting to talk to

you?) But there was much to be said for ordinary moments, like a man reading to his nephew or helping him wash his hands.



Maddie still used her lists, but not quite as obsessively as before. The only item on her list for the day—other than laundry, which she'd finished before she'd left home—had been to see Adrian. She hadn't set a timeline on that.

At six o'clock, she was reading a book to Ryder for the second time. He'd decided that she was "better at the voices" than Adrian, and he giggled in delight every other page.

"Did you know," Adrian said, after the book ended, "that Maddie is an actor? That's why she's so good at all the different voices. She's on TV."

"Like Peppa Pig?" Ryder asked, eyes wide.

"Yes, a bit like Peppa Pig. Isn't that cool?"

Adam's phone buzzed, and he checked his messages. "Your mom's going to be busy for a few more hours," he said to Ryder. "You'll have to eat dinner here, okay?" Then he turned to Maddie and pointed to a text on his phone.

*OMG I realized why your friend looked familiar. That was Maddie Ng, right? Can't believe I didn't recognize her right away!!*

"I was still wearing my mask," Maddie said.

"Yeah, but you're pretty unmistakable." Adrian winked.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her success with *Chu's Restaurant* had given her all sorts of big feelings, but nothing quite like how it felt when Adrian Ma winked at her.

A little overwhelmed, she said, "I should go. I have...stuff to do."

"Let me know when you get home, okay?" he said.

He didn't kiss her, just gave her a smile. Ryder said goodbye while adjusting Gigi's third bandage—the giraffe had sustained two other boo-boos, though what had caused them was unclear to Maddie.

She headed down the stairs, a little dazed, yet she didn't feel like going straight home.

There was nothing else on her list for today, but there was something she'd put on a list before that she still hadn't gotten around to doing.

Now seemed as good a time as any.



The little shop was surprisingly clean and organized. Maddie wasn't sure what she'd expected, but this wasn't it. There was no merchandise on the shelves; instead, there were small signs on each shelf, indicating the options, and you had to ask the clerk to get things from the back.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

Thank God he hadn't recognized her.

“Um. Edibles, I think.” Though there were so many different products. Beverages, extracts... “I’ve never done it before. I mean, I did once. I had some sketchy cupcakes that were very, very strong and it wasn’t a great experience.” She’d never had any interest in smoking something, but that probably would have been better than those cupcakes. The experience had freaked the crap out of her.

The cupcakes hadn’t come with amounts of THC and CBD on the label, unlike all the options on this shelf. Nor had they come with nutritional information—again, unlike these packages. There was something weird about seeing nutritional information on drugs. It was extremely civilized.

“Wait, are you Maddie Ng?” he asked.

Oh, God. It wasn’t like she was doing anything illegal, but visions of this information traveling across town and her parents calling her five minutes later (and yelling, of course) danced in her head.

“Uh, yeah,” she said. “That’s me.”

“I like the show. I’m just starting the second season.”

He returned to giving her recommendations on what she should get, and she left the shop a few minutes later with some fairly lowly-dose strawberry gummies. She considered popping one in her mouth now, since it could take a little while to kick in, but then she recalled the cupcake experience—she couldn’t risk being in public for this.

When she got home, she ate a gummy and had a shower. An hour later, she still didn't feel anything, but maybe she'd have to wait a little longer. She wouldn't take a second one.

Hmm. What should she do now?

She'd missed out on the Wordle craze at the beginning of the year because she'd been too busy, even for something that apparently only took a couple of minutes. She tried that now, along with Quordle, Octordle, and Sedecordle for good measure—she'd always been an overachiever.

She still didn't feel much from the gummy. This was strangely anticlimactic.

In fact, being with Adrian did more for her relaxation than the gummy had...and she was sure that would be true even if she doubled the dose.

But as she thought back to their day together, she began feeling slightly panicked.

Could she fit in his life, once her weeks of taking it easy were behind her? How would she manage, when her schedule was so packed that she didn't even have time for Wordle? And would he understand?



## Chapter 10

@martyxmcflyer: Look who I saw at the bus stop!! #chuties

@eleanoraomg: OMG! So jealous.

@martyxmcflyer: I don't think I embarrassed myself? I hope? She was so nice.

THE FIRST TIME ADRIAN had watched this scene, he'd been happy. Happy that Waverly had finally figured out that Max was the right guy for her.

And now, he felt the same way. Onscreen, Maddie was Waverly; he could separate the characters from the real people. He wasn't jealous.

But thinking of who Maddie Ng could kiss made him feel out of sorts. He was a pretty ordinary guy, both appearance-wise and in other ways. Maddie was breathtakingly beautiful,

and she was amazing at what she did. People found the show entertaining and relatable.

His favorite episode was still the body-swap one. Waverly had been watching a C-drama before bed, and the rest of the episode was about her dreaming she and Max were in a C-drama...in which they swapped bodies. She acted like Max and Max acted like her, and it was incredible how well they pulled it off.

Adrian couldn't believe that the rare time Colleen needed emergency childcare had coincided with Maddie coming up to his neighborhood. Colleen hadn't picked up Ryder until nine on Sunday night, at which point the boy had been sleeping soundly.

Adrian hadn't asked what was happening with Meredith—he didn't feel it was his business—and Colleen hadn't said much about it. But she'd teased him about Maddie.

And continued to tease him via text in the past few days.

After Adrian turned off the TV, he got a text message and a photo of a crocheted Peppa Pig from Maddie.

MADDIE: *What do you think of my pig?*

ADRIAN: *That's really impressive.*

MADDIE: *It's not like I made the pattern myself. I bought it online.*

ADRIAN: *Uh, it's impressive. Didn't you just learn to crochet, like, a week ago?*

MADDIE: *But I have lots of time to practice, and buying yarn is so addictive.*

MADDIE: *It's for Ryder. If you think he'd like it.*

She hadn't needed to stay while he'd babysat his nephew. He wasn't surprised she'd stayed for a little while, so she could eat the lunch they had planned, but all afternoon? And now she'd made him a toy? Adrian was touched.

Ryder already had at least one Peppa Pig plushie—it was his second favorite, after Gigi, but he would love another.

ADRIAN: *Of course*

MADDIE: *I'll give it to you the next time I see you. I was thinking we could go to our old neighborhood? My parents don't live there anymore, so I haven't been in years.*

ADRIAN: *Saturday?*



On Saturday, Adrian picked Maddie up at York Mills Station, since he was the one with a car and taking transit to where they'd lived was a pain.

Maddie, once again, was wearing a dress, and he swore she looked better every time he saw her, which was a truly impressive feat. This dress showed more cleavage than the last one, and he would not think about burying his head between her breasts. He would *not*.

She smiled as she got into the passenger's seat. "How was your week?"

"The usual," he said. "Work was...work." His job had become remote in 2020 and he was still able to work from home. He was one of those weird people who kind of missed the office, though working at home was convenient, and he'd gotten accustomed to it.

But the past few weeks hadn't quite felt like his normal life. He was spending time with Maddie Ng, and it was the most socializing he'd done, outside of his family, since the pandemic began.

"Adrian?"

He startled at her voice, at her hand on his shoulder. "Is something wrong?"

"Nope, nothing. I'm good. How was your week? What did you do other than crochet?" He pulled onto Yonge Street.

"Well, I did a lot of crocheting. Reorganized my bookshelf. Took three and a half naps."

“How do you take half a nap?”

“I count naps under half an hour as half a nap. Otherwise, I feel like I’m giving myself too much credit. Yesterday, I also watched a bunch of videos on how to throw a Frisbee. I figure that knowledge might be useful at some point.”

The words hung in the air again. He wanted to suggest another picnic, another trip to the island, but he didn’t say anything. He shouldn’t be thinking of the future with her, just enjoying whatever it was they had before she went back to her hectic life.

“At some point I ended up with sixty-seven tabs open on my browser,” she said, “which is most unlike me. I prefer to keep it under ten. Remember when browsers didn’t have multiple tabs? God, I feel old.”

When he parked on a residential street, a block from their old elementary school, he felt like he was stepping back in time, to the days of Netscape and dial-up. He remembered when they’d gotten high-speed internet, not long before he’d started high school.

Yes, he came to this general area often, had even lived nearby for part of the pandemic, but he didn’t usually come to the school. More than anything else, though, it was being here with Maddie that made it feel different from when he was in the neighborhood to see his family. Unlike her parents, his had never moved.

They walked to the field behind the school. A few kids were kicking around a soccer ball; others were playing on the

playground.

“They put in a new playground,” Maddie said. “When was that?”

“Ten years ago, maybe more.”

“Huh. What about the plaza? Is it the same? I remember getting bubble tea there in grade seven and eight.”

“The bubble tea shop is still around—well, it’s a different chain, but same location.”

“We should go.” She put a hand on his arm. “Instead of eating the tapioca pearls, you can shoot them out your straw. I remember you and some other boys doing that.”

He chuckled and tried not to feel embarrassed. If it were anyone other than Maddie, he wouldn’t be embarrassed by his thirteen-year-old self’s antics, but...

Dammit, he did want to kiss her again.

She seemed to take his silence as reluctance. “Come on! I’ll make it worth your while.”

Now that got his attention. “What do you mean?”

She waggled her eyebrows. “Let’s go.”

Well, he certainly wasn’t going to say no.

He got the same thing as last time—the last time he’d had bubble tea, which was also the first night he’d seen her in years—and they sat on a bench in a small park.

After a few minutes of sipping their drinks, she said, “How about we walk around some more?”

“As your ‘relaxation instructor,’ I’m going to suggest that we sit here for longer. Watch that dog, the kite that isn’t lifting off...” He gestured to a family.

“Yes, Mr. Ma.”

He didn’t have a thing for being addressed like that, he really didn’t, but when Maddie said it in a saucy tone, wearing that dress, the strap slipping down her tanned shoulder...

Well, *she* did it for him.

“That’s what I like to hear,” he said, in a voice that didn’t sound quite like his own. He leaned toward her. “What—”

“Maddie!”

He straightened up on instinct, just in time to see an older Asian couple heading toward them. He’d seen them before, when they were younger, attending school concerts and—

Oh, shit.

“Mom. Dad,” Maddie said pleasantly, sliding the strap of her dress up her shoulder as she stood. “What are you doing in the neighborhood?”

“Visiting some old friends,” her mother said. “What are *you* doing here?” She flicked her eyes over to Adrian before turning back to Maddie as she awaited an answer.

“Wanted to see the old neighborhood,” Maddie said breezily.

Her words from earlier echoed in Adrian’s head. *I’ll make it worth your while.*

But they hadn’t counted on her parents showing up.

“Ah, by the way,” Mrs. Ng said, “Phoebe’s daughter is very interested in screenwriting, and I said she could talk to you.”

“Okay, I’ll do it, but Mom, you can’t just agree to things on my behalf.”

“And Phoebe had a great idea for an episode, which I said I would tell you—”

“Mom!”

“It really is a good idea! I know you’re so smart, you probably have many ideas yourself, but...” Mrs. Ng seemed to lose her train of thought as her gaze turned back to Adrian.

“Who is this?”

“Why do you sound so accusatory?”

“Wah, I’m not accusatory! Why are you accusing me of being accusatory?”

In different circumstances, Adrian might have laughed.

“You look familiar,” Maddie’s father said to Adrian.

“This is Adrian,” Maddie said. “We went to school together.” She pointed in the direction of said school.

“Yes, I remember you,” Mrs. Ng said. “You played trombone in grade seven and eight. You were the short kid, who always sat in the front row in school pictures, and one year your hair looked so ugly! I asked Maddie what happened, and she said you spiked it without your mother’s permission.”

“Yeah, that was me.” Adrian forced a smile.



Maddie's parents looked between the two of them, the question they wanted to ask evident in their expressions: *What's going on between the two of you?*

Maddie, however, did not answer that question.

"What do you do?" Mrs. Ng asked Adrian.

"I'm a web developer," he said.

"Maddie is on the TV now, you know."

"Yes, she's great."

The look in Mrs. Ng's eyes was easy to interpret: *You're not good enough for my daughter.* Or maybe: *You're not good enough for my daughter, but she's getting old, and she's too busy to meet men, so perhaps you'll do.*

Adrian reminded himself that this woman's opinions didn't matter. After all, she'd greatly favored Maddie's sister over her, and Maddie was, well, incredible. Mrs. Ng probably wanted him to be a doctor, probably had very specific ideas about what was acceptable, but he had a career and made decent money—not enough to buy a house in Toronto, but few people could these days. Or possibly Mrs. Ng was holding his childhood antics against him.

He could be reading too much into this, but given that Janine, his last girlfriend, had literally told him that he wasn't good enough for her, it was hard to get it out of his mind.

Besides, he'd always coasted in life. Put in the minimum effort. That much was true.

For a brief, shining moment, he desperately wanted to change. He'd be a success, in one way or another. He would find the ambition and drive that he'd never possessed, certainly not to the degree of someone like Maddie, and make it happen. He'd be one of those men who built an empire just to prove people wrong.

Except...nah. That wasn't him. Could he be doing a lot better with his degree? Sure, but he valued his free time.

"Are you busy now?" Mrs. Ng asked her daughter. "We should have dinner. Get to know Adrian."

"Sorry, we have plans," Maddie said. "But it was nice to see you."

"You haven't called in two weeks. Why not?"

"I'll call you tomorrow. Promise. But we really have to get going. We're late."

Maddie grabbed Adrian's hand and practically dragged him in the direction of his car, tea in her other hand.

"Oh my God," she whispered. "Oh my God. I can't believe that happened." They were far enough away from her parents that there was zero possibility of them overhearing, but she clearly didn't want to take any chances. "I'm so sorry. Dealing with my mother is best handled with a good amount of mental preparation, which I did *not* have."

"It's okay." He wasn't entirely calm, not yet, but he felt the need to reassure her. "No big deal. It's not like you tried to drag me to dinner when she suggested it."

Maddie let out an unhinged laugh.

“I’m sure, if you asked nicely,” he said, “she’d tell you about her friend’s idea for *Chu’s Restaurant* the next time you talk to her.”

“Do you know how many people try to give me ideas? Ideas are a dime a dozen.”

She sucked the last of her drink up her straw, leaving behind some ice cubes and a few tapioca pearls. When they passed a trashcan, they threw out their cups.

“This wasn’t what I intended when I suggested we come here,” she said as she opened the door to the car.

“What do you want to do now?” He took a seat on the driver’s side. “Whatever you like. I’m flexible. I know a few restaurants around here. We could get take-out and have an early dinner in the park, or—”

The words died in his mouth when she pulled him toward her and kissed him. Eagerly. Fiercely. He was hard even before he started kissing her back. He couldn’t imagine them having the kind of relationship where he eventually *would* need to have dinner with her parents, but he could have this much. His hands wound through the hair of this vibrant, talented woman...

“What do you think?” she asked, touching his chin.

“I, uh...” He couldn’t form thoughts at all right now.

“That’s what I want to do now,” she said, “but preferably back at your place.”

In response, he put on his seatbelt and started the car.

## Chapter 11

AS SOON AS THEY were in Adrian's apartment, Maddie pressed him against the door, stood on her toes, and kissed him.

With her schedule and her experience with Harley, she'd been tentative about getting involved with anyone, but when she knew what she wanted, she went after it. And right now, more than anything, she wanted Adrian. In part so she could forget that they'd run into her parents, but also because in the past few weeks of spending time with him, things had changed.

He groaned into her mouth and palmed her ass. First over her dress...and then his hands slipped underneath her skirt, and it was her turn to groan.

She tugged off his shirt so she could finally admire his arms without any silly fabric in the way. She was about to start on his shorts when he pushed down her panties and ran a finger between her legs, and she no longer knew how buttons and zippers worked.

When she made a strangled sound in her throat, he pulled back to see her face. His expression held an intensity she'd never seen in him before, and it made her shiver—in a good way.

“I’m going to take care of you tonight,” he said.

Yes, she knew he would.

She wanted him to touch her *more*, but she couldn’t form the words to tell him what to do. Instead, she bucked her hips against his hand, and he gave her a crooked grin before slipping his finger inside her wetness.

“*Ohh,*” she said.

It had been so long since anyone had touched her like that. So much had happened since...and then she’d met Adrian. Again.

He cupped her as his finger stroked in and out, his other hand pulling her hair lightly to arch her head back, exposing her neck to his mouth. He licked and nibbled at her sensitive skin as his finger performed some kind of magic inside her, ratcheting up the tension in her body, until she was stretched unbearably taut.

All she could do was hold on to him. Grip his shoulders and let him take her for a ride.

He slid the strap of her dress down with his teeth, then pushed down the neckline of her dress and her bra with his hand. She knew what he was going to do, but that still didn’t

prepare her for how it felt when he sucked her nipple into his warm mouth.

When his finger surged inside her, she cried out and gripped him harder as her orgasm washed over her.

“Maddie,” he murmured. “You’re so pretty when you come.”

He hauled her up in his arms and carried her to his bedroom, where he deposited her on the bed. When he pulled his shorts and boxers down, over his erection, she was riveted by his naked body. By the way his eyes never left her as he stripped himself naked. The anticipation...it was nearly unbearable.

She wanted to stroke him, hear him hiss out a breath, but before she could reach for him, his head was under the skirt of her dress, his tongue between her legs with shocking efficiency.

Maddie made some inarticulate noises as she pressed her palms to her face. He was devouring her, and she had the impression he’d be happy to do so for a long time. She gripped the sheets and squirmed against him. She usually couldn’t orgasm twice this close together, but she knew it was going to happen.

It had been so, so long...and more importantly, it was *him*, and he...he...

She shattered again, this time against his mouth.

When he crawled up the bed, there was a filthy smile on his lips, one that promised *lots more where that came from*, and still, that intensity in his eyes. He kissed her mouth, and the

weight of him pushing her down, that intimacy—there was a relief, of sorts, in it.

*This is the way things should be.* The two of them, together. Her name on his lips; her taste on his lips.

He removed her bunched-up dress and bra, tossing them aside as though they wouldn't be needed for a very long time, and that was perfectly fine with her. The feel of his skin against hers was exquisite. So amazing, it nearly made her cry.

She'd had many dreams come true in the past few years, and it had been incredible—if overwhelming and terrible for her sleep habits—but throughout it all, she hadn't connected with someone quite like this. Had been too busy to even think about it, most of the time.

But now, she could see what she'd lacked, and even though she had so much already, she wanted this, too. Him. Being in front of the camera made her feel *alive*, and so did this...in a totally different way.

She reached down, and he hissed when she stroked his cock, warm and hard and heavy in her hand. She wanted to feel him inside her, deep inside her.

“Adrian, do you have...?” A moment of anxiety overtook her. Perhaps he hadn't been prepared for this today.

But he fumbled with a box of condoms, opened a packet, and rolled it on. Then he stroked her hair back from her face and looked at her like she was the most beautiful and wonderful person he'd ever seen.



Maddie had been complimented countless times in creepy and not-so-creepy ways over the years, but this was still unlike anything that had come before.

He notched the head of his cock at her entrance, and she clawed at his back, desperate to feel him joined with her.

When he pushed inside, her eyes practically rolled to the back of her head.

She usually had good control of her body. It was part of her job, to know how to move, to be aware of how she was occupying the space, but right now? She was *aware*, but she couldn't control anything.

She bent her knees, taking him deeper, and he shut his eyes and groaned in pleasure.

“I’m not...going to last,” he managed.

Neither was she. But that was okay. There would be other times—many other times. There had to be.

He rolled his hips in a way that felt like it ought to be illegal, and she met each of his strokes and kissed him. They were making something beautiful. She could feel it. Another climax was building inside her, and it hit at the same time as his, and she closed her eyes and just *lived* in the moment, stretched it out as long as she could.



They hadn't talked much during, but they spoke after.

“Are you relaxed now?” Adrian asked with a quirk of his lips as Maddie lay on her back. Her breasts were exposed, and it felt natural to be naked and boneless with him.

“Yeah, I’d say I am,” she replied.

“Mmm. That’s good.”

She could have sworn a shadow passed over his face, but perhaps it was just her imagination because now he was grinning at her and she was grinning dopily back, still glad to just be here in the moment.

Maybe that was why it had been so good, why she’d been able to come a second time, even though she usually couldn’t—she wasn’t in her head as much when she was with him.

“You want to stay the night?” he asked. “Or I can drive you back now, if you prefer.”

She didn’t even entertain the thought of leaving this apartment. “I want to stay.”

She wasn’t sure how it was possible, but his grin seemed to broaden even more. She turned onto her side and wrapped her arms around him, needing to keep touching him. She didn’t want to let go.

He slid his hand through her hair, without the urgency of his earlier touches; she pulled him closer and pressed a kiss to his shoulder, then smiled against his skin.

They stayed like that for a while, just basking in the post-sex glow.

“You hungry?” he asked at last. “I can make us dinner, or we can order something.”

“Whatever you like. Doesn’t need to be anything complicated.” Maddie wasn’t picky right now; she just needed more energy so they could have sex again.

“I have leftover rice from yesterday. Fried rice?”

Her mouth started watering, and she realized it wasn’t so much that she just wanted energy; everything sounded good, as long as she’d get to eat it with him.

“Sure,” she said.

He kissed her leisurely, and she stayed cuddled against him for several more minutes before he pulled on his boxers and headed to the kitchen. “Come out whenever you’re ready.”

She didn’t get up right away. She twisted her body this way and that, groaning in pleasure at the stretch.

She wanted to keep this. Wanted to keep Adrian in her life, not just for the rest of her break—which was quickly coming to an end—but for longer, when she was back to working on her show. The thought of him leaving... It made her feel like her heart had been scooped out of her chest.

But her work-life balance had been atrocious. Sure, she wasn’t a showrunner anymore, but could she do it, when she was busy, when she had so many other things to think about?

And would Adrian even want a relationship with someone like her?

## Chapter 12

Much has been written about *Chu's Restaurant* and the meteoric rise of its star and co-creator, Maddie Ng, especially since the sitcom was picked up by Netflix. I suspect the show is being praised because people feel like they aren't allowed to criticize it, thanks to its diverse representation.

In truth, Maddie Ng is nothing special.

—Cara Thompson, *On Your Screen*

WHEN MADDIE WOKE UP the next morning, it didn't take her a minute to orient herself. No, she knew exactly where she was, and she smiled.

Adrian was still asleep. He was lying on his side, facing her, one arm tucked under his head. He looked ruffled and sexy

and delicious. She stared at him for a few minutes before turning away. Though she was tempted to kiss him awake, she'd let him sleep as long as she needed.

She still had questions about her ability to handle a relationship, but they'd receded to the back of her mind. She didn't pay them much notice, just picked up her phone...and discovered she'd been tagged countless times. All related to one particular article. She clicked on it and started reading about how she wasn't talented or beautiful.

Being in the public eye...it was *hard*. To have people tear you down, for one reason or another, just because you dared to exist. Some people were such assholes. She found a forum post that said she was uglier than any C-drama actress, critiquing, among other things, the shape of her eyes.

Maddie knew it was bullshit. She knew. And she could see tons of people supporting her—though some of those were men who wanted her on her knees.

It was just...

She let out a little howl of frustration before remembering that Adrian was asleep. Shit. She hoped he hadn't noticed, but he rolled toward her and opened his eyes.

“Hey.” His voice was sleepy, but then he seemed to realize what had woken him up and jerked to a sitting position. “Maddie, what's wrong?”

She silently handed over her phone. As he skimmed the article, she could sense something dark building inside him.

Could see it in his hand, gripping the sheets in a fist. The notch between his eyebrows.

He was usually pretty chill, but now he looked utterly furious on her behalf.

Maybe she shouldn't like it so much, but it was more reassuring than anything she'd read in support of her.

“I want to tell them—”

“Don't,” she said.

His expression gentled as he set aside her phone and slid his fingers into her hair. “I know. I know you don't want me to tell off people online for you. But if you ever do, or if you want me to read the comments and show you only the good ones...” He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, like he was trying to calm himself down. “You're amazing, and there isn't a single one of your features that I would change.” His thumb skimmed her eyebrow, the slope of her nose. “I love your show. Lots of people love it. And I'm not just saying those things because I'm sleeping with you. I'll support you no matter what.”

There was something so earnest about him. She suddenly knew, with bone-deep certainty, that he would never use her for his own gain, would never begrudge her any success she had. And if her fame faded, he would be there, too.

“I know you know you're amazing,” he said, “but sometimes you still have to hear it. And I know this is a hazard of your occupation, especially as a woman—a woman who isn't white. I hate that, but I'm glad you do what you do.”

“I told you about how my sister couldn’t handle my success, but my ex couldn’t, either. He was jealous.”

“I’m not jealous. I only want to support you however I can.” His thumb rubbed gentle circles on her shoulders.

Her phone buzzed again. A text from Justine, who had some choice words for the person who’d written that article. Maddie chuckled. She quickly replied to Justine, then Cameron, who’d texted her earlier.

“Sorry,” she said, putting away her phone as she settled against Adrian. “I was responding to Justine and Cameron.”

“Your siblings?”

“Yes, my sister and brother on the show.” She chuckled again. “My himbo boyfriend might text me eventually, too.”

“Are you close?” he asked. “With Ethan Park?”

“We get along. He’s nothing like his character, in case you were curious. He likes Shakespeare, which Max would certainly never read for fun.” She realized this was another potential source of jealousy—her co-star who was renowned for his looks. “There’s nothing between us, even if some people want there to be. You believe me?”

“I do.”

She searched Adrian’s face for any hint that his words were counter to his feelings, but she didn’t see anything. Good.

If any of the main cast were going to hook up, it wouldn’t be her and Ethan. No, she’d bet on another couple—her fictional

parents—but she didn't want to think about that at present.

“What do you want right now?” Adrian asked, circling his arms around her.

Maddie didn't say anything. She just kissed him.



Adrian kissed her back, propping himself up on the pillows and pulling her into his lap. His hand drifted to her breast, gently massaging, and Maddie released a sigh into his mouth.

He just wanted to make her feel good.

She undulated her hips against him, and *fuck*. He slid his hand between their bodies, circling her clit, feeling how damp she was for him.

Just as desperate to touch him as he was to touch her, her hand moved to his cock.

“Maddie,” he said, like he was in awe of this, of her.

And he was. In awe of the way she could put herself out there, make herself vulnerable, despite what people said.

“I wish I was an octopus and had eight arms,” she said. “With human hands, of course.”

That surprised a laugh out of him. “Why?”

“Because I want to touch you everywhere, and it's unfair that I have to decide.”

“Where would you put eight hands?”



“Two on your ass. Two for your face. Two for your cock, one on your balls, and the other...” She placed her hand on top of his hand, the one that was between her legs. “One to help you pleasure me.”

“I don’t need help. As I showed you last night.” After they’d had dinner and cleaned up, they’d gone right back to bed.

“Of course not. But you don’t like the idea of me touching myself when I think of you?”

He groaned. “Do you do that?”

“Maybe. Sometimes.”

God. Maddie Ng thinking of him when he wasn’t there, hand between her legs...

He flipped her over so she was on her stomach and he was above her, and she squealed in surprise. Slowly, he kissed a trail from her neck—pushing her hair out of the way so he could touch her skin—down her back...one kiss to each ass cheek...another kiss where her ass met her leg...

She was just too much. Too much for the likes of him.

That thought started burrowing its way into his brain, and he needed to get it out of there. He rolled on a condom and slammed into her from behind.

She shot forward, the top of her head hitting the headboard.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he said.

“No, no, it’s fine. Barely felt it. Keep going.” Her words came out in a rush.

He pushed inside her, again and again, with everything he had.

“Adrian...Adrian...”

He'd seen her give interviews. She was so articulate then, but now she was a sobbing mess on his bed, and that was perfect and lovely, and no one could take this moment away from him.

“That's right, baby,” he murmured, slipping his fingers underneath her body so he could touch her clit, get her juices on his fingers again.

She shuddered beneath him, losing control, and that was it... he was a goner.

Afterward, she headed to the shower, and he put on some clothes and started making coffee. Then he took out some cereal, yogurt, soy milk, and blueberries.

When she skipped into the kitchen, she was wearing his shirt, and he did a double take.

“That's the shirt I was wearing when I spilled bubble tea on you,” he said.

“Yep. I had it in my purse. I'd meant to return it to you yesterday, but...” She shrugged.

How did she make a simple action like a shrug so gorgeous?

And as he saw her, standing there in his kitchen, wearing his shirt, he found himself...overcome.

This wasn't a little crush, like he'd had as a kid. No, he was completely overcome with his desire to both protect Maddie and give her the world. Just seeing her in his kitchen, smiling as she prepared her coffee the way she liked it...

"You okay?" she asked. "Did I wear you out?" She poked his chest, then sat down and helped herself to the yogurt, sprinkling some of the blueberries he'd left in the colander on top.

"I'll be fine to go again in five minutes." He winked at her, struggling to stay calm.

She laughed. "Well, I might need a bit longer than that."

Maddie fucking Ng was sitting here in his kitchen, eating breakfast and drinking coffee like it was the most natural thing in the world, and he was falling in love with her.

This was not what he'd intended.

It was too overwhelming to think about now. He'd try to push it aside and enjoy their morning together, as best he could. After all the ugly things she'd read, she deserved that much.

And then he'd have to figure out whether he could ever reveal his feelings.

She'd assured him that there was nothing between her and Ethan Park, and he trusted her. It wasn't about Ethan; it was about Adrian, spending time with a woman who was so far out of league, it was comical. Janine would laugh at the very idea.

A little fling was one thing—but something more?

## Chapter 13

@sophie\_tjoe: It feels like everyone is talking about Maxwell Kim on Chu's Restaurant, but I'm not sure why Mike doesn't get more love? I think he's cute! And he's definitely a more nuanced character than Max.

@sophie\_tjoe: He's hardworking, loyal, often the family peacemaker. Sure, he has some silly ideas, but he's not afraid to try new things, not afraid to fail. I hope he gets a romance...

“HOLD UP,” JEN SAID to Maddie after she ordered her drink. “Did you just ask for a decaf latte? *Decaf?*”

“Yep!” Maddie said cheerfully.

Jen looked at Maddie as though she'd been replaced by an alien lifeform. “You're not drinking coffee anymore? You've gone from a dozen a day to...none?”

“I never drank a dozen coffees a day.”

“That one time, when we had to rewrite—”

“That was *one* time. Most days I was only drinking, like, eight.”

“So much better.”

“And I’m still drinking coffee. I had a cup this morning.”  
But her brain felt perfectly settled and relaxed, so there was no need to add more caffeine to the mix.

Jen nodded sagely.

“What?” Maddie said.

“You’re sleeping with him, aren’t you?”

“Who?” She was playing innocent only to get under her friend’s skin.

Jen responded with the biggest eyeroll ever.

They got their drinks and wandered over to a bench in the Music Garden.

“Alright,” Jen said, “tell me. Nobody’s close enough to hear anything now.”

“Mm-hmm. What do you want to know?” Maddie sipped her latte.

Jen merely gestured for her to continue.

Maddie released a dramatic sigh. “Yes, I slept with Adrian on the weekend and spent the night. Yes, it was good.”

“When I told you to take time off, I didn’t think you’d be efficient enough to get a boyfriend in a month. I should have known.”

“I’m always efficient.”

“Exactly.”

“But he isn’t my boyfriend. We ran into my parents while we were having bubble tea in my old area, then had sex to help us forget.” Maddie had been trying for a breezy tone, and normally she had no trouble pulling off whatever tone she was going for, but she knew she’d failed this time.

Jen rolled her eyes again, and Maddie didn’t even care. “It’s clearly not just sex. You want more than that, don’t you?”

Maddie nodded. “But sometimes my life gets pretty crazy. Can I really manage a relationship on top of everything else?”

“I think you can,” Jen said slowly, “as long as you don’t work *quite* as hard as last season, and he understands that you’re not always going to be in the city, you’re not going to be home every evening. Some people have different ideas of what they want a relationship to look like.”

Maddie had never thought much about what *she* wanted from a relationship. Because that had always come second to the other things she wanted.

Now she wanted the career she had, and she also wanted Adrian—those shouldn’t be incompatible, right? They’d have to discuss their needs, but she couldn’t see Adrian wanting her to give anything up for him. In turn, she’d use what she’d

learned in the past few weeks and make sure she strived for balance in her life. Make sure he never felt like he wasn't important to her.

Yes, this could work. She would talk to him about it soon.



Wednesday evening, Adrian went to see Maddie. They had sex, and when they were lying with sheets and limbs tangled together afterward, she made a startling confession.

“I was lonely,” she said.

“Lonely.” He didn't know why he felt the need to repeat it.

“Yeah. Like, I'm around people—when I'm filming, on video calls. I see Jen, my parents on occasion. But I'm not close with my family, and with the pandemic and the other changes to my life...it's tough. I used to have a close friend from acting class. We'd go to auditions together, celebrate each other's successes and failures, but *Chu's Restaurant* was a success she couldn't celebrate for me.” Maddie's voice became a little rough. “Although she didn't actually say it, it felt like, deep down, she thought she was the one who deserved to make it over me, and later I saw her ranting online about ‘diversity quotas.’”

Adrian clenched the blanket. “She wasn't really your friend.”

“No, apparently not. But it still felt like I lost a friend, my closest friend other than Jen.”

“Jen Fu?”

“Yeah. I told you about my last boyfriend, though at least he never said anything about diversity quotas. Anyway...” She trailed a hand up his chest. “I’ve really enjoyed having someone else in my life. What about you?”

Adrian was a pretty steady guy. It wasn’t usually difficult for him to smile and make conversation, but the past few weeks had made his emotions go up and down like a yo-yo.

He cared for her, and remarkably, it seemed like she had such feelings for him, too?

But he remained speechless.

What if he was reading this wrong? What if she didn’t want more than what they currently had? She was the sort of person who chased the moon and stars; she should be with someone like that.

The things she had to deal with—like the nonsense in that article—drove home the fact that she was miles above Adrian. She’d created something amazing, whereas he’d never even aspired to such things. Yes, when he was a kid, he’d thought it would be cool to be a hockey player like Mats Sundin, but that was about it.

He’d never try to hold her back, though. It wouldn’t always be smooth sailing, but he believed she could do anything she wanted, that she had a bright future with countless awards and red carpets in it.

For a brief moment, he imagined being the man beside her. Carrying her purse. Watching on proudly as she spoke to the



camera.

Maybe that was possible. But he couldn't be sure, and he was too chickenshit to say anything. Because if she turned him down right now, it would shatter him.

It was easier to just start kissing his way down her body, and when he left her place hours later, there were still many words left unsaid.

## Chapter 14

@theicecreamfiend: You know who would be an amazing guest star on Chu's Restaurant? Ke Huy Quan. Rahul Kohli would be cool, too. @maddieng, can you make this happen??

@asiandude888: I think Sandra Oh should play Max's mom.

ETHAN PARK'S FACE FILLED the screen on Maddie's tablet. She hadn't talked to him in a month, and she was curious about one of the projects he's been working on, so she'd asked if he had time for a call. She wasn't quite in the mood for it now, but she'd scheduled it a few days ago, so she'd do her best.

"Congrats on making that list," she teased, trying to sound upbeat.

"Which list?"

“Ten Hottest Canadian Men.”

He frowned and raked a hand through his curly hair. “Right. I forgot about that.”

When he didn’t add anything more, she moved on to what she’d wanted to ask him about.

They’d been speaking for a few minutes when he said, rather brusquely, “Is something wrong, Maddie?”

Dear God. If Ethan was asking whether she was okay, then she must look like absolute shit. While the character he played on TV was more than happy to talk about his feelings, the actor himself was not, and while nobody would ever call Max grumpy, Ethan was a different matter. Behind his serious, guarded expression, she thought he looked slightly uncomfortable. He probably hated that he felt obligated to ask that question and hoped they would switch topics as quickly as possible.

“I saw more speculation about the two of us,” he said. “It’s annoying. Is that what’s bothering you?”

She shook her head. Yeah, it was a little annoying, but nothing more.

“I’m sorry I ever made that comment,” she said. “I think it fueled the speculation.”

“Which comment?”

“That coy comment I made about kissing you? I just didn’t know what else to say.”

Ethan grunted. “It’s not your fault.” He paused. “You still didn’t answer my question.”

Apparently, he felt it was his duty to get to the bottom of this—her poor complexion, the dark circles under her eyes—but she didn’t want to talk about her love life with him.

“I’m okay. Just a bit tired.” It wasn’t the full truth, but it also wasn’t a lie. Sleep had eluded her in the past few days. It took her hours to fall asleep with Adrian haunting her thoughts.

Ethan didn’t question her further, though he continued to look a little worried.

After they ended their conversation, Maddie’s mind drifted back to Adrian. What was going on with them? She wasn’t sure. She thought she’d given him a decent opening to discuss their relationship—*I’ve really enjoyed having someone else in my life. What about you?*—but he’d remained silent. Though that might be typical of Ethan, it was out of character for Adrian, and now she hadn’t heard from him in a few days.

Should she have been more obvious? She’d planned to be, but she’d dreaded being turned down. *No, I’m sorry. I don’t feel that way about you.*

Yes, Maddie might be on TV, but she was just a person, a person who was in love with someone who may or may not feel the same way. It was easier to not know than to be absolutely sure he didn’t want her. What if he’d avoided saying something because he was trying to figure out how to let her down easy?



Later that afternoon, Maddie headed over to her parents' house.

“Didn’t I tell you to bring Adrian?” Mom asked when Maddie arrived.

It was the last thing she wanted to talk about.

“He’s busy,” she said curtly.

She headed to the kitchen. There was fruit laid out on the table, and her sister was already there.

“So, she joins at last,” Kathryn said.

“I’m right on time,” Maddie muttered, her blood pressure rising as she reached for a piece of melon.

“For once.”

“When was I late?”

Mom interrupted their bickering. “I think you could do better than Adrian. Don’t you agree?” She turned to Maddie’s father, who nodded.

“Mom!” Maddie said.

“A surgeon, maybe.”

“Or a dentist,” Dad said. “Or—”

“Stop it, okay?” Maddie couldn’t take it anymore. “My whole life, you’ve been most concerned about appearances, not what’s best for me. It wasn’t even about wanting me to

have a stable career, which at least would have been understandable. I used to be nobody in your eyes, and you kept telling me to do something else with my life, kept telling me I was a failure, and then after a little success, the way you treat me is completely different. But I'm still *me*."

"I didn't think you were a failure, Maddie," Mom said.

"Well, you sure made me feel like one."

"Aiyah! Why are you saying these things?"

Maddie briefly shut her eyes and took a deep breath. Her family would never give her what she wanted of them, and she'd have to accept that. Hoping otherwise would only lead to disappointment.

She pasted on a smile and reached for more fruit. A part of her wanted to leave, but she didn't have dinner with her parents and sister all that often; today would be the first time in months. Besides, she didn't want to go home and continue avoiding the conversation she needed to have with Adrian.

What did he want? Did he just want to keep sleeping with her? Was he intimidated by her life? He wasn't jealous, but that didn't mean he couldn't be a little intimidated.

She could obsess over questions she didn't know the answer to...or she could finally get some answers.

"Maddie?" Dad said with an unusual amount of concern. "Is something wrong?"

"No." She exhaled slowly. "I'm okay."

She would put herself out there. She was used to dealing with rejection, after all.

Some people wrote about her as if she was an overnight success, just because they'd never heard of her before *Chu's Restaurant*, but she had many credits to her name. And in addition to those, there were the countless times she hadn't gotten the part. She'd dealt with lots of rejection, yet somehow the possibility of this one was scarier than anything else.

Still, that didn't mean she couldn't survive it.



Last night, Adrian had dreamt of having Maddie in his bed... and against a tree in a jungle...and on the back of a flying turtle. (Look, it was a dream. He didn't have control over his subconscious.) When he awoke, he could practically taste her on his lips.

It had only been a few days, but God, he missed her.

Saturday afternoon, he met up with his friends on Devon and Sydney's back patio. Sadie sat in Devon's arms as the rest of them helped themselves to charcuterie and wine. Adrian hadn't expected his friends to want to hang out again so soon, but as it turned out, they were worried about him.

"You've been mopey in the group chat lately," Noah said.

"I haven't been mopey," Adrian protested. "What made you think that?"

Noah just shrugged, and Sydney nodded her agreement.

“You could have brought Maddie,” she said, “or is that why you’ve been mopey? What happened?” When Adrian didn’t say anything, her voice became gentler than usual. “Did she turn you down?”

“No, I didn’t give her the chance to do that. I’m too scared to ask her. She’s Maddie Ng, and I’m...” He gestured to himself.

“You don’t think you’re good enough for her?”

“How could I be when she’s so amazing? But I think I could be a great partner. I *know* I could be, and she’s never made me feel as if I’m not enough, but...” He shoved his hands through his hair. “She makes me so twisted up! Like I’m not myself.”

“Because you feel more for her than anyone else,” Sydney said, “even if it hasn’t been that long. And you don’t know how to deal with that.”

Noah nodded. “I thought you two were good together.”

“Does this have something to do with Janine?” Sydney asked gently. “You were never cocky, but you have a sort of easy confidence that dimmed a little after she dumped you.”

“She was right to end that relationship,” Adrian said.

“Yeah, you didn’t belong together, but she didn’t have to say those things to you. She wasn’t too good for you. She was too different, and she wanted you to be someone you’re not. You aren’t career-oriented, but that’s not a flaw.”

“Maddie is very different from me, too.”



“Maybe ‘different’ was the wrong word, but you have a lot to offer her. You *fit*, don’t you?”

Devon didn’t say anything, but he nodded.

“Sure, you aren’t on some stupid list for hot men like her co-star,” Sydney said, “but I don’t think she cares. She’s attracted to you, isn’t she?”

Yes, the time they’d spent together in bed certainly suggested she was.

Noah patted Adrian’s shoulder. “You have to say something. I think it’ll work out, but if it doesn’t...we’ll be here.”

Adrian looked at the people in front of him, people who’d known him for years—aside from Sadie, but she’d known him all her life; they’d had their first video call when she was three days old. During the months when it had been too dangerous to meet up regularly, they’d still talked often. He trusted these people, didn’t he?

Sydney and Devon had met when they were eighteen and had only ever dated each other. They didn’t know what it was like to be single in your thirties, to be unable to forget your ex’s parting words, to have those words worm their way into the recesses of your mind.

But they did know Adrian, and Sydney had seen him with Maddie. If they thought he had no chance, they would tell him. Sydney was right: he did have a lot to offer Maddie. It was good for her to have someone like him, someone to provide balance in her life. He didn’t have her strengths, but he had his

own. And if she rejected him, his friends would be here for him, as Noah had said.

Adrian released a shaky breath. Yes, with their support, he finally felt like he could do it.

Before he could speak, his phone buzzed. It was Maddie.

*My parents tested positive for COVID today. I was hoping to see you soon, but since I just visited them two days ago, I'm quarantining. Testing negative so far.*

He froze, full of concern for Maddie, for how she worried she must be for her family.

*Are your parents okay?* he asked.

She responded immediately. *My mom is rather sick, but I don't think she's in danger of having to go to the hospital. She's vaccinated.*

He read her response over and over, realizing just how much he wanted to be there for her. He'd never be the person who shot for the moon, but he didn't need to be. She liked him as he was. And she wanted to see him, which was promising.

She could shoot for the moon, and he could support her every step of the way.

The other day, she'd said that her ex hadn't been able to handle her success—and Adrian had been struggling with it, too, but in a different way.

That would end now. He wouldn't let it hold him back.

“Adrian?” Noah said. “Is everything okay? Are you going to tell her?”

“Yes. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

## Chapter 15

One of the things I like about *Chu's Restaurant* is the parents' relationship. I'm tired of shows where the husband is completely useless and his long-suffering, "nagging" wife is holding the family together, and all you can do is wonder why she's married to him. Like, I get the humor potential there, but it's genuinely heartwarming that Wincent and Lindy like spending time together—and they have great chemistry! The fact that they aren't constantly in conflict doesn't mean there can't be humor.

I've seen a few people scoff and say that Wincent really loving his wife after forty years of marriage isn't realistic. I feel sorry for them, sorry they don't know it can be that way. Some couples truly are happy together for decades.

When I ask Lori Lam and Roger Fung whether this aspect of their performance is based on their own personal experience, they both laugh.

“No, I just have a good imagination,” Lori says.  
“I’m a good actor. I can make you believe anything.”

—Theo Roth, *Stream This*

MADDIE WAS CROCHETING FURIOUSLY. She’d meant for crocheting to be a relaxing hobby, but that wasn’t happening now. Being stuck at home was starting to get to her, but she didn’t want to venture out until she’d had a couple more negative tests. She didn’t want to risk infecting anyone.

Fortunately, her mother was feeling better today, and her father was doing fine. Maddie’s worries had eased, though there was still the fear of long COVID.

However, that just meant she’d gone back to thinking more about Adrian, and then there was an article about *Chu’s Restaurant* that had set her off this morning.

*Maddie Ong plays Waverly Yu.*

The fact that her last name and Cameron’s last name had been swapped? She’d usually shrug it off and move on—similar things had happened before—but she was more irritable than usual. Plus, the Instagram post she’d made with her negative COVID-19 test had been overrun by anti-vaxxers.

Her phone buzzed, and she put down the scarf she was making and looked at her messages. Her heart pounded when she saw it was from Adrian. She'd planned to confess her feelings for him, but that had been put on hold while she was in quarantine, since she'd prefer to do it in person.

*Open your door,* he said.

He was here? What?

*You can't visit me,* she replied.

*Don't worry, I'm not visiting you. You won't see anyone.*

Since Maddie was being very careful these days, she put on a mask before unlocking her door. In the hallway, there was a cardboard box, open on top, and she slid it inside as quickly as she could before closing the door.

She examined the contents of the box. Fried chicken from the nearby Korean fried chicken place. Bubble tea—the same order she'd had the last time they were together. Pocky. Oranges. One box of rapid tests. Two bottles of wine. Three novels.

It was a very thoughtful quarantine survival box and—

She noticed another book, a familiar one, though she hadn't seen it in a very long time.

Their yearbook from grade eight.

It wasn't as thick or fancy as the ones she had from high school. She opened the cover, and there was a sticky note with an arrow, pointing to where she'd signed his yearbook. There

was also a cream-colored envelope with her name on it. She tore it open, not bothering to be neat. Her hands were already shaking, and she was in a hurry to see what was inside.

The card said “better together” on the front, with an illustration of a smiling slice of pie and a smiling scoop of ice cream, and oh God, she better not get tears on it.

She opened it up.

*I think pie and ice cream go together better than fried chicken and ice cream, though those sandwiches were fun to have with you.*

*I'm not great with words, but that's not why I didn't say anything until now. I was scared, and I thought I didn't have enough to offer you, even though you've never made me feel that way. But I've moved past that, and if you're interested, I want to be with you. I want to figure out how to make it work, how to be the best partner I can be.*

*Because that's what you deserve. The very best.*

Her eyes wet, she squeezed the card to her chest and smiled.

A moment later, her phone rang. It was a video call from Adrian.

“Hey, Maddie.” He adjusted the position of his phone, and she could see that he was on a patio, with fried chicken and

bubble tea, just like he'd bought for her.

“One sec.” She took her phone, food, and drink to the kitchen island, where she opened up the box of popcorn chicken and pierced the lid of the bubble tea. For now, this was the closest they could get to eating together. “Okay, I’m ready. Thank you for the box.”

“Did you see the card?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think?” He asked it casually, popping a piece of chicken in his mouth afterward, but she could see the anxiety in his expression, and oh, the sight of him made her heart squeeze.

“I...I want to be with you, too.”

A beautiful grin spread across his face. “I’m so sorry I didn’t say something earlier. And now, I’m here and you’re there... and I can’t touch you.”

God, she was desperate to pull him close and kiss him. There was something about physical touch that could be so reassuring.

But this was still pretty good.

“I wondered if my life was too much for you,” she said. “I don’t exactly have a regular job—”

“Maddie, I want to be together, however we can make it happen. I promise. And I never want to hold you back from



your goals. I promise you that, too.” He paused. “Do you need anything else now? Groceries?”

“No, no, I’m good.”

“You’re still not feeling sick?”

She shook her head as a wave of tenderness spread through her. She imagined him taking care of her in the years to come, making sure she had the downtime she needed.

And she would take care of him as well.

Life was in the quiet moments—like eating fried chicken while on the phone—in addition to the splashy ones. She wanted to have both, and she wanted him next to her for both.

He’d said that he didn’t want to hold her back; she was confident he wouldn’t.

No, with him she could soar, and he would be the steady presence next to her. Even when things weren’t going well, he’d still believe in her.

She kissed her hand and held it toward her phone. “I want to wait a few more days. I don’t want to get anyone sick.”

“I understand. Just say the word, and I’ll be there.” He gestured to his fried chicken. “You should eat some before it gets cold. Remember, I’m the expert. I’ve got a whole Instagram account to prove it.”

She laughed, looking forward to all of the meals they’d share together.

And, of course, to when she’d finally get to kiss him again.



The day Maddie texted Adrian to request his physical presence, he came over right after work. She immediately hauled him inside, and after taking off his mask, he pulled her close and kissed her. It was like they were locked in a battle for who could kiss and touch the other most.

“I missed you,” she murmured.

“I missed you, too. So much.”

They’d have to spend more time apart than some couples, but that meant being together would be all the more special.

Yes, the past few years had been a busy roller coaster for Maddie. Many great things had happened to her in that time, and this kiss with Adrian?

It was at the very top of that list.

# Epilogue

Season 3 of *Chu's Restaurant* is currently filming on location in Millfield, Ontario. When I asked star Maddie Ng about what's in store for fans this season, she made a cryptic comment about poutine and hoisin sauce.

—Rosalind O, *YYZist*

IT WAS TEN O'CLOCK on a Thursday, and Adrian couldn't wait for Maddie to arrive at his apartment. She should be here any minute.

Most of the interior scenes for *Chu's Restaurant* were filmed at a studio in Toronto, but she'd spent the past two weeks up in Millfield, the small town that served as Frankfurt for the show. There was already a Chinese restaurant in Frankfurt called Ting's Good Fortune, and the sign had been replaced by the

Chu's sign for filming. It remained up all year now, and some fans made trips to Millfield to take pictures.

Adrian had been there, too, but for the last week, he'd been in the city; they'd spoken almost every day. Though he couldn't be with her in person, he was glad she had good people around her, like Jen, Ethan, and Justine—he'd met them all several times now.

When Adrian heard the key in the lock, he headed to the door. Maddie had a key for his apartment, and they were talking about moving in together. They'd figure it out once filming wrapped up next month.

But first, there was an awards show that he'd attend on her arm. She'd selected a very sexy dress for it, and he couldn't wait for her to dazzle everyone. She also had a supporting role in a big Hollywood film that would start shooting in a few months. He couldn't be prouder of her.

Maddie burst through the door, threw down her bags, and he picked her up and spun her around. He knew she was exhausted, but she lit up as he held her close and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

She could light up screens across the country—across the world—but Adrian still thought there was nothing better than the smile that was just for him.

She adored him, just as he utterly adored her.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too,” he murmured. “What do you want to do tonight?”

She slid her hands into his hair. “I just want to relax. With you.”



Thank you for reading *The Sitcom Star*! The next book in the Chu’s Restaurant series is Ethan’s story, *The Reluctant Heartthrob*.

For the latest Jackie Lau news, [sign up for my newsletter](#).

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## About the Author

**Jackie Lau** decided she wanted to be a writer when she was in grade two, sometime between writing “The Heart That Got Lost” and “The Land of Shapes.” She later studied engineering and worked as a geophysicist before turning to writing romance novels. Jackie lives in Toronto with her husband, and despite living in Canada her whole life, she hates winter. When she’s not writing, she enjoys gelato, gourmet donuts, cooking, hiking, and reading on the balcony when it’s raining.

Find out more at [jackielaubooks.com](http://jackielaubooks.com). You can also follow her on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#), or join her Facebook reader group, [Northern Heat](#), with fellow Canadian rom-com authors Jenny Holiday and Farah Heron.

## Also by Jackie Lau

*Love, Lies, and Cherry Pie*

Donut Fall in Love Series

*Donut Fall in Love*

*The Stand-Up Groomsman*

Weddings with the Moks Series

*Four Weddings to Fall in Love*

*Three Reasons to Run*

Chu's Restaurant Series

*The Sitcom Star*

*The Reluctant Heartthrob*



Cider Bar Sisters Series

*Her Big City Neighbor*

*His Grumpy Childhood Friend*

*Her Pretend Christmas Date* (novella)

*The Professor Next Door*

*Her Favorite Rebound*

*Her Unexpected Roommate*

Kwan Sisters/Fong Brothers Series

*Grumpy Fake Boyfriend*

*Mr. Hotshot CEO*

*Pregnant by the Playboy*

*Bidding for the Bachelor*

Holidays with the Wongs Series

*A Match Made for Thanksgiving*

*A Second Chance Road Trip for Christmas*

*A Fake Girlfriend for Chinese New Year*

*A Big Surprise for Valentine's Day*

Baldwin Village Series

*One Bed for Christmas* (prequel novella)

*The Ultimate Pi Day Party*

*Ice Cream Lover*

*Man vs. Durian*

Chin-Williams Series

*Not Another Family Wedding*

*He's Not My Boyfriend*

Kobo Originals

*The Unmatchmakers*

*Not Your Valentine*