

Being Samantha Masters



an homage-sequel to 'Being Christina Chase'

by Miriam Robern

This work is an homage to
Being Christina Chase,
which has amused and comforted
many a tran.

Thank you, Admiral Krunch!

CHAPTER ONE

Oak Grove

Samuel Masters stared at the clock on the wall in his grandparents' living room. 8:45pm. "Where do all of these rugrats come from?" he said aloud, the sound of his voice immediately swallowed by the hubbub of little bodies and shrill voices that filled the modest living room to overflowing. Sammy regularly was inundated by screaming children; it was just part of being a Levchenko. At eighteen, on the cusp of finishing his high school education, he felt it unfair that he, a Masters and not a Levchenko, was still dragged into each and every one of these "parties." Something about the rugrats being his cousins. He wasn't even sure which one of these 'cousins' was having the birthday this time. It seemed like a Levchenko birthday party happened every two or three weeks. And he was the guy who sat here, stuck with the little kids, praying for the day he could arrange his escape.

He was not just idly daydreaming, either; today he'd received a very exciting piece of mail. He'd pored over the glossy pamphlet, reading it twice over in the car ride to his grandparents'. It seemed to be burning a hole into his belly from where it sat in the kangaroo pocket of his soft grey hoodie. He was going to show the pamphlet to his parents, and then everything would change. But first he had to survive this

gauntlet.

The cousins all fell into two rough types: there were the big and beefies and there were the little waifs. Most of the big and beefies were the boys: they could almost field a whole football team, if everybody being the same age wasn't necessary. They enjoyed, as they were enjoying right now, the diverting pasttime of pumelling each other into the ground. There were at least three wrestling matches happening on the living room floor, which tended to overlap and swap opponents every once in a while, especially when Gramma walked through and everyone pretended they weren't trying to smash each other's faces in.

Most of the little waifs were the girls, and they were contributing the shrieks and cries that filled the room as the wrestling matches inevitably tumbled onto or close to them. Sammy closed his eyes as a particularly piercing objection went tearing through the room.

There were exceptions to the boy/girl rule, of course. There were a few wispy boys and a few beefy girls. They were just as shrill and violent as the rest.

And then of course there was Sammy, who was neither big and beefy nor a little waif. He was just sort of there, and unremarkable. The other thing that set him apart was that while everybody else was somewhere between pasty white to alabaster (even the half-Asian cousins, and Sammy had given up trying to figure out how either Aunt Lisa or Uncle Oliver were related to his own parents), Sammy was ruddy brown.

Samuel was adopted. And it seemed like every birthday, one of the cousins would have hit the age where they just finally realized that Sammy stuck out, and then they'd ask charming questions like where his "real" parents were, where he was from,

and if he was ever going to bring some of “his” food to the family potlucks.

Kids from outside the family were even less tactful about it, and there had been a few years in middle school where some choice phrases had been scratched into his locker. The town of Oak Grove was not a large place, and everybody knew everybody else’s business. And so everybody in town knew that Samuel’s parents couldn’t have children of their own and they had to go to the Baby Store to get one. They knew that he didn’t share any blood with anyone in town. That he was there by sufferance. Everyone knew that everyone pretended that he belonged here, just by sticking around so long.

Last week, he didn’t mind it all so much. Or he did—the cousins were relentlessly loud—but he’d been inured to it. Resigned. He believed then that his byzantine family and their little mountain utopia Oak Grove was a prison. A pretty prison, as his mother was constantly trying to remind him. But a prison nonetheless. He didn’t belong here, but the friendly folks of the town were going to grind him down until he fit.

He was going to graduate high school, get a job either making furniture with his uncle or working at the family grocery store with his grandfather, get trapped into marriage by some local girl (not, preferably, a cousin), settle down, and get busy producing Levchenko great-grandchildren. He’d be folded into the fabric of Oak Grove life until nobody remembered he was adopted, until nobody remembered anything about him, in fact; until he was just another local.

But Today was different. Today he had the pamphlet. Today he knew that he could get out.

The party was winding down—you could tell by the rising

crescendo of childish screams, indicating that a parent would soon be in to declare it time to find shoes and coats and get ready to get in the car. Which sounded like this torment was just about over, but then Gramma would insist everyone take leftovers. Then everybody would spend another half hour as the tupperware got broken out and the food was divvied up and distributed. Meanwhile everybody would sweat in their parkas, the smallest kids would somehow lose the shoes off their feet, and then parents would root around behind couches looking for them.

Seeing a soft shambling shape approach the living room door, Sammy leapt up to intercept his grandmother. “Gramma, can I help you clean up leftovers?” he asked, gesturing at the kitchen table heaped high with half-scooped-out casserole dishes. If the leftovers were packaged early, maybe they could all get out of here that much sooner. Sammy was feeling downright heroic.

But Gramma only patted his elbow. “Of course not, dear. You have fun with your cousins.” She nodded vaguely at the children trying to kill each other. “You show them a thing or two yeah? You’re so big and strong.”

“I’m... not,” Sammy sighed. He might have a few inches of height on his beefy cousins, but they could easily make up the difference in sheer power. And there was nothing quite so mortifying as being pinned to the ground by your younger cousin. Gramma was already moving away. He listened as she called over some of the older girl-cousins and set them to packaging up leftovers. Silver lining, at least: they’d be out of here that much sooner.

With a gusty sigh, he skirted the most tumultuous corners of the living room, opened the front door, and stepped outside. The

January air was crisp and cold; he wrapped his hands around his shoulders. Down at the end of the long porch, the ladies of the clan sat in a circle of beautifully-carved wooden chairs. Their conversation was muted, punctuated by the clink of glass and bursts of throaty laughter. He stepped up to the edge of the circle.

“Hey there, honey,” his mother called, and the murmur of conversation immediately ground to a halt. His mother was all smiles (and reddened cheeks; there were at least five wine bottles lined up along the side of the house) and gestured him forward for a hug. “Did you need something?”

Yeah, a break from his cousins. But he was standing in front of his cousins’ mothers—all of them staring up at him, no longer talking, just putting up with his interruption—which didn’t seem like a very receptive audience for that kind of answer. “Gramma’s starting to pack up leftovers,” he said instead. “So party’s wrapping up soon.”

“I should help her,” his mother said, and shot up to her feet, only to wobble and then slowly collapse to the right. The other moms erupted in peals of laughter, and thin-wristed hands darted out to gently return her to her chair. “Or maybe I’ll sit,” she amended, and did so. She smiled again at Sam, without a great deal of focus. “You should probably tell your father that I’m ready to be poured into my passenger seat.”

Sammy looked across the yard to the barn, which was lit up in the inky night. More throaty laughter, of a far more baritone variety, echoed out of the structure. “Do I have to?”

“You know you’re eighteen, now,” Aunt Nina pointed out. “If you got tired of hanging out with the kids at these things, I

think the men would be happy to have you.”

Sammy pursed his lips. He liked his uncles individually. He was less enamoured of them in a group. “Well at least they’ll be sober, right?”

The women snorted softly. “They’ll be mostly sober,” Aunt Steph corrected. “They take their turn to drive families home very seriously, but also think we can’t notice if they’ve had one or two.”

But Sam was already heading across the yard, trudging though slushy snow. It was only a moment before he stood before the barn door. He could hear the men on the other side talking, laughing. By the cadence of things, he could tell that his father was telling a story. He took a deep breath and pulled the door open.

Just as with the moms, the dads’ conversation stopped on a dime. The five of them looked askance; after a moment, his father said, “What is is, Sam?”

“Gramma broke out the tupperware,” he said, hooking a thumb behind him. “So party’s almost over. And mom’s gonna need help getting to the car.”

“Aw, my passenger princess,” Sam’s father chuckled, to the amusement of the other dads. He nodded. “I’ll be out shortly, son,” he said with the casual finality that he thought was genial and Sammy knew was a pretty potent shut down. Dad wanted to finish his story, and to do so in private.

Thinking of Aunt Nina’s suggestion, Sammy screwed up his courage and asked, “Can I stay with you guys until then?”

His dad pursed his lips, but Uncle Olliver said, “Sure, Sammy. Come on in.”

Sammy stepped fully into the barn and shut the door behind him. It wasn’t exactly warm in here, but it was certainly cold outside. This had once been Uncle Andrei’s workshop; in recent years it had been turned into a sort of collective man-cave. It had started with a dart board, and then a sideboard to hold drinks, and then billiards, and then a flat-screen television to watch football. To Sammy it always seemed just a touch sad.

“What were you guys talking about?” he asked as he approached the line of them.

“Nothing you need worry about,” Sam’s grandfather answered, with a finality that was far less genial.

And that about killed the mood in the barn. The dads looked uncertainly at each other for a few beats, and then started asking the usual questions: how was school (shitty, but he knew to say ‘challenging’), did he see the last comic book movie (he was so over those schlocky, childish movies, and yes, he absolutely had), was there a girl he had his eye on (not in fucking Oak Grove). What little conversation was generated by the boring questions and their boring answers withered and died.

Sammy shoved his hands in his hoodie’s pocket. “Sorry for killing the mood,” he said. He fingered the pamphlet, hidden away. Later. That conversation was soon, but later.

The dads all volubly denied that Sam had, as he so clearly had, thrown a wet blanket on the proceedings.

He shrugged. “Aunt Nina just mentioned that since I’m eighteen, maybe I could ditch the kids and come... talk... manly

things.” He sniggered at how stupid he sounded.

“Drinking age is twenty-one,” grandfather answered stoutly.

Sammy did a poor job of hiding his smirk. “I thought you guys were dry tonight.” Suddenly no one wanted to meet his eye.

Finally his father said, “We’ve been dry for the past ninety minutes. We may have started the evening with a few modest drinks, but we are very capable of driving home.”

“I am not,” grandfather said with a belch.

“You’re not driving,” Uncle Andrei reminded his father with a roll of his eyes.

Sammy nodded and started slowly drifting backwards towards the barn doors. “I get it,” he said, bobbing his head. “Okay. Well I’m gonna go pick out the biggest desert tupperware before anybody else nabs them.” He turned to go.

“Hey Samuel. Sammy,” called Oliver, breaking away from the other dads to come plant a solid hand on the boy’s shoulder. He didn’t stop Sam’s movement toward the door and instead walked alongside him. “Listen, don’t let it bother you. Next time why don’t you hang with us from the start?”

“Next time it’s your turn to drink,” Sammy pointed out, trying to keep the sour note out of his voice. “You still want me kicking around?”

“Maybe the birthday party after that, then,” Oliver conceded with a smirk. As the barn door rose before them, he tugged Sam to a stop. “Look. You’re at a rough age. I sympathize.”

“I don’t think it’s my age,” Sammy sighed and, what the hell, decided to confide in his uncle. “I don’t think it’s going to change.”

“I know it doesn’t feel like it now,” Oliver sympathized with a rough shake of Sammy’s shoulder, “but you’d be surprised how fast things can change. Sometimes so fast you never even see it coming.”

Sammy nodded morosely. “Yeah,” he said, for lack of anything better to say, and slipped out the door.

It was almost an hour before Sammy finally trudged out to the family Lexus, two paper bags of leftovers in each hand. (“Here, you take more,” Gramma insisted, “So big and strong!”) He fumbled for the back door handle, paper bag straps digging into the hook of his fingers, fingertips trying to coax the latch open. No matter how he twisted, however, the door refused to budge.

For a moment he considered putting the bags down, but the half-melted slush on the ground would seep through the paper bags in a moment. He tried lifting the bags to put them on top of the car, but the weight was too great and the bags too tall for him to manage. With a disgusted grunt, he dropped them back to his sides and waited for his parents.

His reflection in the car window stared back at him, sneering in shared frustration. A spiky mop of dark hair sat above his, let’s be honest, unremarkable features. He wasn’t sure if he still had a bit of a baby face or if his general lack of physical fitness qualified him for a fat face. His dark eyes just sort of sat there,

swimming in facial features that never really came together. He just looked like a generic brown kid of indeterminate age.

He'd attempted a moustache last year, which he'd hoped would give his face a little definition and maybe make him look a little older. Like the brown late-teens characters he saw on television (for lack of a comparison here in town). But it hadn't made him look older, just the same age but pathetically trying to look older. Despite the hairs being dark and thick, everything came in patchy, which did not anchor anything, face-wise. So he'd abandoned it. Most days he just sported a mess of stubble, now.

He looked away. Where were his parents? They were supposed to be right behind him. Saying endless rounds of goodbyes, probably. It took forever to escape Gramma's house.

Finally the front door opened and disgorged his parents, his mother pressed up against his father with that lovestruck smile she sported so often. He strutted along, supporting her only-slightly-weaving steps, with the proud air of a man with a prize. They carried on like this all the damn time. His parents were so immeasurably embarrassing.

After some shuffling, bag-juggling, and other jostling, the food was stowed and passengers buckled in. His father twisted around to look backwards as he pulled down the gravel driveway, his hand on the back of the passenger seat. His mother lolled dreamily in her seat, shifting slightly to press her forehead against her husband's forearm.

Worried that his mother might be too sloshed for him to make his pitch, Sammy asked, "Just how hard did you hit the wine, mom?"

She gave him another broad, warm smile. “Not as hard as it looks. I’m also tired, and relaxed, and happy. Those flavours complement a nice pino grigio.”

“Can I... show you something?” he hazarded, fingers inside his hoodie and caressing the edge of the pamphlet. “Or should I wait till tomorrow?”

His mom’s eyebrow rippled at the surprise request, but she sat up a little straighter. “What is it?” she asked, sounding more coherent as she pulled herself together.

“Um, this came in the mail...” Sammy pulled the pamphlet out of his pocket and gingerly held it forward.

Having reached the road, Sam’s father turned to face forward. Glancing sideways at the pamphlet, he said, “Samuel, it’s pretty dark for reading...”

“That’s why we have these, dear,” said his mom as she snapped on the reading light. She took the pamphlet. Sammy watched her eyebrows rise. “Preview Days? At Columbia?”

The car swerved slightly and his father swore. “What? Did you send away for this, son?”

“No, it just came in the mail,” he repeated patiently.

“How on earth do they know I have a college-age kid?” his father groused.

“Facebook data mining,” his wife answered readily and without looking up. She put a smile on her face. “Well this is very nice, Sammy. Do you... want to go? To Columbia?”

Sammy knew, like everyone in the car knew, that nobody at

his high school expected Samuel Masters to go to college, let alone a prestigious one like his father's alma mater. He had, in fact, assiduously avoided the topic since last year when his mother started dropping hints.

"I'd like to go see it," Sammy answered, which sounded like a compromise in his head. "I know I don't have the best grades —"

"Columbia's a very competitive school," his father cut in, "with a very competitive applications process."

"And I'm a legacy," Sammy pointed out.

"I don't think they really do that anymore, son."

"Well I'd like to find out if they do," the kid pressed his point. "I'd like to see what it looks like, I want to see what the classes are like. College is different than high school, right? Maybe what I didn't like about high school won't be a problem in college."

And maybe, Sammy thought but did not say, he could go see the City. Maybe he could see, not just what school looked like, but what life looked like. Real life. Not the podunk knock-off that they had up here on the mountain.

His father leaned over to look at the pamphlet illuminated by the reading light. "It's not going to work," he said, all genial finality again. "That weekend your mother and I are in San Francisco for the trade show."

This Sammy knew, was in fact planning on. Sammy wet his lips. This would be the hardest part of his pitch. "I thought maybe I could go on my own. An uncle can take me to Dover,

and then it's just a bus ride to the City."

His parents looked worriedly at each other, and then his mother looked back at him. She had the distinct look on her face that she didn't want what she had to say to hurt his feelings. "Oh honey, I don't think... I know you're eighteen, and you're an adult, but... New York is... a hard place. And you're not, well... very worldly."

"You lived there, on your own, when you were my age," Sammy responded with frustrated heat.

"And that wasn't a very good idea," she answered quickly, without any of her own heat. "Your grandfather and uncle had to come rescue me."

His father was nodding at the road as it rolled underneath the car. "Your mother's right. A weekend in the City, all on your own? You could get hurt. And we'd be on the other side of the continent."

"I take a bus, I go to campus, I take some tours and stay overnight in a dorm, and then I get back on a bus—"

But his father was shaking his head. "Samuel, I know that sounds simple, but... you've no idea what the City can be like."

I know, he muttered to himself. That's why I want to go.

"Maybe we can go as a family some other time."

Sammy gestured helplessly at the pamphlet. The magical pamphlet that was supposed to make this plan look safe and easy. "But all the presentations and things are during Preview Days. We'd miss all of it."

“You can’t make a trip to the City all on your own,” his father told the rolling road. “You need somebody who knows the place, who can look out for you, who can keep you out of trouble.”

“Ooo!” squealed his mother, rather suddenly, and then sniggered. She looked sidelong at her husband.

He hazarded a quick glance at her. “Oh no, what now?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“I already don’t like it. What?”

Instead of speaking directly to his father, his mother turned her slightly-tipsy smile onto Sammy. “You could visit your uncles. You’ve got a cousin who lives there.”

“My what?”

“Christina—” his father growled warningly. Use of the first name, Sammy noted, was not a good sign.

“Your father’s brother, his husband, and their daughter,” his mother explained simply. “One of them even teaches at Columbia, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” his father grated. “He does.”

Mom shifted back into her seat and stared up at her husband. “Richard, dear. Your son wants to see your alma mater. I know you two have history, but for your son, you can call your brother and ask for a favor.”

Sammy had known he had an uncle on his father’s side; he knew that he was a university professor. He hadn’t known he

was gay married, or that he had a kid. And he didn't know he lived in the City. This changed things.

His mother was watching his father, waiting for the right moment to press her advantage. "It would make your son very happy," she added. "It would make me very happy."

"I know, I know," he sighed. "And I already know you're going to work on me until I agree to do it, so I'm just giving up now." He looked up to the rear-view mirror to make eye contact with Sammy. "Okay," he sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

"The City is dangerous," Uncle Andrei lectured, his mammoth hands wrapped around the steering wheel. He never looked up from the road, but somehow he was also looking at Sammy in the passenger seat. "There's criminals, there's drugs. The streets are full of cars and nobody looks where they're going."

"I'll be careful, Andrei," Sammy grinned, trying to cajole his uncle into a better mood. Usually Andrei was the chill one. Now he was... disturbingly intense.

"There are crosswalks," his uncle went on. "You use them, okay?"

That one caught Sammy off guard. "I mean... sure?"

Andrei shook his head. "You don't understand. Everybody else? Who lives there? They just walk out into the street. Into crazy traffic." He took one hand off the wheel to point a thick finger at Sammy. "You don't do that, okay? You go to the corner. You wait for the signal. You only cross at the

crosswalk.”

Sammy couldn't help but laugh. “I know how to—”

“Make eye contact with every driver you walk in front of,” Andrei insisted.

Sammy gave up and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good boy,” his uncle said, clapped him heavily on the shoulder, and then went back to driving.

A few miles passed before Sammy asked, “You've been to the City, right?”

“Many times,” Andrei nodded, and then thought better of it. “Well. A few times. I don't like being there. It's noisy. It smells.”

“Mom said you... rescued her?” he prodded gently. “From when she was living there?”

His uncle smirked at the road. “Your mother is headstrong, like the rest of the family. And when she was young, she thought she had to go it alone. Do everything herself. Get whatever job she could, pay her own rent. Be independent.” He put a sneering spin on that last word.

Oh great, more of this stuff. “You're independent,” Sammy pointed out. “Or is that only for big manly men like us?”

Andrei spat out laughter. “That's good, ha. That's funny.”

Sammy scowled. He knew he wasn't big or manly, but his uncle didn't have to rub it into his face.

Andrei looked sidelong at him and his expression of amusement dropped when he saw that he'd somehow hurt his nephew. "I am independent now," he explained carefully. "But I lived in my father's house until I was twenty-four. I always had a job at the family store whenever I wanted it. My father gave me the whole barn to use as a workshop for years—years!—before I went professional. And then the only reason I was ever able to make money with my furniture was because of your mother running the business."

"Because she's your receptionist?"

"That's a joke," Andrei scoffed, with a roll of his eyes. He glanced over at Sammy, then did a double-take. "You know that, right? The family says that because... oh never mind. Old joke. She's not the receptionist or the secretary, she's my partner. She handles all the numbers, all the advertising, all the logistics. And now she does that for the grocery store, too. Don't underestimate your mother. Things don't turn out well for those who do."

Sammy hid his smirk by looking out the window. He didn't mind hearing his mother praised so highly. For most of his life she'd presented as an unassuming housewife, focused on the feminine arts and domesticity. But maybe that was just the side that he saw at home.

"Yes, I have a house and I pay my own bills," Andrei went on. "But I didn't do all that the moment I turned eighteen. And the only reason I can do it now is because I didn't try to do it then. I relied on family. That's what we're here for."

Sammy bobbed his head. "Yeah. Speaking of which, thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome, but you don't get what I'm saying,"

Andrei pressed. “You need your family. And your family is at home. In Oak Grove. Not where you’re going.”

“But I do have family there—”

Andrei snorted. “They may be related, but they’re not family. Hank Masters turned his back on his family to go be a big-city doctor. He doesn’t understand how a real family works.”

“Did you know him?” Sammy asked in surprise.

“A little,” his uncle said. “He was two years ahead of me in school. Theater kid. Loud. Worked in... ugh, the store that was where Abby’s place is now, I forget its old name. Anyway. He surprised everybody when he left for college. And then he never came back.”

Sammy nodded. That sounded like a great plan, actually. Leave and never come back. No more Oak Grove, no more sticking out like a sore thumb, no more smothering family. Suddenly Sammy realized that his uncle’s gaze was again on him. Oh. “I’m going to come back, Andrei,” he stammered. “It’s just a weekend.”

“It’s just a weekend now,” his uncle grumbled. “But you go there for school? Spend four years away from family?” He shook his huge head. “It’s no way to live, Sammy. And it does things to your head.”

Sammy rolled his eyes. “I’ll miss you, too.”

“Ha,” Andrei spat again, and reached over to playfully whack the back of his hand against Sammy’s shoulder. He did his best

not to wince.

The winding mountain roads started to straighten out as they drove into Dover. Stop signs increased in number and then increasingly got replaced with traffic lights. It certainly wasn't a big city, but Dover actually had a skyline, and soon they were driving between rows of buildings more than tracts of forest. The GPS informed them that the bus depot was just a few minutes away.

"Listen, Sammy," Andrei said tentatively. His eyes remained on the road, but Sammy got the distinct impression that his uncle wasn't just being safe: he didn't want to look him in the eye. "You should go see Columbia. But if it doesn't work out—"

Sammy heaved a sigh. "Nobody thinks I can get in."

"It's not that," his uncle insisted, but he still didn't make eye contact. "Just. If it doesn't work out, you know there's always a workbench at the warehouse for you, yeah? I can teach you everything you need to know. It's a good job. It's a good life."

Sammy bit back his immediate response (Oh hell, no.) and forced a smile. "Yes sir. I mean. Thank you for the offer." He could feel his head nodding and ignored the feeling that he was drowning, getting pulled down into the depths, from where he'd never escape.

"And we have the apartment over the salon," his uncle went on. "We rent it now, but when the current lease ends, we could move you in there."

Sammy gulped. This was getting serious. "You don't have to put the Andersons out on the street for me."

“You didn’t hear this from me,” his uncle said, the corner of his lip curling upwards. Gossip? From Andrei? “But they are expecting. And I say from experience that that apartment is very nice for a couple, but too small for a family with kids.”

“Well, good for them,” Sammy muttered. He rubbed his hands up and down his upper arms. The heater was blasting; how was it cold in here?

“Just think about it,” Andrei urged as he pulled into the bus depot parking lot. “You have options. You have family.” He pulled into a parking space and the truck lurched to a stop. “It’s a good life.”

Yeah, just not the life Sammy wanted. It wasn’t his life. It was, in fact, Andrei’s life, from twenty years ago. Sammy had no desire to be a carbon copy of his uncle.

By the time he collected his backpack and got out of the truck, Andrei was already walking towards the waiting buses, Sammy’s electric blue rolling suitcase in hand and sleeping bag under his arm. “I can carry my own luggage,” he sputtered, running a few steps to catch up. “Also that has wheels.”

“I’ve got it, it’s nothing,” Andrei shrugged, and leveled a finger at one of the buses. “That one’s yours.”

They crossed the parking lot as Sammy pulled up his ticket on his phone, and then it was time to board. Awkwardly, Sammy turned to his uncle, phone in hand to match the suitcase in Andrei’s. “Um. Thanks for the ride. I really appreciate it.”

“Of course.” The suitcase and sleeping bag were slung under the bus and a moment later Sammy was crushed in a hug. “You

remember what I said, okay?"

"About the crosswalks?"

When Andrei spat his laughter while hugging, Sammy got extra crushed. "Yes. And also about the job, and the apartment, and family, okay?"

Sammy peeled himself off of Andrei's chest. "Yes, sir." He looked back at the steps into the bus. "Well I guess this is it. New York, here I come."

"Stay safe," his uncle said, backing away.

The steps up into the bus were steep and short, and Sammy had to go halfway down the length of the vehicle to find a window seat on the right side. He dumped himself onto the hard cushion and looked outside to wave goodbye.

Andrei was coming towards the bus, Sammy's blue roller bag in hand. But hadn't he already loaded it under the bus? A tall Black girl was trailing behind him, kind of pretty but looking vaguely discomfitted. "No, it's fine," his uncle assured her. "It's nothing." She watched as he strode forward and slung the bag under the bus. Ah. Her roller suitcase. And Uncle Andrei's weird proclivity for carrying everybody's bag.

Sammy caught Andrei's eye and waved. His uncle returned the wave with a smile. "I suppose when the universe gifts you with a body like that," Sammy muttered into the window, "the least you can do is help people with their luggage."

Movement caught Sammy's eye and when he looked up, the girl was boarding the bus. He gulped involuntarily. She wasn't kind of pretty; she was gorgeous. And she also appeared to be

seething angry. “I’ll carry your bag, little lady,” she growled at nobody, “you’re obviously weak and incapable. Let me, a big strong man do it for you.”

Sammy considered saying something, apologizing for his uncle, even commiserating with her. Andrei insisted on carrying his bags, too, so it wasn’t just because she was a girl. But before he could figure out what to say, the girl turned and seated herself on the other side of the bus, five or six rows ahead of him. He barely caught sight of her popping in a pair of wireless headphones, and then she slumped against her window, settling in for the long trip.

With a contented sigh, Sammy did the same. Soon he’d be out of the mountains and finally on his own in the City.

CHAPTER TWO

Like You

"Wakey wakey, sunshine," giggled a soft voice, coupled with a gentle shake to Sammy's shoulder. He wasn't in bed. He was on something... not quite hard. Something smelled weird. He started, suddenly full awake.

A tall white girl was leaning over him, smirking. Stark white-blond hair tumbled around her pale, open face; her lean body was encased in a fluffy white crop top. Sammy's brain informed him that he'd been woken up by an angel. Sammy told his brain that it was being stupid. "Uh. Hey. Are we there yet?"

The girl giggled again. "Yeah, you're the last one off. I'm Rowan. Your cousin. They let me come up to wake you. You almost ended up parked in the bus lot until morning."

"You're my cousin?" he croaked. "But you're so..."

"Amazing, I know," she grinned, and primped her hair.

All his life, Sammy's cousins were younger than him. The eldest among them was four years younger than he was. "Cousin" was wedged in his head alongside "little kid" like they were the same concept. He'd been preparing for this weekend for six weeks, and in all that time he'd assumed that there'd be some rugrat to contend with. He'd told himself one annoying little cousin was better than fifteen of them, swarming all over. But now...

"We should go," his older and very pretty cousin reminded him with a gentle smile.

Groggy, Sammy pushed himself up to sitting straight, then scooted sideways into the aisle. "I, uh, didn't mean to fall asleep."

"And yet," she laughed, and started striding down the aisle to the door. "Come on, my dads are waiting outside."

Sammy trailed after her, trying not to stare at her butt, which bounced along in tight white jeans shorts. This was his cousin; he shouldn't look at her like that.

"Sound asleep, like a little baby," Rowan declared as she hopped off the last step and onto the pavement.

Sammy followed, sneakers hitting the ground for only a moment before he staggered backwards. An overwhelming stench rolled over him: spent motor oil, cracked asphalt, old chewing gum, and what was almost certainly an undertone of urine. "Urk," he coughed, and shook his head. "Wow. That's... a smell."

"You get used to it," chuckled a barrel-chested man waiting on the curb. He had Sammy's blue rollerbag at his side, one hand resting on its telescoped handle. He'd attached the sleeping bag by its straps. "It's good to finally meet you, Samuel. I'm your uncle, Henry."

"Sammy," he corrected mildly, blinking. Somehow the smell had got into his eyes. "Just call me Sammy."

"Sammy it is," his uncle nodded. "And this is my husband, Gideon."

Another man, much shorter and leaner than Henry, stepped forward, arms outstretched tentatively. "Pleasure to meet you, Sammy. Do you hug?"

"Uh, yeah?" he responded, and shuffled forward to hug his uncle. His gay uncle. He'd of course hugged uncles before, but they were all straight, and they liked women and women's bodies, and now here he was, hugging an uncle who liked men, and men's bodies and... He told his brain to stop thinking about it like that. "Sorry, I'm still a little muzzy."

"Don't worry, 'a little muzzy' is the ideal headspace for riding the subway," Gideon grinned, linking arms with Sammy and guiding him down the long line of empty bus terminals.

Sammy just barely caught himself from voicing his surprise that they were taking the subway back to his uncles' place instead of driving, as well as his initial impulse to say, "I've never been on a subway." He was in New York, now; of course they were going to ride the subway. That's what you did in the City.

As they descended white-tiled steps into the subway station, Henry started patting his pockets. "Oh, um. Sam...mmy. We grabbed one of these for you." He held out a plastic card. "Subway pass."

"Old school," Rowan grinned, pulling out her phone and tapping it to the turnstyle reader. "He wasn't sure if you'd have a phone,

Country Mouse.”

Sammy took the card and made his lips form a grateful smile. “Thanks. I mean, I do have a phone, but that was thoughtful.”

Henry went about demonstrating how to use the subway pass, which was so straightforward a child could do it. He pointed at the card. “That’s good for as many trips as you like for the next two weeks, so you can go anywhere in the City that you like.”

Gideon followed after the both of them, gently adding, “Although your parents are kind of expecting you to stick to campus and the Upper West Side.”

“Pssh,” Rowan snorted. “Like there’s anything good there.”

“I was kind of hoping to see the City a bit,” Sammy admitted sheepishly. The four of them walked a little ways down the platform and then came to an unspoken but mutually agreed-upon stop to wait for their train.

“Maybe you could take Sammy out for some night life after dinner,” Henry suggested to Rowan, bushy eyebrows raised.

Rowan’s face blanked, and then she looked over at Sammy as if slotting him into any scenario adequately described as “night life” broke her brain. “Um. He’s underage.”

“So are you,” Henry shot back archly.

“Yes, but I have a really good fake ID,” she responded with a laugh, “and I have tits. So I get in everywhere.”

“So maybe you could drag him along,” Gideon suggested gently.

Sammy couldn’t help but grin at the thought of his cousin—his older cousin—his older, honestly kind of hot cousin—taking him out to sample the city nightlife. “I mean, I would love that, but it’s only Thursday.”

Rowan blinked, and then looked uncertainly to her fathers. “I don’t understand. Why would that matter?”

Gideon chuckled and placed his hands on Rowan’s shoulders. “My dear, dazzling urbanite,” he chuckled. “Outside of the City, most places are dead empty on weeknights. Out there, people only go out on the weekends.”

“Ew, but that’s when the bridge-and-tunnel kids show up.”

Henry snorted. “How exactly do you think your cousin got here, if not a bridge or tunnel?”

“That’s different,” Rowan declared, and stepped around her father to hook an arm around Sammy’s neck. “Sammy isn’t gonna try and claim New Yorker status despite having a 201 area code.”

"I wouldn't dream of it," he grinned at his uncle, leaning into his cousin. "Even if I knew what that meant."

Before anyone could explain or the vague suggestion of late-night plans could be confirmed, wind rose up out of the tunnel, shortly followed by a moaning wail. A minute later, their train pulled into the station. The doors opened, a few people got off, and they got on. The car wasn't even a quarter full, so they had their pick of seats.

Once they were settled in, Gideon explained, "We've got dinner waiting at home, and you can borrow Rowan's bed tonight—"

Sammy frowned. "Wait, where will Rowan be sleeping?"

"My dorm room, of course," she giggled.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were in school," he stammered. "Wait, are you at Columbia?"

She bobbed her head. "Pre-med, just like Daddy."

He grinned. "Like Daddy but not like Daddy."

"Oh no," she said with a shake of her head, not even registering Sammy's comment as humor. She pointed across the subway to Henry. "This one's Daddy." Then she pointed at Gideon. "This one's Tate."

"Tah teh?" Sammy echoed, frantically trying to switch tracks from a joke gone awry to projecting respect for his gay uncles' lifestyle.

"Close enough," Gideon laughed. "It's Yiddish, which I only barely speak. Kind of a family joke that went too far and just became our common parlance."

"Anyway, they're the dads," Rowan summarized dismissively.

"And the dads will feed you dinner, put you up for the night, stuff you full of bagels tomorrow morning, and deliver you to Preview Days in time for registration." Gideon grinned. "Henry can take you, since he's got a morning class."

Henry nodded in agreement.

"That's right, you teach at Columbia."

"We both teach at Columbia," Gideon put in. "I just also teach at SUNY and CUNY and occasionally Marymount and NYU. But Henry has tennnnure." He stretched out the word teasingly; it was clearly another old joke.

The tenured professor coughed to change the subject. "After Preview Days, we can take you back to the Port Authority for your bus. Although by then I'm sure you'll be an old hand at taking the subway and won't need us."

"But we'd still like to say goodbye," Gideon added with a smile. "If only to assure your parents that you're safe and sound."

“In the loving embrace of Greyhound,” Rowan smirked.

Their stop came up and the four of them filed out of the subway and up the stairs. It was still a couple blocks’ walk, but at least the stench seemed to have abated (or, Sammy feared, he was already acclimating). Both sides of the street were lined with stoops and townhouses, a sight with which Sammy was familiar thanks to countless movies and television shows. He couldn’t help but grin. He was really here. He was really in the City.

His uncles’ townhouse was almost indistinguishable from the others, although it had a cheery rainbow flag in the window. Henry led the way up, blue roller bag in tow. Once the door was unlocked, they all filed inside. In the foyer, he held out the bag to Sammy. “Rowan, why don’t you take your cousin upstairs to your room. Dinner in half an hour.”

“Right this way, Country Mouse!” cried the girl, bounding up the wooden stairs with long familiarity. Sammy hurried to hoist his suddenly heavy bag up after her. Where was Andrei when you needed him?

Rowan’s room was, like Rowan herself, immeasurably cool. The walls were a deep purple—except one wall, which was a rich butter yellow under a lattice of black wooden slats. An accent wall, supplied something in the depths of Sammy’s brain. The light fixtures on the walls were all dark gold, angled down for indirect lighting. A computer desk sat beside the door, the bed to the right and a large, half-emptied closet on the left. The other wall, though, was all windows, looking out onto the street. A big reading chair sat in front of it, with a little table at its side.

Sammy stepped up to the window to gaze out at the townhouses and budding trees. He couldn’t help grinning.

Two of the window panes, in the upper left and upper right corners, were covered by stripey banners. Baby blue, pink, and white, then the pink and blue again. They didn’t match the rest of the decor, but Sammy figured they were some sentimental remnant from a baby shower or something. You put something up in the corner like that and you can forget it’s there; then it sticks around for years. He lifted a corner of one banner to better see down the block, and shot his cousin a smirk.

She responded with the most hesitant smile he’d yet seen on the girl, and then a shrug. Was she embarrassed at the old decorations stuck in

the corners? "Your room is... really nice," Sammy said, trying to shove compliments at her to make her feel better. "Like, it's out of a movie or something."

"Thanks," she smiled, now with genuine satisfaction. "I mean I mostly just stole the look from a pinterest board, but the three of us tore out all the old stuff and repainted and rewired the lights and... yeah. It was a really cool family project. I almost feel bad that I only lived in it for a couple years before college."

"That's so cool that your dads did it with you. My mom's very handy and crafty and all that. My dad, not so much. He'd rather hire somebody than do anything himself."

Rowan put her butt on the back of the reading chair. "They're big into that. Or they were, when I was smaller. Very intentional about family time. Which is, you know. It's very Gay Dads."

"I don't actually know," Sammy said with a shrug, and was suddenly struck by a realization. Gay dads didn't have babies on their own, did they? They adopted. Which meant Rowan had to be adopted. Just like Sammy. "But it's good that they, you know, make you feel welcome," he said, trying to turn the conversation towards his realization. "It's... it's a whole thing, you know? Making sure that you know you're loved, and you belong, and it's always going to be your home."

Rowan lifted an eyebrow. "I mean... sure?"

Sammy waved his hands as if he could conjure up the conversation topic he wanted, even though he knew it could be awkward, even painful. "Where I'm from, everybody knows everything about everybody," he sighed. "Except they don't really, you know? They think they do. Everybody's in everybody else's business, and no matter what they whisper, they only ever have a piece of the picture, but they still... say things. Louder than whispers. And sometimes they don't mean any harm, but. Other times they do. They want to make sure you know that they don't think you belong."

Rowan folded her hands over her knees, quietly listening. "Yeah," she said softly, more to coax more words out of her cousin than anything else.

"So it's awesome that your dads do stuff to make you feel like you belong. You know?" He was fucking this up; he knew he was sounding like a crazy person. He looked out the windows. She followed his eyes. It was a nice view, even if those baby banners blocked the corners.

"I'm just saying," he said, unable to make eye contact, still looking out at the street. "I'm like you. You know?" He darted his eyes back to hers, just for a second.

She tipped her head just slightly. "Oh." She looked over at the windows and the baby banners, and then back to him. "Oh!"

"I don't... I don't talk about it much," he said, and thought back to the handful of times he awkwardly described to his uncomprehending peers what it was like being adopted. He shook his whole body as if that could shake off the stress. "Nobody at home would understand. Small town, you know?"

Rowan gave him a shaky, encouraging smile. "Well you're not in a small town anymore."

"I hope it's different here," he told her. "Big city and all."

"It is," she said, bobbing her head. "It really is, it's hardly a thing here." Her encouraging smile was blossoming into something much warmer and wider. Excited. Like they had something that they could share. Sammy felt it, too. "I mean, sometimes it is a thing, just a little, but... everybody I know, knows about me. And the vast, vast majority of them are cool with it."

"Really?" he grinned, and then something tickled his temple. He touched it, finding a drop of sweat. He realized he was overheating inside his hoodie. That's what happened when the conversation topic made you blush all over. Spotting his bag, he reached down, scooped it up, and dropped it on the bed. He'd jam the hoodie in here, and then they could head downstairs for dinner. He unzipped the roller bag and flung it open.

Released from its confines, the stack of clothing inside erupted outwards. A torrent of colors and patterns—pinks, reds, blues—squeezed its way out of the bag's opening. These were not the hoodies and sweats, all grey and black, that Sammy had packed. These were all girl clothes. A plaid skirt flopped out, unfurling its pleats across the bed surface. A lacy bra and matching panties tumbled out, and then slid off of the bed and onto the floor.

Rowan scooped up the lingerie and placed them on top of the rest. "Very cute," she commented, her smile wide and encouraging.

He opened his mouth, closed it. Tried to make words come out. Finally, he said, "I don't... I don't normally wear clothes like this." He thought he was blushing before? Now he was blushing. His whole body must have been beet red.

She blinked. "What, never?"

He laughed shakily. He could make this into a joke, right? “Yeah, no, not ever. It’s, um. Not really my everyday look, strolling around Oak Grove in a cute skirt.” He felt like he was falling backwards. Of course he couldn’t make this into a joke; none of this made any sense.

“Oh my god,” she gasped, fingers to her lips and everything. “Are you not out yet?”

He blinked and tried to ignore how his face felt like it was on fire. “Out?”

“Out of the closet,” Rowan explained. “Does anybody at home know you’re a trans girl?”

“Trans girl,” he heard himself repeat. “Like, transgender.” He tried to remember what he knew about transgender people, all of it gleaned from television, memes, and one very awkward school presentation.

Rowan nodded, her look all sympathy. “I can’t imagine it’s easy living out in the middle of nowhere, everybody riding tractors and going to... I dunno, barn raisings and 4H animal shows and shit. Oh, gosh,” she cried, and wrapped Sammy up in a fierce hug. “And you came to the City, hoping that you could finally try out being you.”

“I did?” he squeaked, trying to ignore how his face was buried in his cousin’s cleavage. Belatedly, he realized that that had not sounded like a question, but confirmation.

Rowan broke the embrace and held Sammy out at arm’s length. “Okay, you don’t worry about a thing, okay? I’ve got you. And obviously my dads are cool. They’ve been through all of this once already. It’ll be like old times for them.”

She beamed into his face, and Sammy felt himself smiling back.

“This is so exciting!” she squealed. “We are going to have so much fun. I am going to show you everything.”

“You— you mean tonight?” Sammy stammered. “Like, after dinner?” If the price of getting his cool, hot cousin to show him around the City was to pretend he was trans for the night... was he seriously considering this?

“Yeah, bitch!” Rowan crowed. “We gonna go clubbing!” She bathed him in a dazzling smile, and it was almost as if he could hear airhorns underscoring her enthusiasm. But then her expression wobbled as her eyes slid sideways. “Assuming you have something to go clubbing in?”

“Uh,” Sammy hedged, looking at the bright-coloured pile of clothes. “I don’t even remember what I packed in there.”

“Well let’s see,” Rowan said, and started digging through the

clothes.

Sammy watched with trepidation. What was in the bag? Where did the contents even come from? But then it struck him: the girl on the bus, the one who'd been so pissed that Andrei helped with her bag. Her bag looked just like Sammy's bag. So this must be hers. He'd fallen asleep on the bus, and she'd disembarked first and rolled off with his bag.

"This could work," Rowan said, and Sammy wrenched his attention out of his head and onto the bed, where she'd laid out a few pieces of clothing. Was he supposed to be able to envision what those would look like on him? Wait, was he supposed to wear girl clothes? Surely he could just wear, like, shorts and a shirt or something? A girl shirt and girl shorts, of course, to placate Rowan, but stuff that would still look... relatively normal, right?

Rowan waved her hands in front of herself. "Whatever. We're getting ahead of ourselves, anyway. Dinner first. And you probably want to change before that, right? Get out of the dysphoria hoodie?"

"What's a dyspho—"

"Oh gosh!" she squealed, cutting him off before he could ask. "Pronouns! And, like, name. Of course. Talk about getting ahead of ourselves." And then she abruptly stopped talking, looking at Sammy expectantly.

"Well, I..." he jammed his hands into his hoodie pocket and twisted his fingers together inside. This was insane. He couldn't do this. How would he explain things in the morning?

...but the morning would be on the other side of going clubbing in the City with his cool, hot cousin.

The aforementioned cool, hot cousin gave him a reassuring smile. "Given the contents of your bag—I mean, clothes aren't gender identity, you can never tell, yadda yadda, but... this is some girly shit in here. So. You wanna use she and her?"

Sammy blinked. He'd only caught about half of that. "What... else would I use?"

"Well, there are femme they/thems," Rowan shrugged.

"Like..." he scowled, thinking. "When you were talking about me, you'd say... they are visiting from Oak Grove. But there's only one of me, so... They is visiting from Oak Grove? That sounds even weirder."

"Gender's weird," Rowan shrugged. "I'll call you whatever you want. But what about name?" His cousin grinned and bit her lip,

which was entirely unfair to Sammy's capacity to string words together.

"I mean... Sammy is girly enough, right?"

"Of course," Rowan nodded enthusiastically, and then her face exploded in excitement again. "Holy shit, are you an Always Knew Tran?!"

Sammy sank onto the bed. This was getting too much. He recognized most of the words that Rowan was using, just not in the ways she was using them. "A what?"

"An Always Knew Tran," she repeated. "Like you didn't have an egg crack moment like I did halfway through freshman year when you realized, oh my god, I'm a girl, you just... always knew." She sat down on the other end of the bed, the pile of clothes and roller bag between them. "I only ask because I heard that the girls who go for the names converted from their deadnames are usually Always Knew Trans, because when they were, like, four years old, their little four year old brains concluded that they really should be called Samantha, not Samuel, and that's how they thought about themselves for years and years until they could finally come out."

Sammy gulped. This seemed like the path of least resistance. "Um. Yeah. That sounds about right."

"Okay, Samantha," Rowan said smiling, and reached forward to squeeze his hand. "And she/her to go with that?"

Sammy felt his head nodding. "Yeah. That's me. Samantha. She/her." What the fuck was he doing?

"Okay, cool." Rowan bounced off the bed. "So. You're gonna get dressed for dinner, right? You want some privacy for that?"

Sammy wasn't about to get naked in front of his cousin. Even if he was pretending to be one of the girls, that was a bridge too far. Besides, he didn't want her to see him fumbling through girl clothes that were supposed to be his. He nodded. "Yes, please."

Rowan all but danced out her own bedroom door. Sammy waited until the door had clicked shut before he let all his false confidence drain out of his body. He slumped onto the bed next to the girl's accidentally-stolen suitcase. Was he really going to do this?

He had come here to see what real life was like in the City, outside the little bubble that was Oak Grove. His most far-fetched dreams about how this weekend might play out had always centered around going to a club, maybe drinking a little bit. There was dancing at

clubs, but Sammy didn't know how to dance, so he wouldn't be doing that, anyway. Just watching. For next time. And if he was watching for next time—getting the lay of the land—then did it really matter if he was wearing a skirt, or even fishnets? He'd still get to see it. He'd be there. And when he came back, as a student at Columbia or however else, then he'd wear whatever he wanted.

It wasn't like he'd go to a club in a hoodie and sweatpants, which was all he packed for this trip in the blue suitcase that was now... somewhere else in the City. So it wasn't like he had actually been prepared to go clubbing to begin with. So maybe this was... lucky?

"This is not lucky," he sighed to himself. "This is bonkers." But he sat up and started mechanically going through the mostly-folded stack of clothes. He just needed something to wear downstairs, to eat dinner with his uncles. Girl shorts and a girl shirt. He would worry about what to wear clubbing when he'd cleared this first hurdle. Surely there had to be shorts and a teeshirt in there somewhere, right?

There was not.

The closest he could find was a pleated skirt and a shirt. Technically, he supposed, it was a blouse. What was the difference, anyway?

With a glance to the door to make sure it was closed, Sammy threw off his hoodie, the white undershirt under that, and his sweat pants, then pulled on the skirt and blouse.

The skirt was relatively straightforward, he felt, but the blouse fit all wrong. "Oh, I'm missing boobs," he muttered, and then looked fearfully at the pile of clothes. He nudged aside another skirt and a tangle of fabric that he couldn't even identify to expose the lacey bra. Sammy stared at the lingerie for a long moment, picked it up, and contemplated it with a sigh. "I guess I really really want to go clubbing."

The next few minutes were consumed by a great deal of twisting, stretching, grunting, and fumbling. After Sammy nearly fell over the second time, he sat down to prevent it from happening again. He was sweaty by the time he finally had the damned thing on. Sammy looked down at the empty cups, flattened them with his hands, and wondered if the struggle had all been for nothing.

"Oh wait, socks, right?" he muttered to himself. "Rolled up?"

He rooted around in the ever-spreading pile of clothes until he came up with two pairs of socks, which he slipped into the cups of the bra. They did not fit well, but he mashed and squished them until they were close enough. Then he pulled the blouse over top of that. His

“boobs” were all sorts of lumpy, but at least the shirt fit better. He tried smoothing out the shape through the blouse, which made little change.

Finally a timid knock sounded on the door. “You okay in there, Samantha?” came Rowan’s stage whisper from the other side.

“Not really,” he groaned at the closed door. The back of the door bore a full-length mirror, and there he was, in all his awkward glory. Very plainly a boy who’d lost a fight with a girl’s wardrobe. “I mean. I’m dressed, you can come in, I guess. I just look stupid.”

Needing no further invitation, Rowan hurried through the door. She turned towards Sammy with a giant smile preemptively radiating positive energy. It immediately crumbled. “Oh! Oh.”

Sammy shrugged and let his arms slap against his sides. “I’m no good at this. It’s a bad idea. I should just... put my hoodie back on.”

“No, no, we are not crawling back into the closet, not on my watch.” She shook her head and advanced on Sammy. “Besides. I can work with this. You just made some... rookie mistakes. But you picked great colours.”

“Colours,” he repeated, and looked down at what he was wearing. It had not even occurred to him that the colours of the clothes might matter. The skirt was blue and the top was green. “Uh. Yeah. I like these colours.”

“I love that teal paisley,” Rowan went on, gesturing vaguely at... either the top or the skirt; Sammy couldn’t be sure. What was teal, again? Blue or green? But his cousin was asking a question: “What is up with your breast forms?”

“My breast fo—” he started to echo, and then gestured helplessly to his lumpy rack. “Oh, it’s just... rolled-up socks.”

“Oh, right, of course. DIY breast forms.” Then her eyebrows shot up and she looked over at her closet. “Actually...” The girl dove into the bottom drawer of her closet, a big bin-sized thing, and started digging.

Sammy averted his eyes from her ass as it waved in the air behind her.

A moment later Rowan shouted “Ah ha!” and came up with a beat-up cardboard box about half the size of a shoebox. She shoved it into Sammy’s hands. “I haven’t worn them for years, but you can use them. Heck, you can have them.”

Sammy opened the hinged top, glanced into the box, and immediately dropped it with a yelp. Two floppy silicone boobs,

complete with cherry nipples, bounced out of the box and across the floor. “Oh fuck, sorry. Uh. They’re just... so lifelike.” Why the hell did his cousin have fake boobs in a drawer?

Rowan giggled as she scooped them up and held them out, squishing one playfully. “I don’t think I have any adhesive in the house, but they can just ride in your bra if your neckline is high enough. And I guess the skin tone wouldn’t actually match anyway, no matter how much blending you did.”

“These were yours?”

Rowan bobbed her head. “When I was but a baby tran. Like. Four years ago? About that. For the first two years,” she confided, “you constantly know how long it’s been down to months and weeks. And then that all sort of... fades out, and you’re just. Girl.”

As she talked, things fell into place in Sammy’s brain. He could swear he could feel the cartoon lightbulb turn on where it floated above his head. Everybody she knew, knew about her. Her dads had been through all of this once already. She had fake boobs she used to wear sitting in a drawer. Rowan was a trans girl.

Rowan was trans, and Sammy was an idiot.

He reached into the blouse and bra that he’d strapped himself into and pulled out the socks. “Um. How do I—”

“They’re pretty intuitive,” Rowan grinned, and then proceeded to yank open his shirt and slide the cool prosthetic breasts against his chest. She fiddled a little, shifting and adjusting, and then pulled the neckline into place over them.

Sammy looked down. The blouse covered up everything. He had tits. “Whoa.”

“Exactly, Neo,” Rowan giggled. “And uh. Tuck in the blouse for me?”

Trying not to stare at his own tits—he had to bend way over to see what he was doing with the waistband of the skirt—he tucked in the shirt tail of the blouse, settling the skirt across his hips again.

Rowan smirked. “Yeah, thought so. Your waist, honey, is up here.” She reached forward, wrapping her hands around Sammy’s belly, and squeezed gently.

Sammy didn’t move. Couldn’t.

Seeing that her cousin was not getting it, Rowan reached down to tug the skirt’s waistband upwards, settling it around Sammy’s waist. “It’s called a waist band, not a hips band. Now tuck in your blouse again, keeping the waistband where it is.”

He did so, frowning softly. "This feels weird."

She shrugged in response. "Yeah. It'll feel weird till you get used to it, and then wearing your pants like some skater boy feels weird." She gestured to the reading chair. "Sit down, I'll brush out your hair."

Having someone else brush out your hair, it turned out, felt really good, and for the first time in an hour Sammy actually felt himself relaxing. The chair was comfy, too. "I bet you have to keep it short at home," Rowan mused. "But we can do, like, a cute soft dyke sort of style with this. Pixie cut adjacent." He nodded dreamily as if that made any sort of sense.

Later—it must have been just a few minutes, but Sammy had no idea—Rowan declared his hair to be sufficiently tamed and squatted in front of him. "Okay. So. You want some makeup?"

"Uh. Isn't it getting late?" he managed. "Your dad said dinner in half an hour, like, forever ago."

Rowan tipped her head side to side. "I told the dads we'd be a little longer. They're patient." She grinned. "Makeup? Just a little. Eyeliner, mascara, lipstick, brow powder."

"That doesn't sound like a little."

His cousin giggled. "Five minutes," she promised.

His cousin's infectious enthusiasm pulled a smile out of Sammy despite his reservations. "I mean, okay."

"Great!" she squealed, and went clattering through her closet drawers again. "Okay, so. You're not supposed to share brushes and mascara, blah blah blah, but I haven't used any of this stuff since, what, Christmas? So I think we're in the clear. Trust me, I'm pre-med." She dropped a handful of items onto the little table next to the reading chair, touched the radiator under the window to make sure it wasn't hot, and planted her butt onto it so she could lean over into Sammy's face.

This of course put her cleavage on full display before him. Sammy tried not to stare, in fact closed his eyes, but his cousin chided him for flinching and insisted he look straight ahead. Which he did. Because hey, if he was going to get an invite, he wasn't going to say no.

He sat stock still when he was told to, he closed one eye and then the other as instructed, he blinked when she said to blink. He made weird faces with his lips. And then she was done.

Rowan leaned back, surveying her work with pride. "You clean up pretty nice, Country Mouse."

Sammy gave her a weak smile. She had to be buttering him up.

He'd already seen himself in her mirror. He looked ridiculous. But he was willing to look ridiculous if it meant he got to go clubbing. It was that simple. Who needed self-respect, he mused, when you had an opportunity to do what you'd been dreaming of for weeks?

Rowan stood and gestured Sammy towards the mirror. "Arise, Samantha, and gaze upon thy true visage."

Sammy burst out laughing. "I'm sorry, what on earth was that?"

His cousin looked up at the ceiling, not making eye contact. "Okay, before I was a cool girl," she confessed, "I might have been, like, a massive nerd. I read all the books about elves and dragons, I watched all the shows about space ships. And sometimes it all comes rushing back, and then it all goes spilling out of my mouth. Nerd vomit. I plan to make my graduate thesis the search for a cure."

"I dunno, I think it's kind of cute," Sammy grinned and pushed himself up out of the chair.

"That makes one of us," she quipped, and then reached forward to grab and turn his shoulders, pointing him towards the mirror on the bedroom door. "Lookee there."

Still chuckling, Sammy picked his way across Rowan's room. He'd spilled clothes just about everywhere, hadn't he? "I'll pick all this up," he promised, turning back to make eye contact, so she could see he was genuinely apologetic.

Rowan crossed her arms and lifted one eyebrow. "Look in the damn mirror, Samantha."

"I'm looking, I'm looking," he laughed as he turned around, and... "Whaaaaat the fuck."

Gone was the boy who'd been mugged by a girl's wardrobe. The lumpy, awkward, uneven clothes had all been straightened out, pulled taut where they should be pulled taut, draped artfully where they ought to be draping. Rowan had brushed out his unruly hair and used a trio of tiny but sparkling-bright emerald hair clips to pull it into an actual shape. His face, even hanging slack and gobsmacked, looked completely different. How had just crayons and colored dust done so much?

Sammy took in his whole body, which had somehow been completely reshaped. Sure, the fake tits explained some of it, but below that, his waist cinched in and the skirt flared out, and...

"Was this skirt always this short?" He could see his knees, and an inch or two of thigh above them.

"I mean, it was longer when you were wearing it four inches too

low," Rowan laughed. "Hey, try this: smile into the mirror."

Sammy turned back, scanning down and back up the length of his reflection. The look of incredulity plastered across his face was almost comical. He swallowed, cleared his features as best he could, and put on a tentative smile.

He staggered backwards. "Whoa."

"And that's not even full power," Rowan giggled, stepping up behind him and resting her chin on his shoulder.

"I don't even know what I'm looking at," Sammy confessed.

Rowan smiled. "A girl."

That was absolutely, positively not the right answer, but Sammy couldn't let her see his honest reaction. He put on another tentative smile and tried not to look at his own face in the mirror as he did so. He still looked like himself, sure, but he also looked like not-himself enough that the little smile he was sporting was making his own knees weak, and his heart pound harder, and his stomach growl.

No wait, that last one had nothing to do with his reflection. "Um. Excuse me." It seemed strangely indecent to make such a sound while he also looked like this.

His cousin stepped backwards, laughing. "We can go downstairs for dinner, but we have to open the door to do that, and to open the door you have to stop looking at yourself."

"Oh ha ha," Sammy retorted, and reached forward to open the door. He did steal one last glance as the mirror turned and his image slid out of sight. And then he was standing in front of the open door, looking out into the hallway. "Um. Rowan," he said uneasily. "You're sure your dads will be okay with this?"

"Psssh," she snorted, and gently pushed him out the door. "They're not going to bat an eye."

CHAPTER THREE

Detransition, Maybe?

In the end, Rowan had to get behind Sammy, put her hands on his shoulders, and gently push him into the dining room.

His uncles were seated at the dining room table, both of them engrossed in books. Gideon looked up first, blinked at Sammy's appearance, and then pasted on a smile that at least seemed genuine. When Henry did not look up, Gideon reached over and whacked his upper arm. He shot Gideon a shocked look, and then followed his gaze to Sammy. His eyebrows drifted upwards.

"Dads," Rowan said, coming around Sammy and dropping her hand to his waist, "I'd like you to meet Samantha. Your niece. She/her pronouns, if you please."

They'd agreed in whispers that Rowan would make the introductions, so all Sammy had to do was half-lift one hand, wave awkwardly, and say, "Hi."

"It's a pleasure to meet you properly, Samantha," Gideon said, smile bright. "You look lovely."

Henry looked from Sammy to his cousin. "Rowan, did you trans your cousin within the first hour of his—her, apologies—her visit?"

"I did no such thing, she came prepared," she responded, and gave Sammy the tiniest little shove towards his seat, where a place setting was waiting. She circled the table to her own place.

"Prepared?" Henry echoed.

Gideon rolled his eyes. "Those aren't Rowan's clothes, babe."

"Were you wearing that under the hoodie?" Henry asked, mystified.

"No," Sammy answered, and pasted on a hesitant smile. "I, uh, I'm not out of the closet. At home. But I..." What the hell, he thought, might as well commit. "I thought I could try things out here. If

that's... okay?"

Henry nodded decisively. "Of course it's okay."

Gideon, seated around the table corner from Sammy, put a gentle hand over his. "Samantha, you said you're not out at home. So just to be clear, and so we don't make a mess of things: do your parents know?"

"Oh, no," Sammy said, shaking his head. "So please don't—"

"We wouldn't dream of it," Gideon said with an encouraging smile and shake of his head. "And just to make things perfectly explicit, I'm also transgender. I came out as a trans man... gosh...twenty...six years ago, now?"

Sammy looked from Gideon to Henry, who shrugged. "Don't worry about me, I'm used to being the only cis at the table."

"Cis?" Sammy echoed, uncomprehending.

"Opposite of trans," Rowan supplied quickly, and then told her dads, "There aren't a lot of resources available for young queers in... damn, whatever town you grew up in, Sammy, I forget the name."

"Oak Grove," he supplied with a weak smile. "And by not a lot, it's really, uh, none."

Henry looked from Rowan to Sammy. "So 'Sammy' is still okay?" he asked hesitantly. "I'm terrible at switching names, just ask these two."

"The cis are going to tell you that a lot," Rowan stage-whispered, hand comically raised to her lips. "Just smile and nod."

Sammy smiled and nodded as instructed. "So um. Not to change the subject, but. What's for dinner?" He was desperate for the conversation to be about anything other than him, his new fake gender, and the stream of lies he was now telling everybody.

"Oh!" Gideon yelped, and bounced to his feet. "We've got a curry, a big pile of naan, rice... it's all in the warming oven." He kicked Henry's chair and said, with curious emphasis. "I could use a hand getting it all out onto the table."

Henry's look of confusion passed quickly. He set his forgotten book on the table and followed his husband into the kitchen.

"See?" Rowan grinned across the table at Sammy. "That went well."

Sammy nodded. It had, and now he felt kind of weird and hollow. It had been too easy; they believed his lie without, as Rowan had said, the bat of an eye. Sammy felt terrible, and groped for a way to change the subject. "One question."

"Shoot."

“What’s a curry?”

Rowan looked at him blankly and then giggled. “Oh wow, Country Mouse. We’re just getting started with you, aren’t we?”

Curry, it turned out, was sort of a spicy stew. And naan was just lumpy pizza crust with garlic on top. By what Sammy suspected was the mutual agreement of his hosts, dinner conversation stayed away from his purported gender and instead focused on the City, Columbia, and everyone’s studies.

Henry was both a lecturing professor and a practicing doctor, although the latter somehow didn’t mean he had an office and patients who came to him with their common colds. He did clinical trials and developed drug treatments, mostly focused in muscle development and pain management.

Gideon was a gender studies professor, which was a subject Sammy hadn’t been aware even existed. Apparently it was all about how sex and gender affected how people interacted with each other and greater society. He was an adjunct professor most places, which meant he scrambled to filled in holes in class schedules for the tenured professors who had secure places at their schools. He was writing a book about detransitioners, which he intoned so gravely that Sammy decided not to ask who or what that was.

Rowan was in her second year at Columbia undergrad, well on her way towards completing her pre-med degree (“technically, it’s a biochem degree, but really it’s just pre-med”). After undergrad, she’d attend one of the many medical schools in the city, after which she hoped to become an endocrinologist.

“Do you have any idea what you’d like to study?” Gideon asked, and suddenly all eyes were on Sammy.

He swallowed. They were all so intent on their academic pursuits, and he had nothing outside of a vague desire to use college as an excuse to move out of Oak Grove. “Um. Not really?” he stammered. “I mean, I’m... mostly here to even see what’s... possible?”

“What are your interests?” Henry asked, in a way that he probably thought sounded casual but instead came across the table as dismissive and judgemental.

Sammy tore off a piece of naan. “Uh. Getting out of Oak Grove?” he answered cheekily, and then stuffed his face with flatbread.

Gideon and Rowan chuckled, but Henry laughed. Guffawed. And then it got away from him and he ended up pounding the table and

shakily pouring half a glass of water down his throat. When he finally recovered, eyes still streaming, he looked across the table and said, "Honey, I completely understand."

"It can't be easy living there," Gideon sympathized. "Especially in the closet. I've only been once—decades ago, now—and it was... I think the polite word is 'quaint?'"

"Oh my god, you actually got to visit?" Rowan gasped. "How did I not know this?"

"Oh, I don't know if I'd call it a visit," Gideon chuckled. "We drove in, we had dinner, we had planned to stay the night... but we drove out after dessert. Found a nice little B&B called the Fairmont a few miles out of town."

"Clairmont," both Henry and Sammy corrected, and shared a smile. Sammy added, "And that's technically still in Oak Grove."

Gideon shrugged. "I can never tell where little towns begin and end. Anyway, it was... not a populous place." He looked to Sammy. "Are there any other transgender people in town? Are we the first you've met face-to-face?"

"Um, no, actually," Sammy answered, and frowned down at his plate. "Or maybe. I... don't know. A couple years back, one of the girls on the basketball team, uh, came out. Wanted everybody to call her Mitch."

"Wanted everybody to call him Mitch?" Rowan gently suggested.

But Sammy shook his head. "Uh, no. I've...got it right. Because. Well. They had a big school presentation about it, and the teachers told us that we had to use he and him for, uh, her. And then there was a PTA meeting, apparently? I didn't go to that. Mom did. And it was all anybody talked about for, like, weeks. But then Barbara—that is, the girl who wanted to be called Mitch—she took it all back, and asked everybody to call her, well, her. And she. And Barbara." He shrugged. "So I don't know if that counts."

"She detransitioned," Gideon sighed, sitting back in his seat. "Poor thing."

"I, uh, don't know actually that word?" Sammy admitted with a shaky don't-hate-me smile.

"So transition—specifically gender transition—is the process of moving from living as one gender to living as another," Gideon explained, falling easily into lecturing mode. "It can encapsulate all sorts of stuff: names and pronouns, hormone therapy, bureaucracy paperwork, surgeries, you name it. And all that can be... very

stressful, as you well know. And sometimes..." Here his cadence faltered, and suddenly he looked like he was telling a child their pet rabbit had been run over in the street. "Sometimes people transition back, to their original gender presentation. Undo all the changes they made as best they can, and go back to living as their assigned gender. That's detransition."

Sammy scowled. "So they were... wrong about it? About who they are?"

Gideon heaved another sigh. "Not usually. Most of the time, it's just the... pressure and the stress of transition, and especially the people in their lives not accepting them as their professed gender. It can get to you. It's a lot. So they go back to a presentation that everyone in their lives can accept, and which has fewer external stresses bearing down on them."

"That's... sad," Sammy said, trying to sympathize. Gideon plainly cared a great deal about the subject, so much that he was writing a whole book about it. But buried in the tragedy, Sammy saw a glimmer of hope for himself. Carefully, he said, "You said... usually. Most detransitioners weren't wrong, they were just overwhelmed by, like, the world. But some of them... they were wrong?"

Gideon searched Sammy's face for a long moment. "Statistically speaking, when you talk about this many people, there's always going to be exceptions. So we don't say, for instance, that all detransitioners were forced to by societal pressures. It's not one hundred percent. There's always outliers."

"Outliers?"

Gideon waved a hand. "Sorry, statistics jargon. There's always an exception. Those exceptions, in statistics, are called outliers." When Sammy nodded, he elaborated: "Whenever you look at anything sociologically, there's always somebody doing something unexpected." He shrugged. "People make weird mistakes or make poor decisions for the wrong reasons all the time. And that applies to gender, too."

"So—"

"So yes, every once in a while, somebody detransitions because they were wrong." Gideon couldn't help adding: "But the vast, vast majority aren't. It's hard to track, statistically, but it appears that most detransitioners actually retransition later in life, when circumstances are more favourable."

Sammy grinned, and then realized that he maybe shouldn't be. "That's, uh, great that they... finally get their chance," he stammered,

all the while thinking: this. This was his way out.

Sammy could dress up and call himself Samantha tonight. Heck, he could do it all weekend, since he didn't have any other clothes. And then he could go home to Oak Grove, back to his boring old life and comfortable old wardrobe. When he came back to go to school, he could just say: he detransitioned. He was one of those outliers, doing something unexpected. He wasn't going to retransition, he had just been trying things out and he decided he didn't like it after all.

And nobody had to ever know the truth.

Sammy was riding the subway to go clubbing in the City, just like he'd always dreamed. True, he was not dressed like he usually was in those dreams, but he told himself that was a minor detail. His cool, hot cousin was going to get him in, there would be dancing, and drinking, and maybe even drugs? He was almost vibrating with excitement.

Rowan examined him from across the subway with a slight smirk. "How you doing over there, Country Mouse?"

Sammy dropped his hands onto his knees and willfully ignored the feel of fishnet stockings under his palms. "I'm really excited," he admitted, jostling along as the subway's movements. "We don't have anything like this back home."

"Like the subway?"

He rolled his eyes. "Like clubs. Like... anything fun to do at night."

"Like being yourself," she grinned back. "You sure you're okay with the outfit? We can still go back and change."

"I'm fine," Sammy insisted with a shake of his head. After dinner Rowan had dragged him back upstairs, scrubbed off the "respectable" makeup she'd put on an hour earlier, directed him to shave (borrowing shaving supplies from Henry, because Sammy hadn't packed any even in the bag he'd lost on the bus), and then dressed him up like a doll.

She'd put him in the (very fiddly) fishnet stockings, a disturbingly short pleated skirt, and one of Rowan's old tops hiding in the back of her closet. It was sleeveless and tight, with a high neck that obscured Sammy's borrowed tits, and its cream colour complemented the purple skirt (so Rowan said). The shoes were the hardest to manage, since Sammy's sneakers were obviously unacceptable, and Rowan's feet were a size larger than his. But the depths of her closet disgorged some old strappy sandals that could be strapped tighter than she'd ever worn them, and that would do.

She'd kept his hair in the cute little sweep he'd worn for dinner and

then gave him a “full face,” which was so many different creams and colours and steps that he’d lost track. By the time she was finished, he literally didn’t recognize himself. His face was clear of all the little spots and acne that he was accustomed to. His eyes looked huge, framed by pencil-thin arched eyebrows, a soft gradient of colour over his lids, and bright blush on his cheeks. His eyelashes were enormous, like a cartoon character. At least five different cosmetics had turned his lips into a shining, blood-red flower.

They’d also already “pre-gamed,” which meant drinking before heading out. The two of them had demolished a small, curved bottle of vodka on the walk between the neighbourhood convenience store (“it’s called a bodega, not a convenience store!”) and the subway station. So Sammy was already very relaxed, which probably accounted for a significant chunk of him not caring much about what he was wearing.

Besides, what did he care if he didn’t look like himself? In fact it was probably all for the best, because this way, when he came back “post detransition,” nobody would recognize him.

“Oh shit, I almost forgot,” Rowan said, digging into her tiny little handbag. She produced a colorful little plastic container which she pried open to reveal a handful of tiny little pills. She quickly slipped one out and popped it into her mouth.

Sammy tried and failed not to stare, and his cousin spotted him.

“Fuck, did you not take yours tonight?” she said, and held out the pill container. “You want one of mine?”

“What is it?” Sammy asked, hoping and fearing what the answer might be. When you went clubbing, you took ecstasy, right?

“It’s just E,” Rowan explained casually. “If yours are buried in your bag back at my dad’s and we’ll be out late... it’s probably better to just pop one of these instead.”

Sammy chose not to explain that he did not come to the City with his own stash of party drugs. “Sure, thanks,” he said, and carefully removed one of the tiny little pills. A memory surfaced and he placed it on the tip of his tongue like he’d seen in a movie once.

Rowan giggled and shook her head. “No, no, underneath your tongue. Like thiaaaauuuugggghhhhh.” She opened her mouth and lifted her tongue, revealing the quickly-dissolving pill underneath.

With a little lingual gymnastics, Sammy shifted the pill to under his tongue, instead, and gave his cousin the thumbs up. He imagined describing his trip to one of his classmates back home: they went out clubbing in the City, no big deal, pre-gamed to the far side of tipsy first

and then took some ecstasy before they got going. Man, this night could not get any better.

It was a short and rather chilly walk from the subway station to the club, which was some sort of taco bar during the day, but at night they opened up the downstairs. There was no line at the entrance, which Sammy found vaguely disappointing—they couldn't be picked to skip to the front of the line, but would they have, anyway? He looked girlish, sure, but he hardly looked, you know, hot.

There was, however, a bouncer standing before the thumping door at the bottom of the stairs. He saw the two of them coming and gestured for IDs. Rowan brandished her fake ID, shamelessly holding it up to her cleavage as she leaned forward to say into the bouncer's ear: "This is my cousin Samantha! From out of town! She lost her ID."

The bouncer looked Sammy over critically, and from the expression on his face, without being much impressed. But he looked sidelong at Rowan, shrugged, and let them in.

On the other side of the door, Sammy crashed into his cousin, giggling. "I can't believe that worked! Oh my god!" he cried, because on the other side of the door, the basement opened up into a tableau that staggered anything he'd ever imagined.

There were stalactites on the ceiling. The walls rippled with rocky texture, melting seamlessly into the ceiling and floors. Tiny fissures in the rock glowed with pink light. There was a bar and there were a handful of tables, and then the dance floor, filled with people grinding and gyrating. Orange chandeliers competed with swirling purple lights from the distant stage.

Rowan watched him as he stared, and then laughed. "Yeah, I picked right for your first time," she declared, and pulled him forward. "Let's daaaaance!"

Sammy had planned on explaining that he didn't actually know how to dance, that he'd just sit on the sidelines and watch, but his cousin didn't even give him the chance. She plunged the both of them into the press of bodies bumping and grinding away. They jostled their way through, with Sammy accidentally making contact with more people than he'd intentionally touched in the past two months. It smelled like sweat and exhale and a dozen different perfumes and colognes.

Rowan found a pocket of space big enough for one and a half bodies and the two of them took up residence, bouncing along to the beat. Sammy roughly mimicked Rowan's movements, hesitantly throwing

his hands in the air and waving them like he just didn't care. And eventually, he realized, he kind of didn't. It was fun moving his body along with the music, along with all the other people on the dance floor.

And any inhibitions he'd planned to have had probably been taken care of by the drugs and booze. He certainly felt free of them as the music coursed through his body.

He danced alongside Rowan, mostly. Occasionally Rowan moved close to somebody else and they'd dance in close proximity while Sammy watched, half-rejected and half-watchful. But she always came back to him, and mostly they danced together. Eventually somebody sidled in next to Sammy and he got to dance close, himself. It was over before he even got a good look at her, outside of the sparkling green sequins of her tight dress.

The music just kept going. Unlike, say, a playlist, with a start and stop to each song, here all the songs just blended together, and so did the dancing. So Sammy had no idea how long they'd been flailing around on the dance floor when Rowan tugged at his shirt and indicated that she'd like to take a breather. He followed her off the dance floor.

The tables and chairs they'd passed on entry had been only half-filled then. Now they were all claimed, and most of them were thronged. Rowan looked a little disappointed until she shouted, "Oh, Finn!" She grabbed Sammy's hand and pulled him after her.

Standing by the last table closest to the door was a tall figure in a dazzling sequinned dress, all in rich green. Sammy grinned, recognizing the backside of the girl he'd danced with briefly. Finally he'd get a good look at her. She turned towards Rowan and—

All the gears in Sammy's brain gummed up all at once.

Lean, toned body; sleek sparkly dress; long brown hair; caramel skin; bright amber eyes... and a big bushy beard. The dancer in the green dress was a man?

"Samantha, this is Finley," Rowan was saying. "They and them. Fellow biochem student. Finley, this is Samantha; she's my cousin from... well, the middle of nowhere. I forget the name of the place."

Finley smiled, revealing perfect teeth. "I love nowhere!" they exclaimed. "And didn't we just dance together?"

"I think so," Sammy admitted uncertainly. "Your dress is... amazing."

The... not-man grinned wide, but before they could respond to the

compliment, Rowan sidled up beside them and cooed, "Finn, can we sit at your taaable?"

Finley patted the table surface affectionately. "Mi mesa es su mesa! Actually, you can hold it down while I grab drinks. What can I get you girls?"

"Oh no, it's so expensive here!" Rowan protested, and crashed into the cushioned seats along the wall.

Finley shrugged and fluffed his beard playfully. "They admit me as a guy, so they expect me to buy a couple drinks. And since I don't drink, I might as well treat you two."

"Vodka tonic," Rowan acquiesced, and then reached forward to snag Sammy's hand and drag him into the seat beside her. A little quieter, she asked, "You want the same, Sammy, or something different?"

"Same's fine, I guess?" he answered, taking entirely too much pleasure in being smooshed up against his soft cousin.

Finley pouted, fists on their hips. "You bitches are boring! You sure you don't want something, you know, colourful and fruity and shit?"

Remembering that he was here to try new things, Sammy tried to sit up a little straighter and ended up toppling forward onto the table. "Actually, yeah," he reversed himself, and then realized he didn't even know what he could order, if he wanted. "Um. Surprise me?" he suggested with a slightly manic smile.

Finley leaned over the table to match Sammy's posture. "Oh, a challenge! Well. Surprising people is my specialty." And then they strutted off towards the bar. Sammy watched the green-sparkled ass sway and bounce into the crowd.

When he glanced over at Rowan, she was watching him watch Finley. One delicate eyebrow was cocked higher than other. Did he do something wrong? "What?"

She raised both eyebrows high in mock skepticism. "I dunno, there's throwing yourself at somebody and then there's, like, literally throwing yourself across a table at them."

"Oh no, I didn't—I mean—I slipped," he said, and tried to demonstrate how his wrists had lost their purchase on the edge of the seat cushion.

"It's okay, they like girls," Rowan grinned impishly. "And everybody else, really. And obviously their being genderqueer isn't a dealbreaker for you." She giggled. "Your faces were so close there you could have kissed."

Sammy was brown and this corner of the club was dark, but he could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks and he was certain his whole face was lit up red. He covered his face with his hands. "Please don't say anything embarrassing," he begged.

"I won't say anything at all," his cousin grinned, and picked up her handbag. "Because I'm not gonna be here." Finley returned just as Rowan stood up. She grinned at them and declared, "I'm gonna go pee." Then his treacherous cousin winked, and not subtly, before flouncing off.

Finley deposited a tall clear drink in front of the seat opposite Sammy and then placed before him a violently pink drink in large curvy glass, garnished with, of all things, a stick of cotton candy. While Sammy boggled at the neon monstrosity, Finley slid into the seat next to him.

Sammy tried to ignore the heat coming off Finley's adjacent body. "What even is this?" he asked of the drink.

"I'm not sure," the genderqueer said, leaning in so they could be heard over the thump and blare of the music. "I asked for the fruitiest, most colourful cocktail they made."

"This is cotton candy," Sammy pointed out needlessly.

"Feels appropriate," Finley replied with a grin. "You seem sweet."

Sammy's brain gummed up again. They did not just say that, did they? He was hallucinating. The drugs had kicked in. But nothing else in the club seemed to be distorting into spaghetti or swimming around aimlessly, which is how drugs worked, right? Was he really getting hit on? How was he even supposed to respond to that?

For lack of any better idea, he leaned forward to find the straw decorated with pink spirals down its length and took a sip. The drink tasted like sugar.

"Ro says you're from out of town," Finley tried along a different tack. "This your first time in the City?"

Sammy bobbed his head. "Does it show?"

"Little bit," came the reply, along with a hand wagging like a seesaw. "It can be a lot at first. You're lucky to have such a great guide to show you around."

Sammy couldn't help but smile at that, and nodded. "Rowan's awesome."

"Rowan?" Finley yelped, mock-affronted and laughing. "I meant me!"

"So far, all you've shown me is how to spike my blood sugar,"

Sammy jibed back, and took a long pull off the straw to demonstrate.

Finley put their elbow on the back of the bench and watched with every indication of appreciation. Too late, Sammy remembered that his painted lips made everything he did with them look salacious. He coughed into his drink.

“Careful there!” Finley reached forward to steady the ungainly drink before it toppled, and then to pat Sammy’s back as he regained control of his breath. He actually found the gesture rather soothing, and leaned into Finley’s hand a little.

When his breathing was finally back to normal, he tried going on the offensive. Maybe if he asked questions, Finley couldn’t make passes. “So you’re at Columbia for biochem? Pre-med like Rowan.”

Finley nodded, smiling. “What can I say, I like bodies.”

Sammy cursed himself for making that one too damn easy. “I’m here for Preview Days this weekend,” he said. “Did you do that back when you were looking at schools?”

“I did,” they answered, bobbing their head enthusiastically. “I came in all the way from Nebraska. First trip to the Big City. Toured the campus, sampled some classes, ate at the dining hall, got fucked senseless in a club bathroom. After that, I was hooked.”

Going on the offensive clearly wasn’t working. In fact, it was only serving to fluster Sammy even further. Who talked about fucking in the bathroom with people you’d just barely met? Was that City behaviour or was it just Finley?

It was Rowan who came to the rescue, plopping down in what was now her chair, opposite Sammy and Finley, and picking up her vodka tonic. “I’m gonna rest my feet for the length of this drink and then I’m getting back out there,” she declared. “I have a quiz tomorrow and I want to dance myself into a zen state where I’m incapable of overthinking anything.”

His cousin looked across the table and smiled conspiratorially, which is when Sammy realized that Finley’s hand was still comfortably resting between his shoulderblades.

He shot up out of his seat. “Um. I’ve got to. Go.”

“Bathrooms’ over there, by the door,” Rowan supplied helpfully, and Sammy’s feet started moving in the direction she indicated.

“I can show her,” Finley offered, and fell into step alongside him.

Sammy looked back at them, stammering, still backpedalling towards the toilets, “Oh, uh. You don’t have to—”

Finley just winked in response, and kept following.

He could just duck into a bathroom stall and lock it behind himself, Sammy thought desperately. There's no way Finley would just stand there in the middle of the men's room... oh wait. Sammy couldn't go into the men's room dressed like this. Could Finley follow him into the women's with a beard? Could Sammy, for that matter, just nonchalantly walk into the women's?

Sammy's brain was about to overheat when he came upon a bunch of people standing down the length of a short hallway, lined up opposite three doors and a sign proudly proclaiming that all the bathrooms were gender-neutral single occupancy facilities.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Sammy got in line. Finley, unsurprisingly, leaned up against the wall beside him.

The line moved slowly. As each door opened and disgorged a relieved clubgoer, the head of the line ducked in after them. Sammy didn't even have time to wonder how an amorous couple would slip in together before two men just walked in, hand in hand. Nobody so much as lifted an eyebrow.

There was at least no conversation in the bathroom line, so Sammy had time to calm down and think. Finley had the wrong idea, here. Sammy had no interest in getting fucked in a club bathroom no wait a minute, that actually did sound kind of hot. Of course Sammy wouldn't have any idea what to do in that situation—his outsider status had kept him completely free of small town romances—but he could fake it, right? Or he'd make a complete ass of himself, in front of Rowan's friend. And Finley would tell Rowan, and Rowan would laugh. At him.

Sammy dropped his hands to his sides, and a moment later Finley's hand brushed up against his, one exploratory pinky stroking gently. Before he could consciously decide how to respond, though, he flinched away from the touch.

Finley's voice was butter smooth and soft in Sammy's ear. "Am I pushing too hard, Samantha?"

A little tension unwound from his shoulders. "A little, yeah," he confessed.

The door at the very end of the hallway, back where the line started, opened up; the girl at the front of the line scrambled to claim her rightful place before somebody who hadn't been waiting as long darted in there.

"Much as it pains me to say it," Finley murmured, just barely audible over the noise of the club, "we don't have to fuck in the

bathroom. And, to be perfectly explicit, anywhere else.”

Sammy exhaled for what felt like the first time in ten full minutes. Finley’s hand twitched to move away, but Sammy squeezed it tight. “Thank you,” he nearly whispered. “It’s not that I don’t... want to—”

Finley got comfortable on the wall next to Sammy. “It’s exactly that you don’t want to, honey, and that’s okay.”

“Yeah, but it’s not that you’re—”

“Oh hush,” came their quick interruption. “It’s okay if it’s that, too. We like what we like.”

“I don’t know what I like,” Sammy sighed so quietly he wasn’t sure if Finley could even hear him.

A shrug. “It takes time to figure it out.”

Sammy was very near the end of the line, now. “Yeah, but I don’t think I’ve been trying to figure it out, if that makes sense? And I’d... like to. Start. Figuring it out.” Ugh, why was this all so complicated?

A bathroom door opened and the line shrunk by another body. They all shuffled down the hall.

“Finley?”

“Hm?”

“Can you help me? Start figuring it out?”

They took a moment to reply. “How would I do that, Samantha?”

A flush, a squeaking door, shuffling feet. Sammy was the new front of the line. He licked his lips. “Just kiss me?”

Finley didn’t answer other than to smile, gently press Sammy’s right hand against the wall, and pivot around until their free hand slipped along his waist. They pressed their shimmery green body up against his to pull him close. When Sammy’s breath caught at the movement, Finley dove in, lips spreading and tongue spearing and suddenly Sammy was very appreciative of the unyielding wall supporting him from behind.

Sammy’s first kiss.

After a moment of uncertain flailing, his free hand fluttered up to rest on the back of Finley’s neck, gently pulling them closer. The beard was little scratchy. Their lips tasted like spearmint. His hips arched up to press more of his body against Finley’s.

All too soon they broke away, amber eyes watching Sammy’s face. It would have been prolonged eye contact if Sammy could make his own eyes focus. They released his trapped hand and waist. A toilet flushed. “You’re up,” Finley told him with a smirk and backed away down the hall.

One of the bathroom doors opened; Sammy staggered in.

It's not like he ever had to pee in the first place, so after locking the door, he braced his hands on either side of the sink and stared himself in the eye. That plan immediately went sideways, because he'd forgotten he didn't look anything like himself. It was like trying to stare down a mask.

He got kissed! Somebody kissed him, because they wanted to kiss him, and then they kissed him, and kissing, it turned out, was amazing. He waved his hands in front of his face (not rubbing his face because that would smudge everything). Something came bubbling up from deep within him, and suddenly he was giggling madly, and he glanced back in the mirror and—

Oh. That's what Rowan meant by a full power smile.

Sammy was not one for exaggeration, so he couldn't, wouldn't say that he looked like a pretty girl, but... when he was all done up like this and he really and truly smiled, there was certainly something compelling about it. Seeing that smile made him want to smile, and he so he did smile, and then he was looking at himself smile, and it made him want to smile, and it just looped around endlessly.

He couldn't help it; he giggled some more, laughed, leaned up against the wall, slid down to the floor.

The floor was disgusting, so he immediately stood back up.

Somebody probably needed to actually use the restroom, so he turned towards the door, shaking his head in disbelief. One last glance back at the mirror—still smiling—and he headed out.

There were more people at the table when he returned. More than there were chairs: Rowan was now sitting in the lap of a rather dapper man, and a new girl was perched on top of the bench seats up against the wall, with another girl nestled between her shins. His cousin shot him an incandescent smile. "Hey Sammy, Finley's friends got here."

"I'm not your friend, too?" asked the man she was sitting on, teasingly.

Rowan planted a familiar hand on his chest and elaborated, "The people who Finley had planned to meet here, and who they were saving a table for, have arrived. They are also my friends, assuming the definition of friends extends to people who make plans to go clubbing together and leave you out of it."

"You had dinner with your dads and your out-of-town cousin," the girl on top protested, and extended one foot to nudge Rowan's shoulder with her toe.

"You got here at one in the morning, I don't think that's a conflict with dinner plans," Rowan shot back without turning to face the girl, and blessed Sammy with an exasperated grin. "Anyway, this is Vikram. The girls behind me are Agatha and Zoey."

"Which one's which?"

Finley shouted, "Agatha's the top and Zoey's the bottom," which caused the whole table to erupt in laughter. Agatha nodded; Zoey leaned further back into her legs. Both looked rather pleased with themselves.

Whatever the joke was, Sammy didn't get it. Certainly it would have been easier to say Agatha was the Black girl and Zoey the white girl, but maybe they didn't want to lean too hard on the race thing. So top and bottom it was.

There wasn't an empty seat for Sammy, so he pointed towards the dancefloor. "So... dancing, I guess?"

Finley shook their head and motioned Sammy closer. "I have good news for you, Samantha. They've all agreed to help you with your research."

"My research?" he repeated, confused.

"Yeah. Your figuring out what you like." They gestured around the table. "They're all going to take turns making out with you, so you can, you know, collect empirical data."

Sammy laughed, thinking it was a joke.

"And then Agatha is all... I don't wanna say anything rude or whatever, but like, she's so squishy? Like, in the best possible way," Sammy blathered away to Rowan as they walked along the street towards her dad's townhouse. It was more than a little chilly, and Sammy skipped along to keep warm without a coat. Rowan had a thin little cardigan, which couldn't really be keeping her warm, but she walked at a sedate pace, silently smiling and nodding along with Sammy's excited monologue. The eastern horizon was beginning to glow.

Sammy narrowly avoided tripping right over a fire hydrant. "The way Vik just wrapped me up in his arms, though. That was. That was, uh, cool. I don't have words for most of these feelings."

That, at least, got a little laugh out of Rowan. "I'm glad you had a good time."

"I had the best time," Sammy responded, grinning so wide he felt like his face was going to split in half. He'd seen his reflection in store

windows; his lipstick was a disaster, smeared all over his lips and cheeks and chin, supplemented generously with extra shades of red from Finn and Agatha and Zoey.

Rowan looked up at her old home as it rose before them. "Hey Sammy, do you mind if I crash with you here?" she asked, sounding as exhausted as she looked. "It's so late it's early, and I don't wanna go back to my dorm. I could even do your makeup before you leave for Preview Days?"

"I mean, it's your house," he shrugged.

"Yeah, but the question is if you mind sharing," she clarified. "In my bedroom, there's only one bed."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Simple Version

Sammy followed Rowan inside, creeping after her as quietly as possible. The girl made no such allowance for the late hour (or, rather, the early hour) and clomped up the stairs to her room. She weaved slightly as she went, and Sammy wondered if the cause was inebriation or exhaustion; the girl had ample cause for both.

Once in her bedroom, Rowan went straight to the drawers inset into her closet and started rummaging. She had a pair of pajamas in hand before Sammy could figure what she was even looking for.

There might be pajamas in the roller bag. The only question is if he'd recognize them as such. He himself had not slept in anything more elaborate than a teeshirt and a pair of briefs for years. Weren't pajamas for little kids?

He went digging in the bag and came up with something that looked probable. Lifting it up with a look of triumph, he turned to show them to Rowan and boggled.

She was naked.

Club gear dropped in a pile at her feet and one half of the pajama bottoms pinched between her knees, she squirmed her upper body around as she struggled to pull on the top half of the pajamas. Her exposed breasts bounced around merrily throughout the effort.

Sammy couldn't look away. He'd never seen a girl's boobs before, not in real life. And her head was buried inside her pajama top, so she couldn't see him watching, which he really shouldn't be doing, but... boobs.

Eventually the girl's blonde locks started spilling out of the neck hole and Sammy tore away his gaze before her eyes inevitably followed. He shucked off his own clothes as quickly as possible: top

and skirt and fishnets, no wait, sandals first and then fishnets, and bra and—whoops, there went the breast forms.

By the time he'd scrambled to catch them as they bounced across the floor, Rowan had crawled into bed, pressing herself up against the wall. "We can make this work, right?" she asked sleepily. "I just need like two hours."

"Yeah, I can, uh, fit in there," he answered, pulling on somebody else's pajamas over the underwear that also wasn't his, but that he was also absolutely not going to take off, because he had seen a rather nice pair of bouncing boobs, in person, and there were natural consequences for seeing such things. Hard consequences.

He climbed into bed, striving to keep a good six inches between his butt and Rowan's everything. His knees and hands dangled over the the edge of the mattress.

"No, that's not how it works," Rowan murmured, and reached forward to slide one arm under his neck and the other around his middle, pulling him close. "Haven't you ever had a sleepover?"

"Uh, not since I was, like, twelve?" he chuckled breathlessly. "One of the guys in my Boy Scouts patrol had a sleepover birthday. But we all slept in our own sleeping bags on the basement floor."

"Pssssshhhh," Rowan huffed, wafting warm, 100-proof breath over the back of Sammy's neck. "Boy sleepover. Doesn't count."

Sammy might have said something agreeable, but he wasn't sure. He was entirely distracted by the warm press of Rowan's body up against his. He was the little spoon; her legs were curled up under his legs, her belly up against his butt, her boobs squished up against his shoulderblades. She was so soft. He hoped like hell her hand, latched around his belly, wouldn't brush up against his ridiculous erection.

Because it was clear that no hanky-panky was going to happen; in fact, Rowan was descending precipitously into dreamland. Besides, it wasn't like she had any interest in him.

"Hey Rowan?" he murmured. "Can I ask you a question?"

She mumbled in the affirmative and snuggled her face against his shoulder.

He figured it was fifty-fifty that she'd even hear his question, so what the hell, why not? He asked the darkened room: "When everybody else was taking a turn kissing me, why didn't you?"

She chuckled, and he could feel her lips on the back of his neck as she said, "Cause you're my cousin, silly."

"Yeah, but not really," he answered, probably too hastily. "Not, like,

genetically. We're both adopted."

That brought her out of her descent, and she raised her head. "What are you talking about? I'm not adopted."

"You have two dads?"

Rowan snorted and tucked herself back in behind him. "My Tate grew me in his belly just like a regular father," she said, and giggled at her own joke. "Didn't know you were adopted, though."

"Yeah," he told the darkness. "I am."

"Doesn't matter, though," she mumbled on. "You're my cousin and I'm going to see you lots more, and have breakfast in the morning, and hang out other times. Hopefully this won't be your last visit. And making out with you would have made all of that weird."

"Yeah," he murmured. Because sleeping like this didn't make anything weird. "I guess that's true."

Rowan snorted into him again. "We're not kissing cousins," she giggled. He ignored how her giggles made her tits wobble against him. When her levity waned, she added, "Besides I was pretty fucking jealous, so. Focused on holding it together."

He shifted as if he was turning to face her, although he barely moved. "Jealous? Of me?"

His cousin sighed. "I've been trying to get Vik to kiss me for months. It wasn't easy to watch."

"I'm sorry."

He could feel her shaking her head. "Not your fault. Vik says he can only date desi girls, because of family expectations, blah blah blah, except I know he's dated white girls before, so why not me?" She squeezed Sammy tight. "Sometimes it's right there, right under the surface, you know? I know he wants me, but then he backs off. Does something stupid to distract himself."

Oh. "Like kiss some out-of-town boy."

"Out-of-town girl," she corrected, and shifted her fingers so she could poke him in the belly to punctuate her point. "Out-of-town girl that he's probably never going to see again, but won't it be fun to wind up the country girl on her first big trip to the City. Um. No offense."

He shook his head; she wouldn't see it, but she could feel it. "No, that sounds about right. Vik and the girls: it was kind of a silly game to them."

"Not for Finn, though," she purred, her grip around his middle slacking. "They would have put you in their pocket... and taken you home for the night." This was punctuated with a long, dreamy yawn.

"I still don't know how I feel about that," Sammy giggled. "I don't think anybody's ever wanted me like that before."

"Mmmm," Rowan mumbled into his back, falling back towards sleep. "See a pretty girl, whatcha gonna do? Flirt her up, make her blush, see how far up her leg you can get a feel."

"Pretty sure all four of them felt my underwear," he said with a wan smile—suddenly he wondered if he should actually be proud of that, in any way, shape, or form—but his cousin didn't answer except to snore softly.

Sammy watched the sunrise light up the street outside. As his buzz faded, he found himself mulling over the night, uncertain. Of course it had all meant nothing; everybody was drunk and acting out. It was the kind of wild stuff that happened when you went out partying, right? They'd probably tell stories about it for years, that night they played a quick round of "wind up the country girl" and sent her staggering into the early morning.

Should he feel ashamed? Or had he played the game just as much as they had? After all, he got kissed and felt up and... hm. Another question barged into his mind, flattening everything else.

Would they have ever played a quick round of "wind up the country boy?"

The simulated shutter sound of a smartphone taking a picture brought Sammy out of his fitful sleep.

"Daddy," Rowan groaned. "You're supposed to get consent before you take people's pictures."

Henry Masters stood over them looking a little sheepish. "Yes, but the two of you were so adorable, and I was only going to share it with Tate."

"I get veto rights," she grouched, "before it goes anywhere. Geez, what time is it?"

"Nearly nine-thirty," came the answer. "I've been calling for Sammy here since nine. I didn't know you were in here. But if you're both up and moving, I'll go down and toast another bagel for you, honey."

"Thank you," she answered muzzily, grinding her palms into her eyes. "Fuck, we didn't wash our faces last night."

Before he left, Uncle Henry said, "Sammy, we'll need to leave by ten thirty at the absolute latest. Ten ten would be preferable." He delivered the news with the gentle insistence that Sammy's own parents had used on numerous mornings. A common denominator of

parenthood.

"Yes, sir," Sammy answered, sitting up and forcing himself to nod.

Once the door closed behind Henry, Rowan turned in the bed, planted her cold-ass feet against Sammy's back, and shoved him out of bed. He went sprawling. "Alright, bitch," she cried, "that means we've got half an hour till showtime!"

Rowan scrubbed down his face, decided he didn't need (and didn't have time for) a shave, gave him some "respectable" light makeup, and then brushed out and pinned up his hair. Then she found her purse on the floor, produced her little pill case, and popped one of its little blue pills. Then she held the pill case out to him.

"In the morning?" he smiled, not at all against the idea. If whatever mild high these gave him contributed to his night last night, he was all for more.

"One every morning, one every night," she answered as if it were obvious. "Don't you...?"

He shook his head as he took a pill. "We don't have this sort of thing in Oak Grove."

Rowan looked thunderstruck. "Oh shit, of course. I made a bone-headed assumption, didn't I?"

He shrugged. That Rowan didn't understand the drug culture of a place she'd never been to didn't seem very remarkable. All they had in Oak Grove was booze, pot, and meth: two for occasional indulgence, one to stay the hell away from; nothing to get very excited about. "Thanks for supplying," he smiled, and tucked the pill under his tongue.

Besides, there was no time to talk comparative drug availabilities; they were rushing to get out the door. Since he'd only worn it for an hour or two, he threw on the outfit from dinner the night before.

"That's wrinkled," his cousin pointed out, "but a couple stops on the 7th Avenue Express will take care of it."

Halfway through putting his second fake tit into his bra, it occurred to Sammy to ask: "Hey um. Last night, Zoey, like, full-on felt me up..."

"I was there. She was... aggressive."

"Yeah, but she was, you know, grabbing these," he said, waving the floppy silicone boob in demonstration. "Not actually grabbing me, but I like... I kind of felt it anyway? It felt like she was grabbing my boob, even though I don't have a boob to grab."

Rowan, halfway through doing her eyeliner, said, "Yep. That's how

it usually works.”

“Yeah, but... how?”

She paused and looked at him in the mirror of her vanity. “You want the simple answer, or the complicated answer that deals with, like, internal conception of self, proprioception, and phantom limb syndrome?”

Sammy wasn’t sure what any of those things were, so he said, “Uh, the simple version.”

“Bodies are weird,” she shrugged, and finished her line.

“Ha, thanks.”

When she moved on to mascara, she elaborated: “Bodies know the shape they’re supposed to be and when they’re not that shape, they compensate. Don’t even get me started on eyeballs, how they actually work is existentially disturbing.”

Sammy very suddenly needed a change of subject, so he did ask her about eyeballs. That took them all the way downstairs to the kitchen, where Henry joined in with further details. The two of them went back-and-forth on the subject all the way to the subway.

“But why can’t we just grow rods and cones overtop of where the optic nerve, like, plugs in to the back of the eyeball?” Sammy asked as the train slowed for Columbia University station. “I want to know that what I’m seeing is what I’m actually seeing, and not just... made-up stuff!”

Both Henry and Rowan shrugged as they disembarked, and then they had to part ways: registration for Preview Days was up the northern street-level exit, while Rowan’s dorm was the opposite way. “Have fuuuunnnn!” she called as she went.

The campus was compact, dignified, and intimidatingly high-class. Sammy stared awe-struck at the venerable old architecture, the sharp lines of red brick and white trim, the endless columns. Blue and white balloon arches and banners all over the campus proclaimed it to be Preview Days. Following these like signposts brought them to a collection of tables set out on the central lawn.

“Welcome!” called out a chipper clerk behind the table, a middle-aged woman dressed in business attire. Her sweater vest was bright blue. Before her on the table was a stack of glossy magazines and a huge array of nametags. “Are you here for Preview Days?”

Sammy threaded his thumb under his backpack strap. “Um, yeah.”

“What’s your name, dear?”

He ignored how she said 'dear,' despite how weird it struck him. Women said it like that to guys, too, right? "Uh. Sammy Masters."

"Oh!" she squealed, recognition lighting up her face. "Our last-minute name change." Before Sammy could ask what she meant, she'd raked over the array of name tags and held one out to him. It read "Samantha Masters."

Sammy took it between numb fingers. "But I registered online as Sammy..."

"Your uncle called us this morning and explained your situation," she said with an efficient little smile.

From behind him, his uncle placed a warm hand on his shoulder. "I wanted you to feel welcome as your whole self. I hope I didn't overstep?"

You absolutely did, Sammy thought but did not say. Even if he was going to be wearing a skirt all day, he really would have rathered his nametag said Sammy. That was even properly short for Samantha, wasn't it? But he didn't want to upset his uncle, or give him any clue to this bizarre deception he seemed trapped in, so he said, "Uh, no. Thank you, Uncle Henry."

"So you can stash your bag right over here," the clerk went on, indicating a collection of other small luggage behind a barricade of folding tables. Henry wheeled it over. "All your electronics—tablet, laptop, and so on—they're in your backpack, right?"

Sammy nodded. "As instructed in the registration confirmation email."

"We'll keep your things safe until you head to your student host's dorm room, but the pre-law student volunteers don't want us to be liable for computers and things," she explained with a wink.

A beat later Sammy realized that had been a joke. He forced out a little laugh.

"The next campus tour is starting right over there," the clerk went on, pointing to a small group of young people standing under a pair of criss-crossed balloon arches. "The tour will end at the dining commons for lunch. There are a bunch of classes you can sit in on throughout the afternoon. And then you'll come back here to touch base and go meet your student host!" She seemed very excited about the whole process.

Sammy tried to muster enthusiasm to match her. This is what he came here for, right? "Thank you, ma'am."

Henry's hand came down on Sammy's shoulder again. He bent

over slightly to tell him, “My three o’clock is one of those sit-in classes, if you want to see what Intro to Anatomy looks like. No pressure, though.”

“Thanks, Uncle Henry, I might just do that. But I should probably go join the group?”

“Absolutely,” his uncle chuckled. “Enjoy the tour. Make new friends.”

Sure, thought Sammy. I’ll make a whole bunch of friends—they’ll all think I’m a girl and then if we cross paths when school actually starts, they’ll think I’m a confused weirdo who couldn’t make up my mind about my own gender. But he went anyway.

Four other teenagers waited under the balloon arches. The largest and most notable was dressed in a three-piece suit, which would have been mockable if he didn’t wear it so well. The two girls of the party—one pale, willowy, and dark-haired, the other short, curvy and blonde—seemed to be keeping their backs to each other. The last kid, a scrawny guy in a hoodie and jeans, was poking desultorily at his phone. The whole collection looked bored right up until Sammy approached. Suddenly their expressions went from blanket ennui to confusion (short blonde), suspicion (three-piece suit), interest (tall brunette), and terror (hoodie).

“Hey,” Sammy said, pairing it with a limp wave. Way to make a first impression, he kicked himself internally. He cleared his throat. “I’m Sammy.”

Before any of them could respond, a young man in a bright blue Columbia-branded tee shirt jogged up to them. “Okay! This the eleven fifteen batch? Alright! Who wants to go on a tour?” As he led them down the sidewalk, the tour guide enthusiastically asked all their names and hometowns. Sammy didn’t retain any of this deluge of information and barely mustered his own response, remembering at the last moment to say Samantha and not Sammy.

“Our first stop is Butler Library,” the guide narrated, taking them up the steps of a—to be frank—ludicrously intimidating building. Inside, the high ceiling glowing with indirect lighting and endless bookshelves did not make it any more approachable. The guide rattled off dates and names excitedly, voice hushed so as to not disturb the many students hard at work studying.

“It’s even prettier than the pictures,” the short blonde cooed.

“It is,” the guide grinned proprietarily. “Which is great. You don’t actually mind spending four or five hours a day hitting the books

when you get to do it here.”

Sammy chuckled at what sounded like a joke, but everyone else nodded eagerly. He stifled his mistaken mirth with a fake cough and a hand crushed over his lips (careful not to smudge his lipstick).

As they came out of the library, the guide turned and asked, “So what about attending Columbia are each of you most excited about?”

“Greek life, internships, networking,” suit jacket said with easy confidence. “Other schools brag about getting good jobs right after graduation, but my brother started working in finance halfway through his senior year. I want a piece of that.”

“Research for me,” the curvy blonde beamed. “I dunno what I’ll get to work on, of course, but I’m so eager to get my hands dirty with real lab work.”

“There’s a bunch of tech incubators here,” hoodie said, as if that was a full and comprehensible answer.

The tall dark-haired girl merely hooked her thumb behind her. “Butler.”

And then everybody was looking at Sammy. “Um,” he mumbled. “Mostly just the City, you know? How many other places let you go to school in the middle of New York City?”

The brunette snorted at his answer and gave him a patronizing little smile. “There’s like, three dozen colleges and universities in Manhattan alone, Samantha.”

“I know that,” he lied. “But this one’s special, you know?”

That they all agreed with, and Sammy gratefully slunk back to the rear of the group.

They walked past or looked into an astounding number of buildings, all seemingly stacked on top of and right beside each other: the fitness center, a dorm, the pool, a lecture hall that could probably seat Sammy’s entire high school. The number of times the guide said, “And this is the something-or-other department” made Sammy’s head spin. How many departments could one university have?

And then it was finally time for something Sammy did understand: lunch. The guide led them up to a dining hall named, like everything else on campus, after somebody historical and famous, and directed them to the center page of their programs, filled with five punch-out meal tickets. This would get them inside, after which it was a giant buffet and they should help themselves to whatever looked good.

“But this is where I leave you,” he said in conclusion. “Your programs have a listing of all the open classes and presentations you

can find on campus. The back page has a map, and you can always find your way back to the registration desk in the center of campus if you need directions. If there are no questions, I wish you all bon appetit!" And without actually waiting for questions, he jogged off towards the campus green.

Suit jacket jumped forward to hold the door open, gesturing grandly inside. "Ladies," he intoned. The smile on his face looked genuine when the blonde passed by, but Sammy could have sworn his lip curled as he stepped inside. The brunette followed behind him, and then suit jacket let the door swing for hoodie to catch as he brought up the rear.

They handed over their torn-out tickets, found trays and plates, and filled them. By unspoken agreement, they all flocked to an empty table and sat together.

Sammy tore into his lunch, which was a motley collection of any food he saw and didn't recognize (trying new things!), along with a few old reliables (because he was starving).

"That's quite a spread you fixed yourself," suit jacket observed. He'd stacked two burgers on his own plate, atop a small mountain of fries.

"I came to check the place out," Sammy retorted with a shrug. "Need to know if the food's any good, right?"

"Is Columbia not your first choice school?" suit jacket asked dubiously.

Sammy immediately sensed a trap, but figured he could play it cool. "My dad went here, so I'm mostly humoring him. That and I thought it'd be cool to hit up a college party, you know?"

"Party?" the blonde asked incredulously. "Here? Who in the world told you Columbia was a party school?"

"Dad, probably," sport jacket laughed. "Waxed rhapsodic about his glory days, with a generous amount of nostalgic embellishment."

Okay, fuck this. Sammy shrugged again. "I mean, we went clubbing last night, and it was a good time. So I've already checked that item off the to-do list." That should shut him up.

Suit jacket rolled his eyes instead of answering, which Sammy decided to take as a win.

"I can't imagine coming here just to party," the short girl opined. "I worked too hard to get here just to drink the same booze I can get from the grocery store back home."

"Exactly," sport jacket nodded. "And I am so looking forward to

dropping all the bullshit I've had to do for years just to pad out my application."

"Stupid clubs," hoodie muttered. "Academic fucking decathlon."

"Volunteering," the brunette groaned.

"Kissing up to school administrators," the blonde spat, and leaned in. "The guidance counselor at my school has been pushing me to add these stupid GenEd requirements—Civics and a Fine Art elective and P.E. of all things—and I had to tell her, look, this crappy school you work at doesn't offer AP Civics, it doesn't have a single AP Fine Art available, and it certainly doesn't have any AP Phys Ed, and I've got to protect my GPA. Those gen-pop classes only give 4 points for As, and if I lump that underachiever bullshit in with the rest of my course load, that will bring my average down towards 4."

Down towards 4? Sammy boggled. But GPA could only get up to 4. And his was... not near 4 at all. How did she get hers higher than the top?

But suit jacket just nodded. "I tested out of some classes to avoid that."

"I tried that," the blonde hissed, hostility aimed not at suit jacket but at the absent guidance counselor, "but I got shut down because they're 'experiential' classes."

Suit jacket snorted in disdain. "That's not a classification in any entrance requirements I've ever seen."

"Right? But it's a classification that my school apparently takes very seriously," she grouched. "So finally, I had to convince her to delay all of that shit until second semester senior year, because applications go out before the final semester's grades hit your GPA."

"Ah, smart!"

She shrugged. "At least my baby-level course load this semester gives me time to study for AP exams. I'm taking three outside of classes."

Sammy opened his mouth to ask what 'AP' was, thought better of it, and kept his silence.

Instead, the dark-haired girl said, "So Samantha, how long have you been out?" which was probably the one question he wanted to hear least. He wasn't the only one: suit jacket muttered darkly into his soup.

"Uh," he responded intelligently. He had been impressed with how girly Rowan had made him look, but he knew he didn't look like an actual girl. Girly, not girl. And here was confirmation. He'd been

clocked, and given that nobody looked surprised, apparently all four of them had seen him and thought, 'trans girl.' He coughed. "Well um. I'm... not, really? Out. Not at home."

Her eyebrows shot upwards. "Oh wow. So this is the escape route. How small a town is that small town you came from?"

"Small," he answered with a decisive nod. "We saw more people walking around campus today than there are residents of Oak Grove."

"Wait, so..." the bubbly blonde perked up, sensing the other girl had broken the ice and she could ask the questions that had been smouldering inside her. "Nobody at home knows you're..." Or apparently if she wasn't up to actually asking questions, she'd strongly imply them.

Sammy took a deep breath. "Trans. Transgender." He almost didn't stumble over the words.

"So you were... born... a...?" she kept pressing.

"Yeah," he said, blushing so hard he could feel it in his ears.

The brunette shook her head hard enough to derail the blonde's line of questioning. "You don't have to answer anything. I shouldn't have asked. You're Samantha, that's all we need to know."

Suit jacket snorted derisively.

The dark-haired girl scowled at him. "You're not going to climb the corporate ladder here with that kind of attitude, hick boy."

"I am not a hick," he shot back, his voice far louder than it needed to be. He leveled a thick finger at Sammy. "If anybody here is a hick, it's him. Her. Fuck."

"Oh my god," the willowy brunette groaned dramatically, and then locked eyes with Sammy. "I have to go to the bathroom," she declared, but didn't move to stand up.

It took a moment for the neurons in Sammy's brain to connect. Girls went to the bathroom in packs. This was an invitation, and an excuse to get away from the table. He put his napkin down. "Yeah, me too."

The blonde invited herself along, as well, and with only a little uncertainty as to where the bathrooms actually were, the trio marched away. "I'm sorry about that," the brunette told Sammy as she pushed open the door with a skirted silhouette on it.

He barely registered the apology as the threshold of the bathroom rose up toward him. Was he doing this? He guessed so, since his feet were following along after her. Besides, it was just a bathroom, right? "Wasn't your fault," he said, almost as automatically as his feet.

"It kind of was, I started the conversation," she said, making a face.

She bounced her hips a little. "Well shit, now that I'm here, I actually do have to pee." She disappeared into a stall.

Sammy leaned up against the sink counter, trying to look like he did this all the time. The fact that it was, in fact, just a bathroom didn't seem to matter much. His heart hammered in his chest. He wasn't supposed to be in here! The sudden sound of pee tinkling into the toilet bowl didn't help at all.

The blonde produced a tube of lipstick from her bag and touched herself up in the mirror. "What's it like?" she asked, not making eye contact.

It took Sammy a beat to realize he was being addressed. "What's what like?"

"You know," she said with a shrug. "Being... like you."

"Cindy," the brunette groaned from inside the stall, "she doesn't need to get it from you, too!"

"I'm curious," Cindy shot back, "and respectful." Finally she made eye contact with Sammy. "I'm an ally," she told him very seriously.

"Allies don't claim allyship, Cindy!" came a frustrated retort from the toilet.

"It's okay," Sammy said, shrugging softly. "It's.... um. It's still new. Getting to... be me, not... the knowing I'm me. I'm, uh, an Always Knew Tran."

The blonde squinted. "What's that?"

"Oh, uh," Sammy scrambled. Rowan had thrown the term around like everybody knew what it meant. "It just means... I always knew I was... Samantha, not Samuel." He cleared his throat. Wasn't he supposed to not admit to his old name? But maybe it was a good idea for him, given that he'd be back, "detransitioned," when classes started. He could lay the groundwork now. "This weekend I'm just... trying things out, you know?"

"But you've always known you were a girl," Cindy pressed again. "Even though you grew up with a..."

"Oh my god, are you just trying to get her to say the word 'penis'?" the brunette thundered as she came back out, toilet gargling behind her. "We came in here to get her away from the topic. I'm sure she's sick of it."

"Not really," he shrugged. "Everybody talks around it. Like they're scared of saying anything. It's kind of a weird vibe."

"The tech incubator kid is kind of a weird vibe," the brunette grumbled as she leaned forward to wash her hands.

"The quiet one?"

The dark-haired girl raised an eyebrow at Sammy. "Have you not seen the furtive little glances he keeps shooting you? He's gotta be an egg or a chaser."

Sammy nodded as if he knew what either of those things were. "Yeah, probably." Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Cindy faking a confident nod, too.

"So do you want to go back to the table?" the brunette asked Sammy. "We can just bolt out of here directly."

"Still kind of hungry," Sammy admitted sheepishly. "And I'll be fine. Stuff like that doesn't bother me." Because, he added mentally, suit jacket had the right of it and Sammy was properly referred to as a 'him,' anyway.

"Yeah, and you can fix your lippy afterwards," Cindy chimed in and gestured to her own lips.

Sammy glanced into the mirror and saw that nearly all his lipstick had come off during lunch. "Oh fuck. I... didn't think to bring mine along."

Cindy held hers up magnanimously. "You can borrow mine. It's not exactly the same shade, but it'll do."

"Are you guys going to the community outreach presentation?" the brunette asked. She'd produced the Preview Days program from her backpack and was scowling down at it. "I thought I'd hit that before going to an open classroom."

"I'm down," Cindy agreed with a smile. "The open class I want to hit is Anatomy, and that's at three."

"Oh, that's my uncle's class," Sammy blurted without thinking.

The curvy blonde blinked slowly. "Your uncle is Doctor Henry Masters-Roth?"

It was the first time Sammy had heard the double-barrelled surname, but that seemed like something that two men might do when they got married. He nodded.

Cindy turned on a dazzling smile complete with deep dimples. "Can you introduce me?"

"Uh, sure?" he stammered. "But first can we get back before all my food gets cold?"

When the girls—plus Sammy—returned to the table, suit jacket was already gone and hoodie got up to leave. "Didn't want them to clear the table if you weren't finished," he explained nervously, very much

not making eye contact with Sammy.

Yeah, Sammy thought as the kid scampered off. He was weirdly twitchy.

The two girls picked at the remains of their own plates and made idle chit-chat while Sammy polished off his smorgasbord of weird and familiar foods. It did not take long. And then they were stalking off across campus to a spacious dorm lounge. Beyond the huge banner proclaiming "Columbia Cares!", the space was filled with tables, placards, and smiling college students.

"What is this, again?" Sammy asked as they waded into the fray. The students manning the different booths beckoned them forward, asking them if they were worried about climate change or if they'd like to help ensure nobody went hungry in Morningside Heights.

"It's all the community outreach organizations," Cindy explained. "You know. Feed the homeless, clean up the park, mentor disadvantaged youths."

"I worked at a food bank," the brunette called back, voice elevated to cut through the din. "Every Saturday, butt crack of morning. Wanna connect with the people doing similar work here?"

"I did river clean up and active transport activism," the blonde explained as they came to a stop at a crossroads of booths. "Keep an eye out for me?"

Sammy realized they were both looking at him again. "Uh. What?"

The brunette prompted, voice pitched like she was speaking to a small child, "And what did you do, Samantha?"

"Oh, uh, nothing," he answered, shaking his head.

Cindy blinked. "What do you mean, nothing?"

"Nothing like this," he elaborated. "You guys are... really cool for doing that stuff. That's... that's really excellent."

"You didn't put any community engagement into your application?" the willowy girl asked incredulously. "You don't think that's going to be a big, gaping hole?"

She seemed to be getting angry, which Sammy did not understand in the least, so he spread his hands. "I mean, I didn't really think about it much?"

The brunette's eyes slitted. "Ah. I see how it is," she nodded. "Daddy's an alum, uncle's an alum and the current head of the Biophysics department. Who needs to actually work at putting together a decent application when you're a legacy." She spat the last word like it was a venomous insult.

"I don't think they actually do that anymore..." Sammy tried to say, quailing before the girl's sudden rage.

He needn't have bothered, because Cindy was jumping forward to shout in his defense. "Lay off of her! She's had to deal with so much! So what if she didn't have time to help out the community that piled so much hate on her?"

"Oh fuck off, Cindy," the brunette spat. "You just want her to introduce you to her uncle. She's your 'in' to the old boy's network."

"That's not true, I'm an ally!" the blonde insisted, but her valiant defense landed only the willowy girl's back as she stalked away, flipping the bird behind her. Cindy watched her go, shoulders tense and back ramrod straight, until the other girl couldn't be seen.

Sammy considered slipping away into the crowd the other way, but he wasn't fast enough.

The short blonde turned to face him with a sigh. "I'm sorry you had to hear that Samu—mantha." She started talking very fast as if she could distract him from how she'd almost used his correct name. "This is a stressful time in our lives and some of us have... a more tenuous bid for admission. Don't have the grades, try to supplement with flashy good deeds, you know? And if that gets threatened, any of us might lash out. I hate that she picked you for her target, though. That was completely unfair."

He nodded numbly and said something vaguely agreeable. The two of them completed the circuit of booths—Cindy talked at length with the bike people and the litter picker-uppers—and then they made meandering progress towards the lecture hall for Intro to Anatomy.

The class was in one of those cavernous lecture halls with stadium seating, and apparently well attended given that the room was already half full. Henry wasn't in evidence yet, so they found seats somewhere in the middle.

At three o'clock exactly Uncle Henry came in at the stage door, deposited his bag next to the podium and leapt right in to talking.

About ten minutes into the lecture, Sammy realized that, beyond "Hello" and "Welcome to Intro to Anatomy," he had not understood a single thing his uncle had said. Everything was ventral this and anterior that and he was pretty sure most of the time Henry wasn't even speaking English. Diagrams and photos were displayed above his uncle's head to illustrate what he was talking about, but if anything they only confused Sammy further.

Cindy, of course, was eating it all up with rapt attention and wide eyes. He tried to ask her a question but she only shushed him. She was rivetted.

Sammy looked around the room. Everyone else was paying attention, nodding every once in a while, jotting down notes. They all seemed to understand what was happening.

It was just Sammy who was lost.

Maybe, Sammy thought dreadfully, there was a reason for that. Maybe nobody back home thought he could get into Columbia because they knew his capabilities better than he did. And because his brain was very helpful that day, it put this into simpler language: maybe he just wasn't smart enough.

Cindy and the others had GPAs that were over 4.0 somehow. His wasn't even above 3.

Apparently you had to 'pad out' an application with stuff you'd been doing throughout your years in high school. Sammy had done nothing except attend class and sort of pay attention sometimes.

The kids here for Preview Days had come, not just with dreams, but with plans and specific goals they wanted to do and accomplish. Sammy's vague desire to see the city seemed petty in comparison. And he wouldn't have even accomplished that if it hadn't been for his cousin taking pity on him.

The kids here for Preview Days seemed like they weren't even kids: they were already adults. They were competent and knew things about the world around them and had vision for how they'd fit into it and plans on making their mark.

That's what a Columbia student looked like, and that wasn't Sammy.

If Columbia wouldn't take him, even as a legacy, none of those other schools in the City would have any reason to admit him, either. If he didn't get accepted to a school in the City, he couldn't come live in the City. And if he didn't come live in the City, he'd be stuck in Oak Grove his whole life, making fucking chairs and living above a hair salon.

Everybody was standing up, now, and his uncle wasn't talking at volume. The screen above him was blank. Apparently the lecture was over. "C'mon," he said to Cindy with a sigh. "Let me introduce you."

They tromped down the steps to the stage, where Henry was talking with a short queue of students. When they approached, he gave Sammy a smile and gestured him forward. "Everyone, this is my niece, Samantha. She's here for Preview Days. Maybe you'll see her

on campus next year.”

Fat chance of that, Sammy thought to himself, but half-turned to indicate Cindy behind him. “Uncle Henry, this is my friend Cindy. She wanted to meet you.”

Cindy didn’t leave him any more time or space to continue, shooting forward with her hand extended to shake. She nearly knocked Sammy over in her haste. “Doctor Masters-Roth, I’m so excited to meet you, you are one of my top five reasons for attending Columbia.”

His bushy eyebrows floated upwards. “Oh am I?”

“I follow the results of your lab religiously,” she went on without even pausing, “and I think the work that you’re doing is absolutely visionary. It is my dream to get accepted here and join your research team and if there is anything you can tell me to help me realize that dream, I would just love to pick your brain.”

“Well I have office hours until six,” he told her with gentle amusement. “Let me field the questions these students are waiting to ask, and then I’d be happy to...”

Sammy slipped away before hearing any more. It’s not like he hadn’t understood that she was just using him to get to his uncle—the other girl in their group had said as much explicitly, after all—but it would have been a nice surprise to discover otherwise.

Nobody wanted him for himself, just as an ‘in’ to his family members or as a plaything in a drunken game while clubbing.

The air was chilly when he stepped outside. The sun, low and orange, cast long shadows up the walls of the campus, looking far warmer than it was. The cold went right down his bared chest while also swirling around under his skirt. Sammy wished he’d dressed warmer, or brought along an extra layer, but they’d been in such a rush this morning. It hadn’t occurred to him.

Actual Columbia students probably weren’t so stupid as to leave the house without a coat in February.

He caught sight of the registration tables down the way and checked the time on his phone. He could go meet his student host now. They were scheduled to grab dinner together, with the idea that the host could answer any questions Sammy had about student life. Sammy didn’t have any questions right now, beyond “why am I so fucking stupid,” but eating sounded good.

Sammy collected his roller bag and followed the (honestly very

complicated) directions to his host's dorm room. Maybe he could bail in the morning, switch his ticket for an earlier bus, and beg Andrei to come get him a day early. He dragged his luggage up a whole bunch of steps and finally found the right door with the right number on it, and knocked.

A guy in athletic wear opened the door. He looked Sammy up and down once in confusion, and then a second time with increasing incredulity. "The fuck is this?"

"I'm Sammy," said Sammy. "I'm your Preview Days guest that you signed up to host?"

"Oh hell no!" the guy exclaimed, rather loudly. Suddenly somebody was chortling behind him, deeper in the room, then stumbling up to hang on the first guy's shoulder and stare. "We are not letting this—" and here he gestured vaguely at Sammy—"into our room."

"But you signed up—"

"I signed up to host a dude," he shot back. "Not some fucking tranny."

All language fled Sammy's brain. The word felt like a slap in the face, a shock so sudden and vile that he didn't even have the bandwidth to muse on whether he should be offended since it was actually inaccurate. It just hurt, because specifics aside, the real intent was, "you're broken, you're worthless, you're less than human," which immediately dovetailed into Sammy's own internal monologue.

"Dude," the guy's friend whispered like only the very drunk whisper, at a volume slightly louder than their speaking voice, "you're not supposed to say tranny anymore."

"I'll say whatever the fuck I want!" came the immediate and very shouted retort. "Tranny tranny tranny! Fuck off, tranny! You don't belong here!" And he slammed the door.

It took almost a full minute before Sammy found his words. "You think I don't KNOW THAT?" he screeched at the closed door. "That's all anybody's told me all fucking day! I'm not fucking good enough for you assholes, I know! Fuck you!"

He stomped down the corridor and down the stairs and got all the way to a park bench fifteen feet outside before the tide of emotion overcame him. The handle of his bag slipped out of his hand, he collapsed onto the hard wrought iron of the bench, and he sobbed.

CHAPTER FIVE

It's the Only Way to Be Sure

"Samantha?" came a gentle voice. "Is that y— oh, honey, what happened?" Arms encircled his shoulders and he didn't even know who it was but he didn't particularly care. He just clutched back and cried all over her shoulder.

A few minutes later when he pulled back, he found Zoey looking down at him, concern written across her face. It was full dark, with the university lit up behind her so bright that there were no stars in the sky. "M okay," he mumbled.

"No, you're not," she responded immediately, and looked him over. "Are you hurt? Physically, I mean? Injured." He shook his head. "Well let's get you inside and cleaned up."

He didn't want to explain what happened, but he managed to admit: "I don't have anywhere to go."

Zoey snorted as she threaded her arm under his and lifted him up. "Yes you do. My dorm room's right upstairs."

He let her carry him more than he probably should have. He was not exactly small and she was not exactly beefy. Meanwhile he was patently aware that his student host was in this dorm somewhere upstairs, and the last thing he wanted to do was cross paths with him again. But getting taken care of and getting cleaned up sounded lovely. He closed his eyes to go through the doors without balking.

Zoey guided him into an elevator—how did he miss the elevator earlier?—and punched the button for 15. When the doors finally slid closed, a good chunk of the tension in Sammy's back unravelled. His host was on eight; they'd go right past him.

On 15 he was able to walk his own damn self down the hallway, although Zoey kept hold of his bag. She pushed through an intensely

decorated and half-open room door. “She followed me home,” she quipped on entry, “can we keep her?”

“What? Ohmygod, Samantha!” and then suddenly Rowan was there, hugging Sammy tight. “What happened, have you been crying?”

Sammy cast around, confused all over again. The dorm “room” had two rooms and in the next were two beds. The decorated dorm room door they’d come through bore two construction-paper hearts in its center, labelled with Zoey and Rowan’s names. A full-length mirror on another wall confronted him with his reflection. He did look a fright: hair impressively mussed, five o’clock shadow darkening his jaw, and mascara dribbled all over his cheeks.

He let himself be guided to sit on a bed. The two girls cooed over him, scrubbed his face with wipes, finger-combed and then brushed his hair. They asked a few questions, which he barely answered, so they shifted to soft nonsense phrases like “you poor thing” and “there, isn’t that better?”

They fed him a microwave burrito, which was objectively terrible but tasted like the best thing he’d ever eaten.

Eventually they got the story out of him in bits and pieces. Zoey was aghast and horrified; Rowan just nodded grimly and made comforting noises. He cried some more, and they wiped away his tears.

“Well obviously you’re sleeping here,” Rowan declared when he had regained some semblance of coherence. “You can do your Preview Days things tomorrow, and then the day after we can check in with the dads and put you on your bus. Okay? So the weekend proceeds onwards.”

“Unless you want to go home now,” Zoey suggested gently.

Going home sounded really good, and Sammy was about to nod when Rowan said, “Or you can come with us tonight.”

“Rowan, she is in no condition to go to a frat party!”

His cousin only snorted at that. “Hey Sammy, you wanna go get drunk for free?”

“God, yes,” he croaked.

“Alright then,” Rowan crowed, and consulted her bare wrist. “We’ve got just enough time to get you ready.” Leaping off the bed, she grabbed Sammy’s forearms and hauled him to his feet. A moment later she draped a towel around his neck and pushed a mesh toiletries bag into his hand. “Shower’s down the hall.”

"Oh fuck," Sammy thought and then realized he also said out loud. "I can't just—"

But Zoey waved a hand. "The first bathroom is a gender-neutral single-stall setup, you don't have to share space. But you really do need a shower, honey." Almost apologetically, she added, "And a shave."

Rowan nodded. "Yeah. You've got dark hair, boo, so you've really got to shave, like, every day. Maybe even twice a day. It suuucks." She gestured into the toiletries bag. "I popped my razor in there, which is gonna be unweildy cause it's for legs, but it'll do the trick."

The cogwheels in Sammy's brain struggled to turn over. "You don't... need to shave? Like, your face?"

"Not anymore," his cousin replied with a perky smile. "My last electrolysis session was, like, a whole year ago. You get to have laser, though, which is kind of lucky even if you have shaving hell up until then." Her hands on his shoulders, she steered him towards the door.

"I don't understand—"

"It's okay, it's a thing for later," she cut him off. "Listen, we don't have a lot of time, so go shower, you'll feel better. Oh!" She waved at a line of hooks by the door. "Grab a room key. Always take a room key to the shower, you don't want to get locked out. Take mine." She unhooked a keyring and dropped it into the toiletries bag. "Rowan's keyring is confusing because she has two dorm room keys."

"...why?"

"You're not supposed to share or copy your dorm keys, but she and Aggie are insatiable horndogs and sometimes she has to go upstairs and service her girlfriend in the middle of the night." Rowan smiled. "Aggie's roommate loves it when that happens."

"I can't help it if Agatha is loud and I'm skilled," Zoey said, not the least bit apologetic. "Samantha, we'll put together an outfit for when you get back."

"Um, thanks," Sammy mumbled, and turned down the hallway towards the showers.

As described, there were two bathrooms, and the first one was... almost single-use. Half of the room was one big stall for shower and bath. There were, though, two toilets, so not really single-use. But there was also a lock on the door, which Sammy employed to give himself a little privacy.

He dropped Rowan's toiletries bag into a convenient sink and exhaled. "The fuck am I doing," he asked his reflection. "I think that's

becoming my fucking mantra.”

But they were pressed for time and the siren call of a free alcoholic stupor still sang in his ears, so he stripped. Clothes went into a pile on the relatively clean floor. Fake boobs went jiggling into another sink.

He scowled into the mirror. He was very stubbly; unsurprising, since he hadn't shaved for more than a day. Between his five o'clock shadow and his wipe-scrubbed face, he looked like he always did at home: disappointing.

He pulled out Rowan's shaving supplies and got to work, trying and failing to not think about how it was to grow up in a house where your mom was angelically beautiful and your dad was ridiculously debonair and you were just some squat, dusky gremlin who shared none of their DNA.

He desperately wanted to rush shaving so he could stop looking at himself, but he also wondered if he'd have got the same reception from his student host if he'd been clean-shaven. He forced himself to make sure every speck of facial hair was gone, scraping his skin raw in a few places doing so. Luckily Rowan had some aftershave moisturizer, which he applied liberally.

The shower was spacious and the water was hot, and he probably spent too long under the spray. But the drubbing the stream delivered on his skin was too good to pass up and he stood there, thinking about absolutely nothing, for a blissful few minutes.

And then it was time to get out and jump back into this farce that was somehow his life right now.

Blouse on but bra and fake boobs still in the sink, he squinted at his reflection. He looked ridiculous. He hung the towel around his neck, ends covering his lack of a bustline. He could walk down the hallway like this, right? Fuck it, he'd also just throw on the skirt and skip the annoyingly lacey underwear.

He was halfway down the empty hallway, thinking that yeah, he was going to get away with this after all, when the elevator up ahead dinged. His stomach, by contrast, dropped all the way to the ground floor. Who was going to saunter out? His student host? Suit jacket? Some other cooler, more put-together college kid who'd see right through him and sneer?

But no, it was some old lady who shuffled out, purse clutched in her hands, looking bewildered. Somehow the universe had found somebody even worse for him to—through some obnoxiously implausible series of events—end up exposing himself in front of. Or

something even worse.

The little old lady saw him and waved, taking little arthritic steps towards him. "Excuse me, I'm looking for room 1514. Can you help me?"

"Uh," Sammy stammered, glanced left, and saw that he was actually standing next to 1514. He pointed mutely.

"Oh, thank you," the lady said, eyes crinkling happily. "I'm visiting my granddaughter. This place is so big!"

He gave her a shaky smile and proceeded on his way. Behind him he heard a knock on the door and then an excited "Grandma! You made it!"

Just as he reached Rowan and Zoey's door, he could hear the little old lady say, "That nice young lady there was kind enough to point me in the right direction. Do you know her?"

Sammy flushed beet red and pushed his way into his cousin's room. Sure, he was wearing a skirt, but there was no way he looked like a nice young lady. No makeup, no boobs, shower-mussed hair. He cast about for the girls' full-length mirror and looked.

Okay, no. He was definitely a guy in a skirt. Even if it cinched his waistline and flared around his hips, he was most definitely a guy. That grandma's vision must be going.

This blouse looked so stupid without boobs to hold it up and out, though. He had to get out of it. Like, now.

"Sammy?" Rowan called from the inner room. "Everything okay?"

He doffed the towel and then the blouse as he went in to join them. "Yeah, somebody just needed directions. Did I take too long in the shower?"

"Not at all," Zoey assured him. "Besides, you looked like you kind of needed it."

"And it's just a frat party," his cousin put in. "We don't have to be on time. We're just going for their booze, anyway. But first—" She reached forward and grabbed Sammy's wrist, pulling him towards an outfit laid out on the bed. "Zoey had a few things that are too small for her, and I had a couple things that are too big for me, so we put them together and voila!"

"That's very... sparkly."

"Sequins," his cousin supplied helpfully. She lifted up the crop top, which sent reflections of the room lights skittering everywhere. "I couldn't resist when I saw it in the store, but it never fit right on me." She laid it across Sammy's bare chest. "But I think it'll be perfect on

you.”

“These were my favourite jeans,” Zoey told him, patting them lovingly. “Until the freshman fifteen hit me, and then sophomore thirty sealed the deal.”

“Shut up,” Rowan remonstrated, “you know you look fine as hell. Curves suit you. And what’s more, they please Aggie.”

Zoey flushed at that comment and then cleared her throat. “Anyway. They’ll probably fit you well enough. I also have some shoes—”

“—since you haven’t got giant boat feet like me,” muttered Rowan.

“Oh, who’s self-body-shaming, now?” Zoey snorted.

“You try buying cute shoes in women’s eleven,” Rowan grouched back.

Zoey only rolled her eyes as she handed him a pair of rather plain-looking women’s sneakers.

Sammy took them, confused. “These are cute shoes?”

“Oh god no,” Rowan shook her head. “No cute shoes at frat parties. There’s spillage.”

“On a good night, it’s just spillage.” Zoey nodded at the shoes in Sammy’s hand. “Those can get whatever on them and nobody will get upset.”

Nodding, Sammy looked uncertainly towards the door. “Should I change out there, or...?”

“No, we’ll bounce out to the sitting room,” Rowan said, putting a faux-classy accent on the last words. “But once you’re dressed I’ll do your hair, okay? I have an idea.”

And then there was nothing left to do but fish out of the toiletries bag the underwear he hadn’t worn in the hallway, pull them on and then the rest of the outfit. The jeans were snug up against his body, so snug he had to reach in and shuffle his junk around so he wasn’t uncomfortable. The crop top left a wide band of his belly exposed, which made him all kinds of nervous.

He tried going out to the “sitting room” to look at his reflection, but Rowan pushed him back into the bedroom. She sat him down on the bed and got to work on hair and makeup. “We’re going a little heavy and a little sloppy,” she narrated, “because we are honestly just a bit rushed and also it’s just a frat party.” She yanked his hair up on top of his head and secured it with something tight in two places, then sat back on her haunches with a triumphant grin. “Yeah, I’m a genius. One more slight adjustment, though.”

She went rooting around in a drawer and came up with an odd little plastic circle with two interior prongs. When he asked what it was, she only shook her head and told him to turn around. When he did, she reached up under the back of his shirt and did something with his bra straps. Suddenly his fake boobs bounced up higher beneath the crop top. She turned him around, ogled his tits, and patted them lovingly. "There we go."

Taking him by the hand, Rowan led him back out to the sitting room. Zoey looked up from her book, pointed at him enthusiastically, and shouted, "Fuck yes!" And then he was positioned in front of the mirror.

"Pigtails? Really?" said his mouth before he had a chance to stop it. Because his cousin had indeed put his hair up in punky pigtails and done his makeup a few degrees of magnitude beyond "a little heavy." His eyes were rimmed with dark eyeshadow. His lips were a bright red pucker. And his fake boobs were lifted so perkily high that his exposed belly somehow looked flat by comparison. The jeans clung to him like a second skin. He turned sideways. "How do I have a butt?"

"Pretty sure you've always had a butt."

"Yes, but not this much butt!" For the second time in two days, he didn't recognize himself. He looked... he looked good.

"They were my favourite jeans for a reason," Zoey grinned. He belatedly realized that at some point she'd changed her clothes (a top that was only slightly more shimmery sequins than cleavage, hip-hugging jeans, forgettable shoes) and done her makeup (far less than he was wearing). "And here. Your fracket." She held out a dark blue cardigan for him to slip his arms into.

"Fracket?"

"Frat jacket," Zoey explained. "Like the sneakers, it's semi-disposable. Gets lost, gets puked on, no big deal. But it's nippy out there, and we don't want to be walking home without something."

"The booze will keep us warm," Rowan muttered defiantly. She was digging around in his backpack, pulling out his phone and his wallet. From his wallet, she pulled out his driver's license. Phone and driver's license she handed over to him and tossed the rest into a comfy-looking reading chair. "Obviously you don't show anybody your ID if you can help it," she advised. "But you should have something on you for emergencies."

He took them both and slid them into pockets only to be scolded. "Not the fracket pockets," Zoey advised. "Might get lost, remember?"

Don't want to lose your phone and ID, too." He slid both into the jeans pockets. It was a tight fit.

"One last thing," Rowan said, opening her pill box and offering it to Sammy. He took one and so did she, holding it under their tongues.

Sammy looked to Zoey, who only lifted an eyebrow at Rowan. "You sure you should be sharing those with her?"

His cousin snapped the lid closed. "Positive." She tossed the pill box into the bedroom, presumably onto her bed, and linked arms with Sammy. "Okay. Let's go get drunk!"

They went out into the hall, called an elevator, and complimented each other on their looks for the night (he could, apparently, just do that now). Rowan made a slight adjustment to Sammy's right pigtail. An hour ago, Sammy just wanted to drown his sorrows in free beer, but he had to admit he was now getting a little excited. Going out with Rowan seemed to have that effect on him.

"Should we review the girl rules?" Zoey said as they came out of the dorm. While phrased as a question it was undoubtedly a demand.

"Yes, let's," Rowan agreed, and linked arms with Sammy.

"Girl rules?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

Zoey linked arms on his other side. "Safety rules, because you're now walking around looking like the girl you are, so the world is going to treat you like a girl, and the world treats girls like shit, and the only people who are going to have your back are other girls."

"Rule number one," Rowan all but shouted into the night, "Do not leave your drink unattended, do not accept a drink you did not see poured or is in a sealed can that you yourself opened." Seeing Sammy's look of confusion, she explained, "Roofies are a real thing. They are not fun."

"Rule number two," Zoey went on, with slightly less enthusiasm than her roommate. "We arrive together, we leave together. If any of us wants to leave, we all leave. Immediately. We will not get mad over it." She nodded to Sammy. "If you need a code phrase, tell us that Jessica called and needs help. And we will all pick up and leave then and there, okay?"

He nodded obediently.

"Rule number three, stay in the public area with the rest of the girls," Rowan intoned. "Do not go upstairs to see their bedroom. Trust me, you don't want to see it. Do not go out back if there's nobody else out there. Do not step into a bathroom with anyone you don't know."

“Rule number four, when it’s crowded, we link arms,” Zoey said, tugging a little on Sammy’s arm to demonstrate. “If we ever lose somebody into a crowd, we find them. We do not shrug and move on.”

Sammy’s nodding was getting a little numb.

“Rule number five, always charge up your phone ahead of time,” said Rowan, and touched the side of her head to Sammy’s shoulder. “I already checked yours, you’re at 88%.”

When that seemed to be the last one, Sammy stammered, “Guys is this... is this safe?”

“Of course not, it’s a frat party,” Zoey said with a shrug.

“But that’s what makes them fun,” Rowan insisted. “It’s like... skydiving or white water rapids. Just perform the proper safety procedures and you’ll be fine.”

“Probably.”

Rowan shot a look at Zoey, and then rolled her eyes. “Okay, let’s make this super safe, okay? Let’s just make this a girls night out, yeah?”

“Is that... a different set of rules?” Sammy asked hesitantly.

“Same rules, different intent,” Rowan pressed. “We’re going to this thing to drink their alcohol, hang out with each other, dance with each other, find a corner and gab at each other. We’re not going to try and pick up anybody.”

Zoey looked dubiously at her roommate, then winked at Sammy with a “watch this” expression. Then she said, “But if you do pull...”

“Well, if you pull, then by all means—” Rowan started, and then shot exasperated daggers at Zoey. “Okay, fine. It’s purely catch-and-release tonight. If you pull, you can toy with them a little, and then let them go. It’s Girls’ Night,” she repeated with a determined nod.

It was a short walk down one block and up another, and no question where the frat party was at. The bass could be heard from the corner; the spill of flashing lights strobing out the windows was visible from four doors down. The miasma of hops, yeast, sweat, and parmesan hit them as they went up the front steps, arms still interlinked.

Zoey looked sidelong at the other two. “Are you ready for this, Samantha?”

He nodded uncertainly. “I’ll be ready as soon as I’m tipsy,” he promised.

“Well let’s get on that!” Rowan grinned and pulled them inside.

The brownstone was not large, and the venerable institution was old enough that the rooms weren't, either, but they were packed wall-to-wall with people. Thumping music suffused the building, muffled so that little things like lyrics or harmonies could not be discerned. Most of the party-goers here just kind of bounced gently to the beat, heads dipping in time as they chatted. Rowan waved her free hand in the air as she waded into the crowd.

The dining room was the bar for the night, the table set with tubs of canned drinks on ice and an impressive array of bottles. A pair of kegs stood in the corner. The girls, plus Sammy, helped themselves to cans.

That seemed simpler and safer, which was not what he'd envisioned as the priorities he'd have at his first frat party.

The dining room was less crowded and quiet enough that Rowan could shout and be understood: "Let's make a circuit of the ground floor, see what's what, and decide what do to from there, yeah?"

And so they did, winding their way through the six rooms full of people. Rowan and Zoey waved at those they knew, but the trio pressed on.

Sammy had beer spilled onto his borrowed shoes for the first time in the second room.

The room with the music system was by far the loudest and most raucous, with a great mass of people bouncing to the beat and a thin crust of onlookers plastered to the wall. Hands clasped, they bounced their way across the dance floor.

Other rooms, by dint of placement away from the speakers and the insulation of century-old construction, were a little quieter, at least in terms of music. One room was full of shouting.

Sammy boggled at what was happening across the tables. "Is that really...?"

Rowan nodded, sighing. "Yup. Beer pong." She leaned closer to speak into his ear: "The thing you have to understand about frat parties is that they're like a year-long competition for which frat can throw the most stereotypical party possible." She pretended to check her watch. "The keg stands will start in, like, ninety minutes or so. Clockwork."

They completed their circuit in the dining room, just in time to help themselves to a second drink. Zoey declared that this was her last for the evening; she wanted to keep a clear head, if only for the sake of the other two. After a brief conference, they resolved to head to one of the quieter rooms where the two girls had seen some friends.

Their friends had claimed a couch and there was (tight) seating available, so they all settled in and piled on top of each other. Rowan and Zoey introduced their friends by name, which Sammy repeated with a nod to try and remember them better. It didn't work. He let their conversation wash over him—classes, spring break plans, and gossip about people he didn't know—and nursed his drink.

He and Rowan and then he and Zoey returned to the dining room to resupply, and then Rowan dragged them both into the blaring music room so they could dance. By that point Sammy was agreeable to nearly anything, and he bounced and flailed along to the beat. The press of bodies was tight—much tighter than the club—and he honestly couldn't be sure if anybody was dancing with the girls or with him. It was more like everybody was dancing with each other, and it was kind of soothing to just be a part of a big, twitching mass of humanity.

He danced until his brain finally turned off, and then he danced some more. The bass was his heartbeat; his limbs were tendrils waving in the wind. He was nothing, he was everyone, he was here at the party, he was a thousand miles away.

Sammy found himself standing over the nearly-depleted tub of canned cocktails, uncertain if he really wanted to bother with another fruit fusion whatever, or if he was done for the night. He'd been out super late the night before, it had been an emotionally trying day, and he had danced all of his remaining energy reserves away. He couldn't remember what was on the schedule for tomorrow but he should probably be awake for it.

He turned to find the girls—he hadn't wandered off, they were in the same room, just over by the kegs—and stopped in his tracks. At the end of the long table, mixing himself a drink in a red solo cup, was his erstwhile student host.

He was right between Sammy and the girls.

Sammy tried to catch his cousin's attention, but she was deep in discussion with her roommate about something. He couldn't go the other way around the table, which had been pushed up against stacks of chairs.

As he turned his head, one of his pigtails tweaked his hair. Ah, that's right. He was still pigtail punk girl, wasn't he? If he didn't recognize himself, this asshole wouldn't recognize him from their thirty-second interaction earlier. He could just walk right past him.

Sammy took a deep breath, wondered if he would be this confident

in his plan if he hadn't lost count of how many drinks he'd already had, and started moving.

At first, the guy's attention was entirely on his drink, and for a moment Sammy thought he'd slip by without even getting noticed. But then he looked up, and Sammy realized he'd been looking directly at the asshole's face, so their eyes locked.

The asshole smiled.

The jerk's hand shot out to encircle Sammy's waist. "Hey, beautiful," he said merrily. "I've been looking for you all night."

"The fuck?" Sammy spat back, but he was getting reeled in, physically pulled closer. For half a second he wondered if it were true: if this guy had been looking for him, if he'd reflected on his actions, if he wanted to apologize. But that was nonsense. Sammy stuck with his plan of being a completely different girl. "You don't know me."

"But I'd like to," he rejoined drunkenly.

Sammy shoved his way out of the jerk's embrace and ended up staggering backwards. The asshole reeled against the table, grinning despite everything.

That was when Zoey and Rowan rushed up beside him, interlinking arms, and pulled him out into the next room. "Ugh, frat boys," Zoey sympathized. "You okay, Samantha?"

He took a shaky breath and nodded. They'd ended up in the beer pong room, but the game was over and now it was comparatively empty and quiet. "He's not a frat boy, though. He lives in your dorm."

"How do you know that?"

He gave her a wan smile. Yeah, he was definitely still a little drunk. "He was supposed to be my student host for the weekend."

"That's the fucker?" Rowan growled, looking daggers through the doorway arch.

"You wanna go home?" Zoey asked immediately.

Before he could answer, his cousin spat, "No. I have a better idea."

Rowan stalked through the frat party like a hunter, circling around to a different entrance into the dining room, then following her quarry through two more rooms. Sammy and Zoey trailed after her uncertainly. Finally her prey settled into a circle of couches and was laughing along with a bunch of other men, most of them shirtless.

Rowan nodded. "That's what I thought." She didn't look away from him when she asked Sammy, "What's his name?"

“Uh, Scott?”

She nodded, still watching him. “Okay, Sammy, we have a choice. You have a choice. If you want to go home, we’ll go home. But if you don’t want to go home right now... I’m gonna go fuck up this asshole’s entire fucking life.”

“You’re not going to, like, hit him?” he gulped.

Now Rowan turned to him. Her smile filled his veins with icewater. “Oh no. Much worse.” She waited a beat longer, and without any call to refrain from Sammy, made her approach.

She strutted into the room with a wiggle to her hips that Sammy swore everyone would think was hilariously exaggerated. But the guys on the couch only looked on approvingly, especially as she asked if she could sit down among them.

Sammy and Zoey followed in her wake, much further behind. “Should I be as scared as I am right now?” he asked her.

“You know the quickest route to the door, right?” was her only answer, her attention focused on her roommate.

“My cousin Samantha is here for Preview Days,” Rowan was saying, her voice pitched at least an octave higher and disturbingly kittenish. “Do you guys remember your Preview Days? Did you come?”

There were scattered nods all around, including Scott, and she leaned across the space to place her hand on his knee. His eyes, and the eyes of the guys on either side of him, widened. Sammy was positive they could see right down her top.

She patted his knee. “You remember our Preview Days, don’t you, Scott?” A flicker of doubt passed over his features, but she didn’t let him answer. “We were at this very frat. You told me how this was the best fraternity in the country and how you were going to pledge here, and now you have, huh?”

He forced a laugh. “Well, uh, not yet. That’s up to these guys.”

“Guyyyys,” she pouted, somehow, at all of them at the same time. “You’ve got to let Scott pledge. This place is his dream. You wanted to pledge even back then, that’s why you came to their party. Not me, though.” She flashed a wicked smile at them all. “I just came to get drunk and laid.”

The frat boys laughed, well-lubricated with cheap beer and excited at where this was going.

Rowan locked eyes with Scott. “And you did... such a good job helping me out with that. Got me drunk and laid just like I wanted.

See, boys? He's helpful. You need a helpful kind of guy in your frat, right?"

Sammy could see the calculation on Scott's face, his glance at the other men to gauge their reaction, his estimation of how many points he'd earn with them if he'd bagged this girl, in this frat house, before he was even a freshman.

He spread his hands. "I did what I could," he laughed along with them.

"We stumbled up into somebody's bedroom upstairs. Who's got number fifteen? Oh, you? Well it wasn't yours then, but we made good use of it, you know what I'm saying?" She grinned salaciously at Scott, lost in false nostalgia. "We made out on the bed, and we got naked, and that's when you sucked my dick."

The circle of men howled in surprise. Scott's face fell.

"I still had my dick back then," Rowan explained to the hooting frat boys. "I only had The Surgery right before my freshman year. But that night—wow. It was, like, the best possible last hurrah for the little guy."

Scott sat up in his seat, trying to laugh it off like it was a joke. Rowan went in for the kill.

"And he went at it," she told her audience, voice all awed. "You know what I'm saying? He had *technique*." She gestured with a hand, flat and splayed, to the men on her right. "Obviously not his first cock. He played me like..." She smiled, rapturously, to the men on her left. "...like I was a flute and he was motherfucking Lizzo. You know? It was a performance."

The poor asshole squirmed in his seat, trying to deny everything. He couldn't seem to find his voice.

Rowan leaned forward to pat his knee again. "I'm just saying: your oral skills might be why I chose to go to Columbia. So be proud, Scott." She stood up. "I just wanted to thank you before I headed out. It's past my bedtime. Night night, boys."

The frat boys wished her good night as she pranced away towards the coat room, half their eyes glued to her ass. The other half of the men stared at Scott, appraising and re-appraising.

Sammy and Zoey darted after Rowan, who bolted as soon as she turned the corner. The three of them frantically dug through the massive pile of coats and scooted outside as fast as they could without looking like they were in a rush.

* * *

"Holy shit, what was that?" Sammy laughed as they pelted up the night-dark street. Or at least what passed for "night-dark" in the City.

Only when they had most of the block behind them did Rowan and Zoey slow down, gasping and giggling. They crashed into each other, crashed into Sammy, and the tangle of the three of them staggered up to the corner.

"I don't think they're going to ask him to pledge," Rowan giggled. "Ever. There or anywhere else. He's gonna be tomorrow's main character around campus."

"You too," Zoey panted beside her, gently reproachful.

Rowan snorted. "I've been the noisiest trans girl on campus for two years, I'm never news anymore." She turned and pointed a finger at Sammy. "That's the trick, see. If you keep being outrageous, they stop paying attention to you. That's how it works."

Zoey wearily looked to Sammy and shook her head. "That's not how it works."

The light changed; they crossed the street in a handclasped line. The largest buildings on campus rose on either side of them.

"Anyway, serves him right for being a transphobic asshole," Rowan half-purred, half-growled. She reached out and pulled Sammy back in so they staggered forward together, hugging. "Made my Sammy cry, so I fucked him up good."

He couldn't help but giggle. "I don't think anybody's ever nuked an asshole from orbit for me before." His giggle faded. "Or stood up for me at all, really."

"Of course I'd stand up for you, Sammy," Rowan protested, squeezing him tighter. "Not cause we're family, we're more than that. We've got to stick together, whether that's us girls, or us queers, or us transes, yeah? I got you, boo."

She nuzzled her cold nose into the crook of his neck, forcing him to squeal and giggle again. When he stopped gasping, he leaned back into her. "Thank you."

"We stick together and we trust each other, yeah?" she whispered to him, suddenly serious. Drunk serious. "We're always up front, we don't hold back, we left all that shit behind with the gender they told us we had to be."

Sammy opened his mouth to say something, but the words didn't come.

Without warning, Rowan lurched out to grab Zoey and pull her in, too. "And all the shit we left behind along with the sexuality they told

us we had to be.”

“Aw, I’m included in the drunken rambling,” cooed her roommate.

“No, you see?” Rowan insisted, whisper shifting to entreaty. “We’re free to be honest with each other like the cis and the straights never can be. Because we had to say fuck you to everything they told us was true, just so we could be ourselves.”

“Uh, yeah,” Sammy sighed, happy to be squished up against her so she couldn’t see his face. Honest, up front, and not holding anything back... that did not really describe his relationship with his cousin, did it?

“Ro, honey,” Zoey croaked from her own headlock, “is it radical honesty if I say you have to let me go so I can unlock the door?”

“We were having a moment,” the noisiest trans girl on campus pouted, releasing them both.

“You were having a moment,” her roommate sniggered, then darted up the steps to unlock the front door and hold it open for the both of them. As they passed by, though, she allowed, “But yeah. I hear you. I’ve had friends before—all with cishets, all from the closet in high school—and what we’ve got is... completely different. Different in kind, not just in degree.”

“Oh, you used fancy words to say what I said,” Rowan squealed and slapped the elevator call button until it glowed. “I love it when you do that.”

“You hate it when I do that.”

“Yes, but I love it, too, because I love you,” Rowan mooned drunkenly at her roommate, “because of our different-in-kind-and-not-just-degree relationship.”

As they rode the elevator up, Rowan rested her head on Sammy’s shoulder “just for a minute” and was very shortly snoring. Working together, he and Zoey maneuvered her down the hall, into the dorm room, and into her bed.

“Love you guys,” she sighed as her body relaxed into the fluffy bedding.

“Love you too, honey,” Zoey murmured, and shared a smile with Sammy.

“Love you, too,” Sammy echoed, both the words and the smile.

“I’m actually going to shower before bed,” Zoey said, collecting her own toiletries bag and towel. Suddenly Sammy realized that she had,

in fact, stopped drinking hours ago, and was completely sober. She flicked at her clothes. "I don't even know how much beer I got on me."

"I just need some pajamas, I think," he told her, and went looking for his bag in the sitting room. She collected her key ring and closed the door to the hall behind her.

Sammy couldn't help smiling at nothing in particular as he hauled the bag out from under the table it had been stowed behind. He'd meant what he'd said: he'd never felt protected and backed up before, not in his whole life. But Rowan was ready and willing to do that for him.

All she wanted in return was honesty from him, so he obviously couldn't tell her that he'd been lying to her all weekend. He could come back in the fall, say he detransitioned, but he was still queer. He rather liked kissing Vikram, and kissing Finley probably counted as queer in some way, too. Being queer still qualified him for all that fierce love she was so willing to pour out for him, right? Girls, queers, transes: one out of three wasn't bad.

All he had to do was preserve this ridiculous white lie through the rest of the weekend. Then he could fix everything and keep Rowan in his life. He just had to make it through the weekend.

He threw open the bag, but there were no pajamas inside. No skirts, no blouses, no lingerie. There was only a tangled mess of balled-up fabric, all greys and blacks. Hoodies, sweatshirts, briefs. His clothes. His clothes from home.

This was his bag.

Sammy slapped the bag closed and hissed into the empty sitting room, "Oh fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck."

CHAPTER SIX

A Good Old College Try

Sammy's phone buzzed him awake at 8:30am. He hadn't been sure that he was going to fall asleep, but he had set the alarm just in case he caught a few hours. Apparently he'd finally dozed off, but he was pretty sure he saw the sky light up with dawn before that happened. Most of the night he'd spent rolled up in his sleeping bag, staring at the ceiling, alternating between thinking and panicking.

If his bag—his actual bag, with his actual, boring clothes from home—was here in Rowan and Zoey's room, then where was the bag that he'd been using? The bag with all the girl clothes.

He'd checked that bag with the Preview Days people while he did the tour and the classroom visitation. Otherwise he'd had a hand on the bag since he zipped it closed in Rowan's townhouse. Or his uncle did; maybe his uncle let go on the subway and it got swapped then? But that made less sense than Sammy's more hopeful conclusion.

Because it seemed obvious that the girl had to be here at Preview Days. She must have also checked a bag with the Preview Days table—only she'd checked his bag, of course. And then when they'd picked up their bags to go meet their student hosts, they'd inadvertently switched them back.

Which meant she was somewhere on campus, and so was her bag.

And Sammy needed that bag back.

Rowan loved him—as a cousin, the non-kissing variety—and supported him and defended him because she believed that he was trans and queer and a girl, and because of all that, she believed he had been open and forthright with her. They had a bond of radical honesty, and that bond was predicated on a lie. To preserve the bond,

he had to preserve the lie.

He could not just throw on a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie for the last Preview Day. He couldn't just say, "oh, right, these are my actual clothes, I've been wearing somebody else's clothes this whole time, and also I'm not actually trans or a girl, and also I've been lying to you."

So he had to get the bag back.

If the girl whose clothes he'd been wearing was here at Preview Days, then she had, just like Sammy had, a paper coupon for breakfast at the dining commons. That opened at 9:30 (if he went here in the fall, some distracted corner of his brain mused, he could get used to breakfast at 9:30 instead of 6:30 like at home).

He could wear the same outfit as the night before—the outfit he'd slept in for lack of pajamas—but like a fool, like a blithering fucking idiot, he'd scrubbed his face and put on some damn face lotion. Zoey had insisted. So now he had an hour to borrow some of Rowan's makeup, replicate the steps he'd half-seen her do to him, and then hightail it across campus to see if he could spot the girl.

And then he would, like a fucking creeper, follow her back to her dorm room and then... somehow he'd get her bag back, and then everything would be okay.

Makeup was harder than he'd ever imagined.

There were so many steps and so many products and it seemed like more than half the time the products weren't even labeled, so how was he supposed to tell an eyeliner from a lip liner or a blush from a bronzer from a contouring highlighter?

About half of Rowan's makeup was in one organizer with tiered shelves, so he carefully and quietly lifted it out from the rest of the detritus that covered her vanity and crept out to the sitting room. Then he sat on the floor in front of the full-length mirror, makeup scattered all around him, and watched YouTube videos for makeup tips.

Pressed for time, he always picked the videos with the shortest run time. He didn't need nuance, he just needed the basics.

Even the basics were complicated.

There was so much blending involved!

He tried to do foundation twice before he realized he was an idiot. Rowan's skin wasn't anything like his, nothing she had matched his skin tone, and consequently she hadn't ever put foundation on him.

Fifteen minutes burned on nothing.

So he wracked his brain trying to remember what she had in fact done: something with his eyebrows and a very weird-looking stick, some eyeshadow, some eyeliner, some mascara, and those bright red lips she liked putting on him.

He found the weird-looking stick. He found brow powder. He watched a video, replicated the steps, and wow did he put on too much. It was like somebody had used those extra thick sharpies with the wedge tips to define the tops of his eyesockets. But luckily you could use the weirder end of the stick to scrub most of that off, and he did so until it looked moderately natural. Right. Eyebrows done.

The video tutorials for eyeshadow really wanted him to use, like, four different colours that were all perfectly selected to complement each other, and he just didn't have time to parse all that out. He picked one sparkly green and dusted the outsides of his eyelids. He blended, blended, blended, until he wasn't even sure there was any product left on him, but it also didn't look like he'd lost a fight with a children's paint set.

Next up: eyeliner. On this one he was saved by remembering the idle advice of his cousin as she'd worked on him: liquid eyeliner looked great but was very fiddly, and he'd be best served by using a eyeliner crayon. He found one of those, pulled his eyelid tight, and lined his eyelid. First time perfect! Was luck actually on his side? But then the second eye didn't go so well, and he looked lopsided. He tried to use the corner of a remover wipe to clean that up, but all he ended up doing was erasing a swath of eyeshadow in the process.

Grumbling under his breath, he scrubbed off that eye completely, redid the eyeshadow, blended until his wrist was sore, and then applied eyeliner. The result was not good, but he didn't care. It was passable, and that was all he was after.

Mascara was, somehow, easy—blink into the brush, the tutorial said—although there were little clumps that he decided weren't too much of an issue. It was enough, and the longer black lashes completed the look of his eyes. He recognized those eyes. They looked right.

He lost a precious minute or two forcing himself not to think about how his made-up eyes looked right and his make-up-less eyes did not. Lipstick. Do lipstick.

Lip liner and lip stick were another "two different colours that complement each other" quagmire, and besides he was running out of time. He grabbed the brightest red he could find, but paused before

applying it. What if he tried something else? Something a little less screaming bright red, maybe something darker...

He rooted around in Rowan's supplies (there were a lot of lipsticks) and finally selected one. He ran it over his lips, careful around his cupid's bow as directed by a tutorial video. Then he sat back, looked in the mirror, and smiled. Yeah. That did look better.

And he was out of time.

Sammy scooped Rowan's supplies onto the little organizer, crept back into the bedroom, and deposited it where he'd found it. He texted both Rowan and Zoey that he was heading out for breakfast and he'd see them later in the day.

He took one last look at his reflection before leaving the dorm room. His makeup was not, by any stretch of the imagination, good. He could see a dozen places where his hand was unsteady, where the edge of lipstick or eyeliner wobbled, or where—somehow—he hadn't blended enough. But the look as a whole came together if sloppily; it clearly communicated 'feminine,' and that matched his clothes. He wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb.

He grabbed his borrowed fracket and slipped out the door.

Sammy hurried across campus. He didn't think getting there ten minutes after the dining commons opened for breakfast would realistically risk missing the girl, but he didn't want to take any chances. The half-asleep check-in clerk accepted his paper coupon with a nod and then he hustled into the large and mostly empty room.

It was a simple matter to scan the room and see she wasn't there—no Black girls at all among the twenty or so students who got here before Sammy. And then his stomach rumbled, and he figured: he was here anyway, and it might be a while until she showed, so he might as well eat.

Plate piled high with pancakes, sausages, home fries, and bacon, Sammy found a high table where he could watch the stream of people come in to eat breakfast. He could just perch here, eat tasty food, and keep an eye out.

He was halfway through his plate, having scanned maybe a hundred students shuffling past in all their morning glory, when his plan went exactly sideways.

A loaded tray hit his table and the hoodie kid from the day before sat down opposite Sammy. Directly across from Sammy, right in the way of his watchful gaze. "Uh, hey," the guy mumbled.

Sammy squint-glared at—or rather, through—the guy, but didn't want to say anything. It seemed rude to tell him to fuck off, and besides, they'd sat together the day before, it was natural to sit together today, right? For a moment he thought about suggesting the guy move to the next seat over, next to Sammy and out of his precious line of sight, but his stomach dropped through the floor at the thought that the suggestion might be mistaken for flirting.

He shuffled his own stool to the right, which almost but didn't really fix his view, and replied, "Hey."

Hoodie buttered his belgian waffles—there was a whole row of waffle machines, but Sammy hadn't wanted to split his attention between cooking a tasty breakfast pastry to completion and keeping an eye out—and they ate in silence for a while. Finally, hoodie asked, "So did you do a class yesterday?"

"Uh," Sammy responded, mostly looking past him to the flow of breakfasters. "Me and Cindy went to, uh, Intro to Anatomy. Mostly to introduce her to my uncle who was teaching it."

Hoodie nodded. "That's cool." He was quiet for a few beats, not even eating. "I, uh, went to an Algorithms class. It was cool."

"Mm," his unwilling tablemate responded limply, and then felt bad about it. "That's your thing, yeah? Computers and tech and stuff?"

"Yeah, I guess," he answered. "It's not like I could get into, like, football or cars or whatever typical guy stuff."

Sammy shrugged. "I could never get into that stuff, either," he answered without thinking. "Always seemed, you know, kind of silly. Strutting around and, uh, posturing about bullshit that doesn't matter, you know?"

"Yeah," the other kid nodded. "I mean, there's a ton of that in video games, too, but. It's not in person, so it's easier to ignore, you know?"

"Just words on a screen," Sammy nodded absently, which was quoting somebody but he didn't remember who. (Later, he'd remember that it had been a vice principal at a school assembly, dismissing a spate of online bullying as beneath everyone's notice and trusting that, if properly ignored, the haters would just fade away. The whole school had quoted him, in all sorts of contexts, for the rest of the year.)

"Yeah," hoodie agreed, thought for a long moment, and then offered, "Sometimes when I'm in chat, I say I'm a girl, so I don't have to do any of that stuff. Nobody expects any of it, and I can just, you know, be me. Not some big masculine caricature."

Sammy craned his neck to the side. There was a tall Black girl coming down the aisle... but it wasn't her. "Yeah, I used to do that, too," he answered, distractedly.

Hoodie smirked. "Yeah? You mean, like, before you, uh, transitioned?"

Fuck. He hadn't been paying attention to the conversation. "Uh. Yeah," he scrambled. "I guess I wasn't so much pretending to be a girl, as... you know, just being me. Girl me." But that contradicted his purported status as an Always Knew Tran, and he couldn't remember if he'd talked about that at lunch yesterday or later in the bathroom. "I mean, I always knew I was a girl. But, uh. Nobody believed me except... except in chat."

Hoodie nodded and was quiet for a long while. "But you always knew?" he finally asked. "That you were a girl?"

Sammy nodded. He could not keep up this conversation and also scan all the students filtering into the dining hall. There also seemed to be a sudden flood of them, as if everybody had agreed that 10:15 was the right time to show up at the dining commons. "Yeah. I always knew. But that's, uh, apparently super rare."

"Really?" hoodie perked up.

Sammy looked past him. "Yeah, my cousin—she's trans, uh, as well—she figured herself out in high school. And my uncle transitioned a lot later in life. He had a kid, like... grown in his belly and everything. Although I'm not a hundred percent sure on that timeline, to be honest. Anyway, I'm pretty sure he was an adult."

"That's, um, that's really interesting," said hoodie, staring down at the puddles of syrup left on his plate. He was quiet for a while, and then asked, "I mean, I know you didn't have that sort of revelation yourself, but do you think—"

Then there she was: the same tall Black girl he'd shared the bus with from Dover, still strikingly pretty, striding down the entry aisle. She was wearing a Columbia-branded sweater and what looked like the same jeans she'd been wearing on the bus. No makeup, which Sammy was surprised to notice. Had he ever noticed anybody's makeup before?

Given what she was wearing, perhaps she hadn't even opened her bag once she recovered it. Maybe she didn't even know they'd switched back.

The girl was talking animatedly with her companion, who Sammy was surprised to recognize: Agatha! She even gave him a short little

smile of recognition as the two of them passed his table.

He watched as the two Black girls filed into the breakfast buffet. Agatha gestured around, talking; the girl nodded. Yep. Aggie was showing her around. Which meant she was probably the girl's student-host.

Which meant—

"I've got to go," he said to hoodie, and piled all his breakfast detritus onto his tray. The other kid had been saying something, but Sammy had no idea what. "Uh. See you next year, maybe?"

Hoodie nodded, a little confused at the sudden departure. "Um. Yeah, sure. It was nice talking to you, uh, Samantha."

Sammy barely heard him and didn't have the bandwidth to respond. He hurried out the door by way of the dish return, then bolted across campus, back to the dorm. He hopped from foot to foot waiting for the elevator, and then booked it down the hall to Zoey and Rowan's door. He turned the knob and—

It was locked.

Wincing, he tapped on the door, hoping that he'd get a sleepy-eyed Rowan or Zoey, that he could apologize for leaving without a door key and having to wake them up, and let them fall back into bed.

But instead he got Rowan, bright-eyed and smiling. "Told you not to leave without a key." Then she gasped. "Oh my god, you did your own makeup!"

Sammy let himself be pulled inside and examined up close. Rowan kept squealing. "I mean, obviously there's some tips I could give you, Sammy, but for a first time? This is so good!" she enthused.

He smiled distantly and thanked her, apologizing for borrowing her supplies without asking, but couldn't help looking past her. There on the hook by the door: two keyrings, one of them with two identical-looking dorm keys. Zoey's key to Agatha's room.

Sammy had to get Zoey's keys plus his own roller bag and leave the dorm room—without Rowan asking what he was doing.

"I was actually hoping to... grab a shower," he stammered, bending over to extend the handle of his suitcase. "Think I'll change in there."

"And wash off all this good work?" she gasped playfully, pinching his chin as she wagged his painted face back and forth.

She had a point; a shower didn't make much sense. But maybe he could turn it into something she'd want to happen. "Uh. Maybe you could, like, watch me do it a second time, and give me those pointers?" he suggested, hoping she'd take the bait.

She beamed at him like a thousand suns. "Oh, I'd love that! I'm in the middle of a paper, but I could use a study break in, like, twenty."

"Okay great, back in a bit," he gushed, grabbing Zoey's keys and pushing for the door.

Rowan called him back—shit, had he been caught?—but she only wanted to drape a towel over his shoulders and give him her toiletries bag. She also reminded him that he'd have to shave. He let the door close behind him and heaved a sigh of relief. Then he bolted back up the hall to the elevator.

Rowan had said that Agatha's room was upstairs, and there were only two floors above 15. He pushed the button for 16 and then stalked up and down that hallway, examining the decorated doors. Not every door was festooned with craft supplies, but decorated doors typically had girl's names prominently displayed and—there. Aggie.

With a glance up and down the hallway—deserted on a Sunday morning—Sammy sidled up to the door and tried one of the dorm room keys. It slid in but didn't turn. He took a deep breath, forced himself not to panic, and tried the other dorm key. It slid in. It turned. The door swung open onto a darkened room, window blinds pulled down against the morning light.

Like Rowan and Zoey's, it was a two-room affair, but this one had a bed in the first room, with a prominent lump in it. A sleepy voice grumbled, "Thought you were having breakfast."

"Shhhh," Sammy whispered, for lack of anything better to say, and darted as quietly as possible into the second room.

"Zoey," the lump groaned, "if that's you, I told you no booty calls this weekend, we have a guest. And Aggie's not here, anyway, she went to breakfast."

Sammy ignored the roommate, hoping she'd stay under wraps, because there in the second bedroom was his goal: a blue rollerbag, identical to his own but with very different contents inside. He rolled his bag up, shifted hers over, and moved his in to replace it.

Then, gripping the handle of her bag as tight as he could, he bolted out of the dorm room as fast as he could.

Sammy was becoming something of a connoisseur of surreal experiences, but nothing so far had topped watching his reflection in the mirror, inexpert makeup making his eyes look all pretty, while he shaved his face. The incongruity was staggering, but also as every swipe revealed more of his face, the result was both not what he was

used to seeing in the mirror and also disturbingly pleasing. His beard shadow had interfered with his amateur makeup, and removing it made all the features of his face work together again.

As soon as he had scraped the last of the shaving cream off his face, he hurried to pull out one of Rowan's makeup wipes and scrub his eyes clear. He looked into the mirror to make sure he'd got it all, but he did not actually see his own reflection, did not take in his whole face. He let the little brown gremlin go unobserved.

The moment he had locked the door of the bathroom behind him, he'd verified that the bag he'd stolen had girl clothes in it, and wasn't somehow a third bag loaded up with, who knows, bricks of cocaine or something. Now he threw himself into the shower to scrub and disassociate... but not take too long. Rowan was expecting him back and didn't know—and didn't need to know—that he'd taken a little side trip up to floor 16.

He dressed in the only-slightly-steamy bathroom, complete with fake boobs this time. Remembering the chilly weather, he pulled out a flannel to wear overtop everything else. It was pinky-orange plaid, but complemented the stretchy grey tank and pleated black skirt he'd also found in the bag. Then he returned to his cousin's room to show off his newly-acquired make up skills.

She confirmed that she didn't have any foundation or contouring that would work for his skin, but did suggest a light layer of blush, which Sammy had to admit did emphasize his cheekbones nicely. He was not to worry too much about eyeshadow—it was fun, but not necessary—but she complimented him anyway on the tint matching his own colouring. Not that he'd even thought about that. And apparently the weird scissor-thing that opened and closed its little rubber jaws was an essential step before applying mascara.

She also remembered, halfway through, to supply him with his morning pill, which he eagerly slipped under his tongue. She then showed him how lip liner was actually just an easier version of the eyeliner he'd used.

The end result of Sammy's newly- and hastily-acquired makeup skills paired with Rowan's guidance was a visible upgrade. At his cousin's enthusiasm, he forced a smile into the mirror; only when she looked away did he look again and allow himself a much smaller, more genuine smile for a job well done. Even if it wasn't a skill he'd ever use again, it was nice to be visibly good at something.

"So what's on your schedule today?" Rowan asked. "After lunch."

Sammy glanced at his phone. It was, indeed, very nearly noon. "Um. Apparently I get one-on-one meetings with admissions and financial aid, at 1:40 and 2:20. That sounds super fun and very skippable."

His cousin considered him for a long moment. "You should go," she told him, uncharacteristically serious. "They'll know exactly what you need to get in here. Which you want to do, yeah?"

Sammy looked away. He strongly suspected they'd only tell him that he didn't belong here and that he didn't stand a chance of getting in. Rowan had to prompt him again before he answered. "I mean, I do. Want to go here. But."

She laid her hand on his shoulder and suddenly he was fighting back tears. Where the heck had this come from? He never cried.

"Hey Sammy," Rowan said softly, and waited until he looked at her. "You'll never know unless you try. Right? I think you owe it to yourself to give it as good a try as you can. Which means going to the one-on-one. And taking notes. You need a notebook? I've got so many notebooks!"

Which is how Sammy came to be carrying a sickeningly vibrant notebook, all the colours super-saturated as they depicted what could only be a drug-induced hallucination involving kittens, dolphins, and horses, all at once. It even had glitter stamped along some of the illustration's lines. Rowan insisted it was "retro" and an homage to Lisa Frank, whoever that was.

He waited in the admissions office lobby for his one-on-one with the lurid notebook on his knees, trying not to look at or get lost in the nonsensical scene its cover depicted. Finally, his name was called, and he went in to give it his best try.

"It was terrible," Sammy moaned. "I was so useless. I didn't know what to say or how to say it."

"It couldn't have been that bad," his cousin said soothingly beside him. They were sitting at a little cafe that somehow served both fancy coffee and killer fries.

He sighed gustily at her. "It felt like getting called into the vice principal's office because your grades are shit and they are really concerned about your social development and they want to know what the problem is and you can't just tell them, 'it's because I'm shit at everything' but they really think there's some other single, simple answer to the whole problem—the problem that is, you know, the fact

that you're shit—and they think that you also know what this other problem is but you're just kind of embarrassed about saying it out loud, so they're going to be really nice to you until you spill it out, but there is no answer because the fact of the matter is, you're just useless and you always have been."

"You're not useless—" she started to protest.

But he cut her off. "According to every teacher and guidance counselor I've ever had, I am. I mean, they never said 'useless,' but every single one of them gave me this look of disappointment, as if I could have been a better student, a better athlete, a better—I don't even know—student journalist or wood shop carpenter or whatever, if I just—" and here he waved his hands as if performing a magic trick—"—applied myself. But nobody ever told me how to do that, and I never figured it out on my own." He took a shaky breath. "If that's not useless, I don't know what is."

Rowan put a cool hand over his on the table. "A lot of us feel that way growing up," she said gently.

"Yeah, well they all seemed to think it was just me who was specially fucked up."

"Well," Rowan said with a rueful sigh, "they're just not set up for trans kids. Especially a little country school up in the mountains. They don't understand us."

Ah, thought Sammy. "A lot of us feel that way" wasn't just people who had difficulties; Rowan's sympathies were limited to trans kids. Barking up the wrong tree again, not that it was her fault. Sammy's problem wasn't that he had been trans all along, Sammy's problem was that he was a fucked up failure. But he still had to play along.

So he shrugged. "That didn't seem to matter in the one-on-one."

"But you took notes, yeah?" she asked, patting the notebook where it lay on the table between them.

"I mean, yeah, fat lot of good it will do me." He stuffed more fries into his mouth.

"This place is intimidating," his cousin said, tipping her head to the side. "Even for me, and I basically grew up on campus. It's understandable if you feel overwhelmed."

He nodded, ate more fries, washed them down with a drink that seemed like it was as much cream and sugar as it was coffee, not that he was complaining. Maybe, if he let her believe he was comforted, she'd drop the issue and stop trying to blame all his problems on being trans, which he, you know, wasn't. "Yeah, I guess."

Rowan smiled. "You know what you need?"

"More fries?"

She slapped his forearm. "You need to come chill with your people."

He didn't know what she was talking about, and told her so.

"The last bit of the Preview Days schedule is affinity group student organizations," she explained with a grin, "which I know because I helped prep the open house for Seekyway."

"For what now?"

"The Columbia Queer Alliance," she all but squealed, grinning like a loon. "CQA. We're the oldest queer student organization in the world!"

"Uh, that's... cool?"

"And today we have pizza."

"Well." Sammy scraped the last bits of french fry out of the basket. "That's a compelling argument."

"This is, like, the queer lounge," Rowan explained as she pushed open the door labeled Stephen Donaldson Lounge. "All our events are here."

The lounge was mid-sized but packed with people who collectively bore a surprising diversity of hair colours. Or maybe that wasn't so surprising, after all. There were, though, all sorts of people there—tall, short, broad, skinny, hot, and... well, not so hot. Sammy had worried that everybody would be beautiful and sexy and he'd just be, you know, him.

He'd gone the whole day with makeup that he'd done himself, which wasn't as good as Rowan had done the days before. Throughout the day he'd thought about it, worried about how it might be slipping or fading off his face or something. A few times he'd ducked into a bathroom or reversed his phone camera to double check. Rowan had made sure he took her borrowed lipstick with him, and that, at least, he'd touched up a couple times.

But he still felt a little naked today, as if his girl costume was a more tenuous than it had been before. As if his real gremlin self was showing through the pretense. He didn't like the feeling. Sammy always felt self-conscious, but this was a whole different level. He couldn't ignore it, he couldn't distract himself; it was as inescapable as his own face.

With so many bodies it was rather warm, which made Sammy

rethink his last-minute stop to swap out the skirt he'd been wearing for Zoey's favourite jeans. He consoled himself with the thought that he could use overheating as an excuse to bail.

Sammy was pretty sure he was queer in some way—after all, he'd rather enjoyed kissing Vikram and Finley the other night, not just Agatha and Zoey. So he qualified to be here, even if his qualifications were different than Rowan might think. But he still felt out of place, like he had invaded somebody else's space. He wasn't sure how long he could stay here, feeling like a trespasser.

The music playing behind the waves of conversation cut out suddenly and a young woman leapt up onto a chair. "Hello and welcome! This is the Columbia Queer Alliance open house and mixer-thing and you'd really think that by now we'd have a good name for this event that we do every year because we are the oldest queer student organization in the woooooorrrrrllld!"

The rest of the room broke out in cheers at that, and with a reluctant smirk Sammy joined in. The brag had the feel of an old joke, but he could tell the students were also rather proud of their group's distinction.

The girl on the chair went on: "My name is Lena; my co-conspirators Allison and Patrick are around here somewhere, lurking in the background."

A hand shot up from one end of the room and waved; from the other side somebody griped, "Somebody's got to refill the soda tub!"

"There they are," Lena crowed, pointing at those two corners of the room. "Anyway, I'm gonna do a quick schpiel that I'm going to repeat every fifteen minutes or so as people come and go, so my apologies to the regulars who're here for the whole time slot, because I'm pretty sure you're already tired of my voice!"

Despite a few good-natured, shouted protests, she went on: "CQA has two primary purposes here on campus. First, we're a safe space where queers of all stripes can come socialize, make friends, eat pizza, and, well, pick each other up." The room laughed. "And I should be clear that last one is not one of our institutional priorities, it just sort of happens."

"The other side of CQA is our commitment to activism," Lena continued, and then had to stop herself to allow for cheers, again. She nodded in happy acknowledgement. "CQA was founded as an activist organization to lobby the school administration to support its queer community and today we still do that and we also reach out to the

surrounding community to foster understanding, acceptance, and celebration of queer life, community, and also we queers ourselves.”

“If you are a queer who comes to Columbia, this is the place where get your sweet sweet hit of queer community and this is the place that we organize from,” Lena declared proudly. The room yelped and whooped. “There’s some pamphlets and posters and stuff over on that wall about some of the stuff we’ve done. And you can also ask the people you meet here what it’s like to be queer at Columbia.” She put the back of her hand to her mouth, as if she were sharing a secret, even though she kept speaking at the same elevated volume: “It’s pretty awesome! Anyway, welcome to our mixer-thing, I will return to say the same exact thing in like fifteen minutes!”

And with that, she dropped off the chair and the room went back to its varied conversations. Rowan squealed, waved over the heads of the crowd, and then dragged Sammy across the room to where she’d spotted Finley.

The genderqueer was dressed down from the club—a long skirt, a band tee shirt, and about the same amount of makeup, just without the glitter tonight—and smiled wide when they saw Sammy approach. “Hey, lover,” they grinned, and pulled him close for a crushing hug. When the hug was done, Finley kept their arm around Sammy’s waist.

Sammy was being introduced to other people, but his brain worked, molasses-like, on how he felt about Finley’s lingering contact. He didn’t mind it, exactly; it was comfortable and warm and a part of him wanted to lean into their side. But some part of it rankled just a little. Wasn’t Finley being a little presumptuous? Especially after they called Sammy ‘lover,’ even if that had been playful.

He caught a giddy look from Rowan and suddenly he realized the image that they were presenting, that he was a willing participant in. He was the girl on Finley’s arm. And yes Finley was genderqueer, but they were taller and stronger than Sammy and had that immaculately-kept beard and...

Whoever Sammy had just been introduced to, they probably thought Finley had fucked him. Like, in the butt.

Sammy’s whole body flushed hot and he almost did lean into Finley’s side just for support. He was very suddenly very not okay with this. His lips worked, trying and failing to find words.

Only Rowan seemed to notice, her look turning from giddy to concerned.

A few neurons in Sammy’s brain connected. He looked down at his

phone, then to his cousin. "Uh. Jessica just texted," he stammered. "She, um, she needs help."

"Oh," Rowan responded, covering her surprise well enough that Sammy doubted anyone else noticed. His cousin reached forward to pull him away from Finley. "Scuse us, folks, we've got an errand to run."

She dragged him through the crowd towards the doors, but before they got there he tapped on her hand where it was vice-gripped on his forearm. "We don't need to leave-leave," he told her, and they came to a stop. "I just... needed out of that situation and didn't know how."

Rowan shifted her grip on his forearm to bring him into a hug. "Okay, I get it. Good use of the Girl Rules, though. Jessica comes through for us once again. We are such good friends to her."

He nodded, catching his breath. "Thanks. Yeah, I dunno, it's not like I don't like Finley, it was just... a lot, all the sudden."

"Yeah, well, Finley is a lot, all of the sudden," Rowan sympathized. "You want me to talk to them?"

"No," he answered immediately, and then tipped his head side-to-side, considering. "Well, maybe. It's not like I'm going to see them again this weekend, and I don't want to leave with them thinking... I don't even know what I want them to think."

Rowan hugged him again, gently. "You don't have to figure it all out right now," she cooed. "Come on, let's get some pizza."

As one of the event volunteers, Rowan was scheduled to spend all three hours of the open house restocking snacks and answering questions. Sammy didn't have to stay, she told him; there was a coffeehouse thing happening across campus that he could check out, or even just crash in the dorm room if he wanted. But Sammy was content to eat free pizza and shadow his cousin around the room.

She seemed to know everybody and everybody smiled at her when she struck up conversations. She moved around the room familiarly, like it was the living room of her house. Sammy had to smile a little. This wasn't the Rowan on show, like she'd been at the club or the frat party or even with her parents, shining her light so bright it dazzled all onlookers. This was Rowan at home. Comfortable. With her people.

More than once somebody called her over to talk to a prospective student about being trans on campus. Sammy stood on the periphery of those conversations, half-listening. He'd expected her to introduce him excitedly, saying, "This is my cousin Samantha, she's trans, too!" but that never happened. She gave him space.

On the fourth or fifth such conversation, Sammy surprised himself by giving his name. He didn't say he was trans; he knew he looked like it, and the actual trans kid grinned in patent recognition. They talked about superficial stuff: what they'd done and seen through the weekend, what they hoped to study, how pretty the campus was. The conversation was short and Sammy found himself smiling as they parted ways.

Lena climbed up onto a chair and repeated her 'schpiel' a few more times, each version tighter and more streamlined and more ignored by the crowd who'd heard it all before.

As the crowd was starting to thin out, a delicate pair of arms wrapped around him from behind and he was hugged fiercely for a moment. Zoey then let him go and crushed Rowan in the same hug. "Hey, bitches," she sighed happily. "How'd it go? Sorry I couldn't be here."

Rowan responded enthusiastically, noting that they'd gone through more than twenty pizzas. The three of them chatted for a little bit—Zoey complimented his choice of jeans—with the deflating energy of a busy event finally wrapping up.

"What were you up to?" Sammy asked Zoey, "if you couldn't be here and all."

"Oh, Aggie and I were showing her prospective student guest around campus," the girl answered. "Spent most of our time at the Black Caucus, which was super comfortable for my white ass, let me tell you. I just stood on the sidelines and tried not to look like a member of the oppressor class. But we couldn't end the evening without visiting CQA."

Sammy faked a laugh to match Rowan's genuine amusement while he furtively scanned the room. Agatha's guest was here?

She was. Grabbing a soda across the lounge, chatting with Agatha. The girl looked up towards Sammy. Their eyes met.

He had to stop staring at people he was trying to not make eye contact with.

The girl lifted one eyebrow—a minute gesture that Sammy could feel across the room—and her lips spread into an odd sort of smile. Like a cat who'd spotted her prey.

Sammy struggled to smile back without looking awkward, embarrassed, or guilty. Here he was, having stolen her bag and now wearing her clothes. He'd been caught red-handed.

The girl sauntered over, taking her time to traverse the thinning

crowded but also never taking her eyes off of the thief she was hunting. And then she and Agatha stepped into the conversational circle of Sammy's trio. Aggie pecked her girlfriend on the cheek.

"I'm Sydney," the girl from the bus told him, and nodded at her own flannel pulled around his shoulders. "You know, I used to have a flannel just like that one."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Girls Night In

Sydney—tall, dark, and fucking gorgeous—grinned down at Sammy, and it was like the people around the two of them had just faded away. Here he was, wearing her flannel (and her tank underneath, and her lingerie...) and she was making a joke out of it.

She used to have a flannel just like that one?

Yeah, until Sammy stole it right out of Agatha's room.

He couldn't quite make his mouth produce words. What was she going to do to him? What would his cousin say? Where would he even sleep tonight, once everyone he knew in the City found out he was a liar and a thief?

The tall girl tipped her head to the side. "It's just cool, because you don't have to wear a pin or anything, right?"

Finally Sammy's brain rediscovered language, and he said: "What?"

"Cause the colours in the plaid are the colours of the lesbian pride flag," Rowan butted in. "So it's its own statement. You... did know that when you put it on today, right, Sammy?"

He looked uncertainly from Sydney to Rowan and back. Apparently the girl wasn't going to accuse him of stealing her clothes? The relief was so great he smiled and said the first thing that came to mind: "...lesbian pride flag?"

"Oh, Country Mouse," his cousin sighed in rueful amusement.

"To be fair, we have entirely too many of them," Sydney said with a shrug. "I'm still not sure why we stopped using the labrys, that one's badass."

"Cause it was created by a dude," Agatha supplied, and then shrugged. "But it's still way more badass than the stripey ones. Cause, you know. Motherfucking axe."

While the lesbians debated their heraldry, Rowan had pulled out her phone, performed a web search, and showed Sammy the results. The webpage had a long list of rectangular flags, most of them made up of colourful stacked stripes. "Pride flags," she explained. "All the queers have one. Or more than one. Typically more, really. Feels like some of us just collect them, like pokémon."

Sammy paged through them all, nodding as if any of the labels made sense. There were a bunch of flags labelled as some variation of "Lesbian," and one of them was indeed the same pink-orange-and-white that crisscrossed the flannel he wore. And oh look, that other one had an axe. Badass.

When he found the transgender flag, with its baby blue and pink and white stripes, he stopped and almost said in wonder, "Oh, you've got this one in your room!" But instead he bit back his own words, realizing only then what had happened two days ago. He'd been looking out the window and Rowan had thought he'd been looking at the flags, and then he said, "I'm like you."

His cousin grinned. "Yep, there's ours!"

"Yeah, well I'm... still figuring out what I am," he muttered, a little defensively. He was going to detransition tomorrow, after all, once he was home.

But apparently Sydney heard his quiet prevarication and chuckled. "Aren't we all. But still, it's nice to wear a pin or a shirt that says, 'I like to smooch girls,' you know?"

"Uh, yeah," Sammy nodded, and handed Rowan her phone.

But Sydney wasn't taking that for an answer. She tipped her head to the side, catching Sammy's attention, and when he look up at her, she bounced her eyebrows. "Do you like to smooch girls, Sammy?"

Suddenly Rowan, Agatha, and Zoey were looking anywhere other than Sydney and Sammy... while also stealing glances at the two of them to watch what was happening.

He struggled to string words together and eventually came up with, "I mean, who doesn't?"

Sydney guffawed at that, and the rest of their little circle chimed in with their own laughter, too. He laughed, more than a little self-consciously, just to fit in. In short order they were setting each other off by repeating, "Well who doesn't like smooching girls?" at each other.

"Straight women and gay men," came a snide voice behind Sammy, and he turned, still giggling, to see who the wet blanket was.

It was a thin white man with a not particularly well-kept goatee. He had bright green eyes that might have been attractive if they hadn't been squinted half-shut as part of the scowl he wore. Beneath his half-beard draped a tee shirt with one of those pride flags on it, under which were the words "Bisexual Visibility!" Jeans and birkenstocks completed his outfit, such as it was.

"Ah, Stewart," Rowan greeted him in mock welcome. "It's good to see that the Fun Police are still on the job. Were we enjoying ourselves a bit too much?"

"I'd like to remind you that CQA is intended as a safe space for all queers," he said by way of answer, and crossed his arms in front of him. "Including straight women and gay men."

Sammy frowned softly. "Why would the queer club be concerned about straight women?"

"Because straight trans girls exist?" the thin man snarled.

"Also, it just so happens that Stewart's girlfriend Mona is a straight girl," Rowan explained to Sammy, "and Stewart is a gay man. So really, we were excluding the both of them."

Sammy boggled. "How does that work?"

"It worked just fine until she came out as a trans girl a few months ago," his cousin answered laconically. "Doesn't work so well now."

Stewart, meanwhile, looked like he was about to have an aneurysm. Finally he gestured at his own shirt and ended up slapping his chest. "I am bisexual!"

Rowan tipped her head towards Sammy and continued to explain as if the angry man wasn't even there. "Stewart discovered he was bisexual when his blowjob provider turned out to be a girl." Then his cousin looked directly to the newly-minted bisexual. "Have you even felt her up yet, Stew? She was complaining to me last week that you won't touch her tits."

Stewart sputtered and then abruptly changed tack. "And there it is, the crass public exhibition," he spat, waving his arms and looking around at the crowd as if they were a rapt audience. A few were in fact watching and listening in; most were studiously ignoring him. "That's your go-to, right, Rowan? Easiest way to get all the attention you ever wanted. Talk about tits or somebody sucking your cock."

"Oh, this is about last night," Zoey observed to Agatha, who sniggered. Sydney looked askance and the other two girls waved their hands in a "tell you later" gesture.

"I heard about your little performance at the frat," Stewart was

growling. “Really went out of your way to prove yourself a stellar representative of our community.”

Rowan only rolled her eyes. “You don’t even know what really happened, Stewart.”

“I know you regaled a bunch of frat boys with a story of your sexcapades, with a punchline of you outing yourself for comedic effect.” He made his face look surprised and he spread his hands wide. “You think trans girls aren’t already hypersexualized enough? Or you just had to strengthen their unjustified association with duplicity?”

Rowan set her fists onto her hips. “You don’t get to police how I present myself, Stewart.”

“There are more trans girls on campus than just you!” he spat. “Your actions reflect on them.”

“Okay first of all, no, my actions reflect on me and me alone,” she hissed, volume rising as she went. “If anybody thinks one trans girl’s behaviour is indicative of any other trans girl, that’s on them, not me. Secondly, if any of the other trans girls on campus want to talk to me about our collective image, I’d welcome that conversation—a conversation about my peers, with my peers. But I don’t see them, Stewart. I certainly don’t see your girl Mona.”

Stewart sputtered but his attempt to retort did nothing to stop Rowan’s momentum.

She was shouting now: “Because Mona didn’t come with you to the CQA mixer because she’s trying to figure out how to dump your ass!”

A collective gasp rippled through the surrounding crowd who definitely hadn’t been watching or listening in to the argument. Lena came rushing through the crowd, hands extended. “Okay, I think that’s enough—”

“Our relationship is rock-solid,” Stewart spat at Rowan. “We’re fine. Or we would be if you weren’t dragging him through the mud behind you.”

Zoey coughed. “Dragging *her* through the mud, I think you meant, Stewart.”

The man’s eyes flickered over to Zoey for only a moment, and then snapped back to Rowan as if drawn by a magnet. He stabbed a finger at her. “Fuck you,” he growled, and then spun on his heel to stalk out the door.

“Wow, even the vicious infighting in this queer club has an elevated quality to it,” Sydney observed with a smirk. “I’m gonna like this

place.”

Lena watched Stewart stomp away until he was through the doors and then turned to face Rowan. “You okay, Ro?” she asked, a picture of concern.

Rowan waved off his memory. “I’m fine. Sorry about the scene. I shouldn’t have escalated.”

“Pretty sure he came looking for a fight,” Lena sighed. “I’m really looking forward to the two of them finally breaking up.”

“No shit,” Zoey agreed. “Meanwhile, I need another soda.” And the mixer event open house thing lurched back into the wash of stilted conversations and awkward flirting that had typified its first two hours.

“Okay, I’m exhausted,” Rowan admitted moments after Lena had stood on a chair one last time and told everybody that the event was over. Anyone who did not vacate the lounge would be dragooned into helping clean up.

Rowan, Sammy, and Zoey were sliding leftover pizza into two catch-all boxes and stacking the empties to one side. It was slow, brainless work, which suited Sammy’s current capabilities just fine.

“Big day today, late night last night,” Zoey nodded, fighting back a yawn. “Late night the night before, too.”

Rowan leaned over to hug her cousin but ended up draping herself on top of him. “Sammy, I want to be a good hostess and take you out and show you the sights but I think I’d fall asleep on the subway.”

“That’s okay,” he assured her. “I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night, either. I’d prolly fall asleep on top of you, and then we’d wake up... uh. Wherever the subway ends up.”

“The Bronx,” supplied Zoey neutrally.

Rowan giggled and disagreed: “Brooklyn!”

“Queens,” offered Agatha from a few steps away, looking vaguely ill at the thought.

“Yeah, let’s not go to any of those places,” Sammy agreed, not having any idea where they were or how they related to the City.

“You know what we should do?” Zoey asked with a half smile, and answered her own question: “Go back to the room, get into our jammies, put on a movie, and fall asleep before the third act even starts.”

“A slumber party?” Rowan gasped, placing a hand on her clavicle as if she were scandalized at the very proposition.

“Well, like...” Zoey moderated, squinting into the middle distance as if estimating some complex math. “Prolly half an hour of slumber party before we’re all passed out.”

“Can we order ice cream delivery?” Rowan asked like a small, truculent child.

Sammy blinked. “You can get ice cream *delivery* here? This place is magical.”

Rowan laughed. “I mean, it’s not exactly exciting, outside of you get ice cream at the end.”

Sammy folded a stack of eight boxes onto itself and then shoved it into the trash bin with finality. “Well that all sounds awesome. I like that plan for my last night here.”

“Then let’s do it!” Rowan grinned, and then called out: “Hey Aggie, Sydney. Pajamas, ice cream, and some mindless movie at ours tonight. Bring your sleeping bag, Syd, we’ll make it a sleepover.”

“Yeah, the more the merr—” Sammy started happily, and then trailed off. Sydney coming back to the room? That’s where her bag was. That’s where all her clothes were, spilling out of her bag in all directions across the sitting room floor.

“You okay there, sport?” Rowan laughed. “You kinda ran out of steam halfway though your aphorism.”

Sammy gave her a wan smile. “Just tired. Here, let’s finish this and head out. I wanna tidy up my, uh, stuff, before Aggie and Sydney get there. I made kind of a mess.”

The dorm room was just upstairs, which was good. Sammy was pretty sure if they’d had to cross campus he’d have jogged ahead of the girls and they’d have asked questions about why he was in such a rush. As it was, he just tapped his hand against his thigh as he watched the elevator climb floors. He made sure to follow Rowan and Zoey, not lead the way, on the short walk down the hall to their door.

But once the door was open, Sammy swept inside and started scooping discarded clothing into his arms. “You see? I’m a mess.” He stuffed it all into the bag, which didn’t work very well, and he had to stop, fold, and stack to make it all fit. His heart was trying to hammer through his ribcage the whole time.

Finally zipped up, he extended the handle and rolled it halfway into the bedroom. “Um, why don’t I stash this in your closet, Rowan, so it’s out of the way?”

She nodded distractedly from the reading chair, tapping on her phone. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Oh, but don’t forget to pull out your

pajamas first.”

Sammy laughed, just a touch manically, as he darted into the bedroom. “Oh right, I forgot about pajamas,” he said, while thinking furiously: he couldn’t wear Sydney’s pajamas in front of her. Both of them happening to own the same flannel was one thing; the flannel and PJs would be too ridiculous for credulity to bear. Especially with her suitcase being “missing.”

He positioned the rollerbag in Rowan’s closet and unzipped it open. There on the top were Sydney’s pajamas. “Um. I don’t see my pajamas in here,” he stammered. “Did I maybe leave them in your room at the townhouse?”

“What did you sleep in last night?” his cousin asked, half-laughing, from the other room.

“Her frat party fit, just like you did,” Zoey retorted. “At least I got her to wash her face off, unlike your trashy ass.”

His cousin laughed along with her roommate’s tease, and then she and her laugh were stepping into the bedroom. He slapped the bag closed and rezipped it, then tucked it behind some long dresses for good measure. His cousin smiled down at him blandly. “You can borrow some of mine.”

“All you have is peek-a-boo nighties and not-really-for-sleeping lingerie,” Zoey pointed out, following Rowan into the bedroom.

“Oh, that’s true, and it’s not like you’ll want to sleep in a bra and falsies, Sammy.” As she talked, she opened her pill box, popped one, and pressed another into Sammy’s palm. He tucked it under his tongue without comment.

Of course he wasn’t going to sleep in a bra and falsies, but the thought of Sydney seeing him without a bustline suddenly crashed his mood into the wall. “I guess it’d be... uncomfortable,” he agreed morosely.

“Without adhesive, yeah. Awkward,” Rowan sighed. “Sorry I don’t have any handy.”

“Here,” Zoey said, and threw a pile of silky material at Sammy. He managed to untangle it as she explained: “That’s long and shapeless, just ask Rowan what she thinks of my sleepwear.”

“But I like that one,” his cousin tried to argue, not that anyone was paying her much attention.

The nightgown was indeed long, made out of a pale yellow material patterned with miniscule white flowers. The neckline had the tiniest little bow that Sammy had ever seen. He’d look like he was cosplaying

Gramma. He peeled off flannel, tank, and bra and then pulled the nightgown overtop. Then he could pull off his jeans under cover of the nightgown.

Rowan and Zoey, by contrast, just stripped in the middle of the room and pulled on their own pajamas. Sammy studied the wall.

“Hey hey,” came Agatha’s voice from the sitting room.

“Oh, you put both beds into the second room,” said Sydney, with an audible smile. “That’s so cool.”

Rowan went to meet them. “We call this the sitting room,” she said, putting on the silly stuffy accent again, and then giggled. “It makes it feel like there’s more space.”

Zoey and Sammy followed Rowan out, and having five bodies in the room made it clear that there wasn’t that much space after all. But with some careful arrangement of sleeping bags, copious blankets, and bean bag chairs, they made it work.

Sammy kept scanning the room to make sure he hadn’t missed anything in his frantic clean up. One recognizable shirt could sink him irrevocably. Then he’d steal glances at Sydney to see if she had noticed or was having a reaction to his sudden lack of boobs. She either hadn’t noticed or was playing it cool. So then he’d go back to scanning the room.

Rowan set up her laptop on a convenient table where all could see, and opened up a streaming service. She glanced back at the room with a raised eyebrow. “Given the audience, I’m thinking Bound would be a good pick?”

The three girls responded with enthusiasm, and Sammy smiled as if he had any idea what Bound was. A movie, presumably. Rowan hit play and bounced across the room to settle into the reading chair with a fluffy fleece blanket over her knees.

They let the movie play, cheering and sighing appreciatively when the two leads came onto the screen. When the leads flirted in the elevator, the room went silent. But otherwise, everyone chatted sleepily as the tale of mob money, apartment renovation, and steamy lesbian romance unfolded on the little screen.

At some point Rowan’s phone lit up. She darted out of the room and came back a few minutes later with ice cream sundaes, all in little plastic bowls. No matter what anybody else said, the sudden appearance of ice cream seemed like magic to Sammy. They distributed the frozen treats, tucked in, and returned half their attention to the screen.

"I love this movie," Sydney murmured happily. "I haven't seen it in forever, since I showed it to Harper."

"Who's Harper?" Zoey asked from the beanbag chair she shared with Agatha, a touch of tease to her voice.

"My ex," was the melancholy answer. "The only other lesbian in my tiny-ass little hometown. Lemme tell you how great it is being black and queer in the middle of nowhere, New Jersey."

"Eugh," Sammy sympathized. "I'm guessing it's roughly similar to being brown and queer in the middle of nowhere, New Jersey." Sleepily, the back of his brain wondered if he'd ever actually told anyone he was queer... aside from all the times he accidentally told people he was trans, of course.

Sydney turned her head to face him across the floor. "Where exactly? I'm in Lafayette."

"Oak Grove?"

But she shook her head. "Never heard of it."

"It's super tiny," he said with a shrug. "I think we once delivered a big dresser chest of drawers thing to Lafayette. There's, like, a toy store?"

"And fuck-all else," Sydney sighed, and turned back to the screen.

Sammy waited a calculated beat and asked, "How long is your drive back tomorrow?"

Sydney snorted. "I'm taking the bus. Which helpfully departs at 11, and there's no stop for lunch."

Which was Sammy's departure time, too. They'd both arrive with their identical blue rollerbags, and she'd spot him across the way and come closer to say hi, and then she'd see his bag, and... he sighed to himself. He'd need to be careful tomorrow. Did Rowan know when his bus was leaving? Had he mentioned it? He hoped against hope that she wouldn't say anything.

But Rowan was offering advice in a half-asleep voice: "This is what you do. At breakfast tomorrow, you make yourself a bacon sandwich with... like, way too much bacon. Use waffles for bread. I mean, there's bread there, but you can use waffles, so why wouldn't you? And then you just wrap it up in napkins and tuck it into your backpack. Voilà. Lunch for the bus."

The girl on the floor next to Sammy giggled. "That sounds kind of awesome, actually."

"The dining plan exists to be exploited," Rowan intoned as if sharing ancient wisdom. "Ooo, sex scene."

As the two leads went at it up on the screen, the room quieted once again... as long as you ignored the quickened breath escalating to muffled moans emanating from the bean bag chairs. Sammy focused on mastering his own arousal; he hardly wanted to pitch a tent in the middle of the room. Finally he just placed one hand over his dick and very studiously moved neither hand nor dick.

"Jennifer Fucking Tilly," Sydney cooed dreamily.

"Right?" drawled Rowan.

Sammy smiled softly in the darkness and found himself saying, "Yeah, but counterpoint: uh. The other one. I'm bad with actress names."

"Gina Gershon," Agatha supplied, voice huskier than he'd ever heard it. "But it's not a competition."

"The beauty of cinema," Rowan opined, "is that the medium invites you to imagine yourself in between both of them."

And for the next few minutes that was all that Sammy could think of.

When the scene was over, Agatha and Zoey got up from the bean bag chair as quietly as they could, which wasn't very, and whispered, "We're going to fall asleep."

"Suuure you are," Rowan murmured. When the two girls had closed the bedroom door behind them, she muttered, with no small measure of fond appreciation, "Fucking horn dogs. Guys, I'm gonna give them fifteen minutes or so and then crawl into my own bed, too. This chair is not good for sleeping."

"Thanks for hosting," Sydney whispered. "I think Sammy's already asleep."

He wasn't; his eyes were closed, and he was close to sleep, but he did hear their exchange, and thought about responding, but that seemed like a lot of effort.

He woke with a start when a bottle of scotch hit the ground and shattered, up on the screen. Rowan was gone from her chair. Sydney was still watching the movie, eyes reflecting the light from the screen. She turned when he stirred and smiled gently. "Just the movie."

Sammy said something intelligent like "Mmph," and watched the screen a little more, intending to drift off. There was a lot of shouting and gun-waving and women getting tied up. He supposed the movie had to earn its title some way, after all.

"This is nice," the girl beside him said when the violence on the screen dipped down to a low ebb. "Your cousin and Zoey are... also

nice. Sorry, I don't have good words this late."

"They are," he nodded. "Nice."

"I think I like this place," she whispered to the screen, but her voice carried the careful, hushed tone of a confessional. "The school, I mean. This weekend might have made it my number one choice."

"I love this place," he murmured. "This has been the best weekend of my life."

She glanced over at him to share a smile but then did a double take. "Then why are you crying, honey?"

He reached up to touch his face; his finger came away wet. What was his deal recently? He wiped the tear trail off his cheek. "It's nothing," he responded automatically, but then he looked over at her, saw her open face watching him with nothing but sympathy, and confided, "I don't think I'm going to get in."

"You never know—" she started.

"I know," he interrupted morosely. "I'm not really Columbia material. Or college material in general."

Her eyes narrowed. "Girl, that is not your decision to make. You know that, right?"

He didn't have any idea what she was talking about. "What?"

"You don't decide if you get accepted," she explained, voice insistent on this rather obvious truth. "All you decide is if you do your best putting together your application. Saying no is their job, don't do it for them."

He couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Don't want to threaten their job security?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean." Suddenly she shifted, hand darting out of her sleeping bag to find Sammy's in his. She squeezed his hand. "I want you to promise me that you'll do the best you can on your application, okay?"

"It's not—"

"Promise me," she insisted, fingers around his like a vice grip, eyes locked on his, her perfect face lit by the shifting colours of the screen.

"I promise," he breathed, and then said it one more time, a little louder: "I promise."

Sydney smiled at him and his stomach flip-flopped. "Good. Cause I want to see you here in September."

He gave her a hesitant smile. "Me, too." They watched through to the end of the movie, but Sammy didn't make it through the credits.

* * *

“If you need anything,” said Uncle Henry as they came up out of the subway station and into the Port Authority bus terminal, “I want you to call us, okay? Call me.”

Sammy nodded, the kind of exaggerated nod he’d learned you had to use with adults when you were wearing a hoodie. Because he was back in his own clothes, the clothes that he’d worn on the bus trip here... was it really just three days ago?

He’d been wearing them since the slumber party had tumbled out of the dorm room and went hunting for breakfast. Rowan had given him a sad-eyed look, but he’d shrugged and explained he really didn’t want to dress girly for breakfast and then change clothes to go home. He didn’t mention that he also really didn’t want to go to breakfast with Sydney dressed in the girl’s own clothes.

His hoodie and sweats were familiar and warm, even if they were far scratchier than he remembered. He told himself it was because he’d worn this set already, and ignored the fact that at home he’d “recycled” clothes off his floor for days if not weeks. He adamantly did not think about how all of Sydney’s girl clothes were lighter, softer, and just plain felt nicer on the skin.

“Listen, Sammy, I don’t think you understand what I’m saying,” his uncle said, and gently took him by the elbow and steered the both of them towards the wall, out of the stream of foot traffic.

Uncle Gideon and Rowan followed after, making a little semi-circle around Sammy.

Henry looked at him gravely and made hard eye contact before continuing. “If Oak Grove gets unliveable, if your parents get upset with you, if you just want a change of scenery for a bit, you call me and we will come get you, okay?”

Sammy couldn’t help but smile at the offer even as he shook his head. “I can’t just—”

“Sammy, we’d be happy to have you come live with us,” put in Uncle Gideon. “However long you need. Even if it’s indefinitely.”

“Oh,” he managed to say. The offer, so quickly and easily made, staggered him. He believed they were sincere, too. Had anyone in Sammy’s life ever—well, sure, Andrei had offered him the apartment, but in Oak Grove, and it was sort of a family hand-me-down—but nobody had offered to straight-up rescue him. He smiled and blinked so he wouldn’t cry. “Thank you.”

Rowan reached forward and pulled him into a hug. “We know a little bit about growing up trans and with families that don’t

understand.”

They were intended as kind words, but Sammy’s swelling gratitude immediately crumpled. His uncles and cousin weren’t accepting and welcoming of Sammy; they were eager to help out a poor trans girl. He forced a plausibly grateful smile. At least he didn’t have to stop up his own tears, now.

He looked down the corridor towards the bus depot. “Um. Would it be rude if I asked to say our goodbyes here?” he asked, and at the looks on the faces of his family he realized it would be. He looked down, hands knotted in the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. Suddenly inspiration struck. “It’s just. I spent all weekend dressed like a girl, and now I’m... back where I was before, you know? And I’m not sure I want you to remember me like this.”

You want to help out a trans girl, he thought, then let her go dodge the cute lesbian from Lafayette, also waiting at the bus depot, without getting in the poor trans girl’s way. You can tell yourself you were being sensitive about her feelings.

Gideon reached forward and squeezed his shoulder. “Of course, honey. Whatever you need. But can I get in a hug before we go?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said, and they cycled through a round of hugs. He let himself believe that this, at least, was genuine. He hoped that one day, after he had “detransitioned” and they got used to the real Sammy, they’d hug him like this again.

“I got you a present,” said Rowan, and brandished the Columbia University Bookstore bag that she’d been carrying since she’d ducked out halfway through breakfast.

He dug into the bag and came out with... a stuffed animal. A lion? Wearing a blue Columbia shirt. Its butt was weighted with plastic beans or something so that it wouldn’t tip over when you sat it down. It was dumb, but he grinned at it.

“That’s Roar-ee the Lion,” she informed him proudly. “I still think we should have adopted Mathilda the Harlem Goat as school mascot, but that decision was made before my time.”

“Thanks, I’ll put it on my desk,” he said, and stuffed the lion in the plastic bag and stuffed the bag into his backpack. “For inspiration when I fill out my application.”

Uncle Henry touched his elbow again. “Speaking of which, Samantha, I’d be happy to write you a letter of recommendation.”

Gideon stage-whispered, “He’s kind of a big deal.”

“Thanks,” Sammy said, and glanced down the corridor again. “And

I mean it, thank you so much, all of you.”

“Okay, one more hug,” said Gideon, squeezing him fiercely, “and then you get the fuck out of here.”

He’d fibbed and told his uncles that his bus was leaving at 10:30 so he could be at the bus station early. He asked at the information window where his bus would be and sat two bays away, where he could still see his bus stop.

Sydney came rolling in at 10:35 and strode confidently to their bay. She had her headphones in and was tipping her head to the beat, lips occasionally mouthing lyrics. She still wore the Columbia sweater and comfortable blue jeans.

Sammy watched without staring, because he’d learned his lesson. No inadvertant eye contact this time. He kept her in the corner of his eye as passengers came and went.

Their bus pulled up to the stop shortly thereafter; its load of passengers disembarked and pulled their luggage out of the cargo bays along the bottom of the bus. Sammy watched as Sydney queued to reverse the procedure, chucking his bag into the bus with an understandable distaste. He watched her board.

Pulling his hood tight, Sammy rose and walked across the two bus bays. Most of the passengers had stowed their stuff and boarded, and he waited for the last one to climb up the stairs. Then he rolled Sydney’s bag into the cargo bay and climbed in after it.

He had to shuffle a bunch of luggage that was already in there, pulling his sleeping bag along with him. When he finally got to his bag, tucked towards the back, he telescoped out the rollerbag’s handle, swung his sleeping bag forward, and strapped it securely to the extended bars.

He then crab-walked backwards, grabbing Sydney’s bag where he’d set it down, and carefully positioned it so that it would be front and center when the cargo bay doors were opened back up in Dover. He set Sydney’s sleeping bag, pulled up from the back of the cargo hold, next to it.

Would it work? Who knew. But he’d like to get Sydney her stuff back if at all possible. He felt guilty for “borrowing” it for so long.

Finally he slunk up the stairs, backpack held before him so that he could hold it up in front of his face if need be. But Sydney was seated in a window seat, looking out at the not particularly scenic bus depot, singing along to her music. He hefted his bag in front of his face

anyway, to make sure she couldn't even spot his reflection in the window.

Sammy settled into the last row of seats, hunkering down a little to hide his face behind the next row's headrests. No one would have any cause to turn their attention to his hiding spot.

His phone chimed and buzzed.

Cursing quietly, he dug it out of his backpack and flicked it onto silent mode.

Rowan had texted: **Have you found the zipper yet?**

Sammy couldn't help smirking. The question made no sense. Had she meant to text that to somebody who knew what she was talking about? He texted back a single question mark.

On Roar-ee, came the reply.

Sammy dug the slick plastic bag out of his backpack and pulled out the plush lion. Sure enough, there was a zipper along its butt, sewn in with an inexpert hand. He carefully tugged it open.

A hundred little blue pills, all wrapped up in a ziploc baggie, stared up at him. Holy shit.

He texted back: **Holy shit!**

You said you didn't have that sort of thing at home, she replied quickly.

He zipped up the plush before anybody could see he was trafficking ecstasy. He tapped out: **Zoey these had to cost so much!**

Not that much, she replied, and then: **Besides, you're worth it.**

Not knowing what else to say, he texted: **This is amazing.**

The three dots bobbed for a while, finally producing: **one in the morning, one at night, every day. That should supply you for three months, okay? Do not ration when you get low. I'll find some way to get you more. Even if I have to rent a car and drive up to Bumfuck myself.**

OMG thank you, he texted back. And then he smirked and typed out: **I promise to take my meds every day like a good girl.**

She hearted it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Spring Fever

Andrei was waiting at the bus depot with the big truck. His hulking uncle was plainly visible from where Sammy slumped in the back seat of the bus, and plainly trying to spot his nephew, but Sammy didn't try to get his attention. First he watched as Sydney disembarked and walked away with her suitcase and sleeping bag, not tied together. Only then did he come down the steps, wave at his uncle, and collect his bag with the sleeping bag strapped to the frame. Andrei wrapped him in a bear hug, asked him how the weekend went, and immediately took his luggage from him.

They drove up the mountain roads in relative silence. Andrei asked the kind of leading questions that adults thought would naturally blossom into a broader conversation, but Sammy stonewalled him with monosyllables ("did you use the crosswalks?" "yes, sir."). At one point he pretended to nap. He knew what Andrei wanted to say, and he hoped he could avoid it entirely. He made it until Andrei turned onto Sammy's street.

"I'm glad you got to see the Big City," his uncle said. "It's very big and very noisy, and it's exciting at first. But that wears off." He pulled up to Sammy's curb. "Just to say. My offer still stands: the workshop, the apartment, all of it. You could have a good life here."

Sammy nodded and kept nodding as he stepped out of the cab, then turned back to his uncle, door held open. "Uncle Andrei, I appreciate the offer. I really do. But I'm going to go to Columbia." He swung the door shut before the man could answer and collected his bags from the truck bed.

His parents were still out West, so Sammy let himself into the house and hauled his bag upstairs. He stopped at the open door to his

bedroom, grimacing. It was a mess. It was the same mess it always was, but he was coming at it fresh from Rowan and Zoey's dorm room, which they kept moderately tidy. His room looked like a tornado had hit it.

With a sigh, he started scooping clothes off the floor.

He got a load of laundry going, filled two trash bags with garbage scattered through his room (a volume of trash which he found just a little disturbing, honestly), and fetched the vacuum from the hall closet. When he got hungry, he went downstairs to raid the fridge only to find that Mom had pre-empted him with leftovers. Each single-serving tupperware was labelled with a sticky note, annotated with how long he should microwave it. The sun was setting when he opened his rollerbag and poured his hoodies and sweatpants into a second load of laundry.

He pulled out Roar-ee and planted the stuffed lion on top of his desk. Then he sat down at his computer, loaded up the Columbia website, and starting printing application forms.

School on Monday was weird. To everybody else, it was just the start of another week, indistinguishable from the last; they went about their lives like nothing had changed. Nothing had, for them. They hadn't gone anywhere over the weekend, they hadn't experienced real life for very first time in their existence. School was the same old daycare-slash-holding-cell it had always been. But to Sammy it was an eggshell about to shatter around him. This was temporary. There was a better world out there.

Everyone in class seemed half asleep, which Sammy knew was normal but suddenly found strange and awkward. He raised his hand and answered the teachers' questions, just to fill the silence. In Biology they talked about the nervous system and he relayed to the class what his cousin and uncle had told him about eyeballs.

Between classes he went to the office and got his transcripts. The school secretary printed up a copy for him there and then, for reference; official copies she'd send to his school of choice directly. She only raised her eyebrows slightly when he gave her the address for Columbia and no others.

When school was done, he walked home and settled in to preparing his application, which had spawned children like rabbits: there were government financial aid forms and recommended scholarships, too. Each one had its own application form asking for the same basic

details over and over again, and an essay prompt that was never the same. He'd have to write so many essays.

He wrote first drafts but didn't like them so at lunch the next day he knocked on the door of his favourite English teacher, from sophomore year. She'd always been kind and attentive, and she assigned more interesting books than any other teacher he'd ever had. He stumbingly asked her for help with his essay drafts, and the smile she hit him with could have lit up the whole town.

His parents got home late on Friday. The both of them were exhausted from a full day of travel and they'd already texted him about the weekend—getting about as many details out of Sammy as Andrei had—so there wasn't much conversation. They plodded towards their bedrooms. His mom ran a bath.

The next morning his mother found him awake in a tidy bedroom, hard at work at his desk. She offered to make him breakfast with a bemused expression on her face. "What's all this?"

"Applications," he answered quickly, focused on the draft on his screen. "There's... a lot. I've been filling out forms since I got home."

"...for Columbia?" his mother verified, her voice carefully scraped clear of expression. Neutral.

He nodded, then finally pulled his eyes off his computer. "Oh, um. There's an application fee?"

She laid a hand on his shoulder. "We've got you, honey. You don't worry about that." She waited a beat and squeezed him softly. "Pancakes or waffles?"

Half an hour later, Sammy munched on his waffles at his desk while Mom delivered a breakfast tray with two plates to her own bedroom. He could hear his father's voice as he woke up, paired with the lighter tinkle of his mother.

He was pretty sure they had no idea how clearly the house's heating vents conducted sound between their bedrooms. Sammy, though, was well aware, just as he was well aware that Thursday nights he should keep watching television when his parents claimed they were "tired" and skipped off to their bedroom.

Their sleepy, flirty banter wafted through the vents like white noise right up until his father very clear said, "What?!" His mother responded, too low to hear, and he retorted, "But he just doesn't have the grades."

Their voices dropped back down into indistinct noise, although there was no mistaking the tenor of their quiet argument: his father

was disdainful, almost angry. His mother's voice alternated between soothing rebuffs and gentle ribbing.

Perhaps she walked closer to the vent in their room, because he clearly heard her say, "...doesn't get accepted, it's nice to see him with something he actually cares about..." His mother was always eager for him to have "interests." So this was just more of the same for her.

Neither of them thought he'd get in.

Sammy plugged in his headphones, cranked up his music, and turned back to revising his essay.

Somewhere in the next week, Sammy was sitting at the kitchen island re-reading what he hoped were the final drafts of his essays. He'd come out here for a snack but only ate half the apple he'd grabbed before he was absorbed in the application again. The essays seemed solid, but he still wasn't done. He flipped back through the presentation binder he kept it all in and scowled at the checklist printed down the front page of the guidelines.

His mom came bustling through with a laundry basket. She pulled the kitchen towels off the handles where they hung, then considered him for a long moment. "Why the long face, hon?"

He set down the application guidelines and gestured at the checklist, frustrated and helpless. "I need a letter of recommendation from somebody in the community."

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know anybody in the community."

She snorted. "This is Oak Grove. You know everybody in the community."

"Yeah, but not..." he pointed at the line on the application. "It has to be somebody who has been a mentor or employer, or otherwise has an extensive understanding of my character and work ethic."

His mother bustled over, laundry basket on her hip, to look down at the line on the paper. After a moment, she said, "Oh, ask Uncle Oliver. He was your scoutmaster for years."

"I already have Uncle Henry writing one letter," he pointed out, "and the admissions advisor said I should only have one letter from a family member."

"Well, Uncle Oliver isn't really your uncle, sweetheart," she told him, brushing a lock of hair out of his face. Then she got a funny smirk on her face. "In fact, none of your uncles in Oak Grove are actually your uncles. Not by blood. Only Henry holds that distinction."

“...wait. Uncle Alexei?”

“Third cousin once removed,” she supplied with a shrug. “And Aunt Nina, too. But Oliver and Lisa are family friends who’ve just been sort of scooped up by the Levchenko horde. Like I was.”

“Okay,” Sammy considered, but then screwed up his face. “But scouts was like... years ago.”

“It was two years ago,” she corrected with a roll of her eyes. “For some of us, that’s an eyeblink.” She rubbed his shoulder encouragingly. “I assure you, it will be okay, and Oliver will write you a fantastic letter. You guys did so much stuff together, he’s got loads of fodder for a recommendation.”

“Mm... maybe,” he allowed, although he was already pulling out his phone to text Oliver.

Mom smiled and headed for the laundry room. “Technically,” she mused, “I think you’re still registered with the old troop.”

But Sammy was watching the three dots bounce on his phone. It only took a moment for Oliver to respond: *I'd be honoured!*

When do you need it by?

Anything in particular you want me to include?

Do I send it to you or directly to the school?

There was a big, gaping hole in Sammy’s application, and that was extracurriculars. Sure, he could claim he’d been a scout, and Oliver had reminded him that as a scout he’d helped run the community fireworks shows on July 4th and helped set up and operate Oak Grove’s mini golf course at the county fair... right up until the COVID lockdowns killed both of those events and the troop, too. So he had community involvement, but it all sounded one-note and not particularly recent.

Which brought him to the Band Room during lunch time on a Wednesday. Not to join the school’s anemic marching band, but to look in on a student club that met there and then. He’d only seen it advertised on flyers plastered onto school doors with entirely too much packing tape... and the torn-down flyers kicked into the corners of the hallways.

He poked his head inside. A wide circle of twelve chairs sat in the middle of the large room, but only three of them were occupied. And Sammy was late; he’d dithered about showing up at all, so he had to be the last one to show up. It didn’t look like much of a meeting,

so he slowly faded back into the hall.

He didn't fade fast enough.

"Hey there!" called out a smiling girl, craning her neck to make and maintain eye contact with him. She waved enthusiastically. "Are you here for GSA? Come on in!"

"Uh, yeah maybe? Sort of?" he answered, stepping inside despite his impulse to flee. "I mean, I... I'm not really sure what the club is for?"

"It's the Gay-Straight Alliance," the girl beamed at him. "We're here to support gay people at the school."

"I'm telling you," one of the other kids retorted wearily, "it should be the Gender and Sexualities Alliance. Gay-Straight Alliance is, like, 2010."

"I like Gay-Straight Alliance," the smiling girl insisted.

"Yeah, cause you're straight," the second kid groaned, and gestured to her and the girl who hadn't spoken yet. "Both of you are straight. Why did you even start this club?"

"Because we're allies," she admonished, and then looked back up to smile at Sammy. "What about you? No wait. Sorry. I'm Pam and I use she and her pronouns. What about you?"

Sammy opened his mouth and closed it, mildly annoyed that his stupid brain almost answered "Samantha, she/her." It was the only answer he'd ever used for that question, after all. No wonder it was on the tip of his tongue. "I'm Sammy. He and him."

The outspoken kid introduced himself as Derrick, he/him, while the third member all but whispered "Dawn, she/her, thank you." Sammy knew them all by sight from around town—it was Oak Grove, after all—but wasn't sure if he'd really met them before. They all seemed small and young, and he'd never had a class with them; they were probably sophomores or even freshmen.

Sammy found himself stepping deeper into the room. He nodded towards Derrick. "So I take it you're not a straight ally?"

"No, I like dick," the boy answered with a hard edge to his voice. Then he sighed. "Theoretically speaking, at least, since I'm apparently the only gay kid at this school."

Pam kept smiling at Sammy, watching hopefully as he laid hands on the back of the nearest chair in the circle. "Good to meet you, Sammy. What brings you to GSA today? Is there anything that you'd like to see our little club do for, uh, the queer community here?"

He gave up and sat down. "Look, I'll be honest. I'm filling out my

college application, and I've never joined a school club in my life, and I thought maybe—"

Derrick snorted. "Oh great. You thought you could join the GSA to 'support the queer community,'"—here he employed air quotes to underscore his disdain—"which is, you know, just me. I'm the queer community at this school. But then you can put it in your college application cause you're such a good ally."

"Well, no," Sammy answered a little feebly, and mentally kicked himself. Why was he letting underclassmen intimidate him? He squared his shoulders. "I'm queer. I just haven't, you know, joined the club before."

"Well we've only been meeting for a couple months," the girl beamed at him. Like really beamed at him, with disturbing intensity. "And our flyers keep getting torn down, so it's perfectly understandable that you hadn't found your way to us yet. But I'm so happy to have you here, Sammy. I really, really am."

By contrast, Derrick all but scowled at him. "I would have heard if there was another gay boy in the school."

Sammy shrugged. "I haven't been out. Of the closet. I mean." He squinted up at the windows, considering. "I guess I just came out right now."

A high, keening sound erupted from the other side of the circle. Sammy looked towards the source with wide-eyed trepidation. But it was only Pam, positively squealing and holding onto the bottom curve of her chair as if it was an ejector seat. Finally she gasped out, "Congratulations, Sammy! That's so awesome!"

"Um, thanks," he said, and shrugged.

"It's a big step," said Derrick, giving Sammy what might have actually been a genuine smile. But then it turned wan. "But let me tell you: you didn't just come out of the closet. You just started coming out of the closet. It's a process. And it never ends."

But Oak Grove was there to make the process quicker, it appeared. By the end of the school day, Sammy could feel eyes on his back. People whispered in his presence. The next day that behavior had spread beyond the school, and people on the street watched him pass by with wary intensity.

As he walked into school on Friday, a pack of football players called out to him in the hall. Knowing that wasn't going to result in anything good, Sammy made sure he was standing outside an open classroom door with a teacher inside before turning and lifting his eyebrows.

"Hey," said the lead football player, lopsided smile plastered across his face. "I heard a rumor about you. That you're gay."

Sammy decided to bite the bullet. "I mean, I prefer 'queer,' but yeah, sure." He shrugged. What were they going to do, ostracize him more than he already was?

But the kid in the letterman jacket just nodded. "That's cool," he told Sammy. "I've got an aunt who's a lesbo."

Charming. But Sammy bobbed his head. "That's great, man."

Letterman jacket shot finger guns at him. "You have a great day, bruh." And then he and his entourage ambled down the hall.

That night, his parents' voices came through the heating vents. "What do we do," Dad blustered incredulously, "ask him if there's anything he wants to tell us?"

His mother demurred. "He'll tell us when he's ready to tell us, dear. Be patient."

His father then complained about how he hated waiting, and his mother offered to distract him, and Sammy put on his headphones.

That Saturday morning, Sammy went over his applications one last time. He had all his details filled out, his unofficial transcripts enclosed with a receipt that official copies were en route, and a short stack of money orders that his mother had driven all the way to Dover for. His list of community and school involvement activities seemed very close to fraudulent to him—Pam had told him that since he'd joined GSA in its first year, he should put himself down as a founding member—but reading it over for the eleventy billionth time, it was all at least rooted in truth.

It was actually kind of impressive. Not the information in the application itself, not really; Sammy wasn't about to think that he'd put together a convincing application. But the sheer breadth of the application, the gathering of details, the essays long and short, the examination of his life in Oak Grove from new angles to best present himself... it might have been the biggest project he'd ever tackled. And he'd finished it.

He'd done his best on the application, just like he'd promised Sydney. He wasn't sure if he'd ever done his best on anything, really, not since, like, grade school. Flipping through the fat stack of paper, he really wasn't sure what had come over him.

His phone buzzed, reminding Sammy to pluck Roar-ee off his desk, turn the stuffie over, and tuck his morning pill under his tongue.

Nodding to himself, Sammy jogged the stack of papers into an orderly rectangle, pieced the pages out into their respective application piles, and placed the money orders on top. Then each stack was slid into its own pre-addressed, appropriately-stamped envelope. He licked and sealed each one and stacked them up. Finished.

He video chatted with Rowan every few days, and sometimes Zoey would hop on, too. They mostly talked about nothing, and often just ended up studying with the screen open in front of them, making idle chit-chat as they went.

He asked Zoey if she or Agatha had got any contact information for Sydney. This immediately got him waggled eyebrows and gentle ribbing, but he insisted his interest was entirely platonic. He just wanted to hear if she'd submitted her application, and maybe commiserate a little on how much work it had been. But they hadn't thought to ask the girl for a number or social media ID before she went home, so he was out of luck.

He wanted to tell Sydney that he'd done his best on his application, like he'd promised. But he couldn't tell her, and since he probably wasn't getting in, he'd never be able to tell her.

He often ended up forcing himself not to think about how many people he wasn't ever going to see again, how many experiences he'd got to taste but would never get to savour. He also forced himself not to think about what awaited him here in Oak Grove—making chairs all day and sleeping alone in a tiny apartment above a hair salon.

There was one silver lining to not getting into Columbia, and that was that he had no deadline on telling his relations in the City that he was detransitioning. He couldn't ever figure how to bring it up naturally, but if he wasn't going there any time soon, he didn't have to tell them any time soon, either.

Every time he started up a video call, he reminded himself to tell Rowan that he was detransitioning, or that it was all just too damn hard as a prelude to telling her that he was detransitioning. He never quite got around to it. There'd be something funny to laugh about, or gossip to share, and then it felt weird to be a downer with his fake news. He'd tell her next time.

With the applications sent off, Sammy expected to deflate into interminable waiting, but his usual lassitude never quite seemed to manifest. He woke up every morning before his alarm clock,

showered, and prepared to face the day.

He found his classes interesting—apparently they saved all the good stuff for the very end of senior year—and he became an active participant in the discussions.

Every week he attended GSA, not really to accomplish anything but just sort of complain and swap recommendations for streaming shows with queer characters in them.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays he walked across town to his grandparents' grocery store to work his shifts at the till and shuffle deliveries into the back room inventory. His grandfather "worked" there every day, which mostly meant sitting on a stool behind the counter and talking with older Oak Grove residents as they stopped in. His many children and grandchildren—blood-related or no—did all the actual work. It used to be a boring if easy source of spending money for Sammy, but he found himself chatting with customers and Uncle Oliver and actually enjoying himself.

Hefting the big bags of rice up onto the shelves always left him a sweaty mess, and at first he thought he'd somehow got into better shape and the task hadn't fazed him. But then he realized he was still sweaty as hell, he just didn't stink as much. Which was weird. Maybe it was a side effect of eating better.

Because he was eating better, almost accidentally. His mother had always made sure there were healthy snacks in the kitchen and only reluctantly stocked bags of chips and boxes of cookies for Sammy and his father. It's not like Sammy completely eschewed the junk food, but when he felt like chips, he just... didn't eat as many. Instead of inhaling a whole bag he'd eat a couple handfuls and lose interest. Or he'd help himself to his mom's celery sticks and hummus, or half an apple.

Sammy tried not to think about his shifting diet, but even he noticed that it had had an effect. His tummy shrank and his face got lean, cheekbones rising to new prominence. A few unconscious changes in diet did this much? All his skin blemishes cleared up, too, which Sammy was actually very happy with. If the cost of not having zits was just eating fewer chips, that seemed like a reasonable bargain.

The only problem was that he was slipping right out of his sweatpants, no matter how tight he cinched and tied the waistbands. Compounded with the weather warming up and his hoodies and sweats getting too hot, and the fact that they all seemed to be rough and coarse against his skin no matter how much fabric softener he

used... he was seriously considering ditching them. But then what would he wear, tee shirts and shorts?

He only had a few of those, and he tried a couple on and scowled at his reflection. This kid was not who he was used to seeing in the mirror. He in fact looked a little too much like Samantha had when Rowan had gone at him with makeup. But he'd liked how he'd looked then—not how he looked for himself; it wasn't a look he really wanted to claim for himself—he just liked how he looked in a detached, aesthetic sort of way. But if he looked just a little more like that, it wouldn't be the end of the world, right?

And maybe he looked kind of nice. Nicer. Like a slightly less unpleasant little brown gremlin.

He banished that thought whenever it came up. Nonsense.

But he forced himself to go to school in shorts and tee shirt and nobody seemed to notice, and also he didn't overheat in the middle of class and was just in general more comfortable, so he guessed he'd do it again.

The third day he came to school without a hoodie, one of his teachers took him aside after class. With an uncertain smile, she told him that she wasn't sure what had changed in his life, but she really liked this new Sammy who participated in class, had insights into the reading, and who seemed eager to apply himself.

Sammy thanked her and stumbled out into lunch period, burdened with a sudden impulse for introspection. He had been telling himself that he was anxiously waiting for the inevitable rejection of his college application, that he was distracting himself from worrying over it by doing other stuff. Class discussions, GSA, chatting with grocery customers. But if he was being honest with himself, he hadn't really done any of that intentionally. It all just sort of happened.

It was like he came home from Preview Days and woke up. He'd been sleepwalking through life before, but now... but now he had a goal, right, and a purpose. Maybe that made all the difference. Even if his dream to get into Columbia was doomed from the start, it was still a dream worth working towards, worth thinking about.

All of it—his good mood, his effortless drive, his incomprehensible impulse to just smile at people now—would come crashing down around his ears, no doubt, when they responded to his application.

It was early May when Sammy came home from school to find his mother fidgeting in the kitchen. She nodded at the far corner of the

kitchen island. "You got something in the mail today."

Sitting there was a fat envelope, and Sammy's first thought was that it had to be something else, some Army recruiter propaganda, a care package from distant family, a marketing scheme that had got his mailing address from somebody at school who didn't like him very much. Because it was a packet, not a slim letter envelope, and rejections came in the little envelopes, didn't they, and acceptance letters in the big envelopes.

But the return address was Columbia University, with its New York address and its blue crown crest.

He looked up at his mother fearfully; she nodded at him with a gentle smile. He worked the envelope open, not wanting to tear whatever was inside, and pulled out the stack of papers. He read the first line of the cover letter.

It was not an acceptance letter.

Or at least, not quite. He scowled and read further, trying to understand what had went sideways. His mother asked if everything was all right, but he didn't answer at first, parsing out the letter.

Finally he explained, "Um. It's welcoming me to something called the Marginalized Scholars Summer Program?"

Mom came around the kitchen island and read over his shoulder. A moment later she shouted happily and pointed at the second-to-last paragraph. "Look, there! Participation in the program confers provisional acceptance to the university."

Sammy nodded slowly. "If I complete the program." He flipped the page over and found a glossy pamphlet underneath it. There were smiling students of many different skin tones and ethnic clothes, sitting in Columbia classrooms and raising their hands enthusiastically. He skimmed a little and swore.

"Language," his mother chided automatically, and then apparently read what he'd read, and repeated his swear.

"Eight weeks of intensive remedial study capped by a final examination in six parts," he summarized, and sat down heavily into one of the stools that lined the kitchen island.

His mother took the pamphlet from his numb fingers and flipped through it. "This looks like..." she started, and scowled at it. "Okay, reading between the lines? This is some diversity program where they bring in students from abroad and then sort of... catch them up to the kind of educational background that domestic students have."

"Yeah, but I'm not from another country," he pointed out needlessly.

"I'm a bus ride away."

She shrugged and then huffed out a sigh. "Maybe they think Oak Grove High School is, uh..."

"...comparable to a third-world education?" he finished for her with distaste. "I'm not a huge fan of my school, but that seems kind of rude."

"But still," she moderated, and waved at the cover letter. "If you complete this program, you get into Columbia."

"If I pass the final exam," he corrected her, "in six parts."

She fixed him with a look, motherly love tempered with frank consideration. "Do you think you can do it?"

Sammy cringed. "Do you think I can do it?"

His mother shrugged. "I think you can do anything you put your mind to, honey. I always have." She grinned and smacked him playfully with the pamphlet. "What do you think? That's what matters."

He gave her a pale, self-deprecating smile in response, but then her words seemed to pry themselves into his brain. He'd been doing really well recently, hadn't he? Compiling that massive application, but also in class and just around town and everything. He'd acquired this new intense focus, the result of having a goal he actually cared about and a reason to engage with the world around him. His head started nodding softly.

He was surprised as anyone when he answered his mother: "You know... I think I can. I can do it."

They shared a short, tight hug and his mother cupped the side of his face. "I am so proud of you, honey. I—" Whatever she was about to say was interrupted by the recognizable growl of his father's car pulling up the drive. She grinned at Sammy, stacked up the papers, and pushed them all into his hands. "You've got good news to share."

His father came in with his usual bluster, tossing his coat and briefcase onto the entryway chair he'd pick them off of in the morning, kicking off his shoes with visceral satisfaction. Then he came across the living room, head cocked at the strange vibe between his wife and child. "What's up, fam?"

"I got some mail from Columbia," Sammy told him with no small measure of sudden trepidation.

His father didn't smile in response; instead he pasted on a look of sympathy and reached forward to wrap him in a hug. "Ah, I'm sorry, son."

"Richard!" his wife hissed with enough vehemence that he froze, arms extended, halfway across the room. "He got in."

"Provisionally," Sammy leapt to clarify. "Provisional acceptance."

His father straightened and put a hand on his shoulder, looking more than a little confused. "Have they not received your test scores or something?"

Sammy handed him the pamphlet. "No, I'm going into something called the Marginalized Scholars Summer Program. And then if I—*when* I pass the final exam, then I get into Columbia for the fall semester."

Dad took the pamphlet and flipped back and forth through it, then took the cover letter and read that too, with the sort of intensity that he usually reserved for legal briefs. Then he flipped through the pamphlet again, and when he came to the last page he muttered, "This is bullshit."

"Richard!" Mom all but shouted.

"No, I mean—" his father stammered, and then set his hand on Sammy's shoulder again. "Sorry, that came out wrong. I just meant." He took a moment to formulate what he meant, or at least what he wanted to say he'd meant. "I just worry that this might be some sort of bureaucratic error, and I don't want you to get there only to find out that you shouldn't be in this program at all."

"This program gets me into Columbia," Sammy told his father, voice carefully even. "It's my way forward."

"But Sammy, you're not—" his father said with a half-chuckle. That genial voice he thought made him sound reasonable. "You're not marginalized; you're a rich white kid."

Sammy took a step backward, large enough that his father's hand fell off his shoulder. "I'm not white, Dad, what the fuck!" He could not keep the incredulity out of his tone.

"Language," his father warned, then shook his head as if to clear it. "No, sorry."

"You realize I get pulled over when I drive, right?" Sammy hissed. "All the time. For nothing."

"Suzie pulled you over?" his mother sputtered angrily. Officer Suzie Parker was the sole member of the Oak Grove police department. She and his mother exchanged recipes.

"Not Suzie, but state troopers," Sammy clarified. "They don't know me. They see my face behind the wheel of a Lexus, they think I've stolen it. It's why I don't like driving very much."

His mother sighed. "Honey, you never said—"

He squared his shoulders at his father. "Point is, I'm not white, people think I'm inherently suspicious and greedy and that I take stuff that I don't deserve. So yeah, Oak Grove High School maybe didn't give me the same education that they'll be happy to give my cousins. And Columbia's dedication to diversity means that they want to give me a chance to make up the difference. Cause it's a good school, and you should be proud that you went there, and you should be proud that I'm going, too."

His father sighed. "Samuel, I am proud of you—"

"I don't think you are," he snapped back. "I don't know why, but you've been nothing but pissed every time I bring this up. You haven't given me a single word of encouragement. I don't know what I'm supposed to think except that you just don't want me there." He spun on his heel and stormed towards the stairs. "I'll be in my room."

His father was wise enough not to follow him (or more likely his mother wisely counseled him not to) and instead apologized the next morning over breakfast. He was proud of Sammy, he knew Sammy would smash the six-part final exam, he was happy that his son would be attending his alma mater. "I just got all up in my lawyer head," was his limp excuse for how he'd acted the day before.

Sammy knew that wasn't the whole story, but his father was making the effort to apologize, so he forgave him. They hugged. Dad offered to tell him about all the best "watering holes" around campus and asked if he was considering a pre-law degree. Sammy told him that he just wanted to focus on completing and passing the summer program.

He made video calls to Rowan and Zoey and then Uncles Henry and Gideon, who were all ecstatic for him. Rowan declared she "always knew you'd get in, boo," and he confessed to her that he had never really believed he would. He wished again that he could call Sydney to share his good news.

Life went back to normal, or as normal as it had been recently, with school and grocery store shifts taking up his time, but all of it feeling ephemeral and temporary. Oak Grove was where he lived, sure, but not for long. He was going to have a life!

A week later he turned Roar-ee over, unzipped his bum, and dug a finger in to extract a pill. When it proved harder than usual, he pulled the ziploc baggie out entirely. There were only ten or so pills left.

He tucked one under his tongue and immediately texted Rowan: Hey I just noticed that my three-month supply is about to run out.

Oh fuck, she repounded an hour later. Sorry, I was in class.

He smirked down at his phone and tapped out, You wanna come visit Oak Grove?

Instead of a text reply he got a request for a video call. He wheeled himself across his room to shut his door and then accepted the call. Rowan's head and upper body jumped around the screen as she walked across campus. Sammy couldn't help smiling. "Hey."

"Hey boo," his cousin responded with a tight smile. "Listen. It's... ugh. I'm in the middle of finals crunch right now."

Sammy settled back into his chair. "I bet that's a lot," he offered, sympathetically.

"It's kind of insane, actually," she said, managing to nod and roll her eyes at the same time, without falling over or careening into another student passing by. "But you're here in, like, three weeks, right?"

He blinked and looked over at the wall calendar next to his desk. Was it really that soon? "Three weeks and a few days," he confirmed. "Wow, I didn't realize."

Rowan nodded her head. "Okay. So. You've got like a week of supply left, right?"

Oh. Sammy's stomach sank. "I mean. A little less."

"I'm so sorry, Sammy, but I have, like, zero time available to me right now." His cousin gave him a long apologetic look which at least looked sincere. "I don't think I can source anything and figure out how to get it to you this week. And I'm running pretty low myself, because I haven't had the time to re-up my supply, and even if I wasn't, you can't exactly send that shit though the mail."

He put on a brave face. "And you can't rent a car and come visit Oak Grove during finals."

She giggled. "I can't even drive, Sammy. I'd have to get somebody to come with, and Zoey's got her own finals to worry about."

"It's okay," he heard himself say. "I wouldn't wish Oak Grove on anybody, let alone poor, unsuspecting Zoey."

"Okay, but don't try to ration yourself, all right?" she insisted. "It'll fuck you up. Better to proceed as usual for the week and then go cold turkey." She gave him a pained look. "It's just two weeks." Her characteristic grin flickered back to life. "And then you'll be here!"

Sammy smiled back. "Can't wait."

"I'm really sorry, Sammy," she groaned. "Any other time of year and I'd move mountains for you, but—"

"Don't worry about it," he told her. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

He was not fine.

Sammy ran out of pills later that week, and the lack hit him like a semi truck almost immediately. He woke up to his bleating alarm clock each morning, had to force himself to shower, and staggered to school.

He let himself sink into the comforting cocoon of sitting through his classes half-asleep, not that there was much happening in the last two weeks of school. Lots of boring assemblies, students presenting their boring final projects, and high school's version of final exams, which weren't important so he hardly put in any effort.

He coasted through his shifts at the grocery store on auto-pilot, head muzzy and attention nowhere at all. He snapped at one of his cousins, just old enough to start helping out at the grocery, and instead of apologizing just muttered and went into the back room. Uncle Oliver asked him if he was okay more than once. He said he was just tired.

He scowled at people on the street. He wished he had, and then dug out of the closet, some of his hoodies, just so he could hide his face and ignore the rest of the world.

It was only when both his history and his biology teachers took him aside that he really realized how far he'd fallen. Both teachers gently suggested that he avail himself of the make-up finals day to retake the finals for their classes. He'd apparently bombed both of them.

Where had all his focus gone? Why did he suddenly feel shitty? Even through the haze in his head, the answer was obvious: it was the pills.

Sammy hadn't been "applying himself" for the past three months. All his new focus and drive wasn't him, it was the drugs.

He came home from school after the double intervention and stared at the pamphlet for the summer program on his desk. A month ago he was sure he could storm through that program and destroy the final exam. A month ago he'd been riding high on MDMA, apparently.

He sunk down into his desk chair. He couldn't do it on his own. But once he was back at Columbia for the program, Rowan would resupply him, right? He'd be back on top of his game, thanks to the pills.

Oh fuck.

Back at Columbia.

If he was going back to Columbia, he had to tell his family there that he'd detransitioned. Rowan was going to be upset. Sure, she'd still be friendly and supportive, but Sammy wouldn't be queer and trans and a girl like she was. He'd just be a queer cis boy. He used to hope that one out of three would still be enough to maintain their easy, sisterly connection. That seemed absolutely delusional, now.

If he lost that tight connection with Rowan, he doubted she'd still supply him with the pills. If he lost access to the pills that made his brain work better, he couldn't weather an intensive eight-week remedial course, let alone the six-part final exam at the end. If he bombed out of the summer program, his provisional acceptance to Columbia would evaporate into thin air.

And then he'd have to come back to Oak Grove, into the well-meaning but smothering embrace of Andrei, teaching him to make fucking chairs.

His brain felt like it was churning through molasses, but the inevitable conclusion was absolutely, startlingly clear: Sammy couldn't detransition.

CHAPTER NINE

Take What You Can Get, Babe

Sammy's parents drove him into the city and helped him carry his three cardboard boxes of belongings up to his new dorm room. He'd been assigned a single, in a different building than Rowan and Zoey and Agatha had been in last semester. It was a bare, grey, cold cube with a view of a brick wall. Maybe he'd decorate and liven it up; maybe it wasn't worth the effort for eight weeks.

It was hard summoning up much enthusiasm for anything; Sammy's mood was overshadowed by doubt and trepidation. Could he even do this? Most likely he was wasting everybody's time.

His father, by contrast, was all enthusiasm and excitement, pointing out and naming each building on campus and telling stories about his glory days at university. He eagerly suggested the family eat lunch at the dining commons, "for old time's sake." Sammy was going to be eating there every day for two months, but he agreed anyway, if only to share a little of his dad's energy.

And then his parents were hugging him and telling him they were proud of him and they were just a phonecall away and then, finally, in the car and driving away. He started unpacking his things into the built-in closet and drawers, but got distracted by his phone halfway through.

Rowan and his uncles knocked on his door an hour later. It was no coincidence that they hadn't come earlier; Rowan had texted to ask if his parental units were gone, and strongly implied that she was asking for Henry's sake.

More hugs all round, and when it was Rowan's turn she slipped a tiny little pill into his palm. Sammy hugged her even tighter. "Oh god, thank you so much," he whispered into her ear, and then tucked

the pill under his tongue.

She gave him a warm conspiratorial smile as they parted, and then turned to take in his three cardboard boxes, half-unpacked. She cocked her head, put her hands on her hips, and asked, "Uh, Sammy, where are all your clothes?"

"You're looking at them?" he hedged.

She scowled at him, because he knew exactly what she was asking. "No, this is all grey hoodies and shit. Where are your real clothes?"

Sammy opened his mouth, closed it. This was supposed to be his last chance to tell them he'd detransitioned, the point he wasn't even supposed to get to because he should have told them already, but now he wasn't sure he could tell them at all. One pill from Rowan was not a two-month supply to last the whole program. He had to stay in her good graces, so he'd have to keep being Samantha Masters—but now he'd have to do it without Sydney's bag of clothes. If he even could.

He'd seen this coming and still didn't know what to say. He went with the occluded truth. "I, uh, don't have them any more."

Rowan lifted one incredulous eyebrow at him; Gideon gently asked, "What happened to them, honey?"

"Did your parents—" Uncle Henry started saying, already building himself up to thunderous indignation.

"Oh, god, no," he stammered quickly, holding out a hand to his uncle as if he could tamp down his building and misplaced rage. "They didn't do anything, they haven't, uh, found out." He gestured vaguely at the boxes. "I just... got rid of them." Which was still, technically, the truth.

Gideon placed a warm hand on Sammy's shoulder. "Are you comfortable telling us why?"

He looked from Gideon's open face to Henry's still-fuming expression, and in the latter found inspiration that he hoped didn't make him a terrible person. He spit it out before he could think about it too much: "My parents were, uh, getting close. To finding out. So I kind of... panicked." He flailed his limbs again. "And so I got rid of it all."

"Aw, we've all been there," Rowan sympathized, and stepped forward to wrap Sammy in a tight hug. "Even with a trans dad I had so many false starts. It's okay."

Sammy squeezed his cousin tight, telling himself that she'd interpret it as trans solidarity or something when in fact he was just relieved that she'd accepted the story. He was still in her good graces. His eyes

itched, but he ignored them. He could do this. He could get through the summer program.

"In the grand scheme of things," Uncle Henry was saying, "it's also an easy setback to fix." He produced his wallet, slid out a credit card, and held it forward. "Rowan, I think you know what to do with this."

The girl squealed and snatched the card out of her father's hands.

Sammy blinked. "Um. What's happening?"

Rowan turned back to him, eyes dancing. "I'm taking you shopping."

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly—"

"Yes, you can," Uncle Henry smiled genially. "We're happy to help you along your path, Samantha."

"But—" he stammered again, interrupted by Gideon's hand on his shoulder.

"Samantha, if I may?" he asked, and then actually waited for his nephew to nod before continuing. "Honey, you are a queer trans woman of colour. This world is going to give you fewer opportunities than it gives almost anybody, and that's when it's not stomping on you directly."

That sounded worrying, and not what Sammy was expecting, but before he could ask clarification, Gideon kept talking.

"So whenever you do get offered an opportunity, you take it, okay?" He nodded his head and Sammy could feel himself nodding in return. "It's not greedy, it's not grasping, it's how you have to move through the world. Take what you can get, babe. Okay?"

Sammy had to admit, a new wardrobe would make it a lot easier to keep up the Samantha charade, and he was already nodding, so he just echoed, "Okay."

And then Rowan was dragging him out of the room. She waved the card at her father. "Daddy, this is all paid off, right? I've got the whole credit limit to work with?"

"I'd say you can't possibly spend that much on clothes, but I won't tempt fate," he answered with a bemused nod. "Just be sure to feed yourselves dinner tonight too, alright?"

"Don't forget your keys, Sammy!" his other uncle laughed, scooping up the keyring from the desk and lobbing it to Sammy. "We'll lock up."

"That doesn't look like a clothing store?" Sammy observed, looking over the strange little shop that Rowan had dragged him through three

subway trains to get to. He squinted up at the sign over the awning. "Transformations Boutique?"

"Oh, it's not a clothing store," Rowan told him confidently, and strode directly across the street, cars be damned.

"But I need clothes—" he started, and then had to scramble after her, looking fearfully up and down the busy street as he did so. "What are we getting here?"

"Oh, lots of stuff," she grinned, and yanked open the door. "In you go."

Sammy did as instructed and then stumbled to a halt immediately inside. There were actually clothes here, after a fashion: long sparkly sequined gowns and plasticky latex costumes. One wall was covered in shelves and shelves of wigs on faceless heads. But most of the shelves held tubs and jars and bottles and... dildos. Those were dildos.

"Is this a sex shop?" he asked incredulously. He'd never been in a sex shop; in fact he'd only ever seen one on a show once.

"Welcome to my sex shop," answered the young woman behind the counter, deadpan, not even looking up from her magazine. She had short black hair, pale skin, and uncountable tattoos.

Rowan came in behind Sammy, grasped him by the shoulders, and shoved him deeper into the store, up towards the counter. "Hey, Gloria!"

The clerk—Gloria—finally looked up from her magazine and blinked. "Oh shit! Hey. Been a long time." She looked Rowan up and down critically. "Damn, you filled out."

His cousin preened. "Thanks. Hey, is Lucille in?"

But Gloria shook her head. "Mom's in fucking Italy now. Painting lessons on the Riviera, can you believe it? So is your name still...?" She trailed off just long enough that the prompt became an admission that she'd forgotten whatever name she'd been given before.

"Still Rowan, yeah," his cousin nodded, happy to play along. She patted her hands on Sammy's shoulders. "And this is my cousin Samantha. She's just getting started."

"Pretty good start," the clerk observed, and smiled. "Nice to meet you, Samantha."

"Uh, thanks," he stammered, and then sidestepped so he could see Rowan better. "So what are we getting here?"

"Well your eyebrows need help," his cousin told him matter-of-factly, "and if we're waxing your eyebrows we might as well do your

legs while we're here." She nodded to Gloria as she spoke, and the clerk nodded in response. Her magazine was quietly closed and tucked away. "We'll also grab you a gaff, get you some proper adhesive this time around, and most importantly, your very own titties."

Sammy wasn't sure how to respond, or if he even could. He managed to blink.

"She had to borrow mine for a while," Rowan explained to Gloria, and then tugged back Sammy's hoodie sleeve so she could hold her bare forearm up against his. "Which, you know, did not really match, so her choice of tops was very limited."

The clerk nodded and examined Sammy's forearm and face carefully. "Yeah, we've got your colour in stock. What are you, Dominican?"

Sammy at least knew how to answer to this one, from long practice. He shrugged. "Don't even know. My birth mom surrendered me anonymously."

"Don't you worry, we'll match you," Gloria assured him with a wink. "But let's get started on the waxing, yeah? This way."

Between the wall of wigs and a wall of latex bodysuits—the wares of both walls in every imaginable colour—an overlookable corridor led deeper into the building. Gloria led them down its length and opened the third door on the right. The door was labelled with a placard that had once read "Salon #2" but had since been corrected with wedgetipped sharpie to read "Torture Chamber," followed by a happy face.

Inside was a sturdy padded massage table and a long sideboard counter filled with tubs and jars and what looked like small kitchen appliances. "Pants off," Gloria directed, and patted the top of the table invitingly. Then she turned her back on them and started fiddling with the stuff on the sideboard.

Sammy dropped his sweatpants with trepidation, looking askance at Rowan. "This is going to hurt, right?"

His cousin only laughed. "Oh gosh, so much. But I promise it's worth it."

As he settled onto the massage table, Sammy contemplated saying no. He could; he could just say, "no thanks, let's not do this part." Rowan always told him that nothing was strictly necessary, and he was sure she'd accept his decision if he backed out. But he didn't want to be a wet blanket. And he'd heard horror stories about waxing from his aunts since forever, which made him, honestly, more than a little

curious. And it would all grow back, right?

Besides, his leg hair was not subtle, and if he was going to be wearing skirts for two months—short skirts, in the summer heat—he might as well look nice.

Right?

So he got stretched out on the table and got comfortable. Gloria appeared above his head, rolling around on a wheeled office chair, and inspected his brow. “All right, I’m going to draw out the lines I’m going to reinforce,” she explained, “and you can okay them before we get started. Okay?”

He nodded. “I don’t know what any of that means, but sure.”

Gloria demonstrated. She brought out a white pencil and drew long, sloping lines along his eyebrows. It tickled a little, but Sammy remained stoic. Finally she gave him a hand mirror with which to see what she had done.

He’d never realized how much of a wild tangle his eyebrows were. They’d always just... been there. But now there were little ghost lines swooping through the scattered hairs. With just a handful of graceful curves, they applied order to the chaos. He could see what his eyebrows could be, with some judicious editing.

“That look good?” asked Gloria.

He looked up off the mirror to see her eyebrows. They were thin, elegant, and perfectly shaped. “Ah,” said his brain. “That’s what eyebrows are supposed to look like.” Which was obviously nonsense, but he nodded nonetheless.

Gloria then applied goopy warm wax to his eyebrows. It was actually quite pleasant; a sort of bone-penetrating heat, as if just his forehead got a dip in a jacuzzi. Then she pressed little strips of gauze into the wax and let the wax cool. “Here we go,” she warned, and ripped the gauze off Sammy’s face.

It stung, sure, but calling it painful would be a stretch. He chuckled in relief. Okay. He could do this.

Gloria repeated the process three more times around his eyebrows and declared that part done. “Right now the skin around your brows is all red and angry,” she told him. “I’ll give you the mirror back when it calms down, then you can admire my handiwork.”

In the mean time, she wheeled herself around the table so she was facing his legs. There was no white pencil and guidelines now, but the rest of the process seemed the same. Warm goopy wax spread out along his legs. Then long strips of gauze pressed into the wax. Let the

wax cool. Sammy readied himself for the little sting that came next. "Here we go," she warned him, and ripped.

Sammy howled.

The process may have been the same, but there was no comparison between having his eyebrows waxed and having leg hairs ripped out of his body. His skin crawled; he fought down an impulse to leap off the table and run for the hills. He wasn't sure if he was whimpering.

Gloria started slathering more wax for the next round.

The next rip was no better, but nor was it worse. And the next one he steeled himself for and it was... just as painful. Rip after rip after rip, and each one left a wake of searing pain that took its own god damn time dissipating. Sammy focused on his breathing and eventually just floated away onto a sea of disassociation. At some point both girls guided him to turn over so that Gloria could savage the backs of his legs, too.

He wasn't sure how long it took, nor how long he was out of it after Gloria was finally done, but then the little mirror was pressed into his hand and he was looking at his reflection.

"Oh wow," he gasped. His eyebrows were sleek, arched, and exacting; somehow that detail redefined the rest of his face, which seemed sharper and more open. His eyes looked huge.

"Just wait till we get some makeup on top of that," Rowan told him with a grin. "Colours are gonna pop so much better. Speaking of which, pick a colour!"

He took the hunk of plastic she handed him, which had rows of sparkling studs in various shades.

"Whatever you pick, you'll be stuck with for two months," she advised. "So neutral's probably best. The silver, the white, the black."

"What are these?"

Rowan giggled. "Earrings, silly."

"My ears aren't pierced," he told her, giggling a little, too. Apparently he was still a little loopy from the pain.

"Yeah, that's the point," she laughed.

Ah, these must all be clip-ons, he thought, and pointed at the last studs in the line. "What about these? They're all, uh, iridescent? They're like, all the colours, so they'll match whatever else I'm wearing, right?"

Rowan grinned. "Yeah, that sounds awesome."

The next thing he knew, Gloria was fiddling with his ear and telling him to hold perfectly still. "Are you... clipping them on?" he asked

uncertainly.

"Well, I'm certainly clipping something," she responded. And then his earlobe was suddenly very very cold.

"Is that ice?"

Gloria moved to the other ear. "Sort of. I deep-freeze the needles so they're super cold when I do the piercing." Before he could decipher her words, his other earlobe was hit with a spike of cold.

"Piercing?!" he repeated.

Rowan held the hand mirror in front of his face. "Yeah. Congrats, you got your ears pierced!"

He held the mirror steady so he could see better, and sure enough, each earlobe now had a little glint of iridescent sparkle on it. More than he'd intended, but he could always take them out, right? But then he remembered what Rowan had just been saying. "...wait, what did you mean I'm stuck with these for two months?"

"You've got to leave them in so the holes can heal around them," Gloria told him. "I'll give you a pamphlet, and some saline solution to flush the holes every night. But it'll take eight to twelve weeks to heal up."

"Eight... to twelve?!" he repeated. "Rowan, I go home in eight weeks!"

His cousin laid a soothing hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, it's okay. You're young, so you heal faster, so you'll probably be fine at eight weeks. And even if you're not, all sorts of people get their ears pierced. Girls and boys."

"Boys don't get glittery rainbow studs!"

"I mean, gay boys do," she very nearly muttered.

"Rowan!"

"It's not a big deal, I promise," she half-insisted, half-plead with him. "Worst case, you take them out before you go home and the holes close up and you'll just have to get pierced again later, okay? You're okay."

Sammy rubbed the bridge of his nose—yes, the skin was still sensitive—and heaved a sigh. "Well it's already done, anyway."

She patted his belly affectionately. "Sorry if I sprang that on you, Sammy. I was just too excited. But you'll like the next part, I promise."

He hesitated to ask. "What's the next part?"

"Let's go pick out some titties!"

* * *

Gloria guided them into a different small back room where they sank into a pair of armchairs facing a small dias surrounded by mirrors. "Shirt off," she declared, and Sammy grudgingly stood to comply. He'd just got his sweatpants back, and now he had to sacrifice his hoodie and undershirt. With a tailor's dispassion, Gloria wrapped a cloth measuring tape around his torso, just under the nipples. Then she produced a cardboard strip with a handful of skin tones, held it up to Sammy's chest, and squinted appraisingly. "Be right back," she declared, and left.

"So what are you thinking of going with?" Rowan asked from where she lounged in her armchair.

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying not to cover up his bare chest.

"What kind of boobs, of course," his cousin giggled. "Big, small? Wide, teardrop, pointy? Dark nips or roses?"

Sammy coughed to clear his suddenly tight throat. "I didn't realize it was going to be that complicated," he admitted. "I mean, I think I like whatever I borrowed from you last time." He looked uncertainly towards the door. "You think she'll bring some like those, just, you know, brown?"

Rowan grinned instead of answering. "Let's see what you end up liking."

Gloria came back with a precariously-balanced double stack of boxes, which she carefully set down on the lip of the dias. She also produced a bra, and tossed it at Sammy. "That'll do for most."

Sammy's struggle with the bra was almost embarrassingly short. Apparently he'd developed some muscle memory during Preview Days.

By the time he'd smoothed all the straps, Gloria was standing in front of him with two wobbling fake boobs in her hands. She deftly slid them into his bra cups while also guiding him up onto the dias. Suddenly he was confronted with his own reflection.

Boobs matching his skin tone made a big difference. Instead of something pale and plainly foreign tucked up against him, the matching boobs looked almost natural. He made a slight adjustment and sort of fuzzed his focus a bit and... it was like they were a part of him. His stomach fluttered.

Gloria noticed what he was doing. "With adhesive and a little foundation, you won't see the seam at all," she promised.

"Uh, great," he mumbled.

"Those are asymmetric," she went on. "So the left is always the left and the right is always the right. These have a relatively low profile."

Sammy nodded, trying to focus. He should probably pay attention if he was going to be wearing these for the next two months. But a single pill had not magically brought him back to full power and focus. A large part of his brain really did not want to think about what was happening right now.

They looked disturbingly real.

"I dunno, I think you looked better with bigger," Rowan opined from her chair.

Sammy considered his reflection. "These are smaller than yours?" When his cousin hefted her actual tits and opened her mouth to comment, he added, "The ones I borrowed?"

Rowan squinted, nodded. "I mean, I think?"

"You'll be doing a bit of a balancing act," Gloria told him. "A lot of these are shaped for a completely flat chest, and you've already got a little curve."

Sammy sniggered at that. Sure he did. "Too many chips," he chuckled.

"Don't sell yourself short," Gloria smiled. "Pretty soon you'll give your cousin a run for her money."

Yeah, after he got a boob job like Rowan must have had years ago, and that wasn't going to happen because this was just for the summer. But he figured he should at least pretend like he hoped for exactly that, so he put a sappy smile on his face. "That's the dream."

"Anyway, we'll find a shape that takes your current topography into account, and will continue to do so as you develop," Gloria promised, although he was barely paying attention. She was already unboxing the next pair of fake tits.

They went through almost a dozen options in different shapes and sizes. Triangle forms projected out of his chest like torpedoes. Teardrop forms made him look dowdy somehow. He went back and forth, trying to find a match for how he remembered looking in Rowan's old forms, but nothing was exactly the same.

"Oh, they don't make that brand anymore," Gloria explained when he finally put words to what he was looking for. "I'm afraid you're going to have to pick something a little bit new."

And that was the problem. Being handed a pair of tits and wearing them for the weekend because that was the only option? That he could do. But actually picking out what he wanted? That was a bridge too

far.

Because he didn't want tits. That was something twelve-year-old girls dreamed about. He wanted, what, like some strong pecs and washboard abs or something, right? That's what he was supposed to want.

He didn't really want that. Even if somebody could hand him that, like Rowan had handed him her old breast forms, he didn't think that he'd take them up on the offer. Because the guys who had bodies like that were insufferable, and he wasn't like that and didn't want to be like that. And it'd look weird, right, to look in the mirror and see some hardbody chiselled build. That wasn't him at all.

Nor did he want what he already had, though. Because face it: his body was doughy and shapeless and nothing to be proud of. If anything, fake tits put some fucking landmarks on him, imposed some sense onto the landscape, even if it was the wrong sense.

He scowled at the mirror, aiming for his doughy belly, except he'd forgotten that he'd slimmed down this spring and so he was just looking at... okay, they weren't washboard abs, but there was less belly than he remembered, and... yeah, the fake boobs did kind of complete the picture.

Wrong picture, he tried to tell himself, but the vehemence he reached for didn't manifest.

He didn't look half bad.

And if he was going to look something like this for the summer, he might as well look good, right? "What are these again?"

Gloria answered without looking up. "Those are ABC triangle mediums. Triangles look good on younger women; they look like, well, like teenager boobs, rather than matronly boobs."

"Do you have the same kind, a bit bigger?"

"We do," she nodded, and opened up one of the boxes. "Here you go." She looked up at him, considering the utilitarian bra she'd given him. "These might strain those bra cups, though."

What she handed him did indeed barely fit into the bra cups, and Sammy struggled between giggling at himself and seriously considering them. With his shoulders and his frame, they weren't completely ridiculous. Rowan pointed out that he'd be edging into a size that made blouses hard to find.

"Oh, I think I mixed up the boxes," Gloria groaned, apologetic. "Those are XLs. They've no business in that bra at all."

She rooted through the boxes scattered around their feet, coming up

with one size down from what Sammy was wearing, one size up from what he had been wearing. They swapped out the massive forms and replaced them with the merely large and...

"I like these," he heard himself say out loud. A moment later the reflection of Rowan was nodding over his shoulder with approval.

They threw a tee shirt overtop the new boobs, then he tried on Rowan's button-down, too. With or without clothes, they looked good. Proportional. Youthful. Curvy. Correct.

Next they had him doff the shirts again and strip off the bra and then it was time to apply adhesive—not too much, a little goes a long way, no it doesn't go that far—and smash the jiggy tits into his chest. A little adjustment left-right, a little twist to make them hang (mostly) symmetrically... he took his hands away and they just stayed there, like they were a part of him.

Gloria sat him down in front of a salon mirror and showed him how to apply and blend foundation across the seam. He'd assumed that this would be complicated, but it was really just... makeup on a large scale, and you could be a bit sloppy.

And then he looked in the mirror and... yeah, there was his naked chest complete with round, perky tits.

"How long does the adhesive last?" he asked Gloria and Rowan's reflections in the mirror.

"The bottle says sixteen hours," the clerk answered, but her voice made it clear that that wasn't half the story.

Rowan chimed in: "You can usually rely on sixteen hours. You can push your luck to like, a full day. It'll probably get you through the walk of shame the next morning. Or as I prefer to call it: the walk of glory."

Sammy sniggered into the mirror. "Of course you do."

Rowan directed him to pull his undershirt on over his braless boobs. They'd be getting lingerie later, and he didn't want a bra from Transformations Boutique. They had fetish wear and valentine's day lingerie, but nothing that could reasonably be called comfortable. Even Gloria nodded in agreement at that one. Without a bra, his boobs bounced and jiggled underneath the shirt, which was all sorts of weird.

While Gloria packed up the rejected fake boobs, Rowan took Sammy through the rest of the store. "We should grab you a gaff," she explained. "You don't actually need one of these... right up until you do."

A gaff turned out to be a pair of very tight, very thick underwear

that flattened down his junk. He supposed that would be useful for shorts that would otherwise show a bulge.

"A little bulge is nice on occasion, though," Rowan opined. "I kind of miss the look sometimes. There's a sort of honest lewdness to it. But then, I like a tight little bikini, too."

"You're not going to put me in one of those?" Sammy asked, almost fearfully pointing up at a latex apparatus on a mannequin. The thing promised to do all the same functions as the gaff in Sammy's hands, but also had a very detailed sculpt of labia and a clitoris on the outside.

Rowan looked up at it, then back to Sammy. "I mean, if you want —"

He shook his head vigorously. "That looks uncomfortable as hell."

"It is," Gloria agreed, coming up behind them. "I wore one for a few months. It helped quiet the gripey little voice, but... in the end I just got tired of straggling in and out of it."

They made their way to the cash register and Gloria started ringing up their purchases. As the register's glowing green total started skyrocketing, Rowan told Sammy to look away, if only for his own sanity. And then with a swipe of Uncle Henry's card, it was done.

As they climbed back up onto the street level, Sammy looked to Rowan's lead. "Okay, now we go get some clothes?"

But his cousin only snorted. "Makeover first."

Rowan took him to a fancy makeup place. He followed her inside, feeling like he was a little boy again, getting dragged along after his mother doing feminine errands. There was aisle upon aisle and row upon row of products in all sorts of colours, with the names of different manufacturers over each block of shelves.

He remembered Rowan showing him how to do his makeup and he was relatively sure he could do it again, but she'd only taught him by plucking items out of a single makeup caddy. Everything was all over everywhere in this store, and he had no idea where he'd even start. From where he stood, he could see half a dozen displays of eyeliner, all in different sections of the store.

Rowan pushed him towards a clerk again. "This is my cousin Samantha, she needs a full face demonstration and then we'll be buying everything you use on her."

The clerk looked bemused, quirked his perfectly accented eyebrow high over cheekbones that could cut glass. With a glance at the clock, he nodded. "Yeah sure, let's get started."

First they matched his colours, wandering through the shop piling up a stack of foundation and contouring and blush and bronzer in his little basket. The clerk selected a eyeshadow palette that he promised would give Sammy a nice range, and plucked a bulbous mascara stick from another display. Then they sat down and got to work.

The clerk narrated as he went, explaining what each product was for, how it was applied, and how to shift things for different looks. Sammy watched in the mirror, nodding along and eventually even asking questions.

“So what prompted this?” the clerk asked, making conversation as he blended, blended, blended Sammy’s forehead. When his subject only grunted querulously, he elaborated: “Well you’re doing kind of a big buy-in here. In my experience when a butch girl ditches her existing look for something more... labor intensive, there’s usually a reason. New job, big wedding coming up, a boy you want to impress? Or girl.”

“Uh, new school,” Sammy answered uncertainly. “Starting at Columbia.”

“Ahhhh,” he nodded in understanding. “Leaving the casual days of high school behind, huh? What did you play, basketball? Soccer?”

Sammy wasn’t sure why he answered, “Soccer.” He liked the game and all, but it wasn’t like he’d been on a team or anything.

But the clerk grinned and kept nodding as if that made sense. “Yeah, you look like a soccer girl.”

“Hopefully less so once you’re done,” Sammy responded, leaning into the role. If this guy wanted to believe he was a jock girl trying make up for the first time, who was he to correct him? It certainly made a more comprehensible story than reality.

“No little grass stain as a sort of accent, then?” he chuckled, and put away the blending sponge. “No, you’re gonna look immaculate. Okay, let’s talk eyeshadow...”

By the time they were done, Sammy looked at his reflection with qualified awe. He looked so different than he usually did... but he’d seen every step performed, knew every product that had gone into the look, and was moderately sure he could replicate it, give or take. In fact, if he stared hard enough, he could mentally peel off the layers, going back in time to his un-made-up face, then turning around and running through the steps again.

This was his face, not somebody else’s, not some mask that he was wearing. This was just what he looked like in makeup.

He thanked the clerk and they checked out with his bag full of cosmetics—Rowan made him hide his eyes again—and then they headed outside. “Okay, now clothes?” he asked.

But Rowan rolled her eyes. “You need a haircut.”

The hair salon was the opposite of the make up store. Nothing was explained. It wasn’t science, it wasn’t art, it was some sort of sorcery.

He sat down in the chair and said, as instructed by his cousin, “It’s been a long time since I had a cut.” (This was true; he’d gone shaggy all spring, too distracted by his application to go by Aunt Steph’s.) “I just need the loose ends trimmed and then... do what you think will work best with what I’ve got.”

The stylist considered him and his hair for a long moment. “Okay. A feminine cut?”

Sammy swallowed. “Um, yeah. Femme.”

She got to work, combing and snipping and spritzing. As curls and sworls of his dark hair collected atop the smock over his fake tits and across the floor, Sammy got lost in thought.

The make up guy had just assumed that Sammy was a girl. A girl athlete, sure, but a girl. But the stylist had to ask if he wanted a girl’s hair cut. What had worked then and didn’t work now? Had he somehow walked in like a boy? Was it the fact that his boobs were covered up by the smock? Or maybe the stylist just had to be more careful than the make up clerk; she was cutting his hair, which would take a long while to grow out, whereas the guy was just selling him stuff he could use or not use as he saw fit.

Or maybe the key difference was the stylist was a woman and the make up guy was a guy, and easily swayed by the presence of boobs.

It did not take long—he’d signed up for a “simple cut and style,” which was apparently the simple end of the services ladder, and something that they could squeeze into the rest of the salon’s schedule with zero notice. But when she was done the stylist still had to shake his shoulder slightly to pull him out of his reverie. He looked up at the mirror.

A girl in a hoodie stared back. In fact it took Sammy a moment to actually focus on his hair rather than the whole effect of which the hair was a part.

The hair wasn’t even that different. Or at least, it was still relatively short, but it was... fluffier, curled in a swirly nimbus around his scalp. He dipped his head side to side and the whole mess sort of...

shimmied around, shifting and moving subtly in ways that he'd never imagined hair could move and yet registered as unmistakably feminine to his brain.

Had he seen hair like this before? Certainly he had. Perhaps he'd just not thought about it, because it was girl hair. Or really, because it was just hair, which he'd never thought about very much. He just had Steph lop his off when the bangs started getting in his eyes.

This was different. Now his hair had a sort of organizing principle, an impression it gave, a look. It said, "This latina chick is too cool for you."

Sammy might have been slightly intimidated by his own hair.

Combined with his makeup, his head looked striking and increasingly out of place nestled atop his hoodie. He looked like he was slumming it, like he really should pull up the hood to hide his face and hair, because the only reason he'd be wearing this top would be to avoid notice. Whereas his makeup and hairstyle were clearly geared to attract notice, not avoid it.

Rowan paid and guided him out of the salon while his head was still spinning. She gave him a couple blocks before she asked, "You okay there, Sammy?"

He looked back at her from his reflection in a store window. "Yeah, I. Um. Is it weird that I feel like my head doesn't belong on my body right now?"

Rowan grinned. "Sometimes it feels like some parts of you are transitioning faster than other parts, and you get this sort of mismatched feeling. I can't imagine the crash course makeover today is helping much."

He nodded vaguely and looked at his reflection again. He looked like an action figure that had had its head popped off and swapped with a different character. "Yeah, this is weird."

His cousin took him by the arm. "Here, let's see if we can bring things into alignment. Because you know what time it is?"

Sammy answered for his squirming stomach. "Dinner?"

Rowan laughed. "Sure, yeah. Let's catch dinner and then it's finally time to go clothes shopping."

When they reached their next destination, Sammy stared with almost as much incredulity as the first. When Rowan looked askance at him, he explained, "I just kind of assumed you'd be taking me to some cool hipster hole-in-the-wall place for clothes. Not... you know... Target."

Rowan waved at the sprawling budget department store. “You need a whole wardrobe, Sammy. You need underwear. You need socks. Bras. Camis. Leggings. We’ll go hit some cool stores after this, but first let’s get the basics covered, all right?”

He tipped his head side to side. It did make sense.

“Plus,” she added as she walked through the automatic doors, “there’s a Starbucks in here.”

Rowan went through Target like a viking raider fleecing a defenseless village of all its valuables, filling their shopping cart with solid-colour everything and checking out no more than thirty minutes after walking in.

Rowan grabbed a seat in the Starbucks by the door and started fishing through the Target bag. She came up with a bra, a camisole, a pair of socks, and a pair of shorts. All of this she stacked in Sammy’s hands and pointed him towards the bathroom. “Go change.”

Which is how Sammy ended up standing in the Target bathroom, dressed in a cami and shorts, contemplating his reflection. Was it even his reflection?

He’d been dressed up by his cousin before. He knew what he looked like. In a word: unconvincing. Sure, sometimes he’d looked good, and he’d maybe even looked kinda almost hot in an alternative-culture punky sort of way. But he looked like a boy dressed up to be edgy and femme.

Except now he didn’t.

His face was softer, his eyes huge and bright, his hair a carefully-sculpted frame for his features. His shoulders and chest gave way to cleavage, and no matter how much he reminded himself that was fake, it still soothed his brain into this weird false sense of surety that he was looking at a girl.

His head had been popped onto the matching body.

He had to pick out the details that didn’t fit: his too-prominent nose, the thick-boned brow ridge hiding under the distractingly-shaped eyebrow, his tummy that was smaller than it used to be but still wasn’t a girl’s belly but a young man’s gut. If he held onto these details, he could still see himself as a boy.

But if he stopped concentrating, it slipped away.

Makeup, a haircut, and clothes could not explain this. It was impossible. And yet here he was: made up, styled, and wardrobe-swapped, and all the proof he needed.

He still looked awkward—he assured himself—without any of the carefree, put-together glamour that his cousin seemed to just exude. But that was to be expected; she was an actual trans girl, and he was just dressing up. Of course he'd look awkward like this.

Except when he didn't, like when he'd come out of the stalls and glanced at his oncoming reflection and swear to god he thought somebody else was in here with him. The mirror had just shown him a girl who was trying to find the mirror after changing her clothes.

He could undo this, right? In two months when he'd secured his admission to Columbia, he could turn it all off. Shave his head if need be. Stop using makeup (although the guy at the make up store did look pretty hot with that eyeliner and contouring). Leave the fake tits at home and just... be himself.

"Yeah, but who's 'himself?'" he muttered at the mirror's reflection. These clothes were comfortable in ways that his hoodies and sweatpants hadn't been for months. And his paltry little collection of shorts and tee shirts had only been a bandaid, a temporary stopgap. He had no idea what he'd rather be wearing. And if he didn't know what look he wanted, he couldn't very well "go back" to that look, could he?

If only he'd never got into the habit of thinking about "looks" and just stayed cocooned in sweatshirt material, where it was safe.

His phone buzzed; Rowan wondering if everything was okay. He tapped back a response that he was coming out shortly.

Because this had only been the first stop, and there were more clothing stores to hit up next, where the interesting clothes could be found. And Sammy would be shopping in those fancy clothing stores looking like this, like he belonged in them.

He refolded his old clothes into a tight bundle and headed out the door. The evening was just beginning.

They got back to his dorm room well past ten, which was later than he thought any clothing store might conceivably stay open, but this was New York and they took that "the city that never sleeps" thing seriously. Both of them were saddled down with a ridiculous number of bags, all of which went crashing into the corner opposite the bed.

The bed Sammy reserved for his own crash. He was wrung out, physically and emotionally.

Rowan refused to let him sleep, however, and instead insisted on his popping off his tits, storing them properly, and then cleansing and

toning his face. She gave him a pill, tucked him in, made sure he had an alarm set for the morning, and slipped out the door.

He slept like the dead.

He woke before his alarm even went off. Excitement and dread washed over him, but then he noticed a ziploc baggie on his desk, filled with little blue pills. Rowan had come through in more ways than one.

He could do this.

Sammy tongued a pill, showered, affixed his tits to his chest, and carefully applied his makeup. He had to go rooting through the bags on his dorm room floor to construct an outfit. He paired a houndstooth pencil skirt with a dark red cami, and then draped over both a white cardigan. He stepped into a pair of white sandals and checked his reflection in the mirror.

He looked like a competent young woman, ready to take on whatever challenge Columbia was going to sling at him. If he could avoid distractions—besides the whole pretending to be trans thing—he could do this.

Sammy hurried to the dining commons for a rushed breakfast and then crossed campus again to sit down in his first classroom with ten minutes to spare. Front row. No distractions. He could do this.

The professor called the class to order, introduced himself, and promised them that Remedial Biology was just as fascinating as any other BIO class he'd ever taught. Then the door swung open and Sammy's heart all but stopped at the sight of who stepped inside. No dis—

The professor shot the latecomer a frustrated look and then extended a hand. "Students, let me introduce you to my teaching assistant, Finley Aceves."

Finley stood up at the front of the class and waved, bright grin beaming through his bushy beard. "A pleasure to meet you all. I promise I'm not usually late." He looked out over the whole classroom with a benevolent, welcoming air, then made direct eye contact with Sammy, and winked.

CHAPTER TEN

Apologia

“Samantha!” Finley called out, ducking between foreign students as they flooded out of the classroom en masse.

Sammy had retained hardly anything from the hour-long class, distracted by the presence of the genderqueer at the front. Finley hadn’t made it any easier, trying to catch his eye and offering little smiles as if nobody else would notice. And now they were following him across campus, and their legs were a lot longer than his.

With a sigh, he turned to face them.

“Hey,” they panted, smiling, as they jogged up to him. Their eyes dipped down and back up. “You look fantastic.”

Sammy rolled his eyes. He knew how he looked: like a fake. Although he did have to admit he looked like a competent fake, so there was that. “Uh, thanks? You look nice, too.”

Finley looked downright respectable, which was a weird look on them. Tailored dress pants, a matching blazer over a creamy silk blouse, and fucking loafers. A pair of beaded necklaces dangled over their partially exposed chest. Sammy forced himself to make eye contact.

They grimaced down at their clothes. “Thanks, I... actually struggled with this outfit a lot more than I felt was necessary. It’s my first TA gig, so I wanted to look... reputable and approachable and still queer and—” But then they shook their head and shoulders like a dog shedding water. “All of that is besides the point. I wanted to apologize.”

Sammy scowled softly. He almost wished Finley wouldn’t apologize, wouldn’t ever say anything about the last night of Preview Days. This promised to be awkward; Sammy had probably done

something wrong, Finley would call him out for it, and he'd feel like a stupid child. "What for?" he asked with trepidation.

"For how I acted at the CQA mixer," they said, face crumpling a bit. "I was just... I was really happy to see you and got... overly excited about it. Which isn't an excuse. I trampled all over your bodily autonomy and didn't check your boundaries and was just... an ass."

Sammy found himself shaking his head. "You weren't—" he started, then trailed off.

Finley gave him a look. "I know what 'Jessica called, she needs our help' means, Samantha. And I am... fucking mortified I made you feel like you needed a rescue."

"I didn't—" he started, and then stopped himself from denying that he had in fact felt like he'd needed a rescue because he'd asked for it, hadn't he? "It was just... it was a lot. And I didn't know any other way out."

Finley folded their hands over their valise, a gesture plainly chosen to keep their hands from reaching out to him. "Yeah, and I should have given you ways out. And I'm sorry I didn't. And I promise I'll do better in the future. Not just with you, but with everybody. Which isn't to assume you even want to talk to me again."

"Well, you are my TA," Sammy pointed out with a slight smile. "We'll be seeing each other three times a week all summer."

But their face crumpled again at the reminder. "Is that a problem? I should probably tell the prof..."

"It's fine, it's fine," Sammy assured them in a rush, reaching out a little. He snatched his hand back when he realized what he was doing, folding it up against his belly. "And I like... talking with you, and I do want to talk to you again."

"Yeah?" they asked with a shy little smile.

That smile was so delicate and tentative that Sammy suddenly wanted to leap forward and kiss all their nerves away. He blinked. Calm the fuck down, brain.

"Can I take you to dinner sometime as an apology?" Finley was asking. "I'm sure you're not sick of the dining commons yet, but... trust me, you'll get there, and a little variety goes a long way."

"I'd like that," Sammy answered, and sublimated his impulse to lean forward into a much safer friendly smile. "The next two months I'm going all-in on my classes for the program, but... I think I'm going to need some downtime, too."

"Excellent. I'll—" Finley started, and then fumbled into their

pocket. "Can I get your number so we can text details?"

They handed over their phone; Sammy punched in his number and handed it back.

"Wait, hold on," said Finley, brandishing their phone at him. "Can I take a picture to add to your contact?"

"...sure?" he answered, and pasted on his taking-a-photo smile.

"Hrm," Finley muttered from behind the phone. "Hey do me a favour, just... don't smile?"

What was wrong with his smile, thought Sammy, and relaxed his features. He took a deep breath and tried not to make any face or look at anything in particular. He figured he must look like he was spacing out. Why would Finley want a picture of that?

"Hey Samantha?" Finley said, face still hidden. When Sammy raised his eyebrows to show he was paying attention, the genderqueer simply said, "You're beautiful." A moment later the phone's camera shutter clicked.

"What the—" Sammy started to say.

"It's this cool trick, you get great pictures the moment after you give a girl a compliment." Finley turned their phone around. "There, you see?"

There he was on the screen: a backdrop of green leaves and red brick behind him, white cardigan over his shoulders and deep crimson cami stretched across his fake cleavage. But on his face was this surprised little smile. The smile had just sparked into his eyes as the pic had been taken, and his raised eyebrows looked like they were floating on top of the undisguised joy that lit up his face.

He looked... well. He looked super cute.

"Kind of an underhanded trick," he muttered, tamping down another smile, along with the impulse to ask Finley to send him the picture. "Warn a girl next time, would you?"

"Can't give you warning, then it doesn't work," they answered with a little self-satisfied smirk. They tapped at their phone to save all the details. "But I'll let you go. And text you later, yeah?"

"Go?" Sammy echoed vaguely.

"To your next class?"

"Fuck!" he shouted, and started running.

The program had six courses—Biology, Composition, History, Literature, Math, and Physics, helpfully abbreviated as BIO50, COMP50, HIS50, LIT50, MA50, PH50. The six classes would

theoretically prepare the Marginalized Scholars for the six sections of the final exam. Sammy had stared at the course list, trying to figure out which one he should be most intimidated by, but could never quite decide. They were all terrifying.

He dashed into the lecture hall for HIS50 with only a few minutes to spare and found the entire front row already filled by his rival overachievers.

"Welcome to class, Samantha," called a familiar voice from up under the screen in front.

Sammy turned and was surprised to find Uncle Gideon, in slacks and sweater vest, looking very collegial. The boy in the skirt swallowed. "Uh, hi."

Gideon grinned as he stepped nearer. "Sorry I didn't say anything about teaching this course. I meant to, when we visited you in your dorm room, but then you guys had to skip out to deal with your wardrobe emergency." His eyes flicked over Sammy's outfit. "I see the emergency has been resolved, though. You look very put together."

Sammy still didn't know how to respond to compliments—aside from getting his picture taken, apparently—so he just smiled in response, cheeks hot. What the—was he actually blushing? He cleared his throat. "Uh. Sorry for being late."

"You're not late," his uncle assured him, but he did shoo him towards the seats. "And you're in college now," he added with a grin. "Nobody's going to call home and tell your parents you were tardy."

As Sammy sat, Gideon clapped his hands together. "Okay everybody, welcome to the History Crash Course! The architects of this program want this class to cram your heads full of all the names and dates that they think is most important for a good, compliant, All-American student ready to bend over backwards and participate in the project of Empire, but unfortunately they hired me to teach it."

Scattered chuckles trickled through the room, but most of the students seemed uncertain and a little bit scared at Gideon's opening salvo. Sammy counted himself among them. He was here to prepare for the final exam; he needed all those names and dates. And he was more than happy to participate in the project of Empire, whatever that was, if it meant he got to attend Columbia.

"My name is Gideon Masters-Roth, and it is my goal in this class to teach you to think historically," the rebel professor went on, tapping his temple with two fingers. "I promise you'll get to cramming all

those names and dates in July when I skip out of here for a couple weeks." He gestured to a young woman seated at a table to the side of the lecture hall. "Speaking of which, this is Andi Górska, my longsuffering TA, who'll be taking over for those two weeks. Be nice to her, she is not paid enough to do this job."

She gave the class a diffident wave.

Gideon directed the whole class to clump up in little groups of four to six so they could introduce each other and where they were from. Sammy shortly found himself in a little circle of five.

"And so the first one is all, hi my name is Leon and I'm from Ukraine," Sammy told his laptop screen. "And then the next one gives their name and explains that they're from Gaza. And then the next one, she's also from Ukraine, and says that her first choice school doesn't exist anymore because it got bombed, and the other one from Ukraine and the guy from Gaza, they both nod and say 'yeah me too.' And then the last girl, she's from Nicaragua and her family got run out of the country because her parents were journalists and pissed off the drug cartels, and her dad's still fucking missing."

"Jeeesus," Rowan breathed, saucer-eyed, from the screen.

"That's a lot," Zoey agreed from the other panel of the vidchat.

"Yeah, and then they all turn to me," Sammy continued on, "all expectant-like, and what the fuck am I supposed to say? Hey, my name is Sammy and I'm a kid from Jersey?"

"What did you say?"

He shrug-flopped. "Hey, my name is Sammy and I'm a kid from Jersey."

"And their response?" Zoey wanted to know.

He deflated slightly where he sat on his dorm room bed. "They wanted me to tell them where I shopped for clothes." Their reception of his personal background had seemed so petty Sammy hadn't known how to respond—especially since he'd forgotten the names and locations of all the places to which Rowan had dragged him.

"Well yeah, you looked like that?" his cousin asked, eyebrow arched. "You didn't come home and change clothes?"

He looked down—cleavage yawned open under his gaze; at some point he'd get used to that, right?—and then back up at the screen. "I mean. Yeah?"

"It's a nice 'fit," Rowan told him with a shrug. "So if by their standards you're a local, and a well-dressed one at that, asking for

shopping tips is understandable.”

“Yeah but—” he sighed, struggling to articulate his discomfort. “They’re all fleeing persecution and fucking warzones, and all I bring to the table is where to get a cute skirt?”

“Well they’re probably tired of being refugees all the time,” Zoey pointed out, “and hope that maybe you can help them feel a little normal for a change.”

He slumped against the wall and exhaled. “Makes sense, I guess.”

“Or they’re hitting on you,” Rowan put in with a smirk.

“Nobody is hitting on me,” Sammy insisted, even though he was pretty sure two guys in Pre-Calc and a girl in the Lit class had been feeling him out. They’d asked him “get to know you” questions with an almost disquieting intensity. He was here to study; he didn’t want distractions.

As if on cue, his phone buzzed. He scooped it up to read a short text message from Finley asking if he liked seafood.

“Ooooh, who’s got you smiling like that?” teased Rowan.

“Wait, what happened?” asked Zoey, coming back into view from off-camera. “I missed it!”

“Nothing—” He tried to say, wiping his face clear, but he could feel his cheeks burning. He had absolutely been smiling at his phone like a goober.

“Somebody texted Sammy and her face lit up like a Christmas tree,” his treacherous cousin giggled.

“It’s not that, it’s just Finley,” he told them with a roll of his eyes. “They’re the TA for Bio.”

“And they were texting you the syllabus?” Rowan asked, skeptical eyebrow raised.

“No, they’re just...” Sammy started, and then realized if he didn’t tell them both the whole story, Rowan would pry it out of him, anyway. “They came up to me after class to say sorry for moving too fast at that CQA event and then they asked me to dinner.”

“So as part of Finn’s apology for moving too fast, they asked you on a date?” his cousin attempted to summarize, now lifting both eyebrows. “And you said yes. Damn, they’ve got game!”

“It’s not a date,” he insisted. “It’s an apology. They’re taking me to dinner as an apology.”

Both Rowan and Zoey just stared at him blankly, waiting.

He blinked first. “Fuck, is it a date?”

“Well, that would make something else make sense,” Zoey said, and

explained: "Earlier today Finn did kind of ask me if they could ethically date somebody in a class they were the TA for."

"I mean, it is kind of sketchy," Rowan conceded.

"Right, but in this case, the final class grade, the part that they might have undue influence over, doesn't matter," she pointed out. "It's just the exam score at the end that matters, and that's impartial."

"So what did you tell them?" Sammy wanted to know.

Zoey shrugged. "I think they're in the clear. Ethically speaking. So they can date... somebody in the class they TA for. Which may or may not be you."

"But it probably is," said Rowan pragmatically. "And you said yes?"

"Yes," Sammy groaned, pressing himself against the cool brick wall. It counteracted the full-body flush he had going on. "I said yes. But I didn't think it was a date!"

"What else did they say?" Zoey asked, probing for clarification. "They were sorry, they asked you out, what else?"

Rowan cut through all the extraneous details that Sammy was considering mentioning as a smoke screen: "Did they compliment you?"

"Um," he mumbled, wondering if he could hedge. "I mean, sort of? When we started talking, they... said I looked fantastic."

"Well, you do," Zoey noted dispassionately.

"And?" his cousin demanded, eyeing him critically through the laptop. "I can tell you're holding out on us."

Casting his eyes to his popcorn ceiling, Sammy sighed. "And they called me beautiful."

"Awww!"

"No, it wasn't like that, it was a... a trick to get a good photo for..." Too late, he realized exactly where he was blundering. "...for my number in their phone."

"Samantha," Zoey said flatly, and waited until he was paying attention before continuing. "Find out if it's a date... before the date happens. Don't put it off, okay?"

"What, like over text?" he sputtered. "Or in class on Wednesday?" Both of those options sounded like trainwrecks.

"Better than over dinner," Rowan pointed out reasonably. "Get on the same page before the date starts or else one of you is guaranteed to be disappointed."

* * *

On Tuesdays and Thursdays he only had two classes, but they were both two hours long: Composition in the morning and Physics in the afternoon.

"This is not a class about writing," the Comp professor had declared. "This is a class about editing. We will be writing a 500-word essay every week. You will bring your first drafts in on Tuesday. You will exchange them with other students for editing. We will discuss in class. Then you'll take it home and bring a revised draft on Thursday. Each Thursday we'll have a handful of you read your essay aloud." She nodded as if this was at all reasonable. "At the end of this eight-week course, you'll have written 4,000 near-perfect words. I'm letting you off light! By the time you get to the final exam, tossing off a solid 500 words will be child's play."

Physics, by contrast, was taught by a scattered, spare little man who didn't look much older than his students. He explained that they had an absurd amount of material to cover, especially since this "Physics" class was also supposed to cover basic chemistry, and then he immediately launched into a lecture on the four fundamental forces of nature. "Oh," he added at the end as they were picking up their textbooks, binders, and bags, "we'll have a quick quiz at the end of class Thursday—or maybe the start of class on Tuesday—going over what we've covered that week. Or the week prior. You understand what I mean."

Sammy never quite got around to texting Finley about their maybe-date before it was time to show up to Biology on Wednesday morning, but the genderqueer just smiled at him across the room, and only the once. No further contact was made, and Sammy dashed out of the classroom before any could be made. He had three more classes that day and didn't need any more distractions.

"Our key task," intoned the literature professor Dr Ngawa, "as readers and as human beings, is that of interpretation. The interpretation not just of texts and of speech acts, but also of our phenomenological world." Ngawa liked to pace as he lectured, roving up and down the steps of the room's sparsely-occupied stadium seating. "That is to say: we are surrounded by signs and symbols, and we are thrust, every day, into interpreting what it all means."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Sammy muttered under his breath, to the amusement of the dark-eyed girl sitting on his right.

"Grab a piece of paper," directed the professor, "and write down a

short description—just a sentence—of an encounter that you had with an ambiguous sign. Some situation where you could not tell what was meant. You could not interpret. Speech act or text or situation,” he elaborated while waving both hands around his head. “Just. Jot it down.”

Sammy opened his notebook to a blank page and tried to think of a time when he didn’t understand what was happening. It seemed like a regular occurrence for him, but nothing specific came to mind. Nothing besides the obvious and immediate situation he was mired in, of course, and as time stretched on and everyone else started putting down their pens, he frantically scribbled out: *Can’t tell if I was asked out on a date.*

“Miss Masters,” came Ngawa’s baritone, sounding off right behind Sammy’s seat. The professor had crept up while he’d dithered over what to write. “What have you written?”

Sammy felt all the blood drain out of his face. “Oh, I thought—” he stammered. “I mean, I thought this was just for... I didn’t think we were sharing it.”

Ngawa gave him a significant look, and then broadcast that look across the whole room. “Ah. So your interpretation of the instructions you were given included some biases and assumptions of your own.”

Trying to laugh it off, Sammy nodded and prayed that that would appease the professor’s inquiry. But Ngawa only watched him, eyebrows raised expectantly. Sammy opened his mouth, closed it, and finally just gave up. “I wrote down that I can’t tell if I got asked out on a date.”

A ripple of good-natured laughter pattered through the lecture hall, and Sammy took a little comfort from the response. A high school classroom would have immediately overflowed with braying mockery. This was different, like everybody sympathized. He felt the corners of his lips lifting slightly.

“A common lament,” the professor intoned. “A nice boy asked you out, but you’re not sure if he *asked you out* asked you out. Even the language we use to describe—”

“Oh, uh,” Sammy half-objected impulsively, and Ngawa paused to lift his expectant eyebrows again. Sammy explained: “Finley’s not a boy.”

“Oh ho!” the professor chortled. “And here’s where *my* biases and assumptions get in the way of my interpretation. My apologies to Miss Finley, she of the ambiguous scheduling practices.”

This time Sammy didn't make a sound of correction, letting Ngawa move on to pry into some other student's private life.

Is Friday night okay for dinner? Finley texted as class was breaking up, which only served to make Sammy apprehensive.

Friday night was a date night, right? A casual dinner on a random Tuesday, that wasn't likely to be a date. Dinner on Friday night, though? That was definitely date territory.

Sammy took a long, shaky breath. Interpreting ambiguous speech acts, indeed. Finley was almost certainly asking him out on a date.

I'm just thinking about how you said you wanted to go all-in on your classes, said the next text. Friday night seems like the least impact on your studies?

Well fuck, now he didn't know what to think. Sammy groaned audibly and shoved his phone into his backpack.

"That your maybe-date?" asked the dark-eyed girl with a twinkle in her eye. "Finley?"

Sammy heaved a sigh. "Yeah. Apparently we're going out on Friday. So I have two days to figure out if we're actually going out or if we're just... going out."

The girl closed her notebook. "I'd love to hear how it turns out for you," she giggled. "If it turns out to not be a date, there are always other options." She raked her eyes up and down his body, smirked, and stalked out of the classroom.

Sammy watched her go, bewilderment giving way to curiosity. He pulled his phone back out, reversed the camera, and took as full-body a selfie as he could. He sent the result to Rowan.

Hot, she responded immediately.

Sammy rolled his eyes and then examined the photo he'd just sent her. The wispy blouse that he'd thought kind of conservative this morning had apparently started showing off an eyeful of cleavage while he wasn't looking. And the capris that had seemed like simple pants were hugging his hips and thighs and—he took a quick side-angle selfie to verify—yeah, they were doing something almost indecent to his ass.

How on earth did he have this much ass?

He texted his cousin: why are all of the clothes we got me either tight or revealing or otherwise slutty in some secret surprise way?

Why would you want clothes that aren't? came the reply. The point of clothes is to look hot.

Sammy didn't even know how to respond, and he had Pre-Calc in fifteen minutes.

The next morning he went through his new wardrobe like a tornado, trying to put together an outfit that Rowan would not describe as 'hot.' It was difficult.

Which wasn't exactly true. He could throw together a bunch of mismatched garments, but then he just looked weird. Like he couldn't dress himself or couldn't see how this top and that skirt didn't go together, when they really obviously did not.

What he needed was not *hot* but also not *incompetent*.

For a half-second he considered his box of hoodies and sweats, but actually shuddered at the thought. Heavy and scratchy and hot and... frumpy.

When the hell had 'frumpy' invaded his vocabulary?

He tried again, without trying so hard as to create a jarring mismatch. This cami, that skirt that probably wasn't quite right, and then that weird little jacket-thing from that weird little boutique, where'd it go? He donned the questionable ensemble, smoothed down his lines, and turned to look in the mirror.

"Oh, huh," he said aloud, scrutinizing himself. "Hold on a minute..."

He doffed the jacket and swapped the cami for a ruffle-fronted blouse, then slipped the jacket back on and turned to look in the mirror.

"Okay," he told his reflection, "this looks really..." His shoulders slumped. "Hot. Fuck!" How easily he lost sight of what he was trying to accomplish and fell back into... whatever took over his brain in the morning and assembled almost-but-not-quite inappropriately hot outfits for class.

He considered changing again, but the outfit really did look good. And he was going to be late if he dithered any more. He shrugged at his reflection. "Might as well just wear it for the day."

By the end of class on Thursday, all six professors had made clear their expectations for how much reading the students would be doing, and most of the initial deadlines were next week. It was... a lot.

Even Math had reading to do, which Sammy felt was vaguely unfair. Math and reading were opposite poles on the academic globe; you shouldn't ever have to read in order to math.

But all of this was why Thursday evening found Sammy sitting at a table in the back of the dining commons. Textbooks were spread out all around him; a tray of dinner sat half-eaten and forgotten at the periphery. He had so much reading to do.

The good news, though, was that he seemed to be getting his focus back. With four days' worth of a regular supply of pills in his system, the fog had cleared and he could read, he could discuss, he could think again. How did other people do college without these pills?

"Did you read all those poems yet?" asked a voice, bringing Sammy out of his reverie. He looked up to find the dark-eyed girl from Literature class. "There were so many."

"I think the idea was that they're all short?" he hazarded. "Kind of an easy way to get us started. And then we're supposed to read a whole novel by Monday, which... I hope it's not boring."

"Oh, it's some white girl who thinks she's poor because her family only has a maid and a cook taking care of their every need. So to avoid a life of such unfathomable poverty... she must date." She threw the back of her hand up against her forehead dramatically and giggled. "Speaking of which, have you figured out your little dating problem?"

Sammy heaved a sigh. "No. I've been avoiding it by digging into the reading."

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked with half a smile. When he nodded, she asked, "Are you hoping it's not a date, or that it is?"

"I mean—" he started, stalled, and then shrugged. "I don't even know. I definitely don't need any distractions right now. This program is my one shot for... everything, and I'm not going to fuck it up." He paused, considering. "But at the same time... it'd be nice if it was? I, uh, I've never been asked before."

The girl blinked, startled. "I don't believe that."

Sammy shrugged again. It was the simple truth.

"Maybe you're just really bad at telling when somebody's into you," she suggested. "Maybe you've been asked out tons and you've just never noticed." She considered him from under one arched eyebrow.

"Yeah, I don't think so," Sammy giggled, realized he'd just giggled, and blushed.

He wasn't oblivious (not when he'd taken his pills), and this girl had already made her interest clear. He just had trouble wrapping his head around the very concept that somebody was hitting on him. All he had to do was slap on some fake tits and a little makeup and suddenly he was popular? It seemed ludicrous.

“No, Samantha, you’re... really pretty,” she pressed. She blushed as she said it. “If the girls weren’t asking you out in high school, I guarantee they were pining for you across the room.”

“Yeah, I... didn’t always look like this,” he protested weakly. There was something in this girl’s voice that was edging towards the desperate, and suddenly Sammy wanted nothing more than to just turn off whatever was happening. The only problem was that he had no idea how to do that. He gestured down at himself. “All I wore through high school was hoodies and sweat pants. The... fashion is all new, and entirely my cousin’s doing.”

“Well tell your cousin thank you for providing the class with eye candy,” she grinned, and leaned her rump up against the table beside him. He realized a beat later that she was ideally positioned to look straight down his shirt.

What was he supposed to do? Cover himself? Stand up? He realized he couldn’t even remember this girl’s name, and asking for it now might seem like he was expressing interest, when all he wanted to do was read.

Sudden inspiration struck, and he went with it before he could examine the impulse. “No, when I say I didn’t look like this, I mean I didn’t look like a girl. I’m transgender.” There. Maybe that would scare her off.

But she only nodded. “I mean, I didn’t want to assume, but I did kind of figure. You make a very pretty girl, Samantha. Good choice on chasing that dream.”

She was, absolutely and unmistakably, looking down his shirt.

“Listen,” he finally grimaced. “I’ve... got a lot of reading to do.” He gestured to the array of books spread out before him. “I don’t want to be rude. I just... I can’t fall behind. I’ll see you in class tomorrow?”

“Oh shit, sorry, yeah,” the girl stammered, immediately straightening and wiping her palms on her thighs. “You even said and I... sorry. Yeah, I’ll see you in class.” She backpedaled a few steps, turned to go, and then turned back. “I hope your dating situation works out the way you want it to, Samantha.”

He smiled and nodded. “Thanks.”

Sammy turned back to his books, very intentionally not watching her go, except for the little peeks he took as she beelined for the door. She turned left once outside and walked along a bank of windows, staying within easy view. From the few glances he stole, she seemed to be talking to herself, and not kindly.

He groaned. All he wanted was to avoid distractions and absolutely destroy the Marginalized Scholars' final exam. He'd worried that pretending to be trans, dressing up and doing his makeup every day, remembering his fake name and fake pronouns, would be one of those distractions. He'd accepted that as the cost of entry. But never had he even considered that dressing up and doing his makeup would bring him more distractions in the form of... amorous attention.

At the same time, complaining about it seemed spectacularly shitty. Oh no, people wanted to talk with him, get to know him, even date him. Walking across campus, people smiled at him for no discernible reason. And just because he couldn't understand it didn't mean he didn't like it. It felt like people wanted him to be there, wanted him to be in their shared space. Welcoming him. It was a heady feeling, and if he was honest with himself, he didn't want it to stop.

He just had to figure out how to get all this reading done, too.

Sammy's Friday classes ended at 3:30. Finley would pick him up in his dorm lobby at 6. By the time he reached his dorm room, Sammy was down to two hours and fifteen minutes to clarify what was happening before it happened.

So he took a shower.

It was almost 4:30 when Sammy returned to his room, steaming and clean and frustrated that the distraction of hot, streaming water had been used up.

He had to get dressed. He hadn't had time to unpack all the clothes he'd bought with Rowan; the bags were all still piled up in the corner.

He poured it all out onto his bed and started folding.

By the time 5 o'clock rolled around he'd sorted all his new clothes into the appropriate drawers and hangers. Then he pulled out the clothes he might wear that night. He had three options out of what was still clean.

Could he do laundry? No, he didn't have enough time for laundry. Finley would be there in less than an hour.

And before Finley got there, Sammy should text them to ask if they were going on a date, or if they were just going out to dinner as friends who were apologizing. For things that happened four months ago.

But he had options for what to wear. He couldn't just go as he was right now, which was naked.

Fuck, he had to re-affix his tits.

Now it was 5:35 and his fake boobs wobbled on his chest as he

contemplated his three outfits. One set—a white skirt and a orange frilly blouse—was boring and basic but that might be an advantage. The next was... well, it was club gear. Shimmery top and a flippy skirt. Classy club gear, but it was designed for dancing. Would there be dancing? At the restaurant? Was that a thing? And then the last was a skater dress, vibrant blue with black polka dots, which was very plainly date wear, and he was mildly frustrated that he didn't have a necklace that went with it.

Finally he realized that he couldn't decide what to wear if he didn't know if he was going on a date or not. He pulled out his phone and stared at it. It was 5:45. Finley was probably already on his way.

With a muttered curse, Sammy typed out a dozen different texts and deleted them, and finally settled for: *Is this a date?* Simple. Straightforward. To the point. There was no way Finley could misunderstand or mangle the query. Sammy would get a straight answer.

His phone buzzed, and he looked at the answer: *Do you want this to be a date?*

Sammy screamed at his phone.

What the fuck kind of answer was that? Surely when Finn had asked him, they'd either thought they were asking him on a date or they weren't. That was something you asked with intention. You couldn't do it accidentally, and if you were doing it on purpose, you sure as fuck knew what you were asking.

Sammy was about to shoot back something scathing but his phone displayed three little bouncing dots. He watched them bounce until they quieted and disappeared. His breath caught, but then they returned. Bounce bounce bounce, wobble wobble wobble.

He stared, transfixed, until the dots turned into words.

Here's the thing, said the text. *At the end of summer term, I'm leaving for med school in California. So while I am very open to this being a date, I can't do a relationship that doesn't have an expiration date. I'm also very open to this being a non-date dinner. I think you're cool and I'd like to share a meal, date or not.*

Sammy read the text through three times, and then it was followed by: *So?*

He grabbed the skater dress. "Date wear it is."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

First Date First Date

Sammy had to make Finley wait downstairs while he put on his makeup, breathing very intentionally so he did not rush or mismatch his eyeliner. That done, he tousled his hair until it looked vaguely correct, and added a few little white clips to keep his bangs under control.

The hiccup came when he went to grab his backpack, which had his wallet and keys in it, and stilled. He couldn't very well take his backpack on a date. And the skater dress had no pockets. Reluctantly, he turned to his closet and pulled out the little white purse that Rowan had insisted he'd need. Wallet and keys inside, he looped it around his shoulder and scowled into his full-length mirror.

A girl with a purse scowled back at him.

He rolled his eyes at himself. He was wearing a polka-dotted dress, sporting flawless if simple makeup, and had two almost-embarrassingly-large tits pasted onto his chest. And the purse was the thing giving him pause?

He didn't have time to parse through these feelings. He added his lippy to the purse and hurried out the door.

Finley was waiting outside on the dorm's stoop, leaning against the railing and smiling up at the clear blue summer sky. The wrap dress they wore was bright green with curls of tie-dye white reaching up from the skirt's hem. A few brightly-coloured, chunky necklaces dangled over their chest, under a beard that Sammy suspected had been recently trimmed. Vibrant green eyeshadow and a comparatively muted lipgloss completed their look.

Sammy took his time getting to the door. He couldn't help smiling

through the window at them. At his date.

Eventually, though, Finley noticed his appraisal, so he had to push open the door and step outside. Their eyes went a little wide. "You look amazing, Samantha."

Sammy rolled his eyes and touched his collarbone. "It needs a necklace but I don't have anything that goes. And I... kind of ran out of time getting ready, worrying about if this was a date or not."

Finley grinned. Was he amused that Sammy had worried over the evening? "And the verdict is?" they asked. "You didn't actually give me an answer."

"Oh shit," Sammy laughed, and reached forward to squeeze their hand in sympathy. Which left him holding Finley's hand. Now what was he supposed to do? And where had that gesture come from in the first place? He looked from their joined hands to Finley's face. "Um. I'd... like it if this were a date."

He willed himself not to blush. He failed.

Finley turned their hand to squeeze his. "I'd like that, too." The two of them stood there smiling at each other for what felt like a full minute before the genderqueer tipped their head away from the door. "Shall we?"

Finley had made reservations at a restaurant at the north end of Battery Park, but they took the subway to the south end to have a leisurely walk before dinner. For most of the way down, the subway was crowded and even when it thinned out enough to permit conversation, they talked about nothing. Classes. Videos they'd seen. Pizza toppings, inspired by the passenger who boarded with a stack of three very aromatic pizzas.

And then the train reached the end of the line. They stepped out into the fresh air and the long leafy stretch of the park, and the lazily lapping water alongside it. And out beyond the water...

"Is that—," Sammy stammered, staring off at the horizon. "It is. Holy shit."

Finley looked where he was looking and chuckled. "The Statue of Liberty? Yeah, that's her. Have you... have you not seen her yet?"

Sammy shook his head and shot a sheepish grin back at them. "I guess I just haven't been where you could see her."

Finley gestured across the park to where they could get a slightly better view. The two of them ambled, with Sammy hardly looking at anything else. "You know she's trans, right?" Finley finally broke their

silence to ask.

That got Sammy's attention, and he looked from the monolithic statue to Finley and back again, confused. "Wait, what?" They'd come up to the railing that separated the park from the Hudson river, and Sammy leaned up against it. "They had trans people back then?"

"Trans people have always been here," his date chuckled. "But yeah. Before she was Lady Liberty, she was Sol Invictus, the god of the unconquered sun. That's why her crown has sunrays around it."

Sammy slitted his eyes at Finley skeptically. "Seriously?"

The genderqueer shrugged. "So the story goes. And since she is a story, that's about as good as we get, right?"

Sammy smirked. "I should tell Rowan."

"Who do you think told me?" Finley laughed, leaning up against the railing, himself.

"It does sound like a Rowan factoid."

They looked out over the water. "If I'd had known you hadn't been out there yet," mused Finley, "I would have taken you. Distinguish myself with the most memorable first date you've ever been on."

"That's not exactly a high bar," Sammy snorted, tearing his eyes away from the statue. They were heading up the green length of the park, which was... this way. He started walking, glancing back towards Finley to make sure they were following.

They did so with alacrity. "What do you mean, not a high bar?"

"I um—" Sammy started, stopped, decided to press on. He confessed, "I've never been on a date before."

Finley's eyebrows jumped up their forehead. "Oh! Oh." They tried to compose their features, but couldn't completely banish the ghost of a smirk. "So this is a *first date* first date."

Sammy didn't think they were trying to be condescending, but he decided he wasn't going to allow it, even accidentally. He crooked an eyebrow at them. "I don't know, first date implies that there will be more dates after this one, and if you keep acting like that..."

Finley laughed and threw up their hands to demonstrate their innocence. "Understood. Understood. But I'm sure there will be. More dates. Somebody will ask you, or you'll ask them... emphasis on 'them.'" They leaned in to waggle their eyebrows.

Sammy shoved them playfully. "Only if you behave yourself," he grinned.

But instead of grinning back, Finley looked away and cleared their throat. "Well, I don't have the best track record on that."

“Okay, no.” Sammy shook his head, and reached over to pull Finley back from spiralling away. “I don’t want to rehash that all over again. You apologized, I accepted, it’s over.” They both walked a few steps before he added, “And apparently I just need to get used to it.”

“No,” Finley leapt to argue so fast they might have sprained something “Nobody should touch you without you—”

“Not the touching, just the... attention,” Sammy clarified. “I’m not used to it. And like... I swear I’m not bragging, but you’re not the only one.”

Finley spread a hand across their collarbone. “I have rival suitors?!”

“Oh my god,” Sammy rolled his eyes towards the sky. “This isn’t fucking Persuasion.”

“I would make a clever literary reference here, but I’m a bio major,” his date admitted. “Honestly I’m kind of impressed with myself that I recognized the book title.”

“Yeah well, we’re reading it in Lit class,” Sammy explained. The park scrolled past them, the sun swollen fat on the horizon painting everything orange. “And there’s a girl there who I bet you money is going to give me moony eyes over it. She already told me if this date doesn’t work out, she’d like to be next in line.”

“I do have rival suitors!” They pumped their fist as if it was an accomplishment.

Sammy couldn’t help but giggle, but his thoughts kept circling. A few quiet steps later, he sighed. “I’m worried about it being a distraction. I need to focus on my classes.”

“Well, like you yourself said,” Finley pointed out, “you’re going to need some downtime, too. Blow off some steam with a little flirting and dating. Believe me, you can burn yourself out in eight weeks, and you don’t want to do that just in time for the final.”

Sammy made agreeable noises instead of answering and they kept walking. Dating to avoid burnout? That seemed even less plausible than people hitting on him in class in the first place.

Eventually he realized Finley had not spoken for a while and was in fact watching him. They smirked when he looked up. “It’s not the distraction that’s bothering you, though, is it?” they asked. “You seem, like, really frustrated about puzzle pieces that don’t fit together.”

Sammy rolled his eyes to pointedly ignore Finley’s observation, but the genderqueer wasn’t letting go. They just kept walking alongside him, waiting. Sammy told himself that he could ice out Finley right back until they gave up and struck up a different conversation. But

they resolutely did no such thing, waiting while Sammy marinated in his own thoughts. Finally his brain boiled over, and he gesticulated into the empty air before him. "I mean, I don't even pass!"

Finley quirked an eyebrow. "What's passing have to do with it?"

"Cause when they... pay attention to me, they pay attention to me like I'm—" He slapped his chest, a little harder than he meant to, and winced.

They treated him like a girl, even though he wasn't a girl, and yes he did a whole bunch of things to look more like a girl, but even then he didn't look all the way like a girl. He knew what he looked like, and it was not *girl*. Maybe at first glance, but not after any length of time. He had so many tells. But they still treated him like they were seeing a girl.

But how to put that into words, especially without admitting to Finley that he wasn't exactly trans? Fuck if he knew. "I mean... I just... I don't see what they see."

"Is it not enough that they like what they see?" his date asked gently.

Sammy shook his head. "They don't. They can't. People look at me and they... they know what they're looking at."

"I think they do, yeah," said Finley, not quite suppressing a chuckle. They reached out to grab Sammy's hands and pulled him to the side of the walk path, under a leafy tree. "Samantha, listen to me," they said, voice so earnest that Sammy couldn't help but look them in the eye. "Passing isn't important."

"But—"

But Finley cut them off. "Passing isn't important," they repeated, emphasizing each word.

Sammy frowned and looked away, would have scrubbed his face if his hands weren't trapped. "You think they're... what do you call them? Chasers?"

Finley burst out laughing and then scrambled to rein it in, not very successfully. They squeezed Sammy's hands before releasing them, and then wiped their own eyes. "I mean... they might be curious. But that's a far cry from a chaser."

Hands freed, Sammy went to rub the heck out of his face. He remembered just in time that he had makeup on that he didn't want to muss. Instead he flexed his hands and wrapped them both around the back of his neck. "Then... what?"

To their credit, Finley's eyes only dipped down into the cavern of

cleavage Sammy was presenting for a moment. Then they made very deliberate eye contact and said, "They just think you look hot, Samantha. I swear."

He snorted, dismissive. But he also dropped his arms so his tits weren't squished together on lewd display. He had to get better about that.

"You say they know what they're looking at," his date pressed, and gently guided the both of them back onto the path along the waterside. "I think you're right; I think they do. They know they're looking at a hot, femme-of-center queer chica. Further details irrelevant." Before Sammy could object, they added, "Do they suspect you're trans? Maybe. Embodying some flavor of queer or genderfuckery? Probably. But if they're chatting you up, then they don't care. Passing is not a prerequisite for hotness."

This time Sammy managed to get out a "But—"

"You think I'm a chaser, Samantha?" asked Finley, eyes rhetorically wide. "I don't just suspect you're trans, I know you're trans. I think that is just one beautiful piece of a much bigger, grander picture. Are my motives suspect?"

"No, of course not." All the emotion sluiced out of Sammy, only to be replaced a moment later with panic. "Oh shit, you didn't think I thought—"

Finley smirked, disarming Sammy's rising anxiety in an instant. "I did not think you thought."

"Because you've always..." he started to say, and then stumbled to a stop. Closed his eyes. His big stupid mouth.

When he finally looked back at Finley, their eyebrows bounced up, curious. "Out with it. Finish the sentence."

Sammy rolled his eyes. Fine, fuck it. All the cards on the table. "Because you've always been into me. Even when I looked like I'd fallen through Rowan's backup closet and landed face-first on her makeup palettes."

"First of all, that is not what you looked like then," they retorted. "And secondly, and this may be a bit of a tangent but... fucking christ, you really have had a glow-up. I'm just saying. You went from notable country girl visiting the big city to, like, fucking trans diva."

"Rowan took me shopping," he said weakly, fingering the hem of his dress.

"Yeah, it's not just the clothes, Samantha," Finley laughed. After only a moment, though, the laugh died on his lips. "Oh. You don't see

it, do you?"

Sammy shrugged. "It's a costume. It looks good, but it's..." Fuck it, he could say what he was thinking without giving away the whole thing. "It's all façade."

Finley considered him for some time before answering. "Samantha, it's not... allow me to revise myself. I don't think it's the clothes at all. Nor is it the... *very* on-point makeup. It's not the image you present. There is a light in your eyes, a fucking spring in your step. An ease in your shoulders that is... incredibly compelling."

Sammy scowled off across the water instead of responding. What was Finley seeing? Maybe his new sense of purpose? More likely his twice-daily microdose of party drugs.

"You were cute at Preview Days," Finley went on. "And also overwhelmed, awkward, and profoundly self-conscious—"

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," they grinned. "But now you... it's like you've found your spine and you're standing up straight for the first time in your life. It's fucking glorious to watch."

Compliments on his appearance were one thing; Sammy didn't even know how to deal with whatever this overblown and patently wrong bullshit was. "I think you're getting fooled by my Fake It Till You Make It act."

"I think you're further along in that process than you think you are," Finley shot back immediately, a cheeky smirk on his face. But then he nodded across the street. They'd come to the end of the park. "We're here."

The restaurant served as the western anchor of what looked like a shopping mall, but also had its own exterior entrance. Finley led Sammy across the street—Andrei would be scandalized—and opened the door for him.

"Thanks," he said with a small smile. It was still new to have doors opened for him, even if it only happened a few times a day on campus. He was slowly accepting the fact that for the next couple months, he'd be smiling and thanking helpful men who—oh fuck.

There was another couple in front of them talking to the hostess, so Sammy cleared his throat and said, "So um. This is a dumb question, but like. You opened the door for me..."

When Sammy trailed off, Finley raised an eyebrow. "Is there a question part of your question?"

Sammy gave up trying to phrase it elegantly. “Men open doors for women, for manners or whatever, but you’re not a man, so... how’s that work?”

His date grinned. “Yeah, non-hetero dating can get confusing sometimes. But there’s usually one half of a couple who likes having the door opened for them more than the other half does. And in my experience, it’s usually a safe bet that a newly-hatched trans girl will enjoy getting a little chivalry laid at her feet.”

Sammy had to smile. “Are we that predictable?”

“Follow me for more queer dating tips,” Finley quipped, tapped the side of their nose, and then shrugged. “We can take turns opening doors for each other later, if you like.”

And then the hostess asked for Finley’s reservation and they were being led through the restaurant to a table by the window, overlooking the water. The sun had almost reached the horizon and the river was all golden sparkles.

“There’s Jersey,” Finley remarked, nodding past the water to the dark, blocky horizon beyond. “Your homeland, right?”

Sammy scoffed. “I mean, yeah, that’s Jersey, but it’s not my Jersey. Like that Real Housewives and Jersey Shore stuff? I don’t even recognize it. The Jersey I know is all backwoods isolation and winding mountain roads.”

Finley settled back in their seat. “Tell me about it?” they asked, but were immediately interrupted by the server.

There were a number of specials that the server rattled off from memory—the curse of a seafood place—and the two of them listened to the litany with only slightly strained politeness. Sammy was realizing that, while he liked fish when his mom made it for dinner, he had no idea what kinds of fish she’d ever served him.

“Um, what would you recommend?” he asked when the piscine diatribe drew to a close. “Imagine that I like fish in general but I’ve mysteriously forgotten what all their different names are.”

Did the server flinch? Sammy knew his question was odd, but that seemed like an extreme reaction. But she recovered quickly to recommend the tuna steak. That sounded straightforward so he ordered that, along with a diet soda.

Finley put in his order, the server retreated, and they were alone. “That’s an interesting mysterious ailment you have, forgetting the names of fish.”

Sammy rolled his eyes at himself. “My mom makes fish all the time

and I love it, but like. I say, 'hey Mom, what's for dinner?' and she tells me the name of the fish, and I look at her confused and stuff and then she just says, 'Fish.' So I nod and then dinner is delicious."

Finley grinned. "Don't go out for seafood much in the Jersey backwoods?"

"No, Oak Grove has got, like... a diner, a chinese takeout place, a pizza place, and, um, this place that calls itself a 'grill' but it serves exactly the same stuff as the diner."

"What, no fast food?"

Sammy shrugged. "Not unless you want to drive all the way to Dover."

Finley whistled. "Wow, you really do live outside of civilization."

Sammy lifted a finger. "Used to live outside of civilization. Now I live in New York City."

"Never going back?"

He shook his head. "Not if I can help it. I mean, go back for visits and stuff, sure. But that's the people. I'll miss people. I won't miss Oak Grove."

Finley nodded. "I get that. I miss my family, definitely, but I gotta admit, sometimes I miss home, the place."

The server reappeared with their drinks and a basket of bread. Sammy thanked her and waited until she'd left to ask, "Where is home again? You said back during Preview Days but I was overwhelmed and awkward."

Finley stuck their tongue out before answering, "Nebraska." Sammy nodded. That sounded like something he'd been told months ago. "A sleepy little suburb called Waverly, outside of Lincoln. Flat as hell. Green in the summer, white in the winter."

"And you miss it?"

"I miss bits," they nodded. "Outdoor seating at the Runza that looked out over a field. The creek where my friends and I hung out. My favourite club down in Lincoln."

"What's a Runza?"

"Sandwich place," Finley clarified with a shrug. "Fast food, because Waverly sits within the bounds of proper civilization."

Sammy gestured with his buttered roll, plainly egging Finley on, because apparently he liked listening to the genderqueer talk. "So you miss a fast food sandwich with a view across a green field leading to a flat horizon."

Finley smirked. "Yeah. I do." They described a particularly

memorable summer day with friends, hanging out at the sandwich place, and Sammy just listened, smiling softly and making encouraging conversational noises every once in a while.

When their food came, Sammy's didn't look much like any fish his mother had ever served him. But he figured he was trying new experiences and dug in. The tuna steak was surprisingly good.

His date was less than enamored with their food. Despite trying to hide their disappointment, they finally admitted that the upscale restaurant's *mojo isleño* sauce paled in comparison to their mother's home cooking. "I had a little spark of hope when I saw Puerto Rican food on the menu, but I should have known better," they sighed.

Sammy made sympathetic noises and got two more bites into his own steak before his curiosity piqued. "Are there a lot of Puerto Ricans in Nebraska?"

"Not really," Finley answered. "There's, like, almost a real Boricua community in Omaha, but not in Lincoln. Certainly not in Waverly."

"Boricuwhat?"

"Boricua," Finley grinned. "It's just what Puerto Ricans call ourselves. I should be able to tell you why but um. I really have no idea."

"Well there's no Boricua community in Nebraska," Sammy pointed out, dimly proud of himself when he didn't stumble over the new word. "Who would have taught you, right?"

His date guffawed at that. "I am, if you can believe it, third-generation Nebraskan Boricua. My great-grandparents moved there when they were discharged after World War Two."

"They were?" Sammy echoed, eyebrows raised. "Not just him?"

"Women's Auxiliary," they answered with no small amount of pride. "She was a mechanic, he was a driver. They met in Italy, got secretly married in London a year before the war was over."

"Secretly married?"

They grinned. "You weren't supposed to get married, it would distract you from your important work fixing jeeps."

"That's so awesome," Sammy grinned. The back of his brain told him that the story might have been mildly amusing, but certainly didn't qualify as 'so awesome.' The rest of his brain, which was now sure it just liked listening to Finley talk, told the back to shut up. "And then they chose Nebraska."

"Nobody on the east coast was giving brown people mortgages under the G.I. Bill, so they had to go inland," they explained, wrinkling

their nose. "But it worked out, I guess. They opened a garage in Lincoln; my grandpa worked there his whole life. My mom worked there part-time through college. She's an accountant, now. Terribly exciting."

"And the garage?" Sammy asked, thinking about his family's patchwork collection of small businesses in Oak Grove.

"It's my uncle's now. Mom moved out to Waverly to be closer to her clients. All agribusiness stuff. Taxes for farms are complicated, apparently. But it kept us housed and clothed and fed, so I'm not complaining." They grinned. "My mom is complaining, but more about the farmers and their bookkeeping practices than the tax codes."

Sammy hesitated only a moment before asking, "Single mom?"

"Sometimes, not always," they answered without hesitation, and then smiled. "Had me when she was on her own; IVF. These days she's shackled up with a girl named Tiff who's like half her age. It's kind of adorable. She asked me a couple months ago if it would be weird for me if they got married."

"What did you say?"

Finley took a moment to chew, swallow, and wash down the disappointing fish sauce with a gulp of water. "I told her, 'you're not going to find another *lesbiana boricua* in Lincoln. You better lock that shit down while you can.'"

Sammy tried not to wince when Finley slipped into Spanish, which he didn't speak, but the meaning was clear enough. He grinned to cover the sudden spike of unease.

Finley just asked, "What about your family, Samantha?"

"Oh, not as exciting," he demurred. But then his brain railed against his own words: Now it's your turn, now you have to be interesting to listen to, and tell a good story, and be engaging and clever. You're on a *date*. So Sammy cleared his throat and said, "My dad's side has been in Oak Grove since, like, time immemorial. They probably fought the British during the Revolution."

Finley grinned at that, but the expression took a moment to hit their face, as if it wasn't quite genuine.

Sammy suspected what was going through his date's head, so he forced himself not to smirk as he set up a sort of conversational surprise. "My mom's family... they're more recent immigrants."

At this, Finley nodded and the trace of hesitation in their face faded. "From where?"

"Russia," he answered, and Finley visibly flinched. Sammy grinned.

“What, don’t I look like I’m half Sons of Liberty, half Pushkin heroine?” He only remembered to add the ‘-ine’ at the last moment and wasn’t even sure if there were Daughters of Liberty that he should have referenced, but Finley did not seem to notice.

“Respectfully, Samantha, you do not,” Finley laughed. “Is there a story there?”

“Not really,” he said, shrugged, and tamped down a rising tide of panic. He should have planned further ahead; now he was heading into fraught territory. “I’m adopted. A foundling left on the steps of a fire department in Jersey City.”

Finley hooked a thumb out the window, at the twinkling skyline across the water. “So you are from over there, after all.”

Sammy snorted softly. “Only technically. My parents adopted me as a baby; I only remember Oak Grove.” He looked down at the remnants of his tuna steak, picking the flake apart with his fork. The conversation lulled, and he felt compelled to fill the silence, even if it would bring down the mood. “It’s not like I was the only brown kid in Oak Grove, but... it was close. And none of the Martinezes or the Sozas had kids my age, so.”

Finley reached across the table to put their hand over his, and had the good sense not to say anything.

Eventually Sammy turned his hand over to clasp Finley’s, and they sat in silence—companionable, not stilted—as the red sun sank behind the Jersey City skyline.

After dinner, Finley suggested they walk to a nearby ice cream place. Sammy was more than eager to make the date last longer, so he grinned and said he was never going to turn down ice cream.

They left the restaurant by a different entrance, connecting into the mall. Finley held open the door to the brightly-lit thoroughfare.

Sammy hesitated. “I thought we were going to take turns opening doors for each other?”

His date grinned. “Yeah, but you like this.”

He considered protesting, but a beat later stepped through, cheeks burning. Sammy wasn’t about to admit anything out loud, but something deep within him blossomed warm and giddy. He did like it. Not because he was a newly-hatched trans girl, of course, because he wasn’t that. Finley had said one half of the couple usually liked that sort of thing, and maybe he was that half of this couple. He was okay with that.

He probably should not be thinking of himself and Finley as a couple, he realized, and flushed even more.

They ambled along the mall walkway without talking, but Sammy slowly became aware that Finley was less comfortable with the arrangement than he was. The genderqueer was tapping their fingers on their thighs, looking furtively at Sammy and then away. Were they actually nervous?

He leaned sideways to bump his shoulder against their upper arm. "Okay, now it's my turn. Out with it. Say the thing you keep not saying."

"You got me," they sighed, and then held their hand out, towards Sammy. "I'd like to slip my arm around your waist as we walk. But I don't want to presume, for obvious reasons, so I need to ask..."

"Oh my god," Sammy giggled, and stepped closer. Finley's hand slid across his back and settled against his far hip. He mirror imaged his own arm around Finley and squeezed. His head tipped against their shoulder, just for a moment, which felt wonderful. "This is nice," he murmured. "And thank you for asking."

"You didn't actually let me get to the asking part," his date pointed out, and added playfully, "Nor did you ask me—"

"Finley, shut up and enjoy this."

"Yes, ma'am."

They walked the length of the mall like that, talking only sporadically and about nothing of import. Sammy could get used to... whatever this was. A walking hug? And Finley was smart and funny and charming, and something about their arm around him made Sammy feel... safe wasn't the right word. Taken care of? Like Finley thought Sammy was worth holding onto—something special—and they weren't shy about demonstrating it to everybody they passed in the mall.

Sammy's musing was interrupted when Finley said, "Ooo!" and used their walking hug to steer them both into a hard ninety-degree turn, plunging directly into a store decorated in purple and pink.

"What's happening?" Sammy asked, just slightly panicked, as they were suddenly surrounded by plastic teenybopper jewelry on all sides. "Where are we?"

"Claire's," Finley answered cheerfully, and disengaged their arm from Sammy's side. He tried not to pout. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that Rowan didn't bring you here during your shopping spree."

"Uh, no. Isn't this place for, like, twelve-year-olds?"

"Twelve-year-olds and working class queers," Finley corrected with a smirk. They grabbed Sammy's hand and dragged him between the display racks. "It's not that Rowan has no appreciation for trash fashion, she just prefers designer trash fashion."

"So we're shopping, now?" Sammy asked, bemusedly allowing himself to be pulled through the claustrophobic store.

"Just for one quick thing," Finley promised. "I thought I saw it through the window—ah, here." They plucked something off a rack and tore its cardboard holder apart. Sammy could mostly see wide black ribbon. "Turn around?"

More than a little unsure, Sammy turned his back on Finley. A moment later, their hands passed over his shoulders and exposed collarbones, fiddled for a heartbeat, and then laid the cool, plasticky necklace against his skin. Fingertips brushed the side of Sammy's neck, and then they were fastening the clasp behind him.

"There," Finley said proudly, and with their hands on Sammy's shoulders, turned him to face a mirror. "Now your outfit is complete."

Sammy's immediate "oh, that's right, I look like a girl" reaction blossomed as he took in his reflection, but over the last week it had been worn down to little more than half a second. So he focused on the necklace that Finley had put on him. It was simple—a wide black ribbon supporting an oversized white plastic cameo—and if he looked close as he was now, it was plainly cheap. But this last week had also shown him that most of humanity did little more than glance at their fellows, and he doubted anyone would think really think poorly about him wearing a plastic pendant.

And it did complete the outfit rather nicely.

...even if it did draw attention down into his fake cleavage.

"It looks good, yeah," he told Finley, and put on a smile. Something tugged at his memory, though, and he scrutinized his reflection for a little longer, and finally laughed. In his blue skater dress, black hair in a swishy bob, and now this necklace... "I look like Betty Rubble."

"Like a hot Betty Rubble, sure," Finley grinned back through the mirror. A trace of uncertainly flickered across their features. "You like it, though?"

Sammy touched the generic figure on the cameo and nodded. "I do, actually."

Finley waved the cardboard backing the necklace had come from. "Okay, let me go pay for it."

"You're buying me jewelry on our first date?" Sammy smirked through the mirror, raising one arch eyebrow.

Finley checked the back of the cardboard. "I mean, I'm spending eight dollars, here," they grinned, and disappeared behind the displays.

Sammy looked back at his reflection. The necklace might be cheap plastic and ribbon, but it worked with everything else perfectly. He stepped back, fitting his reflection into the thin display mirror. Leaving his dorm room, he'd felt thrown together and rushed. Now he looked poised and put together. Was it the addition of the necklace, or just fewer nerves?

Sammy really wanted it to be the latter option, because Finley had been careful, sweet, and gentle. He was having such a good time, and he was a lot less worried about how the date might go, now that it was mostly over.

But if he was being honest with himself, he was pretty sure the outfit was the larger part of his looking better. If only he could swap out these little earring studs he was stuck with for something that properly complemented the necklace...

Finley returned, slipping a thin billfold into the pocket of their dress. Sammy tamped down a sharp flash of envy; where had they got a sleek dress with pockets? The genderqueer met Sammy's eyes in the mirror and held their hands out over his hips, question plain on their face. Sammy smiled, and Finley's hands settled over his hips comfortably. He leaned back against them.

His date dropped their chin onto Sammy's shoulder. "Ice cream?"

Sammy placed his hands over Finley's, squeezing softly in the hopes of silently communicating how the contact had been nice and his date should do it again. With actual spoken words, he said, "Oooo, ice cream."

The ice cream place was out the far end of the mall and a half-block down the street beyond that. Despite the sun setting almost an hour ago, it was still warm out and Sammy had been happy that they'd exploited the mall's air conditioning. It was also, somehow, less crowded in the mall. Now they had to dodge pedestrians on the last leg to the creamery, and holding hands was off the table. Sammy contented himself with frequent shoulder bumps.

"It's not the most prestigious medical school," Finley was saying, "and not even the most prestigious school that I got accepted to. They

just put together a better financial aid package for me. I'll still be in debt for decades, but you know... one decade fewer sounds nice."

"Finley in sunny California," Sammy grinned. "When do you go?"

"I move out of my apartment August 12th," came the answer. "Lease is up then, so it's convenient. I'll head home for a bit... Mom wants me there till the last minute, like three weeks, but I think I need some time to settle in before things start getting hectic."

"That sounds like a good idea, yeah," Sammy grinned. "Home in small doses, even if it has a Runza with a view."

"What about you, what are your plans?"

Sammy shrugged. "I mean, I go home after the final exam, and then hopefully I'm back here a month later."

"You will be," Finley nodded encouragingly. "You're gonna crush it. But I mean in broader strokes. Major? Grad school plans?"

"Oh gosh, that's so many steps ahead," he said, shaking his head. "I don't have any plans beyond 'get into Columbia.' Anything more concrete seems like setting myself up for disappointment."

"There's no rush," his date insisted. "And honestly, I think spending some time figuring out what you want to study and what you want to do after school... that's a good thing. Or maybe I just hang out with too many pre-meds who are super focused on—"

"Hey Tranny!" The shout cut through the humid, acrid air from across the street. Finley rolled their eyes.

Sammy moved to turn, but Finley grabbed his arm to still him. "Don't even turn around. Come on."

He didn't turn, so he scowled at his date instead. "If somebody's gonna shout slurs at me on the street, I want to flip him off at least."

The man shouted across the street again, this time backed by other voices laughing.

"He's not shouting at you, Samantha," Finley told him with a wan smile. With their arm around Sammy, they hastened their pace down the street. "His idea of a tranny is somebody wearing a beard and a dress at the same time."

"Hey chica!" came the next shout. "Ditch the tranny and come on over here. I'll show you what a real man is like!"

Finley tipped their head slightly. "Okay, now he's shouting at you."

"Does that mean I can flip him off?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," they answered, pulled open a storefront door, and guided Sammy inside. "They're probably harmless, but you never know."

In the process of turning and stepping into the ice cream shop, Sammy cast a hasty glance back down the street. The view was complicated by a tide of moving vehicles and a wash of pedestrians on the sidewalk opposite. But the culprit was most likely the scruffy-looking man in tattered clothing, leaning on a lightpost and leering across the street at them. If whoever had laughed along with him had stuck around, Sammy couldn't spot them.

"He looks homeless," he reported to Finley in a whisper. The ice cream shop was tightly packed with display refrigerators blasting hot air out along the floor. A rainbow of colours beckoned to them, but another couple was ahead of them, being helped by the sole worker.

"Might be," his date said with a shrug. "Not getting my sympathy today, though."

"Yeah," he answered weakly. The couple ahead of them were taking their time. "Seems weird, though, that he thinks a trans girl would wear a beard."

"I mean, some do," Finley shrugged. "But it's more that... he saw something different than he expected, it had something to do with gender presentation, and he's only got one word to apply to that situation."

Sammy made an agreeable sound, and then it was their turn to pick flavours.

Later, hunched around one of the two tiny little tables in the front of the store and halfway through their dessert, Sammy said, "Hey um. Can I ask a question about... I mean it's not really about the guy outside, but it's sort of... tangentially related?"

His date made a show of calculated deliberation, and then pointed their spoon at Sammy's ice cream. "Only if you give me a bite of that lemon curd swirl."

Sammy scooped out a generous spoonful and held it out to Finley, who grinned before slurping it up. "Good, right?" he smiled, and then switched tack. "He thought you were transgender, yeah, but... I don't know how to ask this right but... are you?"

"You mean, do I self-identify as transgender," his date rephrased for him, and bobbed their head. "It's a good question. Wish I had a good answer."

"Well if you're not going to give me the answer I paid for," Sammy smirked, "it seems like you owe me a bite of ice cream." He leaned forward slightly and watched Finley's eyes wobble down and snap back up, not quite taking the bait of cleavage that Sammy had put on

display.

"It's good chocolate," Finley said, and scooped out a bite of theirs to hold forward. "Not as good as your lemon curd, though."

After sampling the bite, Sammy tipped his head side to side. "I'm not sure I agree with your ranking, there."

"You want to swap?"

"No," Sammy smiled. "But I think I do need another bite, just to make sure."

"That so?"

"I can make it worth your while," he proposed in a soft, tempting drawl that surprised even him. Then he dangled his spoon, lumped high with yellow ice cream, between them.

"Well," Finley smirked, and prepared their own spoonful. "In the interest of rigorous testing."

The two of them traded bites back and forth for a few minutes, which inevitably resulted in melted ice cream on the tips of both of their noses. And then as both their paper bowls neared empty, Finley said, "So like, definitionally, I am transgender. My realized gender does not match the gender I was assigned at birth. So yeah, I'm trans. Technically."

Sammy nodded, accepting the belated answer and sudden return to the previous topic because, well, he wanted to know.

"But, like, colloquially?" Finley grimaced. "There's a picture of what people think of when they think of transgender people, and I share... only some of those characteristics and experiences, you know? I will never pass. In fact I am trying, every day, not to pass. As either binary gender. So I don't know if it's a useful label in most contexts. I'm happy just claiming genderqueer and leaving it at that."

Sammy bobbed his head and held forward his spoon with the last of the lemon curd. "That's a good answer."

"I'm glad we got to do this," Finley said as the two of them approached Sammy's dorm, steps slowing to prolong the tail end of the date. The long summer day had finally surrendered to darkness, not that the humid heat had gone anywhere. Campus was lit up around them, floodlights spilling across red brick and up alabaster columns.

"Me too," Sammy murmured, and leaned his head against their shoulder. He'd maneuvered them into a walking hug when the dorm came into view, savoring the contact.

"I really enjoyed getting to know you better," they continued, and then grinned down at him. "And I'm glad you decided to make it a date."

"I didn't decide that!" Sammy recoiled, a little more affronted than he wanted to be. "I decided that I'd like it to be a date." He poked Finley's shoulder. "You decided it was a date when you asked me out on a date."

"Is that what I did?" they asked, all skepticism and cheek.

"You may have played it cool when I asked if it was a date," Sammy argued, trying to play it off as funny. Why did this suddenly matter so much? "But we both know what you were doing."

They came to the foot of the stairs up to the dorm's front door, and their steps came to a halt. "Plausible. Certainly sounds like something I'd do," Finley said, and then their performative musing cracked into a devilish smirk. "So. Since this is and always was a date... may I kiss you goodnight?"

Sammy turned to face his date, slipped his arms around their waist, and smiled up at them. "Please."

Finley mirrored his smile, then slid one hand up his back until their fingers nestled into the hairs at the nape of Sammy's neck. They drew him close and gently pressed their lips together. Soft and warm.

Sammy felt his eyes flutter closed more than he shut them with any intention. Finley was taking their time, with slow, light kisses along his lips. He pulled the genderqueer closer and might have made a little quavering sound he'd feel ashamed of if he wasn't presently consumed by sensation.

And then Finley was pulling away gently, which brought out of Sammy a frustrated little squeal. This wasn't over, not yet! He stood up on tip-toes to push his face into theirs, parting his lips to plant a little, inviting lick on Finley's lower lip.

The movement unbalanced him and he wobbled slightly—damn sandals—but his date caught him with the simple expedience of their free hand cupped under his butt, holding him close. Sammy giggled into the kiss; he could feel Finley's lips curl into a responding smile. Lips parted; tongues darted; Sammy started to run out of breath. He didn't particularly care.

Eventually, though, Finley set him back down on solid ground. They pulled back, and this time Sammy's head was spinning too fast to mount a bodily counter-argument. His date nodded up the short stack of stairs behind Sammy. "It's slightly more pragmatic chivalry than

holding restaurant doors open, but I'd like to see you safely through your front door before I head home."

Sammy nodded absently; that made sense. He staggered up the steps, fished keys out of his purse, and managed to get onto the other side of the glass door. It latched and locked with an audible kerthunk.

Through the glass, Finley waved; without thinking, Sammy blew them a kiss. He watched them turn and go, heart pounding. At some point, after Finley was long out of sight, he rested his forehead against the door. "Oh, this is bad," he sighed to himself. "So much for no distractions."

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