

# *Being Samantha Masters*



*an homage-sequel to Being Christina Chase*

by Miriam Robern

## *Distractions*

Sammy, you have to text me when you get home from a date! Rowan's message was waiting on his phone when Sammy woke up the next morning.

How do you know if it was really a date? he texted back, bleary-eyed. I never told you how that shook out.

It was always a fucking date.

The only question was if you'd realize it.

Before you were like a dozen 'apology dinners' in and they fucking proposed or something.

Sammy wasn't particularly happy with how accurate that sounded. Im home, im safe, he texted back. Finn was a perfect gentlethem.

Did you put out? she shot back, followed after a moment with a winky face.

Sammy rolled his eyes and did not dignify his cousin's question with any response. Instead he pushed himself out of bed. He needed to get up and moving. He had so much reading to do this weekend. But a moment later, smirking in sudden perverse inspiration, he dove back to grab his phone and texted Rowan: Good girls don't kiss and tell.

Who the fuck wants to be a good girl? was the—in retrospect—inevitable reply.

Grinning, Sammy shook his head as he packed his bag to straining with all the books he needed for the day. The dining commons was a short walk away, and held the promise of waffles and bacon to wake him up and endless soda refills to keep him that way. Twenty minutes later—he was getting quick at simple makeup looks—his study materials were spread out across a table towards the back of the room,

along with a tray bearing two plates of food.

He took his time with breakfast, but his eyes kept wandering to the stacks of books around him. He'd like to start with something light, but... he wasn't sure any of it qualified. The same went for "something he was comfortable with." Everything in this program was a push for him. Everything was uphill. Everything was so much effort.

Why couldn't it be easy just once, he sighed... like the date last night. Sure, he'd had butterflies like whoa and the start had been a little rocky, but once he got over himself—and really, that had mostly been him making it harder than it ever had to be, right?—the rest of the evening had been... effortless. Comfortable. Finn had really gone out of their way to put Sammy at ease, and that was, apparently, exactly what he'd needed.

His eggs had gone cold. Sammy realized with a start that he'd been sitting there, picking at his breakfast and staring off into space, running back and forth through the date. He rolled his shoulders, set aside his half-eaten food, and picked up whatever book was on top. He had reading to do. He was going to read.

*Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellnynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found... wow, that was a lot of commas. And what the heck was the Baronetage?* Scowling, Sammy pulled out his phone and searched. Apparently it was... a bunch of English nobles? But this seemed to think it was some sort of book. He pressed on—the opening sentence just kept going on and on, taking up almost the whole first paragraph—and apparently, okay. It was a book that listed out all the English nobles? Maybe.

Sammy sighed and settled back into his seat, reading about this dude and his daughters and his dead wife and his big house in England. He was just about to get sick of it all, and especially this rich fucker, when he hit *Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character*, and he actually snorted out loud. Okay. So he wasn't actually supposed to respect this guy. He could do that.

But then the book started going on about his dead wife, and Sammy struggled to keep his attention on the details. By the time he got to the dead wife's friend and the noble guy's daughter that nobody liked except the dead wife's friend, Sammy realized that he was thinking as much about sharing bites of ice cream with Finley than he was about this girl who was apparently exceedingly boring. He closed his eyes

for a moment. He set the book down.

Okay. This was just not the best choice for a good start. He traded *Persuasion* for *Intro to Biological Systems* and dug into the third chapter (the class had skipped the first chapter and covered the second already). But no sooner had he hit something that he remembered from class—radial symmetry—than Sammy also remembered how Finley had laughed when the professor had made a joke about octopuses telling left from right. And then he was thinking about Finley laughing on their date, and how Finley's laugh was low and warm and—

Fuck.

He set *Biological Systems* aside and picked up something else. And then something else. And another thing. No matter what the subject matter was, all Sammy could think about, apparently, was his date last night and how Finley had... wanted him to be there, wanted to be there with him. And how they were so pretty, especially when they smiled.

And when Finley smiled at Sammy, and it was like Sammy was the only thing in the world, and—

Finally Sammy pushed a book titled—no lie—*Feminism is for Everybody* to the side and picked up his phone. His text history with Rowan was still at the top of his screen. **Hey advice?** he tapped out. **I'm supposed to wait, right, before like talking to Finn? After the date? Don't want to come on too strong or whatever.**

Rowan didn't respond for almost half an hour, and Sammy was pushing himself through covalent bonds when his phone finally chimed with her advice. **That's cishet bullshit. Do what feels right, Sammy.**

She went on, at length, in a series of texts that read a lot like the History reading that Sammy wasn't doing, which wasn't a surprise since it was her father that had assigned said reading. A whole lot about the precarity of heterosexual courtship customs and negotiating through unequal power dynamics and so on. With a healthy dollop of Rowan on top: those poor cishet girls, trapped in a situation where they couldn't just be themselves and be loved for being themselves.

Sammy sent back short, agreeable texts as she ranted, and then switched over to his text chain with Finley.

**I really enjoyed last night.** He smiled down at his phone as he hit **Send**. It felt silly how happy it made him just saying how he was

feeling, but then that was how the whole date had gone last night, too. Easy and comfortable.

It was only a few minutes before Finley replied. Sammy had tried to go back to his reading, which wasn't working, but he smiled again when he saw the response: *I did, too.* <3

He picked up his phone and settled back in his chair. *I'm sitting here trying to study but my brain keeps going back to last night and your smile*

*And that kiss,* he added, with a touch more honesty, a moment later.

*And your butt,* he thought but did not commit to SMS. Holding back a little might be a good idea, actually.

*Sounds like I did a good job,* then, Finley responded, along with a two-second video of Bugs Bunny bowing on a stage while getting showered with roses from the audience. *Good first date?*

*Good first date,* he confirmed. He stared at the short, bare text for a long moment. That wasn't enough. Sammy screwed up his lips and tapped out: *But practice makes perfect, right?*

*I have heard this,* came back Finley's reply, which seemed... curiously cagey. When no bouncing dots followed, Sammy frowned down at his phone. Now what? Had they been distracted by some other thing? Was there nothing else to say?

Notifications of Rowan's continuing tirade kept trying to distract him from the suddenly anemic-feeling exchange with Finn. *Do what feels right,* she'd said.

*You wanna do it again?* he typed out, but then frowned. Too passive, too indirect. Too much... implying that he'd be amenable to them asking him out. And hadn't Finn suggested, early on yesterday, that Sammy might do the asking for next date? Sammy deleted his unsent text, and instead typed out *May I take you out sometime?* and hit Send before he could think better of it.

The response was immediate: *I'd like that a lot.* :D

The timing strongly implied that they hadn't been distracted by some other thing. Sammy imagined for a moment Finley sitting hunched over their phone just like he was with his.

*Friday?* he asked.

*It's a date.*

They didn't text any further, and Sammy turned back to his stack of

books, head a little clearer. Just touching base with Finn and setting up another date alleviated the pressure of what had happened yesterday and the question if it would ever happen again. It *would* happen again. On Friday. And as much as he was looking forward to it, Sammy felt a growing sense of peace. Before he knew it, Sammy was almost a quarter of the way into *Persuasion* and it was 11 o'clock.

Eleven meant the grill was open, so Sammy finished a chapter, set down his book, and wandered over to his new and neverending source of cheeseburgers.

Sammy waited his turn behind a couple frat boys, poking at his phone to catch up on Rowan's diatribe on cishet dating practices. She'd apparently wound down eventually, and he felt a little bad about ignoring her in favour of texting Finley and then—worse—schoolwork. He threw in a few laugh reacts and a silly joke to show that he had read what she'd texted.

"What can I get you, chica?" asked the guy behind the grill, with the sort of tone that told Sammy that he'd been staring at his phone instead of ordering for a bit too long. The frat boys ahead of him were walking away with their food. But the grill guy was smiling, with a little conspiratorial gleam to his eye.

There were two possible explanations for that look, and Sammy wasn't sure which it was. The guy was brown, too, and so maybe it was a look of camaraderie here among all the white folks. Or possibly he liked how Sammy looked. The casual ribbed tank that Sammy had pulled on this morning did display a whole bunch of fake cleavage. Or there was the distinct possibility it was both.

Sammy struggled to parse the many connotations and inflections of "chica" here in the City. It's not like he ever got called that back at home.

But he had to order, so he lowered his phone and stepped forward. "Sorry, uh, just a cheeseburger, please. Oh, um. With bacon." Because you could just do that here, and it didn't even cost extra. College was awesome.

But the grill guy only blinked, dumbfounded, in response. A beat later, he nodded forcefully. "Yeah, of course. Coming right up." And he busied himself with the grill, not looking up.

The fuck was that?

"Oh hey. Samantha, right?" The student next in line had stepped up to put in his order and spotted Sammy.

"And you're Leon," he said with a nod, pulling his attention away

from the grill guy's weird reaction. "From Ukraine."

"That's me. One cheeseburger, please," he sent over the grill counter with a curt smile and nod. Then they both sidestepped along the curve of the grill station to wait for their orders to be prepared. "How is your Saturday treating you?" asked Leon. "Finally the weekend. No classes."

"No classes, but a lot of reading," Sammy chuckled mirthlessly. He tipped his head to the back of the room. "I've sort of taken over a table to just power through it all."

"Ah yes, Jane Austen and bell hooks," the Ukrainian nodded. "Quite a combination. Do you ever wonder if the teachers think about how the books they assign contrast with each other?"

"Bilateral symmetry and covalent bonds," Sammy joked, and tried to demonstrate both with the same gesture, the fingers of each hand splayed and wiggling at each other.

"Ta!" Leon chortled. "Yes, exactly."

Sammy leaned against the counter, back to the grill. Leon was tall, and tipping himself back a little to increase the difference in their heights gave Sammy a little flutter in his belly. Silly, but still fun. "What's giving you the most trouble? I can't even decide, between all six."

"Oh, the Austen," the young man from Ukraine answered readily. "And I am reticent about the Composition work. I am not so comfortable with the vagaries of the English language, you know?"

Sammy nodded, pretending that he, a native English speaker, absolutely knew what 'vagaries' meant. "Not the science and math stuff?"

Leon waved a hand. "Science is science, math is math. The hardest part about the Bio and Physics classes is learning the new names for things. Otherwise, it is all the same phenomena under the surface."

"Yeah, I can see how that could be for you," Sammy responded awkwardly, thinking: did the Marginalized Scholars program just import foreign geniuses and then lumped him in with them?

"Your cheeseburger, sir," said the grill guy as he desposited a plate on the edge of the counter beside Sammy.

Leon frowned softly as he lifted the top bun of the burger, and then shook his head. "This is not mine. It has bacon on it."

Sammy turned just in time to see grill guy point at him with his spatula. "No, it's his." The emphasis he put on the last word made clear how intentional the word choice was. His eyes flicked towards

Sammy but wouldn't meet his eye.

Leon drew himself up to his full height, expression stormy. "Sir, my friend Samantha's pronouns are she and her."

Grill guy put up his hands as if to say, "How was I to know?" And then busied himself plating Leon's burger with no bacon.

For his part, Sammy collected his bacon cheeseburger and left the grill behind, not rushing but not not rushing, either. He wasn't upset like he imagined Rowan or a real trans girl might be upset, but the barb still rankled. He hadn't been misidentified, after all. But he had put effort into how he looked, even for a study day in the dining commons, and having all of that ignored was... frustrating.

And the curl of the guy's lip when he said what he said was so plainly hostile, and over so little. Because, what, he thought "I'll low-key flirt with this chica," and then discovered his own homophobia? What a dick.

Leon caught up halfway to Sammy's table. "That man is... augh," he growled, and said something in Ukrainian, with significant emphasis. "I cannot remember the English."

Despite his own frustration at the grill guy, Sammy couldn't help but smirk at Leon's considerably more valuable anger. "There are so many options in English. Easiest is just to say he was being a dick."

"Ah, yes. 'Dick.'" Leon nodded, and then coughed, coloured, and looked sidelong at Sammy. "Sorry if that is inappropriate language for... men speaking to girls."

"Maybe in *Persuasion*, but it's okay here," he told Leon, and then his table and all his books was in front of them both. He paused only a moment before inviting Leon to join. "I'm kind of dug in for the day, but I can move some things if you want to sit?"

"Thank you," he responded, sat down, and tucked in. They talked sporadically about the reading—it was all spread out before them, after all—and their classes and professors, but neither mentioned the grill guy again.

He had been thinking about it ever since he saw it. He'd gone back and forth on the idea all week. He was hesitant to spend the money, and he wasn't sure it would be all that useful, but the thought of it, the idea of it, the promise of it, ate away at his brain. What if it helped? There was so much happening in his brain right now and maybe this was the thing that would make all of it settle down and form up into rows or whatever was inside the heads of people better put together

than he was. And if it didn't do anything for him, well then, it wasn't that much of a waste, right? He was here to try new things, after all. So maybe, possibly, he should give it a try?

But when he went to go take one more look, he got ambushed by the stupidest consideration yet.

Here he was in the campus gift shop, standing before the display of day planners. He knew which format he wanted, with the six sections of graph paper and the integrated calendar. The problem, the stupidest consideration, the hiccup that he couldn't believe was actually stalling him, was that they only had two colours: a very sickly-looking olive green and a bright magenta.

No, it wasn't magenta. It was pink. Dark pink, but... pink.

"You have half a dozen pieces of clothing that are that exact colour," he growled at himself. "And the green is... terrible. There's a reason there's a dozen of those left over after the real school year, because nobody in their right mind could want to see that every day. And there's one pink one left because the rest of them were snatched up, because it's..."

He couldn't bring himself to say, "it's a nice colour" even under his breath. And that, in turn, pissed him off even more.

It wasn't even a contest. He wanted the pink day planner. So why couldn't he pick it up?

He wore that colour all the time—and the thought of his day planner matching his outfit was appealing, too—but the pink clothes were part of his costume, the act, the ridiculous farce that he'd fallen into backwards, pretending to be a trans girl so that he could go to school in the City. That was all necessary (if absurd).

Picking out a pink day planner for himself was a whole different thing.

"Boys can like pink, too," he admonished himself, low enough that nobody could hear, because how would he explain that?

Oh fuck, did he like pink?

His traitorous brain immediately supplied him a list of colours he liked: pink and white and mint green, burgundy but not scarlet; sometimes blue but only very specific blues, and black when used as an accent colour.

He very nearly swore aloud at his brain in the gift store aisle.

Sammy forced himself to pick up the olive green planner. He opened it: six sections, graph paper, the clever calendar. This was what he needed. The question was utility, not looks, and he'd be looking at

it open more often than closed, anyway. He snapped it shut and immediately flinched at the cover.

"It's like vomit," he despaired. He wanted to put it down. He didn't want to even touch this thing. Which would, some corner of his brain chimed in, make it hard to use the thing as much as he wanted to. With a sigh, he put it back on the shelf and looked over at the pink one.

He knew if he picked it up, he wouldn't put it down. There wasn't going to be a decision process after it was in his hand. The decision was right now.

Someone was coming up the aisle. Was she looking at the pink planner? Sammy snapped it up before she could get close. She walked right past.

He looked down at the pink planner. Yeah. He'd been right. Now that it was in his hand, he knew he'd be buying it. "What am I going to do next, go buy some pens with pink ink?" he grumbled at himself, and studiously ignored the part of his brain that perked up at the suggestion. "Just the planner. I'm only getting the planner. I already have pens."

Fuming, he took the planner to the front of the store and set it down on the checkout counter. And there, in front of the cash register, was a display of Columbia-branded pens. Most of them were blue; a handful of them were baby pink. Behind those was a hand-lettered sign reading "Yes, we write pink!" The letters were, predictably, inked in pink, and a rather fetching shade, too. It was like the world was conspiring against him.

He grabbed two pink pens and slapped them on top of the planner.

It was late Sunday afternoon when Sammy, freshly showered and shaved, dressed and made up, received a video call request from his mother. He looked from his phone to the vanity mirror affixed to his chest of drawers. "Fuck," he muttered at his femme-as-hell reflection.

He thumbed Audio Only. "Hey mom!"

"Is your video camera not working, honey?" was his mother's first question.

"No, it's working fine," he squawked, scrambling for something plausible. "I'm just... uh, you caught me just as I got back from the shower." He looked in the mirror at his outfit. "I'm naked."

"Well that's nothing I haven't seen before!"

He lifted an eyebrow at his reflection and did not say, "Trust me,

you've never seen this." Instead he made a strangled, awkward sound. "Mom..."

"Okay, okay," she relented. "I can press my phone up against my head like it's 2007 or something." She huffed a mock-aggreived sigh and said, "I just wanted to check up on you. See your face, but I can make do with hearing your voice."

"It's good to hear you voice, too," he said, a little too automatically. "That is. Sorry, I've been super busy. I should have called earlier."

"Honey, it's only been a week."

He laughed out loud. "Has it really? Holy shit, you're right. Like I said, I've been... super busy."

"I'd love to hear about it, honey."

He couldn't help smiling a little at his mother's voice. "And I'd love to tell you."

So they talked about his classes and his dorm room, about if he'd seen any of the city—"not much, I've mostly stayed on campus"—and the Roth-Masters, who his mother had never even met face-to-face. When all the basics were covered, his mother asked, "Well, anything else exciting to report, honey?"

There were so many ways to answer that question, he mused, looking down into his cleavage. Before he'd actually decided how to hedge, he heard himself saying, "Okay, so don't freak out about this, but... I went on a date."

"Oh!" she gasped, more than a little surprised. "That's excellent. I mean, I hope it was excellent. What's your date's name?"

"Finley," he said, intently aware of how his giddy smile was plainly audible.

"And Finley is..." she asked, trailing off expectantly.

"A pre-med student," Sammy answered immediately. He couldn't help but grin at his mother's leading question. He knew exactly what she was angling for: is 'Finley' a boy or a girl, child of mine who started attending GSA meetings and never gave your loving, supportive parents the honor of coming out to them. He decided to toy with her.

"Oh, that wasn't exactly what I—"

"Oh, right, of course," Sammy nodded, even though she couldn't see him. "Finley is—" Half a beat. "—Puerto Rican. Finley Aceves. From Nebraska, of all places."

"Oh wow, a real out-of-towner," she laughed, the sound coming across a little frayed. Was it the connection or maternal frustration?

"But Finley is..."

"...really fun," he finished for her, and couldn't help but giggle.

"Okay, now you're just fucking with me," she laughed, and he laughed along with her. It felt good; suddenly he missed her fiercely. They used to laugh like this all the time.

"Finley is genderqueer," he finally relented. "Pronouns they and them. And they are... amazing, and they make me feel amazing." He found himself plopping down on his bed. "And yeah, the date was excellent."

"What did you do?" she wanted to know, and so he told her. Or at least he told her a very carefully edited version, without any of the discussion about the importance of passing or shouted transphobia on the street.

To her credit, his mother only stumbled on Finley's pronouns once, and didn't seem even vaguely discomfited at the idea of her son dating a genderqueer. "I'm so glad you got such a good first date experience," she enthused. "Mine was... less so."

Sammy's eyebrows rose. His mom had always been cagey about her past, which he'd chalked up to her being Not From Around Here in Oak Grove, and not having the same bank of shared stories as all the natives. "What was yours like?"

"Oh gosh, it was so pedestrian," his mother laughed. "Dinner and a movie. But I was trying so hard. I overdressed and looked ridiculous for what should have been a very casual thing. And the movie I picked was nothing she was actually interested in."

The pronoun did not escape Sammy's notice. She? Mom's first date was with a girl? Watching family movies together, his mother always talked about how beautiful and sexy the female stars were, but he'd always thought she was doing it to wind up his father. But she'd been queer this whole time?

"Sounds extremely awkward," he said, just to keep her going.

"Oh, it was. I still cringe when I think about it," his mother laughed down the line. "But somehow, despite all that, Amy agreed to go on a second date with me, and a third. We were together for a little more than a year. Ancient history, now. I met your father the next year, and that was that."

"...is Dad home?"

"No, he's in Dover," she answered with a sigh. "I hate when he works weekends, but apparently this client couldn't meet any other time, so. It is what it is."

"Next time, then," he shrugged. "Actually. Why don't we set aside a day and a time to call every week? Sundays work for me, I'll enjoy a break from studying all weekend." And if he knew when the call was going to happen, he could scrub off his makeup beforehand and throw on a hoodie.

"That sounds like a fabulous idea," she responded eagerly. "Same time I called today, like three pm?"

The time did strike Sammy as a little odd, given his mother's usually industrious weekend schedule. And then he realized what must have happened. "After church with your parents?" he smirked.

"Guilty as charged," his mother laughed. "Or redeemed as charged, maybe. But yes, I went to church today, because Richard left for Dover early and the house was too damn quiet. So I called your grandparents and tagged along like old times."

"Gramma must have been ecstatic."

"Oh, she was," she answered ruefully. "Gave me the hard sell on making it a regular thing again."

"Will you?" he asked. His father had never been big on church attendance, which had given Sammy cover to opt out, excepting of course for Christmas and Easter and the odd First Communion of a cousin. He'd never understood the Levchenko attraction to their little mountain church, or his mother's ambivalence. When he was small, she'd taken him to Sunday school every week. He'd played and listened to stories in the Little Kids classroom; she taught in the Big Kids class. And then they didn't anymore. He never went to Big Kids Sunday school. That must have been when he'd been old enough to opt out.

"I don't know," she demurred. "That place is full of memories, good and bad. Lots of good ones, though." Sammy mouthed the words even as she said them over the phone: "Your father and I got married there." It was what she always said about the church.

"One day you'll have to show me pictures," he teased. "I don't think I've ever seen photographic evidence." He had, in fact, lost count of the number of times they'd gone through her wedding album on the couch.

"Just for that, I'm going to start texting you a new photo every hour," she mock-warned, and then her voice shifted to musing. "You know, I keep meaning to digitize that album..."

"Yeah, you have fun with that, mom," he told her, standing up off his bed. He'd spotted the time on his laptop screen; it was an hour

later than he'd thought it was. "I actually have to run. The Roth-Masters invited me over for dinner. Everybody keeps warning me that I'll realize the dining commons is crap and then they try to lure me away with food from elsewhere."

"Is the dining commons crap?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

"No, it's good. I can get a bacon cheeseburger fresh off the grill every day for lunch and for dinner," he bragged, knowing she'd be cringing on the other end of the line. Before she could tell him to eat a more balanced diet, he added, "But I don't. There's loads of steamed veggies all the time, and a salad bar that's... honestly pretty good."

He crossed the room to step into his flats while his mother expressed her relief and then still admonished him to eat better. He unhooked his little white purse from its hook by the door and wandered around the room, collecting his wallet and keys and lippy. "Mom, mom. Mom, I really do need to go."

"Okay, fine," she pouted. "You get dressed and go. I am mollified only because we're going talk next week, with video, yeah?"

"With video," he agreed indulgently. "I love you, mom."

"Love you too, pumpkin."

Finley texted Sammy while he was on the subway to the Roth-Masters, asking **Do I get to know what we're doing on Friday?**

**It's a surprise,** Sammy texted back, since he had no idea what, exactly, he was going to do for the date.

Finley sent back a gif of Frodo Baggins telling Gandalf to keep his secrets. Sammy giggled and sat back in his seat as the subway train rumbled along.

He really should figure out where he could take Finley. He'd never taken anybody on a date before, so he didn't know where to begin. He certainly didn't want to make it something boring, the dinner-and-a-movie that his mom regretted doing.

Although, he mused, the fact that Finley had put an expiration date on whatever they were doing might have some advantages. It was going nowhere, at the end of the day. Or the end of the summer, as it were. Finley would fly off to California and Sammy would stay in New York (whether he made it into Columbia or not; he'd work retail and share an apartment six ways if he had to). So in a lot of ways, if (and when) Sammy screwed up, he wouldn't have to deal with the consequences.

He scowled across the subway car. That sounded callous. He certainly didn't want to do anything that would hurt Finley. He wasn't going to be an asshole. But he could... experiment a little? Try things out. Which is what he was going to have to do anyway, since this was his first... he balked at calling whatever they had 'a relationship' but whatever word you were supposed to use before it was a relationship, that thing.

This was his first whatever-this-is, and therefore he was going to have to experiment and try things out and feel his way through how it worked. But whatever he knocked over in his fumbling around in the dark, whatever mistakes he made, would all fly away to California in seven weeks.

He didn't have to worry, like all the kids in high school always worried, about what if this was the relationship that they settled down with for the rest of their lives, or what if they broke up but then neither of them left Oak Grove and they ended up neighbours and attending PTA meetings together, and wouldn't that be awkward.

It was kind of liberating.

He didn't want to call this a practice relationship, but let's be honest, it kind of was going to end up being a practice relationship, anyway. Assuming it became an actual relationship. He should ask Rowan where the dividing line on that one was; he was pretty sure neither he nor Finley even owned a letterman jacket that they other could wear around campus to make things official.

And after Finley flew off to the rest of their life, Sammy's "detransition" wouldn't upset them, at least not directly. One less person's feelings to worry about, since he was certain by now that Rowan was going to take it hard. She'd say she wasn't disappointed and she'd try and be supportive, but it was going to be an act, and a painful one at that.

Sammy shook his head. He didn't like to think about that, even if it was inevitable. What would happen would happen.

And with Finley, what would happen would happen *in California*, which took a load off Sammy's mind. He could throw caution to the wind, practice having a relationship, and just enjoy what time he and Finley got to have together.

It was perfect.

"Samantha!" cried Gideon as he opened the front door. "It's been so long!"

"Friday," he corrected needlessly as he stepped inside and hugged his uncle. "We had class on Friday."

"Yes, but I don't get hugs in class, so this is plainly superior." He offered to take Sammy's cardigan, which had been doffed and folded over Sammy's forearm almost immediately after coming up out of the subway. The city was hot and muggy; Sammy wasn't sure why he'd worn it at all, outside of how it completed the outfit. He was only too glad to hand it over. Gideon opened the hall closet and gestured him further inside. "Henry and Rowan are eager to see you."

He didn't even make it to the dining room before Rowan crash-hugged into him. "Oooo, Sammy, it's so good seeing you not on a screen!" She held him out at arm's length for scrutiny. "And you're looking good, bitch!"

He couldn't help but smile at the compliment. He had been embarrassed to realize this afternoon that he had dressed for Rowan's approval. Having now secured it, he blushed. "Thanks. There was a cardigan, too, but it was just too damn hot."

"You're too damn hot," she teased, and took his hand to drag him into the dining room. "Summer's hard to dress for, because mostly it's just skin, and there's all sorts of emotions tied up with that."

"Are we talking about how high we can make the midriiffs go?" Henry asked from across the kitchen island, where he was chopping vegetables. When he turned, his eyebrows drifted upwards. "I take it back, Sammy, you're dressed very nicely."

"That was a dig," Rowan informed Sammy in an unsubtle stage whisper, and patted her exposed belly. The girl wore a cropped white tank that did not cover so much as complement the flowered bra underneath, along with daisy duke shorts. She did have a whole lot of skin on display. "But I have to dress so fucking boring for the lab, I have to balance it out somehow."

"So sorry your internship is such a poor fashion venue," Henry mock-sympathized he brought a big bowl of salad to the table. "But if you do want to make endo your career, honey, all your fresh, hot looks will be swallowed up by lab coats most of your days."

Sitting down across the table, Rowan mouthed "fresh, hot looks" at Sammy with a roll of her eyes.

Henry sat next to Rowan and shot a smile across the table. "How is the Marginalized Scholars Program treating you, Sammy?"

"It's good," he answered automatically and immediately, and then nodded to assemble his thoughts. "It is a challenge. There's... a lot of

work. A lot of reading. Labs start up this week, for bio and... well, it's called Physics but we're doing chemistry in the labs."

"Sounds like you've got a lot on your plate," Gideon said as he settled into his seat next to Sammy. Then he added with a smirk: "He says, being responsible for one-sixth of that courseload."

"Oh, you're more than one-sixth," Sammy jibed back. "You had us reading three different books just to start off!"

Gideon shrugged. "Contrasting opinions, multiple perspectives. History's a complex field." He served himself some salad and passed the bowl along to Sammy.

"Is it too much?" Henry wanted to know, suddenly serious. The man's emotions and facial expressions seemed to turn on a dime.

But Sammy shook his head. "No sir, I um. This sounds silly, but I got a day planner? And I wrote out all my assignments and figured out when I'm doing what so that it all gets done by the time it's due. And it's—" he chuckled, or giggled, and it had just a hint of the manic to it. "I mean, I've scheduled my every waking hour for the next two weeks. So yeah, it's... intense, but I think I've got a handle on it."

"What about dating?" Rowan asked, all innocence.

He shared a secret smile across the table. "I have kept my Friday nights free. Just in case."

"Do you have any free time on Sunday evenings?" Gideon asked, with a surprising amount of hesitation. He nodded across the table to Henry. "We were kind of hoping to make this a weekly thing. Have you over for a home-cooked meal, have some family downtime. If that's something you'd want."

Sammy leaned over to bump shoulders against his uncle. "I kind of got the impression you would, so I set aside Sunday dinners, too. Plus travel time."

"Wow, you really are organized," Rowan grinned across the table.

"Well, we'll see if it holds up," Sammy laughed.

"How are the classes?" Henry asked, cutting apart his chicken breast into little cubes, all exactly the same size. "Remedial education is difficult to execute, especially in an accelerated format. It's so easy to lose students by moving too fast."

"Well my history class hasn't even started on the actual history," Sammy said, with a sidelong smirk at Gideon. "It's all theory and feminism and economic justice."

"Oh, don't worry, we'll get to the names and dates soon enough," Gideon promised. "Gotta lay the foundation first."

Henry nodded. "College works differently than high school. It's new ways of looking at old material. When it's not actually doing the work, rather than reviewing others' work."

Sammy frowned softly at his green beans. It took him a beat before he screwed up the courage to say, "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"In high school, you learn the biology that other people figured out," Henry explained, gesturing with his fork. "In college, and especially in university, you do the biology yourself. You do labs, you do experiments, sometimes you help with research."

"You titrate samples," Rowan put in, "and then you titrate more samples, and after that, you guessed it, you titrate samples again."

"You were just telling me how exciting the work was," Gideon laughed at his daughter. "Are you bored already?"

"No," she sighed, drawing out the vowel. "It's just the data analysis is more interesting than the data collection."

"Ain't that the truth," her other father sympathized. "That's the real reason why everyone wants to claw their way to the top of the academic pyramid, you know: because then you get other people to do the collection, and you can just sit at a desk and poke at the numbers."

Gideon leaned towards Sammy, conspiratorially. "It's only like that over in the STEM side of things. Over in the humanities, the data collection is the fun stuff, because then you're talking with people. Or reading new sources. Or hunting through records, unlocking stories. That's the fun stuff."

"Looking forward to it," he grinned back.

But Gideon made a face. "Sadly, I don't think we'll have time to actually *do* history this summer. Not that I'd really know how to do it, anyway. It's not properly my field."

"So how is it that you're teaching it?"

Gideon twirled his half-eaten roll in the air. "Vagaries of academic politics and scheduling."

Sammy made a mental note to figure out what 'vagaries' meant.

Gideon went on: "The course was supposed to be taught by Christchurch—old departmental battleaxe, she's awesome—but she had a medical emergency at the last minute. Everybody else in the department was already out of town or committed to other projects, so they had nobody. But Henry was paying attention to the program because you were in it, caught wind of their little scheduling crisis, and told them I was available."

"Daddy got one person into the program, why not two?" Rowan giggled.

"I was supposed to be starting my sabbatical," Gideon sighed theatrically, "but I'm not going to pass on opportunities to do favours for prestigious academic departments, either."

But Sammy hadn't missed what Rowan had said. "Who else did you get into the program, Uncle Henry?" he asked, eyebrows lifted.

"You, of course," Rowan answered for him, laughing. Henry glowered gently at her, and she rolled her eyes. "What? I'm very proud of your bureaucratic wrangling, Daddy, and you should be, too."

"I was kind of wondering how I got in," Sammy admitted slowly. "My best guess was that I'd applied to it accidentally. There were so many scholarship applications and grant forms, I sort of lost track."

"There isn't an application process, per se," Henry explained gruffly. "It's a vetting process that admissions does, typically with their international applications. Students who look promising but who haven't had all the educational advantages that they might have."

"But I'm not an international student."

His uncle shrugged his shoulders, minimizing the distinction and his own interference. "I had lunch with the admissions director and gently pointed out that MSP made no provisions for queer marginalization."

"He's softballing," Rowan put in.

Uncle Henry shot daggers at his daughter, but then admitted: "I may have described my own childhood and adolescence in Oak Grove, and how being a weird queer kid meant that there were fewer opportunities for me growing up. And I happened to know that another queer kid from Oak Grove, trans and closetted, had just applied." He put up his hands. "I made it quite clear from the outset that you were my niece. I didn't want any favours."

Rowan rolled her eyes at that.

Henry apparently didn't see. "I just suggested that he might consider queer domestic applications," he went on, but then he couldn't keep a victorious smile from his lips. "And the next thing I knew, you'd got in."

Sammy put a smile on his lips. "Well. Thank you," he managed, thoughts and emotions roiling. His uncle was a big deal, and it wasn't implausible that admissions had invited Sammy into the program just to mollify him. But if Henry was to be believed, his application had

still been considered, had still been part of their decision. With a sinking feeling he realized that the distinction between his own merit and his family's nepotism was always going to be murky.

Gideon's warm hand gently covered Sammy's, and his uncle gave him a gentle squeeze. Sammy glanced over at him, and something about his expression brought his words from a week ago back to Sammy: *Take what you can get, babe.*

He nodded, mostly to himself. "It's an amazing opportunity," he rallied, "and I'm going to make the most of it."

Dinner conversation shifted to local politics, in which both Gideon and Henry were active and with which both of them were presently annoyed. From there they talked about nothing: the weather, a recent movie, even sports for a few moments (Henry was a Yankees fan). Eager to stop talking about baseball, Rowan let drop that Sammy had been on a date, and so he had to recount all those details all over again, ears and cheeks burning.

Gideon, at least, steered the conversation away once the basic details had been covered. "Who wants cookies? From Levain Bakery. Not homemade, cause nobody in this house is *that* domestic."

"I can make cookies," protested Henry, affronted. "Cookies aren't hard."

Gideon gave him a pitying look as he returned with a branded paper bag. "Can you make cookies like Levain's?"

"No," Henry grumped, allowing the point with a short nod.

The cookies were distributed and they were, indeed amazing. Nothing like the cookies his mom or Gramma would make, not that theirs were inferior. Just different. These were light and fluffy and somehow also full of nuts and chocolate. Almost more like cake than chewy cookies. And they were huge: each one the size of Sammy's hand. He wasn't sure he could eat more than one.

Sammy's uncles fell into a conversation about different local bakeries which neither Rowan nor Sammy were interested or qualified to participate in, so they just smiled across the table at each other and enjoyed their cookies. This was, Sammy reflected, rather nice. He'd have to be sure to thank his uncles for getting him out of his school routine. He knew he'd be looking forward to Sunday evenings.

"Oh, Sammy," said Rowan, leaning forward to dig into her back pocket. "I got you a present." She slid a small envelope across the table.

"Oh, thank you," he answered automatically, picking up the unmarked envelope and opening it up.

Inside was a hand-made card; the outside read "Gift Certificate" in swooping letters, surrounded by flowers. The colours had the look of being hand stamped, and not amatuerishly. He smiled; it was pretty. Inside was calligraphy reading: "This certificate entitles the bearer to Ten Weeks of Voice Training Lessons."

Sammy looked to Rowan, confused.

"It's with my old voice coach," she told him, beaming with excitement. "She's trans, and specializes in transfemme voice training. She's really really good."

"Oh, Vanessa?" Gideon smiled, apparently as surprised at the gift as Sammy. "How is she doing?"

Rowan made an unhappy face. "Struggling, unfortunately. The problem with serving the trans community is that most of us are broke, can't afford to pay her what would amount to a living wage, and she keeps taking on clients who pay her half-rate, so... she's broke, too." She sighed. "And she just lost her roommate."

Both uncles made sympathetic noises. Even Sammy knew how calamitous the rent was in the City, and he might have chimed in with a vaguely supportive noise. But mostly he was staring at the card.

He looked up at Rowan. "What is... what's voice training?" he managed to ask, although he had a growing suspicion.

Rowan placed two fingers on the top of her sternum. "It teaches you how to speak like this, soft and light and girly," she said, eyes fluttering in overacted pride. "Or however else you want to sound. But you can't just... put on your best girly voice, Sammy, it doesn't work that way."

"I hadn't... really even tried to do that," he admitted. His mind's eye flashed to the restaurant on Friday, to the grill in the dining commons.

Rowan snorted. "Yeah, I know."

"Is there... something wrong with how I sound?" he asked uncertainly. Despite his best effort, he couldn't keep the barest trace of hurt out of his voice.

"Oh no," Rowan responded immediately, eyes suddenly wide in panic. "Sammy, I didn't mean to— fuck, I'm going about this all wrong."

Gideon placed a hand on Sammy's shoulder. "You don't have to do voice training to be trans," he counseled gently. "And a ton of

transgender people never do. They're happy with how they sound, and that works for them."

He looked over at his uncle. "Did you?"

His uncle coloured slightly. "I didn't, but testosterone did a number on my voice all by itself. Unfortunately, transfemmes don't get the same. If they want to sound feminine, they have to train their voices to sound that way."

"Like everything else, it's optional," Rowan insisted from across the table, desperate to fix her overstep. "But I can tell you that I got a lot out of it, and right now... listen, your voice isn't wrong, but it's kind of..."

"It's a tell," Sammy finished for her. The server on Friday, flinching when he asked about fish. Or the grill guy, who was all smiles until Sammy opened his mouth.

"Yeah, if you like," Rowan bobbed her head. "And there's nothing wrong with being visibly trans, Sammy, but it's also good to have options, and learn what you can do, you know?"

He looked down at the card, trying and mostly succeeding at not scowling at the inoffensive piece of cardstock. His voice was giving him away, making it clear to everybody that he was just pretending to be a girl. But did he care? He could be visibly trans for seven more weeks, and then tell them all he was detransitioning.

Seven weeks was a long time for people to be staring at him.

He almost asked "Is it permanent? Can I go back afterwards?" but stopped himself just in time. He didn't want to tip his hand on his detransition plans.

Instead he said, "But I'm so busy. I mean, I've got every waking hour scheduled."

"She has a weekly appointment on Tuesday evenings open," Rowan said, as if she were confessing a sin. "I asked her to pencil you in, because I knew that wouldn't conflict with your classes."

Tuesday evenings he was... reading something, he forgot what. This was why he'd bought a day planner.

"And it would really help out Vanessa," his cousin sighed. "She's too proud to just take money to tide her over till she finds a roommate, so I just thought... two birds, one stone, you know?" She looked from Sammy to her dads, hoping for some validation. "She just doesn't want to have to move back to Wisconsin."

"It was a nice thought," Gideon told her soothingly. "But if Sammy's too busy—"

"I'll do it," Sammy heard himself saying. Hearing that Vanessa would have to move out of the City had twisted like a knife in his gut. Even if he didn't understand anything else, he understood that. "It's just an hour a week, right?"

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