

# *Being Samantha Masters*



*an homage-sequel to 'Being Christina Chase'*

by Miriam Robern

## 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 leap 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 Górski, my long-suffering 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."

"Jeesus," 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.

“Ooooooh, 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."

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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 maybedate 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 floppy 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."

## *Thanks for Reading!*

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