

# *Being Samantha Masters*



*an homage-sequel to Being Christina Chase*

by Miriam Robern

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## It's Pride, Sammy!

When Rowan had said “Next week is Pride,” she meant she had a whole slate of events planned out for Sammy, starting just two days later. She shoved a multi-appointment calendar invite into his inbox, and without thinking, he just clicked Accept All. First his week of orderly coloured blocks were invaded by more, overlapping blocks, and then the stream of notifications about conflicts made his phone and laptop start dinging repeatedly, in chorus.

Rowan had made at least a token gesture of avoiding Sammy’s actual classes—mostly—as well as his voice training lesson. But she apparently thought any other scrap of time, especially through the evenings, was fair game. Time that Sammy had set aside for reading, for revising essays, for preparing for quizzes—all of it—got bulldozed under Rowan’s plans.

Sammy considered begging off a few of these—what was a Drag Brunch, anyway?—but by the way Rowan’s stream of excited texts kept making his phone buzz long after the tide of schedule conflicts receded, he knew it would be a futile effort. He let her burble away, scowled at his schedule, and started shifting things around.

There were some things that were more precautionary review than they were deadline-driven projects, and he could skip those for a week. Everything else he shuffled around to make space. He could also wake up early on Saturday, tomorrow, to get stuff done before Pride took over everything.

Okay, I'm really excited about all of this, he told her once her tour guide monologue had ground to a halt. He’d barely registered any of the specifics, but he had cleared the time, theoretically. But if you’re gonna drag me all over the City all next week, I've got an essay to write and reading to do.

Aren't you an adorably diligent little school girl, she responded, and he could hear her laughter.

See you Sunday.

As a final parting shot, she told him: Wear something skimpy!

Rowan led him down the street towards the noise and the gathering crowd, then leapt up onto a concrete planter at the corner to throw out her hands across the whole scene. “Our people, Sammy!”

Long rows of square canopies lined either side of the street, with a vast mob of colorfully-dressed people flowing between them. The result was basically a sluice of rainbow polyester, bared skin, and sweat. Music pounded from somewhere down the way; the smell of beer and fried food filled the air.

The Brooklyn Pride Multicultural Festival looked a whole lot like the Hunterdon County Fair that he’d volunteered at every year, except three or four times as big and infinitely more queer. Couples wandered up and down the stalls—two men, two women, various gender rebels, even apparent straight people—all holding hands, all laughing companionably at each other, a whole lot of them kissing or just straight-up making out in public.

He’d had a complicated relationship with the County Fair. It had once been exciting, when he was little and easily impressed; but in later years it had grown... intimidating, with too many people giving him too many appraising looks. Trying to figure him out, how he fit into everything else, and usually how hard they could dismiss him for being so patently out of place. He still went, still did his part for the scout troop and the mini golf course they ran, but he hardly ever ventured far from the course, and went home immediately once his shift was done.

At the first look at the sea of people, Sammy’s heart leapt up into his chest, and for a moment he thought he’d have to tamp down the familiar almost-panic that the Fair crowd had triggered in him. But he breathed, and looked, and realized that the looming vibe of intimidation was missing. He wasn’t here to Have Fun or Else, he wasn’t here to fulfill the role of Dutiful Boy Scout Performing Community Service.

Rowan stepped down off the planter, grinning and holding out her hand to pull him in. He was invited. He was welcome. There were so many people here just like him.

He took her hand and dove into the crowd.

“So don’t say it out loud,” Rowan told him a little while later, leaning conspiratorially close, “but this is like... baby pride. Neighbourhood pride. It’s cute, and they do their parade in the evening, which is, seriously, so obviously sensible I don’t know why everybody else doesn’t do the same. No heat stroke, what a revelation!”

But Sammy was hung up on ‘baby pride,’ looking around at the sea of rainbowed humanity that they swam through. “This is small?”

“Compared to the real deal? This is tiny,” she nodded. “But it’s also, you know, comfy and homey. Even if you don’t actually live in Brooklyn.”

They hit up the food trucks and came away with their hands full of fried food, then meandered their way through the stalls. About half presented local organizations with ties to the queer community—some, like the Queer Street Opera, more significant than others, like the Brooklyn Credit Union. The other half sold merchandise, mostly clothes and hand-made art.

It was in the latter half that they spent the most time, poring through racks of brightly-coloured clothing and tables spread with wind chimes, blown-glass bongs, and incense holders. Rowan kept showing him items bearing the trans pride colours, insisting that he needed some “trans bling.” He begged off each time. What would he do with trans pride stuff once he detransitioned, anyway?

But he was absolutely surrounded by people decked out in rainbows or bearing other pride flag colour schemes—when they weren’t just trailing a pride flag off their shoulders like a cape—and he found he was not immune to the ambient peer pressure. He started looking at rainbow things, and for the much more rarer pink-yellow-blue of the pansexual pride flag. He was still a little shaky on which labels he qualified for or wanted to claim, but maybe if he found just the right thing, it would tip him over the threshold.

He held up a likely cardigan—featuring chunky bands of pink, yellow, and blue, even if they weren’t quite the right pink, yellow, and blue—and wrinkled his nose into a tall, thin mirror propped up on the clothing rack. He was pretty sure it would stretch across his tits rather nicely, but was that enough if the colours were off?

“You’d look awesome in that,” came a voice to his right, and he glanced over to answer with a polite little smile. He’d assumed it was the owner of the stall, but this girl looked like she’d just walked in from the thoroughfare. Her eyes dipped down and back up, appraising, and licked her lips. “But I bet you look awesome in most things.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” he stammered, and could feel his ears burning. The girl was hot and, as if that weren’t enough, wasn’t wearing very much at all. “I, um, er—”

Before he could fumble for any more words, Rowan interposed herself between Sammy and the newcomer. “Sorry, she’s taken,” she declared with a wide grin. “Happy Pride!”

The girl took a moment to size up Rowan, and stepped back with a smirk. “Can’t blame a girl for trying,” she said, and then nodded farewell to the both of them. “Happy Pride.”

Rowan waited until she was out of earshot before giggling. “I forgot to mention: the lesbians will be on the hunt.” She gestured out across the festival. “Target-rich environment. Safe bet most girls here are into girls.” She poked him in the side. “You coupled up a week too early.”

“I’ll take notes for next year,” he giggled.

“Actually, I just assumed, but are you guys exclusive?” Rowan asked, pawing through a

basket full of bangles in various primary colours.

Sammy paused in his perusal of the maybe-pansexual top. “I don’t actually know. Back home, girlfriend just *means* exclusive, but that’s probably not a good assumption here.”

“Or with Finn,” Rowan bobbed her head.

Sammy decided that, colours slight off or no, the sweater’s long sleeves were going to be impossible in the summer heat, so he didn’t need it. He returned it to the rack. “I don’t think I’d mind too much if we weren’t,” he was surprised to hear himself say. “It’s a temporary thing, anyway. They’re destined to find somebody else in California, and I’ll be happy for them when that happens.”

“Just as long as they smooch you a lot now,” Rowan grinned. He smiled back, with a little self-conscious nod. Spying his vulnerability and her opportunity, she then added, “...and give you a good fucking every few days.”

He rolled his eyes and left the stall, primarily to hide what felt like the fire-engine-red blush taking over his face.

At the end of the block, the festival terminated with another circle of food trucks, so they grabbed a “bouquet” of pickles to share. Rowan made a joke about trans girls and pickles that Sammy didn’t quite understand, but let slide unexplained. He was too focused on watching the crowd, and watching the crowd watch him, and marvelling.

Rowan had gleefully informed two more girls that Sammy was taken, and then when one of the girls mistook Rowan for Sammy’s girlfriend and suggested all three of them have some fun together, turned that offer down, too. And that was both funny and kind of awesome, but it was also just the tip of the iceberg. Lesbians on the hunt or no, when people looked at Sammy here, it seemed to work differently than other places and other times.

They didn’t see some awkward brown kid who stuck out. They didn’t have questions about who he was or what he was doing there. He was just another queer, in a sea of queers, and there was a delight in most everyone’s eyes, of seeing another queer, maybe saying Happy Pride or that’s a fabulous skirt you’re wearing, and it was all permitted. It was all so normal. It was like a parallel reality, a private little world just for queers, carved out of a Brooklyn street.

Pride was special. He got it now. It made perfect sense to set aside a whole week for this every year for the rest of his life.

“Our people,” he murmured to himself, a little hesitantly, and couldn’t help smiling. “My people.”

The next evening, Sammy looked left and right as they stepped into the hotel lobby. “This is a Pride thing?” he asked Rowan uncertainly. There were no flamboyant costumes, no acres of skin on display, no melange of body odour, sunscreen, and cannabis wafting through the aggressively-conditioned air. It was just a scrupulously clean hotel lobby.

“This is a Pride thing,” his cousin confirmed, striding across the lobby to jam an elevator call button.

He read the logo over the elevator doors. “What the fuck is a skylawn?”

“It’s a very ostentatious name for a roof that’s only three stoies above street level,” she responded with a roll of her eyes. The doors opened and they stepped inside; once the doors closed, she rooted around in her purse. “Oh, you’ll need this.”

He took the proffered card from her hand. “Why do I need some rando’s New York driver’s licence?”

“That’s your New York driver’s license,” she corrected him with a laugh.

He snorted. “Rowan, this doesn’t even look like me.”

She shrugged. “Don’t worry, your cleavage will make up the difference.”

“And it says I’m 24!” he blurted as the elevator chimed and the doors opened.

Rowan leaned closer to whisper as she pulled him out of the elevator and into the evening air. “That is the purpose of a fake ID, Sammy.”

“Good evening, ladies,” called a smiling attendant behind a kiosk. The rooftop was festooned with fairy lights and little potted shrubberies, the latter of which had been positioned to create a little foyer area, complete with hostess kiosk. “Tickets and IDs, please.”

Rowan strode up to the kiosk, presenting her phone with a barcode showing and then her own fake ID. With his own already in hand, Sammy mutely held out the card to the attendant. Unable to make eye contact with her, he instead looked over at the array of chairs that took up most of the roof.

“Thank you very much,” the attendant smiled and gestured them through. “Welcome to the Rooftop Cinema Club.”

It was only then that Sammy spied the movie screen stretched out across the next building over, and the fat outdoor speakers mounted along the sides of the grid of chairs. The chairs which all faced the screen, and were all, obviously, audience seating. It was a movie theatre, except on a rooftop. “Holy shit,” he breathed.

“Innit cool?” Rowan grinned, and then grabbed his hand to pull him across the space, past the seating area. “Ah, there’s the bar.”

They both ordered cocktails with a side of popcorn, a juxtaposition which made Sammy giggle. He tried to present his ID again, but that was unnecessary, apparently. “You can put that away,” she told him quietly as they navigated to their seats. “Only show it when you need to. You don’t want somebody to look too hard and get you tossed out.”

So not as foolproof as all that, he noted absently. Popcorn tucked into his elbow and cocktail held awkwardly in hand, he dropped the card into his purse. He was amazed he hadn’t spilled booze all over some unsuspecting, already-seated moviegoer, and took a deep pull to make that less likely in the future. He blinked; the drink was strong. “Wow, that’s—” he almost coughed, and then covered, “um, tasty.”

“They make great drinks here,” Rowan agreed, settling into her seat. “So you’ve never seen this?”

He sat gingerly, succeeding in spilling neither alcohol nor popcorn. “Um. I didn’t really watch a lot of cheerleader movies in Oak Grove.”

“It’s not a cheerleader movie,” she giggled. “That’s just kind of tangential. Or I dunno, not really. It’s part of the main character’s thing, and—oh, but I don’t want to spoil anything for you. It’s great.”

“What is the whole title, again?” he asked as the lights dimmed and the screen flickered on.

“*But I’m a Cheerleader!*” Rowan stage-whispered, eyes sparkling in the half-light.

“She didn’t know,” he was telling Rowan as the lights came back up. He was dimly aware that he was slurring his words, and more than a little. Rowan had kept fetching them more cocktails throughout the movie. “She didn’t knooow. Everybody around her knew, but she didn’t. She thought she was just... doing what everybody expected of her, so therefore she had to be, or I mean she thought she had to be, what everybody expected of her. But she wasn’t.” He looked up at the dead screen. “She never was.”

Rowan lolled, loose-limbed, in her own chair, smiling beautifully. “Right? And then she figures it out.”

“She figures it out, and then they’re happy.” Sammy’s thoughts skipped like a stone across a pond. “That place they went to, though, was so silly. Are there places like that, really?”

“Conversion camps or gay bars?” Rowan snorted. “Doesn’t matter. Yes, they both exist, but they’re a lot less silly than in the movie.”

He snorted, which made his nose feel funny. “I know gay bars exist. We’re going to one tomorrow, right?”

Rowan stood up—carefully—and looked down at him with a grin. “Assuming your hangover doesn’t fucking kill you in the morning.”



“Are we sure this is necessary?” he asked again while they shuffled along in the slow-moving line. His head was pounding, and the cute little round sunglasses he had on barely cut the morning light that was trying to stab out his eyeballs.

“Necessary? No,” answered Uncle Henry. “Fun? Yes.”

“It’s also kind of a family tradition,” Uncle Gideon put in from further up the line. “We’re so happy to have you with us this year, Samantha.” From the poorly-hidden smirks his uncles shared with each other, his condition was not lost on either of them.

“We’ll get you a little hair of the dog once we’re inside,” Rowan promised, patting his elbow gently. “That’ll help, I promise.”

It was an age before they got to the front of the line and Gideon brandished their tickets, each one printed on a separate piece of printer paper. The ticket-taker, dressed in a sequined dress and wearing a very bad wig, gave them all a manic grin. “Welcome home, fam. Grab whichever table you like.”

It was a gay bar, attested by the rainbow lights everywhere that looked like they’d been up for years, not thrown onto the walls last week like every other bar in New York right now. It was not large, and for all the twinkle lights, neither was it well-lit. Tables and chairs were scattered across the room, with a few wide aisles striking through the tumult. An empty stage took up pride of place against the wall opposite the bar, and above it was spread a banner that read: Stonewall Inn.

Sammy squinted at the banner as they sat down. Rowan ordered a round of mimosas and then a pitcher of the same to follow, and still he couldn’t resolve the tickle in the back of his brain. “Okay,” he finally hazarded, waving up at the wall. “I feel like I should be recognizing the name, but... I’m not exactly firing on all cylinders right now.”

His uncles and cousin blinked at him as one. Finally Henry stammered, “The— the Stonewall Inn. You don’t... recognize. Stonewall.”

Gideon put a gentle hand on his husband’s shoulder. “Did you know what Stonewall was when you were living in Oak Grove, honey?”

Luckily the mimosas arrived then, and Rowan passed one to Sammy insistently. “This is the Stonewall Inn, Sammy. It’s where everything began for queerdom.”

“Not everything—” Gideon tried to interrupt.

But Rowan waved a hand in his face. “Spare me your historical precision for a minute.” Turning back to Sammy, she said, “This is where the first Pride happened, and it was a riot.” She

grinned. “Like, a literal riot. Queers fighting cops.”

Sammy downed his mimosa and slowly poured another from the pitcher. Both the fructose and the alcohol hit his bloodstream almost immediately, and it was like his whole body groaned in gratitude. “Wait, what? How did Pride go from that to...”—he waved at the door, indicating the whole of New York and the rainbows vomitted all over it—“what it is now?”

“A lot of hard work by a lot of activists,” answered Gideon. “But the spirit of the first Pride—that riot, where queers fought back against oppression—was what inspired a whole lot of it. And arguably kicked off the modern queer rights movement.” He tapped the table with splayed fingers. “It all started here.”

Uncle Henry nodded. “Which is why our family comes every year, for—”

“It’s Drag Brunch, bitches!” shouted an announcer as she mounted the stage. She held a bedazzled microphone in front of a face that had... a whole lot of makeup on it. Sammy wasn’t even sure what, exactly, he was looking at. Eye shadow spiked out to her ears, contouring gone absolutely mad, lipstick so vibrant it seemed to glow, and false eyelashes that he was pretty sure would kick up a breeze if she blinked.

She was wearing a wig—it had to be a wig, right?—that was easily twice the size of her head. Her golden sequinned gown shimmered under the stage lights, wrapped around curves so generous they had to be exaggerated. Nor did Sammy miss her nails—not that she allowed anyone to miss her nails, the way she waved her hands around—which extended at least two inches from the tips of her fingers and were painted cheeto orange, with sparkles.

For one brief moment, Sammy wondered if the mimosas had been spiked and he was experiencing a drug-induced hallucination.

But the show went on, the announcer kept braying into the microphone, and the Roth-Masters all smiled and cheered like this was all perfectly normal. The woman on stage, who identified herself as Merri Mountains with a shake of her very solid bosom, promised a string of performances, encouraging the audience to cheer, to sing along, to tip generously, and to stay out of the aisles while the performers strutted their stuff around the room.

“That reminds me,” grunted Uncle Henry, leaning forward to dig his wallet out of his back pocket. He then unceremoniously dropped a stack of twenties on the table. When Sammy boggled—it had to be a few hundred dollars—his uncle gestured up at Miss Mountains. “For tips, like she said.”

And then the announcer in question completed her schpiel, waved, and strutted off stage. The coloured lights winked off, and the room dropped back into silverware-clicking muttering. A server materialized beside the table. “What can I get you?” she asked, and the Roth-Masters

all studiously consulted the menus that Sammy hadn't even noticed on the table.

He reached a hesitant hand out to his cousin's elbow. "R— Rowan. Ro. What the fuck is happening?"

She didn't look up from the menu. "They don't have the waffles this year," she told him as if that was an answer. "They used to make them with rainbow sprinkles; they were my favourite. But I think the bennies are pretty good. I forget who supplies the menu; it's obviously not Stonewall's kitchen doing the brunch."

"No, I mean—" he stammered, but then it was Rowan's turn to order, and he didn't want to interrupt. He numbly opened his menu.

"And for you, miss?" the server asked him not even thirty seconds later.

"Um. The eggs benedict?" he answered, having spied the first item on the list and connected it with Rowan's vague recommendation. "With bacon." The last was muscle memory, really, but you couldn't go wrong with bacon.

"I'll have that out for you in a few minutes," the server promised, collected the menus, and then the stage lights spun up.

Spears of light in every colour of the rainbow danced across the stage and the wall behind it. A pop song started blaring through the room. Another woman, in a costume just as colorful, curvy, and eye-gougingly sparkly, spun onto the stage and began lip-syncing to the lyrics.

The performer was, Sammy was pretty sure, trans. The announcer, too, and almost certainly the ticket-taking hostess at the door. His eye for spotting tells had sharpened in recent weeks, but the women also didn't seem to be avoiding them. Instead they seemed to call attention to each and every clocky tell they could by overdoing it: mammoth wigs, exaggerated makeup, generously padded underwear. Their prancing was ludicrously swishy; their flirting—with literally everyone—full of farcically overblown mannerisms.

The Roth-Masters hooted and cheered along with the rest of the crowd. When the performer came down off the stage and into the crowd, still prancing and lip-syncing, all three of them scrambled to grab a twenty and wave it at her. When she came by, they stuffed the money into her fake cleavage and under her garter belts. All three of them were clearly having the time of their lives.

Sammy profoundly didn't get it.

The first song drew to a close and in the brief respite following, their food was brought to the table. The eggs benedict were rather good, but before he could get even halfway into them, new music started blaring, the announcer crowed a new silly name into the microphone, and another

dancer strutted her way up onto the stage, shaking her ass and winking at everyone she passed by.

He weathered the second performance, even picking up a twenty to wave at the dancer and slide into her garter belt, but it wasn't pleasant. At first he thought it was the too-loud music and his hangover, but as the performer broke out of her lip sync to catcall one of the customers eating brunch, he realized it was something else.

Sammy looked sidelong at Rowan, thinking that she must be feeling what he was feeling, but his cousin was grinning and cheering and banging on the table. He looked from her to the dancer and back. The difference was night and day. Rowan was made up carefully, dressed immaculately, seamless and inarguably a young woman. The dancer, by contrast, was all seams, all exaggeration, playing up her man-in-a-dress schtick for laughs and tips. It was grotesque.

When the music died down, Sammy tried to excuse himself to use the restroom, but Rowan invited herself along.

The bathrooms were small—no surprise there—but Sammy pushed his way directly into a stall. Rowan hung by the sinks, checking her hair and lipstick. “What do you think, Sammy?” she asked, all excitement.

He sat on the toilet, skirt bunched up around his hips, not knowing what to say. “I shouldn't be here.”

“Oh come on, Sammy, you can miss one class,” she chided, good-naturedly. “It's only, what, Physics?”

“It's not that,” he told her through the partition, although now that he'd been reminded, he could worry about that, too. “I just... I'm not really enjoying the show. I don't think it's my thing.”

What he didn't say was: I feel like each drag performer is mocking me, and worse, mocking you. Prancing around on display, laughing at the seams in their presentation, just in general doing really shitty job at being trans. It was as if they were declaring that this was the best any trans girl could hope for, that every effort to look like a girl was doomed to ludicrous failure. The drag queens seemed to be inviting the whole world to laugh at them, and at Rowan, and at Sammy.

“It doesn't have to be your thing,” his cousin assured him. “It's kind of a queer culture thing, but you don't have to enjoy every single thing about queer culture, you know? You'll never see me wearing fucking rainbows. Pick a damn colour and commit, already.”

That drew a chuckle out of Sammy, which brought back the ghost of his headache. “I might need more mimosa,” he grumbled. “Hey wait. We just... drunk a bunch of mimosas in front of

your dads.”

He could hear her shrug in her voice. “We’re adults, the venue didn’t card us, it’s not the dads’ responsibility to police our behaviour. Besides, mimosas are hardly even drinking.” A moment later asked, “Are you actually peeing in there or just hiding from the drag show?”

He thumped his head back against the wall. “Hiding. Or at least just catching my breath.”

“You should have said, silly,” she laughed. “You want some time alone?”

“No, I feel silly enough already,” he told her with a sigh, and stood up. “How many more songs do you think there will be?”

The answer was four: another new performer, then the ticket-taker hostess in her debut performance, followed by the announcer taking a turn, and lastly a duet-trio-quartet blowout finale. There was glitter in the last one, thrown by hand, which got absolutely everywhere.

Afterwards the performers lined up by the door so the audience could gush about the performances and take pictures. Sammy’s family was the last group in the long line-up. Some of the performers recognized the Roth-Masters from prior years, and his uncles insisted on taking pictures with everyone. Sammy let himself be roped in, not wanting to dampen their annual ritual. He could still feel his shoulders slumping a little, though.

The uncles were chatting up the ticket-taker, saying encouraging things about her number, leaving Sammy trapped behind them, standing next to Merri Mountains. Feeling awkward, he raised a fist and said, “Trans pride solidarity.”

But Merri laughed it off. “Oh honey, I’m not trans.”

Sammy scowled, checked that the rest of his family was still engrossed in conversation. “You’re not?”

She—or maybe he?—shook her head, paired with a quiet smile. “No honey, I’m a cis gay man.” She splayed a hand across her very-obviously-fake-up-close cleavage. “Merri Mountains is a performance. It’s camp. It’s all the things that we’re not supposed to do, according to the world of the straights, piled together into a disco dance number. It’s raising a middle finger at expectations. Which is half of what Pride is about, you know?”

“Yeah, but...” he protested, verbally staggering until he waved a hand at her whole get-up, and the rest of the performers, for good measure. “It sure looks trans.”

“I mean, some of us are,” the drag queen allowed with a shrug. “At least for a little while. Clarice over there, in the red?” She nodded down the line to one of the other performers. “She performed for years before she realized she was a woman, and started transitioning a few months

ago. This will be her last performance.”

“She’s quitting? Why?”

Merri laughed. “Because it’s not drag, anymore. Sure, she could maybe do a drag king routine, drag celebrities or something, or just shift over into burlesque, but... once she figured herself out, I think performing lost some of its lustre for her.” She smiled. “She’s so much happier, now, though.”

The uncles were saying what sounded like the beginnings of actual goodbyes. “This was my first drag show,” he told Merri. “And I... didn’t really get it.” She only nodded. “But maybe I’ll understand it better next time.”

“That’s the spirit!” She clapped him on the shoulder like Andrei liked to. He staggered, chuckled at the thought that Merri was betraying a little of her buried masculinity, and then caught her eye. She gave him a look, and he realized: the gesture had been just as much a part of her performance as any shimmy to the beat or lilting flirt with an audience member. She peaked one eyebrow: she saw that he saw, and she winked. “See you then, honey.”

“I told you that you’d eventually need an evening gown,” Rowan grinned, unzipping the garment bag and then clapping her hands as tulle spilled out everywhere. The two of them were in her bedroom, getting ready.

He stood behind her in a comparatively simple outfit: just a cami and a skirt, with some strappy sandals. He was planning on wearing the sandals with the gown and had just worn them over to Rowan’s, which she chided him for, even if she couldn’t really explain why he should have needlessly switched shoes, too.

Rowan seemed intent on making this an event, even more than the rest of the Pride festivities she’d lined up for them. Sammy was just going with the flow.

They’d found the evening gown—three weeks back, now—in a second-hand boutique that still had prices larger than anything Sammy had ever seen in Abby’s little clothing store back home. The strapless bodice and skirt were a deep shimmery red, scarlet at the bustline but brightening to cardinal at the bottom hem, with coils of white tulle studded with little red sequins. It seemed to Sammy to be a bit much, and by a bit, his brain meant a whole lot.

It also didn’t have pockets.

On the other hand, Sammy had found some pearlescent hair clips that would set off nicely.

Rowan insisted that they both do a full face. She’d wheeled Gideon’s office chair into her bedroom and propped her full-length mirror sideways on her computer desk so they could work side-by-side. Sammy sat down to humor her, but once they were underway he found himself enjoying the process, doing makeup alongside his cousin, each step sprinkled with light chit-chat, compliments, and pointers.

When they were both near done, Gideon rapped on the door and stuck his head in. “Your dates are here. So are Agatha and Zoey.”

“Well tell the girls to come up,” Rowan told her father as if that were obvious. “Are you or Daddy going to do the shotgun talk?” Here she wagged her arms, elbows out, to poorly imitate a masculine swagger while still seated. ““You’d better treat my daughter and niece proper if you know what’s good for you’ and all that?”

Gideon snorted. “I’m more worried what the two of you will do to them, poor things.” He smiled. “Samantha, you look stunning, and once you’re in that dress? You’re going to knock their socks off.”

Their faces were finished by the time Aggie and Zoey got to the room, and then there was another round of compliments. The couple had gone with simple sheath dresses, Aggie in white and Zoey in black, with chunky necklaces in the opposite color. They looked adorable, and plainly a couple, and not at all overdressed, which is what Sammy knew he was going to be

momentarily.

Rowan and Zoey helped him step into his gown while Agatha righted the full-length mirror. He zipped up his side, smoothed the lines over his hips, and turned to face his reflection.

“Holy fuck,” he breathed in wonder.

The full-length mirror showed a girl decked out to the nines, looking a little shocked but otherwise... good. He looked good; that was as much as he would allow. He’d been expecting the worst, and it wasn’t that, and he was just surprised, was all, that he didn’t look like a shimmery trainwreck.

The girls wouldn’t stop cooing over him, so he declared he was going downstairs.

“He’s a doctor,” Gideon was saying, voice wobbling on the brink of laughter. “He knows how to dispose of bodies.”

“Which is good, because I don’t think we even own a shovel,” Henry rejoined with a guffaw, “Can’t bury you, so the only option, really, is to disarticulate all your joints and dissolve you in hydrochloric acid.”

“This is what passed for humour throughout my childhood,” Rowan commented drily, coming down the stairs behind Sammy. “If you ever wondered what’s wrong with me.”

That was enough to announce their presence, and both Finley and Vikram stood up from where they were sitting. Vikram was in a trim suit jacket and slacks, with a black tie over an electric blue shirt. Finley wore a tuxedo jacket, ruffled shirt, and a black knee-length skirt, pleated like a school girl’s. Fading smiles creased both of their faces; they’d been laughing along with the Roth-Masters’ jokes about their own murders and dismemberments. As they took in Sammy and Rowan (and Aggie and Zoey behind them), the looks of merriment were replaced by admiration.

“You look amazing,” Vikram said, at the same time that Finley said, “Wow, Samantha, you look incredible.”

They accepted the compliments and then the corsages that their dates had brought with them. As Finley slipped the collection of button red roses onto Sammy’s wrist, he spotted the boutonnière on their lapel, also composed of little red roses. He touched it gently with his free hand and giggled, “We match.”

“That’s the whole point,” said Vikram, and turned Rowan gently to display her corsage of blue orchids, held close to his boutonnière of the same. The flowers matched his blue shirt and Rowan’s dress, which was a deep sapphire blue on top, fading gracefully to white at her feet. (Upstairs, she’d crowed: “I’m Elsa, bitch!” and made pew-pew noises while flinging her hands



out at the walls.)

“Oh, I didn’t know,” Sammy admitted, colouring slightly. “I’ve, uh. Never done this before.”

Rowan had her eye on the clock on the wall. “Okay, pictures! The limo will be here in fifteen.”

Vikram laughed. “You rented a limo?”

She scoffed in mock affront. “It’s Pride Prom, Vikram, of course I rented a limo. You’ve gotta do these things properly.”

Pride Prom was weird and fun and weird and frustrating and weird. It was held at a hotel event center, in a mammoth box of a ballroom decorated with streamers and balloons. The walls and floor would probably have been various shades of beige under the house lights, but pinwheeling rainbow floor lights splayed colour all over everything, instead.

The center of the room was dominated by a wide dance floor before a stage from which a DJ shouted at the crowd in between tracks. Around the other three sides of the dance floor were tables and chairs; against the walls were circles and horseshoes of couches.

The seats were half-full when they arrived. The attendees ranged from teenagers to hipsters to doughy middle-aged folks to white-haired boomers; most of them looked a little dazed.

They'd checked coats and bags and then found a little circle of couches around a coffee table festooned with crepe paper. In the center of the table was a fishbowl filled with tea lights and glass beads, topped with a plastic groom-and-groom cake topper. It sat at an angle, and throughout the night they'd try to right the poor gentlemen, but they never stayed straight for long.

Which was kind of appropriate, Sammy figured.

The event was dry, for which Rowan had accommodated by stocking the limo generously. They had pregamed hard and arrived at the venue on the far side of tipsy. But as their buzzes wore off, the energy seemed to curve the wrong way for an evening of partying.

Once they were situated, Rowan and Zoey dashed across the room to the refreshments table and came back with arms full of punch in clear plastic cups. Once these were passed out, Rowan raised hers high. "A toast," she crowed, "to queers getting to party together, as is our right and our solemn duty."

Everyone cheered merrily, at least at first. With a chuckle, Vikram put out a hand and clarified: "As I am not a queer—sadly, I know; grown men have wept over it—I am happy to see you all get to celebrate in ways you might not have in high school. And so I am here in solidarity with you." He raised his glass towards his date. "As a favour to Rowan, to even out the numbers."

The rest of their little party was quiet for just a moment too long, and then lurched into lifting their glasses, cheering gamefully, and sipping at their punch.

His date smiled sweetly. "Vik, it doesn't matter under what auspices you come tonight. I'll make sure you have a good time."

For once in his life, Sammy caught the innuendo—and he was pretty sure Vikram had not. In any case, for the rest of the evening it seemed like Vikram's presence had an asterisk over it. He

was here as a favour.

But Sammy couldn't pay too much attention to Rowan's pursuit of Vikram and his apparent tone-deaf ignorance of what was happening. He had his own awkwardness to deal with.

It was Sammy and Finley's first time out as a couple with friends. Nestling into the crook of Finley's arm, which Sammy had only ever experienced as comfortable and familiar, took on a distinctly performative cast. More than once he spotted one of the girls making moony eyes at him. He felt put on display, at least until he solved that problem by closing his eyes.

"You two are such a cute couple," Rowan gushed at him when all four of them decamped to the bathroom.

"She speaks the truth," Zoey chimed in. "The way they look at you? Amazing."

Agatha only shot him a smile, but even that felt a little patronizing.

The best defense, he figured, was a strong offense. "Don't think we've missed the two of you making eyes at each other," he said, waving his fingers at Agatha and Zoey. "I think you've mentally undressed each other a dozen times each."

Agatha shrugged. "It's like a fun minigame. At this point, I'm really good at it."

They passed by the refreshments table on the way back, returning to the table laden with glasses of punch, plates of chips and dip, and a few cups filled with candy. Finley laughed at their approach, and it didn't take long to see why. They and Vikram had had the same idea while the girls were in the bathroom, and had already provisioned their little coffee table. Soon it was filled to overflowing, and they all tucked into the feast of junk food. It was surprisingly comfortable, even if it did feel a bit like a high school party.

Which Sammy figured was also kind of appropriate: nothing said 'high school' like prom, after all.

Sammy sat down next to Finley and was about to burrow into them, then thought better of it. He leaned back, tapping his collarbone invitingly, and Finley leaned into him with a contented sigh. Like taking turns opening doors, he thought to himself.

"I'm so glad you guys came down into the city for the weekend," Rowan was telling Aggie and Zoey. She was cuddled up against Vikram, looking exceedingly content.

"I was all set to do our local Prides in Hartford and New Haven, compare and contrast, see whose was better, but this one"—and here she rolled her eyes over at Zoey—"insisted that nothing beats New York Pride."

“She’s right,” Rowan said with a diffident shrug.

“Like you’ve ever done any other Pride in your life, bitch,” Agatha smirked. “Anyway, it’s not like either of us actually have vacation days, but we can take a couple days off to come to the City.”

Sammy had to adjust how he was sitting to take into account the weight of his enbyfriend pressed up against him. He forced a little giggle as he did so, jostling Finley but bending over to brush a kiss across their forehead while he had the opportunity. He settled into seated position; Finley settled into him. It still wasn’t quite right, but Sammy would figure it out.

“Did you fly or train?” asked Vikram.

“Train,” Agatha answered. “It was actually kind of nice.”

He nodded and then made a face. “I’m on a plane next week.”

“Me, too,” said Rowan, bobbing her head, but with a calculating look in her eye. Not one that Vikram would be able to see, given his vantage.

Instead he scoffed. “Yeah, my flight is fifteen hours long.”

“Mine’s eighteen,” she countered sourly.

He craned his neck to look at her. “Where are you going, girl? My parents are roping me into the annual pilgrimage to fucking New Delhi.”

“What?!” Rowan gasped, just a touch theatrically. She planted her hand on his chest as she turned around to face him. “We’re going to New Delhi. What the fuck! That’s such a weird coincidence.”

Sammy strongly suspected that it was not a coincidence at all.

Vikram, by contrast, did not appear to suspect anything. “Holy shit, you’ll have to visit,” he insisted with a bright smile. “Come save me from all my cousins.”

“I would love that,” she gushed, grinning from ear to ear. “Tate’s doing some research stuff and Daddy’s got colleagues he wants to see, so I’ll be at loose ends a bunch—”

“I can show you the city,” he suggested. “All the good food. You can’t miss the food. I bitch about the place, but it has some bright spots.”

“I love this plan,” his cousin enthused, and turned around to lean up against her date again. She smiled like the cat who ate the canary.

Sammy looked from Rowan to Zoey, who caught his eye and rolled hers.

They danced, they took silly photos at the selfie booth, they kept making trips back to the refreshments table to refill their inconveniently small plastic cups. But by ten o'clock, their pregaming had dissipated completely and everyone was distressingly sober.

"It feels strangely offputting to get less drunk as the night grows long," Vikram observed. "Remind me why there's no alcohol at this thing?"

Zoey rolled her eyes. "Vik, there are teenagers present."

When he looked immediately at Sammy, Rowan laughed. "No. Hun. Real teenagers, like fucking fourteen-year-olds. They're not going to give vodka tonics to fourteen-year-olds."

"Nobody wants to see that," Agatha concurred with a solemn nod.

"And there are other things to do than drink," Rowan pointed out, grabbing Vikram's hand and pulling him to his feet. "Come dance!"

With an arm under the small of Sammy's back, Finley scooped him off the couch, onto his feet, and out onto the dance floor. Sammy clutched at their shoulders, giggling. The music had been a truly unholy mish-mash of styles and eras as the DJ tried to cater to the vast breadth of ages among the attendees. By now they were inured to it. "Tainted Love" had just segued into "Pink Pony Club" without so much as a raised eyebrow. They just danced.

An indeterminate number of songs later, the tempo had shifted downward and Sammy was curled up against Finley as they did little more than sway. Who needed booze when you had exhaustion? "This was a weird night," he told them, stifling a yawn, "but I'm glad I got to spend it with you."

"I'm glad, too," Finley replied, their chest vibrating against his cheek, and one corner of Sammy's brain noted that that's what he was learning not to do when he spoke. He giggled at the thought. And then Finley curled a finger under his chin to lift his face so he was looking up at them. "And I don't think I've said it explicitly yet, but you look beautiful tonight."

A slow smile spread over Sammy's face. "You gonna take my picture, now?"

Finley shook their head. "No," their voice was soft, tender; Sammy wasn't sure how he could hear it over the music. "I just wanted you to know. You're beautiful."

Sammy couldn't bring himself to deflect or dodge, so instead he pressed his cheek against Finley's lapel again. Buried his nose in ruffles. He didn't want to deflect or dodge. He wanted, just for a moment, to believe what Finley was saying. "Thank you," he managed after a moment,

unsure if his enbyfriend could even hear him.

The DJ announced the last song of the night, and they spent more of it kissing than dancing. They were hardly the only couple on the dance floor so occupied. Then they returned to their group's corner, where Vikram and Rowan were waiting, tapping on their phones. Aggie and Zoey fell into the couches a moment later, only to stand up again as the party emptied out.

The limo rental had only been for dropoff, so the six of them shuffled their way to the subway station along with at least a hundred other tired queers. There most of them parted; Finn offered to escort Sammy all the way to his dorm room, but doubling back would cost them almost an hour, and Sammy was too exhausted, anyway, to take advantage of the close proximity of Finn and his bed. He demurred, and Rowan promised to get her sleepy cousin home safe. Vikram was taking a different train, anyway.

Finley kissed him once more on the platform, and then Sammy dozed on Rowan's shoulder as the train rattled homewards.

On Thursday morning, he awoke to a text from Rowan: Rest up today for the big push!

So Sammy rested. And went to class. And caught up on reading. But as he traced a simple, tight triangle between dorm, class room, and dining hall, never once leaving campus, it felt like resting.

He even got his voice exercises done, and went to bed at what felt like the decadent hour of ten p.m.

“Why is it called Bliss Days?” he asked. The four of them—Rowan, Agatha, Zoey, and Sammy—had just cleared the front desk of the venue and were crossing a rather sedate dining room towards the stairs. The thumping of bass along with shouts and cheers coming through the ceiling made encouraging promises about the party awaiting them. “Nothing about that name says it’s an event for queer women.”

“They used to call it Femme Fatale,” explained Zoey. “Which was a pretty clever name. But, you know, not all women are femmes, I guess?”

“Or they didn’t want ‘fatal’ to be part of their event name,” observed Agatha.

“Regardless, we’re going to drink and dance and maybe-probably drool over all the eye candy on display,” Rowan declared, heading up the stairs. “I dunno about you girls, but I kind of need this.”

The second floor of the club was a maelstrom of flashing lights, upbeat music, and dancing bodies, nearly all of them women. No windows, here, not that natural light would have had any chance against the flashing, actinic glare that permeated the room.

Rowan’s hips started bouncing as she came up the final steps, and she reached backwards to grab Sammy and pull him into the fray. The crowd parted for them easily, half of the dancers lost in their own groove and the other half plainly checking out the four new femmes who’d joined the party. The dress code mirrored the crowd at Brooklyn Pride—rainbows and skin—just with, somehow, shorter skirts.

Not that Sammy had much room to criticize: the girls had picked him up at his dorm room and decreed that his first outfit just wasn’t slutty enough, and had made him change. He’d protested that he was spoken for, that he didn’t have the least interest in getting picked up that night, but they insisted right back that it was the principle of the thing.

Zoey and Agatha had simply recycled their prom wear from Wednesday, the hypocrites. “Have LBD, will travel,” Zoey had said with a shrug, and then they’d all tried to explain to Sammy what an LBD was, and he had to roll his eyes and insist that he already knew, he had a Little Black Dress in his closet, and why couldn’t he wear that? But he’d been overruled.

“They’re living out of suitcases; you’ve got access to your full closet, so you can go way skimpier,” Rowan admonished him. A woman of convictions, she herself was wearing a red triangle bikini top and daisy dukes so short the bottoms of the pockets poked out under the frayed bottom hems. “Think of all the lesbians, Sammy. They’re going to this event to see some skin; are you going to be the one to disappoint them?”

So here he was in the shortest, flippiest little skirt he owned, plus fishnets, and an iridescent top that he’d only ever considered as something that would be supplemented with other layers—significantly longer layers—but was tonight making its solo debut, and doing a poor job of



covering his bra.

But as Sammy danced alongside Rowan, surrounded by skin and laughter, he found a certain sense of peace. Sure, he was nearly naked, but he was dancing, too, and dancing was about bodies, and the joy of how they moved and how they looked while moving. So maybe wearing something that showed a little more of his body made some sense.

It certainly made sense for the girls and the bodies around him, who were grinding and jiggling and swaying to the beat. Rowan had been right: there was a lot of eye candy on display, set out to be drooled over. But Sammy's appreciation of individual parts—a shapely leg, a perfectly-rounded belly, the soft gradient of squished cleavage—faded away if he didn't focus. He found himself enjoying the whole picture, like one of those massive oil paintings in the Met, where the details added up to something greater than the parts.

And if Sammy felt like he was contributing, that he and his body were part of that beautiful picture, then maybe he could let go a little. Just dance. Just join in. Just be one of the...

"Drinks!" Rowan shouted in his ear, and started tugging him towards the stairs. Aggie and Zoey were leading the way, striking through the crowd so that he and Rowan could follow after.

The next floor was full of leafy trees and fairy lights, a greenhouse that took up the whole third floor, with a retractable roof presently open to the stars. Tables and couches curled around the trees, all of them mobbed with women and femmes. The bar—massive, rectangular, and polished until the wood shone—stood out from the sea of organic shapes and textures, bright backlit bottles beckoning with the promise of inebriation.

Rowan and Zoey bellied up to the bar to order their drinks while Agatha and Sammy scouted for seating. He almost despaired at the slim pickings until a knot of women all stood up right in front of him and beelined for the stairs down to the dance floor. He threw himself at the little circle of seats and then waved frantically for Agatha.

"Well done, Sammy!" crowed Rowan when they regrouped. "I got doubles," she explained, hands full of drinks, "because who knows how long it'll take to get the next round."

They settled in, with both Agatha and Zoey groaning happily as they got off their feet. "We've been walking all over the City for two days straight," Zoey sighed. "I wish I had a pedometer, just to see how far we've gone."

"Wait, was there Pride stuff that Rowan didn't drag me into?" Sammy laughed.

"Not Pride events, just the quixotic farce that is looking for an affordable apartment in New York City," Agatha grouched.

“Good luck with that,” Rowan put in.

“I know I’ll probably be in the dorm with you,” Zoey sighed at her roommate. “And Agatha can train in on weekends. But it just... would have been nice to get a place together.”

“Insert U-Haul joke here,” smirked Rowan.

“We’ve been together six months next week,” Zoey retorted with faux hauteur. “We do not qualify for U-Haul second-date punchlines, thank you very much.”

Sammy blinked; things didn’t add up in his brain. Not the U-Haul lesbian thing; the other thing. “Wait, why will you be training into the City?” he asked Agatha.

“Because I graduated?” she laughed in response. “They don’t let you live in the dorms if you’re not a student. And I’m taking a year off before med school, because... I really need a year off before med school.”

“Oh, I just... assumed you were all sophomores like Rowan,” he admitted, and shook his head as if to clear it of misconceptions.

“I’m a year ahead of Rowan,” explained Zoey, “and Aggie was a year ahead of me, along with Finley.”

“And Vik’s my year,” Rowan added, just a touch sourly.

Nobody responded immediately; finally Zoey just said, “Yeah.”

His cousin flopped her hands onto the plush arms of her chair, sloshing but not spilling her vodka tonic. “Seriously, should I just go back to dating girls?” she asked.

“Yes,” Agatha answered without a second of hesitation.

Zoey was a little more diplomatic. “Or maybe just... not fixate on the one boy who... doesn’t seem interested.”

“He’s interested,” Rowan maintained truculently, and slurped the last of her drink out from the ice. “I’ve sat on his lap enough to know: there is—ahem—*pointed* interest, there. He’s just... being difficult.”

“Honey, you’re hot,” her roommate tried to explain, “and I’m sure you... inspire a reaction in him, especially with the way you flirt, but there’s... other aspects to consider when dating.”

Rowan scowled into her empty glass and stood up. “I’m getting another. Anybody else?”

The other girls had barely put a dent in theirs; Sammy reluctantly asked for a second—his

first wasn't even half gone—just so his cousin wouldn't feel awkward. She stormed off, back to the bar.

“What is with her and Vikram?” he asked Zoey once Rowan was out of earshot.

“He told her no,” the girl replied, shrugged, and sank into her chair. “Which only makes her want it more. Just to show him.”

“If he wanted to be rid of her, all he'd need to do is take her on one medicore date,” Agatha sighed. “Then she'd lose interest.”

Sammy looked back to where his cousin had gone, caught one glimpse of her shoulderblade, waiting by the bar, and turned back to the girls. “So like... why doesn't he? I mean.” He struggled to put together the question he actually wanted to ask. “She's told me that he said he can't date a white girl, but also that he has dated white girls before. And he likes her, right? He's all jazzed to see her in India.”

Zoey rolled her eyes. “Don't even get me started on that nonsense.”

Sammy nodded and waved his hands sideways, as if he could brush the largest democracy in the world back out of the conversation. “Yeah, that's... that's a whole nother thing. But. He seems to like her company, he's attracted to her... what other, uh, aspects is he considering that's holding him back?”

“What do you think?” Agatha all but spat, and focused on her drink.

Zoey saw that he wasn't jumping to the conclusion that she and her girlfriend found obvious, and she gave him a soft, almost apologetic smile. “Cause she's trans, honey.”

“Really?” he asked incredulously. “Vikram?”

She shrugged. “He's a decent guy—as guys go—but for some guys, that's just a non-starter.”

“You can bet he's under pressure from his parents to produce grandchildren,” Agatha added sourly, “and that's not gonna happen with Rowan.”

But he kissed me, Sammy thought but did not say. Because so had Agatha and Zoey, that same night, and it had meant nothing. And because if Vikram had kissed Sammy as a lark, but wouldn't date Rowan because she was trans... the memory of that kiss curdled in Sammy's mind. That kiss, performed right in front of his cousin, had meant less than nothing. It had been something cynical, something for show, something to push Rowan away. To hurt her, just a little, and get her to back off. He felt a little sick.

But then Rowan was back with drinks, and he polished off his first so that he could accept the

next one, and the girls talked about something else for a while. They abandoned their lucky seats to go downstairs and dance some more, and later when they came back up for more drinks, they had to sip while standing around and fending off propositions from hopeful single lesbians. Then they went dancing some more, everything blurring together into a wash of lights and beats and bodies again. They stumbled home in the early hours, when the City was as quiet as it ever got.

Rowan didn't mention Vikram again for the rest of the night.

“Okay, so what is the difference between a March and a Parade?” asked Sammy as they plodded along Fifth Avenue. The four of them had reconvened Saturday afternoon, first at a barbeque place to fuel up on tacos and beer, and then across the street in Bryant Park, for the start of the Dyke March.

Now they were walking down the middle of the street with a whole bunch of lesbians. There were so many, in fact, that they stopped traffic; teams of volunteer marshalls linked arms at every cross street to hold back the cars so everybody else could pass by. A lot of the marchers were waving signs or carrying banners, which bore slogans from the straightforward—“My Body My Choice”—to the arcane: “Even When Her Shackles Are Different Than Mine.” Sammy wasn’t complaining, exactly, but being in a throng of lesbians had been more fun the night before, when there was dancing involved.

“A march advocates for change,” explained Zoey. “It’s an expression of how things are not okay, that we are organized to take action, and those in power ought to take notice.”

“Whereas a parade,” put in Rowan, “is a reminder to ourselves and everybody else, that—” She inflated her lungs and then shouted across the assembled heads: “WE OWN THESE STREETS!”

A moment later a dozen voices echoed back, “WE OWN THESE STREETS!” Rowan repeated the phrase again, and this time even more voices took up the chant.

She kept it up long enough until it had a life of its own, and she didn’t need to cheerlead. She turned to Sammy with a grin. “New York isn’t New York without us.”

“Yeah, but...” Sammy protested weakly. “This is a march, not a parade, so... chanting that we own the streets seems... contrary to your point?”

But Rowan shrugged off his confusion. “There’s overlap.”

“The Parade has a city permit,” Agatha pointed out laconically. “Dyke March does not. This is, technically, an act of civil disobedience. Walking in the Parade is participating in an event condoned by the government.” She wagged her hand. “Kind of a different vibe.”

Different vibe or no, it was a lot of walking: more than thirty blocks of slow steps. The only entertainment was spotting clever new signs and occasionally shouting call-and-response chants. Sammy was... less than enamoured of this particular event. And perhaps part of that was just simple exhaustion on his part: it had been a long week. Now he was walking two miles in the thick summer air, for obscure political reasons.

Thinking about politics prompted Sammy to ask Rowan, “Why aren’t your dads in the march?”

“Because it’s only open to dykes,” she answered easily enough. “Self-identified, of course.”

Ah. So this was another thing that Sammy probably shouldn’t be involved with that Rowan had just swept him into.

He looked around him, at all the dykes shouting and chanting and smiling at each other. Everyone cared so much. You could see it in their faces; you could hear it in their voices.

Thanks to Gideon’s reading list, Sammy had a tenuous grasp of activism—collective action, solidarity, exposing and addressing inequalities and oppression—but until now, his understanding had been entirely theoretical. But looking up and down the thronged street, he was surprised to see all those parts in evidence right in front of him.

He could see how all these dykes had gathered, agreed that many things in the world had gone wrong, and so they stood up and made a scene.

Suddenly, it was amazing to witness. There were so many people in this march, so many people who’d taken time out of their lives, who’d come out to flout the laws and stall the traffic and shout to the rooftops until they were heard.

He wished he could be a part of it. But here he was, merely walking while they marched. Stealing a little of that glory.

Because that’s all he was doing: pretending to be something he wasn’t so he could get into a good school. *Take what you can get, babe*, except Gideon’s advice had been predicated on a marginalized identity that Sammy had no right to claim. Selfish.

Selfish, and now witness to such community, such solidarity, such vision, that it shamed him to his core.

It was as if the circumstances which had wrapped him up in this ridiculous ruse had also brought him closer to all this, dangled him here where he could witness this marvelous, beautiful, powerful community.

A community to which he did not belong.

A community that he was mocking and denigrating just by being here.

A community to which he was an outsider at best and an imposter at worst.

The pace of the march wavered; squeals and shouts sounded from up ahead. Sammy craned his neck to see what the commotion might be. On the horizon were trees and a plume of water arcing up against the afternoon sky.

“You can’t call this the best part of the march,” Rowan appeared at his elbow to confide, “but

this is the best part of the march.” And without any further explanation, she peeled off her shirt. No bra underneath. His cousin ran giggling under the great stone arch that served as the Fifth Avenue entrance to Washington Square Park.

Sammy followed uncertainly, his eyes widening to saucers as the scene before him came into view. Sunk into the center of the park’s plaza and surrounded by thick stone steps was a massive fountain. Water shot six stories into the air before falling down into a broad, shallow pool.

The pool was full of dykes, in various states of undress, all sopping wet.

Zoey went streaking past him a moment later, and then Agatha came up to stand beside him. She was still clothed, and holding Zoey’s shirt and shorts. She gave Sammy and his astonishment a short smile. “This is how the Dyke March always ends,” she told him.

“You’re not... joining?”

Agatha shook her head. “I don’t get naked for everybody. No judgement, it’s just not my style.” She paused a beat. “I’d be happy to hold your clothes for you, if you like.”

Sammy looked down into what was becoming a party in the fountain. People of all shapes and sizes waded and splashed, laughing. Almost all were topless; a smattering were completely nude. A few couples kissed under the spray.

Sammy did a double take to confirm that, yes, one of the naked dykes was, well, trans and hadn’t had bottom surgery. Her little girldick flopped around merrily as she danced in the fountain.

“You not going in?” asked Agatha, voice neutral.

Sammy shook his head. He didn’t belong in there. He might have marched with the dykes today, he might have partied and danced with them last night, but he shouldn’t have. He didn’t understand then, but he understood now: he’d been trespassing. He’d taken the wonderful world that they’d painstakingly created and defended, and he’d smeared himself all over it. Not that he could say any of that to Aggie. So instead he joked: “I think my tits would fall off.”

Agatha nodded. “That would be awkward.”

So they stood and watched as a few hundred dykes splashed and laughed and danced in the water, insisting on being seen in all their glory. Sammy’s heart thumped in his chest with longing. Eventually he turned away, and told Aggie he’d catch the subway home on his own.

“Rowan, I’m not sure how much Pride I’ve got left in me,” he tried telling her the next day. They were coming up out of the subway station, meeting Aggie and Zoey and Finley for the parade. “After yesterday? And the night before? You didn’t tell me Pride is an endurance trial.”

She turned and walked backwards so she could grin at him. “The best endurance trial ever, though. You’ve had fun, yeah?” A flicker of uncertainty squeezed the corners of her eyes.

“I have,” he nodded, and only after answering actually thought about it. He wasn’t lying, at least not in part. There’d been a lot that he had enjoyed, even if there’d been some rocky bits, too. At least the parade today was actually for queers like him, and he wouldn’t end up frustrated at himself for infiltrating events he had no business at.

He’d worn a rainbow tie-dye crop top that he’d picked up at Brooklyn Pride, because the rainbow thing was for all queers, and he qualified for that. He’d also managed to find yellow, pink, and blue bangles for his wrists, so he had a little pan bling, too. He was wearing entirely too many different colours (remembering Rowan’s bathroom admonishment about picking a colour and sticking with it had almost prompted him to ditch the whole outfit), but he was resolved not to care. He was here to have fun and be with his people.

“So where are we sitting?” he asked Rowan’s back. In Brooklyn, she’d insisted they go claim good seats more than an hour before the parade even started.

“Oh, we’re not sitting,” she laughed back at him. She grabbed his hand and pulled him up the street. Fifth Avenue was closed, this time with police barricades, but each street leading east and west was crowded with masses of people, trucks covered in glittery tinsel, and actual parade floats. It was to the one of the floats that she directed him. “We’re riding in style!”

The float was essentially a very flamboyant flatbed trailer: all rainbow glitter shimmering in the morning light. A railing snaked around the outside edge, defining a little walkway around the float’s centerpiece: a massive papier mâché recreation of The Thinker. The real sculpture sat outside Philosophy Hall back on campus; this one had been embellished with a thought bubble above his head. It read: “I Think, Therefore Gay.”

Columbia’s name and logo were emblazoned across the sides of the trailer, along with the names and logos of CQA and GendeRev. Rowan pulled Sammy over to the short ladder at the back corner of the flatbed, all but hidden under the reflective tassels of tinsel. “I’m on the float?” he asked needlessly, even as he climbed aboard. “Is that even allowed?”

Rowan pulled herself up after him and shrugged. “You’re a Columbia student, so sure, why not?”

“Yeah, but not... really.”

“You take classes at Columbia, that makes you a Columbia student,” she told him, rolling her



eyes. “And besides, it’s stupid hard getting volunteers to ride this thing outside of the school year.”

“They even let me on, and I don’t even go there anymore,” said Finley, coming around the walkway from behind The Gay Thinker. Smiling wide, they slid their arms around Sammy’s waist; he leaned in eagerly for a good morning kiss.

“You work there,” Rowan pointed out with good-natured exasperation. “This is as much about Columbia as a queer-friendly workplace as about Columbia as a queer-friendly school.”

Finley had settled their arm onto Sammy’s far hip. They snorted. “Queer friendly because we drag them there, kicking and screaming every time.”

“Exactly.” Rowan returned with a large cardboard box, and shoved it into Finley’s belly, under his free hand. “And now we celebrate our victories on a sparkly parade float in front of millions of people.”

Sammy reached into the box. Inside sloshed little rainbow foil squares, each one bearing the school’s logo. He pulled one out and squinted at it. “We’re celebrating with condoms?”

“Damn straight,” Rowan nodded. “Safer sex for everybody!” She hustled away to talk to some of the other volunteers, having an earnest conversation about something-or-other and directing them all to space out the little cardboard boxes all around the base of the central statue. Rainbow condoms within reach no matter where you were on the float.

“We’re going to throw these out to the people watching the parade,” Finley tried to explain to Sammy.

“Oh, I assumed as much,” he nodded. “Some floats did that at Brooklyn Pride last weekend. I thought about making a little collection out of the ones I caught.”

Finley passed him one with a grin. “Well here, add to your collection.”

Not having pockets, Sammy took the foil packet and slipped it into his bra.

“Oh my god, could you two be any more disgustingly adorable?” asked Zoey as she pulled herself up the ladder behind them. When Sammy detached from Finley self-consciously, she waved her hands. “No no, you were doing a good job. Be disgustingly, publicly adorable. It’s Pride!”

Sammy chuckled at that and looked sidelong at his enbyfriend. They were wearing the sparkly green dress they’d worn at the club when Sammy had first met them, and makeup even bolder than the look they’d been sporting that night. It was probably their most gender-bendy outfit, and also had the benefit of being skimpy and therefore cool for the hot summer day.

Standing beside Sammy, who was decked out in rainbows and all his obvious transness, they were very clearly a queer couple.

And now they'd be on a float in front of—Rowan had said—millions of people. Held up as... what, exemplars of queer life on Columbia's campus? So many people, so many pairs of eyes, all of them seeing him... like this? Was he really comfortable with that?

Sammy was surprised to realize he was.

It was Pride, after all. The streets were lined with queers and allies, and they'd all be smiling and waving and cheering. He had nothing to worry about. It was a big, queer love fest, and they were all there to cheer each other on.

Agatha had climbed aboard after Zoey and was now poking at one of the cardboard boxes. "Ah, the good ol' rainbow condoms, eh? Good to see we're continuing our tradition of erasing cis lesbians dating cis lesbians."

Rowan came around the corner of the float with another box, this one labelled: Open In Case of Agatha Bitching. She thrust it into her friend's hands and then patted her cheek.

Agatha pried open the box. "Ooo, rainbow dental dams!"

They waited for nearly an hour before it was their float's turn to rumble to life and creep onto the parade route. And then they spent the better part of three hours smiling and waving and throwing condoms and dental dams into the crowd.

There was a sound system buried underneath The Gay Thinker, so they blasted queer music as they went, singing along when they knew the words, shaking their hips when they didn't. Sometimes the crowd joined in, which seemed a little like magic.

And sure, it got tiring, and towards the end Sammy's smile and wave were both getting a little strained, but how could he stop? These were his people, who were happy to see him, and he was happy to see them. There were families and little kids, and he wanted to show them, beam into their little brains, that it was okay to be who you were, that being queer was totally normal. Teenagers, too, with fierce grins and who may or may not be here with their parents or their knowledge, taking a chance to see what was possible in this big wide world. So he waved, and smiled, and threw rainbowed prophylactics until the boxes were empty.

The float pulled past the end of the parade route and onto a side street, rumbling to a stop next to the curb. They disembarked sloppily, bending and flexing their legs after having stood and braced on a moving float for hours on end.

Rowan's fellow organizers had to push her off the float, reminding her that she'd signed up for setup, not teardown, and she was done for the day. She turned to her friends with a sheepish smile. "Something something avoid burnout, you stupid bitch," she paraphrased, and then clapped her hands. "And the next step of that is beer, right?"

PrideFest was only a few blocks away, the same kind of square-canopies-lining-the-street sort of affair as Brooklyn Pride had been, only bigger and louder. A beer garden had been set up in an adjacent park; after filing past the bored-looking attendant checking IDs, they bought overpriced beer and settled into a spot of grassy shade.

Rowan pointed at Sammy around her tall plastic cup. "See what I meant about last weekend being baby Pride?"

"Yeah, this is huge," he agreed, and leaned sideways, up against Finley's shoulder. "Seems too big to see it all."

"Oh, absolutely," his enbyfriend laughed. "Especially after the parade."

But Rowan was intent on at least giving it a good try. They roved up and down the streets, poking their heads into every stall they passed, picking up pamphlets for weird community organizations, colourful souvenir condoms for Sammy's new collection, even fridge magnets from the City explaining how to properly recycle your motor oil (why did they even have a booth?). Aggie and Zoey bailed after they completed the first street, citing their tired feet. Rowan, Sammy, and Finley pressed on. It felt like half the stalls they visited they'd already seen

at Brooklyn Pride, or maybe they were all just blurring together.

“Oh my god!” shouted Rowan, and went squealing towards the next stall, a double-wide pavillion filled to bursting with sequins and technicolour wigs and sex toys. The Transformations Boutique had made an appearance at Pride, and staffing the booth was not just Gloria but also Lucille herself, in the flesh. “The Riviera’s too hot this time of year,” she confided to Rowan after introductions had been made. “And besides, I couldn’t miss Pride.”

Sammy’s cousin dove into chatting with Lucille, catching up what sounded like years of backlogged life stories. He chimed in a few times, but it quickly became clear that the conversation was between the two ladies, with Finley listening in.

Finally he took a step back, made sure nobody had noticed his quiet withdrawal, and stalked across the booth to the register counter and Gloria. Along the way he scooped a cardboard box off the display table and quietly set it down next to the register. “Can I get this, please?” he asked the tattooed clerk. “In a, um, in a bag?”

The sales girl smirked, first bagging the box before ringing it up. “Nothing to be ashamed of, Samantha.”

“Not ashamed,” he told her, and managed a smile that was equal parts genuine and embarrassed. “It’s just a surprise.”

Gloria’s eyes darted from Sammy to Finley, across the stall. “They’re cute. Hope you two have fun.”

He handed over money; she gave him his change and a receipt. “Not returnable if it’s opened, obviously,” she advised him.

“Jeez, I hope not,” he laughed, and then turned around to walk right into Rowan, done chatting with Lucille.

She made a show of trying to look down into his bag. “Whatcha got there, Sammy?”

“You don’t want to know what this is,” he told her, and couldn’t help giggling.

She lifted one eyebrow.

“It’s just more rainbow shit,” he admitted, or half-admitted. It was, indeed, rainbow-coloured. She slitted her eyes theatrically and then turned away.

The bag burned in his hand, alternately weighty or as light as air. He couldn’t believe that he’d bought the thing, and he was also so immensely relieved that he had. He simply didn’t have time to go across town to the actual Transformations Boutique, and he didn’t know the first thing

about ordering this sort of thing online. He tried not to think about it, but his attention kept wandering back to the bag and its contents.

It was only when he volunteered to stand in line for lemonade while both Finley and Rowan ran off to the restroom that he could peek again at his purchase. He had to be careful, though, lest the people ahead and behind him in line saw what he had. Not that they were paying much attention; ahead, a gaggle of teens were laughing with their friends, and behind him two bare-chested men were passing the time making out.

Sammy tipped the bag so he could peer down at the box inside. Yep. He'd actually bought it. The top edge was labelled Training Dildo with Flared Base. The name, and the product itself, were indeed rainbow coloured.

It was the rainbow part that caught up with him, and not the thing-to-stick-in-your-butt part.

Knowing that he'd bought yet another rainbow pride thing and still hadn't picked up some proper trans bling seemed to incense Rowan. She started pointing out every iteration of baby blue and pink (sometimes white got in there, but not often) that she spotted, wagging her eyebrows in an unintentional caricature of a used car salesman.

Trans pride hoodie.

Trans pride incense holder.

Trans pride skirt.

"Programmer socks" with bands of the three colours all up and down their length, without any explanation what they had to do with programmers.

A trans pride flag made out of coloured glass to hang in his window.

A trans pride flag sticker to go on his laptop.

By the time Rowan held up the seventh trans pride coloured item for Sammy's consideration—this time it was a pink-blue-and-white knit beanie with a cartoon animal patch on the front—her desperation was starting to show.

"Don't you think I'm a little old for pokémon?" he tried to laugh it off.

"Sylveon is eternal," she insisted, and then looked down at the hat with a slight smile. "Honestly, I might... nah." And then it went back on the hat rack, but the conversation topic itself was not so easily discarded. She followed him out of the booth. "Really, Sammy, I don't get it. Do you just not like the baby colours?"

"It's not that," he hedged. Finley was in the next booth, talking animatedly with the vendor

about windchimes. Maybe he could slide into that conversation to get out of this one.

“It’s because you’re embarrassed,” his cousin said, half-accusingly, half-despondent, and stopped dead in the middle of the flow of people. “You don’t want to wear the colours, you don’t want to... advertise that you’re trans.”

He turned around, already shaking his head. “No, it’s not that at all.”

“It’s not something to be ashamed of, Sammy,” she told him, far more earnestly and desperately than he was comfortable with her acting. “Even if some people don’t understand. Can’t understand. It’s wonderful and amazing and... and it’s Pride, Sammy. Samantha. This week of all weeks, we get to be proud of who we are.” Fuck, did she have tears in her eyes?

He wrapped her up in a hug. “Rowan, I am proud, I am so proud,” he said, his lips to her ear. “You have no idea. This week has been... it’s been magical.” He pulled back so he could look her in the face. A few tears had fallen down her cheeks during the hug. “My first Pride, Ro, and it’s been amazing. And you made it amazing.”

“Really?”

He nodded his head so hard it felt like it might fall off. “Really. Really-really.” He hazarded a weak smile and considered just going back and buying the damn Sylveon beanie.

As if he wasn’t wearing enough pride bling already.

Maybe that was an angle that could work. He nodded Rowan’s attention down to his rainbow crop top, gestured with his pan pride bangles. “But Ro, it’s my first Pride,” he told her. “I’ve never been with so many of my people before. Our people. It’s amazing, and it’s a lot, and... I just want to kind of savour it? Let me just celebrate being queer this year, okay? Next Pride I can focus on being trans.” He immediately felt a little shitty about the disingenuity—next Pride he’d be detransitioned, and he was pretty sure there wasn’t a detransition pride flag—but pushed the thought away.

She considered him for a long moment and then heaved a sigh. “I mean, I guess, even if it means you’re wearing fucking rainbows.” She giggled, then wrapped her arms around him. “I’m glad you’re having a good Pride, Sammy.”

And at least for a little while, Sammy thought he’d fixed things.

Five hours later, Rowan was slumped across the table and also melting onto Sammy, cheek pressed against the tabletop as she explained to him, slurring: “It’s no use, Sammy, it’s stupid, I’m stupid, none of this is gonna work but also I can’t stop. I’ve never been able to stop, Sammy, not with anything, and I’m always this runaway train car which is also on fire. You know? You know.”

Sammy did know, or at least he knew that his cousin had started drinking at PrideFest and then indeed had not seemed able to stop. Finley had said goodnight and headed home before she’d got sloppy. Now it was well past midnight and the two of them were in their third club of the night. Rowan had just drained her last cocktail before deciding to take a burbling nap on the table. “Maybe we should go home?” he suggested.

She glared at him as if he had suggested admitting defeat, inflated her lungs, and pushed herself up to sitting straight. “No. No, I just need to go to the bathroom.”

“That’s not going to—”

Rowan flailed her hand at him. “Just help me to the bathroom, dammit.”

If Rowan never could stop, Sammy never could tell her no. So he pulled her up to standing and then braced his shoulder under her armpit. He was not particularly steady nor sober, himself. A moment later he remembered to turn around and collect their purses and bags of pride bling, and then they lurched off to the bathrooms.

Pressed up against his cousin, Sammy could feel her diaphragm lurch, and worried that she’d puke before they even got there. She held it down valiantly all the way to the door to the ladies’, which they kicked open only to find a five-person line waiting for a stall.

The woman at the head of the line took one look at them and beckoned. “Oh wow, sweetie, come with me. I’ve got you.” And she lifted Rowan off of Sammy’s shoulder and conducted her directly into the next open stall. A moment later the sound of Rowan retching echoed through the room.

Sammy looked worriedly back at the rest of the line, but nobody seemed upset about Rowan skipping to the front. If anything, they looked concerned. He supposed waiting another minute or two was better than somebody puking in the middle of the floor in here. He crossed the room to park his butt against the baby changing station. It was nice and stable, and didn’t require him to do difficult things like stand without drifting to the side.

“That your friend?” asked a plump redheaded girl at the adjacent sink. Her eyes went to the not-quite-closed stall door and back to Sammy, her pupils moving in the laconic slide of the thoroughly inebriated.

He nodded, slowly and carefully. "My cousin."

"Is she alright?"

He shook his head, also slowly and carefully. "I don't think so."

The redhead reached over to pat his elbow. "It's okay, we'll fix her up."

A few minutes later, Rowan staggered back out of the stall and to the sink, looking disconsolably at her reflection. "I'm so ugly," she pouted.

Sammy's stomach lurched in surprise and sudden fear. Rowan calling herself ugly? What was happening? The very foundations of his world were trembling.

The redhead shushed her, digging into her purse. "Oh hush, your mascara's running, that's all." She produced a little crinkly packet of makeup wipes, pulled out the last one, and went to work on Rowan's cheeks.

"That's why nothing works, because I'm hideous, look at me." Rowan told the room, gesturing at her reflection. "Why would he even want this?"

"If he doesn't, he's blind or stupid," answered the woman who had helped Rowan into her stall. She crossed the room to share a sink with another woman, quickly washing her hands and fluffing her curly brown hair. "Which: par for the course. You should try playing for the other team sometime."

"Girls are just fucked up in different ways," Rowan slurred, watching her reflection lose its raccoon face.

"True that," agreed the girl cleaning her up. "You got a lipstick, honey? Cause this is smeared real good and it'd be best if we just started over."

"Oh, that's in... here," Sammy muttered, digging into Rowan's purse. He found the blocky lipstick inside and passed it over.

The brunette leaned towards the mirror to make eye contact with Rowan. "If he doesn't appreciate all this," she said, gesturing up and down Rowan's reflection, "that's a him problem, honey, not a you problem." She jabbed her pointer finger at Rowan through the mirror. "You're gorgeous."

Rowan's shoulders slumped. "No I'm not."

"Do you know how hard I would be hitting on your right now if you weren't completely wasted?" the woman laughed, sloppily, and Sammy realized that she was just as drunk as everyone else here, just better at hiding it. "I'd scoop you up and take you home under my



elbow.”

“But *he* won’t,” Rowan insisted, sniffing. “No matter how much he wants to. I know he wants to.”

“That doesn’t mean he knows how much he wants to.” The redhead had shifted to sit on the counter, facing Rowan, as she deftly worked the twisted-up end of the wipe around the girl’s eyes. Dribbles of mascara and stray smudges of eyeliner were carefully erased, leaving behind a surprisingly intact wing. “Always remember: boys are dense and slow. It takes them forever to see the pretty girl standing right in front of them.” She leaned left so Rowan was facing herself in the mirror.

Rowan’s lip wobbled as she took in her amended reflection, like she was fighting to actually look at herself, actually see what she looked like, and not what her brain told her she looked like. Finally, she said, “I am pretty cute, huh?”

“Yes you are,” smiled the redhead, and held her arms out, weaving slightly on top of the counter. “Do you hug?”

Rowan collapsed forward into the girl. “I love hugs. Specially with pretty girls,” she sighed, squeezing. The redhead squeezed back, and the two of them just kind of tipped back and forth for a little while—long enough that Sammy looked away.

The brunette was frowning at her own reflection. “I should have brought clips,” she sighed. “I’m gonna chop this all back tomorrow, it’s ridiculous.”

“I have clips,” Sammy heard himself say, and pulled out of his purse a trio of purple ones, clipped onto each other in a little bundle. He held them forward.

“You sure?” the brunette asked with a trace of doubt.

He shrugged. “They came in a pack of other colours I actually wanted. These are just my emergency backup clips. Take em.”

She did, and slid them into her hair, squinting at her reflection. “I dunno if these are big enough for all this,” she said doubtfully.

“No, you’ve just got to—” Sammy started, and then pushed himself forward, reaching. “May I?”

The brunette nodded, cocking her head towards Sammy. He made quick work of pinning back her hair into something that looked more like a style and less like a tangled mess. She looked back into the mirror, eyes popping wide. “Oh wow, that’s amazing. Those little clips can

hold, like, a lot.”

“I wear them most every day,” he explained. “I’ve learned some tricks.” He smiled into the mirror at her; she smiled back.

“Oh gosh, you are not too fat,” Rowan was half-whispering at the redheaded girl. “You are hot as hell, girl. Seriously. You should go for it.”

His cousin stepped back from the hug that had apparently gone on the whole time he’d been fixing the other woman’s hair. She dropped a hand on Sammy’s shoulder and gave him a bleary smile. “You need anything, Samantha? Touch up? Relationship advice? Hair care?” His cousin’s spine was straight again, her face immaculate and poised. She’d been completely put back together.

“Um. I’m good,” he answered, and giggled. He looked around the cramped little bathroom. At the other end of the line of sinks, two tipsy girls were fixing each other’s eyeliner and trading fierce compliments. Over by the door, three people waiting for stalls were engaged in a fervent if slightly slurred conversation about how one of them—it wasn’t clear who—should dump their bigotted boyfriend. He looked back to Rowan. “But if I ever need any of that, I know where to get it.”

“Thank the goddess for drunk girls in the club bathroom,” Rowan crowed. With a final wave to the brunette and redhead, Rowan hooked her elbow into Sammy’s and guided them toward the door. Just at the threshold, though, she spun them both around to look back.

The redhead was still seated on the counter, but she’d drawn the brunette over to stand before her. Her head tilted back, her eyes flashed, and her full lips curved into a victorious smile; the brunette leaned forward and they kissed.

“Oh wow,” Sammy cooed. “Good for them.”

Rowan sighed contentedly, and whirled the two of them around again. As the bathroom door closed behind them, she giggled. “God, I love being a girl.”

“Me, too,” Sammy giggled, stumbling merrily along the dimly-lit hall.

It wasn’t until they were on the subway home that Sammy’s sluggish and still half-drunk brain caught up. While Rowan rested her head against his shoulder and talked about nothing whatsoever, Sammy grew quiet. His heart started hammering in his chest. His vision blurred, and it wasn’t the alcohol.

He’d agreed with Rowan without thinking, but also without lying and without a trace of deception. He’d just blurted it out, in drunken honesty.

Sammy loved being a girl.

Fuck.

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