

**GOING
OFF
SCRIPT**

JEN WILDE

SWOON READS

New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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To all the queer folks who won't
be buried, hidden, or erased.

Thank you for being exactly
who you are.

CHAPTER ONE



The door of the bus hisses as it folds open, and a burst of warm air swirls around me. I heave my suitcase down the steps and squint through the glare bouncing off the sidewalk.

I'm here. I'm actually in Los Angeles. After spending years daydreaming about this moment, it's happening. And it's even better than I imagined, because this is real. The sun is burning my pale skin, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and exhaust fumes fills the air, and I'm kicking myself for thinking my fave plaid shirt was a smart outfit choice in this weather. But it's all okay, because I made it.

I open Google Maps on my phone and check the street signs. I've stared at the map of West Hollywood so many times in the last few months that I could probably find Parker's street in my sleep, but the part of me that likes to be in control needs to have the map ready, just in case.

“Okay,” I say quietly to myself. “I’m on Santa Monica Boulevard. Good.”

I start walking, dragging my suitcase with its one busted wheel behind me. It’s Sunday afternoon, and there’s a chill vibe in the air. Tattooed people in printed shirts and oversize sunglasses sip cocktails at trendy outdoor cafés. Locals stroll along the sidewalk, and I smile at their dogs. Bars are painted turquoise and lemon yellow, and there’s so much stunning street art that I don’t know which one to Instagram first.

I can see why Parker, my cousin, loves this neighborhood. Its Old Hollywood vintage-style neon signs and proud queer culture are a perfect fit for him. Compared to our gray hometown of Westmill, Washington, it’s like being on another planet.

Just as I’m thinking of home, I get a text from my mom.

Mom: are you there yet? Let me know you’re safe xo

I’ll reply later. There’s too much going on here that I don’t want to miss, and if I’m honest, the last thing I want to do right now is think about home.

That town was suffocating me. Closing in on me like the walls of the trash compactor on the Death Star. I made it out just in time to avoid being crushed by the weight of utter normalcy and conformity. Being here feels like breathing after

holding my breath my whole life. I'm free. Free to be exactly who I've always wanted to be.

While waiting at the famous rainbow crosswalk, I arch my back to stretch out muscles that are still stiff from being stuck on a bus for eighteen hours. If I were anywhere else, I'd want to find a place to shower and nap and recover from my journey, but not here. All I want to do is dump my suitcase and start exploring this town. The air is filled with limitless possibility that gives me a buzz when I breathe it in.

This is where people who love creating fictional worlds as much as I do all gather to make magic. The world's most iconic stars have been born here. My heroes have walked these streets.

Emotion swells in my chest, and I squeeze my eyes shut. I can't believe I actually made it.

Finally, I can stop dreaming and start doing. No more long, rainy nights standing behind a deep fryer, feeling a thousand miles away from where I wanted to be. No more hiding in the back of classrooms, counting down the days on the calendar until I could be free.

I'm here for an internship on my favorite TV show: *Silver Falls*—about werewolves and the people who love them. This time tomorrow, I'll be sitting in the writers' room, taking notes and listening to ideas and trying not to fangirl all over everyone. I'm about to take my first big leap toward my goal of creating my own TV show. I'll intern this summer, hopefully find a job as a personal assistant to a showrunner, then work hard and

pay my dues for a while. After a few years, I'll be promoted to writer. My days will be spent crafting story lines and creating characters I've always wanted to see on my television. Then, maybe by the time I'm in my thirties, I'll have proven myself worthy of getting my own hour of airtime. I'll be Bex Phillips: showrunner.

That's my plan, anyway. Mom always says, "Every house needs a blueprint and every dream needs a plan."

I check the map on my phone again. One more block. I look up just as two pretty people with long legs and colorful hair walk by. One wears a T-shirt with HELLA BI printed on it, and the other has a denim jacket covered in buttons that proudly support trans pride. They don't notice me staring at them—they're much too infatuated with each other. They hold hands and giggle as they walk by, and I'm filled with such hope and joy that all I can do is swoon.

I'm home.

When I turn down Parker's street, I still can't wipe the smile from my face. It's lined with palm trees. The sky is a perfect blue. I feel like I've stepped into a postcard. But the closer I get to his building, the higher my nerves rise.

I made it to LA, which means there are no excuses now. Is it possible that some part of me believed I'd never actually make it this far? Did I feel safer holding on to a dream that was so huge, I never thought it would ever come true? What do I do now that it has?

I mean, it's not like I'm the first eighteen-year-old stepping off a bus in LA, carrying a suitcase full of dreams. Everyone has heard those stories of young hopefuls flocking to Hollywood, chasing fame and fortune. But this town is notoriously tough on new arrivals. I could get eaten alive. I could end up back in Westmill with my tail between my legs and my dream crushed to smithereens. God, the jerks from school would love that.

My heart starts racing. Sweat drips down my back, and I'm not sure if it's from the California heat or my sudden burst of anxiety.

Limitless possibility . . . that's a lot of pressure.

Walking the streets of my heroes . . . that's a lot to live up to.

Stop dreaming and start doing . . . that's a lot of responsibility.

Jesus. This is actually happening. I'm here. It's all on me now.

I cannot fuck this up.



CHAPTER TWO

“Come on, dude, be nice,” I mutter under my breath. “Please.”

I’m talking to a door. An orange door with a faded green *16* nailed onto it, just above the peephole. And I’m talking to it because no matter how hard I try, it. Won’t. Open. I slide the key in for the fifth time, jiggle it, twist it, but it doesn’t budge. My fingers sting from trying to turn it.

“You mother . . .,” I grunt, then stop myself and take a deep breath. It’s too damn hot for this. I drop my backpack on the welcome mat and sit on my suitcase.

I pull my phone out and text Parker.

Bex: Cuz. I think you left the wrong key under the mat.

Parker: what?

Bex: Your door won't open.

Parker: one sec

I hear footsteps coming up the steps, and a moment later, Parker appears. "Hey!"

No.

No, he's not supposed to be home yet.

I was supposed to shower and unpack first.

He was supposed to come home and I'd be there, clean and fresh and awake and with the words "I'm gay" on my lips.

"I thought you had clients all day?" I ask.

He pulls his makeup case behind him, the wheels rolling loudly across the concrete. "I fudged a little. I wanted to surprise you!"

"Oh," I say. "Yay!" I push my disappointment aside so I can just enjoy seeing him after so long.

Last time I saw him in person, he was boarding a plane from Seattle to LA, his forehead glistening from nervous sweat. That was three years ago. He'd just graduated high school and was moving to Hollywood to train as a makeup artist. Now he's glowing. And somehow, he still looks eighteen even though he's almost twenty-two. His skin is bronzed from the California sun, and his teeth are whiter, but he's still my dorky cousin. I can see that from the tears in his eyes.

“I told you,” he says as he pulls me in for a bear hug. “I said you’d make it here one day, and here you are!”

“Here I am,” I say with an excited smile. He holds me at arm’s length, taking in the sight of me.

“I’m so glad you stopped straightening your curls,” he says as he tugs on the ends of my shoulder-length hair. It’s red, like his used to be before he bleached it white.

“Don’t get too close to me,” I say, shaking my hair loose from his fingers. “My stench might attach itself to you.” Spending all night on a bus with busted air-conditioning never smells good.

He cringes and pulls his keys from his pocket. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but yeah.” He slides his key into the door. “There’s a trick to this bitch. Watch and learn.”

I take note as he pulls the handle toward him, jiggles the key, and kicks the bottom corner of the door. It opens with a thud and a creak.

“That seems overly complicated,” I say as I swing my backpack over my shoulder.

Parker shrugs. “Welcome to LA.”

I follow him inside, dumping my bags onto the cushion-covered futon that will be my bed for the next month, at least.

Parker twirls in the middle of his living room. “So what do you think of my bachelor pad?”

The outside of the building is old, faded pink and stuck in the seventies, but the inside is modern, sleek, and very Parker.

Framed black-and-white photos of Old Hollywood adorn the cool gray walls: Marlon Brando, James Dean, Sidney Poitier. A metal bookshelf holds framed Polaroids of Parker and his friends in between stacks of books by makeup artists like Kevyn Aucoin and Bobbi Brown. He works freelance as a makeup and hair stylist, mostly on the Glamsquad app, but recently he's been getting jobs prepping celebs for award shows and photo shoots.

"I've never slept on the futon myself," he says. "But Ma slept fine on it when she came down to visit, and you know how fussy she is."

I chuckle. "She wanted me to give you this, by the way." I pull him in for another hug, squeezing him tight around the ribs. My aunt Laura is a big woman and super strong, and her hugs damn near break you, but in the best possible way.

"Aww," Parker says as he squeezes me back. "I miss that old girl."

Should I just tell him now? Is this the moment? *Just say it, Bex*, I tell myself for the thousandth time. *I'm gay. I'm gay. I'm gay.* I open my mouth and wait for the words to come out, but my voice seems to be hiding. Just like me.

Logically, I know I shouldn't be so nervous to come out to him. It's not that I'm afraid he won't accept me—he will. But I've spent my whole life doing whatever Parker did. I looked up to him. When he started school, I threw a tantrum because I wanted to go to school, too. When he got the training wheels

off his bike, I made my mom take mine off, too—which ended with me upside down in a bush, but I didn't care. I wanted to be like Parker so much that it became a running joke in our family and earned me the nickname Lil P. I think the rock in my stomach that's weighing me down and stopping me from biting the bullet is the fear that they'll laugh at me. That Parker will give me a sympathetic smile and brush it off as another way I'm trying to be like him. Or Mom will laugh her loud, throaty laugh, shake her head softly, and say, "Aww, Lil P. That's cute." Or the kids from school will think I'm coming out to be relevant and gain attention.

I just don't want to be laughed at.

Maybe I could just add it nonchalantly to the end of any sentence, like it's no big deal. I could say something like, "I'm tired and I'm gay." Or . . . "I've missed you and I'm gay."

"Oh! Wait," he says, and takes his phone out of his jeans pocket. "I promised your ma that I'd let her know when you arrived."

He opens the camera on his phone and holds it up to take a video of us.

"She's here, Auntie Jack!" he says.

I wave to the camera and smile. "Hey, Ma! I'm alive! You can stop worrying now!"

Parker stops recording and texts the video to my mama. It's Sunday afternoon, so she's at work with my old crew at the

Westmill Sonic Drive-In. Right now, she's probably stuffing burgers into bags and wrangling staff together for the lunch rush. It's wild to think that I was right there with her a week ago, rushing orders out to cars and getting soaked in the Seattle rain. And now I'm here, sunburned and sleep-deprived in Los Angeles.

Parker points behind me to the kitchenette. "The kitchen is too tiny for any kind of mess, so eat whatever you want, just clean up your shit." It's super small, but super neat and organized. He walks over to a closed door and pushes it open. "My room. You have to walk through here to get to the bathroom."

Some people might think this is too small a space for two people, but Parker and I have shared a room our whole lives. I'm actually kind of excited to be living with him again. It'll be just like when we were kids, only now we won't have to whisper the day's gossip to each other so our moms don't hear.

"I cleared space behind the mirror for your meds," he says. "You're still on Ritalin, yeah?"

I nod. "And Lexapro now, too."

He raises his hands to the air. "Same, girl, same."

I could say it now. Just spit it out. He's queer as hell. He'll understand. Shit, he'd throw me a party.

I feel it coming. The two most important words of my life are rising up inside me like an air bubble rising from the bottom of the ocean.

“Parker,” I say. My heart feels like it’s stopped, like it’s listening, waiting for me to introduce it to him from behind an invisible curtain.

“Mhmm?” he says as he clicks open his cosmetics case.

I can’t do it. I’m chickening out. I don’t know how to say the words. I just keep picturing him laughing in my face the moment I do. The air bubble pops before it reaches the surface, and I slouch onto the futon. My eyes feel heavy, and suddenly all I want to do is sleep. But I can’t stand the smell of myself, so I dig my bathroom bag out of my backpack.

“I’m gonna have a shower,” I say.

“Sure thing, honey,” he says with a smile.

I start walking to the bathroom when he calls my name. When I turn around, he’s got tears in his eyes again.

“I’m so glad you’re finally here.”

I give him a tired smile. “Me too.”

And I’m gay.

CHAPTER THREE



“We need to leave Silver Falls,” Jonah says as he wraps Tom’s arm in gauze.

Parker and I are watching the new episode of *Silver Falls*. At the end of last season, a family of werewolf hunters came into town and have been causing havoc ever since, so tonight Jonah and Tom are hiding out in an old barn just outside of town. The buzz online is that the queer YouTuber and actress Alyssa Huntington is joining the cast as a special guest tonight, but the episode is almost over and she hasn’t made an appearance yet.

“No,” Tom growls, still struggling to keep his werewolf side under control. “I won’t be chased from my home. I’d rather die.”

“Then you will die,” a new voice says from offscreen.

I grab Parker’s hand and we both squeal in anticipation as Alyssa emerges from the shadows.

Onscreen, Jonah jumps to his feet, standing between Alyssa and Tom, his teeth bared. “Who are you?”

The camera zooms in on Alyssa just as she says, “I’m one of you.”

The credits roll, and Parker and I bounce excitedly on the futon.

“You have to introduce me to Will Horowitz,” Parker says as he squeezes my hands in his. Will Horowitz is the actor who plays Jonah, and Parker has had a crush on him since season one. “I promise I’ll thank you at our wedding.”

I laugh. “He’s got a boyfriend. Ryan from that band the Brightsiders.”

Parker groans. “Fiiiiine. I’ll take Archer, then.”

“He’s straight, I think.”

“Oh,” he says with a pout. “Well, you should date him, then. It’s about time you got yourself a cutie like him.”

My cheeks burn. “Ha. Yeah. I don’t think fraternizing with the talent is on my list of intern duties.”

Also, I’m gay.

Parker takes our plates of half-eaten macaroni and cheese into the kitchen. “You gotta tell me if Alyssa Huntington is staying for the whole season. It’s about time they added another queer kid to that show. Six seasons and only one gay is not enough.”

I nod. “I hope the character she’s playing is queer, too.”

Parker puts the plates in the sink and claps his hands

together. “Let us pray,” he says with a sigh, like he’s asking the Gods of Gay to make it so.

. . .

The next morning, I’m in the passenger seat of Parker’s old Buick LeSabre. Its blue paint is faded and the interior is torn and stained from all his morning coffees, but it works, so that’s all that matters to me. There was a time when neither of our moms could afford a car, so being able to drive anywhere we want still feels like a luxury to us. Even in LA.

The radio plays the latest Bleachers hit, and the sun is already turning up the heat even though it’s not even 8:00 A.M. yet. I feel like a bowl of Jell-O, jiggling and shaking as the car rumbles through the traffic. I’m so nervous for my first day that I couldn’t eat breakfast, and now I’m sweating through the navy button-up shirt that I so carefully picked out just for today.

Parker catches me sniffing myself and pops open his glove box. “I got you.” He pulls out a spray-on deodorant and I quickly stuff it under my shirt and apply it.

“Thanks, man,” I say.

Soon, we’re pulling up at the entrance to the studio lot, and my heart is pounding out of my chest. A tall bronzed arch towers over the entry, with *Rosemount Studios* engraved into it. To think that some of the most legendary performers, writers,

and directors have passed through these gates over the decades, and I get to follow in their footsteps. I snap a photo and send it to my mom and my best friend, Gabby, while Parker pulls into the line of cars waiting to pass security at the gate.

My phone buzzes with a text from Gabby.

Gabby: GOOD LUCK TODAY BABE

Gabby: send me tons of pics! xo

Gabby is pretty much my only IRL friend. We went to high school together and basically started hanging out because we were the kids the bullies picked on most. We bonded over fanfic and music and spent most of our time reposting each other's Tumblrs. We're like sisters, but even she doesn't know I'm gay.

Bex: so nervous. Gonna die.

Gabby: lol wanna trade? Summer just started and I'm already bored out of my mind.

Bex: I'll take it

Gabby: stfu! This is everything for you.

I feel like a traitor to my own dreams for this, but I honestly would trade with Gabby right now. She's got the summer off before college. Days of sleeping in, sitting in front of the television, and doing nothing sounds pretty damn appealing as I sit here in a hot car, so anxious it feels like my heart is about to explode. I squeeze my eyes shut and imagine I'm home, in my bed, safe under my covers. No responsibilities, no pressure, no way to fail. But when I open my eyes again, I'm still here. And I'm terrified.

"I can't do this," I say.

Parker smirks like he was waiting for me to say that. "Yeah. You can."

I shake my head. "Nope. This was a bad idea. I'm not ready for this. I'm just a child!"

He bursts into laughter. "Bex, you're eighteen. You're grown. You can do this."

"Nope," I say again. "Nuh-uh. Turn around. I wanna go back to Westmill. I'm not ready to be grown."

He stops laughing and turns to look at me. "Honey, this is all you've been dreaming of since you were seven and I took you to see *Twilight*. I'm not letting you leave."

I fold my arms over my chest. "Okay, firstly, bringing up my *Twilight* phase is a low move. Secondly, maybe I'm not ready to achieve my dream just yet. I'll try again next year."

The guard lets one of the cars ahead of us in and we move forward in the line.

“What are you gonna do in Westmill for a year?” Parker asks. “Work at Sonic with your ma every day and go home and write *Silver Falls* fanfic all night?”

“What’s wrong with that?” I ask, offended.

“Nothing!” he says, his voice a couple of octaves higher. “If that’s what you really want. But that’s not what you want. You want to go into that studio and be the best fucking intern in the history of interns. You want to schmooze the higher-ups and hustle your way into a job writing about hunky werewolves.”

My stomach does flips and I wrap my arms tighter around myself. “I’m gonna barf.”

He shrugs. “So barf. You wouldn’t be the first one to puke in this car. But then you’re still going to march into that writers’ room and do the job you fought so hard for.”

He’s right. I did fight hard for this opportunity. I worked almost every day after school and on weekends for nearly two years to save up enough money to come to LA. I stalked all the social media of television studios and signed up for every newsletter and joined every Facebook group to find writing internships. I filled out dozens of applications. All while trying to pass my classes and graduate high school. I promised myself that it would all be worth it once I made it through these gates.

Another car is let through. There’s only one car ahead of us now.

I let out a sigh. “I hate you.”

“Awww,” Parker says teasingly. “I hate you, too, sweetie.”

When it’s our turn, I introduce myself to the guard, an older gentleman with glasses and thinning white hair, and tell him I’m here for my internship and show him all my IDs and paperwork. The pages tremble in my hands, and the guard gives me a warm smile. His name badge says PETER, but he tells me I can call him Pete as he welcomes me to the studio. I like him already.

The gates slide open, and we drive into the lot. I feel like I’m entering a lost city of magic and wonder, like when Thor took Jane to Asgard for the first time in *The Dark World*.

Parker pulls into the visitors’ parking lot and gives me a hug. “Now, get out and have a blast.”

“Thanks, P,” I say.

My fingers shake as I open the car door and step out. The phrase “fake it till you make it” repeats in my head, and I try my best to play it cool. I hold my head high as I enter the building, but the door makes an awful creaking noise that makes everyone in the reception area stare at me. Totally thrown off my game, I bypass the front desk, hurry as casually as I can into the gender-neutral bathroom, and lock myself in a stall. I’m sweating again, so I tear some toilet paper off and wipe my armpits with it. Stains are already forming on my shirt. Note to self: Do not lift arms at all today.

After a minute or two of deep breathing and fanning my sweaty spots with my hands, I swing the door open and step back out, taking what Parker said to heart: If I need to barf, I'll barf, but then I'm going to get back up and keep going.

I've got a dream to chase.

CHAPTER FOUR



“Room 121. Room 121. Room...,” I mutter to myself as I walk down the hallway, checking the numbers on all the doors. My new official lanyard hangs around my neck, swinging slightly with each step I take. I reach the corner boardroom, with a sign on the door that says ROOM 121: SILVER FALLS WRITERS’ ROOM. Just like Angela, the cute girl at reception, described.

I take a moment to compose myself. Deep breath in, slow breath out.

Time to go for what you want, Bex.

I knock on the door, but all I get in response is silence. Someone walks out of the office behind me and down the hallway. I try to smile at them, but they don’t even notice me. I knock again. Still no answer.

Do I knock for a third time? Maybe they’re saying come in but I’m just not hearing it. Should I just go in? Ugh, I feel

like such a loser. I touch my fingers to the door handle, turn it an inch, and wait, listening. Still nothing.

“Um, hello?” I open the door, hoping I’m not interrupting anything.

I’m greeted by an empty room.

“Hello?” I say again for good measure.

Weird. Angela said they would all be here. I take one last look down the empty hallway and step inside the room. A long table sits in the middle of the room with eight office chairs around it and a tin of whiteboard markers in the middle of it. A couch sits along the far wall, under a window that overlooks the staff parking lot. But the thing I can’t take my eyes off is the whiteboard on the wall behind the table. It’s covered in Post-it notes and paragraphs of dialogue and ideas for the latest episode. I step farther into the room and see the wall to the right of that plastered with headshots of the cast, along with their character names and more Post-it notes. A long timeline is pinned above them, listing all the pivotal moments from season one to season six—the current season. There’s the episode when Jonah’s girlfriend, Katie, died. Ugh, I cried so hard that night. And the episode when Tom led the other werewolves into war with the vamps. That was one of the best episodes to date, in my opinion.

“Can I help you?” a voice asks from the doorway. I jump out of my skin like I’ve been caught doing something I shouldn’t be.

The guy stares at me, waiting for my answer.

“Hi,” I say with a smile. “I’m Bex, the new intern.”

He cocks his head to the side. “I wasn’t aware we were getting a new intern this season.”

I hold up my lanyard. “Oh, well. I’m supposed to be working in the writers’ room with Malcolm Butler.”

He makes a face, like he just got a whiff of something bad. “I’m Malcolm Butler.”

I narrow my eyes at him. He doesn’t look like Malcolm Butler, at least not like the photo on his Twitter profile. But the longer I search his face for the resemblance, the more I see him. He looks older, with more lines around his eyes and gray in his hair, and a scruffy beard.

Shit. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize *the* Malcolm Butler. He’s been the showrunner since season four and a leader in the industry since before I was born. My cheeks warm in embarrassment.

For some reason, I wave. “Hi! It’s so nice to meet you! I’m a huge fan!”

He does a cool kind of chin nod and drops his satchel on the table. “We’re about to have a meeting to go over the next script.”

Oh my god. I’m about to listen to the writers of *Silver Falls* talk about the latest script.

OhmygodOhmygodOhmyfreakinggod.

“Cool,” I say, trying to seem as casual as possible. But I can’t stop grinning. I sit on one of the chairs at the table but

instantly realize I've fucked up when he looks at me like I've offended him.

"No," he says. "The writers sit at the table."

I stand up so fast I push the chair into the wall, and one of the cast photos falls off.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" I gasp. I scramble to pick up the headshot and pin it back where it was, all while he watches and sighs and very definitely starts to loathe me already. Then I walk to the other side of the room and stand there sheepishly.

We wait in unbearable silence for a little while. I look everywhere but at him. Nervous sweat runs down my back.

"You look young for an intern," he says, narrowing his eyes.

It's not a question, but the suspicion in his voice pushes me to give an answer. "I'm getting college credit."

He nods. "UCLA?"

I rub the back of my neck. "Community college."

"Look," he finally says. "I don't normally allow interns in the room. But Ruby—the new network head—wants us to . . ." He pauses and does air quotes with his fingers. "'Lift as we climb,' like this is some diversity outreach program instead of a business. Anyway, she's the boss, and lucky for you that means you can stay."

"Thanks," I say, even though I'm a little offended.

"Before everyone else gets here," he continues, "tell me, do you have any relatives in the business?"

“No,” I say. “My family is small. Just me, my mom, aunt, and cousin. Oh, wait, actually, my cousin is a makeup artist.”

“Oh,” he says, like he’s finally interested. “Which studio does she work for?”

“He,” I say. “And he’s freelance. Mostly makeup and hair for photo shoots.”

He lowers an eyebrow. “So no one in the film or television business, then.”

I shake my head. “I guess not.”

He opens his laptop but keeps asking questions.

“Do you have any interest in writing?” he asks.

My eyes light up. “Oh, yes.”

“Do you intend to have a career in television writing?”

“Yes,” I say. “That’s always been my dream.”

He chuckles. “*Dream*. You’re one of those. Well, I hope you’re serious about this. I don’t want to waste anyone’s time here,” he says. “If I’m going to let my writers take time out of their own jobs for you, I need to know that you’re going to work hard. I’m not interested in giving you an ‘epic fangirl experience.’” He uses air quotes again. “You have to take initiative and prove that you’re in this for the long haul.”

I stop smiling and put on my serious face. “I’m very serious. I want this more than anything.”

He taps his pen on the table a few times. “Well, good. Do you have any writing experience?”

I tug on the sleeves of my shirt. “I’ve been writing on

FanFic.com for years. My most popular story there has over two million reads.”

“FanFic.com.” He says it with a judgmental tone, then turns his attention back to his laptop.

I feel myself getting defensive but rein it back in. “I’ve also written scripts, and obviously I had to write scenes and episodes for my internship applications.”

“Obviously.” There’s a pause as he starts typing on his laptop. “You didn’t submit to any scriptwriting contests or fellowships?”

I deflate a little. “No.” I don’t want to tell him that I couldn’t afford any of the entry fees, so I leave it at that.

“Hmm,” he says. “Well, I expect you to be here five days a week. Lunch breaks are thirty minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” I say quietly. My stomach turns uneasily. The application said this was supposed to be a Monday-to-Wednesday gig. I was planning to get a part-time job, so I’d be earning some money, seeing as this is an unpaid internship. But he’s my boss, and if he says I need to be here Monday to Friday, that’s what I have to do. I’ll just have to stretch my savings and go over my budget again. Ugh. My chest tightens with panic just thinking about it.

Just then, a short guy with spiked-up hair and a laptop walks in. He walks by me and takes a seat on the couch.

“Dirk,” Malcolm says. “You’re late.”

“I know, I know,” he says. “I’ve been searching everywhere

for the fountain pen you wanted, but it's sold out everywhere. Even online."

"Don't whine to me," Malcolm says, rolling his eyes. "Just do your job. And fix that attitude. You're dropping the ball lately."

Dirk just nods, and then they sit in awkward silence, with me standing near the door and wondering if I should leave the room.

Finally, other people arrive. Some make eye contact with me and nod; others don't seem to even notice I'm there. I'm disappointed, but not surprised, to see that there's only one woman at the table, and everyone is white. I hope I'm not the only queer person, but I'm not going to hold my breath. I wait for Malcolm to introduce me, but he just starts the meeting.

"Happy Monday, folks," he says. "Let's get straight to it. Andy, what have you got for us?"

A guy wearing a gray hoodie and black-rimmed glasses hands copies of his script around the table. He glances at me, then at the last script in his hands, then looks at Malcolm like he's unsure of whether to give me one.

"Oh, right," Malcolm says. "This is our new intern."

Everyone in the room turns to look at me, and I rub the tips of my sneakers together nervously. I wonder how I must look to them. Broad-shouldered girl with orange curls, thick glasses on the edge of her nose, sweat-stained shirt, and black jeans. I try to muster a few ounces of confidence, but it's not enough to even make eye contact with anyone.

“Hi,” I say to my shoes. “I’m Bex.”

Everyone smiles and says hi, and Andy hands me a copy of the script. “Just FYI,” he says. “That’s top secret, so don’t, like, take any selfies with it or anything.”

I nod. “I won’t. It’s safe with me.”

My fingers trace over the paper. I want to cry. This must be how Gollum felt when he held the ring.

“Oh, Becky,” Malcom says. I consider correcting him about my name, but I’m so intimidated that my words get stuck.

I guess my name is Becky now.

“I’d love a coffee,” he says. “Run over to the café, would you? Anyone else want one?”

Others in the room start listing their orders, and I frantically type them out on my phone.

“Got it,” I say. “Be right back.”

“Thanks, doll,” Malcolm says as I walk out the door.

Doll? Ugh. I’d prefer Becky.

CHAPTER FIVE



By the time I return with their orders, the meeting is wrapping up.

“Oh,” Malcolm says when he sees me. “I was wondering where you’d gone.”

“Sorry,” I say as he takes his cup off the tray in my hands. “The line was out the door.” And also I got seriously lost. This studio is bigger than all of Westmill.

The other writers take their cups off the tray as they walk out the door. They all thank me, which is nice. My phone vibrates in my back pocket, and I strategically fish it out while still holding the drink tray. It’s my mom. Ugh. She knows how important this day is for me; why is she calling now? Doesn’t she know how embarrassed I’d feel, taking a call from my mother on my first day at my important new job? I hit the ignore button and slide it back into my pocket, making a mental note to call her back later.

Then it's just me and the female writer left in the room, and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do next.

She smiles at me as she hangs her laptop bag over her shoulder. I smile back, still holding the empty tray.

"So," she says. "Did Malcolm give you something to do today? Or a writer to shadow?"

"Um, no," I say slowly. "Was he supposed to?"

She smiles like she feels sorry for me but doesn't answer my question. "It's okay! You can hang with me if you like. I can find plenty of things for you to do."

"Cool!" I lift my index and middle fingers to my temple and salute . . . because that's a thing I do now, I guess. "I am at your service."

She laughs, and we head out the door and down the hallway.

"I'm Jane," she says, reaching out to shake my hand. Her emerald green eyes sparkle behind dark lashes, and her brows are perfectly arched. She's probably the first person I've come across in LA who is even paler than I am. "I'm an EP—executive producer. I started as a staff writer on season one and worked my way up, so if you have any questions or need anything while you're here, I'm happy to help."

I beam at her. I've seen her name in the opening credits so many times. I'm so excited I could scream. But I don't want to freak her out, so I promise myself I'll stay chill.

That lasts about three seconds.

“You wrote the prom night episode last season, right?” I ask as we leave the building.

Her eyes widen like she’s surprised I knew that, then a smile tugs at her lips. “I did.”

I clutch my chest. “That was one of my favorite episodes ever! The moment Jonah finally admitted his feelings for Sue . . .” I dip my head back and swoon, “I cried.”

Her smile reaches her eyes. “Oh, wow. I’m so happy you liked it!”

I keep bombarding her with questions about what it’s like to work here, where else she’s worked, and how she got into the business. She answers my questions with excited ramblings that I eat up. Jane talks to me like I’m a person, and for the first time today, I feel like I’m going to be okay here.

I’m so caught up in our conversation that I don’t pay attention to where we’re going until we reach a tall steel door.

“You’ve been watching since season one, I’m guessing?” Jane asks as she uses both arms to drag it open.

“Never missed an episode,” I say, suddenly realizing where we are. I’m frozen still as the door slides open to reveal a soundstage the size of an aircraft hangar. Noise filters out into the street where I’m standing, my jaw practically hitting the ground. People rush in every direction, some talking into their headpieces, others moving equipment across the concrete floors. It’s like opening a portal into a new world.

Jane walks ahead of me and I hurry to keep up. My head darts from left to right as I try to look at everything at once.

“Welcome to Silver Falls,” she says.

I stare in awe at the sight before me. It’s the exterior of the cabin that Jonah and Tom (played by Will and Archer) retreat to every full moon, in the woods just outside Silver Falls. I feel like I’ve stepped into my TV.

“Are you okay?” Jane asks with a laugh. I pull my jaw back off the ground and nod.

“I’m just so happy,” I croak. I try to rein in my glee, reminding myself that I’m here to learn and work—I need to be professional. But I make a mental note to have a celebratory dance party the moment I get back to Parker’s.

“Here,” Jane says as she hands me a copy of the script for the episode being filmed. Her name is on the front.

“You wrote this episode?” I ask.

She nods. “I mean, it’s all very collaborative. But yes.”

I start flipping through the script and land on a page that says . . .

EXT. THE CABIN—NIGHT

Jonah, Tom, and Sasha are outside the cabin. Fog swims around their ankles.

Jonah and Sasha are packing the truck to leave Silver Falls. Tom watches from the porch.

“This is the scene that’s being set up?” I ask.

Jane glances at the page and nods. “It’s only a few lines of dialogue, but we’ll probably be here through lunch.”

“I can’t wait to see it all come together!”

“Good!” she says. “Why don’t you take notes? Lines sometimes get tweaked or details changed, so I need someone to edit the script as we go.”

I pull my pencil case out of my bag. “Sure thing.”

Just then, Alyssa Huntington and Will Horowitz walk by, chatting about their lines. Alyssa is black, her body lean and athletic, with a contagious smile. She usually wears her hair shaved super short, but I notice it’s grown out a little on top, with a cool fade on the sides. Her tattoos are mostly hidden under her clothes: a dark red leather jacket paired with skinny jeans and combat boots. Will is tall, maybe six feet, with light skin, wavy brown hair, and a permanent five-o’clock shadow that makes him look older than twenty-three. Parker is going to be so jealous that I’m breathing the same air as his crush.

I can’t believe how close I am to my faves right now. Alyssa makes eye contact with me and I smile. She smiles back and it feels like time has slowed down. I stare after her as she takes a seat in a chair with her name on it, only a few feet away.

“Pretty cool to see all this, huh?” Jane asks me.

“The coolest,” I say.

A young guy paces near us, talking into a walkie. “Does anyone have eyes on Archer? We need Archer!”

I hear a ton of footsteps walking through the soundstage and turn to see a small group of important-looking people walking toward the set. A woman with dark brown skin and very high heels seems to be the center of attention in the group.

“I’ll be right back,” Jane says as she hurries to talk to her.

As the entourage gets closer, I recognize the woman from a feature *Teen Vogue* did on her last year. Her name is Ruby Randall, and she’s the first black woman to be named head of a major television network. She’s the biggest boss around.

“Bex,” Jane says, waving me over. “This is Ruby Randall, the head of the network. Ms. Randall, Bex is our new intern in the writers’ room. It’s her first day.”

Ms. Randall smiles like I’m an old friend. “Hello! First day here and you’re already on set. Glad to see you’re diving right in!”

I shake her hand a little too enthusiastically, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

“I’m having a blast!” I say. “Thank you for giving me such an amazing opportunity.”

“I always say it’s important for us to lift as we climb,” she says. “I hope you learn a lot during your time here.”

I gesture to the script in my hand. “I’ve already started taking notes.”

She laughs. “A girl after my own heart.”

Malcolm walks into the building then, with Dirk following him like a shadow.

“Looks like everything is running smoothly,” Malcolm says. He turns to Dirk. “Dirk, Danish.” Dirk scurries over to the craft services table and picks up a plate.

“Malcolm,” Ms. Randall says. “It’s great to see you giving your intern a real hands-on experience by inviting her to the set. I wish I’d had someone like that when I was a young intern.” She looks at me, rolling her eyes. “All I did was fetch coffees for people who didn’t even remember my name.”

I’m about to say that it was Jane’s idea to bring me to set, but Malcolm speaks first.

“Yes,” he says. “Well, interns are the future, I always say.”

Wow. I look at Jane, who’s smiling and going along with it, so I follow her lead. This isn’t like in high school, where I could just keep my head down, get my work done, and avoid eye contact with everyone else. I actually have to talk to people here, and be, like, social.

“That’s great, Malcolm,” Ms. Randall says. Her assistant arrives and beckons her away, and the moment she’s out of sight, Malcolm leaves, too.

I watch Jane out of the corner of my eye, wondering if I should say something. The last thing I want to do is cause trouble on my first day, but I can’t be the only one in this whole studio who notices Malcolm’s behavior.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says. I pretend to not know what she’s talking about, but acting has never been a skill

of mine. She smirks. “‘Interns are the future, I always say,’” she says, lowering her voice and puffing her chest out to impersonate him. Then she rolls her eyes. “No one says that.”

I chuckle but remind myself to be careful of what I say. “I don’t think he likes me very much.”

She frowns. “He doesn’t like anyone very much. And trust me, the feeling is mutual. But he makes great television.”

“Hey, Jane,” a voice says from behind me. I turn around to see Archer Carlton walking toward us. My breath catches in my throat. “I have a few Qs for you to A about my lines,” he says to Jane.

“Sure,” Jane says. “What’s up?”

He notices me standing next to her and looks me up and down. I grin at him like the huge *Silver Falls* fangirl that I am. He smiles. Oh my sweet lord. He’s going to talk to me. Archer Carlton is going to speak words at me and I can’t deal. This is a pivotal moment in my life. He opens his mouth to speak . . .

“I’ll take a green juice, thanks.”

Okay, so that’s not exactly what I was hoping for, but this is part of my job now, so I drop everything to make his wish my command. Only I don’t know where I’m supposed to find green juice in this place. Dirk is still at the craft table, so I go over to introduce myself and ask him.

“Hey!” I say with a friendly smile. “I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself in the writers’ room. I’m Bex, Malcolm’s new intern.”

He doesn't look up from the table as he piles Danishes onto a plate. "Don't talk to me."

For a second I think I misheard him, so I try again. "Do you know where I can find green juice? Archer wants some, and it's my first day so—"

"Do I look like a tour guide?" he asks. His phone dings in his pocket, but we both ignore it.

I shrink back a little. "No."

His phone dings again, but he ignores it again. "Listen, intern. There's a hierarchy you need to learn." He gestures with his hands, measuring the rankings. "It goes Randall, Malcolm, me, then literally everyone else in the whole fucking world, then right here at the bottom? That's you. You're a speck."

I want to crawl under the craft table and hide. I feel just like Andy in *The Devil Wears Prada*, naive, frazzled, and completely out of my depth. And Dirk just went full Emily on me.

"Sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to upset you. It's just that we both work for Malcolm, so I thought we could help each other out."

He raises an eyebrow. His phone dings three more times, and he groans while pulling it out of his pocket. "I'm so over this." He starts typing something, then glances up at me.

"Actually," he says. "There is something you could help me with."

I smile, feeling like he's coming around. "Sure!"

"Ms. Randall has asked a few select people to take over the

Silver Falls social accounts,” he explains. “So fans can get a glimpse of what life on set is like. I’ve been running the Instagram, but it’s so . . .” He pauses, like he’s trying to find the words. “Superficial. And all these fangirls just won’t stop with the comments and the questions and tagging me in their fanfic posts.” He chuckles, then takes a step closer. “It’s not for me. Someone like you, however, could be perfect for this role.”

I smile, not really sure if he’s being fake nice or real nice, but I want him to like me. And I don’t want to be a speck. “I’d love to do that!”

“Great!” he says. “All you need to do is post some stories, photos, maybe a livestream or two. No spoilers, of course, but just enough content to keep the fans frothing for more.”

He gives me the log-in details, and I’m genuinely excited to be taking on such an important responsibility. He may not understand the power of social media in the fandom, but I know from experience how important it is.

“Thank you,” I say. “Now, seeing as we’re helping each other, do you mind telling me where I can find green juice?”

He starts walking away. “I have no idea. Sorry!”

. . .

The rest of my day is spent running errands. Fetching an assorted variety of beverages, making phone calls, delivering

paperwork, and making script notes for Jane on set. I even manage to snap a few photos for the *Silver Falls* Instagram and reply to some of the comments. As hectic as it sounds, I love every minute of it—at least the minutes when Malcolm and Dirk are out of sight.

It's dark by the time I leave. Hayley Kiyoko serenades me through my headphones as the bus rolls down the highway. My Ritalin wore off hours ago and it shows: I can barely keep my head up, I'm so tired.

I have a love/hate relationship with Ritalin. When I take it, it energizes me. I become very talkative and animated and focused. I get shit done. I'm awake. But there's an undercurrent of anxiety, a truly uncomfortable feeling in my chest, the kind you would get when you're running late to the most important meeting of your life. But if I don't take it? I'm half-asleep all day. I move like a sloth. I never know which task to focus on first, and if I do my focus never lasts long enough to see it to completion. There's no in-between with me—it's either sleepy sloth or Energizer Bunny. And right now I'm in peak sloth mode; even the jolting stop-and-start bus ride through Los Angeles can't keep me awake.

By the time I walk to Parker's from the bus stop, it's past nine. I fetch my key out of my bag and try to unlock the door, but once again it won't budge. Before I have time to test Parker's über-complicated trick, he opens the door, smiling.

“Finally!” he says as he pulls me into his arms. I relax into his hug, my cheek resting against his shoulder. “I’ve been waiting all day to give you this hug.”

He leads me inside and closes the door. “I’m so proud of you. Now, tell me everything that you saw today, starting with Will Horowitz.”