

# 1

“Chaos is what killed the dinosaurs, darling.”

(*Heathers*, 1988)

The message arrived as Madison Nakama slid into the passenger seat of her mother’s sedan. She pulled the phone from her pocket with one hand and tugged the seat belt across her lap with the other.

**NEW Message, \*anonymous\*:** 3:59 p.m. EST

**Subject:** I Love, LOVE, LOOOOOOOOOOOVE YOUR BLOG!

Madi grinned. Fanmail was the very best kind of e-mail! The messages had been coming in more frequently the last few weeks, sometimes two or three a day and many more after a rewatch. Each note of happiness she received gave Madi a thrill of excitement. People loved what she blogged!

The voice of Madi’s sister, Sarah, echoed from the backseat. “What’re you reading, Madi?”

Madi hit OPEN, waiting as the message loaded on her phone. “Just a message.”

“Is it Aunt Lisa again?” Sarah asked. “She texted Dad seven times today. Mom told Dad to turn off his phone since he was at home, and Dad said he was waiting for a message from his editor. But then Mom said the editor could e-mail and Aunt Lisa was interrupting their personal time, but he told Mom

that she was his little sister, and if she wanted to talk, he'd talk. So is"—her sister took a quick breath—"this Aunt Lisa again?"

"Not Lisa," Madi said absently. "Someone else."

"Is it about your blog?"

Madi glanced toward the front door of the house, but their mother had yet to arrive. Madi still had time. "Uh-huh," she mumbled.

Dear MadLib,

I've never written to anyone famous before, so I hope this is okay! I recently joined the MadLibbers, and I had to tell you how much I ABSOLUTELY LOVE your blog! I'd heard about your rewatches once or twice, but hadn't checked them out before this month. When a fandom friend of mine told me you'd started a rewatch of the SV series, I decided to pop by. I am SO GLAD that I did! I've never laughed so hard at—

"So who is the message from?" Sarah asked, interrupting the flow of Madi's thoughts. She groaned, scanning to find her place again.

—the inside jokes and all those fandom FEELS. I honestly just wanted to call you up and say: "IKR???!!!" You totally GET it! And I know you were never a SV fangirl before you started the rewatch, but if you ever—

"Madi!" Sarah shouted. "Who's the message from?!"

Madi jerked. "I don't know who," she said. "It was sent anonymously."

"But why would someone send you an anonymous e-mail?"

"Because they don't want me to know who they are."

"Why would they e-mail you at all, if they didn't want you to know that? Why send anything? They could just *not* e-mail and then you'd never know anything about them. It doesn't make sense."

Madi glanced over the back of the seat to find her younger sister watching.

Sarah was small for fifteen years old, but the severity of her expression made her seem older.

“I’ll explain the whole anon thing later, okay?” Madi said. “I just need a minute to finish.”

“Finish what?”

“I want to reply to this message before we go to the park.”

“But—”

“Please, Sarah. Just a minute.”

Her sister crossed her arms and looked out the window. “Fine,” she sighed.

Madi hit `REPLY`, her thumbs blurring over the screen as she typed.

**Reply to Message from \*anonymous\*: 4:03 p.m. EST**

**Subject: RE: I Love, LOVE, LOOOOOOOOOOOVE YOUR BLOG!**

Hi, Anon!

I’m so glad you’re enjoying the blog! Don’t feel you have to hide. Feel free to jump into the liveblog on Twitter when we start *Starveil V: Ghosts of the Rebellion*. That rewatch starts tonight at 7:30 p.m. EST. Just search up the MadLibs tag and—

Before Madi could finish, the door to the house opened and Madi’s mother appeared. She took a step outside then turned back around, pausing half in and half out of the doorway. Madi figured her father must have called out to her to do some last-second errand. (Her father was always doing that.) With Olympic-level thumb-typing abilities, Madi sped through the last bit of her message.

—join in! I’d love to see you there.

Thanks for the fanmail. Got to go!

—MadLib

With a grin, she hit `SEND`. The door to the car opened with a *screech* and Madi looked up to see her mother, white-faced, as she slid behind the wheel.

Madi's smile faltered. "Everything okay, Mom? You look—"

"Everything's fine," she said, then pulled the car onto the street without another word.

Madi glanced into the backseat, hoping to catch Sarah's eyes, but her sister was engrossed in something on her phone. After a moment, Madi turned back around. She slid her phone back in her pocket and frowned, the fleeting joy from her fanmail already gone.



Madi stared at her mother, the seconds ticking by.

"You're kidding, right?"

Around them, the May afternoon continued on like nothing had happened. The spring air hummed with the rumble of lawn mowers and motor vehicles. Children laughed on the playground. A bee buzzed. Madi was oblivious to all of it. Her chest ached like the time she'd fallen off the top of the monkey bars and her body had forgotten how to breathe. This time she'd been pushed by her mother.

"Mom," Madi pleaded, "please tell me this is a joke."

"No joke. I'm leaving."

Madi's eyes darted to the playground and the brick-fronted buildings behind it, seeking out her sister. Spring had arrived in Millburn, New Jersey. Around the park, crab-apple trees hung heavy with pink blossoms, the blue sky dotted with perfect silver clouds. Her fingers clenched, clawlike, around the cell phone in her hand. *This is so bad! So freaking bad!*

"It's been in the works for a while," her mother said, the nervous tapping of her foot the only hint of her emotions, "but I got the confirmation yesterday."

"Confirmation. Right."

"I'm . . ." Her mother shifted uneasily on the bench. "I'm leaving at the end of the week."

Madi jerked. "As in *this* week?!"

"Oxford has an undergrad summer course they'd like me to coteach. It starts June first. I want to have the paperwork done and be settled in the apartment before—"

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Madi’s shock rolled into sudden anger. “This is like some—some kind of awful joke.”

Her mother gave a long-suffering sigh. “For goodness’ sake, Madison, you’re a senior in high school, not a child, so please start acting like one.”

“But you’re running away.”

“No one’s running anywhere.”

“Driving. Flying. Whatever!”

Madi glared at children laughing on the equipment. Over on the swing set, her sister, Sarah—looking younger than her age would suggest—swung back and forth. Her lips were pursed in focus, eyes half-closed. The swing’s chains screeched in time to her motion. Watching her, Madi had the unsettling realization that while the pin had been pulled, the grenade had yet to go off.

*But when it did . . .*

“Look, it just sort of happened.” Julia Nakama’s voice was barely audible above the happy din of children. “And while I know this must be hard for you—”

“You know *nothing* about how hard it is.”

“I know what it must seem like,” her mother said, undeterred. “But my fellowship was only approved by the committee yesterday. As soon as your father and I talked about the move, I—”

“Dad knew about this?!”

*Squeak . . . squeak . . .*

Her mother leaned closer. “I understand you’re upset, but please lower your voice or—”

“Or what? You’ll leave?”

“Madi, please.”

*Squeak . . . squeak . . .*

Madi stared at her sister, willing her angry tears to disappear. This couldn’t be happening to them. Not now! Not when Sarah was finally settled into a good routine.

“I know this is hard to hear,” her mother said. “But opportunities like this don’t come along every day. When you’re older and you’re building your own

career, you'll understand." *Squeak . . . squeak . . .* "Madi, are you even listening to me?"

"Listening to what? You're leaving." Her eyes narrowed. "*Again.*"

Her mother's concern faded into frosty annoyance. "Calm down. People are staring at us."

*Squeak . . . squeak . . .*

"Calm down? How am I supposed to 'calm down' when you're taking off?!" Madi's voice grew shrill and she stumbled to her feet. A nearby mother turned in surprise. "You said you wouldn't do that. You promised us—you promised Sarah! And now you're doing it all over again."

"Madison, please!" Her mother's fingers clamped around her wrist and she tugged her back down to the park bench. She smiled apologetically at the onlookers, shrugging as if to say: *Sorry about this. My teen's just being a teen. You know how it is.* Madi could almost hear the laughter.

*Squeak . . .* The repetitive pattern slowed, and Madi caught her sister's eyes across the playground. *Squeak . . .* Sarah frowned. *Squeak . . .* Madi looked away.

"You need to keep your voice down."

Madi jerked her hand back and crossed her arms. "Yeah, well, you need to keep your promises."

"You'll understand when you're older. Families and careers are never easy to balance. . . ." Her mother's voice faltered. "Especially with our challenges. But I can't keep putting this off. Teaching at Oxford is an opportunity I'll never get again." She stood from the bench, brushing invisible crumbs from her slacks. "Now get your sister. We need to leave."

Madi grabbed her pack and stood. "Why don't you get her yourself since you're so certain about everything?"

A nearby woman gasped and Julia's face drained of color. She stepped in front of Madi, blocking her from onlookers. "We'll talk later. Go get Sarah."

Madi lifted her chin. "No."

Her mother let out a hissing breath as her fingers snaked around her daughter's wrist. "Now I don't know what you think you're playing at, Madison, but you *will* go get your sister or—"

"Why is Mom hurting your arm, Madi?"

Julia released her daughter and stumbled back. Sarah stood behind them, watching the interaction with an unwavering gaze.

“I-I’m not.”

“Yes, you were. I saw you,” Sarah announced. “You were talking to Madi, and then Madi started frowning, and she yelled at you, and then you yelled at her, and then you grabbed her arm, and—”

“I’ll be in the car! Hurry up, girls. We’re already late.” Julia bolted away, dodging wayward children. She didn’t look back.

Madi threw her arms around Sarah, hugging her younger sister. Sarah tolerated it for the count of three, then began to squirm.

“Thanks for saving me,” Madi said as she released her.

Sarah didn’t smile. (She rarely did.) “Why is Mom mad at you?”

“She isn’t.”

“Yes, she is.”

“No.”

“But I saw her, Madi.” Sarah spoke with certainty. “You were talking, and then you started frowning, and—”

“I dunno, Sarah. Mom’s just . . .”

Madi’s shoulders slumped. It wasn’t in her heart to tell her sister the truth: Everything in their lives had just changed yet again, and Sarah would be the one to suffer for it. Instead, she forced a brave smile. “Mom was just ready to go. She asked me to get you, and I said no.”

Her sister seemed to consider that for a moment, and Madi wondered if she’d now have to explain *why* she’d refused to get her. Questions, with Sarah, continued until she was satisfied.

“Okay.” Sarah looked up the street where their mother had disappeared. “So Mom’s ready to go home?”

“Yeah. You ready to leave?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and looked back at the swing. “It was a good day.”

Madi didn’t answer. Couldn’t. In seconds, Sarah was down the street, leaving her to follow. Madi glanced down at her phone, forgotten in her hand. In the last stressful minutes, a new post had appeared on her dashboard. Her throat ached as she read it.

# That moment when your parents mess up

and suddenly you're the 'go-to' adult in the family.



15 minutes ago | 15 notes

#Parental Units #TMI #Adventures in RL #WHY????

- laurentabelard likes this
- museonfire likes this
- shakespearegirlz likes this
- artwithattitude likes this

With a sigh, Madi hit REBLOG.

This was the worst possible day in a long string of them, and her sister, Sarah, didn't know the half of it.

## 2

“I don’t understand. All my life I’ve been waiting  
for someone, and when I find her, she’s . . . she’s a fish.”

(*Splash*, 1984)

The Nakama house was unnervingly quiet. The moment they’d walked inside, Madi’s mother had stormed upstairs and slammed the bedroom door.

*Discussion over.*

It made Madi want to scream.

She slumped at the kitchen table, phone in hand. The view of her father, sitting across from her, was partially blocked by the screen of his laptop and the long swath of black hair that hung limp in her eyes. *Dad won’t say anything*, she thought irritably. *He never does.*

She spun her thumb and a series of messages rolled up the screen. Several tweets had been posted in the last few minutes. They echoed shock at Madi’s solitary message, shouted to the universe at large:

**@MadLib:** The parental units have really done it this time. Why do they pull shit like this and LEAVE ME TO HANDLE THE FALLOUT?!? #WTF #ParentalFail

She smiled sadly as she read the replies.

**@fandometric:** @MadLib Saw your post. Anything I can do?

**@ModernDayWitch:** @MadLib Family emergencies are rough. Take

a moment and breathe. (Or get a voodoo doll. ;) Sending good vibes.

**@laurentabelard:** @MadLib Just heading home. I'm only a text or Skype away. I can't fix it but I can listen.

Madi sighed and tapped in a quick reply to the group of online friends:

**@MadLib:** @fandometric @ModernDayWitch @laurentabelard  
Thanks for the replies. Things are going to get worse before better.  
#DNW

She belatedly added a second, personal reply to Lauren, wishing, as she so often did, that her online friends lived nearby. She needed someone to talk to tonight. Her chest felt like it was caught in a vise.

**@MadLib:** @laurentabelard I know. I might text you later.

She looked back up to find her father still typing. The silence of the house was as upsetting as the news. Madi had expected something—*anything!*

“I wish you'd told me before, Dad,” Madi said.

He didn't look up or respond, though his mustache twitched.

“If you ask me,” she added, “this whole thing's going to be just as hard as Sarah's first day of high school. There's going to be fallout from this.”

Her father lifted his gaze from the screen for a fleeting second. “Then we'll manage.” His eyes dropped. “Just like we always have.”

Madi's phone buzzed and she read the notification.

**@laurentabelard:** @MadLib Msg me anytime. I'm up late. (Always.)  
You know I'm here for you.

Madi smiled at the sentiment. Lauren was a good friend.

From the far room, a musical swell of intergalactic proportions began.

"It's starting, Madi!" Sarah called.

Madi leaned sideways, balancing the wooden chair on two legs. "Just a sec! I'm talking to Dad."

His typing slowed. "Could you get your sister to keep it down? I have a bunch of articles to finish. Editor needs them by tomorrow morning."

"But we can't put off telling her. She deserves to—"

"These aren't going to write themselves," he interrupted. "And your mother and I *are* going to tell Sarah. We're just waiting for the right moment. We don't want to upset her unnecessarily."

Madi's phone buzzed again, but she ignored it. "Mom's leaving Saturday morning. If you ask me—"

"Friday night, actually."

"Friday?!"

"Mm-hmm."

"Then the sooner you tell Sarah, the better."

"It's not that simple, and you know that," he sighed.

"What I *know* is Mom's running off, and I'm stuck picking up the pieces."

"That's hardly fair."

"This is exactly what happened when she took the research grant."

Her father lifted his hands from the keyboard and steepled his fingers. He didn't quite make eye contact, just looked over Madi's shoulder. She hated when he did that. "That was two years ago," he said.

"And Sarah *still* freaks out when we drive by the airport." Madi leaned forward, trying unsuccessfully to catch his eyes. "You need to talk to Mom. She can't keep doing this. Every time it happens, it's harder to—"

"Madi!" Sarah shrieked. "The movie's on NOW!"

Charles shrank at the sound of his daughter's screams.

Madi craned sideways. "Just a second, Sarah! I'm about to—"

"But it's ON! The movie's starting! It's starting right NOW! Hurry, Madi! HURRY!" Her sister's words faded into sharp-pitched cries.

Charles closed his laptop with a *snap*. For the first time, he met Madi's gaze and her breath caught. Her father didn't look annoyed, nor did he look angry. He looked utterly *exhausted*.

“You’d better go,” he said, cringing as the screams rose to earsplitting levels. “Sarah sounds upset. I’m going to work in the office.”

“MADI! MADI, COME ONNNN!!!”

Her father tucked the laptop under his arm and walked away.



In the living room, a sci-fi sound track roared, the deep bass shuddering the windows. Sarah’s panicked shouting faded into excited cries as Madi appeared.

“It’s starting! It’s starting! Hurry!”

“Sorry I’m late,” Madi said.

“Sit down!”

Slumping down on the cushion at her side, Madi took a surreptitious glance at her sister. Sarah was rapt. She didn’t smile or look over, but she leaned against Madi. This was the closest personal contact Sarah ever initiated, and the little gesture was the thing that finally tipped the balance. Madi’s vision blurred with tears as the worry that had been eating away at her came rushing back. *Oh my God. When Sarah finds out about Mom, she’s gonna freak!* She pulled out her phone and flipped through the contacts she knew well enough to text.

@ModernDayWitch worked night shifts. @fandometric was cool, but kept to himself. And @StarveilBrian1981 didn’t commiserate unless the discussion involved science fiction or the military.

Her finger spun one last time and paused. @laurentabelard was an exchange student and relatively new to the MadLibs community, Madi’s blog. The only reason Madi had even noticed Lauren in the first place was that when she got active in the MadLibs fandom, she’d begun posting her comments in French.

Curious, Madi had pasted Lauren’s first, tentative comment into Google Translate, and the answer appeared: *“I love the MadLibs blog. It’s fantastic! Very interesting. Can’t wait to read more!”* In the months since, Madi had watched Lauren’s name rise up the ranks of the most active MadLibbers. They’d even texted a few times.

Madi had launched the MadLibs website two years before in hopes of shar-

ing her love of popular culture. For Madi, her fans were a benevolent mass of unknowns, cheering her on from behind an array of usernames. The blog had succeeded far beyond her wildest dreams: More than sixty thousand readers followed her posts directly, with twice that many popping in to read on a daily basis. The MadLibs site had nearly half a million hits each month, and that number was rising! Her followers called themselves “MadLibbers,” and there were offshoot fan sites that boosted the signal to the Internet at large. According to Lauren, there was a fan collective based in Paris who painstakingly translated each of her posts.

Madi loved this connection to the world! Her readers voted topics and Madi covered them. The rewatches she hosted included everything from video games to Old Hollywood movies. In addition to her posts, Madi tweeted a running commentary, liveblogging the experience with her global followers.

Lauren was one of Madi’s countless fans, and though Madi had never met her, they regularly chatted online. Lauren seemed supportive. Madi popped open her contacts and thumbed in a brief message.

u around, l?

On-screen, an epic battle began. Madi watched from under half-closed lids. Combat scenes weren’t really her thing. She saw the use of them, but she was too good at guessing the outcome. The hero, for one, always made it through with seconds to spare. (Spartan would be no different.) A pulsing trio of dots appeared on her phone’s screen, letting her know a reply was about to arrive.

salut, madi! feeling better? 😊

hardly. i rly need someone to talk to. u up for a bitchfest? 😡

absolutely! is this about the “parental unit” tweet?

yes and no. it's a looooooong story

the subway ride will be longer. (still not used to that word. i typed metro three times before I remembered what it was)

use metro—it sounds cool—like a steampunk novel 😁

nice! 😁 now, you said you had a story for me . . . ?

my mother's leaving

😞 like forever? a divorce?

not a divorce (though I wonder if that's coming) she got a fellowship

hold on. i need my translator

it's like an exchange but for grown-ups—like what u r doing! only she's not attending a school, she's teaching

??? 😞

she's a prof at princeton.  
fellowship is to oxford (uk)

ah! and you're sad because she's leaving?

sort of but that's not really the issue

it's not?

it's my sister

sorry, i don't follow.

all right, long text ahead & TMI warning: i'm telling u MAJOR family drama now. u r SWORN TO SECRECY. no sharing. u promise?

promise 😊

my sister has some challenges

?

special needs

i'm sorry to hear that. what's wrong?

she's on the spectrum. she needs routine & if she has it, she does really well. she's brilliant, actually. (she'll probably end up going to harvard or something.) but whenever her schedule gets messed up, everything goes to hell . . . FAST.

oh no 😞

exactly

do you have anyone you can talk to? someone who can visit (what's the american saying?) to talk to you head-to-head?

(the saying is face-to-face). no. not really. i help a lot with Sarah, but otherwise i don't have a lot of outside contact. i mean i do have friends and all, but they're online mostly. 😞 i sound like a creepy shut-in. i'm not, i promise! it's just complicated.

you don't sound creepy. 😊  
you sound angry and sad.

YES

it's normal.

why?

i hid in my room every night for the first month after i left france.

ugh! it would be horrible to be so far away from home 😞

it's all right now. nyc is quite spectacular. very distracting. bright and interesting. 😊

OMG i never knew you were in ny! (my aunt lisa lives there.) i'm in nj. THAT'S ONLY FORTY MINUTES AWAY FROM YOU!!! 😊

really? that's crazy!

ikr? here i have these friends around the world & one is right in my backyard

i have an idea! COME TO NY THIS FRIDAY!  
we're going to a movie!!!!!!!!!!!!

Madi's hand hovered over the screen, considering how to reply. Friday was the day her mother left. If Madi went out, she'd avoid the drama with Sarah, and would return only after her sister had settled down. She glanced guiltily at Sarah. Real life was already in a nosedive; a night out couldn't make it any worse.

*But . . .*

The anxious side of Madi's mind began a slide show of late-night TV horror stories: young women lured to an untimely death by Internet predators. She only knew Lauren online. Her user pic was an old camera, nothing else. Madi cursed herself for not finding @laurentabelard on Snapsed. What did she *really* know about her friend? Nothing at all. *This is stupid. I hardly know her. I should just say no.* But the truth was, Madi didn't want to.

She typed a question.

where in ny?

an old movie house called the metrograph  
(lower east side). ny is the midway point for a lot  
of us. (though we meet in other places, too.) the  
madlibbers from ny and nj and pennsylvania get  
together a couple times a month to do a rewatch.

madlibbers like—my readers???

YES!

but . . . why? 😞

why what?

why do you get together?

because we are REAL friends. come along with us! it'll be marvelous! i've gone to three of these events already and i'd love to meet you!

i don't know . . . that sounds a bit weird.  
i mean I don't rly know any of u. 😐

why would it be weird? come meet your fans!

LOL fans???

YES! we are all your fans. you're madlib herself! you're internet famous, don't you know?

hardly 😊

please, madi. i've SEEN your follower count. you really are internet famous! think about it.

could we talk first?

??? we are talking.

no, i mean like skype or something—just so i know who u r

oh, yes! yes, of course!

“Madi,” Sarah whined, elbowing her. “You’re not even watching the movie!”  
The smile slid from Madi’s face and she sat up, focusing her attention on the technicolor explosions filling the television. Her phone buzzed.

are you online?  
we could talk right now if you want.

i'm doing a rewatch ATM, but how  
about afterward?

great! i'll wait for you to ping me. 😊

cool 😊

Madi dropped her phone back into her pocket. She had a movie to watch, a blog to write, and a family meltdown to avert. Maybe, just maybe, she deserved a night on the town after all of that.

She turned to Sarah: “So, what’d I miss? Give me a recap.”

Her sister gave her an intense half frown. Anyone who *didn't* know her would assume she was annoyed, but Madi knew better. Sarah was enthralled.

“The movie started with a scene of Tekla on the Star Freighter *Hyperion*—leading the rebels and giving a bit of backstory,” Sarah whispered. “Then the action cut to the rebel base on Earth. Darthku’s troops just showed up at the space station on the moon. Right now they’re getting ready to attack. But don’t worry. Captain Spartan has already alerted the ground troops.” She turned her attention back to the ongoing movie. “He’s going to stop them. Tekla knows they’re trapped, and if Spartan can contact the *Hyperion*, then they’ll have the reinforcements they need. . . .”

Madi’s emotions rose alongside the music, the space opera drawing her into an epic battle of flashing explosions and decadent visuals. She let out a satisfied sigh, her anxiety receding into a dull hum. This was why she loved rewatches. They were an escape—*her escape!*—and everything seemed easier to deal with once she was immersed. The weight of worries that had filled the week lifted. She’d meet Lauren tonight, albeit via Skype, and if all went well, she’d be going into New York to meet the rest of the MadLibbers on Friday.



It was past ten when the movie ended and Madi retreated to her bedroom. She paused in front of her mirror, smoothing her hair and straightening her latest TeeFury shirt, an homage to *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*. She peered at herself. While her sister Sarah's expression could be described as "intense," Madi's was pure mischief. Almond-shaped eyes sparkled in an elfin face framed by black hair. Smiling or scowling, happy or sad, her dimpled cheeks and impish grin made Madi look like she was about to tell a joke. She stuck out her tongue and her reflection did the same. Much as she might wish it otherwise, she'd always be "cute" rather than a classic beauty. It bugged her.

With a sigh, she opened the video-chat program and typed in Lauren's e-mail address. A thrill of excitement danced the length of her spine. She always got nerves when meeting people for the first time and preferred the neutral distance of online interactions to face-to-face meetings. Skype hovered in the no-man's-land between the two approaches.

"Here goes nothing."

Madi clicked CONNECT.

There was the requisite dance of image and sound, bouncing merrily from Madi's laptop in Millburn to a satellite, and from there back down to Lauren's computer in New York. The video flickered and Madi leaned into the screen.

A man appeared.

"Whoa, Nellie!"

Her hand was halfway to the laptop's touch pad, intending to hang up the video-chat connection, when she froze. Her mouth fell open. She had seen good-looking guys before—*every movie she ever watched was full of them!*—but someone with features so chiseled they could have been borrowed from a movie poster was another thing entirely. The stranger's clothes were an eclectic mix of pop culture and high fashion—a retro comic book tee mixed with jeans and a faded leather jacket that sported a TARDIS pin on its collar. The look separated him from every boy Madi knew.

"Oh . . . wow!" The words were out before she could think better of them.

He was a gorgeously realistic anime character come to life . . . and that face. *OMG that face!* He caught her eyes on-screen and she stopped breathing.

"Hello?"

“I—you—” Madi struggled to make sounds come out of her mouth, but with no air in her lungs it was a useless proposition. Lauren wasn’t home alone, she realized. And her boyfriend was damned hot!

Madi took a wheezing breath. “Jesus, take the wheel.”

“*Pardonnez-moi?*”

She blinked. “I, um—Did you just talk to me in French?”

“*Bien sûr,*” he said, then shook his head. “Yes, yes. Bad habit.”

He grinned, and the need to sigh hit Madi right in the center of her chest. (She didn’t. Swooning was for romantics, not bloggers.)

“Y-you must be Lauren’s boyfriend,” she said. *Her hot French boyfriend!* “Is she around?”

“Sorry, who? I thought you were Madi.” The French accent cloaked his words like expensive cologne. Subtle but distinct. Madi’s uncertainty grew. Hadn’t Lauren said she was an exchange student when they’d texted the other day? Madi looked at the e-mail address. Every letter was correct.

“I—yeah, I am. But I thought . . .”

This guy looked more like a college student than high school senior, but there were too many other clues to ignore. Madi’s stomach twisted. *Oh God—there’s no way this is happening.*

“You’re Madi,” he repeated. “From the MadLibs blog, right?”

“I am,” she said, then forced a smile. “I know this sounds weird, but how do you pronounce your name?”

“It’s Laurent.” The way he said his name tipped her off: *Luh-Ron*. It rhymed with LeBron—the accent on the second part of the name—clearly masculine. *Laurent Abelard, not Lauren Tabelard!* she realized. Madi fought the urge to face-palm.

“I didn’t realize it was you,” she said. “I thought you were a girl.”

“I didn’t, either. I thought you were . . .” He laughed. “I don’t know. Someone else. I expected someone . . . different.”

“Different?”

“I don’t know. You just look like—like—”

Madi’s wanton perusal came to a screeching halt. *What. The. HELL.*

“Like what?” she snapped.

“Like a blogger.”

“A blogger? What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

He shrugged “I . . . I don’t know. You’re just not what I expected.”

Madi drew herself up to her full height, vibrating with anger. “Sorry to disappoint you, but there are lots of people who look lots of ways—”

“But I only meant—”

“—and bloggers come in all shapes and sizes—”

“Yes, I know, but—”

“—and MadLibs has a HUGE fan base! Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to my site each month. I’m eighteen years old. I’m an entrepreneur. I’m not some—some kid, or something!”

Laurent recoiled from the screen, his face blanching. “*Ah, non! Ce n’est pas le cas!* I—I’m so very sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just—I messed up. I didn’t think—I—I—*Pardonnez-moi, s’il vous plaît. Je ne veux pas vous ennuyer. . .*” His words tumbled out faster and faster, disappearing into a blur of anxiety-ridden French.

And that was the moment when Madi knew she was going to fall, and fall hard, because nothing was more romantic than a language you couldn’t understand and a young man who was anything but American who was spouting apologies and wringing his hands. (That doing it on-screen made him look like a matinee idol from some brooding French film was an added bonus.)

“It’s fine,” Madi said. “And it’s good to actually meet you, Laurent.” The masculine version of his name sounded strange. “It really is. No problem.”

“I’m sorry about what I said before. When I get flustered, I tend to say whatever pops to mind. That’s not always a good policy. I had a picture in my mind and you weren’t that, and I spoke without thinking.” He covered his heart with his hand. “I’m so very sorry, Madi. That was awful of me.”

“I have the same problem with saying whatever pops to mind.”

“You do?”

The corners of her mouth curled mischievously. “It’s gotten me in serious trouble more than once, I promise.”

“Oh-ho! This sounds good.”

“It is. But it’s a story for another time.”

Laurent’s smile changed. Madi couldn’t exactly say *how*, only that she suddenly felt warmer. His eyes were intent—gold-green darkening to hazel at the edges—and she had the sudden urge to look away. *She couldn’t.*

“I want to hear your story,” he said. “Please tell me.”

Madi bit the inside of her cheeks to try to control the grin that seemed determined to flash back again. The heat of her bedroom jumped ten degrees.

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll tell you eventually. I can’t seem to keep a secret for the life of me.” She rolled her eyes. “That’s another issue.”

“Any way I can lure the story out?”

“I’m sure at some point I’ll spill the beans.”

The smolder in Laurent’s expression winked out, replaced by confusion. “Spill the . . . beans?” The heartthrob was gone, awkward tourist in his place. Madi watched as he pulled out his phone, the long-sleeved tee he was wearing pulling back slightly as he lifted it. A complex Japanese-style tattoo of fish and water appeared on his right forearm. Madi stealthily leaned across her keyboard and tapped PRINT SCREEN. (She’d check that out later!)

As if sensing her waiting, his gaze flicked up. Another jolt of awareness hit Madi, a spark of electricity arcing from his computer to hers. “I just need a minute to look that up: Spill. The. B—”

“It means I *will* tell you,” she said with a nervous giggle. “But not right now, Laurent. Okay?”

“Okay.” He set the phone down and the sleeve dropped, fish disappearing. “But if you’re not spilling the beans now, then I’ll expect you to spill the beans later.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I’ll be wanting *all* the beans at that point. No holding back your beans. All right, Madi? I will want *all* the beans.”

The wide smile she’d been holding in popped back. Laurent’s non-American earnestness was so endearing she didn’t have the heart to tell him how dumb he sounded.

“All the beans.” Madi laughed. “You got it.”

# 3

“I’m making this up as I go.”

(*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981)

Madi grimaced at the laptop screen, her eyes gritty from glare. Too excited after chatting with Laurent to sleep, she’d tossed and turned, wondering if the click she felt with him online would translate into a real-life connection. Only one way to find out: *talk to him in person*. Blushing at the imagined meeting, she returned her attention to her newest blog post.

Madi loved writing and she knew what she *wanted* to say, but with the mixture of bone-deep exhaustion and hormonal excitement, the words simply would not flow. She closed her eyes as Laurent’s laughing face appeared in her mind’s eye. Tired or not, she wouldn’t have given up their late-night chat for anything. Laurent was amazing! Any anxiety she’d had about going to New York on Friday to meet the MadLibbers was gone. She couldn’t wait!

With a happy sigh, she looked back to the laptop screen. Her smile faded. It was the ending of the *Starveil* rewatch that was throwing her. She twirled a long strand of black hair around her finger as she reread. She deleted two sentences and switched a third.

“Better,” she muttered, then scrolled to the stats screen.

**Would I rewatch this?** Not a chance. Too much angst.

She deleted her original answer, and typed in a new reply.

**Would I rewatch this?** YES, but only after a break.

No use provoking the die-hard fans if you didn't have to. There were far too many *Starveil* minions in the world. She turned her attention to the final paragraph.

And with a final blare of John Williams–esque trumpets, *Starveil V* came to a rather dismal ending. I expected—I don't know—something else, I guess? A hint of closure? Instead, the millions of viewers who worshipped the series were left to absorb the fact that their favorite character was dead. There was no reason for the sacrifice (except maybe for the little kid he saved, but I still think they both could have fit into the escape pod). Leaving Spartan to die was a rip-off. I didn't cry when he died—sorry, MadLibbers! You always get the truth here—but I definitely choked up. And I'm certain if I were a true *Starveil* fan—not a blogger moonlighting as one—the ending would have broken me.

Here are my final stats.

**Series Rating:** 8/10 Mad!Cows, with definite Mad!Love going out to the early B-movie stylings of SV1 and SV2. Loved those films!

**Movie Rating** (for SV5 specifically): 6.5/10 with a side of disappointment for obvious fridging. No reason for that!

**Would I rewatch it?** YES, but only after a break.

And thus ends the MadLibs for the *Starveil* saga, which means . . . \*drumroll, please\* . . . the comment box is open for suggestions for my NEXT MadLib. Remember: It's your job to keep me funemployed. (And on that note, the more you clickety-click on those ads, the more likely I'll get to order pizza for dinner, so thanks for that!)

\*musical accompaniment rises\*

\*exeunt\*

**MadLib**

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Comments enabled.

Tags: #MadLibs #StarveilV #Madi watches things and then blogs about them #Funemployment

Madi grinned as she reached the end. “And there we go.”

A rush of excitement filled her as she clicked `POST`. Attending online school allowed her the freedom to write whenever she wanted, and today she wanted to write! When she was doing other things—schoolwork, chores, exercising—Madi had to work to keep herself interested. Writing was the opposite. Finishing a blog always left her more “full” than empty. She leaned back in her rolling chair and pushed, feeling the telltale *pop* of released vertebrae from the hours of typing. She checked the time on her phone.

“Twenty minutes to the bell,” she muttered, climbing from the chair. “Time to go.”

These were the last hours of “normal” before her parents told Sarah about her mother’s departure. After that, it was anyone’s guess as to what would happen. *If only they’d told her already.* . . . But wishing changed nothing.

Delay tactics were well known in the Nakama household, and Madi wondered if they’d wait to tell Sarah until the very last second. If anything threw off Sarah’s schedule, then her whole day was off, and if her whole day was off, then school—even with support—wasn’t going to happen.

She flicked the laptop into sleep mode and slid her feet into flip-flops, heading for the stairs. A guilty smile crossed Madi’s face. Friday afternoon was D-day, but she’d be on the train into New York long before the bomb dropped.

In ten minutes, Madi had walked the six blocks to Millburn Academy, the private high school Sarah attended. She waited outside her sister’s classroom. The hall was mostly deserted, but Madi didn’t dare leave her post until Sarah arrived, another structure to her sister’s timetable that kept everyone’s life on an even keel. Madi leaned her head against the wall, eyes fluttering closed as she remembered Laurent on-screen the night before.

They’d been laughing about something she could no longer remember, when Laurent sighed and said: “*I should go. It sucks, but it’s late.*”

“*You probably should.* . . .” Madi smirked. “*I mean, if it’s your bedtime and all.*”

He snorted. “*Not my bedtime, no, but I have school in the morning. Have to do homework, too. What time is it, anyhow?*” He glanced at his phone. “*Shit! Have we been talking that long? Forget homework. I need sleep.*”

*“Not sure you’ve heard, but I’m kind of a bad influence.”*

*“Don’t believe it.”*

*“My squeaky-clean looks are the perfect cover.” She giggled. “I’m the last person you’d ever suspect.”*

He lifted an eyebrow. *“Still don’t believe you. “*

*“Is that a challenge, Laurent?”*

*“Maybe.”* He flashed her a sucker-punch smile she couldn’t help but return.

*“Then challenge accepted. Forget this nice-guy-exchange-student thing you’ve got going. I’m bringing you down!”*

*“Bring me down? Down to what?”*

*“Complete and utter reputation destruction!”*

And for some reason that had sent the two of them into gales of laughter so loud Madi had had to muffle her face in her pillow to keep from waking her parents and sister.

At the end of the hallway a door squeaked and Madi’s lashes opened. She smothered a yawn behind her hand as a teen with short red hair and a wide smile appeared. He was a classmate Madi remembered from her freshman year of high school, and though they’d been in several classes together, Madi could no longer remember his name. His parents owned the Colonial Inn.

“Hey, Madi,” he said. “Nice to see you around again.”

“Mmph,” she mumbled in agreement. What was his name? *Ron? Rob? Rupert? No, that’s the kid from the Harry Potter movies.* Madi’s sluggish brain wouldn’t provide the answer other than “Gingersnap,” and she was certain he wouldn’t appreciate a reminder of the schoolyard taunt.

“You here to pick up your sister?”

“As always.”

“Thought maybe you decided to rejoin the rest of us drones.” His voice dropped into a robotic monotone. “We are the borg. You will be assimilated.”

“Not a chance.”

“Resistance is futile.”

“Unless you do online school.”

His smile drooped at the edges. “Wish my parents were as cool as yours. I begged them for weeks after you took off.”

“Er . . . yeah.” He seemed to be waiting for her to say something else, but she wasn’t sure what. A few uncomfortable seconds passed.

“Well, it was good seeing you again,” he said.

The nameless boy waved as he disappeared into a nearby classroom, and Madi felt herself relax. Interactions were so much easier online.

A minute passed.

Then two.

At the five-minute mark, Madi was once again dozing against the wall, eyes closed, when the sound of clicking heels warned her of an adult’s arrival. She opened her eyes to discover a steely-haired teacher making a beeline to her side. The woman peered at Madi from behind thick rectangular glasses.

“Hallway pass?”

“Oh, I’m not in a class,” Madi said sleepily. “I’m just here to—”

“I know you’re not in class,” she interrupted. “That’s why you need a pass. All students are provided passes for rest breaks. Where is yours?”

Madi pulled herself up to her full height (barely reaching the woman’s shoulders), trying to look alert. “But you see, ma’am, I’m only—”

“I need your pass,” she said irritably. “Hurry, please. I have a meeting and don’t want to be late.”

“But I don’t *need* a pass,” Madi insisted. “I’m here as one of the guardians for my sister, Sarah.”

The woman’s eyebrows rose until they almost met her tightly curled gray hair. “*You’re* her guardian?” she said uncertainly.

“I am.”

“But Mr. Wattley teaches an Advanced Sciences class.”

“Yes, he does.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed behind thick glasses. She pulled a pen from one jacket pocket, a small pad of paper from the other. “What’s the name of your sister? I need to check into this. There’s a protocol for pickups, you know. The school can’t just have *anyone* wandering in off the street.”

The way she said *anyone* riled Madi. “It’s Sarah,” she said. “Now may I ask *your name*, ma’am? Because every teacher in this school *knows* I pick up Sarah from school. I’ve done it every day for the last two years.”

The woman's heels clattered as she stumbled back a step. "Well, I never!" She sucked in a breath through pursed lips. "There's absolutely no call for rudeness. There are rules to pickups. Now, if you'll come with me—"

"Oh, I can't go anywhere! Sarah will be out in two minutes and—"

At that moment the door opened and Mr. Wattlely appeared in his usual bedraggled state. Hair sprang from his head in tufts; his white lab coat was misbuttoned. "Oh my! Mrs. Preet. You're . . ." He glanced at Madi. "You're here early."

"Mr. Wattlely," she said stiffly, her double chin rising in authority. "I was just having a discussion with Miss . . ." She glowered down at Madi.

"Nakama," Mr. Wattlely said. "Sarah's sister. She picks her up a few minutes before the bell goes."

"Nakama?" the woman repeated. "As in Charles Nakama?"

Madi winced. Millburn was a small town where everyone knew everyone else's business. Since Charles Nakama's popular "Down Home" column headed the *Tri-State Herald*, the largest-distributed paper in New Jersey, Madi's father was practically a celebrity. His photograph accompanied each post. "Down Home" included topics that highlighted family values and traditional beliefs. It was serialized in papers across the US. Everyone who read it knew and recognized Madi's father. By proxy, everyone knew *her*. She hated that.

"Yes," Mr. Wattlely said. "Madi's a senior here, but her sister, Sarah—"

Mrs. Preet's attention swiveled back like a hawk on a mouse. "I thought you said you weren't in classes."

Madi's phone buzzed, but she forced herself not to look. "I'm not. I mean, I *am*—but only online." She crossed her arms, wishing she were anywhere but here. She was too tired for verbal gymnastics. "I'm not a regular student. I do Millburn's off-campus program."

"The online high school?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Preet nodded and scribbled a note into her book. "I'll have to check into that."

Madi let out a frustrated sound somewhere between a laugh and cough. "Check into *what*? I'm just here to pick up my sister." In her exhaustion, all the

annoyance at her parents came surging back. She pointed into the classroom to where Sarah was engrossed in organizing her backpack. “It’s part of Sarah’s program. I do this literally every day.”

“I’m sure you do,” Mrs. Preet said matter-of-factly. “I just hadn’t been told. I pride myself on knowing what’s going on at my school.” Her attention turned to Mr. Wattlely. “I assume you’re ready for our discussion.”

“Of course. Just let me send Sarah off.”

She strutted into the classroom, leaving Madi and Mr. Wattlely staring after her.

“I, er, I should have warned you,” he said. Sarah arrived and headed down the hallway without pause. (Schedules were schedules, and Sarah’s didn’t vary.)

“Warned me about what?”

Mr. Wattlely gave a nervous smile. “That is Mrs. Preet. She’s taken over for Mr. Palmer as the new assistant principal. She’s very interested in efficiency and organization.” He coughed. “And rules.”

Madi wilted. “Thanks for the warning, Mr. Wattlely,” she said as she shouldered her pack. “I’ll keep that in mind.”



Phone in hand, Madi scrolled through her dashboard as she and Sarah walked home. Sarah had launched into a rehash of today’s topic from physics class, and as much as Madi wanted to be interested in string theory, there was no way she was going to keep up with her sister’s train of thought. Sarah’s monologue continued, unabated, street by street.

Madi rolled her thumb up the screen and a new post appeared. She giggled. Sarah’s speech fumbled, and she glanced over at Madi. “What?”

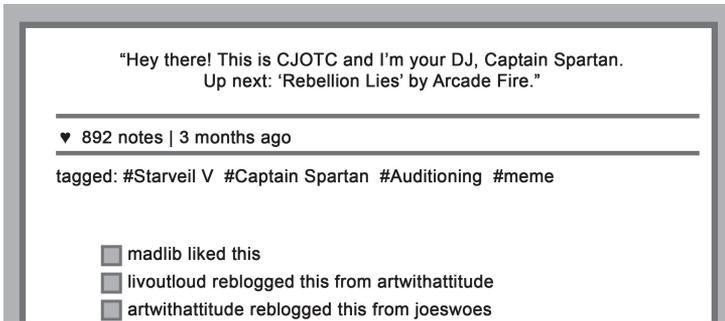
“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. You laughed at something.”

“I didn’t.”

“You did.”

“Fine,” Madi said. “It’s this post. See?” She turned her phone’s screen so her sister could see. “It’s about *Starveil*!”



Sarah frowned. "I don't get it."

"The *Starveil* series is about a rebellion."

"I know that."

"And Captain Spartan's the 'OTC' in 'CJOTC.' Like, the one true character."

"Yeah."

"Well, the song's by Arcade Fire," Madi explained. "And there was the big explosion on Io when the rebels were betrayed."

"So what?"

"The title is 'Rebellion Lies.'"

"I still don't get it."

"It's just that . . ." Madi let out a tired sigh and put her phone away. She patted Sarah's arm. "So, what were you saying about superstrings?"

Her sister nodded and continued.



The rest of the week passed in a heartbeat. There were simply too many things to do and never enough time to do them. More than once, Madi thought her parents were going to tell Sarah that her mother was leaving, but in every case the moment passed and the announcement was delayed yet again. Sarah had no idea.

As Friday morning and afternoon dragged by, Madi threw herself back into blogging. Writing was a distraction. And if she needed one thing, it was a way to not think about meeting her fans. She shuddered. The line she so carefully followed—keeping online and real life separated—was going to be breached, if

only for tonight. Panicked, she did the one thing that she knew would solve it: She focused entirely on her blog.

By late afternoon, she'd finished her latest MadLib rewatch, and she posted it as she headed out the door.

**Blog Post 208**, Friday 3:48 p.m.:

***Mad, Mad Choices!***

Keep those votes coming in, MadLibbers, because the race is a close one! The four main options at this point are:

*Star Wars* saga. Thank you to @StarveilBrian1981 for nominating it and also for suggesting the *Starveil* series. That was a blast!

*Supernatural*, seasons one to infinity. Thank you to @WinchesterForLife for the suggestion. I'm definitely open to this one (and I'm actually not sure why I haven't seen this yet). So much fandom potential here.

*Buffy* series. OMG OMG OMG OMG This would be SPECTACULAR! \*puppy-dog eyes\* I definitely would be open to a rewatch for this 'verse. But the MadLibbers are always right—so make your own choice. \*coughs\* Vote Buffy. \*cough\* PLEASE. \*cough\*

'80s movies. This one's the dark horse at this point, but I think there's a chance it could happen. (I'm actually named because of an '80s film, but I'm not sharing that story unless your votes demand it.) If '80s movies are a go, we'll do a second round of voting for the actual films.

Happy voting, everyone!

\*confetti canon\*

**MadLib**

PS: I'll respond to comments as soon as I can—I'm off for a bit of R&R tonight.

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Comments enabled.

Tags: #MadLibs #Round Two MadLibbing #Madi watches things and then blogs about them #Funemployment



Madi walked through the Penn Station arrivals area, her backpack clutched tight against her chest. She scanned the crowd. There were no screaming teens wearing her recently sold-out MadLibs shirts, no signs with WELCOME MADI! to signal her online-to-real-life arrival.

“This was a terrible idea,” she muttered as she forded the crowd. “What in the world was I thinking?”

It wasn’t that Madi was *against* meeting new people, she just wasn’t used to it. Her role at home was to keep things calm and help out with Sarah. Here—alone and on her own in New York—she wasn’t quite sure what to do. She thought of herself as independent: The MadLibs blog had been a source of income for well over a year. But the difference between her online life and reality overwhelmed her.

Seeing no one waiting to meet her, Madi headed to the chairs in the waiting area. A young woman with blue hair glanced up as Madi neared.

“Are you a MadLibber?” Madi asked with a quick wave. The woman stood from the chairs and Madi smiled in relief.

The teen pushed past her, launching herself into the arms of an older woman who was approaching from the same direction as Madi. “Mom! You made it!”

People in the chairs around Madi smirked. A teen boy snickered and leaned toward his friend, whispering. Horrified at her gaffe, Madi waved at an indeterminate person in the distance.

“Coming!” she said, bustling past the onlookers and disappearing around the next knot of people. “Just a second!”

She dropped her hand as the crowd closed behind her. “Shouldn’t have come,” she grumbled. “Dumb. Dumb. Dumb.”

Someone *should* be here to meet her. Laurent had promised her that. But in her excitement to come, Madi had totally forgotten to find out *who*.

“This is why the Internet was invented.” She sighed as she peered into the sea of faces.

Tonight the group of online friends would be heading to the newly renovated Metrograph theater on the Lower East Side to see a rerelease of *Blade Runner*. It had seemed like a good idea when Laurent mentioned it, but with the moment nearing, she’d lost her excitement.

Stumbling past burdened travelers and wearied mothers, Madi felt her

cheeks prickling, imagining every eye attuned to her. *What if the MadLibbers don't like me?* Before the thought could take hold, she found the farthest chair from the crowd and sat down, pulling out her phone.

*Wi-Fi!*

She was here. There was no way out except through. She slumped down in the seat, phone in front of her face to block her from strangers. Worst-case scenario, she had the return ticket in her wallet. She'd hang out here all night and play on her phone, then return home no worse for wear. It wasn't a fun evening by any means, but she'd manage. She peeked over the top of the screen, spying a nearby snack shack and, farther down, a sign for bathroom facilities. Food, Wi-Fi, a bathroom within walking distance. Yes, she'd survive.

With a sigh, she opened the MadLibs site, scrolling through the comments section. As expected, Brian was campaigning for another space epic. She shook her head as she read through his commentary.

### **Comments on Blog Post 208: Mad, Mad Choices!**

**Comment 12.1, @StarveilBrian1981:** Thanks for MadLibbing the *Starveil* series, @MadLib. I knew you'd be a fan! It was great to see it through your eyes. Very cathartic. If you ever want to talk about it, I'm always open. There's a great fandom online. And I'm excited to see *Star Wars* got short-listed for your next rewatch.

Madi typed in a reply, careful to keep her tone neutral. Her years of blogging had taught her the skill of fan management, and Brian seemed to be pricklier than most.

**@MadLib:** Thank YOU, @StarveilBrian1981, for the *Starveil* suggestion AND for the *Star Wars* suggestion for the upcoming MadLibs vote. Good luck with the campaign! Voting's open until Saturday. I'll try to tabulate the votes by the end of this weekend (if not sooner).

His answer appeared seconds after she posted her reply and refreshed the page.

**@StarveilBrian1981:** To quote Spartan—"Trying is for fools. Rebels just do!" I really think *Star Wars* would be a great choice. I mean, it's no *Starveil*, but you can see which canon elements are linked. I wrote a big meta post on that last week. I can't post a link here, but if you search my username, you'll find it.

She slumped lower, typing another reply to Brian.

**@MadLib:** That's really awesome, @StarveilBrian1981, but I've gotta run now. Talk to you later.

**@StarveilBrian1981:** Run where? I have more ideas I want to talk about.

**@MadLib:** Heading for a *Blade Runner* rerelease, but I PROMISE I'll be replying to comments later tonight. Bye!

**@StarveilBrian1981:** I love *Blade Runner*! You should post as you watch it. DO IT! I think there are LOADS of MadLibbers who'd be up for an impromptu liveblog! What do you say, @MadLib?

**@MadLib:** Um, great idea, @StarveilBrian1981, but I really can't. Gotta go.

**@StarveilBrian1981:** Okay, then, I'll just be waiting here. Reply when you get back. Okay?

A message from her father appeared on the phone's screen before she could type in her answer. Seeing it, a flicker of worry rose inside her—imagining Sarah getting tonight's news—but it turned out to be a list of reminders.

Madi. Don't forget to be waiting for the train at least fifteen minutes early. Be safe. Walk in groups. I know you've been to New York before, but—

Another text appeared on-screen before Madi could finish her father's message. This one was from Laurent, saying he had arrived.

Madi glanced up. She had seen Laurent on-screen and knew what to expect—the flawless face and perfect physique—but having attended a couple of comic conventions, Madi realized that small-screen perceptions didn't always align. The actors she'd met at conventions seemed smaller in real life. More approachable. Laurent in real life was something else entirely. If anything, he seemed bigger. Not just tall, but *huge*. Like some Asgardian god on a humble Earth-bound errand, he loomed over the crowd, searching for her. Details sprang into focus like the close-up of a made-for-TV movie star: tanned skin that hinted at Latin roots, a straight jaw dotted with dark stubble, longish hair that varied from caramel at the tips to brownish black at the roots, and a physique that made Madi think of every teen heartthrob she'd ever spent hours dreaming about. He literally could have been torn from the pop-music poster on her bedroom door. He lifted his phone and began to type one-handed.

*Oh. My. God. That can't be Laurent. I'm going to puke. Or die. Or puke and THEN die. That would be worse. He CAN'T be this hot in person. No freaking way—* Their eyes met. . . . *Yes way.*

"Madi!" He laughed. "I didn't see you there."

"It happens when you're only five feet . . ." Her breath caught as Laurent wrapped her in a sudden hug.

She was in his arms. *Laurent's arms!* He spun her around and set her back down again in the space of three seconds, then stepped back and slid his hands into his pockets. His face looked flushed under his tan, but she was still reeling from being touched, her mind pulling in a hundred different directions at once. Laurent smelled good. He felt good. He was so unbelievably beyond her level.

*Oh my God . . . I'm totally falling for him.*

"So are you ready?" he asked.

"R-ready . . .?"

"To go to the movie?"

"Oh—yeah, of course," Madi said. "You?"

He grinned. "Wouldn't miss a MadLibbers get-together for anything!"

# 4

“That’s why they call them *crushes*. If they were easy, they’d call ‘em something else.”

(*Sixteen Candles*, 1984)

Madi followed Laurent out of Penn Station and onto the street. It felt like surfacing; the sounds and smells of the city hit her in a wave of sensory overload. A taxi peeled by. A horn blared. People milled past, on their way to countless destinations. Madi squinted into the late-afternoon glare and smiled. The hum of millions of separate lives, woven together, gave her a buzz she couldn’t explain. Here in New York, she was faceless, unknown. *Herself*.

“You like the city?” Laurent asked.

She turned to find him watching. “Do I ever,” she said with a nervous laugh. “You?”

He grinned and started walking. “Wouldn’t be here otherwise. It’s amazing. So busy. So full of . . . of . . .”

“Life?”

He nodded, and Madi fell into step at his side. “So are we walking to the Metrograph? The Lower East Side seems a long way.”

“Oh no.” He laughed. “We’re just heading up to the Thirty-Fourth Street station. I grabbed you a ticket.”

“Thanks.”

“The metr—subway,” he corrected, “is so convenient. Just another block.”

Madi found herself puffing. Laurent’s long-legged stride was nearly twice

hers. A single person took position between them. Then two. Five. “Hold on,” she called, fearful of losing him in the crowds. “Can’t keep up.”

“Ah! Sorry.” He dropped his pace to match hers. “I should have waited. I’m just excited to get to the theater.”

The anxiety that had only just faded, tightened once more. “We’re not going to grab a coffee or something first?”

“No time,” he said. “I want a good seat.”

“But it won’t be busy,” Madi said. “I mean, it’s an early show of an old movie, right? I don’t think there’ll be a line or anything.”

“But there will! Everyone’s coming!”

Madi’s eyes widened. “Everyone . . . ?”

“The New York MadLibbers group has hundreds of regulars. They’re thrilled you’re coming tonight.”

“Y-you told them?”

He grinned. “Of course I did! And they’ll all want to talk to you. People started texting me as soon as I said you’d agreed. . . .” Laurent chattered on, but Madi couldn’t follow his words. This *wasn’t* what she’d imagined. A few people, yes, but an entire theater full of them?

“. . . and I want to make sure that my close friends get to meet you,” Laurent said. “Ava and Kelly and Morag.” In his excitement to explain, Laurent’s pace had returned to its previous speed, and Madi soon found herself lagging.

“Laurent, I really need you to slow down.”

He turned to discover her two steps behind. “Ah! *Je suis désolé!* Sorry, Madi.”

“It’s fine. Just short legs.”

“Your legs are perfectly sized.”

“That should be a compliment,” she said, “but it’s not. Short is short.”

“Petite. Tiny. Wee. Delicate.” Laurent glanced at his phone, apparently checking the dictionary. “Aha! Miniature,” he announced.

“That is *not* a compliment.” She snorted.

“No? Fitting, though.” He gave her a once-over. “Mini Madi sounds like a candy bar or—” Laurent yelped as Madi poked him in the ribs.

“Not funny!” She giggled.

“Then how about *minette* instead?”

She bit her cheeks to keep from smiling. “What does *minette* mean?”

Laurent slowed his steps as the stairwell entrance to the subway appeared.

“I’ll give you a hint: small, cute, but deadly, with . . .” He poked her and she lurched sideways, laughing, nearly colliding with a businessman emerging from the Thirty-Fourth Street entrance. “Claws.”

“You’re calling me a cat?” She was breathing hard, and not just from trying to keep up with him.

“Not any old cat,” Laurent said, grinning. “A kitten.”

“Kitten, hmmm?”

“Yes, *minette*.”

She couldn’t help noticing his hand hovering near her elbow, guiding her toward the entrance.

“Unless you prefer Mini Madi.”

“*Minette* is fine.” She laughed.



The crowd outside the Metrograph was visible a block away. Knots of people milled around the entrance, most of them wearing T-shirts that Madi herself had designed. *MadLibbing for the PEOPLE!* one announced. *It Madders because YOU say it does!* quipped another. *MADLIBERATION!*

“Oh my God,” Madi moaned. “Who *are* all these people?”

Laurent bumped her with his elbow. “Your fans, of course.”

“My fans?” Madi’s feet slowed. There were too many—far too many!—and she had no idea how she was supposed to act. This was completely different from online chatter. And any skills she’d once had with face-to-face interaction had long since faded. Dread filled her gut.

“C’mon,” Laurent said. “I have a few people I want you to meet. The friends I hang out with.”

“I guess that sounds all right.”

“Great! Come on!”

He walked toward a small group lounging near the alley on the far side of the street, half a block down. One girl had messy blond hair and an angry

scowl, the kind of person Madi would avoid on any other day. Beside her stood a beaming teen, braces flashing. Her pink T-shirt announced, *Mad for MadLibs*. She reminded Madi of an extra from the Disney channel.

The angry-looking girl glanced up, catching Madi's eyes. She scowled for the count of three, then her gaze shifted upward. Her expression backflipped into joy.

"Laurent!" she shouted. "You came!"

He strode forward, leaving Madi struggling to keep up. "I told you I'd be here."

"So what happened to MadLib? I thought you were heading to Penn Station to get her."

"I was—I did!" Laurent reached out, touching Madi's shoulder. "She's here. *This is Madi!*"

Madi waved nervously as all eyes turned on her. "Hiiiiiii . . ."

The Disney girl's eyes were so big they looked like they were going to pop. "You're her! You're Madi. Like the actual, real-to-life, in-the-flesh—"

The other girl stared at Madi with a look that reminded her all too much of the popular crowd at Millburn Academy. After a long moment she reached out a hand. "So we finally get to meet the infamous MadLib."

"Just Madi, thanks."

"I'm Ava."

Laurent nodded to the other teen. "And this is Chantal," he said smoothly. "She was going to pick you up, but I beat her to it."

"It's so weird to actually meet you," Chantal gasped, her hand to her chest. "I have so many questions! I just—I can't . . ." She let out a high-pitched giggle. "I've been wanting to talk to you forever."

"Thanks," Madi said. "It's good to be here." She peeked over at Laurent, who hadn't stopped grinning since they'd arrived.

Ava shook her head. "I still can't believe you're actually *here*. I mean, it just seems . . . weird or something."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Aren't you, like, a bona fide recluse or something? I mean, no one's actually met you before today."

“I’m not—”

Chantal grabbed Madi’s hand. “But you’re MadLib—Madi! And you’re here—with us—for real!” She laughed aloud. “That’s crazy!”

Madi smiled. “Thanks.”

“I’m so glad you came,” Chantal said. “I have so much to ask you.”

“Like what?”

“Like you write the MadLibs blog for a living, right?”

“Gainfully funemployed,” Madi said. Laurent chuckled at the joke, and she felt her cheeks warm. *Play it cool, Nakama!* She forced herself to focus on the two young women. “So how about you two?”

“What *about* us?” Ava asked.

“What do you guys do?”

“Art program.” Ava glanced at Laurent as if sharing some secret and then back to Madi. “Though I prefer painting. Not mainstream crap. *Real* art.”

“And I’m in high school,” Chantal added, still grinning.

“I hated high school,” Madi said. “Absolutely *loathed* it!”

“God, me, too,” Ava said. “So glad to be in college now.”

“I haven’t graduated yet,” Madi admitted. “I take online classes.”

Laurent laughed. “I don’t think I’d be able to focus long enough to finish anything. Way too many distractions on the Internet.”

“That’s how regular classes were for me,” Madi said. “I just kind of zoned out.”

“I can’t believe your parents let you do online school,” Chantal said with a wistful sigh. “So does it work the same as a regular high school?”

“Well, yes and no.” Madi grinned. Now that the shock had passed, she was starting to feel like herself again. Perhaps real-life interactions weren’t so bad. “Millburn Academy is a private school,” Madi said. “It has both regular classes and online courses. Taking my whole diploma through OMA—the online track of Millburn Academy—was sort of my idea.”

“It was?”

“My parents are pretty busy most nights, so I convinced them I’d help out more with my younger sister, if I could do online classes.” She shrugged. “I drop her off and pick her up after school, stuff like that. Seemed like a good trade.”

Ava looked skeptical. “And your parents were okay with that?”

“Eventually. They told me I could do OMA, but only for one semester, and only if I *proved* I could keep my marks up. So I spent all my time studying that first semester and . . . BAM!” She clapped her hands. “I was on the honor roll.”

“I barely slide by at the best of times.” Ava snorted.

“Ah, but you’re a badass,” Laurent said. “And that makes up for it.” Madi wasn’t sure why his comment to Ava irked her, but she soon forgot when he turned his attention back to her. “The honor roll is really cool, Madi. That takes a lot of work. Kudos to you.”

“It’s not as awesome as you’d think,” she said. “I’ve had to keep up those marks ever since.” She dropped her voice in imitation of her father. “You’ve got potential, Madi. You can’t waste that. I expect As from now on.”

“Oh no,” Chantal groaned. “Like for every class? And you’ve got to write your MadLibs blog, too?”

“Yup.”

“How do you manage?”

“I dunno,” Madi said with a laugh. “I just do. The blog is fun. School is work.”

One corner of Laurent’s lips curled up into a lopsided grin. “Aha! You set the bar,” he said. “Now you’re dealing with the consequences. You’re a victim of your own success.”

“Something like that,” Madi said. “But that’s not the half of it. My dad’s a journalist and my mom’s a professor of microbiology, so there’s all this pressure to follow in their footsteps. . . .”

If Madi had been worried before meeting Laurent’s friends when she arrived, those fears were gone. Even Ava seemed to have toned back the attitude. The MadLibbers were the perfect reflection of why she loved online friendships. Chantal, aka @WrittenInChantalics, was the ingénue of the group. Ava, aka @ArtWithAttitude, the rebel. And Laurent, aka @laurentabelard, was everyone’s leading man. Madi peeked over at him: the unkempt hair brushing his collar, his aesthetic balanced between European fashion and grad-student poverty. *Damnit! Some people have all the cards.* It was like he’d been plucked right out of a romantic comedy.

As if sensing her watching, Laurent looked up and smiled, green eyes sparkling. Madi looked away. *Too perfect*, she thought. *There's got to be a chink in the armor*. But if there was, she had yet to find it.

"We should probably head to the Metrograph," Laurent said. "It's going to be busy, and I want seats together." Across the street, the crowds were starting to disappear through the entrance. "You ready to go?"

A twinge of fear flickered in Madi's stomach, but she ignored it. "Sure."

Chantal moved in next to Madi as the group headed down the street. "Have you decided yet?" she asked breathlessly.

"Decided what?"

"What your next MadLib topic is! I could hardly sleep last night, I was so excited about it!"

Madi peeked over to find Chantal grinning. "I, um . . . I kind of—"

"Is it hard to choose?"

"Sometimes, I guess. Especially if I have two I really like."

"So how do you decide?" Chantal asked as they reached an intersection and stopped, waiting for the WALK signal. "How do you make the call?"

"Mostly it's based on votes," Madi said.

Ava smirked. "Do you ever cheat?" she teased.

"I swear we won't tell," Chantal added.

"Never needed to," Madi said. "I'm pretty good at guessing what people will choose."

"Do you know what this one will be?" Laurent asked.

"I'm hoping for *Star Wars* myself," Chantal said. "That or *Buffy*."

"*Buffy* is fantastic," Ava said fiercely. "I'm fighting for that one. You've got to choose it. All right, Madi?"

"It's up to the fans."

"But we're fans!" Chantal pleaded. "That counts for something, doesn't it?!"

Madi grinned.

"Can't we, like, bribe you or something?" Ava said drily. "*Buffy* needs a re-watch."

"*Star Wars* would be better!" Chantal argued.

"Would not!"

“Would, too.”

“You haven’t even SEEN *Buffy* yet!” Ava snapped. “How would you even know?”

Madi giggled.

“I’ll read whatever Madi blogs about,” Laurent said. “I’m all about the experience.”

“The experience?” Ava scoffed. “That sounds dirty, you naughty boy.” Madi fought the urge to defend him as Laurent’s cheeks flushed and he looked away.

“Not at all!” he said. “I came to America to be immersed—and popular culture is part of it.”

“I know, I know,” Ava said.

“But I do like eighties movies. They’re very . . . optimistic.”

Everyone laughed. Up ahead, the entrance to the Metrograph theater was nearly clear of people. Madi sighed in relief. By the time they arrived, she would be able to come inside unseen. Irritated, Ava paced back and forth on the sidewalk, waiting for the light to change.

“I’m so excited for this new MadLib,” Chantal said. “And that you’re here with us!”

“Only if we get seats in time,” Ava grumbled.

“It’ll be fine,” Laurent said. “Relax.”

Ava swore under her breath.

“The light’s going to change. Just give it a minute to—”

Ava darted out into traffic without warning. Chantal shrieked.

“Metrograph’s going to be packed,” Ava shouted as horns blared. “I’ll grab us places to sit. You catch up!”

They watched as she sprinted down the street and disappeared through the theater’s entrance.

“Only Ava.” Chantal giggled.

A minute later, the light changed and they crossed. Laurent dropped back, coming around behind them to fall into step at Madi’s side. She bit the inside of her cheeks to keep from grinning.

“You know, Laurent,” Madi said, “if eighties movies are your thing, you should go for it. I’m happy with whatever. But be warned: Brian’s determined to

bring a science-fiction renaissance to MadLibs. He and a few other people are promoting faves. *Star Wars* might take it.” She bumped him with her shoulder as they walked. “You should promote, too.”

Laurent smiled down at her. “Maybe I will.”

She nodded. “Good.”



Ava had been right. The Metrograph was packed. Row after row of refurbished seats was filled with a sea of strangers, their eyes following Laurent, Chantal, and Madi as they waded into the tide. Madi touched Laurent’s sleeve as her fears took hold. He glanced back.

“Are there any seats left?” she whispered, scanning the rows for an open section. “It doesn’t look like there are.”

“I’m sure there are some left. Ava texted me that she’s up near the front.” He glanced at his phone’s screen. “She says she saved four seats for us.”

Madi’s eyes skittered to the crowd. “I don’t know . . .”

His hand brushed hers, then moved away. “Trust me. All right?”

She nodded.

Whispers rose from the gallery as they came forward. Madi didn’t want to hear the people talking, but with the limited walking room, she couldn’t help it. Hissed phrases pushed at her from all sides. People leaned forward, staring.

“Is that her?”

“Not sure—”

“She doesn’t post pictures online. . . . Don’t know what she looks like.”

“But that’s Laurent, isn’t it?”

The sounds rose from a hiss to the sound of a swarm of bees.

“—he said he’d bring MadLib along.”

“It is her! I’m sure of it!”

“Madi!” a voice shouted. “MADLIB!”

Laurent took Madi’s hand, his warm fingers drawing her attention. She looked up. “C’mon. We’re over here.”

The crowd’s chatter had risen to fill the theater with the roar of a hundred voices. Madi could no longer make out individual words.

Laurent stepped into a row of seats near the front of the theater, but before Madi could follow, a middle-aged woman stood, blocking her way.

“You’re MadLib, aren’t you?” she exclaimed.

“I—I—”

Laurent leaned sideways, catching Madi’s eyes. “Got to go,” he said, cheerfully ignoring the human barrier that separated them. “Ava’s halfway down.” Laurent pulled her in front of him. Suddenly, his hands were on her shoulders, guiding her, and all Madi could focus on was the warmth.

“You looked worried.”

“Thanks, I was. . . . I’m okay now.” Her gaze lifted to the rows of the theater. People stood on chairs, pointing, and for once in her life Madi was glad she was barely five feet tall. “Where’s Ava sitting?”

“Just a little farther.”

“MadLib!” a voice nearby shrieked and Madi jumped.

Laurent leaned in, his mouth near her ear. “Sorry about all of this. You’re a bit of a celebrity with the MadLibbers, you know.”

“I’m starting to realize that.” Madi tucked her chin and walked faster.

“It IS MadLib!” someone cried.

Madi ducked down as soon as they reached their seats. Laurent sat next to Ava, Madi next to him, Chantal on Madi’s other side, buffering her from the crowd on each side. For a few seconds, Madi thought things might calm down, but then the woman sitting in the seat ahead of Madi turned around.

“Oh my God! It’s you! You’re really MadLib!” She stared over the back of her seat while Madi avoided eye contact. This was growing weirder by the second! “I heard you might be coming,” she gasped. “I didn’t believe it, but you’re here—with us—like really, *really* here!”

Madi’s gaze flicked up to discover the woman had leaned halfway over the seat. Ava snorted with laughter.

“Madi,” Ava said drily, “this here is Steph, though you probably know her as @antebellumintro. Steph, this is MadLib—also called Madi.”

“It’s good to put a face to the name,” Madi said, though she had no recollection of that MadLibber’s name. There were simply too many fans.

"It's so great to meet you!" Steph cried. "I couldn't believe it when Ava said she needed seats, but not just for anyone. For MadLib herself!"

"Thanks." Madi sank lower in her chair, but Steph leaned closer.

"I'd heard Laurent was bringing you," she continued. "But I didn't think you'd actually come. I've followed your blog for almost two years. You've never met your fans before." She reached out her hand to shake. "It's seriously awesome to meet you!"

"Thanks."

Madi slid down until she was almost reclining.

Ava stood and gently took Steph's shoulders. "Honey, you're overcrowding the talent. Maybe some breathing room?"

"Of course! Let's talk later, all right?"

"Um . . . okay?"

Steph grinned and slid back into her seat.

For a second, Madi thought the worst was over. "Thanks, Ava," she said. "I appreciate you—"

But before Madi could finish, a new face appeared, leaning across the aisle in front of Laurent to get Madi's attention. "Hey, Madi!" he shouted. "I was wondering if you could sign the coffee mug I got from your store!" He shoved it toward her.

"Sorry, do what?"

"Sign my mug!" A Sharpie marker appeared in the man's grip. "If you could write: 'To Ben, from MadLib,' that'd be great!"

"I guess," Madi said, "but we've got to hurry. The movie will be starting in a minute, and I don't—"

"It'll only take a second. Besides, there's a bunch of people waiting to talk to you."

Madi looked up from writing. Her eyes widened. "Oh hell no. . . ."

In the last seconds of stilted conversation, a line of people had appeared in the row. The queue of fans stretched down the length of the chairs and wound up the aisle, as at least thirty people waited for a chance to talk to her.

"MadLib! Madi! MADIIII!"

For fifteen endless minutes, Madi signed and talked and shook hands with a blur of fans who'd made the incongruous jump from her online world to real life. Everyone had a story to tell. Each person a request. Every once in a while, Madi caught Laurent's gaze, but he seemed as helpless to stop the tide of MadLibbers as she was. The theater lights dimmed, but the MadLibbers kept coming.

"I'm sorry," Madi said, wobbling from exhaustion. "But the movie—"

Suddenly, Ava rose and pushed her way in front of Madi, directly into the line of fire. Her voice rang out through the theater. "Madi's only got time to say hello. No signings, no requests!" she bellowed. "If you want to talk after the show is over, she'll be available for fifteen minutes. No more!"

"Thank you for following my blog!" Madi shouted as they turned away. "I'd love to talk to you after the movie!"

With a few shouts of "MadLib!" the line dispersed into the growing darkness.

Grinning, Madi sat down. "Thanks for wrangling the crowd, Ava. I didn't think I'd ever get through that."

Ava smirked. "Not a problem. But you'd better be ready for more meet and greet after the movie ends. I gave you a breather, not an out. There'll be die-hards waiting the second the credits roll."

Madi peered over her shoulder. If the theater had been busy before, it was now full to capacity. Attendants walked the aisles, guiding the people huddled on the stairs to the nosebleed seats in the back.

"This is all so crazy." She laughed.

"What's that?" Laurent asked, sliding his coat from his shoulders. The koi flashed to life, swimming in the tan depths of his arm.

"There are so many people here tonight."

"They came out for you," Laurent said, smiling.

She blushed and looked away. It felt like he was saying something else, but she didn't dare ask if she was right. On-screen, the previews began. As if on cue, the entire group of them pulled out their phones. Even Laurent—ever attentive—checked through his messages. Unlike Madi's parents, who insisted on talking face-to-face if they were in the same room together, the MadLibbers seemed to

have an intrinsic understanding of the digital interface. Ava chatted to the girl next to her, but her hands blurred over the screen at the same time. Even Laurent seemed caught up in his own list of notifications.

Madi sighed. With everyone drawn into their own devices, she could finally relax. Laughter rose from one end of the theater's aisle and was echoed at the other side. There was a quiet camaraderie. Voices balanced by the *ping* of text notifications and the warmth of laughter. Madi leaned back in her seat.

"You look a little more relaxed," Laurent said.

She smiled. "I just needed a few minutes to get used to this kind of . . ." She waved at the theater. "Notoriety."

"Of course. And for the rest of us to get used to you, too."

Madi nodded. She could feel it now, a different kind of excitement. These were MadLibbers, her people. They'd come because of her posts. *Because of HER*. The smile grew until it filled her expression.

"I'm glad you're here," Laurent said.

Madi nodded as her phone buzzed. She glanced down to discover both Ava and Chantal had tweeted at her to ask her what the new focus of the MadLibs blog would be. Undecided, Madi searched her dashboard for "MadLibs" to see if anyone besides Brian was on the campaign trail. She snickered as a post appeared. Somewhere, among her countless fans, a MadLibber had started yet another MadLibs meme.

"A new MadLibs rewatch? I love ALL the fan suggestions:

*Buffy! Supernatural!! Star Wars!!!"*...

*\*muffles voice under hand\* "(and those eighties movies)."*

May 15 | 18 notes

*#MadLibs #Mad Mad Choices #Rewatch #Funemployment*

- writteninchantalics liked this
- writteninchantalics reblogged this from fandometric
- fandometric reblogged this from moderndaywitch

Laurent leaned closer. “What is it?”

Madi turned her phone’s screen to him and he scrolled up to read the tags. He chuckled, the rumble moving from his arm to hers. The houselights faded into full darkness, but he was close enough she could still pick out details. Laurent’s face, in profile, looked like a statue: jaw perfectly cut at a ninety-degree angle, the muscle visible under the skin. The smell of his cologne was distracting. He was too close. Too beautiful. Madi’s heart pounded so loudly she could feel her chest vibrating with each *thud*.

“So you like old movies, huh?” she whispered.

“Mm-hmm,” Laurent said with a wink. “I really do.”

She grinned. “Me, too.”

She was going to say more, but Ava said something to Laurent, and he turned away, ending their conversation. His head tipped to the side as Ava animatedly whispered, then Laurent laughed and whispered something in return. Madi’s smile faded.

Laurent certainly liked Madi as a friend, but more than that, she couldn’t say. Distracted from the movie, she could only think of how confident he seemed, how at ease. But that wasn’t her . . . at least not in real life.



Hours later, Madi and Laurent headed out of the theater onto the nighttime street. The MadLibbers swelled around them, and Madi forced herself to face them. She smiled and nodded, talking to more people than she could remember interacting with in her entire life. Ava had promised the crowd fifteen minutes, but it was closer to half an hour before they started to disperse.

“Thank you!” Madi shouted to them as they finally headed their separate ways. “It was great meeting you all!”

The small knot of friends tightened around Madi to block the rest out: Laurent at one side, Ava at the other, Chantal on her heels, and a few MadLibbers whose names Madi couldn’t recall making a human shield as they headed away from the Metrograph. Her mind buzzed with the excitement of finally meeting her fans firsthand.

“That was crazy,” Madi said with a laugh.