

## The Stand-In Excerpt

My phone buzzes. It's Sam. Here.

I answer the door. "Isn't it easier to knock? Also, this is a bad idea."

"Texting is equally easy and then you don't need to look through the peephole. If you don't like the plan, I'm happy to hear an idea that results in us getting this shot today with Fangli or an appropriate designate." He points to the connecting door. "I went in to see her."

"And?"

"After some begging and threats, neither of which felt good or comfortable to do, Fangli agreed to see someone who makes emergency house calls. She'll be here in two hours."

"You did the right thing."

He closes his eyes and leans down to rest his cheek on my head as if I'm a pillow. I freeze. "I hope so."

When he straightens up, I leap across to the sink to fill a glass of water with the eagerness of someone escaping a desert. Be normal, Gracie. I grip the glass with numb fingers, hearing Sam speak in the disembodied, unintelligible voice of a Charlie Brown adult.

"And that should be it," concludes Sam. I haven't heard a thing.

At least Fangli will get help, which means I can stop being worried for her and transfer my full distress back onto me.

"Sam, I can't act."

"You've been acting for over two weeks, as I pointed out before. Are you listening? You're not even listening."

I'm spiraling. "That's not acting. I'm mimicking."

"Semantics and if you can do it there, then do it here."

"It won't work," I say immediately. "The makeup people will know I'm not her. They have to see my face up close."

"Luckily, Mei has a new woman in for today who's never met you. Nor has anyone on this crew."

That's convenient, but still. "It's a bad idea," I repeat. "It won't work."

"Why not?" He asks this as though earnestly interested in my answer.

Why not? Just because doesn't seem like the best answer but I also can't think of another one. Thinking an option won't work is the default mode of the Defeatists, which I've always considered to be my people. What if for once I thought it might?

I can copy Fangli. I can pretend to be her because I have been. If I can do that in real life, I can pretend to act as her acting, couldn't I? These mental gymnastics are exhausting and it's not made any better when I suddenly understand why I haven't dismissed Sam out of hand. It's because deep down, I want to try, the same way I wanted to try to be Fangli's double. I want to see if I can do it. The denials are mostly face-saving, so if I screw it up, I can point back as an I told you so.

I'm so tired of lying to myself.

I look at the script and back at Sam. "Tell me what to expect."

He's a good teacher and coaches me through the process. First we read it through, only the lines. Then the lines with the feeling. I channel my inner Fangli to do this. The final step is the acting. Sam stops me almost immediately.

“You’re thinking too hard about how to be like the character,” he tells me. “You need to feel it, to be the character. Close your eyes.”

I close them but not all the way.

He makes an impatient sound. “Close them.”

Then he comes behind me and puts his hands over my eyes, blocking out the light. His voice comes close to my ear. “Right now, you’re not Gracie. You’re not Fangli. You’re Lin, a waitress in a run-down restaurant who wanted better things. You’re in love with a man who you know will leave but you want him, even though you’re supposed to marry someone else—a cruel man your family chose. Jimmy is an escape, even if it’s only for the day. You’re conflicted but here, in this moment: All. You. Want. Is. Him.”

He takes away his hands, and when I look at him, he’s Jimmy, my salvation.

“Why are you here?” I know Fangli’s voice and I pitch mine the same as she would, light but low.

“I can’t leave this unfinished.”

We finish the scene and Sam steps back, hands on hips. “That was good,” he approves. “Good enough.”

Good enough for Sam is fantastic for me, and I can’t stop grinning. That was satisfying to do. I had such a rush, like being in total flow.

“The next scene you’re safe from dialogue.” He coughs. “We need to kiss.”

I rear back as if a cobra dropped down from the ceiling. “Sorry, I think I misheard.” A kiss was not on page 47 of the script.

“It’s a later scene,” he explains as if it’s the time continuity I’m stuck on. “We’ve both accepted we’re in love.”

“We need to kiss.” I cross my arms. “Tenderly? Passionately? With sweet regret?” I think I know the exact scene but I want it confirmed.

“Passionately.”

“I am not prepared for this.”

To my surprise, he bursts out laughing. “No one is, ever. It’s the most awkward thing in the world. I use about a bottle of mouthwash.”

Jesus, I hadn’t even thought about my breath. Another worry.

“Do we have to?”

“Is it better to know I’m self-conscious as well?”

“Yes?” Not really, because he’s Sam fucking Yao and of course I want him desperate to kiss me but in private and because he wants to, not because of a script direction. “There’s no way to get out of this?”

“I’m sorry.” He sounds genuinely regretful. “I tried.”

I take a deep breath. This may be my last time helping them, so I might as well go out with a bang. “Okay.”

“We can practice.”

“Great.”

Either he doesn’t sense the sarcasm or decides to ignore it. He comes up to me and he’s so close.

Mouthwash. All I've had this morning is coffee. "Excuse me." I duck under his arm and run to the bathroom where I proceed to eradicate most of the skin from my tongue and the top layer of enamel from my teeth. I even brush my inner cheeks.

"Better?" he asks when I come out.

"Yes."

"Are you ready?"

"Yes." *No.*

He leans in again, one arm dropping down to my waist to bring me close as the other hand lifts my chin. Dazed by his face so close to mine, I overstep and promptly stomp on his foot.

"Ow!" He drops me and leans to grab his toes, knocking his forehead against my chin in the process.

"Sam, watch it!" I rub my face as he glares at me.

"That hurt," he says.

"You came at me too fast. I was unprepared."

"Did I or did I not say the words *Are you ready?*" He straightens up.

"You did," I admit.

"You said you were. You said yes."

"I thought I was!"

He looks at me, suddenly more serious. "If you truly don't want to kiss me, I won't force you. This is up to you."

*C'mon, Gracie.* I rub my arms to ground myself while staring at his lips.

"I kiss Fangli like this almost every day onstage," he offers. "Try thinking of it like kissing a mannequin."

"That's not helpful but thanks for trying." A mannequin. That might work. I motion him forward.

The moment his face comes close to mine, I see the issue. Mannequins are not people with warm lips and eyes that flicker across your face to see how you're reacting. I burst out with nervous giggles. "Sorry."

Sam has the long-suffering expression of a man who simply wants to get to work. "I see the mannequin idea was a bust. Glad you find this funny. We have an hour."

"Right." I try to wipe the smile off my face but when he gets close again, I have to squish my lips together to try to physically stop the cackling.

This time, Sam doesn't give me time to recover. He takes my face in his hands and covers my mouth with his.