

1. A LOT OF BAD DECISIONS LED ME TO THIS MOMENT, BUT IN MY DEFENSE, I MADE THEM REALLY FAST

When I woke up this morning with a feeling that this was going to be the Worst Day of My Life So Far, I brushed it off as the self-destructive voice in my head doing his daily affirmations.

I was wrong. This is turning out to be the Worst Day of My Life *Ever*.

I'm not usually this pessimistic, but I think I'm allowed to mope in the privacy of my own thoughts after what happened last night—or maybe I'm not, because this whole mess is my own fault. I'm just not going to think about it, because *that's* a healthy way to deal with your problems, River.

The dreadful symphony of test pages being flipped and scribbled on with #2 pencils snaps me out of my spiraling. I sit up a little straighter in these god-awful chairs, glancing around the cafeteria-turned-testing room. This probably isn't the best time to reflect on my mistakes, since I'm supposed to be taking the most important test of my seventeen-year-old life.

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My blank Scantron and unopened SAT booklet stare at me from the desk. The clock in the corner of the cafeteria ticks in time to my rapidly beating heart. How has an hour already passed? I'm running out of time. And air—it's stuffy in here. Panic rushes up my esophagus and perches below my chin, ready to spew all over my test. At least then I'd have something to turn in.

I lean forward and hold my head in my hands, leg bouncing under the table. I should've prepared for this. There's no amount of last-minute cramming that could make up for an entire academic career of slacking off and barely scraping through grade levels on Cs and the occasional B, but I should have at least *tried* to study, or gotten a good night's sleep—or, hey, maybe not have dumped my girlfriend of almost four years out of the blue.

My eyes drift a few rows over, locking onto the back of a head of long, ash-blond hair. Cecelia Campbell tucks a strand of it behind her ear, exposing the side of her face. There are deep circles under her eyes that aren't usually there, but she's still beautiful, always is, even last night when those eyes watered as I told her *I just can't do this anymore. I'm sorry.*

As if she can feel me staring—or the universe just hates me, which would also make sense—Cecelia glances over her shoulder and meets my gaze.

Seeing her heart break for the second time in twenty-four hours, across the aisles of desks and students between us, snaps the last tether in my mind grounding me to reality.

I don't even realize I'm standing until the squeal of my chair against the linoleum floor echoes through the cafeteria. Hundreds

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of eyes are on me in seconds. Their stares peel the skin from my bones.

“Langston-Lee?” Mrs. Klug, the principal and proctor, sits up from her perch at the front of the room. “If you have a question, raise your hand and I’ll come to you.”

My lips part, but no sound escapes. The room spins. My teeth vibrate in my gums, making my jaw chatter.

“I have to go,” I manage to say.

“No one’s allowed to leave the testing room. Please, sit down.”

But my legs are moving on their own. I need to get out of here, get away. Mrs. Klug yells something as I pick up my backpack and thermos of coffee and sprint out the doors.

I flee the musty confines of Summit Sierra High School and find myself on the busy streets of Seattle. The cool, misty air helps regulate my system, and after a few blocks, I feel almost normal. Well, not on the verge of a panic attack anymore, which is an improvement.

A desperate laugh bubbles out of me like an indigestion burp. Raincoat-clad strangers passing by on the busy sidewalk glance at me before scuttling away. I duck my head and hold my thermos of coffee closer to my chest as I continue walking. Home certainly isn’t an option right now, not unless I want to explain to Umma and Dad why I’m not at school, so I head to work. Going in a few hours early can’t hurt.

For the first time in a long while, I’m not dreading my shift at Cafe Gong, my family’s quaint coffee shop turned corporate cafe-feine hell. The way the business has changed since the early days of helping my parents pour milk and wipe up spills for their few loyal

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customers is disappointing, sure, but it's not the *cafe* I'm averse to. It's my co-workers.

It'll be a good distraction, though, especially since it's the grand opening week for our newest store, the one me and my girlfriend—*ex*-girlfriend now, I guess—are co-managers of. I'll clock in, bear Jorge and Rosalind's torment, then clock out and go home.

At the intersection of Union Street and 4th Avenue is Cafe Gong's newest and biggest location, nestled on the ground floor of one of downtown's many skyscraping buildings. Being co-managers, Cece and I oversaw everything that went into opening it. By that, I mean *she* oversaw everything important, and let me choose the location. I picked this spot mostly because we're a stone's throw away from the water, and standing at the crosswalk now, I can see the Puget Sound from the top of the hill. It's nice to pretend the squawking of seagulls and sloshing of waves is audible over the traffic.

Before entering Cafe Gong, I pause to gain some composure. *I can do this*, I think, rolling the tension from my shoulders. *Just play it cool and no one will know you're two seconds away from hurling.*

I try to salvage my appearance, fixing the oversized circle glasses that cover my narrow, upturned brown eyes. There's no helping the unruly, dark hair wilting over my forehead, or what Cecelia calls my "dumb lost puppy who's just happy to be included" expression, which is apparently a permanent fixture of my face.

Thinking of Cecelia physically hurts. A dull, pulsing ache that ricochets through my core. I push the thought of her out of my mind, brace myself, and open the door.

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The place hums with life, with customers packed on gaudy industrial-chic furniture that matches the sleek decor. Umma and Dad own a dozen of these cafes across Seattle and they're all the same, from the cloying smell of sugary syrup and toasted pastries wafting in the air, to the generic coffeehouse music drowning out the sounds of chatter, keyboards clacking, and the espresso machine grinding. Cafe Gong didn't use to be like this, tacky and sterile, but its homely appeal was sanitized when business expanded beyond the scale of a ma-and-pa shop.

This location is the busiest by far, which is good because according to Dad, if Cece and I are able to turn this store into a success, they can start franchising nationally. And: *It'll look great on your guys' college applications.* Whoop-de-do.

I spot a head of corkscrew curls tied up by a purple ribbon across the cafe, and my anxiety eases. Thank *God*. Isabette Tucker is one of my two best friends, and the only decent human being working here. In fact, she's probably too good for this place, but I'm glad she lowered her standards enough to apply after we met at Comic-Con last year. She hasn't been able to shake me off since then despite going to a different school.

She looks up when I approach the counter, doe eyes widening in surprise.

"River!" Isabette says. The fluorescent lights shine on her warm brown face, creased with concern. "What the hell happened?"

I fish my manager badge from my pocket and clip it on. "I'm glad you asked. Remember that fan fiction I was telling you about? The one that hasn't updated in five years because the author's beta

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reader went to jail? Well, they're out, and she posted a note saying the next chapter is coming soon."

"Oh shoot, really?" Isabette pulls her phone out and starts tapping away before she catches herself. I grin. "Hey—don't change the subject. I heard what you did."

"How? It's been like, half an hour."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wait, what are *you* talking about?"

She looks worried that I left my head on my pillow this morning. Which *would* explain what just happened in the testing room at school.

"Hello? I'm talking about Cece?" Isabette whispers. "Rosalind said you dumped her last night."

"*Oh*. Yes, that," I say in the coolest tone of voice I can manage. I rub my chest, suddenly constricted by my hoodie. "I thought you were talking about something else."

"What else did you do?" she says, like she knows I'm capable of worse. Which is fair.

"I may have walked out of a certain test."

"Please don't tell me it was your SAT."

"Maybe."

"*What?*"

"I don't—forget it. Uh, yeah, about Cece. We broke up."

Instead of asking why, in true Isabette fashion, her voice lowers into the sincerest tone and she says, "Are you okay?"

Which is a harder question to answer.

I sip from my thermos to quench my suddenly dry mouth, when a hand slaps my back and makes me choke. Behind me is Jorge

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Sanchez, Pain in My Ass Number Two. Who, despite my begging, Cece insisted be relocated to our new store with us. We've never had the same taste in friends.

"Sorry, boss. I forget you're jumpy," he says, leaning against the mop he was using. He's short enough that the handle reaches his chin, but he's on the wrestling team at Isabette's high school and could fold me into a pretzel without disturbing a single hair of his quiff. I know because he's tried enough times in the back room. "That's my nice way of saying you're a pu—"

"Hi to you, too," I cut him off, wiping the coffee dribbling down my chin. "You surprised me, is all. It's hard to see you down there. I guess the Axe body spray should've been a dead giveaway."

Jorge "accidentally" whacks my shin with the mop handle. My yelp is covered up by a nasally laugh. Pain in My Ass Number One, Rosalind Huynh: as muscled as Jorge but twice as terrifying. She steps up to the counter beside an uncomfortable Isabette, flinging her ombre hair behind her.

"You've got some nerve showing up," she says.

Here we go. "To my own job?"

"Yes, the one Mommy and Daddy handed you on a silver platter. Do us all a favor and keep your ugly mug at home. Cecelia won't want to see you."

"Can we please not argue in front of the customers? At least not during grand opening week," Isabette says.

I clench my fists. Rosalind and I have never gotten along, but when Cece and I were chosen to run this location instead of her, it didn't exactly sweeten our "friendship." "Don't pretend you give a shit about Cecelia."

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Jorge grins, all teeth. “Neither do you, apparently.”

I smile, eye twitching past the red in my vision, considering how to respond. The possible options blip calmly through my mind like a Top 10 Photos Taken Seconds Before Disaster compilation.

Photo 1: Me cramming a stack of the gift cards we keep next to the register into Jorge’s mouth to shut him up for the first time in his life.

Photo 2: Me stealing the coffee from the soccer mom sitting behind me and giving Rosalind’s perfectly styled hair an iced caramel macchiato salon treatment.

Photo 3: Me in the back, shoving my hand into the coffee grinder as punishment for not quitting the second Cecelia transferred my least favorite co-workers to our store—

That’s enough of that.

Jorge and Rosalind hated me long before I broke Cecelia’s heart or became co-manager—something I never asked for, by the way. Umma and Dad tasking me with running Cafe Gong isn’t them sliding me a silver platter of success, contrary to Rosalind’s belief; it’s more of a lifeline. If they didn’t think I could be successful outside of the family business before, skipping out on the SATs will be the final nail in that coffin. Which means I’m stuck with Jorge, Rosalind, and my ex-girlfriend for the foreseeable future.

I guess I have no choice but to resort to violence.

The bell chiming above the door stops me from acting on that intrusive thought. A feminine voice lets out an emphatic “Ugh!”

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Two people enter the store. The first is a short girl with long black hair, copper-toned skin, and heavy-lidded eyes that scan the room. I hear Isabette make a panicked, garbled noise and run into the back, but I don't turn around, distracted by the second person.

Standing in the middle of the cafe is one of the prettiest girls I've ever seen. The kind of pretty that's startling to see in real life and not in a fashion magazine, or wherever else beautiful people spawn from. She's short, chubby, and dressed in an ensemble of sheer stockings, a black and teal plaid skirt, and a cropped shirt layered over a black neck sweater. The girl crinkles her pierced nose, a look of disgust on her heart-shaped face complemented by dark makeup and neon green, choppy bangs.

Rosalind huffs. "Halloween came early."

Green Hair doesn't bother lowering her voice as she approaches the counter. "*This* is their newest store? How are they our competition? Who could put up with this cheesy music? Holy shit, look at the prices. No one in their right mind should be charging that much for an espresso that's probably burnt."

My lips purse. Cecelia set the prices.

"We won't be here long," Green Hair's friend reassures her. "And we sure as hell aren't ordering anything."

The two girls reach me, Jorge, and Rosalind. The friend smiles lazily. "Hello. Cozy place you've got. Does someone named Betty happen to work here?"

Jorge and Rosalind exchange a not-very-subtle bitch face. "Nope, no Bettys here," Jorge says. "Anything you'd like to order?"

Green Hair barks out a laugh. "No."

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As manager and resident idiot of the place Green Hair is shitting on, I feel like it's technically my responsibility to defend it. I turn on my best customer service voice. "If you're looking for something good on the menu, I can help."

She does a double take like she just noticed me, expression smoothing out, but then her eyes catch on the thermos in my hand, then my badge. "I don't think I'll take recommendations from a manager who doesn't drink the shit they're trying to sell."

Rosalind and Jorge snicker, and my neck heats up. This is the worst possible morning to deal with an annoying customer, but years of working a stupid food industry job means I can keep up my smile.

"I'm just trying to offer advice, since it seems like you have some issues with rational judgment." I glance at her highlighter-colored hair.

Without missing a beat, she nods to the hoodie I'm wearing: fan merch from my favorite (but objectively bad) book series, *Son of Sin*. "You can't be all that rational if you think wearing that out in broad daylight is a good idea."

"The cold brew here is great for digestion, which would really help in pushing that stick out of your ass."

A nearby table gasps, and some part of me realizes that half the cafe has stopped talking to watch us engage in the most passive-aggressive fight in the history of fights. I don't care; I've never been this riled up. I consider myself pretty laid-back—despite the last twenty-four hours proving otherwise—but for some reason, this baby-faced goth girl is pushing all my wrong buttons.

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Green Hair smiles cutely. She has dimples. My eyes linger on them.

“Is your coffee still hot?” she asks.

I blink. “No?”

She gingerly grabs the thermos from my hand, pops the lid off, stands on her tiptoes, and dumps the coffee over my head.

The lukewarm liquid cascades across my scalp and over my face, shielding her from sight as a river of bean juice coats my glasses. The whole cafe goes dead silent besides the horrible elevator music coming over the speakers.

Only one thought runs through my mind: This is *now* officially the Worst Day of My Life Ever.

“What a waste of coffee,” I say drily.

She shrugs, still showing off her dimples. “Worth it.”

On any other day, I would let this slide. But today, I turn to her friend, who looks torn between amusement and exasperation, and gesture at the bags of whole coffee beans behind her. “Could you pass me one of those, please?”

Both Green Hair and her friend watch as I open the bag. The rich aroma of roasted beans wafts into my nose, though that could be the coffee dripping from my bangs. I take a step toward Green Hair. She doesn’t move away. I hook one finger into the neckline of her sweater, pull the fabric back, and dump the entirety of the bag down the inside.

Her friend bursts into laughter, while Green Hair and everyone else in the store gapes at me.

I toss the bag to the ground and smile. “Worth it.”

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“Oh my *god*,” Rosalind says with glee. “Your parents are *so* going to fire you for that.”

I give her the middle finger. “I’ll save them the trouble. I quit.”

I don’t look at anybody as I walk away, not even the pretty goth girl with coffee beans falling out of her sweater. The grating music and my rapid heartbeat thumping in my ears follow me out, the chiming of the bell above the door a sweet closing note.

Well, I tell myself, too high on adrenaline to regret anything that just happened yet, *at least it’s literally impossible for it to get worse from here.*