

MY OWN WORST ENEMY

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For my fellow lovers of gay drama



PROLOGUE



I'm crouched backstage, about to throw up.

Come on, Emmy. Touch your toes. Shake out your arms. Pray with a tongue twister and spin your lucky earring.

I *can* do this. I *have* prepared enough. I *won't* get stage fright and ruin my one chance to ever achieve my dreams.

Behind the curtain, my fellow drama school graduands complete their own rituals, avoiding each other's eyes.

Of course, everybody hates actors. But the people who hate actors the *most* are other actors.

We've spent three years together. Daily sessions of ritualised touching, trust falls, and sharing how our characters' traumas relate to our own have done their job, and we're all dangerously bonded. But now it's final term. A deep, unspoken suspicion has arrived. We've become dreadfully aware we're about to be thrown from the nest and expected to fly into The Acting Industry.

My fellow actors are not my friends anymore. They're my enemies.

At this showcase, we're not only performing to friends and family, but to agents. Agents who will make or break our careers.

I peek out at the crowd. You can tell who the agents are, not only because they have an aura of godliness, but because their faces are lit up by their open laptops. The rumours are true, then: agents will have the program with our contact details open on their armrests, and they'll send emails offering representation

before you've even finished your monologue. Or, crucially, they won't.

Supporting friends and family have picked up on the tense vibe. It's deathly quiet out there. Normally I want to strangle people who cough in the theatre, but right now I'd be grateful for a few phones going off.

I don't have any friends or family here. My dad's working, obviously, and so's Pete. Ruth is preparing for an interview, and Raphy is on a meditation retreat in Uzbekistan. I didn't invite Mum.

A cold hand squeezes mine. In the dim backstage lights, I look into the painfully beautiful face of my best friend, Thalia. Everyone else may have become suddenly distant and menacing, but Thalia's exactly the same. She's the only one I trust to never, ever let me down, even when she inevitably rises to stardom.

I clasp her hand in both of mine, trying to warm it. I know she's trying to be comforting, but the thought that she'll be watching always ramps up my nausea. I want to impress her even more than I want to impress those agents.

Thalia tugs me in the direction of the green room.

I glance out towards the stage. There's three monologues between now and my performance. Yes, technically that means fifteen minutes, but what if someone speaks superfast, or quits?

But Thalia strides away, so I follow.

In the empty green room, I turn up the speaker that feeds through the audio from the stage into the room and angle the screen showing who's on the stage. It's still Ben, doing his modern. I squint at his technique. His left hand is swinging. I know he's meant to be my rival now, but my stomach clenches in sympathy.

Thalia yawns. 'Shall we place bets on who isn't going to get any offers?'

I can't join in with her laughter. She rolls her dark eyes at me.

'Emmy, how are you going to be a professional actor when you get *this* nervous before a performance?'

Thalia doesn't have to be nervous. She already has an agent – one of the best. She's even already been offered a major TV role, which she turned down. Unlike me, raised on a diet of theatre, musicals and pantomime, Thalia has always set her sights on Hollywood.

I try to breathe.

'They don't *care* about your performance,' she says reassuringly. 'They're businessmen. They'll just choose people based on their casting type.'

She pouts in the mirror, tossing her ponytail. With her athletic physique, spotless brown skin, sharp cheek bones and bold eyebrows, Thalia has sarcastically said that her casting type is 'they couldn't afford Zendaya'.

'You'll be fine,' she says, patting my arm. 'It's not like many agents already have a short-haired lesbian on their list.'

'Most agents don't *need* a short-haired lesbian on their list,' I mutter. 'It's not like the industry has hundreds of "leading lady" roles for anyone remotely butch.'

Thalia tuts.

'OK, but the industry needs *one*. You can be that one. The best. You're top of the year! You got, like, the highest mark ever on that Shakespeare thi—'

'We both know good exam results don't matter on stage,' I say, pacing.

God, was twenty times enough times to practise my monologue this morning? I mutter it again at supersonic speed under my breath. Damn, damn, damn, I knew I should have gone for the other one. Maybe I still have time to change it. I do have two others memorised, just in case. Maybe I should—

'Emmy. Chill out. You'll put them off. It's like horses, they can tell when you're scared.'

I gape at her and start hyperventilating.

'Jeesh, OK,' she says, swinging down from the table. 'I'll see you after.'

I try to steady my breaths. She's right.

'Wait, wait,' I say, grabbing her hand. 'Thank you. I just...' I look down at her fingers in mine. 'Please don't forget about me when you're a star, OK?'

Thalia smiles and tosses her ponytail over her other shoulder.

'How could I forget about you, you dummy? We're going to be living together, and flying round the world doing all our filming. Who else is going to roll my celebratory cigarettes?'

After a successful performance, Thalia and I always go to the smoking area to have one celebratory cigarette. Well, I don't actually smoke myself, but I roll it for her in a celebratory way. Of all my theatre rituals, it's my favourite.

I stroke her fingers.

'I'll roll you a whopper on graduation day.'

She grins and pulls away, flopping over a chair.

'It's so soon, I can almost taste it. No more stupid lectures, no more pointless exams, just being an *actual* performer.'

She closes her eyes in pleasure.

'Picture the scene. Graduation day. The others are stuck in the foyer, making fake promises to stay in touch, and singing from like, *Hello Dolly*. But you and me, we're out in the smoking area, sipping champagne and signing contracts. It's going to be so good, we're going to want to do it every year.'

I watch her laugh, reflected a hundred times in the green room mirrors. And I know, without a doubt, that she's going to be famous one day. One day horribly soon.

'Then *let's* do it every year,' I say urgently. 'No matter what happens with... Every year on June 29th we'll come back to The Boards, and see how far we've come.'

Thalia looks up at me.

'Urgh, you're *such* a thespian.'

But she smiles, that rare, unpractised grin that shows the gap between her teeth and makes my pulse do stupid things. When she smiles at me like that, I can almost convince myself that Thalia likes me back.

Graduation day, I promise myself, June 29th, in The Boards

Theatre Smoking Area, I'm going to finally tell her how I feel.

Applause thunders through the intercom. On the screen it's suddenly Aoife, and she's bowing.

'*Shit*,' I say, and dash towards the door.

'Good luck!'

I gasp and trip.

'Thalia!' I say, crossing myself, and knocking on the wooden door frame three times.

'What?' she laughs. 'I thought it's only bad luck to say that during a performance of Macb—'

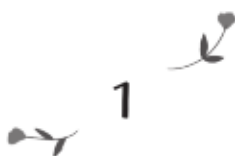
I scream and hold my finger out to silence her, then point urgently at my trousers.

'*Break a leg*, then, whatever.' She yawns. 'You don't need to care about that crap. Superstitions are for people who can't rely on their own talent.'

I wish I could believe her. Thalia waves lazily as the green room door closes.

I sprint up to the wings, our teacher already announcing my name.

There's just time to take a deep breath and twist my earring. Then I step out onto the stage.



Nine Months Later

'Emmy Clooney,' announces the casting assistant.

'No relation,' I apologise.

The four panellists look at me. I know exactly who each of them is: the director, head writer, producer, and casting director. I memorised all their IMDb pages. Let's be honest, I memorised all of their social media pages too. You can never be too prepared.

I've done all the sniffing around about the project possible before it's in production – it's a TV drama called *High School* about sixth form students on drugs. It would be my first TV part.

I try to keep my voice calm.

'Thank you for the opportunity to read for you.'

They nod and shuffle their papers. Four printouts of my acting CV stare back at me. My upside-down headshot doesn't look happy.

For auditions, I try to look exactly like my headshot: no make-up on my pale skin (except a secret dot of white eyeliner which Thalia once told me makes actors' eyes more expressive), black T-shirt (loose enough to be androgynous, tight enough to showcase breathwork), black jeans (soft enough to allow for choreographed movements), one earring (silver hoop from my mum, supposedly lucky), and my signature short back and sides (cut last weekend so that today I would have optimum fresh-but-not-raw look), quiff gelled carefully back. The aim is to be neutral, a blank canvas to showcase not my own personality

but that of my character. And also to look explicitly gay. I am confident I have at least succeeded in that.

The director, Laura Brooke (white, blonde, 38, attended Kent Grammar School, father also a successful director, had muesli for breakfast) frowns at my CV. My pulse surges with anxiety. I've spent approximately one thousand hours trying to perfect the best structure and wording for it, but whenever I'm in an audition room, I'm convinced I got it wrong. My first-class degree from Saint Genesius School of Drama is surely the most important part so I've got that at the top. But does that make it look like I am embarrassed about my unimpressive professional work? Surely, they're thinking – hang on, this person graduated nine months ago, why hasn't she had her big break yet? Why are we even bothering to see her in this audition if she hasn't already had multiple lead TV roles?

'Whenever you're ready,' says Laura.

The camera is on a tripod next to the panel, already recording me. I instinctively angle my face so that it will be capturing my best side.

Unlike theatre, where you must exaggerate your expressions for the audience, good television acting is about reducing your emotions to minute details. Instead of showing your emotions, you should hide them. Fortunately, I'm well-practised at that.

I put down the script. I always bring it so that I can revise my annotations beforehand, but of course I would never *dream* of auditioning without knowing it by heart.

Deep breath in through my nose, and out again. I close my eyes and let my own gait drop from my body. Just like I practised a hundred, a thousand times over the weekend, I adopt a whole new physicality.

I'm no longer Emmy Clooney (no relation). I'm now... Lesbian Number Two.

'Fuck off, Christina,' says Lesbian Number Two. 'You never seen two women kissing before?'

And... that's the end of the lines. I hold the silence for a second,

all Lesbian Number Two's pent-up frustration and insecurity tense in the air. Then, controlled, I let all my muscles relax into my own posture. Well, into the character of Emmy Clooney, a professional actor, awaiting feedback.

The panel whoop. One of them does a spontaneous little round of applause.

'You're perfect!' squeals the producer. 'It's like you were made for the part!'

I bow my head graciously, but my eye twitches. Damn it, I hope they've turned the recording off. I remind myself that being put up for the role of 'Lesbian Number Two' doesn't mean they think that I'm a 'second-best' lesbian actress. It will just be because Lesbian Number One is being cast as a more femme lesbian (likely with long hair, lipstick, and other more audience-pleasing stereotypes).

Fictional lesbian couples must either be one femme and one butch, or two femmes. The question of whether two butches have the capacity to fancy each other in real life is irrelevant. The Media rules that two butches cannot be a couple – how else would audiences know which one wears the trousers?

My spiral must have lasted too long, because Laura looks aghast down at my CV.

'Oh my God, I'm so sorry,' she says. 'You *are* a lesbian, aren't you?'

I rehearsed a thousand scenarios for this audition, but none of this is playing to my script.

'I... What?'

Laura's forehead is crinkled in genuine distress. 'You are a – er – a woman who – umm – sleeps with other women?'

I'm not sure if I'm thrown because of the weirdness of being asked that outright by strangers, because of the binary implications of that phrasing, or because I'm taken aback that she even needs to ask. Normally it's enough to just have short hair and do a monologue from Oscar Wilde.

'I am gay,' I say, managing to avoid adding 'duh'. 'But—'

Technically, I don't sleep with other women, I avoid saying. I am a woman who has in the past had embarrassingly few half-hearted fumbles with other women. I haven't even *kissed* someone since graduation – except onstage.

'Thank *God*,' says Laura. 'No wonder it's so authentic! You're a natural!'

My eye twitches again. I spent one hundred hours practising so that I could look this natural.


I swallow and remind myself what my drama teacher used to say: the sign of a true actor is complete control over your emotions. Whatever I am feeling right now is not relevant. All that matters when the camera is on is the interior life and complex motivations of Lesbian Number Two. Now the camera is off, all that matters is performing the well-rehearsed role of Emmy Clooney, the world's next great lesbian thespian.

I smile and bow.


'Thank you so much,' I say, hand on heart. 'I really identify with this part.'

The casting panel beam back, radiating the confident glow of good allies.

'Well done, Emmy,' says Laura. 'We'll be in touch.'



2



Fade out on the audition scene. Or ideally there'd be some kind of fun special effect like they used to do in the noughties – a clunky dissolve, perhaps, or a whoosh.

New establishing shot: a surprisingly nice flat in Walthamstow. The front door is large and green, the marble steps are clean, and there's a well-kept garden patch with unusual fresh herbs that a witchy viewer might recognise as potion ingredients. The general viewer will question how attractive the flat is given that my character is a clearly unsuccessful actor. They might wonder if the film is going to be unrealistic, or if I have some other source of income, or if the story is set in an alternate universe that is not in the midst of several economic crises.

Emmy fumbles for her keys, and she – er, I mean, *I* – am about to open it when it swings from the inside. Two gorgeous men are standing flushed in the doorway. One I don't recognise, wearing designer yoga pants, was about to go in for a kiss. The other is my flatmate Raphy, wearing just a towel. His brown skin is tattooed with abstract shapes in rainbow colours, and his voluminous sun-kissed curls are in a loose bun.

Raphy opens his naked arms to me.

'Welcome home!' he says, completely unphased. The man I don't recognise throws his hands up and runs out into the street.

Raphy waves to him and closes the door behind us. He smells of the aloe vera and ginger scrub he makes himself. As I lean into his glistening chest, I try not to think about how embarrassing it

is that I'm more physically intimate with my best friend than I've ever been with a romantic partner.

We go arm in arm into the inner flat, which features light wooden floors, tall windows, and an inordinate amount of house plants.

He puts our keys in the clay dish he made and says, 'I'm so glad your audition went well!'

Raphy insists he isn't psychic, merely in conversation with the universe's frequencies.

'Can you please just tell me if I'll get the part?' I ask.

'Honey, you know it doesn't work like that.'

But he wiggles his eyebrows at me. I grin back.

'Time to nourish,' he says.

In the kitchen, Raphy clicks open a mason jar of rice and opens paper bags of fresh vegetables – courgette, tomato, kale, red onions.

'He seemed... nice?' I say.

'Oh, he's the nicest,' he sighs. 'Sweet Ferdinand. He's got a serene cat pose. We met at the cacao ceremony last night.'

That would explain the uninhibited noises coming from Raphy's room last night.

'Do you think you'll see him again?'

Raphy starts chopping. 'No, I think we learned what we needed to from each other.'

'Seemed like he wanted you to teach him some more...'

'Sometimes we don't get what we want,' he says, soberly, 'but we get what we need.'

He pours two large glasses of red wine, just as the front door slams. Multiple digital devices are dumped on the entrance table, and Ruth strides in, looking as fresh as a photoshoot for *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list. She's wearing a crisp white shirt under a magenta broad-shouldered suit and matching lipstick. Her stilettos are as sharp as her smooth black bob, but as Ruth is about five foot, she still only comes up to Raphy's chest. She pokes it hard.

'I nearly *yawned* during my pitch today. If I don't get this client, I'm blaming you.'

'Sorry, my love,' he says, and holds out the second glass of wine to her.

Ruth softens.

'At least someone is getting laid around here,' she says, taking a large sip.

'Oh, like you're one to complain!' he laughs, whipping her with a tea towel. 'You've been working very late at the office this week.'

'Urgh,' says Ruth. 'Not any more. He's started sending GIFs on our team Slack, and honestly? Ick.' She kicks off her shoes and rolls her eyes. 'Straight white marketing dudes in suits. Em, are you sure you don't have any hot actor friends you can introduce to me?'

'Never date an actor,' I say darkly.

'Oh, for God's sake, they can't *all* be unreliable. You're the most chronically committed person I know.' She shrugs. 'Except me.'

'I'm the exception that proves the rule, I promise you,' I say.

Ruth's watch beeps with the signal for the start of the hour. I flop my head on the table and groan.

Raphy pats my head. 'Can I get you anything else before your shift?'

I realise I'm being melodramatic.

'I'm OK, I'm OK,' I say, rolling my shoulders back. 'I'll send them your regards.'

'Well, do try not to be *too* late for your shift,' says Raphy, putting his apron back on. 'You can tell Pete I'm trying his recipe for garlic bread tonight. With naan, though, so Mum doesn't disown me.'

Raphy's mum is Indian, his dad's Nigerian, and they're both competitive food snobs.

On cue, Ruth's stomach rumbles, and she starts typing. 'My parents must never find out the only Greek food I eat these days is from Deliveroo...'

'I'm making more than enough for two,' says Raphy, 'if you'd like to join me for dinner?'

Ruth gives him a rare smile, but then her work phone starts ringing. They both flinch.

'I'll leave it in the oven for you,' says Raphy, as she heads to her bedroom to take the call.

He turns away and puts on a melancholy birdsong playlist. My stomach knots. I feel responsible for their friendship, because I'm the mutual who brought them together. Ruth's my best – and only – childhood friend, a friendship forged by the two of us being the most intense geeks in our primary school. I met Raphy last year on an 'Acting and Community' workshop that I should have known would be irrelevant for my actual career. But it's the best thing I ever did for my non-working life. Raphy said I had a gold-coloured aura and that it was in our destinies to be friends. I, bizarrely, believed him. Unlike my drama school friends, I trusted him to stick around, regardless of my external success. So far, he's proved me right.

Raphy says he wants to live in a commune, but his dad is a property developer and gave him landlord duties of this flat. (Yes, Raphy is one of those hippies with significant family wealth.) I assumed he would have a million Pilates partners clamouring to move in, especially as he had convinced his father to charge mate's rates. But, when living with Thalia after drama school fell through, I contacted him on a whim and he said yes. He even asked if I had a friend to invite into the third bedroom. Specifically, he asked if I had a 'friend who has just got a high-flying promotion in London which means she can move out of her family home and is looking to complete your childhood promise of living together'. Ruth messaged me a few minutes later.

When Ruth and Raphy first met, it was weird. It was as if they thought that to be on their best behaviour they should be the opposite of themselves. Ruth kept trying to smile (creepy) and Raphy, inexplicably, wore a suit. We spoke about the weather until our pizzas arrived. Then Ruth went into business mode.

‘If we’re to consider this arrangement, we should clarify our positions. Emmy told me you’re into all sorts of’— she waved her hand dismissively — ‘hippie spirituality. Well, you do you, but I shan’t participate in it. I don’t believe in the supernatural.’

I froze with my pizza slice suspended in mid-air, horrified.

Raphy slowly undid the top button on his collar. ‘Well, Emmy told me *you’re* into all sorts of... workaholic careerism. You do you, but I shan’t participate in it. I don’t believe in capitalism.’

I put the pizza down and buried my face in my greasy hands.

But then, to my complete astonishment, I heard them laughing. I looked up to find them pushing each other as if *they* were the old friends. They even shared a sorbet. It’s as though they’re so opposite to each other that they’ve somehow gone full circle and ended up on exactly the same wavelength.

By the end of the evening, we’d already arranged our move-in date. To sign the deal, we created a handshake, crossing over our hands to shake the three of us at the same time. When our hands united, Raphy looked dramatically into the middle distance.

‘I have had a premonition. I prophesy that cohabiting will bring great love into all of our lives. This is for the best.’

‘Well then,’ said Ruth, shaking our hands, ‘maybe your powers aren’t complete bullshit.’

‘For the best of times,’ I said, squeezing hard, ‘with the best of friends.’

Still, even though we’ve lived together in harmony for nearly half a year now, I still get the sense they prefer hanging out as the three of us rather than just the two of them.

I know it sounds bad, but this is absolutely fine with me. I’m very happy being both of my best friends’ best friend. Forever and ever, amen.

I dry our plates, slotting them neatly into the rack, and smile when mine fits into the slot perfectly between theirs.