

Chapter One

Ridley

I walk out the school's double doors, wave to the front desk staff, and start this walk home for the last time.

My laptop bag is tucked against my side and bounces against me with each step. The sky is darkening from clouds rolling in. Luckily, I make it home still dry.

I jog up the stairs of my apartment building and happily toe off my shoes in the entryway, dropping my bags on the floor and collapsing face-first into the couch so I can hide my head under a throw pillow. I groan and the sound reverberates from being trapped against the cushion.

My phone buzzes, making me jump. It's either Honey or work. I debate checking it and eventually fold in case it *is* Honey. I wouldn't want to leave her waiting.

Honey - How was work? Was today your last day?

I smile at her familiar gold icon before standing to text back. I pace around the living room while responding and then check outside.

It's snowing.

I take a photo of the city in the white haze to send to her too.

Robin - it was. It was definitely work

Robin - first snow! hows your weather?

I watch the snowfall while waiting for her reply. The wind makes a small spiral of snowflakes on the balcony dust up for a few seconds before collapsing. It's cold enough for the snow to stick right away, so there is a small film of white on the rooftops and tree branches already.

Honey - Congratulations! I'm glad you were able to get through the last day! The weather here is warming up. It's approaching comfortable outdoor temperatures for me now.

Robin - thats good. Dyou have any warm weather plans?

Honey - I'm looking forward to walking in the garden without shivering. I also like how the lake looks in the summer when the flowers are all open and fresh.

I smile at her answer and wonder how to respond. I want to vent about work more, but I also want to stop thinking about it. I decide to bring up something random instead.

Robin - dyou watch the mv yet?

She replies immediately. I laugh under my breath at her enthusiasm.

Honey - Of course! It's perfect! Have you?

Robin - not yet

I consider asking if we could watch it together, but we haven't video-called before. She's been skittish about showing her face, so I don't want to ask. I've only ever seen her in heavy, cosplay makeup.

I don't think she's hiding who she is, but it's still nerve racking to ask to see a friend's face for the first time. *Especially hers*, my brain whispers to me, and I sigh. I stop looking out the window to sit back on the couch.

I watch the video to avoid thinking anymore. Honey's favorite video game released a music video for their main theme by my favorite violinist. The concept went perfectly because the protagonist in the game plays a violin too.

Madrigal's playing is excellent as usual, and her smoky voice suits the creepy ambiance of the game. It's not often she sings in her songs, so I savor every second of it.

Honey was right, as usual. The video is perfect.

Robin - as expected, perfect!

Honey - Right!?

Honey - Can I be nosy for a second?

I hesitate, knowing she'll probably ask about my job.

Robin - sure?

Honey - Do you have a second job lined up already? What is it?

I stare at her message for so long that she sends another.

Honey - Also I'm so proud of you for quitting! I could tell it wasn't good for you. I'm glad you're moving on.

I sigh and start pacing around the living room. Do I tell her everything? Should I omit some things?

Robin - thank you!! I'm honestly not sure what I'm going to do. I was hoping my writing would be enough but. I'm not sure it will be after that journal shut down.

Honey - Oh shit, really?

I blink at her sudden tone change. It's not often that something can catch her off guard.

Honey - Are you actually in need of money then? I remember you really counting on them paying for that publication. (Which was incredible by the way. I still randomly reread it.)

I blush at her text despite the looming anxiety of running out of money.

I type, delete, type, delete a few times. I can't decide what to tell her. Be honest and say I made a dumb, spur-of-the-moment decision? Lie and say I'll be fine making rent next month? Lie and say I'll gladly take any money she can scrounge up to help?

Robin - (I'm glad you like it) I'm not sure what I'm gonna do. I can save and be more careful and I'll probably be able to stretch the savings until I find another job. I was counting on having more time, but I think I can still do it with the time I've got. At worst, I just ask for a rent extension and explain to them what happened

Honey - That sounds stressful. How much time do you have?

I rub my eyes and laugh in disbelief at her ability to ask the one question I didn't want her to.

Robin - About a month, but I can stretch it to two. I was /planning/ on having two months but you know how it is

She doesn't reply for a while, so I distract myself with chores. After cleaning up the kitchen from my rush out this morning, I finally strip out of my work clothes. I decide to take a bath instead of a shower so I can answer my phone if Honey replies. Her abrupt silence is worrying me, but this isn't the first time it's happened so I hope everything is fine.

My phone buzzes while I'm relaxing in the tub. The familiar anxiety spikes. *Is it work or is it Honey?* I hope it's her again, and not a journal's email. I have it set to notify me when my work is accepted or declined for publication.

I dip some of my face in the water as I hesitate, feeling childish for hiding but enjoying the warm water regardless. I eventually gain the courage to sit up, dry a hand, and grab my phone.

Honey - I'm sending someone your way that can help, but I wanted your permission first because I don't know how prudish you are.

Prudish? I look up the word, not certain I understand what she's asking me. I flush at the definition, rereading "reserved with sexual affection" several times before it clicks what she's doing.

Robin - WHAT

Robin - One, how on earth do you know this person? Two, I am not fit for having a sugar daddy! You dont know what I look like I could be a gross lil rat and you wouldnt know!

Honey - He's really sweet! I met him the same way I met you. And it doesn't matter what you look like! If he thinks you're nice, he'll definitely pay your rent. Just try!

I let out a relieved sigh that she met him from her cosplay like I did. I texted her a little over a year ago how much I loved her work and we've been talking ever since.

I wouldn't judge her for meeting him through more promiscuous means, only that she hadn't brought it up until now. I don't want to think about why she would have hid something like that from me. She's seemed very open so far, except with her appearance outside of cosplay.

I take a deep breath before replying, trying to calm down and not reflexively shoot down her idea.

Robin - what makes you think I even want to do that!? What if I say no!?

Honey - I know you. You didn't say no! You'll be fine! Just text him and see if he likes you. (Even if he doesn't, he'll probably pay for wasting your time.)

I groan and dip my hair back into the water, holding my arm out over the lip of the tub so my phone doesn't get splashed. I consider it for a moment, listening to the resonant hum of my apartment while submerged in the bath.

Robin - fine. I'll talk to him, then apologize for wasting his time and hopefully he'll give me enough to cover next month's rent

Honey - Great! And even more likely, he'll text you, like you, and then you can have a sugar daddy for the next few months!

Robin - youre crazy

Honey - No, I'm right! You'll see.

I laugh at her confidence and wonder how she knew I would agree to this. I don't know what gave her the impression that this was something normal to do for a person.

An unknown number texts me, and my eyes widen. I almost drop my phone, desperate to escape this scenario by any means.

Robin - he texted already!!

Honey - Yay! You'll do great!

"Oh my god," I mumble and open the new message.

??? - Is this Robin?

Robin - Yes, who is this?

"Oh my god," I groan again and rest my forehead on the side of the tub, sloshing the water around me and shivering as it starts to cool down.

??? - Jazz. I'm Honey's friend. She told me you were in need of extra funds, but that's all I know.

Before I can reply, he sends another text which surprises me. He seemed professional, although likely a facade, so I didn't think he would text twice.

Jazz - Well, she also said you two were close and she had faith you would be a good fit. Although that's entirely up in the air. Don't feel pressured and don't act fake, please.

Don't act fake? I'm offended before I remember he doesn't know anything about me. He must think I do this all the time. Well... If he wants me to be real then I should clarify it, right?

Robin - Okay. This is all new to me. Honey sprung this on me Just now. I've never seriously considered this before

Jazz - What do you think this is?

I falter at the question. Is he being serious? What if I've got this all wrong? I stay vague, just in case I misread this. Honey didn't correct me earlier, but if she thought it was funny she wouldn't have anyway.

Robin - You ask for photos and I ask for money?

Jazz - That's possible.

Robin - Is that what you were expecting?

I wince and distract myself with the bath for a moment, adding more hot water so I can comfortably stay in longer. The phone buzzes as I'm drying my hands again and I flinch, almost dropping the towel in the water.

Jazz - I'm expecting you to be a break from normal life. I want someone in my sphere that won't be fake. Be yourself. Don't lie if you think we're disagreeing. Argue if you want. Ask questions if you want. Consistently text back and ask for money whenever you need to.

"What the hell..." I reread his message several times. Jazz must be a really lonely person. It sounds like he just wants a friend.

Robin - You need good company? I can do that, I think

After I hit send, I remember he said I could ask questions.

Robin - Whats your job? You must make a lot of money if youre doing this right?

Jazz - I work in tech, so I make a decent amount, yes.

Robin - so what exactly do you want me to do then? Just answer your texts?

Jazz - Yes. You're going to be my new breath of fresh air.