

“What the fuck happened to you?”

David Crane didn't bother with a greeting as soon as I stepped into the office he shared with Marta Kauffman.

Both of them were in their mid-to-late thirties. David's receding hairline exaggerated his already large forehead, and his glasses kept sliding down his nose. Marta sat beside him, a beautiful, homely woman with kind eyes and a fuller figure that gave her a comforting presence.

“What do you mean, exactly?” I asked, genuinely confused.

Then I remembered my powers. I focused and turned them on, letting their thoughts slip into my head.

Why do I have a feeling I'm sacrificing my Saturday for nothing? David's thought practically echoed.

I frowned slightly but made sure not to let my irritation show.

“Why are you so bone-thin?” Marta asked next, tilting her head as she studied me. “The last time I saw you, you didn't look like a strong gust of wind would knock you over.”

“Oh. That,” I said awkwardly, suddenly very aware of my narrow frame. I hadn't realized just how much my appearance had changed from just a year ago.

“Yeah, that,” David added. “We're looking for someone who looks mid-twenties. With your lack of bulk, you barely look eighteen. No offense.”

“I am eighteen,” I replied. “And I can bulk up fast. Give me a few months and I'll be one swole dude.”

Swole? What is he, some rapper from the streets? Marta thought.

“We don't have a few months,” David said firmly. “We need to shoot the pilot as soon as the cast is finalized. Even if we reshot your scenes later, the network could reject the entire pilot just because of you. Everyone has to be perfect.”

Is he on drugs? Marta wondered as she scanned me from head to toe. *If that's the case, we absolutely can't accept him.*

“I went to Nigeria last year with some friends from university,” I said quickly, cutting off her line of thought before it spiraled further. “It was a UNICEF volunteer program. One of my core subjects is International Relations. While I was there, I got bitten by a mosquito and contracted dengue fever. My platelet count dropped dangerously low, and I lost most of my weight during recovery. I've been busy catching up with life since then, so I haven't had time to regain it. But if I land a regular role on a show, that'll give me the motivation to get back into shape.”

That part, at least, was true.

The dengue fever had been brutal. Not the worst thing I'd experienced across a lifetime of global travel, but it came close. There'd been a brief window where I genuinely didn't know if I'd recover.

Thankfully, I had.

"It's good to hear you're alright now," David said after a moment. "But that still doesn't fix the problem. You look too young for this role."

I leaned forward slightly, curiosity creeping into my voice. "So what's the show about? And what role did you have in mind for me?"

I already had a pretty solid guess.

I just wanted to hear them say it.

"The title hasn't been finalized yet," Marta said, sounding slightly hesitant. "It'll either be called *Friends Like Us* or *Six of One*. It's about a group of six friends in their twenties who live together in New York at the beginning of their respective careers."

She leaned back in her chair as she continued, clearly warming to the pitch.

"They experience life together. The ups, the downs, and everything in between. Their love lives, relationships, being perpetually broke, and all the other problems young people face when they're living on their own for the first time."

As she finished, David picked up the thread.

"As for your character, we were thinking Joey," he said. "He's an Italian-American guy with seven sisters and dreams of becoming an actor. He's not the brightest, but he's easily the most likable of the six. He's great with women, which makes the other guys jealous. Especially Chandler and Ross."

David adjusted his glasses before continuing.

"Ross has a PhD, and Chandler and Ross went to school together. So it wouldn't make much sense if they were close friends with an eighteen-year-old."

That all made perfect sense.

Casting a sitcom wasn't just about comedic timing or acting ability. A lot of thought went into how believable the group dynamic felt. While character ages could be adjusted by a competent writer, they couldn't stretch credibility too far.

Still, I wanted this role badly.

"Why not make jokes about Joey being young?" I suggested. "One of his friends, maybe Chandler, could say something like, 'Joey slept with a girl, but later found out she only did it because she wanted to adopt him.'"

Marta burst out laughing and immediately scribbled something into her notebook.

"That was a good one, Caleb."

"Thank you," I said with a smile. "There's more where that came from."

"Oh?" Marta said, intrigued. "If you don't qualify for this role, maybe you could try out for our writing team instead."

I shook my head firmly. "No. It's either acting, or I finish my degree. I might try writing someday, but only after I'm done with my education."

"Understandable," Marta said with a nod.

David steered the conversation back to me. "How are you still eighteen if you're already in college? Don't get me wrong, we've known you for a long time thanks to Aria. I honestly thought you were older."

Aria Grayson was my sister. She was fifteen years older than me.

At present, she worked in Los Angeles, but years ago she'd been roommates with David and Marta in New York. When they eventually moved back to LA, I started spending time around them too.

To Aria's credit, she never made me feel like an outsider. Even though everyone in her social circle was much older, she treated me like an equal.

It made sense that David and Marta had never bothered to ask my exact age. They'd simply assumed I was older. Which, now, I am. Thanks to the deity who sent me here.

"I finished school at fifteen to pursue acting full-time," I explained. "Mom wasn't happy about it and told me I'd get exactly one year to try before I had to go for higher education. That year was miserable. I couldn't land anything meaningful, so I quit acting and joined UCLA at sixteen. I'll be starting my third year this fall."

It had been decades ago for me. I wasn't bitter or sad anymore. I was just stating facts.

Judging by the sympathetic looks Marta and David exchanged, they didn't see it the same way.

"That doesn't really matter," Marta said gently after a moment. "If you bulk up even a little, you could pass for a twenty-one-year-old Joey. Your height helps a lot."

That was true.

My height was one of my strongest physical features. At six feet one, I was taller than average. Anyone that tall, even without much muscle, could easily be perceived as older.

"What's your ethnic background?" David asked.

"I'm kind of a mutt," I said with a small smile. "My maternal grandmother was Jewish, a Holocaust survivor. My maternal grandfather was German. On my dad's side, my grandmother was Italian, and my grandfather was Spanish. So I can technically claim all four. Religiously, I'd be considered Jewish since it goes through my mother. I even had a bar mitzvah. But my dad isn't religious, so we're not strict about customs."

My mixed heritage meant I didn't look distinctly like any one ethnicity. Dark hair, light blue eyes, and no strong facial markers that screamed Jewish, Italian, or Spanish.

"Do you know any Italian?" David asked. "Joey's supposed to be Italian-American."

"Certo, conosco l'italiano," I replied, my accent flawless.

Marta raised an eyebrow. "And that means?"

"Of course, I know Italian," I said. "My dad taught me when I was little. I also know French, German, and Spanish. At UCLA, I'm majoring in linguistics along with International Relations. I do a lot of Model United Nations, and languages give me an edge there. I was planning to learn some Asian languages next. Japanese, Mandarin, Korean, Hindi, things like that."

I already knew those languages, but could not explain my knowledge of them in this timeline.

Just what we need, an overachieving brat to give us an inferiority complex, David thought.

I closed my eyes briefly, silently deciding to rein myself in.

Marta, on the other hand, looked at me with open amazement.

"And to think we were asking you to play a dumb guy!"

"I can play him," I said confidently. "It sounds fun, honestly. Playing dumb would be a nice change of pace. My classes were starting to bore me anyway."

David raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you want to leave your education behind to work on a TV show? I know how dedicated students at places like UCLA can be. If this show gets picked up, you'll be signing a seven-year contract. If it becomes as successful as *Dream On*, you won't have a college career to return to when it's over. You can always pursue acting after college, but not necessarily the other way around."

"I won't mind," I said, already constructing a believable story in my head. "As I said, I've been feeling a little disillusioned with college lately. Acting was always my first choice. I only joined UCLA because my acting career wasn't going anywhere."

I met his gaze steadily.

"I have a good feeling about this role. I want to give it my best shot. Even if the show only lasts one season before it gets canceled. And honestly, the money wouldn't hurt either."

"We take care of our talent," Marta said reassuringly. "If you want, we can even add a clause to your contract. If the show gets canceled before one full season, we'll pay for your college on top of your salary."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," David interjected before I could respond. "We haven't even auditioned him yet."

"Right," Marta said, giving me an apologetic look.

"You're auditioning me right now?" I asked, surprised. "I thought you said the audition would be in two weeks."

Of course we're auditioning you now. Knowing you doesn't mean you get the role, David thought.

"For the network executives, yes," Marta clarified. "But we still need to evaluate you before recommending you. Don't worry. For today, you just need to read some lines from the script."

That was exactly what I'd been dreading.

Still, I kept my expression calm and nodded. "Alright. Let's get it out of the way."

It didn't take long for Marta to hand me a small stack of pages.

"This is the pilot," she said. "Give it a quick read before you start."

As I flipped through the script, memories surfaced almost immediately.

I'd watched **Friends** more times than I could count in my previous life. That didn't mean everything was perfect here, though. In the early seasons, some of Joey's defining traits were missing. Habits that would later become iconic hadn't been introduced yet.

He shared food freely in the beginning. The whole not-sharing-food thing came much later. Even "How you doin'?" didn't show up until the middle seasons. They sounded like small details, but they mattered. Those quirks were what eventually made Joey who he was. Early on, he felt a bit bland. By the end of the show, he was almost everyone's favorite.

I stopped flipping pages and looked up.

"So," Marta asked, watching me closely. "What do you think?"

"It's good," I said honestly. "It's very good. If I'm selected, though, I'd love to sit down with both of you and add more depth to my character."

"Sure," David said without hesitation. "We want fully fleshed-out characters too, so I don't have a problem with that. Now, how about we do some reading? Maybe a little improvisation. Let's see if you actually click with the character."

I could tell David was growing impatient, so I decided not to waste any more time.

Marta moved across the room and set up a small camera on a tripod, adjusting the angle until it framed me properly.

"Whenever you're ready," she said.

I took a deep breath and fixed an easygoing, relaxed smile on my face. The kind Joey would wear without thinking.

"Come on!" I said, fully in character. "You're going out with a guy. There's gotta be something wrong with him!"

That line was meant as a response to Monica mentioning she was dating a guy from work.

"Hi!" David prompted, giving me my cue.

I sighed dramatically, rolling my eyes before delivering the next line.

"This guy says 'hello', I wanna kill myself."

Marta burst out laughing behind the camera.

The moment I heard it, a surge of confidence rushed through me. I knew I'd nailed it.

I kept going, maintaining the same tone and rhythm as we moved through different scenes. Marta struggled to contain her laughter more than once, while David stayed composed, focused on reading lines with me and watching closely.

Nearly half an hour passed before Marta finally lowered the camera.

"Alright," she said, still smiling. "I think we've seen enough for today. Give us a few days. We'll show your tape to some other people, and then we'll call you with the results."

She paused, eyeing my frame once more.

"It'd be good if you started working out, though. If not for this role, then just in general."

I nodded. "Sure."

I stood up and smiled at both of them. There was nothing else I could do now. Having acted before, I knew how this worked. Sometimes producers took weeks, even months, to get back to you.

I doubted David and Marta would drag it out like that, but I was prepared for any outcome.

I shook hands with both of them and turned toward the door.

That was when I froze mid-step.

Marta seems pretty impressed by Caleb. Now how the fuck do I convince her he's not right for this role at all? Even if his delivery was good, the guy's eighteen for fuck's sake. And he looks even younger. What a waste of a perfectly good Saturday.

"Is everything okay, Cal?" Marta asked, puzzled when she noticed I hadn't left yet.

"Yeah," I said quickly, forcing a grin. "Everything's fine. I was just thinking about something else."

Then I walked out of the office for real.

I didn't stop until I was back in my car, the door shut firmly behind me.

Only then did I let out a string of curses under my breath.

"Fuck!"

I slammed my hands down on the steering wheel, the horn blaring loudly and making a man on the sidewalk in front of my car jump in surprise. He shot me an angry glare, but I ignored him and leaned back in my seat, staring at nothing.

Everything had gone wrong.

I'd come all the way back to the day I regretted the most, only to realize that regret itself had been a lie. Nothing I did would magically land me a role in Friends. Not like this. Not with reality stacked so firmly against me.

And that wasn't even the worst part.

I'd lived with Kim's betrayal for years. I'd made peace with it somewhere along the way. But Tom's betrayal still felt fresh, like a punch straight to the gut. My best friend. The one person I trusted without question.

Now I had no idea what to do.

Or more accurately, I had no idea who to turn to.

I'd never been someone with a wide circle of friends. I preferred keeping my world small. The few people I let in, I kept for life.

Apparently, that hadn't protected me from being stabbed in the back.

My parents weren't an option either.

Mom had always been actively against acting. She'd discouraged me every step of the way, convinced it was a waste of time and potential. Dad wasn't much better. He wasn't hostile about it, just indifferent. A simple man who went to work, came home, and repeated the cycle. If I asked him for advice, he'd give it, but it would always end up being a softer version of whatever Mom had already said.

In the end, there was only one person left.

One person who might support me. And that came with its own set of problems.

(Break)

I rang the doorbell and shifted nervously from foot to foot on the porch.

Out of everyone I knew at this point in my life, Aria was the only one I trusted completely.

Damn it, who is it now? I swear if it's another salesman, I'll lose it. I just put Miles to bed.

Her thought reached me even before the door opened.

When it finally did, I found myself face-to-face with the person I loved more than anyone else in the world.

She looked just like I remembered. Only younger.

The same dark hair and light blue eyes as me. The same sharp presence that always made me feel like a kid again. The most noticeable difference was her stomach, round and unmistakably pregnant.

Right. Isla hasn't been born yet.

"Cal?" Aria said, surprise clear in her voice.

"Hey, sis," I replied, offering a sheepish smile.

If memory served me right, we hadn't spoken in a while in this timeline. We'd had a major argument last year, right after I came back from Nigeria. Ever since then, I'd avoided visiting her, even though she lived barely ten minutes away. We hadn't even talked on the phone.

In the future, we'd eventually apologized and moved past it.

Looking back now, it all felt painfully stupid.

"You look good," I said, glancing down at her belly. "Really good."

"Thank you," she replied, but she didn't step aside or invite me in.

The silence stretched.

"Won't you invite me in?" I asked gently, nodding toward the inside of her quiet suburban home.

"Oh. Right. Come in," she said, stepping back to give me space. "Sorry. I just didn't expect you to show up right now."

She closed the door behind me as I took in the familiar surroundings. Aria had upgraded the house years ago, but standing there felt like stepping straight into the past.

The slightly worn couch. The old grandfather clock our parents had gifted her. The framed photos along the wall. Everything looked older than I remembered, yet impossibly comforting.

It felt good to see it all again.

Why is he here now? Aria thought. *If he's started some shit with Hugo again, I swear I'll clobber him this time.*

Ouch.

Clearly, my dear sister wasn't my biggest fan at the moment. I needed to fix that. Quickly.

As soon as I sat down beside her on the couch, I reached for her hand and held it tightly.

"I'm so sorry," I said earnestly.

Her eyes widened in shock.

The younger version of me had been stubborn to a fault. Apologies didn't come easily, if at all. Hearing one now must have felt unreal.

"Are you okay, Cal?" she asked, worry creeping into her voice.

"I will be," I said quietly. "I..."

I almost told her everything.

The accident. The green screen. Coming back in time. The mind reading. Every unbelievable detail sat on the tip of my tongue.

I stopped myself just in time.

Even if I trusted Aria more than anyone in the world, I had no idea how she'd react to something like that. It sounded insane. And once spoken, there'd be no taking it back. As I looked into her worried eyes, I made a decision. I won't tell anyone. Ever. Some things are better kept secret.

"What is it, Cal?" Aria asked softly.

"Kim cheated on me," I said instead. "With Tom. And a bunch of other guys. I couldn't stay at my place, so I thought I'd come here for a while."

I didn't even finish the sentence.

Aria pulled me into a hug immediately, as tight as she could manage with her pregnant belly between us.

"Stay as long as you want," she whispered into my ear. "I'm so sorry this happened to you. She didn't deserve someone like you."

"I know," I said, rubbing her back gently. "Thanks, sis. I won't stay too long, though. Just a few days. Until I figure out what to do next."

She stiffened instantly and pulled back.

Before I could ask what was wrong, she grabbed my hand and placed it on her belly. For a moment I was confused about what she was trying to establish, but then I felt it. A sudden flutter beneath my palm.

"Whoa," I breathed. "Is that...?"

"She gets a little antsy in the afternoons," Aria said with a small smile. "I think she likes your voice."

My eyes watered as another movement rippled beneath my hand. I'd missed this last time. I hadn't even visited Aria after she gave birth. Standing there now, feeling life move beneath my palm, hurt more than any betrayal ever could.

And somehow, it also felt better than anything I'd ever experienced.

"Aww, don't cry, little bro," Aria said teasingly. "You felt the same thing when Miles was born, didn't you?"

Yeah. But I was thirteen back then, which is decades ago in my head. I don't remember it nearly as clearly as this.

Just then, one of the doors down the hall opened, and my brother-in-law stepped out.

Hugo Russo paused when he saw me.

He stood at an above-average height, about five feet eleven, with a lean, athletic build. His sun-kissed blond hair looked permanently windswept, and his face had the kind of easy handsomeness that came from a life spent outdoors. Dressed in a muscle tee and shorts, a gym bag slung over his shoulder, he looked like he was on his way to work out.

"Cal," he said, surprise clear in his voice.

"Hugo," I replied, getting to my feet and offering my hand.

Instead of just shaking it, he pulled me into a brief hug.

Aria looks really happy to see Cal again.

Reading his thoughts made my chest tighten.

"It's really good to see you," he said with a grin.

I could see how much he meant it. That only made me feel like a bigger asshole.

Hugo had been the reason for my falling out with Aria. I'd discovered he'd cheated on her and immediately told her everything. Like a brat, I'd insisted she divorce him, completely ignoring the reality of the situation.

Hugo had ended things before they escalated. He'd confessed to Aria on his own and apologized sincerely. And because she had a family to think about, she chose to forgive him.

It might sound old-fashioned or even weak to some people, but real life wasn't a movie. Not every woman walked away the moment a partner messed up. Some stayed. People like Hillary Clinton. People like Aria Grayson.

Marriage was complicated as hell.

Something I hadn't understood back then.

Despite that rough patch, Aria and Hugo went on to have a long, happy marriage. The day I died, I'd returned to the States to celebrate their fortieth anniversary.

"It's good to see you too," I said, patting Hugo's back as he released me. "About the last time we talked..."

"Forget it," he interrupted easily, waving it off before I could even apologize. "You were just looking out for your sister. I'd have done the same thing in your place."

"Thank you," I said quietly.

"Hugo," Aria said suddenly. "Cal's going to stay with us for a while. Is that okay?"

"Of course," he said without hesitation, then looked at me. "You can take the guest bedroom on the second floor."

He leaned down and kissed Aria gently. "I'll be back in about an hour. Love you."

"Love you too," she replied with a smile as he headed out the door.

Once he was gone, I sat back down beside her.

"You seem happy," I said.

"I am," she replied honestly. "I didn't like you getting involved in my personal life back then, but it ended up bringing Hugo and me closer." She smiled and patted her belly. "This helped too. Even Miles has become more manageable now."

"That reminds me," I said with a grin. "Where's the little devil?"

"I just put him down for his afternoon nap," she said, then tilted her head at me. "But that's not important right now. Tell me how your audition went."

It didn't take me long to connect the dots. After all, Aria was the one who'd given Marta Kauffman my phone number in the first place.

Out of everyone in my family, Aria was the only one who'd ever supported my dream of becoming an actor without reservations. My parents hated the idea. Even my grandparents thought it was foolish to chase a profession known for chewing people up and spitting them out.

"I'm not getting the role," I said flatly. "They want someone in his mid-twenties to early thirties. I can give a good performance, but I can't change my age."

"It's their loss," Aria said immediately, resting a comforting hand on my shoulder. "If you want, I can ask about getting you a job at my new company."

I frowned slightly. "You do know I'm still a sophomore at UCLA, right? I can't work a full-time job."

She didn't respond right away.

Instead, she just stared at me.

"What?" I asked when the silence started to feel uncomfortable.

"Do you know where I work?" she asked.

"At that marketing firm," I replied. "In the design department."

“No,” she said. “I switched jobs last year. I’m working at Paramount Studios now. Production and art department.”

I stared at her, my mind momentarily blank.

Dammit, Mom. I told her to tell Cal. She probably didn’t because she knew it’d give him hope again. This is so like her. And now I look like the bad guy for not saying anything.

I chose not to address it.

“How’s the job?” I asked casually, pretending there wasn’t a massive revelation hanging in the air.

“Honestly?” Aria sighed. “Not as great as I hoped. I liked advertising more. The culture in the art department here is a bit toxic. I’ll probably stick it out for a year or two before jumping ship back to advertising.”

That explained a lot.

In my original life, I hadn’t spoken to Aria again until 1997. By then, she must’ve already moved back into advertising. No wonder I never knew about this.

“So,” she said, watching me carefully. “Do you want me to talk to someone about getting you a role? Or was it a one-time thing?”

I didn’t hesitate.

“Get me a role,” I said firmly. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Her eyes widened. “You want to drop out?”

“If the role’s good enough,” I said. “You know I never wanted to be there in the first place.”

“You’re already halfway done,” she said, concern creeping into her voice. “At least finish your degree as a backup.”

“Not if I don’t need it,” I replied calmly.

“Being a full-time actor isn’t easy,” Aria said. “What happens if you still don’t get work in a few years? How do you plan to sustain yourself?”

That part was easy.

Thanks to my future knowledge, I knew exactly what was coming. The dot-com bubble of the late nineties. The absurd rise of tech stocks. The kind of opportunity that could turn smart timing into obscene wealth. If I played my cards right, I’d be a multimillionaire before I turned twenty-five.

One thing was certain: I wasn't going to die poor in this life.

"I'll manage somehow," I insisted. "If things don't work out, I can always come back and finish my degree later. I'm only eighteen and already two years ahead of most people my age. I don't want to grow old regretting that I never chased what I truly wanted."

Damn. He's serious. I haven't seen this kind of passion in him in a long time. I guess getting cheated on really does give you clarity. What a pair we are. Both of us figuring out our damn lives after being cheated on by our damn partners.

"You say 'damn' a lot, don't you?" I said casually.

Aria frowned. "When did I say 'damn'? I've been trying not to curse at all ever since Miles told Hugo 'fuck off' to his face."

I burst out laughing.

"That was my reaction too," she said with a grin. "Hugo blamed me for swearing like a sailor. So I'm trying to control it now. I don't even say damn, shit, or hell anymore. Forget the bigger words."

That was when it hit me. I was picking up the words she used in her head.

It felt wrong to do that to my own sister. I immediately shut my power off, making a firm mental promise never to use it on my family again.

"I'll talk to my supervisor about getting you a film role," Aria said after a moment. "But I can't promise you a lead. If anything, they might offer you a supporting role. And if that happens, they'll probably want you to sign a multi-picture deal."

"I don't mind," I said without hesitation. "I'll take anything, as long as I get to act."

She nodded slowly. "So what do you plan to do now?"

I shrugged. "First, I'll get my stuff back from my place. Then I'll meet my old agent and start looking for roles again."

"You'll at least finish this academic year, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I've got about a month of classes left. But in the meantime, I want to do something Marta suggested." I hesitated for a second. "Do you think Hugo would be okay with me tagging along for some gym sessions?"

She smiled instantly. "He'd love that."

Before we could continue our conversation, we were stopped by a third voice in the room.

“Uncle Cal!”

A small blur barreled into me and latched on like a koala.

“Hey, bud,” I said, hugging my nephew tightly. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I woke up when I heard you!” Miles declared proudly. “So where’s my present?”

“Your present?” I asked, glancing at Aria.

“You missed his birthday,” she said apologetically. “So I told him you’d bring him something next time you came over.”

Of course.

I rubbed Miles’ head gently. “Alright. What do you want? I’ll get it for you.”

“I want a train,” he announced.

“You already have a train,” Aria reminded him.

“Oh.” He paused, deep in thought. “Then I want a guitar.”

“You have that too.”

“But I want a bigger one!” he protested. “The one you got me is for kids. I’m big now.”

I laughed, the sound coming easier than it had all day. In that moment, I realized something important: Even if I didn’t get the role, even if acting didn’t work out the way I hoped, I’d already gained something priceless.

I’d missed too many moments like this in my first life. First, because of my ego, then because of my career.

I wasn’t going to waste this second chance.