

T*Summer* Term



MOLLY RINGLE

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by

Molly Ringle

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Dedication

For all my fellow fangirls (and fanboys).

Chapter One

The possibility of finding a film star among her students didn't even enter Paige Huntley's head on the first morning of Linguistics 101. As she set her backpack on the table at the front of the classroom, her brain was busy going over the lecture and hoping she had brought all the right pieces of paper. She had served as a teaching assistant for this course five times now, but this was only the second time she had taught the course herself. On the first occasion she'd felt about as graceful and collected as a cat flung into a lake. She was determined to make a better show of it this time, even though it was only a summer course, and she was still only a Ph.D. student, not a proper professor.

Already, at nine a.m., the sun blazed hot, which didn't help wake up her seventy-five students. The first day of summer term always felt drowsy, Paige thought, compared to the first day of other terms. She lifted her face to scan the rising tiers of seats in the large lecture hall, making sure everyone was settled. June sunshine poured in through the open doors in the upper corners of the room, and flies buzzed through the chalk dust in the sunbeams. Paige spread out her roll sheet, called a greeting that quieted the mumbles of conversation, and began reading names aloud.

"Aidan Grey?" she said, a third of the way down the alphabet, and paused. Funny, she thought. Like the actor's name. She looked up in curiosity to see what ordinary undergraduate answered her summons. A couple of female students turned their

heads too.

“Here.” He lifted a hand.

It took her a second. At first she saw only a guy with dark hair sticking out from under a green baseball cap, a guy who needed a shave and a haircut, like many a college student. But the beauty of the long lashes, the suppleness of the lips, the cheekbones people beat down plastic surgeons’ doors for—suddenly those all jumped out at her, and she couldn’t say a word. Ironic, since this was, after all, a linguistics class.

He smiled when he saw how she stared, but the smile looked grim. He lowered his legendary lashes and played with the edge of the syllabus, cutting one glance aside at a whispering pair of girls. Paige could almost hear his thoughts: *Damn it, they recognized me.*

“Thank you.” Paige smoothed the roster, heart hammering. Her gaze instinctively swept downward, checking her appearance. As on most summer days, she wore one of her dozen sundresses (white-with-black paisley today) and a pair of saltwater sandals, flat-soled for easy bicycling. When fastening up her red hair in the mirror this morning she had thought she looked classy. Now, comparing herself against every actress who had ever walked a red carpet, she felt hokey and hippie-ish. Like an Oregon grad student.

At the same time, she was thrilled. She wanted to fling the textbook aside, pull up a chair, and grill him on the movie lifestyle, ask him if he had ever met Brad Pitt, *something*. But of course the only clear words that came to mind were, *Oh, my God, we saw your new movie last weekend. And my friend Ky? She said she’d do you.*

Paige stifled a laugh in her fist, disguising it as a cough, and moved along. “Heather Hampton?”

After getting through the roll sheet she started

the lecture, though she was tempted to put it off and announce, "I see we have a celebrity among us today. Aidan? Could you please come up here where everyone can see you?" She was stopped only by the notion that he would hate her forever if she did. Anyway, she was thirty-three, not a teenage fangirl, and ought to behave accordingly.

But every glance in his direction sent her mind spinning with delighted commotion. She never, ever, met celebrities. To get one for an entire term—and a very attractive one, though much too young for her—made her so giddy she could barely spell. Twice while writing on the chalkboard she had to erase a letter with the side of her hand and re-chalk it in properly. *Some linguist*, her students were probably thinking. *Can't even spell "syntax" or "phonetics."*

And of course, as she delivered the lecture, she was dying to know why in the gol-darn heck (as her father might say) Aidan Grey was attending summer classes at Ocean Range University in Gordon, Oregon. Gordon was a nice enough little town, tucked into the moist green hills between the Willamette Valley and the Pacific Ocean, an hour's drive from either. But half its twelve thousand residents worked or studied at the university, and if it weren't for that institution, Gordon wouldn't register a blip on anyone's radar. Students serving their four years here tended to call it "Boredom," or, as Paige herself had often said, "Back-Ass-Hills, Oregon."

Aidan Grey was registered as a senior, no less. Paige had noted the "SR" after his name when drawing a shaky checkmark beside it on the roll sheet. Must have acquired credits at other schools, UCLA or USC or something, in between movies. She could make a dubious case for why he would take linguistics—actors could be interested in dialects and foreign accents—but why the hell was he *here*?

He stayed silent, like most of the students, while she lectured. Sometimes she prompted the class for feedback to keep them awake—easy things like, “What are some parts of speech you learned in English class?” To which someone mumbled “Noun” from one side of the room, and someone else “Adjective” from another side, and “Preposition” from a perky girl sipping iced coffee in the first row. But Aidan Grey only took notes, smiling a couple of times at her best jokes but never raising his hand or saying a word.

Paige resented him by the end of the lecture. It drove her mad, having to perform up here for a professional actor. Her armpits were soaked, her face felt hot and shiny, and she could use a little encouragement, damn it. He at least owed her an explanation as to why he thought he could mosey into her classroom and kick her composure out the window. Who did he think he was, anyhow?

When the lecture ended she wanted to march over there and get some answers. But she didn’t have the chance. For one thing, he was fast: he scooped up his notebook and his striped canvas satchel and ducked out of that row with the very first of the exodus. For another thing, other students, who presumably had no idea they were in the presence of fame or else didn’t care, ambled down to ask Paige about the class. She answered their questions, casting glances over their shoulders at the vanishing Aidan Grey.

He got snagged at the door by the girls who had been whispering about him. They asked him something, giggled and gasped while he answered, and tagged along as he left the lecture hall. Oh, well. Provided he didn’t drop the class, Paige would see him again in two days. Ling 101 was a Monday-Wednesday-Friday deal.

When the last students had left, Paige dashed

out into the hot sun and unlocked her bike. Along the tree-shaded campus streets she pedaled back to her duplex, barely noticing the effort it took on the hill at the last stretch. She waited until she'd darted inside before grabbing her cell phone and calling her best friend Kylie.

She got Ky's voice mail, which didn't surprise her, as Ky spent most of her time these days in the library, working on her anthropology doctorate. For someone so careless around food and sharp objects, Ky was surprisingly meticulous about bibliographies.

"Ky? It's Paige," she said. "Oh, my God. Ask me about Aidan Grey." She hung up, flopped onto the sofa, and grinned at the ceiling.

The next day, in the mild morning air, Paige bicycled to the campus day care, where she conducted research and did some impromptu babysitting once a week. For her allotted hour she played with one- to five-year-olds on the floor amid a landslide of brightly colored toys, recording everything they said on a small digital device. Her Ph.D. thesis examined how kids learned and used language, and, not having any children of her own, Paige had to borrow other people's in order to collect data.

This weekly hour with the tots tended to produce troubling, intriguing, or sweet reflections in Paige. Some weeks they reminded her she was getting into her thirties and had better settle down and get pregnant if she ever intended to. Other weeks she decided it was best to be the cool aunt type her whole life and not bother with direct descendants. Still other weeks she considered adoption, or spent a while ruminating on her own childhood.

This week, however, she found herself thinking,

Wonder if any of you are going to become famous child actors like Aidan Grey? I'll say I knew you way back when.

After finishing up with the kids, it was time for her office hours. As it was the first week of class, she didn't expect any students to show up, and indeed it was quiet in the grad student office of the linguistics department. Paige was the first to arrive, unlocking the door and turning on the lights. She spread her notebooks on the desk and peered through the window, looking down three stories upon the courtyard through leafy maple branches. As usual, the office smelled of dry-erase markers and stale coffee, but at least it was cool, thanks to the blessed air conditioning.

Morris, another doctoral candidate, strolled in, yawning, and chatted with her for a few minutes about the English as a Second Language class he was teaching. He then sat at his desk and put headphones on, immersing himself in learning Mandarin.

Paige ignored the "chow, jai, ma" sounds coming from his side of the room and tried to read a photocopied article for her thesis. It was difficult to concentrate on theories of language acquisition in infants, however, when half her brain was babbling like a fourteen-year-old, *I have a movie star in my class and ohmyGod he's so cute!*

Kylie had called back last night to ask about Aidan Grey. They had a grand time cackling lasciviously over the great windfall Fate had dealt her. Ky begged to be allowed to crash Paige's class, sit right behind Aidan, and slip him dirty notes. Paige managed to discourage her, but agreed to let Ky arrive at the end of the lecture to watch young Mr. Grey leave the building. That was as far into unprofessional behavior as Paige was willing to go for now.

Meanwhile, as Paige sat at her desk in the grad student office, the other half of her brain listened for footsteps in the hallway that would signal the arrival of a student or professor.

For on that latter count—the subject of professors—her brain was hardly any more mature than on the subject of Aidan Grey. Ky teased her about her attachment to Stefan Serovinak, and Paige allowed it and laughed it off, but the crush went deeper than she liked to admit.

He had a Ph.D., of course, but as he was only forty-two and looked younger, he wasn't one of the professors you called "Doctor." Practically everyone, undergrads included, called Professor Serovinak "Stefan." Paige had chosen him as her thesis adviser a year ago for several reasons, which at the time actually didn't include his hotness. One reason was that his expertise matched what she wanted to study. Another was that he was a perfectionist and she appreciated perfectionism. Also, though his praise was hard to earn, he had praised her work in the classes she took from him, and she liked him for that.

Then she started noticing, or rather acknowledging, his other attractive features.

Like many linguistics professors, Stefan Serovinak had a wild mix of ethnic ancestry. He had forebears from Africa, Southern Europe, and Asia; had grown up in Australia and spent a few years each in Japan, Brazil and Alaska; and spoke three languages fluently. English was his true native language and he spoke it with a worldly, slightly British softness which was all the more alluring combined with the cutting words he used.

Sarcasm had never sounded so sweet as from this man's mouth. This past February, after he had said a certain textbook author "writes prose as if he's being whipped for every word under three syllables,"

Paige's heart went all tender for Stefan.

The wit would have been enough, but he also had caramel-colored skin, black hair whose curls sometimes escaped his attempts at taming them and gave him a romantic Heathcliff look, and scads of elegance compared to most people in town. He wore vests with his shirts, and some of the shirts were silk. Once, outside a diner where he was taking Paige to talk about her project, they had pressed close together as Stefan held the door for a crowd of students coming out. A fold of his silken sleeve rippled in the wind and caressed Paige's bare arm, leaving her drenched in desire.

Surely it wasn't right to look at your major professor's unfastened top shirt button and want to glue your lips to the patch of skin revealed there. It also wasn't a respectable or scholarly thought to imagine squeezing his butt through the fine-spun fabric of his trousers.

No, those ideas didn't have much to do with language acquisition at all.

And, in fact, those ideas were deplorable, because Stefan was married. Three years now, to a lovely blonde woman. Jolene's hair color didn't really matter, Paige supposed, but it was such a bright golden blonde she couldn't help thinking of it when picturing her.

But Paige practically never saw Jolene in real life, so it was sometimes easy to forget she existed and contemplate Stefan's charms as if he were unattached.

She hadn't seen him since spring term ended two weeks ago. He and Jolene had gone on vacation. But he was due back any day now, and despite the situation being all wrong, her ear wouldn't stop listening for that footstep a few doors down, that key in that particular lock.

Paige shifted her legs, aware she was tingling

and not concentrating on the article. She gripped her yellow highlighter and tried to think up some comments on the article to impress Stefan when he came in.

Chapter Two

For all his perfectionism, Stefan was still a linguist and therefore found slang delightful. So his vacation, he thought, had been what his undergrads might call “a bumner.”

Oh, it had been pleasant enough to drive down to San Francisco and stroll along the waterfront while Jolene went to her activism meetings. Monterey had been lovely too, even with the delay at the aquarium while Jolene grilled the caretakers on what kind of water filtration they were using in the tuna tank. And Sonoma Valley had been beautiful, though Stefan would have liked to stop at some of the famous wineries, an idea vetoed by Jolene, who cited ethical problems such as the unfair treatment of migrant workers and the use of certain pesticides on the grapes.

“Their wine is good,” Stefan said. “They’ve been doing this for a hundred years. People wouldn’t work there if it were so horrible.”

“These people are being exploited!” said Jolene. And though Stefan tried to make her see his point throughout the drive to the coast, none of his arguments had budged her from her position.

That was something he loved about Jolene, however: she cared deeply and she tried to change things. So few people in the world could say the same. The apathy in his classroom disgusted him on a daily basis, and he was only asking them to care about *language*, not something far away and unfamiliar.

Still...he did wish his passionate wife could have

a little more fun. Come to think of it, the last time a smile glowed upon her face was when one of her Californian activist friends convinced Leonardo diCaprio to do an environmentalism fundraiser with them in San Diego. She swore it was only the fabulous publicity making her happy, but Stefan teased her for being star-struck.

That was three months ago, and he couldn't recall seeing her laugh since.

Now, back from vacation, he allowed other concerns to enter his mind. He wasn't teaching during the summer term—the department roped the grad students into that task, thank God—but he had plenty of research to do, and mentoring as well. He served on the committee for two master's students, whose progress would have to be checked once a month or so, and then he had Paige Huntley's doctoral thesis to oversee. She would be ready to turn in a draft by the end of fall term, he estimated, if she kept working at her current pace. She could be done with her whole degree by the end of winter.

He had walked to campus from his house today, only a quarter of a mile away. Though it was still morning and this heat couldn't compare to Australia's or Brazil's, sweat trickled down his back beneath his white shirt. He swung his canvas satchel to the opposite shoulder and entered the shade of the linguistics building, breathing the chilled air with gratitude.

He trudged up to the department on the third floor, taking the stairs. Had to stay in shape, now that he'd passed forty.

Stefan swung the office keys around one finger, his mind returning to Paige and her thesis. Such a hard worker, Paige was, and so bright. He had convinced the senior professors to offer her a position as a full-time lecturer for the coming year while she finished her thesis—and a term or two

beyond, if she liked—so he could keep her around.

He liked talking to her. She saw language the same way he did. The theories that made sense to him also made sense to her, and on many occasions she had been the first to grasp a concept he was explaining to a class. Besides, she made him laugh.

And she had red hair that was long and wavy and lightweight, soft against his skin when he leaned over a book with her; and smooth skin, and freckles across her nose, making her look thirteen sometimes instead of thirty-something; and a lanky body that she draped into chairs with an easy grace, propping herself forward far enough that sometimes her blouse gaped open and showed a swell of cleavage; and a way of carelessly crossing her legs and revealing an edge of panties if she was wearing the right kind of skirt...

Stefan exhaled a sigh and turned into the hallway of the linguistics offices. *That's all very well, Professor, but keep it to yourself.* Before unlocking his office door, he cast a glance toward the grad student office, three doors down. It was open, and light spilled out from it, but he decided not to walk down there and look in. Even if Paige was there, he could refrain from rushing in and seeing her the first minute he'd arrived. He turned and went to his own office.

Five minutes later, a knock on the open door brought his head up. The red cascade of hair fell across the wheat-toned sundress in a masterpiece of warm color. He felt himself smile without meaning to. "Oh, hello."

"Hi," Paige said. "I came up for my office hours and saw your door open, so I thought I'd check in."

"Yes, yes, come in." He beckoned her forward, half rising from his seat.

She dropped into the chair he kept for visitors, flipping one ankle up onto her knee, flashing him a

length of creamy thigh. He swallowed, sat back down, and shoved some papers around on his desk.

“How was your vacation?” she asked.

“It was decent,” he said. “Except in the parts that were ugly, hot, and dry.” She made a smile of commiseration and he went on, “But much of it was beautiful. We saw Monterey, and San Francisco, and...well, never mind.” He leaned back in his chair and folded both hands behind his head. “You’re teaching this term? How’s it going?”

“So far, so good. I might want to use some of your materials for the phonetics section, and the historical too.”

“Feel free.”

“Oh, and...” She grinned. “Guess what? I have a film star in my class.”

“Really? I wasn’t aware we had any film stars on campus.”

“Neither was I. It’s Aidan Grey. Have you heard of him?”

“The name sounds familiar.”

“He’s in that movie *Sailing with the Sedlaks*.”

“Oh.” Stefan nodded. “Haven’t seen it. Supposed to be a ‘chick-flick,’ isn’t it?”

“It’s a date movie,” Paige said diplomatically.

“Did you see it on a date?” The question escaped his mouth before he could catch it. Oh, well. At least he’d find out. Not that he needed to know.

“No, actually I saw it with my friend Kylie.” Was Stefan imagining things, or did a blush appear on that fair face? Again, not that it was any of his business. “Anyway,” Paige added, “it’s about a young guy who gets hired to take this rich Eastern-European family sailing, in Maine or somewhere...”

“And undoubtedly falls in love with the Americanized daughter, causing much consternation on the part of the traditional father. And hilarity ensues.”

Paige laughed. “Yes. It’s a cute movie, honestly. But the young guy, the love interest—that’s Aidan Grey. And for some reason he’s here, in my class this summer.”

“How strange. I wonder if they’re shooting a movie nearby.”

“Search me.”

Don’t tempt me.

Stefan coughed. “Well. Is he friendly? Smart?”

“Hasn’t spoken a word to me. Just between us, I think he might be a little full of himself.”

“Famous people.” Stefan shook his head. “Isn’t that always the way.”

“Yeah, exactly.” Paige opened a notebook on her lap. “So. Can I ask you about this article?”

Chapter Three

Bicycling is really the only way to get to and from campus, Aidan decided by the end of the second day. If he biked, see, he could get away from people, whereas if he walked, they often insisted on walking with him. It didn't matter where he was going. They'd go his way. They didn't mind! Just as long as he could answer five thousand more questions about sex scenes, stunts, other actors, and his personal life along the way.

And even his bike wasn't entirely a refuge. Today, only a few days into the term, he came out of his Statistics class to find a note attached to his Kryptonite lock, tied with sky-blue ribbon, the kind you could curl with scissors. The letter writer had opted not to curl it, though. She (or possibly he) only threaded it through a hole punched in the note's corner and tied it in a bow. The note, in dark blue pen on light blue paper, said:

Welcome to town.

Love you,

Polly

The welcome part was friendly enough, but "Love you"? Kind of extreme from, as far as he knew, a complete stranger.

Damn *Sailing with the Sedlaks*, he thought as he dodged slower cyclists and whipped around parked cars. Damn it to hell. He hadn't been hounded like this before, and it was all the fault of that film.

Sure, there had been websites devoted to him since he was a kid, and almost every time he went

out in public over the last ten years someone recognized him. But that was L.A., where people knew about actors and were used to seeing them around. On location in other cities and towns, he could go a week or more without anyone approaching him. And when he came home to Gordon, he would have expected only his old friends to recognize him, people who knew him from school or were friends of his mom's.

But no. Leave it to fate to pick this summer as the time when he finally broke through with a number-one hit movie. And it would of course have to be a movie whose demographic was the high-school-to-college crowd, at the same exact time he had enrolled in a university up here in Oregon where they never saw celebrities and therefore went ape-shit when one showed up.

His professors weren't behaving much better. In Communications the bottle-blonde, overtanned, middle-aged woman teaching the course had opened the class with, "Well, an exciting day for those of us interested in the media of film. You've got a professional actor among your classmates!" Goodbye, anonymity. In Statistics, the balding professor hadn't said anything to the class at large, but had approached Aidan after class on the first day, handed him a blank Post-It Note, and said, "Hoo boy, my daughter's going to *freak out* when she hears who's in town. Can you sign this for her?"

Only his linguistics teacher, Paige Huntley, with the long legs and the hair the color of Tabasco sauce, hadn't said a word about him yet. For that he was grateful to her, but only grudgingly so, since she had obviously *wanted* to say something. She'd gaped at him for a full ten seconds that first day.

Yeah, it was promising to be a headache of a summer.

He hadn't been mobbed yet, strictly speaking.

He hadn't been forced to run for his safety, which had happened to other actors he knew. But he was being stared at, whispered about, and approached by knots of four or more people at a time, which was unprecedented. And *Sailing with the Sedlaks* was only in its third week at the cinemas. Plenty of people hadn't seen it yet.

Things were only going to get worse.

He swung into his mother's driveway, ducked into the shade of the old oak tree, and hopped off his bike. As he guided it down the slant to the subterranean garage, his cell phone rang inside his knapsack.

"I hate you," he said pleasantly. The phone went on ringing. He reached the bottom of the slope, leaned the bike against the house, and fished out the phone. He looked at the caller ID: MARKIE SALAZAR.

"No, really, I do hate you," he promised. He thumbed the "on" button and put the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

"Aidan!" screeched Markie, which was how she always greeted him.

"Hi."

"Well, how's school?"

"It's fine." He tapped in the entry code on the garage keypad and held the front wheel of the bike out of the way as the door went up. "Looks like I'll be really busy."

"Great, hon. Listen. Can I Fed-Ex you a script? Morning Glory has a thriller set in Ireland and they want you. That's right, kid, *you!*"

"Um..." He wheeled the bike into the garage, leaned it against the wall, and sat down on the step to the kitchen door. The concrete felt deliciously cool through his shorts. "Ireland, huh? When do they start shooting?"

"Beginning of August."

Aidan shook his head and smiled—but not because he was amused. “I can’t do it. I’m here until the term ends. Last week of August.”

“At least look at the script,” she said. “I’ll send it. You’ll see.”

“All I’m doing this season is studying. Finishing my degree. That’s all. I really can’t concentrate on other projects at the same time.”

“Kid, you are hot right now. Hot. Did you get the figures I emailed on *Sailing with the Sedlaks*?”

Aidan closed his eyes and massaged his eyebrows. “Yes.”

“Tell me you’re not hot.”

“I know. It’s a very popular movie.”

“Tell me you’re not hot.”

“I understand, but with school—”

“Tell me you’re not hot.”

He caved. “Guess I can’t tell you that.”

“That’s right. You can’t. Colby West has two new films coming out this summer. Two.”

“Oh? Good for him.” Aidan meant it. Colby was a nice guy. They had been in a film together three years ago.

“Aidan. You’ve got nothing coming out till January. January!”

“January, yes.”

“And it’s an art film. I loved your work in it, you know I did, but between you and me, no one’s going to care. *Sanctuary* isn’t even going to make the radar.”

Now Aidan’s smile was genuine, if a bit malicious. “Huh. Really. You said that about *The Sedlaks*.”

“And I am eating crow happily. This is a sign, though, baby, don’t you see? This is our big chance! You’ve got a window here. You know? A window!”

He stretched an arm over his head, letting his knuckles touch the wood behind him, and thought,

Actually, I've got a door here. "I understand," he said.

"You don't have to do the Ireland picture. I know it's important to you, for personal reasons, to take some time off and do your college thing." The implication *And of course you're crazy* echoed behind her words. "But can I send some other scripts? We've got to decide what you're doing in the fall, at least. Give me that much, sweetie."

"Well..."

"You could be so huge if you worked at it. You could be beating them off with a stick."

"I do enough of that already."

"This is nothing. You could have whatever you wanted. You've only got to show your face and work your magic. But we've got to do it while we've got this window. See?"

"Yeah."

"Will you read the scripts I send?"

"I'll have homework."

"Between homework. Make it homework. This is my assignment to you." She sounded proud of herself, as if she had found a position he would have to respect. Wow, put it in terms of school! He'd have no way to argue against that!

He clamped his teeth shut and counted to three before answering. "All right. I'll look at them."

"You're an angel, Aidan. You're my ace. Have I told you you're the best?"

"Thanks, Markie."

"Bye, sweetheart. You should get those scripts tomorrow. Call me if you don't, and I'll chew someone's ass."

"Okay. Bye." He turned off the phone before she could bring up anything else, and flung it into his bag, singing in calm tones, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you..." He hopped up, pressed the button to close the garage door, and slipped inside the house.

When he was in his apartment in L.A. and enjoying the warm breezes off the open balcony door, he often thought it silly that his mother still insisted on living in their old house in Gordon, Oregon. And when he came back for Thanksgiving and Christmas, he was sometimes intolerably bored here and tried to convince her to move, or at least accept the funds for a bigger house, in the mountains or the countryside or somewhere.

She wouldn't budge. "This is where I've lived for thirty years, and this is where my friends live, and you're only in L.A. some of the time anyway, so I think I'm as good here as anywhere else. Besides, I don't want to go getting above myself."

And Aidan would roll his eyes and accept it with a sigh, and the discussion would end.

But this time, as with other occasions when the Hollywood life was wearing on him, he was deeply grateful for this ordinary house, hundreds of miles from Southern California. He liked coming home to sensations he had known all his life, the same light slanting through the same trees into the same window. He liked the smell of laundry and houseplants and whatever exactly *home* smelled like. He liked sitting at the kitchen table with a bowl of cereal in the afternoon, in the same habit he had kept during his school years here.

When he was a kid, acting had been fun but strange. Then again, acting was *still* fun but strange. The difference was he had felt as a child that it was leading up to something grand, that he would reach some plateau and look out and see the world from his position on top of the mountain.

Now he had a sneaking suspicion that this *was* the top of the mountain—having a hit film and being thronged by strangers and harassed by your agent—and it rather sucked, actually.

He finished his cereal, pushed aside the bowl,

and looked at the microwave clock. 4:40. His mom's note said she would be back around five. She was volunteering at the blood drive again. At least he had convinced her to give up her crappy job at the county courthouse once his films started pulling in significant cash. Now she spread herself across ten or fifteen charities, always fretting that this still wasn't enough, that she should be doing more "for people."

"You're people too, Mom," he had reminded her last year. "Do something *you* want to do."

"This is what I want to do," she had insisted.

Which was true. That, and continue to mourn his father, dead since Aidan was four years old.

Aidan pulled off his baseball cap and ran his fingers through his tangled hair. He knew he gave his mom too much advice, knew he was only twenty-four and not exactly as worldly-wise as he sometimes felt. But he consoled himself with the knowledge that he had never suggested she start dating again. Oh, he was tempted to say it, all the time. But he had seen too many bad relationships—thank you for that, Hollywood—to want to put her through any.

Also, he had the horrible notion that some sleazebag might start dating her because of him—because of Aidan. Someone could be after the money, the connection to fame. Especially now that he was getting more of both.

He groaned and put his head on the kitchen table and folded his arms over it. "Fame bites," he said into the polished wood, and immediately felt like a spoiled little shit for saying it. *Yeah, real tough life you lead, Aidan. Suck it up and do your homework.*

He took the cereal bowl to the sink, rinsed it, and picked up his bag full of texts and notebooks. Earning his bachelor of arts in communications, trivial though it might be in the face of his recent

acting success, would make his mother proud. And it would make him feel less like a Hollywood airhead. It was only one more term. He could manage.

Before he reached the stairs, the front door opened and his mother came in. Her keys dangled from her hand, bearing the same plastic-shelled photo of him that had been on the keyring for over a decade. Her hair, completely gray already at age forty-six, was in a loose braid, with tufts sticking out at the base of her neck.

But her eyes, still expressive and bright blue and long-lashed—the eyes he had inherited and which earned him love letters from fourteen-year-olds—made her pretty, and they lit up when she saw him.

“Hi, baboo.” She had called him “baboo” since he was a baby.

“Hey. How’s the world of blood?”

“Oh, fine. We have lots of it. The college kids are always generous with it, since we give them free juice and cookies.”

“Yeah, we’ll do anything for food, pretty much.”

She beamed and hugged him. “Oh, I love that you’re here, being a college student.”

He hugged her back. The smell of her perfume made him feel like a kid again. Everything was okay for a moment, and his agent and film studios and Fed-Exed scripts didn’t exist. “It’s good to be here,” he said into her hair.

On Thursday of the second week of classes, Aidan walked into the six-story social sciences building and tracked down the grad student office of the linguistics department. The door was open. One guy sat in the far corner studying with headphones on, and an Asian woman next to him marked papers. A splash of red ponytail alerted him to the person he came to see, though: Paige Huntley, his teacher for

Ling 101. Today she wore another sundress, this one brown with turquoise polka dots. The woman seemed to live in sundresses. She sat at a computer terminal with her back to the door, her chin propped on her hand.

And she was scrolling through photos of Aidan, on the Internet.

Golly, look, there was that one from the photo shoot with *Filmtime* magazine when they put some sort of conquistador jacket on him. And, great, there was that black-and-white from the promotional material of *Sailing with the Sedlaks* where he was shirtless and barefoot and clinging jauntily to the mast. And, oh, fantastic, there was his absolute favorite: the one where *Nouveau* magazine had slathered eyeliner and bronzer on him and photographed him in a vinyl vest on a set strewn with dead leaves.

It all took only a second for him to see. He had raised his arm to knock on the door and opened his mouth to say "Hi." But at being confronted with his own airbrushed and moussed self, he was blindsided into a mere grunt of a sound.

Paige turned in her chair. Her mouth fell open.

"Oh," she said, and her hand flew to the computer mouse to hide the browser, but she was smart enough not to bother. She knew it was too late. Instead she appealed to him with a guilty smile. "Sorry. I don't usually look up students on the Internet, honest."

"That's all right." He shifted his book bag to the other arm. "Guess I don't have to tell you my name, then."

"No. I recognized you. Honestly, I wasn't out to look at photos of you. I was only trying to find out why you were here. I thought maybe your fan websites would say something."

"Did they?"

“Kind of. I mean, I learned this is your hometown, so that probably explains it.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.” He glanced down at his old yellow T-shirt and gray shorts, wondering if she’d ever see him as a normal guy, now that she’d viewed photos of him wearing the world’s most outlandish clothes.

She shook her head and closed the browser. “I’m sorry. None of my business. How can I help you?”

He advanced and sat in the wooden chair beside her desk, pulling out his linguistics notebook. “I wanted to make sure I was on the right track with these phonology problems.”

“Okay. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

He turned the book sideways on his lap so she could see it. She smelled nice, a summery scent that reminded him of tropical fruit spritzers at L.A. parties, but the Internet photos had rattled him too much. He couldn’t think of flirtation right now. He stuck to business. “These first three problems weren’t too hard. I think I got those.”

“Yep. That looks fine.” She glanced sideways at him with a smile. “You’re pretty handy with those IPA symbols.”

For an actor? he wondered in a flash of resentment. He tried to keep the frost out of his voice. “I learned the International Phonetic Alphabet when I was ten. A dialect coach taught it to me.”

She looked chastened, which made him feel both vindicated and guilty. “Oh. Well—that’s great. People practically never know about phonetics before they take this class.”

“It helps if you’re learning another accent.”

She nodded. “That’s what we teach the ESL students. We get them started right away on phonetics. Makes a huge difference.”

“So, this question about Japanese...did I do this right?” He put the paper up on her desk and moved

the textbook closer to her.

They spent a few minutes going over the Japanese problem, by the end of which Aidan was fairly sure he understood what was meant by a *phoneme* and what was meant by an *allophone*, though putting them into practice was a bit confusing.

“So that’s why this Japanese guy would always call Colby *Corby*,” he mused.

“Yep. To them, *r* and *l* are the same sound, at heart.” She sat back and rolled the pencil along the desk. “I’d say you’re doing fine. Nothing to worry about.”

“Good.”

“So, since you’re here, I may as well ask...”

“What am I doing taking classes in Gordon when I should be out promoting *Sailing with the Sedlaks*?”

“Something like that.”

“I was one quarter away from having a bachelor’s. I thought, why leave it unfinished? Too many people I know never got around to finishing college. It always seemed lazy to me.”

“Hard worker. I like that. Then your degree is in...”

“Communications.”

“Oh.” Her eyebrows lifted briefly. “So you *have* to take Ling 101.”

“Well—yeah. But I’m not just taking it because it’s required. That is, I really do think it’s interesting.” He felt baffled. Hadn’t they started this conversation with her trying to appease *him*?

The Asian woman got up from her desk and came to fetch a book from the shelf near Paige. She paused as she reached for it, gazing at Aidan.

“You look really familiar,” she said. “Have you taken ling classes before?”

Paige rested an elbow on her desk, threading her hair through her fingers. Smiling, she watched

Aidan, letting him be the one to explain.

“Uh, no,” he said. “But I grew up around here.”

“Huh.” The other woman took the book down and shrugged. “Must have seen you around. Sorry, Paige. I’ll leave you alone.”

“No worries, Mary.” Paige watched Mary return to her desk, then crinkled her nose at Aidan and said in a stage whisper, “I haven’t told the other grads. They’d only be jealous.”

A grin spread on his face, surprising him. “Thanks. I guess.”

“I did tell my major professor, and one of my friends. But the professor couldn’t care less, and I promise to keep the friend from stalking you.”

“Much appreciated.” He folded his homework into the textbook and closed it. “By the way, the vinyl vest, in that one photo?”

Paige made a sound of chagrin and winced. “Mm-hm?”

“Felt like wearing a tight plastic garbage bag. I was dripping with sweat. I do *not* recommend it.”

Paige burst into laughter. She was blushing, which was always obvious on redheads—a stain of warm color from eye sockets to jawbone. “Ah, the things they don’t tell you about the glamorous life.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” He slid his books into the bag.

She stood with him as he got up to leave. “I am sorry for the Internet thing.”

“No big deal. I look people up too, if I’m going to be working with them. Pretty standard in the movie industry.”

“I shouldn’t have, though, as your teacher...”

Aidan slipped the bag over his shoulder. “Really, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, thank you for understanding. I’ll see you in class tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. Bye, Aidan.”

“Bye.” He trudged out into the corridor, glancing back once. She had stepped out into the hall with him, and was adjusting the note cards stuck to the door. He caught her in a sidelong glance. They exchanged wavering smiles before he ducked away.

God, he thought. Everywhere I go, I embarrass people. This sure is fun.

Emerging into the June glare, he put on his dark sunglasses—stupid though it was, they seemed to help keep people from recognizing him—and jumped on his bicycle. He set off for home, buzzing parked cars and pedestrians a little too closely, working out his tension through sheer adrenaline.