

Not Here to Make Friends

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Murray

The fourth of my contestants left the makeshift studio we'd set up in the hotel conference room. I ticked off the name *Cecilia James*, closed my eyes, and allowed myself a quick, wistful dream about the hotel pillows.

All the cast and crew on Season Eleven of *Marry Me, Juliet* had just done two weeks of mandatory hotel quarantine before on-set filming started tonight. I'd been hoping to use the time to sleep. It had been a foolish, naïve hope – there was always another fire to put out when you were running a show, especially when you were running it on your own – but there was still something to be said about doing your job from a luxurious hotel bed.

'Who's next, Murray?' Saurav, the camera operator, asked me.

I opened my eyes. The right one immediately started twitching. I pressed two fingers into the muscle beside it. 'The ringer. The supervillain. The one we don't know anything about.'

‘How did that even happen?’ Indigo the gaffer adjusted one of the lights. ‘I thought you had this whole season mapped out. I’s dotted. T’s crossed. The works.’

‘Fucking Greg. As usual.’

It hadn’t been easy, talking Fucking Greg into letting me do this season, but I’d done it. I’d presented him with proposal after proposal and report after report on the audience reaction to Brett not picking Mary-Ellen, and eventually he’d cracked. ‘All right, fine,’ he’d growled. ‘You can have your woke season – *if* you promise me the fairytale. And it better rate its tits off, O’Connell, or you’re done.’

I should have expected something like this. Signing off on a million documents on our season plans and then deciding at the last minute to throw in some top-of-his-head wildcard was classic Greg.

But I hadn’t expected it. Maybe because I was on my own now, doing all the work that Lily and I used to do together. Maybe because I didn’t think it could get any harder than the pandemic restrictions were already making it. Or maybe it was just because I was an idiot – but I hadn’t seen it coming at all.

Greg hadn’t even bothered to call me. He’d done it in an email, which I’d received forty-five minutes after entering hotel quarantine. *O’Connell, I’ve found you the perfect villain for the latest MMJ. A real spicy meatball.*

I’d put my head between my knees to take some deep breaths before replying. *Perhaps for next season? We’re all set for S11. All our cast and crew are now in quarantine, so we can’t change any of our plans.*

Already sorted, Greg sent back. *Spicy meatball’s been in lockdown since this morning.*

I can't just add another contestant into the mix, I replied. Pandemic restrictions mean there are strict limits on how many people we can take into the bubble. We already had to get government permits to take this many.

Cut one of the other girls, he wrote. You're keeping the spicy meatball. She'll be ratings gold. Everyone will love to hate her. Make sure she stays until at least episode eight.

He'd sent a follow-up two minutes later. *You're welcome.* 😊

The first few emails were bad enough, but it was the last one that was really responsible for the flare-up of my chronic eye-twitch. Fucking Greg.

The twitch wasn't abating, so I tried closing my right eye and pressing my fingers into the eyelid. I balanced my tablet on my knee and scrolled through it with my free hand to get to the contestant information breakdown sheet. We had these for all our contestants, and they were detailed. I could probably ghost-write the autobiographies of the fourteen other women who would be competing for the Romeo's heart (and of twenty-four-year-old TikTok balloon artist Kristal, who'd burst into loud sobs when I'd broken it to her over Zoom that she would not, in fact, be on this season of *Marry Me, Juliet*, despite already being in quarantine, because 'the network decided to go in a different direction').

I didn't even have a headshot for the spicy meatball. I hadn't had a breakdown for her at all until last night, and it was only three lines long.

Name: Lily Fireball.

Age: 25.

Occupation: Entrepreneur.

Lily.

There were two pangs in my heart, like there was whenever I came across anyone with her name. One of pain. One of guilt.

I should send a message to Thuong at some point before the madness of the First Night Party kicked off. Thuong, a successful fashion designer, was another close friend of Lily's – but more importantly, she was married to Lily's brother Michael, which meant Lily hadn't been able to disappear on her the way she'd disappeared on me. I checked in with her every month or so to see how Lily was doing.

I flicked WhatsApp open. *Any updates on our favourite drama queen?* I typed.

The last message I had from Thuong (not counting around eighty-seven baby photos) was a response to much the same question, sent a few weeks ago.

Still changing the subject every time Michael or I ask her how she's feeling, she replied now. *Still the reigning undefeated international queen of avoidance.*

I closed my eyes for a second. The fact that I was still included on the list of things Lily was avoiding was an open wound.

Every day I went to work, I was conscious of the bare desk across from mine. Every meeting I sat in, I felt the empty chair beside me. Every suggestion I made, I found myself waiting for her to yes-and it, to build on it, to make it better.

Tell her I miss her, I sent to Thuong.

Then I let out a long breath, tilting my head from side to side to stretch out my neck. I didn't have time to feel my feelings now. I had a job to do.

Two people's jobs, in fact. Everything was so much more difficult without her. She would have known just which buttons to press to get Fucking Greg to butt out.

A production assistant tapped at the door. This one was Tim, I thought, but there were two gangly white boys named Tim and Tom and I could never keep them straight. 'Murray, Lily is here.'

'Okay. Send her in.'

Tim/Tom hesitated. 'Um . . .'

'Tom,' I said, taking a stab in the dark, 'it's been a long day. We've got a long night ahead of us, and we're on a tight schedule. Just send her in.'

I flicked back to the notes I'd made on the meagre contestant information breakdown. *Entrepreneur* was code for *wannabe girlboss*, which was code for *I want to be an influencer*. The *Fireball* of it all supported that theory. If this Lily was not in fact descended from a long line of Fireballs, the name was clearly some kind of targeted marketing thing. She didn't seem to have any social media profiles, but that might be on purpose, to start building her brand identity from a blank slate with our glossy promo photos.

I flicked over to my list of questions. We had some standard ones that everyone answered – basics like *why do you want to be on Marry Me, Juliet?* – but also some tailored to the archetype we were planning to fit the contestants into.

My best bet for this initial interview, given I knew nothing about this woman except that Fucking Greg wanted her to be the villain, was to try and plant the seeds of a classic not-here-for-the-right-reasons narrative. Eight episodes was a long time to drag one of those out, so we'd have to play a

deception angle. We'd show her telling the Romeo over and over again how into him she was, while making it clear in all her other words and actions that she was just there for money and fame and brand-building.

And then, come episode eight, we'd do a big reveal. Expose the long con. The ritual humiliation of the villain was a classic reality TV trope.

'Tom!' I barked, not looking up as I scrolled down to my villain questions. 'What are you waiting for? Send her in!'

'Murray, like I've told you a thousand times, that's Tim.'

My head snapped up.

'Is your eye still bothering you?' Lily asked. 'Are you doing any of the things you're supposed to? Taking magnesium? Cutting back on caffeine?'

I couldn't respond. My thought processes had completely short-circuited.

Lily's heels clicked against the floor as she walked across the room and settled herself on the stool in front of the green screen, crossing her ankles and hooked them around the crossbar. She was wearing the most ridiculous dress I'd ever seen: bright yellow, the colour of a daffodil, with sleeves that sat just off her shoulder. It was short at the front, secured by a wrap tie, but the back was ludicrously enormous, with a train so long that it puddled around the foot of the stool.

She took her compact out of some hidden pocket in the masses of skirts, the same one she always carried, the one Jeff had given her. She looked at herself briefly, then snapped it shut and glanced down at her train. 'Could someone straighten my dress? I don't think it's being shown to its best effect.'

‘Everybody out.’

‘Murray,’ Saurav said quietly, ‘I know this is a lot, but if we don’t get this now, we’ll eat into the shoot time.’

‘Out! Everybody! Right now!’

The crew didn’t make me tell them again.

One corner of Lily’s mouth curled upwards. She was wearing *Blood of My Enemies*, same as always. ‘The First Night Party hasn’t even started and you’re already behind schedule?’ she said. ‘Standards are slipping.’

‘Lily, what the fuck?!’

People usually started backing away from me when I used that tone of voice, but her smile just deepened. ‘Nice to see you too, Murray.’

I wanted to scream at her.

I wanted to throw my arms around her and bury my face in her hair and crush her so hard to my chest that she’d complain that she couldn’t breathe and that the cheap material of my polo shirt touching her skin was a human rights violation.

‘Lily,’ I said, fighting to speak in a more controlled tone, ‘what the fuck are you doing here?’

She shrugged, one mostly bare shoulder rising and falling. Years of reading contestants’ body language had taught me that a shrug was usually a passive gesture, an abdication of thought and responsibility, a physical I-don’t-know-it-just-happened – but not when Lily did it.

‘After how hard we fought to get this season off the ground,’ she said, ‘did you really think I would miss it?’

I stared at her.

She raised an eyebrow.

Blood was rushing in my ears. I could hear my own heart-beat, like there was someone with a hammer inside my head, pounding against my skull.

‘Do you like the dress?’ She smoothed a hand along her enormous yellow skirt. ‘It’s one of Thuong’s designs. She made it for me a few years ago and I’ve never had the opportunity to wear it.’

‘It’s ridiculous.’

She clutched at her heart in mock horror. ‘How dare you?’

‘Stop,’ I bit out.

I was not a man who lost his composure easily. I got angry, and frustrated, and had definitely been known to lose my temper – but when push came to shove, I kept it together.

No matter what was happening, I thought my way through. I solved the problem. I figured it out. I was a master at compartmentalising. No one was better at setting aside their feelings and getting the job done than I was. When I’d been going through my divorce, none of my colleagues had a single clue how raw and rough and vulnerable I was.

Except for Lily.

Lily.

Lily was *here*.

Looking at her, sitting there, with that fucking *smile* on her face, my brain stopped functioning.

And then it started racing, ricocheting between two images faster and faster, trying to reconcile them.

A year ago. The night of Jeff’s funeral. After everyone had left, after even Thuong and Michael and their new baby had left, when it was just her and me.

Her agonised, broken sobs, like someone had put a hook down her throat and was yanking the sounds out of her. *Don't go, don't go. Don't leave me alone.*

I'd put my arms around her, pressing her into me, as if I could hold her together if I just held her tight enough. *I won't. I won't leave you.*

I knew her words weren't for me, but I held them close, held her close, her face warm and damp against my throat.

She'd made me leave the next morning. *I'm sorry*, she'd told me, eyes red above one of the dramatic satin dressing gowns she loved so much.

Lily, I'd replied, reaching out and clasping her hand, *you have nothing to be sorry for. I'm here for you. Always.*

I need some time and space alone to work through this. I need to go no-contact with the world for a while, I think. Even you. Is that all right?

Of course it is. Whatever you need.

Thank you. She'd squeezed my fingers.

Then she'd let go, and I hadn't heard a single word from her since.

Until now.

'Lily,' I said, 'are you all right?'

'Do I not seem all right?'

'Do you really want me to answer that question? Do you want me to sit here, think about it, say "hmmm, yes, this all seems totally fine and normal"?''

What she was actually doing, I had no idea, but I knew exactly how I'd frame this story if I was telling it on TV. A bereaved woman cuts off her support system, completely

reinvents herself, and decides to become a reality TV villain? That was the clearest, most obvious cry for help –

‘This is not a cry for help, if that’s what you’re thinking.’
God-fucking-damn it.

‘I’m not here because I’ve lost my mind.’

If she’d said that to me on any other day of our long friendship, I probably would have believed her. Lily Ong knew herself, and she did not lie.

But looking at Lily Fireball was like looking at an uncanny valley version of the real Lily. The shrewd, calculating expression in her eyes was pure Lily Ong, but it was like she was looking at me from behind a mask, a wall erected between her and me.

‘I’m here because I need to be,’ she said, ‘and because *you* need me to be.’

What the fuck did *that* mean?

‘This season has to be a ratings draw if Fucking Greg will ever let you cast diversely again.’ Her tone was businesslike, as if we’d sat down for some ordinary meeting on some ordinary day. ‘You don’t just need romance. You need conflict. You need drama. You need something to make the story go – and nothing does that like a really good villain.’

‘I’m aware. I’ve cast accordingly. That doesn’t explain why you’re here.’

‘Because no one will be as good at it as me.’

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. Lily had always had beautiful hair, long and black and shiny, but the hair and makeup team had done something to it that gave it an extra lustre under the lights.

‘We always planned for this season to be the greatest one ever,’ she said. ‘To do that, it needs the greatest villain ever. I understand all the right notes to hit, all the right buttons to push. No one can get the job done like I can.’

I rubbed at my temple. I could barely process what she was saying.

‘Lily Fireball is going to be a monster.’ A gleeful glint came into her eyes. ‘No one watching will be able to shut up about what a monster she is. And they’ll tune in every week, just to hate her more. She’ll be a legendary icon of loathsomeness, the kind that people will talk about for years.’

Years of living off coffee, sugar, and whatever I could scavenge from craft services at two in the morning had given me an iron stomach.

Hearing her say that, I felt sick.

‘You got us the season we always wanted,’ she said. ‘I’m going to get us the ratings.’

‘And then what?’

She looked at me – not blankly, not like she didn’t understand what I was saying, but with a deliberate expressionlessness. ‘And then *what?*’

‘What happens next, in this plan of yours? Going on reality TV isn’t something you can just walk back. This isn’t some temp job you can dip into for six weeks then step out of again and go back to your real life.’

There was an ache at the base of my skull, the sign that a massive tension headache was building. ‘If you do this, then this is who you are to the world, forever. Lily Fireball. Twenty-five. Entrepreneur. Nation’s biggest bitch.’

‘And there’ll be abuse and death threats, et cetera, et cetera.’ She sounded as calm as if she were discussing the weather, side-stepping what I was actually saying as easily as if it was a puddle on a footpath. A year away clearly hadn’t blunted her skills. ‘I’m well aware of the consequences. I’ve orchestrated some of them. Karmically, it’s probably my turn – although the bonus racism and anti-Asian bullshit it’ll come with will be, I acknowledge, an extra little treat just for me.’

She tapped her fingernails against her knee. They were painted the same red as her lips, pristine and perfect.

She wasn’t wearing her wedding ring. It was the first time I’d seen her without it since her actual wedding.

‘But we both know how good I am at ruining people’s lives,’ she said. ‘Now I’ll just be doing it in public.’

Her tone was cheerful. Of all the things in the world: cheerful.

I had a sudden flashback to that last day I’d seen her. When I’d got into my car to leave her house, the morning after the funeral, I’d caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror. Lily’s lipstick was smeared all over my shirt collar, like someone had tried to slit my throat.

I’d glanced back at her. Standing on her doorstep in her dressing gown, arms wrapped around herself, she’d looked so small.

Everything in me had told me to open my car door. To go back to her. To hold her a while longer.

But I’d listened to her. I always listened to her. She’d told me she wanted me to go, that she wanted time and space, and Lily Ong had always been a woman who knew exactly what she wanted.

So I'd gone. I'd done what she asked, let her go no-contact, and waited for her to come back to me when she was ready – my best friend, my partner, the person I trusted most in the world, back beside me, where she belonged.

I'd made the wrong decision.

I wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

'No,' I said.

She raised an eyebrow. 'No?'

'No.' I pulled out my phone. 'No, we are not doing this, Lily. *You* are not doing this.'

Fucking Greg answered on the second ring. 'O'Connell! How did you like my surprise?'

'Hi Greg!' Lily called brightly.

I glared at her. She looked back, completely unabashed.

'Am I right, or am I right?' he said. I hated everything about the tone in his voice.

'Look, this isn't going to work, Greg,' I said. 'Trust me on this. I'm not sending Lily in.'

'Yes, you fucking are!' he exclaimed. 'She's just the spicy meatball you need, O'Connell. If you can't see that, I've got serious questions about your judgement.'

I pressed two fingers into my twitching eye and searched for a line that would work. 'It's not the right tone for the season. We've talked about what we're going for, what'll bring us those ratings. High romance. Real fairytale shit. Throwing such a big villain into the mix will –'

'Only make it better! Your plans are full of sugar. They need some spice to balance the nice. What fairy tale doesn't have an evil queen?'

God-fucking-damn it.

Lily folded her hands in her lap, the picture of innocence, but she couldn't fool me. Those were her words coming out of Greg's mouth.

'Fine,' I said. 'You want an all-time legendary villain, I'll give you one. I've cast some women we can produce into that role. But it can't be Lily.'

'Who better than Lily? She knows the show inside out. Plus, isn't this season all about diversity? She's diverse! What is she again? Vietnamese? I always forget.'

I knew for a fact that Fucking Greg had been through the network's Diversity and Inclusion training program seven times. It clearly wasn't enough.

I switched tack. 'What about the contestants from past seasons? Lily and I have worked with every *Romeo and Juliet* contestant for the past nine years. They'll all know who she is the second they see her on TV. If one of them talks to the press, it'll be obvious she's a network plant.'

'Already on it. The lawyers are real good at NDAs now – and we freed up some budget for hush money.'

How the hell had Lily got him to do *that*?

'Greg,' I said, 'I think she's having a nervous –'

'Another call!' he announced. 'I gave you everything else you wanted, O'Connell. You're giving me this. Do your job.'

'It's –'

The line went dead.

'I'm not having a nervous breakdown,' Lily said, a note of annoyance entering her voice.

'What the fuck else am I meant to think?' I snapped. 'How would you read this, if you were in my shoes?'

‘I know it’s not exactly orthodox, and it’s a bit of a surprise,’ she said, ‘but I really am here to help you.’

A bit of a fucking surprise?!

There was a roaring sound in my ears. In the last part of my mind capable of any kind of thought, I noted that she hadn’t actually answered the question.

‘I’m looking forward to working with you again, Murray,’ Lily said. ‘I’ve missed you.’

No matter how hard I pushed the base of my thumb into my right eye, it wouldn’t stop twitching.

‘Have you missed me?’ she asked.

With my one good eye, I looked at her. She was still wearing the same impenetrable expression.

‘What kind of a question is that?’ I said.

She didn’t say anything. She just raised one of her eyebrows slightly, the way she always did when she was riding a silence with a contestant, waiting for them to crack and tell her their secrets.

I didn’t say anything either. She might be able to produce Fucking Greg like he was a contestant, but she wasn’t going to do it to me.

‘Shall we get started?’ she said. ‘I know you have a schedule to keep, and you’re going to need this interview for my intro package.’

I didn’t move.

‘Fine. I’ll interview myself.’

She shifted her voice into a lower register, mimicking me. ‘Why did you come on *Marry Me, Juliet*, Lily Fireball?’

Then she shifted into another voice – one that had the pitch and the cadence of her own voice, but a different tone

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entirely. ‘I’m Lily Fireball, and I came on *Marry Me, Juliet* for one important reason,’ she purred, looking at me rather than the camera, the perfect interview eyeline. ‘I came here to get my man.’