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The mirrored desires that make *Heated Rivalry* so addictive

Everyone's favorite Canadian hockey smut has some of the meatiest character work on TV.

By Caroline Siede | February 2, 2026 | 7:00am

Photo: Sabrina Lantos/HBO Max

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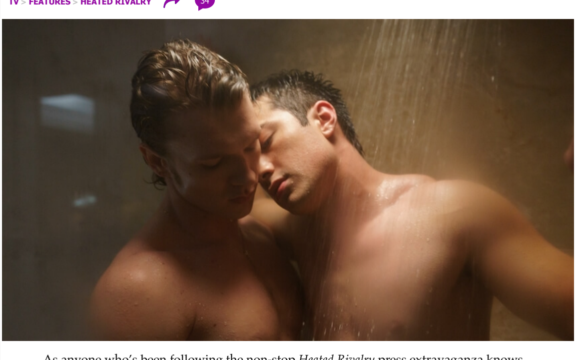

As anyone who's been following the non-stop *Heated Rivalry* press extravaganza knows, stars Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie wrapped up production by getting matching tattoos that read "sex sells." It's a cheeky nod toward what first made the show a sensation—both as a fun bit of wintertime hockey smut and as a genuinely revolutionary depiction of queer sex on TV. But while physical intimacy is the hook of *Heated Rivalry*, it's a different quality that has turned the show into a full-on phenomenon in the month since its finale aired. Plenty of other romances have been this sexy (here's looking at you, *Bridgerton*), but few have been this nuanced with their character work. And it's that delicate exploration of emotional desire that has people watching the series over and over again.

In fact, sex is the easy part for rival hockey players Shane Hollander (Williams) and Ilya Rozanov (Storrie). Their spark is immediate; it only takes them a few chance encounters and one sexually charged late-night gym session to trade ice hockey for tongue hockey. As creator Jacob Tierney so effectively captures, part of being gay in a highly homophobic world like professional hockey is being able to communicate a mutual sense of desire without outing yourself to someone unsafe. Here Shane and Ilya use longing looks and lingering touches to silently convey the same thing to one another: "I'd like to fuck you."

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The trouble is, that act of silent communication sets them up for nearly a decade of miscommunication too. Because their initial assumption about each other is correct, they both make the tragic mistake of extrapolating it out further—of assuming they know what the other is thinking and feeling even when they don't. While *Heated Rivalry* could easily have been a romance about external forces conspiring to keep its two star-crossed lovers apart, the series makes the far more interesting choice to keep nearly all of its conflict internal instead. Only it's not quite clear that's what the show is doing until halfway into its run, when the character work that may have seemed thin at first is eventually revealed to be a complicated mix of idealization and repression between two young men who don't understand each other nearly as well as they think they do.

When Shane looks at Ilya, he sees a portrait of extroverted self-confidence. Where Shane was basically raised since birth to be a humble golden boy and athletic role model for Asian-Canadians, Ilya is allowed to be loud, braggadocios, and openly cocky. He feels no pressure to be a good example; and though he hides his queerness from the public, he's not hiding anything from himself. He's been hooking up with both men and women for years now, and he's more often than not the one leading the sexual encounters with Shane too. Shane can't fathom what Ilya would have to be insecure about, so anytime Ilya pulls away or acts distant—as he does at an awards party in the show's first episode—Shane assumes he's just being a callous fuckboy.

What Shane misses, however, is that Ilya has none of the foundational stability that Shane takes for granted. Shane has two deeply supportive parents, endless brand deals, and close friends on his hockey team. Plus, he gets to live and work in his home country, where it's safe to be openly gay. All of that feels a million miles away for Ilya, who grew up with a cruel father and brother, watched his mom die by suicide, and comes from a country where "promoting homosexuality" is illegal.

When he steps away at the awards night, it doesn't have anything to do with Shane. He's just upset at the thought of returning to Russia to be chastised by his dad for not winning Rookie Of The Year. But because Shane can't grasp his own Canadian privilege, he misses that entirely. When Ilya tries to explain his bad mood by saying "I go home in three days," Shane just responds, "Okay, must be nice." Shane hears Ilya changing the subject, and Ilya hears Shane not understanding his life, which causes him to default to his survival mechanism of shoving all his unhappy emotions down even further.

It's a beautifully subtextual exploration of the sort of real-life communication problems that actually keep people apart rather than the plot contrivances rom-coms so often reach for. And it goes both ways. For his part, Ilya doesn't understand how much his self-acceptance is a privilege. Since sex, sexuality, and no-strings-attached relationships come easily to him, he dramatically underestimates just how much Shane is struggling internally with questions of who he is, what he wants, and what that means for his future. When Ilya randomly brings up his friend with benefits, Svetlana, after a hookup, he's trying to be open about his life and invite Shane to do the same. But because he's diving into one of the topics Shane is least comfortable with, Shane perceives it as Ilya pushing him away and bragging about his girlfriend.

As Storrie put it when asked what the show has to say about love, "Everyone's really going through their own thing. And half the time when we feel slighted by someone else, we have no idea exactly what's going on in their head." Indeed, moments like Shane's unsent "we didn't even kiss" text or the duo's fraught post-tuna melt sex scene or their "All The Things She Said" dance-floor breakdown call to mind other sexy dramas about complex romantic yearning that have similarly sent the world into a collective obsession—like *Normal People, Call Me By Your Name,* and the second season of *Fleabag*. But what makes *Heated Rivalry* so unique is that it ultimately deploys all that intense character drama toward a happy ending rather than a bittersweet one.

Part of the reason people have gone so feral for the show's last two episodes in particular is because they deliver the rare, beautiful rom-com magic of watching two people inspire each other to become better versions of themselves. Shane has to find his own form of Ilya's internal confidence, while Ilya has to learn to open up and build a foundation of stability outside of his toxic dynamic with his family. And they both need to learn to actually understand each other rather than just project onto the other. They need to *talk*, which is why episode five forgoes the onscreen sex entirely for a different kind of intimacy.

It's also the episode where Storrie and Williams ratchet up their already strong performances to a new level. Particularly on rewatch, you can really appreciate how Williams totally shifts Shane's level of confidence after his girlfriend Rose Landry (Sophie Nélisse) gently but firmly ushers him out of the closet and into a new level of self-understanding. For all the beloved sequences in episode five, an underrated one involves Shane coming out as gay and pushing Ilya to admit they have something real. Tierney sets it up like a scene that's going to serve as a moment of catharsis for Shane only to unexpectedly pivot to one of catharsis for *Ilya*—who's suddenly talking about Russia and his family in a way he never has in the past nine years. One act of openness begets another. It's the moment Ilya mentally shifts Shane from the guy he texts for a hookup to the person he calls when his father dies—an opening of the emotional floodgates he can at first only acknowledge in Russian. (This is the standout scene in a season full of them for Storrie.)

The other rewarding thing about *Heated Rivalry* is that it seldom takes the expected rom-com path. Over and over again, the show keeps setting up these potential false conflicts (Shane misinterpreting why Ilya said Svetlana's name on the phone or accidentally spilling the beans while high on painkillers) only to keep things firmly in the realm of grounded human drama. Even the external push of watching fellow hockey player Scott Hunter (François Arnaud) kiss his boyfriend Kip (Robbie G.K.) on ice is a culmination of a parallel storyline about the importance of communication and understanding. And while Shane and Ilya don't know what it took for Scott and Kip to get to that moment, the effect still ripples out to their now iconic retreat to Shane's cottage.

After the high of episode five, there's something wonderfully anticlimactic about the *Heated Rivalry* finale. Shane and Ilya have accepted that they desire each other physically and emotionally. The question is whether they can both admit they want something more than that too. And, fittingly, they have to revisit their past miscommunications to get there. This time, when Shane asks about Ilya's family, Ilya opens up about losing his mom rather than burying his emotions again. And when Ilya brings up the idea of marrying Svetlana to get American citizenship, Shane digs into what he's actually trying to say rather than assuming the worst and imploding.

Part of what makes "The Cottage" such an enchanting episode of television is the bittersweet joy of watching two people nine years into a situationship finally admit they have a mutual desire to understand and be understood. That's the breakthrough that allows Shane and Ilya to actually say the "I love you" they've both been feeling for years now. And while it's not a big rom-com moment like the one Scott and Kip get, that only makes it more earned. The finale is a reward for those who have deeply invested in the subtle character arcs that Storrie, Williams, and Tierney have been building all season. Even the very Slavic way Ilya does a full 180 from his detached playboy demeanor to a deeply loyal, supportive boyfriend as soon as he's recategorized Shane as family is a reminder of just how much cultural differences were getting in their way.

Indeed, *Heated Rivalry* is filled with the kind of poignantly written, brilliantly acted scene work that so often becomes the breakout moments of prestige fantasy dramas or superhero movies or sci-fi shows. But what's so special about the romance genre is that it doesn't have to smuggle its character arcs into some kind of larger plot-driven package. The character work *is* the story engine in a way that's singularly rewarding, whether on a first watch or a fifth. William Faulkner once said that the only thing worth writing about is "the human heart in conflict with itself." And few shows have explored that as purely—or as carnally—as *Heated Rivalry*.

Caroline Siede is a contributor to *The A.V. Club*.

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What's on TV this week—*The Muppet Show*, the Olympics, and *Fallout*'s season finale

Plus, Trevor Noah hosts the Grammys.

By Christina Izzo | February 1, 2026 | 8:00am

The Muppet Show (Photo: Disney/Mitch Haaseth)

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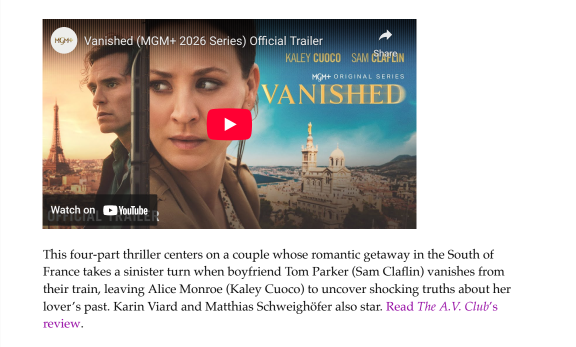
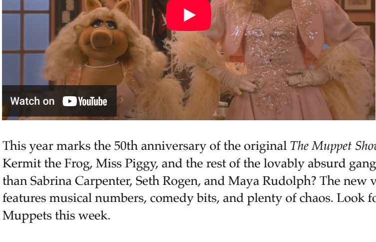


Welcome to What's On, our weekly roundup of notable shows and streaming films. Here is what's happening on TV from Sunday, February 1 to Saturday, February 7. All times are Eastern.

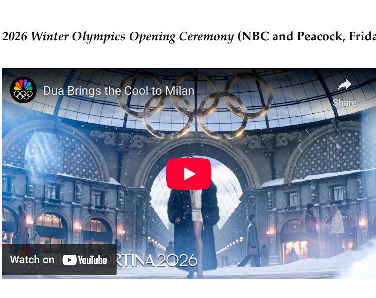
New this week

***Vanished* (MGM+, Sunday, 9 p.m., miniseries premiere)**



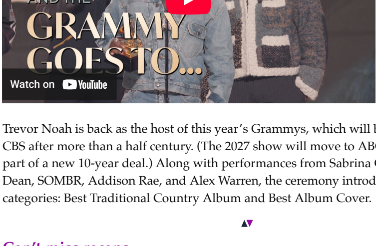
This four-part thriller centers on a couple whose romantic getaway in the South of France takes a sinister turn when boyfriend Tom Parker (Sam Claflin) vanishes from their train, leaving Alice Monroe (Kaley Cuoco) to uncover shocking truths about her lover's past. Karin Viard and Matthias Schweighöfer also star. Read *The A.V. Club*'s review.

***The Muppet Show* (ABC and Disney+, Wednesday, 9 p.m., standalone special)**



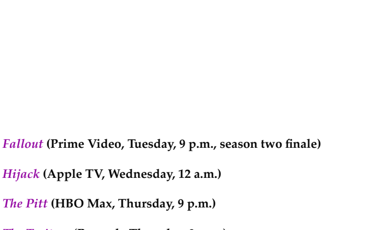
This year marks the 50th anniversary of the original *The Muppet Show*, and who better for Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, and the rest of the lovably absurd gang to party it up with than Sabrina Carpenter, Seth Rogen, and Maya Rudolph? The new variety special features musical numbers, comedy bits, and plenty of chaos. Look for a piece on the Muppets this week.

***2026 Winter Olympics Opening Ceremony* (NBC and Peacock, Friday, 2 p.m.)**



Kicking off 17 days of athletic excellence, national pride, and hideous team uniforms, the opening ceremony in Milan promises live performances from Andrea Bocelli and Mariah Carey, a Giorgio Armani tribute, and the lighting of two separate Olympic cauldrons (a first for the spectacle).

***The 68th Annual Grammy Awards* (CBS and Paramount+, Sunday, 8 p.m.)**



Trevor Noah is back as the host of this year's Grammys, which will be the last to air on CBS after more than a half century. (The 2027 show will move to ABC and Disney+ as part of a new 10-year deal.) Along with performances from Sabrina Carpenter, Olivia Dean, SOMBR, Addison Rae, and Alex Warren, the ceremony introduces two new categories: Best Traditional Country Album and Best Album Cover.

Can't miss recaps

***Industry* (HBO, Sunday, 9 p.m.)**

***A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms* (HBO, Sunday, 10:03 p.m.)**

***Fallout* (Prime Video, Tuesday, 9 p.m., season two finale)**

***Hijack* (Apple TV, Wednesday, 12 a.m.)**

***The Pitt* (HBO Max, Thursday, 9 p.m.)**

***The Traitors* (Peacock, Thursday, 9 p.m.)**

***Frieren: Beyond Journey's End* (Crunchyroll, Friday, 10 a.m.)**

Also arriving

***The Great American Baking Show: Celebrity Big Game* (Roku Channel, Sunday, 3 a.m., season two premiere)**

***Below Deck Down Under* (Bravo, Monday, 8 p.m., season four premiere)**

***Father Brown* (BritBox, Tuesday, 7 a.m., season thirteen premiere)**

***Summer House* (Bravo, Tuesday, 8 p.m., season ten premiere)**

***The Lincoln Lawyer* (Netflix, Thursday, 3 a.m., season four premiere)**

Ending soon

***The Night Manager* (Prime Video, Sunday, 3 a.m., season two finale)**

***Wolf* (AMC+ and Shudder, Tuesday, 9 p.m., season one finale)**

***The Boyfriend* (Netflix, Tuesday, 3 a.m., season two finale)**

***Spartacus: House Of Ashur* (Starz, Saturday, 9 a.m., season one finale)**

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What the *Game Of Thrones* universe really needed was a smaller story

HBO's fantasy franchise regains its spark with the warmer, funnier *A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms*.

By Saloni Gajjar | January 27, 2026 | 1:00pm

A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms (Photo: Steffan Hill/HBO)

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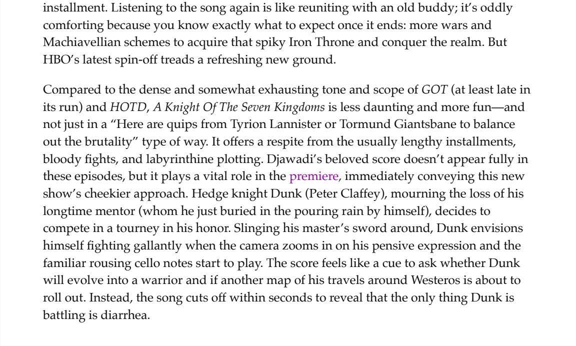

It's tough to divorce *Game Of Thrones* from Ramin Djawadi's goosebumps-inducing main-title theme. The show ended in 2019, but the haunting orchestral track can still transport viewers to Westeros' devious politics, gory violence, mythological creatures, and life-or-death stakes. The opening credits—first deployed after the undead wights killed the Night's Watch rangers in the series opener—helped set up the intensity and the horrors to come. *GOT*'s Targaryen-centric prequel, *House Of The Dragon*, continues to utilize the familiar tune to usher in its own bold storylines and scale with each installment. Listening to the song again is like reuniting with an old buddy; it's oddly comforting because you know exactly what to expect once it ends: more wars and Machiavellian schemes to acquire that spiky Iron Throne and conquer the realm. But HBO's latest spin-off treads a refreshing new ground.

Compared to the dense and somewhat exhausting tone and scope of *GOT* (at least late in its run) and *HOTD*, *A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms* is less daunting and more fun—and not just in a "Here are quips from Tyrion Lannister or Tormund Giantsbane to balance out the brutality" type of way. It offers a respite from the usually lengthy installments, bloody fights, and labyrinthine plotting. Djawadi's beloved score doesn't appear fully in these episodes, but it plays a vital role in the premiere, immediately conveying this new show's cheekier approach. Hedge knight Dunk (Peter Claffey), mourning the loss of his longtime mentor (whom he just buried in the pouring rain by himself), decides to compete in a tourney in his honor. Slinging his master's sword around, Dunk envisions himself fighting gallantly when the camera zooms in on his pensive expression and the familiar rousing cello notes start to play. The score feels like a cue to ask whether Dunk will evolve into a warrior and if another map of his travels around Westeros is about to roll out. Instead, the song cuts off within seconds to reveal that the only thing Dunk is battling is diarrhea.

This hero's journey is markedly different from other *GOT* favorites, but it isn't any less compelling. Dunk doesn't beckon followers or admirers in the same way as Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), Jon Snow (Kit Harington), or Rhaenyra Targaryen (Emma D'Arcy); he isn't on a vengeance mission like Arya (Maisie Williams) or Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner); and, unlike Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), he isn't hungry to kill others to secure a mighty leadership position. He's just a guy from Flea Bottom who wants to prove his mettle, even when the odds are stacked against him. Switching the POV from the deathly politics of the royal court or the drama of kings and queens to those who live under their thumbs gives *Seven Kingdoms* a distinctive purpose. Series co-creators Ira Parker (*Better Things*, *HOTD*) and George R.R. Martin (who authored the Tales Of Dunk And Egg novellas) bring a grounded element into a fantasy world of fiery beasts, a gigantic ice wall, greenseers, and frozen zombies. (For all those who want more *GOT* characters like Hot Pie or Podrick, this is the show for you.)

Parker and the series' writers rely heavily on lighthearted humor and visual gags to sell this charming version of Martin's universe, which is a reprieve in and of itself. (Dunk shimmying and getting drunk with Daniel Ings' Lord Lyonel Baratheon in his tent is a premiere highlight.) *Seven Kingdoms* quickly becomes a two-hander between the tall knight and a precocious young boy who calls himself Egg (Dexter Sole Ansell). As Dunk prepares to joust, he takes Egg on as squire, unaware of the kid's life story. But it doesn't matter just yet because Dunk—sweet fella that he is—takes Egg under his wing. In only 30 minutes or so, episode two foregrounds their unexpected and wholesome friendship as the show's beating heart. *Game Of Thrones* delivered a few memorable onscreen duos (Jamie Lannister and Brienne of Tarth, Arya and the Hound, Tyrion and Bronn, etc.). But the *Seven Kingdoms*' protagonists seem to connect on a much more human level without hidden agendas, and both of them truly lean on each other because of it. This relatively microscopic scale, along with two sincere lead performances, makes it easy to forget it's the same Westeros we're used to seeing.

Seven Kingdoms is also notable because it doesn't demand homework to be understood. Most IP-driven pop culture wears out over time because of an unrelenting requirement to keep up. Take the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which had to introduce the Spotlight feature on Disney+ to tell (somewhat) standalone stories in *Echo*, *Ironheart*, and *Wonder Man* after a barrage of movies and TV originals that contributed to superhero fatigue. But here, unlike *HOTD*, which kicked off by telling the audience about its connection to *GOT* and establishing a timeline, *Seven Kingdoms* doesn't spell out those details. There's still much to glean about Egg's background, why he chose to follow Dunk to Ashford Meadow, and where their adventures together will lead them. With other potential *GOT* spin-offs on the way, *Seven Kingdoms* has positioned itself well as a delightful palate cleanser.

Saloni Gajjar is *The A.V. Club*'s TV critic.

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February 2026 TV preview: *The 'Burbs, Paradise,* and *Scrubs*' return

Plus, *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters* and *Dark Winds* are back, Netflix debuts a comedy from *Derry Girls*' creator, and more.

By **Saloni Gajjar** | **January 26, 2026 | 6:00am**

Clockwise from bottom left: Paradise (Photo: Anne-Marie Fox/Disney), Scrubs (Photo: Jeff Weddell/Disney), The 'Burbs (Photo: Elizabeth Morris/Peacock), How To Get To Heaven From Belfast (Photo: Christopher Kim/Netflix)

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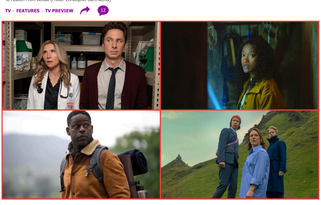
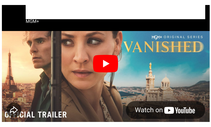


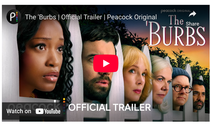
The most romantic month of the year promises monsters, criminals, and the end of the world—at least on TV. February is packed with returning shows like *Paradise* and *Dark Winds*, along with the conclusion of *Bridgerton*'s latest season. As for debuts, Kaley Cuoco swings into action in another thriller, Keke Palmer takes center stage in *The 'Burbs*, Ryan Murphy presents a *Love Story*, and Netflix drops a new Northern Ireland-set series from *Derry Girls*' Lisa McGee. Here is *The A.V. Club*'s guide to what to watch on TV next month.

Vanished (MGM+, February 1)



After starring in *The Flight Attendant* and *Based On A True Story*, Kaley Cuoco clearly likes choosing characters who find themselves in trouble wherever they go. In her latest TV drama, she plays a woman whose boyfriend (portrayed by *Daisy Jones & The Six*'s Sam Claflin) goes missing while they're vacationing in France. Digging into his disappearance plunges her into her lover's dangerous secret life and world.

The 'Burbs (Peacock, February 8)

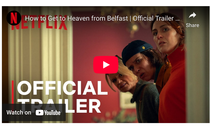


1989's dark comedy *The 'Burbs* gets a modern spin with this TV adaptation, which is led by Keke Palmer and Jack Whitehall. They play newlyweds who move to his childhood home for a fresh start. However, she becomes obsessed with an abandoned house nearby and soon uncovers long-buried secrets about the people who live in this neighborhood. Paula Pell, Julia Duffy, and Mark Proksch co-star.

Love Story: John F. Kennedy Jr. & Carolyn Bessette (FX, February 12)

Ryan Murphy's latest FX anthology series tackles the whirlwind romance between JFK Jr. (Paul Kelly) and fashion publicist Carolyn Bessette (Sarah Pidgeon). The cast includes Murphy regulars like Naomi Watts and Grace Gummer, who play Kennedy's family members, as well as Alessandro Nivola as Calvin Klein.

How To Get To Heaven From Belfast (Netflix, February 12)



Derry Girls creator Lisa McGee has another comedy about female friendships up her sleeve. In *How To Get To Heaven From Belfast*, three close pals go back home upon learning that their estranged fourth musketeer has died and quickly piece together that something about her passing doesn't add up.

56 Days (Prime Video, February 18)

This adaptation of Catherine Ryan Howard's novel charts the turbulent *56 Days* when Oliver (Avan Jogia) and Ciara (Dove Cameron) have a meet-cute and fall for each other hard and fast—only for the cops to find an unidentified body at his home. The show switches between the investigation in the present day and their twisted affair.

Strip Law (Netflix, February 20)

Created by comedian and *Late Show With Stephen Colbert* writer Cullen Crawford, this adult-animated comedy revolves around an uptight lawyer (voiced by Adam Scott) whose work in Las Vegas—of all places—is too boring. It isn't until he meets and teams up with a local magician (portrayed by Janelle James) that he starts picking up flashy, silly cases that revive his career. The cast also boasts Stephen Root, Keith David, and Aimee Garcia.

Paradise season two (Hulu, February 23)

Less than a year after Secret Service agent Xavier Collins (Sterling K. Brown) flew out of the underground bunker, *Paradise* returns with (hopefully) some answers. Is the outside world finally habitable after a supervolcano eruption three years ago? Is Xavier's wife alive? And does anyone find out how corrupt Sinatra (Julianne Nicholson) is? Back in Paradise, the social fabric is disrupted by the reveal of who killed the President. Shailene Woodley and Thomas Doherty join this round.

Scrubs season 10 (ABC, February 25)

Sacred Heart Hospital's finest return in the *Scrubs* revival, in which the bromance between J.D. (Zach Braff) and Turk (Donald Faison) remains strong. However, the two now have to cope with technological advancements in medicine and a whole new set of interns. These episodes welcome Vanessa Bayer and Joel Kim Booster, as well as returning folks like Sarah Chalke and Judy Reyes.

The Gray House (Prime Video, February 26)

This Civil War-set limited series, which counts Morgan Freeman and Kevin Costner as executive producers, follows four people—a Virginia socialite, her mother, a courtesan, and a formerly enslaved woman—who help transform the Underground Railroad. The ensemble features Mary-Louise Parker, Daisy Head, Keith David, and Colin O'Donoghue.

Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters season two (Apple TV, February 27)

After teasing Skull Island in season one, *Monarch*'s next round focuses heavily on it, with King Kong along for the ride with his old frenemy Godzilla. The sci-fi drama continues to follow half-siblings Cate (Anna Sawai) and Kentaro (Ren Watabe) as they dig into their family history and deal with a monster-hunting org, all while various mythological creatures rise up. Kurt and Wyatt Russell are also back, with Amber Midthunder joining the ensemble this time around.

Other February premieres

February 1
Rise Of The 49ers (AMC)

February 5
The Lincoln Lawyer season four (Netflix)

February 10
The Artful Dodger season two (Hulu)

February 11
Cross season two (Prime Video)

February 15
Dark Winds season four (AMC)
Like Water For Chocolate season two (HBO Max)

February 19
The Night Agent season four (Netflix)

February 20
The Last Thing He Told Me season two (Apple TV)

February 21
Shoresy season five (Hulu)

February 23
CIA (CBS)

February 26
Bridgerton season four, part two (Netflix)

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