

**Laws of Attraction**

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### **About this book:**

Aaron fights past his social anxiety to do what he loves: show other people how to be strong, as a personal trainer at a gym in New York City. His tendency to follow all the rules is normal for a hard-working employee. So his quirks, like keeping all the pens facing the same direction and always taking the locker on the end of the row are also normal, right? Definitely not a symptom of something deeper than a little awkwardness around strangers. And co-workers. And everyone he's ever met.

Like Lex, the vibrant, infuriating artist who sneaks in to use the showers every day, despite Aaron's best efforts to stop him...and the chemistry between them. But Lex has insecurities of his own, including the rough patch he's going through, which is far rougher than he'd ever let Aaron know.

## Chapter 1

*Suzanne George: How's the new job going?*

Aaron watched the cursor blink in the empty text space. A smudge split the message in half, and he wiped it away as best he could while he tried to think of a response.

He had five minutes left of his break, and three minutes until he needed to get up and put his phone away. How did he explain his first month at Get Fit! without sounding like he was unhappy? (The exclamation point was mandatory on pain of termination, Imani had told him. He still wasn't sure if she was joking.)

He wasn't unhappy. The gym was a better fit for him in every way, so completely different from the last one. He didn't have three supervisors to report to at any given time, just the owner. Mr. Lovitz dropped in at random throughout the week to use a machine furiously for ten minutes, drink a smoothie made out of only one kind of fruit (a different one each time) and talk--yell--at them all about how they were doing, which was usually just fine, or sometimes great, but he always sounded like he was pissed about it. Aaron didn't mind. At least he was consistent in his inconsistency.

He didn't know anyone here, which was more of a relief than Aaron had expected. No one held him prisoner at the front desk, expecting a detailed history of everything the members of his family had been doing for the last 290 days. None of the other employees knew how awkward he'd been in high school, too tall, too weird, and even worse at talking to people than he was now.

His co-workers were nice. He was doing the job he'd trained for in college. He was living in New York City, beyond the borders of small-town mentality. He was happy. Mostly.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but he hadn't thought his problems would fix themselves overnight. He would never be gregarious and good at making friends, but he hadn't thought that being away from home would be quite so lonely. He'd been alone all his life, other than his family. But that was just it. His family.

*Suzanne George: Do you still like it?*

*Suzanne George: Are they nice?*

Aaron's frown eased as the texts came in, rapid-fire.

Most people would have just entered the contact as *Mom*, but then the last name field would have been empty, and it wouldn't have matched the rest of the list. He could've lived

with it, but his skin would have itched every time she texted, and that would have meant a lot of scratching. An easy decision, in the end.

He'd inherited his brown hair from her, and his hazel eyes, and the square jaw that made him look like he was always clenching his teeth, but not much else. No one else in his family had trouble making phone calls, even to friends, or talking in front of people.

He had gotten his impatience from her, though.

*Suzanne George: Just remember, you can come back any time you want. You can find something closer to home.*

He knew that. His family would welcome him back without a word about his failure to thrive, but he really was happier there, overall.

*I'm fine*, he sent back, hoping she'd be able to read his sincerity over text. *Really. Everyone here is great and I like all my clients so far.*

One of those clients would be arriving soon, he reminded himself, and his three minutes were up. His phone went back into the left side of the zippered pocket in his backpack, on the right side of the locker at the end of the row, and when Aaron's sweater was zipped up, he went back to the front desk.

He didn't like to complain, not even to himself, but if he was going to grumble about any part of his job, it would be this one. Unlike all of the other gyms Aaron had set foot in, Get Fit! didn't have a gate at the front entrance. Members came up the escalator from the mall downstairs and could walk right in, provided there wasn't someone at the front desk...and there always was.

And given that Aaron was the newest hire, with the smallest client roster, he was usually the one who had to plaster on a customer service grin and scan their keycard to log their attendance. Mr. Lovitz wanted someone watching the door at all times, so Aaron was stuck there, folding towels and drawing invisible pictures on the top of the desk until Imani's client left and Aaron's arrived and they could trade off.

That was the plan, anyway. He'd only been there for four minutes (eleven minutes until shift switch) when he heard voices coming from the weight room, loud enough to carry through the metal rafters and sharp enough that even Aaron could tell it wasn't just a case of headphones turned up too loud and not taken off.

The edge of the counter bit into Aaron's fingers. Arguments between members didn't happen often. Mostly, people worked together to follow the rules, including the unwritten

ones Aaron's dad had taught him when he was fourteen and something had to give before he was forced to transfer out of the school every member of his family had attended.

Aaron grabbed the sign under the desk that claimed he'd be back in a few minutes and set it on the counter, almost entirely positive that he'd rather have open heart surgery than have to deal with a disgruntled member, but resigned nonetheless.

Aaron's sister had told him that the reason why he never learned how to get past his nerves about social situations is because he never looked like he was having trouble. Brittany said that *she* could tell when he was dying a little bit inside, but anyone else would assume he was calm and collected.

He hoped that was true because the only part of him that was collected as he approached the angry voice in the weight room was his intestines, bunching into a ball somewhere near his lungs.

"I've been waiting thirty goddamn minutes for this machine, you asshole."

"Look, man, I have a set and a half to finish. You're only making this take longer."

The two men arguing next to the assisted pull up machine couldn't have looked more different. The one whose voice Aaron had heard from the desk was as tall as Aaron, but on the skinny side, with brightly coloured, branded workout gear that looked like it was just out of the package. He looked like part of what Ryan liked to call the *Too Little Too Late* crowd.

(Aaron didn't call them anything, but he could see what Ryan meant about the people who suddenly realized in July that they wanted to be wearing short sleeves and ran to the gym, just in time to get ripped for sweater season in September or give up entirely by August.)

The other man was big, with muscles that came from long and frequent maintenance, a regular who Aaron was already on nodding terms with by the name of Troy. The neck of his shirt was soaked, and his dark skin beaded with sweat, but he embodied the type of confidence Aaron wished he had, staring down the angry gnat bothering him like he wasn't even worth the energy required to crush him.

It was kind of hot if Aaron was honest with himself, but in an intimidating way that got rid of any boner he might have tried to hide. Small mercies.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?" Aaron said, placing himself an equal distance between them, but out of reaching distance, just in case.

"Yeah," the smaller guy--Aaron thought his fob had flashed the name Ronnie--said, jutting out his chin. "This asshole has been hogging the chin up bar for the last half hour--"

"The assisted pull up machine."

That made Ronnie stop, and he looked over at Aaron for the first time. "What?"

"It's not a chin-up bar," Aaron explained, pointing to the knee platform. "It's an assisted--"

"Yeah, whatever." Ronnie rolled out his shoulders, shifting his feet, but not stepping any closer to Aaron or Troy, thankfully. "I'm just trying to do my work out, and I can't, not when he's taking his time."

Troy flashed a small, white smile and shook his head at the ground, his feet firmly planted and his hands as relaxed as Ronnie's were clenched. "I'm here to do the same thing, man. I'm nearly done, and I told you how long I'd be when you asked me the first time."

"Whatever, dude. It's not your personal toy."

Whatever Troy's response was, Aaron missed it. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse through the open floor of the club of someone walking by the front desk at a fast clip. It wasn't Imani, because she always wore Get Fit!'s bright blue sweater, even on August days like this one. (She said it was because it made brown skin with pink undertones look good, but Aaron thought it was probably because people stared at her enough without her having to worry about her shirt being too tight. And he had no idea what undertones were.)

Had the person even scanned their fob? Aaron should've been over there. Anyone could just walk in, and there was a sign, but what was that going to do if someone wanted to sneak in? Nothing. He'd made a bad call, he should've--

"That's it, I'm done. Screw off, or take it up with him."

Aaron blinked, tuning back in just as Troy turned his back on the conversation and hopped back up on the machine. "Pardon?"

Ronnie's cheeks were as red from irritation as they would have been if he'd been working out. His nostrils flared as he demanded, "Well, what are you going to do about this?"

Aaron fixed his eyes just beyond Ronnie's left ear and cleared his throat. "Club rule is that it's first come, first served. Troy is using the machine right now, and so unless he'll let you use it in between his sets--"

Troy made a derisive sound between upward pulls. "Not a chance."

Aaron nodded. "Then you'll just have to wait. If you want, I can suggest a few exercises you can do instead that'll target the same areas."

For a second, Aaron thought he might get more of a fight than he was expecting. Ronnie drew himself up, his chest expanding and his spine growing a few inches before his eyes locked on the motion of Aaron crossing his arms over his wide chest.

(Aaron might have ordered the wrong size of sweater his first week there, but he'd sooner volunteer for a root canal than ask his boss for a bigger one.)

"Don't bother," Ronnie spat, snatching his tall glass water bottle from the floor and turning to leave. "I can find the same stuff on Google as I could get from some meathead who printed off a certificate from the internet that calls him an expert."

"Cornell."

Ronnie's running shoes squeaked on the rubber floor. "Huh?"

"The certificate that calls me an expert. It wasn't from the internet, it was from Cornell."

Behind him, he heard the clank of the knee platform bottoming out and a rough, wheezing laugh. He turned around to see what Troy was laughing at, and Ronnie took that as his cue to stomp away to the cardio bank.

Aaron watched him go, fiddling with the zip on his sweater and wondering if his attempt to diffuse the situation had gone well. Nobody'd gotten punched. That was a plus.

He stepped back out of the way when he heard Troy hop down, but he didn't go back to the desk. He watched as Troy packed up his watch, phone and water bottle and wound his headphones around his fingers.

He wanted to leave. He should have left, but he couldn't stop thinking about--

"You wondering if I've actually got a set left to do?"

Troy was smirking at him, reading his confusion like a book.

"Yeah."

Troy lifted his phone, flashing a screen dense with numbers and abbreviations.

"According to this handy plan, I do, but honestly, I'm tired. I really wanted to give up ten minutes ago, but pissy pants over there was being so shitty, I found the motivation to push through."

It probably wasn't that professional of Aaron to laugh, but it felt like a balloon in his chest being let loose, blowing out the tension in a smothered chuckle.

Troy's smile grew. "I guess I should thank him for keeping me in line."

Aaron coughed to force down another wave of laughter. "Maybe. He probably wouldn't appreciate it."

"Likely not." He tipped his head wisely, then stuck out a hand for Aaron to shake. "I'm Troy."

"I know." He let go of Troy's hand and rubbed at the short hair on the back of his head, his gaze skittering away from Troy's wry, questioning eyebrow. "You're in the system. I'm Aaron."

"I know. You wear a name tag." Even Aaron could read the amusement in Troy's small grin, but it didn't feel malicious.

"Oh, right." He wasn't that good with faces, and it always threw him off when people he thought were strangers started using his name as if they knew him.

"Thanks for the back-up," Troy said, slinging a towel over his neck, juggling all his things to one arm.

"Any time." *No more times, please*, he begged silently. He already needed to pop an antacid from one member dispute.

"I promise I don't come here to pick fights."

"That's a relief. We don't have the equipment for boxing."

Troy laughed again, and Aaron savoured the lightness of--for once--having said the right thing.

"You're funny." Troy nodded at him once more, walking backward in the direction of the exit. "See you around, man."

Aaron smiled privately to himself while he pretended to look busy doing something in the weight room. (He didn't want to follow Troy after they'd already reached the end of their conversation, even though he was itching to get back to the desk.)

He'd done it. He'd survived mediating a disagreement with his dignity and his stomach lining intact, and he'd even--maybe--made a friend. He felt a little like a kindergartener after the first day of school, running out to his parent with good news about a kid who also liked sand and string cheese, but he couldn't wait to text his mother.

Who gave a crap if he was 25 years old and doing an internal jig because someone was nice to him when they didn't have to be? Small victories.

After he'd waited long enough, he quickly swiped a paper towel dampened with sanitizer over the knee platform his new almost-friend had been using--*nobody's perfect*, he reasoned--and finally went back to the desk.

After the *Back Soon!* sign was neatly tucked away, a few members wandered in, scanning their fobs, oblivious to how rapidly Aaron's good mood was fading.

Aaron liked his job as a personal trainer, enjoyed helping people meet their goals and designing workouts that fit their strengths and weaknesses. (Not to mention, pushing them so hard they stopped trying to make small talk while sweating and panting.) He'd just had a different picture in his head of what his working day would look like when he graduated.

He was glad he hadn't known when he was struggling through the toughest days of his kinesiology program that he was in for so much menial labour, like towel duty, mopping the muddy entrance on rainy days, and keeping an eye on the smoothie bar to make sure none of the containers were more than half empty.

(He was supremely grateful that he wasn't the person who had to chop up the fruit on offer into neat and uniform pieces. No one liked blood in their smoothie, so it was for the best.)

But he hadn't lied when he'd told his mother he was happy. Even the worst day at Get Fit! was better than the best day at some franchise gym where he was treated like another cog in the multi-million dollar wheel. When he wasn't the newest hire anymore, he'd have more clients and more time to circle the gym, intimidating regular members into doing their push-ups with proper form.

Truly, the personal trainer's dream.

Two minutes to the hour and seven minutes before Aaron needed to be getting ready for his client, Imani strolled up to the desk, plunking her water bottle next to the scanner and inserting her small stature into the space between the two counters, silently but firmly forcing Aaron out of her way without ever physically nudging him.

"I heard some drama all the way from the back," she said, grabbing the ends of a handful of her long thin braids and using them to draw lines on her palm. It was a little like watching a cartoon villain maniacally steeple their fingers. "So, spill."

He did his best to recount the incident with the amount of detail Imani seemed to want, and it seemed like she was satisfied since it started her off on a story about the time two 70-somethings had it out over the same recumbent bike.

Aaron was barely listening, because the moment she got to the part about flying ankle weights, Troy came out of the changeroom and waved to him on his way out.

Aaron was so busy worrying about whether the way he'd lifted his hand was embarrassingly eager that he almost missed the person who slipped out behind Troy.

The man was a flash of dark blond hair and a red T-shirt, mostly hidden behind Troy, except for the huge black backpack sticking out behind him like a turtle's shell. The only reason Aaron had noticed him was because he thought he recognized the man from earlier when he'd been away from the desk, and because he'd come out of the right side of the men's area, instead of the left. He'd come from the showers.

(The way those entrances were set up was the top most complained-about feature of the gym. More than the loud Top 40 music, more than the occasional shortage of towels on Friday mornings. More even than the avocado costing three dollars extra at the smoothie bar. (Even Aaron thought that was a little much.) There was five feet of space between the doors, which meant that members couldn't just leave everything but their towel in their locker on their way to the showers, unless they wanted to risk flashing people.)

*Strange*, Aaron thought. He usually had a pretty good gauge of passing time, but he must have been wasting time chatting with Troy for longer than he thought if he'd missed this guy's entire workout and shower.

But that didn't make sense. No more than ten minutes could have gone by. There was no way someone could work up enough of a sweat and finish washing it off and get dressed in that time, so it must have been someone else he'd seen earlier.

Someone else with the same light hair and a red T-shirt.

"Aaron?" Imani bounced up onto her toes. "Are you even listening to my incredible anecdote?"

"No," he answered without thinking, then he winced. "I'm sorry. I'll listen next time."

She rolled her dark eyes but smirked as she waved him off. "I'll let it slide. You look a little shell-shocked. Go on and shake off that argument before Brenda comes in."

By the time he was back in the break room at the end of his shift, he was exhausted, but in a good way, kind of. He could have done without the stress, but it had made his afternoon fly by, and next time Troy came in, Aaron wouldn't just nod. He'd say hello to a person he had a passing acquaintance with.

*Baby steps*, his mom would say.

He did end up texting her about it and got a bunch of emojis in response. He didn't think she meant to send a sickly green nausea face along with the smiles and hearts, but he got the general idea that she was happy for him.

He was happy for himself. Maybe this whole *moving away from home and trying to be normal* thing would work out.

Even if the idea still made him want to nausea face.

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"Did that chest press murder your whole family?"

It was Ryan, another one of the trainers on staff, smirking as he swept by on his way to the break room.

Aaron blinked, glancing down at the machine he'd been cleaning. "My family lives upstate."

Ryan slowed down, sending a crinkled smile over his shoulder. "Oh. Cool. Just joking with you."

"Right," Aaron told Ryan's retreating back. He picked up his spray bottle and fiddled with the nozzle while he tried not to let his embarrassment ruin his day.

*What would he have done if my family was dead?*

Probably played it off with a perfect mix of sympathy and self-deprecating apology. Ryan always knew the right thing to say, and he was so effortlessly nice that Aaron couldn't even bring himself to be jealous.

He'd been glaring, Aaron realized. An accident, since he rarely glared at anyone on purpose, but he'd definitely been staring very hard at someone through the white metal bars of the chest press.

The same member from yesterday had gone into the shower, slipping in and out of Aaron's line of vision quickly. His backpack was what gave him away, taking longer to go through the door than any other part of him.

That had been about 15 minutes ago, and just before Ryan had walked by, Aaron had seen Backpack Guy again, throwing a hand up to wave at a staff member Aaron couldn't see. Aaron had been in the middle of the gym, with eyes on every corner, so he now had proof that the man had come in long enough to change, use the shower and...not much else.

Later, when Aaron relieved Imani on the desk, he was reminded of Backpack Guy by the flickering of the red light on the counter in front of the key scanner. The rush had died

down a bit, so Aaron took a few seconds to check the sign-in log for the time he'd been cleaning.

Backpack Guy wasn't there.

Aaron knew most of the members who'd scanned their keychains, and the ones he didn't recognize were all women. Maybe the guy had borrowed a membership card?

*Odd*, Aaron thought. Imani was usually better than that, explaining in that friendly, but inarguable way she had that only members could use the facilities. She usually got a new member out of it by the end of the conversation.

When Aaron used to try that at the gym back home, he only ever got a pissed off non-member and a gentle suggestion from management that he handle it better next time, without any instructions as to how he was supposed to do that.

So he stuck to the rules and guarded the entrance like a well-trained puppy. Rules were the only thing Aaron could count on, and he'd quit and go back home before he started breaking them.

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"Who folded these towels?"

The sharp voice jerked Aaron's head up from his incident report. His eyes landed on the speaker, but he had to fight not to go right back to describing in gruesome detail how someone taking a spin class ended up with a bloody nose. That probably wouldn't have been a good idea, considering that the shouty man with a shock of white hair which made him look older than he was peeking out from behind the towel cupboard was Aaron's employer.

Aaron lifted his hand and stood his ground when he was hit with an intense, squinting stare. "It was me, Mr. Lovitz."

Mr. Lovitz's eyes slitted impossibly further and he eased the cupboard silently shut. "And who are you?"

Aaron blinked and felt the clip on his pen digging into his thumb. This wasn't the first time they'd met. Even if he was unrecognizable through a pixelated Skype window, they'd spoken face to face a couple of times since then. Although, it occurred to Aaron that he'd always been part of a group. He was good at blending in. Maybe too good.

"I'm Aaron George," he said, but Mr. Lovitz just continued staring. "I was hired last month." Nothing. "You did my interview."

"And why did I hire you?" Mr. Lovitz demanded, crossing his arms over the wide lapels of his unseasonable coat.

"I don't--" Aaron stopped himself. He *did* know, he just needed to have the same kind of confidence in himself that his parents had. "Because I'm a good personal trainer."

"No, no, why did I hire *you*." He waved an impatient hand toward the entrance and the street beyond the mall that housed the club. "There's a thousand good trainers in Brooklyn alone, let alone the rest of this godforsaken city. Why you?"

Aaron floundered for a better answer for a few moments before he gave up and admitted what he'd always suspected. "Because I said I was moving five blocks away and don't have a social life, so I can cover any shifts, any time?"

Mr. Lovitz snapped his fingers loud enough that Aaron jumped. "Yes, that's it. I remember you now. Aaron George. Small town kid."

"That's right, Mr. Lovitz." Mostly. He wasn't a kid, but the small town part was right.

"Didn't I tell you to call me Phil?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Oh. Well, do so." Phil looked around, taking in the lobby like he was seeing it for the first time until his eyes fell on the towel cupboard again and he seemed to remember the reason why they were even talking. "Who folded these towels?"

This was it. He was done. He was going to get fired. "I did."

Phil hummed, peering into the cupboard and scrutinizing the stacks of clean laundry, then flicking the door shut with a harsh clack. "Good work."

Through the haze of panic and fantasies of job loss, Aaron remembered folding the towels and the reason why he wouldn't be getting fired. Against his normal policy, he'd thrown out the method Imani had shown him, the way they'd always done it, and came up with something new. It'd been a choice between being bothered by bending the rules and being annoyed by the mess the pile always turned into by the end of the week.

Now, with the towels folded in thirds instead of halves, they all fit snugly in the cupboard on the end and it had satisfied him in a way he normally only was by making sure the 13 pens in the jar on the desk were all pointed in the same direction.

Later, when he was back in his apartment and couldn't sleep, he'd blame the high he'd gotten from knowing his way was better for the burst of confidence that made him ask, "Phil, are we going to get a gate put up soon?"

"A gate?" Phil slapped a palm to his own forehead, his frown turning thunderous. "A gate? Son, I don't have time to worry about a gate, I got books to shelve and I haven't even read the Phil's picks for this month."

With a swish of his long beige coat, Phil turned around and swept out the door, leaving Aaron behind with a building headache and a suspicion that he hadn't actually gotten out of bed that morning and was having a bizarre work-related anxiety dream. (He hoped he wouldn't wake up trying to scan his pillow again like he did in high school after his first job as a cashier at a grocery store.)

"Books?" Aaron asked the room, hoping it would make more sense if he said it out loud.

"Don't mind him." Ryan came up behind him, leaning on the edge of the desk and grinning in the direction their boss had fled. "Phil's a weird dude, and he's got a lot going on. He's got another gym in Manhattan, and a coffee shop slash bookstore and...I think maybe one or two other businesses."

"Wow."

"Yeah. He's one of those eccentric New York City old dudes who get away with not having their shit together because they're really rich. He's smart, and he knows how to make money, but he gets a little mixed up about people, places and things. Sometimes, he shows up here, yells at us for not being baristas and leaves."

Aaron tried to imagine it. "That's..."

"Odd. I know." Ryan nodded slowly, then shrugged. "But honestly, he's the best boss I've ever had, so I'd recommend just rolling with it."

Aaron was not the type of person to roll with anything. In fact, he'd actively resisted rolling with things since he was a child, and hadn't as yet had an inclination to develop his rolling skills.

"Thanks for the tip," he told Ryan, then he disappeared into the breakroom to take a deep breath and stop his insides from rolling.

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"Hey!"

In Aaron's defence, he didn't actually expect that to work. He'd decided to raise his voice in a split second, without really thinking about what he'd do if the person he was yelling at actually stopped and looked at him.

So the fact that he didn't do anything but stand there, just as shocked as Backpack Guy, wasn't really his fault. Neither was it his fault that Backpack Guy recovered first and dashed through the door to the showers before Aaron could figure out what to do next.

He almost made another quick and useless decision but stopped himself before he vaulted over the desk to run after the guy. What would he even do when he got there? He wasn't a security guard. He wasn't qualified to force anyone to leave, much less when they were naked and soaking wet.

Regardless of what poor decisions he might or might not have made, today was still a good day, or at the very least, progress. What had been a suspicion before was now confirmed: Backpack Guy wasn't a member. He'd blatantly walked past the entrance without scanning his card and had run away when Aaron tried to stop him.

The only problem was that now he had to do something about it.

He allowed himself one minute of indecision--he timed it on his watch--before he just went with the plan of action he was considering that moment, rather than the best plan. (He knew himself, it'd be next week before he figured out the best plan.)

He put the self-serve sign out and went in search of Imani. He found her in the kitchenette, where her knife fell heavily onto the avocado on her chopping block, and the pile of bruised bananas in a bowl next to it let Aaron know how stressed out her school work was making her.

"What," she said. Not annoyed, she was too nice for that, but warningly, giving Aaron a jolt to get over his anxiety about bothering her.

"A guy just snuck into the showers." It spilled out of his mouth, landing in an inelegant splat on the rubber matted floor.

"What?" The knife in her hand glinted as brightly as her shocked eyes, but then she put it down, her shoulders relaxing. "Oh, that's probably Lex."

"Who?" Had Mr. Lovitz--Phil--hired someone and nobody thought to tell Aaron?

"He's Ryan's friend. His hot water is broken, or something. Ryan hinted he might be using ours."

Aaron's brain performed a bit of a short circuit, and he said, close to whining, before he could stop himself, "That's against the rules."

Imani went statue-still, then widened her heavily-mascaraed eyes, tilting her head in a perfect impression of the empty-headed gym bunny Aaron knew she wasn't. "What is?"

He clenched his fists at his sides, and enunciated slowly, "Letting a non-member use the facilities."

"Which non-member? I don't see anyone around. What the hell are you doing over here, anyway? Get your fantastic butt back to the desk." She made a shooing motion with her avocado-smear hands, far closer to Aaron's ass than was comfortable.

"That's sexual harassment," Aaron muttered, but he opened the door to leave.

"Sorry. I'll put a dollar in the jar." She rolled her eyes, but Aaron was pretty sure she was sincere.

(The I Got Hit On Today Jar was a bedazzled coffee canister that lived under the cashbox at the front desk. Whenever it happened, the hitee would stuff a dollar bill into it. At first, Aaron had doubted the concept, but then someone told him that the two giant leather armchairs in the staff-only break room were paid for by the jar. The jar was sacred. Long live the jar.)

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"Ryan, can I talk to you for a second?"

Ryan dropped his armful of rope and looked up in surprise. Aaron couldn't blame him. Aaron wasn't a conversation starter. Or a finisher. Or much of a middle-er either.

"Yeah, sure," Ryan said, shaking out his arms. "What's up?"

"Imani told me about your friend."

"My friend?" Ryan looked even more confused for a second, long enough for Aaron to start wondering if a) Imani had heard wrong, and Ryan hadn't done anything, b) Ryan had so many friends coming in to use the facilities that he didn't know which one Aaron was talking about, and c) Aaron could barrel roll right out of the conversation before it went any further.

The answer, according to Aaron, was d) silent screaming until it all went away.

"Oh, you mean Lex."

"Yes," Aaron gusted out, just managing to keep his knees locked against his relief.

"Yes, I mean Lex. He keeps sneaking into the showers."

"Yeah, it really sucks."

Aaron drew in a small breath, then held it, surprise morphing into suspicion. Was it really going to be that easy? Maybe this Lex guy wasn't Ryan's *friend*-friend, but a rule-breaking, policy-ignoring *sort-of*-friend.

But then Ryan didn't stop talking.

"Lex's landlord is a jerk who won't get the hot water fixed, so he's been coming here sometimes. Never when it's busy, though. I'd let him use mine, but I work weird hours, and so does my girlfriend, so it's easier if he just comes here."

"That's not--uh." Aaron coughed, hoping he could get rid of the nasally pout in his voice. "That's not really allowed."

Aaron was the type of person who stood at a crosswalk until the pedestrian signal turned on, even if there were no cars around for miles. He also threw things out the day after they expired, even if they looked and smelled fine because there was always the slight chance that whatever it was had spoiled.

He knew this. He'd always known it, ever since his mother had started calling him her *best baby* when she'd catch his brother and sister misbehaving as soon as she left the room. They all knew she didn't mean it, she would never play favourites like that. And he wasn't so much afraid of the repercussions as respectful of the boundaries they'd set. Rules were always made for a reason. Just because someone disagreed with them didn't mean they could disregard them completely.

Ryan seemed like he was the kind of guy who didn't worry so much about rules. It wasn't that he was a troublemaker. He did great work and always showed up on time.

Technically, he and Aaron were at the same level of seniority. They all were. But Ryan had taught Aaron everything he'd needed to know about Get Fit!. He felt like a superior, which was probably what made it so difficult for Aaron to see him beg.

"Please don't report it to Phil." Ryan dug his hands into the pockets of his branded sweater, but Aaron could see his fingers twisting the fabric on the inside. "The water will be fixed soon and he'll be gone."

Aaron's shoulders tightened a little bit more, the center of his back pinching and getting sweaty. He'd probably have to take an antacid later. He sighed, trying to rub away the headache he could feel forming, and using that as an excuse not to look into Ryan's puppy dog eyes.

"I won't tell Phil," he said, and Ryan visibly relaxed. "But it's still against the rules. If I catch him, I won't be able to let it slide, and I won't throw myself under the bus."

"That's fair. I appreciate it, man."

Aaron gratefully returned Ryan's fistbump, keeping his wet palms turned down, then headed to the break room to get ready for his next client. His major muscle groups relaxed with every step away from the conversation he took, but his stomach still clenched with apprehension.

This wasn't finished. He knew it with the same certainty that he knew it would never go well for someone like him.

## Chapter 2

"Oh, hey. Aaron, right?"

Aaron stopped and turned around as carefully as he could with a load of rectangular plastic step platforms in his arms. Troy must have seen him list to the side under the weight because he reached out and took a few off the top before Aaron could answer.

"Let me help you with that."

"Thanks." Aaron adjusted his grip on what was left, feeling the strain ease on his biceps. "Yes. And you're Troy."

"Sure am. The one and only." Troy grinned, showing off a barely there dimple. "You look busy."

Aaron took that as permission to keep walking. He had twelve minutes before Muriel would arrive, and eight minutes until he wanted to be finished getting ready. "Yeah. I have a lot of clients to prepare for, and an obstacle course to set up." He nodded his thanks when Troy put down his load next to Aaron's on the grey mat flooring.

"I could help you out, if you want. I'm waiting for a buddy to come and spot me."

"No, thanks." It was only his mother's constant reminders that silence in the middle of a conversation wasn't desirable that made him stop and reassess how he must have sounded: rude, definitely. "We're not allowed to let members help set up our station. Something to do with insurance."

The tension in Troy's shoulders that Aaron hadn't even registered disappeared. "Ah. I get that. You don't want to get sued when I fall over moving things around for you."

Finally, someone who understood that rules were made for a reason. "Exactly. But you could stand there and watch me put it together."

"Oh, boy, could I?"

"If you want. If you were my Wednesday client, you would have been here ten minutes ago, and spent the whole time looking at my ass." Aaron paused while reaching for a five-pound weight on the rack. "If anyone asks, I said glutes, not ass."

The dimple made another fleeting appearance. "Actually, are you accepting clients?"

Aaron was glad the weight he was holding was most of the way to the floor. He dropped it the rest of the way, with a noise as off-kilter as he felt. Was this him misreading the room? It didn't typically happen like this. Aaron usually said something suggestive and

had no clue until everyone was laughing, or sometimes, it was other people saying them, but Aaron wouldn't notice until they were walking away, annoyed at Aaron for blanking their come-ons.

Aaron wasn't used to being the one to wonder if he was just hearing things.

"Oh, man," Troy groaned, before Aaron could work it out. "I just realized how that sounded. I don't want to stare at your ass--"

"Glutes."

"Glutes," Troy allowed. "They're probably very nice, but I'm not...uh, I mean to say--"

"It's fine," he cut in, saving Troy from the kind of cringing misstep he was familiar with. "I'm not offended. My glutes get enough attention."

Troy laughed, relief punching it past what the joke really deserved. "Okay. Cool. It came out wrong, but I was serious about becoming a client."

The rake of Aaron's eyes started right from Troy's well-broken in gym shoes, and didn't stop until he reached the thickest part of his meaty shoulder. "You want a personal trainer?"

It wasn't as if he only coached people who'd never been to a gym in their lives, but he'd never had someone as obviously experienced as Troy ask him for help.

"Not to get in shape. Just to stay at this level. I need someone to help me stay accountable and keep me from getting crushed or brain-damaged, and my friend can't make an appointment to save his life." He cast his gaze in the direction of the entrance, presumably toward the missing friend. "You're cool, have the strength to spot me, and best of all, I know you won't brag about your weekend hookups while I'm pinned to a bench and at your mercy. For that alone, I'll pay you for your services."

Aaron had had a friend once. Their lockers had been next to each other in sixth through eighth grade, and by the last year, they'd been eating lunch together every day. Back then, it had seemed too good to be true, because it was. Ninth grade hit, Aaron's awkwardness got worse--or more apparent, at least--and suddenly, being alphabetically close was no longer a good enough reason to be friends.

This--Troy's warm and fuzzy overture of casual friendship--was too good to be good for future Aaron, but that was just too damn bad, because present Aaron wasn't about to turn it down.

"Sure," he said, hoping he sounded casual, and not like a ten-year-old wrinkling the paper of a birthday party invitation in his excitement. "You can stop by the desk later, we'll work out the details."

"I will. Thanks, man." Troy looked around at the small piles of equipment scattered across the mat. "I think I'll leave you to it. Looks more like you're setting up a torture session than a workout."

"My client would probably agree with you. You might be in for the same if you don't watch out."

"Bring it on."

Their banter as Aaron finished setting up wasn't easy, necessarily. Aaron was too tense and trying too hard for that. It was fun, though, more fun than Aaron had had in the months since moving to the city, and it seemed like the kind of thing he wouldn't mind practicing at a set time every week, performing a predictable course of action. The perfect friendship.

Three minutes until Muriel was supposed to arrive and six minutes until she probably would, they headed up to the desk together to wait for her and for Troy's friend. (Late. Not that great a friend. Aaron was *never* late.) Troy stopped at the desk to talk to one of the part-time desk attendants Aaron didn't know.

Lex chose that moment to make his move.

"You!" Aaron blurted as Lex nearly sprinted from the entrance.

Troy's head snapped in his direction. "What about me?"

"No. Sorry. Not you, him."

Aaron pointed, but by the time they both turned to look, the hall was empty and still, like no one had ever been there.

"Okay, then." Troy smiled at him--no dimple this time--and turned back to the counter.

Lex opened the door of the changeroom, saw that only Aaron was looking and raced through the other door to the showers.

In a span of less than three seconds, Aaron realized three things. A) He wanted to say something, anything, to know that he at least tried. B) If he did that, Troy wouldn't see who he was talking to, and would think he was being weird. C) Lex was probably psychic. How else would he know that his mischievous, *I won this one, sucker* smile was totally justified?

\*\*\*

"Your cab's here, Muriel."

"Thank you, Imani."

Aaron supported Muriel's arm as she stood up from the bench, and didn't let go. "Are you sure you don't want me to walk you down?"

She patted his hand, then let it go, standing--gingerly, but steadily--on her own steam. "Oh, no, dear. I'm sure you've got too much to do."

"Not really. I'm supposed to be with you for another 20 minutes."

"So you are." She peered out of the entrance, and a look of fixed determination filled her squinting eyes as she took in the escalator and the mall beyond. "All the same, I'll be fine. Nothing a lie down and a heat pack won't fix."

She left with a promise to Aaron that she'd take it easy, although it was tough to advise her on what to avoid. Her back hadn't been thrown out from something Aaron had told her to do, but by taking off her sweater at a weird angle in the locker room before they'd even started. It'd taken Aaron six minutes to realize something was wrong, and eight minutes to find someone who could go into the women's changing area to rescue the poor woman.

Another day, another incident report.

He was staring into the middle distance, wondering if he needed to describe what kind of sweater Muriel had been wearing when Lex reappeared. He was still damp, his blond hair darkened to deep gold and his skin pink from the heat.

He was...surprisingly attractive for someone who annoyed Aaron on a deep, spiritual level.

And he was staring at Aaron, while Aaron stared right back.

"Can I help you?" Aaron asked, putting down his pen and lining it up with the bottom of his paper.

"Oh, maybe." Lex's smile appeared, fast as lightning and just as bright, but it stayed longer. "That depends. How good is your eyesight?"

Aaron hid from that smile, looking down at his paper without seeing the words. "Fine. Why?"

"Oh, crap. I was hoping that you had selective 20/20 vision, which would let you ignore me slipping in while at the same time letting you frown that piece of paper into submission. No such luck, huh?"

Was he frowning? He hadn't been trying to. "No. My eyes work around the clock."

"What about your ears? If you avert your eyes, I could be really quiet and you won't even hear me. Unless you had supersonic hearing."

Lex looked so genuinely excited by the prospect, Aaron couldn't tell which answer would have disappointed him more. "My hearing's pretty good, actually." Not to mention, there was no way in hell he'd be averting his eyes from anything.

"Or your heart. Maybe it's *really big*, and--"

"Stop it. I know what you're doing, and I can't--"

A wide, graceful-fingered hand shot out between them. "I'm Lex. Nice to meet you, uh." He unsubtly ducked his head down to check for a nametag. "Aaron. I'm from Epworth, Iowa, a little town that I left more because it was too small for me, rather than me being too big for it. I worry sometimes that they don't miss me at all. I'm left-handed and it sucks. My shoes after a long day can clear a room."

Aaron wasn't the best at conversational rhythm on a good day, but he was pretty sure he wasn't at fault in this case. "What are you talking about?"

"It's psychology," Lex told him, his hands tapping quickly on the desk as he leaned in, his wide eyes almost as blue as Aaron's uniform. "I read somewhere that if you tell someone your insecurities, they like you faster."

"Do you know if it's actually true?"

"Not a clue. Is it working on you? My piano teacher made my parents stop bringing me when I was ten because I was so bad at it."

"Stop that!" His eyelashes were crazy, Aaron noticed. Dark and clumped together with water, but long and curved. "No, it's not working. Will you leave now?"

Lex gasped loud enough that Min-ho who was exiting behind him jumped. "So rude! I could be a potential customer. You never know."

Aaron didn't bother to respond, he simply set his jaw, hoping he was radiating *yeah right* instead of *your presence here unsettles me in ways I don't fully understand*.

"I could," Lex insisted, lifting his arms and flexing them. "I can curl a mean two pound weight."

Aaron snorted. "I'll just bet you can, with arms like those."

"Why, Aaron, if I'd known you were looking, I would've worn my Sunday best."

Aaron looked at the change room doors past Lex's shoulder instead of at his coquettish, hip-thrusted pose. He actually had pretty good shoulders, probably from supporting that backpack all the time. His hands were muscular and mesmerizing in their constant movement.

He suddenly realized he'd been quiet for too long, but grasped around and came up empty. Lex just smiled wider and hitched up his backpack, then pointed his finger fiercely at Aaron.

"I'll get you on my side, yet, mister. I know I can make you like me, I'm a delight!"

Aaron imagined it wouldn't just be a campaign. It would be an all out war. "It's not about liking you."

"Don't worry. By the time my hot water's been connected, you won't want me to leave."

"No one's making you leave forever." Phil would definitely rather he stayed, but as a paying member.

Lex put a hand on his heart and started walking backwards to the entrance. "Aw, thanks, buddy. I knew you'd come around."

"Wait." Aaron blinked hard, watching him disappear. "No, that's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant," he tossed over his shoulder just before he reached the escalator. "See you soon!"

\*\*\*

*This is what you want, Aaron told himself.*

*You have a passion for fitness.*

*There's nothing you'd rather be doing.*

"Come out on Saturday for our open house," he said, handing a flyer to a passerby.

"Hey, Aaron." It was one of the daytime desk people. Amy, maybe? "Thanks for covering, you can go back upstairs."

"Oh, thank god." He thrust his stack of crisp blue and white papers at her and fled.

He'd only been down there 20 minutes--he'd had just 30 minutes until Brenda, one of his favourite clients arrived--and he was ready to tear his hair out.

*It's fine, he said, deliberately reaching deep--deep--into his well of optimism for the bright side. You survived. You might get a few new clients out of it, and can take more time to work on exercise plans instead of sales pitches.*

Brenda's red hair came into view first as he rode up the escalator, and it made him smile. She worked hard, so it was always a sweaty mess by the end of the session, but she made an effort to look as glamorous as a can of hairspray would allow.

The problem was, as her face appeared in his line of sight, so did Lex's. It'd been a few days since Aaron had seen him, but he was still just as smugly amused and stupidly--attractively--long and lean, especially next to the diminutive Brenda.

"Aaron!" Brenda waved with her perfectly squared fingernails. "There you are, honey. I'm a little early, I hope you don't mind. I was just telling this boy--what's your name, babe?"

"Lex." His eyes glittered at Aaron's struggle to keep from glaring.

"Lex. I was telling him what a wonderful trainer you are."

"She was. She's very convincing."

"I don't have to be. He does that himself." Brenda reached out and patted Aaron's shoulder, leaving her hand there as she sung his praises. "It's only been a few weeks, but I feel fantastic, and I couldn't have done that without him."

The warmth of her palm sank quickly through the thin fabric of his sweater and cotton T-shirt, and heated the inside of his stomach. "You did the work, Brenda."

"Yes, but you made me feel that I could. You don't say much, but you always seem to know when I need the encouragement. And because you don't say much, it means a lot when you do."

Aaron could feel his face getting hot and pushed down his embarrassment as best he could. "Thanks."

"You're a good boy, honey." She patted his arm again and said to Lex, "He's a good boy."

"I'm 26," he grumbled, but she just laughed and used the hand she'd put on him to bat lightly at his bicep.

"Age is just a number. I should know!" She made a small *come hither* motion with her fingers and Lex leaned in conspiratorially. "This boy taught me some yoga moves. You ever done yoga, honey? It'll change your life."

"I have, actually."

Aaron's running shoes squeaked audibly when he rocked back in surprise. Lex didn't come off as the all-American masculine jerk people often assumed Aaron was, but he also didn't seem like the type to enjoy any kind of recreational stretching. "Really?"

Lex nodded and pulled at the neck of his T-shirt. "My parents wanted me to join a team for my college applications, but I'm terrible at every sport ever. My school had a yoga club, though, so I signed up as a joke. It was pretty cool, honestly. I would have been way more stressed out in senior year if I hadn't been learning how to breathe deep from my chemistry teacher after school."

"Did it help you get into college?"

Lex looked about as surprised to hear the question as Aaron was to be asking it, but he recovered quickly and shrugged. "It didn't hurt. Well, except for the times I was shoved into the wall by the baseball team, who weren't too thrilled by the concept of the weird, fruity art kid doing the downward dog with their girlfriends in leggings. That was a little painful."

Aaron remembered the bite of a locker grate on his arm. He still had a scar. "Ouch," he said. An understatement, but Lex just quirked his mouth in a half-grin.

"I never really understood how they could get mad at me for that, then call me a queer for doing yoga in the next breath. Kind of a contradiction, right?"

"Logic isn't really their main concern. Not in my experience." Aaron had felt the same about the kids who'd teased him when he'd started to bulk up, telling him *hit me, pussy, hit me*, and then got pissed off when he finally did.

Lex tilted his head consideringly, his smile disappearing for the first time in their acquaintance. It didn't last long, but if Aaron had to guess, he'd say he was witnessing Lex's opinion of him shift a little bit. They weren't friends, but at least Lex now had a better idea of who Aaron hadn't called his friends.

"Ain't that the truth." The easy smile was back. "But it got better, just like they said it would. I just wish I still had time for some warrior pose."

Brenda clapped her hands, suddenly reminding them both that she was there. "No time like the present, babe!"

One silent moment later--during which Aaron was sure Lex was picturing her in a number of poses, each more alarming than the next--Brenda bustled off to fill her water bottle.

(Aaron had seen a few of those poses in real life. Brenda was very courageous and remarkably spry.)

The two of them were left standing in the middle of the hallway, just having had a remarkably pleasant conversation about *yoga* of all things. Aaron didn't know which way was up anymore, but he did know one thing.

"You have to leave now," he whispered, conscious of Brenda still at the fountain a short distance away.

"But I just got here!" Lex whispered back. "And I don't want to disappoint Brenda by leaving so soon. If she thinks I left without doing a cool down, I'm pretty sure she'll bend me into a pretzel herself."

From some people, hearing that about Brenda would make Aaron's hackles go up, coming to her defense. From Lex, though, he could let it slide, because Lex understood that it wasn't a negative trait. Lex appreciated the whirlwind that was Brenda and it made Aaron smile, but only for a second, until he remembered himself.

"All the more reason to leave now, before she gets her hands on you," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

For the first time, frustration bled through Lex's expression. "Oh, come on, man. Everyone else here is on board with this. Why are you being such a dick about it?"

The pleading tone, along with the backpack and the graphic tee made Lex seem young, but he must be at least as old as Ryan, who'd invited everyone out for his 24th birthday the first week Aaron had worked at Get Fit!

(Aaron hadn't gone because the sight of the moving boxes piled up in his living room had had him in hives, but he'd heard about it later, and wished he'd been able to suck it up and at least pretend to enjoy a night out with co-workers who still might become his friends.)

24 was old enough to know better.

"Because it's theft," Aaron explained.

"Theft," Lex said, flatly, his eyebrows climbing. "Of hot water."

"Yes. Our energy bills are high enough as it is." Aaron had never actually seen the gym's energy bills, but he knew it cost money to keep the fluorescent lights on and the Britney Spears pumping. "Look, I get it. You need to get clean. Why don't you go to the public pool and use the showers there? Or another friend."

All the righteous indignation seemed to go out of Lex, but only for a brief moment, then he came back with, "I can't afford to pay admission to the pool every day. And anyone I'd call a friend, other than Ryan, is back in Iowa. How many casual acquaintances do you

have in one of the most unfriendly cities in the world who would give you *carte blanche* to use their bathroom?"

*None* was the answer Lex was looking for, as well as the most truthful one. It was a good excuse, Aaron could see that. All of Lex's excuses were good ones, and Aaron wished he were the kind of person who could back down, turn a blind eye, and let Lex do what he needed to do.

But he wasn't that person. He couldn't do any of those things, the same way he couldn't just decide to write with his left hand, or call in sick on a day when he was only tired. It wasn't right and it wasn't a choice for him to make.

"How unfortunate for you," he said. It felt brittle and petty, and not sincere at all. "It's still against the rules."

Lex sighed, long and breathy, then nodded decisively. "Do you know what's also against the rules?"

"What?"

"Personal trainers being late for appointments."

Aaron's eyes went wide. *Brenda*.

He didn't bother responding, just turned around and made for the mats as fast as he could without running. He put the brakes on next to the bench she always laid her things and--

She wasn't there.

He turned, looking around the open concept floor plan, and didn't see her until he'd made a full circle, back to the entrance and the fountain that he'd walked right past.

He looked down at his watch. He wasn't late, he still had three--

When his head snapped up, Lex was already beyond the door of the showers, waving at him as it closed.

\*\*\*

Aaron felt the disturbance of the air before he saw Lex run past the desk and knew instantly that it was too late to stop him. Again.

He looked up in time to see Lex nearly trip over when he skidded to a stop, but his backpack kept going, but he'd already reached the door to the showers, which had become the unofficial *home free* in their cat and mouse game.

(One which Aaron was losing. Badly. He'd only managed to stop Lex once, when he'd been in the middle of sweeping the entrance and had used his broom to shoo him away. It had totally been worth the stick figure drawing of Brave Sir Aaron the joustier that had appeared on the staff whiteboard.)

Aaron still wasn't entirely sure why he was able to let go after Lex reached the door. It probably had to do with the logic of risk management, and the fact that Lex would never go quietly if security was called on him. He'd make a scene, and probably slip and hit his head and have to be carried out of the gym on a stretcher. And then he'd sue the club, and he might actually win, seeing as he'd never signed any of the insurance waivers, and then it'd be Aaron who was in trouble.

So, actually, he did know why he let it go. He didn't like it, but he could live with this system, at least for a while. All he had to do was re-organize a drawer everytime it happened until he could function again, but that came with problems of its own: He was running out of drawers.

He pulled a dusty pencil case out of the back of one and was just getting started on it when he felt the weight of being watched. He looked up to see Lex leaning in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. The straps of his backpack pulled the fabric of his T-shirt up, revealing the jut of a hip bone, pale and sharp. Objectively, it wasn't much of an erogenous zone, but it still made Aaron want to punch a wall.

"I think I might be winning you over."

Aaron blinked, surfacing, and realized he'd been staring at the door next to Lex's stomach for a good few seconds. "What makes you say that?"

"You barely even tried just then." He jerked his head in the direction of the door.

Aaron's fingers tightened around a dull, chewed up pencil, but he fixed Lex with a stern look. "I can only go so fast. That doesn't mean I'm letting you off easy."

"You sure?" Lex's eyes flashed with a sparkle that always made Aaron want to smile back at him, even though they were supposedly bitter enemies. "I'm not growing on you?"

"Like a fungus," he deadpanned.

Lex winced and the door squeaked behind him. "Harsh. You know, I'm worried enough about picking up some disease in here without you reminding me."

"Do you wear flip flops?"

"Duh."

"Then I wouldn't get too panicked about it. They get cleaned every day."

Lex lifted one of his eyebrows. "Every day?"

"Every other day, tops." He shrugged off Lex's surprise. "Phil's big into sanitary gym practices."

"Phil?"

"My boss. Ryan's too," he remembered.

"Oh, yeah." When Lex snapped his fingers, Aaron noticed that they were stained, but he couldn't tell with what. "That guy who called Ryan *Chad* for like three months, and then just switched to his real name, with no explanation."

Aaron couldn't fight down a smirk, not at Ryan's expense, but at the sheer ridiculousness that was Phil Lovitz. "That sounds like him."

"Well. Thank god for Phil's neat freakiness, eh?"

*Neat freak.*

Aaron's amusement faded a bit, remembering all the times the word had been used to describe him. He'd had a roommate in college, once. Only once, for about three weeks, before he'd admitted what he'd known all along: That he was better off commuting from home, and not trying to mesh all of his quirks with someone else's.

The most annoying thing was, he wouldn't call himself a neat freak. He liked things to be orderly, but he wasn't a germaphobe. But try to tell that to an 18-year-old video-game addicted engineering major, who just couldn't understand why Aaron didn't like energy drink cans on his side of the desk and pizza boxes making the garbage can overflow.

"Yeah," he said, weakly, grabbing hold of his attention span again. "Hey, I know a great way to prevent getting athlete's foot, if you're still worried about it."

Lex visibly brightened. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Not using public showers."

Lex was hard to rattle, Aaron had learned. He always had a quip and a sunny smile, and nothing Aaron threw at him seemed to penetrate his thick skin. This, though, a fairly mild shot in the scheme of things, made him slump, and made his face go curiously blank.

"Simple as that, huh?" Lex said, tonelessly. "You think I'd be here talking to you if I had another option?"

Why did that hurt, Aaron wondered. They weren't friends. Aaron had been trying his best for two weeks to see the back of Lex, so he could go back to his normal days at Get Fit!: Routine. Uneventful. Predictable.

*Boring*, a tiny voice whispered inside of him, that he ruthlessly squashed down. He *liked* boring. He *was* boring, as a natural state of being and it suited him just fine, except for the occasional bout of heartburn from being around decidedly *unboring* people like Lex.

"I--uh," Aaron stammered, unhelpfully. "That's--"

"Not your problem, I know. Sorry." Lex's shrug was jerky and uncoordinated, but by the time his shoulders were down, the smirk was back in place. "But the fact remains, pal, that this is the option I have."

"Okay." Watching Lex perk up was like the sun coming out after a week of clouds he didn't even know were bothering him until he felt the warmth on his face--and realized he was getting burnt. "Well, not *okay*, but--"

"I knew it!" Lex cried, loud enough that it echoed around the high metal rafters of the gym. "Your resolve is weakening. You are melting like soft serve in the sun, Aaron, admit it. I'll be moving in here by next week."

"Not likely."

For a second, Lex caught his tongue between his teeth, and he looked like the kind of person a fictional character would meet at a crossroads and not waste time selling their soul to for string and air.

"I'd like to see you try to stop me," he said. "I'm way too fast for you."

"Are you sure about that?"

Whatever Lex's response would have been, Aaron didn't hear it. He was too busy stepping back for momentum, then planting his palms on the desk and vaulting over it, landing on the other side in one smooth motion...much closer to Lex than before.

If pressed, Aaron would describe the noise Lex made right before he scrambled backward through the door as a *squeak*. He was almost sad that no one was around to hear it, but then, that meant they would've been there to see Aaron's--admittedly kind of impressive, but ultimately embarrassingly showy--power move.

He might not have been winning their war, but he was pretty sure that counted as winning a battle.

\*\*\*

Brittany always called Aaron hypervigilant. According to his sister, that was an upgrade from her original choice of paranoid, but Aaron didn't think he was paranoid or hyper-anything if people really were laughing at him.

He checked his fly first, as subtly as he could, when he first noticed Imani try to hide her grin. She had no reason to be hanging around the desk, but there she was, barely containing her amusement while Ryan didn't even try, smirking as he leaned against the water fountain.

His mind raced through the possibilities of what they could be laughing at: What had he said or done in the last hour or so that he'd seen them? What kind of embarrassing or odd confession had he made, without even realizing that it was supposed to be a shameful secret?

Something, probably. Why wouldn't there be? He was always doing this, opening his mouth and talking when he should just shut the--

"Love the new picture, Aaron!" Imani said, running out of patience for him to figure out the joke.

Picture? What picture--

Of course. *That* picture.

The one a part-time desk attendant had taken of him on his first day, when he was so nervous he could barely speak, and blown up to eight inches by eleven to pin up on the Meet Our Staff! board on the wall. He hated that picture, not because he didn't like the way he looked, but because Ryan's cheeky grin and Imani's expanse of straight, white teeth made Aaron's barely-there smile look surly and like he wanted to be anywhere else.

(Sometimes, he thought that picture was half the reason why he hadn't gotten a new client in weeks, other than Troy, who didn't really *need* him. The other half, though...that was all him, live and in person.)

Tacked over the original picture was a piece of notebook paper, dark with rough lines of a pen pressed down hard. This picture was of Aaron, too, but a caricature. Whoever had drawn it had made Aaron's jaw exaggeratedly square, and his eyes more hooded than they ever were. Kind of sultry? The cartoon's hair was perfect, with little sparkles all around his head, like it magically stayed that way all the time. The tiny smile Aaron had thought he'd managed was gone, the drawing's lips turned down and pouty.

His stomach sank lower the longer he dissected all the features whoever had drawn this had chosen to play up. Was this all anyone saw in him? Perpetual frown and symmetrical bone structure?

With stiff, but steady fingers, Aaron unpinned the drawing from the board and the sweet, metallic smell of fresh ink drifted off the paper as he held it up. "Very funny. Who did this?"

Imani was still smiling, wide and joyful, with no spite that Aaron could see. "Your new friend, of course," she said.

Aaron frowned down at the portrait. Did she mean--

He tried to imagine Troy's blunt fingers creating something like this, and it was surprisingly difficult. Their friendship was just starting out, so they certainly hadn't spilled all their secrets, but it was odd that the kind of artistic talent Aaron could begrudgingly admit this must have taken hadn't come up in the two sessions they'd already had.

"Lex is amazing," Ryan chimed, bouncing a little on his heels. "You should see his other stuff, things that he actually spent some time on. He's the reason we moved to New York, so he could work at an independent graphic novel publisher."

Aaron would've bet Ryan told that to everyone, like a proud parent sharing a photo of a soccer trophy to anyone who would listen for longer than a few seconds. He probably didn't even notice that the pleased wriggle Aaron's insides had been doing had turned into sick disappointment.

Of course. Not a weird friendship overture from Troy that he didn't understand. Payback, just on the edge of mean-spirited, but not enough that Aaron could complain about his feelings being hurt without looking like a crybaby who couldn't take a joke.

Carefully, but with deliberate nonchalance, he folded up the paper and stuffed it into the pocket of his sweater. He didn't want to have to stare at his own worst features in black and white until he managed to find a garbage can to throw it away.

"Very funny," he said, purposefully not showing a drop of anything more than mild annoyance. If they all saw him like the picture showed him, they'd probably expect him to implode with indignation. *Fussy, grouchy Aaron, ruining the fun.* "With talent like that, I'm shocked the Met isn't knocking down his door."

"I'll tell him you said so," Ryan replied, ignoring Aaron's sarcasm with a twinkle in his eyes.

At that moment, Phil burst through the open doors in a flurry of a one-sided conversation about...Moby Dick, apparently. Aaron didn't manage to find out whether or not Phil knew he'd lost his assistant somewhere, but he was glad to escape into the back of the gym, away from well-intentioned laughter and his own photo staring judgmentally down at him.

\*\*\*

"Hi, Princess."

Aaron's small, grey tabby cat *mrrped* and wound around his legs as he took his key out of the door to his apartment. She was always desperate for his attention, as if he'd been gone for days, but he didn't bend down to pick her up.

He took off his backpack and hung it on the end of the row of pegs next to the door. He placed his keys and wallet in the lumpy clay bowl his niece made him, his name badge and water bottle to the right of that, then his black pen, blue pen and mechanical pencil to the left, lined up so the tips were all pointing the same way.

Aaron wouldn't say that this routine gave him pleasure. It satisfied him, but it wasn't as if he looked forward to it all day. He had to do it, regardless, and at least it gave him something to think about after such a weird shift.

He knelt down and stroked Princess' spine when she headbutted his ankle particularly hard, but only when he was back in the living room in comfy home clothes did he pick her up and scratch under her chin, holding her soft, vibrating body next to his chest.

"There's my girl," he whispered into her neck. "Did you keep the mice away for me?"

She chirped at him and purred louder, which Aaron took to mean that she had. He certainly hadn't seen any rodents since he'd woken up on his second day to the sound of her yowling on his fire escape. His cousin, who'd moved out of the apartment a few days before Aaron arrived, hadn't seen her before, and no one had responded to the Found Cat posters he'd put up. He figured a fuzzy ball of aggressive affection wasn't even close to the worst thing that could've come with the place.

He let her perch on his shoulder while he ate his dinner over the kitchen sink, passing her bits of chicken until they were both full and she leapt down to go and stretch out in one of the long strips of sunlight she'd claimed within ten minutes of being let inside.

She made a pretty picture. A silver-grey slice out of an uneven golden brown rectangle. If Aaron was an artist, he might have whipped out his favourite medium and called

the finished product something pretentious like *Portrait of Princess Titania Blumenthal the Second*. Or something.

Aaron wasn't an artist, but he knew one. He couldn't help but imagine Lex's interpretation of the same scene, how he'd render Princess in his cartoonish style. On the way from his tiny kitchen to the couch, he stopped by the dish that held his wallet, taking out the drawing of himself and unfolding it while he sat down.

He didn't know why he hadn't thrown it away. He'd told himself he should during the entire act of folding it up and tucking it away, but he hadn't managed it. Probably some kind of unconscious protective mechanism, to remind himself that he couldn't trust anyone. Rationally, he knew he was only punishing himself, but he'd learned not to argue with his brain years ago.

But there was also something about the picture that made him want to look again. At first glance, the drawing had seemed simple, but the longer he looked, the more detail he saw, captured in quick pen strokes, like afterthoughts that spoke so much more than the finished project.

Lex had captured the little chunk of Aaron's eyebrow that didn't lie flat because he had a scar from falling down the stairs. He'd remembered Aaron's dimple, one of the few features he had that he never felt bad about, because his dad had the same one, and he liked the thought of looking more like his dad as he got older. Those little things made it hard to hate the piece of paper, even though it was supposed to be an insult.

It took a lot longer for his mother to answer his video call than it did for him to turn on his computer. When she finally picked up, the beep of her answering was obscured by the crunchy sound of her moving the microphone.

"Hello? Aaron? Did I do it right?"

The sound of her voice soothed any jangled nerves that Princess' fur hadn't worked out of him. "Hi, Mom. You did it right."

"Oh, good. Your dad's here, too."

Sure enough, his father's face slid into the pixelated frame as they got themselves settled in, his "how are you, kiddo?" making the microphone blare.

26 years old, and still a kid to them. He probably would be forever, at least until he had kids of his own, if he ever did.

"I'm good," he said. Infinitely better for seeing their faces. "What's going on at home?"

"Perfect timing, son, Brittany just stopped by," Dad informed him, scooching closer to Mom. "But you just missed your brother, he went to practice. He just passed your mark on the fridge, did I tell you? He's getting closer to Brittany's, but not there yet. Maybe he'll reach his full Amazonian warrior potential, just like his sister."

"*I heard that!*" Brittany yelled from somewhere off camera.

"We know, honey!" Mom yelled back. "It wasn't an insult, all six feet of you is fierce!"

"Has Tyler been educating you again, Mom?" Aaron cut in.

"I learned that one all by myself, actually."

By the time he was filled in on the minutiae of the George family's lives since the last time he'd called, three days ago, it was fully dark and Princess had jumped delicately onto the couch to settle in his lap like she paid more rent than Aaron. (Pretty easy to do, admittedly, considering how little his grandparents allowed him to give them.)

Brittany took his parents' place when they left--Mom to pick up Tyler and Dad to switch the laundry--and was bursting with details about her new job. Aaron soaked it all in like it was a riveting bestseller.

"So, what about you?" Brittany asked, when she was finished. "What have you been up to?"

The question was casual, easy to answer or to dodge with a meaningless platitude, but Aaron knew what she was really asking. *Are you happy? Do you talk to anyone besides your cat? Are they treating you well at work?*

"I'm fine. Really. The people at work are cool, and I'm getting better at small talk with the members." Partially true. He was getting better at knowing which members would do the talking for him, and which would expect him to lead.

Brittany hummed, then peered closer at his picture on the computer screen, trying to spot a lie.

Aaron wasn't offended by her skepticism. It was Brittany who'd convinced him to quit his last job, after she'd pulled the stories out of him like wisdom teeth. The way she'd gotten him to open up was particularly impressive, given that he wouldn't have called it bullying before she'd pointed out how well it described the problem.

The number of times his shoes had gone missing or his schedule had gotten messed up or his invitation to team lunches had gotten lost in the mail had been more than just harmless jokes in the name of camaraderie, especially when he'd been the only one not laughing.

"I mean it," he told her, casting around for something he could say to make her believe him. "Here, look."

He put the laptop on the cushion for a minute and leaned forward, ignoring Princess' annoyed *prbt*. When he sat back and settled the laptop on his knees, the drawing was in his hands.

"Someone at work drew this for me, a--" How to describe Lex? An annoyance? A mortal enemy? "A regular."

Brittany gasped, her face huge on the screen. "Oh, my god, Aaron, it's you!"

"Right?" He smiled at the reaction he'd known he would get, predictable as she was. "He's pretty good."

"You'll have to send that to Mom and Dad, they'll love it. Expect to see it framed on your next visit."

"Will do."

A phone chimed and Aaron patted his pocket only to realize that it was Brittany's.

She sighed, deflating a bit. "Sorry, bro. It's past Hilary's bedtime, and she won't go to sleep without me."

Aaron looked at his own watch. It'd gotten late without him marking the time. 36 minutes until he'd be in bed and 66 minutes until he'd turn out the light.

"That's fine. Say hi for me."

"I will. And Aaron?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't lie this time." Brittany wrapped her arms around her upper body, probably in an effort to keep from hugging the computer. "You deserve to be happy."

It was typical Brittany. Always looking out for him, leftover from their years of him being the baby of the family until Tyler came along, a welcome surprise eight years overdue. As far as she was concerned, Aaron needed her help more than Tyler ever had, whether or not he asked for it.

"I know," he said, burying his clenched fist in the fluffy fur of Princess' belly. "I am happy. It's all a big change, and you know how I am with change--"

"Do I ever."

"--but it's all working out. They're nice here. I like them."

*And they like me* was the one thing that would've truly put her mind at ease, and the one thing Aaron couldn't say, but Brittany was satisfied. She signed off with a wave, and Aaron's computer screen went dark.

"Well, Princess. Shall we turn in?"

He picked her up and she *merped* but didn't argue, curling up into a tight ball on his extra pillow while he brushed his teeth. After he rinsed out the brush and put it back in the holder in the space at the end, he looked in the mirror face-on, just like in the picture of him at work.

His reflection stared back at him, his lips pressed into a firm line, even relaxed and comfortable in his own home. That was always his default. His mom used to tell him it was like the sun came out when he smiled. She stopped when she saw how worried he was about it, telling him that rain was nice too, and nobody appreciated the sun if it was always out.

Should he try smiling more? Could someone even do that--decide to change their resting face at 26 years old? He tried a couple of tentative curves of his lips. None of them felt natural, but he had to admit that it made him look more friendly.

He would try, he decided. After all, he had plenty to smile about, even on his worst days. A loving family just five hours and a phone call away, a nice apartment he paid next to nothing for, a cat, and the job of his dreams.

What did it matter that he didn't have many friends and he walked on eggshells at work, hoping nobody hated him? He had plenty to keep him happy.



### Chapter 3

"Three. Four. Get that leg back under your knee."

Troy let out an explosive, tight-lipped sigh. "C'mon, man, you're killing me."

"That's what you pay me for. And that's six, you're done."

Aaron helped Troy guide the bar back onto the rack, then held out his water bottle, still cold and dripping with condensation. Troy took a huge drink, then switched to small sips before Aaron could say something. He panted on the end of the bench for a while, his head hanging low between his shoulders until he'd gotten his breath back and he slanted a sly look up at Aaron.

"I can feel you thinking something at me," he said, a little muffled as he swiped a towel over his face. "What did I do this time?"

Guilty as charged, Aaron shuffled his feet as he admitted, "Your left wrist wants to bend back."

"Is it bending?"

"No, but it wants to, which means it will if you don't watch it."

Troy laughed, shaking his head down at the grey matted floor. "Jesus. You do not let up." But he was smiling while he said it, the loopy, lazy smile of a human who'd been worked to their limit, so Aaron took it as a compliment.

Troy took a few more minutes to gather himself before he stood up with a groan and started stretching out his sore muscles. When he was finished, Aaron held out his clipboard, and cleared his throat.

Troy took it, and the offered pen. "You need me to sign my life away?"

"Certify that you're alive and uninjured at--" He looked at his watch, "--four oh one, yes."

Troy was used to it, so he made quick work of scribbling his signature at the bottom. Aaron took the clipboard back but raised an eyebrow when he caught a glimpse of what Troy had written.

"Is that supposed to be a T?"

"Gimme a break, you just turned my arms into spaghetti, then you ask me to wield a pen. I think that's a pretty good try."

Aaron pretended to scrutinize the signature a little longer, inwardly cheering on his own successful stab at being funny. "It'll do," he pronounced, and Troy laughed again.

"In all seriousness, though." He gripped Aaron's shoulder for a second. "Thanks, man. I know it's only been a few weeks, but I feel great."

"You're welcome. That's my job."

"I know, and I pay you pretty well for it, but I still want to thank you. So, listen, me and a couple of buddies are going out for drinks tomorrow night. Why don't you come along? I'll get your first one."

Flashing lights. Wailing sirens. A panic room door clanking shut. If Aaron hadn't been sure he was in the middle of a gym blasting Michael Jackson, he would've sworn that all of those things weren't just happening in his head.

His gut reaction was to say no--or, more accurately, *oh please no god no*--but Brittany's rational voice from one of their last calls told him to stop and think.

This was exactly what he'd been waiting for, and he knew just how to make himself calm down. All he had to do was ask himself some questions.

*What was the best case scenario?* He'd have a great time, make some new friends and laugh the night away.

*What was the worst case scenario?* Everybody at the table would hate him, Troy would realize what a buzzkill he was outside of work and he'd lose the one friend he'd managed to make.

*What was the most likely outcome?* He'd get that one drink, spend most of the evening bored, but have a few good conversations with Troy, then head home before the rest of the group was even close to being finished, with vague promises to stay longer next time.

"Sure," he forced out, before the second-guessing could start, followed by third-, fourth- and fifth- guessing.

"Awesome." Troy took out his phone, the screen fogging up a little under his warm fingertips. "Let me get your number, I'll text you as soon as we know where we're going."

Aaron rattled off his digits, tapping his fingers rapidly against the back of his clipboard the whole time. He drew breath to ask about the other people coming along with them tomorrow, but a loud burst of laughter at the front desk caught his attention.

His eyes landed--of course--on Lex, who was running through the entrance at top speed. There was nothing Aaron could have done from that distance, so he was a second

away from going back to his conversation when time seemed to slow down, and the whole room seemed to hold its breath.

Mrs. Saito, an impossibly old woman who came in for yoga three times a week, had shuffled into Lex's crash zone as he skidded to a stop, his leg coming up and his backpack overbalancing him. She stumbled back out of the way, and Lex grabbed onto the door frame just in time to keep from toppling into her and sending them both to the ground.

"*Lex!*" Aaron shouted when the room collectively exhaled. Everyone jumped, including Mrs. Saito, who'd grabbed onto her friend for support, and Lex himself, who turned around, leaning against the door with his face open and blank like a criminal in a floodlight.

They held a moment of sustained eye contact, Aaron's anger bubbling up faster with each blink, then Lex was stuttering an apology and disappearing through the door at his back.

"See you," Aaron bit off to a stunned Troy, who said something about texting him. He wasn't listening. He was already striding over to Mrs. Saito, who was still clutching Mrs. Connolly's hand with a grip tight enough to make him worry about both of them.

She was fine. They were both fine. They told him as much, more than once, after he asked them multiple times if they needed help, if they wanted to file an incident report, if they'd hurt themselves getting out of the way.

They were *fine*, which on one hand, settled his concern about their health, but on the other, didn't put him very much at ease, considering that Mrs. Connolly (who was single-handedly responsible for a third of the bills in the I Got Hit On Today Jar) had never felt more alive.

Adrenaline was still flooding Aaron's system when he went in search of Ryan. The tips of his fingers were digging into his palms, and his whole body was running hotter than it had when a sleazy new member had slapped a woman's ass during Aaron's first week on the job, then threatened legal action when Aaron had called security to have him tossed out.

Aaron had watched Mrs. Saito walk out. He'd seen her moving under her own steam, and yet, whenever he closed his eyes, even to blink, all he saw was her falling, her hip breaking, her face contorting in pain. He could hear her wavering voice crying out. Over and over again, the fall, the injury, the scream, like an unskippable advertisement glitching to repeat eternally. It hadn't happened, but he still couldn't stop the instant replay.

The fall. The snap of brittle bone. The scream.

He felt sick.

He found Ryan by the cardio area, patiently and kindly informing a member that no, he couldn't help them recreate that one video with the treadmills. He waited until Ryan was finished, then wordlessly directed him to a quiet corner of the gym.

"Is there a problem?" Ryan asked, leaning on a piece of equipment while Aaron stood straight enough that he worried his spine would snap.

"Yes. Your friend is a problem."

"Lex?" Ryan winced, finally standing up, giving the conversation his full attention. "I know. It's been a month. I asked him how the hell his hot water could still be broken. It took some probing questions, but I found out he was late with the rent this month. He says he's really close to scraping up the cash, but his hot water's shut off until then."

Aaron felt his body rock back on his heels. A month, already? The time had flown. That meant Aaron had been at Get Fit! for twice that. He'd gotten into such a rhythm of chasing and failing to catch Lex that he hadn't noticed it going by. But that wasn't what he was talking to Ryan about.

"Lex is a danger to other members," Aaron said. No side-stepping. No asking for changes to be made. He'd tried that.

Ryan rolled his eyes to the gym's high ceiling. "Oh, come on. That's a little dramatic, don't you--"

"He nearly ran over Mrs. Saito. She almost fell because he was running way too fast." Almost fell, and broke something, and *screamed* and it would've been Aaron's fault too because he hadn't done enough.

Ryan's hand slipped off the machine next to him in his shock, but he recovered quickly, shaking his head. "It was an accident, I'm positive. And he wouldn't have to run so fast if *someone* would just let him in here without getting on his case about it all the time."

There was Ryan's stubborn streak. The other staff joked about it, but Aaron had never seen it turned on anyone except clients who needed an extra push to finish a set. That didn't mean he wasn't ready for it.

"Don't try to put this on me," he said, as calmly as his shaking core would allow. "Letting a non-member use the facilities is against our policies--"

"I know, you've only mentioned it a hundred times."

"--And I can't make an exception to our rules, even for an employee's friend."

"Why not?" Ryan demanded.

“Because--” He stumbled and lost momentum. He didn't usually get this much push-back when the rules were black and white. “Because it’s not right.” The words sounded stupid as soon as they left his mouth.

“What isn’t? Letting one guy use a few gallons of hot water when he’s down on his luck? That’s selfish, and you know it.”

“I--” Ryan’s eyes were blazing, and Aaron couldn’t get his cool back to form a response that was anywhere near well-spoken or professional. “I don’t have to take this from you, Ryan.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Aaron knew it right away, when Ryan’s jaw set, his shoulders squared, and he abandoned all pretense that this was just a friendly discussion between coworkers.

“Well, excuse me, but I don’t have to take your shit either. We’re supposed to be a team, Aaron, and all you’ve done since you started working here is act like you’re better than everyone else because you make sure the coffee pot is kept at exactly 165 degrees Fahrenheit and all the goddamn pens are facing the same direction.”

Aaron could feel the stares of curious members on his back who heard Ryan's voice over early-2000s pop. He hated being the centre of attention, especially when it was because he was getting berated by someone he’d thought was close to being a friend.

This always happened. No matter where he lived, or what group he desperately wanted to be included in, his inability to be a normal human being came back to bite him in the ass. He didn’t know how to smile brightly without looking like a creepy serial killer or make a joke without it coming off as cynical or unfunny, so he played it safe, waited for other people to make the first overture, and ended up alienating himself from everyone.

Every. Single. Time. His old job. The other people in his apartment building. His disastrous attempt to join a community basketball team.

He really should just stop trying. Hole himself up in his apartment and stop caring what other people thought of him. Let go of the treacherous hope that *this time* things would be different.

He didn't need the unhelpful disorder of heartache.

He felt like he should say something in his defence, but once again, all of his vocabulary had fled, and all he could do was clench his jaw and look at a spot to the right of Ryan’s face. It didn’t matter, though, because Ryan wasn’t finished.

"Sometimes people mess up, Aaron," he said, inching into his personal space. "You can't always expect them to be perfect every moment of every day, like you. And running into somebody doesn't make them a danger to society."

"That's not what I said," he tried to argue, which *of course* did tons to de-escalate the situation.

"You might as well have. I mean, Jesus Christ, it isn't your job to police everybody, like you're the boss--"

"Ryan. That's enough."

Ryan took a step back, a sort of forcible ejection from the argument as he looked over Aaron's shoulder. Aaron knew who'd spoken before he looked, but he still wished he hadn't.

Lex's hair was soaking wet, his T-shirt damp in patches, like he hadn't had time to dry off properly. His face was as blank and sombre as Aaron had ever seen it, and he didn't like it. The frown that came so naturally to Aaron looked wrong on Lex.

Aaron didn't care much about Lex being there. He'd already seen Aaron at his worst, but behind him, Imani was hovering with one of the part-timers with shocked expressions. Had they heard the whole thing? Definitely. More to the point, did they agree with everything Ryan had said? Probably.

His shoulder was jostled. It was Ryan, stalking off through the open area. Aaron didn't bother to watch him go, choosing to fix his eyes to a spot on the mat. It only took him a few deep breaths before he wasn't worried about his vision going blurry anymore.

He checked his watch. 34 minutes until his shift was over. 47 minutes until he could be at home, alone, with a thick blanket and a locked door keeping him penned in. All he had to do was make it until then without looking any of his coworkers in the eye.

He took a few long breaths, until on the last one, he actually felt like he was being filled up. He straightened his shoulders, turned around, and headed for the supply cupboard to hide for 33 more minutes.

He didn't expect Lex to still be standing there.

"I'm sorry about him," Lex said, jerking his head in the direction where Ryan must have gone. "He can be a dick when he's feeling defensive. And he's really good at poking at the things you most wish he'd leave alone. It's one of his greatest talents, actually, besides picking things up and putting them down a bunch of times in a row."

"It's fine." His whole face felt like stone, his voice tight. "I probably deserved it."

“No. It was uncalled for,” Lex insisted, then he shoved his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans. “If it makes you feel any better, Ryan's a good guy at heart, so he'll be tearing himself up with guilt almost immediately. Expect a heartfelt apology tomorrow.”

“I don't work tomorrow.”

“Even better. Let him stew a little longer. He'll rewrite his speech at least three times. It'll be really tear-jerking, I promise.”

Aaron surprised himself by forcing a little smile that felt almost genuine. Leave it to Lex to be the catalyst of all his problems, and still be distracting enough to make him feel a little better.

He took one more deep breath, then nodded at Lex. There was a supply closet that needed his attention. He could survive another half hour. Filling spray bottles with sanitizer solution would get him through. Then, he had a whole two days to build up his shields again, and practice his neutral face in the mirror.

“The glamorous life of a trainer, huh?”

Aaron nearly spilled sanitizer all over himself but managed to right the bottle just in time. He sighed and scowled at Lex, hanging out in the middle of the door to the supply closet like he had every right to be there annoying Aaron. “It isn't all shouting people's abs into making an appearance.”

"Yeah, but I bet you're good at that too."

Aaron's fingers stalled on the cap of the bottle he was screwing closed. "I try." It was one of the only useful things he knew how to do.

"What got you into this line of work anyway?"

The question was so casual, he almost answered it right away, but he'd been burned for being honest before. "Why should I tell you that?"

"I don't know. Making conversation?" Lex's scoff showed every bit of his playful exasperation. "Here, I'll trade you an origin story. Ryan flunked out of pre-med, but managed to remember where all his muscles were in between drinking his stomach lining away and deciding to become a real adult. I convinced him to come to New York with me because I didn't want to go alone and Ryan could show other people how to pick things up and put them down again anywhere, not just in Iowa."

Interesting. A little painful, too, since Ryan was the last person Aaron wanted to think about. But maybe Lex's insecurity-sharing thing had some truth in it, because he already felt

differently--not better, just differently--about Ryan, knowing he might be chafing at working the career he fell back on.

"That isn't all we do, you know," Aaron couldn't keep from pointing out.

"I know." Lex settled further into the door with a small, soft smile. "Alright, I showed you mine. Or Ryan's, actually, but same difference."

"I don't know if he'd agree with that." *Epecially not right now*, Aaron added to himself, grabbing a new bottle to fill and putting it down with a bit too much force.

"He was an asshole today, he doesn't get a vote."

Lex's voice was so vehement that Aaron looked up, meeting his eyes. They were blue, he noticed again. A more stormy colour than he remembered from the last time he'd been out of sorts enough to make eye contact.

"I learned how to be strong when I was in high school," he heard himself blurting. "My dad taught me. After that, I never wanted to do anything else but help other people do the same thing."

But that involved talking, inevitably. He'd come a long way since his first year at college, barely able to open his mouth to say an answer he'd known was correct, but he was grateful the turnover in clients was fairly quick. He didn't normally have the time to start second guessing everything he'd ever said before they were gone with a handshake and a new spring in their step.

He couldn't say the same for the people he worked with. He'd messed up, ruined everything. Standing here talking with Lex had distracted him for a minute, but he still had an entire life to get through, trying and failing to get along with people who were supposed to want the same things he did.

If he couldn't find some common ground with someone as nice as Ryan, who the hell could he find it with?

"That's really cool, man," Lex said. "To have a calling like that."

"Sure." His knuckles turned white on the bottle cap as he twisted it off. "Was there something else I could help you with, Lex? Setting up a membership, for instance?"

"Ha, nice try, buddy. I'm still thinking about it. Consider this a trial membership."

"Your trial period ended after three days."

Lex bit his lip, then drew a little line in the air with his index fingers. "Three days consecutively, or three days total when added up in 20 minute increments?"

“The first one.”

Lex slumped off the doorjamb, barely avoiding braining his head on a shelf. “Darn. Guess I’ll have to keep saving up for it.”

Jokes. Always with the jokes, when Aaron was perfectly, inconveniently serious. “Why don’t you save up for rent money instead, and get your hot water back,” he snapped, the top of the sanitizer bottle coming in and out of focus with how hard he was staring at it. “That would solve all our problems.”

Lex’s running shoe squeaked. There was quiet for a second, then Lex laughed, a fake one and Aaron heard the sound of scratching nails on...plastic? The backpack, maybe. “Yeah, uh. It’s a tough world out there for millennials. Can’t live without my Starbucks, you know?”

“Seriously, Lex,” Aaron said, with as much volume as he dared, given that the closet door was still open and the members had heard enough staff drama today. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten what you did today. It was an accident, I get that, but the injury you might have caused doesn’t give a crap about your intentions. It would’ve hurt just the same.”

The same fall, broken bone, scream--*no*, he told himself. He didn’t have the energy to start the replay again.

Lex cringed with his whole body and shoved his hands in his pockets. “I know. It was stupid. I won’t go so fast next time.”

"No next time. Sort your shit out, Lex." Drained and too anxious to finish the task he started, he closed the door on whatever Lex’s response would have been, resting his back against the wood. Two seconds later, he opened it again. "I’m sorry I said shit. Please don’t tell my boss."

Lex made a tsking noise with his tongue, pouting pink lips that Aaron wished he didn’t notice. "You’re a monster, but I won’t reveal your secret shame."

"Goodbye, Lex."

"See you later."

"*No.*"

Aaron shut the door on Lex’s laughter, then immediately attacked the chore he’d assigned himself. After he’d finished and found a few other tasks to busy himself with, he looked down at his watch. His shift was over. 13 minutes until he would be home.

Grabbing his stuff from the locker on the end of the row was the work of moments, then he was headed for the door. He almost chickened out when he saw Ryan at the bulletin

board he'd have to pass, but Ryan kept his eyes trained on the sign he was pinning up about the closures for the long weekend.

Behind him, a high, nasal voice said, "Ryan, Phil wants to talk to you for a minute."

Aaron knew who it was without looking. Phil's assistant was very recognizable. He hadn't even known they were in the building, but they must have come in when Aaron was locked in the supply cupboard.

From where he was standing, he got a front row seat to Ryan's face when he realized he might be in big trouble.

In the short time Aaron had been working at Get Fit!, he'd learned that Phil wasn't a boss who micromanaged. Or managed at all. As long as they followed the rules and made more money than they spent, Phil was happy to let them do what they pleased. So, getting called into the office meant something big.

Ryan shut his gaping jaw with a snap, then stuttered a reply. As he passed Aaron, the quick glance he gave him was cold and full of blame. When Aaron turned his head to get away, he found the same look in Imani's face. He stumbled back from it, then used his momentum to get himself out of there and down the escalator into the mall and the world outside.

He barely remembered the walk home. When he dragged himself up the stairs, weighed down by more than tiredness, he wanted to fall into his bed immediately, but he just couldn't. First, he had to hang up his backpack. Empty his pockets. Wallet and keys first, into the bowl. Then badge and water bottle. Pens and pencil last.

His stupid, necessary ritual eased one fractional knot of tension, but it was about as effective as a lemon verbena candle on a swarm of locusts. He shucked off his work clothes, wishing he could shed the worries that went along with them just as easily, and scooped up Princess from the floor. Together, they burrowed deep under the blanket, shutting out the world and all its chaos and disappointment.

## Chapter 4

Aaron's fists were hard as rocks in the pockets of his jeans as he waited for Troy at the intersection they'd decided on. He'd already almost left three times, but cleverly, Past Aaron had texted Troy to say he was there the moment he'd stopped walking. It would be way more awkward and hard to explain disappearing than it would to not show up in the first place.

He was going to do this. Troy had invited him to a small gathering of friends, and he was going to enjoy it, damn it. It was a great way to distract himself from everything at work, and if his family asked, he could honestly say that he'd hit up one of the hottest bars in New York City with a friend.

(He had no idea if the place they were going was anywhere near the top of the hot list, but from the sound of the music and the steady stream of people coming in and out, he could tell it wasn't cold.)

Four minutes until Troy said he'd be there. In his head, he went through one of the exercise plans he had to start with a client. The repetitive actions kept him sane for a little bit, but it didn't take him long to reach the end.

Two minutes. Should he have worn different shoes? He'd chosen some that looked like a hybrid between a sneaker and a brogue, but should he have just picked one? Too late now, but that didn't mean he could stop worrying about it.

One minute. Then his watch ticked over to one minute past. Then two minutes. Then--  
"Hey, man."

Aaron was hit by a curious mixture of relief and intensified panic. "Hey. Thanks for inviting me." *Is this a damned play date? Are you five? Grow up, Aaron.*

"No problem. Glad you came. You ready to go in? The guys are already there."

"Yes," he said. *No, never! Abort! Get the unadulterated fuck out of there!*

If Troy could tell that Aaron was a little--a bit, the tiniest amount, really--reluctant, he didn't show it. He gave Aaron one of his bright, white smiles and led the way...in the wrong direction.

"Wait," Aaron said, "isn't it that way?"

Troy looked where he was pointing and shook his head. "Nah. We're going there."

Troy's thumb jerked in the direction of a building on the adjacent corner. Not a bar. Very much a club. Quite obviously a gay club.

"Um. What?" This was not how Aaron had pictured this night going. Was this still a couple of friends getting a drink? Had he been sending out signals to Troy he hadn't been aware of? Was Troy even... "Are you--"

"No, that ain't me. It's not my people, you know?" He shrugged his wide shoulders. "But this place has a half-off happy hour every Friday and the music is pretty good. Plus, you flex a little and you get in free. I don't mind getting hit on by someone who isn't my type if it means I can save some money. What about you? You the type who minds?"

The last was accompanied by a look so crashingly judgemental that Aaron almost apologized for everything he'd ever done.

"No, no. No. I don't mind at all. This is--" What had Troy called them? "My people."

"Oh." It was a bit like emotional whiplash, how quickly Troy had gone from critical to the kind of surprise he might show if Aaron had shared that he was allergic to bananas.

"Nice. Let's go, then."

"Oh, I didn't mention," Troy said as they crossed the street. "I invited Ryan from the gym. He says his buddy used to come here all the time. That's cool, right?"

Aaron felt himself nodding, but the physical sensation took a back seat to the disappointment that crushed his gut and his windpipe.

So, this was different from how he thought it was. He wasn't the only person from Get Fit! who'd made enough of a connection with Troy to be included among his friends. "Yeah," he said weakly when he realized Troy hadn't seen his nod in the dark. "S'fine."

"He's a good guy."

"Absolutely." He was just different from Aaron in every conceivable way, and Aaron hadn't prepared himself to have to defend his new friendship against being compared to Ryan's example.

Getting in was easy, and they found the booth Troy's friend had managed to snag. Ryan was already there and avoided looking at him while Aaron was introduced. Aaron forgot the friend's name immediately after hearing it, but it didn't matter much, because the conversation moved swiftly around him without his input.

When his first and only beer was half empty, he got up to search out a glass of water. He wasn't worried about being hungover, he just missed the taste of his mouth without alcohol in it.

The club was packed, probably because of the cheap beer. The wide dance floor was crowded, an undulating mass of people all feeling the same beat. Aaron waded in, perfectly happy to pick his way through to the bar at a slow pace. It was better than sitting at the table reading the label of his drink.

It was more difficult than he thought not to get lost in it. He didn't dance, but it wasn't because he didn't have rhythm or didn't enjoy it. Every time he was jostled off his path, his skin brushing deliciously against a stranger's, it was harder to pull away.

It was hot. He had the bizarre impulse to take off his shirt, under a drugging influence that had nothing to do with the partial beer he'd downed. He stopped trying to fight his way through the crowd, because why would he leave and go back to a table where the tension was thick when he could stay here, buried in a living organism that didn't care who he was or what he'd done?

He was moving to the beat without realizing it. He didn't stop when he noticed, just glanced back in the direction of the table to see if anyone was watching. He couldn't see through the forest of bodies, so he let himself go, not dancing so much as pulsing, pretending he was part of the world around him.

He wasn't alone for long. Men came up to him and tried to pull him in, smiling too wide and gripping too tight. He always shook his head, stepped away. Kept his hand on the centre of his chest where he could feel the bass, until they drifted off, unconcerned about one rejection. Lucky them.

The song changed to something high and jarring, and he almost stopped, but a presence behind him, continuing the rhythm he'd lost, helped him get back in.

He didn't step away this time. He didn't look, just let the stranger close the distance because it didn't feel like there was a greediness in their body language. Just a request to share some space.

With the stranger plastered to his back, Aaron let his eyes close, blocking out the flashing light show. His thighs started to burn as the rhythm changed, deeper and slower and more primal.

He felt the stranger's hands on his hips first and didn't stop them as they skimmed over his shirt, up the front of his body. The goal, he found out, was his wrists. The man--it was definitely a man, he could see that much under the dim lights--followed the line of his arms until their palms met and they moved together like that for a while.

Aaron didn't know much about dancing in clubs, but he was pretty sure people didn't normally hold hands.

"Hey," came a voice in his ear. Quiet, even though the music was loud. "We could go somewhere."

Tonight, Aaron had done a lot of things he didn't do. He'd come out with friends. Gone to a club. Danced. Let a stranger put his hands on him without even showing him his face.

What was one more to add to the list of things he'd never do?

He couldn't leave. He didn't want Troy to think he'd bailed without saying goodbye. He wasn't interested in going outside to an alley, but there was a corner of the club he could see, tucked away out of the LED lights above the tables and the neon flashers.

He led them, tightening one of his hands and using the other to move people gently out of the way. He didn't know if this was what the man had in mind, but for once, he didn't care, because he was no one. They were nothing, so it didn't matter.

It was even darker by the wall than he'd thought, shielded from the ambient light by a staircase to the upper level and support beams with bulbs that pointed outward, sending spots across his vision before it went almost completely black.

He got the impression of light hair and skin, but not much more. It didn't matter, because the moment they were under the shadow, like a trip down to Hades instead of back out, the stranger put his back against the wall and pulled Aaron into him.

He hadn't kissed anyone since college. He didn't have time to wonder if he was good at it, because the stranger was too needy, licking the taste of liquor from his mouth. Aaron fell into it, bracing his arms on the wall on either side of the stranger's head.

Getting off wasn't what he'd come here for--to the club or to the shadowy corner. He didn't know what he *had* expected, but it certainly wasn't the hands of a nameless, faceless man snaking up the back of his shirt to bring their hips together.

That point of contact--palms against his bare skin--was almost more erotic than the rough press of jeans on his cock. It certainly contributed to how fast it turned messy, the two of them clinging and grinding in the dark until Aaron felt the tensing of the stranger's body, and the skid of a shoe up his calf as he shuddered through an orgasm Aaron had given him.

Aaron had no reason to hold back after that. It was *fine*. He could let go, come embarrassingly quickly in his boxers because the stranger had, too.

If it was hot before, it was sweltering after, the both of them breathing hard into each other's faces while the music seemed to fade around them.

Aaron stepped away, his legs loose and weak. He could have stayed in the stranger's reach for hours, but he'd felt that the stranger wasn't as big as him and didn't want him to feel trapped.

"Wow," the stranger said. "That was sure...something."

His voice shivered across Aaron's ear, the breathy timbre of it making something ping in a dusty corner of his brain. It wasn't a nice feeling, so Aaron shook it off, burrowing further into the cozy, languid aftermath of that *something*.

"Yeah," he said, since the stranger's silence seemed expectant. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me. It was you out there with your back muscles looking just ridiculous that got me over there."

Heat rose in Aaron's face as he remembered his clumsy attempt at dancing.

"Ridiculous?"

"Oh, my bad. Ridiculously hot, I mean." Fluttering movement stirred the air between them. "I thought that went without saying."

"Thanks." Embarrassment fought with pleasure at the man's unnecessary flattery. "I probably looked ridiculous, too."

"No way. Sexy."

"You haven't even seen my face," he pointed out. He didn't have a good reason to argue so hard for his own unattractiveness, but he still felt like he had to try.

The man laughed, plucking the strings of Aaron's memory again. "Fair enough, man of mystery."

"I'm not mysterious."

"God, you sound like--" The man broke off with a choked inhale.

"Like what?" The dark had seemed so freeing before. Now all he wanted was to see the man's face.

"Nothing. Jesus, I'm a mess. You know where the bathrooms are?"

"No. Maybe there?" He pointed to a lit up part of the club, where he could see the tops of people's heads coming and going quickly.

"Right. Help me out, you're closer to the light."

He didn't know how else to do it, so he grabbed the stranger's hand, twining their fingers as they had on the dance floor. Their wrists pressing together was just as heady, even though Aaron was already spent. It wasn't sexual, just...intimate.

And Aaron hadn't been intimate with anyone in such a long time. Maybe ever.

He led the way, blinking in the bright, disorienting lights. He held his arm taut behind him dragging the man along with him until he was sure he could see. He didn't want to let go, so he kept on tugging, pulling them through the crowd until they were all the way to the restroom. Only then did he look behind him.

The light wasn't romantic, here. It was fluorescent and slightly green, and it turned the shock on Lex's face into a pale, gothic portrait of horror.

"It's you," Lex said. He realized at the same time Aaron did that they were still connected, and snatched his hand away like he'd been burned.

"Oh, my god." It was him. The whole time, it'd been Lex. "I can't believe I didn't--"

"I know, right?" Lex ran a fidgeting hand through his hair--which was messed up at the back from *what they'd done*. "You look really different without your uniform."

"So do you," Aaron said, tearing his eyes away from the span of Lex's shoulders, wide and attractive without backpack straps getting in the way. He realized what he'd said when he heard Lex's inelegant snort. "No, that's not what I mean. I meant that you sound different, and I couldn't see, and it was dark. I wouldn't--"

"Jesus, I get it." Lex's eyebrows crashed down. He looked to the floor, his back hunched as if he hadn't lost the weight of that damned backpack. "You don't have to tell me every single reason why this wouldn't have happened if you'd seen me. I'm sure there's a long list."

This was...it was all going so wrong. "It's not like that," he tried to explain, but Lex was already shaking his head.

"Whatever, Aaron. I'm sorry I ruined your night by not being someone else."

He didn't try to stop Lex as he shouldered past, colliding with someone as he ducked into...the bathroom. Of course. Because that was what always happened when he was around Lex. He said something stupid and Lex ran away into the safety of porcelain and running water.

He stood a few feet away from the door for a few moments, before the flow of traffic started to push him away. The crowding wasn't soothing this time. It was oppressive,

touching him and knocking him out of his path when all he wanted to do was get back to the table and put the last half hour completely behind him.

"There you are, man. I was about to send a search party for--whoa."

"Hey." He looked at the table instead of at Troy's knowing smile. His beer was sitting in a puddle of condensation. The thought of drinking it made his stomach turn sour.

"Dude. You hooked up."

It wasn't a question, so Aaron didn't answer it. "I'm going to go home."

"Holy shit, man, I was about to get on your case for ditching us, but I guess congratulations are in order." He lifted his drink, his eyes crinkled with an easy smile that didn't seem mocking, though Aaron wasn't sure he could even tell. "To Aaron, the most surprising player of the night."

They all lifted their drinks, echoing '*To Aaron*,' even Ryan, though he did it distractedly, frowning down at his phone.

"Okay," Aaron said, viciously uncomfortable in ways both tangible and intangible. (He hadn't cleaned up in the washroom, like Lex presumably had.) "Have a good night."

"Won't be as good as yours," Troy called after him.

The night air was cooler and if not entirely clean--the city rarely was--then less stuffy than inside.

Aaron started the walk home. It wasn't a short one, but he was glad for it. The longer he stayed up and moving, the less time he'd spend staring at his ceiling going over one of the strangest nights of his life.

He'd never done anything like that before. He'd try to tell himself he didn't know what came over him, but the contact was what had done it. Human interaction, the thing Aaron so often felt removed from, like he was in a bubble.

It'd been that, and Lex. Lex's strong hands in his. Lex's desperate lips reminding him how to kiss like he meant it. He'd meant it, then. He'd probably still mean it now, if Lex appeared in front of him, and let him explain that he'd been trying for weeks not to notice how beautiful he was when his cheeks were flushed from running.

Aaron's legs were still loose. His chest had lost its gripping tightness, a feeling he normally only got when he worked out past the limits of healthy.

His life was still lonely. Ryan was still mad at him, and the rest of the staff distrustful of him. Troy now had a different opinion of him, one that wasn't really correct.

But it all seemed a little less world-ending, on this side of the night. His stores of casual, crucial physical affection were filled, at least for now. He had Lex to thank for that, even if he hadn't meant to do it. He was grateful.

He still had no intention of letting him break the rules.

## Chapter 5

If someone had told Lex when he was a teenager that someday he would become an early bird, he would have died laughing. Then he would have gone back to bed, because back then, if he wasn't stuffing his face to fill the huge gaping chasm in his stomach, he was sleeping.

He wasn't laughing this morning, despite the best efforts of the jokes on the back of the cereal box he was reading. His bowl was full, the second one of that morning, although the first one had been boring granola with nothing but promises of excessive amounts of fibre on the back of the box.

Breakfast used to be one of those meals that other people ate, a social construct that informed him that he couldn't possibly eat a cheeseburger for his first meal of the day. The horror! Breakfast used to live in that strange time of the morning that didn't really exist unless you were there to see it. People like Lex usually saw it from the other side, having stayed up past late to early.

Lex saw it most days, now. And sometimes, he was lucky enough to use it to eat cereal and trace the maze games on the back of the box. Sometimes, like now, he washed and dried his dishes and put them back in the cupboard where he found them, then curled up in a kitchen chair that used to be his favourite when it lived in his kitchen.

Back when he had a kitchen.

Mornings like this, he could sit with his knees pressing against the table, wait for Ryan to wake up, and pretend he hadn't already been awake and eating his food for hours. Not a bad gig, when it gave him an excuse to just do nothing for a few hours.

"I want *death*."

Lex startled so hard his knees slipped and he almost brained himself on the scratched table. Ryan was wrapped around the corner of the kitchen, pressing his face into the cool painted wall. His undead shuffle must have been especially ginger to not have distracted Lex from refreshing a job search site for the fifth time in an hour.

"That's rough, buddy," he said, then he got up and steered Ryan gently into the nearest seat, where a two-liter bottle of water and a pair of aspirin were waiting, lovingly placed there by Lex in between bowls of cereal.

Ryan made an unintelligible noise that sounded like gratitude, then buried himself in the task of rehydrating. He flinched away from the plate of buttered toast Lex fixed him, but was warily munching on a square--because he didn't like it in triangles, the freak--by the time Lex had sat down again.

"Still walking toward the light?" Lex asked, pulling his knees against his chest and resting his bare feet on the underside of the table.

"Nah, it's fading." Ryan's voice was wrecked. "I'm changing my request to death to all fermented grain beverages."

Lex hissed. "Tall order. You probably won't get too many people to agree to that. They actually already tried, and apart from some really great movies and a few interesting history classes, it didn't do much."

"I'll just wait until they feel like I do right now."

"Oh, good thinking. A very well-timed online petition might do the trick."

"It wouldn't, but I appreciate the support. You'd sign my petition, right?"

"Of course, big guy." Lex lifted a hand to give a conciliatory pat, but Ryan was still hunched over his comically tall water bottle in that way that screamed *every inch of me is in pain*. "I'll give it up in solidarity if you still mean it later."

"You're the best. I probably don't mean it."

"Well, thank god for that. I was just starting to acquire a taste for battery acid, I'd hate to give it up now."

In truth, he'd already given it up. While Ryan was ordering shot after shot of his favourite rotgut clear alcohol, Lex had used the busy bar as a cover for not ordering anything stronger than a glass of water. The only reason he'd agreed to come out last night was because it was easy to hide his lack of participation while letting go of his worries for a short time.

He had forgotten them for a while...but then they'd come back, with a few buddies for him to add to the pile.

"You okay?"

Lex lifted his head. He hadn't realized he'd been pressing his face against his bony knees. "Yeah, totally. Why?"

Ryan's shrug was small and careful. "You left early yesterday."

"It wasn't really my scene--"

"I know, you said." The smile that curled on Ryan's chapped lips was the same one he'd used on Lex since they were boys. The one that could always bust through the games of pretend. "You just seem a little stressed."

"More than usual?" Lex joked. Ryan still looked like a belly laugh would break him. "I'm fine. Just wish my boss would hurry up and tell me if I'm getting that raise."

The promotion, the raise, the new apartment he could move into with a few strangers the moment he had first and last saved up again. It was all part of the fiction he'd constructed, and Ryan was buying stock in it.

"It'll happen, I know it," Ryan said, then he shoved a square of toast in his mouth.

"Thanks, man. Until then, I'm just a little frazzled and unkempt, despite my best efforts."

"Mbfur ffu--"

"I gave that breakfast unto you, I can take it away." He let his hand creep toward the plate for an extra threat.

Ryan nudged it closer to himself and swallowed his bite. "Maybe if Aaron would quit bothering you about it, you wouldn't be so stressed."

The mention of Aaron was like a raincloud breaking over their slow, sunny morning. "Yeah, about that. Do you think--"

"It's ridiculous. Talking about you like you're a bum who's leeching off of us."

Righteous anger was a great antidote for a hangover, apparently, but all Lex wanted to do was cover his ears and go back to talking about modern prohibition.

"I can understand where he's coming from," he tried, but Ryan was on a roll, twisting the cap back onto his water bottle with more force than necessary.

"I don't care, Imani doesn't care, the clients don't care. I didn't ask him, but I'm sure Phil wouldn't care."

Lex blinked. He hadn't really considered that. "You didn't ask him?" He'd sort of assumed that Ryan wouldn't have said it was fine if there was a chance his boss would fire him.

"Not really." He took one last huge bite of toast, unconcerned by Lex staring him down until he'd swallowed it. "I sort of tried to bring it up, but then he made me tell him what my top five favourite books were."

"Why?"

"He owns a bookstore, remember?"

"Oh." He vaguely remembered hearing that about Ryan's oddball boss, but he hadn't heard that the guy was fond of non-sequiturs. "And you told him your favourites are Harry Potter one to four and Charlotte's Web, right?"

"Obviously. He told me I wasn't helpful and left. So I never brought it up again. But he doesn't give a crap about what we do with the facilities, so I don't know why Aaron does." Grabbing his bottle off the table, he hugged it to his chest, propping his chin on it with his lips pooching out above the cap. "Or why he has to be so rude."

"Was he rude, though?"

Ryan went utterly still and his head swivelled on the top of the water bottle, sending a furrowed look in Lex's direction. "Well, yeah."

"Really? Or are you just projecting your discomfort because you know it's not really cool for me to be there all the time using up the gym's shampoo-conditioner-body wash abomination?"

Ryan's stunned expression crumpled into something way more incredulous. He shook his head, asking, "When the hell did you become some kind of psychologist?"

"I'm an artist, darling. I live for internal conflict and analyzing things too much."

Ryan snorted and flicked a piece of crust at him. "You're wrong, though. He was rude."

"So were you."

The kitchen went quiet again, almost as still as it'd been when Lex was lying on the couch, before breakfast and hangovers and conversations that got a little too serious for a Saturday morning off.

Ryan said nothing for a while, his face as he dragged a finger through the toast crumbs a little betrayed, but a little ashamed, too.

"I know you're only trying to look out for me," Lex told him. "But you've done enough, just by letting me use the building. I can handle Aaron, so don't worry about me."

"Sure," he said, but the quick there-and-gone of his smile told Lex how much intention Ryan had to let it go.

"Hey do you remember Pauly Brant?"

The gears of nostalgia ticked behind Ryan's eyes. "He went to elementary school with us, right? Why?"

Pauly Brant had had the bad luck of living one street before Ryan on the bus route. Every morning of the first few months of fifth grade, Ryan would step onto the vehicle and find the seat closest to the door--the seat he'd always saved for him and Lex--taken. After months of a ten-year-old's best passive aggression and a very contentious shared science project, Ryan had finally broken down and asked him to move, only to be told that Pauly got really bad motion sickness if he couldn't see the road ahead of him.

It turned out, when he wasn't a mean, inconsiderate seat stealer, Pauly wasn't so bad. And he knew a lot about bugs, so suddenly the sting of losing their spot wasn't so harsh.

"No reason," Lex said. "I was just thinking about him the other day."

The thing about Ryan was that he was a lot more stubborn than anyone gave him credit for. Everyone saw his sunny smile and charm and assumed he was easy to get along with 100% of the time, when in reality, they only felt that way because Ryan had convinced them--with a grin--that his way was the best way. Any attempt to convince him that their way was better would only make Ryan dig his heels in.

Lex had learned fourth grade, when they'd had a difference of opinion about what movie to watch after school--that the best way to convince Ryan of something was to let him do the work himself. It'd worked when Lex had made their popcorn in a sweet Ninja Turtles bowl and hidden the Pokemon cups, and it would work now.

He hadn't been lying to Aaron when he'd said Ryan would eventually feel guilty and apologize. He was just speeding up the process a little bit, in everyone's best interest.

He got up from his chair, snagging Ryan's plate and leaning against the counter to rinse it. "So, what are you up to today?"

Ryan brightened, looking fully human for the first time that morning. "Me and Jenny are going hiking. There's these cool waterfalls out by Poughkeepsie, we're going to make a whole day of it, since it's the first weekend off we've both had in forever."

"Sickening. Your whole job is physical activity, and you use your one day off for *more* physical activity? Why am I even friends with you?"

"Because Melnick is close to McLaughlin in the alphabet, and your mom made good cookies."

Lex put the plate in the rack next to his bowls and spun around, pointing at Ryan. "Right you are, Mr. McLaughlin. If your name had been Smith, we never would have met."

"And don't try to tell me that you go home and quit doing your art thing. Too many of our take-out menus have been drawn on for me to believe that."

"Right again. You're pretty coherent for having pickled yourself last night."

The cap of the water bottle was twisted off again and Ryan took a huge slug. "Force of will," he said. "If I'm not ready for a four hour hike by 10 o'clock, Jenny will make me wish I was never born."

"Which is a vast improvement from a few minutes ago, when you were ready for death."

Ryan nodded, and kept doing it, his head shaking with his vehemence. "I was so ready for it."

"Sounds like a perfect weekend. Death and torture from every angle."

"Yeah." Ryan's grin was dopey and soft, his eyes unfocusing at the prospect of a whole day of uninterrupted Jenny Time.

And that was Lex's cue. "I'll leave you to it, then. Freak."

"Thanks for the toast, weirdo." Ryan saluted with his water bottle and shuffled off, probably back to bed to detox a little more before Jenny woke up, still talking as he went down the hall. "Give that landlord of yours a kick in the ass for me."

Lex let himself out, his shoulders zapping him with familiar pain from the heavy backpack. When he stepped out into the morning air, he went to the right, even though he didn't have anywhere in particular to go in that direction.

He had to keep up the fiction. As far as Ryan knew, Lex was going back to his postage-stamp-sized apartment, which meant he was walking West. Instead, he walked around the block. Walked around a lot of blocks, actually.

When he'd first moved to the city, he'd loved walking. He used to get off the train at random stops, just to feel the energy of the neighbourhoods he'd get spit out into. In his first week there, he'd told Ryan that he could walk for days in New York City and never be bored a single moment.

Good thing, too, since that's what he ended up doing. Walking was basically his full-time occupation, these days. That, and sitting. This time, he sat in a park about half an hour from Ryan's house. It was a nice spot, with benches, and a view of the street instead of the playground. (A necessity when a single gentleman started hanging around within spotting distance of vigilant parents.)

He used to sit here a lot, before. All winter, he'd come out of his job at a tiny comic book publisher and sit on the frozen bench, and watch the people go by and wonder what he'd done in a past life to deserve everything going so right for him.

He kept coming back, even after he'd come to work one day to find out they'd gone bankrupt. The owners--young guys, who Lex had wanted to be when he grew up, who'd given him a shot at his dream over Skype, because they were *hip*--didn't even tell the employees. They just picked up and left one day, and the bank put a foreclosure sign on the door and changed the locks.

It was a great bench to sit on when he was avoiding his roommate, peacing out from nine to five because he'd already said yes when Ryan asked him if he could leave to move in with Jenny. Ryan absolutely would have stayed if he knew, and Lex couldn't face that.

He thought maybe the bench was starting to remember him. They'd been through a lot already. He'd thought the hardest day would be when he sat and pulled out his phone and typed in *how to be homeless*. Not so much, it turned out.

Harder was getting rejection after rejection from every job, because at 24 years old, the only things on his resume were a defunct publisher no one had ever heard of and ten years of babysitting. Harder was lowering his standards and applying to anything even tangentially related to the art world, because he knew if he gave up and worked in a factory or something, the dream was over. Finished before it had even started. He might as well go back to Iowa and have dinner with his parents every Sunday until he died of shame and boredom because at least it'd be cheaper.

Harder was sleeping in a shelter for the first time, scared out of his mind and wanting to scream that he didn't belong there.

*Whoa there, pity party express pony.*

No more sitting, he decided. Or at least, no more sitting on this particular bench. The Williamsburg library was open until five on Saturdays and they had comfy chairs and a ripping internet connection. What more could he want? Aside from a job, a roof over his head, and all those other Needs on the Hierarchy. He could rough it for now. He'd get there.

The problem was, when? Lex had made his landlord's life easier by just leaving back in July. It was September now, and the cold was starting to sink into his bones, along with tiredness.

Something had to give. He'd find something soon, or else some cosmic sign would beam down from the heavens and tell him to give up and get a real job that would pay the bills. It would probably look like a Starbucks logo.

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Before this--Lex liked to think of the low point he was currently experiencing as a brief concluding sentence in an Early Life section on his Wikipedia page before it got interesting--he hadn't considered how boring being homeless would be.

He spent a lot of Monday mornings like this one: Check the classified, check every job search website known to the internet, make a few calls and try not to sound too much like he was begging (he was begging), then sit around playing solitaire until the cards were printed on the back of his eyelids.

He never checked his Facebook anymore, or god forbid, posted anything. It felt way too much like screaming into the void.

Last week, he'd actually accepted an invitation to come to a service at one of the churches that ran hot meals. It was awkward, and he was far from converted, but at least it had been something to keep him busy.

He spent a lot of time drawing. A *lot* of time. He hadn't gotten so much practice at freehanding since the summer Ryan had to go and live with his aunt in Arizona.

And then, of course, there was the time he whiled away at a certain gym, with a certain personal trainer who, quite accidentally, had gotten incredibly personal with Lex.

He wouldn't lie to himself. He was avoiding the place. He tried to keep his visits to every other day--unless he had a job interview--to keep Aaron from blowing a gasket, but he hadn't gone since Thursday.

He was starting to get that phantom unclean feeling, which he knew was mostly in his head. It wasn't like the shelters didn't make everyone shower before they'd let them bed down. The gym was different. It was a deeper, scalding kind of clean. Not to mention, his heart didn't pound like a runner at the end of a sprint when he was tucked away in his own sanitized cubicle.

He dragged his feet on his way through the swanky mall to the gym, peering into the windows of stores he'd never have the money to shop in, even if he did have a regular income source. He focused on the ugly charm bracelets and orthopedic shoes on display instead of on his reflection in the mirror, because no matter how much he scrubbed, and polished, and

combed his hair, he always felt grimy when he made eye contact with salespeople who went to work in suits.

He passed Imani on the way in and winked as he ducked out of sight. Usually he stopped by for a chat, but he wanted to be able to storm out of the gym with his head held high if seeing Aaron again turned into a problem. It'd really put a damper on his dramatic exit if he had to make a pitstop to shampoo his hair.

Not that he wanted to leave in a huff. Or leave at all, without setting the record straight and letting Aaron know in no uncertain terms that they would not be hooking up again.

His pride still stung a little at having to bring it up when Aaron's slack, shocked face kept poking at his confidence. He wasn't stupid. He knew it'd been good, while it lasted. A delicious, but highly indulgent blip on his radar that he never would have planned. Not now.

But Aaron's silhouette in the odd light-not light of the club had been so magnetic. Lex had thought about it when he'd gotten to Ryan's house that night, lying on the lumpy couch, trying to put himself to sleep by counting spots on the ceiling. He'd thought more about Aaron's long, gently rocking body than he had about the expression Aaron had when he'd turned around and put a face to the wandering hands he'd used.

Thankfully, that kind of rejection was enough to ice any boner out of existence. Jerking off on a kindly loaned futon was way beyond bad BFF etiquette.

Lex didn't luxuriate. He did what he had to do and got out of the water, and did the minimum of grooming rituals, not even bothering to shave. Not like he really needed it, but he never let it go longer than a few days, now. He was lucky that he didn't need to do it more than that, he realized now, and every joke he'd ever made about looking like a hobo if he tried to grow facial hair felt like a punch in the gut.

He didn't have to go far to see Aaron once he left the steamy safety of the shower room. Imani was still at the desk, messing with the ends of a few of her thin braids, slowly going cross-eyed. Aaron was across the gym in the open area, sitting on a bench while lifting sizable dumbbells with a look of concentration so fierce that Lex was certain he had no clue what he was doing to innocent bystanders.

Aaron's T-shirt was tight. Not obscene, just...fitted, to every bit of straining, eager muscle. His legs, thick and shaking from the effort of staying in place, were spread on either

side of the bench. *Spread*, like he was taking up all the space he was owed just by being strong enough to lift someone like Lex and hold them against a wall indefinitely. *Indefinitely*.

Lex walked into a rowing machine.

The resulting clang was loud enough that Aaron heard it even through his headphones, which he took off as soon as he'd put down his dumbbells. He sat, motionless, as Lex carefully picked his way across the floor, obviously having picked up on his destination, but just as obviously unsure what to do about it.

Aaron was a bit of an alien. He moved with the careful stiffness of a farsighted person without their glasses. He looked like he'd walked out of the pages of GQ, but Lex had witnessed him taking a full three seconds to laugh after a joke, like a creature from a far off galaxy with a wonky translator device.

He was pretty good at appearing normal, if someone didn't look closely. Lex had seen him do the small talk thing with the members, and it was easy to miss the fact that every casual conversation he had was...off. Like he knew how to perform the social rituals, but he didn't know why he had to.

It was kind of ridiculously endearing. And annoying, since that made it difficult for Lex to stay mad at Aaron for any length of time. Like now, when he was supposed to be hurt by Aaron's obvious rejection of him on Friday night, and all he could think about was how cute it was that he could see Aaron preparing himself for Conversation Mode.

Lex slowed as he approached, getting a creeping expectant feeling, like he was walking into a surprise party with everyone he knew hiding behind couches. Or, in this case, machines with sticky-outy bits that were, frankly, upsetting to look at.

He held his hands up as he approached, then asked, "You're not going to tell me off today?"

Aaron shrugged, winding up his headphones around his fingers. "I'm not on the clock. Not my circus, not my monkey."

Lex gasped, his hand coming to rest over his heart, which was racing for some reason. "The disrespect! I'll have you know that I am far too sophisticated a monkey to join the circus. I am a house monkey, if not a mansion monkey."

Aaron's eyebrows creased in the middle, in that adorable way he had that made Lex forget that he was supposed to be mad.

"What are you talking about?"

It was Lex's turn to shrug. "You started it. I just took your metaphor and ran with it, buddy."

"I'm your buddy, now?"

"Yeah. I'm calling you buddy, Mister--What's your last name, anyway?"

"It's George."

"God, I might have known you were one of those two-first-names people."

Aaron's eyebrow crinkle went a little deeper. "At least I don't have a made up name."

"Hey, take that up with my kindergarten teacher."

"What?"

"There were three other Alexes in my class," Lex explained. "She let us sort it out between ourselves, and ended up with an Ally, a Princess Alex, a Roger, a Lex and a list of parents who wanted to set up a meeting."

"You are ridiculous," Aaron said, flatly, but the line of his lips was twitching up like it wasn't entirely a bad thing. "Your whole life is like a punchline."

"Haha, yeah." Even with the tease of a smile, which was the same as a full on grin for Aaron, it still hurt a little. "Listen, this was fun, but can we talk for real? Privately?"

Aaron's fingers, still fidgeting with the wire of his headphones, stopped moving, and his brown--soft, warm, teddy bear-like--eyes widened. "Sure."

Neither of them moved or said a word for a few uhn-tisses of the gym's music. (No wonder Aaron brought his own.) Then Aaron seemed to figure out what Lex was waiting for. He stood up from the bench, body heat pouring off of him in waves as he put his dumbbells back on the rack and started off in another direction.

Lex followed until they arrived at a door not far from the main desk, which he recognized after a second. The supply room. The glorified closet where Aaron had gone to hide after his fight with Ryan. Aaron held the door for him, and Lex went through with only a couple small reservations.

Like, the size of it. There was barely enough room for him to turn around, much less get Aaron's lean muscles in there with him.

And it was dark. Completely dark, actually, once Aaron shut the door...with himself on the wrong side of it.

"Aaron!" Lex shout-whispered from inside the cupboard. Alone. In the dark. "What the hell?"

He jerked back when he felt the knock of Aaron's hand against the door.

"Yes! Imani. Hi," Aaron was saying, muffled, but distinctly panicked. "Good weekend?"

Lex couldn't hear her response. He was too busy taking Aaron's advice and shutting up.

"Oh, cool," Aaron said. "Well, I'll just be in here. No, I'm not working, I just forgot, uh...something."

The door opened, letting in a sliver of light, then the tiny room was flooded with the sickly yellow glow of the uncovered overhead light bulb. Lex's eyes adjusted just in time to see the little dangly pull switch hit Aaron in the face.

"Smooth," Lex said, holding back a snicker. "What *was* that? Are we in a spy movie?"

"You said you wanted privacy."

"I guess." He hadn't wanted a bedroom farce with a bunch of opening and closing doors, but he'd take what he could get. "Whatever, let's get this over with so we can both get back out of the closet. Although, my dad would be thrilled to hear about it. Have you been conspiring with my Aunt Kathy to get me to shut up about the gays at Christmas dinner?"

Aaron squinted at him, his entire expression pained. "Uh. No."

"Of course you haven't, nevermind. We need to talk about what happened Friday."

"I wanted to have sex with you," Aaron blurted.

"Okay." It was Lex's turn to blink in confusion. "Good to know."

"I mean, I wasn't disgusted or anything. Just surprised. But if you were a stranger, I would have wanted to have sex with you."

Fear was a funny thing. So was self-esteem. Someone like Lex could be loud and energetic and, supposedly, fearless, but give him an opportunity to jump to a conclusion? He'd take the leap every time, if it looked like it was confirming his worst insecurities.

"Oh," he said, eloquently. "Thanks. I'm sorry I overreacted. I was surprised too, I suppose. I can't believe I didn't recognize you, honestly. Seems kind of improbable, but there was that whole playful anonymity vibe going on. So, sorry."

"It's okay."

"But we're not doing it again."

Aaron's lips pressed together, turning them white for a second, then he nodded and let go of a huge breath. "Alright," he said.

"I'm way too busy with my work to have a relationship right now, and I'm not into casual." Lex winced, recalling just how casual his encounter with Aaron had been. "Usually. And no, that wasn't a hint that I'm actually interested in you and you should start to woo me with increasingly stalkerish tactics like in rom coms."

Aaron shook his head. "I didn't think it was."

"Good, then. We're clear."

Lex allowed himself a moment of sharp regret that he hadn't met Aaron the normal way. It wasn't inconceivable. Lex could've tagged along to the Get Fit! holiday party with Ryan, drunk too much eggnog and made out with that one hot trainer with the perfect alien face. Would they have been good together, if fate hadn't decided to kick Lex's ass? There was too much history between them, now, for them to know.

"Well, Aaron George," Lex said. "I'm glad we had this talk. I almost convinced myself it would be better just to pretend it never happened."

"That seems kind of..."

"Stupid? That's what I decided. But you should never underestimate the power of a human's ability to ignore something until it goes away. I once played seven minutes in heaven with a girl in her step-dad's basement and the next week at school she seemed to genuinely not remember that I even lived in the same plane of reality as her. It was kind of impressive."

"Wow."

"Yeah. I should really send her a card. It was because of that game that I figured out I actually wanted to be locked in closets with boys."

Aaron's eyes rounded and Lex replayed what he'd said. In a closet. With Aaron. Aaron, who knew what Lex sounded like when he came. Aaron, who's breath smelled like mint, but sweet, like it wasn't gum that he'd put in his mouth but candy. It was a nice mouth.

The door next to their heads exploded.

Or at least that was how it sounded. After a second of blind panic, Lex realized it was much more likely to be someone knocking, in an energetic and highly unnecessary pattern.

Lex knew that pattern. He'd heard it a hundred times, first on his bedroom door at home, then in New York, when--

"Aaron? It's Ryan."

"Shit," Lex hissed, stumbling back the few inches the closet allowed him, the light switch cord pinged off the top of his head. "Why do you suddenly have a full social calendar, huh?"

"Imani said she saw you in here," came Ryan's voice again. "Can we talk for a minute?"

Aaron fumbled for the door knob, saying "Sure," like he'd rather do anything but that.

"No." Lex dove for the door, shutting it the scant centimetre it'd opened.

"Why?" Aaron demanded, still whispering like Lex was.

"He'll wonder why we're stuck in a tiny closet together."

"We're just talking."

Lex winced. "I know, but--"

Ryan knocked again. "Aaron?"

Lex slapped Aaron on his thick--slightly damp--shoulder. "Say something!"

"Would should I say?"

"I don't know. Say give me a minute."

"Give me a minute," Aaron said, at a normal volume, which just about blew all of Lex's hair off, since his ears had gotten used to whispering.

"Okay," Ryan said, and his footsteps faded away from the door.

"What now?" Aaron demanded, quietly again, thankfully. "Why can't I just go out there?"

"I don't want to explain why we're in here, alright?" He tried to find the words to explain keeping secrets like this from his best friend. "Ryan is a worrier. If he thinks I'm desperate enough to fuck someone who hates me, he'll worry. And start trying to set me up with every gay guy he meets, which I really don't need right now."

Aaron nodded once, decisive. "Okay."

"That's it? No resistance? You know what, don't answer that. You need to get out there, and I need Ryan not to see me."

It took some maneuvering, but they figured out that the only way to make sure Lex stayed hidden was for him to tuck himself into the far corner on the floor, since there were too many shelves for him to stand up.

Lex sank to his knees too fast and got a mop handle to ribs. He swore and fell forward, only managing not to fall on his face because he broke his fall with his hands...on Aaron's hips.

He didn't mean to pause, but suddenly finding himself there, his fingers digging into the tops of Aaron's thighs under his soft workout pants, looking up into Aaron's wide eyes from his knees in a tight, close space...well, he paused anyway.

Then he let go like he'd been burned and shuffled, double-time, into the corner so that Aaron could squeeze himself through the door.

It hadn't occurred to him until that moment that he'd have a front row seat to whatever Ryan wanted to talk about. He might not have been able to see, but he could hear everything.

"Hey, man, I just wanted to apologize for what I said the other day."

"I didn't report you to Phil," Aaron said, the words falling out in such a rush that Lex could picture him toppling over.

"What? Oh, yeah. No, I know you didn't. He just wanted to talk to me about taking one of Imani's clients, some dudebro who makes her uncomfortable. No big deal, just not a conversation you want to have in the open."

"Oh. I'm glad. Because I wouldn't have said anything."

The relief in Aaron's voice was palpable. Lex had been there to witness that little misunderstanding, from the same closet, actually. That'd been...Thursday. Jesus, Aaron must have been stressing about that all weekend, while Ryan--still pissed off, but with an undercurrent of self-preserving acknowledgement that Aaron was right--had moved on.

"Yeah, I know you wouldn't, even when you have every right to do that. Lex coming in here *is* technically against the rules. So, I just want to say sorry for how I acted."

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't. Lex is a bit of a mess, but even he should have known better than to risk knocking someone down."

True brotherly love, right there. The only reason Lex wasn't gasping with indignance was because he knew Ryan was right. He was more than a bit of a mess. He was a *lot* of a mess, and he *should* have known better.

"So, are we cool?" Ryan prompted, with a nervous tightness in his voice that Lex knew would be accompanied by a hand scratching the back of his head, a tic he'd never gotten rid of.

"Yes, of course," Aaron said.

A gusty, relieved sigh. "Great. I appreciate it, especially since it'd be totally reasonable for you to tell me to buzz off. But I knew you wouldn't. After what Lex said--"

"Lex?"

"Yeah. He just reminded me of some things. He's a decent guy, when you get to know him. You probably don't believe me, but--"

"I believe it." Aaron's interruption was so quiet, Lex almost didn't hear it. "He said the same thing about you."

"Did he?" Yes, Lex remembered. On Thursday, when it all had gone down. "What a guy. Anyway, I'll see you later."

The sound of footsteps were soon drowned out by the faint buzzing of music beyond the closet. He stayed where he was, coming to an annoying realization that he had no exit strategy. So far, he'd managed to keep Ryan from knowing he was *in* there. Now, how did he manage to get *out*?

A chunk of light bolted across the dim floor, then widened steadily. Aaron poked his head around the corner and squinted into the corner Lex had wedged himself in.

"He's gone," he said. "So's Imani."

"Nice. I'll make a break for it then." He got up and dusted off his knees and ass, then followed Aaron out the door.

"See you later, I guess," he said with a wave as he picked up his pace toward the exit.

"I don't hate you."

Lex turned around to see Aaron fiddling with the end of his headphones, sticking out of his pocket like an emaciated pet snake. "What you said about Ryan setting you up because he thinks you're...but I don't hate you, so it wouldn't apply."

Aaron was different like this. His uniform was at home, and with it, a bit of the armour that kept his back stiff and his upper lip even stiffer. Lex wondered if Aaron would be standing there, his hair a little messy, his cheeks still pink, having said something like *that*, if Lex had come during his working hours.

He gave Aaron an awkward little salute, a move he'd never before attempted, just before he went on his way. "Thanks, big guy, I don't hate you, too."

## Chapter 6

"Jesus, slow down."

The piece of broccoli that had been dangling from Lex's lips plopped back to the plate. "Sorry," he mumbled past his full mouth, then he swallowed. "It's really good."

Ryan just shook his head and laughed. Lex knew he'd been teasing him, of course. They'd inhaled many a pizza next to each other on the couch, avoiding eye contact so that they could forget for a few minutes that they were human beings who used tools and had opposable thumbs and a sense of decency.

High school was a hell of a time.

"Thanks, man," Ryan said when Lex resumed stuffing his face with broccoli. "It's got lemon juice on it. I didn't know you liked it so much."

Lex made a noncommittal noise around his full mouth and didn't stop eating, because it wasn't about whether he liked it. He hadn't developed a particular affinity for slightly mushy, lemon-flavoured green vegetables since he'd quit living with Ryan. It was just a lot more necessary, now that a multivitamin was out of his budget.

The jokes they used to make about Lex getting scurvy from their bachelor lifestyle really didn't age well.

"So, Lex, have you heard about that promotion?"

Jenny often asked him questions like that. He liked her, voluntarily spent time with her, even. But she hadn't been around long enough to truly fit into the rhythm of his and Ryan's bromance for the ages, so a lot of her conversation starters sounded like they were coming out of a magazine article called *How to Win Over Your Boyfriend's Shitty Family in Two Thanksgivings or Less*.

Lex wiped his mouth and put his fork down, giving up on the last shrivelled floret. *Goodnight, sweet prince, and boats of cheese sauce fly thee to thy compost bin.*

"I just found out today, actually," he said. "I didn't get it."

"Ah, bummer," Ryan exclaimed, his knife smacking against his plate as a result of his full-body recoil of sympathy. "I thought you'd get it for sure."

Lex shrugged, hoping it showed the right blend of disappointment and resignation. "I'm not surprised, it went to someone who's been there longer."

It was nice, the fantasy he'd created of the life he was supposed to have. For a few minutes, he got to pretend, and imagine himself there. It was a good life. Not glamorous, but he would have been happy living it.

"So, what are you going to do?" Ryan asked, gently, like he thought if he was careful, the question wouldn't be so hard to answer. "You were kind of counting on that pay raise, right?"

"Get a part time job, I guess. In the evening, or on a weekend or something." He could get by for weeks with progress updates on his search for some minimum wage work.

"That sucks, man."

"Yeah. But it's better than going back to Iowa."

Ryan stood up, carrying his plates into the kitchen, but not quite managing to hide the way he pursed his lips to keep from saying what he wanted to.

"Don't start with that again," Lex grumbled, even though Ryan had been trying not to. Maybe he was just in the mood for a bit of old, tired debate.

"I just think there's no harm in asking. Your parents love you, and they want you to be happy. They'd lend you the money you need for a nicer place."

"Sure, they'd gladly give me as much as I wanted, provided it was in gift certificates for American Airlines."

"Lex--"

"You know I'm right." It was a sure sign of Lex having told the truth that Ryan just looked down at the sink and didn't say anything right away. "My parents aren't like yours."

"They *love* you."

"Yeah, but it's conditional. I'm not currently meeting all those conditions."

Like not being a total fuck up. His parents didn't even know how bad off he was, and they still sent him passive aggressive texts about places back home that were hiring.

On bad days, Lex considered it. Only ever for a moment, because he had a great imagination. He could picture with stunning realism what it would be like if he took his parents up on the offer they'd made to keep his room free.

His dad might not even say *I told you so*. Not out loud. But he'd say it in every purse of his lips, every flick of his eyes toward Lex's useless degree hanging crookedly on the wall.

He'd decided he'd rather spend a thousand nights in the shelter system than under his father's sympathetic, rent-free roof, with blank applications for the grocery store up the street appearing on the kitchen table every few days.

That was still true for now. But the fact that it might not be forever scared him more than the drop in temperature he could feel in the air every night.

And all the anger, the agonizing over his future, near and distant...Maybe it would be worth giving up the part of his soul that just wanted to make cool art, just to make it quiet.

"Sorry," Lex said, standing up and bringing his own plate to the sink next to Ryan. "I'm stressed out. I didn't mean to make you worry about me."

"I'm always going to worry about you."

Ryan had worried ever since they were in school, and he tried to protect Lex from the worst of the bullying for being the skinny kid who drew cartoons on his homework and let his eyes linger too long on biceps and hipbones.

"I know, buddy." He bumped his hip against Ryan's and wished he could turn in for one of the hugs they used to give each other. Firm, warm and long, unafraid of getting cooties or crossing lines. They'd known each other too long for any new lines to be crossed.

He wanted so badly to be held by someone who cared about him, but sharp emotion was already close enough to the surface to give him papercuts on the wrong side of his skin. If he got more than a pat on the back, it was over for him.

"Anyway," he said, scrubbing a hand over his dry face. "Now that we've gotten our feelings all over the kitchen, can I leave you guys to clean it?"

Jenny smiled tentatively and waved at the washroom off the kitchen. "Go right ahead."

He gratefully escaped. They'd been doing this long enough that Lex didn't need to bother to offer to clean up. Jenny and Ryan were both adamant that he was a guest, and guests didn't help, period, forever and ever, amen. Instead, he used their shower and tried his best to let his mind go blank under the water.

The pressure wasn't as good as at Get Fit!, but it was warmer, and he had to force himself not to spend any extra time washing away his sins.

What sin, though? Being 24 and idealistic? That didn't seem fair.

Putting on unwashed clothes over clean skin was actually a form of torture, one Lex had become familiar with. Worse, though, was the step in his routine that came right after.

Before he came into the bathroom every week, he resolved not to take things from Ryan and Jenny's cupboards anymore. Then, temptation and necessity took that resolve out back and put it out of its misery.

One of the 20 pack of razors from the dollar store. An envelope of tissues. A couple of benadryl for when his fall allergies flared up. Like the stuff they gave out in the shelter, but an endless supply of it that he didn't have to line up for, feeling the weight of his failure every step of the way.

A spare toothbrush, out of the multi-pack Ryan never used because they were too soft. Four squares of lemon-scented wipes.

He felt like a spoon under a tap as he zipped up his stash into a pocket in his backpack. He deflected his bad luck and bad decisions on everyone else he knew. He'd already taken so much from them, in food, kindness, and even closet space.

He'd left his two boxes of things he couldn't live without here, when he'd helped Ryan move in. That'd been back when he was certain people like him didn't end up checking into the shelter every night and that something would happen in the few days left he had on his lease to keep it from happening.

Seeing how happy Ryan was, with his job, and his small, but clean apartment and his girlfriend who he called *the one* to Lex in private, Lex had been jealous of him for the first time. It wasn't a nice feeling, and he hated to break his record.

He'd managed not to envy Ryan in school, when sports and popularity had come easy to him. He'd never wished he had Ryan's parents, who would've cheered him on if he'd decided to throw away everything and join the circus.

Over a decade of friendship, and Lex finally turned green about an overpriced shoebox and a hetero honeymoon fantasy? Boring. Like a bad origin story of the villain in a superhero movie that didn't make back its budget.

The backpack felt heavier when he put it on, and not because of the things he'd stolen. Jenny and Ryan were curled up on the couch, already on their way to enjoying their evening off.

"I'm gonna head out," he called, shoving his feet into his shoes.

"Oh, okay." Of course, Ryan wouldn't let him escape. He got up from the couch and came over, ever the attentive host. "Thanks for coming."

"Thanks for the food, it was great." Ryan couldn't make his mom's mac and cheese recipe the same way she did, but his best effort was still pretty damn good.

"You can return the favour when you've got a kitchen you don't share with your pet cockroaches."

"Hey, Bill and Billy aren't pets. They're tenants. Who I can't seem to evict. But you're right, I'll get you back as soon as I feel safe inviting you to my neighbourhood."

"And what about you? Are you safe? Is that asshole going to turn your water back on now you're caught up?"

Oh, yeah, that. According to *The Fake Life and Times of Lex Melnick*, he was caught up on his rent. That was, at least, a little true. His rent was currently zero, and he was right on track.

"I'm happy to report that the temperature has risen."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Definitely. From arctic to frigid."

"Shit." Ryan's expressive face fell. "Don't get my hopes up like that."

With a hand on his chest, he gasped and fell into the wall behind him. "I'm starting to get the feeling you don't like me hanging around your job."

Ryan didn't take the bait. "It isn't that. I just want you to be happy and safe."

"I am happy," he promised. "And I'm working on safe."

"Work harder." Ryan smiled and squeezed his shoulder, grinning like he hadn't squeezed Lex's guts just as hard.

"Sure thing."

He checked his phone on his way out the door. He was cutting it close to get to this week's shelter by the check-in time, but he could make it if he didn't get distracted by people watching.

He skinned in to join the line at the last second, ignoring the raised eyebrow of the worker running the table. He passed over his backpack, but hesitated to give up his phone.

He'd wanted to call his parents tonight. He hadn't done it in a while, and since the phone and the bill that came with it were the only things he'd let his parents pay for, he liked to be available to them whenever. In the end, he knew he couldn't keep it on him. He wouldn't be able to use it, anyway, not without painting a huge target on himself.

Next was the worst part. Even though he'd already showered, the policy was that he had to do it here, or find somewhere else to sleep. He knew why the policy existed. Bed bugs, sanitary conditions, all of that. That didn't stop his skin from crawling for the whole time he was in there, which was as short as he could get away with.

Workers stood outside the shower rooms, but it would take 10 seconds for someone to decide that the new guy was staring at them wrong. Every minute he spent in the shelter, clothed or unclothed, he felt closer to getting stuck with a hospital bill to fix his face.

Most of the people he saw in the shelter would only be there for a week or two. A month, maybe. A lot of them were like him: An average but unlikely person who managed to find themselves out of work, without the money saved up to keep paying rent. Once they found a new job, it didn't take that long to get first and last, and they were out of there. There was a much smaller subset of people who didn't--or couldn't--hold any sort of hope for having a steady income.

Those were the people who scared Lex most, but not because he thought they were threatening or dangerous. He avoided looking at the older men who'd been in the shelter system for years, who fell into addiction to deal with the mind-numbing boredom and isolation, or to soothe some ache inside them that money or a bachelor apartment in Queens couldn't fix.

He survived another day. His shower--a generous term for his seconds long dunking--was without incident and he was curling up under the scratchy blanket. Lights-off was soon, but Lex already felt the pull of sleep.

His current--*temporary, please God, let it be temporary*--life was a strange mixture of constant vigilance and jarring, guilty ennui. He did nothing all day, and yet, fell exhausted into a bed that wasn't his...and slept restlessly because he couldn't stop writing job applications and practicing interview skills in his dreams.

At least he didn't have trouble *falling* asleep. He'd gotten used to the snoring, the quiet talking, the occasional lighter flicking on to burn what was definitely *not* tobacco or weed.

It was just *staying* asleep that gave him trouble. And every time he woke up again, it was harder not to look at the puzzle pieces he had and try, uselessly to put them together in a different way, that would make everything alright again.

A lot of it came down to pride. If he told someone--Ryan, mostly--his problems, he'd have a place to sleep before he could finish explaining why he hadn't come to him before. But he didn't want to take advantage of him like that, more than he already was.

Then, there was his folks. Or, if he was being honest with himself, his dad. Lex's pride had already taken a huge knock by the skepticism he'd faced when he'd announced--because everything he did had to be announced, like he was asking for their approval--he'd gotten a job in New York City.

He'd tried his best not to be hurt by his dad's worry that it was all too good to be true. He was talented. He had good ideas, a solid portfolio, and the job was real, not some scam for desperate students with a Bachelor of Fine Arts and an illustration minor.

It'd been real enough, just not sustainable. Not a *career*.

So where did that leave him? Not crawling back to Iowa, that was for damn sure. But what was good for his self-esteem wasn't good for his bank account.

Even if unemployment insurance from the government would give him enough to live on--it didn't--he still didn't have a mailing address, or money for a post office box. He couldn't risk something showing up at his parent's house, or Ryan's place, because what if they accidentally opened it? Or, in his mother's case, opened it quite on purpose? And it was only supposed to be for a couple of weeks, until he found something else. That was almost six weeks ago.

It was funny, how fast the time had gone by when he was living his dream, and how slowly it melted away when he was battling through a living hell.

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Lex picked an unblended piece of kale off his tongue and flicked it into a pile of dryer lint in the garbage with a noise from deep in his throat. "God, this is gross," he complained.

Ryan didn't even look up from stuffing the washing machine to acknowledge his suffering. "Then why are you drinking it?"

"Why does anyone eat vegetables? So I don't die."

"I'm pretty sure some people actually enjoy vegetables."

"Lies." His emphatic gesture was cut short, but he did manage not to spill greenish slop on the pristine white dryer he was perched on. "Patriotic citizens of this country enjoy only truth, justice and American cheese."

"Whatever you say, buddy." The door banged shut and the drum started filling.

"Oh, hey, can I stick some shirts in there? Saves me from having to drag my ass to the laundromat for a couple more days."

The question sounded casual, just a last-minute afterthought to make his life a little more convenient, but not necessary. Just how he'd planned it, weighing every second, wondering if *now* would be too soon, or *now*.

"Sure." The lid of the washer came up again, and Ryan waited patiently for Lex to dig the clothes out of the biggest part of his backpack. "You'll have to stick around to switch it, though, if you want them soon. I have a--"

He was interrupted by the door opening, followed by a knock that was a bit unnecessary. "Ryan, your 1:30 is waiting at--Oh. Hi, Lex."

Aaron was back to wearing his uniform, thankfully. He filled it out just as nicely as he did his soft T-shirts from home, but at least Lex had built up a bit of tolerance against this outfit.

"In the flesh." Sweeping a hand down the length of his body, he narrowly missed knocking over a sticky bottle of detergent. "Hey, you'll be thrilled to hear I'm actually pulling my weight around here."

A single raised eyebrow was the only response he received.

"I'm helping with laundry!" He tipped the door to the washer closed with an echoing bang. "See?"

"Congratulations. Your hours of hard labour will more than make up for everything else."

"Everything else?" Lex spluttered. "You make it sound like I'm living like a king on Get Fit!'s dime. Is there a throne made of towels I could be lounging on? Is there a jacuzzi I can drive up your power bill with by leaving the bubbles running all the time?"

"Neither." Aaron crossed his arms over that remarkable chest. "But I notice you aren't limiting yourself to showers anymore."

"What, this?" He lifted his cup and slurped loudly on the straw. The effect would have been better if he'd been able to keep a straight face, but the point was made despite his grimace. "I earned this bucket of slop."

"How? Folding towels? We have employees to do that."

"They have other things to do. Important trainer stuff."

"It's their job, they can do it just fine without your help."

"So you *don't* want my help? That seems kind of counterintuitive, when you're always going on about how I don't pay my way." **TAF START HERE**

"You're supposed to pay your way like everyone else, with *money*--"

"Guys, break it up, sheesh," Ryan cut in, stepping into Lex's line of vision and reminding him of his presence in the small laundry room.

"Huh?" He looked back at Aaron, then clued in. "Oh, this? We do this all the time. It's how we show affection." Stretching out an arm, he tried to hook it around Aaron's shoulders, but ended up sliding clumsily off the dryer and nearly crashing into him when Aaron stepped out of reach.

"Asshole," Lex muttered when he was upright again, but he couldn't keep the grin off his face.

"Freeloader." Aaron was smiling too. Just a little...but it was there.

Ryan shook his head. "You guys are weird. But you can relax, anyway, Aaron. That's my weekly freebie. I'm sick of the stuff and Lex will take them."

"I certainly will," Lex added, taking a huge gulp for emphasis, and nearly throwing up in the process. Ryan closed the door on his theatrical retching, presumably off to tend to his 1:30.

"You could just not drink it," Aaron suggested.

He clicked the straw against his teeth, trying to psych himself up for another hit. "True. But then I'd have to get my five a day somewhere else. This, at least, requires no mastication." With a wet cough, he picked another piece of kale off his tongue. "Or almost none, anyway."

He looked up from flicking the green speck toward the trash can, expecting another return of their comfortable antagonistic rhythm, and didn't see Aaron working on a real zinger. He found him with his mouth open and his cheeks stained with ruddy colour.

Lex spit out the straw. "Aaron George. Are you getting hot and bothered by my word choice?"

Aaron blushed even redder, his eyes skating away to the floor. "I know what mastication is! I just--"

"You misheard me, right? You thought things were getting saucy up in this lint-covered love cave."

"I did not." His cheeks were still flaming as he stared mutinously at the floor and the wall at the same time, somehow. "Could you stop that?"

"Stop what?"

"The straw," he mumbled.

"Oh." The thick plastic fell out of his mouth, wet and shining from his tongue. "Uh. Whoops."

He thought he'd let go of the habit of fellating everything that came within reach of his mouth in college. As an art major, it'd been a necessity, unless he wanted to get kicked out of studio class. Funny, he must be a little bit *stressed out*.

It must have been the dumbfounded look on his face, or maybe just the contrast between his best attempt at provocative banter and the apologetic grimace he ended up with, but regardless, Aaron laughed.

It was a nice laugh. Breathily, and surprisingly high for a man of Aaron's stature. Nice, and so private and rare that it made Lex's chest warm and his throat tighten.

"You're so ridiculous," Aaron said, looking up at him with his head bent, like he didn't want to say it, but needed to like he needed food. "Half the things you do to get under my skin, you don't even know you're doing them."

From anyone else, Lex might have been offended. He felt like enough of a failure, he didn't need people telling him how silly he was. But from Aaron, who'd chased him around the gym, being just as ridiculous, who laughed so softly at Lex's wayward mouth, it didn't seem so harsh. It sounded somehow longing. Like he wanted a bit of Lex's ridiculousness for himself.

"That's me," he said, pitching the mostly-empty cup in the garbage with a flourish. "Crazy Lex, with the innate talent of bugging all uptight personal trainers named Aaron."

"Have you met many of us?"

"Not yet, but I hope they're all as nice as you."

The small room shrunk around them, trapping the ripples of the whole conversation, from the fight, to the teasing, to the surprising candidness, and magnifying them so they took up all the space they had.

Lex couldn't take it for long. "Well, this has been sufficiently weird. I'm going to go now."

Aaron waved as Lex skittered past him out the door. Lex made a beeline right for the door to the showers, a hysterical laugh pushing at his throat at Aaron's obliviousness. But maybe it was only funny because he was still off-balance from their little chat.

Somehow, it'd felt more intimate than the time in the club. Well, that wasn't saying much, perhaps. A handshake was more intimate than two strangers getting off in the dark.

(Usually. This pair of strangers--him and Aaron--had felt far from impersonal at the time.)

He headed to the back of the shower room, avoiding eye contact with the trio of extremely naked guys who'd lost their sense of modesty in 'Nam. Stashing his backpack in a corner, he stripped and stuck a hand past the curtain to start the spray.

*Aaahh, that pressure.* And once he stepped into the cubicle, the lack of pressure from judgemental eyes, and from the world outside the three walls and paper thin curtain was just as satisfying.

It wasn't much of a guilty pleasure. The place smelled like bleach and the harsh perfume of the three-in-one cleanser. It was cramped and claustrophobic, and the light overhead flickered every other minute.

But he wouldn't give it up. This solitude was different from the loneliness he was chased by. This was a choice, a sequestering of himself that he performed for his own benefit. It was different from the way he seemed to fade into the background of everyone's lives as they passed by him on a park bench or looked beyond his shoulder in the street.

The water poured over him, and he scratched his fingers through his overlong hair. If his mother could see him, she'd click her tongue and offer to make him an appointment for a haircut, but she'd soften it by running a hand over his scalp and kissing the top of his head.

It was a good thing she wasn't there, actually, because the combination of the warm water rushing down his body and the playful chat he'd had with Aaron had given Lex something he hadn't experienced in quite a while.

He'd been worried when he first left his and Ryan's old place that his body's internal clock wouldn't give a shit about his new situation and lack of privacy. But it turned out, having to worry about his next meal and a roof over his head was a bit of a mood killer.

But right now...he could pretend hard enough to get into some kind of mood. It wouldn't be like a no-holds-barred, naked-with-no-covers,

Saturday-morning-with-the-apartment-to-himself session, but he could lean into a sneaky, guilty, shame-filled moment, especially given the locale.

It wasn't very good etiquette, but damn it, where else was he going to do it?

Closing his eyes, he groped for the conditioner dispenser on the wall and coated his hand. Grasping his dick--still soft, but noticeably plump from his wandering thoughts--he started giving himself slow, measured strokes. Mechanical, at first, but it all came rushing back pretty soon. Like riding...something. His breath sped up, and after a particularly good upward squeeze, he moaned, then froze, remembering where he was.

His pulse pumped against his palm as he waited for the sound of footsteps, but he was alone. He *knew* it, but he still put his other hand against his mouth, biting down on the thick flesh under his thumb because it felt right to stifle himself, tucked away in a corner and doing something he knew was wrong.

More conditioner squirted into his hand, but first, he tipped the shower head away so only part of his shoulder was under the water, and turned down the temperature until it was just cold enough to make his skin prickle into goosebumps.

The slick handful of product was cool against his cock. Two contrasts in temperature, which he'd always loved. He remembered summers spent on the deck of Ryan's pool, sweating and soaking up the heat because plunging into the crisp, clear water would feel so much better if his skin was burning.

Aaron was like that.

The thought popped into his head between one firm pull of his hand and another.

Aaron gave off an aura of cool indifference, but Lex had been a witness to the passion that ran deep. He loved his job, he felt insecure, he danced with a kind of timid abandon, then followed a stranger into the dark. His anger, that flared hot when Lex truly fucked up.

He was made of contrasts, and it made Lex want to touch him in hidden places, to see if it would freeze or burn.

For now, he settled with what he remembered. Afterward, Lex had kicked himself for not recognizing the breadth of Aaron's chest and shoulders right away. Of course there was no way he truly could have known, but he'd stared at them long enough that their shape was starting to become real under his fingers.

He stroked himself faster, remembering how the space between their bodies had gotten damp, just like Aaron's T-shirt had been damp the other day, sticking to the hard expanse of his torso.

Aaron's hands, strong and usually fisted. His arms, bulging in the sleeves of his sweater. His lips. His smile. His laugh.

Lex came to the fantasy of Aaron's breath ghosting over his neck as he laughed. An embrace that had happened dozens of times before, so they could relax and be joyful and silly while they got each other off.

A relationship.

Lex slumped, leaning on his arm as his blood pressure returned to normal and the snatches of fake closeness faded away.

He felt kind of bad, actually. Usually, if he pictured anything at all, he pictured some unattainable paragon. It was physical, like picturing Aaron was supposed to be physical. Somehow, it didn't seem right to fantasize about a connection he couldn't make.

## Chapter 7

"And I was talking to Mrs. McLaughlin the other day, you know."

"Oh, yeah? What did Patty have to say?"

Lex's mom launched into another soliloquy about her interaction with Ryan's mom, and Lex fell back into the routine of vague, monosyllabic noises of interest. She was easy to talk to. She steered the conversation where she wanted it to go, which was always to insignificant, harmless topics, minutiae he was missing from his small town. He could let her voice wash over him and comfort him with the normalcy of it.

Today was a good day. So far, at least.

He'd applied for three jobs, all over the city, which was two more than he normally found on any of the sites he checked. He'd splurged on a train ride uptown and handed out resumés at 15 businesses, and a couple of them had even seemed interested. His hot meal from the soup kitchen was sitting comfortably in his belly, and his mother's voice was making him feel sleepy and warm.

"She's planning on going down to visit Ryan, and I thought maybe I'd come with her."

Lex almost fell out of his plush library reading chair. "What?"

She clicked her tongue. "Were you even listening?"

"Yeah, of course. You were talking about Patty. I was just surprised, that's all." And horrified. And terrified. And aha--

"So, are you busy on the third weekend in October? We thought we'd get a move on so you can have time to miss us before you come home for Christmas."

"Uh." His mind raced. *Say something, say **something***, his sense of self-preservation urged, but he was too busy glitching out on harsh reality to function.

Even if he got a job tomorrow, which was unlikely, given his luck, he wouldn't have first and last month's rent for a while. Once he had it, he'd have to scope out some roommates who weren't completely insane, find a place, rescue his stuff from Ryan's, and gain back the 10 pounds of weight he hadn't had in him to lose before she arrived.

It was impossible. He'd need a miracle to pull it off without her knowing, and he hadn't been the recipient of a miracle since a cool boutique comic book publisher had called him and told him he'd gotten the job. And look how well that had turned out.

"I'm having kind of a crazy time right now," he blurted.

Disappointment coloured both her long pause and her voice following it. "Oh, honey, it's been so long."

"I know, but with two jobs, it's hard to get a minute to sleep, let alone give you the tour of the city you deserve."

"I'm sure the restaurant can spare you for just a couple of evenings."

"Yeah, probably, but can I spare the paycheck?"

"Oh, it'll be fine! You can go to work, and we'll go with Mrs. McLaughlin and Ryan, do the tourist thing properly, then see you when you get a moment. How does that sound?"

It sounded...almost great. Lex could imagine if he was actually living his fiction, that he would have loved to have his mother and his best friend's teen sitcom dream mom visit them. They could march all over the city, a happy group, and Lex wouldn't even remember the pang of worry he carried that his mom wished she had Ryan for a son instead.

"Mom, you know I'd love it if you came to visit. I miss you, and I feel bad that I wasn't there last week."

"We understand, honey. It was a lovely day, and it would have been great to have you there, but we knew it was probably asking too much for you to make the trip."

His parents' anniversary party had been held in their backyard. He'd looked at all the photos on the screen of a library computer that always seemed to be blurry, no matter what settings he adjusted.

It had looked like fun. A night of carefree fun that was all about the elder Melnicks, so Lex would probably have gotten away without a single discussion about *his future*. He would've loved to be there, and it hurt his stomach that his mom didn't think it was that out of character for him to flake out on a promise to show up he'd made over six months ago.

"But Mom, I think it'd be a waste of money for you to come here," he said, covering his eyes and fervently thanking any deity that happened to be listening that he wasn't on video chat. "It'll be Christmas before we know it, and I'll be coming home anyway."

"But Lex, you'll be alone for Thanksgiving. Shouldn't I at least see you before that, so you don't feel lonely?"

"I'll feel lonely anyway, Mom. I'll be fine. Don't spend your money. Buy yourself something instead."

The phone line came alive with the hissing of dead air as neither of them spoke. Lex rubbed his forehead, cringing away from his excuses and hoping they were enough.

"Alexander," she said, softly. "Is everything okay?"

His heart thumped, from the combination of hearing his full name for the first time in months and the panic alarm going off, screaming *she knows, she knows, damage control, you fucked up!*

"Of course," he said, forcing fake brightness into his tone. "I'm fabulous. I have a job, a passable place, a wonderful life in the Big Apple. All I need is a girl who doesn't mind marrying a gay guy, and I'll be on the road to a picture perfect happy ending, right? And maybe Grandma Melnick will start sending me birthday cards again. That's the dream, eh?"

"Alexander."

"What?" Of course she wasn't fooled by his weird babbling, or the surfacing of some repressed internalized queer guilt. Was that a thing? Did other people feel bad about disappointing their parents, even though they'd graciously accepted his coming out, and acted like it didn't matter when, in small town Iowa, it obviously did?

"Are you sure you're alright? You sound strange. I feel as if you don't tell me anything anymore. I don't care about the money, or if you have a lot of time to spend with us. I want to see you, and your father does, too. We're buying tickets--"

"Mom, *no*."

A lady browsing the shelves near his seat jumped and scowled at him. Lex barely registered it.

As if it wasn't bad enough that *she* wanted to see how he was living. Now his dad was involved, too? This wasn't damage control anymore. This was a state of emergency.

"Mom, I love you, and I'd like to see you, but I don't want you to come here," he said. His eyes stung, so he closed them, without a hope of keeping them dry. "Not for a long while."

"Wh-why?"

"I'm a different person here. I've started to make a life for myself, and I don't want my old life to come back and mess it up. I do miss you, but I need to make a clean break. You understand, right?"

The worst thing--the absolute *worst*--was that the excuse had to come from somewhere. Every lie had a grain of truth, or else it wouldn't be believable. This, his mother could believe.

"Yes." Her voice was soft, barely audible over the long-distance line she was paying for. "I can see that you're different."

His stomach clenched. He pulled his knees to his chest, squeezing his full belly until he thought he'd throw up if he didn't need the calories.

"Mom," he said. *Shut up*, said the ruthlessness he hadn't known he possessed. *Keep talking and you'll give it away*.

"Well, when you decide that your break has been clean enough, you can call us. Your room will always be ready for you, whether or not you choose to use it."

"Mom, don't--"

She'd already hung up. His phone was heavy in his hands, the screen smeared with his cold sweat. The annoyed lady in the stacks had left, so he was entirely alone as he laid his head on his knees and wet them with tired, futile regret.

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"Excuse me?"

Lex came awake with a jolt. His feet slid off the cushion and he was suddenly leaning over, his head almost touching the floor between his shoes. "Whah?"

"Sorry, sir. The library's closing."

It was one of the librarians. Young, cute, with a permanent look of practiced tolerant pity whenever she looked at him.

"You don't close until eight." His voice was smooth as a rusted tin can.

"It's quarter to eight now," she said, apologetic, but firm.

"What?" He patted himself down, finding his phone shoved into the chair's cushion. The screen flashed the time, burning his tired eyes.

7:47.

"Oh, shit." He scrambled out of his chair, lurching forward and probably scaring the librarian with his erratic movements. "Oh, *shit*."

He was on his feet and thundering down the stairs in a minute, pulling on his backpack at the same time. The speakers overhead blared with the final ten minute closing warning just as he made the front door.

His mind was blank. There wasn't anything he could think or debate that would make the time go slower, or his mistake any less idiotic.

The desk was already packing up when he pushed his way through the milling crowd. He panted, leaning on the table, his stomach sinking as it became quite clear that he hadn't run fast enough.

He wiped his face. It still felt sticky from blubbering all over himself earlier, and scorching from exertion that never used to take this much out of him. He already knew the answer before he asked, "Nobody ever changes their mind, do they?"

The motherly woman looked up from filling up her pencil case, her mouth turned down. "Sorry, sweetie. You can try St Augustine's, maybe."

He shook his head. "It'll take me an hour to get there. They'll be closed by then.

"I'm sorry. People sometimes spend the night in the parking lot out back. There's an awning, and we have some blankets to hand out."

"Thanks."

He didn't stick around. The chatter of the shelter faded as he left it behind, changing to the more ignorable bustling never-quiet of the city. He wasn't even close to downtown, but everything still made so much more noise than it did in Iowa. It used to energize him, keep him moving forward and into the future.

Now, Lex longed for a moment of the pure, deep quiet that came from true solitude. He wasn't a country boy, but he wanted to walk into a corn field or something, and hear only crickets and the frantic shriek of frogs.

He wanted a lot of things, but the only thing he needed to do was find a place to sleep.

He didn't want to stay outside the doors of the shelter. Maybe being surrounded by people like him would make it easier, but he'd spend the whole night bitter and angry with himself for not getting his shit together enough to make it inside in time.

He walked instead, in the direction of the sliver of colour from the set sun, peeking through buildings. His legs and feet were sore by the time he sat down on a bench in a park the size of a drink coaster. He'd found the spot weeks earlier, 15 feet away from some kind of generator and partially hidden by scraggly trees that didn't provide much shade in the daytime. The bench went mostly undiscovered, and most importantly, unpatrolled by cops.

Just like the street, the park was far from quiet. Above him, a white plastic bag crinkled in the wind, its white, ragged shreds looking ghostly.

He didn't want to sleep here, but if he did, it wouldn't be the first time.

He'd slept a couple nights rough before he figured out the rhythm of the shelter system, and that he preferred the structure and illusion of safety. Not everyone did. He liked the feeling of safety in numbers, and the semblance of normalcy that came with getting a pillow to lay his head on, even if it always smelled of bleach.

He was ashamed, this many weeks later, that it had felt a bit exciting. Like an adventure, or a scene in a tear-jerking montage of character building. He'd packed his bag to go on a similar journey a hundred times as a kid, and he'd finally done it.

No famous artist had an entirely happy youth, did they? He needed some tragic backstory, and this would do nicely, he'd thought. It'd be a hell of a story for the grandkids.

Or maybe not. He might never tell a single soul how well acquainted he became with the shelter system of New York City.

His backpack barely fit on the narrow bench, but he shoved it under his head and laid down, testing the waters. The hood of his sweater wasn't much of a barrier, and it was pretty clear to him soon that this whole thing wasn't going to work. Not that night anyway. He had too much on his mind to try to sleep somewhere that wasn't warm and at least semi-protected.

The question was, what the hell would he do instead?

He could stay where he was, but that seemed like the height of pathetic.

He might have called Ryan and scammed his way into an impromptu movie night and *accidental* sleepover, but it was Friday. Date night. The only night of the week Ryan made sure he booked off a couple of times a month to spend with Jenny. Ryan was a good guy and would cancel any plans he had if Lex leaned on him enough, but he didn't want to. He'd already taken so much from his best friend.

So he walked. He didn't have a destination, just hours and hours to fill until he could go back to the library and fill the time with something productive.

The wind picked up, blowing his hoodie against his arms and freezing him. The weather was changing. Early, because wasn't that just his luck?

The air had started to feel like a fall day that didn't know it was winter. Leaves were starting to go, but snow wouldn't make an appearance yet. The charm of autumn would be gone before he knew it, and all he'd have to anticipate would be the hibernation of winter.

New York supposedly had better, warmer winters than Iowa, but then again, he'd never spent an Iowa winter outside. Not much to look forward to.

His feet complained with every step, and after an indeterminable amount of time that was probably shorter than it felt, he stopped and looked around him. He expected not to recognize a thing, since he hadn't been paying much attention to where he was going, but the glowing sign across the street was unmistakable.

Muscle memory had walked him right to the mall that housed Get Fit!, noticeably darkened at this hour, but still shining from display windows. It figured. There were only a few places he went regularly these days, and this was the one where he felt the most human.

He started toward the door before he could even wonder if the gym was open, and reached down for his phone at the same time. If it hadn't been late, if he hadn't been so constantly exhausted and distracted, he might have remembered the lessons he'd learned in pre-school about looking both ways.

The lights of the oncoming car burned his eyes, and the blaring horn blasted his skull. Momentarily blind and deaf, he froze, fight or flight abandoning him, and the time seemed to slow to a crawl for milliseconds before he was being yanked back.

He tripped over the sidewalk, but didn't fall. His shoulders twinged hard, like a rug burn, which clued him in that it was only because of someone's grip on his backpack that he wasn't on his ass on the ground, or way worse, in a heap under a tire.

"Are you okay?"

Recovery from nearly getting creamed by a car wasn't a quick process, but Lex definitely recognized that voice.

"Aaron?" He jerked himself out of reach and leaned over on his knees, his head spinning. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm heading home. The gym just closed and I saw you...it doesn't matter. Are you okay," he asked again, crouching so his frowny face was in Lex's line of vision.

"Never been better!" He might have been a little hysterical.

"Why are you here?" Aaron pressed, supporting him as he straightened up. "We're closed. You know that, right?"

Irritation flared, but he pushed it down. "Of course I do. I was just passing by."

"At nine o'clock? Why?"

"Funny story, actually." Was it a funny story? He didn't know it, if it was. But it gave him a few extra seconds to come up with something. "I've got this new roommate. He's a

piece of work, no idea how to live with other people. He doesn't seem to be bothered by this no hot water thing, if that gives you an idea of what kind of person he is."

"Right." Aaron's eyebrows pulled into a grimace, but he didn't lose the suspicion.

"Well, somehow--I really don't understand it--he got himself a girlfriend. The walls in our place aren't much better than a couple of soda crackers glued together. I had to listen to them have sex all last night, and I can't do it again today."

"So you came here?"

He shrugged, hoping it didn't look too manic from almost getting *hit by a freaking car*. "I figured I'd just walk until the sun came up. I can't afford a motel."

At least that last part was the truth. He tried not to squirm under Aaron's scrutiny as he hoped his lie held up.

"Alright. Come on, then."

Aaron was walking away before Lex had a chance to celebrate his ruse being accepted as fact. "What? Wait, where are you going? Where do you want *me* to go?"

Aaron stopped and looked at him like *he* was the one who wasn't making sense. "You can't stay here, or go home. You can't get a motel or stay with Ryan, since it's date night."

"How the hell do you even know that?"

"Because Ryan hasn't shut up about it all day."

"Fair enough. So where do you suggest I go, in your infinite wisdom?"

His head tilted up the street. "My place. It's not far, and you can use my couch."

Had he actually been hit by that car? Was he hallucinating, and he was about to open his mouth and spew gibberish from his brain injury speech aphasia?

"You're kidding," he said instead, and Aaron seemed to understand.

"No. It's cold tonight. You should be inside."

"Why? You don't even like me."

*No such thing as a free lunch*, Lex's dad used to tell him. He was full of those cheesier-than-cheddar sayings, busting one out whenever he thought Lex was about to make a bad decision. Which meant, of course, *frequently*.

There was no way this lunch was free, especially since it was coming from the one person who had the least reason to help him.

"I don't have to like you to trust you not to kill me in my sleep."

Aaron said it with such confidence, such quiet certainty that Lex couldn't think of a single rebuttal worth the effort of his breath.

"Okay," he said. "If you're sure."

"It's fine. Come on, it's not a long walk, but I'm tired."

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Aaron unlocked the door to let them in, then immediately stopped at a small table and emptied his pockets. He kept glancing over at Lex while he did it, like he was afraid Lex would run away if he didn't hurry.

A cat came out of the woodwork and started to vocally appreciate Aaron's return, before seeming to notice Lex's presence and taking off somewhere he couldn't see. Aaron said something like *sorry about her* but Lex wasn't really listening.

He was looking around, noting the neat and clean surfaces and the spartan decorating. There was such a lack of *stuff* that if Lex didn't know better, he'd think Aaron had just moved in.

Aaron disappeared for a while, and came back out minus the blue Get Fit sweater. He was wearing *jeans*, of all things. Lex had only seen him in jeans once before, and had to think about something else quickly to keep from getting weird.

"You can sit, if you want," Aaron said, gesturing to a big leather sofa that looked like it could swallow a person whole in its cushions if they weren't careful.

"Sure." He might as well get comfortable in his new temporary bed. "Cool place. Very...open concept."

*Open* in this case meant that there were no walls. From his place on the couch, Lex could see the kitchen, dining area and small office, all out in the open.

He could also see the bed. Hard to miss, really, since it was less than 10 feet away, and it made quite a statement. Big, puffy pillows and a glorious comforter topped a huge mattress that could easily hold three.

That probably wasn't what Aaron was thinking about when he bought it. But it was what Lex was thinking about now, damn it.

"I like it," Aaron said, scratching the back of his neck. "You're cool with the, uh--"

"The no walls thing? Sure." Walls were a luxury Lex couldn't afford.

Even though it was pretty simplistic, there were still things for Lex to notice. The most eye-catching was a blown-up picture on the wall of an explosion of rainbow-covered people, surrounding a decidedly non-rainbow Aaron.

If Lex had to guess, he thought he was looking at baby's first pride parade, and the whole family was there to support. Picture Aaron looked uncomfortable, but the rest of them were obviously okay with him being out and proud, which was a relief Lex wasn't expecting.

He hadn't even realized until now that he'd been a little worried that Aaron had used him to scratch an itch, and was a closeted mess outside of their interaction at the club.

Of course, he wasn't, Lex could now know with confidence. They'd gotten to know each other surprisingly well over the last couple of months.

"I'm going to order some food. You want anything?"

Lex stopped ogling the happy group in the picture, gasping in Aaron's direction. "The fitness expert eats take out? The horror!"

Aaron's eye roll was legendary. "Yes, Lex, sometimes I eat like crap. I know Ryan does, too, so you can't be too shocked."

"Yeah. But I know everything about him. I've seen him wear the same pair of sweatpants five days in a row, so I know he's not perfect. You, on the other hand..."

Aaron looked up from his phone, shaking his head. "I'm not perfect. Far from it. Sometimes, I order a pizza and eat the whole thing by myself. It's not pretty. My cat judges me."

The laugh that honked out of Lex's mouth startled him, as well as the cat, who bolted under the bed. It was nice, getting the endorphins from a bit of silly, unexpected humour. He didn't laugh as much as he used to, so he could appreciate it while it lasted.

"So, please, help me out," Aaron said, waggling his phone. "You like pepperoni? Otherwise, it'll be just me and I don't know if my heart can take the strain."

"Fine, I'll do the generous thing and eat some of your food. Pepperoni's fine." Actually, he preferred just cheese, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and while their banter was amusing, they both knew Aaron was doing him a favour.

Aaron didn't know how big a favour he was doing, and Lex intended to keep it that way, but he had to get all he could out of this opportunity before it was over.

"Hey, you mind if I take a shower?"

Aaron barely looked up from his phone, busily entering his pizza order. "Yeah, go ahead. It's through there."

If Aaron pointed, then Lex didn't see it, but there was only one walled-off area in the corner. He closed the door on the rest of the apartment and folded his clothes in a neat pile on Aaron's laundry hamper. He needed to wash them. It'd been a few days, and soon he wouldn't be able to cover the lived-in smell with deodorant.

He was starting to feel as if he was going from one shower to the next, one washing machine to another, just trying to stay afloat.

He stayed in the shower a long time, using Aaron's shampoo and reeling at the trippy sensation of smelling what Aaron always smelled like, but in concentrate. He left the steamy air of the bathroom, his feet bare and his skin buzzing from the vulnerability of being freshly scrubbed.

He hadn't gone more than a few steps when Aaron popped out of nowhere--an impressive feat in an apartment with no walls--and slumped out of his usual straight-backed posture.

"Oh, good, you're okay."

"Yeah," Lex said slowly. "I didn't fall in or anything. You probably would have heard me."

"I know. I just started worrying that I didn't notice you getting hit."

Lex's fingers got wet as he reached up and scratched his clean hair. "You were there. You saw it." His momentary lapse of judgement, his accidental near-death experience that he'd probably start to analyze as soon as he closed his eyes, to make sure it really was accidental.

Aaron shrugged, jerking his big shoulders in a clumsy way he normally wasn't. "I know. I just...started to forget. I could see it really clearly, then I couldn't."

"Okay." Aaron's terrible short term memory wasn't really his problem, and he certainly wasn't going to make any comparisons to goldfish when Aaron was sharing his fishbowl. "Well, I'm good. Didn't even stub my toe, thanks to you."

Or lose a whole foot.

"No worries," Aaron said, like saving his life was nothing. Maybe it was, to the noble Superman type, with the body to match. "I'm glad you're okay. Pizza's here, by the way."

"That was quick."

Aaron tossed him a look over the huge pizza box. "You were in there long enough."

"Lies!" Lex cried as he fell onto the fluffy couch.

"And the place is just down the street," Aaron admitted, setting the box on the coffee table.

Lex did the honours of opening the box and sending the lid flying back with a dull plonk of cardboard and a wave of rich smells. "God, that smells amazing. I'm willing to bet that no cauliflower crust, spinach-covered monstrosity you could make me would ever smell this good."

"I agree, but regardless, you'd never see me making pizza for you."

"Why not? I'm an excellent taste-tester, even if what you're making is obviously subpar."

Aaron looked down at his fingers, pulling every string of cheese off the hot, grease slice in his hands. After a pause, he muttered, "I don't like cooking for other people. Something could go wrong."

"Like what? Putting too much kale in your pesto?"

"No, like salmonella."

He said it so seriously, like he thought Lex would be just as concerned. "Oh, come on. Do you really--"

Lex would have kept going. He was used to being the one who took jokes too far, but this time, he could tell that he was the only one joking. Aaron was perfectly serious, and Lex wasn't a total asshole. He pictured Aaron's face shutting down and turning hard again, and suddenly it was easy to swallow any remarks he might have had.

He shoved pizza in his mouth instead. "God, this is great," he said, as soon as he swallowed his first mouth-searing bite. He was a bit tickled with himself that he'd managed to wait since he didn't think Aaron would appreciate him chewing with his mouth open.

Look at him, becoming self-aware and whatever.

"I like it," Aaron agreed. "And the owner lets me order by text, so I don't have to talk."

"Work smarter, not harder." Another bite went down, this one as big as the state of Rhode Island. "This is really cheesy, but is there anything better than New York style pizza? Not even joking, but sometimes, I feel like I want to eat something like this more than I want my next breath."

"I wouldn't go quite that far, but it is amazing. People from Italy would probably disagree with you."

"Mphf." Lex pointed with his crust, then tossed it down into the box. "I'm a good ol' Midwestern boy, as you know."

"As you keep bringing up."

"Exactly. And the great state of Iowa shares a border with Illinois, which is also a pretty cool state. I went there on a school trip in 8th grade, and somebody dared me to leave a butt print on the Bean. The teacher caught me before I did it, but nobody ever doubted my follow-through after that."

"Do you have a point, or should I start sharing my field trip to the Finger Lakes when I lost my bathing suit?"

"Oh, yeah. My point is that this pizza is great, and that Chicago deep dish is an abomination."

Aaron paused in the action of picking up another piece and looked to the sky. *Is this a conversation I'm really having?* Aaron's face said. He actually said, "Yeah. I guess it is kind of weird, but--"

"*Kind of.* Nuh-uh. Sauce on top of cheese? That's a crime. Every time I think about it, I want to call Special Cheese Victims Unit."

"I hope you don't think about it a lot."

"Only as much as I have to, whenever that nightmare pops back into my brain. Now, this," he gestured to the box with suitable flair, "is good pizza. I would have moved to New York just for this."

"Why *did* you move to New York?"

Half an hour ago, Lex would have sworn he could eat a whole pizza by himself. After two slices, suddenly he couldn't eat another bite. A large part of it was probably that he wasn't used to eating big, rich meals anymore. Soup kitchens and church groups did what they could, but there had to be enough to go around.

He looked at his hands, brushing off the dust from the crisp crust as he tried to explain it.

"Somebody get the SCVU on the phone, because things are about to get excessively cheesy." Aaron didn't crack a smile, so obviously, he couldn't joke his way out of this one. He answered honestly, "I had a dream. I wanted to make art. I've made comics since forever, and

I wanted to make them in the place that so many of the great ones are set. Seems kind of romantic and rose-coloured, now."

"Not at all," Aaron insisted. "You're doing it, right? Ryan talks about your cool job all the time. You're going through a rough patch, but you'll get there."

"Thanks." *Rough patch* was the understatement of the decade, but *desolate, uninhabitable patch* didn't have a good ring to it and was for Lex to know and Aaron to never find out. "Man, with the amount of stuff Ryan talks about at work, you'd think he'd never get anything done."

"Oh, he does his job. I'm just always around when he has a captive audience too busy doing crunches to talk about themselves."

Lex laughed again, and settled deeper into the couch, happy to curl up into a comfortable ball while Aaron finished eating and the cat judged them from afar. They didn't manage to demolish the whole thing since Lex wasn't doing his part. The pizza cooled on the table while the two of them sat and talked about nothing in particular, teasing each other as usual.

Aaron was different here. On his own turf, he wasn't so stiff. He wasn't expecting a blow, here, Lex realized. At work, he was constantly on guard, hypervigilant so he could prevent an ambush of his one-man army.

Lex would have stayed up and made bad jokes all night, but it was hard to deliver punchlines when he was yawning every minute.

"It's late," Aaron said, leaning forward and up off the couch in one slow, smooth move. "Let me put this away and I'll get you settled."

While Aaron bustled around putting pizza in tupperware and getting a sheet for Lex's couch-bed, while Lex stewed in The Awkwardness of not being entirely comfortable in someone's living space.

He basically lived at Ryan's house in the summers, so he knew what was expected of him. Where the forks were, how loud the TV could be before the neighbouring duplex occupant banged on the wall. Little things that made him almost family instead of a houseguest.

"I'll probably go to sleep soon," Aaron said as he handed over some pillows. "Do you mind if I turn out the lights?"

"Not at all. Me too." He watched, quiet and unsettled as Aaron went around flicking switches until the only light was the blue glow from the kitchen and the warm spill from the bathroom. "Thanks for this."

Aaron took the pillows from Lex's hands, placing them at the end of the couch himself. "It's nothing."

"It isn't. It's definitely something. Letting a stranger into your home, it's--"

"But we're not strangers." Aaron had frozen, giving Lex one of his penetrating, unwavering stares that happened more frequently now. "We're not friends, but I know so much more about you than someone I pass in the street."

Lex's breath caught and he couldn't seem to get it back again. "Like what?"

"I know you love your art. Your fingers twitch all the time, like they wish they had a pen in them. You don't like your hair."

"What?"

"You push it out of your way, and you're rough with it. Not vain."

Aaron was truly incredible--as in hard to credit. He had trouble telling what was obviously sarcasm, but he could look at Lex and see little things like that and understand him like he was reading DNA strands.

"I know how you kiss."

If Lex had any air left in his lungs, that stole it.

"Like you'd die if you had to stop," Aaron said, his quiet passion stark through the shadows. "And I can't stop thinking about it."

No words came to him. Everything he could think of was too flippant, or it would give away what he didn't have to spare.

"Sorry," Aaron mumbled, his eyes dropping to the floor. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm going to just--"

He was drifting away and closing the door to the bathroom before Lex could think of a response.

Instead, Lex was left alone in the airy, high-ceilinged space, wishing he could bury himself under the borrowed quilt made by someone's grandma and sleep until morning. It was impossible, after that.

He wandered instead, walking the perimeter, keeping his hands off Aaron's things, but letting his eyes do the exploring. He knew just as much about Aaron as Aaron knew about

him, he realized, and he was entranced by the idea. Someone else knew him, could see him and had a vested interest in Lex continuing to breathe. Sure, Aaron would prefer Lex didn't bother him, but he *cared* enough that it mattered.

He was high on it. It was more than just human interaction, which he searched out like a fix every day. Human *connection*, with a man who seemed superhuman until he was locked behind the closed airlock doors in his own mothership.

The actual length of time he spent drifting around wasn't important. The time Aaron took to shower and come back could have been an hour or five minutes, and Lex still would have thought *finally* and *not yet*.

His pacing had brought him to the long partition wall that shielded the bathroom, so he was the first thing that Aaron saw when he opened the door. He'd changed his clothes again. He wore a different T-shirt and loose boxers that hid nothing. The fabric of both looked even thinner than the work out clothes Lex had seen him in.

Aaron looked so soft, while the body underneath was so strong. A warm, cozy safe place with built-in defences.

Scenes from a nature documentary intruded. Choosy lady birds who picked a man by the size and structure of their house suddenly seemed more relatable.

"I like that we aren't strangers," Lex said.

The light around them was dim. The apartment was hushed, a false mid-evening isolation, the only place in New York City that was motionless, except for Lex's body as he stepped up to Aaron and kissed him.

It was a zero to 60 kind of kiss. Aaron went from sleepy and shower-warm to awake and fully active under Lex's palms. The last time hadn't been about kissing, so this time, even as his conscience screamed in the back of his head about how this was a *bad idea*, he sank into it, greedy.

There were no walls. No barriers to keep them from stumbling, their lips still frantic and grasping, to the bed. Aaron had enough presence of mind to take his shirt off, the cozy material brushing against Lex's face as it was pulled overhead. Instead of comforting him with its downy, skin-heated fabric, it just sparked annoyance that it would dare to stop their speeding train.

Logic was a bit of a mood killer. He intended to avoid it at all costs, at least until the morning.

Getting naked with Aaron was thrilling. He already felt paper thin whenever they were together, but baring all in the physical sense was even more disarming. But this wasn't the kind of sex where they explored each other's bodies in soft lighting, discovering scars and spots and getting the story behind them.

As soon as both of them kicked off every article of clothing, Lex used his body--smaller than Aaron's, spare from a lack of excess, but with just enough strength--to push them both onto the island of Aaron's bed.

Their legs tangled. Aaron's hands came to Lex's hips, squeezing as they didn't stop kissing, even though they'd reached the destination required for more. Lex let his hands wander, getting his fingers into Aaron's ribs, loving the twitch of ticklish spots.

It wasn't enough, after a while. The same feverish, unhinged want that made him attach himself to Aaron's face in the first place prodded him to go further, take more, ask for everything. The problem was in the transition. He wanted to be *there*, but *here* was so delicious.

"Fuck me," he gasped when he finally lifted himself away, crawling, unsteady, into the centre of the big bed.

"Lex," Aaron said, breathless.

It was just the kind of *Lex* that he'd been trying to avoid for most of his life. First by cracking joke after joke to anyone who would listen so no one thought to ask if he was okay, then by moving a thousand miles away from his parents, because how could they say his name with that same cautious, diplomatic tone if they weren't there to see him make terrible decisions?

"Don't you want me?" Lex demanded. He wasn't above a guilt trip, or looking back over his shoulder to give Aaron a view he might see more of.

"Yeah. But--" Aaron's voice was strained and low, but he melted, his eyes raking up Lex's naked back. "Lex, are you sure?"

*Yes. No.* "Yes."

"Okay."

Aaron took him at his word, leaning over and pressing his mouth to Lex's shoulder blade, urging him onto his stomach on the bed. The sheets smelled clean, like soap, but Lex was more focused on how it felt to press his face into them as Aaron dragged slow hands

down his back and sides. It was like a massage, but without any knot or major muscle group in mind. Just touch, for the sake of it.

He was almost grateful when it stopped. He was too close to crying, and the rise of blood to his skin too visceral.

He waited, breathing shallowly into the bed while Aaron slid open the bedside drawer. A bit of a cliché, maybe, but simple, efficient, and dependable. Like Aaron.

The sound of conscientious preparation was familiar to him, even though he hadn't heard it in a long time. The crinkle of plastic, for later. The click and suction of a tube, the thump of it hitting the bedside drawer when Aaron was finished with it. It was a strange kind of music to him, swelling to a crescendo with Lex's gasp at cool fingers pressed to his hole.

No matter how long it was incoming, no one was ever really prepared for the shock of cold lube on warm, sensitive bits.

There was no hesitation in Aaron's fingers. He'd lost the tentative, careful way he spoke and moved in public, and used his steady, thick digits with ease in private. Did he do this for himself, Lex wondered, rubbing his cheek against the covers and imagining Aaron doing the same thing.

The vision of Aaron's body writhing on these same sheets broke apart under the distracting, even pulses of his fingers. He'd worked up to two, patient and silent, and their size meant it was much more of a tight fit than two of Lex's. The stretch was an exquisite case of muscle memory, reminding him what he'd missed and getting him to the edge of riotous pleasure again, quicker than he'd like.

"Stop," he mouthed into the mattress under his face. He had to lift his head and repeat himself before Aaron heard him and did as he asked.

More than anything, he wanted to push Aaron down onto his back and ride him until his legs ached and he was seasick from rocking, but realistically, he was too tired. If he was out of it enough to walk into a busy street without looking both ways, he probably wouldn't last long if he was in charge.

He settled instead for the next best thing. "This way," he said, rolling on his back and tugging at Aaron's shoulders until he got the message and crawled over Lex, bracketing him with his limbs in close-quartered missionary.

They wasted their time by kissing again because for once, time wasn't precious. They had nothing but time, hours until the sun rose and either of them turned into unattractive pumpkins with commitment issues.

There was a limited time Aaron could hold himself up, however, so Lex let him go, waiting passively for Aaron to remember the condom perched next to them and to slide it on, slick his fingers again and press his fisted cock to Lex's hole.

Lex reeled him in as he was breached, wrapping skinny arms around wide shoulders, never so grateful for having limbs that went for days. By the time Aaron was finished being careful and had set a slow, rolling pace, they were so entwined, legs and hands and fingers grasping, it would have taken a chisel to get them apart before they were ready.

The pleasure was creeping, a banked, still scorching fire, building to nothing in particular. It felt like they'd skipped a few steps. Past the passion of the first few months, into sleepy, late-night, barely-trying sex that still felt so damn good he never wanted to stop.

Aaron's breath sawed in his ear. It was one of the only ways he could tell when they were close to the end, when it caught and made a noise like a rumble, a low, wrenching, repeated groan.

That, and the graze of teeth against his throat. An accident, probably, but also a catalyst for the orgasm gathering in Lex's balls, ramping it up and almost getting him there before Aaron had come, but not quite.

As it was, he finished himself off while Aaron panted on his collarbone, snaking a sweaty hand between his dick and Aaron's trembling stomach and twisting his wrist in the cramped space until he was gasping, his body an arced current, then a slack, twisted line.

Exhaustion didn't even let him enjoy the afterglow. He went from alive and warm to tired and cold when Aaron stumbled from the bed, tugging the sheets against the skin of his back.

He wasn't cold for long. When Aaron came back, he didn't kick him out or make pointed suggestions that he go back to the untouched couch bed. Instead, he inserted himself under Lex's shoulder until there was no other option but to roll on his side and allow himself to be held snugly from behind.

It wasn't bad. The blanket was heavy, but not restrictive. He was dirty, and would regret not cleaning up in the morning, but he would be cozy until he fell asleep, warm and for once, not in a state of vigilance.

In Aaron's arms, he felt cared for. Like this wasn't a desperate, inadvisable bid for normalcy in his life where there could be none.

## Chapter 8

Oh, yeah. Going to sleep with come all over his stomach was a terrible idea.

Lex sat up in the bed, wincing at the tug of sticky skin on his stomach. Gross. And his head hurt. Why? He'd gotten a damn good night's sleep, for once. A full--he squinted blearily at the alarm clock on the nightstand--nine or ten hours of shut-eye.

Well, that was probably why. His body was yelling at him for his sudden gluttony.

Aaron was nowhere to be found. Pretty hard to hide in an apartment with *no freaking walls*, so he was either in the bathroom or he'd fallen off the face of the earth. Or, given that the gym was open seven days a week, maybe he was at work already. That was far more likely, and a distinct possibility, it turned out, since opening the bathroom door revealed neither Aaron nor a serial killer.

Two long, hot showers in just over 12 hours? Life was rarely so kind to him, so he took advantage in Aaron's absence. Took advantage of a lot of things, actually. He physically cringed under the showerhead, wrapping his arms over the top of his head as the water ran across his skin, taking the grime of last night's sex down the drain.

The towel he'd used last night was still hanging up on the door, damp, but not too wet. He dragged it quickly, punishingly over his body, then put it back on the door, taking a minute to press his face against it, burying his fingers in the rough, soaked terry. It smelled like laundry and shampoo, not like sin and sweat, like the bed. He didn't know which he preferred.

Aaron was waiting for him when he walked out, carrying a paper bag and wearing a shirt and pants more presentable than his sleep clothes, but still not work clothes. (Aaron seemed to go through life dressed in things that could all be described as comfy, but in varying levels of formality.)

"Good morning!" Lex said, too loud, too cheerful, and too rough to pretend it wasn't the first thing he'd said that day.

"Hey. Muffin?" Aaron opened the bag and held it out to him at arm's length, like he was feeding a skittish animal at a petting zoo.

Lex wanted to refuse on principle, but he was wicked hungry, and he didn't know what principle he'd refuse on. The first muffin he pulled out was lemon poppyseed, and he

must have made a face, because Aaron told him there was blueberry, too, and made him switch it out.

They sat at Aaron's small kitchen table, eating muffins warm from someone's oven, without butter. Lex's crumbled on the plain blue plate Aaron had fetched from the kitchen, and he finished it in pieces while he tried to find a way to say what he needed to before he left.

"Aaron," he said, giving up on preparing something and just going for it. "Nothing's changed--"

"I know," Aaron said, putting his perfectly halved muffin top back on his plate. "I knew it last night. You already told me you're not interested, and I didn't expect anything different."

"Oh." He ran his finger along the edge of the porcelain. He knew his eyes were wide with--not quite shock, but he certainly wasn't unsurprised.

"I'm not stupid or naive."

Lex shook his head, wishing he had more of a poker face. "I didn't think you were." Aaron seemed to accept that, his spine unbristling. Lex still felt like an asshole, even forgiven as he was, so he blurted out, "I'm sorry."

Aaron shrugged, and it was natural enough that Lex could believe his nonchalance. "There's nothing to forgive," he said. "You had a good time, so did I. People have one night stands all the time."

"Not usually with people they have to see the next day at work."

"Well, that won't be a problem for too much longer, will it? You'll get your feet back under you and stop coming around so much."

*Ouch.* Honest, but harsh, in true Aaron George fashion.

"Yeah," he allowed, "but not yet. My landlord says they're waiting for a cheap water heater from China or something, it's going to take weeks."

He hated how easily the lies dripped from his tongue now.

"It sounds like a hellhole, with your roommate and everything. Why don't you move?"

"Oh, just move, he says!" Lex scoffed, his indignance only partially inflated. "If I could scrounge up first and last month's rent that easy, I would have done it weeks ago."

Thankfully, Aaron let it go, accepting Lex's drama with an eye roll and a perfectly neat bite of muffin. Lemon poppyseed, because he was weird and enjoyed eating dusty lollipops in bread form.

"When I walk through that door, things go back to normal," Lex said later, his backpack on his shoulders and his hand on the doorknob. "I'll be back to the gym, you'll try to stop me, and fail, because I'm awesome and sneaky. You'll pretend to be pissed off--"

"I *am* pissed off."

"Yeah, yeah." Lex grinned and poked him in the centre of the chest. The minuscule contact felt strangely intimate, now that he knew what it was like to touch that skin without the barrier of cotton.

"See you later, Lex," Aaron said, on a long-suffering sigh.

"Don't ever change, man. Seriously. And thank you. Again."

Aaron nodded and let the heavy door fall closed. Lex made his own way to the stairs that led from the cluster of apartments back to the street, and walked, loose-legged, a weight on his chest, and couldn't bring himself to regret a single second of the last day.

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Showers washed away a multitude of sins. Problems and worries. Pain, sometimes. In high school, he'd curl up fetal in the tub with the water beating down on the back of his neck. He was never sure if it actually helped with the migraines or the acidic, churning nausea that came with them, but it somehow made him feel more human when all he wanted to do was scoop his eyes out of their sockets.

They didn't fix everything, though. Sometimes, the problems that had seemed insurmountable while the water heated up were just as daunting when the tap was shut off. Lex was hoping that today wouldn't be one of those showers. Today, he was hoping for a miracle.

He wanted to check his phone as he stood on the escalator up to the gym, letting it do the work for once, but reading the email again wouldn't change the words.

*Thank you for your interest. However, another applicant has been selected...*

Nothing new. He'd heard it a thousand times, along with *Sorry, we're not hiring*, and *2-3 years job experience*. But this time seemed particularly hard to bear.

He'd given his all in that interview. Talked the talk, made compelling eye contact, spouted all the interesting facts he'd learned on the company website. He'd walked out feeling like a champion, and like his luck had changed.

This was why he preferred being a pessimist. No hope meant no crushing disappointment.

It was a testament to how out of it he was that he didn't realize his path to the showers was blocked until he met a wall of human. He looked up at the immovable object and froze when he saw Aaron's sly little grin.

This was a red letter day, and Aaron knew it. As adamant as he was that Lex not sneak in, Aaron was doing a remarkably poor job of keeping him out. For once, the timing was in his favour, and Lex was out of luck.

Lex deflated, losing inches of height that he felt like he'd never get back.

"Fine," he bit out, and he turned to go.

"What's wrong?" Aaron demanded before Lex could get back to the entrance.

It was a little like calling an ex-boyfriend for a ride in a pinch. He and Aaron had an experience between them that wasn't relevant to the conversation, but it refused to be forgotten regardless, rearing its awkward head as Lex tried to think of an excuse to brush him off.

"Nothing," he said, convincingly. "Just a really bad day."

"Doesn't seem like nothing."

Of *course*. The one time Aaron wasn't going to take his words at face value was the one time he'd lost his knack for pretending nothing was wrong when, really, *everything* was wrong.

(Even in his head, Lex knew he wasn't being fair. Aaron was more perceptive than Lex's pissed-off internal monologue gave him credit for.)

"I'll deal with it," he said, plastering on a slash of a smile. "I always do."

Aaron swayed on his feet, his arms still crossed over his chest, but less confrontational and more disappointed teacher demanding an explanation for sub-par homework. "Still. I'm sorry you have to...deal."

"It's fine," he choked past the tight knot of misery in his throat. "Nothing you can do about it."

He'd already done more than enough for Lex. Selfish, childish Lex, who wouldn't just go out and get a real job, because of his fucking dream of gainful employment in a creative setting. Instead, he stole and he lied, and he took advantage of good men like Aaron.

Aaron, who looked at him, and made him want to spill every secret on the floor in a sticky mess that wouldn't feel better out than in.

"Wait here," Aaron said.

Lex's feet were too heavy to do anything but what he was told. He was a lot better at waiting, now that it was all he ever did.

When Aaron came back from behind the desk, his index finger ink-stained on the side, like Lex's always were, he held a glossy blue and white card. He held it out with a grimace.

"I know I said your trial period ended weeks ago," Aaron gritted out, like he was in the middle of getting a flu shot. "But it wasn't on the books. Officially, this is your initial visit, so your three days starts tomorrow."

Lex took the card with cold fingers. They didn't shake, thankfully, or sweat on the crisp edges of the expensive stock.

"Thank you," he said. But was that really it? Was there a synonym for intense gratitude that was appropriate for this situation? People didn't prostrate themselves anymore, and they certainly didn't do it over a free three-day trial for a fancy health club, but there wasn't much Aaron could have offered him that would be worth more to him at that moment.

"Don't abuse it," Aaron grumbled, but it lacked the bite Lex would have expected.

To anyone else, it would probably be insulting. As stomach-churning as the businessman who'd strong-armed Lex over to the nearest halal cart the other day and made a big show for his buddies of buying something for 'his friend here,' the pitiful kid who'd spent the whole day sketching the bank with all of his worldly possessions at his feet.

The card in his hand only gave him three days. Lex would've snuck in anyway, to use the same hot water that he would without Aaron's permission, but this gave him something else. A bit of dignity, and the confirmation that somebody gave a shit that he was having a bad day.

And who knew? Perhaps by the end of the three days, he'd have an expiry date on his current way of life. Tomorrow, he could get a call offering him the job of his life.

Then again, he'd thought that last week. And the week before.

"Why do you keep saving the day, huh?" Lex demanded. "You got a hero complex I don't know about?"

"No. You just seem to need a bit of saving right now." Aaron lifted a casual shoulder as he backed up, clearing the way for Lex to go where he always did. "You'll pay it forward."

"Maybe."

If he ever became a rich, eccentric queer living in a fancy place in Manhattan, he'd take in as many strays like himself as possible. And he'd make sure he was easy to find.

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15 minutes and way too much hot water later, Lex still didn't have a job or a place to live but he had clean skin, conditioned hair and eyes that opened fully without ripping any eyelashes out with crusty sleep goop.

Aaron was at the desk, scanning the tags of a group of guys headed for the mirror-walled weight room, nodding at each of them in a movement that seemed so practiced it must have been taught to him by someone. Lex grinned just imagining it.

*Okay, Aaron. This is how we casually greet a member of the Dudebro genus, subspecies meathead. They will think you are one of them, so you must use your mimicking abilities, or the interaction will quickly devolve into a battle of dominance. Dominance over what, you ask? No one knows.*

The desk didn't hold the same power it used to, when he first started coming around. It was like this impenetrable throne, encasing the experts and maintaining the sanctity of the castle, but then he found out that three years' worth of forgotten ID cards were kept in an old cereal box in the back of a drawer, and Imani hid her favourite granola bars behind the printer, because she wasn't supposed to have them. Someone had a peanut allergy, but it wasn't like they'd *die*, she'd told him.

Yeah, not quite a mighty fortress.

"Is that your family?" Lex asked, pointing at the screen of Aaron's laptop even though he knew the answer. It was another print of the picture that hung on Aaron's wall at home, of colourful pride flags and Aaron sheepishly thrown into the middle.

"Yes." Aaron reached for the lid of his computer to close it, but Lex stopped him with a few fingers on the display. They left an oily smudge, which Aaron frowned at, then swiped ineffectively with his own thumb, but the laptop stayed open.

“They look nice.” Nice like an apple pie made with fruit they all picked themselves at a local farm. A cozy, familiar niceness that settled into the spaces between their bones and kept them tied to each other in a way distance couldn’t overcome.

“They are.”

“Do you miss them?” He didn’t know how he knew that they weren’t geographically close. He just did.

"A lot." His finger tapped erratically on the desk next to the computer, like he was only just keeping himself from adding more smudges to the screen.

“Gimme a piece of paper, will you?”

“That guest pass doesn’t entitle you to unlimited office supplies,” Aaron grumbled, but he handed over a sheet of A4.

Lex grabbed a good ink pen from his backpack, then nudged the laptop so he could see the whole picture more clearly and pointed to the tall girl in the centre.

“Who’s that?”

“My older sister. Brittany.”

“Tell me about her.”

Lex's pen scratched musically on the thin, low-quality paper while Aaron, with surprisingly little prompting, said more in one go than Lex had ever heard him say.

His dad thought black pepper was way too spicy. His mom could eat a whole jalapeno without flinching.

Brittany still hadn’t told their parents about the tattoo she’d gotten on her 18th birthday, but Aaron thought they knew anyway.

Tyler, his younger brother, had more musical talent in his pinky finger than the rest of their extended family had combined, but he only practiced in the shower or in the corner of the basement with the door closed.

The picture took shape quickly, guided by the reference photo, but not married to it. He took liberties with their facial expressions, adding his own style, but kept the exuberance. It was a happy occasion, unmarred by the knowledge that they’d lose their middle child to the wilds of New York City in just a few years. Or maybe they did know, and they were full of so much love that it didn’t matter or ruin the atmosphere.

When it was done, he didn’t sign it. It wasn’t about him, and he didn’t want to leave a reminder of himself behind, in case Aaron didn't have good memories of Lex in the future.

"This is great," Aaron said when it was finished, holding it carefully by the sides of the paper. "They'll love it."

"You like it too, right?"

"Of course." He looked up at Lex, smiling across the desk like he'd been given a generous Christmas bonus three months early. "Thank you."

"It's nothing."

It cost Lex nothing but a couple millimetres of ink to make Aaron smile like that, and as he left with the guest pass safe and dry in his pocket, he knew he was far from repaying his debts.

## Chapter 9

Aaron loved texting.

He still remembered the few times, as a kid, that he'd been forced to use the landline to call people. Classmates, his singular friend, his aunt. He'd dragged his feet and protested loudly to try to get his parents to change their minds.

He'd even *liked* his aunt. He just hated talking on the phone to her.

Texting, though, was his childhood dream come true.

He had whole minutes to decide what he wanted to say. Or, in some cases, *hours*. Like today. Troy had texted him that morning just as he'd been putting his things into the locker on the end of the row, asking if he'd like to get a coffee tomorrow after their session.

Aaron had spent the morning stressing out about it, but on a low level. A comfortable, back burner stress. He'd gone through all the stages of fear, denial, and acceptance, and just before his break had ended he'd sent back his reply:

*Sure.*

The phone went back into his bag immediately, locked away so he didn't have to think about it. There wasn't anything he could do about it, now that it was sent, but this way, he wouldn't be tempted to compose some kind of follow-up and ruin everything.

Today was a good day. He had a potential new client to meet. He'd already seen Brenda, who was happier than ever. Later, he had an appointment with Sandy, who talked through every exercise to try and make him lose count of the number of push-ups she'd done. (He never lost count. Ever.)

The list of things that could ruin his good day was a short one. It didn't include the strange playlist Phil had chosen today that consisted of techno-polka jams. Or the hour he was scheduled to man the front desk.

Or Lex, only his arm visible as it stretched across the threshold, waving a stick with a piece of paper stuck on it.

Instinct had him rounding the desk, but he'd only gotten a few steps when he recognized the white flag for what it was.

"I come in peace!" Lex shouted.

Aaron could see a clerk from one of the jewelry stores on the other side of the mall perk up like a groundhog to see what was happening.

"This really isn't necessary," Aaron told him.

"Is it safe?" Lex peeked around the door, completely sideways like a sneaky cartoon character. "See my flag?"

"How did you even do that?"

He emerged fully, carefully peeling his three day pass off the stick. "Ingenuity," he declared. "And some tape I borrowed from the office supply shop downstairs. The woman appreciates a good joke."

"Lex, it's fine." He worked on keeping his best glare in place while Lex inched toward the desk with the pass outstretched. "Would you put that thing away?"

Lex stuffed both the pass and the stick into the top of his backpack without taking it off, which lifted the bottom of his T-shirt. Aaron had to look away, fighting down inconvenient memories of what Lex's body had felt like rolling up into his, and embarrassment over being sent into conniptions over an inch of pale stomach.

"You're not going to try to toss me out?" Lex asked, carefully placing his palms on the desk, like they'd be electrocuted at any second.

"Of course not. You've got a pass."

"And if I decided I wanted to get in a work out, as well? You wouldn't stop me from going over there and lifting some heavy things and putting them down?"

Aaron rolled his eyes, picturing all the ways it could go wrong. "I'm not going to keep you from killing yourself, no."

"Alright," Lex said slowly. "You're absolutely sure that this little piece of paper is going to make it okay for me to be here?"

"Yes, okay?" He was already regretting giving the only inch he ever would. "How many times do you want me to say it? Our policy is that potential members are given one three day pass to try out anything they like."

Lex's eyes brightened. "Even--"

"Not smoothies. Those are extra."

"Damn."

"Until that pass expires, you can do whatever you want, within the rules and regulations of the gym, which are posted over there for your reference."

Lex looked to where he'd pointed, then back at him, a small, bemused smile growing on his lips, one that Aaron had never seen.

"Good to know," he said, then he leaned on his elbows on the tall desk. "You really care about rules, don't you?"

"Yes,' Aaron answered right away. He'd thought that much was obvious.

Lex looked down at his fingers, drumming them on the counter. "You'd get along with my parents," he said, quick and almost light, if not for the tightness around the edges of his voice.

Aaron shrugged. "I don't know. Having a kid who always follows the rules isn't all it's cracked up to be. My parents used to worry about me." They still worried about him, but Lex didn't need to know that. "Whenever my school called, they always joked that it was the principal telling them I was in trouble, but I think they started to hope that one day it would be. They started to value normal over well-behaved. They probably would have jumped for joy if I'd been caught drinking or something."

Lex laughed, quiet but real, and a bubble of surprised pride made Aaron's chest feel too small.

"I can just picture it," Lex said, as he leaned over the counter to prod at the picture on the wall of the desk. "The two of them waiting at the door with a cake and balloons while you suffer through a bad tequila hangover."

"Tequila? Are you kidding? Knowing me, I would have found something with an illegal alcohol content so I could get plastered from two shots, then go home to bed."

Lex laughed with his whole body. He was always laughing. Loud or soft, quick snickers or bold guffaws. Aaron had seen him laugh so many times, but he'd never been able to relax enough to really *see* it. It was...charming.

And Aaron needed to find a task to do. *Quickly*.

"I have to go," he said. "I need to wash something."

"Cool. Don't let me keep you." Lex walked backwards, snaking a hand under his shirt to pretend his heart was leading him. "That generic shampoo you guys buy in bulk is calling out to me with its sweet perfume."

Aaron managed to fight a smile and shake his head at Lex's antics, but then he frowned. "Wait, aren't you going to work out first?"

"Oh, god no. I was just bluffing."

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"Go get 'em, buddy," Ryan said, patting Aaron on the shoulder hard enough to make him sway. Or maybe that was just his nerves.

Aaron nodded and walked out to the front of the large open area that usually hosted their scheduled classes, but today would act as a stage for Aaron's worst nightmare.

Public speaking.

"Hello, everyone, my name--"

A chorus of half-hearted hellos interrupted his carefully written and memorized script. He supposed he should have expected it, but he prayed he wouldn't have to go too far off-book.

"My name is Aaron," he started again. "You might have seen me around the gym. I'm a personal trainer, and today I'm going to show you a few things about Brazilian jiu jitsu."

It hadn't been his idea. He'd totally forgotten he'd put his purple belt on his application for the job, but when Phil had cornered him about it the week before, he couldn't find a good enough reason to refuse to run a demo for any interested members.

He started off with a short history lesson. Shorter, even, than his script had prescribed, because the longer he spoke, the more worried he was that everyone was indescribably bored.

"I'm not an instructor," he told them next. "I'm really only an intermediate level, but we wanted to give you all a quick rundown of what you can expect from your first class, to gauge your interest."

A ripple of excitement went through the gathered crowd. Aaron tracked it all the way to the edge of the room, where Ryan was standing, his smile jacked up to blinding in encouragement. When he met Aaron's eyes, he lifted his hands to give a double thumbs up which, on one hand, made Aaron feel like a seventh grader being forced to ask his crush to the dance, and on the other, actually did encourage him.

At his shoulder stood Lex, who waved cheerily, smiling almost as wide as Ryan, his hair still wet and curling a little around his ears.

Aaron had almost forgotten he was at the gym today. Lex had sailed past him with a wave, and hadn't come out of the showers before he was changing into his gi. He'd been a bit disappointed, he could admit, that he'd been too busy with a client to stop and have a conversation.

But perhaps fate had had a better plan in mind.

"I'm going to need a volunteer," Aaron announced.

Several hands shot up. Aaron only had eyes for one person.

"No. Oh, no," Lex was saying. He turned to leave, but Ryan--dear, wonderful Ryan--caught him around the waist and swung him back in the direction of the demo area.

"Just one volunteer," Aaron was saying, pretending to consider other people. When he got back to Lex, he widened his eyes and fought to keep his professional smile from creeping toward maniacal. "How about you?"

Aaron would very much have liked to be close enough to hear the short conversation whispered furiously between Lex and Ryan, but whatever they said, it ended in Lex looking betrayed...and winding slowly through the crowd to the front.

"Everybody give Lex a hand!" Ryan yelled, cracking his hands together with eardrum-shaking volume in that way straight guys did.

There was a smattering of polite applause, and all the eager hands went down. As Lex got closer, Aaron watched his face morph through a few different emotions--annoyance, fear, and finally hope.

"I'm not really dressed for this," he said, waving a hand at his T-shirt and skinny jeans, then at Aaron's get-up. "Maybe someone else should do it, someone with--"

"That's fine, I brought an extra gi for our volunteer." He handed the bag over to Lex's reluctant hands, then pointed to a door off the main area. "You can use the equipment room, there's no window."

"Aaron," Lex whispered, stepping in close so that their audience couldn't see or hear them.

"Lex," he whispered back.

"*Aaron.*"

He patted the bag of clothes clutched to Lex's chest. "Put it on, Lex."

"Why are you punishing me like this?" Lex hissed.

"You know why," Aaron whispered back, just as intense.

They might have called a truce for three days, but Lex had been the cause of Aaron's heartburn for two months now. No amount of surprisingly pleasant conversation, best friend interference or intimate mistakes could keep Aaron from getting this sweet, sweet revenge.

"Alright," Aaron said at full volume. Lex reeled back, wincing, then glared as he stomped off to the impromptu changeroom. "We'll see Lex in two minutes."

While they waited for Lex, Aaron answered a few questions about the sport, looking to Ryan after each response, despite trying not to.

Halfway through a question about lessons and costs, the door to the equipment room opened, slamming into the wall and revealing Lex, drowning in Aaron's extra clothes, with the belt tied all wrong, but with his mouth in a mulish line and his eyes sparkling with outrage.

"Okay, big guy," Lex said, milking his moment in the spotlight. "Let's *do jitsu*."

Aaron had to close his eyes for a second against the physical pain Lex was capable of causing with only a really bad pun. "Sure. We'll start with some basic submission holds."

"Oh, shit."

Two minutes in, he realized he wasn't really cut out for teaching jiu jitsu. He wasn't about to stop halfway through, but he didn't have the patience to go through all the motions verbally before just...doing them. Especially not with someone who had no interest in learning the technique.

"I need a safeword," Lex declared, after half a second of his first collar hold.

"No, you don't."

"I do! I'm feeling unsafe."

"Then tap out."

"Do you take me for a quitter, sir?"

At least people seemed interested. Or amused. Ten minutes in, he started to worry he'd get in trouble with Phil for letting Lex turn their friendly demonstration a little PG-13.

"I need that arm! You bastard, I'm left-handed, I need that!"

Aaron had known there was a reason he'd kept up his grappling skills in college. He'd almost given up on his purple belt, struggling to stay on top of his classes, but now, years later, he'd been given a purpose. A divine calling to annoy Lex Melnick so much, he was red in the face.

Although, that might have been the chokehold.

"So, now that I have him under me like *this--*"

"Oof," Lex said, starfishing on his back.

"I have to make sure my hips are *firmly--*"

"Good *god*."

"--Settled onto his torso, so he has no leverage to get me off when I lean forward like this."

Aaron honestly hadn't given a thought to what might happen if they got so close to each other again. Aaron hadn't had a problem with getting hard under his gi since he was 14, and that'd been more about friction than a crush on any of the guys in his class.

Aaron didn't have a crush on Lex, but when he leaned down and found himself inches from Lex's open, panting mouth, rosy cheeks and messed up hair, the sexual spark that had laid dormant fired to life.

And Aaron needed to *not* be sitting on top of him.

"So, that's the kind of physical activity you're looking at," he said, clambering off and rolling to his feet. "As you can see, it's, uh, vigorous. If you're interested in attending a class, please fill out a suggestion card from Ryan. And thank you to our volunteer."

Lex made a choked, wet noise, but didn't move.

Applause bounced off the ceiling of the open area, and the crowd broke up, most of the bystanders heading for Ryan. Aaron snatched up his water bottle and took a long drink.

He turned around when he heard the squeaking of damp skin on the mat. Lex was struggling to sit up.

"You okay?" Aaron asked, taking pity on him and offering him a drink from his water bottle.

"I'll live," Lex managed, still breathing heavily.

"Good."

With that, Aaron left the mat. As he walked away, smiling, he heard more mat-squeaking.

Then, Lex's outraged cry: "Now I'm all dirty again!"

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"Don't do it."

Aaron knew who it was without looking up from the sandwich display case. "Why not?"

Lex jammed a finger into the glass over the kitschy chalkboard label. "Southwest chipotle might sound exciting, but it's really just way too much cayenne on some dry ass chicken."

"How do you know that?"

"How else? I tried one. Or, Ryan tried one, then gave up after two bites between he's a true Midwest boy who finds paprika spicy. He brought it home for me, but I didn't do much better."

"Good to know." Aaron wasn't one for spice. He'd lost the taste for it after a 'harmless' prank from a co-worker had burned a layer off Aaron's tongue with a hot sauce dosed cookie. "Have any other recommendations?"

Lex made a rude noise with his tongue. "Nope. This place is too fancy for me. Twelve bucks for a sandwich? Are you kidding me?"

"Welcome to New York."

"Amen." Lex looked at his finger as it tapped against the glass. "I'd hate the place if I didn't love it so much."

Aaron had lived a few hours away from the city all his life, but his hometown felt like it was worlds away. He tried to imagine how it must have been for Lex. "Must be different from Iowa."

"Yeah, it sure is," he said, on a breathy laugh, then looked at Aaron, sarcastic admiration on his face. "I can't believe you remembered that."

Aaron rolled his eyes. "Pretty tough to forget. As far as Ryan's concerned, he never left."

"Sounds like him. He'll go back as soon as he convinces his girlfriend that small town life isn't so bad. And then it'll be just me, all alone in the big city." Lex's lips tightened, his fingernail pressing hard into the glass, making the pink nail turn white. "Screening my mother's calls because there's only so many times I can tell her that I'm happier, and I need to be here if I want to do anything with my life, even though it's fucking *hard*, and I wish--"

"Scuse me," a gruff voice said.

They sprang apart, making room for a man in a suit to lean under the glass and grab his food. It was incredible, Aaron thought, how he could forget what he was doing whenever Lex opened his mouth.

"Sorry," Lex said, hitching his backpack higher on his shoulders. "You're probably in a rush."

Aaron shrugged. "Not really. I've got 23 minutes left of my break. Do you want to join me?"

Lex looked as surprised to hear the offer as Aaron was to be making it. "No, I couldn't. I forgot my wallet, and it'd be weird if you had to eat in front of me."

"I could buy you something. Phil pays me pretty well." Not to mention, he wasn't crippled by his rent like everyone else he knew.

"I couldn't do that," Lex protested, but he didn't leave, or even turn to go, which gave Aaron the bravery he needed.

"You could," he insisted. "Please. I never get any company at lunch. It'd be a nice change."

Lex's sudden smile took him more off guard than the fact that he was telling the truth.

"Okay, fine. You smooth talker."

Aaron's snort was involuntary and highly unattractive. "I'd like to see what a real smooth talker could get you to do."

"Well, you kind of already have."

An unaccustomed blush heated Aaron's cheeks, and he fought the urge to run back to the staff break room. He didn't need food, no way. Not when Lex was grinning like that, clearly loving every second of his embarrassment.

"I'll just--I'm going to--" He reached for a sandwich, but Lex batted his hand away.

"Oh, no. Allow me. You're buying, the least I can do is be your pack horse."

He watched with a stomach that plunged like it'd had a weight dropped in it as Lex chose two plastic-wrapped sandwiches from the pile Aaron had been reaching for.

All of them were identical. The same boring fillings and crusty bread, for the same outrageous 10 dollars plus tax.

"Um," Aaron said.

Lex looked up at him. "Yes?"

"Not those ones."

"Not these ones?"

Aaron shook his head, the blush coming back, travelling down his neck this time. He would rather be impaled by one of the plastic straws at the cash register than have the rest of this conversation, but since that wasn't likely to happen, he had to say something, or he wouldn't be able to eat.

"The ones on the end," he forced out, jerking his chin in the direction he meant.

For a disbelieving second, Lex just stared at him, then he said, slowly "Okay," and put down the ones he'd picked up, replacing them with two of the exact same sandwiches from the end of the row. "You want a drink?"

"Water. You get one too."

Again, Lex reached for one in the middle, but he must have seen or felt Aaron tense, because halfway through the motion, he paused and switched his trajectory, grabbing two bottles from the end.

The cashier rushed them through, and they sat down at one of the small tables. The easy flow of conversation they'd had seemed to have left them, but Lex didn't seem to have noticed. He was too busy eating.

He wasn't a messy eater, just...fast. And thorough. Aaron left a few crusts on his napkin, and half a bottle of water. When Lex was finished, there was nothing. Not a crumb.

"Thanks for that," Lex said, when he was leaning back in his chair like he'd gorged at a buffet. "I'll hit you back when it's not a struggle just to buy groceries."

"No problem. You don't have to worry about it."

It was probably the languid posture Lex had been lounging in that made his stiffening so obvious.

"What, no comment about my budgeting skills? Suggestions on how to coupon? An app I should be using to curb spending?"

"No," Aaron said, tearing the corner of his napkin. "I thought we'd steer clear of that. For 24 more hours at least."

Lex showed everything on his face. It was one of the things Aaron liked about him. He never had to wonder if he was seeing something that wasn't there. This time, Aaron saw his strange annoyance fade into confusion then understanding as Lex figured out what he was talking about.

In 24 hours, Lex's guest pass would run out. Everything would go back to normal, until the day Lex could get his hot water turned on, or until he got tired of having to interact with Aaron. Whichever came first.

"Good idea," Lex said, picking up his napkin and folding it into his hand with too much care. "Sorry. I get defensive--"

"It's fine. We all do, about something."

Lex laughed, like he always did, but this one was small, more air than voice. He finally looked up at Aaron when he said, "Why is it that you always seem to be there at my lowest moments? I don't think it's because you bring it out in me. I'm sure you're actually a good influence. Maybe it's just because my low moments seem to be increasing in frequency."

Aaron reached out and plucked the mangled napkin from Lex's fingers, then laid his hand on Lex's forearm. It was tense under his palm, the cords of muscle stretched taut under thin skin.

He missed being physical with people. Yesterday's demonstration didn't count, it wasn't the type of casual touch he used to give and receive when his family was around him. He avoided touching clients as much as possible, and he didn't have that type of relationship with Troy, Ryan or Imani. But with Lex, maybe because they'd been closer than this before, it didn't feel like crossing a line to place a hand on Lex's bare skin and squeeze, because he looked like he needed it just as much as Aaron did.

He looked tired. The purple bruises that used to appear under his eyes occasionally were all but permanent. His nail beds were a mess of dry skin and redness. His skin was clean, but pale. A step away from waxy.

"Lex. I know it's none of my business," he said, quiet enough that he wouldn't be heard by the chatter of the deli. "We don't even know each other that well, but...are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Lex answered, immediately and loudly. "Things are tough right now, but I'm due for a pay raise in a couple months. I'm exactly where I want to be. Living the dream."

On the last word, his voice was throttled, but he was still smiling, his eyes squinting with it.

"If you're sure." He tightened his grip on Lex's arm, like he could press a little harder and get honesty in return. "If that changes, you can--"

"I'm gonna go." The chair squealed as Lex got up, edging clumsily out from between it and the small table. His fingers twitched on the straps of his backpack. "Can't spend all day chatting you up, can I?"

Aaron stood too, his arms extending, like Lex needed steadying but didn't know it yet. "Lex, you could--"

"See you."

He didn't run until he got to the escalator, taking the steps two at a time until he disappeared through the door of the gym, escaping to the showers like he'd done for weeks, and hadn't in three days.

It was strange, Aaron thought, that it'd taken so much watching Lex and hearing his excuses, to make him worry.

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"Help me, Aaron, you're my only hope!"

Aaron looked up from the machine he was cleaning to Imani, who'd leaped up and swung her legs over the pull up bar. Her gathered braids hung almost to the floor, a sleek black and gold rope.

"What do you need, princess?"

She laughed, her body swaying like she wasn't expending any effort at all. "From anyone else, that would sound so creepy. You just sound like a gigantic nerd, but in a good way."

"You started it."

"I sure did. I really do need your help." She righted herself and leaped nimbly down beside him. "I know both you and Ryan are hopeless with cutting fruit into even pieces, and don't get me started about how lame that is, but Ashley just called in sick."

He paused and frowned down at the spray bottle hooked over his fingers. "Who?"

She rolled her eyes. "The blonde desk attendant. The one with the glasses and the cute smile?"

"Oh, yeah. I know her."

"You know, you're going to have to start remembering their names. You've been here for three months, it's past the point where you can get away with being bad with faces. We all wear name tags, Aaron."

"Yeah, I know," he said, wincing. He had no real excuse for not bothering to learn the names of the staff who weren't trainers. At least, not one he could share with Imani. *It's a self-defense mechanism so I don't start thinking of people as friends before they turn on me* was too pitiful a reason to say out loud.

"Well, anyway, she's not coming, but I'm booked back to back from now until five. We're running low on everything at the smoothie station, and we're completely out of strawberries. It's not how we usually do things, but I need you to take care of it."

Aaron's panic was like an alarm clock that started off quiet, then got louder as it continued to beep unchecked. "You want me to..."

"Cut up some fruit and whatever. Yeah."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

Imani's stillness was sudden and ominous. The alarm rang louder.

"What do you mean? It's all in there for you." She was laughing as she said it, probably hoping he was joking. "I know you and Ryan make jokes about cutting off a finger, but that knife is barely sharp enough to cut through cantaloupe. You'll be fine."

"It wouldn't be good."

Her arms folded across her chest. The laughter was gone. "Why? Explain it to me, please. Is it a masculinity thing?"

"No, that's not it." *Keep digging*, he thought, the alarm like a jet engine in his ears now. *Deeper and deeper*. "I just, I can't cook for other people. Something would--I can't."

Everything he touched went wrong. Salmonella. Botulism. Some horrifying insect in the bananas. The members running to the bathroom, turning around and suing the place, shutting it down, all of them losing their jobs--

"It's not *cooking*," she said, her fingers turning pale on her own upper arms. "It's cutting up stuff into slightly smaller pieces, it's not rocket science. I'm not asking you to do this as a favour. It needs to be done, and just because I'm always the one who does it doesn't mean that it isn't in your job description."

"I know that." He couldn't make her understand, because he barely understood it himself. "But things will go wrong."

"Um, sorry to interrupt."

They both turned around quickly. Aaron dropped the spray bottle and picked it up slowly as an excuse not to look at Lex, who was there for his humiliation, once again.

How long ago had it been since Lex had complained that Aaron had seen his lowest moments? A whole half an hour? Aaron still thought he was winning that game.

"Hey, man, I found that medicine for you," Lex was saying, carefree and cheerful, even though Imani's face was still thunderous.

Aaron blinked. The plastic of the spray bottle dented under his fingers. "Medicine?"

"Yeah, for your cold." Lex's eyes bored into his, bright with significance. "I left it at the front desk."

He was lying, Aaron realized. It took him longer than it should have to get with the program, the one where Lex was rescuing him.

"Oh," he said, then he sniffed, hoping it didn't sound completely fake. "I should...probably go and take it."

Imani didn't let him take more than one step. "We still have a problem to solve. My client is going to be here in five minutes, so even if you're sick, you'll have to help."

"What's the problem?" Lex asked, inserting himself between them.

"Uh, work stuff," she tried to brush him off.

"What kind? Can I help?"

Aaron suddenly started to feel a little better about how easily Lex steamrolled him sometimes. He was an unstoppable force of friendly conversation, and Imani wasn't immune to it. She told him about Ashley, about her packed schedule, and glossed over her anger at Aaron, which Lex certainly must have heard.

"Well, I know how to fix that," Lex said. "I can do it."

Before Aaron even had to clamp down on his gut response, Imani was already saying, "I don't think that's allowed," but Aaron could tell she was reluctant to say it. It was the perfect solution.

"Oh, come on," Lex argued, slinging an arm across the back of Imani's shoulders. "We both know I do a lot of things that aren't allowed. What's one more? I want to help out, pay you back for being so cool about all this."

Aaron wanted to argue. He knew it was against the rules, but what could he do? It wasn't his decision, and if he did say something, what was the alternative? At least this way, the hard place he chose instead of the rock wouldn't get him fired, and neither was it his bad call if something went wrong.

And didn't that just make it so much worse.

Imani didn't need any more convincing. "Sure. I'll show you the room." She didn't shrug off Lex's arm as they walked away, but she did turn back once. "Feel better, Aaron," she said. It was close to an apology, but there was still a suspicion there that he was glad to see.

He didn't deserve her full forgiveness or trust.

"Thanks," he said, then he escaped to the desk, to find the imaginary medicine for his made-up cold.

He felt numb. The alarm was still sounding, but it was farther away, less urgent. He'd just lied to a co-worker, who he valued and respected. And the worst part was, even though it was awful, he couldn't deny that everything had turned out better for it. Well, better for him.

Aaron stood at the desk on autopilot, scanning key cards and greeting members as they walked in, the sandwich he'd shared with Lex churning in his stomach. He thought he must be feeling something similar to a teenager who was most of the way out of the mall with a shoplifted pair of earrings in their pocket. Almost free, but still so, so far from being out of trouble.

When he saw Lex coming out of the kitchen, he didn't hesitate to put the *Back Soon!* sign up. Lex was already heading for the changerooms, but Aaron got there quicker, grabbing him by his slightly sticky hand and dragging him to the changing stall at the end of the row.

"Why did you do that?" Aaron demanded.

"Do what?" Lex gave up on trying to stay upright and sank to the bench at the back of the stall. "Save your whole entire ass?"

"I didn't need your help."

"What was the other option? Continue to dig yourself deeper into your coworker hating your guts?" Lex paused, his derision softening. "What even was that? I know you're not afraid of hard work, so why wouldn't you just do what she asked?"

For the first time, Aaron regretted stashing them both in a tiny cubicle meant for one. There was nowhere to look except Lex's eyes, that saw too much.

"It's hard to explain," he muttered. "But I shouldn't have lied, and I hate that you had to lie for me."

Lex slumped on the bench, his fingers tapping the wood by his legs. "Okay. Yeah, maybe it was the wrong call. I was just trying to help you deal with whatever's going on with you."

"Nothing's going on," Aaron argued, instantly on the defensive. It was probably the worst thing he could have said, and Lex rolled his eyes, entirely unconvinced and not afraid to show it.

"Alright, if you say so. I kind of thought we were past that, but if you don't want to tell me what you're fighting against, then fine."

"Nothing's wrong with me." *You hope*, an insidious voice spoke. "Please don't do that again. If something happens, I'll get myself out of it myself."

Lex sat up straight on the bench, growing inches in his indignation. "So, you can offer to come to my rescue, but I can't return the favour?"

"What are you talking about?"

"An hour ago. You, asking if I'm okay like you know the first thing about what I'm--" He stood up, leaving whatever he was going to say behind, looking down at the handle of the door like he wanted to reach for it. "Like you could help. You can't, so stay out of my business."

"Only if you stay out of mine."

"I will."

"Fine."

They were close, like this, in the cramped space of the cubicle. Lex's eyes snapped with anger instead of being weighed down and dark with the strange sadness Aaron had seen more than once that day.

They were close enough that Aaron could see the fragile, crepey skin at the corners of Lex's eyes, and smell the sweet, earthy residue of the fruit he'd been handling.

Aaron wanted to kiss him. It struck him suddenly, like a blow from behind, the realization that he wanted to put his lips on Lex's temple next to those wrinkles and bring his juice covered hands up to his face so he could taste them.

"Thank you," he said instead. An intimacy of a different kind. "For what you did just now."

He felt the rush of Lex's breath leaving him and watched in confusion as he dropped his head into his hands and groaned.

"I don't understand you at all," he said, muffled by his pink and purple fingers. "First, you're all nice, like you care."

*I do care*, he wanted to say, but it sounded like the beginning of a list.

"Then you jump down my throat for trying to help. Now you're thanking me?"

"I'm trying to apologize." He might end up going gray in the process. "I'm not good at it," he confessed.

"What are you good at?"

He had to think about the right answer for a while. His job, mostly, but only on days that didn't require him to be a normal human being.

"Picking things up," he decided. "Putting them down again. And fucking up. I'm pretty good at that, too."

He let Lex stare at him for long moments that he wanted to shrink away from. Lex still looked mad, but then in a split second, he broke out in a smile, letting out a small, soft laugh.

"Damn it," Lex said. "I was doing so well, too. But then you have to go and say something like that."

"What do you mean? I just--"

Lex was kissing him. His lips were planted on Aaron's and his body was pushing him into the door of the changeroom, insistent, demanding, but gentling the longer Aaron let it go on.

As if Aaron would ever ask him to stop, when the live wire of Lex's body was under his hands, and the taste of him was in his mouth. A little like toothpaste, actually.

He didn't know how he had time or attention to notice something like that, when Lex was a slow start to a wildfire. The kiss was long, *involved*, not a means to any end but an experience itself.

Aaron peeled his hands away from bracing on the door and slid them up Lex's back, wishing he was touching skin, wishing he was brave enough to bury his fingers in Lex's hair, wishing this could go on forever--

Lex stepped away, putting himself out of reach of Aaron's hands as best he could in the small space. They were both breathing a little harder, the stall shrinking around them.

One of the taps had a leak. Aaron could hear it smack against the porcelain sink outside and echo around the room. He'd have to take care of that, he thought absently. He couldn't let the members suffer through a sound as loud as a gunshot every time they used the bathroom.

Or maybe that was just what *he* was hearing.

"Nothing's changed," Lex said, soft enough that Aaron wouldn't have been able to hear it if they hadn't been locked in a cupboard together. "We can't do this. Don't get near me again."

Aaron immediately bristled at the unfairness of it. "You kissed *me*, Lex."

"I *know that*." His outburst ricocheted, louder than the drip. The next time he spoke, he was quiet and calm. "I shouldn't have. It won't happen again."

"It could," he heard himself saying. The dissipating thrill of the kiss made him bold. "Lex, there must be a reason why this keeps happening. Our chemistry--"

Lex covered his face, looking like he was seconds away from plugging his ears and humming like a child who didn't want to hear the trouble he was in. "No. Don't. Please, don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I *can't*." His voice was on the edge of cracking, which was the only reason Aaron didn't interrupt or try harder to convince him. "Don't ask me to. And don't look at me like that. Don't talk to me anymore. Don't smile. And please, *please*, don't stop me tomorrow when I come back, and this all goes back to normal."

He hadn't noticed that Lex had seemed to get smaller and smaller while he ruined any hope Aaron might have had that they could have had something. Lex took a deep breath, surging up to his full size and pushing past Aaron and out of the stall.

Aaron sat on the bench and listened for the sound of the heavy door to the lobby closing. It did, with a thump, and Aaron was left alone with tingling lips, a bunch of *what-ifs* and whole lot of dread about what would happen tomorrow.

## Chapter 10

Lex was out of money.

Before he'd lost his job, he hadn't been rich. They hadn't paid him much and the rent in New York was just as killer as he'd read about, but his bank account hadn't been empty when he'd bitten the bullet and checked into the closest shelter.

He'd survived on the meager savings he'd had, the proceeds from his reluctantly pawned tablet, and the birthday money his dad had sent him.

In the days before his 24th--happy birthday to him-- he'd had to ask a stranger if they had a few dollars for *bus fare*, because he'd *forgotten his wallet*. A couple people fell for it, and he'd used it to buy some cheap granola bars. He hadn't had to truly beg, but he'd been close.

Once his dad's gift had come through, he'd been smart with it, reining in any impulse to splurge on creature comforts, and moving around between shelters before they'd start asking him to pay.

But it'd run out. At the beginning of the week, a lady saw past the lost wallet story and gave him a ten dollar bill for one subway ride. He bought peanut butter, brown bread and an orange to fill the space between hot meals, and every time he ate some, he couldn't help but break down the math in his head, calculating how much each slice and spoonful cost him. 10 cents. 15 cents. It added up.

Today, he hadn't had enough change to print more than one résumé at the library. He'd sat with it in his hand on the nearest chair and wondered if he should be taking it to the place he'd planned--a theatre with a set painting job advertised, even though he'd never set foot on a stage in his life--or just bite the bullet and drop it off at the burger joint he'd passed on his way to Get Fit! every other day, like he should have done the moment he realized his old job wasn't going to pay him anymore.

He still had it in his bag, getting crumpled when he stuffed his clothes in next to it.

His head swam as he leaned it on his arm, which was slowly slipping off the shower dial. Every drip of the tap into the emptying drain was like a blow to the back of his aching skull, which hadn't stopped pounding for two days.

Was it stress? That was unhelpful. Phone interviews were hard enough when he could hardly string a sentence together from the pain. Was he not eating enough? It was hard to

remember when his appetite was letting him down. The last time he'd had more than pulpy fruit was...yesterday? The day before? They all ran together.

He was hungry now, though. Maybe just because he was thinking about it, but his craving for a full belly hit him so hard he wanted to throw up, which would definitely be counterproductive.

The screech of the shower curtain rings was a distraction from the relentless pain, however momentary. He felt brittle. Lightheaded, like he'd float away in a minute.

He didn't shave. Hard to do when his hands were shaking like he was detoxing. He walked out the door instead, grateful for the empty front desk. He didn't have it in him to run, or to avoid Aaron's eyes so he couldn't see how much help he needed.

Why was the desk empty, though? He fixated on it, his feet stuck to the floor firmly before he'd realized he'd stopped. Imani was there before. Where was--There, the ends of her braids flicking out past a machine. Chatting with a member, and not happy about it, going by the force of her hair flip.

He almost forgot about it, walked out and back to his decision. Minimum wage job that he had a hope in hell of getting hired for, or stay on his path to self-destruction? On paper, the choice seemed pretty easy, but after months of holding firm, to give up now seemed worse than betrayal. It felt like he'd be killing a part of himself.

Hunger made him dramatic, apparently.

He turned to go, but a burst of colour, just as eye-catching as the golden flash of Imani's hair, caught his gaze and held it.

Strawberries, on the smoothie bar. A carton of them, unnaturally red with wide streaks of white at the tops, definitely out of season. Whole, still waiting for someone to break them down and add them to the rows of wilting fruit and veg in the rest of the sticky dishes at the bar.

Lex's mouth watered. It might have been from the nausea, but it felt the same as hunger at that point. Normally, strawberries didn't rate on his list of favourite foods, but right then, standing alone in a fancy gym in a swanky mall, he would've sworn his last meal on death row would be nothing but red, ripe strawberries.

There wasn't a whole lot of thinking involved in the next few minutes. It was like hunger and the constant, pervading anxiety that followed him like a dark cloud joined forces to revert him back to some kind of animal brain that didn't see moral high or low ground.

Like a dog who didn't understand the concept of fairness, only *need* and *take*, he picked up the carton and started walking out the door.

Because what was fairness? Good people like Ryan, who worked hard, got what they deserved sometimes. But people like Lex, who might not have been quite good enough for sainthood, could work their ass off and still end up in a public park eating peanut butter straight from the jar with a week-old plastic spoon.

Sometimes, assholes won the lottery.

Lex was not an asshole, and a pound of strawberries was hardly a jackpot.

The best way to do something he wasn't supposed to be doing--he'd learned from sneaking into movie theatre bathrooms and doctor's offices with bowls of breath mints--was to act as if you were definitely supposed to be doing that thing.

Someone he didn't know went by him as he passed the welcome desk and didn't give him a second glance. There was no one else to see when he closed the gap between him and the entrance to the gym, and the mall was empty outside.

A couple more steps, and no one yelled at him to stop. He was good. He'd done it. He'd fought off scurvy for another day, because strawberries had vitamin C in them, right?

High on the exhilaration of his successful heist, he took a berry off the top of the pile and bit off the red part, the sticky juice from the stem staining his fingers. He only had a second to enjoy the burst of sweet and tart flavour before the fruit turned to dust in his mouth.

Aaron was at the top of the escalator, his face tilted down, looking at his phone. His stride was unhurried and a cup of coffee from the expensive shop downstairs steamed in his hand.

If he hadn't frozen, he might have been able to get away with it. If he'd turned and walked the other way, Aaron's eyes would have skated over the back of his dark hoodie, and he could have doubled back around.

He didn't do that. His feet stuck to the floor, wet cement suddenly dry and inescapable. He was still standing there, his fingers biting into the carton, when Aaron looked up.

They'd fought the last time he was there. Sort of. They fought every time he came, but that was different. The recognition in Aaron's eyes was followed by caution, and Lex wished it could have stayed there. Instead, the micro-movements of Aaron's face shifted to curiosity, then realization, then...

“What are you doing?”

The prickling heat of shame travelled up his neck and he pressed the carton into Aaron's hands just to be rid of it. “Here, I bought these for you. A peace offering.”

It was a shitty lie, delivered in a flat, disingenuous tone. He couldn't find the showmanship and sham he usually used on Ryan when he forgot his birthday, or his mother when she asked him if he could see himself dating girls again.

Aaron saw through it right away. “No, you didn't. I know this box, and I left it in there fifteen minutes ago.”

Lex followed the line of Aaron's accusing finger to the empty space on the counter just visible through the open doors.

“It's not what you think,” he stammered, trying to come up with a plausible reason for the theft that wasn't *I haven't eaten in 20 hours, and I have literally a single quarter to my name.*

“What is wrong with you?” Aaron spat, his hand tightening dangerously on his coffee. “Any one of us could have called security on you every time you came here. This is how you repay us?”

Behind him, he became aware of whispering, and he felt the weight of eyes on his neck. A guy had to walk around them, giving them a curious look

"Listen," Lex said. "I made a mistake, but it's only because I'm a little desperate right now."

"That doesn't give you the right to steal from people who showed you kindness. And for what? So you can waste time being lazy and not getting a real job like the rest of us?"

Lex flinched back, tripping over his feet. No dart had ever cut so deep. As harsh as they'd ever gotten with each other, Aaron had never been so brutal or so honest. So absolutely right.

He wanted the portrait he'd drawn of Aaron's family back, so he could rip it up and cram the pieces into the slimy grate of the shower drain. He wanted to hide everything he'd ever drawn away from anyone's eyes, to avoid even the remote possibility that Aaron would ever see one again.

The fight went out of him, and he wanted to be done, but of course, he couldn't keep his mouth shut and let Aaron say and do what he needed to do.

“I needed them,” he said, in a weak almost-whine.

Aaron's bark of laughter was harsh and mirthless. "Don't tell me you spent your grocery money on Starbucks."

"No. I don't have any money."

"There's a difference between not being able to budget and having no money, Lex."

All the words and pleas for help he'd wanted to say to Ryan and his dad pushed and pulled at his throat until he thought he would gag from it.

"I know," Lex said, through gritted teeth. "And I know what it means to have *no money*."

Lex's voice echoed away into the atrium of the mall, but he was way past caring who heard.

He dug his hand into his pocket, his fingers closing around the quarter he'd been carrying around since he'd bought his last meal. He flipped his palm over and let it drop to the marble floor. Aaron watched it spin, but Lex didn't need to see which side it landed on to know that heads or tails didn't matter. He'd never win this game.

"Keep it," he said, kicking the quarter over to Aaron when it finally stopped spinning. "It's not enough, but it's everything I have, I swear."

Aaron frowned, his eyes locked down at 25 lonely cents. "Lex--"

"I swear. I don't have--" His voice gave out with a wet click, "--anything anymore."

He couldn't stay there. His legs moved like broken stilts, carrying him stiffly past Aaron and down the escalator. He gained momentum, breaking into a run to keep from falling on his face. He didn't truly expect to reach the entrance, even after it came into view.

Mall security was just a call away for Aaron, and Lex waited for a tight grip to come down on his shoulder, pulling him back and landing him in deep shit for a carton of fucking strawberries he hadn't even gotten to keep.

But no one stopped him, and he pushed through the heavy glass doors to the last flight of stairs to the sidewalk and freedom.

Halfway down, his legs, already weak from the whiplash of his adrenaline, started trembling more than his balance could handle. They gave out three steps from the bottom and he sank down on the cold concrete, curling in on himself and pressing his palms into his eyes.

He didn't cry. He was too busy trying to breathe. The air he managed to draw sawed in and out of his tight throat and burning chest, whistling and heaving as he tried

unsuccessfully to reverse the cycle of anxiety. *I am having a panic attack*, he thought, with the functioning part of his brain. *On a dirty staircase, next to a pile of soggy cigarette butts.*

He was such a fucking waste of space. His gut churned from hunger and self-loathing, and if he'd had any room in his esophagus for more than a wisp of smoggy air, he probably would have thrown up stomach acid and saliva onto the rough, chilly, power-washed steps, and on the running shoes which had stopped next to him.

He didn't even notice at first that he'd tipped over, guided by gentle but firm hands until he was leaning hard into a wide, strong chest. When he finally registered the soft fabric against his cheek, he tensed and tried to pull back, but Aaron shushed him and wrapped his arms tighter around his shoulders.

"Lex, relax."

He felt his legs get repositioned to a lower step, freeing up some breathing room, but also triggering a wave of nausea. He gave a low moan and lurched closer into Aaron's space, the grain of the polyester-blend hoodie giving him an anchor point of touch.

"That's it. Deep breaths."

With the gradual return of his lung function came the ability to think past his instinctual search for comfort. He seized up with the intention of pulling away, but his body had already decided *enough is enough*.

He gripped tighter instead, and the sobs he'd been holding back for months clawed their way to the surface, wetting the fabric under his cheek and jolting his frame until he thought he might fall apart like a rusted car frame losing doors.

Aaron held him until the tears dried up, patient and unmoving until Lex was sitting up on his own and breathing more or less evenly. The rattle of recent crying wouldn't go away for a while.

"Lex?" Aaron said, gently.

He let his eyes fall closed. It was easier to hide behind the scratchy, swollen lids for a few more minutes than to see Aaron's pity. "Yeah," he croaked.

"Can I take you somewhere? Your home? Ryan's?"

Lex's heart sped up at just the thought of showing up at his best friend's apartment like this. "No. I can't see Ryan."

Some of his terror must have come across because Aaron backed off like he was letting a scared animal get used to his presence. "Okay, that's fine. But let me come with you to your place, then. I don't think you should be alone right now."

"Can't." Numbness stole his ability to lie or hide the truth under tricky words. "Don't have one."

"Don't have--" Lex waited for Aaron to get it. When he did, a long silence followed, then, "What are you talking about? What about your apartment?"

"No apartment. I made it up."

"Lex. Where are you living?"

He swallowed. Tried to recall, even though it felt so far away now. "Salvation Army this week. St. Augustine's before that."

Aaron was quiet for so long that Lex opened his eyes and turned his heavy head toward him with no idea what to expect.

He was treated to a moment of decision playing over Aaron's features. A knowledge was there, an understanding of what Lex had been trying to tell him, and an action plan beginning to form.

"Come on." Aaron stood up, and Lex missed his radiating warmth. He'd forgotten how cold the concrete was.

"What?"

"Come with me. I meant what I said about you not being alone today."

The breeze picked up and buffeted Lex's body from behind, making it easier for him to lean forward and up. Aaron took his hand to steady him, and Lex let himself be pulled down the stairs and onto the street, to wherever Aaron wanted to take him.

## Chapter 11

If someone had asked him how to get to Aaron's apartment from the gym, Lex still wouldn't have been able to tell them. The first time, it'd been dark, and Lex had been freaking out a little bit about nearly getting hit by a car. The second time, he wasn't interested in anything besides putting one foot in front of the other.

As soon as he was in the door, he crouched down, rocking with the weight of his backpack, but saving himself from falling by sheer force of will. Princess the cat padded up to him, chirping and rubbing her face on his finger before abandoning him for the cuffs of Aaron's work pants.

"Are you going to get in trouble for skipping out?" Lex asked. Consequences were a far-off concern for him, but Aaron was different. People depended on him.

"No." A chorus of jingling and clinking accompanied Aaron quickly putting away everything he kept in his pockets. "This counts as a personal day, and I've never taken one."

Lex nodded, relieved, distantly, but also too drained to feel anything deeper than surface level.

"You can sit over there," Aaron told him. Lex didn't argue, seeing no reason not to take an opportunity to rest when it was offered. He shrugged off the weight of his backpack and bypassed sitting completely, lying down instead, his head buried in the cushy armrest.

Things were pretty foggy. The apartment was warm and quiet, except for some distant clinking noises in the kitchen that didn't worry him, or require any attention or opinion. The loudest thing he could hear was his own breath, getting slower and deeper. It was a bit like self-hypnosis, and he went under almost instantly.

It was a miracle he was still mostly awake when Aaron came back, dragging the coffee table closer to the edge of the couch with a grating squawk and sitting on the other end of the couch near Lex's feet.

"Eat this," Aaron said, putting a bowl in front of him, then placing a spoon and a bottle of water next to it.

It was soup. Chicken noodle, by the look of it, with big pieces of meat, funky pasta shapes and flecks of actual parsley.

"What's this?" Lex asked. That wasn't the question he meant to ask, because it was very clearly soup, but it was the closest he could get to what he really needed to know.

"It's from the deli up the street. It's fresh, I bought it just now. It's good, you should have some."

He must have been more out of it than he thought, if he hadn't noticed Aaron leave and come back. Before he could get his filter back up and running, he blurted, "You weren't afraid I'd rob the place?"

"No," Aaron answered, with no hesitation. "Knowing you're homeless now doesn't make this any different from the last time I trusted you to be here."

"Yes, it does." He wanted to get up, because it felt wrong to be picking a fight while curled up on a soft surface, but he couldn't make his muscles move. "You *just* caught me stealing."

"I caught you making a mistake," Aaron corrected, gently.

The soft, reasonable tone made Lex want to scream, and also cry a little bit, but Aaron was hitting him with a question before he could do either.

"Would you have done it if you were well-rested and full from a hot meal?"

The thick thread detailing of the couch was rough under Lex's fingers. His eyes followed the line of it as he answered, "No."

He felt Aaron's nod more than he saw it.

"Alright. So, eat, then sleep. And we'll talk more about it later."

"I'm not really hungry," he said, honestly. The smell was objectively a good one, but he was struggling to keep his gag reflex under control.

Aaron leaned over and nudged the container closer to the edge of the table, as if that inch might make it more appealing. "Just try a bite. Food makes everything better."

He pushed himself up, peeling his face away from the leather of the couch with a wince. His head throbbed a bit from the change in position, but it didn't make the urge to vomit any worse, so that was a good sign.

He picked up the spoon next to the tall plastic tub of soup and filled its deep belly with clear, steaming broth. He'd have to try some of the chicken or noodle part of the chicken noodle soup eventually, but that would only happen if he didn't eject his own stomach lining after a mouthful of savoury water.

He sipped, wiping his chin when a drop missed his mouth. It stayed down. And stayed. And tasted pretty good, actually. His stomach seemed to remember, *oh, yeah, food is good, not poison* and half the soup was gone in just a few minutes.

"I can't," he said, when he reached his limit.

He couldn't have managed another bite, but he was happy to sit there with the container warming his hands. Aaron took it from him instead, popping the lid on and taking it to the kitchen.

When he came back, he had a blanket in his hands. A soft, forest green fleece that felt like heaven around Lex's shoulders.

"You can have some more later. You look exhausted."

He didn't know if he said anything, but he hoped it wasn't *no shit*. That would've been rude, especially when he was talking to someone who was taking his shoes off for him and pushing him over to lie on the armrest.

He was full and warm and safe, and sleep was a welcome pit to sink into.

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Waking up, it felt like no time had passed, but the windows were dark and his stomach wasn't sloshing with soup anymore. He blinked his eyes clear and found Aaron on his bed, sitting up with a book in his lap, looking like a brooding scholar.

"Hey," Lex said, with the growl of a hundred rusty chainsaws.

Aaron looked up, and tucked a piece of paper into his book to mark his place. "Hi. It's eight in the evening, if you're wondering."

"Thanks." He would have guessed later, from the stillness of the apartment and how tired he still was. Normally, he was already in a bed and-- "Wait. I have to--oh, shit, I gotta go."

Where were his socks? It didn't matter, he'd get them later. He grabbed his backpack by the handle, lifting it onto his shoulders even as he stuffed his feet into his shoes. It was too light. He needed his stuff, he had to find a place for the night, he needed to--

"Where are you going?"

He stumbled, his sneaker hanging off his foot, uncomfortable and useless, at this point. He was too late to get into his usual place, now, so he might as well slow down.

It was odd, how difficult it was to tell Aaron the truth. There was no point in hiding it, and he owed him that much, for listening, and for buying him food.

"I have to find somewhere to sleep tonight," he said, staring at the laces of his shoes as he fixed them.

"You can stay here again," Aaron said, getting up from the bed and shuffling awkwardly closer. "And actually use the couch, this time."

"Okay." His pride twinged at how easily he gave in, but not enough to put up any more resistance. "Thanks."

He sat back down on the couch, his hand on the fuzzy blanket, and put his backpack--too light, why was it so empty?--on the ground next to his feet. He startled, just a bit, when Aaron sank down next to him, the same safe distance away as earlier. A redo, he supposed, that would end in the talk Aaron mentioned, instead of Lex going dead to the world.

"I washed your clothes," Aaron told him, solving the mystery of the backpack. "They're in the dryer. I hope you don't mind."

He did mind, a little bit. But he supposed he couldn't complain when he was a guest of honour with a bag full of laundry that always smelled a bit, no matter what he did.

Aaron cleared his throat. "Should I be calling Ryan? Or someone else?"

"No, please don't tell him," Lex blurted. "He doesn't know how bad it is, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"Okay."

It was a promise, and Lex had no reason not to believe him.

He reached for his phone, compulsively checking the time twice in one minute before he remembered that it was hard for some people to comprehend how someone could have no money for food when they had a mini computer at their fingertips. Aaron didn't seem phased, thankfully.

"Does anyone else know?" Aaron asked. "Your family?"

What was it that made Lex crave honesty like he was? Was it Aaron himself, or just a by-product of keeping his mouth shut tight for so long? Probably a combination of both. There were plenty of volunteers to listen to him at the church-run shelters, but he'd never felt the same longing to unload his burdens.

"No. Nobody," he said.

"Sounds lonely." It wasn't a question.

Lex shrugged. "Sometimes. Better than the alternative, though." Aaron didn't press for more, but his expression did. "They would've tried to help."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

“Honestly? Yes.” He grimaced at the harsh ring of the truth. “I don’t want to be in their debt. I’d never be able to pay them back.”

“I don’t know your parents,” Aaron said, carefully. “But I know Ryan. He wouldn’t have asked you to repay him.”

“That’s the whole problem. If it was as easy as paying him back with cash when I have some to spare, I’d do that, but he’d never take my money.” He sounded like a whining child to his own ears. Shoving a hand into his messy, too long hair, he gave it a tug, which did little to help his frustration. “I’m not explaining this very well.”

"It's fine. Take your time. Do you want to start from the beginning?"

That, at least, he knew how to say. He knew the sequence of events like the back of his hand. “I lost my job,” he said, and Aaron’s mouth pursed in sympathy.

The story, for all it seemed so dramatic to Lex when he was the one living it, was a pretty short one. Nothing groundbreaking or complicated about someone not being prepared for months of unemployment.

“So, that’s it,” he said, just before he reached the part Aaron already knew: The strawberries at the gym earlier that day.

“Thanks for telling me.”

Lex shrugged, uncomfortable with the idea that Aaron should be the grateful one. Spilling his guts had been just as cathartic as he’d hoped, and his problems seemed a little more solvable, now that another person was thinking about them.

“Lex.” Aaron’s hand landed on the back of Lex’s forearm and stayed there, not tight, just heavy. “Are you alright?”

“What do you mean? I’m fine. I’m alive, aren’t I? I’m as alright as I can be, considering.”

“I don’t mean physically. I mean--” Aaron’s hand squeezed on his arm, warm and solid, but Lex didn’t feel trapped. “Are you going to be okay?”

When Lex had graduated, optimistic (naive) and passionate (reckless), and taken off across the country at the first opportunity, he’d thought, *what’s the worst that could happen?*

He hadn’t counted on how embarrassed he’d be when he had to admit to himself that it didn’t just not work out, he’d also failed spectacularly. The fantasy of the lean life of a working artist was a lot different from the reality. He’d hoped for the best, and not been prepared for the worst.

"I don't know," he admitted, shaking his head quickly, a little hysterical laugh cracking out of his throat. "I don't *know*, I don't--"

Aaron pulled him by the grip he had on his forearm, and in a matter of seconds, was hugging him tight with his whole body, not just his arms.

Lex didn't like crying. He'd never found it cleansing like other people said they did. The few times in his life he'd broken down and let himself sob for hours, he'd only felt worse afterward, with a headache and itchy eyes. And, inevitably, the thing that had caused the tears in the first place would still be there when he was finished with the waterworks.

That was what happened earlier, on the steps of the gym. Aaron had patiently let him cry it out, and while he'd felt exhausted and empty, he hadn't really felt much better. So this time, he didn't cry. He just held on tight--probably tight enough to hurt--and was held.

Aaron's fingers were splayed wide on Lex's back, tucked far enough around that they fit almost perfectly in the deepening grooves between his ribs. He'd tried to ignore the shadows his cheekbones cast, because, he'd told himself, he'd be eating square meals soon. But he'd never truly stopped worrying about it.

"You'll be okay," Aaron murmured in his ear. "I promise."

Lex shivered and his whole body lost the tension it'd been building since the moment he woke up. Not necessarily from what Aaron said. He'd told himself the same thing on all the mornings it was difficult to get out of his borrowed bed.

What comforted him was Aaron's physical closeness. Funny enough, the last few times he'd started to miss the friction of another human body against his, it'd been Aaron who soothed the ache.

Would any other person have instinctively noticed how much Lex had needed contact? He didn't think so. Aaron simply saw through him, even if he hadn't understood what he was seeing, he'd seen his desperation.

Lex was still desperate. He wasn't touching enough of Aaron, not anymore. He needed all of him, more of what only he could offer.

He lurched up and planted his lips on Aaron's, clumsy and needy. The heat was there, the chemistry that had pulled them together before burning bright, but it didn't last.

Aaron pulled away, but he didn't go far. He rested his forehead on Lex's, whispering, "We can't."

Lex knew he was right, but he wished he didn't. The timing wasn't any better now than it was any of the times before. Maybe worse, now that Aaron knew the whole story.

"I'm about to ask you something and I don't want your answer to be swayed by anything that you and I might or might not be."

Lex blinked and leaned back. He'd been bracing himself for a gentle, pitying rejection, but a question? "Okay, shoot."

Aaron put more distance between them, shifting along the couch. "It isn't so much a question as a suggestion."

"Alright." He waited, expectant, but Aaron said nothing until Lex prodded, "What is it?"

"I did some thinking while you were asleep." Some script-writing, too, if Lex had to guess. He sounded like he'd been over it in his head more than once. "I think you should come and live with me. Not just for tonight. Until you get a job, and decide you want to live somewhere else."

Somewhere in the apartment, a humming started up. A water heater, or a fridge filter, or something, buzzing away to fill the silence.

"Why?" Lex asked. Aaron's immediate reaction was to wilt almost imperceptibly, so he rushed to clarify, "I'm not saying no. It's just that you've been so generous already."

It didn't make sense in Lex's worldview--the one where there was no such thing as a free lunch--that Aaron would continue his streak of philanthropy.

Aaron shrugged, but his eyes skittered to the side, keeping something back. "I like you. You're annoyingly tenacious, but you're also nice, and funny. And you never make me feel stupid."

"Glad to hear it, but being nice doesn't usually get people apartments like this for free. What's the catch?"

He didn't want to be noticing he was alone in an apartment with a man who outmatched him physically, or that nobody knew he was there, but he couldn't unknow it.

"I'm not selfless," Aaron admitted. "I'm also not good at people."

"I noticed," Lex said, then winced. That probably sounded meaner than he'd meant it to, but he really had noticed how normal social interaction didn't come easy for Aaron.

Aaron didn't seem to take it badly. "I come from a big family," he explained. "We were always in each other's spaces. I get--" *Lonely*, Aaron couldn't quite say, but Lex

understood. "I don't like being on my own here. I figure you're better than any roommate I could find on Kijiji."

Lex relaxed, his uncomfortable urge to get up off the couch and get as far away from Aaron as possible diminished. The twist of guilt over what he'd worried Aaron--sweet, hopelessly awkward Aaron--could be capable of would take longer to fade, but he couldn't regret his caution.

He nodded. "That makes sense."

"You haven't told me what you think."

Aaron was anxious about this, Lex realized, more than his usual, stiff seriousness. He *cared* about whether Lex would say yes.

"I think...that I don't know," he said, honestly. "What makes taking help from you any different from taking it from my friends?"

This, Aaron answered confidently, another prepared response. "The difference is that you'll pay me back in full. My grandparents own the building, so I get this place dirt cheap. Once you're on your feet, you can catch up on the rent you've missed and take a few extra turns getting groceries, then we'll be even. No debt--emotional or monetary--no mess. We both get something out of it."

"Smart." Realistic. Tempting.

Aaron reached out and touched Lex's knee with just the barest tips of his fingers, as if a firm grip would shatter any chance of Lex agreeing. "Do you understand now why we can't start..." Aaron flicked his other hand between them. "This. Whatever this is. I don't want to be your sugar daddy."

Lex choked on a surprised laugh. Of all the words he'd expected to come out of Aaron's mouth, those ones wouldn't have come to mind. "Yeah, I get it. Roommates, not fuckbuddies or boyfriends."

"Yeah. For now, at least."

An anxious knot Lex hadn't even known he had loosened in his chest. He nodded like a bobblehead for a few seconds. "Okay. For now. I can totally do that."

Aaron's eyebrows went up, and he blinked. "Are you...agreeing, then? To stay here?"

For the life of him, he couldn't think of a single reason why not.

"Yeah," he said, dazedly. "I guess I am agreeing."

“You’re sure?” Aaron said, crossing his arms over his chest and furrowing his brow. He looked like a disapproving dad, and it made Lex want to poke him in the stomach until they were both laughing at how ridiculous it was.

“Yes? Shouldn’t I be?”

“I just...” Hadn’t expected him to agree so easily, apparently. “I have some quirks you’ll have to get used to.”

"So do I," Lex admitted. "Ryan will tell you, I'm far from a clean freak."

Aaron shifted, his hands going tight at his sides. "No, that's not what I mean. There's...things I have to do."

They both turned to look toward a thump across the room. Princess cantered toward the couch, then curled up between them.

"Things," Lex said, cautiously, watching her tail twitch back and forth.

"Yeah. If I don't do them, my whole day sucks," Aaron said, stilted and soft, like he was confessing some kind of sin. "Or bad things happen."

Lex let out the breath he'd taken and looked across the room at the table by the door, where everything was laid out precisely, just like the last time he was there. He thought about Aaron's conviction in defending the rules for the sake of the rules.

He remembered Aaron's panic when Imani had asked him to deviate from his normal routine.

"Okay," he said. "I understand."

"I don't know if you do--"

"We'll work it out." He reached across the couch and put a hand on Aaron's clenched fist, thrilled to be able to do the comforting, rather than be comforted. "Roommates learn how to live around each other. We're going to be okay, you and me."

"Okay," Aaron said, his hand relaxing under Lex's, his lips twitching in a tentative smile. "You and me."

They sat in silence for a while, Princess purring between them as the night grew darker outside. Aaron kept nudging the dangling strap of Lex's backpack with his toe, and Lex found himself wanting to laugh at the sight of his bare foot. No expensive, ergonomic running shoes, no moisture wicking socks, just long, slightly fuzzy toes and tan lines that were like night and day. It seemed far more private than anything he'd seen before.

What Aaron's feet looked like naked was one of the many inconsequential things he'd learn about Aaron if he stayed. Tomorrow, he might find out if Aaron ate cereal in the mornings, or if he liked eggs, or if he was like Lex and didn't believe in the criminally limiting concept of breakfast foods.

Lex couldn't wait to find out, and that was how he knew that, for once, everything was going to turn out alright.

Princess made a disgruntled cooing noise as Aaron gathered her into his arms and stood up, scritching her under the chin.

"You should take tonight to think it over," Aaron said. "If you change your mind between now and tomorrow, there'll be no hard feelings."

He shook his head. "I won't change my mind."

"I believe you, but you can if you want. I'm going to sleep." He put his cat down and jerked his head toward the bed a few feet away. "Right there. I have no idea if I snore, sorry."

Lex shrugged and stretched, feeling the tiredness settle back into his bones. He didn't want to sleep yet, but he didn't think he'd have any trouble, even after his nap.

"Your snoring couldn't be worse than any of the things I've had to listen to over the last few months."

He said it flippantly, intoxicated by both his ability to speak freely and the idea that he'd never have to sleep in a shelter again. He hadn't intended for Aaron to go still and tense, his mouth forming the word *months*.

Now wasn't the time for that kind of talk, though, and Aaron seemed to realize that. "Good night, Lex," he said, and let him escape the sadness of recent memory.

"Good night," Lex said in return. "Oh, wait. One more thing."

"Yeah?"

Lex felt his lips curl into the biggest, truest smile he'd had in months. "Can I use your shower?"

## Chapter 12

Aaron had never minded the loft-style layout of the family apartment. It wasn't as if he had a lot of visitors who might be embarrassed by seeing where he slept from the comfort of the couch.

But when he woke up the morning after Lex agreed to stay with him, he started to wish he had a few more walls between him and his brand new houseguest. Lex wouldn't have to see him in his soft sleeping clothes, with his hair a mess and his breath a nightmare.

He stayed under his thin sheet until he couldn't ignore the call of nature any longer, then rolled out of bed as nonchalantly as possible. It was damned difficult, but he managed not to look toward the couch until he was at the bathroom door and he could sneakily glance over his shoulder as the door was closing.

Apparently, he needn't have worried.

Lex was awake, and sitting up on the couch, his long legs folded in and his sketchbook open on his knees, his pen furiously scratching away. He didn't look remotely tempted to look at Aaron in his pajamas.

Aaron looked down at himself. Should he have worn something a little more enticing? He definitely didn't want the romance to die before they even started a relationship.

*No*, he told himself. *Don't overthink it.*

What would he even wear if he decided to spice it up a bit for Lex? That one shirt that had a hole in the arm? A lace teddy? Ridiculous. He had a reprieve from that stuff, one he'd given himself and that he was going to stick to.

He didn't have to worry about any of that relationship garbage until Lex was back on his feet. Maybe by then, Aaron would learn how to be a real boy and not freak out over being spotted in sweatpants.

*Not likely*, his inner realist informed him as he got in the shower.

*Not necessary*, the hopeful part of him argued.

When he was finished in the shower and dressed--and hadn't that been a debate and a half, over whether to bother putting clothes back on to get to his closet or stick with a towel--he wandered into the living room area to find that Lex was in the exact same position as before, maybe even more scrunched up over the sketchbook.

"Morning," Aaron said. His voice came out scratchy and crumpled from sleep, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "Good morning."

Lex said nothing. He didn't even look up.

"Lex?" He stepped closer to the couch and raised his voice. "Lex."

"Hmm?" His head snapped up, his eyes wide as saucers. His pen clattered to the stiff pages of the sketchbook as he seemed to wake up from whatever trance he'd been in. "Oh. Sorry. I kind of go away sometimes."

"I gathered." Pleasantries stalled, he scrambled for something to say until his eyes fell onto the ink drawing under Lex's hand. "Is that...me?"

"Uh." The drawing was quickly covered, but since Aaron had already seen it, it was uncovered just as quickly, as Lex looked sheepishly down at his work. "Yeah, it is."

He'd caught Aaron in the middle of sleep, stretched out in his bed, his limbs shortened by the perspective. The page was dark and sticky with all the ink he'd used to shade the folds of the blankets...and the shadows between Aaron's legs and at his hips that he hadn't known could be so intimate.

"This is..." he started, but Lex snatched the book away, flipping the page up and over the spiral binding with a snap.

"Sorry. I didn't think you'd mind. You don't mind, do you? Oh, god, I'm sorry. I should have asked, that's probably really invasive. Here, let me--" He ripped out the page in his book and folded it in half, and was an inch away from tearing it in two when Aaron managed to grab it out of his hands.

"No, wait," he said, holding the paper protectively against his chest. "It's fine. You can ask me next time. I don't mind."

"Oh. Okay." Lex sat in his pretzel shape on the couch, biting his lip and flicking the top of his sketchbook, the picture of frenetic nerves with nowhere to go.

Something in Aaron relaxed, a knot loosening from the knowledge that he wasn't the only one who didn't know how they were supposed to make this work. It was fine, he decided as he walked past the couch. They'd figure it out.

He heard Lex get up and join him as he tacked up the drawing--still embarrassingly bare, but *right* nonetheless--on the bulletin board by the door, alongside the portrait Lex had done of him, and the picture of his family.

"You kept them," Lex said softly.

"Of course." Aaron let his eyes trail over the pictures and smiled.

Right when he noticed the detail that had been put into the open palm of Aaron's hand on the sheets in the drawing, he felt the touch of Lex's fingers curling into his. It was sweet, simple contact, not sexual or even romantic, but he forced himself to let go after a while because if he let himself start to enjoy it too much, where would he draw a line?

"Hungry?" Aaron asked.

"Always."

He led them to his tiny kitchen, trying to remember if he'd bought bread, now that he'd already offered breakfast. "I don't have much," he admitted. "It's my day off, so I should probably go shopping."

"Got any eggs?"

He looked in his fridge. "A few, yeah." Would Lex ask him to cook them? He couldn't cook for Lex. There was no way he was giving salmonella to the only person--outside his family and the internet installer person--who'd ever visited his apartment. He was already failing at being a host.

He didn't have to stress about it for long, because Lex pushed him out of the way, taking his place in the fridge door. "Right on," he was saying, gathering up the carton and some cheese Aaron had forgotten he had. "Well, you sit down. Tell me where everything is, and I'll make you breakfast."

*Yeah*, he thought, planting his butt on a stool at the counter and watching, mystified, as Lex became a whirlwind of chatter and non-stick cooking spray. *Maybe this could work.*

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*This is never going to work*, he thought later, listening to the telltale rhythmic rustle coming from the couch.

Maybe he could have dealt with Lex being a little clueless about housemate etiquette, if it was accidental and embarrassing for both of them. But this--the sound of Lex touching himself, his hastening breath getting closer to moans with every second that Aaron tried to ignore it--was absolutely and maliciously *on purpose*.

"Lex," he said, after five minutes of staring at his ceiling and desperately trying to ignore the slick sounds of Lex's hand picking up speed. (Was that lube? Where the hell did he find lube? Or moisturizer, he supposed. Like the bottle in the bathroom, which Lex had used just before he'd gotten into his couch bed. Damn it.)

"What?" Lex was breathless, the short word jostled by the movements Aaron couldn't see.

"You're killing me."

"Oh, come on. This won't break your rules, right? You could just--" He broke off into a low groan that made Aaron's ankles flex against his sheets. "--listen to me. It wouldn't make us boyfriends or anything, if you accidentally heard me jerking off."

"I guess so." Sounded fake, but what did Aaron know--or care.

"It wouldn't matter if I was thinking of you while I did it. Picturing your face and your body. And your fingers." He gasped, then there was a sudden quiet.

Had he just--was he using his fingers? Maybe. Maybe not. Aaron couldn't know for sure, neither did he want to, when it was hard enough to lie there and keep from touching something, anything, on himself or Lex.

"It wouldn't matter if I was saying your name." Another moan. The slick sounds starting again. "Aaron. God, *Aaron*."

A noise--some strangled bubble of frustration and want and shame--erupted from Aaron, and he covered his face, the press of his palms into his eyes the only thing keeping him pinned to the bed.

He didn't realize the room had gone quiet again until he heard Lex speak up, barely above a whisper, but without the brazen sense of taunting.

Honest. Questioning.

"I'll stop if you want me to," he said. "Tell me to stop."

Aaron let out all the breath in his lungs, then took one illicit, quicksilver glance at the couch. All he could see of Lex was his arm, flung against the back of the couch, his fingers spread and straining around a fistful of leather.

"Don't stop," Aaron said.

If Lex was acting out before, he was performing now, every second building up to a new sound that drove Aaron crazy enough that he flipped over to his stomach and fucked his hand, fired up from the squeak of leather and rasp of Lex's voice.

He wasn't sure if he was picturing Lex behind him or underneath him but it didn't matter. He was surrounded by Lex, his noises, his scent from the afternoon he'd spent in Aaron's bed, laughing and chatting and catching up on shows he'd missed when he didn't have the time or the internet connection to see.

Lex's headstart didn't seem to make much difference, either. When Lex came, loud and full of drama, Aaron was right there with him, coming messy and explosive into his own hand.

They laid there, separate but together. Breathing and descending.

"You're the worst," Aaron said, just to hear Lex laugh. It worked.

"You going to kick me out?" He already knew the answer.

Aaron couldn't keep the smile from his voice. "No."

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He'd worried, after that, about how much his moral integrity could withstand the tempest of Lex, but he didn't have to worry long. After one morning of Aaron blushing and getting laughed at, Lex got a cold, and no longer felt remotely frisky.

It was like three colds had gotten together and decided to join forces to make Lex as miserable as he could possibly be. It wasn't quite a flu, but it was close, with a raging fever and more liquids coming out of more places than Lex ever wanted him to see, or so he moaned in his brief periods of consciousness.

Aaron ended up taking a day off to help him, and he spent most of it pondering the great *what ifs*. The cold was probably so severe because Lex finally had a safe place for his body to break down, but Aaron was uncomfortable with the thought that if Lex hadn't gotten caught and spilled everything, he might have been this sick and on the street, alone. He might have had a fever like this, and no ibuprofen to bring it down. He wouldn't have gone to the doctor because he had no money to pay for it, and then he would've gotten worse and worse, and he could've--

The sound of Lex's hacking cough brought him out of his spiraling. None of that happened, he reminded himself as he brought Lex a bottle of water and the value box of cold medicine he'd bought on sale a few months ago, just in case.

Right now, Lex was safe and warm and had Aaron to keep him happy.

"I'm dying," Lex rasped, sprawled out on the couch like a death scene in a renaissance painting, with Princess under his arm.

"No, you aren't." He stole the sheet from off the couch and shook it out while Lex curled into a ball of chilled misery.

"I can't remember what it was like to be healthy," Lex whined, pouting up at Aaron as he folded the sheet. "This is it. This is my life now, forever."

"No, it isn't. You're already better than yesterday."

He still sounded like he'd been smoking a pack a day since he was five, but he could string a sentence together, which was definitely an improvement.

"Yeah, but better is relative. I can bear the feeling of my own hair touching my skin, but that's not really saying much."

Lex squirmed pathetically until Aaron put a hand on his forehead. He knew it wasn't an accurate gage of temperature, but it made Lex smile, so he pressed his lips to the place his palm had been, for good measure.

"You'll be okay," he decided, then he handed Lex the box of pills. "Take some of these and drink some water."

"Yes, Mom. You're so good to me, Mom."

He busied himself, picking up tissues and popsicle wrappers until he couldn't hold back his commentary. "You know, you could call your actual mother, and tell her--"

"No," Lex said firmly, sitting up and putting the medicine down in one smooth motion. "I already told you, I'm not telling her anything."

"Okay." He put his hands up, garbage bag and all, in surrender. "Sorry."

There were an awkward few moments of Lex sitting up on the couch, still a little annoyed, but mostly chagrined and groggy before he managed to talk again.

"Don't be sorry," he said, painfully low and scratchy. "I'm too defensive about it. Thank you. Really."

"You're welcome. I'll just have to mother you for her."

Lex grabbed one of his pillows to bury his head in, his voice coming out muffled. "I was joking before, but please don't compare yourself to her, not when I feel a certain kind of a way about your ass."

So, not *entirely* un-frisky.

After he was finished rolling his eyes, Aaron picked up the box of medicine and handed it to him again. "Take those."

He turned his back on the rattle of pills in the blister pack, tidying up, but really just fussing over everything he could. When he heard the cap of the water bottle get screwed back on, he came back and took the medicine, intending to put it away while Lex turned back into a pitiful heap, but he made the mistake of looking at the tinfoil-covered sheet of capsules.

"What's that face?"

Aaron looked up, surprised out of his irked stupor. "No face. I don't have a face." He'd missed Lex's laugh, so he didn't mind when it was directed at him. "I'm not making a face."

"You definitely are. It's the 'something is not right' face. What did I do? Come on, be honest. I can take it."

"You...it's stupid."

"No, tell me. I promise I won't laugh or anything."

It took all of Aaron's faith in that promise to point out how Lex had taken two pills in the middle of the package, out of order. By the time he was finished explaining, he was red and almost as hot as Lex's fever, from embarrassment over how much it bothered him.

"Oh, I can see that," was Lex's only comment before he made gimme hands.

Aaron watched as he popped out a few of the pills and put them on the coffee table.

"I'll definitely use that many between today and tomorrow. Now you don't have to worry about it. Did that fix it?"

Aaron took the package back and looked at it, waiting to see if the itch at the back of his brain still kicked up a fuss. Nothing. "Yeah, actually."

"Really? Wow, I didn't actually expect that to work. You mean that," he pointed at the little pile of pills, "doesn't bother you, but this did." He pointed again, at the sheet in Aaron's hand.

"Yes." Lex's face as he struggled to comprehend was entertaining, but Aaron still cringed from self-consciousness. "I never said it made sense."

Lex shrugged, then pulled a blanket off the back of the couch to snuggle up with. "It doesn't have to. That's an easy one to work around."

Aaron went back to the kitchen, a strange lightness replacing the shame. It was a strange thought. That his weird things weren't something to be overcome, just...worked around.

They could do that. Aaron wasn't afraid of hard work, and neither was Lex.

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"I'm not crazy!"

Lex followed him out of the kitchen, carrying the open laptop Aaron had stormed away from. "I'm not saying you are! I'd never say that! All I'm saying is that maybe you should consider this as an explanation."

With nowhere else to go in the open loft, Aaron whipped around to face him. "I'm twenty-six years old. You don't think I would've known by now?"

"I think you're too hard on yourself," Lex argued, standing tall and firm-footed in the middle of the living room. "You know you're not good with people or stress, and you think that everything else that isn't normal is just a part of that, instead of a symptom of something bigger. And you hide it from people. It took me forever to figure it out, but you've got *quirks*, Aaron."

"I don't hide from my family." Aaron's rebuttal was tossed out like a gauntlet between them. "They know me, you don't think one of them would have said 'hey, Aaron, maybe you've got OCD!'"

The word fell like a stone between them, filling the tense moment with meaning. It was the first time either of them had actually said it, he realized. The argument hadn't started with Lex sitting him down and dropping a bomb like that. Lex had probably been hoping to avoid an argument altogether by leaving an article on the laptop for Aaron to find after he was finished using it.

Later, Aaron thought he'd feel bad for how poorly he'd handled having to read all of his insecurities in a list of possible symptoms, but at the moment, indignant denial was better than petrified acceptance.

"I think they're protective of you," Lex said, softly, like he was gentling a wild animal. "If anyone ever tried to say you weren't normal, they'd use their last breath to defend you."

"Is that a bad thing? You think it's their fault that I'm a nutjob?"

"No! Of course not, that's not what I'm saying. I love your family." The same laptop Lex held helplessly in his hands had been used to introduce them. "I just think that maybe if they took a step back, they'd realize that as great as you are, and as much as they love you, some things about you aren't...typical."

"You think I don't know that already?" Aaron snapped. He took a step back, putting physical distance between them and jamming a hand through his hair. "I'm weird, and awkward, and I can't talk to people. I don't need one more thing that's wrong with me. What do you know anyway? Everybody says you should never google your symptoms and expect to come away healthy."

Lex was quiet for a long time. Aaron had looked away, begging the floor of his apartment for something to distract him, to take his mind off the truth of what Lex was saying. He thought that Lex might have given up, but then, he was talking again.

"I have an aunt who looks at the fire evacuation plans wherever she goes," he said, matter-of-factly. "*Everywhere* she goes. If they can't find a copy for her, she leaves. She has to. I never thought it was weird, because she'd just always done it whenever we'd go out to dinner the two or three times a year I'd see her."

"What does that have to do with me?"

Lex continued as if Aaron hadn't spoken. "I made a joke once, about how I liked to keep my paint brushes clean because I'm kind of OCD about it. I'd never seen her get angry about anything before, and certainly not at me. She told me about how it affects her life. How she can't drive because something in her brain tells her that she's hit someone every time she goes over a bump."

"I don't do that--"

"I know. But you never cook for anyone but yourself, because you think you'll poison someone."

Aaron had nothing to say to that since he never had anything to say to himself when he tried to convince his own mind that he could scramble an egg for his sister in the morning and nothing would go wrong.

"It never occurred to 14 year old me that it was shitty to assume that every person with OCD would be a clean freak, or that it would be a little bit useful," Lex went on. "Your house would always be spotless. What's so bad about that, right? I was an idiot, and Aunt Martie told me so. I'm not saying I'm an expert. But I know that you don't need to scrub toilets with a toothbrush to have OCD. And a compulsion is a compulsion, no matter how it affects your life."

"That's not me." It wasn't an argument anymore. It was a plea, for Lex to be wrong. "I don't...wash my hands a hundred times a day."

"Nope. But you get ready for work in the same order, at the same time every single day, timed down to the minute. There's nothing wrong with that. But what would happen if you did it a different way some day? Or didn't do something?"

"Nothing. I know that, but--"

"Did you know you always take the last one of anything? Usually on the right side, but you're not that picky. But it has to be the one in the end. Did you know that?"

"Yes," he admitted, yanking at his hair again.

"It isn't normal." Lex raised his voice over Aaron's attempt to defend himself. "Not the way you *have* to do it. It's not just an urge or a preference. It's a compulsion."

The quiet fell again, Lex having won this round and Aaron having no idea what to say. He stopped torturing his hair follicles and stood, his world a maelstrom around him.

In the middle of all that chaos, one small detail broke through and made everything crystal clear. Lex's fingers. They were white on the edges of the laptop, stiff with tension.

"Lex, you--"

"What?"

Other than that one tell, nothing about Lex gave away that he was anything other than calm and collected. This was their first fight they'd had as roommates, and Lex was terrified, but doing his best to hide it.

"You wouldn't have said something just for the hell of it, would you?" Aaron said, the sinking feeling in his gut falling faster.

"No. I wouldn't."

He had too much riding on Aaron liking him to bring it up if he didn't think it was important, and most of all, true.

Aaron shook out his own fingers, which were digging into his palms as hard as Lex's were pressing into the plastic of the laptop, then with a hand that shook a little, he reached out for the computer. "Can I see that?"

"Of course," Lex said, then he left Aaron to read the article that had started the whole thing.

Even as he started the first paragraph, Aaron wasn't convinced that any of it would apply to him, but he was learning to trust Lex just as much as Lex was trusting him. If Lex was willing to risk so much in an effort to make him consider what the article had to say, the least he could do was look.

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Lex hit the ground running after his cold was completely gone.

He hadn't stopped checking employment websites while he could barely function, but as soon as he could talk without sounding like he was holding his nose closed, he was calling

and visiting businesses with anything close to a link with the art world, and coming home to Aaron with no good news.

Aaron made it home before Lex, like he usually did. He waited on the couch, tantalized by the smell of whatever it was Lex had put in the slow cooker he'd dug out of a cupboard. He laid on his side, reading his book until he heard the door open, then didn't look up when he heard Lex's trudging footsteps and his shoes being kicked off, hitting the closet door with identical slams.

More trudging. A long sigh. Then, he felt the bump of Lex's knees on the couch, and in just a few seconds, Lex had flopped his entire body on top of Aaron's.

"Rough day?" Aaron asked, turning the page in his book.

Lex let out a sigh that shivered in the middle, close to breaking. Aaron stayed perfectly still, letting him take the comfort he needed.

"No rougher than yesterday," was Lex's answer, eventually. His voice was bright and cheerful, but Aaron remembered how he'd come home the day before, his eyes a more vibrant blue and red rimmed from the tears he'd wiped away before he'd come in the door.

Aaron turned onto his back, jostling Lex so he slid off, but keeping him pinned to his chest with a bear hug. It was probably the most contact they'd had since the jiu jitsu demo, but Lex getting comfort from him wasn't new. Yesterday, Lex had curled up and put his head in Aaron's lap for ten minutes before he could get up and pretend everything was fine.

Lex didn't resist. He rested his cheek on Aaron's chest and wedged his arms into Aaron's sides, getting as close as possible, while still quipping, "I thought we weren't allowed to get cozy."

Aaron squeezed him harder and told him, "This has nothing to do with sex."

They stayed there for a long time, and by the time they got up, Lex looked like he was feeling truly better, not just pretending, but the problem still wasn't fixed.

Lex still didn't have a job he'd be proud to do or a place to live that wasn't Aaron's couch, and worse, Aaron could tell he was starting to lose hope that he ever would.

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Aaron glanced up from the client chart he was filling out, then went right back to it. Then he looked again when he realized it wasn't just a member passing by. It was Lex, shuffling in and casting his eyes around like he'd entered an art museum and there was a lot for him to see.

"What, the water pressure at our place isn't good enough for you?" Aaron teased, to make Lex smile, but also to hear out loud the words that made his insides warm.

*Our place.*

"I thought I'd save you the soggy sandwich from downstairs." He patted the bottom of the brown paper bag in his hand. "What's the point of having a little wife at home if I can't send you with food, honey?"

The warm feeling soured and chilled. "Lex."

"What?"

"You don't have to look after me." It was a point Aaron had been trying to impress on him since he'd been back on his feet after his illness. Aaron hadn't cleaned his own dishes in days. They were always being snatched out of his hands the moment he was finished with them so Lex could clean them up. But where did it stop? It was still Aaron's apartment, and Aaron's mess.

"I know that," Lex said, his eyes fixed on the fake granite pattern of the welcome desk. "I just feel like I have to do my part. Cleaning and throwing a lunch together is something I can contribute."

"That's fine, but you don't *need* to--"

"I don't mind," he interrupted, and he finally looked up into Aaron's face. His grin was soft and small, but it reached his eyes, like so many of his smiles didn't, these days. "And it's only fair that if you're bringing home the bacon, I have to fill up the dishwasher."

"Okay." Lex's firm conviction and the logic behind it helped him relax. In Aaron's family, the chores were divided up equitably, so they could do the same. "But no more jokes about you being the little woman. That's sexist and weird, and you shouldn't think about yourself like that."

Lex winced, and paper crinkled in his hand. "You're not going to like this, then."

He lifted the bag and flipped it around, showing the detailed drawing of himself in a 1950s housewife dress, complete with fat pearls and a frilly apron. Aaron was there too, in a chunky tie, with a tiny waist and crazy, swollen arms and shoulders.

It wasn't a caricature, it was too elegant for that. But Lex's exaggerated style was cartoonish enough to force a laugh past Aaron's lips, even though he was supposed to disapprove.

"I don't look like that," he said, pointing at the triangular shape of his body in the drawing.

"You sure?" Lex turned around the sack in his hand and held it up, comparing the two Aarons side by side, his face pulled into a contemplative frown. "I think it's a pretty good likeness."

"You think I look like a yield sign? Remind me why I haven't kicked you out yet?"

"Well, I--"

Whatever Lex might have said skittered away in surprise as the lunch bag was plucked out of his hand. They both jumped and stared as Phil, having made a silent entrance for once, glared at the picture.

Aaron was frozen. Were they in trouble? He wasn't doing anything wrong, was he? He was just talking, making conversation. But with a non-member. Someone he knew had no intention of shelling out Get Fit!'s monthly fee. Hanging around with his roommate when he was supposed to be working.

*Oh, Lord, no*, he thought. After all those weeks of trying to keep Lex out, losing his mind attempting to follow the rules, and finally coming up with a solution to their problem, he was going to get fired for *chatting on the clock*.

A rumbling sound revved up, almost drowning out the piped-in music of the gym. Aaron didn't recognize it at first, but the longer he listened, the quicker Phil's face pulled into an accordion of wrinkles.

A smile. Phil was laughing.

It quickly turned into a hacking cough, while relief weakened Aaron's knees. He leaned heavily on the desk and met Lex's panicked expression with one of his own. The moment their eyes locked, a tremble of nervous laughter started pushing at his chest, made even worse by being mirrored by Lex.

"I own a bookstore," Phil said, startling them again. "You want to come work for me?"

"I--uh, maybe," Lex stammered. "I'm not that great at retail."

Aaron had already listened to Lex's struggle. If finding a sales gig at minimum wage was the name of the game, Lex would have done it weeks ago. That wasn't the point, and it was more than pride that kept him from giving in. It was the threat of complacency.

If Lex said yes to this, got a steady paycheck, a life he could be content with, how would he ever convince himself to leave it for the uncertainty of the thing he loved most?

"It wouldn't be," Phil said, waving the hand that didn't hold the lunch bag. His tone implied a *you idiot* at the end. "I want you to draw some pictures for the covers."

"Cover art," Lex said, blank and hesitant, as if waiting for the punchline. "For the books you sell in your store?"

"The new books, the ones that need covers." *Obviously*, came the unspoken addition once again.

It was only because Aaron had come to know Lex so well that he could see him start to vibrate.

"You mean, you own a publishing company," Lex said.

Phil made a blustering, dismissive noise and hit Lex in the shoulder with the paper bag. "Bookstore, publisher, whatever. I sell books, what do you want to call it?"

"I'll call it whatever you want, sir," Lex said, breathless, his smile widening more the longer Phil didn't snatch away the perfect chance he'd dangled in front of them. "Of course, I'd love to work for you."

"Good." Phil nodded once, then looked down at the artwork and chuckled again. "Can I keep this?"

"Yeah, but--"

"Fine. Come back here tomorrow, I like this office better." He walked away, not looking at either of them as he yelled, "And bring a portfolio, I want to know if you suck at the serious crap."

The office door shut on whatever Lex's response would have been. Aaron and Lex were left staring at the Manager Hours sign, its incorrect information swinging back and forth.

"That was my lunch," Aaron said.

A shell-shocked laugh bounced around the rafters of the gym. Aaron wanted to hug Lex so badly, he almost leaped over the desk to do it

"It sure was. I hope your boss likes peanut butter and jelly."

Aaron frowned. "I think he's allergic, actually. It's gym policy, you're not supposed to bring nuts--"

"Oh, my god, Phil! Wait!"

Weeks of sneaking and chasing and avoiding and Aaron had never seen Lex run so fast.

## Epilogue

Aaron stepped out of the kitchenette and closed the door, leaning back against it and closing his eyes. Pressing his shoulders against the wood, he calmed his breathing, filling his lungs like he'd just finished running a marathon rather than cutting up one and a half bananas.

He would have preferred the marathon.

But he'd done it. He'd finished it. He'd said *sure, Imani, whatever you say*, when he'd asked him to finish up so she could go home.

Yes, he was standing there, taking his time getting his heart rate under control. Yes, it had taken him almost 15 minutes to even open the door. But he'd done it. The thought of doing it again tomorrow exhausted him, but it was a baby step he could be proud of.

He wanted to text Lex and get an inexplicable string of emojis in return, but he knew Lex would be on the subway, so he decided to wait a few minutes until they were both home. He did text his therapist, though, after a stern self-lecture that he wasn't being a bother.

Putting his phone away, he grabbed his backpack from the locker on the end of the row and left the staff room. He was looking forward to the first weekend he'd had completely off since Christmas, to recharge from a busy month of New Year's Resolutioners and the regulars who were inconvenienced by their presence.

"See you later," he said to Ryan, lifting a hand that felt almost casual on his way around the desk.

"Yeah, later, man. Oh, hey, Lex. I didn't know you were coming in today."

Lex stood on the other side of the shiny new gate--Phil's Hanukkah present to himself--bouncing up and down on his heels with a wide, Happy Lex Smile on his face.

Aaron used to keep those smiles for himself, cherishing them, because even though Lex smiled all the time, very rarely did he truly mean it. He was getting better at sharing them, these days. Probably because they were happening at an exponential rate.

"Yep, I'm unpredictable as hell," Lex announced proudly, with a wink in Aaron's direction. "Also, the best roommate ever, because I came to keep Aaron company on his walk home."

"Sure," Ryan said, rolling his eyes.

If Ryan was suspicious about how close his friend and his 'roommate' were, he hadn't shown it. He just seemed happy that Lex was happier. He still had no idea about how Lex had

been living before he moved in with Aaron, but Aaron still had hope that the truth would come out. Eventually. Maybe when the snow thawed and the image of what Lex nearly had to go through wasn't so easy to picture.

"So, roomie. What's the hold up?" Lex demanded, grabbing the metal rails and leaning into the exit as far as he could without getting smacked by the gate when it swung open to shoot Aaron out the other side.

"Let's go," he said, then he grunted in surprise when Lex grabbed his hand and gave it a yank, speeding their progress out the door.

The quick glance he caught of Ryan was of him shaking his head at their antics--well, Lex's antics--then they were out of sight. They didn't go far, though, only to the hallway outside of the gym, where Lex turned around, crowding up close and brandishing his phone in Aaron's face.

"Look, look!"

Aaron caught Lex's wrist and held it still, peripherally aware of the fluttering pulse underneath his fingers. On the screen was the home page of Lex's mobile banking app. With his free hand, Lex pointed proudly at the balance of his chequing account.

"I just got paid. Direct deposit, baby."

"And? It's Friday. You always get paid on Fridays."

After Lex had gotten the job at Phil's he'd spent every Friday evening grinning ear to ear and celebrating. Within reason, of course. If there was one thing Lex knew, it was how to stretch a dollar. Aaron had to admit the blanket fort was a fun way to spend a Friday night.

"Yeah, but look. Look at that balance, Aaron."

Aaron looked. Then did some math in his head. "Is that--"

"Enough for rent?" Lex's eyes sparkled and he put his phone away, using the extra space to get closer to Aaron's body. "Yep. First and last, a couple more for cushion, and some grocery money left over. I could move out next week if I wanted."

Aaron's heart sped up. The thing they hadn't talked about for months, the tension they danced around...this was it. The moment when they could finally speak their minds.

And for once, Aaron knew exactly what to say.

"And do you want to move out?"

Aaron was off the clock. There was no one, not a client or a supervisor, around to care when, a few yards away from Aaron's job, Lex leaned forward and kissed him, slow and

deep, with so much more meaning than any other kiss Aaron had ever had. Because it might have been the first time they'd been on the same page, willing and able to commit, but it was far from the first time they'd known each other enough to care.

"No," Lex said, when they finally broke apart. "Not at all."

"Good. Because I don't want to teach the house rules to anyone else."

"What rules?" Lex asked, his eyes innocently wide as he grabbed the zipper of Aaron's sweater and pulled it all the way down. "I can pay rent now, I do what I want."

Aaron took both of Lex's clever hands in his and squeezed them. "And what do you want?"

"Just you."

This time, when they kissed, there was someone to see. Brenda wolf-whistled as she went by, shooting them both a thumbs up. Aaron couldn't keep his smile to himself. This was his happiness, and no anxious voice in the back of his head could pop up to take it from him.

"Take me home?" Lex said.

Home. The small space they'd carved out for the two of them. A little odd, with a list on the door of things they both promised to do, to make each other happy. Lex's pens all facing the same direction in every cup-shaped receptacle. Aaron's name badge and backpack next to Lex's beat-up sneakers by the door, every day.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "Let's go home."