



YEAR  
OF THE  
JACKAL



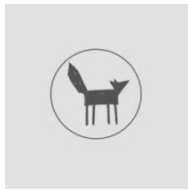
A NOVEL

ABBY KAITZ

YEAR OF THE JACKAL

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**ABBY KAITZ**



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FALL  
SEMESTER

# 1

Tonight went against the lunar calendar.

Max Trellis-Tan had approximately 1,380 seconds left to live. That sounded much longer than the twenty-or-so minutes he actually had. Because his legs were starting to feel like marshmallows trying to cut through cement. All that time wasted on strength training. It didn't even prepare him for this—this—whatever the heck was happening to him right now.

He stole a glance over his shoulder. Drunken bodies teetered out of his way, laughing. They laughed again, louder, and that was when Max knew the giant chasing him was closing in.

1,200 seconds left.

It suddenly occurred to him that he could simply run into one of these houses on Greek Row. Safety in numbers and all that. Except the giant was bulldozing his way through the crowded sidewalk, and Max was not enough of an idiot to think he wouldn't do the same in a house full of even more drunks. The smart thing to do was to keep running.

Something was blocking the sidewalk a couple of yards away. Max gave his legs an extra push and jumped over the recycling bin that had been recommissioned as some sort of

ill-conceived beer pong table. Plastic cups and cheap beer spilled in his wake.

“Watch it, Jackie Chan!” The sound of high fives and hollering. “That Asian kid can run. Hey, Chan, can you get us some egg rolls?”

Even with the giant just strides away from pouncing, Max had enough clarity of mind to yell: “The egg rolls in this town are atrocious!”

He pushed past another group of students, ignoring the wasted frat bro who fell over after getting (accidentally!) elbowed by Max. Oops. Well, that guy wasn't on the verge of losing his life tonight. Behind him, the growl of the giant bounding closer. It had an advantage. Those long legs: the pride of Bramburgh University.

It would take another three minutes to reach the corner of Pemaquid Avenue and Butterfirth Lane. Once there, it was a straight shot to Keesby Hall. Max patted his back pocket for his student ID; still there. Just a matter of whipping it out fast enough once he got to his dorm. And then he'd lock the growling giant out and do an annoying celebratory dance as the giant crushed rocks between his fingers or whatever it was that angry people did.

Anger was such a foreign feeling. Like having water inside your ear. Even now, being chased by a vicious giant, finding himself in a situation that wasn't entirely his fault (“But it technically was,” Zach would say), Max wasn't mad. He wasn't even scared. This was what college was all about: making strategically arbitrary decisions and feeling the rush of it pound at your ears and fill your heart with something close to invincibility—

THWACK.

He fell to the ground.

“Shit, Libby! You just totally cracked his head open with Greg's lacrosse stick!”

“Oh. My. Godzilla! Hey, are you okaaaay? Are you aliiive?”

“He’s super cute. We should take him home and nurse him back to health. Like Florence Nightingale. Libby, we can finally have a threesome!”

“Are you aliiive?”

Max opened his eyes and immediately started running again. He didn’t get five feet before a pair of plywood-like arms circled his chest and tackled him back to the ground. This time, it hurt. Concrete was unforgiving a second time. An ant ventured near his nose, then stopped, stroking its antennae as if preparing for the feast of Max’s impending carcass. A mouth came down right against his ear, panting. Large, cold hands flipped him over and Max found himself staring into the eyes of the giant.

The movies had it all wrong.

Your life didn’t flash before your eyes as you’re about to die. It’s all the other little things surrounding you: the size of the moon that night; the intoxicated laughter swirling with a particular hip-hop song blasting from one of the frat houses; the purple high-tops of a girl as she perched on the shoulders of her potential one-night stand.

And the hazel eyes of the giant staring back at him. Even in the dark, they stood out like never-ending forests in autumn.

Max Trellis-Tan was quite possibly about to face death soon. Not by an axe murderer, but by a two-hundred-pound basketball player with a face that belonged to a Shakespearean hero. Gallant. And also: incredibly angry. His angel of death. “Before you kill me, can I get a kiss?” he asked.



## 2

It started a week ago.

Max was sitting on a bench near the north quad, about to enjoy a lobster roll. He didn't mind the overcast sky or the angry wind whistling through his hair, growing angrier by the second. Nor did he mind the snippet of cold that struck deep into his bones.

If it were possible, he wouldn't hesitate to live in sub-zero conditions; better than dealing with oppressive heat all the time. He was one of those rare Texans who preferred the cold. So when Bramburgh University had told him 'Welcome to the Class of 2024!' he'd gladly packed his bags and floated on clouds all the way to Greenloch, Maine.

A pair of shiny walnut-colored loafers appeared in front of him as he stuffed the first piece of lobster meat in his mouth. He looked up.

"I need something from Aaron Scudder," the guy said. No introduction, no segue. How true business was done.

Max appraised the guy, who was now scuffing the toe of his shoe on the neatly trimmed lawn. Dark hair combed back. Rugby shirt underneath a herringbone sport jacket. His voice had that layer of polish to it that summoned New England prep schools and horseback riding on Martha's Vineyard; a voice

that was used to being obeyed. But something about him stopped short of being proper old money. Max decided to name the guy Archibald.

“Scudder?” He slurped up more lobster meat.

“Yes, he has a treasured possession that I would like to see burned in the pits of East Campus.”

“Again...*Scudder?*”

“Do you ask your professors to repeat everything?” Archibald dug his toe deeper into the grass. “I fear for the future of our country.”

“It’s just...Aaron Scudder’s untouchable.” Max recalled the blissed-out looks his classmates got whenever they passed Scudder in the student union or the library—the look that *everyone* got in Aaron Scudder’s presence.

Everyone except Max. And Archibald, apparently.

“What do you want from Scudder?”

Archibald smiled, wolf-like. “His lucky underwear.”

*Oh hell no.*

Max was not going there. His specialty was spiders in your smoothie, jump scares from the rare manuscript archive, maybe some ethical hacking. He did not stoop to theft—especially not something so base as stealing used underwear from Bramburgh’s brightest basketball star.

Before Max could decline, Archibald pulled out his wallet. “One hundred for the job. Half up front.”

“Sorry, man, but I make triple that in a weekend selling my games.”

No one had to know that Max hadn’t designed a decent video game in three years. The last game he’d made, the one that got him into Bramburgh, was mere child’s play compared to what he knew he was capable of.

Archibald pulled out another bill. “Two hundred.” And then, as though that was enough to get Max to agree: “I’d like

it done before the exhibition game with Dartmouth. That's in two weeks."

"Wait," Max said, not even fazed that this guy had a stack of fifties and hundreds simply chilling in his wallet, "what do you have against Scudder?"

"I thought you operated under one of those client confidentiality codes?"

"Yeah, but this isn't a random person you're telling me to prank. It's Aaron 'America's Sweetheart' Scudder. He's got fans beyond Bramburgh. If something happens to him, the entire Ivy League will come for me."

The wind screeched around them, but Archibald's hair remained perfectly in place. "I'm just telling you to steal his underwear, not give him a heart attack."

That was true. There was no real harm in taking a guy's underwear. He could always replace it, right? Max enjoyed putting people in their place if they deserved it: the guy who stole another film major's idea for a script; the professors who favored certain types of students; that girl from Calculus II who'd been secretly dating their TA and didn't even have the decency to share a copy of the final exam with anyone.

People came to him with their (mostly harmless but satisfying) ideas for revenge and relied on Max to execute them. That was how high-achieving students with zero street smarts fought back: through passive-aggressive vengeance.

His favorite had been sending fake love notes to a linguistics major after the guy had unceremoniously dumped his girlfriend for a grad student; the guy then broke up with the grad student thinking his secret admirer was a Kennedy. Max and the first ex-girlfriend had toasted to a prank well done on the roof of Kappa Gamma Zeta.

But Aaron Scudder.

Why would anyone want to humiliate him? From what Max had read, the guy was too good to be true: volunteered at soup kitchens during the off-season, mentored little kids from his old elementary school, had the patience to teach elderly

folks how to use the computer, and at twelve years old became one of the youngest people to earn an Eagle Scout ranking.

Max scratched at his neck. “I don’t know about this. I don’t really mess with athletes. They’re so...focused, you know? I don’t want to throw anyone off their game.”

The wallet opened again. Two more bills came out. The wind could take them away and Archibald probably wouldn’t even notice or care.

What was it like to have an inverse relationship with money? To have so much of it that you went through life wondering how to spend it? Max supposed that if Archibald was willing to offer him a few hundred bucks to carry out revenge on a fellow student, he was willing to part with more. Much more. It all depended on how the rest of this conversation went. Because Max was no Eagle Scout.

“Just tell me...why Scudder?”

“Why does it matter? I just want you to get it done. And send me the proof.”

“But you haven’t told me what his underwear looks like.”  
*Or how you even know he has lucky underwear.*

Archibald frowned. “They were these awful white briefs. Like the geriatric kind. Neon green marks all over it. He kept going on and on about how they’re so special to him. Pathetic, if you ask me. He was wearing it when we—” He cut himself off. Faint red patches spread across his cheeks.

Max grinned wide. “Ah. So this is one of those jilted lover scenarios.”

Because part of the appeal of Aaron Scudder, the reason why the media lined up like sheep to interview him, was that he was an openly gay athlete on a Division I team at one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. Well, Max was gay, too, but were *Good Morning America* and *60 Minutes* tripping over their own feet to talk to him?

“All right. I know how this works. You’re hardly the first person to come to me with this scenario.” He paused to finish his lobster roll, drawing out the chewing. He had the upper-

hand now. After taking a swig from his water bottle, he said: “Whatever you’re offering, add another three hundred.”

“I’m already being more than generous—”

Max stood up, dusting crumbs off his jeans. He took the bills that were already in Archibald’s hand. “What you’re asking for is a high-profile job. I’ll need to scope out Scudder’s dorm, learn his schedule, and find a way to sneak those hot undies out. That’s already more work than my usual hits. My textbooks aren’t going to study themselves. Make it another two hundred and it’s a deal.”

“You freshmen are unbelievable.”

“I’m a sophomore.”

“Basically freshmen with extra credit.” Archibald scowled, but opened his wallet just the same.

“Not that it’s any of my business,” Max said, “but that’s an awful lot of benjamins you’ve got there. Why don’t you just carry a credit card like a normal person?”

“And contribute to the debt cycle plaguing this country?”

After Archibald had stomped away, Max stared at the money in his hands. It wasn’t enough to fund his new venture, but it was a start. He crammed the bills into his backpack and whistled all the way to class.

---

The lunar calendar never failed him. Max had checked and double-checked it over the last few days.

*Good for new business.*

That sounded close enough for what he was about to do. Pulling pranks was his business, and pranking an athlete was new for him.

After catching dinner with Jared and Zach, and conjuring up three more pages for his paper on the fatal flaws of humanity as reflected in the jealousies of Hellenistic deities, he made his way to Duncan Hall.

Ten years ago, Bramburgh had decided to build a new dorm on East Campus to attract prospective student athletes. Duncan Hall boasted a full basement gym, a snack bar with no less than twenty varieties of smoothies and acai bowls, and had the only dining hall on campus that offered Paleo Tuesdays.

The building looked as if it were designed by an architect who had discovered the existence of aliens and decided to make contact: a giant crop circle erected to life, all rounded edges and geometrical symmetry—the modern bastard in a campus defined by Gothic and Romanesque beauty. If it were up to Max, he would have put that money towards something more worthwhile, like...topiaries; that would make the slog to an 8 a.m. class much more bearable.

He punched the elevator button. It was only thirty minutes to midnight, but the dorm already had that eerie, quiet feel to it. Student athletes took their sleep seriously; at least, the ones who decided to forgo partying on a Friday night. When he reached the basement, he whistled down the hallway to the laundry room, his rendition of “Take Me Home, Country Roads” echoing off the cinder block walls.

The laundry room was empty but not lifeless. It smelled of organic detergent and fabric softeners with the consistency of richly woven spiderwebs. A lone machine hummed in the far corner. Max hauled himself onto it, enjoying the slight massage as the washer throbbed beneath him. Were there lace thongs and flower-printed bras in there? Or just the sweat of socks and jockstraps? The latter seemed more erotic.

He checked his watch. 11:39 p.m. A few more seconds and...

Something squeaked. The door to the laundry room opened and Max saw the guy's butt before anything else. It hid behind a pair of wrinkled cargo shorts, which did nothing to conceal the fact that this guy had an awesome rear end. Too bad the closest Max would get to touching it was rummaging through its owner's dirty laundry.

Aaron Scudder nodded at Max as he lugged his basket towards the other side of the room. No smile. Just one of those completely perfunctory dude-nods. Max flashed his cutest smile anyway and said, “Pretty late to be doing laundry.”

“It’s quieter this way.” Aaron plopped a pod of detergent into the washer.

“So you’re an octopus.”

“Excuse me?”

Max jumped off the washer and came to stand beside Bramburgh University’s most prized athlete. Aaron Scudder was a good half foot taller than Max’s five-eleven. Mr. Eagle Scout had a biscuit-beige scar that ran from the corner of his left eye to halfway up his temple. Probably got it trying to save Little Timmy from a bear. Or a group of schoolchildren from a flaming bus.

“Octopuses prefer solitude,” Max said. “If they’re taking a stroll through the ocean and see another octopus, they get territorial and attack.”

“Okay...” Aaron lifted a shirt from his basket and laid it carefully in the washer. Unlike Max, who simply stuffed as many clothes as he could fit into the machine, Aaron treated the chore of doing laundry as if he were preparing to baptize a baby: every article of clothing handled gently and laid to rest in the cradle of a stainless-steel drum.

Max pulled himself atop the washer next to Aaron’s. His heels thudded against the side of the machine. “It’s kind of like basketball, right?”

“What?”

“You’re guarding your net against the other team. Sports are just an excuse to express our territorial instincts. Which makes me think that people who play sports are undiagnosed psychopaths.”

Aaron dropped his socks and turned to stare at him. “Are you drunk, man?”

“No. I’m here to meet a cute guy.” Max flashed another smile.

“You’re in the wrong place, then.”

“Nope.” He watched as Aaron continued to fill the washer. Something white and green—neon green—peeked out from the bottom of the laundry basket. “I’m right where I belong.”

Aaron gave him a funny look, but not before Max caught the faintest hint of a smile. He had never flirted with someone of Aaron’s caliber before. Bramburgh was populated by nerds of all stripes—even the craziest frat guys regularly made the dean’s list—but Max tended to stick with his comfort flirts: other engineering majors, the ubiquitous liberal arts majors, and the occasional grad student going through some form of academic crisis.

He paced around the room, peeking in the empty dryers for lost treasure. Once, he’d found a crumpled fifty-dollar bill in the lint filter; another time, a pair of earbuds that still worked. Tonight yielded nothing valuable—unless he counted the way Aaron kept stealing glances at him from across the room. He straightened up and closed the door to the last dryer. “Have you ever found a condom in here?”

The way Aaron’s face turned red gave Max the confidence to continue: “I lived in Bailey last year. You’d think a dorm full of STEM majors would be pretty tame, right? But I found a bunch of condoms in the dryer one time. They were still sealed. So I used them to make floating night lights. All you really need is a lithium coin battery.”

Aaron had stopped emptying his basket. “How did you make them float?”

“By blowing into them.” Max winked. “Probably couldn’t do that in the olden times. Did you know that they used to make condoms using animal intestines?”

“That’s kind of...cool?”

“What’s the weirdest fact you know?”

“Oh, um...” Aaron turned red again. The target underwear was now in full view. It looked like a droopy rag covered in



bright green slashes and swirls, as if a child had taken a highlighter to it. This was the lucky underwear that got Bramburgh all the way to the Sweet Sixteen last spring? More like something you'd find in an abandoned geriatric hospital.

"I think I read somewhere that crows can remember people's faces," Aaron said.

"Huh. So do you think you're like a crow?"

"What?"

"Would you remember my face?" Max smiled and walked towards the door. He gave one last wink before closing it behind him.

An industrial sink took up the end of the hallway. Max crouched behind it while keeping an eye on the door to the laundry room. He could have stayed hidden here the whole time, but he'd been curious about the basketball star and couldn't pass up the chance to talk to a cute guy.

Less than two minutes later, Aaron emerged from the laundry room and stood in the middle of the hallway. He swiveled his head left and right, as if looking for someone, then bonked himself on the forehead with a fist, muttering something that Max couldn't make out.

The guy might be cute, but he was a strange one.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Max ran back to the laundry room and flipped open Aaron's washer. A salad of sweatpants, shorts, socks, and T-shirts floated around. He stuck his hand inside and began his search.

It was so weird touching a stranger's clothes. The intimacy was akin to reading their diary. Was this the sock Aaron had worn to prom? Was this the shirt he had on when he got his acceptance letter to Bramburgh? Did he hook up with a guy in those stegosaurus boxers?

Max sloshed around until he caught a glimpse of neon green. After wringing it out, he studied the briefs closely. They looked even sadder, all wrinkled and dripping wet. He considered ditching this prank—it wasn't even a prank, just

straight-up theft—but the thought of giving up five hundred easy dollars...

He held the underwear awkwardly. It continued to cry large, wet drops onto the linoleum. If Aaron Scudder really thought of this as some kind of good luck charm, then Max was meddling with psychological and cosmic forces he had no business poking his nose in. He stood staring at the briefs for the better part of a minute.

It was too long.

The door squeaked behind him.

“Oh, hey! You’re still here.” Aaron’s smile was a mix of delight and bashfulness. He held up a clump of socks. “I just, uh, forgot about these.” The smile melted into a look of confusion as he noticed the sad lump in Max’s hands. “Hey, why are you—”

Max pushed past and ran for the elevator.

“Hey! Give those back! Fucking asshole!”

So the Eagle Scout had a potty mouth.

Max looked back. Aaron had sprinted out of the laundry room and was coming at him with the force of a thousand angry hornets. Shitfuckfuckingshit. There was no time to wait for the elevator. He made a sharp turn towards the stairs. Aaron’s footsteps echoed his own as they thundered up the steps and into the lobby of Duncan Hall.

“Come back here, you dick!”

In another world, one where logic and common sense reigned, Max would be in his room right now, making progress on the new business venture that would (most certainly) (in all likelihood) (he hoped) make him and his friends household names before they even graduated from college.

“Fucking asshole!”

Instead, he was going to die at the hands of a bloodthirsty basketball player who harbored an unhealthy attachment to a pair of depressing briefs.

---

Which brought him to this moment: on his back in the middle of Frat Row, about to be murdered.

Aaron pinned Max's arms down. The underwear fell out of his grip. Aaron snatched it up and stuffed it in the pocket of his hoodie. His eyes blazed hotter and angrier than wildfire. "Why did you take this?"

"I'll tell you if you kiss me."

"Are you some kind of pervert?"

Max tried to wriggle free, but Aaron pushed him down harder. A crowd gathered around them.

"Check it out! Scudder and his new boyfriend!"

"So he really is gay?"

"Aaron, I love you! Sign my boobs!" a girl yelled before puking on the grass.

Max twisted under Aaron's weight. "If you're not going to kiss me, I'd like to go back to my room now."

"What were you going to do with my underwear?" Aaron hissed.

"Well, I was going to extract your skin cells and mix them with the cell nucleus of a dog to see if I could create a man-dog hybrid. A mog. It will ideally be able to breed with pure humans—"

"You're a crazy pervert!"

"Science is full of perversions."

Aaron leaned in, so close they were inhaling each other's scent; if Max wasn't already on the ground, he would have probably swooned. "What were you *really* planning on doing with my underwear?"

Those hazel eyes continued to burn through his skin. Their faces were mere inches from each other. There was only one thing to do: Max curled his neck up, stuck his lips out, and kissed the tip of Aaron Scudder's nose.

They both froze.

Instead of releasing him, as Max had hoped, Aaron tightened his grip. One hand reached for Max's face, as if to caress it, then—

Pure blackness clouded his vision before he felt it: burning pain under his right eye that spread and numbed the rest of his face.

Max had never been punched before. Like your life flashing before your eyes, people only got punched in the movies—not in a campus full of bougie overachievers.

Someone danced around them twirling glow sticks. A group of hoodied frat guys lugged a keg onto the sidewalk and struck it with a mallet. Beer exploded everywhere, turning the crowd feral. “Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

The basketball player leapt away, shaking. “I’m—I didn’t mean to—”

Max didn’t wait for an explanation. He staggered to his feet, blinked until the cloudy blackness faded, and bolted for his dorm without looking back. One of his sneakers came loose, but he didn’t stop to retrieve it.

Aaron Scudder was a wild card. Max didn’t know whether to be afraid or aroused. One thing was certain: this Eagle Scout had claws.

# 3

Love and pain sound exactly the same in the Hokkien language.

Tiah.

Did some ancient person from the Minnan region of China, who'd been toiling away in a rice field, suddenly think: "My back hurts, but I love it—*I love it!*—because I'm feeding my family!"

Max supposed that his ancestors got some things right. They went through life trusting in the power of intangible forces so they could preserve the tangible: family. That was something every good Chinese boy and girl had stamped into their conscience. Past, present, future. Family got you here, family is providing for you now, family is what you must preserve when you are old enough to care for another human being. But how were you supposed to preserve something like that? Keep it in a jar like jam or pickles?

The moment Max crashed through his bedroom door, he fell onto the mattress, laughing. Not an out-loud laugh. More like the kind that started in your stomach as a bubble and took its time floating up your throat. Half-cackle, half-choke.

The most popular guy on campus had been *on top* of him.

No one had ever forced their way into his personal space like that before. There had been times when Max wished the boy he was meeting for coffee/movies/video game marathons would stop adjusting his glasses/pretending to drink out of an empty cup/playing with the loose thread on his shirt sleeve and just kiss him like an animal. Max never loved any of those boys. He felt no pain when they inevitably stopped texting. Just relief.

That familiar sense of relief was absent tonight. Two hundred pounds of muscle threatening to break his bones had felt like the best part of a roller coaster ride: nerves coiled tight just before the plunge.

Was he really a crazy pervert? He didn't care. It got Aaron Scudder riled up—and that was enough to give Max another rush of roller-coaster butterflies.

He queued up an old Italo-pop song before collapsing back into bed. His eye throbbed where Aaron had slugged him. The throbbing slipped in time with the music as his favorite band sang about being confused by love. Max couldn't relate, but he was often attracted to things he couldn't comprehend. The allure of the peculiar. Like being drawn to a baby with a misshapen nose or cats with six toes.

He didn't remember unzipping his jeans. Every part of his body seemed to be running on pure adrenaline at this point. What he did notice was how loud his lumpy dorm mattress creaked as he slid his palm up and down. Hearing that always made the moment hotter. Imagining faceless men working him sometimes added a layer of thrill, but it was mostly the escalating sounds of creaking that made him come the fastest.

Tonight, though—tonight he could finally introduce a new fantasy. Max closed his eyes and erased Aaron Scudder's face, replacing it with a featureless blob. Mr. Blob Face retained Aaron's trunk-like arms and barrel of a torso. No, that made him sound like a beefy football player. Aaron was more like an especially tall ballet dancer. Lithe and graceful.

Max immediately sat up and released his dick.

Mr. Blob Face transformed into the handsome guy from the laundry room who had looked at him with curiosity.

No, no, no.

He closed his eyes again and re-summoned Mr. Blob Face. But every time he got into a comfortable rhythm, there was Aaron Scudder, with his hazel eyes and taut muscles and perfect-amount-of-stubble and breath that smelled like sugar-free licorice—

The first spurt of come hit his shirt. Max sighed. “You failed me tonight, Mr. Blob Face.” He pumped the rest out as the music concluded with a happy swell of drums and violins.

Noise erupted from down the hall. Someone was banging on a door and shouting loud enough to wake a hibernating bear. “Jessica! I’m sorry! I swear, I didn’t know she was going to be there tonight!”

“Don’t open the door, Jessica,” Max whispered into his pillow, “just write a song about him and get rich by exploiting your heartbreak.”

He changed into a new shirt and spent the next few minutes drawing shapes on the ceiling with his one good eye. When he was a child, he used to create entire jungles full of imaginary animals; now, he conjured up imaginary lines of code, data structures, algorithms...

Numbers and letters filled the ceiling, spinning and twisting in a rhythm that even Max failed to understand at times. He often wondered what it would feel like if he simply stopped thinking—about computer programming; about his grades; about the future. Move to a cabin in the middle of nowhere and stain his hands with dirt.

But then he remembered the stubborn bug in his code and made a note to text Jared tomorrow about scrapping C++ and going with their original plan.

*Brrr-ring! Brrr-ring!*

Who the hell was calling at two in the morning? If Jared had gotten in trouble with campus security again...

He squinted at his phone, then sat up when he saw who it was. His grandfather never called this late.

“Hey, Ang-kong, is everything okay?”

“Max! I knew you’d still be awake!” His grandfather’s voice crackled from poor reception. Max caught a glimpse of pearly-white sand before the video cut to black.

“Ang-kong, are you okay?”

“Wait—” A burst of laughter. Waves crashing. A woman’s voice. More laughter. The video came back on, clear and bright. His grandfather was smiling like a teenage boy who’d just made it to third base. “That was Greta. Met her in Boracay. She just got her divorce finalized. Do you know that she used to star in an Argentine telenovela? She played the rich grandmother who sabotaged her daughter-in-law’s career trying to protect her grandson and then got amnesia—”

“Did you want me to look her up? Make sure she’s not another Doña Elena?”

“I’m much more careful now, Max. After what happened with Doña Elena, I’ve gotten better at finding the fakes in the Philippines. Greta is as pure as they come. Well, not exactly pure in the biblical sense—”

“Ang-kong, please keep the details between you and Greta and God.”

His grandfather let out another laugh. Rumbling and flavorful and full-bodied, just like the man behind it. “I called because I was doing tai chi on the beach when I got this sudden feeling that you were in trouble.”

“What?”

“Something pricked at my chest just as I was grasping the bird’s tail—”

“*What?*”

“It’s a tai chi move. Anyway, I felt this little spasm in my chest and immediately thought of you. Did someone hurt you today?”



*Yes, a hot basketball player punched me in the face, then proceeded to invade my masturbatory fantasies. Meanwhile, my seventy-three-year-old grandfather is having beach sex with a soap opera actress. What is life!*

“Maybe you should be more concerned about that chest spasm. Get it checked out when you return to Manila.”

“No, no. This was different. A grandfather and his grandson share a very special connection, Max. Tethered by blood and sinew, but also by centuries of history and chi, all blended together to form the bond we have now. You’ll feel it too when you have your own children, and then grandchildren.”

Max didn’t say anything, hoping his grandfather would get the hint.

“If you come to the Philippines after graduation, like I’ve been telling you, you won’t have to worry about childcare. We’ll find you a good and honest nanny from the provinces. You’ll also have your choice of nice Chinese boys in Manila. Or even Davao and Cebu. The Chinese gays are starting to open up here. You just have to know the right kind of families. Open, but also discreet, yeah?”

Why did conversations with his grandfather always end up here? Max had zero, zilch, nil plans to settle into a life of complacency, raising kids and eating at chain restaurants while debating between a minivan and an SUV. He and his friends were building their own path. Even if they had to whack and plow and bleed to forge it, it would be born of their own sweat: a trail made specially for the mavericks and independent thinkers.

“No man should go through life alone. You need a companion.”

“Ang-kong, I’m still in college. I don’t want to think about these things. And I have Jared and Zach. We’re like our own family.”

“And how is your...family business going?”

His grandfather meant Max's other business. The one that didn't involve pranks and pissing off basketball players.

"We're still building out the main application. But we're close to getting a demo out." A spark surged through him, a zap of unmitigated joy whenever he thought of his startup. "I really think it'll be a step forward for the virtual reality industry."

His grandfather shouted at the ocean: "My grandson is going to be the next Zuckerberg! Except more handsome! The press will go crazy over you, Max. When your company goes public and you get all your money, you can come and live with me in the Philippines. We'll eat halo-halo every day and swim with the whale sharks. Oh, I can't wait for you to come. You can see where I grew up and where I got into my first fight—it was just like *West Side Story*! Your mother goes to Japan every year and never once thought to bring you to Manila. Ayia!"

"She travels for business."

"She's lost touch with her roots, that's the problem. Do you know that I'm the one who insisted that she speak to you in Hokkien while you were growing up? No grandson of mine carrying Tan blood will be ignorant of his ancestral tongue."

Max recalled the kids in school who used to ask him to "say something in Chinese." He taught them curse words gleaned from his grandfather and said they meant *love* or *dragon* or *chicken wings*. Jimmy Larson went around in sixth grade proclaiming, "Gwa si lanjiao bin!" He chanted it every morning in homeroom before the pledge of allegiance, thinking it was a compliment on his athletic abilities. If there had been another Hokkien speaker in their Texas town, they would have warned Jimmy Larson that what he was saying actually translated to: "I'm a dickface."

"And when your mother was looking for a sperm donor, I told her to choose a Chinese man," his grandfather continued. "A Han Chinese. We are the only ancient civilization to survive and thrive in the modern world. Look what happened to the Romans. They've been reduced to making Gucci handbags—"

“But I’m part Italian—”

“And the Mongols? Now a pawn trapped between Russia and China. When you look at the bigger picture, you’ll see that the Han Chinese have emerged at the head of the pack. Do you know why? Because we don’t conquer other people. We build businesses. Like what you’re doing with your friends.”

“Ang-kong, you can’t say these things out loud.”

“I just did.”

“You can’t say it to...other people.”

“Don’t worry, all my mahjong buddies are kai-ki lang.”  
Fellow Chinese-Filipinos.

“I have to get to bed,” Max said. He knew that when his grandfather got riled up about a topic, it was hard to get him to slow down. His former students at Carnegie Mellon often stayed well after class time debating him on thermodynamics and reaction engineering. And Francisco Tan was more than happy to oblige them.

“Tell Jared and Zach I’ve got a bungalow on the beach waiting for them if they ever come. Good night, xiao ma.”  
Little Horse.

Max smiled at the pet name. “Bye, Ang-kong. Have fun with, um, Greta.”

“We’re going snorkeling. I hope we see porcupinefish!”

Instead of getting ready for bed, Max opened his laptop and began the nightly ritual that started a year and a half ago. He went on Twitter and typed in the name the sperm bank had given him. The profile revealed a simple bio: *Attorney. Licensed pilot. Dumpling addict.*

Max loved dumplings, too.

A post from earlier in the day showed a man wearing a Giants cap posing in front of an old-looking building, arms stretched wide as if ready to embrace the sun: “Escaping to Alcatraz!”

Who took the picture? His wife? Girlfriend? Son? Max hoped it was a random tourist.

Before he could shut his laptop and forget about the picture, more unanswered questions banged around in his head.

Would the man have taken Max to a Giants game and celebrated with ice cream afterwards? Would they have spent a weekend at Yosemite, with the man teaching Max how to set up a tent and identify poison ivy? Would he have gone to Max's science fair competitions?

He scrolled down. Another picture of the man, this time in cycling gear, one foot on the pedal in a victory pose, the Golden Gate Bridge looming behind him. The post below that showed him eating street tacos from a food truck: "Best carne asada in Oakland!!!"

Always solo pictures. Always upbeat.

In his mind, Max shoved the mystery photographer away and asked the man to smile for him. Just him.

*Hey, Dad, say cheese!*

Or would he ask Max to call him Papa? Pops? Daddy-o? Max only knew him by his legal name: William Phillip Zhang. Even that sounded cool. Kind of regal. Also, W and Z were undoubtedly the most badass letters in the alphabet.

He settled into bed and pulled up a video of William P. Zhang hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. A solo backpacking trip from five years ago. He had made quite a dent through all of William P. Zhang's social media profiles, working in chronological order. This hiking video was Max's favorite. In it, he could hear the birds and the wind. But most importantly, *his* voice. Sure and confident. A man who was best friends with the world.

The throbbing around his eye grew worse, but Max hardly felt anything as he listened to William P. Zhang pointing out the different wildflowers and explaining what to do if you came across a mountain lion.

Max closed his eyes.

*“Wow, look at that view!”*

He knew the camera was panning over the Sierra Nevada. Just like he knew that William P. Zhang would then start humming a John Denver song. A man greeting the mountains, as if he were created straight from the rocks and the trees and the soil. Completely in his element.

So cool.

# 4

This was some weird Cinderella shit.

Aaron Scudder held up the lone sneaker. He had stared at it for hours last night. How were you supposed to fall asleep after punching someone?

Instead of offering his hand to the underwear thief, he had picked up the shoe and carried it all the way back to his room as if it were precious cargo. Years spent in locker rooms had made him immune to musky smells. But this shoe didn't smell; at least, not in the cartoon sense with green fumes hanging over it. It was a blue Chuck Taylor, weather-beaten and streaked with lines of dirt, as if its owner regularly ran through sludge; the top of the tongue had started to fray. The checkered laces didn't quite match the rest of the color scheme, which meant its owner had customized it. This was a sneaker that had been loved.

He stuffed the shoe into his duffel bag, along with a torn piece of notebook paper where he'd scrawled a haiku:

*Laundry room meeting*

*Turned into something  
foolish*

*Sorry. Buy you lunch?*

It had taken him less than ten minutes to come up with the poem, but he had spent the entire night plus most of this morning debating whether he should give it to Underwear Thief.

Was it too presumptuous? Would the guy even want to talk to him after what happened? Aaron had also scribbled his phone number beneath the poem. Maybe he should cross it out. But then it would mess up the aesthetic. He should rewrite the poem on better paper. Something more professional. Maybe even type it out? But then he'd have to run to the printer at the student center, cutting it close to practice—

*Thud thud thud!*

What sounded like huge werewolf paws threatened to knock down his door.

“Turn off the porn, Scudder! Time to bounce!”

He glanced at the clock. Still an hour before Coach chewed their asses. The other guys liked to leave early for practice to review game tape or do extended warm ups. When your team makes the top twenty-five in the preseason polls, the only Ivy League school to do so for the past two seasons, you needed to squeeze every minute out of your day and make sure any free time was devoted to improving your game. Aaron had only been late to practice once, when he'd accidentally fallen asleep after a particularly exhausting physics lecture last year, and the look in Coach's eyes was sharp enough to slice him in half. After that, he'd started tagging along with his early-bird teammates.

“Someone's in a good mood.” Benny Luczak, a senior point guard, gave him a small fist bump on the shoulder as Aaron locked his door. “Did you score last night?”

“Not exactly. Um, do you know an Asian-looking guy who’s about this tall?” Aaron leveled his hand slightly above his chin.

“We’re at Bramburgh. You need to be more specific.”

“I don’t know anything else about him.”

“Major? Minor? SAT score? If it’s below 1500, he’s probably a legacy student or a former child actor.”

They met three other teammates in the lobby and made the trek up the hill to the practice courts. Orange leaves rustled above them, while chubby squirrels darted back and forth in search of detritus left from last night’s partying crowd. Strips of amber poked through the clouds, but the rest of campus remained sheathed in a dusky glow. A small breeze patted Aaron on the cheeks, making him smile. He loved the quiet, in-between state of early mornings.

Benny grinned at their teammates. “Scudder has a mystery boyfriend.”

“He’s not!” Aaron said. “We had a...uh, a scuffle last night and I feel bad about it. He left his shoe and I’m trying to get it back to him.”

“A scuffle?” George Geraard, Bramburgh’s power forward, gave Aaron a concerned look. “You have to be careful with some people. They can lure you in with their sweet talk and then cut your dick off five minutes later. The hotter they are, the more dangerous.”

“Speaking of hot,” Benny said, “Scudder, when are you going to introduce us to Winnie?”

Aaron bopped the back of his teammate’s head. “I am not introducing my best friend to any of you clowns.”

“But, dude, did you see her at the Delta Phi party? I can’t resist a woman who can pull off shorts and cowboy boots.”

The rodeo-themed party was the first and only frat party Aaron had attended this semester. There was an unspoken rule among the team that you were granted one party at the



beginning of the school year to let off steam, clearing the way for better focus the rest of the season.

“You should sit in on my geology class,” George said to Benny. “Our professor, wow. She’s married, of course, but...”

Aaron felt the sneaker bouncing inside his duffel bag. Once practice let out, he’d meet with Winnie. Maybe she could run DNA tests on it and get her forensics buddies to track down his underwear thief—wait, *his* underwear thief?

He shook his head at the thought.

He would find the underwear thief, apologize, and hope all the other witnesses from last night were too drunk to remember the incident.

---

Five minutes before their official practice, Aaron, Benny, and George wrapped up their mini free throw game and returned to the locker room. The air inside was already heavy with the tang of sweat, growing heavier as the rest of their teammates poured in, jostling and joking and throwing rolls of athletic tape around.

A large TV was set up in the middle of the room. “Are we watching game tape now?” Aaron said. “I thought that was Wednesdays.”

Benny shrugged. “Maybe they want us to analyze that Syracuse game again. We’ve already seen it a *billion* times. I don’t know what else Coach wants us to do with it.”

“We really do need to work on our two-three zone. It can help when we’re up against teams that are crap at shooting from the outside.”

“Remember when we played Kentucky? And their center flopped right in the paint because he didn’t know what to do with three of our guys closing in? That was classic.”

Aaron swatted a towel against his teammate’s legs. “That only happened because we practiced the play a *billion* times.”

“And we only used it, like, twice last season! I really think we should focus on—” Benny’s face dropped, eyes frozen on

something beyond Aaron's shoulder. Aaron turned to look and felt his own heart drop.

Coach Henderson stood at the entrance to the locker room looking like he was about to kill every person in front of him. Assistant coaches flanked his sides, less severe versions of the man who now stormed inside without a word.

"Shit, he looks more pissed off than that time we lost to Sacramento State," Benny whispered.

"Did he lose another bet with the water polo coach?" Aaron whispered back.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop twenty degrees as Coach Henderson fixed his gray stare on each of them. Aaron felt saliva pooling behind his tongue. The gray eyes lingered on his own for a beat too long. He swallowed.

Without saying anything, Coach Henderson flicked on the TV. Static greeted them before one of the assistant coaches pressed the remote and the screen gave way to a dark scene, too dark to see anything clearly. It stayed like that for a few seconds.

"Coach, are we watching *The Blair Witch Project*?" Benny asked.

No one answered him.

The screen adjusted to the dark, and Aaron gradually came to realize that it was a shot of one of the frat houses on Pemaquid Avenue. But it was the people in front of the house that seemed to be the center of attention. A lanky figure attacked a slightly smaller figure from behind. Both of them fell to the ground as shouts erupted. The person behind the camera yelled something unintelligible, then ran towards the action. Crowds of students pressed forward and made a semi-circle around the two struggling figures.

Aaron knew what was coming next. The sound of knuckles crashing into flesh.

He lowered his eyes. He had watched himself on game film and television countless times, but they all involved

basketball. Seeing himself now—it was like watching his doppelganger commit a crime. Surreal.

*“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”*

Coach Henderson flipped the TV off. His body, still lean and toned for a man of fifty-six, radiated gamma rays that turned Aaron’s intestines to goop. Their coach gave one more death glare before speaking. “What did I tell you boys about partying right before the first game of the season?”

“I wasn’t partying, Coach!” Aaron shot up from the bench. “That guy was trying to steal my—” He quickly shut his mouth. He had never told anyone about his lucky underwear. Except Winnie and...crap. He never should have trusted that slimy brother from Delta Phi at the rodeo party. “It was just a misunderstanding, Coach. It’s my mistake. Please don’t take it out on the team.”

Their head coach ignored him.

“If you all want to party like the Wolf of Wall Street, then I suggest you take your transcripts and get your twerking asses over to Penn or Dartmouth. This is Bramburgh. *Coronatus est sapientia. Crowned With Wisdom.* You want Wisdom to crown you? Then you better start sleeping with her and not some random classmate you met at a yeet or whatever you kids call your parties these days.”

“But I wasn’t partying!” Aaron said. “I wasn’t even drunk!”

His teammates stared at him. Benny opened his mouth to say something, then clamped down when Coach Henderson shot him an ultra-death glare.

“You just dug yourself into a deeper pit, Scudder,” their coach said. “Assaulting someone while *sober*? What in the damn hell are you doing getting into fights on Frat Row with the Dartmouth game less than a week away? I know you can beat them in your sleep, but we are on a mission this season to be the best iteration in the history of Jackals Basketball. Did you forget that you were the team to get us to our first Sweet Sixteen? I will burn in *hell* before I let my boys embarrass

themselves. The season hasn't even started yet, for fuck's sake!" He paused to rub at his temples. "I'm extending mandatory study sessions for everyone. You will eat, sleep, go to class, practice, and that's it. If I hear that any one of you has put so much as the tip of your toe inside a house party, you are off the team."

A full eon seemed to pass before Coach Henderson spoke again. "Go start your drills. Now."

The collective breath of the locker room tumbled out in a rush of squeaking sneakers and nervous chatter. Aaron grabbed his water bottle and was about to catch up with Benny and George when Coach Henderson stopped him with another death glare: "Scudder. My office."

---

For a man as meticulous as Coach Henderson, his office was a hodgepodge of randomness and eccentricity. Orange and white Bramburgh pennants lined one wall, while another was adorned with vintage movie posters. A third wall was covered with floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed full of sports biographies, business psychology textbooks, and, for reasons that still eluded Aaron, several thick volumes on cattle breeds around the world. A large, jackal-shaped rug lay in the center of the room.

As soon as Coach Henderson closed his office door, the gamma-ray eyes softened to fatherly concern. "Have a seat, Aaron. I know that must have caught you off guard out there, but I needed to make sure the rest of the guys stay out of trouble."

"I'm sorry, Coach. But I swear I wasn't out to cause trouble. That other guy took something special that belonged to me and I...I just snapped."

Coach Henderson tilted his head and studied a small, poorly-sewn bean bag on his desk shaped like a basketball. "My son made that for me when he was eight. He hates basketball. He's at NYU now studying screenwriting. I gave him a hard time at first. What the hell are you supposed to do

with that kind of degree? But then I realized he must have had a reason for doing so. Do you know what that reason is?”

“N-no, sir.”

“It’s talent. Once I understood that, I knew I needed to give him a chance to develop his gifts and pursue his potential.”

Aaron followed his coach’s eyes to the vintage movie posters across the room.

“I put those up to remind myself that one day, one of those posters will belong to a movie my son created.”

“That’s...inspiring, sir.” Aaron didn’t know where the heck this conversation was heading.

“You remind me of him,” Coach Henderson said. “Immensely talented. The natural kind. Leadership material, but prefers to stay out of the spotlight. A bit of an angry streak, but I chalk that up to the side effects of innate artistry. Basketball is also a form of art, Aaron. All sports are. It’s choreographed strategy.”

“Sir, what did you want to speak with me about?”

His coach gave the bean bag basketball a squeeze. “In sports, strategy is everything. You can have the strongest, most skilled player on your team, but without a solid plan, you’re doomed. Even the weakest opponents can stage an upset once they find your blind spot.” He let the bean bag fall to the desk with a soft *plop!* “This is why I have to suspend you from the team.”

The words nearly knocked Aaron out of his chair, as if hundreds of asteroids had crashed into him at once. “Wh-what?”

“You were physically violent with another student. It’s one thing if it happened behind closed doors. But this was filmed and distributed all over the Internet. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s made national news by now. Wait—an email just came in from PR. You are trending on Twitter and...something called BuzzFeed.”

“What...”

“Now, this is just for one season. We’ll regroup in the spring to determine your eligibility to return next fall. You’re only a sophomore. There’s plenty of playing time left your junior and senior years.”

“But...”

“Son, you have to understand that your actions don’t just impact you. If we let you stay on the team without any repercussions, those hippies on social media will burn a hole through our reputation. Bramburgh Athletics is a scandal-free organization. We have zero tolerance for violence of any kind. I understand that you might have had your reasons for acting the way you did, but in the eyes of the university...well, the only thing that matters is that you attacked someone. Very publicly. We’re lucky his lawyer hasn’t pressed charges—yet.”

“But I...”

“You’re probably wondering about your scholarship. I spoke with the folks over at Financial Aid. They weren’t too happy getting a call from me at six in the morning, but Leslie owed me a favor after what happened at the holiday party last year—anyway, you don’t have to worry. We won’t revoke all of your aid.”

“But what about—”

“Tuition will still be covered. However, since you’ll no longer be a student athlete, you will need to move out of Duncan Hall within the next two weeks. Residence Life will contact you with information about your new room assignment. This means room and board will be removed from your aid package.”

Empty words continued to fall out of Aaron’s mouth. He gaped at his coach. Everything he wanted to say, everything he needed to say, floated out of reach, flying higher and higher until he felt the first sting of tears.

Coach Henderson leaned over his desk, palms flat in front of him. He looked at Aaron for several seconds. Aaron imagined his coach pulling him in for a fatherly hug, like all the times he wished for someone to hug him: when he fell off

the monkey bars in kindergarten; when he lost his favorite stuffed pig; when his first tooth fell out and he thought he was going to die.

All he got from Coach Henderson was a sigh. “I hate to do this to you, Aaron. But you need to be a man about it. Focus on your studies. Hopefully, you can rejoin us next fall.”

The gray eyes continued to regard him with a softness that gave Aaron the courage to unscramble his brain.

“This was just one mistake, Coach. I’m really sorry. I’ll work double hard. I’ll keep out of trouble from now on. I—I won’t leave my room after 10 p.m. except on game days. I’ll...I’m willing to...Isn’t there anything I can do to stay on the team? What if I give a public apology?”

Coach Henderson shook his head. “We’ll have you on record giving an apology—expect an email from PR about that later this week—but I’m afraid the suspension is non-negotiable. We can’t risk this turning into a scandal—”

“This isn’t a scandal! I just made a stupid mistake and hit someone. Because he tried to steal my private property!”

“I’m sorry, Aaron.”

“But what about giving people a chance, like what you said about your son? A chance to pursue their talents? Basketball is my only talent!”

Coach Henderson gave a small smile, so properly paternal and warm that Aaron found himself longing for a memory he never had. “My son is also double majoring in education. Talent comes in many forms and can be developed in many ways.”

---

Aaron sat outside the practice courts for an hour, knees curled to his chest. His gaze latched onto a group of students laughing and playing Frisbee on the grass across the street. No one seemed to notice him. No one noticed failures.

In truth, it wasn’t basketball itself that Aaron loved. He could have swapped the sport with soccer or volleyball or

football—it was all the same to him: just a game. It was the camaraderie that Aaron clung to.

Despite his bursts of temper at inopportune moments, he enjoyed making new friends and had hoped to find his own squad at Bramburgh, the type of forever-buddies you invited to weddings and called up during a midlife crisis. Maybe that was why he enjoyed team sports so much: it made him feel like he finally belonged to a real family, something to fill the black hole in his own home...

No. He wouldn't dwell on that today.

His phone pinged.

**Winnie:** *OMG. PLS tell me this is your evil twin???*  
*Or a film major roped you into one of their weird*  
*movies???*

Below the text was a video attachment. Aaron clicked on it even though he knew it would be another sucker-punch to his quickly deteriorating dignity. This version of the video was a remix. Someone had edited Aaron pummeling Underwear Thief to the chorus of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." On loop.

He typed his name in the search engine. This was less ripping off the Band-Aid and more like masochism on autopilot. Searches pulled up more than twenty different videos of him and Underwear Thief set to rap music, classical music, the theme song to *Hawaii Five-O*, even superimposed onto a scene from *The Godfather*.

The punch heard 'round the world.

Over and over again, he stared at every version of himself until that familiar blind rage bubbled to the surface.

"I am not a fucking meme!"

He tore open his duffel bag and pulled out the dirty sneaker. *Cinderella, my ass*. He rifled through the bag until he found the poem. What had compelled him to waste his energy on this asshole? He looked around, then dumped the stupid sneaker and the stupid poem in the nearest trash bin.



This crazy dickweed klepto bastard was a thief in more ways than one. Now he'd stolen Aaron's future.

# 5

Max strolled along the riverbank. It was part of a woodland preserve about ten miles from campus. He had never visited this part of Greenloch before. Bramburgh students were so insulated, living their entire college existence in the campus bubble. Most of them had probably never spoken to a local. As soon as he'd arrived as a freshman, Max had popped that bubble and spent his first few days exploring the town.

It was so different from his Texas suburb, where all the houses were clones of each other and strip malls infected the landscape like relentless pimples. Greenloch, by comparison, seemed to be untouched by time: a pocket of natural beauty and simplicity.

Farther inland brought him to a hiking trail through shaggy-barked hickory trees. He placed a palm on one of them; it was marked by a dozen small holes, just large enough for a woodpecker to poke its head through. Trees didn't really have to worry about anything. They stood still in one place forever. Even when rascally animals made holes in them, or clawed, or bit, or scratched—trees remained stolid; always strong, always steady.

A porcupine waddled by. Max stared at its chubby tail flopping up and down. It stopped to stare back. They looked at each other until the porcupine became startled by a noise

coming up the trail. It waddled as fast as it could into the forest and disappeared under the shadows.

Another shadow fell on Max. He looked up—and saw Aaron Scudder: head crowned with the outline of the sun.

Without a word, the basketball player shoved him up against a tree. Neither of them said anything as Aaron began to slide one rough palm down Max's arm. The busy sounds of the forest faded away. All Max could hear was their breathing and the small sounds Aaron made as he kissed Max's neck.

And then they were sinking.

Aaron gently lowered them both to the ground without breaking the kiss. Max closed his eyes. He lifted his hand to skim through Aaron's hair. Anyone else would have called him towheaded, but to Max, Aaron Scudder's hair was a marvelous shade of yellow. It curled a little at the back, and Max played with it, winding a strand around his finger.

“What are you doing?” Aaron said.

“Your hair feels so soft.” Max tilted his head to give Aaron easier access to the rest of his neck. “Keep kissing me. I don't mind.”

“What are you doing?” Aaron demanded again.

“We're just having a little fun out here.” Max rubbed at the muscles that connected Aaron's neck to his shoulders.

“Dude, what are you doing?”

“What?” Max opened his eyes.

Aaron was gone. Someone else was staring down at him.

“Aaahh!” Max fell out of bed, limbs flailing.

“Aaahh!” The other person leapt away and dropped their phone.

Max blinked. Pale streaks of sunlight cut across the room. His two best friends stood on either side of the bed.

“Oh my gosh, what happened to your face!” Zach cried.

“What the—how did you guys get in my room?”

Jared waved an unfurled paper clip. “My dad sells cars, remember? I’ve been picking locks since I was five.”

Zach helped Max back up to bed. “We came over as soon as we saw the video.” He plucked a compact mirror from his pocket and held it up.

“What video?”

Max looked at his reflection. A dark purple blotch ran around his entire right eye.

*Oh, right—that happened last night.*

Jared sat at the foot of the bed and tossed his phone over. “You’re famous, man. YouTube, Twitter, TikTok. They’re even talking about it on my machine learning Discord, and those guys are usually clueless about these things.”

With every swipe, Max saw video after video of him getting tackled then punched. One video had Max and Aaron’s heads replaced with the faces of Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather.

“Well, shit,” he said. Then he began to chuckle. The whole thing looked ridiculous on camera, and even more absurd with the clarity of morning.

“What’s so funny?” Zach fumed. “That Aaron Scudder needs to be expelled. He thinks he’s such a bigshot basketball player who’s beyond reprimand. My dad is friends with the chief of police here. You should press charges.”

“No,” Max said, “it was my fault—”

“I know he’s hot and all, but you really shouldn’t be defending someone like that. These athletes are classic narcissists—”

“You took one psych class freshman year and think you’re Freud,” Jared said, flicking a piece of lint at their friend.

Zach put a hand to Max’s face, examining the bruise. “Your eye’s not bleeding. That’s good. Is your vision blurry?”

“No. I feel fine.” He ignored the pinpricks of pain through his head whenever he moved. “And it really was my fault. The

whole thing. I was doing one of my pranks, except this time I had to steal something. From Aaron.”

“You need to stop with your pranks.” Jared flicked another ball of lint at Zach, who shoved him off the bed. “I keep telling you. My dad can be our investor. You don’t have to fund our startup doing these dumb pranks.”

“Yeah,” Zach said, “my dad’s happy to help, too, as long as it can get his company good press.”

“No, we’re not asking our parents for money.”

Max knew that between the three of their families, they could raise enough capital to rent their own office and buy the fastest, most powerful equipment in the industry. Jared’s father owned several car dealerships in New Jersey; Zach was legitimate old money and heir to Bennington International, one of the largest food conglomerates in the world. And Max’s mother—oftentimes, he wondered how he could ever match her accomplishments in the video game industry.

But the point of starting your own business was to take a risk. Taking money from their parents wasn’t a risk: it was an incestuous business relationship. Max would rather experience honest failure than coast by on the influence of their families. They were going to do this themselves—and if they had to live on canned beans for several years, so be it.

He slipped his hand under the bed and fished out his laptop. He began to type.

“Dude, you just woke up,” Jared said. “Put that away.”

“I just thought of something. We have to rewrite everything in Python. It’ll be easier to debug. Plus, it’s cleaner, so if we hire other developers in the future they can slide in without a problem.”

“Python is overrated.” Jared flopped on his back. “It’s slow as fuck and weak as shit. I wanna meet someone who can actually write fluently in C++ and something like Malbolge.”

“No one is supposed to understand Malbolge, that’s the point.”

“And I don’t understand what either of you are talking about,” Zach said. He yawned and stretched out on the floor, using Max’s hoodie as a pillow. “Wake me up when you’re back to speaking in English.”

Jared nudged Max on the shoulder. “It’s Sunday, dude. Let’s take a break. Get a breakfast burrito. Go to the farmer’s market.”

“Since when do you go to the farmer’s market?” Zach said, lobbing a sock at Jared.

“That’s where all the hot girls hang out. Duh.”

“We should take Max to the clinic.”

“No, I’m fine.” He touched the skin around his eye and winced. “I’ll just pop some aspirin. No big deal.”

“Stop typing.” Jared covered the keyboard with his hands. Max lifted his laptop and walked to his desk.

“I’ll just be a minute. You guys go and get breakfast. I’ll meet you there.”

Jared groaned. “You got beat up and have a serious black eye. And all you’re thinking about is coding?”

Max continued to type. If he didn’t get all of this down now, he’d forget half of it and then they’d be back at the starting line. The room fell silent for several minutes. He thought his friends had fallen asleep. But then Jared said: “Your mom never replied to my Christmas card last year.”

Max spun around in his seat. “You sent my mom a Christmas card?!”

Jared laughed. “I *knew* that would get your attention.”

“Dude, you need to stop hitting on my mom! It’s weird and uncomfortable and makes me think of uncomfortable things!”

“Your mom’s hot, man. Just stating facts. I can’t believe she’s single.”

“Ms. Trellis-Tan is a self-made woman who doesn’t need anything else in her life,” Zach said. “Except Max, of course.”

He smoothed his hair and glanced at the other bed in the room. “Hey, is your roommate here today?”

“I’ve told you a billion times,” Max said, “he’s never around. He sleeps in the Dungeon with all of the other zombie architecture majors. He comes back once a week to shower.”

“And you’re a computer science zombie.” Jared swooped in from behind and grabbed Max’s laptop. “I’m holding this hostage. Zach, let’s go. We outro.”

Max sighed and slumped in his chair. Zach ruffled his hair. “Come on. You need fuel for all that coding I know you’ll be doing later anyway. And we can get some ice for your eye.”

With his roommate perpetually absent, Max had made his mark on every square inch of the room. Computer hardware and wires lay scattered all over the floor. Shirts and boxers hung limply from the dresser. Max had taken to using his roommate’s empty desk as extra space for the gaming PC he was building for fun. After searching around, he found a pair of clean-looking jeans under his bed; everything seemed to get thrown under his bed before spreading through the rest of the room like weeds.

“Why are you putting your boots on?” Zach said. “It’s only October.”

“I lost one of my sneakers last night.”

Zach gnashed his teeth. “That Aaron Scudder. It boils my blood to think how he attacked you. Like some feral dog!”

“Maybe he’s your Prince Charming,” Jared countered.

“No, I’m pretty sure he hates my guts.”

“But you don’t hate his.”

“I’m...indifferent.” Max pretended to brush it off, but the thought of Aaron Scudder activated a mini gust of wind in his chest—a tiny thrill that slowly danced through every cell in his body.

They walked out into the hall.

“No, you definitely have a boner for him,” Jared said. “You kept saying his name in your sleep earlier. You know, before you saw my face and screamed.” He whooped loudly and jumped to touch his fingers to the ceiling.

“Can you not yell?” Zach said.

“Just stating facts here.” Jared stopped to write a calculus problem on someone’s whiteboard, then drew a smiley face next to it. “If you and Scudder ever get married, I call dibs on best man.” He whooped again and ran towards the stairs.

Max and Zach looked at each other before laughing and running to catch up with their friend.

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The morning seemed to laze by.

Max shielded his eye from the glare of the sun; an ice pack was pressed against his other eye. He sipped some more of his orange juice and half-listened as Jared and Zach argued about a movie they had seen the other week. Bits of scrambled egg and biscuit littered the table.

They were at the local diner, in their usual booth by the window. Max liked to look out and watch the pigeons pecking for crumbs, the happy people strolling past as if they had all the time in the world. He had seen one of his professors pushing a baby stroller a few days ago, and it had struck him how funny it was that they lived completely normal and full lives outside of the classroom; that their professors didn’t simply press a button and go to sleep after a lecture, then reboot when it came time for the next class. He smiled at the silly thought.

“Hey, do you guys want to go to Mateo’s screening next weekend?” Jared asked, stealing a tater tot from Zach’s plate. His dark brown hair flopped across his forehead, making him look like one of those shaggy dogs with boundless energy. He rarely spoke without a playful crackle to his voice. The only time he’d shown restraint was early in their friendship, when Max had gotten too close and put a drunken hand on Jared’s



thigh; Jared had gently removed it before saying, “I’m sorry. It’s not like that for me.”

“Your friend Mateo scares me,” Zach said. “He’s always recommending those disturbing movies.”

“He’s harmless. Just a major film nut. You should have seen this girl I hooked up with freshman year. Made the mistake of sleeping over. Damn, she was freaky as hell.” Jared gave an exaggerated shudder.

“What, she turned out to be a nympho?” Zach said. “That’s not so bad.”

“No. I woke up to screaming. She was watching *The Human Centipede*. While eating leftover lasagna and sloppy joes. Like, why. Why!”

“Oh, wait...was this the girl who dressed up as Lizzie Borden at the Halloween party? The one who kept telling us to watch *A Serbian Film* and *Cannibal Holocaust*?”

“Yes!”

“Yeah, man, that’s why I walked away when she started to physically salivate over the Marquis de Sade.”

Zach stabbed at his pancakes, his normally graceful composure absent whenever there was food in front of him. Max had always wondered about the private lives of the old rich; watching Zach eat confirmed that they simply didn’t care what other people thought about them.

Despite coming from generations of wealth, Zach Bennington’s wardrobe consisted of classic rock T-shirts and a weekly rotation of flannel. Today was Pink Floyd under teal plaid. It matched his eyes well; Zach had very light blue eyes and hair the color of fresh pineapples. His entire person resembled that of a porcelain figure in skater-boy clothes: a rebellious sort of beauty that often turned heads.

It was Jared who’d tried to set Max and Zach up on a blind date last year. Instead of getting angry after Max had drunkenly hit on him, Jared had decided to introduce Max to his one other gay friend. “He’s super chill,” Jared had said, “and he’s pre-law, majoring in environmental science, so

you'll get a break from talking about computers." The date never went beyond mutual friendliness, and both Max and Zach realized they preferred laughing over Jared's antics than actually dating each other.

"So you know how I was planning on going to London next semester?" Jared said, dipping the tip of his sausage in syrup.

"How could we forget." Zach swatted Jared's hand away from his tater tots. "You've only been practicing your Cockney accent every day for the past year."

"And I still don't know what a Tesco is!" Max said.

"Well, I resubmitted my study abroad application last week. I'm not going to London anymore."

"Huh? But you said you wanted to finally try bangers and mash. Unironically."

"And trick American girls into thinking you're related to Kate Middleton."

"Change of plans, my dudes," Jared said. "London is for amateurs who are too lazy to use Google Translate. Real explorers enter The Continent." He pulled a miniature flag from his pocket.

"Why do you have a tiny Romanian flag? Were you carrying that around this whole time?"

"I swiped it from those high school kids who are here for a Model UN conference. I'm going to Bucharest!"

Zach let out a sigh. "The Carpathian Mountains."

"Dude, you were dead set on London last year," Max said. "Why the sudden change?"

Jared's eyes lit up. "Romania has a cool tech scene. I figured I'd take advantage of Bramburgh's resources and check it out. Meet other programmers and developers. Who knows, maybe we can set up base in Bucharest if the U.S. ever self-destructs."

“I feel like you’re setting yourself up for another spiel about the Illuminati,” Zach said. “Please don’t.”

Max laughed. “Isn’t your dad friends with the Rothschilds? So what are they like?”

“This is why I’m going into environmental law,” Zach said, “so I can avoid all of this capitalist nonsense!”

“You do know that most environmental lawyers represent the very capitalists who are wreaking havoc on our ecosystem, don’t you?”

They ate the rest of their breakfast in good-natured fun. It was mornings like these, with the whole day and forever in front of them, that also made Max anxious. Would they still get to be this carefree after graduation? Would their friendship survive marriages and crappy jobs, even—Max hated to think of it—the potential failure of their startup? He liked to believe in fate, that the universe brought the three of them together for a reason, allowed them to get along so well that they were willing to break the law for one another without a second thought.

Zach suddenly froze with a biscuit midway to his mouth. “Why is there an extremely attractive guy walking towards us?”

An image of Aaron smiling at him in the laundry room filled Max’s vision. He turned, excited, then silently cursed.

It was Archibald.

“There you are! You’re a genius!” Archibald moseyed over and slapped Max on the back as if they were the best of bros. “Getting him to attack you in public and filming it? Now I know why people pay you the big bucks! Here.” He handed Max an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“The rest of the money I owe you! I even threw in an extra hundred. Worth every penny!”

“No,” Max said, “I didn’t mean for any of that to happen.”

“Doesn’t matter. It happened anyway! Got your black eye to prove it, too. And now Aaron Scudder’s suspended from the team. This turned out better than I expected!”

“Wait...he’s suspended?” Max felt a pit form in his stomach.

“What did you think would happen? Any athlete caught engaging in violence is automatically suspended.”

Jared scrolled through his phone. “Nothing’s mentioned in *The Daily Jackal* or any of the other news sites.”

“Check Jackals Wild,” Archibald said. “It’ll be mainstream news by the end of tomorrow.”

Zach passed his phone to Max. It had the Jackals Wild message board pulled up. **Scudder in the Gutter** read the title post, with the original video of the punch attached. Underneath was a grainy, faraway shot of Aaron and the basketball coach talking outside the practice courts. The coach had a hand on Aaron’s shoulder; Aaron himself looked like a house of cards about to crumble. The image was dated earlier this morning.

So the Bramburgh paparazzi had gotten hold of Aaron’s suspension and leaked it to the school’s gossip site. There were already dozens of comments, with dozens more streaming in:

*That video is fake news! Aaron’s innocent!*

*#BringScudderBack #MarchMadnessOrBust*

*Who da fuq is that other guy? He’s a mole from Dartmouth!*

*B’burgh’s season is ruined now! Fuk that other guy!*

*Fam, that other guy is Max Trellis-Tan, son of Emma Trellis-Tan. We should boycott his mom’s video games!!!*

“What the hell?” They were now in a backwards universe where Max was made out to be the villain—which, well, wasn’t entirely untrue.

“Unbelievable,” Zach said, reading over his shoulder, “how did these people get into college? They can’t even spell!”

Archibald turned to stare at Zach, as if noticing him for the first time. He grinned. “Hey. We’re having a party at Delta Phi this Saturday. You should come.”

Zach narrowed his eyes. “Your pickup line isn’t original enough. Begone!”

After Archibald had sauntered off (and Zach had taken a clandestine peek at his butt), they sat in a strange silence. Max slid his finger over the envelope of money. This was now blood money. Did he miscalculate the lunar calendar? Did it have to do with their lunar signs? They were in the Year of the Ox, and Aaron Scudder was a Snake; those two signs were supposed to get along well. It didn’t make sense. Or maybe that dream he had two weeks ago was an omen...

“Max, you really need to stop with these useless pranks.” Jared’s serious voice was making another rare appearance. “You’re just a glorified gofer for a bunch of nerds who can’t solve their own problems.”

“But I’m getting paid.”

“Dude, if you want to make money, focus on building our software. You’ve got Zach and me to help—”

“No, it’s your company,” Zach said. “I’m just here to look good and tag along to soirées once you guys hit it big.”

Jared smiled. “Promise us you won’t do any more of these pranks?”

Both his friends were juniors, a year older than Max. When they switched into big-brother mode, Max couldn’t help but feel a swell of affection. He wanted to impress them as much as he wanted to impress his mother, his grandfather, William P. Zhang...

“Okay,” he said. “No more pranks.”

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That evening, as Max studied for a linear algebra quiz, his thoughts kept turning to Aaron Scudder. Maybe if he spoke with the athletics director, or even Coach Henderson,

explained what really happened, they would understand and bring Aaron back.

But then—would Max be the one getting punished? For stealing Aaron's underwear? Could you go to jail for something like that? He imagined calling his mom from a dank prison cell. There was an old TV movie about a homeless girl who had made it to the Ivy League: *From Homeless to Harvard*. Max was going in the opposite direction: From Bramburgh to Buffoon. The campus newspaper would have all sorts of fun with that.

It was all so silly.

If anyone deserved punishment, it was that Archibald guy. Why did he want to make a fool of Aaron so badly? TV producers should really consider making a reality show set in Bramburgh; the amount of ridiculous drama that went on in every dorm, every frat and sorority house, every academic department was enough to fuel at least five seasons.

He pushed his textbook aside and opened his laptop. His heart thumped as he scrolled through William P. Zhang's posts. What would he do if he found out Max had accidentally gotten a classmate suspended from the basketball team? Was he one of those old-school fathers who belittled their children for every shortcoming? Or would he guide Max towards becoming a better person?

The video he settled on for tonight was from New Year's Eve 2015. William P. Zhang waved at the camera from Times Square, the street filled with smiling people and confetti. They didn't know what the future held, but they were ready to welcome the new year.

And tomorrow would be a new day.

A fresh start.

Max could handle that.

He fell asleep to an image of his father hugging strangers in the middle of Times Square and dreamed of confetti and basketballs and computer screens filled with perfect lines of code.

## 6

“Quaint. Very...quaint,” Winnie said, doing a spin around the room. She glanced at Aaron, who slouched against the wall.

He shrugged. “I guess.”

The new room they had assigned him was more cramped than the one in Duncan Hall. It wasn't even wide enough to do proper push-ups. But it was a single, so he couldn't really complain.

They had relocated him to a corner room on the top floor of Luella Hall, the oldest—meaning: draftiest—residence on campus. Rumor had it that no fewer than five ghosts lived there. Some rooms had a fireplace (closed off), like the one Winnie was now poking with a hanger. “I heard that a possum fell out of here once,” she said.

“Like, in this room?”

“No. I don't think so. It was one of the suites.” She picked up a cardboard box and plopped it on the desk next to the radiator. “Want me to help you unpack?”

He shrugged again.

Winnie pulled a newsboy cap from the box and put it on. She cupped her hands around her mouth and said in a terrible

New York gangster accent: “Extra! Extra! Aaron Scudder hates his new dorm! Read all about it!”

“I don’t hate it.” He smiled. “Wanna hear some real news?”

“Bramburgh has seen the error of their ways and you’re back on the team?”

“No.” Even though it had been almost three weeks since his suspension, Aaron still felt a twinge of sadness when he thought about his teammates. They had all rallied in his room that day after practice, vowing to overturn the school’s wrongful decision; but no one had texted him or kept in touch after that. They were probably busy with the season underway.

He managed another smile. “I got a job.”

“Oh, sweet!”

“It’s just that little convenience store on Lancaster. They were the only ones willing to work with my schedule. I can pay for my books next semester and buy more goat cheese for my grandma. She’s addicted to them for some reason.”

Winnie joined him against the wall and rested her head on his bicep. They must have looked like the ultimate odd couple, with his towering build and her petite frame. “Just think,” she said, “it’ll be junior year before you know it, and you’ll be back on the court. With your full scholarship.”

They slid to the carpet, sitting cross-legged. Winnie put the newsboy cap on his head. “Remember when you wore this to Nick’s murder mystery party? And he started calling you Boss Tweed? You should’ve asked him out. His new boyfriend is a total nightmare.”

Aaron had never dated anyone before. He had never even kissed anyone until last month, at that Delta Phi party...

Maybe getting suspended was karma for what he did to one of the brothers there. It was embarrassing, in hindsight, but in the heat of the moment, his brain had acted on impulse and did what it thought was the right thing to do—what he felt was the right thing to do.



That particular brother had been eyeing him from across the room since the first round of flip cup, and when he finally came over, Aaron was so struck by a hot upperclassman noticing him that he had nodded like an overeager puppy when the guy invited him up to his room. They had talked about classes (the guy had also taken a course on string theory), their hometowns (he was from a suburb of Boston, just a few hours away from Aaron's home in upstate New York), and plans for the future ("Senator by thirty, president by forty-five," the guy had said with the self-assurance of a lion stalking its prey).

Those first few minutes had been a blur of the guy smiling at everything Aaron said. "You're really brave for coming out," the guy rasped as his thumb ran lazy circles around Aaron's knee. "You know, with being an athlete and all. I'm sure it was a tough decision." Another smile. "I like guys who aren't afraid of getting hurt." The hand slid from his knee to his thigh.

Aaron couldn't bring himself to explain that he was afraid of many things, that fear was a constant drum pounding at his insides every time he had to step onto the court. Every athlete was afraid of getting hurt. But not in the bruises-and-broken-bones manner. It was the intangibles that scared him.

When the guy leaned in to kiss him, Aaron's first thought went to his underwear. The only way to minimize humiliation was to fully acknowledge it. "I'm, uh, wearing briefs."

The guy stopped kissing him and looked down. "Okay?"

"It's...it's, um, like those old-man type of briefs."

The guy continued kissing his neck.

"Ah, I just wanted you to know," Aaron said. "I mean, in case we...If you see it, just know that it's my lucky underwear. That's why I'm wearing it tonight. I wear it to most games, too. And practice, if I wash it in time. It's just...I know it might look like something your grandpa would wear—"

"My grandfather's dead."

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't mean—I don't mean *your* grandpa, specifically. I'm just giving you a heads up about my

underwear. It's kind of saggy and it's got these green marks on it, but it's not poop! I swear I wash it all the time. And it's been a good luck charm for me since forever, so if you see it please don't—"

"Are you nervous, Aaron Scudder?" The guy was smiling again. It almost made Aaron forget that he didn't even know the guy's name. Was it too late to ask? Was it even appropriate to ask at this point, now that impatient hands were pushing him back against the mattress?

The guy had somehow managed to remove Aaron's jeans in the seconds Aaron spent ruminating hook-up etiquette. Hands on his bare thighs now felt like spiders.

"Wait." He suddenly didn't want this unnamed guy kissing him. He didn't even care about learning his name.

"Don't get shy on me now. You're about to get lucky. We both are. Your ugly underwear's working."

*Ugly?*

"Now I know why you were babbling." The guy pinched the saggy edge of Aaron's briefs between his fingers. "Is this from the Civil War? No wonder Bramburgh couldn't make it past the Sweet Sixteen. You should consider throwing this dreck out. It's almost big enough to fit an adult diaper."

"It's not dreck!"

The guy yawned and cracked his neck, left-right-left. It sounded like tiny firecrackers. "You sportsmen and your superstitions." He sat back on his heels. "I thought you'd be a different kind of fuck. The guys I usually have always want to debate philosophy or literature or fucking socialism for hours. The only reason I brought you up here tonight was because I wanted an easy lay with no talking. That's what you athletes are good for, right?"

"I'm...I'm taking an upper-level English class where we psychoanalyze stories using Lacanian philosophy."

The guy laughed. "Is that supposed to impress me? That's cute. But you're only here because Bramburgh likes your

muscles. Don't delude yourself into thinking you're on the same level as the rest of us."

"I got fours and fives on all of my AP exams. I was captain of the chess team. I almost made salutatorian!" Aaron didn't know why he was reciting his high school resume to this prick. He grabbed his jeans and ignored the burning in his cheeks as he fumbled with the zipper.

"You freshmen are so temperamental." The guy yawned again as he watched Aaron stumble into his sneakers. "So I guess you're going to cool off at the gym now. Makes sense. It's the only place on campus where you truly belong."

That was the match that set Aaron's entire body on fire. With flames engulfing his vision, he lunged forward and swung his fist. It struck yielding flesh. The guy spilled over the bed and landed on his back; he clutched at his stomach where Aaron had punched him. Aaron took advantage of the dumb shock on the guy's face to pull on his other sneaker and yell "I'm a sophomore!" before bolting out of the room.

It was strange. He didn't feel bad for punching that asshole. Some people really did deserve a good beating. But people like Underwear Thief...Aaron shooed the thought away. He hadn't seen the pervert klepto around since that night. Good riddance. He hoped he never had to run into him again. That guy was a walking jinx.

"Do you want to hear the new comments on Jackals Wild?" Winnie asked, breaking off his broody thoughts. "They're actually not that bad. And you have a new fan club: Aaron Scudder is a Sexy Apricot." She giggled.

"What the hell does that even mean? I don't know why you go on that site, Winnie. It rips the brain cells right out of you."

"I just read it for the stock predictions."

Jackals Wild—an underground, student-powered message board—was the pulse of Bramburgh University. It had everything a college student needed: ratings on every professor (from their teaching methods to their level of

attractiveness); where to find study drugs for the best value; a list of every secret society on campus and their presumed members; ads for paid note-takers; and everyone's favorite: gossip—who got hired to what firm, which celebrities would be joining the freshman class, which Greek house had the hottest members...

Aaron thought it was all a waste of time. Now that his name kept popping up on the message boards, he had even less of a desire to look at the site. He just wanted to get through this semester in peace.

Winnie poked him in the stomach. "I think you're more like a...dorky strawberry than a sexy apricot." She giggled again, her friendly brown eyes lighting up her face. She usually giggled when she was feeling nervous or shy, but around Aaron it meant she was completely at ease. While both her parents were highly aggressive, highly competitive types—her mother was a law professor at Georgetown and her father was the first Black senator from Michigan—Winnie was a gentle soul who preferred tinkering in the lab with her own experiments.

"Why a strawberry?" Aaron asked.

"Because you're sweet all over."

He pretended to throw up, then laughed. "Have you ever used that line on someone?"

"Nope. I wanted to test it out on you first before using it on an actual hot guy."

"Ouch."

Out in the hall, a group of girls could be heard singing "Happy Birthday" to their friend. Voices from the quad below drifted through the window. A pigeon cooed in the distance.

Aaron scooted closer and laid his head on Winnie's shoulder. He said in a very quiet voice: "I miss the team. I don't know if they'll let me back next year. I'm worried about my scholarship. I think I ruined everything."

Winnie didn't say anything at first; she simply put an arm around him and let him sink into her. Then she said, "We'll

figure something out.”

---

The next day, Aaron got ready for his first shift at Casco Mart. He couldn't decide between leaving his hair floppy or combing it to the side. In the end, he went with the comb: more professional, even if he was just working the cash register and making sure teenagers didn't try to sneak out with the beer. He sent a quick text to Benny—*Good game last night!*—before heading out.

He ignored the stares from other students as he walked through campus. At least they weren't throwing stones at him like some medieval shitshow. Two girls sipping on iced coffees followed him with their eyes as he walked past their bench. A shirtless guy in running shorts sidled up to him and said, “Hey, Scudder, I heard the wrestling team has an opening!” before laughing and jogging away.

Someone tugged on his arm. He looked down and saw a short blonde girl holding a clipboard. “Aaron, we've got over three hundred signatures in our petition.”

“What?”

“Haven't you been checking Jackals Wild? The petition to put you back on the team! You're too hot to be ostracized like this.”

Good grief. He sprinted the rest of the way to work.

When he pushed through the door, he found the place packed. A line of chatty customers trailed almost to the entrance. Someone called his name—he saw a hand waving at him from behind the counter. “Aaron! Perfect day to start your training! We're throwin' you right in the deep end!” Marge the manager waded through the throng. “Tomorrow's the Mega Jackpot drawing. It's over ten million now!”

Aaron looked around. Most of the customers were holding lottery slips or quickly marking their numbers with little stubby pencils. The lone cashier at the front, a teenager wearing braces and a Greenloch High sweatshirt, seemed unperturbed by all the busyness. He greeted each customer

with a bored “Hi” and didn’t even blink when one of them launched into a complaint about a can of tomato soup she had bought yesterday.

“Once we’re done with your paperwork, Noah will get you all trained up before his shift ends.” Marge led him into a back office. As he signed the onboarding forms, she seemed to study him in the way a mother might admire her child. “How’re you holding up?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Shame about what happened. My husband liked you the moment he saw you play. We were watching the Duke game and he says to me, ‘That Aaron Scudder is special. The NBA will scoop him up, no doubt.’” She patted him on the shoulder. “We’re still rootin’ for you. In the meantime, Casco Mart’s got its own celebrity!”

The store was quiet when they returned out front. Noah was leaning over the counter, one elbow propping his head up as he drew invisible shapes on the glass with his index finger. A couple of customers—the only ones left—perused the liquor selection in the back.

“Where did everyone go?” Marge asked.

Noah shrugged. “Someone said they were giving away free chowder across the street.”

“Everybody wants everything free these days,” Marge tsked. She motioned for Aaron to step behind the counter. “Noah’s my nephew. He helps out when things get busy.”

“Hey,” Noah said, in that monotone teenagers of every generation had perfected.

“Hi.” Aaron shook his hand. “So, have you guys joined in the lottery madness?”

“Oh, no.” Marge snapped her wrist as if batting away a fly. “We don’t gamble. The Lord gives each according to what they deserve. Are you a churchgoer, Aaron?”

“Aunt Marge!” Noah groaned.

“Um, I haven’t been going as much since I started college,” Aaron said. “But I used to go every Sunday with my grandma.”

“She must be so proud of her grandbaby. And your parents, too. For raising such a smart young man!”

Aaron quickly changed the subject, like he always did when it came to his family. “So what’s the game plan for today?”

After Marge and Noah had walked him through how to work the cash register and other small tasks that had to be done during a lull, Aaron clipped his name tag to his shirt and took his place behind the counter. Marge had disappeared back into her office. Noah stood by the door, strapping on his bike helmet. He turned. “I hope you get to play again. You’re really good.” Then he walked out into the afternoon sun and rode away.

Hm. Not all teenagers were little shits, after all.

The first thirty minutes went by with Aaron staring at his reflection in the glass. This was just like the time he worked at an ice cream shop in high school. There were moments of pure chaos, as if every person in the neighborhood had decided to get a Freezie Cream at the same time; but the majority of his shifts were so uneventful that he spent most of it studying for upcoming exams or practicing for the SAT. Jobs like this didn’t pay much, but it sure was easy money.

He checked his phone. No reply from Benny.

After another sluggish ten minutes, he grabbed his backpack and pulled out his anthropology textbook. His professor reminded him of those people who had unconventional childhoods growing up in the Australian Outback or the African savanna: impossibly clever and worldly.

Maybe he could become an anthropologist. Was that an actual job? Going to ancient sites and brushing dirt off fossils? Maybe that was just the romanticized version. He had taken so many career quizzes trying to find the right fit. He wasn’t

fooling himself into believing he could make it to the NBA; he played well, but knew he'd never stand a chance on a professional court—those guys were a completely different breed: faster, stronger, tougher.

Tucked between the pages of his textbook was a collection of scribbled poems. He got out a pen and started a new haiku:

*Why do these textbooks  
Cost so damn much; criminal  
College is a scam*

He chuckled softly to himself and wrote another:

*Dining hall food: yuck  
Except Family Weekend  
Then it's fine dining*

The little bell above the door let out a sharp *ding!* He looked up, ready to greet the first official customer of his shift—and immediately scowled.

Underwear Thief froze, staring, as soon as he noticed Aaron. A pale brown splotch rimmed his right eye. Aaron felt a sting as he came face-to-face with what he had done. Did Underwear Thief need medical attention afterwards? Did he lay curled in bed, holding his eye against his hands, unable to sleep from the pain?

Then he remembered what that klepto-pervert had cost him, and scowled even deeper.

He had since found out the guy's name, but couldn't bring himself to call him *Max*—no way was he going to acknowledge this weirdo by anything other than Underwear Thief.

Now the guy was walking slowly down the snack aisle. Picked up a bag of cookies. Put it back. Glanced over at the counter.

Aaron flicked his eyes away. When he heard light rustling, he stole another look. Underwear Thief was closely studying the back of a loaf of bread as if it contained the answers to life



and death. What the hell was he doing? Total weirdo. A good-looking weirdo, though. His hair looked like pure dark chocolate; it stood out in messy tufts, as if he'd just crawled out of bed.

Now the weirdo was wandering over to the aisle with all the soaps and sundries. He raised his eyes towards Aaron, who quickly looked away.

This was so dumb.

But Aaron couldn't stop himself from taking another peek. Underwear Thief held a box of detergent to his nose, sniffing. His face was a strange puzzle: he was obviously Asian, but there was something else there, something almost imperceptible; it was the way his nose curved delicately, the pronounced brows, maybe the coppery shade of his eyes that hinted at a deeper mystery, like a tree whose roots were so far underground that you forgot it had any history at all.

He watched as Underwear Thief walked up and down the rest of the aisles. There weren't that many; it was a tiny shop. His gaze drifted down Underwear Thief's body, taking in the slim-fitting jeans...

"Hi."

The coppery eyes were right in front of him.

Aaron straightened up, blushing, before putting on his best imitation of Coach Henderson's death glare. "Are you here to steal something again?"

Underwear Thief remained composed. He put a finger to the counter and tapped. "I wanted to apologize. For that night. And for what happened after that. I spoke with your coach—"

*"What?"*

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on going to the police. I went to explain that it was all my fault."

Aaron crossed his arms in front of his chest. "So what did you tell him, exactly?"

"That you caught me filming you in the shower, so you chased me down to delete the footage."

“What the hell! You—you’re a thief *and* a liar!”

“As opposed to telling him that you punched me because I stole your underwear? Do you know how stupid that would make the both of us look?” He slid an envelope across the counter. “Someone paid me to do it. I don’t want the money. You can have it. It’s six hundred bucks.”

Aaron’s eyes widened. Then he frowned. “No.”

“I feel bad and I don’t want it.” Underwear Thief gestured towards the shop behind him. “You obviously need money, so...”

“I’m not a charity! If you don’t want it, go and donate to an actual charity!”

A long silence passed between them. Underwear Thief gnawed at his lip before eventually saying, “Well, your coach wouldn’t budge on his decision. He just gave me a lifetime pass to Bramburgh basketball games. I guess to prevent me from talking to the cops.”

“Are you going to?”

“I said I wouldn’t.”

They fell into another awkward silence. Why couldn’t a customer walk in, so Aaron wouldn’t have to stand here like an idiot while Underwear Thief continued to look at him as if he were some lost puppy?

“Stop staring at me.”

“You just make it so easy.” Underwear Thief smirked at him.

Aaron felt his cheeks grow hot. “If you’re not going to buy anything, please leave.”

Underwear Thief remained planted to the spot. He looked down at Aaron’s page of haikus. “Are you writing song lyrics?”

“N-no!” He snatched the paper away and shoved it under his textbook.

“Huh. Didn’t take you for a creative type.” Underwear Thief leaned across the counter and grinned. “That’s pretty hot.”

“You’re—you’re creepy and weird! How did you even find me here? Have you been stalking me?”

*Ding!*

A man walked in and headed for the beer section. “Good afternoon!” Aaron called out before tidying up the counter. Finally.

But Underwear Thief still didn’t show any signs of leaving. He was looking at the Mega Jackpot poster above them. “Dang,” he whistled, “ten and a half million? Crazy.” He grabbed a lottery slip and a stubby pencil from the rack. “What’s your kua number?”

“My what?”

“Never mind, I’ve memorized your birthday. It’s on the Bramburgh Athletics website. They took your profile down, but I have it archived.” Underwear Thief tapped the stubby pencil against his chin as he made a mental calculation. Then he filled in a bracket. “You spell your name with two A’s, right?”

“What are you doing?”

“Numerology.”

*What the hell?*

The other customer approached the counter and set his items down. Aaron rang him up and cheerfully bid him a good day. Back in weirdo land, Underwear Thief continued to mark down brackets. The tip of his tongue stuck out in concentration, like a teensy rose bud, as he filled in the last number.

“There!” he said triumphantly. He handed Aaron the slip. “I’d like to purchase a lottery ticket, please.”

“Two dollars,” Aaron said in his flattest voice.

Underwear Thief smiled as he watched Aaron run the payslip through the scanner. “Don’t you want to know how I picked the numbers?”

“No.”

“Okay, then.” He smiled again. “Gives it an air of secrecy.” When Aaron had finished scanning and held out the ticket, Underwear Thief shook his head. “It’s yours. A little souvenir from me. Consider these your lucky numbers.” Then he winked, and strolled out the door.

Aaron stared at the ticket:

**08 33 06 15 07 10**

Was this supposed to be some cryptic message? What a crock of shit. Anything that had to do with Underwear Thief was bound to be *unlucky*.

He crumpled up the lottery ticket and tossed it in the trash.

# 7

“Due to their deep sea domain, frill sharks typically have a gestation period lasting as long as three and a half years...” Zach flipped his marine ecology textbook shut. “I can’t imagine having something growing inside of me for that long.”

“Aren’t you supposed to appreciate these kinds of things? You’re an environmental science major.” Max lay on his belly, coding away, as Zach opened another textbook: *An Introduction to Soils*.

“Plants and animals enable the reorganization of soils through burrowing, consumption, and even defecation. This process is called bioturbation, a principal engineer of biodiversity.” Zach rolled over onto his back. “Did I ever tell you about that time I was in Jared’s room, freshman year? I was lying on the floor, just like now. I felt this tickle on my arm and thought it was a stray hair or maybe an ant. It turned out to be a tarantula.”

“Cool!”

“Cool? I freaked the hell out! Jared told me it was his pet, and to keep quiet about it.”

Max laughed as he stared at his laptop screen. He studied the last line of code before erasing all of it; too clunky.

“Remember when he wanted to adopt that snake we found by Pickler’s Pond?”

“I can only imagine him as a child.” Zach dusted himself off the carpet and peered into the skeleton of the computer Max was building. “His mother must have found all sorts of things in his room.”

“Do you know about the baby raccoon he hid when he was five? His mom thought it was a stuffed animal, so he got away with it for a whole year. When she tried to pick it up to wash it, she screamed so loud that the neighbors weren’t sure if someone was getting murdered or getting railed.”

They both laughed so hard that they almost didn’t hear the knock at the door. Zach opened it to reveal Max’s floormate from across the hall. He was wearing a utility belt and had a small camera strapped to his chest.

“Hey, Carl,” Max said, trying to look as busy as possible.

Carl shuffled halfway through the door. “Hey, Max! Our paranormal society is having a meeting tonight. Just thought you might want to come. We’re kicking off our podcast. Free ice cream!”

“Sorry, Carl. I have jazz practice.”

“Oh...okay! Next time, then. Just thought I’d let you know. If you finish early, come find us. We’ll be at the philosophy library until eleven.”

“Thank you, Carl.”

Zach closed the door and let out a muffled laugh. “You are evil!”

“He asks me the same thing every week. I’m running out of excuses. Help me think of more.”

“Evil.”

Max was about to throw a pillow at him when the walls began to tremble. Heavy footsteps tore down the hall, as if someone was trying to escape from a clingy ex or a homicidal clown. They stopped in front of Max’s room. The door flew

open and Jared burst inside, breathless. “Dudes! Dudes! Oh man... This is insane... Guess what!”

“They’re giving everyone a guaranteed internship at a FAANG?” Max said.

“The East Campus apartments got busted again for dealing Adderall?” Zach held his hand up. “No. Wait. The dean caught you yelling ‘fascists’ at the business school. I told you to stop doing that!”

“No!” Jared jumped onto Max’s chair with the swiftness of a cat. “They’re opening a startup incubator in downtown Greenloch! And guess who’s behind it?”

“The hot guy who invented Snapchat?” Zach said.

“Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber!”

Max almost keeled over. “Holy shit!”

“Who and who?” Zach asked.

“You don’t know them?” Max pulled up a search on his laptop. “They were roommates at Bramburgh. Graduated like fifteen years ago. They worked for a startup in San Francisco and were among the first employees, so they got the best stock options. When the company went public, they both became millionaires overnight.”

“Now they’re billionaires and venture capitalists,” Jared said.

“Okay, he’s cute.” Zach pointed to an image of Ethan Farber. “The other guy looks like my cousin Chip. How strange. And gross.”

“Wait,” Max said, turning to Jared, “how did you hear about the incubator?”

“I was coming back from that new doughnut place downtown. Here...” Jared handed each of them a hot pink doughnut covered in bacon bits. “The local news crew was there. They asked if I was a Bramburgh student. Wanted to interview me about the school’s push towards innovation and entrepreneurship and blah blah blah. So I was like, okay, sure.” He paused to take a bite of his own purple doughnut

with raisins. With his mouth full, he continued, “So then I asked what this was all about, and they said that Oliver and Ethan had bought that old post office on the corner of Williamson and they’re turning it into an incubator for student entrepreneurs.”

“Holy shit! Did you see them? Did you get to meet them?”

“No, they were interviewed earlier. When I went to check the place out, it was empty.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Zach said. “You’re going to be on TV?”

“On the six o’clock news tonight.”

“Well, why didn’t you lead with that! We have to tape it. Do either of you know how to work a DVR?”

Max looked at his code.

This was their chance. There were real Silicon Valley investors in Greenloch searching for The Next Big Thing. He couldn’t just sit here. Not now, not after finding out that two of the biggest tech powerhouses were breathing the same immediate air as him. He shut his laptop. “Let’s go downtown!”

“The place is still closed,” Jared said.

“Maybe we’ll run into them.” Max imagined bumping into Oliver and Ethan in the street; they would take one look at him, instantly recognize a fellow computer science major, and then they’d hit it off, just like that...

“Are you thinking of pitching to them?”

“If we happen to see them. Yeah. Why not?”

“Do you have our pitch ready?”

“We’ll wing it,” Max said.

---

They did not wing it.

They ended up eating chicken wings at the diner instead.



“I told you it was empty,” Jared said. “But did you see that giant espresso machine?”

They had peered into the windows of the incubator, looking like little kids trying to get a glimpse inside the new toy shop in town. Max had pressed his face flat against the glass, taking in the log-shaped tables, the hardwood floors purposely scuffed to look more rustic, and the giant painting of a lighthouse. He painted his own picture, one with him and his friends seated at one of those tables, drinking coffee, having a lively debate with Oliver and Ethan about next-level AI, machine learning, changing the world one programming language at a time...

“I can’t believe it!” He crunched into a particularly juicy wing. “I wonder when they’ll open. Why haven’t they written anything about it in *The Daily Jackal*? Should we change the color of our interface? I heard Oliver’s favorite color is gr—”

Jared put a hand on his shoulder, laughing. “Dude, calm down! Let’s just focus on making our software demo-ready. We won’t stand a chance of getting into the incubator if our product is crap.”

“It’s just...holy shit! These guys are actually here! Holy shit!” Max dipped another wing in ranch dressing before quickly dropping it back on the plate; he was vibrating all over.

“If you’re going to be a businessman, you’re going to need to develop a more expansive vocabulary,” Zach said.

“Holy shit!” Max cried again.

They ordered a second round of chicken wings, with a side of macaroni salad and mozzarella sticks. A meal away from the dining hall needed to be milked to the fullest.

Zach pointed to the large TV hanging above the counter. “The news is on. Jared, it’s your fifteen minutes!”

*“Homecoming may be over at Bramburgh University, but today a new kind of homecoming is underway. Alumni and high-profile Silicon Valley investors Ethan Farber and Oliver Mackey of Toadstool Capital have announced that they are*

*making Greenloch their new home. Citing the small-town charm and their desire to nurture the next generation of entrepreneurs as their motivation for moving across the country, the two former college roommates have now partnered with Bramburgh and plan to make Greenloch the tech hub of New England.”*

An older man sitting at the counter shook his fist at the screen. “Damn Californians! They’re ruining everything!”

“Did that reporter just say Toadstool Capital?” Zach was laughing, but his face looked like he’d just found a cockroach in his soup.

“When you’re as rich as them, you can name your company after fungus and people will just roll with it,” Max said.

*“We’re here now with Ethan Farber and Oliver Mackey. Gentlemen, what do you hope to accomplish with the opening of your startup incubator?”*

*“Well, our main priority is fostering a greater interest in technology and entrepreneurship in students. Not everyone needs to learn how to develop software, but everyone should have the opportunity to pursue the things that they believe in.”*

*“There’s untapped potential here, and with the tech industry evolving at such turbo speeds, we’re excited to meet the bright minds that will step up to lead our brave new world.”*

“Go back to California!” the man at the counter yelled.

Max clapped Jared on the back. “You’re up!”

*“...so what do the students at Bramburgh think? Here’s what some of them have to say.”*

Jared’s face filled the screen. He was smiling that smile reserved for old ladies, impressionable professors, and drunk girls.

*“I came to Bramburgh for the strong computer science program. But real talk? It’s because Stanford rejected me. Yes, kids, college admissions is a cruel, cruel mistress! They all*

*want a manic pixie dream student who's won the Pulitzer and an Olympic gold medal and plays the cello and has perfect SATs and had to overcome some adverse life experience... ”*

Zach buried his face into the table. “I can't watch this. Jared, why?”

*“...super excited that Oliver and Ethan are here. We need to decentralize the tech industry. We need to decentralize the World Wide Web. We need to decentralize the government and get rid of the Federal Res—”*

*“Thank you. That was Jared Shapiro, a third-year student. Next we have...”*

“Well, at least you're telegenic,” Zach said.

“You think I should start auditioning for movies?”

“As long as you don't have to open your mouth.”

When the check came, Jared insisted on treating in honor of his budding career in entertainment. “If being a programmer doesn't work out, I now know that I can fall back on my looks.”

Max turned back to the TV while his friends continued to argue about Jared's nonexistent Hollywood career. The drawing for the Mega Jackpot was about to begin. A man with slicked-back hair and a bright red tie beamed at the camera.

*“Gooood evening, America! It's October 22, 2021. Tonight's Mega Jackpot is an estimated 10.5 million dollars. Gooood luck to everyone...”*

The first number to pop out was one that Max remembered putting down yesterday. He ignored the tiny flip in his stomach. This happened to tons of people; they got one number and nothing else.

When the second number came out, Max still ignored the fluttering in his stomach. It was nothing. Two numbers. So what.

The third number was drawn. Okay. Not a big deal. Getting three numbers only amounted to a ten-dollar prize.

By the time the fourth and fifth numbers were announced, Max had grabbed a ketchup packet and was gripping it so tightly that his nails were close to puncturing the plastic.

The sixth and final number was called.

Max closed his eyes. Ketchup spurted all over the table. The sounds of his friends and the clatter of the diner died away. He was in a shapeless, colorless void—flying.

*Holy shit.*

## 8

*You are an owl: a calm facade harboring deep thoughts. Decisive, organized, and an eye for detail. Once owls have their target in sight, they are relentless in their pursuit. Their greatest fear is ambiguity.*

Aaron refreshed the page and took the personality test again. He was still an owl. Career paths for owls included statisticians, economists, law enforcement, data scientists, orthodontists, and auditors. He put his laptop to sleep and stared out the window. There were no stars out tonight. Even the sky was bored.

He picked up an old paperback he had brought from home. Studied the cover art. Could he become a graphic designer? He remembered art class in elementary school. One time, he had drawn an aardvark that everyone mistook for a pig. “Aaron drew a pig because he’s fat,” Josie Muller had said right before she stole his favorite lime-green crayon. “He’s fat and he doesn’t have a mom or dad. He probably ate them.”

Fuck Josie Muller. And fuck these personality tests. He didn’t need anyone telling him what he was or what he should be.

Several pairs of feet pounded down the hall, followed by lusty laughter. Someone yelled something about a bikini beer

pong tournament at Sigma Epsilon. The rest of his floor was getting ready to party. He tossed himself into bed, face-first. His pillow smelled like the citrusy shampoo he used. Was it possible to suffocate from a scent? He kept his face pressed against the pillow for twenty seconds before he had to come up for air.

His phone had been quiet all day. Winnie was with her lab group, and none of his teammates had replied to his texts. He found himself watching old game footage out of habit before realizing...what was the point. Coach Henderson wasn't going to sit next to him tomorrow and get his opinion on how to best execute a full-court press against Rutgers. Aaron continued to watch the footage anyway.

Right before midnight, he went to brush his teeth and take a quick shower. The bathroom was gloriously empty. And not a hint of vomit from the freshmen who overestimated their alcohol tolerance. He felt like singing. As he stepped into the shower, he wrote another haiku in his head.

*Thunder of sneakers*

*Dribble dribble dribble shoot*

*Sweaty teammates hug*

What were the guys doing? They were probably in bed now, resting up for the Brown game. He wondered if Benny would start a round of charades on the bus ride to Rhode Island, or if George would fall asleep and drool on the window again.

He scrubbed his arms.

The door to the bathroom creaked open. Shuffling noises bounced off the tiles, as if someone were attempting to dance. The shuffling noises came nearer. Then a poor imitation of a spooky voice wafted through the shower curtain:  
“Aaaaronnnn...this is the ghost of Luella Hall...You are standing in the exact spot where I died two hundred years agoooo...I am here to possess you...”

*Who the hell?*

The spooky voice turned into a laugh. “I know it’s you in there, Aaron. I see your slippers. Bigfoot wants to know where he can get your size.”

Aaron poked his head out. Underwear Thief grinned back at him.

“I feel like the luckiest guy in the world. Alone in the bathroom with a naked Aaron Scudder.”

Unbelievable! This guy was a straight-up stalker.

“What in the fuck are you doing here?”

“Can I join you?”

“Go away!”

Despite the hot water bouncing off his back, Aaron felt himself growing even hotter. Was this crazy bastard going to steal his clothes and towel and leave him trapped in the bathroom?

“Hurry up and finish because I have some very *eeenteresting* news.”

“Can you just fuck off?”

Underwear Thief tutted. “You have quite a mouth. I thought you were an Eagle Scout.”

“It’s just a natural reflex whenever I have to look at your face.”

“So you’ve been checking me out?”

Aaron blushed under the showerhead. “What do you want?”

“It’s better if I tell you somewhere more private.”

“No one’s here.”

“I think this is something you’ll need to sit down for.”

“You’re not coming into my room. I don’t trust you.”

“Oh, you’ll trust me when you hear what I have to say.”

Aaron poked his head back out. “You won’t leave me alone until I let you in my room, will you? You’re... You’re

just waiting to fondle me in my sleep!”

“Dude, this is serious.” Underwear Thief’s eyes lost their playful spark. “I’ll wait outside.”

Ten minutes later, Aaron stomped out of the bathroom, ready to yell and chase the annoying bastard off. This time, he’d make sure Underwear Thief stayed away for good.

But when he stepped out into the hall, no one was there. He walked all the way to the end, peering into the little alcove. Empty. He checked the lounge. A girl sat on the couch reading Nabokov; she gave him a quick nod before returning to her book. He crouched down to peek under the communal sink and the couch, just in case. Then he let out a breath.

Underwear Thief was gone! And Aaron didn’t even have to do anything.

He returned to his room in significantly lighter spirits—and jumped back in fright as soon as he opened the door.

“You have a fireplace in your room,” Underwear Thief said. “That’s so unfair.”

“What—why—*how* did you get in here!”

“It was unlocked. Figured I’d better guard it. That girl in the lounge looked kind of sketchy.”

“How do you even know where I live!”

Underwear Thief leaned against the dresser and said very matter-of-factly, “I hacked into the school’s database.”

“What the hell! You—you’re just committing crimes left and right!”

“Chill out. I didn’t look at your GPA. Unless you want me to. I can totally change your grades if you—”

“I’m reporting you to my RA!”

“You mean the guy in room 501? He’s stoned. I walked by earlier and he was eating mayonnaise right out of the jar. With a straw.”



Aaron flopped into bed, suddenly exhausted. Being around this guy was like getting cornered by a pack of wild toddlers. “I give up. Just tell me what you want so you can go away.”

Underwear Thief was silent for a moment. Aaron thought he had magically evaporated—or better yet, got whisked away to a different timeline altogether—but when he turned to look, the object of his loathing was still there, staring at the floor. “I don’t know if you’ll believe me,” he said.

“You got me kicked off the team, you stalked me at work, and now you’ve broken into my room. I think whatever you have to say can’t be any more ridiculous than that.”

Underwear Thief held up his phone. “These are the winning numbers for the Mega Jackpot.”

“So?”

“Do you have that ticket I gave you yesterday?”

“Oh. That. I threw it out.”

“WHAT?”

Aaron smirked. “You were planning on tricking me, weren’t you? I’ve heard about you. You’re some kind of computer hacker-prankster. You made a fake lottery website and now you’re trying to trick me into believing I won ten million dollars so I can foolishly give you access to my bank account. Well, joke’s on you. I only have sixty bucks in there. And I threw the ticket out the minute you left the store.”

“It’s actually ten and a half million.”

“What?”

“Ten and a *half* million.”

“Whatever. Get out of my room or I’m calling campus security.”

But Underwear Thief continued to stare at him. “We have to find the ticket,” he whispered, almost to himself. He threw a hoodie at Aaron. “Get dressed.”

“Go away! I’m about to go to bed.” Aaron turned to face the wall, reciting a banishing spell from a storybook he’d once

read to kindergarteners on a volunteer trip to rural Tennessee.  
*Good day, I say, good day and away you shall stay!*

A stronger-than-expected hand grabbed his shoulder.

“If you don’t help me find that lottery ticket,” Underwear Thief said, all traces of humor gone, “I’m going to show the cops that video of you punching me. I’m going to make a case against you. I’ll break my own arm and tell them you attacked me again. You’ll have a record. When you apply for jobs, they’ll see that you have a violent past. No respectable company will want to hire a loaded gun, not even if it graduated from Bramburgh. Or maybe you won’t get that far. Maybe Bramburgh will just expel you. You’ll be forced to return to your depressing hometown and resort to stripping—”

“Shut up!” Aaron rose to pull on his hoodie. “After you find your ticket, we’re done. You’ll stop stalking me and we’ll never speak again. Fucking hell, you’re annoying.”

Underwear Thief smiled. He opened the door and let Aaron lead the way.

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The back of Casco Mart smelled like rat turd. Paper cups and cigarette butts littered the ground near the dumpster, where someone had spray-painted ‘GnArLy’ on one side.

“It should be in there,” Aaron said. “The garbage truck doesn’t come until Monday.”

“Great. Now we just need to break into the store and get some gloves.”

If Aaron’s eyeballs hadn’t already popped out from all the sheer foolishness going on tonight, they sure did now. “Fucking unbelievable! No! We’re not committing any more crimes! Either do it bare-handed or bail. I’m not letting you get me in trouble again.”

Underwear Thief laughed. “I’m kidding, dude. Here.” He pulled out two pairs of gloves from his back pocket and tossed one to Aaron. “I had a feeling you’d do something dumb and

throw the ticket out. So I came prepared. Sweet-talked one of the ladies from the dining hall.”

“You are so weird.”

“Weird makes the world go round.”

They both turned to stare at the dumpster. “Help me up,” Underwear Thief said.

“Wait, you’re just...going to jump in? You could get tetanus or something.”

“My future is in there. I don’t care if I have to wade through poop and spit and heroin needles. Now boost me up.”

Aaron didn’t like the idea of Underwear Thief getting sick from dumpster diving. That would be another notch in the ‘Stupid Mistakes Aaron Scudder Has Made in Less Than a Month’ column. But if Underwear Thief was willing to jump waist-deep in actual shit to find that lottery ticket, then maybe that meant—

“There’s a whole bag of tacos in here!”

Underwear Thief had already lifted the lid and was balancing on the corner edge of the dumpster. He grinned before leaping right in.

“Wait!” Aaron rushed over, holding his breath. The smell seeped into his skin. He felt like throwing up.

“Come on down, the water’s warm!”

“Get out of there! Are you crazy?”

“Probably. But you know what’s even crazier? Losing ten and a half million dollars.”

“How do you even know those were the right numbers? Maybe you remembered them wrong.”

“Trust me, I remember.” Underwear Thief opened one of the trash bags. A new wave of odors flew out. “Why would someone throw out a whole-ass sandwich? And roast beef, too! For shame.”

Aaron watched as Underwear Thief rummaged through the rest of the bag. His expression had turned serious, as if he were studying for an exam or performing brain surgery. That little tip of tongue stuck out again. Aaron stared at it, wondering how many guys that tongue had touched.

A huge black trash bag plopped on the ground next to his feet. “Start looking in there,” Underwear Thief said. “It should be in one of these top bags, since you only threw it out yesterday.”

“This is ridiculous.” But Aaron knelt down and opened the bag. Thankfully, it was mostly full of receipts and shredded paperwork. He sifted through the mass half-heartedly. There was no way. No way they were going to find that ticket. And even if they did, it would probably turn out to be a fluke.

Winning the lottery...it wasn't *real*. He had a classmate from middle school whose cousin had built and sold an app for millions of dollars. One of his professors had worked at Google back when no one took the company seriously. A girl in his physics class had just signed a book deal with a major publishing house. Those people had won the lottery. He didn't know anyone who had actually won by picking random numbers out of thin air.

“Here's another one.” Underwear Thief threw a second bag down.

A new thought occurred to Aaron, one more humiliating than all the others. He looked over his shoulder at the dark alley that led to an even darker street; while Bramburgh's campus still throbbed with parties and late-night study jams, the sleepy town of Greenloch had already tucked itself into bed. It was the perfect hour for delinquents and troublemakers.

“You're getting revenge,” he said.

“What?”

“You're mad because a lot of people are on my side. They're saying you screwed up Bramburgh's chances of getting into March Madness. Your friends are probably hiding in the dark out there, filming me for one of your pranks.

You're going to put it on Jackals Wild so everyone can finally laugh at the big, dumb basketball player who's desperate enough to think he won the lottery." He stood up, suddenly hot all over. He was such an idiot for following this crazy bastard out here. "I don't need this."

Underwear Thief frowned. "I would never embarrass you like that."

"You kind of already did."

"No, this isn't a prank—"

"I don't even know you, yet you somehow wheedled me into walking into a deserted alley to look through trash. You even have gloves on. Now no one will know who murdered me and dumped my body in Pickler's Pond."

"Look, I'm not playing around. Do you see me? Do you see where I'm standing right now?" Underwear Thief was still frowning. He waved his hands to swat away the flies. "If we just find the ticket, I'll show you. It's real. We could be millionaires by tomorrow."

Aaron peeled off his gloves and flung them into the dumpster. He clapped slowly. "You are a great actor. Bravo. Are you a drama major? Actually, I don't care. Because you're a lying hacker prankster dipshit. Tell your friends filming this they can fuck right off." He turned to the darkness and yelled, "You hear me? You all can just fuck the fuck off!"

His voice bounced off the brick walls. A shadow emerged from the mouth of the alley. It grew larger and larger until a small orange cat took its place. The cat walked towards them, letting out a soft "meowr." It stopped and sat right next to Aaron's sneakers. Glowing yellow eyes blinked at them. "Meowr."

"Hey, it's Anne-Shirley!" Underwear Thief scrambled out of the dumpster. He crouched down and extended his arm. The orange cat licked it.

"All evil villains have a pet cat. Of course," Aaron scoffed.

"She usually hangs around my friend's frat house. I didn't know she wandered this far."

“Well, have fun with your strays. I’m out.” Aaron started to walk away, then backtracked. He picked up the two trash bags that were on the ground and dropped them into the dumpster. Then he looked around for a fallen leaf and used it to sweep the cigarette butts into one of the empty paper cups before throwing it all in the trash as well.

He scratched the cat behind the ears and, without looking at Underwear Thief, said, “Now I’m out. Have a nice life, you crazy creep.”

As he turned out of the alley and made his way down the deserted street, he thought he heard a whisper: “Good night, Eagle Scout.”

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Despite his best attempts, Aaron couldn’t get the crazy bastard out of his mind. He had played on college basketball’s biggest court, been interviewed on national television, and seen his face in almost every major sports blog—but none of that had given him this topsy-turvy feeling that now filled his stomach every time he thought about Underwear Thief.

After the dumpster nonsense, he’d taken another shower and ended up shooting his load all over the tiled wall. Imagined Underwear Thief licking it off. Imagined himself commanding Underwear Thief to lick it off. Funny how he always seemed so much more confident in his fantasies.

“I think he likes you,” Winnie said a couple days later. “You know how when you like someone, you find excuses to run into them?”

“Yeah, but his are so extreme.”

They both had a break before their next class. Aaron’s plan was to take a nap while Winnie got work done in his room; her roommate was trying to hypnotize people again as part of a psychology experiment.

“I’m gonna check my mail first,” he said. “They’re supposed to send me an update about my financial aid.”

But a single piece of notebook paper was the only thing in his mailbox. He unfolded it.

*Aaron,*

*I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I was wrong to show up at your room like that. But I found what we were looking for! Let me make it up to you. Please give me another chance to explain everything. Meet me at the music library on Friday. 4 pm. No tricks, I promise.*

*- Max*

*P.S. You probably still don't trust me, so I'll tell you a secret. Remember that email everyone got last year? The one that said half of our professors are part of the Illuminati so it doesn't matter how hard we study, we're all going to be slaves to the New World Order anyway? And the school thought they got hacked and sent the FBI to investigate? That was all yours truly. Now you have some leverage. I hope you'll come on Friday.*

Aaron handed the note to Winnie. When she finished reading, she covered her mouth with her textbook. "Oh my gosh, he was the one who sent that weird email last year?"

"That's the main thing you got out of all this?"

She let out a soft laugh. "Don't get mad but...this is kind of romantic."

"How!"

"He sent you a handwritten letter. No boy would take the time to do that unless they really liked someone. And he sounds sincere."

Aaron gaped at his friend. "You've been reading too much Jane Austen or whatever."

Once they were in his room, Aaron shed off his backpack and fell into bed. "Should I skip anthropology today?"

"We should both skip class and analyze the Max situation." Winnie perched on the edge of his chair, smiling. "Do you think it's true? About the lottery ticket?"

“I told you, it’s all some elaborate prank. The guy’s a nutjob.”

“His mom is pretty cool, though.”

Aaron sat up. “You know his mom?”

“Not personally, but she was a guest speaker at this STEM camp I went to in eighth grade. I remember she gave everyone a coding kit to build our own mini video game.”

“Wait...Emma Trellis-Tan? She’s his *mom*? She made *Regents of Valor*, right?”

“Yeah.” Winnie laughed. “I played it so much in middle school that my dad used to joke about passing a law banning kids from playing video games until they graduated from college.”

Aaron recalled going to his friends’ houses and spending hours customizing their characters on *Regents of Valor*. All of his friends had a copy of the game. He used to finish his homework early just so he could ride his bike to Mike Langley’s; there, time stopped and things like dinner and bedtime ceased to exist as they agonized over strategies to defeat the vampire guild.

How was it possible for the creator of the greatest video game on Earth to give birth to a loony underwear thief?

“Maybe you should go meet him,” Winnie said.

“Huh?”

“If he’s telling the truth about the lottery ticket, it could change your life, Aaron. You and your grandmother—”

“I’m not Charlie with the golden ticket! Willy Wonka’s not going to magically leave his entire empire to me. It’s all just... it’s crazy stuff. I don’t trust him at all.” He kicked at his comforter, making it fall to the floor.

“Do you know how much you look like a cranky baby right now?”

Aaron bent over the edge of the bed to pick up a stray piece of popcorn. He threw it playfully at his friend. She stuck



out her tongue before grabbing the jackal plushie from his desk and chucking it at him. He was about to gross her out with one of his old socks when he caught sight of an unfamiliar scrap of paper on the floor. It was a sticky note. He didn't use those; once you scribbled on one, they started breeding like horny mice until your entire desk was covered in them.

He picked up the note. It was filled with a bunch of—he squinted at the small, untidy print—it was...computer code. There were words like “import” and “def” and “raw” and strings of random numbers.

He passed it to Winnie. “Is this yours?”

She did a similar squint and tilted her head. “Nope. I have no idea what any of that means. I think it's Python, though.”

“The snake?”

“It's a programming language. We learned about it at the STEM camp.” She looked at the note more closely. “And it looks like Max's handwriting. See the way that seven is written? He also put a slash through the middle in the letter he sent you.”

“Why is his code in my room?”

“Maybe he dropped it the other night. You said he was in here, right?”

“Yeah, he just let himself in and—” A horrible thought struck him. “He's framing me!”

“What?”

“He left that code here on purpose. He's going to tell the school that I'm the one who hacked into everyone's account last year and sent that Illuminati email! He's been setting me up this whole time!”

“Or...maybe that code is just a cheat sheet for class. My lab partner is a computer science major and she does the same thing with sticky notes.”

Aaron grabbed his jacket and sneakers.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m not waiting until Friday. I’m going to find that creep and get some answers.”

“Aaron, why would he write you a letter admitting he was the hacker, sign his name, and then try to frame you? Doesn’t that sound counterintuitive?”

“That’s how his mind works. He thinks backwards. Like a perverted creepazoid.”

Out in the lounge, he stopped by the communal sink to fill his water bottle. He felt like he was gearing up for some kind of battle. Facing off the final boss. Except this wasn’t an intimidating monster or a super powerful wizard. It was a deceptively hot guy whose face he very much wanted to punch again.

He took out a second water bottle from his backpack and filled that as well.

“Are you going for a stroll up Mount Katahdin?” Winnie was wiping the first bottle with a paper towel.

“I don’t know how long it’ll take me to find him, and I don’t want to get dehydrated.”

“Always the athlete.”

“Also, I can’t punch him anymore, but I can throw water in his face. Maybe he’ll melt and we can use his decomposed body as fertilizer for the dorm’s tomato garden.”

Winnie shook her head, as if he were a child that had just told an inappropriate joke. But she was smiling. “Perverted creepazoid.”

# 9

The clock was too slow. Max's calculus professor was talking too slowly. Why was everything so slow? He kept thinking about the lottery ticket. He hadn't told Jared or Zach. Not yet. This was between him and Aaron Scudder. He needed to word what he wanted to say very carefully on Friday. *If* Aaron showed up on Friday.

"Can I see your notes real quick?" the girl next to him whispered. He slid it across the table.

Their professor was explaining absolute convergence. Max felt as if everything in his life had converged to arrive at this moment—a windfall so large he had trouble justifying his presence in class right now. He could simply walk out, collect the money, and say sayonara to college forever...

But then that would preclude him from applying to the startup incubator. He needed the money and the incubator; the former to invest in his business, and the latter to validate the value of his business.

After class, he decided to engage in one of his favorite activities: people-spying, which was completely different from people-watching.

With people-watching, you made up hypothetical dialogue for your targets; all harmless fun. People-spying, on the other

hand: that involved analyzing someone else's actions for future blackmail opportunities.

To "outsiders," Bramburgh University was an academic utopia full of the intellectually curious and some of the brightest minds in the world. In reality, it was more akin to *Battle Royale*: a shark tank where the morally ambiguous survived while the pure of heart got their heads bitten off.

Just the other day, while walking through the humanities building, Max had witnessed a girl from his English Lit class get brutally rejected for an editorial position at the school's premier literary magazine; she had fled from the room, teary-eyed. Max knew the problem: she probably didn't think to lie on her resume.

Lying was an important skill, almost as important as knowing how to flatter your way through an interview or convincing your professor that, no, you did not use Google Translate to write that paper for Advanced Italian.

The afternoon was still mild enough to lure students onto the quad. Max settled under the oak tree that everyone called Miss Eugene; someone from the eighteenth century had (drunkenly? ironically? playfully?) carved the name into the trunk, effectively turning it into a campus legend. He leaned against Miss Eugene and looked around for something interesting to spy on. He was watching a guy feeding the squirrels when three pairs of legs blocked his view.

"Are you Max?" the girl in ripped jeans asked.

"Yeah...?"

"Can you give a quote for *The Daily Jackal*?" A guy wearing khakis held a recorder in front of him, like a microphone. "Jackals Basketball lost their last four games, to teams we usually have no trouble beating. Do you think it's because you got Aaron Scudder kicked off?"

Max scratched at the back of his hand. He didn't pay attention to any school sports (except lacrosse last year, when he'd had a crush on one of the players). "I'm not going to answer that," he said.

“You cost Bramburgh a shot at the Final Four,” the other girl said. She had one of those professional-looking video cameras propped on her shoulder, with a JACKALTV sticker on the side. “You owe the school an explanation.”

“I don’t owe anyone an explanation,” Max said, “except Aaron.”

“So you’ve been talking to him?”

“No comment.”

The girl with the ripped jeans glared at him. “Aaron gave a public apology right after the incident. But it should have been you. He was chasing you for some reason. You did something to him. And you’re a coward for not coming forward.”

“Aren’t journalists supposed to be objective? Seems to me like you’re crossing a line.” Max stood up. He was about to walk away when the guy with the recorder held him back.

“Tell us what you did to make Aaron punch you.”

Max considered lying and telling them what he had told Coach Henderson, about filming Aaron in the shower. But he didn’t want to add any more fuel to this shitstorm. “Look, it was just a misunderstanding. You guys are turning this into some kind of conspiracy.”

“So tell us what happened,” the girl with the camera demanded.

“I gotta go.”

They crowded closer. “Max Trellis-Tan is a coward!” ripped-jeans girl yelled. “Coward! Coward! Coward!”

The rest of the quad was now staring at them. A few people approached to film ripped-jeans girl and recorder guy cornering Max against Miss Eugene. His backpack lay between the two of them. Ripped-jeans girl saw him looking and snatched it up. “Bracket buster!” she shouted before flinging his backpack across the quad.

Max winced. His laptop was in there. And all the code he had written. He turned his head away, as if that would help

shield him from the carnage. Maybe the hard drive could still be salvaged—

“Whoah, nice catch!”

The quad erupted in applause. Max swiveled his head. His heart unclenched at seeing his backpack safe in someone’s arms—then beat in double-time when he saw who had caught it.

Aaron Scudder stood a few yards away, holding the backpack by one strap. He looked surprised. And a little angry. Maybe more than a little angry. But that was overshadowed by how handsome he looked with the afternoon sun glinting off his hair, making it shine an even brighter yellow.

Recorder guy ran to him. “Aaron! Aaron! Is it true? You and Max are part of some conspiracy?”

“What! I didn’t say that!” Max cried. He glanced at Aaron, whose face had turned ashen.

“What happened between you two?” camera girl asked.

Aaron rushed over and seized Max by the hand. “Leave him alone,” he snapped at the crowd. Without another word, and as the rest of the quad stared after them, speechless, he strode away, pulling Max with him. This was a rare occurrence where Max didn’t know what to say. He didn’t even want to say anything, afraid that the slightest word out of his mouth would lead to Aaron letting go of his hand.

They made their way down the main path that cut through campus. Max looked back and saw the audience from the quad continuing to stare after them. Aaron tightened his grip. Max couldn’t help himself and said, “I’m not going to run away.” The hand around his own grew tighter. It was warm and firm and not at all rough like he’d imagined.

When they crested the hill and reached a quieter part of campus, Aaron dragged him to the back of the fine arts building and unclamped their hands.

“Thanks for saving me from those wannabe journalists,” Max said. “I don’t know how they expect to get hired by *The*

*New York Times*. Or *HuffPost*, even. Godspeed and bless their hearts, I guess.”

Aaron only glowered back at him. “I wasn’t helping you. I only got you away so you couldn’t frame me.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

Aaron reached into his pocket and shoved something at Max’s chest. “You were planting evidence in my room. And now you’re trying to make me the school hacker. You were about to tell them that I’m the mastermind behind the Illuminati email!”

“What the heck are you talking about, dude?” Max looked down and saw a little sticky note. He immediately recognized it and laughed. “This is just joke code. We pass them around in class when the professor isn’t looking.”

Aaron’s cute angry-face slowly faded. He took a step back. “Oh.”

“First of all, a true hacker would never give someone else credit for their work.”

“Oh.”

“And I’ve done some risky pranks before, but I always set them up so no one else gets in trouble. I’d never throw anyone under the bus.”

“Except that time you took my underwear.” Angry-face was back.

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

They stood in silence. An airplane passed overhead, its rumble matching the boom-boom-boom inside Max’s own chest. This was his last chance to get Aaron to trust him. He summoned his most serious voice and said, “Can I show you something?”

---

The room was no bigger than a narrow walk-in closet. Max watched as Aaron placed a palm on the stone walls, which were surprisingly dry considering how far they had descended.

Even the air in here felt dry and cool, like the first nip of winter. Aaron let his hand drag slowly along the walls as he circled the room. It was completely bare and windowless. The floor matched the walls: gray stone brick that threw their own voices back at them.

“Is this...a torture chamber?” Aaron asked, not in a suspicious manner but more in the way of a curious child.

“I don’t know,” Max said. “I accidentally found it when I was trying to hide from a prank last year.”

Bramburgh had four confirmed secret rooms throughout campus, all with detailed maps on Jackals Wild. This one, in the basement of the music library, had gone undiscovered and untouched—probably since the late nineteenth century, when the library was built.

“Do you know much about Maine history?”

Aaron shrugged. Tufts of hair on the top of his head brushed against the low ceiling. “All I know is that it used to be a part of Massachusetts.”

“Why does everyone here seem to hate Massachusetts?”

“Dunno. Must be a New England thing.” Aaron shifted his attention from studying the stone walls to studying Max. His eyes, so fiery-dark just moments before, had now retreated to a calm green-brown. “So you’ve never told anyone about this room?”

“Nope. I kind of like being the only one who knows about it.”

“Why’d you take me here?”

Max sat on the floor. To his surprise, Aaron also took a seat across from him. “This is the most private place on campus. Trap door. No windows. Stone everything. No one can hear you.”

“You’d make a good real estate agent,” Aaron said, “for dungeons.” He started to smile. But Max didn’t want to get too comfortable just yet.



“Look, Aaron...I’m really, really sorry. About everything. I thought it would be a funny, harmless prank. If I knew it would turn out like this, I never would have done it. I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I think all of it happened for a reason. That lottery ticket...it’s real. It’s—it’s as real as the penis snake!”

“What? What the hell...!”

“Sorry. I’ve been reading my friend’s zoology textbook.” Max took a deep breath and tried again. “The lottery ticket is under my bed. I haven’t told anyone about it. I want to split it with you. It’s a ton of money. We can basically move to another country and start a new life. I mean, separately, of course.”

Aaron stared down at his hands. His foot tap-tap-tapped against the floor, but otherwise he remained silent.

“You don’t believe me, do you? You still think I’m pranking you?”

“You said you haven’t told anyone about winning the lottery?” Aaron continued to fidget with his hands.

“Yeah. Why would I go around broadcasting something like that?”

“I kind of told someone.”

“What do you mean?” Max said.

“I thought you were playing a joke on me, so I told my friend about it. I showed her the letter, too.”

“Well, shit.”

“We can trust her. She’s my best friend.”

“*We?*” Max brightened. “So you believe me?”

“I just...I don’t know what to think. This is all so weird.”

“Well, we’ve got a year to claim the money. But the sooner the better.”

“Do you know if anyone else won?”

“I’ve been checking the local paper. It’s been three days and I haven’t seen anything yet. We could sweep the whole jackpot.”

Aaron began to chew his top lip. He frowned, but more to himself than in response to anything Max had said. “Don’t lotto winners end up with bad luck? Like, most of them lose it all in the end?”

“That’s because most people don’t know how to invest their money. Winning the lottery isn’t a curse.”

“I’m just...not sure about this...” Aaron fell silent again. He looked sad.

Max fought the urge to scooch right next to him and take his hand; his palm still glowed from Aaron’s touch earlier.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just feel like I didn’t do anything to deserve the money.”

“Well, I sure as hell don’t deserve it, either. I’m the joke of the school. But the money is ours now and we can’t just ignore it.”

“What are you going to do with your share? I mean, once we claim it?”

“Invest it in my startup.”

“You have a startup?”

Max nodded. “It’s still in the early stages. I just need to—”

Something took shape in his mind. How serendipitous! He quickly jumped up, almost hitting his head on the ceiling.

“Skip the rest of your classes today. I have an idea.”

# 10

Underwear Thief's room was exactly how Aaron had imagined it: like a mad scientist's lair. Books and leftover food and body parts of computers all over the place. It was the kind of room that made you afraid to take off your shoes, but at the same time you wanted to respect its owner.

"Who's that?" Aaron pointed to a poster of a man in a suit with an old-timey side part.

"Alan Turing."

"Oh, the, uh..." Aaron dove into the recesses of his brain, not wanting to look like an idiot in front of Underwear Thief. "He's, uh, that computer guy." *Ugh.*

"Yeah." Underwear Thief smiled. "Exactly."

Aaron went to examine the half-built computer on one of the desks. Black wires hung out of it like intestines. He couldn't even begin to recognize what any of the pieces were for; he barely knew the difference between RAM and CPU.

"Have a seat," Underwear Thief said, pulling out his desk chair. "Thanks for agreeing to come. Did you text your friend?"

"Yeah."

If someone had told Aaron a month ago that he would be sitting in Underwear Thief's room to discuss the allotment of ten and a half million dollars, he would have bonked them on the head with a basketball. This had to be a bizarro dream right now. There was no way he was about to become a millionaire.

He would have preferred to reach millionaire status the old-fashioned way. Become an executive. Start a business. Maybe even fool around on the stock market. Basketball had always come easy to him, but it was...just a game. He wanted to achieve something greater off the court that was all his own, something that would impress Childhood Aaron and make him go, "You did it, bud!"

Just as he was about to talk himself out of accepting the money, the door burst open and two guys staggered inside, nearly tripping over each other.

"What's the emergency?" the one with messy brown hair said. "Did Delta Phi figure out our house was the one that cut their power over the weekend?" He stopped when he noticed Aaron. "Huh?"

The other guy, a blond wearing a Fleetwood Mac shirt and a red beanie, looked like he was about to crack Aaron's neck in half. "What is *he* doing here?"

"Can you guys just sit down?" Underwear Thief said. "We're waiting for one more person."

"Who?" The blond continued to glare at Aaron.

A light tap sounded behind them. They all turned to see Winnie peeking through the doorway. She looked just as lost as the other two. When she saw Aaron, her face relaxed. "I got your text. What's going on?"

Brown-hair guy bent over in a gentlemanly bow. "Enchantée, fair maiden."

Winnie gave one of her shy laughs. "Are you guys recruiting me for a play?"

"Sort of." Underwear Thief closed the door behind her and locked it, then drew the curtains. The room fell into a soft darkness.

“You made me skip class so we could tell ghost stories like a bunch of middle schoolers?” the blond said.

Underwear Thief pulled up the other chair for Winnie before joining his friends on the floor. “We have to whisper now.”

“Oh no, is this an intervention?” brown-hair guy said. “How’d you know I’ve been hooking up with that freaky girl again?”

“Well, now we do.” The blond pointed at Aaron. “Can we clear this up first? Why is your attacker here?”

Aaron fidgeted in his seat. He glanced over at Underwear Thief. “I can leave if you guys are uncomfortable—”

“No, you need to be here,” Underwear Thief said. And then he just let it out, in the tiniest whisper: “Aaron and I won the lottery.”

“Do you mean in the metaphorical sense?” brown-hair guy said. “Like, you’re both smart and attractive?”

“No! I mean, we are going to be—” Underwear Thief paused as a noisy group walked by the room. Then he said, “We’re like Jay Gatsby now.”

“Dead?”

“No, man!” Underwear Thief grabbed a pillow and slugged his friend on the shoulder. “We won ten and a half million dollars!”

“What? How?”

“I just said it! The lottery!”

“But how did you both win?” the blond asked.

“I’ll explain later. Right now, we need to talk about what we’re doing with the money. And...I propose we invest it in the startup and hire Aaron.”

“Wait, what?” Now it was Aaron’s turn to feel like he just got hit with a million bombs.

“You said you felt bad about not deserving the money. If you work with us, and the startup makes money, then...”

“But I don’t know anything about computers.”

“You don’t have to.” Underwear Thief smiled at him, and Aaron wondered why he never noticed the beauty in it before. It was a smile that could melt glaciers. “Startups live and die on hype. And you’re kind of a public figure. If people find out you’re working with us, imagine the publicity we’d get. ‘Aaron Scudder, Ivy League’s Sweetheart, Joins Forces With Genius Startup.’”

“But I’m a disgraced athlete.”

“Even juicier.”

“Hold up,” brown-hair guy said, turning to Aaron. “Dude, I’m sure you’re nice and all, minus punching my friend. And you play great ball. But we don’t even *know* you. Max and I have been working on this project for almost a year. It’s our baby. I don’t think we need a third parent.”

“That’s...that’s fine...” Aaron looked at Underwear Thief. “I don’t really care about the money, anyway.” He made a move to get up. Judging by the way these guys acted around each other, it seemed like they were a tight group. And Aaron was just a spare tire.

“You’re going to be in Romania next semester,” Underwear Thief said to his friend. “I need someone to help me hold down the fort. I’m the CEO of the company, and I’m voting for Aaron to join us.”

The blond guy rubbed at his temple, looking even more annoyed. “You’re just letting a complete stranger in? Someone who gave you a black eye?”

“I already told you guys it was all my fault. I deserved to get punched. And Aaron’s not a total stranger. He’s our classmate, not some random person off the street.”

“True...” Brown-hair guy stroked his chin. “At least you’re not from Dartmouth. Or Princeton.” He made a fake retching sound. “Like, what the hell is an ‘eating club’? Just call it a damn frat!”

“If it helps, I turned down Princeton,” Aaron said. “Didn’t vibe with their recruiters.”

Brown-hair guy leapt off the floor and gave him a high-five. “Yeah, fuck the high society! Hey, I like you, man. If Princeton won the lottery, they’d probably spend it on a new yacht.”

“So it’s settled,” Underwear Thief said, banging his pen on the bed like a gavel. “Aaron Scudder, you are hereby an official employee of...our startup.”

“You guys haven’t named your company yet?”

“We prefer to focus on immediate priorities.”

“What would Aaron be doing, though?” Winnie asked. She had been so quiet that her voice came as a surprise, like an unexpected flower. “What’s his role in the company?”

“Contacting tech blogs, social media, stuff like that.”

“Kind of like promoting the brand?”

“Yeah. Marketing.”

“Can we back up again for a second?” brown-hair guy said. “You dudes just won a shitload of millions and you’re not even thinking of dropping out of school? Also...”—he extended his hand for Aaron to shake—“...welcome, I’m Jared. CTO, code master, scrum master, recent TV star. And the only brother in Sigma Epsilon with a real six-pack.” He threw a wink at Winnie.

“I just thought of something,” the blond guy said. “They’ll publish your name in the paper when you get your prize money. So this secret campfire thing we’re doing now? Pretty soon, everyone will know.”

“What?” Underwear Thief jumped up to retrieve the lottery ticket. Aaron made good use of the dim lighting and stole a glance at his butt. Across the room, the blond guy narrowed his eyes. Aaron quickly looked away.

Underwear Thief flipped the ticket over. “Does it say anything about having to share our names? I don’t want

anyone else to know about this. Zach, you're the lawyer here. Legal advice!"

"I'm doing environmental law!"

"There's a way you can get around it." Winnie took out her phone. "Let me check real quick. My mom handled a case like this before." She stopped scrolling and smiled. "It says here that in Maine, you can claim the money as a trust. So you wouldn't have to use your real name at all."

"How do we set up a trust?"

"That I can help you with," Zach said.

---

"Your friend Zach is a *billionaire*?" This day couldn't get any weirder.

Aaron and Underwear Thief were alone again. They had picked up dinner at the least popular dining hall on campus (which perpetually smelled like cow farts) and successfully snuck back to Underwear Thief's room without another ambush from the school paparazzi.

"Zach may dress like a drummer in a second-rate punk band, but he's a trust fund kid."

Aaron poked his garlic bread with a fork. He didn't know how to respond to that, so he asked, "So, um, you want me to do marketing for your company?"

"I think you're perfect for it. What's your major, by the way?"

"You mean you didn't sneak a peek when you hacked into my files?"

"Didn't cross my mind." Underwear Thief gave a little smirk as he bit into a meatball.

"I'm still undeclared, actually."

"Are you leaning towards anything? What do you want to do after graduation?"



“I like physics. And my grandma’s a teacher. So maybe a physics teacher?”

“Classic.”

“I’m...I’m not sure yet.” Aaron picked at the pasta. He felt like the noodles: limp and useless. It was a strange form of torture to have Underwear Thief sitting so close to him. Aaron felt conscious of his every movement, every blink, every time he opened his mouth to shove spaghetti in, every freckle on his arm—as if he were being scrutinized under a microscope by curious coppery eyes.

“Well, if our startup takes off, then it won’t matter what you major in.”

“Um, can we talk more about that? What are you guys making, exactly?”

The smile on Underwear Thief’s face was bright enough to power the sun. He looked ready to stand on a podium and address Congress or Parliament. “No one has cracked virtual reality yet,” he said. “Silicon Valley has been trying to make it mainstream for the last couple of decades. But they keep failing. Yeah, you’ve got the VR headsets now, but they’re limited and not a lot of people care about them outside of the gaming industry.”

“My friend had a VR headset in high school. I played some games on it, and it was cool at first, but...I kind of prefer a normal console.”

“Exactly! VR is only cool if you’re doing something that’s already boring.”

Aaron stuffed a dinner roll in his mouth to give himself time to think of a response. He couldn’t follow Underwear Thief’s peculiar way of thinking, but he was intrigued.

“And what’s more boring than going to the DMV? Or opening a bank account? Or going shopping for clothes?”

“Lots of people like shopping.”

“But lots of people also hate driving to malls. Physical retail is a dead man walking.”

“So what’s your plan?”

Underwear Thief stood up and began to pace the room. There was no Zach this time to stop Aaron from checking out that tightly-packed butt. It looked like the guy worked out. How did he have time to do so many squats in between schoolwork, building a tech startup, and concocting intricate pranks? Compared to that kind of work ethic, Aaron might as well be a tub of lard.

“We’re going to bring virtual reality to everyday life. The boring parts of it. Imagine this. You wake up. It’s time to renew your license. You pick up your VR headset and log on. You’re taken to the lobby of your local DMV. A friendly avatar greets you and takes all of your information. You fill out the forms, they take your picture, and you’re done. A few days later, you get your new license in the mail. And you didn’t even have to leave your house!”

Aaron continued to chew his food. He didn’t know what to think of this.

“Okay, scene two,” Underwear Thief continued. “You see a nice shirt at your favorite online store. But you don’t know if it’ll actually look good on you. So you put on your VR headset. An avatar that’s a photo-realistic copy of you walks into a virtual fitting room to try on the shirt. It sucks. You just saved yourself twenty bucks and return shipping.”

“What about the bank? How will that work?”

“We’re still trying to figure that one out so we don’t get in trouble with the OCC. But we’ve written the source code for basic environments and interactions. All we need to do is tweak it for different industries.”

“Do you have a sample I can try?”

“That’s the problem. There isn’t a headset that can support our software. We’ll need to manufacture it ourselves. I could technically show you a demo on my laptop, but it’s going to look basic. We need a headset.”

“So this is why you wanted to find that lottery ticket so bad.”

Underwear Thief stopped pacing. His face had become completely serious; it reminded Aaron of a mad scientist right before they blew up the world. “We can change the future of... *everything*.”

They worked on getting through the rest of their dinner before Underwear Thief motioned for them to spread out on the floor. He started typing on his laptop, then turned the screen around. It was a map of Maine. “It’s about an hour from here to Augusta.”

“That’s where we have to claim the money?”

“Yup. We can borrow Zach’s car.”

*Oh no.* “I don’t think he likes me.”

“He can be protective.”

“Maybe we can do a rideshare,” Aaron suggested. “I have the Waagen app.”

“Dude, we are in a small town in the middle of Maine. There aren’t Waagen drivers just cruising around, waiting to give us a ride. Zach won’t mind if we use his car. He has zero stake in the company, so you don’t have to worry about upsetting him.”

“I just feel weird about all this.” Aaron looked down at his sauce-smearred food carton. “Your startup...it’s yours. And Jared’s. I don’t know how I fit in.”

“Have you heard about the incubator opening downtown?”

“An incubator? For eggs?”

Underwear Thief laughed. “For startups. Man, you’re cute. You’re like a tech virgin.”

Aaron’s face, which had been in a near-constant state of blushing since the secret room in the library, now burst into scarlet. He was sure the color was traveling through the rest of his body, too. “I know how to use a computer,” he said quietly.

“No, I’m not making fun of you.” Underwear Thief shifted closer and put a hand on his arm. “The incubator is accepting applications in a couple of weeks. It’s like a...like a summer

camp for startups. They help with your business and give you funding. I think having a marketing person will get us noticed. It'll make us look more organized, at least."

"That sounds really ambitious."

"So are you. You made it to Bramburgh, didn't you?"

The rest of the evening turned into a game where Aaron tried not to stare at Underwear Thief's pink mouth. Now *he* was the creep. He could almost hear Winnie giggling from the other side of campus.

As he got ready to leave for the night, he paused at the door. "Hey, um..."

"Yeah?"

Aaron tipped his head in a small nod. "Thanks, Max."

*Max.*

His name had never sounded so...*seductive* coming from someone else's mouth!

For the next two weeks, Max walked around in a fog of hazel eyes and butter-yellow hair. Lectures simply became an opportunity for him to daydream about Aaron doing more than just holding his hand; he even considered writing his final paper for Classical Mythology on Aaron Scudder's (allegedly) impossible abs that deserved their own origin story.

He had tried looking for the basketball player's social media profiles, but nothing turned up except a single Twitter post from four years ago that simply read: "Got my driver's license yo." Even the articles and interviews with Aaron were lacking. They always mentioned the same things: his volunteer work, his academic achievements, being an out athlete. Max didn't want to see Aaron's resume; he wanted to know where Aaron hung out for fun, his favorite food, whether or not he had braces in middle school, did he have any pets?

Strange how Max knew more about the biological father he'd never met. He scrolled through William P. Zhang's latest posts. What would he think of Aaron?

The most recent photo from his father showed a colorful display of dim sum dishes. The caption read: “Chinatown food tour!”

Max opened his bookmarks folder. He clicked on the address that he had pinned to his browser ever since the sperm bank released it to him.

The page opened to a quiet residential street on Google Maps. Center stage was a light green, ranch-style house with a pair of foo dogs standing guard outside the front door. Max spent more time stalking his father’s home than calling his own mother. He had memorized the slope of the roof, the number of windows facing the street, the mud on the Jeep Wrangler parked in the driveway. He imagined strolling right up and ringing the bell: “Surprise! What up, fam?”

Now *that* would be a cruel prank.

He placed a hand on his father’s profile picture. “William Phillip Zhang. Where should we spend the money first? Should we start looking for other programmers? More importantly, do you think I have a chance with Aaron Scudder? I haven’t seen his abs yet, and I don’t know if I’ll survive when I do.”

His father’s image remained smiling. A silent agreement to every secret Max shared. Max wanted to tell him so much more. He looked at the green house and the foo dogs and the muddy Jeep for a little longer, then clicked away. When he eventually gathered the courage to contact his father, their startup would hopefully be more than three guys working out of their dorm room. William P. Zhang would get a call from a real CEO...

He pulled up his favorite Italo-pop playlist and resumed coding.

---

The day they were supposed to pick up the prize money, it rained.

Max had chosen this particular day because it was a favorable date on the lunar calendar. That, and he had a

discussion group for Linear Algebra that he would rather skip. Whoever thought it was a good idea to schedule pointless discussion groups on a Friday morning should be pelted with rotten fruit.

His phone vibrated with a text. He picked it up and immediately smiled.

**Aaron:** *Just checking, we're still good for today?*

Still good? Max was willing to drive through a blizzard—heck, even a full-blown apocalypse—with Aaron Scudder.

**Max:** *Yup*

So lame. Now that Aaron wasn't fending him off and calling him a crazy pervert, Max seemed to have lost his flirting game. There was nothing like a hot guy yelling at you that really challenged your improv skills.

**Max:** *Can you wear your Eagle Scout uniform? We can pretend I'm kidnapping you and taking you to my sex den, where you'll have to use your wits and survival instincts to claw your way out*

That was more like it.

When Aaron replied with a string of eye roll emojis, Max pocketed his phone with a satisfied grin.

The drive to Casco Mart took less than five minutes, but he might as well have arrived on a magic carpet. The thought of seeing Aaron made time irrelevant. Even the rain was like a welcome kiss.

He parked Zach's car across the street and jogged over. He was an hour early, but an hour hanging out with Aaron in a convenience store sure beat sitting in his room thinking about Aaron.

A single customer stood at the counter. The guy's body language resembled that of a frat bro three beers deep trying to pick up a girl, one arm leaning casually against the counter, the other hand toying with a pack of cigarettes. Max moved closer and heard the guy saying, "...willing to give you another chance. Just come up to my room."

Max caught Aaron's eye and smiled. His smile faded when the other guy turned around.

"Well, hey, genius!" Archibald said. "Isn't this a merry reunion!"

"You've paid for your stuff. You should go now." Aaron tried to sound authoritative, but there was a slight waver to his voice—none of the conviction he'd had when he yelled at Max.

"I want to get a selfie first. With the little genius and the gangly goon. How many likes do you think I'll get on Jackals Wild?" Archibald pretended to snap a picture with his phone.

"He told you to leave," Max said.

"Wait, you two are friends now? Plot twist!"

"Are you drunk?" Max sniffed the air in front of Archibald. "It's not even noon yet!"

"I've been asking Scudder to have a drink with me, but he doesn't want to ditch work for some Hennessy. What a party pooper."

"You're the pooper," Max said. "This is a place of business, not a frat house."

"Why are *you* here?" Archibald bopped Max on the nose with the tip of his finger. "Come for your weekly stash of ramen and high fructose corn syrup? Don't buy too much. Scudder might have a hard time counting everything. He's probably not used to doing so much math."

Aaron clenched his fists. He looked ready to toss Archibald into the dumpster. Max shot him a look and shook his head.

"You freshmen are so boring. I'm out. Auf Wiedersehen, dorks." Archibald threw his hand up in a peace sign as he drifted out the door.

Max waited until the guy and his annoyingly preppy umbrella disappeared down the street. "He's a moron. All hat and no cattle." When Aaron didn't say anything, Max looked up. Aaron's face was a blend of rage and dejection. Max didn't



know if he was about to turn the room upside down or start bawling. “Are you okay?”

There was silence for several seconds, then: “Let’s go get that fucking money.”

---

The rain had slowed to a drizzle by the time Aaron’s shift ended. When he saw Zach’s car, he let out a relieved sigh. “I thought we’d be riding in a Porsche or a Lamborghini or something like that. I was getting ready to just not move the whole ride so I wouldn’t mess anything up.”

“Nah, the old money types prefer boring old cars. Hop in.”

The most luxurious thing about Zach’s ten-year-old Volvo station wagon was the cracked leather seats. Max immediately turned on the radio to kill any awkward silences.

“Your friends couldn’t come with us?” Aaron said. “I mean...I’m not trying to say I don’t trust your driving or anything. I’m just...” His face was now redder than cranberries. “I’m sorry, I’m not real good with small talk.”

Max just smiled. “Zach’s cleaning the river with his eco club. And Jared flew home for the weekend to celebrate his dog’s bat mitzvah.”

“Seriously?”

“The bond between a boy and his dog is eternal.”

On the radio, Ozzy Osbourne was screaming about a crazy train. Quite possibly the most unromantic song ever recorded. But it was a welcome distraction. If Zach had been into Whitney Houston or Celine Dion, it would have made the atmosphere in the car ten times more intense.

They managed to reach the outer fringes of Greenloch without saying much of anything. All sorts of words and half-formed sentences darted around Max’s head, only to get swallowed down. He watched Aaron from his peripheral vision during a red light. Aaron kept both hands resting atop his thighs in a very still pose. His head almost grazed the ceiling. Max considered taking a detour through one of

Maine's many forested paths and having a secret makeout session. But that would probably scare Aaron off.

So Max reverted to what he was comfortable with. He smirked and said, "Do you know that if you have sex with a fresh corpse, in nine months your devil spawn will hunt you down and eat you?"

"Oh my gosh, you are so random!"

"Saw it in a movie."

"What the hell kinds of things do you watch?"

"Right now, a cute guy who's judging my taste in film."

The resulting silence meant Aaron was likely trying not to blush. Max decided to push on. "Have you ever had a literary boyfriend?"

"Um...huh?"

"You've never had a crush on a book character before?"

"Why would I be attracted to a fake person?"

"They're not fake. It's just, instead of flesh and blood, they're made of fonts and ink."

Aaron let out a little half-snort. "So who's your book Romeo?"

"Jonas from *The Giver*."

"Okay..."

"We read it in sixth grade. Did you? Remember that dream he has where he wants to give his friend Fiona a bath? I used to draw pictures of that. Except I replaced Fiona with me."

"That's a little too much information."

"I bet your literary boyfriend is Holden Caulfield."

"No, I would never go for someone that nihilistic," Aaron scoffed.

"Heathcliff, then? Patrick Bateman? Ponyboy?"

"Why do you just assume that I'm into tortured bad boys?"

“Because you have a sweet face.”

Silence again.

Max was about to bring up a weird animal fact from one of Zach’s textbooks when Aaron cleared his throat. “You’re not wrong.”

“About what?”

“About me liking tortured bad boys.”

“Spill.”

Aaron rubbed his palms over his thighs. “I was watching *Psycho* with my grandma one time, when I was thirteen. And I just turned to her and said, ‘Norman Bates is really good-looking.’”

“What did she say?”

“She just said, ‘I think so too.’”

“Your grandma sounds very wise.”

“She is.”

“What about your parents?” Max said. “How’d they take your coming out?”

“Oh...they—they didn’t really care, either. I guess I’m lucky.” Aaron turned to look out the window.

Max detected a shift in energy and decided not to prod any further. But when they merged onto the highway, Aaron surprised him by asking, “So where are you from?”

“My ancestors are from China,” Max recited automatically. That was the only answer people wanted to hear and the only answer they would accept coming from someone who looked like him. “And my mom’s half Italian, so Italy, too, I guess.”

“That’s cool,” Aaron said, “but I meant what state.”

“Oh.” Max had been so used to people brushing aside his Texas roots and demanding, *No, where are you actually from?* that he sat there for a good solid second, letting Aaron’s question linger in the air for a little while longer. Then he

lifted one hand to touch the brim of an invisible cowboy hat.  
“Lone Star.”

“So what kind of Texan are you? *Texas Chainsaw* or *Friday Night Lights*?” There was a new layer of playfulness to Aaron’s voice that made Max want to pull over and jump in his lap.

“Neither. I’m from Austin.”

“No you’re not,” Aaron said.

“I’m not?”

“Fancy boy like you slumming it in the city? No, you’re from the nice suburbs. Which is it? Barton Creek? Pflugerville? Round Rock?”

Max shifted his eyes from the road for the shortest millisecond to gape at his passenger. “It’s Pflugerville. And how do you know so much about random Texas neighborhoods?”

Aaron seemed to shrug. He looked out the window again and said in a quieter voice, “Hobby of mine.”

“That’s an oddly specific hobby.”

No further explanation came.

The longer they sat in the car, the more it felt like the thick woods on either side of the highway were closing in. It was the apocalypse, and trees all over the world were suffering from an existential crisis, bent on destroying mankind!

He pictured the trees reaching in through the windows, their scraggly branches closing around Aaron and hauling him off to the deepest part of the forest. Max would transform the car into a hovercraft and race to save his new friend. Laser beams would shoot out from the headlights. He’d stun all of the evil monster trees and turn them peaceful again. Then he’d grab Aaron and they’d fly to the top of Mount Katahdin, the highest point in Maine. William P. Zhang would be waiting there to present them with medals for heroism, bravery, courage, all the synonyms.

And then Aaron would kiss him, right there on the mountain—

“What are you doing?” Aaron was giving him an amused look.

“Huh?”

“You were going, ‘Pew pew pew.’”

“I was reminding myself to get to the pews,” Max said. “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been five seasons of *The Simpsons* since my last Confession.”

“It’s ‘Bless me, Father.’ You said it wrong.”

“And that’s why I’m going straight to Hell.”

“Save me a seat when you get there.”

“You know, I actually wish I could meet Hades.” Max changed lanes to overtake a truck. “He’s my favorite Greek god.”

“Is he one of your literary boyfriends?”

“Duh. He’s a total gentleman. While Zeus and Poseidon were trying to sleep with everything that moved, Hades only ever wanted Persephone.”

“Um, he wanted to bang his own niece.”

“Let’s not frown upon the customs of ancient cultures,” Max said. “They didn’t have that many options back then.”

“Man, you’re weird.” Aaron turned away to resume looking out the window. When Max glanced over, he caught the basketball player’s reflection in the glass. It was smiling.

---

They made it to Augusta without Max getting distracted by Aaron’s body heat and crashing the car into a light pole. The lottery office was in a perfectly rectangular building across from the Kennebec River. Probably so the winners could easily throw themselves into the water and escape to safety should thieving relatives decide to stage an attack.

The woman behind the counter didn't hear them walk in. She had earbuds on and was humming an ABBA song—while also playing Sudoku and knitting what looked like a tea cozy.

“Hello, ma'am.”

She looked up. Max braced himself for some kind of frosty stare—they were no longer in the cocoon of Greenloch and Bramburgh; this was the “real” part of Maine, where he was most likely the first Asian person they'd seen in a bajillion years. But the woman smiled and removed her earbuds. “Help ya?”

“We're here to claim our lottery winnings.” Max showed her the ticket. He suddenly felt like a little kid presenting his teacher with an essay he'd copied off a classmate.

She checked her records, then nodded and handed him a form. “Fill this out, please.” Noticing Aaron standing off to the side, she added, “Wouldya like to split the prize between the two a-ya? We'll give ya separate checks.”

“Um, we're going to be claiming as a trust.”

The woman nodded again and left them to work on the form. “Shit,” Max whispered when he read the fine print at the bottom. “We have to pay a thirty percent tax?!”

“That still leaves us with a lot,” Aaron said. “Over seven million. Considering no one else has won.”

“What do they do with all of the taxes we pay? Our infrastructure is still crap. There isn't even a train from Greenloch to Augusta!”

A scraping sound filled the office. The woman was dragging a giant fake check across the carpet. “Ready for your picture?” she asked.

“Picture?”

“Ayuh. You boys are the only ones to win this week's Mega Jackpot.” She held the fake check out. “Now who wantsta hold which side?”

Max and Aaron looked at each other. “We'd rather not...”

“This is the most action our office has gotten since the skunk that wandered in ten months ago,” the woman said. “And you two look like movie stars. It’ll give the local paper some life.”

After explaining to her that they were really undercover agents tracking a drug lord hiding out in the woods of this mighty fine state, and therefore couldn’t risk having their photo taken but were very, very appreciative of her efforts to keep their identities a secret, they quickly left the office and collapsed against the car, laughing.

“She actually believed you,” Aaron said.

“I think she’s been waiting to experience a real-life *NCIS* moment.”

Max was about to unlock the car when he felt a tiny drop of water hit his hand. He shielded his eyes and looked up.

It was snowing.

First rain and now snow—the first snowfall of the season. And they were officially millionaires! What a day!

Without thinking, he grabbed Aaron by the hand and tugged him across the street.

# 12

Aaron watched as Max spun in circles under the gently falling snow. His arms were flung wide open as if to catch every last flake. All around them, the grass was dusted with white and the trees looked like powdered cinnamon sticks. But the most delightful sight of all was the underwear thief spinning and spinning and spinning—

Max slumped to the ground.

“Hey, are you all right?” Aaron called, running over.

A laugh answered him. “Let’s not go back yet.” Max started to move like he was making a snow angel.

“There’s not enough snow for that,” Aaron said. But he felt like joining in.

After a few more pumps of his arms and legs, Max sat up. “Wanna get lunch?”

Aaron did a quick calculation of his finances. Casco Mart had paid him last week. A cheeseburger and fries wouldn’t hurt...

Max misinterpreted his silence. “I didn’t mean to sound like I’m hitting on you. I just thought, since it’s already noon...But we don’t have to, if you don’t want. I can drive us



right back to school. And I won't make any more weird sexual jokes. Promise.”

There was a snowflake stuck to his eyelash. It made him look even more mischievous, but also boyish and innocent. Aaron wanted to reach over and brush it away. Instead, he simply said, “Lunch sounds good.”

---

The foodie thread on Jackals Wild had been hyping up a “totally fucktastic” hole-in-the-wall chowder shop in Augusta that was supposed to be “so completely bamboozling to your taste buds, you’ll walk out with an orgasm in your mouth like you just gave a blowjob to the king of lobsters.” Aaron sincerely hoped none of his classmates ever became food critics.

“This tastes like every other lobster roll I’ve had,” Max said, looking disappointed. “Never trust anything that’s overhyped.”

They sat under the bright lights of The Clam House, taking up a spacious booth in the corner. There was only one other customer; from the snores that broke the air every few minutes, it seemed like the man had fallen asleep in his chowder.

Aaron snapped his chicken finger in half before dipping it in ketchup. He had ordered the cheapest thing on the menu that still resembled a full meal. Now he felt like a five-year-old next to Max, who was polishing off his lobster roll with root beer. Aaron wanted to bonk himself on the head. Why didn’t he just get the turkey melt? It was only a dollar more.

Max leaned across the table, lifted his eyebrows excitedly, and whispered, “Can you believe it? We’re rich!”

It suddenly occurred to Aaron how odd this sounded. “Aren’t you already rich?” he said. “Your mom’s, like, a famous video game designer, isn’t she?”

Max’s smile disappeared. He slouched back in his seat. “That doesn’t make *me* a famous video game designer.”

“I’m sorry. I just thought it was public knowledge, about your mom.”

“No, it’s fine.” Max shrugged. “My mom’s a successful video game designer. My grandfather’s a successful engineering professor. My grandmother actually climbed Mount Everest. And my da—my father...he’s a successful lawyer. I think.”

“You think?”

“I don’t really know him.”

Aaron felt a small flutter in his chest. Maybe there was someone like him after all, someone who knew what it felt like...

But Max said, “I’m a test-tube baby.”

“Oh...”

So Underwear Thief was the product of a science experiment. That explained a lot. Or maybe it didn’t.

“My mom really wanted a kid. So she went and got herself one.”

“You’ve never met your biological dad?”

“No. I have his number. I just haven’t...” Max grew quiet and nibbled on his straw. This was the most subdued Aaron had seen him. When his eyes weren’t gleaming with pranks or cuckoo ideas, he almost looked princely. Like one of those ancient Roman sculptures: all stoic and ready for battle, but also a brittleness behind the stony eyes.

“I never knew my dad either,” Aaron said. “Or my mom.” When Max cocked his head, waiting, Aaron continued, “They ran away right after I was born.”

“Ran away?”

“They had me when they were seventeen. Before I’d even turned one, they both skipped town. Didn’t tell their parents anything.”

“So your grandma...”

“Yep.”

“Did you ever hear from them?”

Aaron tore a chunk off his chicken finger. There had been a time when that question would have triggered some kind of sadness. But he'd had twenty years to get over it. It was just another fact of his life, like growing up in Rochester and being left-handed and being a Sagittarius. Aaron Scudder didn't have parents. That was that.

“They never called and they never came back,” he said, ripping another chicken finger in half. He stared at the white meat peeking beneath the blood-red ketchup. “My grandma gave me a jigsaw puzzle of the U.S. for my sixth birthday. It had a thousand pieces. I was so proud when I finished it. We had it laminated and hung in my room. I used to study it every night, imagining my parents in Orlando or Los Angeles or Honolulu. I told myself that they were just taking a really cool vacation because they wanted to bring back an awesome souvenir for me.

“As I got older, I started studying every state, all the different cities, wondering if maybe they were living in Ypsilanti or Walla Walla or Pflugerville.”

Max gasped. “That's how you knew...”

“I guess I'm qualified to be a realtor in all fifty states now.”

“That's not all you're good for,” Max said. His face had become animated again. “You're with us now. You're going to be part of our startup. We'll get that spot in the incubator, and everyone will know us then. That'll show your parents. Show them what a dumb mistake they made.”

“I honestly don't care about them anymore,” Aaron said. He hoped he sounded convincing.

The one other customer in the restaurant let out a deafening snore, waking himself up. He blinked and looked around the room, then continued eating his chowder as if he'd been conscious this whole time.

Aaron and Max hunched over the table, holding back laughter.

“His snore sounded like a fart,” Max whisper-wheezed.

“Do you think his farts sound like snores?”

They were about to fall into another fit of laughter when the waitress arrived. She placed a heaping bowl of buttery chowder in front of each of them. “Enjoy.”

“But I didn’t order this,” Aaron said.

“I got it when you were in the bathroom.” Max grinned. “To celebrate our big win.”

Aaron took a bite. “Yeah, I can see how this would taste like giving a blowjob to the king of lobsters.”

---

The taste of lobster and chowder and chicken fingers still lingered in his mouth later that evening. Aaron tried to focus on his anthropology paper, but the words and letters kept swirling together to form a figure spinning, spinning, spinning in the snow. He got out his notebook and started writing.

*Bright as snow, he felt*

*Warm dancing under the sun*

*His laugh: skies open*

He’d get to see Max again on Sunday. They would be working on the application for the incubator. Aaron had been reading up on virtual reality and how startups worked. It seemed like such a turbulent way to make money. Startup founders devoted their entire lives to a single idea, a single mission; most of them were putting all of their hopes into getting acquired by another tech giant for billions of dollars, while the more idealistic founders would rather die a painful death than sell out.

Aaron didn’t know what kind of founder Max was. And that excited him the most.

He was settling into his anthropology paper again when a knock sounded at his door. Winnie usually came over at this

time to gossip about her lab group or complain about her roommate's boyfriend. "It's open," he called without looking up from his textbook. When he heard his friend step inside, he said, "Guess what? I had lunch with Max and he—"

The person standing in his room was most definitely *not* Winnie. He was wearing a faded Duran Duran T-shirt and tattered green flannel. He placed something on Aaron's desk. "You left this in my car."

Aaron saw that it was his student ID. "Oh...thanks," he said. "And, um, thanks for letting us borrow your car today. I really liked the...leather seats."

Zach continued to stare at him. His face remained expressionless.

"That's not to say...I mean, we didn't do anything in your car. We sat upright the whole time. In our own seats. We didn't even touch the back seat. We didn't touch each other at all."  
*Shut up, Aaron!*

In the half-light of the room, Zach's eyes seemed to glow. Two flaming blue torches leading the way to Hades. "Max takes his startup very seriously." His voice was both calm and austere. It reminded Aaron of Catholic school nuns. "He's worked very hard building that software. Extremely hard. Do you understand?" The last sentence was enunciated slowly, each syllable dragged out.

Aaron nodded. "Um, yeah, totally. I get it."

Zach looked as if to say something else, but ended up shooting Aaron one more weighty stare before walking out and closing the door behind him.

Aaron sat still for several seconds. He didn't realize he'd been holding his breath. Coach Henderson now had competition for scariest death glare.

Outside, snow had started to fall again. A neat pile formed on his window sill. He stuck his finger out to scoop some of it up, then brought it to his lips. It melted before he got a taste.

# 13

“Isn’t she gorgeous?” Jared said. “She was crowned Miss Canine Bergen County 2016.”

Max looked at the photo of Belinda, Jared’s scrawny Chihuahua with an overbite and bug-eyed stare; her large, alienoid head seemed at risk of tipping over from the tiniest gust of wind. She was drooling into the little dog-cake in front of her, and atop her head was a pink party hat with the number 13. “Yeah, she’s...quite a looker.”

“She learned how to fetch when she was ten.”

“It took her that long?”

“I like to think of her as an independent spirit.”

The windchimes at the front of the diner tinkled and Aaron came through, stamping on the welcome rug to get rid of the snow clinging to his sneakers. He waved when he saw them. “So this is where Cosmos conducts business?”

“Cosmos?”

Aaron blushed. “I’ve been coming up with names for the company. Since I’m supposed to do marketing and all that.”

“I like it.” Max tried it out again: “Cosmos...”

“Can we vote on it later?” Jared said. “I have a list of some other names that I want to go over.”

“Oh, yeah, no, we don’t have to use my idea,” Aaron said. “Whatever you guys think is best.” He stood awkwardly next to the booth.

“Have a seat.” Max started to slide over, but Aaron was already slipping in beside Jared, who immediately showed him his phone.

“What do you think of Belinda?”

“What *is* that?” Aaron said.

Jared’s hand flew to his heart. “Dude. Hurtful!”

“It’s his dog-daughter,” Max explained.

“I think we should name our company after her,” Jared said. “Siri. Alexa. Now Belinda.”

“No, we are one trillion percent not doing that.”

“Put it to a vote.”

“Let’s talk about this first.” Max opened the incubator application on his laptop. He had filled out the easier stuff already: contact information, number of founders, equity. “We need to describe our product in two sentences. Short and sweet.”

“How about this…” Jared wiggled his fingers in the air. He offered a dramatic pause before saying, “Virtual reality. For virtually anything.”

Max gave him a blank stare. “That. Sucks.”

“We can vote on it.”

Their food arrived. Max remembered how Aaron had devoured his chowder the other day and had ordered another bowl just for him. The waitress also set down plates of bacon cheeseburger sliders, onion rings, chili cheese fries, and buffalo wings; they had to remove one of the napkin holders to squeeze in the pizza.

“Dig in,” Jared said, grabbing a fistful of onion rings.

Aaron fingered his spoon. He looked at Max, uncertain.

“This is a working lunch,” Max reassured him. “So it’s covered by the company credit card.”

“You mean your mom’s credit card,” Jared said. “She never replied to the birthday email I sent, by the way.”

Max ignored his friend. “I’m going to get us a company card soon. We can afford one now.”

“I’ve never had this many carbs all at once before,” Aaron laughed. He picked up a fry and gave Max a timid smile. Max wanted to order everything delicious in the diner and give it to his new friend.

“Why don’t we just hire an English major to write all this for us?” Jared gestured at the incubator application.

Aaron raised his hand, then realized what he was doing and lowered it sheepishly. “I have an idea. Um, for the product description? We can say something like, ‘Optimize your life without leaving home.’”

“Okay, that’s a start.”

“It’s not specific enough,” Jared said.

“How about, ‘Errands simplified. Virtual reality realized.’”

“Your virtual reality butler. Convenience at your service.”

“We should hire an English major *and* an advertising major,” Jared said. “What are we, jingle writers?”

Aaron hauled his backpack up. He fished around inside, then pulled out a notebook and pen. Max and Jared watched as he began to write. It only took him a minute before he grinned and looked up. “How about this?”

*Virtual errands*

*Done at the speed of a blink*

*Convenience: all in your head*

“Of course! A poem!” Jared cried. “That’s how you win them over!”



“Virtual errands. All in your head.” Max repeated the phrase again. He beamed. “Aaron, this is great!”

“You think so?”

“Now we don’t have to hire the English majors anymore,” Jared said. “Do you know how expensive they are? I asked one of them to write my online dating bio, and she wanted to be paid in bitcoin!”

Aaron seemed to finish his chowder with greater confidence. Max had noticed him quietly eyeing the buffalo wings since they arrived, and now he reached over and brought two wings to his plate. Everything seemed to move in slow motion as Aaron sank his teeth into the meat. Max stared at the scrunch of Aaron’s nose, the way he closed his eyes just for a second as he chewed, the grease on his lips...

“Another round of wings for Double-A Aaron!” Jared clapped him on the back, making Aaron sputter. “Sorry, man.”

Max scrolled to the next section of the application. “Okay, what about our competitors? Everyone in tech wants a piece of virtual reality. And then you have NFTs. Musicians. Real estate. Gamers. But it’s all escapist. We’re the only ones so far who are trying to normalize the VR experience for everyday things.”

“So our competition is...everyone and no one,” Jared said.

Aaron wiped at his fingers. He had a smudge of sauce near the corner of his mouth. Max decided not to tell him. It looked cute. “Jared’s right,” Aaron said. “Our competitors are every virtual reality and augmented reality company out there. But what makes us different is our approach.” He looked at Max and grinned. “You’re making something that will actually benefit the average person. It’s useful.”

Useful!

That was the most wonderful compliment Max had ever received.

Silicon Valley was full of companies trying to push out impractical products dressed up in sleek branding and promoted by hot tech bros who were more preoccupied with

earning their next billion than creating anything meaningful. Max knew that his VR idea was closer to a geeky kid with braces than a leggy supermodel, but if Aaron thought it was useful—maybe people like Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber would think so, too. And that was all that mattered.

His phone suddenly lit up with a call. He was about to ignore it when he noticed that it was his grandfather. After waiting a beat, he answered. “Hey, Ang-kong.”

“Xiao ma, I’m glad you picked up! I just spoke with Buboy Ramos. Do you know what he told me?”

“Who’s—”

Jared leaned across the table. “Hi, Ang-kong!”

“Jared! How was Belinda’s bat mitzvah?”

“Magical! She really liked the pumpkin cheesecake. Thanks for the idea.”

When Max gave his friend a weird look, Jared said, “What? Your grandpa and I chat on Instagram.”

“Who is that with you?” Max’s grandfather pressed his face closer to the screen. “Is that Zach? Zachary, why are you being so quiet?”

“This is Aaron,” Max said, turning the phone all the way around. “Aaron, my grandfather.”

“Hi...sir.” Aaron waved shyly at the screen.

“Wow, you look like a young James Dean!”

“James Dean never got old, Ang-kong.”

“Thank you...?” Aaron said.

“Who’s James Dean?” Jared asked. “The guy who makes those frozen breakfasts?”

Max sighed. “Can I call you back, Ang-kong? We’re working on the startup right now.”

“I’ll be quick. Buboy Ramos told me that his wife’s sister’s cousin’s nephew has a son who is working as a dentist in Manila. He is a Tiger, so he’s only four years older than you,

xiao ma. He graduated college early, which means he is a smart boy. And guess what? This is the best part—he’s fluent in Mandarin *and* Hokkien!”

“Um...”

“I’ll send you a picture, and you can tell me if you like him,” his grandfather said. “Okay, I have to go, too. Greta and I need to get up early tomorrow. We’re going spelunking!”

“Your grandpa is such a slayer,” Jared said when they had hung up. “I can’t wait to be just like him when I get old and qualify for Medicare.”

Max’s phone pinged with a text. It was a photo.

“Damn!” Jared almost shouted. “Is that the dude Buboy Ramos was talking about? He could be in a cologne commercial! Are you gonna message him?”

Across the table, Aaron frowned at the photo of the Tiger dentist from Manila with the perfect hair.

“Of course not.” Max deleted the photo. “Let’s get back to work.”

---

After they wrapped up their work on the application, Jared left for his frat meeting while Max loitered outside the diner to watch the snow fall. All that greasy food had made his head feel heavy, but he wasn’t in the mood to return to his room just yet.

Aaron seemed to have the same idea. The basketball player stood nearby, glancing over when he thought Max wasn’t looking.

“Do you want to go see Anne-Shirley?” Max said.

At the sound of his voice, Aaron’s head shot up. “Anne-Shirley?”

“The cat we saw behind Casco Mart. When I went dumpster diving.”

Aaron shifted on the balls of his feet; nodded. “Um. Yeah. Okay.”

They walked down Pemaquid Avenue and tried not to pay attention to the stares from other students. There was now a thread on Jackals Wild dedicated to Aaron Scudder and Max Trellis-Tan sightings. **Are they dating???** was the most commented topic, followed by **#BringScudderBack!!!**

“Do you know what they’re saying about us online?” Max said.

“What?”

“That I paid you to punch me because I’m an attention-seeking scumbag.”

Aaron kicked a pebble down the pavement. “The Internet is full of idiots.”

“You mean the World Wide Web is full of idiots.”

“Isn’t that the same thing as the Internet?”

“Not at all.” Max stepped over a miniature snowman someone had cobbled together from the scant bit of snow they’d gotten so far. “The Internet isn’t websites or the cloud, like people think it is. It’s actually hardware. It’s a piece of wire. Or, more like hundreds of thousands of miles of wires. Most of it underwater and stretching all over the world.”

“Like, routers?”

“Routers are part of it. The Internet is basically a whole bunch of physical computers connected to each other. It’s the infrastructure that powers the World Wide Web. It’s really beautiful. We can video chat with people like my grandfather, who’s on the other side of the world, because of a single piece of wire. The Internet has a much better infrastructure than most of our cities.”

Aaron stopped walking. He turned to Max, cheeks cherry-red. “You’re really...” He let out a chuckle.

Max lowered his eyes to the ground. “I’m boring you. I know. We won’t talk about computers anymore for the rest of the day.”

“No, I think you’re—I mean, what you’re talking about is really cool. Maybe I should take some computer science

classes next semester.”

“If you do, go with Professor Steinman. He’s the best.”

“Will you tutor me if I get stuck?”

“Yeah, for sure.” *I will tutor you in whatever subject you desire!* Max imagined the two of them sharing a textbook and playing footsie under the library tables.

As if reading his mind, Aaron blushed an even brighter red.

“There she is,” Max said when they reached the end of Pemaquid Avenue. Anne-Shirley was crouched in front of a bush on the lawn of Lambda Lambda Chi. Her orange tail swished from side to side.

“Is she someone’s pet?”

“She belongs to Lambda Lambda. But they let her roam around.”

Max sat on a bare patch of lawn that had been cleared of snow. Anne-Shirley spotted him and zipped over. She rubbed her head against the side of his leg. Aaron wrinkled his nose. “Cat hair.”

“I’m guessing you don’t have any felines at home?”

“No, but I had a pet rat.” Aaron stretched his legs out. His hand came to rest right beside Max’s thigh, by accident or by design Max didn’t have the synapses to analyze right now—he was sitting next to the cutest guy on campus, under the silvery November sky, with everything to look forward to. This was a True Moment.

“Rats are so underappreciated,” Aaron continued. “They’re smarter than dogs and friendlier than cats.”

Max lay back on the grass. The sun hid behind a cushion of gray clouds. Next week was Thanksgiving break. That would give them some time to polish their code before the incubator opened. Oliver and Ethan were going to announce the chosen batch of startups in December, and they would officially start working in the incubator the following month. Max was positive they would get in. Jared was an awesome

programmer, Max had the vision, and Aaron was already getting the hang of all this tech stuff.

Anne-Shirley climbed onto his chest. She swatted at his chin before curling up against his neck. Aaron was right. Cats and dogs possessed the market share of human hearts and viral videos. No video of a rat had ever gone viral. Except for Pizza Rat. And that was only because Pizza Rat was an underdog. The World Wide Web loved underdogs. America loved underdogs. America was built by underdogs. The original Silicon Valley rested on the dreams of scrappy underdogs.

Max sat up. He hardly noticed Anne-Shirley's startled "meowr!"

His brain went into overdrive. The lottery. Their startup. Viral. Underdogs.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Aaron's voice sounded like it was underwater, distant.

Max continued to smile, staring straight ahead. What he saw was inconceivable, unimaginable, highly questionable. But also: spectacular and fantastic and sublime and just the right amount of crazy.

"Text the others," he said. "Secret meeting number two."

What he saw was the greatest prank of his life.

# 14

“Are you *insane*?”

“Of all your harebrained ideas, this is the harest-brained.”

“People will kill you!”

“I feel like murdering you right now!”

“Why am I here again?”

Max’s friends stopped yelling at him to stare at Winnie. “Just wondering what all of this has to do with me,” she said, laughing softly.

“You and Zach are our advisers,” Max said. “Every company has them.”

“We’re not going to have a company when people find out the CEO is a flaming wacko!” Jared cried. “This is startup suicide!”

Aaron had been silent the entire time Max was explaining his scheme. It made sense in the way that the health insurance industry or the biological makeup of the platypus made sense: that is to say, it didn’t. But there was an untamed glimmer in the underwear thief’s eyes that made it hard for Aaron to look away.

“The tech world isn’t the same as it was forty years ago,” Max said. “Now it’s all about hype and who has the most funding and who’s gonna be the next unicorn. It doesn’t even matter what your startup is. You can have an idea for...for booger-picking robots, and if enough investors put money into it, people will think it’s the greatest thing since the smartphone.”

Jared collapsed into Max’s bed. “So you want us to create a fake venture capital firm, pretend we’re getting funding from them, but it’s really money from your lottery winnings?”

“Like I said before, startups live and die on hype. All we have to do is leave an anonymous tip at every major tech blog and tell them about this new mysterious VC firm that’s betting on an unknown company from Maine. People can’t resist a mystery, especially Silicon Valley. And once they realize how much money this new mysterious VC firm is shelling out, that’ll get us noticed by the real investors.”

“And how much money is your fake VC firm giving your startup?” Zach asked. He was sitting on the floor, shaking his head every time Max went deeper into his scheme.

“We want to make it seem legit, so...one million. It’s not a crazy-big amount, but enough to get attention.”

“That sounds about right,” Winnie said, tapping away at her phone. “Most startups get seed funding between five hundred thousand and two million. If you give yourselves one million, with your fake VC getting the minimum ten percent equity, that means you’re valuing yourselves at ten million dollars, post-money.”

Aaron blinked at her. “What the heck was all of that you just said?”

“It’s not unicorn status, but it’ll generate some hype.” Max paced the length of the room, back and forth, back and forth. He hadn’t stopped smiling since petting Anne-Shirley goodbye three hours ago. His energy shot out in infectious waves, striking Aaron right in the chest. This was the kind of passion Aaron wished he had. A passion so powerful that it became



embedded in his veins, became a map that guided him to his future. A passion that he could call his own.

“All that code I wrote,” Jared sighed. “All that beautiful, beautiful code...”

“You’re acting like I’ve already killed the company,” Max said.

“You think Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber will want us in their incubator when they find out we’ve scammed our way to a ten-million-dollar valuation?”

Winnie stood from where she had been leaning against the foot of Max’s bed. She, too, began pacing the room. “You guys won’t need the incubator if your plan works. If Oliver and Ethan buy into the fake hype of your startup, then they’ll want to jump on the bandwagon. And once they actually get to sample your software—which, from what I’ve heard so far, is really good—they’ll be willing to give you even more money. You might end up with a fifty-million-dollar valuation.”

“Winnie, you’re officially our CFO,” Max said.

She clasped her hands to her chest. “Woo-hoo!”

Zach threw up his own hands, exasperated. “You guys are delusional!”

“Okay, here’s a question for everyone.” Max sat back at his desk and picked up a hacky sack. “What is every Bramburgh student’s greatest fear?”

“Are you therapizing us right now?” Zach said. “You, Mr. Bananas?”

“Just answer the question. What’s your greatest fear?” Max threw the hacky sack at his friend.

Zach thought for a second. “Animals going extinct. Also, I’ve had recurring nightmares where I ended up at Dartmouth.” He tossed the hacky sack to Winnie.

“Not getting an internship,” she said, passing the sack to Aaron.

“Graduating without a job.” He pitched the sack to Jared across the room.

“Moving back home and working at my dad’s car dealership for the rest of my life.” Jared clutched at his head. “Oh my gosh! Guys, if that ever happens, please fly to New Jersey and stab me with a steak knife.”

“That’s right, we’re all afraid of mediocrity!” Max said. “Because mediocrity is worse than failure. Mediocrity means you didn’t even try. And the only way to fight it is to do something outrageously risky. We’re a business. This is the risk we take.”

“Except what you’re proposing isn’t even a risk,” Zach said. “It’s a death march.”

“Wait...” Jared thumped the hacky sack against his temple. “I—I think I agree with Max. People have pulled crazier stunts in the Valley. Just look at all the scammers and fraudsters in the news.” He gave the hacky sack a squeeze. “We have a solid product. The hype we produce might be fake, but our software isn’t. This could be our foot in the door. Programming jobs are getting more competitive. There aren’t any guarantees, even with a degree. And I do *not* want to sell cars after I graduate.” He paused before letting out a breath: “I’m in. Whatever whack-job plan you’re hatching, Max, I’m in.”

It was then that Aaron became acutely aware of his surroundings. He was standing in a cluttered dorm room with Winnie and three new friends—well, he still wasn’t sure about Zach—talking about million-dollar valuations and seed money and pulling off a high-profile prank. None of this would have made any sense to him a month ago.

But he was here now.

This was their locker room.

They were a team.

He was back on a team.

And Max had made it all possible. Now Aaron needed to pull his weight.

“Count me in, too,” he said.

“Yes, fuck yeah!” Jared slapped him a high-five. “We’re gonna change the world!”

“You would need at least a ten-billion-dollar valuation to have that kind of impact,” Winnie said, “but, yes, you’re on the right track.”

Everyone looked at Zach. “So are you coming with us?” Max asked.

Zach continued to shake his head as he grumbled, “You all are going to need a lawyer after this nonsense, so I reluctantly volunteer as legal counsel.”

Max gathered their group into a huddle. He gave each of them that glacier-melting smile, and Aaron was certain Max’s eyes lingered on him the longest.

“We’re officially in business.”

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The sky had turned a darker gray by the time Aaron left Max’s dorm. Students rushed past in their quest to get to the dining halls early before even the dry-as-sandpaper baked ziti ran out.

Winnie nudged his arm. “Do you want to go to my roommate’s dress rehearsal tonight? They’re doing *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but sapphic.”

“Sure,” Aaron said without really hearing his friend. His mind was still back in the underwear thief’s room. “Actually, um, I think I left my phone on Max’s desk. I’m just going to run up real quick...”

“Okay. Oh my. It’s finally happening.” Winnie steadied herself on a bench. “I didn’t think it would happen our sophomore year, maybe spring semester junior year at the earliest. But it’s happening.”

“What? What’s happening?”

“Say ‘strawberry.’”

“What?”

“Strawberry. Say it.”

“Um, strawberry?”

Winnie grinned. “That’s our code word from now on. For when we need to tell each other not to wait up on account of a cute guy. This is our first strawberry moment, so I will just float away and see you tomorrow. Have fun with Max.”

“I wasn’t—”

But Winnie was already skipping towards her dorm. She turned and gave him another playful grin before blending into the crowd.

During his walk back to Keesby Hall, the sky seemed to grow lighter and the air sweeter. He didn’t even mind the gawks and whispers from the other students. Not anymore. His stomach flipped and flopped with a new kind of excitement as he made his way to Max’s room. He paused right outside, listening. Only the loud clack-clacking of a keyboard. They immediately stopped when Aaron knocked.

“No, Carl, I already told you,” Max called, “I can’t go ghost hunting tonight. I have pickleball practice.”

Aaron pushed the door open a crack.

“Oh!” Max took off his headphones. “I thought you were the guy from across the hall. He keeps inviting me to his paranormal club. I think he has a crush on me.”

Aaron had the sudden urge to turn this Carl guy into a ghost. He opened the door wider and stepped in. His underarms tingled with sweat.

“I know we’ve been talking about the startup all day,” he said, “and you probably have other things to do, or you probably have stuff to do with Jared and Zach, or maybe other—other school stuff, but they’ve got lobster bites tonight at Luella and I remember you like lobster so I was wondering if maybe you, like, want to grab dinner? With me? I mean, the two of us. Together.” *This is a trainwreck.*

Max looked at him. He didn’t answer. The seconds ticked by, and Aaron considered slipping back out before he

embarrassed himself further. But then Max stood up. “No.”

“O-okay. That’s...that’s okay. I just thought—”

“I’ve got a better idea.” Max threw a jacket over his hoodie and before Aaron knew what was happening, he was running after the underwear thief down the hall and into the hazy, silvery evening.

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“Have you ever eaten lobster bites during sunset on the shores of Lake Wabanaki while watching the men’s crew team?”

Aaron swallowed the last of his dinner. “This is definitely a first for me.”

“We’re lucky to catch them tonight,” Max said. “They usually practice in the mornings.”

“I can see why you’d consider this fortuitous.” Aaron took in the sight of the rowers’ biceps flexing against the quickly fading light. It would soon be too dark to ogle.

Max yawned and set his empty food carton aside. “Have you ever wondered why rich-people sports are so phallic?”

“Aaand you’ve just ruined a perfectly respectable moment.” Aaron turned away from the gliding biceps to smirk at him. “But tell me, why are they so phallic?”

“Well, it’s obvious. Golf clubs, fencing swords, skis, those stick things they use in polo.” Max pointed at the rowers growing smaller in the distance. “Crew boats and oars. They’re all long and hard.”

“What about equestrian? That’s, like, the poshest of sports.”

“Yeah, that too. Horses have big you-know-whats.”

Aaron slid his hand a tiny bit closer to Max’s. The grass felt spongy and prickly at the same time, creating an odd sensation against his skin. Max yawned again and drew his knees up to his chest.

“Do you want to head back?”

Max gave him an obviously sleepy smile, but said, “No. This is nice.”

They watched the rowers glide back. The coxswain’s voice punctured the air in steady strokes: “Even up! Even up!” Aaron pretended to busy himself with his food cartons while inching closer to Max. Only a slim patch of grass separated them.

“Do you play any sports?”

Max’s laugh warmed the air around them. “My mom signed me up for Little League when I was...four or five, I think? I lasted half a season.”

“What happened?”

“I kept trying to pull down the other kids’ pants.”

Aaron leaned back on his elbows. “I’m not even surprised. That’s very on-brand for you.”

“I just wanted to see if anyone else had the same robot underwear as me.”

“So you’ve gone from disrobing people to stealing their underwear. You’ve come full circle.”

Max hung his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, no, I was just joking. What happened between us...it happened. We’re past that.”

“I wish I could program a time machine and stop myself from getting you in trouble.”

Aaron let his pinky finger graze the side of Max’s hand. When Max didn’t move away, Aaron brushed his finger lightly up and down.

“The underwear belonged to my dad,” he said. “I found it in a drawer when I was little. Back then I had a favorite green marker and colored every random thing I came across. One time, I didn’t have any clean underwear so I took my dad’s and wore it to a basketball game. It was the middle school championship. We won. I’ve worn it to every big game ever since.”

“That’s a really sweet story.” Max gave him a smile before covering his mouth and letting out a yawn. “Sorry. They must have put a ton of MSG in those lobster bites.”

“You’re tired. Let’s get back to campus.”

“No, the crew team isn’t done yet. We’ll leave when they get to shore. Tell me more about your dad’s lucky underwear.”

Aaron rested his arms on his knees. He looked out into the water. “I know it sounds stupid, but I thought wearing the underwear would somehow bring my parents back. Like, if I wore it enough, maybe they would sense—”

Something fell against him.

It was so unexpected that he immediately drew back, thinking someone had hit him with a Frisbee or a water balloon. When he glanced over and realized what it was, his heart pumped faster than the rowers and louder than the lapping of the water in Lake Wabanaki.

Max had fallen asleep on his shoulder.

# 15

The next day, Aaron received a text.

**Max:** *Can I come over? :-)*

He jumped up from his study carrel in the library, almost knocking his chair over. The guy sitting next to him flinched in surprise. “Sorry about that,” Aaron said. He stared at the text. What did that mean? Was this an invitation to hang out? What was the purpose of the smiley face? Was he supposed to respond with an emoji, too?

**Aaron:** *Yes.*

Better to keep it simple.

He swung his backpack over his shoulder and made it to Luella Hall in record time. His room was already tidy. There was only a pair of dirty gym shorts on the floor, which were quickly shoved under the bed. He took out his physics textbook and flipped it open to a random page, spread his notes around the desk, then sat down—making it seem like he had been casually studying this whole time, as one does on a Monday afternoon.

Then he noticed his bed was unmade. If he left it like that, it would make him look laid-back, relaxed, open; an unkempt bed was the most natural part of a college student’s room. But



—if the guy you liked was coming over, then the bed became an awkward centerpiece. Aaron straightened his comforter and repositioned his pillows; it was best to create a completely neutral environment that didn't unnecessarily stimulate the senses.

He looked in the mirror. Checked his teeth. Rearranged his hair. There was a smudge of ink on his chin! How did that get there? He licked his finger and rubbed until the blue smudge disappeared. After resurveying the room, he went back to his desk and waited.

Five minutes later, he heard a soft knock.

“Um, come in,” he said as he scribbled imaginary physics formulas into his notebook.

The door slowly opened, like a magician unveiling his curtain, and there was Max, eyes dewy and bright from the cold outside. He was wearing a thick brown sweater that perfectly matched his chocolate hair. Aaron didn't realize he had been staring until Max asked, “Do I have a blood-sucking leech on my face?”

“No, uh, come on in.” Aaron stood and offered his chair. “Sit.” He cringed. “Crap. That sounded wrong. You're not a dog. Um. Sit wherever you'd like. My room's pretty small. I've only got one chair. And one bed.” *And zero brain cells left.*

“I know. I've been in here already, remember?” Max smiled at him before settling on the bed. He peeled his backpack off and removed his laptop. “Take a look at this.” He typed something, then handed the laptop to Aaron.

On the screen was the inside of a grocery store. People-less shopping carts drifted between aisles.

“What is this? A video game?”

Max came to stand beside him. “Use the arrows to move around.”

Aaron pressed ↑, and his own shopping cart moved forward. A cartoon pumpkin popped up on the bottom of the

screen. It had shiny button eyes and a smiling mouth. The pumpkin started listing various items:

- Milk (1 gal) \$4
- Apples \$1.30/lb
- Peanut butter \$3.30

Aaron moved to the dairy aisle. A new text bubble appeared instructing him to press ENTER to pick up an item. When Aaron grabbed the virtual milk, the little cartoon pumpkin let out a *ping!* followed by ‘Milk (1 gal) \$4’ getting crossed off the list.

“You just bought a gallon of milk,” Max said. “Without going to the cash register.”

“Is this part of your VR idea?”

“Kind of. This is more augmented reality, though. My plan is to have an augmented reality department to complement our VR projects. I’m thinking we could make AR glasses that let you write grocery lists. When you get to the store, the glasses will scan whatever item you want to buy and let you pay through the glasses. You won’t need a cashier at all.”

Aaron studied the layout of the store. It looked like Max had gone and filmed an actual grocery. Everything—the bags of chips, the deli meat, the fresh fruits—looked incredibly sharp and detailed. There was even soft jazz playing. “Where did you get this footage? Hannaford? Wegmans? Is there even a Wegmans in Maine?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a real grocery store, right?”

“No...” Max paused to chew at his lip. Then, in almost a whisper, he said, “I created it. I made the images with my own algorithm.”

Aaron could only stare back. “Huh?”

“I was messing around with Huffman coding one night. The thing with Huffman is that the algorithm is based on one-

to-one, right?”

“Um...right,” Aaron said without knowing what he just responded to.

“I was basing our algorithm on Huffman when I should have been looking at arithmetic coding, which uses less bits. Problem is, it’s got a higher compression ratio. So the file’s smaller, but the quality sucks.”

Aaron nodded as though he understood.

“With VR and AR, you need to have it look as close to real as possible without compromising the quality.”

“Right,” Aaron repeated absentmindedly, gaze now fixed on Max’s mouth as it opened and closed, opened and closed.

“There’s a way to combine the algorithms,” Max continued. “Well, not really combine, but adapt them to fit our needs. So the other day I skipped class to figure it out. And it’s really simple. I can’t believe we didn’t see it before.”

“See what?” All Aaron could see was Max’s pink mouth, the little tip of tongue hiding within its walls. He imagined it sliding along various parts of his body. It would start down his neck, then the bulge of his shoulder, then south to his—

“Arbitrary compliant compression.”

Aaron snapped out of his daydream. “Huh?”

“That’s the algorithm.” Max broke out in a huge grin. “*Our* algorithm.”

“You just...came up with it?”

“It’s crazy. I didn’t think it would actually work. Because we were writing everything in Python, right?”

“Right,” Aaron said, on cue.

“Jared originally wanted to write in C++ because it’s more efficient. But I was a dodo and suggested we rewrite in Python. And we tried to make Python work, but it turned out to be slower than we thought. So I got back to messing around and”—Max grinned wider—“I accidentally found a way to

create near-realistic images using a different kind of language.”

“Huh?” If Aaron had been lost before, he was now certifiably marooned.

“Well, it’s more a dialect of C++ than a completely new language,” Max said. “But it works! I spent all of this morning finishing the demo I just showed you. Now we just need to translate the new algorithm using our adaptive language over to the VR framework.”

“How...what...how do we do that?”

“Jared. He’ll take care of it.”

Aaron placed the laptop on his desk. The cartoon pumpkin with the friendly button eyes beamed back. “Has Jared seen this yet? What does he think?”

Max chewed on his lip again. An unexpected shyness. “I wanted to show you first, since you’re closer to our target user. You’re actually the first person to test this version.”

*He likes me!*

Aaron willed his heart to calm down. “I don’t understand half of what you just said about the programming stuff, but I think Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber will be impressed. A new algorithm and language? You’re, like, a real pioneer.” His heart gave a hard *thump* when Max smiled back.

“Here. Check this out.” Max clicked on the cartoon pumpkin. A line of text popped up:

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“You used the name.” Aaron’s heart thumped even harder. Somehow, seeing his idea—even if it was just a name for a fledgling company—being put to use filled him with a kind of pride that surpassed every game-winning shot he’d ever made.

“I really like it,” Max said. “It’s catchy. And it’s got the hard C sound. I read that names with a hard C or K make a better impression because—”

Aaron didn't care why people prefer hard C or K sounds. He didn't care about Huffman or algorithms or Python or C++. Every atom in his body was pulling him in one single direction. He stepped right in front of Max, leaned in, and closed his eyes when their lips touched.

Max Trellis-Tan tasted like dining hall food and lobster bites and snowflakes.

Like the raw waters of Lake Wabanaki.

Like the power of the World Wide Web.

Like winning the Mega Jackpot.

Like—

He felt a sharp pinch on his arm.

“Ow!”

Max looked back at him with big, dewy deer eyes.

“Why'd you do that? No wonder you like lobsters so much. You pinch like them!”

The deer eyes twinkled in reply.

“Do you pinch every guy you kiss?”

“I just wanted to make sure this is real,” Max said, voice slightly shaky. He lowered his head and wrung his hands.

That's when Aaron realized: despite all the weird sexual jokes and his kooky way of flirting, this underwear thief had as much experience in the bedroom as a newborn kitten. This one small revelation gave Aaron a strange sort of confidence. He had no idea what he was doing either, but he wasn't ready for the taste of Max to leave his lips just yet.

He lifted his palm and placed it against Max's cheek. “Does this feel real?”

Max held his stare.

Aaron moved his palm to the slim, pale neck, right above the artery. “How about this?”

The answer came in quick pulses.

He stroked the sensitive skin. “This?”

Max’s eyelids fluttered. He opened his mouth, but only a tiny breath came out. Aaron turned his attention to the eye that had met his knuckles that bizarre, fateful night. His thumb traced the evaporated pattern of bruises. A face like this should have never been spoiled. He trailed a finger around the almond-shaped curve of Max’s eye. “I’m so sorry I punched you.”

“We’re past that,” Max whispered. Then he stood on his tiptoes, curled his arms around Aaron’s neck, and kissed him.

The kitten was gone; in its place, a hungry lion intent on dragging Aaron down with him.

And down they went.

As soon as Max’s back hit the mattress, he grabbed the front of Aaron’s shirt and pulled. Their lips reconnected, harder and deeper this time, sending Aaron’s brain scrambling. Was he supposed to use tongue now? How long were you supposed to make out before undressing?

Something twitched beneath him. Even through the thickness of his jeans, Aaron could feel every inch of Max coming to life. But when he moved his hand closer to the heat, Max pushed it away. When Aaron tried again, Max tugged on his hand and brought it up to his shoulder before whispering, “Just kiss me.”

Aaron tried not to let his relief show. He was desperate to see Max naked...but then what? He’d never been this far with anyone before. There were so many things you had to do with your mouth and your hands and also your legs? The movies and porn made it look so easy. Two people who liked each other were just supposed to know what to do.

Everything seemed to turn even more chaotic when Max pressed lava-hot fingers into the flesh of Aaron’s back; when his tongue nudged against Aaron’s lips; when he made little mewling sounds from the back of his throat.

So Aaron simply kissed him.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed. His RA could be heard rounding up the floor for an impromptu meeting. Probably about the bootleg moonshine found in one of the freshman's rooms.

"Do you need to go?" Max breathed against his mouth.

"Hell no," Aaron breathed back.

They continued making out until Aaron thought he was going to burst inside his jeans. He pushed his hips down and hoped Max would respond with similar urgency. But Max only tilted his head to the side and said, "Kiss my neck."

A mint-green vein stood out. Aaron covered it with his mouth. When he sucked, Max let out a soft mewl. He almost sounded like Anne-Shirley. *Ugh. Why am I thinking about a cat right now?* He moved to a fresh part of the neck and kissed around the Adam's apple.

Max coiled his fingers around Aaron's hair. The mewling grew louder and came in staccato-swift beats. Aaron drove his hips down again. It felt like his jeans were about to blow apart.

And just like that, Max rolled out from under him and got to his feet. He smoothed down his sweater and gathered his laptop and backpack. "I have to go."

"Wait, but..." The warmth from Max's body was quickly fading.

"We have a lot of work to do. I still need to make adjustments to the code. And you need to draft the emails we'll be sending out to the blogs."

Aaron lifted himself off the bed. "Can we get dinner later?"

Max smiled. His lips had turned slightly puffy and glowed a bright red, just like the tail of a freshly-cooked lobster. "I'll see you tomorrow, Aaron."

The rest of the afternoon crawled by. Aaron spent most of it back in bed, grasping at the remainder of Max's body heat. He researched tech blogs. Got distracted and wrote a haiku. Wrote a second haiku. When it grew dark and his stomach

grumbled, he trudged out of his room, headed for the dining hall, and hoped there were still enough lobster bites left.



# 16

Male fruit bats were skilled in oral sex.

Giraffes babysat each other's young.

A species of jellyfish was capable of immortality.

And Aaron Scudder was the best kisser in the world.

Max had arrived at this fact and conclusion after dancing around in his room to Italo-pop. Everything was better, magnified, when set to the soundtrack of Italo-pop. He jumped into bed and hugged himself, the scent of Aaron still clinging to his skin. Aaron smelled of the air in winter and the most fragrant fabric softener: clean and light and happy.

He hopped off the bed and pulled up all of William P. Zhang's social accounts. Several versions of his father grinned back. Max looked into the shiny brown eyes that had seen so many interesting things but never the boy sitting alone in his dorm room dreaming of virtual reality...and a shy basketball player.

"Aaron Scudder likes me. He likes my software." Something bothered him, though; something he'd always wondered about. "Mom never got married and now she has her own video game company. Ang-kong and Grandma became

even more successful after they divorced. Do you think there's a pattern in our family?"

His father seemed to nod, his permanent smile appearing wiser.

"You're right." Max nodded in return. "I need to focus on the startup. I can't let a hot guy hoard all of my brain space. It's a good thing he didn't take his shirt off. I'd probably be dead by now." He propped his chin up on his hand. "We can just be friends. With some kissing. And maybe handjobs? If he wants to do more, I'll just tell him that there's been a new study that found a link between condom use and hyper-flatulence. Yeah...I think that's a good strategy." He pressed play on his father's latest hiking video. "Thanks, William P. Zhang."

---

It snowed again the day before Thanksgiving. Cosmos wasn't going home for the holidays. They would be working through the break like diligent elves preparing for Christmas. Max's radiator hummed happily in the corner, the only sound in the room for the past three hours.

Aaron finally broke the concentrated silence. "So here's the list of reputable tech blogs," he said, showing them his spreadsheet, "and in the other column I have the Silicon Valley gossip blogs."

Max looked over the names. "Did you tailor the emails so the ones going to the gossip blogs focus on how we're contrarian upstarts bent on disrupting the status quo?"

"Yup." Aaron gave him a thumbs up. Even his thumb looked cute. Max wondered what it would feel like inside his mouth.

"I was up all night working on the framework and cleaning up the code," Jared said. "I'm about a quarter of the way done. The demo should be ready by January. If Oliver and Ethan don't like it, I'm jumping off Mount Katahdin."

Zach aimed a rubber band at him like a slingshot. "Drama king."

“That’s why I’ve still got Hollywood as my backup.” Jared leaned into Winnie and loudly whispered, “I played Captain Hook in third grade. All the moms wanted a picture with me.”

Winnie covered her mouth to laugh and continued her review of their incubator application, making sure everything was presented as professionally as possible.

While his friends worked on the finishing touches, Max worked on trying not to touch Aaron. But when he took his laptop and went to sit in the corner, Aaron plopped down beside him. “You haven’t hit on me or made any phallic jokes today. I’m starting to think you’re becoming normal.”

“I get contemplative sometimes.”

Aaron glanced at their friends arguing with Jared about which professor was the hottest. “Um, if you’re uncomfortable about what happened the other day...”

“No, I liked it.”

“You’ve been less jokey.”

“I just keep thinking about our company. Maybe Zach’s right. Maybe creating this fake hype is a bad idea.”

Aaron touched his sneaker to Max’s socked foot. “I’m not going to say something uplifting like, ‘Everything will work out.’ But I think whatever happens, you should be proud that you created something all by yourself. You and Jared. That’s super cool.”

His eyes looked so honest and pure that Max wanted to tell his friends to please kindly evacuate the room so he and Aaron could set the bed on fire.

“Your application looks good,” Winnie said at last. “Ready to submit?”

“Go ahead.” Max returned to his desk. “I’ll start emailing the blogs.”

“I can do that,” Aaron said. “I’ve already got the drafts all set on my computer.”

“We should use mine. We need to make the emails untraceable, and I have the VPN.” Max had taught himself how to set up his own encrypted email hosting in high school and used a virtual private network for all of his online activities. He was the Eagle Scout of hackers: always prepared.

Aaron came to stand behind him, his shadow falling across the desk as Max transferred the drafts to his laptop. Their friends clustered around them. Max read the first draft out loud, inviting any last-minute changes:

*“An anonymously funded startup has just received one million dollars in seed money. They seem to have come from nowhere! Cosmos claims that they are revolutionizing the virtual reality sphere with a platform that allows for errands to be done in your living room. They also claim to have created a proprietary programming language that makes it possible to renew your driver’s license, try on clothes, visit the doctor, and even withdraw money from your bank account—all in a virtual environment.*”

*“We urge you to look into how an unknown startup was able to catch the attention of such deep-pocketed investors! Is this the eve of a new renaissance in the tech world? Take a look at [www.cosmosishere.net](http://www.cosmosishere.net) and let the world know!”*

They let the words sink in. Once the emails were sent, that was it. Their Cosmos was going out into the cosmos of the World Wide Web. It almost felt like a mother bird kicking her baby out of the nest. But they weren’t going to let their software flounder and fall to oblivion; they would make it soar.

“Any final comments?” Max said. “Speak now or forever hold your cheese.”

Jared cleared his throat. “I’d just like to say that, as much as I respect our name, I still think we should’ve used Belinda.”

“We are not naming our company after a geriatric dog.”

“I like Cosmos,” Zach said. He looked at Aaron and shrugged. “It describes the company well.”

Aaron blushed from the unexpected compliment.

“All right. I’m pressing send...” Max hovered his finger over the mouse.

Jared let out a whoop at the same moment the emails were scattered to cyberspace.

“Oh gosh, my heart’s beating so fast,” Winnie said. “This is the most exciting thing that’s happened to me since I discovered *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* when I was twelve.”

The room became silent again, only punctured by Jared’s whooping as he attempted to do a dance that resembled a drunk kangaroo.

“So what do we do now?” Zach asked.

Max closed his laptop and folded his hands over it. Just like an experienced CEO who one hundred percent, totally, absolutely, no doubt knew exactly what he was doing. “Now we wait.”

---

Patience was a weakness in Silicon Valley. No one could afford to sit around and wait for someone else to come up with The Next Big Thing. But Max found himself lying in bed that night completely at the mercy of patience.

They would need to wait another month before the incubator got back to them. And he didn’t know if the blogs would take their bait. He had turned his phone and laptop off after dinner to stop himself from checking his email every two seconds. Now he itched to get his hands on them and press refresh, refresh, refresh...

Something rustled outside his window. He heard a sharp yelp, then the sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

*What in the heck?*

He kicked off his covers and went to peer out the window. Below, illuminated by the midnight moon, was Aaron, sprawled on his back, limbs askew.

Max shoved on gloves and a jacket before sprinting outside. “Oh my gosh! What happened?” He knelt beside the crumpled body. “Please don’t die. We haven’t made it to third base yet.”

Aaron wiped snow off his mouth, then groaned. “Good to know where your priorities lie.” He sat up and rubbed at his back. “Man, that hurt.”

“Is anything broken? Do we need to go to the ER?”

“No, I’m good. I think falling into snow actually helped.”

“What were you doing?”

Aaron brushed himself off the ground. “I couldn’t sleep and wanted to see you. But you weren’t answering my texts. And you know how the dorms lock their doors to non-residents after midnight, so I couldn’t even swipe in with my ID. So I tried to climb the tree next to your window, thinking I could throw a pebble to get your attention, but I slipped, and...”

“You risked your life to see me.”

“Not really. Your room’s only on the second floor and I didn’t climb that high.”

Max dusted the rest of the snow off Aaron’s jacket. “Come on, I’ll make us some instant cocoa.”

“Actually, I was thinking we could go somewhere else. I \_\_\_”

Before Max could find out if Aaron was going to surprise him with impossible twelve-pack abs, the front door to Keesby Hall opened and a stocky figure stepped out. It was Carl the ghost hunter, with his trusty utility belt and chest cam.

“Whoah, Aaron Scudder!”

Max instinctively reached for Aaron’s hand in case Carl was about to spew the usual bonkers-talk the rest of their classmates were writing on Jackals Wild.

But Carl looked like he’d just met his favorite celebrity. “Aaron, you’ve been such an inspiration to me.”

“Oh! Um...”

“I loved your interview with ESPN,” Carl went on. “When you said that you want to be known for your skills, not your sexuality? And that you hope people see you as a good basketball player who just happens to be gay? That really stuck with me.”

“Um...thanks! I’m glad it helped you.”

It was too dark to see clearly, but Max could almost make out the pink spreading to Aaron’s ears. He loosened his hand and was about to let go, but Aaron curled his fingers and held on.

“So you guys are sticking around for Thanksgiving?”

Max nodded. “I thought you were going home?”

“No way!” Carl patted his camera. “An empty campus is prime time for ghosts. I can’t miss out. I’m actually heading to the law building right now. The spirit of a former dean is supposed to show up tonight. You guys want to come?” He looked down and suddenly noticed their clasped hands. “Oh, I didn’t know...I’m sorry, you probably have other plans...”

“Maybe another time,” Aaron said.

Carl gave Max a shy smile. “Well, see you around.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Carl.”

Once the ghost hunter had shuffled off, Aaron walked them in the opposite direction. Their hands remained tightly clasped. Max didn’t say anything about it, and neither did Aaron. They simply walked that way until they reached the basketball arena on the other side of campus. Official name: The Geoffrey R. Holzenklein-Baumgartner Memorial Arena, but everyone just called it the Jackal’s Den.

“Over here.” Aaron pulled them along the side of the building before stopping in front of a rusty blue door. He finally let go of their hands, and Max felt a rush of cold air hit his palm. Aaron used his teeth to peel off one of his own gloves and approached the keypad on the lock. He typed in the

code, producing a satisfied *beep!* and a click. He turned to Max with a grin. “Come on.”

“What are we doing?”

Aaron took his hand again and led him through the door. It creaked closed behind them. They walked through a dark hallway, passed several other doors, almost ran into a mop and bucket, and ended up in front of another door with a keypad. Aaron seemed to know the code to this one, too. When they pushed through, he flicked a switch and the Jackal’s Den came to life, revealing a polished court, high sloped ceilings, and seven thousand empty seats.

Max had been to exactly one basketball game, and between the beer getting spilled on him, the brassy screams from the pep band, and his total lack of interest in the sport aside from the players’ rippling biceps as they passed the ball around, he knew he wouldn’t be returning. But standing here now, with the arena deserted and quiet, it almost felt sacred—like being in a cathedral.

“You broke into the Den.” He couldn’t help letting out a hoot and hearing his voice echo through the emptiness. “Mr. Eagle Scout gets a merit badge for trespassing.”

“Your ways are starting to rub off on me.” Aaron’s hazel eyes popped against the bright arena lights. “Also, I’m friendly with the maintenance crew.”

“Are you okay being in here? You’re not...It’s not weird for you?”

Aaron shrugged off his jacket, picked up a basketball from the rack next to them, and said, “We’re past that, remember?” before striding right onto the court.

Max jogged after him.

“This is called an in and out.” Aaron dribbled the ball towards the center of his body before quickly directing it back to the side. He did it a few more times, giving Max a come-and-get-it grin. Max decided that making a fool of himself in front of Aaron was preferable to being a spoilsport. He made his best attempt to steal the ball away, but Aaron was too fast



—he bounced the ball behind him, caught it with his other hand, and ran past Max for an easy shot at the basket. “And that was a lateral back dribble,” he said, not even out of breath.

“In and out. Back dribble. Why do these sound mildly erotic?”

“Oh yeah?” Aaron nudged him towards the free throw line. “Want me to nail you?”

Max’s eyes grew wide.

“No, there’s actually a nail in the floor.” Aaron pointed. “Right in the middle there.”

“Huh.” Max bent to take a closer look. So there was. “Never knew that.”

“The nail is the smallest but most important part of a basketball court. It’s how we know where to position our feet when we’re shooting and helps with defense. Here.” Aaron took hold of Max’s shoulder and gently guided his body, so that the toe of Max’s right foot stopped a couple of inches from the nail. He gave the ball to Max, and with his hands now free, stepped behind and gripped Max by the waist. “Turn a little to the side.”

“I feel like a human compass.”

“It’s all about getting the right angle.”

And then Aaron pressed into his back and slid his arms around, overwhelming Max in a haze of fabric softener and some kind of lemony shampoo. His chin came to rest on Max’s shoulder. “Hold it like this,” he said, steering Max’s hands so they were positioned correctly on the ball. His breathing came in slow and controlled puffs, like a coach calmly giving advice.

Except Max was pretty sure basketball coaches didn’t then graze their lips over a player’s neck. Or pull the player tighter against them.

“Let me see you shoot,” Aaron whispered into the side of his neck before stepping back.

Max almost forgot where they were for a moment. He straightened himself and cleared his throat. “Please know that my athletic abilities come with a disclaimer. So don’t laugh at whatever happens in the next five seconds.”

Aaron pretended to zip his mouth.

The ball flew out of Max’s hands, made a pathetic arc, and fell with an unremarkable plunk before it even reached the basket.

“You said you wouldn’t laugh!”

“That was the cutest air ball I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, I warned you.”

Aaron shifted his eyebrows suggestively. “Maybe I can show you how to hold the ball again?”

“This is turning into quite the night for Mr. Eagle Scout. First the trespassing. Then the shameless ball handling...”

Aaron immediately went crimson. “Was I out of line? I didn’t mean to make you feel awkward. This is the first time I’ve done something like that. I’ve never even...It’s just...You look really cute tonight. You—you look cute all the time. But tonight with the snow and being in here and Carl—”

Max reached up to sweep a lock of hair from Aaron’s forehead. “You look really cute tonight, too.” Then he spun on his heel and went to sit on the sideline. “Since we’re here, I’d like a private show. Let me see the real Aaron Scudder at work.”

“Wait...are you asking me to *strip* right now?”

“No! I meant do your basketball thing. Layups and dunks and...I guess those are the only basketball terms I know.”

Soon, the arena was filled with the music of Aaron’s sneakers as he ran up and down the court, the only other sound being the swish of the net, again and again as Aaron shot from the side, from the middle, from the three-point line. He dribbled the ball between his legs, dribbled low, dribbled behind him, dribbled at double speed. His body glided from one side of the court to the other with the grace of a true

athlete. It was as if he was formed straight from the wood of the court itself: beauty forged out of toughness.

Aaron Scudder deserved to play in front of a packed audience, to hear people cheering his name.

Max seriously considered researching the mechanics of building a time machine; if virtual reality could alter the present, then surely there was a way to manipulate the space-time continuum to reconstruct the past or even control the future. If such a time machine ever came to existence, Max would first turn down Archibald's prank; next, he would transport himself to the future and learn the fate of Cosmos. But would it even be called Cosmos if the prank had never happened and he'd never met Aaron? Maybe time travel wasn't so appealing after all.

"Why do you look like you just ate one of those mystery meats from the dining hall?" Aaron had stopped his one-man exhibition. A tiny bead of sweat trickled down his temple while the rest of his face and neck glistened like rare treasure.

"Once you're back on the team, you'll lead Bramburgh to another winning season," Max said. "You're amazing."

"Will that get you to start watching my games?"

"I promise to attend every single one. Even if it means I have to set foot on the campus of our mortal rivals, Dartmouth College."

Aaron shot him an unexpectedly bold and saucy smile. "Wanna play some one-on-one?"

"These basketball innuendos never seem to end."

"I want to see what other moves you've got."

"Well, just keep my disclaimer in mind."

Max dribbled slowly as Aaron bent his knees in a defensive pose. He continued to dribble in place as Aaron edged closer. Unsure what to do, he tried to mimic Aaron's earlier move and made a backwards bouncy dribble or whatever that was called, but he lost control of the ball and his balance. His sneaker skidded against the wood; before he even

realized he was falling, he was already halfway to the floor. His tailbone took the hit.

Aaron was beside him in an instant. “Are you hurt? We should’ve warmed up first. I’m such a dunce.”

“Dunce?” Max fell to his back, laughing, the sting from the fall fading the louder he laughed.

“My grandma used to say it all the time. ‘Don’t be a dunce and finish your homework.’”

Aaron joined him on the floor, the wood smooth and slippery under their backs. Max wasn’t sure who moved first, but their hands found each other again, now sweaty and warm.

They stared into the rafters and enjoyed the heady stillness of being surrounded by so much nothingness. The Jackal’s Den bordered on anarchy during home games, but tonight it was the closest to paradise Max had ever felt.

When Aaron turned to look at him, hazel eyes full of hope, Max made a conscious decision: he didn’t want to just be friends with Aaron Scudder, with some kissing and maybe handjobs. Aaron was worth much more than that.

He dipped his head a little, nestling it against Aaron’s shoulder. “I like how our first date is going so far.”

Maybe it was his imagination, but he was positive he felt the Eagle Scout’s heart thump in reply.

Sometime around two in the morning, they found themselves in the locker room. Max poked his way around the cubbies while Aaron got used to the fact that he wouldn't be hanging his jersey in here until...now that he'd had time to digest the whole thing, he wasn't sure if he'd ever be accepted back. While he still clung to a sliver of optimism, he also knew that he needed to plan for a future without Jackals Basketball.

And right now, that future was sniffing someone's sneaker.

"How much do you think I can get for this if I sell it online?" Max said.

"Nothing. Because that belongs to a second-string freshman who's had zero playing time."

"I wasn't expecting your locker room to look like this." Max gazed at the solid wood cubby stalls and the plush carpeting. A giant light fixture shaped in the school's signature orange **B** shone from the ceiling. "You even have a black leather couch. It's like a cigar lounge." Then in a strangely accurate Mid-Atlantic accent: "A veritable old boys' club."

"Men's basketball gets the biggest budget."

"And all the way on the other side of campus, we've got broken radiators in the engineering building and elevators in

the library that have been out of order since probably the Roosevelt administration.”

“Which Roosevelt?”

“Cousin Teddy? You know what, no more serious talk. Let’s lighten the mood.” Max took out his phone and something like disco music started playing. “This is my favorite song!” he said, wiggling to the beat. Aaron had never seen anything so simultaneously charming and embarrassing—a bafflement of windmill arms and lurching hips. But Max possessed zero hints of self-consciousness as he proceeded to flail like a tween at a boy band concert.

The song was catchy enough to warrant some toe-tapping, which was the extent of Aaron’s dancing skills. He couldn’t understand the lyrics, though. It sounded like Italian. The only word he recognized was the name ‘Sarah’ repeated again and again.

“Why do they keep mentioning Sarah?” he asked.

“The song’s called ‘Sarà perché ti amo.’”

“So it’s about someone who’s in love with a girl named Sarah?”

“No, sarà is a verb. The title literally translates to ‘It will be because I love you.’”

“Gotta love those literal translations.”

Max resumed his wiggling as the song ended and another similarly uplifting song started up.

“So...you understand Italian?” Aaron tracked the bouncing butt as it shimmied its way around the locker room.

“I’m conversational. I’m trying to learn all the languages of my heritage. My grandmother says she might be, like, three percent Finnish, so I want to learn that next.”

“What other languages do you know?”

“I grew up speaking Mandarin, Hokkien, and Tagalog.”

Aaron felt like the most underachieving underachiever in the history of underachieving. He had taken six years of

Spanish, and the longest sentence he could say with confidence was: “Me gusta comer bistec.”

“Maybe we can learn something new together.” Max came to sit beside him on the couch. “Now that we have a business, it won’t hurt to know additional languages. Who knows, maybe we’ll have Finnish investors in the future.”

“You’re so cool,” Aaron blurted, then cringed; he sounded like a gushy teen fawning over the most popular guy in school.

“Everyone has something cool about them.” Max scooped closer until their knees bumped. “Like you and your poems.”

“Oh...I just write about random things.”

“What kinds of random things?”

Like his nonexistent parents, Aaron’s haikus were rarely a topic of conversation. They were the purest things he had to a private life. Everything else about him was fair game for the media: strangers knew his height, his weight, his birthday, his grandma’s name, where he was born, every injury he’d had on the court. But not even Winnie had seen his poems.

“It’s okay if you don’t feel like telling me.” Max gave him an understanding smile. It was a look that told him the night was dangerously close to wrapping up. But Aaron wasn’t ready to go back to his drafty dorm room and dream about Max. Not when the real thing was right here.

He went to the whiteboard that took up one of the walls (now empty of Coach Henderson’s usual game notes) and stared at the blank space, thinking. Then he picked up the marker and wrote:

*Computer wizard*

*Zapped me with his code; he’s  
my*

*Hacker with a heart*

“So this is what I—”

Max was standing right behind him. His eyes flicked from the poem to Aaron. Some weird time skip happened, then. Aaron didn't know how he went from writing on the board to having his back pressed against it. His field of vision had narrowed down to a pair of hungry copper eyes closing in. The last thought that came to his mind right before their lips collided was: *Coach Henderson is going to murder me.*

Oh well.

Because Max was now shirtless. How it happened so fast, Aaron had no clue but blamed his sudden loss of reasoning skills. He didn't even have time to admire the sight. Max kissed him again, and they stumbled their way over to the couch.

“Hey, I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“I'm kissing my boss.”

“Then it's a good thing we don't have HR,” Max said before yanking him down. As they sank into Jackals Basketball's expensive leather couch, Aaron finally found a reason to be grateful for the team's huge budget.

The leather squeaked and whined beneath them as they fumbled to find a comfortable position. Max ended up straddling him while Aaron, on his back, was blessed with the perfect view. Even in the harsh light of the locker room, Max's body gave off a brilliant feeling, like catching a once-in-a-lifetime comet or discovering the Milky Way.

Blindingly beautiful.

So beautiful that Aaron hardly knew what to do next. He could feel his mouth gaping open like a fish and promptly closed it.

“So are the rumors true?” Max tugged at Aaron's shirt playfully. “Do you really have a twelve-pack?”

“You're too smart to be reading the school's gossip site. But you can see for yourself.”

And then they were both shirtless.



Max stared and continued to stare. His eyes drifted from Aaron's stomach to his chest, and back to his stomach.

"I, uh, haven't been working out as much lately." Aaron wasn't sure where Max's silent staring fell in the spectrum of turned on and indifferent. He barely had a six-pack before, and now that he wasn't obligated to hit the gym every week, his six-pack had deflated to a nil-pack.

"This is so much better." Max coasted a breath over the nil-pack. Kissed it. "It's *real*."

Real.

Just like winning the lottery. And embarking on a startup adventure. And making out with a former underwear thief on a noisy leather couch in the middle of a locker room.

Aaron finally regained his motor skills and slowly slid his hands over to the thighs currently clenched around him. Max sighed his approval and kissed him harder.

All right, so thigh-caressing equaled more kisses. Noted.

What if he moved further back? With no stop signs in his path, Aaron let his hands wander past the thighs to grip at the roundness beyond. It was just like handling a basketball, if basketballs were made of two fleshy mounds that fit perfectly in his palms.

*Thunk!*

It was Aaron's sneaker striking against the cubbies. Max tore the other sneaker off and it landed somewhere between the couch and Who Cares. Aaron's jeans received the same haphazard treatment; they scuffed the framed photograph of Bramburgh's first basketball team, circa 1899, before flopping to the carpet. Their predecessors looked on as Max lightly rubbed at Aaron's underwear. His eyes softened. "You're wearing it."

"I think it's been working pretty well tonight."

"Here." Max slid the lucky underwear down Aaron's hips, his mouth following its path. Aaron flung an arm over his eyes and bit the inside of his cheek; he kept his eyes closed as Max

kissed and licked the tip of his cock before traveling down, down, until he reached the base. The same hot tongue burned a trail down his thigh, his leg—and then he was completely naked, the last inch of underwear brushing past his toes.

Instead of flinging it to the side like the rest of their clothing, Max carefully folded the underwear and placed it on one of the chairs next to the couch.

“Thank you,” Aaron felt compelled to say.

“Are you this polite with every guy who gets you naked?”

“I wouldn’t know. You’re the first.”

Max climbed back on him, surprised. “What about Archibald?”

“Who’s that?”

“The guy who paid me to steal your underwear.”

“Oh. We didn’t get that far.” Aaron paused. “Is that really his name?”

“Yes, according to the Max Trellis-Tan Book of Morons and Jerks.”

Aaron smiled as he tweaked the belt loops on Max’s jeans. “I don’t want to talk about Archibald. And I don’t want to be polite right now.”

They slid together in a mix of sweat and unruly hormones. Aaron had underestimated the amount of multitasking needed once you went past second base. He wanted to hold Max tight while also stroking every part of his body and playing with that butt and making his tongue do interesting things inside Max’s mouth.

He must have been doing something right, because his underwear thief began to mewl—that delightful sound that encouraged Aaron to steal inside Max’s waistband, feeling the plumpness and the heat and the thrill seep through his skin.

“Why are my pants still on?” Max sat up, lips shining.

“I was wondering the same th—OW!” A sudden, burning pain bloomed in the middle of his face.

“Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. I’m so sorry!”

In their rush to get his jeans off, Max had jabbed his knee into Aaron’s nose.

“Oh my gosh, you’re bleeding!”

Aaron bolted upright, sending Max tumbling off the couch. “Shit, I’m sorry!” He lifted Max by the arm. Streaks of red smeared the pale skin.

“I’m so sorry!” Max repeated. His jeans were clustered around his ankles, revealing a pair of Texas Longhorn boxers. He tripped as he tried to waddle his way over to the cubbies but hauled himself right back up. “Is there a first aid kit here?”

“There’s one in the cabinet over there.” Even with blood dripping from his face, Aaron could still appreciate the sight of Max’s sprightly body scampering off.

Seconds later, he was dabbing at Aaron’s nose with gauze, then used his own T-shirt to wipe the rest of the blood off.

“You’re ruining your shirt.”

“Your life is at risk.”

“I’m fine,” Aaron laughed. “Ever had a busted knee cap? Way worse.”

“My leg just...and the jeans were...I didn’t mean for it...”

Aaron took the stained T-shirt and gently set it aside. “Look at it this way. We’re even now. I gave you a black eye, you gave me a bloody nose.”

“Maybe Carl should check out the locker room. There might be a vengeful ghost messing with us.”

Somewhere—under their discarded clothing or kicked under the couch—the phone continued to stream peppy Italian music.

“I ruined our date.” Max burrowed into Aaron’s chest. His hair was now a mess. Aaron wove his fingers around the strands; it felt like running through a field of the smoothest chocolate. He wanted to tell Max that this was the best night of his entire semester. That he just wanted to stay here like this,

with Max tucked into him, their heartbeats the only sounds that mattered.

“You didn’t ruin anything,” was what he ended up saying.

The locker room grew still. Only the happy Italian music carried on, as if urging them to pick up where they had left off.

Sticky fingers nipped at Aaron’s pec. “Well, I think you’ve earned your third merit badge of the night,” Max said.

“And what’s that?”

“Public nudity.”

“But no one’s here to see us.”

“According to the Max Trellis-Tan Book of Felonies and Misdemeanors, we’re not in a dorm room, so it counts.”

“I’ll have to read these so-called books of yours one of these days.”

After they had cleaned up and made sure nothing was out of place (in addition to his famous death glare, Coach Henderson also had hawk eyes), they slipped back out into the bitter cold.

Walking through the deserted campus felt otherworldly, but also peaceful. Aaron wondered if Carl ever found his ghost. He cast a glance at Max, whose face had taken on that brittle quality again. The night had reached a point where the only chatter came from the wind and the spirits. But it was easy to guess at what was churning around inside Max’s head.

When Aaron used to get nervous before a big game, he would always tell himself to just have fun. Business was a different kind of game and played by a different set of rules. Aaron was no businessman, but even he knew that with millions of dollars and the potential to revolutionize an entire industry at stake, having fun was the worst advice you could give.

Having fun could cost you the entire game.

SPRING  
SEMESTER

# 18

**From:** The Toadstool

**To:** Max Trellis-Tan

**Date:** December 20, 2021

**Subject:** Welcome to The Toadstool!

Hey Cosmos!

We are happy to announce that you have been selected to join our incubator's inaugural batch of startups. Your vision for the future of virtual reality is refreshing and we at The Toadstool believe it's something worth supporting.

You, along with six other promising teams from Bramburgh University, are now part of a distinguished group of innovators and disruptors. We are so excited to meet you in a few weeks. In the meantime, please take a look at the attached documents to prepare for our first batch meeting.

Best,

Monica Eborg

Batch Lead @ The Toadstool

—

**From:** Oliver Mackey

**To:** Max Trellis-Tan

**Date:** December 26, 2021

**Subject:** (no subject)

Great stuff. VR needs more talent. Looking forward to meeting rest of your team.

O.

Max stared at Oliver Mackey's email as his plane took off from Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. He couldn't stop thinking about it, so he took out his phone and stared some more when he touched down in Boston. The three-hour train ride from Boston to Greenloch was spent sleeping in short fits, staring at the email, finishing his bag of chips, and staring at the email some more.

He imagined Oliver Mackey sitting at his desk, the day after Christmas, maybe still in his pajamas, feet bare, composing that email, typing out *max* and *cosmos* with those Oliver Mackey fingers—fingers that had touched hands with the most powerful people in the tech industry; heck, the world.

The coolest guy in Silicon Valley had sent him a personal message!

Maybe he should print it out and have it framed. As soon as it had appeared in his inbox, he'd taken a screenshot and sent it to his friends. Jared had immediately replied with a fainting GIF.

His phone lit up with a new text.

**Aaron:** *Just got to campus. You?*

If there was one person who could compete with Oliver Mackey for Max's attention right now, it was his Eagle Scout.

**Max:** *I'm two hours away :-)*

**Aaron:** *Come to my room after you get settled.*

**Max:** *Are you going to give me my...belated Christmas present? ;-)*

**Aaron:** *I haven't seen you for almost a month. Can't tell if you've been naughty or nice.*

**Max:** *I'll show you when I get there...*

**Aaron:** *I'm the only one on my floor so far. Just FYI.*

**Max:** *Remember our video chat on new year's eve? When I used the coconut oil?*

**Aaron:** *YES. Did you bring it with you?*

**Zach:** *Can you guys PLEASE get your own chat room?!*

**Jared:** *No, stay, I want to know what Max did with the coconut oil*

**Aaron:** *Crap!!! Wrong chat. Sorry! Sorry!*

*Aaron deleted a message*

*Aaron deleted a message*

*Aaron deleted a message*

**Jared:** *Hey man, we're all adults here. No need to be shy*

**Winnie:** *What did I miss??*

**Jared:** *Things unbecoming for thine eyes, fair maiden*

---

When Max got to Keesby Hall, he found Zach leaning by the front door reading *The Greenloch Gazette*.

“Where’s Jared? Did he decide to go to Romania after all?”

Zach pointed over his shoulder, where Jared could be seen flirting with the front desk assistant: “Do I know you from Hillel? I feel like I’ve seen you at Hillel.” Max dragged him away and gave the front desk assistant an apologetic smile.

“She has a boyfriend, man.”



“Well, she didn’t mention him.”

“Romania really dodged a bullet with you,” Zach said. “Millions of women spared from your awful pickup lines.”

“I’ll make my way over there one day. But when will I ever get another chance to meet Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber?” Jared grabbed one end of Max’s suitcase and helped him haul it up the stairs.

“Wait!” The front desk assistant ran over to them. “This is for you.” She handed Max a tightly folded note. Then she turned to Zach and slipped another note into the pocket of his flannel. “And this is from me.”

They all stared as she pranced back to the lobby.

Zach unfolded his note. “She just invited me to Zeta Zeta’s mixer.” He looked confused. “I’m not even in a frat.”

“Why do they always end up hitting on you!” Jared cried. “I’m the cute one in the group. Girls are supposed to go for the cute one!”

“Max is the cute one,” Zach said. “You’re...acute. Like an ulcer.”

Inside Max’s room, they scattered to their usual spots: Jared spread out on the bed, Zach on the floor, and Max at his desk. He opened his own note. The handwriting immediately made him smile.

*Texas boy, you must*

*Be so tired of Texas  
food.*

*Get dinner with me?*

“What did he write now?” Jared said.

“Nothing.” Max tucked the note into his drawer with the others. “Just asking me to dinner.”

“He used a physical pen and wrote you a physical letter on physical paper, just to ask if you want to eat?” Jared flopped

back into the pillows.

“See, this is why girls ignore you,” Zach said. “You’re not romantic enough.”

Jared responded by flipping onto his stomach and letting out a harrumph.

“But it seems like Aaron’s writing wasn’t romantic enough to woo the Valley blogs.” Zach scanned his phone. “Still nothing.”

Now it was Max who harrumphed. “The only people covering us are sportswriters and fangirls on Twitter.”

Over winter break, Max had convinced Aaron to get on social media. “You don’t have to post anything personal,” he’d explained, “just that you’ve joined a hot new startup that’s about to change the landscape of everyday life as we know it.”

Within hours of reactivating his Twitter account, Aaron had over five thousand followers. Headlines from sports blogs poured in the next day:

- **Athle-tech: Ivy League’s Prodigal Son Pivots to Virtual Reality**
- **Bramburgh’s Aaron Scudder Gets Techy With It**
- **Off the Bench: Aaron Scudder Trades Basketball for Binary Code**

But not a peep from Silicon Valley.

“Why doesn’t anyone care?” Max said. “I can’t believe *Byte Me* didn’t even bite. They’re the lowest hanging fruit. They covered that necro cult in Palo Alto but skipped over us? What the hell!”

“At least we got into the incubator,” Jared said. “That’s the most important part.”

“Some extra hype would’ve helped.” Max began to unpack his suitcase. Now they would need to put all of their hope into the incubator. Say the right things. Shake the right hands.

Come up with the right numbers. Much slower than generating fake hype.

Jared dangled his head over the edge of the bed. “We just started our company. It’ll take time to earn the hype.”

“Yeah,” Zach said, “let’s just focus on impressing the people at The Toadstool.” He wrinkled his nose at the name. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

“As long as they continue to know we exist, we’re good,” Jared added. “I’ve got the demo all set, so we’ll have something to show them this weekend.”

Max’s stomach gave an involuntary flip. This weekend! Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber in the flesh. At last. He wondered if they looked as good in person—California-tanned and pearl-white teeth bright enough to reduce mere mortals to dust. As much as he wanted to talk to them about VR and the future of tech, he also wanted to just marinate in their presence. Whatever words that came out of their mouths needed to be preserved; whatever ideas they put forth, treasured.

And Aaron: he would get to experience the magic and the madness of the tech world. Max couldn’t wait to explore the incubator with him. Maybe they could sneak in after hours and get drunk off the giant espresso machine.

“So is your roommate here yet?” Zach suddenly asked, looking around as if the roommate was simply hiding behind the drawer or crouched under the desk.

“I don’t think he ever went home for winter break,” Max said. “He’s probably still in the Dungeon.”

“It’s a shame what they do to the architecture majors.”

---

An hour later, Max felt a pleasant kind of strangeness, like a tiny mouse tickling him, as he waited outside Luella’s dining hall. The guy walking towards him looked like Aaron and smiled like Aaron. He even waved like Aaron. But all of their texts and video chats over the holiday break couldn’t make up

for the fact that they hadn't *seen* each other in almost a month. It was like meeting your crush for the first time—all over again.

Aaron came to a stop a foot from him. “Hey,” he said, his voice as shy as the mouse scurrying up Max's chest.

“You look nice.”

“Thanks. You too.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you have a good flight?”

“Yes. You?”

“Great.”

“Awesome.”

Just a few hours ago, they had been trading flirty texts; now, neither of them could seem to communicate without sounding like robots learning the fundamentals of human speech.

“Um...let's...” Aaron made a move towards the dining hall.

“Are you really in the mood for dinner now?” Because Max was feeling selfish all of a sudden. He wanted everything to disappear, poof poof gone, leaving him and Aaron in a blanket of solitude where they could do things like talk to each other through intense staring and feed each other clams and wake up to nothing but each other's eyes.

“It's five-thirty,” Aaron said, checking his watch. That was new. He must have gotten it for Christmas. “If we don't go in now, the semi-edible stuff will be gone and we'll be stuck with the vegetable mash.”

Max thought for a second. “Have you ever had shrimp crackers?”

“I don't think so...”

The mouse squirmed its way out of Max's throat and disappeared with the rest of his nerves. He took Aaron's arm

and looped his own through it. “Perfect.”

They took a detour through Max’s room, grabbing bags of the crackers in question, before zigzagging their way around campus. The January snow lay in clumps around them. Someone had carved giant letters—I LOVE YOU JULIE—into the powdered quad. Wherever they stepped, their sneakers made squishing noises over the packed snow.

When they reached the heavy wooden door to the secret room in the music library, Aaron pulled it open—and the thick smell of antiquity spilled out: a musty hollowness that swallowed any conversations that might have occurred between its walls. Max wondered how many ghosts were trapped inside.

He lowered himself to the floor, cross-legged, and ripped open a bag of the shrimp crackers. He held it out. “Merry Christmas, Happy New Year.”

Aaron’s crunching filled the room. “Tastes exactly how it’s described. Shrimpy and cracker-y.” He sat across from Max and eyed the other snacks spread out before them like colorful loot: squid flakes, sweet corn chips, spicy rice crackers, and dried mango strips.

“I stock up every time I go home,” Max said. “There’s a pan-Asian market near Austin that I like, and I just raid their junk food aisle.”

“How do you stay so fit, though?”

“Jared and Zach. They usually end up eating most of my stash.”

Aaron covered his eyes and groaned. “I can’t believe I typed in the wrong chat earlier. Zach hates me even more now.”

“They actually thought the coconut oil was a sex thing,” Max laughed.

“Why didn’t you tell them we were using it to make homemade deodorant?”

“I like seeing you flustered.” Max popped a cracker in his mouth. “It’s hot.”

Aaron Scudder on the court was a boulder: steady, solid, untouchable. Off the court, Max came to realize, he was much more vulnerable; unsure. A mighty tree perpetually on the verge of tipping over.

And it was with hesitant fingers that Aaron reached into his pocket, pulling out a small, wrinkled bundle. He cupped it in his hands, pausing, before presenting it to Max. “I, um, got you something.”

The bundle was swaddled in green Christmas paper with a pattern of ice-skating penguins. Max carefully pulled the wrapping off. Inside was a miniature...llama? He brought it to eye level, trying to make sense of it. Was that the neck, or the nose? Maybe it was a moose...

“I remember your grandpa mentioning the Tiger guy,” Aaron said, addressing the cracks on the floor, “and how he’s four years older than you. So I looked up the Chinese zodiac and found out you’re a Horse.”

Ah.

The miniature horse had a cottony-white complexion. It felt creamy to the touch, with a lumpy smoothness, like the texture of dried clay. But it wasn’t clay.

“Did you make this?”

Aaron fiddled with his shoelaces. “I had a lot of coconut oil left, and my grandma makes her own soap, so she helped me with the mold.” He cast his eyes up, expectant. “I did the carving myself.”

Max turned the soap horse around in his hands. It looked more like a mutant cryptid. The legs, or what were supposed to be the legs, stuck out in different directions. The tail was the longest part of the body, and the eyes, for some reason, were right next to the nostrils.

A child’s interpretation of a monster.

And the most precious gift Max had ever received.

“It’s okay if you don’t like it,” Aaron said. “But, um...do you like it?”

The eyes of a dozen silent ghosts watched as Max leapt forward and kissed and kissed and kissed the Eagle Scout behind the magnificent mutant horse.

# 19

“Please turn around.”

“Aaron, we’re not meeting the President,” Winnie said from the other side of the room. She had her hands over her eyes, even though her back was already turned. “Just wear what you’d wear to a job interview.”

“These are super rich people, Winnie. We have to look extra proper.” Which was the opposite of how Aaron currently looked: bare-chested and clad in ratty boxers from the clearance bin at Walmart.

“How many outfits have we gone through already?”

“This will be the last one, I swear.” He looked between the two pairs of pants on the bed. Khakis versus gray slacks. Business casual might be too casual to meet Silicon Valley billionaires for the first time, so he slipped on the slacks. “Did you like the blue shirt or the red one better?”

“Blue.”

“Are you just saying that to make me hurry up?”

“No, blue goes better with your hair.”

“Crap, my hair!” It looked like some critter had gone and made a nest in it. He grabbed his comb and tamed it down to a



respectable side part.

“You look like an Old Hollywood heartthrob.”

Aaron wrapped his arms around his chest. “You’re not supposed to turn around yet!”

“I’ve seen you shirtless before.” Winnie handed him the blue button-down. “Can I pick your tie?”

“Already got it.” Aaron had made his choice after a single-elimination round between the navy blue tie, the green satin tie, and a maroon ascot that he still wasn’t sure how he came to own.

“Very handsome,” Winnie said as she knotted the navy blue tie into place.

“Likewise, Lady Winifred.” She was wearing one of those floaty-looking blouses with a bow in front. Draped over her shoulders was a bright yellow pea coat.

They were just a couple of college students on their way to mingle with two dudes whose combined net worth was enough to buy the entire country of Fiji.

Aaron had done his homework.

Oliver Mackey: Bramburgh, class of 2005. Head of engineering at the social sharing site Mongoose until the company was bought out by a UK media conglomerate. Started investing in pre-revenue startups and hit it big with the rideshare app Waagen. Has a knack for betting on companies that go on to debut with impressive IPOs. Single, but has been pictured with a (different) supermodel on several occasions.

Ethan Farber: Oliver’s best friend and business partner. Pioneered the monetization of social posts on Mongoose. Left Mongoose after the acquisition to establish Toadstool Capital with his friend. Created a popular full-stack web framework in JavaScript used by several Fortune 500 companies. Wrote a book (*Hard Things are Hard and How to Un-Hard Them*). Hasn’t taken a vacation in ten years. Married to a cardiac surgeon, two kids (twins).

Both came from average backgrounds. It gave Aaron hope that he, too, could reach a sliver of their success one day. He didn't mind having a perfectly ordinary job after graduation, but Max and his friends had shown him the other end of the spectrum: being so obsessed with a singular idea that you couldn't imagine doing anything else with your life.

It also made Aaron wonder: would Max still have time for him if Cosmos took off? Their company was focused on the future, but Aaron wanted to focus on right now—the way Max's eyes flickered right before they kissed, Max leading him down to the secret room in the library, Max wiggling his body to cheerful Italian music.

Aaron would do his best to help Cosmos. Sports and business were all about teamwork, and if Aaron had learned anything from his years playing basketball, it was how to be a good teammate.

He cringed when he thought back to all the unkind things he'd called Max. Creepazoid. Dipshit hacker. Weirdo. Aaron had given him every reason to claim the lottery money for himself, but Max kept coming back. The basketball team had given up on him, but Max never did.

Like a true team player.

It was time to put on the lucky underwear and play ball with some billionaires.

---

“Why are you guys dressed like you're going to a royal wedding?” Jared said when they got to the bus stop.

Aaron looked at the three pairs of dirty sneakers in front of him. Max, Jared, and Zach stared back. They were all wearing the uniform of every northeastern college student in winter: North Face jacket, beanie, salt-stained jeans.

“We forgot to tell them about the dress code,” Zach said.

“What dress code?” Winnie asked.

Max waved at the approaching bus. “The first thing you need to know about tech people: we hate dress codes.” He

tugged on Aaron's coat and whispered, "But you look great."

"I don't want to stand out. Should I go back and change?"

"No. I like you in a suit."

They took up the entire back row of the bus. Aaron *might* have jostled Jared (lightly) out of the way so he could end up next to Max. After fifteen minutes of listening to Jared recount the time Belinda was chased by a turkey, they made it to downtown Greenloch.

The incubator was a short walk up the block. As soon as they entered, it quickly became apparent that Aaron and Winnie were severely overdressed. Every person in The Toadstool was in jeans and a T-shirt, their plain old winter jackets slung over the wooden tables that were assembled all over the room.

"Hi! I'm Monica, your batch leader! Which group are you?"

A willowy woman with short black hair had sprung up in front of them, as if by magic. She looked like she could be a college student herself, but the giant smile on her face exposed faint lines that suggested she was closer to forty.

"We're Cosmos," Max said.

"The virtual reality peeps! Yes, I have you scheduled for a talk on Ethics in an Artificial Landscape later this afternoon. That'll be upstairs. The ground floor is where we have batch-wide meetings and where you'll be working for the next three months."

Monica led them to the middle of the room and extended one arm like an overexcited tour guide. "Open floor! Everyone loves an open floor plan. You'll get to *collaborate* and *synergize* and *ideate*. Oliver and Ethan believe in total transparency. It's the best way to build trust. If we can't trust each other, we can't *achieve*."

"We've walked into a cult," Zach mumbled under his breath.

While Monica carried on about the foundation of trust building, Aaron studied their surroundings.

All around them was wood: wooden walls, wooden floors, wooden ceilings. Long wooden tables and benches were scattered throughout; their “workspaces,” Aaron assumed. Punctuating the room were several mushroom decorations. They sprouted in the form of a painting over by the window, a flower vase on the reception desk, pillows on the couch; there was even an armchair shaped like a toadstool. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of all was the massive moose head hanging above an elaborate brick fireplace. It protruded from the wall like a gossiping aunt, its eyes seeming to twinkle back at Aaron.

“That’s Bernie,” Monica said. “He’s not a real moose. Oliver and Ethan would *never* hunt a living creature. Ethan is actually a vegan.”

“Is Ethan the cute one?” Zach whispered from the corner of his mouth.

“What’s that?” Monica was still smiling her giant smile. “Did you have a question?”

“Oh, I was just admiring Bernie,” Zach said. “He’s very cute.”

Monica beamed. “Yes, we found him at this resort in Mammoth Lakes a few months ago. Oliver and Ethan were up there for a conference and they couldn’t leave without him. Said it would be good feng shui for us.”

Aaron knew next to nothing about feng shui, but he was pretty sure the disembodied head of a fake-dead animal possessed minimal good fortune—even with a name as wholesome as Bernie.

Before Monica could finish explaining Bernie’s artisanal origins, loud rap music drowned out the room. “Oh, we’re about to start!” she said, ushering everyone to their seats. “Gather in, peeps!”

Aaron scrunched his eyes as the music grew louder. Was this a business meeting or an Eminem concert? He still didn’t

know what to think as two guys emerged from the stairs and zigzagged their way around the tables, cracking high-fives with everyone they passed. Some of the other students cheered and clapped. The music instantly stopped when Oliver Mackey and Ethan Farber took their spots in front of the fireplace.

“Wassup wassup, Jackals!” Oliver yelled to the still cheering crowd. He was wearing an orange Bramburgh hoodie and—in what looked to be a middle finger to the cold weather—shorts and sandals.

“So good to be back, my peeps!” Ethan echoed. He was dressed more appropriately—but barely—in a baggy sweater and even baggier jogging pants.

Aaron and Winnie exchanged a silent question: *What the hell?*

“We’re Ethan and Oliver,” Ethan continued. “I mean, I’m Ethan. That devil over there is Oliver.”

“And we’re going to be your surrogate fathers for the next three months.”

Laughter from the back.

“We will guide you, train you, mold you into the best companies this side of the Mississippi River.”

“And the world.”

“This is an incubator, but it’s also a bootcamp. Yes, we know you’re still in school and you’ve got to deal with classes and papers and those damn group projects. But you guys aren’t average college students. You’re founders. Creators. You’re the future of tech. And we’re not going to go easy on you.”

“You will be challenged. You will face difficult questions. About your company, your goals, your life’s *essence*.”

“Because running a startup is like raising a child. You are responsible for another beating heart. Your startup is a living, breathing organism. Its blood is your soul. Are you willing to give your soul to your child?”

“Are you willing to feed your baby the best food possible?”

“Are you willing to do whatever it takes to make sure they don’t grow up to be drug addicts and sex maniacs?”

Monica handed Oliver a wicker basket.

“There are seven startups here today,” he said. “At the end of our time together, all seven will have proud parents. *You* will be parents. But instead of kicking your kid out at eighteen, you will be living with them for the rest of your life. Or until you decide to sell them to the highest bidder.” Oliver reached into the basket. “Which road will you take?”

And then he started flinging T-shirts at them.

The rap music returned, booming through Oliver and Ethan’s shouts of “Which road will you take? Which road will you take?” as they tossed T-shirts at the crowd like they were rock stars feeding their fans. A shirt landed on Aaron’s head. He picked it off and examined it. On the front was an illustration of a red mushroom that, no matter how hard he tried to un-see it, looked like an uncut phallus. He turned to Max and was about to make a joke about the absurdity of this whole incubator, but stopped.

Max was already wearing the mushroom T-shirt. His eyes remained fixed on Oliver and Ethan, a wide grin spreading across his face. The purity of it stabbed Aaron deep in the gut. Because Aaron recognized that look. It was the same one he had when he used to gaze at his parents’ old photographs, back when he still thought they were worth his time.

---

During their break an hour later—“Pit stop!” Monica had called it—Aaron parked himself by the snack table. Zach and Winnie were already scouring the (all-organic and ethically sourced) chips and cookies.

“Dude, you’re embarrassing us,” Jared said as he watched Zach load his jacket with bags of veggie sticks. “Your dad owns, like, the entire snack industry. Why are you acting like you just escaped a shipwreck?”

Zach slipped another bag into his pocket. “Free food is free food.”

“Guys, we should introduce ourselves to Ethan and Oliver,” Max said.

As if on cue, the Billionaire Bros materialized next to them. Aaron took a step back, startled, and bumped into the table. A cookie fell to the floor, which Zach promptly scooped up and added to his cache.

“You okay there?” Ethan said, giving Aaron an ivory smile. His intensely red beard and red hair made him look like a video game character, and not one Aaron wanted to play. “We’ve seen your website. You’re the VR wizards. Cosmos, right?”

“Well, we wouldn’t call ourselves wizards—” Max began before Oliver held up a hairy, tanned hand.

“Don’t be humble, my little bro peep. Own your innovation. The first thing investors look for is confidence—in your product and in yourselves.”

“Oh, we are super confident,” Jared said. “We’ve figured out a way to make virtual reality accessible beyond games and entertainment.”

“So we’ve gathered from your application.” Oliver set his brown eyes—brown like oozing syrup—on Max. “You’re the CEO?”

Max gave a slight nod. His body seemed to contract the longer Oliver studied him. It made Aaron uncomfortable seeing Max uncomfortable. He was so used to his underwear thief charging into situations with a laugh and a smile. Instinct took over, and he moved to stand behind Max, offering a protective shadow.

Winnie chose this moment to let out a sneeze. Cookie crumbs sprayed all over the floor. “Whew! Sorry about that,” she said. “Don’t you hate it when you’re in the middle of chewing and that happens?”

The Billionaire Bros swiveled their eyes. “And who’s our peepette?” Ethan asked.

“I’m Winnie. I help with this and that.” She bent to clean up her mess, but Aaron had already grabbed a napkin and was

wiping away the last of the crumbs.

“She’s actually our CFO,” Max said, regaining his confidence. “We have a pretty great team. We’re really excited to learn from you guys and meet the other startups.”

“Spoken like a true leader.” Oliver put a hand on Max’s shoulder. “Never stop learning. Life is an infinite loop of knowledge and wisdom. Remember that.”

When Aaron stood to throw the napkin away, he felt the syrupy eyes drift toward him. Oliver scanned his suit and tie. “What’s up, Wall Street? You look like you’re ready to prey on innocent interns.”

Aaron grimaced, and Ethan slapped him on the back, chuckling. “He’s kidding! We never know what’s politically correct anymore with your generation. Back in my day, we just wrote whatever the hell we wanted on LiveJournal and gave zero shits.”

“This is Aaron,” Jared said. “He’s taking a hiatus from basketball to work with us.”

“Right, right. Aaron Scudder. Read about you. Pretty weird setup you got here. Working with the guy you beat up?”

“He didn’t beat me up,” Max said.

“Punched. Socked. Beat up. Same thing.”

Aaron found his mouth had gone dry. He didn’t want to rehash that night in front of Oliver and Ethan. It was none of their business. It had nothing to do with Cosmos, or what he could contribute.

“Bramburgh’s not gonna make it to March Madness this year,” Ethan went on. “How do you feel about that, Scudder? Must be weird for you, huh?”

“I notice that Bernie is facing north,” Zach suddenly cut in. He had pulled away from the snack table and was opening a bag of veggie sticks. “Is that for a reason?”

Like sharks distracted by a new target, the Billionaire Bros crowded around Zach and launched into the importance of feng shui and how having the moose head face north brought



*prosperity* and *clarity* and *tranquility*. Then they led him back towards the fireplace and continued explaining, with exaggerated hand movements, how everything in the incubator had a *purpose* and *direction*.

From the other side of the room, Zach bit into his veggie stick and gave Aaron a wink.

# 20

The room next door thumped with electronic music. Max was grateful for the noise. Because Aaron's head was between his legs and Aaron's mouth was on him and Max didn't think he could hold back any longer. With one hand tightening around the bedsheet and the other gripping the yellow hair bobbing in front of him, he let out a gasp-grunt as Aaron finished him off.

"You're getting good at this."

"I'm no stranger to practice." Aaron trailed his tongue along the inside crease of Max's thigh. Then the tongue turned into a hot finger. It slid down, and down, and down. "I was wondering...um, have you thought about us maybe...doing more?" His finger skirted around the nerves that led to Max's most private spot.

The answer should have been simple. Max was in that post-orgasm high, where you were supposed to say yes to anything. But what Aaron was asking for—it was a big leap. Only one person had ever been inside him, a high school classmate who'd been as clueless as he was, and Max had come away from the experience with a simple conclusion: He Did Not Like It. So he'd consulted every teenage boy's best friend—the World Wide Web—and discovered that this kind of sex was equivalent to making reservations at a fancy restaurant: you couldn't just show up and get stuffed.

Maybe it was all the prep work that turned him off, maybe it was the fact that he vastly favored blowjobs, but he was absolutely fine with never having to make a fancy dinner reservation in his lifetime. He used to think there was something wrong with him, that other guys wouldn't want to be with him once they found out.

Now he'd get to see what Aaron Scudder thought.

"I don't like ramen," he said.

Aaron stopped moving his finger around. "Huh?"

"I'm Asian and I don't like ramen. I think it's overrated." He brushed a hand down Aaron's cheek. "Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

"Um...that I shouldn't take you to a ramen shop? What do you prefer instead?"

"No. Bad analogy." He sat up. "I like you a lot, Aaron. But I don't want to..."—he glanced down at the spot where Aaron had been stroking—"...I'm not ready to do more. Not yet, at least. I just want to keep doing what we've been doing." When Aaron stayed quiet, Max drew the comforter around himself. "Is that a dealbreaker for you?"

Aaron still seemed to be in a daze. After several more seconds, he finally looked up, smiling. "Sorry. I didn't hear anything after 'I like you a lot, Aaron.'"

"I do. I like making out with you, and everything else. I'm just not that interested in..." He looked off to the side, at his boxers on the floor and the books on Aaron's desk.

"You know what I'm interested in?" Aaron slid up the bed so they were level. "Watching your face when you come. It doesn't matter to me how you get there, or how I get there. I just like being with you."

A few minutes later, it was Aaron gripping the bedsheets and competing with the loud music next door. Max wiped his mouth and lounged atop Aaron's torso, like a cat settling into its favorite spot. This was the best part: listening to each other's heartbeats until one of them (Aaron) fell asleep. But

when he snuck a peek to see if his Eagle Scout had drifted off, he found a pair of hazel eyes watching him.

“So about Ethan and Oliver,” Aaron said, “they’re a couple of...characters, don’t you think?”

Max thought back to yesterday, when the two venture capitalists had called them wizards. Wizards! “Aren’t they awesome? They were really impressed with us.”

“Yeah, but they were also kind of weird.”

“They’re just unconventional.”

“In a weird way.”

“You used to think I was weird, too.” Max played with the sprouts of hair on Aaron’s forearm. “Now you can’t get enough.”

“Your weirdness is cute. Ethan and Oliver are...strange.”

“Aaron, we are both minorities. We have no right to judge people for being different.”

“I’m not judging,” Aaron laughed. “There’s something creepy about them. They finish each other’s thoughts. They speak the same way. If Ethan didn’t have red hair and a beard, I wouldn’t be able to tell them apart.”

“They’ve been friends for twenty years. Their minds are probably in sync by now.”

Aaron shifted so they were face-to-face. “Well, I don’t like them.”

How silly! Ethan and Oliver were the most popular tech investors, loved by the media and everyone’s mother. They worked hard and truly cared about spreading positive energy. And they weren’t even forty yet, so they had that cool, older brother aura. How could anyone dislike them?

“I just get a bad vibe,” Aaron said.

Max unglued himself from that wonderful torso, which, right now, wasn’t feeling so wonderful anymore. He quickly got dressed.

“Is something wrong?” Aaron reached for his own boxers.

“Jared and I have been dreaming about this moment for a long time. Ethan and Oliver could change our lives. I don’t think it’s good for us to talk badly about them.”

“It’s not like we’re saying it to their faces.” Aaron let out a laugh. “I’m just going off the general impression I got yesterday. They don’t seem like normal people.”

“Of course they’re not normal people! They have an insane net worth. They’re not weirdos. They just have a different approach to things. If you were that rich, you’d be a little eccentric too. It forces you to develop a completely different mindset.”

“We *are* that rich.” Aaron took Max’s hand. “We won the lotto, remember?”

Max shook him off. “What does that have to do with anything now? Our prank on the tech blogs didn’t work. All we’ve got is the incubator. It’s our only shot at this.”

“Max, maybe we don’t need Ethan and Oliver. We have millions of dollars just sitting in our bank account. What if we try to get Cosmos off the ground ourselves?”

“Money isn’t the answer to everything!” Blood rushed to his face. Raising his voice felt both unnatural and therapeutic. Max had never cared much about what other people thought of him, but when it came to his business—he turned into an overprotective parent.

The future of Cosmos came down to how much Ethan and Oliver believed in them. As sweet as he was, Aaron simply didn’t understand what it took to succeed in this industry.

“We need connections. Ethan and Oliver know people. People who will buy our software. That’s the whole point. This is why we need them. So I’d appreciate it if you stopped making fun of their bad juju.”

“I said they gave me bad vibes, not bad juju.” Aaron laughed again. “And I’m not making fun of them. I’m just trying to figure them out.”

“There’s nothing to figure out. They want to help us. That’s all we need to know.”

Aaron moved to kiss him, but Max ducked away. He snagged his backpack off the floor and shoved his arms through. “I have to meet with Jared,” he said, ignoring the confused look on Aaron’s face as he shut the door.

That night, for the very first time, Max forgot to check on William P. Zhang.

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The next morning, his inbox pinged with a new message.

**From:** Monica Eborg

**To:** Max Trellis-Tan

**Date:** January 24, 2022

**Subject:** Let’s synergize!

Hey peeps!

Running a startup is demanding. It’s easy to lose sight of your goals when you’re constantly stressed out. That’s why The Toadstool is inviting you to a day of fun and bonding!

Join us for a day trip to Acadia National Park, where we will go snowshoeing and enjoy the beautiful winter weather. You’ll have a chance to network with the other startups in your batch and learn from each other.

Meet outside The Toadstool at 6 a.m. this coming Saturday. We’ve arranged transportation and meals, so all you have to do is show up—and bundle up!

See you soon!!!

Monica

Normally, Max would have been ready to suit up in his most comfortable cold-weather gear. He loved the snow. But after his argument with Aaron—did that even count as an argument?—he felt like doing nothing but putting his head down and concentrating on Cosmos.

He'd already skipped his first two lectures of the semester to update their code. No matter how confident they were in their product, they kept coming up with what-if scenarios and new features that required constant revisions.

This would take up his entire semester—if not his life.

Maybe he wasn't cut out to be someone's boyfriend. Maybe his gut was right that first time: he and Aaron should just be friends.

If Max was asked to choose between Cosmos or a love life, there was no doubt which one he'd give up. Aaron was the guy you brought home to meet your family. He was kind and thoughtful and polite—all the reasons why he wouldn't last a minute inside a boardroom with hungry investors; he'd be the first to get eaten alive.

What Max needed was someone who could bite back, someone who understood the game and the sacrifices you had to make. Someone who didn't laugh at Oliver and Ethan.

“What do you think of them?” Max asked his friends later that day.

“Frickin' badass,” Jared said.

“Absolutely ridiculous,” Zach declared.

Noisy grumbles broke out from the other side of the room. The dining hall was currently in an uproar due to the hibachi station breaking down in the middle of lunch rush.

Max ignored the outrage and frowned at Zach. “Why do you think Oliver and Ethan are ridiculous?”

“They're grown men who speak like teenagers.”

“But that's what makes them relatable.”

“Relatable is irrelevant. Do you trust them?”

“Duh,” Jared said, “they're rich as hell. They always bet on the right companies. Of course we trust them.”

Zach simply shrugged. “So are we going snowshoeing?”

“I think we should spend this weekend working on our business plan.” Max wanted to show Ethan and Oliver that they were serious. The sooner they had a proper business plan and projections for growth, the better their chances of attracting even more investors and, most importantly, customers.

“No, we’re going.” Jared speared a forkful of macaroni. “My dad always says ninety percent of business happens on the golf course. Or, in our case, the trails of Acadia National Park.”

“You guys go, then. I’ll work on the business plan.”

“You’re our CEO. You can’t stay behind.”

“I don’t feel like going.”

“What’s wrong?” Zach said. “You’re being weird today.”

Max pushed away from the table, scraping his chair loudly against the floor. “Weird is perfectly fine! Why does everyone think being weird is such a...a weird thing? Weird people are the ones who invent things and move civilization forward. Ethan and Oliver aren’t weird and they don’t have bad juju!”

He grabbed his tray. His mind was so cloudy that he didn’t even realize he’d dumped the reusable plates and utensils into the trash. The students protesting the breakdown of the hibachi station thought he was making a stand and followed suit: “We will no longer tolerate a subpar dining experience!”

Echoes of their shouts followed Max all the way back to his room, where he sank facedown into bed and fell asleep, missing his first class of the day.

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His phone rang. It had been ringing on and off for the last ten minutes, he realized. He rubbed his eyes and checked the time: twenty minutes until his statistics class. Well. Who cared. He’d just get the notes online. Going to lectures wouldn’t make him money.

When he went to use the bathroom, he found Aaron sitting outside his door.



“Don’t you have class now?” Max said.

“Our professor had an emergency.” Aaron got to his feet. “I thought *you* were supposed to be in class. I was waiting for you to get back.”

“I’m taking a break today.”

“We’re only a week into the semester. You’re skipping class already?”

“Did you come here to lecture me?”

“N-no. Can I—can I come in?”

“I’m about to start coding.”

Aaron reached out to grip the door, as if he expected it to slam in his face. “Max, I’m sorry if I said something wrong yesterday. But I want you to know that I believe in Cosmos. And I believe in you. If you think Ethan and Oliver can help us, then I’m on board.”

This was exactly the kind of behavior that would get Aaron eaten alive in Silicon Valley. He was without guile, too honest, too quick to compromise and agree. But Max felt his heart begin to thaw as the Eagle Scout looked at him with open and trusting eyes. He sighed, pulled the door open the rest of the way, and fell back into bed.

“Before we got into the incubator, everything seemed so far away,” he said. “It felt like we could still fool around in between getting stuff done. But now that we’ve actually met Ethan and Oliver, I just feel like...I feel like it’s time for us to start taking things more seriously.”

“I get it.” Aaron came to sit beside him. “You want them to respect us.”

It was more than that.

“Do you know how much I hate the idea of working for someone else after I graduate?” Max winced. Just saying it out loud made everything inside him shrink. “I don’t want to be a code monkey, plugging in patches for software that I don’t care about. My mom used to let me hang out at her video game studio. The developers there are talented, but they’re

stuck working on someone else's vision. One time, this guy got so burned out that he just walked right out of the office and never came back. I never want that to happen to me."

Aaron's face softened. He moved closer. Max let Aaron kiss him this time. Later, he let Aaron undress him and use his mouth on him. But all the while, his mind kept drifting to Cosmos and their business plan and all the code he still had to fix.

That evening, long after Aaron had left, Max checked his phone. He had a voicemail.

*"Wassup, Maxwell! It's Oliver. You got the snowshoe email, right? A buddy of mine's gonna be at Acadia this weekend. Winter hiking with his wife. Or his side chick. I can't keep track these days.*

*"Anyway, I told him about Cosmos and he's stoked. Wants to invest in you guys. Thing is, he can't make it down to Greenloch and he's gotta fly back to California by Sunday. So make sure you're on that bus to Acadia.*

*"I'll introduce you guys, we'll have some whiskey—are you over twenty-one? Doesn't matter. I was drinking from kegs my freshman year. Anyway, we'll see you Saturday. Peace, my peep!"*

The guy sitting next to Aaron smelled like weed.

“My startup matches cannabis companies with accountants who specialize in the cannabis industry,” the guy said. He showed Aaron the app. “I’m studying to be a CPA. Once I graduate and get my license, I’m going to...”

Aaron tuned the guy out and looked across the aisle. Max was sitting beside a girl who had been filming on her phone nonstop since they boarded the bus. She flipped the camera to him and he waved, saying something Aaron couldn’t hear.

“...so then my company will control a good chunk of the cannabis market,” Weed Guy continued. “Supply chain. Accounting. Advertising.”

“Cool, man.” Aaron continued to stare across the aisle. Now Max was filming the girl while she did some kind of dance in her seat.

“I’m Brandon, by the way,” Weed Guy said. “Do you mind if I get your autograph? You know, in case the NBA picks you up. I think you’re good enough. I was at the Sweet Sixteen game last year with the pep band. That half-court shot you made was epic. We should’ve won. I think the referees were bribed or something—”

“Yeah, um, excuse me for a second.” Aaron got up from his seat, but before he could get to Max, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

“Aaron, do you remember what we agreed to before we hit the road?” Monica said. She was wearing giant purple earmuffs that swallowed her face.

“We’re supposed to sit with our assigned batch partner and synergize.”

Monica smiled and patted his arm. “Exactly. You and Brandon should be *absorbing* each other’s knowledge. You can talk to your own teammates when we get to the park.”

He slumped back in his seat. Max hadn’t even looked his way. They barely saw each other this past week. Every time Aaron texted him to grab dinner, he’d get a reply hours later: *Sorry, I’m coding.*

“Hey, check this out.” Brandon nudged him with his phone. Aaron pretended to fall asleep. He was not in the mood to look at more pictures of cannabis strains or listen to why skunk weed gave you a better high than Acapulco Gold. But Brandon persisted. “Dude, you gotta see this.”

Aaron was about to suggest they spend the rest of the trip synergizing separately and silently—then immediately sat up when he realized what Brandon was showing him.

It was a video on Jackals Wild. With Archibald. The slimeball was sitting in the library with two other guys. They seemed unaware that they were being filmed.

*“Have you heard about Scudder joining some startup?”*

*“Yeah, the VR thing. Makes no sense.”*

*“Isn’t he with that Max Trellis-Chang guy? The one he punched? Fucking weird.”*

*“Scudder turned you down for an Asian dude. Harsh.”*

*“He’s off the basketball team. That’s all I care about.”*

*“So how much did you pay Max to steal his lucky underwear?”*

*“A few hundred bucks. Money well spent. Scudder’s nothing without basketball. He’ll never play again.”*

*“Damn, dude. That’s cold.”*

Brandon scrolled down to the comments. “Everyone’s pissed! Some people already threw eggs at his window. He’s a brother at Delta Phi, I think. Total fucker.”

“Who filmed this?”

“The uploader is anonymous, but I know who it is. It’s my friend Carl. He’s into ghost hunting and hides cameras all over campus trying to get evidence. He’s got one in the student union, the basement in Taggart, the drama school, everywhere. I guess he had one in the main library, too.”

At that moment, Aaron could have hugged Brandon. And Carl. Bramburgh’s most rabid students and the World Wide Web would now decide Archibald’s fate.

Synergizing wasn’t so bad after all.

“Tell Carl I said thanks.”

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The Billionaire Bros had driven up in a separate car and met them at the trailhead. They were both swaddled in matching puffer jackets and trekking pants—the material of which looked way too tailored and trim, like they’d just stepped out of a Patagonia catalog.

“Peeps, assemble!”

“Ready to plow some virgin snow?”

Cosmos hung near the back of the group. Winnie clung to Aaron’s arm for warmth. Max and Jared squabbled over their code. Zach pooh-poohed at another joke Oliver made. “Do we have to listen to Tweedledee and Tweedledum the entire hike?”

The sky this morning was a perfect blue. Skinny spruce trees surrounded them, leading the way to acres of untouched snow. Aaron expected Max to start making snow angels or surprising them with a snowball to the face. Normal

Underwear Thief behavior. But Max had his arms crossed, a steely look in his eyes—the most serious Aaron had ever seen him.

“Do you want to hit me with a snowball?” he asked.

Max turned to him, his eyes retreating to a mellow copper. He smiled but didn’t say anything.

“Are you nervous about meeting that new investor?”

“A little.”

Aaron squeezed his hand; a few seconds later, Max squeezed back.

Monica began handing out snowshoes. “Okay, everyone, strap on and follow me!” When Aaron reached for a pair, she shook her head. “Cosmos, you guys are with Ethan and Oliver.”

And there they were, right beside them, as if Monica had summoned them from the ice and the trees. Two sets of too-white teeth, brighter than disco balls. “Jonathan should be here any minute now,” Oliver said. “He’s been dying to meet you ever since I told him about your little venture.”

“But our business plan isn’t ready yet,” Max said.

“Don’t need it.”

The Billionaire Bros led them back to the parking lot. The rest of their batch had disappeared into the forest, Monica’s spirited shouts growing fainter and fainter. They were miles from any kind of building or shelter. Aside from their bus and the Billionaire Bros’ SUV, there were no other vehicles in the lot. They were the only people here.

Where were they supposed to have the meeting? Was this Jonathan guy even a real investor? What if Ethan and Oliver were actually serial killers who’ve been posing as venture capitalists? Was Monica their accomplice? What if their real plan was to lure innocent college students into the wilderness and sacrifice them to some demon so they could continue to accrue eternal wealth and—

*Honk! Honk! Honk!*

They all turned to see an RV roll into the parking lot. This wasn't one of those old Winnebagos associated with retired people and meth labs. This looked more like a motorcoach. It slid effortlessly into place beside the bus, and out popped a man wearing a fur trapper hat.

“Johnny Boy!” The Billionaire Bros steered them over to the shiny RV that probably cost more than the Scudder home.

“So this is Cosmos?” When Johnny Boy took off his sunglasses, Aaron's mouth fell open.

They weren't about to get sacrificed to evil demons.

While Aaron had a lot of catching up to do in the world of tech, even he knew that the guy now grinning at them was none other than Jonathan Zeger, founder of the revolutionary rideshare app Waagen. Barely out of his twenties, he was one of the youngest self-made billionaires in the world—and one of those people who had reached last-name fame: all you had to do was say ‘Zeger’ and everyone would know who you were talking about.

“Holy shit!” Jared cried.

The rest of their group remained speechless. They continued to remain speechless as Jonathan Zeger invited them up to his RV. It was like walking into an actual house, except Aaron was quite certain everything in here was beyond anything he and his grandma could afford.

One side of the RV was taken up by an abnormally long leather sofa. The other side was the kitchen, complete with a giant refrigerator and marble dining table. Everything was glossy and clean and smelled of tangerines.

“Our interior designer told us to go ultra-modern,” Zeger said, gazing at their surroundings as if he, too, was seeing it for the first time.

“You have an interior designer for your *RV*?” Jared stopped to stare at the TV built into the refrigerator. “Holy shit.”

“Why not? And with your talents, you'll be able to afford one sooner than you think.”

“Have a seat, peeps.” Ethan motioned for them to get comfortable on the sofa. “Judging by your holy shits, you’re all probably aware that Jonathan is founder and CEO of Waagen, the biggest and most successful company in our portfolio. We took a risk seven years ago and it paid off big time.”

“And I think we’ve come across another Waagen,” Oliver said. “No one has heard of Cosmos yet, but you guys have a solid idea.”

Zeger tossed them bottles of sparkling water. “So tell me more about it.”

All eyes turned to Max.

“Well, uh...” He licked his lip. “We know that virtual reality has been underutilized so far. There’s so much more we can get out of it. Most of our lives take place online. We work online, shop online, communicate online. Why can’t we do more? Why do we still have to drive all the way to—”

Zeger drummed his fingers loudly on the marble table. “I’m gonna stop you right there. You’re giving me the elevator pitch. I’ve already heard it from Ethan and Oliver. This is what I want to know: how scalable is your software?”

“Scalable?”

“How easy is it to add features? Add users?”

“We’ve been working on that. Jared and I—”

“Wait, wait!” Zeger scanned their faces, as if going through a police lineup. “This is a game I like to play with new people.” He pointed at Zach. “You’re Jared! You’ve got that Jared-ness about you.”

Zach smiled politely and shook his head; then in a whisper that only Aaron heard: “Tweedle Dumber.” Only Zach remained unimpressed by everything so far. His jaw didn’t drop when they entered the RV, nor did he seem to care that they were in the presence of Jonathan Zeger.

“*You’re* Jared!” Zeger pointed at Winnie next. “Everything’s unisex now, am I right? I’ve got a girl working



for me named Dexter. Can you believe it? Dexter!”

“I’m Jared.” The real Jared raised his hand. “We’ve been going through bugs in our code, but we’ve built it to be as future-proof as possible. Max actually came up with his own language that could replace VR’s reliance on C++.”

“Oh? A new programming language?” The Billionaire Bros and Zeger circled their heads around in unison, three gargoyles bearing down on Max. “You never mentioned that in your application,” Ethan said.

“It’s actually more like a dialect of C++.”

“And it works?”

“I brought my laptop with me,” Max said. “It’s on the bus. I can show you.”

When he returned, the Billionaire Trio rubbed their chins. Max had pulled up the grocery store simulation, the same one he’d shown Aaron the day of their first kiss. Aaron hoped no one could see him blushing.

“This isn’t VR,” Oliver said. “It’s augmented.”

“Right.” Max pressed a button, and the grocery store started playing jazzy music. “But the code translates perfectly to VR. We just need to manufacture the right headset that can support our software.”

More chin rubbing.

Zeger grabbed hold of the laptop and started clicking and typing. “Shit. Five hundred megabytes? No lag?”

“And it’s lossless,” Jared pointed out, chest puffed with pride.

“How’s that possible? That’s less than half a gigabyte. Most simulations of this quality are at least two gigs.”

“We developed a separate algorithm,” Max said. “Arbitrary compliant compression. It complements the new language. It took us a while to figure out, but after some tests, we ran it. And it works. It works perfectly.”

Even more chin rubbing.

“Arbitrary compliant compression,” Zeger mused. “A curious thing.”

The other two Billionaire Bros were less convinced.

“We’ve certainly never seen anyone treat VR—or augmented reality, for that matter—as something that can save people *time*,” Ethan said. “You’ve taken something sexy and made it...incredibly mundane.”

“Dull, almost,” Oliver added.

“I thought you’d have something cooler to show us. This is a snoozefest.”

Aaron saw Max’s face sag. It made his own blood run hot. His fist clenched. He wanted to smash those billionaire teeth into tiny little dust particles.

“Which is why we want to be your lead investors,” Oliver said.

*Wait—what?*

Ethan let out a howling laugh, causing the RV to tremble. “Got you good, didn’t we? My peeps, we’ve been having meetings about you since we got your application for the incubator.”

“The best ideas solve a simple problem,” Oliver said. “People want convenience. That’s what you’re offering.”

“And what *we’re* offering *you* is twelve million dollars.”

*Holy hell.*

Everyone stopped breathing. Or maybe just Aaron. It was as if all the snow in Maine got dumped on him at once, numbing his mind. He wasn’t sure if he heard that right. Twelve million dollars? They didn’t even have customers yet. Or any revenue. All they had was Max and Jared’s code.

“Twelve million at ten percent,” Ethan said. “That puts your valuation at a hundred twenty million. You know what that means, don’t you? You’ll be courted by every big-name VC once word of our offer gets out. But you won’t have to worry about them. We’ll be the ones taking care of you.”

Winnie raised her hand.

“Yes, peepette?”

“Her name is Winnie,” Zach said.

She seemed to hesitate before speaking, then asked, “The twelve million is just from the three of you? From Toadstool?”

“Yes, we’re your lead investors,” Ethan said. “Jonathan and his company are part of the Toadstool family, so we’re keeping it...all in the family.” Another rumbling laugh.

“What’s a lead investor?” Aaron said without thinking. He immediately felt like a dunce. He was undoubtedly the least sophisticated person in this room. His leg began to jitter up and down, prompting Winnie to reach out and hold it in place.

“A very good question.” Oliver strode over to the refrigerator as if he owned the place and pulled out an apple. “Don’t be afraid of ignorance, my little peeps. Embrace your lack of knowledge. Grow from it.” He took a bite. “Lead investors are like a startup’s grandparents. They will love you more than other investors, shell out the most money, and give you all the advice you need. Once you’ve got one, you’re peachy.”

Both Max and Jared seemed to have lost their ability to speak or blink after hearing ‘twelve million dollars,’ so Winnie was the one to ask, “Can we think about it?”

“Of cour—”

“We’ll take it,” Max blurted.

“Max, are you sure?” Winnie whispered.

“I’m sure. This will be good for us. We can make some headsets, hire some other people, go straight to Series A funding.”

The billionaires traded a smile between them that Aaron couldn’t interpret.

“Your CEO has spoken.” Oliver munched on his apple, sending out mists of juice. “We’ll get the paperwork started.

Jonathan will come back in three weeks and we can finalize everything then.”

“There’s just one more thing,” Ethan said, grinning big. “We’ll need you to move to California by the end of the summer.”

## 22

“Absolutely not.” Zach had his lips pressed in the thinnest line. He stood by the door to Max’s room, arms crossed. “They’re asking us to drop out of school. No way.”

The five of them had been arguing for two days straight. Well, it was more like Max and Zach doing all the loud talking while the rest of their group watched. Aaron scratched at the carpet with his fingernail. He didn’t know how to contribute to the conversation, so he simply kept his mouth shut.

“What’s the point of finishing college when we’re already getting paid?” Max said. “We finally have funding. Legit funding. From people who actually know what they’re doing.”

“But it doesn’t make sense,” Winnie finally piped up. “We aren’t making any money yet. That kind of funding is usually for startups that already have some kind of traction.”

“It just means they really believe in us. They think our idea is worth the big risk.”

Aaron was more concerned about the moving to California part.

Why did the Billionaire Bros want them to do that when they could just work out of the incubator here in Greenloch? Despite the appeal of heading out west, Aaron wasn’t ready to

do it so soon—and not without a degree. His grandma had worked hard raising him and teaching him to value education. A college education was his most valuable asset. He had nothing else to fall back on. There was the lottery money...but he didn't dare touch that without Max's approval.

"I think it'd be a mistake to leave Bramburgh." It wasn't until he noticed his friends staring at him that he realized he'd said it out loud.

"It would be a mistake to *stay*," Max said. "You want to give up twelve million dollars and a chance at making even more?"

"I thought you said money isn't everything."

"I said having money isn't the answer to everything."

"That means the same thing."

"No, it doesn't," Max countered. "Money isn't the answer to everything, but it's the answer to *some* things. We used to have nothing. Now we've got *some* thing."

Jared lay on the floor and closed his eyes. "Dude, this is turning into an econ lecture."

"I'm just saying," Aaron continued, "that you're giving up an education that millions of people would kill for. Ethan and Oliver graduated from Bramburgh, but they're telling us we don't have to? Doesn't that seem weird to you? I thought they were supposed to be guiding us. All that talk about 'knowledge' and 'learning.' I'd love to move to California, but not before I've graduated."

Everything about Max seemed to harden, then. His eyes narrowed. "What do *you* know? You haven't even declared a major. You don't even know what you want to do with your life."

Aaron's cheeks burned, as if Max had just slapped him. Those words hurt more than any basketball injury he'd suffered. This wasn't the same underwear thief who'd barged in like a happy tornado while he was in the shower, who'd spun around and around in the snow when they were in

Augusta, who'd held his hand in the Jackal's Den. This was an ugly replica.

"You're an asshole."

Right as it came out, Aaron wanted to take it back. But his blubbering mouth had tipped the first domino.

There was a second of stifled tension. Coppery eyes flared red. Then the explosion: "*I'm* the asshole? Y'all hearing this right now?"

"Oh shit," Jared whispered, "he's gone full Texan."

"*I'm* the asshole for inviting you to join my startup? For getting us into the incubator? For writing a piece of software that could change the world and make all ya'll rich as fuck? Now that I'm fixin' to leave, y'all want to stay and waste your time in fake-ass Silicon Valley when we could be living in the real thing with real people who're doing actual things with their lives? People who aren't sitting around in college learning shit theory and writing worthless papers? That makes *me* an asshole?"

A thick carpet of silence settled around them. The only thing moving was Max's chest as it heaved up and down. His fists were balled tight. "I'm such an asshole," he gritted out, "that I'm giving Aaron all of our lottery winnings."

"What?" Aaron pushed himself off the floor. "Max, what are you—"

"I've got funding now, and Cosmos is on a path to earning money. So you can take the Mega Jackpot. You need it more than anyone here."

Another slap.

"I am *not* a charity." Aaron tried to keep his voice from cracking.

Max glared at him. It was such a mean look, so nasty and unexpected, that it knocked Aaron back. "I'm not being charitable," Max said, every word growing colder, "I'm giving you your severance package."

"Oh shit," Jared whispered again, "still in Texan mode."

Heat spread through Aaron's face. He must have looked like a baboon's bum right now. He didn't want the money; he never did. He wanted Max. But not this version of Max. The guy currently sneering at him was so unrecognizable that Aaron wondered if he'd been dreaming up his underwear thief this whole time.

"Max, can we talk about this in priv—"

"How dare you!" a sharp voice cut over him.

Winnie was staring Max down.

Aaron had no idea his kindhearted friend was capable of looking so terrifying—or that her voice could reach the level of a yell. But there she was, coiled like a cobra, ready to strike.

"How *dare* you insult Aaron after everything he's been through! You're the one who got him suspended from basketball. You're the reason he's stuck here, listening to your selfish rant when he could be on the court, talking to NBA scouts! That was supposed to be his future, not this Silicon Valley pipe dream nonsense!"

Before Aaron knew what was happening, she grabbed him by the arm, pulled him through the door, and slammed it so hard that the person walking by squeaked in surprise.

---

By some misalignment in the stars, Aaron Scudder now found himself kicked off another team.

"You don't need someone like that," Winnie said. She was aggressively organizing his desk, stacking papers and lining up pens.

Aaron didn't say anything. There was nothing to say, and nothing he wanted to say. His mind did all the talking. A few minutes ago, it was telling him to "fuck Max, fuck that asshole," but now it was mewling and gasping and laughing—an unlimited supply of sound effects for all the wanking off he'd be doing (alone) in the foreseeable future.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" Winnie asked. "We can do a comedy. Or horror. Or we can go downstairs and get a



smoothie.”

“Can we just sit here? Forever?”

She smiled at him. “Okay.”

Their peaceful silence was interrupted by a *tat-tat-tat* at the door.

Winnie hopped to her feet. “If that’s you-know-who, he’s got some nerve.”

But it wasn’t Max.

“Hey, can I come in?” Zach stood outside, looking uncertain.

Everyone was behaving strangely today. It was as if Ethan and Oliver had come to town and cast a spell that made them all act the opposite of their usual personalities.

Zach took off his beanie and twisted it around his hands, like a kid who knew he was about to get in trouble. “I came by to apologize.”

Aaron allowed himself to check out Max’s friend. That was something he could freely indulge in now. But no matter how attractive Zach looked with his skater-boy hair and intense blue eyes, his presence did nothing to Aaron’s heart rate. All he felt was a massive *blah*.

“Why are you apologizing?” Winnie said. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Max had no right to treat Aaron like that. But you have to understand, he’s hardcore when it comes to his startup.”

Winnie frowned. “That doesn’t give him license to be a jerk.”

“You guys don’t have to talk to any of us ever again if you don’t want to. I just thought you deserved a proper apology. I don’t agree with those venture capitalists, either. They just waltz in waving big-money around. Max and Jared have an endgame in mind, but so do Ethan and Oliver. We just don’t know what...”

Zach continued to talk, but Aaron zoned out. He wanted to lie down and wake up to graduation. He'd take out his puzzle map, the one he used to stare at when he was a kid imagining his parents on all sorts of adventures, and he'd find a place to start his new life—somewhere far, far away from California and Texas.

---

The room was dark the next time he opened his eyes. Zach was gone. Winnie was slouched over his desk, snoring softly. He checked his phone. 10:28 p.m. He'd conked out for three hours.

No texts or missed calls.

Fine by him.

He was now free of Max's weirdness and random randomness and his foreign music and his mouth that tasted like lobster rolls and that annoyingly tight butt... All right. He would delete Max's number. The earlier the purge, the calmer the mind. His finger floated over the 'delete' button...

Maybe he could do it after his physics assignment. Nothing like damped harmonic oscillators and diffractions to get your mind off a dude.

After tucking a groggy Winnie into bed, he took his place at the desk. He was halfway through a problem set when he decided to check his email. If Max had messaged him, then Aaron would have the satisfaction of trashing it before reading a single word. He might even mark it as spam, and maybe Max would get flagged and incur the wrath of the IT department. Hah!

There was nothing stopping Aaron from revealing Max as the hacker who sent the Illuminati email their freshman year. Once the school had a lead, it would be easy to look for bread crumbs and trace it all back to Underwear Thief.

That would be a rotten thing to do, though. And Underwear Thief had left his inbox alone tonight.

But there *was* a new message. From someone else. Someone Aaron had given up on. He did a double take. He'd just woken up, and his eyes were still adjusting. Maybe he read it wrong.

Except he didn't.

After all these months, Coach Henderson and the athletic department were finally acknowledging his existence again. The subject line made his chest grow warm: **Reinstatement Hearing - Attendance Required**

He had never been so happy to receive such a bureaucratic email.

# 23

The incubator quivered with activity. Students zipped across the open floor plan, a chatty line formed behind the coffee machine, and markers squeaked across giant whiteboards.

Max continued to stare at his computer screen. It was the only way to stay focused. The last time he looked up, he thought he saw a tall guy with yellow hair...until the guy turned around and Max realized it was just the dude with the composting startup.

“Have you talked to those girls doing AI?” Jared said, plunking down next to him. “They’re making a chatbot that can help you learn any language. Even Elvish!”

“Did you find anyone who knows security?” Max asked. “We’ll need a network admin soon.”

“Before we get into that, my dad wants to know if he can advertise with us.”

“No, we are not running ads for Shapiro Motors.”

Someone walked by wearing a Jackals Basketball sweatshirt. Max turned away and cemented his eyes back on the screen.

“Just apologize to him.” Jared rolled his chair closer. He was in serious, older-brother mode once more. The two of

them were what remained of Cosmos—how it was and how it should have been all along. Zach still came over to study and hang out in Max’s room; they still went to the diner together; still best friends: Max and Jared the engineers, Zach the enviro-lawyer. Nothing had changed. Nothing at all.

Except everything had changed.

Max busied himself with editing their code and feigned obliviousness to his friend’s advice. “What? Apologize to whom?”

“If those hot AI girls weren’t here right now, I’d beat you with my keyboard.” Jared flicked at Max’s ear.

“Dude, what the hell!”

“You’re hardly working, man. You keep staring at that guy over there who looks like Aaron.”

“He looks nothing like Aaron. He has a nicer face,” Max lied. “And why should I apologize? I was only stating my opinion. Aaron didn’t agree with it. So it means we’re incompatible. I don’t have to apologize for wanting what’s best for the business.”

The words came out, but they were loaded with emptiness; they didn’t match what was in his heart. Because what Max wanted to do right now was bulldoze his way through Aaron’s door and tell him how sorry he was, that he’d been a prick and a dick and a rancid asshole.

But, somehow, apologizing this time seemed so much harder than apologizing for getting Aaron kicked off the basketball team.

Apologizing to a stranger or someone he didn’t care about was easy: all he had to do was put on his best shame-face, say what the offended wanted to hear, and they’d go their separate ways. But after getting to know Aaron—what he tasted like, the feel of his body, his deepest thoughts—suddenly, no apology seemed good enough. All the code in the world couldn’t delete the hurtful things he’d said.

What if Aaron had already started throwing darts at pictures of his face? Or made a voodoo doll of him? Worst of

all, what if Max apologized, and Aaron still shut the door in his face?

The ball was in Max's court, but he had no idea how to make his shot.

Which was why, later that night, he lay awake with William P. Zhang on the pillow next to him. "I feel embarrassed," he told his father, "and I feel like a piece of shit."

William P. Zhang responded with that perpetual smile. His newest photo had been taken outside a BART station in Daly City: "Reunion with Shannon!"

Who the hell was Shannon?

The next photo revealed Shannon to be a bulldog his father had fostered two years ago.

In a few weeks, Max would be in California, just a BART ride away from William P. Zhang. Maybe this was it—all of his hard work, getting Ethan and Oliver to notice him—maybe it was all meant to bring him one step closer to his father. It was a sign. He had to go. California was waiting. California was where he belonged.

He just needed to talk to Aaron first.

But how?

Aaron was a simple guy. Not a simpleton—but simple and thoughtful. That was how Max should approach his apology. Scrolling through William P. Zhang's photos with Shannon the bulldog, he noticed that his father had brought her a bag of treats. Gifts! Yes, Max would give Aaron a sincere gift. He started typing ideas down. Something simple and thoughtful.

His gaze fell on the little soap horse that Aaron had carved for him. It stood proudly on his desk, unashamed of its mutant looks. Maybe he could give Aaron his own zodiac animal. Aaron was a Snake, and every animal in the zodiac had a "secret friend" (no, not *that* kind of secret friend). Zodiac friends were meant to help each other, like BFFs. And the Snake's secret friend was the Monkey.

That was it!

He would make Aaron a Monkey for extra luck. His roommate had leftover clay from architecture projects; he'd use that.

A clay Monkey. Simple and thoughtful.

Worst case scenario: Aaron would punch him again.

Best case: they would remain friends.

Just friends.

# 24

How long did it take to permanently evict a guy from your memory? Aaron was on day nine. He had no problem concentrating when he was in class. But everywhere else? There wasn't an inch of campus that didn't bear the mark of Underwear Thief. They had hung out and made out all over the place.

It had been the most exhilarating feeling when Max tapped a foot to his under the tables in the dining hall; when they trudged up the hill together, their jeans speckled with snow and salt; when they were in Aaron's room, just the two of them, no need for words or clothes. Normal things like studying and eating became a hundred—a thousand, infinite—times better when the guy you liked was laughing beside you.

Except Max had never really liked him after all. He was devoted to his startup. That was his true love—and Aaron's single consolation: at least he got dumped for computer code, and not a hotter dude.

It also made him wonder: if he had still been on the basketball team, would he have chosen the sport over the guy? March Madness glory over spending time developing a relationship?

He didn't know.



His grandma had taught him to prioritize his studies above everything else. She was right. He'd gotten into Bramburgh, and he wasn't about to squander this opportunity.

Max was moving to the land of earthquakes, fake people, and bad traffic; and good luck trying to save any money in San Francisco—hah! Meanwhile, Aaron would be suiting up in his Jackals Basketball jersey once again, as long as he didn't make a fool of himself at the reinstatement hearing. He'd have his teammates back, Benny and George and the other guys. He had Winnie. Who cared about some crazy underwear thief.

“Whatcha thinkin' 'bout?”

An elderly woman stood in front of him. She looked at his name tag. “Aaron. My grandson's name is Aaron.”

“I'm sorry, ma'am, let me ring you up.” He didn't even realize he'd spaced out. Good thing Marge wasn't here. Noah was restocking the sodas at the back of the store.

“Someone keeping you down?” the woman asked. “You look like a girl just ran away with your heart.”

“No. No girl.” *Just a boy who loves his code more than me.*

Wait. Why was he thinking about *love*? Weird.

He rang up the final item and handed the woman her change. “Thank you for shopping at Casco Mart. I hope you have a great day.”

“I hope *you* have a great day.” She handed him the bag of Goldfish crackers she'd just bought. “I was going to give this to my grandson, but I think you need it more. Put a smile on your cunnin' little face.”

Noah sidled up to the counter after the woman had left. “My friends and I have a bet going on,” he said. “You'll get Bramburgh to the Final Four next year. You're back on the team, right?”

“I still have the hearing next week. If it goes well, I think I can start practicing again in October.”

“You’re my favorite player, you know. You don’t celebrate whenever you dunk or make a good shot. You just play. And you’re really smart.”

“Oh. Thanks, I appreciate that.” Was this what it felt like to have a little brother? Unconditional adoration? Maybe he *could* be a teacher. Have a bunch of little brothers and sisters. It was a thankless job, but it was way better than working with people like the Billionaire Bros.

And then they were in front of him.

He didn’t even hear them walk in. They were like crocodiles, appearing out of nowhere to chomp your leg off.

“My peep!” Oliver called before the door had even closed. “This where you been hiding out?”

“Haven’t seen you at the incubator lately,” Ethan said. He nodded at Noah. “What’s up, junior peep?”

Noah gave him a blank look. Teenager-speak for: *You repulse me.*

“This place, man,” Oliver marveled, surveying the shop, “nothing’s changed. Is Marge still here? She was so hot back then. Junior peep, give me a rating. Marge’s ass. One to ten.”

Noah picked up the broom and began to sweep. Translation: *You are not worth the opening of my mouth and the draining of my saliva.*

“Marge is a one,” Aaron said, “because she’s the first in command here. She’s a great boss. Everyone respects her.”

“Boss lady now, huh? Hot.”

Aaron straightened a display of candy bars to keep his hands from lunging at Oliver’s neck. “Can I help you find anything?”

“Yeah, you can help us find the rest of Cosmos,” Ethan said. “What the hell happened to you? Is the band breaking up?”

“We thought it would be better to leave the business to Max and Jared.” These guys didn’t deserve to know the

details.

“You’re missing out on all that equity.” Oliver opened a pack of gum from the counter. “I’ll pay for this later. Did you know that chewing gum helps with heartburn? True story, I was at this bar in Los Gatos—”

“No one wants to hear how you almost threw up on the Netflix interns,” Ethan said. He turned back to Aaron. “So you’re just going to walk away from the money?”

“Doesn’t bother me.”

“Damn, you are one weird conundrum. Who walks away from twelve million dollars?”

Oliver strolled to the back of the store. “Hey, do you have those microwave pizzas? I just smoked a joint with Brandon. Used to break out the bong on the reg when I was your age. Always came here for the pizza afterwards.”

“And Marge,” Ethan added. “Bazoink.” The Billionaire Bros high-fived.

“The pizza’s in the back,” Aaron said. “We just got a new shipment. I’ll bring it out for you.” Anything to get a break from these two.

He slipped into the stockroom and rummaged around for the pizza. Outside, the booming voices of the Billionaire Bros could be heard questioning Noah on gravity and Marge’s boobs. Aaron wouldn’t be surprised if he stepped out to find Ethan and Oliver on the floor, knocked out from Noah’s broom.

Just as he was about to head back into the store, the billionaires’ voices lowered to a hush and their conversation took a different turn.

*“Good thing we moved here, huh?”*

*“I told you we’d find something. That Max kid is gonna make our stock fly higher than a stoner on steroids.”*

Aaron stood in place, ear to the door, pizza clutched to his chest.

*“Get ’em while they’re young and desperate. That way, they don’t question you.”*

*“Lossless compression for VR. And he wants to use it for fucking grocery shopping and the DMV. It’s like he doesn’t even know what he’s created.”*

*“So when do we tell him?”*

*“Tell him? He’ll be drowning in so much money, he won’t be able to hear us.”*

*“He’s going to figure it out, eventually. The kid’s not dumb.”*

*“When he finds out, the papers will be signed. What’s he got to complain about, then? He’ll be richer than all his friends. He can retire and get himself a robot girlfriend or whatever.”*

*“We should have funded that android flight attendant last year.”*

*“Ethan, we’ve been over this shit. Androids will eventually become sentient, and when that day comes, humans are fucked. Do you want your beautiful twin daughters slaving away for a machine? Uncle Oliver’s just looking out for them. Androids are like crypto. Everyone thinks it’s cool until shit hits the fan.”*

*“This is exactly why Teresa told me to stop inviting you to Thursday dinners.”*

The frozen pizza box soaked into the front of his shirt. Aaron didn’t move. He had no idea what the Billionaire Bros were talking about, but it didn’t sound like good news for Max.

He started to reach for his phone, then paused. Whatever he said, however he said it, Max wouldn’t believe him; he was way too smitten with Ethan and Oliver. Calling him would only lead to another fight.

And why should Aaron be worried? He wasn’t even part of Cosmos anymore. Let Max deal with it. Asshole to assholes.

But.

A sudden image of Max spinning in the snow after they'd claimed the Mega Jackpot, a snowflake stuck to his eyelash.

That had been it.

The moment Aaron's heart caught fire.

He had known then that he'd never meet another person like Max. He didn't want anyone else. There would never be another underwear thief for him.

This was his chance. He needed to do something. Get evidence of the Billionaire Bros. Then he could have proof, let Max know, tell him everything...

"Yo, my peep!" Oliver shouted through the door. "You okay back there?"

Aaron put down the pizza box. His brain swished and swirled.

"Are you doing blow?" Ethan called. "Don't worry, we won't rat you out, man. We just want to know where we can get some. Who's your supplier?"

Swished and swirled. Swished and swirled. Swished and swirled.

Then it came to him.

"I'll be right out!" he shouted back.

He smiled. He knew exactly what to do.

# 25

Carl the ghost hunter lived right across the hall from Max.

“Whoah, Aaron Scudder!”

“Hey, Carl, are you busy?”

The ghost hunter remained stunned for a second, but quickly recovered. “I was just writing up the agenda for our paranormal society meeting. What’s up?”

Aaron threw a glance over his shoulder to make sure Max wasn’t coming down the hall. “Can you help me with something?”

“Is it about a ghost?” Carl ushered him inside. “Did you feel a presence?”

“No, um...”

“It’s okay. I won’t think you’re crazy. This is what I’m all about. So where did you come across the spirit? I think I caught something in Taggart the other day. Was it in Taggart?”

“Actually...” Aaron spotted the collection of cameras spread across Carl’s desk. “I was wondering if I could borrow your equipment.”

Carl gave him a curious look. “What are you filming?”

“A couple of no-gooders.” He explained his suspicions, and how he needed to get more information out of the Billionaire Bros.

“So you think they’re out to cheat Max?” Carl said.

“I don’t really know. I’m not sure what they’re going after.” His anger returned. Max had poured every last bit of energy and soul into his startup. Those billionaire jerks didn’t deserve him. Max wanted to make a difference; the billionaires just wanted to become even richer billionaires.

“We can hide a camera in the incubator.” Carl palmed a small round object that looked like a black eyeball. “Slip this in somewhere, and we’re good to go. I can direct the feed to your phone.”

“Will they find out?”

“Not if we hide it well enough.”

It was then that Aaron realized how ridiculous this sounded. Sneak into Ethan and Oliver’s office to plant a hidden camera? If they got caught, Aaron could kiss his basketball hopes and his scholarship goodbye. He’d be expelled. And he’d drag Carl with him.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” he said.

Carl bounced the eyeball camera in his hand. “It’s up to you. But if you want my opinion, I think it’s worth the risk.”

“Why?”

“You like Max. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have knocked on my door asking me to help you spy on these dangerously rich people.”

Who knew an amateur ghost hunter possessed such wisdom.

Aaron clung to the image of Max in the snow. If he let the Billionaire Bros have their way, he would never see Max again. And that was a risk he wasn’t willing to take.

“Okay,” he said before he changed his mind, “let’s do this.”

Carl nodded, all business. “Awesome. Meet me back here at midnight. We’ll plant the badger then.”

“Sorry...plant the badger?”

“I don’t know. I just thought it sounded cool.”

---

Winnie wanted to plant the badger with them.

“I thought you were anti-Max,” Aaron said.

They had just finished dinner and were heading back to his room. Winnie popped a mint in her mouth. “That day I yelled at him, something happened,” she said. “It was like another person took over my body. But not in a bad way. It felt good.”

“You kind of scared me.”

“I’ve been the nice, quiet girl for a long time.” A fresh layer of grit swelled in her voice. “I think I’m ready to be more.”

“But you could get in trouble.”

She paused in front of the elevator. Her eyes held a new kind of energy, a long-dormant spark now waking up. “Aaron, you’re my best friend. If you’re willing to risk it all for Max, then I’m willing to risk even more to help you.”

Back in his room, they sat cross-legged on the carpet. “How many cameras are we planting?” Winnie asked.

“Just one, I think. In their office.” Aaron hadn’t really thought the plan through. He could now cross off CIA agent from his list of potential careers.

“Aside from their office, where do Ethan and Oliver spend most of their time?”

“Um...Burning Man?”

They doubled over in laughter.

“I think Ethan goes to Burning Man, and Oliver goes to Coachella,” Winnie said.

“What about Jonathan Zeger?”



“He probably does peyote in the desert every 2.5 years to ‘find himself.’”

They laughed again.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Aaron sighed, “how are they so rich?”

“Because they know how to BS their way through life. The greater your ability to BS, the more successful you are.”

“Should we be doing that?”

Winnie tapped a pen against her chin. “I think we should do what we’re good at. Everyone has a secret weapon. Theirs is just knowing what to say to get people to give them money.”

“Sometimes it seems like we have to be like them to get anywhere in life.” Aaron thought of Max and his pranks. Max had the skills to navigate and survive Silicon Valley, but he was nothing like Oliver and Ethan and Jonathan Zeger. He wasn’t greedy like them.

“There’s still room for people like us.” Winnie patted his hand. “Plenty of room.”

In the end, they decided to hide two cameras: one in the Billionaire Bros’ shared office at the incubator, and another in the moose head overlooking the main floor.

The incubator was open 24/7 and free of security cameras to “foster an environment of truth and creativity unshackled from the bonds of insidious totalitarianism,” as Oliver had explained on their first day. At least their kookiness was good for something. Planting the secret cameras would be quick and easy. The hard part was getting the information.

Aaron had eight days to figure out what the billionaires were up to. Jonathan Zeger would be flying in next week with the paperwork. After that, Max would be gone—out of Aaron’s life as quickly as he’d barged into it.

The thought sent his stomach careening towards a bottomless pit.

He and Winnie spread out on the floor with their textbooks and waited for midnight.

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“Shit.”

Aaron, Winnie, and Carl stood outside the incubator as snow piled up around them. The lights were on, and the Billionaire Bros could be seen in their glass-walled office taking turns hitting up a bong.

“Why are they still here?” Aaron groaned. “Do they not go home?”

Winnie drew her coat tight. “What should we do?”

“Distraction,” Carl said. “One of us has to get them out of the office. I can do it. They don’t know me. I’ll pretend I got lost or something.”

“What are you going to tell them?”

Carl’s breath came out in light swirls as he thought about it. Finally, he said, “I have no idea. But if they’re stoned, it shouldn’t be too hard to get them to agree to something dumb.”

“Here, take this.” Aaron handed him the keycard to the incubator. He still hadn’t turned his copy in.

As Carl prepared to swipe inside, Aaron and Winnie crouched behind a bench on the other side of the street. Snow continued to cover the sidewalk and everything around them.

If Max were here, he would already be rolling up snowballs in preparation for a midnight snowman or on his back catching snowflakes with his tongue. Instead of spying on a couple of stoned billionaires, Aaron could have been watching Max dancing in the snow, lips chapped, but Aaron wouldn’t care, he’d still kiss him, he’d kiss Max even if he had thorns growing out of his mouth—

“They’re coming outside,” Winnie said.

Across the street, Carl pointed vaguely down the block. Ethan and Oliver were turning their heads as if anticipating a knife-wielding murderer to pop out. The wind carried their voices over, loud and crisp in the late-night stillness.

“Which way do you think he went?” Ethan asked.

“I’m not sure,” Carl said, “maybe that way?” He continued to point at nothing in particular.

“Don’t worry, little bro peep,” Oliver said, “we’ll help you find your dog! What’s his name again?”

“Er...Bob. Bob Barker.”

The billionaires staggered down the pavement. “Bob!” Ethan called out. “Yo, Bobby!”

They turned the corner and disappeared from view. Carl signaled to Aaron and Winnie before trailing after the billionaires. “I think I see Bob’s tracks! This way!” Their voices faded into the wind.

Aaron and Winnie quickly made their way to the incubator. While she snuck into the upstairs office, Aaron grabbed a chair and plopped it under the moose head.

“Hello, Bernie,” he said. “I’m just going to tickle your nose for a bit.” He pulled out the heavy-duty tape Carl had given him and fixed it to the back of the camera. Then he reached into Bernie’s left nostril and stuck the little camera inside. The angle wouldn’t be good for video, but they could still hear everything.

He jumped off the chair and studied his handiwork. Excellent! No one would be able to tell that there was a camera up Bernie’s nose.

Maybe he *could* be a CIA agent.

Trotting upstairs, he found Winnie examining a sculpture in the Billionaire Bros’ office.

The space was much...starker than he expected. There was hardly any furniture—just two standing desks and a small credenza that looked like it was made of bamboo. No paintings, no books, no family photos. The glass walls made everything seem even emptier. A beautiful room filled with nothing.

Except for the strange sculpture on the credenza.

It was a ceramic of some sort. An icy blue figure with spikes all around. Aaron stepped closer and realized it was a dragon eating its own tail.

“An ouroboros,” Winnie said. She bent down to look into its mouth. “I put the camera in there. It was just wide enough to fit.”

“You think they’ll notice it?”

She pointed at the bong in the corner. “I think we’ll be fine.”

Before they had a chance to slip back out, the front door banged open.

“Crap,” Aaron whispered, pulling Winnie to the floor. They squatted behind a large flower pot on the second-floor landing.

“Are they back?” Winnie said.

It was too quiet to be the Billionaire Bros.

A second later, they heard someone opening a bag of chips.

“I’ll go check.” Aaron stayed low as he shuffled towards the stairs. Very slowly, he craned his neck over the landing—and breathed in relief. “It’s Carl.”

Downstairs, the ghost hunter greeted them with a mouth full of organic veggie sticks. “Did you plant the badgers?”

“Yeah,” Aaron said. “Where’s Ethan and Oliver?”

“Well, I tried to stall and lead them down Lewis Avenue, but then we passed a strip club and...that was where I lost them.”

The three of them exchanged muted chuckles. Winnie was the first to let out a full-blown laugh. She plucked a veggie stick from Carl and continued to laugh as she chewed. Soon, Aaron and the ghost hunter joined in, until the whole incubator was filled with their breathless laughter.

---

Half an hour later, Winnie was warming up in her dorm and Aaron was back in Carl's room. "I just connected the cameras to your phone," Carl said. "Check and see if it works."

Aaron pulled up the app and clicked on **moose cam**. Dark. Silent. He clicked on **ouroboros cam**. It showed an empty office.

"Looks like the bong brothers are still having fun with the ladies." Carl turned off his own phone. "I don't want to kick you out, but I have to get to bed. I've got an early class tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, I didn't mean to keep you up," Aaron said, jumping to his feet. "Thanks for helping us tonight. That was really cool of you."

"Of course! You're my hero. I can't just leave you hanging." Carl pulled a business card from the pocket of his utility belt. "This is my podcast," he said, his voice turning shy. "You can check it out if you want. But only if you want."

On the card was a sketch of a friendly ghoul wearing headphones. Aaron smiled and tucked it into his pocket. "I look forward to listening."

"Let me know if you have any problems with the camera footage," Carl said. "Or if you need to, you know, plant any more badgers."

Aaron opened the door and gave him a salute. "Will do. Thanks again, Carl. Tonight was actually fun."

He was still smiling when he turned around and bumped into someone out in the hall. "Oh, I'm sorry—"

Two coppery eyes stared back.

"Max..." Aaron's mouth dried up.

The coppery eyes shifted to Carl's door, then back to Aaron; they seemed to grow dimmer and sadder the longer Aaron stood there.

"Max, I was just... Carl and I..." A muddle of thoughts and words thrashed around in his head, but he couldn't seem to settle on anything coherent. Max was wearing cow-themed

pajama bottoms and his hair stuck out in a cute mess, reducing Aaron to an even bigger stammering fool. “Carl has cameras... We were just—” Shit, that sounded worse out loud. “It’s—it’s not like that. We were filming—crap, I don’t mean... I mean, I was asking Carl to help. There’s something I need to tell you—”

But Max was already turning back to his room. He gave Aaron a small, pained smile.

“Max, wait—”

The door clicked shut in his face.

## 26

Max locked the door behind him, even though he knew Aaron was too polite to force his way inside. What he didn't expect was the total silence. Aaron didn't even attempt to knock or talk to him through the door. Too polite to cause a commotion in the middle of the night. Not that Max would have opened the door for him anyway.

Starting tomorrow, he would stop using his door and start leaving the dorm through his window. He'd make a rope from his roommate's bedsheets. That might work. And then he could just rappel off the side of the building. No more running into Aaron and Carl on one of their booty calls.

Less than a minute later, Max gave in and peeked outside. Not that he expected Aaron to still be there, curled on the floor waiting for him. That was ridiculous. But he decided to scan the hallway just the same. Not that he was *looking* for Aaron. Nope. He was just making sure the floor was free of clutter and debris, in case any of his drunk floormates came stumbling back. He was simply looking out for their well-being.

Now that he was feeling neighborly, he should also check the bathroom. Not that Aaron would be in there. He just wanted to make sure the toilets were clear of vomit, so the custodial staff wouldn't have such a hard time in the morning.

The bathroom was as silent and empty as the hallway. This was where he was headed, anyway, before he ran into Aaron. He was simply taking a midnight pee, *not* hoping Aaron would come in and push him into one of the stalls and take him, quick and dirty.

As he washed his hands, he wondered if the lights in the lounge were off. He'd go check. Not that he expected Aaron to be sitting on the couch, waiting to talk to him. He was only going to check the lights and turn them off so Keesby Hall wouldn't waste so much electricity and charge so much for room and board.

The lounge was dark when he got there; the couch empty.

Max walked back to his room, buried himself under the covers, and didn't fall asleep until the first rays of sunlight slithered in through the window.

---

As soon as he woke up, he grabbed the unfinished clay monkey he'd been making for Aaron and began ripping it apart. Embarrassment flooded him. Of course Aaron had already moved on. He was tall and built and handsome. All he had to do was simply exist, and guys would find their way to him. Guys like Carl, who were probably willing to take more than blowjobs.

The clay monkey lay pathetically before him: arms broken off, tail a curly nothing, head leering up at him in a dead smile. It looked so childish. He'd spent all that time on a silly monkey charm for nothing. Aaron wasn't even thinking of him anymore. He was making freaky supernatural sex tapes with Carl!

And another, even more painful, realization: it was impossible to just be friends with Aaron Scudder. Max had caught every speckle of color in Aaron's eyes, touched every strand of yellow hair. Even the taste of Aaron still remained, no matter how many times Max brushed his teeth. Staying friends after all that—it would just turn into a game he could never win. He would always want the Eagle Scout.



Which was why he needed to get as far away as possible.

He opened his suitcase and started packing. He'd decided not to finish out the semester. Cosmos was taking up more and more of his time, and the sooner he could work on it without the distraction of school and other trivial nonsense, the better. Once the papers were signed and the check for twelve million dollars hit his bank account, he'd be on the next plane to San Francisco.

There was just one problem.

"I can't go with you," Jared said when they met up at the incubator that afternoon.

"What? We're supposed to get an apartment together. And—and talk to other investors together."

"My dad threatened to give Belinda away if I drop out." Jared looked as if he was on the verge of surrendering his one true love to a gang of pirates. "I can't lose her! She's supposed to win Miss Senior Canine Bergen County this year!"

"What if you transfer to Stanford?" Max suggested.

"Dude, I'm a junior. Transferring all those credits is a bitch. And Stanford already rejected me once; therefore, they can eat my shit."

"But...what am I supposed to do when I get there? I need you, man. You're my main guy. You're the only other person who knows everything about our company."

"You'll be fine," Jared said in his older-brother voice. "I'll keep doing whatever you need me to do here. It's only another year until I graduate. Then Belinda and I can move into your overpriced San Francisco apartment and we'll all live happily ever after."

Max suddenly didn't like the idea of moving to the other side of the country by himself. He'd always imagined Jared and Zach by his side, the three of them against the world. He didn't know anyone in California. His own father wasn't even aware of his existence. There was only Ethan and Oliver and Jonathan Zeger.

Strangers with money.

A tanned finger tapped the corner of his computer screen. Max looked up to see Oliver grinning at him; Ethan stood by with the same cloned smile. Were the two of them ever apart? Come to think of it, Max had never seen one without the other. They were like twin shadows.

“How’s it going?” Ethan said.

“Made any more commits since your last commit?” Oliver peered at the screen. “Damn, I miss using Git. Every time I pushed a commit, it was like having the greatest orgasm of my life. Again and again and agai—”

“Oliver, we’re not allowed to say ‘orgasm’ anymore in front of college students,” Ethan said. “Remember what happened in San Jose?”

“How was I supposed to know that intern was seventeen years old? She told me she was a sophomore at Berkeley!”

Max put his computer to sleep. He didn’t like it when other people hovered over his work—not even famous VCs who were about to own a piece of his startup. “I’ve been looking at apartments in the Bay Area,” he said. “The Tenderloin looks like an affordable neighborhood. Do you recommend it?”

The venture capitalists looked at him for a second, then laughed so loud and hard that the rest of the incubator paused to stare.

“What’s so funny?” Max wasn’t sure if they were laughing at him or...no, it definitely sounded like they were laughing at him. His face turned an awkward red. “The Bay Area is huge. I have no idea what anything’s like over there.”

“Little dude,” Oliver said, “we are giving you twelve million bucks, and you want to live in the *Tenderloin*?”

“I’m putting most of the money into Cosmos,” Max explained. “I don’t mind living somewhere less glamorous until the company starts turning a profit.”

That was something the VCs should have been happy to hear, but they only clapped him on the back and told him to

“Check out San Mateo” before wandering off to talk to the other startups.

Jared nudged Max with his phone. “What the hell is this shit?”

It was a listing for a studio apartment in San Mateo. Max looked at the rent.

\$5,300 a month.

He suddenly felt very, very tired.

# 27

There was a fly in the lecture hall. Aaron followed its aimless path as it zoomed to the front before buzzing towards the ceiling. It was winter. Why were there flies eavesdropping on a lecture about electromagnetism?

The guy sitting in front of him had his laptop screen split in two: half for note-taking, the other half full of computer code in red and teal and orange and a bunch of other colors. What was the point of all those colors? Why couldn't they use a single color? Why did computer science majors have to make everything so unnecessarily complicated? Why did they kiss you, and then kick you out of their startup the next day? Why did they continue to ignore your texts, even when it was obvious that you weren't hooking up with the ghost hunter from across the hall?

Up front, their professor sneezed, sending the fly racing in a spiral to the opposite wall.

The psychology behind this was so warped. Seeing Max get upset over Carl shouldn't have turned Aaron on. But it did. It meant there was a part of the underwear thief that wanted him back. And the only way to get Max to trust him was to show him the simple proof.

He checked the camera feed again. Ethan and Oliver hadn't been inside their office today. They had arrived at the incubator earlier this morning, and were heard under the moose head for a few minutes, chatting with one of the startups, but disappeared after that. Perhaps paying another visit to Wild Kitty's Exxxotic Cabaret.

"Have you found anything?" Winnie asked at dinner.

"Not yet," Aaron said. "All they talk about is harvesting teenagers for a blood transfusion."

"Why would they want that? They're only thirty-nine."

"So they can live to be two hundred years old instead of a measly one hundred."

"Do you think the elite will eventually find a way to live forever?"

Aaron snorted. "They want to colonize Mars. I wouldn't be surprised if they've been experimenting with immortality, too. There's probably a secret base in Antarctica where they do all their Frankenstein stuff."

"What about Max? You think he'll turn into one of those nutty rich people?"

"He's already nutty." Aaron smiled to himself. *And I like it.*

---

Back in his room, he left the camera feed running while he worked on a lab assignment for Modern Physics. Oliver and Ethan were still absent from the incubator, but sometime around 10 p.m. there was movement on the ouroboros cam. They were back in their office. Aaron watched as Ethan tossed his friend a shot glass.

*"Teresa hates it when I drink at home."*

*"Wasn't her dad an alcoholic?"*

*"Yeah, but I'm not."*

*"Does she like it up here? She must be going crazy."*

*“She’s not a fan of the weather. But the girls love it. We have a dozen snowmen in our yard right now.”*

*“Fuck, dude, we’re turning forty this year. You know what’ll be the best birthday present?”*

*“What?”*

*“Our own vineyard. In Sardinia.”*

*“Everyone we know has a vineyard and their own shitty wine brand. We’re not doing that.”*

*“Did you hear about Morovitch and Caldwell?”*

*“Those dumbos? What, they’re still trying to get permits to build their mega city in Nevada?”*

*“No, they’re funding that cargo drone company.”*

*“What? The one that turned us down? They’re going with Morovitch and Caldwell?”*

*“We can still get in when they open their next round of funding.”*

*“That’s not the point, Oliver. We just lost the biggest shares to the bozos of the Valley. Morovitch and Caldwell can’t even tie their own shoes! They have androids doing everything for them!”*

*“How many times do I have to tell you? We are not investing in androids!”*

*“Well, if we did, we’d have a more diverse portfolio.”*

*“Relax. Cosmos is in the bag. That’s our next home run.”*

Aaron dropped his pencil. He pulled the phone closer. The feed showed Oliver downing a shot.

*“Jonathan and the guys will be here Thursday, right?”*

*“Yeah. It’ll be smooth sailing after that.”*

*“I kind of feel bad for the kid.”*

*“It’s just business. He’ll understand. Eventually.”*

Understand what! Aaron stared at the screen, straining to hear more. But the billionaires were already slipping into their

coats. Seconds later, the video feed showed an empty office. He bit his pencil and punched at the mattress.

Thursday was only three days away. He needed solid evidence before then. What were Ethan and Oliver planning to do with Cosmos? Why were they throwing money at an idea that hadn't even *made* money?

There were plenty of scenarios.

Could they be pushing for more shares of the company and betting on future returns? Were they planning on forcing Max out as CEO? Aaron knew that some investors wanted more experienced business people to manage a young startup. Was that it? Were they demoting Max to the sidelines of his own company? But then why were they rushing to have him work in California?

Aaron could only guess.

He knew one thing for sure: Ethan and Oliver were *not* team players.

# 28

Max looked around his room. Soon to be his ex-room. A cardboard box held the few possessions he would be taking with him to California: his gaming PC, his poster of Alan Turing, and a couple of routers. That was what his life amounted to. Plastic and silicon and paper.

He thought about leaving a note for his roommate. He hadn't seen the guy in weeks, and wasn't sure if he was still alive or if he'd finally turned into a zombie. A note wouldn't hurt. He found a flyer for an upcoming campus scavenger hunt and scribbled on the back:

*Dear Pete, thanks for being such a great roommate. I'm withdrawing from Bramburgh. I leave you the rest of my instant cocoa and my spare USB cable. I hope you become a successful architect. Please get more sleep. Sincerely, Max*

Perfect.

Everything was set.

There was just one more thing. He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the deliberately goofy poems Aaron had written him.



*Stinky bathroom crud*

*Raccoon in the dining  
hall*

*College mysteries*

One poem made him pause. It was the most recent one—the last one.

*Python, Java, C*

*Programming confuses  
me*

*Only you make sense*

Throwing these poems out would make the most sense. A clean slate. New state, new city, new Max. He would dedicate the rest of his life to Cosmos. His software would never let him down. It would never disappoint him.

It would never hurt him.

He gathered the poems and let them hover over the trash. Five seconds passed. Ten. Fifteen. Almost a full minute later, his hand still dangling over the trash can, the door to his room swung open and his friends burst inside.

“Oh, good, you’re still here,” Jared panted. Zach’s head popped up behind him.

Max stuffed the poems back into his desk.

“We wanted to give you this, for good luck.” Jared handed him a box of doughnuts. The largest one had a message written in electric blue icing: YOU SUCK.

“What?” Max looked at his friends, confused.

Zach glanced down. “Oh my gosh, Jared! I told you I should’ve been the one to hold it. Now it’s smeared!”

“Oops.”

“It’s supposed to say ‘You Rock,’” Zach explained, shifting to a gentler tone, “because you’re going to rock the meeting today and all the meetings you’ll have as Cosmos’s CEO.”

Max cradled the doughnuts to his chest. “Thanks, guys.”

“You can eat them later,” Jared said, “in case you’re feeling queasy now.”

“I’m just signing the paperwork today. Easy stuff.” For some reason, though, Max *did* feel queasy. He wanted his friends to be with him at the meeting. But they both had quizzes and group presentations they couldn’t miss.

“Text us when you’re done, and we’ll go to the diner after,” Zach said. “You can order all the chicken wings you want.”

“Okay.”

A sudden sadness swept over him. Even though he still had two whole days left before his flight to California, he missed his friends already. He steeled his mind. He needed to focus on the positives: moving out west would mean progress for Cosmos, a chance for him to really get the company going, and... William P. Zhang.

The thought of finally meeting his father filled him with a giddy kind of thrill; but also: nervousness and doubt and a level of fear he’d never experienced before. Just the idea of seeing William P. Zhang in the flesh—even speaking to him over the phone—terrified him more than having to present his software in front of the top VC firms in Silicon Valley.

“Are you okay?” Zach gave him a worried look. “You don’t have to go through with this if you don’t want to. There are other investors out there, not just Ethan and Oliver. I’m sure a lot of them would love to meet you if you reached out.”

“No, it’s not that.” Max straightened, setting the box of doughnuts down. “I’m fine.”

“Have you told your mom yet? About California?” Jared asked.

Max felt a different sort of fear course through him. His mom and his grandparents would turn apeshit if they found out he was dropping out of Bramburgh. That was why he planned on telling them *after* the twelve million dollars were safely in his account—once he had the money, they wouldn't be able to talk him out of it.

“I'll call my family after the meeting,” he said.

*And if they disown me, I'll still have William P. Zhang.*

---

The conference room in the incubator must have been decorated by Bigfoot. Everything was huge, from the beefy tree trunk of a table to the imposing high-back chairs. A giant TV ran the length of one wall. Nestled in the corner was a pine tree that stretched to the ceiling. Max touched it: real.

He deposited himself into one of the ridiculously enormous chairs and waited. He was early. Way too early. The VCs and their lawyers—his lawyers now, too?—wouldn't be here for another twenty minutes. But Max had been too distracted in his own room. He wanted total silence for once, and all of Bramburgh was too noisy with memories.

The moose-shaped clock across from him ticked off another minute.

If he hadn't been such an idiot, he wouldn't be sitting here alone right now. That nonsense about being lonely at the top wasn't true at all. Not if you had real friends. Max wished his friends were beside him. And not just Jared and Zach. He thought of Winnie storming out of his room with Aaron. He still didn't know how to apologize to them.

*Hey, guys, so...I know I ruined Aaron's college basketball career and maybe his life, and I ruined everything again by trying to give him all the lottery money and basically telling him he's poor—but, uh, I'm sorry?*

Winnie would be the one punching him this time.

Maybe it was good that he was moving away. They would forget about him, and he would pretend to forget about them.

A fair tradeoff.

“My peep! You’re here! Hell yeah! Let’s do this!” The VCs and Jonathan Zeger blasted through the doors with such a whirlwind of energy that Max found himself gripping his chair for fear of blowing away.

“Ready to party?” Oliver said.

“Um...”

Two other people entered the room, a man and a woman in business suits holding thick stacks of paper.

“This is Alex and Alex,” Ethan said. “Can you believe it? Our lawyers have the same name!”

“Nice to meet y—” Before Max had a chance to introduce himself, Jonathan Zeger fist-bumped him on the shoulder. “After you sign everything, let’s go hike Cadillac Mountain.”

“Cadillac Mountain?”

“It’s how we get ready for Burning Man every year. Climb an actual mountain in the trenches of winter before transcending to the summit of your true self in the bloom of summer.”

“I...what?”

Ethan handed him a pen. “Just sign where the suits tell you.”

Alex and Alex slid the stacks of papers towards him.

“You look like you’re about to puke.” Jonathan draped himself over a chair, legs dangling off the armrest. “Is it the dining hall food? Be glad you are leaving that tripe behind. Nothing but Soylent and intermittent fasting for you, my friend. Embrace the freedom!”

“Our buddy over in the East Bay runs a biohacking company,” Ethan said. “We’ll set you up. Make you a new man. A turbo man. You can live to be two hundred, you know. Maybe longer. It’s all about self optimization.”

“I’m fine,” Max found himself saying for the second time that day.

The lawyers slid the papers closer.

“They’ll walk you through the legalese,” Oliver said. He retrieved a football from beneath the huge pine tree and tossed a spiral to Ethan.

The Alexes turned to Max. “Are you ready?”

He clicked the pen and watched as the football made another spiral across the room. Thought about Cosmos and everything he would get to accomplish after this. Thought about William P. Zhang.

“Yes, I’m ready.”

# 29

Aaron's foot tapping against the tiled floor was the only sound in the too-bright waiting room. "You're doing it again," Winnie said, laying a hand on his jittery leg. She pulled bottled water from her bag. "Drink something."

"It'll make me go to the bathroom."

"How long do you think the hearing will last?"

He shrugged. "An hour? Two?"

"I'm going to the vending machine," she said. "Do you want anything?"

"Just a stun gun. So I can knock myself out."

She smiled. "Be right back."

Aaron listened to her footsteps plodding down the shiny floors until they grew faint. Then he fished out his phone. He hadn't had time to check the camera footage today, what with preparing for his reinstatement hearing and cramming for a quiz earlier in the day.

He rewound the footage to this morning. The Billionaire Bros had barreled into their office around 7 a.m. with trays of coffee and bagels. There was someone else with them. It took

Aaron a second to identify Jonathan Zeger after the third billionaire took his sunglasses off.

*“Why does your office look like Ikea, but the rest of the incubator looks like a log cabin?”*

*“Have you heard of wabi-sabi?”*

*“Wasabi?”*

*“Wabi-sabi. Imperfection. The fusion of simplicity, nature, and emptiness.”*

Jonathan Zeger spoke into his wristwatch: *“Remind me to ask Irene about wabi-sabi.”*

*“She your feng shui consultant?”*

*“No, she’s this reiki healer I’ve been seeing. By the way, how are the women here? I swear, I need to get away from all those—”*

Aaron hit fast forward. The billionaires drank their coffee, the billionaires scrolled through their phones, the billionaires snapped a photo of Jonathan Zeger next to the ouroboros, the billionaires turned to stare at a female walking by the office, the billionaires chased a cockroach skittering up the wall...

This was going nowhere.

Max was probably signing the paperwork right now. Officially funded. Headed for the West Coast. Wasn’t that what Aaron had wanted all along, for Underwear Thief to leave him alone? He could forget the last four months ever happened. Focus on school and basketball. As if he’d never met Max at all.

A knot formed deep in his stomach.

The knot pushed him to continue watching the footage. After disappearing from their office for almost four hours, the billionaires returned around 11 a.m. carrying greasy bags from the local burger joint. Ethan the vegan had his own salad bowl.

*“When do the lawyers get here?”*

*“They’re already here.”*

*“Why didn’t we just fly Max to San Francisco and have him sign everything there? The kid’s been ready to go since day one.”*

*“Jonathan just wanted an excuse to go back to Acadia.”*

*“You know, I’ve been thinking. If you guys had come up with an idea while you were still in college, would you have dropped out?”*

*“Yeah. No question. School’s only for people who want to get average jobs, play the rat race.”*

*“And a hunting ground for rich families to arrange marriages with other rich families.”*

*“Can you believe we made it out of Bramburgh alive?”*

*“I had this nimrod calc professor sophomore year—”*

Aaron hit fast forward again. When the billionaires went to their standing desks, he pressed play.

*“So Max has no idea?”*

*“Why are you making it sound like we’re about to rob him? We’re giving the kid a shitload of money.”*

*“We’re doing the smart thing.”*

Aaron’s heart knocked against his chest.

*“His algorithm’s too good to waste on VR.”*

*“Once he gets to San Francisco, have your Waagen engineers meet with him. Get them to study the algorithm, deconstruct it, figure it out.”*

*“What if he won’t share it?”*

*“After he signs those papers, we own ten percent of his company. Waagen owns ten percent of his company. He has no other shareholders. We’re in.”*

*“You really think his algorithm can help with autonomous driving?”*

*“Waagen is the only company that’s perfected sensor fusion. Our own algorithm can benefit from Max’s—what did he call it?”*



*“Arbitrary compliant compression.”*

*“Yeah. That’s the missing link. Once we’ve got that, we can do anything with our cars. Those other idiots can go to space, but we’re going to dominate vehicular AI.”*

He stopped the video. His leg began to jitter even faster. Ethan and Oliver didn’t want to invest in Cosmos. They wanted to *buy* the algorithm. He stood up so fast that blood rushed to his head. He leaned against the wall to steady himself.

Before the wooziness fully dissolved, a door opened behind him. Coach Henderson appeared, and Aaron felt a wave of comfort surge through him, like going home to see his grandma after a tough semester.

“Aaron, we’re ready for you,” his coach said. There was a fatherly shine to his eyes that made Aaron want to tell him everything—about Max and the lottery and Cosmos and the Billionaire Bros. But that wouldn’t help his case at all. His coach would probably think he was on drugs.

Inside, the athletic director and four other people turned their heads as he entered. He hovered awkwardly by the door until Coach Henderson gestured for him to have a seat.

“Thank you for coming today, Aaron.” The athletic director gave him a smile that teetered between professional and affectionate. “We have water, snacks. Help yourself.”

Aaron felt his stomach twist. The rest of him was still outside, replaying what he’d just heard: *“Get them to study the algorithm, deconstruct it...That’s the missing link.”*

“Are you all right, son?”

He looked at his coach. “Yes. Sorry.”

The athletic director unfolded his glasses. “Shall we begin?”

“Yes,” Aaron heard himself saying.

“Let’s start by going over the incident.” The athletic director glanced at his notes. “On the night of October second,

you were filmed engaging in violence with a Bramburgh University student.”

“But—”

“You’ll have your chance to speak, Aaron. Right now I need to review why we’re here.”

“I’m sorry.”

The athletic director continued, “On the morning of October third, you were suspended from the basketball team due to a direct violation of article sixteen, section two of the Bramburgh University Code of Student Conduct...”

Was Max still at the incubator? Was it over? Did he sign with them? Aaron felt like hitting himself. He should have told Max earlier, even without the evidence. He should have warned him.

“Son, please stop doing that.” Coach Henderson aimed a pointed look at Aaron’s jittering leg. “It’s making the table shake.”

“I’m sorry.”

The athletic director cleared his throat. “Your suspension was declared for a full season and is currently being carried out...”

Max had kicked him out of Cosmos, but it was also Max who had asked him to join in the first place. It was Max who made him believe he could actually do something outside of basketball. Max had turned Aaron’s sophomore year upside down and his heart inside out. He wasn’t an asshole. Misguided, maybe. But not an asshole. Not like the Billionaire Bros.

“Aaron, are you following?”

He pried himself out of his own head. “Um...I’m sorry?”

“You can join us for summer training,” Coach Henderson said.

“Summer training?”

“We’re inviting you back on the team,” the athletic director explained, slowly, as if Aaron was learning to speak for the first time.

“Um...”

“Something wrong?” Coach Henderson tilted his head in concern. “I know how upsetting it was to lose your spot on the team. But you’ve been an exemplary student this past semester. You’ve stayed out of trouble. Made the dean’s list. You’ve even joined some kind of technology club? A startup? This is outstanding, son. We think you’re ready to play again.”

Aaron pushed his chair back. The wooziness returned, but he shook it off. “I’m sorry,” he said for the millionth time before his legs carried him across the room and right out the door. He almost bumped into Winnie coming back from the vending machine.

“Over already?” she asked.

“I have to—I have to go.”

“What? What did they say?”

But Aaron was already sprinting for the exit. “Strawberry!” he called before tumbling out into the wind and the snow.

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Max wasn’t at the incubator. Aaron scanned every person, every laptop. Lots of laughter and chatter, but none belonged to his underwear thief. He checked the men’s restroom. Peeked into the server room. Pounded up the stairs to the Billionaire Bros’ office. He was about to leave and run to Max’s dorm when he felt a tap from behind.

“Hey, man, haven’t seen you around in a while.” It was Brandon the weed guy. “Where’ve you been?”

“Have you seen Max?”

Brandon scratched at his chin. He pointed to a pair of humongous double doors that looked like they belonged in a medieval castle. “I saw him go in there. But that was an hour ago—”

Aaron charged towards the doors and split them open. He didn't care if they fell off their hinges. He didn't care about anything right now, except: "Max, don't sign anything! They're going to steal your algorithm! Don't believe anything they tell you—"

Something slammed into his head. He staggered back, holding a hand against his temple. The room became a messy blur.

"Shit!" cried a voice that sounded like Oliver.

"Why did you have to throw it right when he walked in!"

"Can he sue us for this?" Oliver said. "Fuck, I just got through San Jose! I can't have another student suing me!"

When the blurriness subsided, the first thing Aaron saw was coppery eyes looking back at him. Max sat at one end of a gigantic wooden table. Aaron couldn't make out his expression. It was a mix of irritation, disappointment, surprise, and—maybe it was just Aaron's imagination—relief.

"Don't sign the papers, Max. They want to steal your algorithm."

"Hold up," Ethan said, tossing the offending football aside. "You can't be in here. This is a private meeting, and you're no longer part of Cosmos."

"You don't even care about Cosmos," Aaron said. "You just care about the algorithm. I heard you—" He clamped his mouth shut. They couldn't know about the hidden cameras. "I overheard you talking about it at Casco Mart," he semi-lied.

Ethan sighed. "Oliver, I told you we should have stopped smoking. You always blab your mouth after hitting the skunk weed."

"So it's true," Aaron said, "you guys were planning on picking apart Max's algorithm like it's some Thanksgiving turkey." He turned to give each of the Billionaire Bros and Jonathan Zeger his iciest glare. Although his heart was pounding a trillion beats per minute, he wasn't nervous at all. He felt ready to hurl the three of them off the side of the building. "I never liked you. Any of you."

“We don’t care, kid,” Jonathan Zeger said. “Now can you get out? We’re trying to wrap up a deal here.”

Aaron ignored him. All he saw was Max. “They won’t help you when you move to California. They’re going to use your algorithm for Waagen. They’re making self-driving cars with fuse sensation or something—”

“Sensor fusion!” Oliver said, throwing his hands up.

“That’s why they’re giving you so much money, Max. They’re buying you out.” Aaron took a step forward, then stopped when Max rose from his seat. Aaron’s heart throbbed harder. “Come on, let’s go. You don’t need these guys.”

“Fifteen million.” Ethan came to stand next to Aaron. The devil on the other shoulder. His voice had changed. It was no longer the babble of a bumbling frat bro. There was now a menacing edge to it. “Since the cloak-and-dagger show is over, we can be honest with each other. Fifteen million for the algorithm.”

Aaron turned to Max. “That algorithm is yours. You came up with it. Don’t let these creeps take it from you.”

“We’re not *taking* anything,” Ethan said in the tone of someone speaking over a child. “We’re willing to pay. How about eighteen million?”

“Max, you want to change the world. You can still do it. Cosmos deserves to live. It’s your dream. And what about Jared? He built everything with you. He wrote the code. It’s not fair—”

“Thirty million.”

Every eye in the room latched onto Max, who remained still.

“Thirty million,” Ethan repeated. “You can walk out of this room with a check and never have to work another day in your life.” Then he smiled, cheery and wide and fake fake fake. “What do you say, my peep?”

Max lowered his head. As he did so, something wet fell from his face. A single teardrop. It spilled over Aaron’s own

heart, releasing a final tsunami of rage. “Peep my ass!” he yelled before shoving the billionaires to the side. They immediately toppled over, three flimsy bowling pins with nothing anchoring them. Aaron ran to Max. But when he tried to get close, Max turned away, dodging his arms.

Without looking at anyone, and without saying anything, the underwear thief disappeared out the door and out of the incubator.

# 30

William P. Zhang looked too happy.

Was he smiling because he was taking a selfie with the Pacific Ocean behind him, or did he inherently know his loser son wouldn't be contacting him any time soon?

There was no way Max could face his father now. Take away the incubator and the funding, and he was just a lowly college student. A wannabe CEO who almost had his own company stolen from him.

William P. Zhang probably had other bio kids who were astronauts and secret agents and Michelin-starred chefs; people who were at the top of their game and changing the world. Why would he care about some random college student? He'd just assume Max was out to scam him for tuition money.

Instead of scrolling through his father's social media feeds, Max shut his phone off and threw it at the floor. It bounced off the carpet with the dullness of a dead fish.

He lay in his room, listening to his floormates come and go, until the shadows took over. Then he rolled his body over the bed and landed next to his phone with the same dull thud. He was a lump of nothing; just a sack of meat and blood.

When his hand grew numb, he reached for his phone and turned it back on. Dialed.

His grandfather answered on the first ring. “Xiao ma!”

“Did I wake you, Ang-kong?”

“No, the balut sellers have been yelling up and down the street since three in the morning. I’m glad you called. I had a dream about you.”

Normally, Max would have made an excuse to avoid hearing about his grandfather’s questionable dreams, which often involved flying zebras and underwater civilizations populated by topless mermaids. But hearing his voice now felt like the closest thing to a hug. And, for the first time in a long time, Max was desperate for one.

“I dreamt that you fell into a toilet.”

Maybe not the kind of hug he’d hoped for.

“So I consulted the Duke,” his grandfather continued, as if he were best friends with the Duke of Zhou himself, an eleventh-century Chinese royal who inspired an ancient book of dreams. “If you fall into a toilet, it’s bad luck. But only if you don’t get out.”

“Did I get out?”

“I couldn’t tell. Those balut sellers woke me up before I could finish the dream.”

Max replayed the image of Aaron barging into the conference room. Of almost losing his algorithm. Of Ethan offering him thirty million dollars on the spot. All of that had happened just a few hours ago, but it felt like a thousand years had passed.

“How is school, xiao ma? Are you having trouble with your classes? Is that why you fell in the toilet?”

“I—” Max turned the phone towards the wall, so his grandfather couldn’t see his face. “I was going to drop out.”

“WHAT?” And then louder: “AYIA!”

“I don’t know...I don’t know what I’m doing.”



“Xiao ma, you’re not supposed to know what you’re doing.”

Max faced his grandfather again. “Huh?”

“You are nineteen years old. You are a child. How is a child supposed to know anything?”

“I’m turning twenty next month—”

A wrinkled but no less powerful hand came up, silencing him. “Tell me why you almost became a college dropout.”

“I wanted to move to California.”

His grandfather wiped at his glasses and eased into his big brown armchair. “What’s in California?”

Max explained the incubator, Ethan and Oliver’s offer, their interest in his algorithm. He conveniently left out William P. Zhang.

“Well, you *are* a Horse,” his grandfather said after a long pause. “Horse people have a tendency to roam around. They like movement. But you can’t just wander aimlessly. You need direction.”

“I do have direction. I’m trying to grow my business. That’s my priority.”

This was met with a sigh. “Xiao ma, you are not Steve Jobs. You are not Bill Gates. You are not even Mark Zuckerberg.”

“But...you told me...” Max felt the hug turning into a jab. “You were really happy for me. You said I was going to be the next Zuckerberg. You said you couldn’t wait for my company to go public so I could retire with you in the Philippines.”

“Yes, you’ve accomplished a great deal for your age. And I’m very proud of you. We all are. Your mother, your grandmother. You’re our miracle baby.”

“I don’t feel like a miracle,” Max mumbled. “I just screw things up.”

“How so?”

“I actually thought Ethan and Oliver would help me. I almost signed it all away, everything Jared and I had built. If it wasn’t for Aaron—” Max stopped himself. He had screwed up with Aaron, too. The only guy who was willing to put up with his pranks and his general insanity. Maybe he really was meant to be single for the rest of his life. That would simplify so many things. “All I want is to make technology easier for everyone,” he said. “I don’t want the money or the attention. I just care about Cosmos.”

“And what happens when you do succeed? When Cosmos becomes everything you hoped it would be?”

“What do you mean?” Max frowned. “I’ll keep working. Make it even better.”

“Xiao ma,” his grandfather said, sounding at once tender and intimidating, “I won’t be around forever. And neither will your grandmother. Or your mother. When we’re gone, do you have anyone you can call at four in the morning to help you get rid of evidence?”

“What?”

“Who’s going to help you bury the body? Go to jail for you? Sacrifice everything for you?”

That was easy: “Jared and Zach.”

But his grandfather shook his head. “Your friends will have their own lives and their own families.”

“We’ll still be friends, though. We’ll always be friends.”

“Yes, but it won’t be the same.”

“Ang-kong, what does any of this have to do with—”

His grandfather drew the phone close so his face took up the entire screen. “You say Cosmos is your priority. But you need someone who will make *you* their priority.”

“If I’m successful, I won’t need anyone. I can do whatever I want.”

“Then you will be a Horse without legs.”

“What?” These ancient Chinese metaphors straddled the line between helpful and downright incoherent.

“A legless Horse has no foundation,” his grandfather went on. “It might be the most beautiful creature to grace this world, but without legs it cannot do anything. It cannot go anywhere.”

“Of course I can go anywhere. As long as I have enough money, I can do anything I want.”

“Ayia! Go be a lawyer, then! You have a rebuttal for everything!” His glasses almost flew off. “Success without a foundation is meaningless. Do you expect to just work and work? Who are you going to share your success with? Investors? Employees? They are not your foundation.”

“This is why I wanted to leave Bramburgh,” Max said. “If I focus all my energy on Cosmos, then I can be successful sooner. That will be my foundation.”

“You kids idolize those billionaire dropouts too much. Ayia! Don’t you think it would have been even more impressive if Mark Zuckerberg had finished college?”

“No.”

“That was a rhetorical question!” His grandfather rubbed at his temples. “Xiao ma, you can be different from those billionaire dropouts. You can build your company while you are still in school and be a role model for the next generation. Show them that school is not a waste of time.”

“But—”

“Finish what you start. College is only four years. After that, you have the rest of your life to do what you want.”

Max let his phone hang limp. A part of him still wanted to leave everything behind and go all in with Cosmos. But his grandfather’s words made him think of Aaron. If Aaron had been just as eager to leave for California, and their business ended up failing, it would have hurt his future. Aaron was a scholarship student. He couldn’t afford to quit college and then come back whenever he felt like it. And he would never take

the lottery money. Aaron Scudder was an Eagle Scout until the end. Honorable and true.

“I’m a jerk,” Max said, at last.

His grandfather chuckled. “You should have seen me when I was your age. Teachers didn’t know what to do with me. And look what happened. I became a professor! Everything is a circle...”

*A circle.*

*Finish what you start.*

Aaron didn’t start Cosmos, but he was a part of its DNA. He didn’t write the code, but he believed in it. He gave their company its name. The very definition of cosmos was something epic and eternal; it was the whole universe. Max had been trying to build the universe on his own. He should have known that was impossible.

“Why is your face like that, xiao ma? Are you upset with me?”

“No. I...I have to do something.” He touched a finger to the screen, where his grandfather’s cheek was, and stroked it affectionately. He smiled. “Thank you, Ang-kong. I’ll call you back.”

“Meeting with Jared and Zach?”

“No...” He started searching for the clay monkey he’d ripped apart. “I’m getting myself out of the toilet.”

# 31

*Your personality type is Sentimental Guardian. These personalities do well as librarians, public defenders, scientists, and nurses.*

Aaron took another career quiz. The next one told him to pursue human resources, film editing, and botany.

Maybe he should just throw darts. Leave his future career to the whims of a tiny weapon. That seemed way easier than figuring it all out on his own. Because when he tried to take matters into his own hands, he just made everything worse. He messed up his chance to get back on the team. He messed up with Max. There was nothing left to do but play darts with his own fate.

Right when he was about to click on a random website that looked kind of shady but promised to reveal “The Ultimate Career Path for Introverts,” his phone pinged. It was a text from an unknown number: *Look out your window*

Nope. This had horror movie vibes all over it.

The same number texted again: *Please*

A stalker/murderer with manners? Well, if this was a trick, it couldn't be any worse than all the shit that had already happened to him. He came to realize that once you've reached

a low point, you become immune to any subsequent shits thrown your way.

So he lifted the curtain and looked outside. There, carved into the snow, in letters as tall as a human, were two words: I'M SORRY

The culprit was nowhere to be seen. Aaron pushed up the window and stuck his head out.

Nothing. No one.

Snow began to fall, erasing the letters one by one. He kept his head out and tried to see behind the trees. Was that...no, it was just some dude feeding a squirrel.

A sudden knock at his door almost sent him falling out the window. He quickly closed it and turned around.

Max was standing in the doorway.

“It was unlocked,” he said, “so I just...in case you knew it was me and didn't want to...”

They stared at each other.

“Max, I'm really sorry—”

But Max charged into the room and clamped a hand over Aaron's mouth.

“Don't apologize,” he said. “You never have to apologize to me. I'm the jerk. You were only trying to help, and I hurt you. It's because I'm a legless horse. I'm an idiot. I wanted to impress William P. Zhang. He's the coolest person I've never met. He's successful and happy and it's like he's figured out the meaning of life. I didn't want to meet him until I was just as cool as him. So I pushed myself to make Cosmos as awesome as possible. But I'm back where I started. A nobody. Except it's worse. I hurt you. So I understand if you never want to speak to me again. I'm weird and crazy and a creep, just like you said when we first met. You can do better. Carl's much better than me. He's nice and sweet, minus the ghost thing. You two can have your own ghost hunting show. You can forget about me. Except I hope you don't...” He paused to take a breath.

Aaron gently unclamped his mouth from Max's hand. It was then that he realized Max wasn't wearing gloves. Or a jacket. "You're shaking." He led Max over to the bed and wrapped the comforter around his shoulders. "You *are* crazy. Why did you go out like this? I'm going to get you some hot water."

"Wait, you need to hear the rest of my apology." Max's teeth started to chatter.

"You're vibrating like a vibrator!"

"I-I'm f-fine. This is what I get for being an asshole. Forgetting my jacket in fifteen-degree weather."

"And you didn't think to run back to your room and put something on?"

"This is why I'm a crazy idiot!" Max cried. "I was in such a hurry to see you, my brain stopped functioning!"

They stared at each other again.

"Um, anyway," Max said after what seemed like an eon of clumsy silence, "I wanted to meet my father. That's why I was so intent on going to California. But I didn't want him to see me as some random college student. I wanted him to think I was cool and interesting. That's one of the reasons—well, it's the main reason—why I've been so obsessed with getting funding and hyping up the company. It was all to impress a person who doesn't even know I exist." He lowered his eyes to the floor. "It's pathetic."

Aaron's fist twitched with the urge to punch a stranger named William P. Zhang, who was probably surfing right now or sitting in traffic or doing whatever it was people in California did. He banged his fist against the desk instead. "It's not pathetic. And you're not pathetic. You're the coolest person I know, Max. You speak like ten different languages, including C++ and Cobra—"

"Python."

"Right. Python. You hacked into the school's database without getting caught. You built a whole virtual reality program from scratch. You invented an algorithm that's worth

at least thirty million dollars. And you're cute as hell! Who in their right mind would think you're pathetic?"

"I don't know," Max said in a small voice, "I guess William P. Zhang, because he doesn't know I exist."

"Fuck William P. Zhang!" Aaron re-clamped his mouth shut. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrespect your dad. I'm sure he's a nice guy. I just got caught up in the moment..."

Max tightened the comforter around his shoulders. "No, you're right. I need to let him go. I've been stuck wondering about the past when I should be focusing on the future. Like you."

"I still think about my parents sometimes," Aaron admitted. "There will always be a part of me that wants answers. I don't think the curiosity or the pain will ever go away."

"How do we get past that?"

"I'm not sure...I think we just have to look at the opportunities we're given instead of the opportunities we've missed." He blushed. "That sounded lame. I don't even know what I'm trying to say."

"No, that was really good."

"Maybe I should be a motivational speaker, then."

"Have you decided on a major yet?"

"I'm narrowing a few options down," Aaron said. "It's fine, though. I've got a couple more months."

"You'll find something that's right for you." Max laid a hand on his arm before quickly pulling away.

"You're still freezing."

"I guess I underestimated how long it would take to write seven letters into twelve inches of snow."

"You didn't have to do that," Aaron said, though he secretly liked it.

"Winnie said that was how I could get you to forgive me."



“You talked to her?”

Max nodded, and melted snow splashed from his hair to Aaron’s chin. “I went to apologize. I honestly thought she was going to beat me up. But we ended up talking for an hour. And she said writing in the snow is the most romantic way to tell someone you’re sorry.”

Aaron sighed. “She’s going through a Jane Austen phase.”

“I also talked to someone else.”

“Who? Ethan and Oliver? Tell me you didn’t go back and sign with them.”

“No,” Max said. “Check your email.”

When Aaron refreshed his inbox and saw the latest message, whatever remaining bit of tension inside him finally peeled away, replaced by a thrilling sort of lightheadedness; except he didn’t feel like fainting—he felt like flying.

“Winnie told me about your reinstatement hearing,” Max said, “and that you...didn’t get to stay for the whole meeting. So I went to see Coach Henderson. I told him about Cosmos and how you were trying to help and that you’re a really good guy. That you’re a team player.”

“What did he say?”

Max tilted his head at Aaron’s computer. “It’s all in the email.”

But Aaron didn’t have to read it. The subject line told him everything he needed to know: **Men’s Basketball Summer Training Schedule**

“I’m really back on the team,” he whispered.

“I know you’re not thinking about the NBA,” Max continued, “but you’re amazing at basketball. Anyone who’s watched you play can see that. You deserve to be on the court. Even if you don’t think you have a shot at going pro, you deserve that chance.”

“Max, this is...” There weren’t enough words to describe just how he felt. “I can’t believe you did this for me.” He

started to reach for Max's hand, but drew back. They still hadn't figured out *that* situation. Although Aaron was ready to pull the underwear thief to him and make out until the snow melted, he sensed a hesitation from Max.

"Sometimes Eagle Scouts need saving, too."

The room seemed to grow warmer. Aaron was thinking of ways to convince the shivering guy in front of him to spend the night when Max reached into the pocket of his jeans and fished out a rusty-brown figurine. It was a tiny thing, no bigger than a golf ball.

"Th-this is for you," Max said, turning red—and Aaron didn't know why, but a shy underwear thief was a hot underwear thief. "Since you're a Snake, I made you a Monkey. They're zodiac friends. I hope—I really hope we can still be friends."

Aaron took the little Monkey and balanced it on his palm. The clay matched the color of Max's eyes. He placed it on his desk and turned back to the underwear thief. "I don't want to be your friend."

Max looked at him first with confusion, then sadness. "I—I understand—"

"No, you don't." Aaron moved so their eyes were only inches apart. He cradled Max's face between his hands, took a moment to indulge in the coppery brilliance, then kissed him—deep and hard, slow then fast. The lips beneath his own were chapped and dry and snagged on his skin. But they belonged to his underwear thief. So Aaron pulled him closer and deepened the kiss, and it felt like gliding through the smoothest, creamiest bowl of chowder: no hype, no pretense, nothing but pureness and clarity.

"Wait," Max said, breaking free. "What about Carl?"

"Huh?" It took Aaron a moment to register anything that wasn't Max's mouth and Max's skin. "Don't worry about Carl," he said, "I'll tell you everything later."

"So you weren't making supernatural sex tapes?"

“What? No!” Then he smirked. “But if you’re into that kind of thing, I know where we can get some cameras...”

“No thanks.”

“Thought so.”

Max rested his head on Aaron’s chest, arms circling his midsection. “I didn’t actually believe you were hooking up with Carl.”

“You didn’t, huh? Then why did you ignore my texts?”

“Because if I convinced myself that you were with Carl, then it was easier to convince myself to leave Bramburgh.”

Aaron swept his fingers through the field of chocolate hair. “Well, I’m glad you came to your senses.”

“I should have listened to you when you said Ethan and Oliver were weird.”

“You didn’t know. And I don’t blame you. You were only doing what you thought was best for your company.”

Max looked up, eyes shining. “Let’s never fight again.”

“I can’t guarantee that,” Aaron laughed.

“Sure you can,” Max said. “It’s easy. Whenever I start to say something idiotic or hurtful, just kiss me to shut me up.”

Aaron smiled at him. “What if I’m the one being idiotic and hurtful?”

“Then I’ll do this—” And Max pushed him against the window and kissed him back.

The comforter fell away to pool around their feet. Aaron took its place, pressing their bodies together and covering every inch of Max with his own warmth. The temperature in the room skyrocketed to chili pepper levels. Their breathing blanketed them in a heatwave of hands and fingers and lips roaming without shame. Aaron kissed a winding pattern across Max’s neck, producing his favorite sound.

“You don’t have class tomorrow, do you?”

“No,” Max said before letting out another mewl and a gasp as Aaron’s tongue retraced the pattern on his neck.

“Good, because I’m not letting you leave my room for the next twenty-four hours.”

The little clay Monkey looked on as they tumbled into bed. This time, Max Trellis-Tan tasted like Texas and Bramburgh and Maine and all the flavors of the world.

Fiery.

Sweet.

Raw.

And a little crazy.

Just the way Aaron liked it.

# 32

“Does everyone have their recorder and walkie-talkie?” Carl shined his flashlight on each member of their group.

Jared raised his hand. “When are we gonna use the ouija board?”

“Those are fake,” Carl replied good-naturedly. “We rely on actual science. Thermal imaging. Electromagnetic energy. Sound waves.”

Max poked Aaron in the ribs with his voice recorder. “I bet you look hot on a thermal camera,” he whispered.

They were currently assembled in the bowels of the humanities building. According to official Bramburgh University records, a student had entered the basement of the building on March 18, 1852, and never resurfaced. Other reports claimed that the student never existed in the first place.

“I think there’s a portal in here,” Carl said. “It’s either bringing entities into our world, or pulling people into other dimensions.”

“What if we find the portal and it sucks us in?” Jared asked.

But Carl had become preoccupied with rummaging through his backpack. “Oh no! I forgot my spirit box!”

“What’s that?” Zach said.

“It’s supposed to help us communicate with the ghosts. Just wait a sec, guys. I’ll go grab it and come right back.”

“So is he single?” Zach asked when Carl was out of earshot.

“I listened to his podcast,” Winnie said, “and he’s been ghost hunting since he was eight. He found the spirit of a little boy at his aunt’s house in Kentucky.”

“Ghost kids are the creepiest form of ghosts.” Jared sat on the dusty floor and aimed his flashlight at Aaron. “Since you’re the tallest, you should be the one to check out the devil portal.”

Winnie threw a dust ball at him.

“How’s your major search going, Aaron?” Zach leaned against a rotted cabinet that looked perilously close to falling apart.

“I’m actually looking into careers I’d like, then picking a major based on that.”

Max turned to his friend. “Zach, maybe you can help. You’ve got the old-money connections.”

Zach wiped a layer of grime off the wall and studied it before asking, “What do you have in mind?”

“Well, I think I’m pretty good at writing,” Aaron said. “So maybe journalism or publishing?”

Jared rocked his flashlight violently back and forth. “Dude, avoid. My sister works in book publishing. She graduated like five years ago, and our dad still has to pay her rent.”

Zach nodded sagely. “Yes, avoid.”

“What about advertising?” Aaron suggested. “Like, copywriting?”

“Avoid,” Zach repeated. “My cousin’s husband used to work for one of those big ad agencies. He became an alcoholic after ten years. And he can’t watch TV anymore. He still gets traumatized by commercials.”

“Oh my gosh,” Winnie whispered. “What kind of commercials?”

“All of them.”

“Um...how about finance?” Aaron tried. “Those investment banks are always recruiting on campus.”

“Are you willing to screw people over for a living?” Jared said. “If so, congratulations: you’re the king of Wall Street and Satan’s bitch.”

“Teaching?” Aaron tried next. “I was thinking I could be a physics teacher. Or a professor.”

Zach grabbed hold of his shoulders and shook. “Do we even have to explain that one? Avoid! Avoid!”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come back as our marketing guy?” Jared said. “You’ll have a stake in Cosmos and a guaranteed job after graduation.”

Aaron looked at Max and smiled. “I think it’s better if we pursue our own things.”

Max took hold of his boyfriend’s hand, clasping it tight. They were surrounded by their friends and the dank smells of a forgotten basement, but the simple touch of Aaron’s hand made everything around them grow fuzzy until there was nothing left but two hearts beating in time. This was the answer. This was how people survived the madness and twisty-turniness of life: by finding a steady heartbeat that matched their own.

A loud crash sounded from the stairs.

“Poltergeists!” Jared cried.

They all ran to investigate and found Carl slumped on the floor with one foot in an empty can of paint.

Zach rushed to help him up. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. The bottom step must have come loose.” Carl patted the spirit box clutched to his chest. “Still safe.”

“Maybe a ghost pushed you down,” Jared said, prompting Winnie to fling another dust ball at him.

Max noticed a familiar orange figure slinking down the stairs. “Hey! Anne-Shirley!”

“Oh, is that her name?” Carl adjusted his utility belt. “She just started following me.”

The orange cat lowered herself gracefully down each step before rolling onto her side and staring at them, as if waiting for something interesting to happen. “Meowr.”

“This is perfect!” Carl said. “Animals have a sixth sense. She can help us.” He shook his foot out of the paint can. “The basement is pretty big. We should split up in pairs.”

“I’ll go with Carl,” Zach immediately volunteered.

“And obviously you two are together,” Jared said, waving a finger between Max and Aaron. He turned to Winnie and grinned. “So I guess you’re stuck with me.”

“Who do you think will scream first?” she said before racing him to one of the hallways strung with cobwebs. Max found himself enjoying this new version of Winnie.

As their friends’ voices scattered and dissolved into the belly of the basement, he heard his phone ping. “Huh. Wasn’t expecting any signal down here.” He almost let out a shout when he saw the email.

“What is it?” Aaron asked.

Max showed him the message. “Investors. They want to set up a meeting.”

“Morovitch and Caldwell...”

“They’re one of the best VC firms,” Max said. Every part of him was quaking. “Their portfolio is legendary. And they really care about mentoring new companies.”

Aaron blew at a strand of hair that had fallen over Max’s eye. “See? You *are* cool.”

“Not as cool as you, Mr. Secret Agent Man. I still can’t believe you hid a camera in Ethan and Oliver’s office.”

“You know, maybe I *should* apply to the CIA.” Aaron puffed out his chest. “I really think I can do it.”



“Aaron, we need to be realistic. You wouldn’t last as a CIA agent.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ll keep pestering you for all the government secrets, and you’ll end up telling me everything because that’s just how you are, and you’ll get fired. And then we’ll both be exiled to some random country, forced to live out our days as goatherds.”

“Hm. That’s true.” Aaron draped his arms around Max’s neck. “I’d put the whole world in jeopardy, all on account of my boyfriend who can’t keep his cuteness in check.”

Max brushed a finger lightly across the side of Aaron’s face. “Whatever you end up doing, I know you’ll be great at it. You already got into Bramburgh—” He let out a gasp.

“What?” Aaron grabbed his thermal cam, looking around. “Did you see a ghost?”

“No, I just figured out what to do with the lottery money!” Max thought back to what his grandfather had said about finishing college, and Aaron... Aaron, who wouldn’t have been able to attend Bramburgh if it wasn’t for—“A scholarship! We can set up a scholarship! For kids who really need it.”

Aaron smiled. “You just got even cooler.”

“I’ll start looking into schools and programs we can partner with.”

“I can help, too,” Aaron said. He seemed to hesitate before adding, “Um, can we leave a little bit of the money? Just a little bit? For my grandma?”

“Of course.” Max was willing to give Aaron anything at this point. “I’ll leave a little bit for us, too.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. We’ll need a place to live after we graduate. I can work on Cosmos from anywhere, so I’ll just move wherever you get a job. Maybe we can stay close to your grandma, so you can check on her and—”

Aaron kissed him.

It was a kiss that lifted them out of the dingy basement and into the fresh moonlight. They vanished into each other, blending and fusing and twisting together, letting their kiss carry them up, up, into the open sky and the cosmos beyond, until the sound of footsteps brought them back.

Then the Underwear Thief and the Eagle Scout hurried off, laughing, to join their friends.

# THANKS FOR READING

Don't forget to leave a rating or review on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), or [Bookbub](#).

Are you curious about Max's heritage?

Want to know the inspiration behind the Billionaire Bros?

I address all of that and more in my "behind the scenes" [blog post](#).

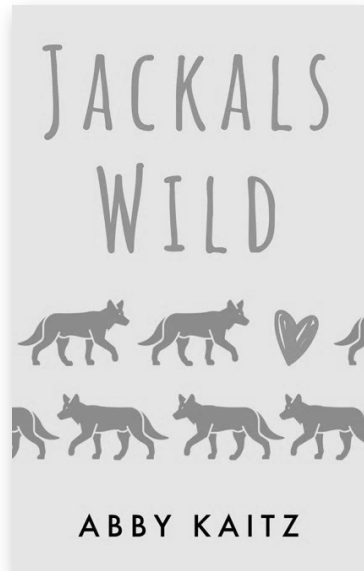
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