

Alms & Matter

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Abstract

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Alms & Matter works against the predominance of the tragic mode in queer narratives by taking heteronormative romantic tropes and reapplying them to characters who normally would be offered suffering and strife instead. The novel aims for a queer optimism rooted in a reality that is not, and should not be, limited to tales of queer suffering. The novel's division into four parts reflects the setting which binds the characters together: a door-to-door fundraising office in Calgary. The protagonists follow a script when soliciting donations, of which Waiting, Rapport, the Ask, and Concern-Handling are fundamental parts. While we follow the characters through their work, we see the main plots go through the same format. The story is set up in Part I, disrupted and developed in Part II, the stakes raised in Part III, and the plot and subplots resolved in Part IV.

Setting the novel in a fundraising office blends oppression with lightheartedness; though the stories the protagonists present are often dire, many of the interactions they have at the door are startling, bizarre, and surreal. Though many of the scenes take place in or around the workplace, and the protagonists talk about contemporary global issues, the plot revolves around the social aspects of their lives. Both of the novel's primary romantic plots begin with standard tropes of queer suffering, and typically end in tragedy. In *Alms & Matter*, these tragic tropes are averted.

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PART 1: WAITING

CHAPTER 1

The up-and-coming neighbourhood of Kensington — otherwise known as Sunnyside/Hillhurst, and more up than coming, these days — is largely defined by a few blocks lining Kensington Road and 10th Street, just northwest of the heart of downtown Calgary.

Kensington Road is lined with breakfast spots, bars and pubs, coffee shops, a smattering of clothing stores, a toy store, and an alternative sex shop. Its token Starbucks is on the same block as its most prominent local coffee shop, Higher Ground. 10th Street is comprised of clothing shops, a skincare store, three coffee shops, one tea shop, one shop that sells but does not *serve* tea, shawarma shops, a poutine place, a convenience store, and a couple of tattoo parlours. Its Starbucks, a Safeway location, was replaced by a Tim Hortons some time ago. For over seventy years, the Lido Café was one of the most infamous landmarks on 10th Street. A rundown diner, its regulars knew to avoid certain booths favoured — so the rumours went — by a former waitress when entertaining her lovers after hours. The Lido is now to be knocked down and, along with its neighbouring establishments, replaced with a condo complex.

This will also be named the Lido, in honour of the business's storied past, failed health inspections and all.

Follow 10th Street up past the Lido and you will come to the cacophonous heart of Kensington: the intersection of Kensington and 10th.

Cross over — past the bank, the froyo place, the cupcake shop (closed on Mondays) — and you will eventually come to the Jugo Juice building, trimmed in a shade of forest green at odds with the terracotta colouring of the stippled walls and the muted orange of the Jugo Juice

sign itself. In the upper levels of this garishly painted promontory, encased in natural light and wandering through rooms set at odd angles thanks to the building's trapezoid structure, roam the employees of Helping Hand Fundraising Services, an international agency that solicits donations for its nonprofit clientele. The fundraisers of HHYYC are young, energetic, and too excited about a job that pays \$14 an hour and never asks you to get up before noon to be discouraged by daily rejection from potential donors. The average career length of an HHYYC fundraiser is four months.

Today, at the close of April, it is hiring day.

Pretending has been a necessity for so long that it fits Lee better than honesty. He waits for James to get up in the mornings. If James has had a girl over, he waits for her, too, and watches TV on Netflix while he waits, and he does not think. Lee is usually up before James, even though he tends to go to sleep after. Sleep has never suited him.

Last night, James did not have a girl over — has not in months — so when there's rustling and a creak in the other room, Lee knows who it will be. When the door opens, *not* noticing the broad span of James's shoulders and the casual air with which he holds himself is the easiest thing in the world, because it has to be.

"Hey," Lee says.

James smiles, sleep-rumpled and soft-eyed.

"Hey," he replies, and makes for their shared bathroom.

Lee met James when they were both 15, not quite a month after Lee's family had relocated from Vancouver to Fort McMurray, for the work in the oil sands. (James and Lee, as good upstanding liberals, should use the more foreboding moniker of 'tar sands,' but neither

does.)

He remembers one night spent on the rooftop of a friend's house. In Fort MacMurray, as in most of rural Alberta, there's little to amuse the local youth save creative pursuits or substance abuse, and their group of friends had chosen the latter. The night had been cold, but the wind blissfully absent, and while the sounds of music and their peers having clumsy sex filtered up from the house, the two of them had sat on the roof, sharing a cigarette. It was spring, and James had rested his head on Lee's shoulder while they talked about whether or not the *Transformers* movies were at all redeemable.

Lee knew then that he was well and truly fucked.

Today, there's no time to pine. As James exits the bathroom, Lee claims it, pulling his hair (curly, voluminous, not quite shoulder-length), into some sort of order, slicking down strays. There is a pimple forming by his hairline, but it's barely visible against the dark sepia tones of his skin.

"Should I eat?" James asks, pouring himself two-hour-old coffee as Lee leaves the bathroom, stubble sheared down to its ideal morning length.

"Nah." He rubs a hand over his jaw, trying not to make anything of the fond, steady way James watches him. "We're meeting in 30. Unless you're starved, I wouldn't bother."

James shrugs, setting the coffee for a minute in the microwave, selecting a slightly soft Granny Smith from the fridge and plucking the paring knife from the sink, rinsing it clean and carving off a slice.

Key and Lee had joined HHYC around the same time, seven months ago. As such, they are two of HHYYC's most senior employees. Where Lee goes, James goes, and vice versa, so in February, when James was fed up with his job as a bartender, he joined them. The three have

vague plans to form an umbrella social justice organization, trying to mobilize the widespread but woefully underactive liberal population of Calgary. They have had these plans for six months.

Normally, HHYYC employees tend not to meet up before shifts, being both disinclined to rise any earlier than usual and predisposed to long bouts of after-work drinking. For Key, Lee and James make exceptions. Their Monday pre-shift breakfast meetings at Nellie's don't happen *every* week, but it's a close enough thing that the week doesn't feel quite right when they can't find the time.

By the time Lee's thrown everything into his bag, James is tossing the apple core in the garbage, knife in the sink. Today James is wearing a thin moss-coloured t-shirt that shows off the curve of his shoulder blade as he bends to close the cupboard under the sink; Lee studies it out of habit before resolutely checking his phone.

"Ready to go?" James asks a moment later.

Lee smiles at him, and it is the easiest thing in the world.

Due to an unforeseen debate about Rachel Dolezal and the impact of white activism during the Civil Rights movement on contemporary allyship, the three of them end up scrambling to work from the cafe despite their early start. The others are already assembled in a circle in the slightly worn, colourful employee room of the HHYYC offices when they slip in, binders in arms, backpacks sliding from shoulders to forearms to ground as quietly as they can manage.

Their manager, Max, is 37 years old, a former door-to-door scented candle salesman, and currently giving the first pre-shift pep talk. There is the barest lapse in Max's jovial speech, his

apple cheeks tensing momentarily at their late arrival, before he carries on.

“So we have some heroes-in-training with us today,” he says, clasping pale hands together, beaming at the new recruits. “Do you want to introduce yourselves?”

“I’m Acacia,” says the girl, after a momentary pause, freckles scattered across the bridge of her nose. She lifts her hand in a wave too quickly aborted, her smile thin. “Um. And I’m really excited to work with you guys?”

“I’m Robin,” says a gangly redhead from the other side of the room. He does not wave, though his smile is more convincing.

“If you save some lives today, you’ll be Batman!” Max says, to a smattering of laughter.

The Door fundraisers of HHYYC are all given superhero names once they’ve raised the requisite \$200 in monthly donations during their probationary period. Max is SuperMax. Key is Wonderful World Woman, or Triple W. Lee is Iron Will Man. James is Daredonor.

Robin, should he succeed in his mission, will apparently be Batman. He does not look as thrilled at this prospect as Max thinks he ought to be, but Max carries on.

“Why don’t we go around, all introduce ourselves, and give Robin and Acacia some pointers for their first day?”

There is a pause, the established HHYYCers exchanging glances, before a small girl in a large, threadbare sweater, hair escaping from an artfully messy bun, begins to speak.

“I’m Natalie,” she says. “I’ve been here since January, I’m studying sociology and history at the University of Calgary, and I’m in a band. Um, for first day advice...” she exchanges a glance with another girl, her smile small and a little too sharp. “Have fun, and don’t freak out if you try something and it doesn’t work. We all still mess up or trip over our words sometimes and it doesn’t hurt your DRM, so.”

“Sorry,” Robin leans forward, brows furrowed behind his glasses, “DRM?”

“So that is,” Max takes a step to the side, allowing the room a full view of the whiteboard that spans one wall, covered in doodles, quotes, and two large charts, one of which he gestures at now, “Donations Raised per Month. Like we went over in your training, it’s your DRM that matters. One-time donations are nice, but we always want to go for that monthly, because that’s what our clients are looking for. Doug, do you want to introduce yourself and tell Robin and Acacia why monthly donations are important?”

Doug has close-cropped hair. He’s in his late 20s or early 30s, younger than Max but notably older than most of the rest of the room. He is wearing khaki capris and a maroon t-shirt, and loosely holds a plastic cup filled with a homemade protein smoothie the colour of sludge.

“Uh, hey, I’m Doug. Uh, two months here, not in a band. We go for monthly donations because it lets our clients budget and plan effectively, so they can work on long-term projects and know they have steady funding coming in.”

“That’s right, it’s strategic and sustainable instead of reactionary.” Max claps his hands together, looking delighted.

The room’s attention shifts to Lee, who has been smiling his encouragement through everyone’s introductions, and his clasped hands rub together in preparation for his speech.

“I’m Lee — Iron *Will* Man.” Key’s eyes slide to the ceiling again. “I’ve been here since the start of October so I can honestly say no matter how much today sucks or freaks you out it’s gonna be an *awesome* day ’cause you won’t be knocking doors in a minus 40 windchill.”

A few people laugh, though Max’s brows briefly contract at this mention of today possibly sucking for the new recruits. Negativity is *verboten* at HHYYC, counteracted with pep talks, group activities, and resolute optimism.

“Uh, studied business in university — I know, right? Gross. Anyway. My advice for the first day is really work on your rapport, guys. Like, if you only focus on what you want, you know, DRM and getting people to sign on, you’re gonna lose sight of what *they* want, and that’s gonna make it way harder to get them onboard. Talk with people, see how their day’s going, really pay attention to what they respond to ’cause that’s gonna help you figure out how to get them invested.”

He exchanges a glance with James beside him before James gives the pair a wave, expression blandly pleasant.

“Hi, I’m James. I’ve been here since February. Lee brought me on board — we’re roommates. Before this I was a bartender, and the tips here aren’t as great but it’s work you can feel good about. My advice would be to... try out different strategies and see what works for you. We all have our own styles, and whoever trains you might be really good at their style, but don’t try and force something that’s not working for you.”

Key is the last to introduce herself, arms unfolding from around her stomach so that her fingers can fidget, voice low.

“I’m Key. I’ve been here since October. I’m originally from B.C. My advice for the first day is to relax, like everyone else said. Pay attention to what other people are doing that’s working, and never lose sight of the fact that what you’re doing is making a difference. Whether you get them onboard, get a one-time donation, or get them to sign on for a phone call later, even if you don’t get any paper from them, you’re still having important conversations with them, and you’re raising awareness about issues they should be paying attention to. No day is wasted here.”

“That’s *right!*” Max claps his hands together again, beaming at the group. “We’re here to save lives, to get that money, and to get people thinking about and acting on what matters. Does

everyone have their binders ready? Are we good to go? Are we ready to be heroes?"

CHAPTER 2

The drive through downtown is brief as they coast from the north to the south side of the city, making for the groomed community of Garrison Green. Built on a former army base, it is a tribute to the myth of the peace-making Canadian war-man. They coast down Peacekeepers Way SW to Peacekeepers Park, to the Wall of Honour for fallen Canadian peacekeepers and a statue [“Mark R. Isfeld presenting small knitted dolls to Bosnian children,” André Gauthier, 2003], and more importantly, a playground. It is surrounded by streets with names like [Lieutenant-General Roméo] Dallaire[, OC CMM GOQ MSC CD] Ave, [Major Bruce] Henwood[, retired soldier, double amputee, disability advocate] Street, and [Sergeant Cornelius Michael “]Mike[”] Ralph [six kills, killed August 17, 1992, in Bosanska Gradiska, Bosnia] Way.

It is a neighbourhood entrenched in layers of history and propaganda, but more importantly, there is a playground. It’s from here they depart from after map assignments and a second pep talk. While the others go off on their own, Robin follows James and Acacia follows Lee, shadowing their seniors to see the tricks of the trade in action.

“The first door you do on your own will be the hardest,” says Lee. “But once you get used to it, the first door’s the easiest.” He grins. “Usually the first door’s not home.”

Indeed, the first door, as they head east on Dallaire, is not home, nor is the second, nor the third. The fourth opens to reveal a woman, white, mid-30s, heavy bags under her eyes, straw-blond hair. Her expression takes in their blue vests, binders, bright but not overbearing smiles and seems to reply, ‘Why must you be on my doorstep, and if you must be on my doorstep, why must you be here *today*?’

“Hello,” Lee says, smile unfaltering, binder tilted between hip and forearm.

“Hi.”

“How are you today?”

The woman looks from Lee to Acacia. “Fine. What is this about?”

“Well, my name’s Lee and this is Acacia, and we’re here representing Think of the Children. Are you familiar with us?”

“Yes.” In the background, down the hardwood-floored hall, the TV is visible, a 39” flat screen. “I’m sorry, but we’ve done our donations for the year—”

“That’s fine. Do you have a few minutes to talk with us? We’d just like to let people know about what’s going on with Ebola in West Africa right now.”

The woman’s hand is on the door, but she stills, studying Lee. “Fine.”

Lee shifts his weight from one foot to the other, still looking cheerful. “Awesome! So, do you know what Ebola is?”

The woman raises an eyebrow. Acacia offers her a small smile, trying not to look too much between her and Lee. Doesn’t a shifting glance seem, well, shifty? “It’s some fever disease. African.”

“Exactly!” Lee’s smile brightens, and if there is any disjuncture between the wattage of his smile and the subject matter, he does not appear to notice. “It’s doing some pretty heavy damage in West Africa right now, especially in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. Ebola’s not actually that contagious, but there’s just *rampant* misinformation and stuff there, y’know? People aren’t aware of good sanitation practice, so a lot of people are getting sick who don’t need to, and that’s where we come in. Now, I don’t know if you know much about TOC’s emergency response history...?” The woman shrugs, and he nods, still smiling, dimples indomitable. “It’s actually one of the main pillars of what we do as an organization. We were there for the Syrian

refugee camps last year, and for the Pakistan flooding in 2010, and loads of other crises. Whether it's a natural disaster or a health crisis or a war, we're really lucky in that we've been around long enough to have resources ready to deploy workers and aid to troubled areas within 24 hours of an emergency breaking out, which is amazing."

The woman tilts her head, not quite a nod, arms crossed, shooting a desultory glance at Acacia.

"So with Ebola, we've had workers on the ground for months," Lee continues, "even going long distances by foot to reach remote areas to spread the word about how to prevent transmission."

"So why is it still spreading?" the woman asks.

Lee barely falters. "Well, it's a big job! And we're constantly improving our resources for how to spread the word. In Liberia, cellphone use is at 40%, so we actually worked with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the major communications companies to send out a mass SMS message letting people know about the outbreak and what the symptoms are. We also—"

The woman holds up a hand, eyes shutting briefly. "Sorry, but I've got to pick up my kid in two hours and I've got stuff to do before then, so could you just..." She waves her hand.

"Of course! So, the reason we're able to deploy quickly and stay for the long term in emergencies like this is actually because of our monthly supporters. Lots of people donate when an emergency makes the news, but we can't really plan in the long-term with those one-time donations, 'cause who knows when they'll come in, aside from Christmas, right? So our monthly plan—"

He trails off as the woman, after giving him a steady up and down look, lip curled, closes the door. She does not slam it, but she does lock it promptly. Lee's smile fades only slightly as he studies the closed door, clicking his pen once before taking out their door sheet and crossing off the address.

“Well,” he says, giving Acacia an amused look. “That happens sometimes. Let's do another door.”

—

Despite her seniority, Key is not given a new recruit to oversee. Key — grim, slim, long-limbed, dark-skinned, perpetually carrying her battered leather messenger bag — does not have the requisite pep required for the effective training of a new HHYYC Hero. She has one of the highest DRMs in the country because she is relentless, but she smiles rarely, is unskilled at small talk, and is far too easily offended to be a safe introduction to the art of good fundraising.

The first door is not home. While Lee shows Acacia one street away how to knock in the rhythm of Darth Vader's theme, Key consistently doles out four sharp knocks, equally spaced. For the newbies, the wear on the knuckles will be one of the most grating aspects of the job. They don't realize yet that when they knock on a door, they hit the same small stretch of knuckle at the same angle out of habit, and by the end of the second day, knocking every door will feel like a sliver of agony slid between the bones. Some will try rapping the wood at new angles; others will court ambidexterity; still more will push through, waiting for calluses to develop.

Key has calluses.

A door opens, and Key is ready, shoulders straight, binder clasped beneath the arms that cross her chest, expression solemn and attentive. “Hello.”

The woman at the door already looks exasperated — they open the door in case it's

important, and usually the disappointment is evident as soon as they process the vest and binder. Still, the door stays open, as it usually does. Most of the time, if there isn't a shrieking child in the house or a phone ringing or an appointment to get to, the lure of human contact outweighs the vague annoyance.

“Hi.”

“How are you today?”

One of the woman's eyebrows lifts. “Fine. You?”

“Good. Happy the sun's out.”

“Yes,” the woman says. Her eyes flick to Key's binder, the bright yellow text proclaiming **THINK OF THE CHILDREN!** “I did some gardening earlier.”

“Your yard looks lovely.”

“The garden's in the back.”

There is a pause, where they assess their mutual discomfort with the conversation, and Key bites down on a curl of dry skin on her lower lip.

“I'm sure it looks wonderful. I'm terrible with plants.” She has not yet managed to kill the cactus Lee gave her for Christmas, but this is a first. “I'm out here today representing Think of the Children. Are you familiar with us?”

“Yes,” the woman says, eyes flicking to the binder again, hand curled against the doorframe. “The Halloween boxes...”

Key nods, offering the barest smile. “Yes. A lot of people know us for that. We discontinued those drives, because the cost of assembling all the change exceeded the worth of the donations, but I'm glad to hear you're familiar with us.”

“Oh. That's a shame... I liked the boxes. It was always nice, seeing the kids out

supporting each other...”

“Yes. May I ask what else you know about us?”

“Oh...” the woman shifts her weight back, studying Key, eyes flicking down to her throat and back. Key swallows. “I mean, you... I mean, obviously you work with kids.” She laughs, brief and nervous. “And, I mean... it’s mostly... it’s disadvantaged children, right? From... third-world countries? You do quite a lot in Africa, don’t you?”

Her eyes flit more nervously over Key, the several shades between their skin tones heavy in the wake of her statement. Key presses her lips together in a gesture of clemency, and responds.

“Yes. We’ve done a lot in Africa, you’re right. Something not a lot of people realize is that we also do work here in Canada, particularly with regard to First Nations children and the matter of child trafficking.”

“Oh.”

“As a matter of fact, we were instrumental in helping bring about much-needed changes in Canada’s child-trafficking laws. Previously, it didn’t matter whether traffickers brought in a train car full of forty children for sale into the sex industry, or ten. They were charged by the car instead of by the child. We helped change that. Now, every child trafficked is counted against them.”

“Oh, I see.” The woman’s hand plays at her throat, toying with the slim chain of a gold necklace. “That’s good, then.”

“But what I’d like to talk to you about today is our recent polio vaccination campaigns in Iraq. Were you aware that there’s been a resurgence in polio cases in children in the Middle East?”

“Oh... no.” The woman shifts her weight.

“It really hasn’t been in the news as much as it ought to be. But particularly in the wake of the Syrian war and refugee crisis, we’ve been in grave danger of seeing polio reemerge in the area. Last month, we saw the first new case of polio in Iraq in fourteen years.”

“Oh, how awful.”

“In a six-month-old boy from northern Baghdad.”

“That’s terrible.”

Key nods. “Since then, we’ve done a round of anti-polio vaccinations in Iraq, as well as Syria and Egypt. This is the 25th round we’ve done in the region since October 2013.”

“All because of the one boy?”

Key clicks her pen. “No. Actually, as of the end of last month, twenty-seven children have been paralyzed by polio in Syria alone. Before this outbreak, Syria had no reported cases since 1999. One of the reasons we’ve had to vaccinate so much in surrounding countries is because of that massive refugee movement in the wake of the war the Syrian government has been waging on its people.”

“How awful.”

“It is. But we’re doing our best to make it better. In this month’s campaign, we reached twenty million children in only five days.”

“Oh. Good!”

“The reason we’re able to act so quickly — the polio case was reported on March 30th, and our most recent vaccination campaign started on April 6th — is because we always have a vast reserve of emergency workers and supplies on hand. Now, the reason we’re able to have that reserve isn’t only because we’re well established, but because of the people who support us.

Were you aware that Think of the Childen is supported entirely by voluntary donations?”

“Oh. No, I wasn’t. You get no money from the government?”

“None.”

“The United Nations?”

“No. It’s entirely people like you who enable us to act so quickly. And it’s not seasonal campaigns like the Halloween boxes that form the pillar of our success — it’s monthly donors. Like anyone else, when we budget, we need to be able to depend on a regular source of income in order to plan effectively. How would you feel if you got a job and your employer didn’t tell you how much you’d be paid, or when?”

The woman runs a thumb along the underside of her necklace. “Not very good, no.” A laugh, breathy and reserved.

“Exactly. So while we appreciate seasonal donations, and those we receive when we put out word about a crisis, it’s our monthly donors who enable us to be on the scene of an emergency only 24 hours after it happens. Now, how much do you think it costs to vaccinate 1200 children against polio?”

“Oh.” Her eyes widen and she fiddles with the chain more urgently. “1200?”

Key nods.

“At least... oh, I don’t know. \$2,400?”

Key offers another smile, realer than the last. “No. For only \$20 a month, you could vaccinate 1200 children in a year. For \$40 a month, you’d save 2400 children from contracting an utterly preventable but debilitating disease.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice. You know, my husband isn’t home, and we make financial decisions together...”

“And I’d never want you to put you in an awkward position. But this is happening right now, and we’re nowhere near done our work in the Middle East. I can show you the form right here, you’re not bound to any particular period of donation...”

“Oh, I don’t know...” but Key has already whipped out the form, is angling it towards the woman so she can read it.

“As you can see here, if we sign you up today, you’re able to cancel provided you give us five business days’ notice. Now, donations either come out on the 1st or the 15th, so if we sign you up today for donations on the 15th, we get the paperwork out of the way, and if when your husband gets home he decides it’s not right for you two, you can just phone this number and cancel.”

“Oh, I see. What was your name again?”

“Key.” Their eyes meet and Key extends an arm awkwardly over the binder. They shake hands, the pen between their palms.

“Oh, that’s a nice name. I’m Sharon...”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Sharon. Now, can you come on board so we can eradicate preventable diseases in children?”

“I’m really not sure... I’m not comfortable doing this without my husband here to look over the forms, and you know, there’s always the possibility of fraud...”

“I have our certification as a registered and regulated charity right here,” Key says, flipping the binder open to the appropriate laminated pocket. The certificate looks very official. “We’re one of under 110 charities in Canada who meet the guidelines of the Imagine Canada Standards Program, which ensures financial accountability. If you’re uncomfortable, we can call the number right now and you can get confirmation that I am who I say I am. But the nice thing

about donating to an established charity like TOC is we've been around long enough that you know we have a reputation to uphold. We wouldn't have lasted this long if we didn't treat our donors with care."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure, but my husband..."

"I understand. I know how important it is for families to cooperate with one another when making financial decisions," though Key has not spoken to her family in years, "and how careful we have to be when handing out personal information. But can I tell you something?"

"Yes?"

Sharon pulls the gold chain of her necklace a little more firmly, the metal digging in to the lightly freckled skin of her neck.

"When the Syrian government turned on its people, they disregarded all sense of decency. They targeted hospitals and schools, because they knew that would do the most damage. People had to flee their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs, on foot, with their children, walking the equivalent of a walk from here to Regina or further, on very little notice. When they managed to reach the border — and many of them didn't — they were taken in at refugee camps meant to hold a fraction of the people they had to contain. Refugee camps meant to hold 2,000 families may house as many as 8,000, with countless more refugees living in the surrounding area. These camps offer only the barest comforts, and because of the close proximity and the sanitation problems you inevitably face when keeping a camp at four times its intended capacity, conditions are ripe for the spread of the disease. Very often, the tragedies we see around the world are not preventable. But polio is. We can eradicate it, and the cost of vaccination is so low compared to the human suffering and medical costs that happen when children transmit it. This is an evil that we *can* erase."

Sharon studies Key for a moment — again, her eyes flicker to Key’s throat, lingering there — then nods, biting the inside of her lip. “Maybe... I mean... perhaps a smaller donation...”

“How much were you thinking?”

“Oh, I... maybe 15?”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“I... oh, I’m really not sure. If he were home, if we talked about this, I could maybe say more, but...”

“Why don’t we do what you think would work for you two, and then if it turns out a little less would be better, you can just call the number and change it?”

“Oh... no, I’m sorry, I really don’t feel comfortable doing this. I’m sorry.” She’s retreating back into the shelter and shade of the house, but Key speaks before Sharon can start to close the door.

“When will your husband be home?”

“I... around six, I suppose.”

“I’m here until seven-thirty. Why don’t I come by around seven-fifteen, after you’ve had some time to discuss it and relax a little, and we can see whether or not we can get you onboard?”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose that would be fine.”

“Great.” Key tries smiling and mostly succeeds. “I’ll see you then.”

“Oh, yes. Yes. Fine. Thank you.”

Key marks it down on her map sheet — 7:15, Sharon — puts the donation form back in its assigned pocket, takes a breath, and walks down the steps, turning left to the next door.

“Not bad, team,” Max says, surveying the numbers Natalie’s written on the board in pink and green. Doug is long gone but the rest linger at the promise of drinks and 30-cent wings at Sam’s across the street. Lee and Key file the day’s paperwork, entering their numbers into the company website. “Acacia, are you gonna make some DRM tomorrow?”

“Yes, Max,” Acacia replies, looking up from her phone with wide eyes. At the computer, Lee frowns between them. James, sitting beside her, offers her a smile. She looks down at her phone again, a little pink.

Max smiles, his cheeks globular and ruddy. “Good.”

Both Acacia and Robin made it through their first day and, by their own accounts, intend to come back tomorrow. Neither of them reached their \$200 goal yet, but no one really expected them to.

Key, the day’s Hulk — the one with the highest DRM per hour is declared the Hulk — will be asked to recap and analyse her great success tomorrow. The table marking the day’s progress dominates the whiteboard, assaulting them with its shades of neon. Key’s numbers are written in green, to proclaim her success and supremacy with as little ambiguity as possible.

“Good job, Robin,” Max says, not for the first time that night, after studying the board again, clasping Robin’s shoulder. His hand looks comically meaty against the sharp jut of the younger man’s angular body. Robin does not look particularly thrilled with the contact, but Max does not seem to notice. “You excited to be Batman?”

“I always preferred Professor X,” Robin says after a moment. “I don’t really like DC.”

“You don’t like DC? Come on, man. Batman? Who doesn’t like Batman? Who doesn’t like Superman?” Max has reclaimed his hand, and is giving Robin a look of disbelief. “Come on.

Acacia, you like Superman, right?”

Acacia looks up from her phone again. “Um. I guess?”

“Everyone likes Superman, Robin.”

PART 2: RAPPORT

CHAPTER 3

Lee's better at ignoring the tentative ache than he used to be, but there are some nights when his awareness of James, James as a being within reach, exceeds his nerves' capacity for absorbing it. It's just the two of them tonight, side by side watching episodes of *Scandal* on James's laptop. The silence between them should be comfortable, but an unbearable pressure is building in Lee's ears as he wonders whether or not his leg propped up on the coffee table is an adequate distance from James's, if it's held too rigidly to pass unnoticed.

He's certain this episode has some sort of plot — yadda yadda national security, blah blah people having sex — but he's lost the details, distracted by the business of regulating the frequency of his side glances. James has not been sleeping well; Lee hears him moving around at night. There are shadows the shade of the badlands at dusk haunting the skin around his eyes. Sometimes, on nights like this, Lee seriously considers doing something, which is ridiculous. Doing something would be an irreversible strike against a friendship that's become as natural to him as his own blood.

Not that James is a homophobe, obviously. But he might look back on the times he's been shirtless in Lee's company somewhat differently if he found out that Lee had long since memorized the planes of his stomach, and the colour and density of the hair that trails down from its centre. He might feel less at ease with the times he and a female paramour had livened up their apartment with the sounds of their coupling if he learned how Lee had committed *his* part in those harmonies, not quite willingly, to heart. All this to say: though James may have no problem with Lee being bisexual, it is not beyond imagining that he might take issue with Lee being all

bisexual *at him*.

Time passes differently when you're doing your best not to move, or breathe too disruptively, or let your gaze slide where it wants to. Olivia Pope has barely even begun to see the brilliant strategy that no one else ever could, but to Lee, the last few minutes have been a saga of epic, muscle-straining proportions. He imagines the blood in his veins slowing with his careful breaths, the fluid coagulating into something spongier than clots, forming swollen rivulets down his calves that encircle and reinforce the cramps slowly taking hold. He takes a deep breath, steels himself, and — after two more minutes of steeling himself — drops his leg to the floor. He means to casually knock James's foot with his own in the process, but loses heart at the last minute.

“Need another?” he asks, nodding at James's beer.

James has paused the episode before the words are done leaving Lee's mouth, and he smiles a smile similar to the one he offers when waking from a light nap. “Sure.”

“Don't wait for me,” Lee says, smiling back. “Just be a minute.”

In the kitchen, Lee cracks his can open and takes a long drink, staring at the microwave clock, which is 12 minutes ahead of the oven clock and 10 minutes ahead of the actual time. He considers setting both clocks to the correct time, as he usually does when reminded of their existence. Instead, he opens James's bottle and makes his return to the couch, slower than he normally would. He hands James his drink and receives another smile in return; when he raises his legs to the coffee table once again, he feels rigidity set in even before he's finished leaning back.

—

In the absence of a watch, or any kind of commitment to punctuality, Graham measures

transit time in cigarettes smoked. He used to measure it in songs played on his iPod, back when teenagers bought iPods instead of iPhones to play their music. Graham doesn't have an iPhone. He bought an LG Android instead. The camera's shit and Snapchat always crashes, but he maintains it was worth it. No point getting a phone that costs more, leads to bigger phone bills, and makes him that much more dependent on a steady stream of data. His Netflix addiction is embarrassing enough. His phone has been dropped down no less than five staircases, and the screen has never cracked. Take that, Apple.

After 27 years, he can only assume that on a primal, reptilian level, he enjoys both making bad decisions and dealing with their fallout. It's not that he buys the repetition-of-action definition of insanity, but the evidence seems a little damning after a while. Right now, he is rushing through thready May sunlight from the company apartment to HHYYC. This should be barely a one-cigarette walk, but last night Drunk Graham came for a visit, and Drunk Graham has a perilous propensity towards hitting the snooze button.

The trip would have been a one-cigarette walk maximum if, as planned, he'd gotten up an hour early, showered, shaved, eaten, and caffeinated himself into something that could masquerade as an adult. As Graham did not heed his alarm until ten minutes before his shift, he is instead stubbled and dripping, gripped by nausea and panic in equal measure. Although the pace he's keeping means he'll be there in fine time, it might as well be a 100-cigarette marathon. It is 12:39, which means he's only 9 minutes late and counting. However, first-day minutes are to normal minutes as dog years are to human, so this revelation only tightens the web of acid clinging to his guts. He ignores a dirty look from a black person with a battered messenger bag, long limbs, short hair, and features the kind of elf-androgynous you find in photoshoots, as he tosses his cigarette in the gutter outside the building and makes a beeline for the elevator.

Marcy has no mercy for him. She half-turns, arms crossed, upon hearing frantic footsteps and graces him with a slow look, down and up, and half a smirk before returning her attention to Max. Max is wearing his Grumpy Teddybear face, the one that says he's only keeping calm because positivity sells, because calling you a dickhead isn't how we do things at HHYYC.

"Hey, sorry I'm late, must be jetlagged," Gray offers, softening Max's expression for a moment before Marcy counters with:

"Montreal's two hours ahead of Calgary, Gray."

"You know," Max says, face solemn again, "it's important that you two as team leaders are on time."

Graham rubs at the cat that's using the inside of his skull as a scratching post. "I know, Max."

"You two have to set a good example to keep up morale and inspire our heroes."

"I know, Max."

"This is a fun job, but it's still a job," Max continues. "I need you two to help everybody remember that even if we love what we're doing here, we're doing important work. Important *work*, Graham. The people we're raising money for don't get to sleep in."

"Max, I get it. Hella crucial. Lives in the balance, crime knows no lie-ins, evil doesn't take mornings off, suffering is punctual — got it." Graham smiles through his tremendous urge to go have another cigarette. "We're good. Won't happen again. So!" He looks from Max to Marcy, smiling wider. The cat in his skull rolls over, revealing a long line of ragged stegosaurus spikes along its back.

"What's on the agenda today? Meet and greet? Group hug? Any burning orphanages that need saving?"

He glances over his shoulder when the door opens and sees Legs Ahoy McDirtylook, the same person who'd tried glaring a hole through him downstairs, walk in. They spare him another look of momentary displeasure before making for the team lounge. Good, then. Good impressions all around.

—

Lee is not even remotely concerned about Acacia, or how often she smiles at James. He is certainly not concerned about the way James smiles back. It is a point of absolutely no concern, which is why Max has Lee's undivided attention as he introduces the two HHMTLers who've come to HHYYC for the summer to lead their first ever second Door Team. Their ranks, newly swelled with even more university students than usual, have merited expansion, a two-pronged attack on Calgary's chequebooks.

The HHMTLers are a boy and a girl. One is stubbly, tired-eyed, with a mess of brown hair and a vague look of world-weary resignation, while the other, devoid of stubble, has dirty blonde hair pulled into a neat ponytail, two-inch dark roots, a no-nonsense expression, and hands clasped behind her back. They are both in t-shirts and jeans: standard Helping Hand couture.

Lee is absolutely focused, and the bewildered "What?" he gives when he realizes everyone is looking at him is purely coincidental. He does not at all stumble over his words when he realizes he's supposed to be introducing himself to the pair. Key watches him for only a moment longer than usual before she takes her turn. When she begins to speak, he catches James's eye and is only a little embarrassed to see the smirk he's giving Lee.

The team will take turns going out with Marcy and Graham for the week, and determine the best fit for the two divisions by next week. Today, Lee, Key, and James are out with the HHMTLers, along with Acacia, Doug, and Mike, their new 71-year-old recruit. When they reach

turf, they settle in the middle of an underused dog park, and Lee mourns the lost opportunity to find out which dogs are friendly as they sit in a circle.

Graham stands slightly off to the side of the circle, lighting a cigarette, blowing the smoke away from the group only to be thwarted by the Calgary wind.

Key wrinkles her nose every time the smoke drifts near her. She seems unusually on edge today, but Lee hasn't quite had the energy to tease out why from her, too perturbed by his own thoughts. He is sitting on James's left side; Acacia sits on James's right.

"So, Max has told us you guys like to do roleplaying games before shift to get in the right frame of mind, but since all of you have done at least a few of those, we thought we'd try something different for today," Marcy says, looking around the group from behind highly reflective sunglasses. "Since we're all getting to know each other, we thought we'd go back to the basics. Why did you go for this job? And why did you pick the charity story you did?"

Lee cannot stop picking grass. He feels bad about it, because it's probably bad for the planet or something, but it's *right there* all around them and it's so hard not to rip it up.

"I'll start," Marcy continues. "I started working for Helping Hand four years ago, when I needed a summer job. I thought it was just going to be a joke or a scam, but when I found out the breakdown, how little the charities we work with allot in their budget for fundraising, I was impressed. I like knowing that we're doing good without working starvation wages or going without benefits. I'm talking about TOC's emergency education packages, because I think education's one of the most important tools we have in the fight against inequality, and because it's something people usually seem to relate to. Doug, you wanna get us going next?"

Doug has another protein shake today — this one is the colour of clay.

"I've worked in sales a lot before, more when I was younger than... It seemed like a

natural fit, and it's nice being able to sell a product people can feel good about. It's interesting learning about the charities, and finding out what works and what doesn't. For my story, I'm talking about the initiatives TOC's made with young girls' education, partly 'cause of what you said, and partly because so many of the people we talk to, especially earlier in the day, are women and they really connect with it."

"Thanks, Doug," says Marcy, while Graham blows an immense cloud of smoke into the air above him, smirking. "How about you, Key?"

Key looks from Graham to Marcy, eyes flitting over the group at large, before she answers, voice low.

"I took this job because it was one of the only ethical jobs you can get in Alberta, and because of how open the office tries to be." She is studying her long fingers interwoven in her lap, back straight. "I'm talking about our vaccination campaigns, partly because it's something a lot of people can get on board with, partly because it's something that so obviously needs to be done, and partly because it's topical."

"Have you had any anti-vaccers?" asks Graham, who has settled in the grass a way back, leaning back, another cigarette lit.

"One," Key says after a moment, eyes steady on his. "She told me her nephew had 'severe autism' and it was the worst thing that had ever happened to her family."

Graham grins, tapping his cigarette. "Ouch. What'd you say?"

Key shoots the ash perched between blades of grass an irritated look before meeting his eyes again. "I told her they probably would've liked smallpox less and that I hoped her nephew found a better family when he's older."

Graham laughs and Marcy shoots him a look of years-old exasperation, while Lee chews

on the inside of his lip, still toying with the grass. Key's face remains solemn, as is Marcy's when she speaks.

"It's totally valid to get frustrated with people's responses, but we have to remember that as much as we're met with ignorance when we talk to potential donors, alienating them doesn't help anyone. We'll come back to that. Thanks, Key. How about you, Lee?"

Lee gives his usual breakdown of Syria and cyclical violence; James talks about child labour in Madagascar's mines. Acacia talks about South Sudan and family reunification, her sentences wandering up into questioning tones as she looks around the group for confirmation. Mike is next, and he speaks at length about the plight of aboriginal children in Canada; two minutes pass and he has gone into an in-depth, stream-of-consciousness history of residential schools in Alberta. Key and James are listening attentively, faces serious; Lee, like most of the others, can't stay focused. He continues picking at the grass.

"That's great, Mike," Marcy says when he finally trails off to what was either an end or a pause. "Graham, wanna finish us off?"

"Always," Graham replies. He leans towards Marcy with a grin that verges on lecherous, and is met with the rise of one thinly plucked eyebrow. "So." He turns his attention to the others, his broad features softening into a more genuine expression.

"I started four years ago, same as Marce. I'd worked a lot of crappy dead-end jobs and I liked the benefits, the pay was alright, and anything for a good cause, rah rah, all of that. I'm talking about our clean water initiatives. It's especially great on a sunny day like this," he gestures, "when people have their sprinklers keeping the pavement nice and hydrated. It's something people take for granted, it's a heart-wrencher, and the guilt really helps me close. Plus it's a super easy fix, so it's something we can get people on board with. *And* Orlando Bloom did

a video talking about it, so if I see any Lord of the Rings posters or anybody who seems like they're into elves, I can do my spot-on O-Bloom impresh." At the look on Acacia's face, he wiggles his eyebrows. "Want a preview?"

"Okay, Gray," Marcy says before Acacia can answer. "Are we feeling good to go?"

An hour and a half into his shift, Lee hasn't signed anyone on, and it's started to drizzle. Mourning the lack of his hoodie, left in the back of the company van, he knocks on the next door, running a hand through his hair and forcing himself to look pleasant, like someone who is absolutely in the mood to be drizzled on, like someone who can live in the moment and embrace the spontaneity of Calgary weather instead of feeling like there are some very mean-spirited angels up in the clouds giving them a good shake just to fuck with him. The woman who opens the door — early 40s, maybe, with dark hair and skin the colour of Carnation hot chocolate — glances from his bare arms to the overcast sky, smiling slightly.

"You must be cold," she says.

Lee laughs, looking down and shaking his head. "No, not yet. It just started."

"You want a cup of tea?"

Lee looks at her again — maybe the angels aren't so mean-spirited after all — before shrugging and nodding. "Sure. If you don't mind."

"Hold on," the woman says. "I'll be right back." She closes the door and Lee stands on her step, trying not to feel awkward despite the conspicuous blue glare of his vest and binder, the car that drives by and slows down, the driver watching him intently as he passes by. The woman returns shortly after with a wicker box filled with teabags, along with a few smaller tins and boxes. "I've got all kinds of herbal, I have chai, English Breakfast, Irish Breakfast, rooibos,

green tea, mint tea, chocolate mint tea... pick one," she says, thrusting the wicker box towards him, leaving him to shrug his binder under one arm as he takes the box, perusing her wares.

"Er," he says, while she turns a box of orange pekoe over, frowning slightly at the text on the back, "if it's not too much trouble, I mean, chocolate mint would be amazing, thank you."

She smiles at him, taking back the wicker box and nodding. "Chocolate mint it is. Wait here, I'll put the water on."

She shuts the door again. Lee studies a small stone cherub placed at the corner of her porch, perched on one tip-toe, body extended forward mid-leap. When she returns, she leans easily against the doorframe, arms crossed, smiling at him. It is a pleasant smile, but one just the uncomfortable side of confident; it is the smile of someone who will not be talked into anything easily. On the bright side, Lee is going to get tea. Tea is better than nothing.

"So," she says, legs crossed at the ankle, "what can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm out in your neighbourhood today with Think of the Children — have you heard of us?"

"Of course," she says, inclining her head, looking a little amused.

"Awesome!" He rocks his weight from the heels of his feet and back again, the rain feeling a little less cold. "If you don't mind, can I ask what you know about us?"

"I know you were founded several decades ago. That you're a worldwide organization, that you do... crisis intervention, vaccination, anti-hunger, anti-poverty, pro-education, health initiatives, women's rights..." She trails off, shrugging. "You're well established."

Lee feels his smile widen. "You're absolutely right! Are any of those topics ones that you're especially passionate about?"

"Oh, they're all worthy causes," she says, smooth and unhurried. "But what are *you*

passionate about?”

It’s easiest to hook a donor on something *they* care about, but Lee’s good at getting people to care about his stories. “Well, today I’m talking about the Syrian refugee crisis, and how we’re intervening to help keep kids’ lives normal — or as normal as possible — while they try to find new homes, or wait to return to the ones they’ve had to flee. Do you know a lot about the war in Syria?”

The woman inclines her head again. “Of course. It’s a terrible thing, what’s happening there. Not so new, but terrible.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Lee says, shifting his binder from one arm to the other, holding it close against his chest. “And one of our primary concerns is the number of children who’ve been caught up in the violence. The conservative estimate is that over 10,000 children have been—” He’s cut off by the sharp ringing of the phone, which the woman turns towards, frowning slightly, shooting him an apologetic look.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “Hold on to that thought — I’ll be back, with the tea.”

She shuts the door again. Lee takes a deep breath, hesitating before taking his own phone out, leaning over it to block the tiny drops still peppering his shoulders, checking his messages. There are six, all from James. By the time Lee has shot off a reply in the form of a string of emojis, the door opens, and she holds out a mug of tea as he pockets his phone, cradling one of her own.

“Sorry about that,” she says. “I’m expecting a call.”

“That’s absolutely fine!” Lee smiles at her. “And thank you so much for the tea; that’s really nice of you.”

“Of course.” She smiles slightly. “I’m sure you’ve earned it. So, you were saying…”

“Right! The most conservative estimates suggest that over 10,000 children have been killed in the current conflict in Syria, and that’s an absolute travesty, but TOC is dedicated to helping the children the war *hasn’t* killed. Do you know how many kids have been displaced by the war so far?”

Her eyebrows raise and she blows on her tea. “You’d like for me to guess?” Lee nods. “Oh, I don’t know... a few million, maybe.”

“You’re right around the mark. There are almost 3 million displaced children in Syria alone, and over 1.2 million Syrian refugees who are children. TOC is working to ensure that these kids are taken to safe places, that the refugee camps have enough water, food, and medicine, and that Syrian children are given access to education and some sense of normalcy as quickly as possible. What’s already been done to these kids is unforgivable, but what we urgently need to do is give these kids the resources they need to move on from the trauma and regain some sense of routine before they become a lost generation. If those 4.2 million children don’t get to have something *resembling* a normal childhood, it’s only going to create more unrest as they get older and become the generation in charge.”

The woman nods, sipping her tea. “And do you think you’re the people to do that?”

Lee blinks. Some of the rain has dripped down from his hair into his eyes, but between the mug and his binder, he’s not quite willing to try and brush it away. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m from Lebanon, you know. I left in the late 90s. I have friends who are still there... organizations like Think of the Children... you’re very good at visibility, but you’re not very good at follow-through. One of my friends works for an organization that follows up at places TOC has been and left. She’s seen communities where you’ve built wells for clean water and then left. The wells break down over time and the people who live there just... let them. My

friend's organization goes in and they're shocked because these communities often don't understand that the well is not TOC's, but *theirs*. They have to be trained how to maintain it. And in Bangladesh, your wells brought up water tainted with arsenic. People are getting bronchitis, they're getting cancer... millions of people have arsenic in their drinking water because of your wells. Did you know that?"

Lee thinks again of the mean-spirited angels up in the clouds shaking down drizzle and new headaches on him. His mind is working overtime to find a way to lure her back to the Syrian conversation, but it's hard to come back from 'millions of people drinking arsenic.' He's not sure he *wants* to come back from that. He clears his throat, sipping his tea and shaking his head. "No. I didn't. Where did you... hear about that?"

"Oh, it was all over the news a few years ago," she says, waving her hand and sipping her tea, straightening up from the doorframe before leaning again, ankles crossed the other way. "But that's the point — when you try to spread your reach all over the world, to all these avenues — just to work on the *education* of the world's children would be a near-impossibility. Or their health. Or their food. Or children in wars. So when organizations like TOC try to take on *all* of that for *all* the world... too much slips through the cracks. It doesn't mean they're not useful. But they're perhaps not as useful as the alternatives. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Well, yeah, but." Lee puts down his tea by his feet, opening his binder to the glossy graphics they're sent out with, holding one out for her to see. "We do an excellent job of putting as much of the money we raise as we can towards our initiatives," he says, pointing to a pie chart. "And you're right, you're absolutely right that our mandate is broad, but it enables us to take care of the worst case scenarios—" he stops as she raises a finger.

"But you don't. You don't take care of them. Not really. Because you can't. There's too

much. What you need to do is support the grassroots initiatives that come from the communities themselves, do you see? Use your reputation and your clout to support them. And that's where my money goes, I'm afraid. The people who are in the communities? Those are the people who will stick around to make sure their projects *work*. But I appreciate the work that you're doing — what's your name?"

Lee swallows, holding up his lanyard, which features TOC's logo, a somewhat washed-out photo of him smiling widely, his name, and employee ID, among a few other things. "Lee."

"Lee." She holds out a hand, which he shakes. "I know that you're out here because you care. People don't do jobs like this for the benefits. So today, I'm going to have to pass, but I hope you have better luck with my neighbours. And that you enjoy your tea. Just leave the mug on the porch when you're done, okay?"

Lee hesitates, then nods slowly. "You know, if you'd like, I could always give you a phone follow-up, so you could look into us a little more and see if you'd be comfortable giving with us once you know more about the organization..." he starts, fumbling for the forms.

She smiles, shaking her head. "I know enough. But thank you, Lee. It was nice meeting you."

Lee nods again as she backs into the house, closing the door. "Yeah. You too." The door shut, he stands there, wiping the rain off his brow, then looks down at the mug between his feet, bending to pick it up and take a sip. After a moment, he takes out his phone, taking a photo of the mug and sending it to James with the caption: *a lady just told me we kill people&gave me free tea*

Some seconds later, the reply buzzes: *is it poison?*

The drizzle has turned into a downpour and the water rushing through the gutters reminds Key of the summer before, of downtown underwater and half of Calgary evacuated. She is intent on marching forward, ignoring the cacophonous crack of thunder, bending forward to keep the binder dry inside her vest. She does not hear the approaching footsteps.

“Hey,” Graham says, catching up with her, out of breath, bangs hanging thick and limp in his eyes. “Mind if I do some doors with you?”

Key has not had to suffer the indignity of anyone but Lee doing doors with her since she was in training. Her initial response is a firm *No*, but Graham is technically her new boss, and it doesn't seem like a fight worth picking on his first day, in the rain. She nods instead, and they march in tandem to a first door: no answer. A second — a brief conversation cut short by the man's mutterings about security, safety, preferring to donate on the internet. A third and a fourth — no answer, again — before, on the fifth, they meet a middle-aged white woman in teddybear-patterned scrubs, whose eyes widen at the sight of them just as a louder crack of thunder rumbles through the air, chasing a prolonged flash of lightning.

“My God! Come in,” she says, stepping back to make room for them. Key and Graham exchange looks, Graham seemingly unbothered by the steady drip of rain into his eyes, Key sheltering hers with her hand, before they walk in, both stopping short on the rug in the entryway, eyeing the spotless cream carpet that awaits them, neither willing to mar it.

“Stay right there,” the woman says, holding up a finger. “Get those shoes off. I'll get you two towels.”

As she disappears upstairs, Graham leans over, whispering, “Figure she's a serial killer?”

Key shoots him a warning look, though her lips twitch slightly. He still smells like cigarettes, despite the rain. “No.”

Graham stands straighter, brushing his bangs out of his eyes and studying her, grinning. “No? You sure? It’s always the nice ones.”

“That’s just what people say about violent white people once they’re in jail to make themselves feel better,” Key says in an undertone, turning to smile at the woman as she returns, bearing two fluffy pastel towels.

Key takes one and starts to meticulously dry herself off, unlacing her boots with the towel draped over her shoulders.

“Thanks for giving us a break!” Graham says, toeing off his sneakers and drying his hair into a tangled, damp cloud, flashing the woman a smile Key hasn’t seen him wear before — genuine, warm, and enthusiastic, without the sharp cant that usually accompanies his comments. “My phone didn’t tell me there’d be an apocalypse today.”

The woman laughs, watching the pair. “Calgary,” she says. “I can’t believe you two are out there in this. You shouldn’t be out there while it’s thundering.”

“Well, you know.” Graham flashes her another smile, this one more along his usual lines, while Key watches the pair, wrapping her binder in the towel to dry it off. “The people we’re representing have bigger problems than a little rain. Figure we can handle it.” He winks, and the woman smirks, shaking her head.

“Come in,” she says, starting to walk towards the back of the house. “You shouldn’t be out there while it’s like this. You can have a seat in the kitchen and tell me why you’re out here.” She glances over her shoulder. “You two want hot chocolate?”

Graham shoots Key a delighted look that would be better suited to the offer of untold riches before looking at the woman, holding his towel in a bundle between his broad-fingered hands. “We would love hot chocolate. Would we love hot chocolate?” He looks back at Key

again, expression less certain. “Are you a vegan?”

Key looks at him for a second, brow furrowing, lips twitching again. “No, I’m not a vegan.”

“Thank God. I can’t stand vegans. Oh crap.” He looks at the woman, who’s at the opposite edge of the living room, arms crossed. “Are you a vegan?”

“Hell no. I’m Albertan. Come on in.”

They take careful steps over the cream carpet, towels at the ready, shoulders relaxing once their feet touch tile. The woman’s hands are busy in a cupboard. She stands on tiptoe while the kettle starts to warm. “So you’re with TOC?” she asks, pulling out a box of hot chocolate packets, casting a glance at them as they settle their weight on wooden stools with graceful metal legs.

“We are.” Graham smiles, then looks to Key, waiting for her to take the bait.

“How much do you know about us?” she asks, looking to the woman. She is sitting on her towel, reluctant to chance harming the seat. Her binder is on the island counter in front of her; Graham’s stays in his lap.

“Oh, this and that. I know the Halloween campaigns and the Christmas cards and all of that. I know you work with children. That’s about it.”

Key nods, feels her settling into something more herself, calm replacing the slight giddiness of being invited in, the feeling of being snuck into somewhere one does not belong.

“We’re actually in your neighbourhood today to tell people a little more about us. Do you know about our vaccination campaigns, or our clean water initiatives?”

The woman leans against the counter, smiling slightly. “No. Why don’t you tell me about them?”

CHAPTER 4

“Alright,” Graham says, grinning and leaning forward, exposing the persistent stain on his left front tooth, which had turned up around his 26th birthday and never went away, despite dental intervention. “Truth or Dare, Two Truths and a Lie, Never Have I Ever, or King’s Cup. The choice is yours.”

“Because God forbid we just have a few drinks and enjoy each other’s company,” Marcy says, pouring the wine.

“Yes!” Graham shouts, turning in his seat to jab a finger in her direction. “God *has* forbidden it, Marce. Leviticus, 14:24: Those who gather in groups of four or more with ample libations who fail to play one of the four pillars of intoxication shall be stoned to death. Thank you.”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” she mutters, putting the cheap white wine back in the fridge door.

“It’s salted rims or pillars of salt for you,” he continues, turning back to the seated crowd in the living room of the company apartment. “Your choice, tributes.”

Lee has tried, and failed, to convince Key to join them in the night’s festivities; he suspects Graham’s repeated references to bacchanalia were the screws in that sarcophagus. Once again, James is seated between him and Acacia.

“I don’t like Truth or Dare, or Never Have I Ever,” Acacia says, after a moment of sideways glances and tentative smiles. Marcy sets plastic wine glasses in front of those disinclined to opt for beer, or Graham mixing their drinks.

“Excellent.” Graham claps his hands together. “What say you we play King’s Cup, put Two Truths in there, and hope variety keeps everyone in high spirits and high spirit

consumption?”

Lee grins. He was the only one to accept Graham’s offer of bartending; they are both drinking a syrupy brew of \$18 whiskey, Jägermeister, and coke that Lee is pretty sure is equal parts alcohol to mix. Marcy retrieves a pack of cards from the bedroom, and Graham takes out a notebook, drawing up the rules while the others spread out the cards.

“Who’d like to go first?” Graham asks, when the cards have been spread in a circle around the ill-fated cup — destined for shitmix — standing empty in the centre of the table.

“You’re the jackass who thought this would be a good idea,” supplies Marcy, but before Graham can retort, Acacia has reached forward and selected a card, smirking and holding it up.

“Two truths and a lie!” Graham crows, clapping his hands together again. “Kay-kay, dazzle us like a Cullen. Anyone who guesses wrong drinks, and you take a drink for every person who guesses right.”

“Alright.” Acacia smiles around the table, dimples deep. “I’m divorced, I’ve been arrested three times, and I’ve never watched a Harry Potter movie.”

With outraged cries from those forced to drink, they learn that Acacia is indeed divorced at 19, but has only been arrested *twice*. Some turns later, after Lee’s given drinks to James and Marcy, the room has seen Robin’s atrocious but ambitious dancing, and heard Mike’s *Spice World*-esque British accent. Now, Graham holds up a 7, winking at Acacia. “Twinsies. Alright... I used to be straight edge, I was born on a school bus, and I am allergic to semen. Also, Marcy can’t answer.”

“Oh, I can definitely answer.”

“Marce, it’s no fair if you answer. You know everything. Then I have to take seven drinks and everybody else has to take zero drinks.”

Marcy looks at him, expression guileless. "I thought that's how you liked it, Gray."

"Allergic to semen for the lie," Lee says, eyes slightly narrowed as he studies the pair. "You're weird, but you're not nearly neurotic enough to be someone who can't come."

"A *compelling* argument from Sir Smilesalot! Do we have any other theories?"

"School bus," Natalie says after a moment. "It could be a mild allergy, and allergic to semen would be a good red herring."

"Another fine point! Anyone want to speak in favour of straight edge?"

"What's straight edge?" asks Mike.

"Mike. *Michael*. Can I call you Michael?" Graham leans closer to the older man. "Thank you. Straight edge means no drinking, no drugs, no silly substance business."

"Well, Graham, I'm going to be honest," Mike gestures at Graham with his bottle of Coors Light, "that doesn't sound like you."

"*Excellent!*" Graham bounces back in his seat and taking a long drink of his shitmix. "Shall we vote? Let's vote. Democracy! Everybody close your eyes and *I* will count votes, thank you, no need to peek at Marce..."

It turns out that Graham is not, in fact, allergic to his own or anyone else's semen, and most of the room knows that, to his repeatedly sipping chagrin.

By the time Lee picks a 7, they've gone round the room twice more. The group's collective enunciation has been compromised. Graham and Natalie keep laughing every time anything that could by any stretch of imagination be construed as innuendo is spoken. Mike is smiling and loose, but does not appear to be absorbing any of the conversations around the table unless directly prompted to do so. The second round of drinks Graham mixed is stronger than the last; Lee can feel the sugar stick to his throat as it burns its way down.

“Fuck.” He takes a sip, setting the card down on the edge of the table. “Alright.” He takes a deep breath, pushing down the usual confession. “I... have never been in a relationship longer than four months. I’ve never had sex in a public place. And... I’m scared of rabbits.”

“Oh *come on*.” Acacia snorts, sipping her wine and shaking her head. “*Rabbits?*”

“Haven’t you seen *Monty Python and the Holy Grail?*”

“That shit was brutal,” Graham adds, smiling a little, though his voice is somber. “I had to kill my pet rabbit Bartholomew and cook him in a stew after I saw that shit. I was eight years old. The only salt was from my tears and snot.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Marcy gets up, going to grab another bottle of white. “You can’t cook stew *now*. You sure as shit didn’t do that when you were eight.”

“I *choose* not to cook stew, Marcy! Because of the *memories*.” Graham takes a drink with a level of defiance that would be better suited to someone staring down an execution squad. “And I’d *thank you* not to *bring it up again*. What Bartholomew and I had was *real*.”

“Rabbits for the lie,” Natalie says, studying Lee. “I can’t picture you not having a good relationship with small woodland creatures.”

“Aw,” Lee says, before pointing at James, shooting him a look. “Not a word from you.”

James smirks, holding up his hands in surrender, before moving to take a drink.

Acacia leans in towards James. One of the straps of her shirt has slipped down her shoulder and her face is flushed. It isn’t that Lee hadn’t noticed that she was pretty before; he simply hadn’t had reason to think her being pretty was cause for alarm. Now the way her eyes linger on James’s features gives him pause.

“Come on, James. Help a girl out. Is it the rabbits?”

It is, of course, perfectly reasonable for James to return her smile. They’re all young, hot-

blooded adults here — Acacia, a divorcée, may well be more adult than Lee, by some accounts. There is no reason why James, a young man with no significant other, should not return Acacia's smile.

It still makes Lee's drink rise up in his chest for a moment, though.

"You're asking me to betray my best friend here," James says, voice assured and smooth, if not enunciated as clearly as usual. "I'm going to need some motivation."

"Hey now!" Graham interrupts, pointing at the two. "Absolutely no hooking up until the game is done. *Focus*, children."

They laugh, and the moment passes — the lie was not the rabbits, but the public sex, and most everyone except James is forced to drink. For the rest of the night, Lee can't help but note the lessened distance between James and Acacia, how she leans towards him automatically. He sees James's eyes flick over her face and takes a long drink, hoping to drown the petty, unkind thoughts the sight prompts.

—

"We need to talk."

Lee had thought about starting the conversation differently. Somehow, pretending a We Need To Talk conversation was anything but a We Need To Talk conversation seemed much worse than invoking the familiar warning bell. Less kind.

James's face becomes guarded as soon as Lee says the words, eyes scanning his features for some sign of the danger that prompted the warning.

"Sure. What about?"

"You wanna..." Lee reaches into his backpack, producing a bottle of Jameson and holding it up, eyes wide. The very idea of the Jameson makes him nauseous, even given that two

days passed since the party, but the prospect of trying without is even worse. The bottle earns a more perturbed look, but James nods, shutting his laptop. They settle on the couch, two mismatched, stout tumblers on the table on either side of the bottle, mirroring them, on either side of the couch.

“Shots?” Lee asks, and James acquiesces, letting Lee pour over-generously, lifting his glass before they drain the liquid, both grimacing slightly, both remembering countless scenes with actors downing shots without a cringe, both feeling a little inadequate. Lee pours again, but they nurse the refrain. James holds his tumbler lightly between fingertips, while Lee fiddles with his, running fingers restlessly against the glass, thumb tracing its curve. “So.”

“So,” says James.

Lee takes a sip. “We’ve been friends a really long time.”

A pause. “Yes.”

“And we know each other pretty well.”

“Also true.” James sips, shifting his weight on the couch.

“I... need to tell you something. That I don’t really want to tell you, but I have to, because I’ve been waiting for it to become not-necessary for a really long time, and it’s not happening. And pretending it’s not necessary is kind of ruining my life. And I don’t wanna feel like that anymore.”

James takes another sip, giving a slow nod. “Okay.”

“So...”

Lee studies James for a moment. He can feel the way his hand is imbued with energy, like if he lifts it from the tumbler, it will vibrate. He keeps both hands firmly against the glass, thumb no longer roaming. He wonders if he can pass this off as a different conversation; he’s

done it before. He wonders if this will be the last time he'll be able to look at James like this, with any sort of leisure, like he isn't stealing the sight of him.

"I know... I don't get serious about feelings a lot. Or people. But you? I'm serious about you. And Key, but like... in different ways? I just... I mean." He sips his Jameson, placing the lip of the glass underneath his own. A sheen of whiskey lingers, turns into a drip, hastily wiped away. "I ignored it when I got a crush on you because you're too important. Our friendship's too important. So I ignored it, and I waited for it to go away. But it didn't. I mean, sometimes it was less bad. Sometimes something distracted me for a while. But it never... it's been seven years and it's never gone away."

"Seven years." James's face is impassive, but he sits too still, bent forward. Lee lets his eyes slide over James's familiar features again, lingering on his hands, before nodding.

"Yeah."

James's jaw is a little too tight. He takes a long drink then refills both glasses. Lee tries not to read into James's positioning as he leans closer to pour, or to the amount he pours, or the way he looks down at the couch as he leans away again, setting the bottle back on the table.

"So anyway," Lee says, swallowing, taking a drink, swallowing again. "It... listen, if it was just a crush, you know, it wouldn't be anything. It wouldn't be a problem. I wouldn't bother saying anything."

"So it's more than a crush."

Lee swallows again, can feel his jaw working. "Like... yeah. Like I said, if it wasn't..."

"It wouldn't be a problem." James drinks.

"Yeah."

"But it is."

Lee sips his drink and nods, feeling his head give in to the movement like spring ice giving in to weight.

“Okay.” James moves to take another drink before hesitating, letting his glass return instead to the shelter of his hands, suspended above his lap, clearing his throat. “Go on.”

There’s plenty of beauty to be found in love, but not when it’s unwanted. There’s no point telling James all of the details, things Lee loves about him; their situation makes it more voyeurism than a lover’s attention to detail.

“I’m in love with you. I have been for a long time.” He ignores the wideness of James’s eyes and plows on. “And I was okay with it for a long time — like, not okay, but... willing.” He sips. “I was willing to just deal with it because it... it happens, you know, people fall for their... I mean, it happens. But our friendship’s important to me, so. I just. You know. I figured I’d get over it. But I haven’t, and it... I can date other people, and I can fuck other people, but it always comes back to you, J. Someone will, like, have really shitty taste in music and I’ll think about you listening to Iron & Wine with your eyes closed, or someone will make a shitty joke and I’ll just think about how you’d never say that. Or the conversation’ll go awkward and I’ll get stuck thinking how easy it is to talk to you. There’s too much history, J. Nobody measures up to you.”

“Um,” says James, looking a bit like a 6-foot tall lobster has just undressed in front of him.

“And it’s not like...” Lee downs the rest of his drink, almost choking on the burn before pouring another, lips numb. “I don’t expect you to reciprocate or anything. I don’t expect anything to come of this. I just... it seemed stupid, when it wasn’t going away, and when it was making everything else too hard, not to... say something and just... check.”

James still looks shellshocked. They both sit still.

“So anyway.” Lee clears his throat, shifting. “Do you need some time to... think?”

James nods slowly, looking at Lee as something unfamiliar.

“Alright.” Lee forces a smile, can feel his cheeks bunching together too tightly.

“Whatever you... anyway. I just thought I should say. But take all the time you need.”

He stands, lifting his glass in cheers and taking a sip. He can still feel himself smiling, is distantly aware that it's probably not appropriate to be smiling this much, under the circumstances, but he can't make himself stop. The alternative is something dangerous that binds his ribs together faster than he can fight it, making air hard to come by. “I'm gonna go to my room and leave you the rest.” He swallows, looking at James, breathing a little too fast. “Sorry. Anyway.” He walks the short distance to his room with quick, stiff steps, not realizing until after he's closed the door that he's left his backpack, along with his cellphone, in the other room.

PART 3: THE ASK

CHAPTER 5

Key drops by Lee and James's place before work on Monday. Lee had texted the night before, asking if she could, saying James was taking the day off and he didn't want to walk alone. It means getting up earlier, to have the time to walk over to theirs and to accommodate the invariably slower walk it will be with Lee in tow, but Key has never had trouble being punctual.

Instead of Lee, it's James who opens the door. Lee, who *has* always had trouble being punctual, is still in the shower. James seems unusually stiff when he greets her. It makes old anxieties flare up: Key has lost plenty of people for no good reason, and the way James won't hold her gaze makes her question every interaction they've had in the last few days. Was she oversensitive about something? Not sensitive enough about something else? Did she forget an important date? She follows him down the stairs and into the kitchen, her hands holding the strap of her messenger bag like they're ready to swing it at the first sudden movement.

"Did you know?" he says after a few uncomfortable moments, hunched over the counter by the coffee pot, one hand on his mug. His voice is too level, and Key's mind is already on overdrive, can't hold on to the words, let alone make sense of them. She casts a glance at the closed bathroom door and fights the panic rising in her throat.

"What?"

He looks at her. He looks tired. "Did you know Lee was in love with me."

Key's eyes widen and she stares at him, holding her strap more for reassurance than weaponry now, mind racing in new directions. Did she know? She knew they were close. She knew Lee sometimes got too drunk when James was chatting with a girl, but Lee also sometimes

got too drunk when it was a Wednesday. She knew Lee never seemed to stick with any of the people he flirted with, but then again, neither did James.

“No,” she says, eyes focused on the line of his body, the angle of his brows. “Is he?”

James nods, looking back down at the counter. The sound of the shower stops and Lee emerges, still dripping, a towel covering him from the waist down. The smile he shoots them is bright, but he barely glances at James as he passes from bathroom to bedroom, calling, “I’ll be ready in a sec!” before shutting the door. Key looks from the closed door to James, wishing she were better with micro-crises; she’s always been better at handling capital-H Humanity than at dealing with lowercase-p people and their problems.

“Do you... want to talk about it?”

James shakes his head, lifting his mug, straightening his spine, and taking a long dram. “No. Not right now. I’ll see you later, Key.”

Key watches him disappear into his bedroom, watches another door close, and shifts her weight to the other foot, frowning. She spends a minute fighting the urge to push back this knowledge, take out her phone, and check Twitter instead. She wonders whether confronting Lee about this when he reemerges would be helpful, whether *her in particular* confronting him would be. Key does not have a great track record with gentle confrontation, and this seems like the sort of thing one ought to be gentle about. Instead of coming up with a logical plan of attack, by the time Lee emerges from his bedroom fully clothed and smiling, all Key has accomplished is nursing her anxiety.

“Hey!” he says, shrugging on a light grey hoodie. “How’re you? Thanks for coming!”

“Yeah.” Key adjusts the strap of her bag again. “No problem.”

“James isn’t feeling well so it’s just us today and I didn’t feel like walking alone,” he

continues, casting a glance around the kitchen before retrieving his keys, improbably, from the dish rack. “Did you talk to him?” His eyes are on her, then, his smile threatening to flicker like a neglected streetlamp.

Key nods. She knows her face is generally impassive but can’t guess whether or not it looks like her usual impassivity. “I did.”

He looks at her another moment before his smile reasserts itself without quite dragging the rest of his face along. “Alright! Well, should we go?”

Key nods again. What James said does not seem like the sort of thing to bring up with a person who’s putting all his energy into speaking with exclamation marks.

She follows him up the stairs and out the door, making more of an effort than usual to slow her pace to his. He speaks at length about nothing of consequence, leaving few pauses between sentences and fewer between words. He shows her two videos: one of a dog with a cat toy in its mouth playing with a clumsy kitten, and another of several birds stealing GoPro cameras. Despite Key’s best scheduling efforts, they barely qualify as on time when they walk through the door.

“Graham!” The exponentially increased audience seems to lend Lee’s facade new life, and he claps the other man on the shoulder as he approaches, giving it a squeeze. “Your hair looks good today!”

Graham’s hair looks the same as it ever does, a mop of mess that may or may not be intentionally sculpted. He also looks as though he has not had enough coffee to process the amount of cheer Lee is doling out today, though his blank look does not deter Lee’s hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, man. You... too?”

“I know,” Lee says, his rigid smile shifting into something more natural. He tosses his curls

before heading off to the binder room. Graham stays where he was, holding his own binder, frowning as he looks at Key, lowering his voice.

“Is he okay?”

Key schools her expression. “James is out sick today,” she says, before following Lee to the binder room.

“I... know? He called in?”

“Who you talkin’ to, buddy?” asks Max, emerging from his office.

Graham surveys Max. He looks as normal as he ever does, his nauseating cheer of the same calibre and register it usually is.

“No one who’s listening,” he says slowly, wondering if they’ll have time to make a coffee run before hitting turf. A moment later, he flashes Max a smile. “What else is new in this job?”

CHAPTER 6

They've assembled at Sam's bar again. Normally, Lee and James would be sitting together, Lee having a sip of whatever James ordered, the two of them sharing glances throughout the conversation that seem to have the effect of silent, dramatic asides, the ensuing quirks of lips, low laughs, or raised eyebrows indecipherable to the rest of the table.

Tonight, Lee's sandwiched between Key and Max instead. Max has been bumming cigarettes off of Graham since midway through his first beer; he is now on his third. Key's first glass of water is still a quarter full.

"I'm trying to quit," Max says, after returning from the third stolen cigarette.

Graham, who looked jovial after their first smoke break, is starting to cast skeptical looks at the remaining cigarettes in his pack, his lips a thinning line.

Max's warm mass next to Lee smells powerfully of smoke, and he can feel Key shift a little further away on his other side. "I figure so long as I don't buy another pack, I'm doing okay."

Graham stares at him, while Marcy hides a smirk in her vodka tonic.

"How long have you been smoking, Gray?" asks Lee, shifting in his seat.

"Uh. Six years, about." Pocketing his pack, Graham redirects his attention to Lee, who seems unable to sit still, keeps thumbing the edge of his phone without looking at it.

"What made you start?"

To Lee's left, Key takes another sip of her water, watching Graham intently. He takes a long drink of his beer before answering.

"*That,*" he says before sucking the excess off his top lip, "is not a story you or anybody else wants to hear."

“He’s being melodramatic,” Marcy confides.

Graham shoots her a look of offence that may or may not be in jest. “I was having an *existential crisis*. I was 21. You’re allowed to have existential crises when you’re 21.”

“Melodrama.”

“It’s only melodrama if you’re still in your teens.” Graham takes another sip of beer, drawing himself up, aiming for dignified and falling short. “Once you’re in your *twenties*, it gains the dignity of *existential crisis*. Once you approach thirty, it turns into a nervous breakdown. Anything after that’s a midlife crisis or dementia.”

Max laughs, the sound a little brittle. “I don’t think it counts as a midlife crisis if you’re thirty, Graham.”

Graham shuts his eyes, nodding. “Of course, *senpai*.”

“What about you, Max? When did you start smoking?”

“Oh, I was just a kid, Lee. My parents smoked, my friends smoked, everybody in the neighbourhood did... I was maybe 13 the first time I started stealing them regularly. It wasn’t hard to find someone who’d buy them for you, if you had a little spare money for them on top. But that’s all behind me now.”

“After tonight,” Graham interjects.

Max does not seem to catch his tone, meeting him with a wink and a finger gun. “After tonight,” he agrees.

“It’s a stupid habit.” These are the first words Key has said in some time, and prompts a variety of reactions: Lee tenses, Max frowns the frown of a disapproving father, Marcy starts to grin, and Graham’s eyes slide to her as he starts to smirk.

“No shit? Where’d you hear that?”

Key's face remains neutral, her water in hand. "It's not funny. You're giving money to corporations that prey on vulnerable populations worldwide in exchange for something that does horrific damage to your body. Putting a monthly deposit in a savings account for your funeral costs would make more sense."

"Yeah, but if I put my money towards my funeral costs instead, it'd take that much longer for me to need the money for the funeral. If I'm not smoking, what'll kill me, Key? I'd probably rack up a million. It'd be the funeral of the century. You don't want me to give all that cash to Big Mortu, do you?"

"You know," Max starts, "tobacco companies are starting to market to developing nations, since they don't have the same health regulations we do. I heard in the Philippines you can get a pack for a dollar."

"Now *that'd* give me room to budget for the funeral. Road trip?"

Lee and Marcy laugh. Key and Max don't.

Max fixes Graham with the same grave stare he uses on pensioners who allege they don't have a spare fifteen dollars a month. "It's a dangerous habit, Graham. Key's right; we should be aware of how our vices contribute to suffering among those less fortunate than us. You should quit while you're ahead. Every cigarette you smoke brings you that much closer to the point of no return."

The mirth is gone from Graham's face as he surveys the other man. "Max, you can't bum cigarettes from me *and* give me shit about smoking. It's one or the other, dude."

"Maybe you two could be quitting buddies," Marcy pipes in, apparently immune to the look of indignation Graham gives her. "Support each other. Text if you get any late-night cravings."

"Marcy, I cannot believe you'd tell me to text our boss in the middle of the night. Don't you

believe in *boundaries*? What would you do if young Lee here decided to start texting you about his *cravings* at ungodly hours?”

Marcy casts a glance across the table at Lee, whose thumb has frozen on the edge of his phone, eyes a little wide. Her eyes do a quick swipe over what she can see of him, before she shrugs. “Wouldn’t say no.”

“*Sexual harassment*,” Graham hisses, face bright with delight.

Max shifts his weight in the seat. “That’s enough of that, I think.” He swallows, casting a glance at the door, before looking back to Graham. “Another?”

—

That weekend, Graham is not surprised that James looks a little bewildered to see him walk down the stairs with Lee. What *does* unsettle him is the hint of dismay on James’s face. Granted, Graham knows he’s a strong personality and by no means the easiest person to get along with, but he can’t remember having done anything to offend James yet. Then again, he’s one of the quieter ones, harder to read than Max or Key or Acacia.

“Look who I ran into!” Lee’s cheer sounds forced, though maybe that’s the sense of unease James’s expression has left Graham with, or the acoustics in the basement suite. “I invited him over to hang with us before we all head out. Is that cool?”

James studies the pair for a moment before nodding, relaxing, and Graham can’t find whatever it was in his expression that had unsettled him a moment before.

“Yeah, sure. Should I invite Key over, too?”

“Oh yeah, good idea!” Lee is busying himself in the cupboards, taking down glasses; Graham sets down his bag on the counter, leaning against it. His pulse is going a little faster than it was before James brought up Key, but he does his best to ignore that.

“Key has an easier time dealing with people drinking when she gets to see us steadily disintegrate instead of just running into us drunk and unruly,” Lee adds to Graham.

“So does she not drink at all, or...?”

He’s still not sure what to make of Key. As her boss, he’s torn between admiration for her relentlessness and a vague fear that she’s going to get them all sued and unemployed the next time someone at the door crosses her. As her work acquaintance, he can’t quite make sense of her, can’t suss out how much of her attitude towards the less rigidly principled people who surround her is morality, and how much of it is arrogance. She’s very fun to argue with, though he’s not sure she feels the same way, if she bothers feeling anything about him at all.

“Oh, she does, just.” Lee shrugs, opening the fridge to take out a half-full bottle of Pepsi while James texts on the other side of the suite. “She doesn’t like getting drunk. And she doesn’t like dealing with drunk people. Which is understandable, you know?”

“Yeah.” Graham watches Lee pour them each a drink, rum and unenthusiastically fizzy Pepsi. “I guess. She doesn’t... I mean, are people rude to her?”

“Oh yeah. Sometimes.” Lee hands Graham a drink and, casting a glance over to James, still busy with his phone, takes a sip of his own, shoulders slightly rounded. “Sure. I mean, even if she weren’t... you know, being black and a girl would be enough, you know? Let alone everything else. People can be dicks about it. ...poor choice of words.” His smile is like a flinch.

“Well.” Graham smiles back, feeling a little overwhelmed, as he usually does when confronted with concrete evidence of suffering. He lifts his glass. “If anybody tries jackshit tonight, we’ll sort them out.”

“Oh yeah. Cheers.” James approaches the two, and Lee hands him his drink, eyes flicking over his face before settling back on Graham’s. “But honestly, she doesn’t usually need it. I

mean. You've seen her annoyed. You should see her really pissed off. But it's okay. We never let her head home on her own. Or, we try not to."

"Most people don't do anything outright anyway," James says, leaning against the fridge, arms crossed, drink in hand. "It's more the general undertones of jackassery."

"General undertones of jackassery are pretty much the soundtrack to my life," Graham confides. "But yeah. No. That's cool. So is she coming?"

"She'll be over in a bit." James takes a sip of his drink, before continuing in a low, steady tone. "Don't bring it up with her unless she brings it up first. She doesn't like talking about herself."

"Yeah, I noticed. More the strong, silent type. Tall, dark and mysterious." Graham takes a long drink. "You guys have been friends a while though, right?"

"Oh yeah, me and Key have been working here longer than most of the office, and James joined up with us a while after. I mean, me and James've known each other since high school," Lee adds, casting a fleeting smile at his friend, "but he didn't start working with us until a couple months in. We're all pretty close, though."

"That's cool, man." Graham gauges the fullness of the others' drinks, then takes a more modest sip of his own. "This job's good for that."

"Yeah — hey, you wanna invite Marcy over, too? Is she coming tonight?"

"Nah. She's got a *date*. But it's a Tinder date, so she'll probably be done by 10, one way or another."

"Oh, that's cool. I've never really done the Tinder thing. I mean, me and James tried it out — I think he still has it? But..." Lee fidgets with his glass. "I dunno, it all felt kinda hollow."

"That's because technology's hollow and we need to abandon the urban centres and get back

to our hunter-gatherer roots, Lee,” Graham says.

The look on Lee’s face suggests he is not completely sure whether or not Graham is joking.

“Yeah.” Lee laughs weakly. “I guess.”

The conversation is stilted as they work on the rum and wait for Key. Much of what James and Lee say concerns the other, old stories in which they’re both key players, but neither of them faces the other for long. James is quieter than usual, and seems more interested in watching the halfhearted bubbles in his drink than looking at either of them. Lee focuses all of his attention on Graham, aside from those frequent, quickly aborted glances at his friend.

Graham feels like he’s at a really weird job interview.

When the knock at the door announces Key’s arrival, Graham can’t help but sag into his seat on the couch a little, grateful for someone else to take the heat. When she settles in — accepting a drink with some reluctance, her lip curling at the first sip — it starts to feel less like an interview. Still, Graham notes how the other two members of the conversation are trying not to acknowledge each other’s presence.

By the time they meet the others for drinks, Graham has had more than enough rum to let other people’s problems be other people’s problems, and to fall easily into old rhythms, cracking jokes and coaxing people into drinking more than their better judgment tells them to. By virtue of the arrival party, he ends up sitting next to Key, and is delighted to discover that a couple of drinks in, she’s capable of relaxing. He sees actual *smiles*. Sometimes even at things he says!

When he stands, shrugging on his jacket, trying to make his way to the door for a cigarette as unobtrusively as possible, it is hard not to be stung by the return of her usual look of disapproval.

With Graham gone, there’s no one to distract Key from her unease, partly at being out at all and partly at the impending disaster that is Lee and James, out together, drinking, pretending

everything is fine.

Key has been privy to some bewildering text conversations in the last few days. On Lee's side, there is an abundance of feeling, confessions and anxieties that Key feels ill-equipped to handle. James is more taciturn, but Key can tell from the sheer number of monosyllabic replies she's had from him that he's similarly unsettled.

Alcohol and proximity to an audience does not seem like an ideal response to their situation, but both of them had agreed to the plans beforehand and she is, if nothing else, bound by friendship to come along in case of disaster.

Right now, Lee is eagerly explaining the plot of *Sharknado* to Natalie, while James half-listens to a story Acacia is telling him. They are sitting on opposite sides of the table, but while Lee is leaning towards Natalie, the lower half of his body remains slightly angled towards James.

"Sorry about that," Graham says, sliding back into the seat beside her. His bangs are askew, like he's run his hand through them and didn't know how to put them back in place. He shrugs off his jacket and smiles at her, and her eyes catch the stain on his teeth. She wonders if he flosses, and decides he does not seem like a flossing person. "I know you think it's a stupid habit."

"I don't think it is," she says automatically. "I know it is."

His smile has a hint of grimace as he reaches for his beer, taking a long drink. "Fair enough."

Key studies him, dragging a sliver of cheek between her teeth as she debates whether or not she'd like to leave it at that.

"Have you ever lived anywhere else?" she asks. "Aside from Montreal and Calgary?"

"Well, I don't know if I live here *yet*," Graham says, leaning back to survey her. She adjusts her skirt. "Only been here a few weeks, and we don't know if we're gonna stay. But. I'm from

Saskatoon, actually.”

“Saskatoon.” She smiles, trying to picture it.

“So you can see why I’m so screwed up.” He runs his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, Saskatoon. Born and raised. Left after high school, straight to Montreal. I haven’t really lived anywhere else, but I’ve traveled a lot. Partly for the job. Partly for fun.”

“Tell me a story about traveling,” she says, sipping her drink — vodka tonic, and much less nauseating than what the boys had been mixing at their place.

“A story about traveling.” His eyes flicker over her face, and she is unsure whether or not it annoys her. “Alright. Okay. There’s this bar in Queens,” he says, leaning closer. “You’d miss it if you were just walking past. So I’m going to New York for reading break one year, no real fuckin’ plan, barely enough money to handle getting there and crashing somewhere, well aware that I’m shooting myself in the foot because nobody’s gonna get any *reading* done if they’re in New York, right? And I’m still 20, but I have a decent fake. So from Montreal to New York, you can take a train really cheap. Only thing is, it takes 10 fucking hours, but it’s still *way* cheaper than flying, so I bring my textbooks with me, end up listening to my iPod the whole time instead, whatever. Penn Station’s a fucking mess and none of the employees know where my fuckin’ train leaves ‘cause, I dunno, who cares about Queens? So by the time I get to the hostel, I’m fucking exhausted, right? And when I get there, there’s no reservation. Guy at the desk is baffled ‘cause I have my confirmation number there, on my phone, but the reservation isn’t in the system. Just out of pure luck, he’s got *one* reservation left — and I was cursing New York to Windsor and back 20 minutes before but now I’m just so fucking happy I have a bed to sleep in, dude’s looking at me like he expects me to jump over the counter and throttle him, but I don’t care, I’m over the fucking moon, I say great, pay again — mom’s credit card. And he’s entering

my passport info and the credit card shit, and I ask him: where can I get decent food and a drink around here?”

Key’s eyes flick down to his beer, already nearly empty. His smile stiffens, but he carries on.

“So the place he sends me to is Dutch Kills — sweet dude, printed off directions and everything, even though it’s only a couple of blocks away. So I show up there, and you know how there’s that stereotype of the dimly lit bar? This place takes it to a new level. I walk in and they’re playing a Zeppelin album all the way through, you can barely see your way between the booths, so I sit down and the best waiter — no, don’t start, don’t make that face. The best waiter in the *world* helps me out.”

Key sips her vodka, then her water. She wonders if this is what he’s like when he pitches on his own, imagines donors at the door caving in the face of a stream-of-consciousness wall of sound. She imagines he swears less at the door.

“So first I order a drink, cause fuck it, I’m gonna get my drink first even if I order food at the same time, and that” — he holds up a finger, eyes bright beneath the mess of his bangs — “that was not a time for sobriety. Have you ever *seen* Penn Station?”

“No.”

“So he brings me this drink. And all I processed when I ordered it was there was rye, cause fuck if this is a vodka or a gin or a rum night. And he brings it in this long, super tall, slim glass, and clinking against it is this heavyass metal straw — like, you could *kill* a man with this thing, it’s not fucking around. And they don’t use ice *cubes*. Fuck no. Fuck that bourgeois, limited... whatever. No. Clinking in my glass is a fucking *pillar of ice*, floating around, hitting the glass alongside my murder straw, right? And okay, it’s not just that the drink was good — it was, it was fucking *amazing* — it’s that, for the first time, in all the times I’d been to New York, I felt

like I got what everybody was talking about.”

“And what was everybody talking about?”

“You know, *New York*. Like it’s supposed to be this... beacon of shit you can’t get anywhere else. Everything’s supposed to be shinier and grittier and sexier and more important there. But I mean, I’d been to New York before. Mostly it’s just crowded and expensive and really brightly lit. Like, seriously, have you ever looked at a picture of Times Square? How much fucking electricity do all those lights take? And who’s ever *actually* needed a gigantic video monitor ad for their company? Like, if you can afford an ad like that in Times Square, you *have enough customers*. You’re *good*. Just put a fucking commercial on YouTube, Christ.”

“But if you’ve got that much money, are you really going to be satisfied with what you have?”

“*Right?*” His hand goes from his hair to splayed between them, palm up, his eyes wide and a little frantic. “It’s just... there’s no point to that. Like, if you have enough money where realistically you could burn a thousand-dollar bill in front of someone and they wouldn’t think you were that crazy for doing it, like... fuck, man. Take a vacation. Take up knitting. Shit. That’s just... that’s too much. Anyway. But that’s like... that’s not what people are talking about when they talk about New York. Like, not the New York *devotees*. They’re not talking Times Square. They... It’s supposed to be something more elusive than that. Something that sticks with you. Ads don’t stick with people when they see them in Times Square; there are too many to make an impression. But like. *That fucking bar*, man. That ice pillar was big as a *cucumber*. That was a fucking ice dildo. And just... I mean, the food was okay. The drink was better. But the waiter, man, he like. Dude looked at me like he knew, *at a glance*, exactly how fucking tired I was, like... you know the bartender who’s supposed to look at you and be ready to hear all of your

troubles and light your cigarette for you? Like, he was *that guy*.”

“Did he light your cigarette for you?”

Graham gives her the sort of look she usually gives him.

“No. But like... fuck, I finish everything, and I’m just... zenned the fuck out. Sitting in my booth, listening to this group of like... random fucking Russian dudes with these two chicks who are *way too hot* for them, and they’re half-talking Russian, half-talking English, and exclaiming like... I don’t even *know* what they were talking about, but it’s all blending in with the music, and I’m just *listening* to it ’cause honestly, you can’t see a thing in there, man, like, the waiter brings lit candles when he brings out people’s drinks and shit just so he can *see*, and it just...”

“You can’t see.”

“No.” He pulls his bangs away from his eyes again.

“So how did you know the girls were too hot for the guys?”

“I—” He lets his hair flop back over his brows, smiling slightly, shaking his head and finishing his beer. “You are *ruthless*.”

She sips her drink and wonders if they’re flirting. It’s been a long time since she’s flirted. She thinks she’s mostly just heckling him. Is that a form of flirting?

“Anyway.” She gnaws the inside of her lip. “You were saying.”

“I was saying.” His cheeks are flushed. “That’s the best time I ever had in New York City. I’ve been to... the tourist shit, to underground shows in basements, on middle-of-the-night subway adventures, but that. That was the best time I ever had in New York, sitting there listening to Zeppelin and these random fucking Russians. The waiter gave me a night cap for *free* cause he said I looked like I needed it. He was a *saint*. Best waiter in the world.”

“Did you tip him well?”

“*Of course* I tipped him well. I’m not a monster.”

“Hey guys.” Lee, who Key has mostly forgotten is at the table, is leaning towards them, the others watching. “We were thinking we should head to the show soon, if that’s cool with you?”

Part of Key is alarmed at how fully she’d forgotten the rest of their party, tuned out the noise around her, neglected to keep an eye on Lee and James. Part of her is grateful she’s never been prone to blushing.

She sips her still half-full drink and nods, peripherally aware of Graham cradling his empty glass beside her.

“Yeah, I think we can do that,” he says. “Come on, Key. *Chug.*”

—

Lee, James, Natalie, and Acacia outlast last call. Graham and Key leave earlier, Key citing fatigue, Graham insisting on accompanying her back to Kensington. And *that* is interesting, but Lee can’t watch the development with the same interest he normally would.

Acacia and Natalie are heading in the opposite direction, south rather than north, so it’s just Lee and James making their way through downtown back to Kensington.

The streets of Calgary are, by this point, largely deserted save for stragglers like them. In some ways, this is good: they don’t have to worry too much about running into people looking for trouble. In other ways, it’s terrible: Lee could really do with a distraction right now.

Normally, when walking home in this sort of state, he can ride the giddiness of alcohol and read too much into their habitual closeness, the two of them leaning on one another and laughing at each other’s lack of coordination, joking easily. Normally, at this point in the night, everything feels very warm. Tonight, there’s a healthy few inches of distance between them on the sidewalk, and they mostly walk in silence. Lee thinks it would feel more appropriate if it had started to

rain, or if there was at least a chilly breeze to complement his sense of unease, but the June night is unyieldingly mild, despite the hour.

He wonders if this is what it'll be like from now on, even though he knows that's ridiculous. Either things will get better or they'll get worse. Neither of them's masochistic enough to stay in this tense limbo indefinitely.

He wonders if James will move out. Maybe Key would be his new roommate. God knows he wouldn't be able to afford to stay in the basement suite alone, on their salary. Then again, if James said he was going to move out, Lee would have to move out instead. James has done nothing wrong in this situation aside from exist. Aside from be within arm's reach for years, being the easiest person to talk to in the world and making it through puberty *cum laude*. If anyone has to move, it will have to be Lee.

When they're home, James gets his keys out while Lee keeps his hands in his pockets. James steps aside and Lee walks through the door first, fumbling for the light switch, swallowing and wondering whether or not he should do the sensible thing and pour a glass of water to take to bed.

"Well," he says, when the door is locked and they are left together in a confined space, both unsteady and unsure. He looks at James, who looks at him with what Lee reads as a sort of helpless guilt that makes him want to go lay down in the shower and wait for death. "I guess. Good night, then."

James wets his lips and presses them together before giving a slow nod. His keys are still in hand, his fingers lightly curled around them. "Yeah. Good night."

CHAPTER 7

The past week has been an exercise in unobtrusive avoidance. Neither Lee nor James has acknowledged that they're avoiding the other. They offer one another small smiles in those moments they are unable to avoid proximity, and they do their best not to talk.

It doesn't sting as much as it ought to, the fact that James has not yet taken Lee in his arms and told him what a fool he was for even hesitating, that of course it's Lee, has always been Lee, that he doesn't know what he's doing but he wants it to be *with Lee*... mostly because James has not yet said that there's no chance of such a thing happening. There is, technically, still a chance that this might not blow up in Lee's face. It's a minuscule chance, but one worth holding on to.

So, when James actually looks at him straight on that Tuesday, Lee can't be blamed for the swell of hope that expands his chest, straightens his shoulders, makes his steps slow as he looks back at James. He knows, whatever happens, that he did the right thing. There was no way bottling everything up would have worked out in the long run. And at least this way, *if* James says no... Lee will know.

"I think we should probably talk," James says, and the tone of his voice is no more reassuring than the words it delivers. Lee wonders if James struggled as much with the ominous phrase as he did. Probably not.

"Alright. You wanna..." He gestures at the couch.

"Yeah. I guess."

They take seats on opposite ends, each taking the same corner they had the last time.

"I've been thinking about what you said. And it... I've had to do a lot of thinking, 'cause... you know I haven't. I mean, you *know* I haven't ever. Done anything. With a guy."

Lee nods.

“And... you’re important to me. Our friendship is important to me. But I don’t... I don’t know if I can do that.”

Lee feels as though his body has shifted to the right of the rest of him. He’s aware that he should be, at this point in the conversation, alarmed. He should be trying to extricate himself from the situation. But he can’t connect to the roiling mass of bad feeling that is hovering somewhere to his left. He can’t connect to his limbs, which are in the same position they were when James started talking. He is caught in the middle, watching James.

“I... you’re important to me, and I want you to be happy. I don’t want to hurt you. But. I can’t do that.”

James looks upset. Part of Lee wants to make him stop looking upset. Another, surlier part of him thinks he ought to look *much more* upset.

“That’s fine,” Lee says. He is aware that the second word did not come out without a crack, but he presses on. He thinks he’s smiling a little, which is probably wrong. “Don’t worry about it.” He coalesces enough to stand, still looking at James, whose brows have drawn together. They are nice brows: thick but not too unruly, framing the faint shadows around his dark eyes.

“Lee...”

“Seriously. Don’t worry about it. It was stupid anyways.”

James is wearing his Crisis Face, grave and intent. Lee thinks that’s a little rude. He is making this so much more pleasant than it ought to be. The least James could do is pitch in.

“Lee. I don’t want this to be weird. I don’t... I want us to... I don’t want this to ruin our friendship.”

If their friendship does end up ruined, will it be because of this, the confessing, the

confirmation of unrequitedness? Or was the friendship inherently ruined, this moment only the grim diagnosis after an abnormally long incubation period? *If you were a contagion*, Lee wonders, *what sort of contagion would you be?* He wonders how much it would cost Think of the Children to vaccinate 100,000 Syrian kids against him.

“It won’t,” he says. “But I don’t want to talk to you right now, okay?”

A pause. “Okay.”

James does not look happy about this answer. That’s his prerogative. Lee isn’t happy about James’s face. The world is full of unhappy people. A thought passes through his skull: Graham would probably really enjoy his internal monologue right now. (He’s correct. Graham would.)

“But we’ll talk later, right? I don’t. I can’t not talk to you.”

Normally, that sort of sentence would make Lee’s stomach do funny things. Right now it makes him want to slam his own head through a wall. Not a *hard* wall. Just a little drywall.

“Yeah. We’ll talk later.”

He picks his wallet up off the kitchen counter, checks that his keys are still in his back pocket, and heads out the door without much idea where he’s going.

CHAPTER 8

“You look chipper today!” Graham knows that saying things like, ‘You look chipper today!’ to people who look decidedly not-chipper is, as a rule, not a good way to make them cheer up. He knows that saying that sort of thing will very often make the person look even less chipper, and yet those are the words out of his mouth when Key walks through the door, shoulders hunched and mouth tight.

Her eyes widen as she registers him before her features settle into a definitive show of ‘Fuck you, too, buddy.’ She adjusts the strap of her bag across her chest. Shrugging, she walks past him to the binder room.

He wonders, briefly, if he should apologize. But that’s a social situation he’s not ready to navigate on only one cup of coffee.

He makes for the team room instead, where several of the fundraisers are engaged in a spirited discussion about the politics of representation, whether *Orange is the New Black* qualifies as positive representation, and why Jason Biggs is still on the show.

To the side is James, his water bottle suspended loosely between his hands, watching the conversation with a stoic expression.

“This really isn’t your scene, is it?” Graham asks in an undertone, taking a seat beside the man.

“What do you mean?”

“Just.” Graham sips his coffee, shrugging. “For some people, this is a job, and for other people it turns into something like a cult. You’re a job guy, aren’t you?”

James’s eyes flick over Graham. He has the rare ability to make people feel like he can, at a

glance, sum someone up in their entirety, catalogue their sins, and forgive them instantly.

“Should I really answer that to my boss?”

“Aw, fuck, dude, I mean, yeah, I guess, but I’m not, you know.” He glances around then leans in to whisper conspiratorially. “I’m not *Max*. I’m not one of the cult kids. I straddle the line. I’m the cult treasurer! Which is ironic, since I’m shit with money. But no, you know what I mean. I mean, Key,” James’s lips quirk, “she’s a *cause kid*. She’s a true believer. And Lee’s too fucking friendly not to be all about helping people out. I’m not saying you’re not into the helping people out and shit, but... You don’t get excited about this shit the way the others do. So why’re you here?”

There is a wryness to James’s smirk that makes Graham wish he’d gone drinking with the guy more.

“I needed a job. And Lee loves it here. And I was friends with Key by then. I like it. I mean. I’d rather be working here than in oil.” He tilts his head. “Though I wouldn’t mind getting paid an oil wage.”

“Fuck, man, *right?* And there’s all the free coke they get at Stampede! I mean, I’m not really a coke guy, but, y’know, if it’s *free*.”

“If it’s free.”

Lee is the last on the team to arrive, looking even worse for the wear than Key did.

Graham is peripherally aware that a tremendous *something* has happened there. When he arrived at HHYYC, the three were attached at the hip. Since a couple of weeks ago he’s barely seen Lee and James exchange a dozen sentences, and Key seems to bounce back and forth between them, a reluctant and statuesque ping pong ball.

They head out to turf, and the first half of the day is so monotonous it verges on misery. The

sky is overcast, the air heavy with humidity, and just this side of unseasonably chilly. Graham has several conversations with people about clean water initiatives, with nothing to show for it by lunch.

They head towards the nearest strip mall, where there's a long, narrow Subway with overzealous air conditioning and a loud radio station tuned in to some frequency that seems only to play discordant remixes of last year's pop hits. Graham thinks that if there's a purgatory, it would be something like this Subway.

It seems that Lee has Key for the day. The two huddle together at a corner table, slightly apart from the rest of the crowd, while James takes his lunch outside. Graham puts a sub on credit, thinking back to oil wages, and follows James, taking a seat beside him on a bench and casting his eyes up to the unrelenting grey of the sky.

"You mind?" he asks, and James shakes his head, taking out a sandwich from his knapsack.

They eat in silence for a few minutes, before James speaks.

"If you could have the powers of any superhero, Marvel or DC, who would you choose?" he asks, looking across the parking lot instead of at Graham.

Graham is slow to smile at the unanticipated question, but nods, chewing the mouthful of messy sauce, carbs, and meatstuff, thinking his answer through.

"Gambit, man. I mean, okay, wait — are we counting stuff like martial arts training and shit in 'powers'? Like just, generally, the ability to do the shit they do?"

"Sure," he says, taking another bite.

"Alright, then Gambit. I mean, I don't know exactly how the card thing works, but it looks super cool, and he's all... acrobatic and the ladies go crazy for him. I mean, we're counting Ability to Speak With A Sexy Cajun Accent as part of his powers, right?"

James laughs. “Seems fair.”

“Then yeah, absolutely Gambit. Shit, have you *seen* Rogue? If being like Gambit means being able to get girls like Rogue into you, then being like Gambit is definitely worth it. Plus, wicked card tricks. I could quit this job and make my living impressing people with card tricks. And scam casinos. It’d be great.”

“And the martial arts would help for when casino security cracked down on you.”

Graham laughs. “Yeah, man! Exactly!” He takes another bite, chewing and swallowing before nodding. “What about you? Who would you choose?”

“Batman,” James says after a pause. “*Could* kick ass, but don’t really have any supernatural destiny forcing you to. Loads of money, can stop punching people in the face and use my vast fortune to lobby for gun control and against privatization of social services instead.”

“Plus you get Alfred.”

“Alfred. He tries so hard to keep that dude in check.”

“Bruce’s life would be so much better if he listened to Alfred more often. Plus, if you’re Batman, you’re doing pretty well as far as wardrobe goes. Not too embarrassing.”

“What, that whole sex club PVC leather vibe he has going on?” James asks, looking faintly amused. “Yeah, could be worse, definitely.”

“Hellish in the summer, though. The sweat.”

“Alfred probably warned him against that. ‘Master Bruce, why don’t you just wear sweats? Sweats won’t stick in the summer heat.’”

“Poor Alfred. So much good advice gone to waste.”

CHAPTER 9

The Door teams descend into Olympic Billiards like a chatty cloud of locusts, moving tables, ordering shots, only narrowly talking Graham out of programming the karaoke machine to play Eiffel 65's "Blue (Da Ba Dee)" on repeat for the next hour.

The regulars shoot the group looks of suspicion, exasperation, or interest. The girls draw the most attention. Aside from the waitress, they're the only women in the place.

Two pool tables are promptly claimed, an informal tournament starting up, while those just looking to drink watch from the sitting area.

Key orders a vodka tonic with an intent to nurse it for the next hour, and makes a point of not looking at anyone in the bar other than the people she came with. When she has to pass within a foot of a table of men, she feels her body tense, though her eyes stay forward.

Lee is flirting with the waitress, compulsively adjusting his newly ombre hair.

Key sips her drink, sitting beside James, and sees him watching the pair out of the corner of her eye. James is drinking faster than usual.

Marcy and Graham are loudly shit-talking each other while Graham tries to coach Acacia through beating Marcy at pool. He keeps looking over at Key and it makes her muscles tense again, though not in the same the bone-deep, stabbing way she experiences passing by the men's table.

He looks like a teenager with his newly dyed hair, his ears stained green from Lee's drunk paint job.

By the time Key has ordered her second drink, most of the rest of the crowd is on at least their fourth. Graham can't stop laughing at something Lee said, while James, more relaxed now,

stands beside the pair, smirking.

Key is wondering whether she'd rather risk the walk home alone or wait until one of the three is ready to head back to Kensington when she feels someone behind her, stiffens instantly, turning to look directly into Doug's eyes.

He is noticeably more drunk than she is, and fear flares up in her chest despite the crowd. She takes a step backwards towards her friends, schooling her expression, fingers curled firmly around her drink.

"Hey," he says. He is smiling like they're good friends, ones with inside jokes, like he has had breakfast with her before.

"Hi," she says.

His features are innocuous: dark brown hair cut short, tanned white skin, warm brown eyes, a broad mouth. He is only an inch or two taller than she is, though his shoulders are broader. His lips twitch as his eyes slide over her like a wave of molasses.

"Having a good night?"

"Yeah," she says. "Sure." It takes her too long to remember what she's supposed to ask after this: "You?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah. It's nice to let loose, you know? Good day. You were amazing today."

Key feels her brow furrow. This is not normal, compliments from Doug. Normally he is too busy asserting himself to accommodate others. "Thanks. It was a good day."

"Yeah," he says, nodding, looking her over again in a way that steals the warmth from her skin. "Totally. Listen. I just—" he takes a long drink then shakes his head, smiling crookedly at her, "—I've been wondering something for a while and I just. I have to ask."

"Okay."

He wets his lips and it occurs to Key, errantly, that someone has probably once touched that tongue. “I just. I’ve been wondering. Have you...” He nods at her, eyes sizing her up once more, then shrugs.

His grin suggests that she should know the rest of the sentence, and she does, though at this point she can still write it off to being conditioned to expect the worse.

She does the mental math in advance: a drink is \$6, and if she throws hers in his face, that’s wasting \$6 on him. But she doesn’t want to stay here. She doesn’t want to take the walk alone home, doesn’t want to cut her friends’ night short, but she absolutely does not want to stay here while he’s looking at her like that.

“What?” she prompts.

His eyes slide over her again. “Have you...?”

His fingers wiggle from chest height down at the general direction of her hips, his smile hitched to one side. Someone has touched that tongue.

“What.”

He takes a long drink of beer. “Is it still there?”

Key watches him. She does not move. The molasses of his gaze has saturated her. It’s making her organs sluggish, her breath sticky in her chest.

“You know.” He nods downwards, and the bottle looks small in his hairy hand. “Have you lopped it off or what?”

A thought runs insistently through her head: this cannot be real. It’s nowhere near the rudest thing someone’s said to her, but the thought knocks around her skull anyway: this cannot be real. This is not how co-workers speak to each other. But he is there, the ice is melting in her drink, and someone has touched that tongue.

She knows she is staring, but doesn't know how — she wonders if she looks angry, shocked, neutral, scared, surprised. She wonders if he cares, or thinks he cares.

Her drink is \$6 and it would be a waste to throw it in his face, and doing that could lead to an assault charge, and cops don't like girls like her, but she doesn't want to finish her drink now. Alcohol is vulnerability. Maybe Graham would like her drink, but she doesn't want to look him or anyone else in the eye right now.

“Do you think what you just said is appropriate?” The words are clinical. She recites more than speaks them.

His face does something, a micro-expression she can't decipher, before he lets out one laugh. “C'mon. Are you really gonna be like that?”

“Like what?”

“We're all friends here. And everybody's, y'know, polite about it. It's all cool. But.” He readjusts his grip on his bottle and looks at her like she's a busted piece of equipment. “You know everybody wants to know. Have you lopped it off, or is it still down there?”

She looks at him for a long moment. *Someone has touched that tongue.* He is grinning at her again and there is nothing she would like so much as to scream at him, to tear this man apart.

Instead, she puts her drink down on the nearest table and moves to get her coat from the back of a chair. She does so without looking back at her friends, or at him. She hears him say, indistinct, something along the lines of, “Oh fuck, come on, don't be like that,” and does not look back.

She leaves her drink on the table and manages not to knock it over in the process. She walks up the stairs with mechanical drive, not making eye contact with anyone she passes, and emerges on the spit-stained sidewalk of 17th Avenue, breathing the night air in deep. It has begun to rain,

and she turns her face skyward, letting the water spatter her skin before she starts walking home, too conscious of the shaky, strained path her breaths forge through her chest.

—

Graham is trying his best to teach Lee how to hit the cue ball so that it stops after knocking its target rather than toppling after it into the pocket. “Aim for the bottom,” he says, pointing at the ball.

Lee appears to aim for the bottom and somehow, in the process, knocks the cue ball into the air and onto the floor, to laughter and a slow clap from Marcy.

Graham looks back towards the tables to see if Key caught it, only to see that somehow, in this brief pedagogical interlude, she’s disappeared.

There’s Doug, ordering another beer, and Acacia and Robin bent close over a table, deep in discussion, but Key and her coat are nowhere to be seen, a drink that might’ve been hers on one of their tables, the ice melted.

“I’ll be right back,” he says to the table, downing the rest of his rye and ginger fast enough to leave a bubble of carbonation in his chest, grabbing his hoodie and pounding up the stairs to see if he can still catch her.

He wonders if she took a cab. He hopes she’s not walking alone. He knows they’re all drunker than she likes, hopes she didn’t get too exasperated with him. He notices the rain but doesn’t think much of it, hoodie under his arm, looking up and down the street before spotting the familiar, black-clad form walking quickly downtown.

“Key!” he calls, starting to run.

She doesn’t hear him, or doesn’t turn, and he remembers that these shoes have a hole near the right sole, that he’s been meaning to replace them for a while now. His sock is already soaking

up moisture from the sidewalk.

“Key!” he calls again, closer.

This time she glances over her shoulder, slowing her pace before coming to a stop.

When he reaches her, he’s out of breath and wants a cigarette, but he brushes his bangs out of his eyes, offering her a smile. “Hey. You heading out?”

“Yeah,” she says. She’s stiffer than usual and he can’t tell if it’s the lateness of the hour, the booze on his breath — but she’s been drinking too tonight. Her eyes flit over him and he brushes his hair away from his face again, conscious of his exposed forehead, the way his hair is starting to flatten to his skull under the rain.

“You gonna walk?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to walk you back to Kensington?” Something in her spine unlocks, her shoulders relaxing, and she nods acquiescence.

He keeps his hoodie under his arm, the rain a welcome chill after the crowded heat of the bar — besides, he looks better in the t-shirt than he does in the hoodie.

There is something about the night and the water slowly soaking his shirt, the slight strangeness of the way she’s glancing at him, that emboldens Graham. Or it could be the alcohol.

“So listen,” he says, adjusting his arm around the black bundle of fabric. “I was wondering if I could ask you something.”

She stiffens again, more than before, and they come to a stop at a corner.

“I was wondering, uhm. I was wondering if you wanted to go out sometime. And I know that’s, like, skeezy because I’m sort of one of your bosses, but it’s not, like. I mean. I’m obviously not going to be a dick about it if you don’t want to.” He holds up two fingers. “Scout’s

honour. I mean, I wasn't a boy scout, but..."

He trails off, swallowing at the look on her face. He's pretty sure he's eating shit right now, but he might as well get it out while it still seems like an okay idea. No sense digging a grave only halfway.

"This is a no-strings-attached offer. I promise I'm not going to be a jerk at all if you say no. But I think you're really cool and you're, you know... You're smart and articulate and I like spending time around you," he says, thinking she would probably not be the sort of girl who would like men using 'and you're beautiful' as a reason to ask her out. "So I just. I thought I'd ask."

She looks at him for a long moment. Graham can feel the rye and ginger roiling in his gut. He sincerely wishes Marcy was here to drag him away from the scene.

"Your hair is bleeding," she says.

This makes no sense until Graham swipes a hand across his forehead and realizes that, yes, the rain is making excess dye seep out of his hair. Of course. Because sane, sober people remember not to go strolling around in the rain right after dying their hair a funny colour. Yes, excellent. He wonders how long little green streams have been trailing down his face — it's starting to seep into his shirt, now.

He looks at her, stricken, before shrugging on the hoodie, throwing up the hood, brushing his hair away from his eyes.

She's still looking at him with more horror than bleeding dye warrants. He is briefly taken with the impulse to make a joke about Medusa. He refrains.

"I'm going to catch a cab," she says.

"Okay." His eyes scan over her to try and find some clue as to how badly he's fucked up.

“Do you want me to... you don’t want me to split the cab with you.”

“No.”

“Do you want me to... go back and get James or Lee to split it with you?”

She hesitates this time before shaking her head. “No. You...” She reaches and pushes a lock of green hair away from where it’s settled on his cheek. He is unable to tear his eyes from hers while she does so, but she drops her gaze immediately after.

“No. I’d rather be alone.”

“Right.” He can feel the trail of her nail where it grazed his cheek. He desperately wants a cigarette. “So is. You’d like to... not do the thing I suggested.”

She looks at him again, then shakes her head, arms crossed tightly over her chest. “No.”

“Right,” he says. “Okay. Cool. Do you uh...” He glances over his shoulder, ignoring how his breaths want to come too fast all of a sudden, ignoring the sudden knowledge of how much he’d wanted her to say yes. “Let’s get you a cab.”

“I can get it myself,” she says, taking out her phone. “You should go back, Graham.”

“Right.”

He should really stay here and make sure she gets a cab, but he’d also very much like to not be here, and besides, he’s probably supposed to be respecting her wishes and giving her space.

Oh fuck, work is going to be *hell*, why did he think she’d say yes?

“I’ll uh...” He should hurry back, get Lee or James to come wait with her. “I’ll... go then... Do you...” He wants ten cigarettes and at least three more drinks within the next fifteen minutes.

“You should, uh, text somebody when you get home safe so we... know.”

She nods. Her jaw is tight, her head bent to shield her phone from the rain. He notices, not for the first time, how long her fingers are and feels the ghost of her nail along his cheek again.

“I will.”

“Right. Okay. I’ll uh. I’ll see you at work, okay? No hard feelings. Or whatever.”

She gives one more nod, expression blank.

He wonders if she’s going to text anyone about this fiasco. Oh fuck, how many awkward glances is he going to have to deal with at work?

Oh *fuck*, Marcy’s going to be able to see it all over his face. Can he get in trouble with HR for this? White cis guy asks black trans female employee out. While drunk. Perfect.

“Okay,” he says again, taking a step back, hands in his pockets, fingers brushing along the edges of his cigarette pack. “Well. See you.”

“Bye.”

He turns abruptly and walks back to the bar. Is it obvious that he’s trying to walk a straight line? Oh fuck, he hopes she’s not watching him. He wonders how immoral it would be to ask Lee to try and get Key blackout drunk at her place tonight in the hopes she’ll forget this ever happened. He settles for getting blackout drunk himself instead.

PART 4:

CONCERN-HANDLING

CHAPTER 10

Talking to James is something Lee has done his best to avoid ever since royally fucking their friendship last month, but when Monday comes around, he is unable to resist.

It starts when he sees Key in the binder room when he arrives at HHYYC. Reading Key can be hard for a lot of people. She's put so much time into hiding the parts of herself that are easy to hurt that even around friends, her default is stoicism. But Lee has spent enough time around her to know, when he spots her, that something is very wrong. She is often upset, which he can't blame her for. Their job involves reflecting at length on some of the most upsetting parts of the world around and beyond them, and Key is naturally inclined to righteous fury and disapproval. However, when he sees her in the binder room that morning, fingers lingering on donation forms, she looks smaller than usual.

She greets him with a start and a wide-eyed stare.

"Hey," he says. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She looks down, hurrying to stuff the forms in their appropriate plastic compartment, wrinkling them in the process. She scrunches her nose and lifts them again, lowering them more carefully, pressing her hands down to try and smooth them again.

"You sure? You seem kinda spooked." He leans against the counter, frowning.

"Yeah," she says again, throwing a few promotional brochures into another compartment before zipping up her binder. "I'm fine."

She strides out of the binder room before he can respond, leaving Lee wondering if *he's* done something to upset her. Maybe her patience for his lovelorn bullshit has finally been exceeded.

The second clue comes when Graham rolls into work just before they're ready to head out to turf. It's not uncommon for Graham to show up late, or turn up looking worse for the wear, but usually not on Mondays, and never so brittle as he looks that afternoon.

It's not until they're on turf that Lee catches the uncertain glances Graham keeps shooting Key and the way Key won't look at him or anyone else directly.

He sits next to James for the first time in weeks and leans over, dropping his voice. "Do you think something happened there?"

James looks surprised for a moment before following Lee's gaze, frowning slightly, voice low. "Could be." If there's any discomfort in playing voyeur to office drama when only a short while ago they were the prime story, neither of them acknowledges it. "I know he's had his eye on her."

Lee pulls back a little to look at James full on, eyes wide. "Wait, seriously?"

"Something to share with the class, kids?" Graham interrupts. "You two are talking about how to deal with people who say they only donate annually, right?"

Lee laughs, leaning away from James again, feeling sheepish for more than the simple fact of being called out.

"Totally. Absolutely. But, y'know. Secret. We have secret techniques."

"Secret techniques," James agrees. "Had to make blood sacrifices to get them. We'd tell you, but anyone who hears them without the appropriate rituals dies."

"It's an ugly death," Lee adds. "Lots of fluids. You wouldn't like it."

Graham looks at the pair for a moment before taking a long pull of his coffee and shaking his

head. “Alright. Anybody have any tips that won’t turn us into puddles of guts?”

As they each take their assigned street and start their day, Lee has two choices: wait until lunch to ask James for details, or text him as they work.

He unlocks his phone at the start of his street, studying it for a moment. The last text he sent to James was over two weeks ago.

He brushes his thumb over the screen before giving in to curiosity and starting to type: *spill*.

The answering text comes while he’s talking to his first door of the day, a man in a striped shirt who makes a polite effort to mask his boredom as Lee talks. He can feel it buzz in his pocket, but pushes through his pitch, asking and re-asking before giving in and wishing the man a good day.

Spill?

U KNOW WHAT!!! His eye on her???

The conversation continues throughout the first half of their shift, replies delayed when one or the other of them is chatting up a potential donor. It feels like something has shifted back into place, though Lee probably shouldn’t be as relieved as he is at the return of one of his most prolific work distractions.

I’ve just noticed it lately. He watches her. He seeks her out. I think she likes him too, but I don’t know if she likes him that way.

Do u think he asked her out?

Could be.

Do u think she said no???

Key’s pretty picky. And she might not want to date someone at work.

Shit. Yeah.

But also we shouldn't be speculating. You could always ask her.

I don't think she wants 2 talk tho!!!

Okay. More speculation. Do we think he asked her out wearing a robe made of rose petals?

Omg. Probably. This explains everything. She's CLEARLY a daffodil girl. Fuck.

By the time they break for lunch, the conversation has devolved into territory best covered by *The Weekly World News*, featuring theories involving One Direction, puppy farming, and Graham's long-hidden Illuminati membership.

When he spots James they both break into smiles and another piece shifts back into place. There's danger in this, Lee knows, but it's hard to worry about the consequences when sitting and joking with James at lunch is easier than it's been in ages.

—

When Lee comes upon her in the binder room, she's gripped momentarily by a visceral fear, convinced that his shape will be the one she's been dreading all weekend. Every corner she turns, she's convinced Doug will be there, the formerly mundane space of HHYYC transformed into a minefield only she can see. She sits next to Acacia in the team room and beckons James over when he arrives, seeking security in witnesses.

Normally, Key is good at pushing back when people make her feel unsafe. She's already lost her family and her hometown over her gender. She's been beaten up, followed home, harassed, attacked, insulted by friends and total strangers alike. She's fought for the confidence she carries herself with, and most of the time, she's not afraid to fight to keep it.

It's different at work. Key has learned that speaking out often means being let go. Even in the bohemian enclave of HHYYC, the idea of speaking to HR or one of the managers about Doug fills Key with dread. She will, but not yet.

When Doug arrives there is a moment, briefer than it feels, where he pauses in the doorway and they lock eyes, each waiting to see what the other will do. It passes, and he settles on the opposite side of the circle of chairs and couches, taking out his smoothie and checking his phone.

Key focuses on James and Acacia, but she's acutely aware of every move he makes in the periphery of her vision, every minute shift a threat that makes her senses flare.

When Graham arrives, it's worse — there's no room in her to even start to deal with that quandary, with the mixture of attraction and exasperation he inspires. Graham is messy and frustrating and she still doesn't know if she can trust him. Judging by the bags under his eyes and the brittleness of his smile when he rushes in, the answer is no, at least for today.

When they break off to claim their streets, she makes use of the full length of her stride, breathing in deep and clearing her mind of the anxieties of the weekend.

The first door to open reveals a man, average height, a little tired around the eyes. His expression is open, pleasant enough, if hinting at imminent annoyance.

"Hello," he says.

Key adjusts her grip on the binder. "How are you today?"

"Alright. Been better, been worse. What can I do for you?" His eyes travel the length of her body and she runs her thumb along the length of her pen.

"I'd like to talk to you about the refugee crisis in Syria."

His lips pinch and she presses on.

"How familiar are you with the situation there?"

"I've seen enough on the news. You know, my wife and I have our preferred charities, we decide where our money will go every year."

"It's always nice to meet someone who prioritizes charitable giving," Key says. "But I'm not

out here today asking for one-off donations. Do you mind if I tell you a bit about what's going on in Syria and how we're helping?"

"Sure." He relaxes against the doorframe, arms crossed, dishtowel in hand.

She runs through the details — how the war started, how many of the refugees are children, what ToC has been doing to help them. When she finishes, he gives a single nod, arms still crossed.

"That's great." The line of his mouth does not suggest he thinks that's great. He has about the same build as Doug, a little softer around the middle.

"The reason we're out here today is partly to spread awareness, both of this crisis and our response to it, but also to let people know the reason we can accomplish this sort of aid is because of our monthly supporters. Being able to respond quickly and efficiently depends on our knowing what sort of income we're working with."

"Okay."

She removes the insert from the binder, a glossy, laminated trifold covered in bright photos of smiling children and illustrative. On the back is a neatly ordered table of suggested donation amounts and what they'll accomplish over a year, from the minimum of \$10 all the way up to \$80 per month.

"A lot of people don't realize how much of a difference they make with only a little bit every month. Can I get you on board to start making a difference in children's lives today?"

The man, who has been leaning against the doorframe this whole time, shifts his weight. "It's a good thing, what you're trying to do, but it's not really my problem."

"I'm sorry?"

“I’ve got my own kid to look after. If kids are getting killed in Syria, it should be their government looking into that, not Canadians.”

Key studies the man’s face for a moment, letting the familiar words wash over and off her.

“You understand that it’s Syria’s government putting the children in this position in the first place, right?”

He shrugs. “Not our problem.”

“You understand that if you’d been born in Syria, right now it would be you trying to keep your child alive and well in an overcrowded refugee camp, right?”

Again, he shrugs; he is already closing the door. “Sorry.”

—

The vague dread that Graham might get a call from HR at any moment asking him what the precise fuck he thought he’d been doing Friday night does not help the overwhelming regret that comes along with having taken a chance and being summarily rejected.

True, Key hadn’t openly laughed in his face or told him she’d rather be George W. Bush’s concubine than go on a date with him, but most of the time, when he’s asked girls out, they haven’t immediately called a cab to escape the situation. He’d thought briefly on Friday that it may have been a new low for him, until he remembered the time he’d thrown up on a girl while trying to ask her out, a few months after he’d first given up on being straight-edge. He is nearing the halfway mark of the second part of his shift and does not have a single piece of paper to show for it, not even a phone follow-up.

When he catches sight of Acacia sitting on the porch bench of a modest two-level house with fading paint, he is charmed. She is sitting with a man who has one of the most spectacular beards he’s ever seen. He looks like a retired punk rock Gandalf, and she could easily be his

granddaughter there for a leisurely afternoon visit. Graham nods at her as he walks past, catching a snippet of conversation, something about his wife.

Looping around to his own street and resisting the urge to have yet another cigarette break, Graham trudges down the sidewalk to do second knocks, desperately wishing he'd remembered his sunglasses. True, they're not supposed to wear them at the door, but it would be nice to have them, if only to block out the hell-glare of the afternoon sun as he readies himself for another rejection.

He takes a deep breath when he hits the next door. The door opens to reveal a woman who looks like she's in her late 30s, pretty and tanned, hair pinned haphazardly on top of her head.

"Good afternoon," he says, infusing his voice with warmth, the source of which is unknown to him. "How are you today?"

The woman's befuddlement at a stranger at the door has settled into a look of harried exasperation, but she doesn't shut the door in his face, which is nice. "I'm alright. Fine. How can I help you?"

Do you have a bucket of Advil and a time machine? Graham smiles, easy and practiced. "I'm out here today with Think of the Children, just raising some awareness about some of our programs and initiatives. Are you familiar with us?"

"I am." Her hand and forearm are braced against the doorway, her other hand resting on the edge of the door. Graham wonders if anyone's ever accidentally slammed their hand in the door while trying to slam it in the face of a fundraiser. Surely someone must have.

"Awesome! That's great. If you don't mind my asking, what do you know about us?"

She brushes back a stray lock of hair from her eyes, opening her mouth to reply, before a mass of brown and white fur barrels through the gap between her legs and the doorframe,

pummelling into Graham, knocking him down before starting to jump around him, barking.

It is the biggest Saint Bernard Graham has ever seen. It is the sort of dog a biker would get if he wanted something that could easily knock a man to his death, but also bring joy to the eyes of children.

He has lost his pen in the fray and he's pretty sure something in the general region of his ass is going to bruise, but it's hard to focus on that when there's a gigantic mass of dog frolicking in delight over his fallen body.

The woman has moved to pull the dog back, is hauling it with all the force in her slim arms. "Snuffles, *no*."

Graham pushes himself off the sidewalk to sit upright, watching with bemusement as the woman tries to stuff all who-knows-how-many-pounds of dog back into the house, shutting the door firmly.

"So that's Snuffles, huh?"

The woman looks startled for a moment before relaxing, nodding, voice tired. "Snuffleupagus McMafferly. Never let your kids name the pets. Shit." Her eyes flit over him, alarmed, and Graham belatedly realizes that his left palm is bleeding quite a lot. "Shit, I'm sorry."

She offers him a hand, which he takes with his relatively unblemished right hand, standing with only a little stiffness.

"That's okay," he says, looking at his palm and wondering why it doesn't hurt more. "I'll just, uh." He wonders if it'll encourage people to donate more if his binder is bloodstained, if it would convey some sense of urgency. "Don't worry about it."

"Crap." He gets the powerful sense that he is the latest in a series of things to go wrong in her

day. He knows the feeling. “Just. Hold on.”

She disappears into the house, pushing the dog back, and Graham stands there, holding his left hand in the air, wondering if it would be insane to ask if she could let Snuffleupagus McMafferly out again so he could pat the dog. He could do with some dog-patting right now.

When she returns, she has a small green first aid kit and some wet paper towel in her hands. If this had happened a week ago, his hair might’ve just about matched, but the dye’s faded.

“Have a seat,” she says, sitting on her front step and nodding at the space beside her.

He obeys, feeling a little like he’s back at the school nurse. There’s even the same sense of exasperating an adult; usually, if he was at the school nurse growing up, he was at least partly faking it.

She holds out her hand and he rests his there, palm-up. She begins to clean out the cut, brow furrowed.

“Happen a lot?” he asks. She looks at him and he offers an apologetic grin. “Having to clean up fundraisers after the path of destruction that is Snuffleupagus?”

She breathes the ghost of a laugh, shaking her head and returning her attention to his hand, starting to disinfect it. It’s a superficial cut, despite the blood. “No, not usually. She’s a nightmare for jumping, but.... Usually I catch her ahead of time.”

“You know... You seem like a woman who cares about the benefits of quick medical response. Are you familiar with Think of the Children’s response to Ebola this year?”

She shoots him a look before dropping the paper towel on the step beside her, shaking her head. “No, but I have the feeling you’re about to tell me it was incredible.”

“It *was*.” He can’t stop grinning, now. Pitches where both you and the potential donor know you’re annoying them are some of the most fun pitches to make. “We delivered over a thousand

metric tonnes of medical supplies to people in Guinea and the surrounding countries.”

“My goodness.” She’s rummaging through different sizes of Bandaid now. “Did they send you a thank-you card?”

“Oh, we don’t do it for the thank-you cards. Or even the fruit baskets. Honestly, we’re getting tired of the fruit baskets; we can’t eat fruit that quickly and redistributing it costs a lot in shipping. But we *did* give psychosocial support to over 125,000 children affected by the crisis, *and* hygiene kits to over three million people in Guinea, helping prevent the spread of further infection *and* helping those whose lives had already been affected by the epidemic. Do you know how long it takes for Ebola to incubate and start presenting symptoms?”

She shrugs, shaking her head, carefully lining up the biggest Bandaid from the kit over his scrape before pressing down the edges.

“Anywhere from two to twenty-one days, with most cases starting to present symptoms anywhere from four days to a week and a half after exposure — thank you,” he adds, once the Bandaid is in place. “Once those first symptoms present, death usually occurs within six to sixteen days, if it’s not properly treated. Best case scenario, we have just over a month between someone being exposed to the virus and them dying of it. In other cases, it’s more like a week. Now, when a virus is spreading that quickly, and works that fast, that means we have to be able to act faster if we want to prevent death. And we’ve got fast response down to an art. We have offices all over the world, and we’re ready to respond to new emergencies — medical or otherwise — faster than just about any other organization. Can you guess why we’re able to respond so quickly?”

“You have sprinting competitions at the office Christmas party?”

Graham smiles at her for a moment, incredulous, flexing his left hand, which is finally

starting to sting. “No. I mean yes, but that’s not the reason why.”

She looks at him, expectant.

“It’s because of our monthly donors. Because we have a steady flow of income that we can budget with, which means when a crisis happens we can start to act *immediately*, not waste time trying to drum up emergency funds first.”

“Look.” She stands up, plucking up the detritus from her front step field medicine, and he hurries to follow suit. “You do a good job, and I’m not about to argue with what you do. Fighting Ebola, responding to emergencies... that’s all great. But I have organizations I support, and to be honest, I’m not a huge fan of yours compared to a lot of them. You’ve been around for so long, and you’re trying to respond to so much, it’s like you’re... bloated. I’d rather support organizations with a targeted approach. But I’m sorry about your hand. Honestly. Can I grab you a coke or something...?”

“I’ll trade in that coke for 90 more seconds of your time. Listen, I totally get where you’re coming from. I mean, you hear all this shit about, you know, charities not doing what they’re supposed to — like World Vision, what the fuck is that? — and we’re so big and we’ve been around for so long... I get it. The establishment, man. Give the little guys a chance. And I’d never, ever tell you or anybody else to stop donating to their preferred charities. Unless their preferred charities are, you know. World Vision or something. But tell me this: for all that we’re trying to do so much, how often have we fallen short? Honestly. ’Cause from where I’m standing — and I’ve read a lot about us, since it’s my job to know what we’re up to — we do a pretty good job on all those fronts. We’re improving education for girls worldwide. We’re running highly successful vaccination campaigns. We’re improving access to clean water by leaps and bounds. We’re responding to refugee crises, earthquakes, civil wars... We’re trying to do a lot,

absolutely, but we're also *doing* a lot. We're *getting it done*. So, let's say for the sake of argument that you have to offer apology cokes to fifteen people a month because of Snuffleupagus's rampages, right?"

She barks out a laugh, curt and surprised.

"Right. At least fifteen," he continues. "So instead, you sign on with us today — and look," he takes out a form from his binder, showing it to her, "you can cancel here any time if you decide it's not for you, just by calling this number. But if we get you signed up today for \$15 a month, you can put all of that apology coke money towards saving lives and making brighter futures, and the next time Snuffles knocks somebody over, you just say, 'Look, I'd give you a coke to say I'm sorry, but I'm too busy saving children's lives with my money.' And they'll just..." he gestures downwards, "...fall at your feet right then and there. I don't mean to get your hopes up, but it's honestly possible they'll elect you neighbour of the year. Even if they don't live here. Plus, you'll make *my* day, because new donors make me happy."

She gives him a long, searching look, lips curled slightly in something resembling amusement. "You're not gonna give up, are you?"

"No ma'am. I want you onboard. And I know you want to help."

She studies him for another moment before rolling her eyes, turning to the door. "Come in, then. Watch the dog."

—

Key finds Acacia sitting on the curb balancing a cigarette between shaking fingers, staring at the space between two cars. Their shifts aren't quite over for the day, but Key's knocked out her street and — despite the rocky start — gotten her DRM up to a respectable enough amount to be fine with calling it a day and getting started on her paperwork.

She stops short at the sight of Acacia, and the look the girl shoots her — wide-eyed and wary before it settles into recognition — makes Key’s stomach sink.

“Are you okay?” she asks, uncomfortably aware of the social distance between them. In the time since Acacia and the other new recruits showed up, the only one who Key’s consistently gotten to know is Graham. Making friends in the office has always been Lee’s job, not hers.

Acacia sniffs, nodding and pressing a long-nailed fingertip to her lashline, looking up, trying not to smudge her eyeliner. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Key frowns, glancing up and down the street before moving to sit beside her on the curb.

Acacia scoots closer to the back of a gleaming red truck to make room. Her skeleton is so much smaller than Key’s; she takes up so much less space, even though Key’s limbs are more spare.

“What’s going on?” Key asks.

“Just. Had a really creepy guy at the door earlier. He like. Got me to sit down on his bench with him and just started talking to me about how his wife’s sick with cancer in the hospital and they can’t afford their home anymore and like, how he really wanted to donate, how he used to build houses overseas with a charity, but they couldn’t afford it, and he kept talking about how pretty I was and *looking* at me, like...” She gestures at her chest. “He said I should come back and cheer him up every day. And like, he asked me if I wanted to go to a movie with him and then said it was a joke, but it wasn’t a joke, you know? Like the way he looked at me. It wasn’t a joke and I just. I didn’t know how to walk away from it cause his *wife has cancer*, you know?”

Key can feel her spit watery in her mouth. “Acacia, even if someone’s having a hard time, you should never feel obligated to humour them when they’re making you feel uncomfortable. You can’t hurt yourself to look after other people. Not when they haven’t done anything to

deserve it.”

“I know,” Acacia says, taking a drag. “But. I do. It. *Fuck*. And then.” She runs a hand through her hair, looking up at Key. “Marcy took me aside and had a talk with me about my numbers and... they’re not great. But I really like this job, you know? This job is important to me. I don’t wanna go back to working at fucking Starbucks.”

Key nods, studying her. “What did she say about your numbers?”

“Just that I might get put on like, a probationary thing if I don’t bring them up this week.”

Acacia sniffs, chewing her upper lip. “I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. I mean, I do everything they say to, but I just... I can’t get people to sign on, you know?”

Key doesn’t exactly know; she can be persistent to the point of ruthlessness. She does know that the overwhelming majority of people she’s seen arrive at HHYYC have since quit, and she can understand their reasons, even if she doesn’t always respect them, so she nods. “What do you think you’re struggling with?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t... if people say they don’t want to donate after a couple of times, I... stop. It just feels rude, going on.”

Key nods. “Do you want to do some doors together tomorrow? I’ll see if I can offer you some tips?”

Acacia looks up at her, eyes wide, and nods. “That would be perfect. If you want to. You don’t have to.”

“It’s fine.” Key stands up, taking a deeper breath now that she’s further away from the smoke from Acacia’s cigarette. “Do you want to go start on our paperwork?”

Taking a final drag, smoking the edge of the filter, Acacia nods, tossing the butt out into the street.

Key's eyes follow it and her lips tighten, her eyelids lowering a little.

"Yeah," Acacia says. "Let's. Thanks."

CHAPTER 11

Key doesn't normally have people over to her place. When so much of her time outside her apartment is spent being hyper-aware of how she's presenting herself to those around her, when being looked at often feels like being stripped bare, having a space of her own is important.

Still, it's been awhile since she and James have had the opportunity to just hang out and talk, and she's uncertain of where he and Lee stand — they're talking again, but so far as she's heard, nothing has really been addressed — so she invites him over to her place for a change of pace.

He comes bearing a tin of tea from one of the local teashops, and she is overwhelmed with gratitude at being offered a non-alcoholic beverage by one of her friends for once. They settle on her couch, a faded deep purple with worn, thin cushions, and blow on their tea, enjoying a moment of silence and the floral scent. The trouble starts after a few minutes of lacklustre small talk, even less interesting than usual given how much of their week they regularly spend together.

“Is everything okay, Key?” His eyes are steady on her and she remembers having a crush on James when they were first getting to know each other, before her affection for him settled firmly into platonic territory. “I didn't want to ask at work, but you've seemed kind of tense lately.”

She studies him, cradling her mug with both hands. It's been over a week and she still hasn't told any of her coworkers about the incident with Doug, except to Max, upon prompting from the HR hotline. She certainly hasn't told anyone about Graham, though she's wondered if he has.

“A couple of things happened,” she says slowly. “With Doug and Graham.”

A minute line has appeared between James's brows. “What sort of things?”

“Last Friday, when we were all out at Olympic’s. I think Doug was drunk. And he asked me The Trans Woman Question.” At the lack of comprehension on his face, she clarifies. “He asked me if I was pre-op. In cruder terms.”

It’s unusual to see James fired up, but his anger is evident in the way his shoulders tighten and his expression darkens, how his voice is lower when he replies. “Have you talked to Max about it?”

“Yes.” She sips her tea, momentarily bemused at the expression ‘spill the tea.’ “I called HR first. They said they took it seriously, but that I should talk to Max first, and they’d be in contact with both of us.”

“Did either of them say what the repercussions will be?”

She shakes her head. “Max said he’d talk to Doug about it, and see where we’ll go from there. I don’t know.” She sips. “I can’t stand being in the same room as him. Looking at him just makes me think back to it. When I’m not looking at him, it feels like his eyes are on me.” She runs her tongue over her teeth. “I don’t know if they’ll fire him, though. He has good numbers.”

James snorts, the disgust evident on his face. “Fuck good numbers. If they give half a shit about what they preach, they’ll suspend him *at least*. He’s not gonna learn shit from a slap on the wrist.” He pauses. “I’m sorry that happened, Key. That’s awful.”

“Thanks.”

“If he does anything to make you uncomfortable again, you can just call me over or text me. But tell Max how uncomfortable it makes you working with him. He can’t ignore that.”

“I will.”

They’re silent, briefly, before he speaks again. “What about Graham? He didn’t do something like that, did he?”

“No.” She snorts, passing her hand over her hair. “Nothing like that. He asked me out.”

James’s eyes are wide when she meets them again. “What did you say?”

“I said...” She shakes her head again, looking at the coffee table. “Honestly, I can barely remember. It was right after the thing with Doug. It just... Felt like another man trying to get up in my space. It was too much at once.”

“So it’s unrequited?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s unrequited or not. Honestly, I haven’t been able to think about it that much. It’s just. He’s our boss, technically. And when I’m already worried about dealing with Max and the Doug thing...”

“Yeah, that’s fair. It’s a complicated situation.”

“I already feel like I’m risking my job speaking up about that. If they tried firing him, how would it look if I started dating one of my bosses right after?”

“That makes sense. I mean, it shouldn’t be an issue, but.” He shrugs, offering her an Alberta-dry smirk. “Your coworkers asking you shit like that shouldn’t be an issue either.”

“Exactly. What about you? How are things with Lee?”

For the first time in their conversation, James looks genuinely unsure of himself, sitting back a little and looking down at his mug, brow furrowed again.

“They’re... fine, mostly. It’s not so awkward anymore. I’m just...” He takes a deep breath then sighs, meeting Key’s eyes again. “How did you know you were trans? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Normally, she would, but James is a good friend, and the look on his face makes her reluctant to withhold too much.

“I... think I always knew on some level. It just took me a while to find out there were words

for it, and took me a lot longer to find the courage to own them. Why?”

He looks down again, fiddling with his mug, jaw working slightly. He is silent for longer than normal in casual conversation, but Key has learned through her job to let silences sit. “I think... I don’t know.” He purses his lips, frowning deeper. “When Lee... told me he was in love with me, I just. It caught me so off-guard, you know? I mean. We’ve been best friends forever. I can’t imagine living without him. Honestly, whenever I think about the future, it’s with him in it, but I just... never thought that was part of our friendship, you know? He’d never come on to me or tried to kiss me or anything, and I... never thought that was anything between us. And when he told me that, I just. It didn’t seem fair to make him think I’d ever thought about that when I hadn’t. And I had to step back and reevaluate where we’d been. Who we’d been to each other. But... I don’t know how much of it is having had to deal with us basically not being friends for a while, and how much of it is... wanting to be able to make him happy, and how much of it is other stuff.” He shakes his head. “I’ve thought about it. A couple of times. But I don’t know whether it’s real or not. I don’t know if I could go through with any of it. I don’t know.”

“Have you told him about any of this?”

He shakes his head again, meeting her gaze. “I don’t know if I should.”

“Because you’re so unsure of it.” He nods, and Key continues. “I think that makes sense. I don’t know how much help I can be, aside from being willing to listen. If you’ve never considered being queer before until your mid-twenties, it’s a pretty big revelation to have to deal with, even if you decide you’re not. So I’d say... don’t be afraid of trying to work through it, at least *thinking* about it, but don’t feel pressured to act on it unless and until you’re comfortable doing so. Do you feel like you have to reciprocate to maintain your friendship?”

He lets out a breath. “No. I don’t think so. Things have been pretty good lately. He doesn’t

know about any of this, so. I think we'll be okay either way."

"There are a lot of online resources, too, you know. For people who are questioning their sexualities. You might find some of them helpful."

"Yeah, I know. I've been looking." He smiles slightly. "Thanks, Key. Sorry to dump on you."

"It's mutual dumping." She sips her tea. "That's what friends are for."

"Feels dumpsters?"

"Feels dumpsters."

—

"Thanks for coming in early, guys." It's been a week and a half since Graham asked Key out, and the early summons to Max's office is not making him feel hugely secure in his future. Even if the early meeting isn't about Key, it's an *early meeting* on a *Monday*, and this, Graham feels, is reason enough for bleakness.

"No problem," Marcy says, being the sort of person who does not adequately appreciate the grave injustice of early Monday meetings.

Max looks at them with excessive gravitas. He looks like a miscast actor in a D-list horror movie who is about to inform the team of intrepid scientists that it's happened, the virus has mutated into a pack of rabid, contagious hellhounds, and they are personally responsible for the almost-certain extinction of the human race. His round, rosy cheeks and tufts of honey-blond hair were not made for expressions so solemn.

Oh Jesus, this *is* about Key, isn't it? There's no other explanation for why Max would be making that face. Either that or the company folded and he wants their help laying everyone off.

"It's about Key," says Max, setting off a series of brightly coloured explosions in Graham's

brain. “She came to me at the end of last week with some concerns about Doug.”

The explosions fizzle out, dud firecrackers plopping around the base of Graham’s skull like volatile electric fish.

Marcy is leaning forward attentively and Graham realizes he is, too.

“Apparently, the weekend before last, while you were all out together at Olympic’s, Doug made some inappropriate comments to Key. I can’t disclose the nature of those comments, and I would urge you both not to ask Key about them or bring them up with her unless she does first, but they were extremely inappropriate and had to do with her status as a transgender person.”

Marcy’s lip is curled and Graham’s brain is, all of a sudden, working far too fast for him to keep up. The weekend before last, Olympic’s, yes, he’s fairly certain that only happened the one time last weekend, and that Key did not come back to Olympic’s after fleeing his question, which means he definitely, absolutely asked her out not long after one of their coworkers said something transphobic to her. Perfect. Suddenly, that night is back in the running for among the most embarrassing times he’s asked a girl out.

“She’s spoken to HR and so have I, and we’re going to have someone come in and have a talk with the team, brush us all up on workplace boundaries and respect. But if either of you see him giving her a hard time, or see them interacting in any way that raises flags, stop it as soon as you can and then bring it back to me.”

Marcy nods. Graham is still processing, staring at the potted plant on Max’s desk. He thinks it’s a succulent. He’s not 100% sure what a succulent is, but it looks like the sort of plant he thinks of when he thinks of the word ‘succulent.’

“We will,” Marcy says. “Thanks, Max. When is HR coming in for the talk?”

“Later this week. Probably around Wednesday. I’m going to have a talk with Doug before

you all go out today, too. Get his side of the story, make sure he knows he should give Key her space.”

“Is anything going to happen to him, though?” Graham asks, coming back to himself. “Like, are we suspending him or firing him or something?”

Max’s expression is more closed off than it was before. “We still haven’t heard Doug’s side of the story yet, Graham. For all we know, this could be an unfortunate misunderstanding. But he’s been here for a while now, and he’s a good employee. I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt before we start throwing those words around.”

“Right, but.” Graham clears his throat, frowning, scratching his eyebrow. “Don’t we have, like, policies against that sort of thing? Isn’t it, like, a liability for the company to not take this seriously?”

“We are taking this seriously, Graham.”

Marcy is giving him a bewildered look, but Graham keeps his eyes on Max, trying to make sense of his expression.

“Key knows what the process we’re in is, and I’ll be able to say more once I’ve spoken with Doug. Until then, keep an eye out, be there for your team, and don’t spread this around. Let’s leave both of them their dignity.”

“Right.” Graham wishes he was the sort of employee to familiarize himself with company policies on things like workplace discrimination. When all your coworkers are some degree of social justice warrior, you tend to take things like ‘don’t be a bigoted asshole’ for granted, but he doesn’t even know where to look on the employee website to see the actual protocol they’re supposed to be following. “Okay. Well. Thanks.”

“No problem.” Max’s teddybear smile is back, and he taps his pen on his desk, looking

between the two. “Thanks for your help on this, guys.”

They stand to leave and Graham follows Marcy’s lead, still feeling a little divorced from his body.

When they’re safely down the hallway from Max’s office she turns to look at him.

“Jesus Christ,” she says. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever seen you take your job seriously.”

Graham gives her a look, the shock starting to settle into quiet irritation. “Yeah, fuck you too, Marce. Shit.”

CHAPTER 12

The text is innocuous enough. “Wanna catch up on *Scandal*?” Lee and James haven’t watched the television show together since Lee’s confession and, for his part, Lee hasn’t watched any of it on his own either. This is not loyalty; the show is far too inextricably linked with nights in with James, James’s commentary and the heat of his body close by, and the idea of watching it was, for a time, equal parts nauseating and mortifying.

Now that things appear to be returning more or less to normal, the idea is less abhorrent. There’s comfort in the idea that they might be able to reclaim this one aspect of their friendship as it was, even if it won’t be quite the same. If nothing else, it might be a little easier to manage, *knowing*. He won’t have to spend any time wondering what would happen if he made a move.

They pass the first two episodes largely in silence, aside from the occasional muttered comment, theories about plot twists and disparaging remarks about the various men in Olivia Pope’s life.

While they wait for the third to buffer, James goes to get them each a new drink, and when he takes his usual place on the couch, he looks at Lee instead of the laptop, pressing his lips together. Lee meets his eyes, and after a deep breath, James speaks.

“Can we talk?”

Jesus Christ, not again. Lee nods, even if he’s sure the wariness is evident in his face. He takes a drink of his beer, trying not to worry that he has, despite his best efforts, made things weird again.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since the last time we talked about... our friendship. And I still don’t... Are you still in love with me?”

This is a trap. This has to be a trap. There is no logical reason for James to be asking about this, except to confirm that their slowly healing friendship is a terrible lie built on the false premise that Lee has found a way to fix his feelings. Still, if Lee has to deal with being roommates and best friends with the cause of his broken heart, said roommate/best friend can deal with knowing he's dealing with that. "Yeah," he says, leaning back into his side of the couch.

"Okay." James's posture relaxes.

Lee fiddles with the label on his beer bottle. "I'm working on it, though," he adds. "I'm trying to... You know. I'm working on it."

James looks at him more intently. "Okay. Do you think you could maybe not work on it, though?"

"Um. Why?"

James swallows. As close as they are, Lee has only seen James nervous a few times. He rarely gets nervous, not even before job interviews or dates. His vast reserves of calm are one of the things Lee loves best about him.

But here he is, definitely nervous. Lee can see James's teeth working the inside of his cheek through the skin.

"I don't... I still haven't worked things out, exactly. I'm not sure... what I am or where I stand. But when I think about the future, I think about you. And part of that's because you're my best friend and I wouldn't know what to do without you, but part of it might be... something else. And thinking about you... falling in love with someone else, like really falling in love and moving on and us growing apart... feels really shitty. And I think part of that might have to do with me maybe not just feeling platonically about you. And I'm not sure exactly what that means

yet, but... I'd like it if we could... see if it means something like what you were talking about. Slowly."

Lee spends the first few seconds silent as his brain tries to sift through the last several weeks and figure out what in the hell he did to make this come out of their last serious conversation, which had also involved his brain imploding, but in a distinctly different way.

"Um." He takes a drink. "Okay. I mean... If you figure out it is just platonic, you need to tell me right away. Cause I can't... There's only so many times I can deal with that kind of conversation with you."

"I know. And I wouldn't have brought it up if I didn't... have serious doubts about it being platonic, but I'm also... it's a lot to deal with. So I need you to be patient with me. While I figure it out. Is that okay?"

It is difficult to imagine a world in which Lee would not jump at the chance to try being with James. There's a small screaming part of his brain that is waving its arms and telling him to proceed with extreme caution, but it's hard to focus on that part when a new world of possibility has exploded into being in front of him, when suddenly the angle of James's jaw, his short, wavy hair, his strong arms are all infinitely closer to touchable than they were a few minutes before.

"Okay," he says. "Yeah, that's okay. Just. ...Yeah. We can try that." He clears his throat, taking another drink and looking down before meeting James's eyes again. "Uh. What do you want to... What do you want to do now?"

James shifts. "D'you wanna keep watching *Scandal*?"

Lee smiles, taking another drink and leaning back against the couch. "Yeah. That's cool for now."

CHAPTER 13

“SELFIES FOR JUSTICE! SELFIES FOR PEACE!” The cry comes from the team room and Key walks in to see Graham, Lee, James, and Acacia all improbably piled together on one modest couch. Graham is trying to hold his phone far enough above them to fit all four faces in the camera’s scope.

Lee has construction paper taped to his forehead. As Key gets closer, she sees that he’s written ‘#SJW’ across it in dark red marker, a nauseating contrast to the particular muted green of the paper.

“Key, get in here,” Graham says.

“No.”

“Fair enough,” he replies after a beat, resuming his ill-fated efforts to fit them all into the frame.

“We could get Key to take the picture,” Lee suggests.

Graham snorts. “It wouldn’t be a *selfie* that way, Lee. Honestly, have I taught you *nothing* this summer?”

Stampede finished the week before, but Graham is still wearing the garish pink rhinestone-studded cowboy hat he donned throughout the festival.

There was no official disciplinary action taken against Doug beyond the HR meeting and a couple of stern talks, followed by a deeply uncomfortable apology to Key, supervised by Max. Still, he quit a few weeks after the meeting. Apparently, he found a better job. Key suspects that’s the truth, but there’s still a part of her that hopes he came up with the excuse to cover up a horribly humiliating reason, like some debilitating skin condition.

His absence has allowed her to settle into the office again. She's had some of her worst suspicions about Max confirmed in his relative inaction, but she's also found out which of her coworkers she can trust to back her up. It's reassuring, knowing that the next time something like this happens — and she knows it will — most of them will have her back.

James has also put in his two weeks' notice, having secured an office job at the university.

"Thinking about me and Lee put a lot of things in perspective," he'd said to her when he shared the news.

Part of her is disappointed that she'll have one less friend here, but she can't begrudge James his optimism about the job, which involves far fewer sales tactics and a much more climate-controlled working environment.

When Graham emerges from the selfie pile, Lee and James are still sitting close together on the couch, and while Lee chats to Acacia, his hand and James's rest together, unacknowledged save the animation with which Lee speaks and the faint smile on James's face.

"Not a selfie fan?" Graham asks, taking the chair next to hers and grinning.

He has re-dyed his hair, the green vibrant again. The underside of the cowboy hat is stained with dye. Key is still not sure whether or not it suits him, but she likes that it's there all the same.

"Not a dogpile selfie kind of person."

"Fair. And how is the elegant and righteous Key this afternoon?"

Her lips twitch. "Good. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm sunny, I'm fine." He rocks back in his seat, looking at her, before leaning forward again. "Officially staying in Calgary for the foreseeable future."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He flashes her a smile, eyebrows disappearing into his bangs. "I heard your winters

are even shittier than Montreal's. I gotta see that shit."

She looks down at her binder, straightening the donation forms in their plastic cover. "Well, if that's true, maybe you can take me out for coffee sometime."

Graham's eyes widen. "Seriously?"

His hands have gone still on his knees. She looks at them, noting a nail torn to the quick, an ink stain, and a faded scar. She is still not sure what to make of him, but she thinks she might be curious enough to take the risk and find out.

"Sure. If you can beat my DRM today."