

# THE LATTE SEGMENT

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## CHAPTER ONE

A rabbit sat in a coffee shop. It was Sunday, about 3 o'clock, so this was expected. Her absence would be more surprising, more worthy of report. It had become so predictable an event that her order was almost ready before she even finished paying - a latte, medium, improved with a hint of mint no matter the season. When the barista wasn't too busy, he would draw a sprig of mint in the foam. It was how she had her first coffee years and years ago when she was in college. There was no reason to change it.

She wore the local uniform, jeans with a durable button-down shirt. She was tucked away in the corner, a simple wood chair supporting her, a laptop glowing blue-grey light onto her face. There, the noise of a half-empty cafe was whittled away to a fine din. Her brown ears, half-perked, kept the light from falling onto a painting behind her. It was an impressionist take on the look just a few blocks up the street; she was

fond of it. The corner was slightly dark, tucked away from the September sun. Still, there was enough light in the back. If anyone there wanted to see the painting, they would be able to.

Sarah fidgeted and the corner creaked. She was worrying about money.

Her finances were safe, by most reasonable standards, yet there was a nagging sense that she should be doing better. Perhaps she could save a little more. She could go to fewer movies with Sean and their whole circle of friends. She couldn't get rid of her television like Sean did; she relied on it too much for work. But she could stop coming to the Deadline Cafe every Sunday. It did feel like the lattes got more expensive the last year or so.

Everything in Portland felt like it was getting more expensive lately. Most of it was inevitable. She moved here when things weren't very good anywhere, and now things were especially good here. New businesses were popping up in her neighborhood left and right. Businesses that, for one reason or another, she rarely went to.

Some of the growth was probably her fault. At least, it was the fault of the swarm that started moving into town in the last few years. She knew she was part of it.

So making plans made sense. Sarah wanted to be a sensible rabbit.

She wanted to keep enjoying the city, to keep on going without having to cut back too much.

The Deadline was a home away from home. It almost felt like more of a home than her cozy apartment up the road. The walls here were caked with artwork. Scenes of local attractions and raw emotion, the output of the city's remaining artistic heritage. Tall windows kept the front well-lit in the summer, with only subtle ambient light filling the area Sarah preferred.

*Maybe I should keep the lights low at home, she thought. It would cut down the electric bill, at least. Probably wouldn't mind it.*

What she did mind was the pair of foxes sitting halfway across the room. She was always instinctively on edge around foxes, but these were more distracting simply because they were so loud. The cafe was never silent, but the pair had apparently decided to try to compete for the loudest source of noise. They were putting in a gold-star effort.

Sarah tried not to eavesdrop, but her focus was repeatedly ripped from her laptop by their laughing interjections. Howls of "you're serious?" and "oh hun, I know!" were favorites. Their loudest cries grabbed the attention of the entire back room, including a coyote on the other side of the room. He stumbled onto eye contact with Sarah, his face broadcasting the same silent exasperation.

She tried to avoid focusing on the two and let her mind float in the

air. A breeze from the vent pushed her thoughts to a wire sculpture. It hung from a thin string, high against the bare rafters. It was a silver skeleton of pyramids, interlocking and staggered. Its construction probably held no particular significance, but it was familiar to Sarah.

Her neighbor, Carl, had something similar on his apartment door. It was simpler and flatter, but it showed the same geometric approach. It had been there since she moved in years ago, never coming down, not even for holidays. It was one of those things that she knew him by; he was The Hyena with the Sculpture above anything else.

She shook her head quickly to regain focus, her ears flopping loosely. All this effort and worry around budget was starting to feel like a pointless exercise. After all, things were going fine. She wasn't rich - not by her own standards - but she didn't need to make sacrifices. She wasn't struggling to make rent. She could even afford that trip to Washington to help Alex with his gallery showing.

*Hell, she thought, I have savings. Nobody has savings.*

The uncertainty still hung on her face. Even if things were good now, she was convinced they wouldn't last. Her routines would have to change someday. A surprise would be hard to manage.

She sipped her coffee as if part of a ritual, closed her eyes, and took deep meditative breaths. Her focus returned. She started thinking of

scenarios that could affect her finances.

*What if I find a new job? Would make things easier, sure, but I doubt it'd be that much... And that's best case anyway. What if I lost it? I mean, Roger likes me too much so I'm not gonna get fired, but even then, I should be fine for a little while. Like, four months? Maybe five if I cut down a little. I can find a new job by then. Moving would... no, I can't do that, rent's too crazy. Well, I guess I could split a place with Sean if he'd want to, but... I don't think he'd really want to...*

The tangents were useful, she'd tell herself, even if they were unlikely. She found success at work by letting her mind wander. Her marketing job was rarely creative, but when it was, her wandering mind impressed people. And besides, the whole point of her coming by on a pleasant Sunday afternoon was to prepare. What good is it to only be ready for things that were likely to happen?

But she knew she wasn't getting anywhere. And as her latte cooled and neared its end, the mint aroma all but vanished, she conceded the point. Her head was only filled with half-thoughts, each trailing into the next, none of them offering any meaningful action or idea. There might be some small nugget of gold buried in there, but she wasn't going to find it today. Her mind was stuck in mud without the strength to pull itself out.

She sighed and closed her laptop, fitting it into her bag. As she stood, she glanced again at the hanging wire sculpture. It, like everything

else that decorated the cafe, had a price attached to it. \$165.

It wasn't going in the budget.



## CHAPTER TWO

September had only just started, and the weather had not gotten the memo. The sun still hung in cloudless skies, as warm and bright as Sarah ever wanted summers to be. She was starting to miss the spring rain and looked forward to the autumn muck. It wouldn't be comfortable or even pleasant weather, but it was coming. She knew what to expect.

Compared to so many of her neighbors, though, she was an outright veteran. Her building was old, but its residents had mostly moved in after her. Only two or three others in the building were there longer. The new neighbors were split into two camps: either they came to town as part of the soggy gold rush that was the local tech scene, or they were trying to downsize out of a neighborhood that gold rush made too expensive. The Alphabet District was far from the most expensive area (that was the Pearl District, by all estimates), but it did have its price. Yet, it also had its appeal. Sarah couldn't blame anyone for wanting to move here.

She always left her apartment door open when she got home. Hers was a corner apartment, as far from the stairs and elevator as it gets, so nobody ever passed by her door. Carl lived across the hall, but that was it. So leaving the door open became something she just did.

This confused Sean. He was the kind to lock his door, and double-check the lock, and even then be a little wary that he forgot. He worked in software, and, as a result, became tensely aware of his own privacy and security.

At the same time, he was a raccoon. By his telling, he was a loner growing up as well. The combination made others just a tiny bit unsettled, if only subconsciously. But Sean noticed. He had developed a fear of his own reputation. He kept the fact quiet, but around Sarah, he was willing to share.

As far as she was concerned, his reputation was clean. Perhaps even admirable. He was something of a leader for their group of friends, a cobbled-together set of imports who needed others in their new town to be friends with. She admired anyone who could keep them organized.

The group started doing whatever was around. Small street festivals, holiday events, trivia nights, anything that sounded interesting. Sean wasn't in charge when things started, but nobody minded it when he took charge. He was happy to do anything that didn't exist back in his corner of

California. That was the whole reason he moved - he needed to do something new.

Sarah let him into the building and led him back up to her still-open apartment, rolling his bike along. He was slightly taller than Sarah (unless they had their ears perked) and, despite riding several miles to Sarah's place, still wore the programmer's typical hoodie and dark jeans. He paused when they reached the apartment door.

"Okay, seriously," Sean said, "why is your door still open?"

"It's hot." For September, it was. "Besides, it's not like it's a big deal. I mean yeah, people steal shit, but the building's locked. It's fine."

Sean nodded. "I guess I always worry someone's just gonna, like, swoop in and steal my laptop and boom, it's gone."

"Well, that's 'cause your computer is, like, your whole life."

Sean feigned indignation. "Not all of it! I have the bike too."

The two bonded over movies. The group made a ritual of going to a small theater every other weekend. Sean and Sarah made a habit of going to each others' place on the other weekends. Other members of the group used to join in, but lately, it was just the two of them.

This week was the same. Invitations came back with a batch of "no"s, along with some "maybe"s that everyone knew to treat as a polite rejection. Sean said he might call it off entirely at this point. Kate was starting to talk as if Sarah and Sean were dating, and with how much time

they spent together, they were both running out of arguments to the contrary. But Sarah liked the routine. She liked the movies they picked. And, though she wouldn't admit it, she liked Sean.

"So," Sean said, "I need you to explain something to me. How in the hell have you not seen *Young Frankenstein*?"

Sarah shrugged. "I haven't gotten into Mel Brooks yet. He's not my style."

"But he's-"

Sean cut himself off. He loved debating movies with friends. Most of them were even good for a snappy quip in return, the sort of friendly banter that endeared Sarah to the whole crowd. Sean played well off Kate in particular because she was so loud. Sarah, a more mild-mannered rabbit, wasn't a good foil.

Mel Brooks was Sean's kind of thing. Sarah wasn't as much of a fan; she liked Hitchcock and Kubrick, any sort of slow and brooding drama. But she was never very interested in defending her tastes, so if Sean wanted to argue, well then, he could argue.

"Right. We need to get you to see *History of the World* at some point."

"I saw that," Sarah said. "You got me to watch that last time we had this argument."

"Well, then, there you go. You've seen the best Mel Brooks movie."

"So, good, we're done."

"I didn't say that!" He grabbed the remote. "It's *Young Frankenstein*, or it's *Spaceballs*, whichever one is around..."

Sean trailed off. Sarah's face was back to the same expression she wore in the coffee shop, her cheeks drooping as she stared at the idle TV.

"Look, I'm sorry about arguing."

Sarah chuckled. "No, dude, that's half the fun."

He tilted his head and examined her face. "Well, is something wrong? You look kinda..."

"I know. I'm just... I dunno. Been thinking about work, and the apartment..."

"Things not going well?"

Sean was one of the few people Sarah knew she could open up to. "Two guys on my team both quit lately. One went off to another startup, no surprise, but the other left town for somewhere cheaper. And I keep hearing about stuff like that, things getting too expensive, and I'm just like... I don't know if I'm ready in case I have to worry about that."

"Well, your job's going fine, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Not gonna lose that anytime soon."

"Then don't worry. You know what you're doing."

Sean dropped himself on the couch, swiping his tail to the side. Sarah joined him, leaning back and tucking her tail between the cushions.

"You know better than to tell me not to worry."

"This is true," Sean said with a slight smile.

"Besides, you're the one with the good job." Sean nodded meekly.

"So you've definitely got nothing to worry about."

"Well, you've got a good job too."

She didn't enjoy working in marketing, but she had to admit, it did pay well. "I guess. I just... I feel sorry for people."

Sean nodded, more confidently this time. "This about Alex?"

Sarah dithered. "Maybe, a little?"

"How's she doing?"

"He," Sarah said.

"We're going with 'he' now?"

"Last we talked."

Alex was known to move around with what pronouns he preferred. Sarah was always willing to oblige, but it was the sort of information that needed to be passed around. He was one of the first people Sarah got to know in Portland. He was offering lessons at the time, and Sarah took him up on the offer. He fit Sarah's idea of the eccentric, androgynous artist to a T: a small, curiously fashionable otter, soft-spoken with an excitable and scattered brain. Just the kind of character Sarah wanted to get to know.

"But yeah. He's surviving, still working at that bar. Sold a couple of pieces."

"Well, that's good. He still looking at that guild thing?"

Sarah sighed. "Didn't sound like it."

The guild was one of Sarah's many attempts to help Alex out. He was a starving artist, at times literally, and Sarah felt a motherly need to help him. She caught wind of a graphic designer guild in town - more of an industry support group than anything serious - and suggested it to Alex. Most of the members were artists, so she assumed he would fit in fine. Perhaps he would even get a more meaningful job than waiting tables at yet another bar. At this point, he seemed as well known in food service circles as in art circles.

Sean and Sarah didn't run in either of those. Their circle was, tonight, focused on a cheap couch and a modest TV in a cheap and modest apartment. It was nowhere near perfect. Sarah would definitely prefer it if the apartment were bigger or if the couch was more inviting. But it was okay, and she was satisfied.

## CHAPTER THREE

For the big-business enterprise-scale world that Sarah spent her weekdays in, the end of the quarter was something of a sacred period. One worshiped by all and approached with the fear of angering an unseen and unpredictable god. By the time the mood worked its way down to her level, the doctrine and ritual had disintegrated into sheer chaos. Even with weeks left in September, the quarter would end too soon. So everything must happen now, if not yesterday. Otherwise, the stock market may become angry and start throwing lightning bolts.

Sarah could only deal with these months. She didn't enjoy the chaos. After four years at this job, however, she learned to manage it. She was in charge of managing marketing campaigns for two different clients, and she kept tabs on them gradually. Her approach was measured; chaos would only bring more chaos. An email here, a meeting there, a phone call on occasion, delivered slowly and when necessary. They weren't the



projects with the best performance or most spend or anything that her bosses cared about, but she kept organized and planned ahead. For that, she was well-liked.

That was a modest consolation. Things took a dip a year after she started, and other well-liked marketing managers got the ax in the process. (Her survival was rabbits' luck, as far as she was concerned.) Being well-liked didn't make her job any easier or more exciting. It was just something she did, and she did it well enough, and it paid well enough. That was all.

"So, Sarah, how'd your weekend out in the woods go?"

Michelle did enjoy her job. She was a perky middle-aged wolf dressed in a vibrant green that nearly matched the walls. Perfectly on brand, whether intended or not. Her desk, neighboring Sarah's, was full of papers and notes, wherever she hadn't situated photos of her kids. Sarah's desk was barren in comparison.

The office space was open rows of desks all the way around. There were no cubicle walls to block windows, but that also meant they couldn't block noise. The result was a steady din of keyboards and chatter. It was like working in a coffee shop, with the smell of coffee replaced by a faint sting of lemon cleaner.

Sarah paused to process that yes, Michelle had started a

conversation, and yes, it was with her. "Oh. Fine, I guess."

"First time up Multnomah Falls?"

"Yep," Sarah said, now thoroughly distracted. "You kinda have to, sooner or later."

"Definitely! I'm just waiting until I know the boys can handle it. It can be a tough hike."

"I know. Guess I'm not quite in the kind of shape I want to be."

"Oh, pshaw," Michelle said. "You're fine. You just have to pace yourself. That's all there is to it."

Sarah watched her drink yet another soda. It was mid-afternoon, and she was on her third or fourth of the day. *Maybe you should pace yourself too*, she found herself thinking before a rush of guilt came over her.

*No. Stop being judgmental. Stop it.*

Even if Sarah was well-liked and had a good standing in the office, the moment she stepped in she started being hard on herself. When things got especially tense with a client, she started to panic. Roger, the marketing director, would have to reassure her that things were going to be fine. He'd remind her that she consistently rated herself low on her self-evaluations while everyone else rated themselves highly.

It bled into thoughts about the rest of her life. She felt fine at home, but here, suddenly she became critical of everything. Her impulse was to criticize Michelle for her diet, to get a little stab at a wolf. But she worried

more about her own. She was healthy, as far as she knew, but there had to be room to improve. Maybe she should go to that Thai restaurant less often. The portions were huge, and besides, they don't get tofu right and sometimes still leave the eggs in...

She would even beat herself up for letting her mind wander. The job always had plenty of tasks to offer. There was always a little more customer research to do, a little more communication with the clients. Even in the meetings that required hardly any focus, she felt an obligation to be productive. Otherwise, she feared she would lose her job, and she didn't like the budget she made for that.

The office did have private rooms, designed for someone to use as their exclusive space, which were instead the venue for conference calls and the like. They were all too claustrophobic to use for meetings, but they were soundproof. A relief on some days.

Sarah had a call coming, so she claimed one by laying her laptop on the desk. These calls never required much focus. Everyone was somewhere else, and her only function on them was to keep things organized. This group of creatives and production managers was particularly self-organizing. She didn't even feel necessary.

Maybe she should practice drawing. Ever since the lessons with Alex ended, she had let the whole art thing slide. She had her notepad, its yellow pages still virgin and crisp. She had a pen that still worked. Nobody

could see if her mind was elsewhere, and she could imagine Ben and Kim doing the same while the more business-oriented attendees went on about logistics. There was no reason to feel guilty about it.

After everyone picked up their phones - late, of course - and Sarah kicked off the meeting, she immediately started staring at the blank page. Her pen tapped gently. Something had to come out. She tried random, nondescript swirls. Then, she traced over them and layered echoes and ripples around them. She was doodling, technically, but she felt uninspired. After a few minutes, she tore the sheet off the top of the pad in disappointment. The attempt at distracting herself instead left her more focused, listening keenly to the conversation just in case she had to chime in with something.

But she didn't. She never did. She knew she never did. These meetings ran themselves, more or less. They made people feel good, as if they achieved something meaningful in the process. And they chewed up time. For a time when everyone claimed to be busy, there was plenty of time being wasted.

All of her meetings that day followed the same refrain. She was present in body, but barely in mind. Virtually unnecessary, yet always required. It was productive on paper, but she couldn't ignore the feeling that her time would be better used doing something else.

When evening came, Sarah walked back across the street to the

parking garage. Her head hung slightly, her ears drooped. On the corner was a trash can, stuffed with plastic lunch trays from the food carts nearby. As she passed it, she threw a crumpled piece of yellow paper with a soft grunt, not even turning to make sure it fell in.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Sarah had a routine for most things, and returning home after a work day was no exception. She would swing around the side of her apartment building, parking in the furthest corner of the lot. There was a parking spot near the front that was always available and would be more convenient, but she never took it. Instead, she went to the back entrance. It was a beat-up old door beneath the fire escape, surrounded by moss. The mailboxes sat there. There was rarely anything important, mostly circulars and credit card offers, but it was a ritual. It was such a habit that she found herself checking the mail when she returned from running Sunday errands.

The building was far from the nicest in town, or even the nicest in the neighborhood. When an apartment opened up, its ad contained words like "vintage" and "cozy". Nothing more than euphemisms. They tried to give appeal to a building nearly 100 years old and far more modest than the flashy new complexes that were popping up.

The building showed its age. The heat didn't come on as quickly or consistently as it should; the windows had a strange way of opening and years of rust that made it a physical feat; the floorboards creaked so softly yet frequently that their absence would surprise Sarah. None of these were problems in the newer buildings like the one where Sean lived. She had reasons to complain about the place if she wanted to.

But she didn't. Not often, at least. She stumbled into the place when she first moved to town, back when rents were arguably cheap but certainly reasonable. Staying put kept her rent from jumping very much, a fact she accepted with great appreciation and relief. It was a fair compromise. The newer buildings were flashier and more comfortable, but they had price tags to match. Never mind that several didn't have anywhere to park. Eric, an occasional member of her circle of friends, lived in a neighborhood where many of those sorts of buildings were popping up. He was more than willing to comment on their impact.

Among the typical stuffing that filled her mailbox was a nondescript and unstamped envelope. It was from the building's management company - or, more accurately, the sole landlady Deborah. She was a small and fiercely independent woman, what Sarah imagined her own grandmother would be like were she a coyote. They had a good rapport from the day Sarah first saw the apartment. Deborah was always willing to try and fix anything that came up from the residents, even the sort of work that a woman of her age would rarely attempt. Sarah could hardly think of

a time she called for a handyman and it wasn't Deborah herself that came to fix things.

She immediately felt a rush of guilt. Letters from Deborah were rare, and it was relatively early in the month. *Did I forget to pay rent? I had to have paid, my phone reminded me, I know I went to the site right after...*

It took her an embarrassing amount of time to realize that the mystery could be solved by opening the letter. It was typed; not unheard of from Deborah, but rare. She preferred to write everything out, even the annual rent increases. This had to be something important.

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Dear residents,

I hope you're all doing just lovely! I sure have been. These last few years have been wonderful for our little family. So many new faces!

Most of you know me pretty well by now. You know I care about you all, you know I enjoy doing everything I can for you all. You also know I didn't used to be such a gray coyote! So I'm afraid it's just about time for me to hang up my boots and retire. I wish I could keep going for another 50 years, but it's getting so hard to keep up with everyone!

Don't you fret, though! I'm handing over the keys to the folks at



Waterknell Management. Yes, it's a big group of folks, but they have a bunch of little families in town. I've heard good things about them, so I'm sure they'll take care of you folks just fine. They'll be moving in a few weeks from now. October 1<sup>st</sup>! My, is it almost the end of the year already? Anyway, their man Andrew will be taking my office, so I hope you all take a chance to get to know him. He's a fine young hare, but he's sure got some little shoes to fill here!

Hugs and kisses,

Deborah

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Deborah always wrote the way she talked.

The news surprised Sarah only because, in the back of her mind, she expected Deborah would never retire. She'd be replacing a lightbulb in one of the hallway sconces, step down off her old green stepladder, take a seat on it, and just pass away quietly then and there. A morbid idea, sure. But she figured that's what she would have wanted to do, to work on her building right up to the end.

Instead, she was retiring.

*Is it her health? I didn't know she was in bad shape... is she in bad*

*shape? Or, maybe money? I dunno, I'd probably give up by the time I got to her age. She's what, 73 now? 74? I'd cash out too.*

She kept asking herself questions that were better asked to someone else as she rode up the cramped elevator. A hundred-year-old building meant a hundred-year-old elevator, one with a scissor gate blocking its entry. It could've come from the days when elevators had dedicated operators. But then, it felt far too small for that. Riding it with even two other people could get personal.

She stepped out of the elevator and turned the corner. Carl was in the hallway, sitting on a stool outside his apartment door. He wore his usual blue collar uniform, a dirtied sweater from a local college and jeans that were distressed and faded from work rather than fashion. His large paws held pliers, working a small metal sheet gently and methodically. His working life was about wood, but now that he was retired, it was about metal.

The timber industry where Carl once worked used to dominate the city. Now, the few mills and factories that survived did so on the backs of shipping interests and the growing ranks of small-scale artisans. Since his retirement, he'd moved towards joining those ranks. He passed the days by making small trinkets for himself and people he knew. Sarah even had one sitting next to her TV. He'd occasionally sell a few, but he didn't care much for the craft fair circuit. He wasn't relying on the money, anyway.

"Evening, Carl," Sarah said as she approached.

"Evening," he said wearily, looking up from his work.

"What're you working on now?"

"Some metal origami." Carl put his work down on his good leg. "Saw a little guide on doing it, figured I'd take a whack at it. Make something different."

Sarah gave it a quick glance. "Seems to be going pretty well."

"Well, wait until it's done, then we'll see how it's going." Sarah wasn't sure if the phrasing was wisdom or just Carl messing around with words.

"That's true. Did you check your mail yet?"

"Yep. Debby's taking the gold watch. Can't blame her, she's been here forever. Longer than I have."

Carl had been in that apartment for a decade. It was a long tenure for that building. He moved in with his wife after the kids went to college; they didn't need their old home, and they could get a good selling price for it. Carl didn't want to mow the lawn every week anyway, the weeds were such a pain in the ass, and his neighbors always gave them hassle for the dumbest things. He'd swear up and down that they just didn't like hyenas.

Sarah knew all this because Carl loved to talk. He especially loved talking with Sarah. She actually listened.

"Guess I gotta be glad for her," Sarah said. "Didn't think she'd retire, but..."

"Probably got bought out," Carl said. "Just the land's probably worth a million or two to some jackass in a suit." He enjoyed being frank.

"She did say it was some local management company. Never heard of 'em, but still."

"Don't mean they're not jackasses."

She paused. "True."

Carl stood up. "Town's got plenty of weird folks, but they're good folks. Working for a living. I swear, though, there's more suits every day. Shame."

In a way, Sarah agreed. She would've gone to New York if she was interested in business. But, despite her tan pants and plaid top, she probably counted as one of those suits. If she was honest with herself.

"Yeah. Lot of random startups popping up, too. One of our product guys just left for a banking thing."

"Well, fuck 'em," Carl said, getting a small laugh out of Sarah. "If he's willing to do something dumb like that, it's his ass. No point taking a dumb risk. Plenty of good ones lying about."

"Definitely."

"Speaking of, you make a move on your boyfriend yet?"

Sarah blushed and laughed. Only Carl or her mom could get away with asking about Sean like that. "No, I-"

"You know the boy likes you!"

"I do! I just... don't think he knows he does."

Carl laughed his hearty, old man laugh. "Well then, I guess I'll have to

keep on you about it."

"And I'll keep on you about the origami, then. Wanna see it when it's done."

She opened her apartment door and tossed the junk mail aside, rereading the letter. Her door remained open.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sarah had never experienced a takeover, by any definition. Her personal life was free of any major upheavals. She never worked for any company that got acquired. Things changed, of course, but the news was rarely sudden or unpredictable. She could always prepare for the change.

She couldn't remember hearing of Waterknell Management before. There were so many apartment buildings already in town. Dozens more were going up. Even if she was interested in the detailed machinations of the real estate business she probably couldn't keep track of it all. It was one of a million topics that affected other people, but not her. She never gave it a second thought.

Now that it affected her, she found herself sitting at her desk, trying to research the new company. There were a dozen Waterknells, dotted across the country, making claims to anything from suburban townhouses

to commercial towers. It was a strange name to be so generic. None looked like they held very strictly to any geographic area, so Sarah wasn't sure which would be her new landlord come October.

But her job was marketing. She wasn't a devoted practitioner, but she knew what she was doing. And she knew what others were doing. It may take some time to piece it together, but she could read the insides of a marketing campaign, even envision the people who made it. Everyone left their paw print.

Purely from a marketing standpoint, something was fishy about the Waterknells. Browsing across a few sites between work tasks, she started noticing similarities. The website layouts started to match, almost precisely. She wasn't too surprised - some of her clients used templates just to keep things moving. It could be an artifact of some management software they used; she knew Deborah used something along those lines.

But it was smoke, and the fire started to emerge. The photographs had the same pacing, the same feel. The shots flowed through the rooms the same way, no matter what kind of apartment or office it was. And the descriptions were formatted almost identically. The language changed here and there - competitors hate having identical copy, after all - but they were close enough that they could've come from the same writer. Sarah remembered her efforts from when she did copywriting, how similar her language was between projects.

The floor plans sparked her strongest suspicion. She pulled up three apartments, from three different buildings, side by side. They seemed to share a cookie-cutter sense of architecture. The floor plans weren't precisely the same, but they were close enough.

It was the illustrations that did it. The text was in the same positions, the same visual hierarchy, the same typeface. Sure, they could have all come from the same program, but wouldn't they customize the output? Or they could have come from the same construction firm, but with one building in California and one in Georgia? It was too close for coincidence.

She was willing to entertain the idea that her eyes were fooling her, that she just saw patterns where there weren't any. She trusted Deborah, and if Deborah trusted them, she had no reason not to. Maybe real estate branding had just coalesced like this. None of her clients were in real estate, and it had been years since she looked for an apartment. It wasn't impossible.

It was, however, improbable. And since she had yet another conference call that was moving along fine without her, she kept browsing. Soon she started comparing contact information for each of the different Waterknells. The managers put their name and photo right on the page - a standard trick for small businesses and any company trying to make themselves seem more personable. There weren't many categories that needed a personal touch more than housing.



A building down in San Mateo had as its contact a brown-grey hare. He was a classic real estate suit; confident smile, well-groomed fur, perfectly angled pose. The page gave his name - Andrew Casterwall.

*This must be the guy. Seems to check out. Guess he's moving up here.*

She continued browsing, this time to a condo tower in Houston. Its contact page also had the manager's name and photo, all laid out the same way. All laid out with the same content. It was Andrew again.

*Well. Huh. She took a moment to work through the facts. I... guess they're not local. They're... they're definitely not local. No way. Man, Carl is gonna be pissed when he finds out.*

She wasn't sure how she felt about the fact. She knew there was strong advocacy for doing everything local, and from time to time she went along with it. But most of her furniture at home came from Ikea. She had no qualms about shopping at the Target downtown.

She could only be upset for Deborah. Apparently, she had been drastically misled. Was Andrew just going around the country, sweeping up properties? If so, what would he do with the building? He certainly wouldn't be hand-writing notes to the residents and fixing the hallway lights on his own.

## CHAPTER SIX

The questions and worries remained on her mind all the way to Alex's studio. It was just across the river, but those few hundred yards felt like a world away. Downtown was full of impressive, almost foreboding office towers. The east side held its array of old, short warehouses, many of them now empty and dilapidated.

Alex's studio was in that area; one of those warehouses had been converted to studio spaces. They were habitable enough and, more importantly, cheap. They attracted all manner of weasel and coyote on the skids, along with artists like Alex. He was the only otter Sarah ever saw there, and tended to be the best kept of anyone. Some days, that didn't seem like it meant much.

Sarah pushed through the apartment door, sticking in its frame. She was barely two steps in before Alex started offering directions. "Hey

Sarah. Real quick, that black cord thing? Third pile from your left, really long, looks like a shoelace, feels like spaghetti? Could you toss that up here, please?"

"I'm fine, thanks, how are you," she replied in deadpan. Despite the sarcasm, she complied with his request.

While Sarah's life could be considered organized chaos at worst, Alex's could best be described as chaotic organization. That cord was in a very precise spot that only he could explain. From atop the ladder in the corner, he could easily see where it was, but amidst the scattered personal effects and "borrowed" art supplies it was difficult for Sarah to work out where anything was.

"Very funny," he said.

"Which third pile?"

"The third - that one." He pointed to the opposite corner and went back to dismantling the work hanging on his wall. It was his most elaborate piece yet, an array of paintings on canvases of varied depth and size. Dark curves bulged like a bubbling swamp off several pieces. Sarah would describe it as a sort of sculpture painting mishmash, for lack of any better words.

She would describe Alex as a mishmash too. He would talk art history and hip-hop rumors in the same breath. He wore a newsboy cap that allowed only a small shock of orange to stick out underneath, combined with a loose-fitting suit jacket, t-shirt, and yoga pants. His

socks, as usual, didn't match. Still, he pulled off the look.

Sarah dug and eventually found what she assumed he was looking for. She held it up to the ladder with a quizzical look, and Alex extended his paw to confirm the guess. She tossed the cord to him and went back to organizing the pieces that were already laid out.

"How do you feel about the show?" she asked, sitting on his mattress.

"Not bad, not bad," Alex said. "Got out of the bar for the day, fucking finally."

"They weren't giving you the night off?"

"No, Pete's been a twat. Had to remind him like five times about it, make sure I'm not scheduled for anything. Dumbass probably would've if I didn't remind him Sunday."

"That... would've sucked." It had been so long since Sarah had a job that involved having shifts scheduled that she had virtually forgotten the stresses that went along with it.

"Yeah. Just, like, a lot."

He climbed down from the ladder, carrying wires and other small pieces of mounting, before hopping off with a soft squeak. Sarah was always willing to help him, whether it was delivering his work to a gallery or just listening to his problems. She had to admit that she could rarely ever relate to them. Alex was a proper artist, with works in galleries and everything. It didn't get more "artist" than that, as far as Sarah was

concerned. He was free to work on what he found interesting, mostly macabre takes on stock oil paintings. In Sarah's office, any artistic creativity was a matter of committee.

She looked around at the bare brick walls, the tiny kitchen, the sparse mess spread across the floor. It wasn't a good place to live by any stretch, but it was an artist's home, and for that reason alone she liked it.

"Is he still giving you shit about the skirt?" she asked.

"He gives me shit about everything. Always picking on the little guy."

Sarah wasn't unusually tall, but she was taller than him. She didn't wear a skirt as often as he did, though.

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Eh."

"Well, there is that guild thing I mentioned a while back. I mean, could get you a new job."

"I guess."

Sarah paused. "Did you go?"

He groaned. "I just... I dunno. Between work, and trying to put stuff together, it's like..."

"Don't have time?"

"Yeah. Just been too busy."

"Well, I mean... the meetings aren't all that long. Hell, there's free food. You can just go and eat, it's fine."

"Yeah, but..." He stretched for an excuse.

Sarah didn't want to push it this time. She knew how much Alex struggled to get by, how hard it was for any artist to make a living in this town. There were ways to make it easier, she figured, and she wanted Alex to take one of those options. She didn't see any reason for him to do the whole starving artist thing, outside of romanticizing the whole idea.

Or, stubbornness. They were each stubborn in their own way. When they dated, Sarah would persistently argue her case for what she was after until Alex agreed. He would listen to suggestions, smile his meek smile, and carry on how he wanted anyway.

As far as she knew, his friends never pushed him like she did. But she wanted him to be successful. He was willing to put up with her stumbling through an attempt to learn art; nobody else had the patience. She respected that. It made her want to be more helpful, to pick him up when he was struggling. It didn't quite matter to her that she had almost no understanding of the art world.

Nowhere was that lack of understanding more evident than a gallery show. The one they were preparing for was in the north part of town, in an old converted church. It was a moment of sensory overload for Sarah; the intimidating gothic architecture, combined with the highly conceptual modern works, was just enough to beat on her senses. She could piece together what was going on, but why it was happening? That was beyond

her.

So Alex did the talking. It was his domain, after all. The space made his voice double in volume and size. They dropped his boxes along a blank wall, his work's home for at least the weekend. He immediately scurried off to find a ladder, leaving Sarah to stand awkwardly. She looked around for some way to help. The boxes grabbed her attention, so she started to empty the boxes around her and hope not to mess up his obtuse system.

She looked around. Mice and badgers wearing scarves and skinny jeans shuffled around, carrying sculptures and ceramics. They moved confidently, weaving around the uncertain Sarah.

*I don't belong here.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Everything okay, Sarah? You're kinda tense."

Kate still wore her suit from work, though the jacket was already loosened up. Out of the entire movie group, she was always the most talkative and energetic, and she was always willing to probe. Often it felt like an investigation. This time, the meerkat seemed genuinely concerned.

They were hitting a small, independent theater on the east side, its marquee featuring what it called "recent classics." This time, it was *No Country for Old Men*, one of Sarah's favorites. There was a dull excitement for the movie within her, buried beneath some unspoken stress.

"I guess. A little." She was buying time, working out for herself where the mood might've truly come from.

"How'd things go with Alex?" Sean asked.



"Oh. It was okay."

"Usual?"

"As usual as he ever is."

"C'mon, details!" Kate said. Her stance perked up fully, in classic meerkat fashion. "How weird was it? See any cool stuff? Did he try to hit on you?"

"No, he was - he's been good about that."

"He still not over things?" Sean asked.

"Seemed like it." She shrugged lightly. "Thought he was months ago, so I hope so by now."

"True."

Sarah and Alex were a light couple; it was more of a casual thing than any serious dating. They were both single, Alex found Sarah attractive, she was willing to give him a try. Inevitably, the romance wasn't very strong. It fizzled out well before Sarah found the movie group, but they were a tight group. They shared.

Kate overshared. As far as Sarah was concerned, she knew more about Kate's personal life than she was interested in ever knowing. She could name most of her boyfriends, even the ones she had never met in person. She knew more gossip about the real estate world than she knew about her own office.

In a way, Kate was a balance to Lee. While she was large in stature and personality, he was a meek and small ferret. He had been standing

with the group in the lobby without saying much of anything.

The four made a balanced core group, a kind of four-man band. Many others would join in regularly, but this evening was just them. Sarah was okay with that.

"So, Lee." Kate eagerly broke the silence. "What's new with the whole job situation?"

He shrugged. "Boss is a dick."

"Fair," Sean said.

There was an awkward pause. Nobody volunteered to continue the conversation.

Eventually, Lee continued. "And, like... I guess nobody really needs chemical engineers around here. I've looked; there's not really anything around. It's all coding stuff."

"Sorry," Sean said.

"Not your fault. Just means he thinks he can get away with shit."

"Or," Sarah said, "he could just be a dick naturally." She shrugged to offer the idea. Lee shrugged back, slinking into his jacket.

"Well," Sean said, "if you want to do coding stuff I could help. It sucks that you can't find anything as it is, but I'm sure you could do it if you had to. You're pretty smart."

Lee shrugged again. Sean stopped pressing the issue any further.

Sarah wanted to, though; she knew how badly stuck Lee was with his current job. She didn't want any of her friends in that position, but she didn't know the first thing about writing code. It never appealed to her. Even though she wanted to help, she knew she couldn't.

The group made their way into the theater, already debating what would be next week's movie. The movie choice was ultimately Sean's decision, but he picked it knowing full well who would like it. This week was a slow drama for Sarah's sake; the next would probably be a horror movie more to Lee's taste. He seemed to like making sure that everyone knew why they were the movies he picked. It was as if he was reminding his subjects how kind a leader he was.

They sat down as Sean entered the self-congratulatory phase of the conversation.

"Sean, is it okay if I just throw something out there real quick?" Kate asked, sitting a few seats away.

"Proceed," he said, keeping up the playfully haughty tone.

"You're kind of an obnoxious twerp."

Sarah laughed and joined in. "You kinda are, dude."

"I know." Sean nodded confidently.

Kate failed to hold in her laugh. "That's not supposed to be a good thing!"

"Well, hey," Sean said, "I know I'm annoying. I'm okay with that. You guys are the only ones that put up with me, so really it's your fault for

sticking around."

"Now, you're not that bad," Sarah said. "There's annoying, and then there's like..."

"I know what you mean. I'm like annoying-lite."

"Still annoying," Lee said.

"We got him to talk!" Sean said with an enthusiastic snark. He always did a small celebration when Lee jumped in without a prompt. "See, being annoying can be helpful."

Sarah enjoyed that about him. He was annoying, but it was a playful annoying. More importantly, Sean was aware of it. When the two of them were alone, he was much more willing to tone it down. He'd even talk about his flaws. It was private, off the record. That seemed to put him at ease.

"Well, you could always try to, like... not be," Kate said, grimacing at her own language.

"It's who I am, though," Sean said. "I'm just gonna be a little annoying, no matter what."

"Naw. You can still be you and just keep that stuff quiet, I guess. I mean, if you know it's going to annoy someone."

"Yeah, but that's not me."

"It's still you," Sarah said. "Just like if Kate shut up, she'd still be Kate."

"And I'd be concerned," Sean said.

"So would I, why am I shutting up here?"

"I don't know," Sarah said, "maybe someone stabbed you in the larynx or something?"

Sarah smiled. She was getting snide. The group had a way of drawing a playful mood out of her.

Kate played along. "Okay, so I've been stabbed in the larynx. I didn't seek medical attention, why?"

"No, I would think you did, and they patch you up, but it's like, you have to heal for a bit."

"What if they gave her one of those voice box things?" Sean loved the hypotheticals. He relished the chance to work something out logically, even if it was one of the ridiculous situations that Sarah came up with as a joke.

"Wait, like Stephen Hawking?" Kate sounded concerned.

"Well, a different voice," he offered. "You could get the navigation lady voice."

"Then she'd be more annoying than you," Sarah said.

"Exactly!"

Meanwhile, Lee sat at the end of their row. He checked his phone periodically, waiting for the show to start. Sarah could see his expression occasionally shift as though holding in a laugh or trying to avoid rolling his eyes.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The sky was already dim when the group entered the theater. It was pitch black and cloudless by the time they made their way across the street to a small, candlelit bar in the middle of a block of storefronts. The space was sparse and warm, lined with oak accents, smelling of beer and grenadine. A sharply-dressed ocelot stood behind the counter; he was changing the record on a turntable.

"This is such a hipster place," Sean whispered.

"Oh, bah," Kate said. "It's comfortable. And Matthew is a wizard with bourbon."

And she had say over the evening. She was absent from the group's events for weeks, her time consumed by a major real estate deal. The deal finally finished, and she wanted to celebrate with her friends. As much as Sean acted as if he ran the show, he would freely concede control on such

an occasion.

But it wouldn't prevent him from cracking wise about it.

"Seriously, this is just-"

"It's not your style, I know," Kate said. "I thought you liked to explore?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

Kate scoffed. "Fine, what is your style? You a dive kinda guy? Snooty wine bar?"

"He's a Red Mast guy, totally," Lee said.

"Hey! Those are fighting words." Sean seemed legitimately offended, surprising Lee.

He recoiled. "Sorry man."

"No, it's..." Sean sighed. "Sorry. I know you were joking." He shuffled his feet. "You're not even that far off, honestly. I guess I like something more... anonymous? I mean, I'd love a sports bar that just didn't do sports. You know?"

"Think so," Sarah said. "More the restaurant, tavern sort of thing?"

"Yeah, I guess." He turned to Lee. "What's your kind of place? We can do that next time."

"Divey. Small, cheap, no frills. And you don't have to."

"We can try it, at least."

"You don't have to." Lee was insistent this time.

Sean paused. Rather than keep arguing, he asked Sarah, "What about you? I know you have a coffee place."

"Which becomes a bar at night."

"Which you never go to. Doesn't count."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Fine. I guess..."

She looked around. It did feel like a hipster bar, but it felt like it had been there long before "hipster bar" was a thing. It was well-worn but well-maintained, its wooden stools comfortable with showing their age. Using vinyl records for background music felt a bit much, but she was on Kate's side. It felt like a good bar.

"I guess I'd be okay with this, honestly."

"Well good!" Kate claimed a booth with her purse. There were plenty of options available. "First round is on me!"

There was only ever one round. Typically, it was at a place that now felt more like Sean's style - taverns and pubs meant to be unassuming and inoffensive, along with the occasional microbrewery. They made for good venues. Everyone could handle one drink without complaint and could talk without distraction.

Kate wasn't interested in discussing the movie at all. She immediately started on about the deal, and how much work it took, and how great it was going to be for the whole Buckman neighborhood. Everyone else was willing to oblige; they hadn't seen her for at least a month, after all.



She must have made an arrangement with Matthew beforehand. Sarah had only come close to finishing her beer before a second round appeared unprompted.

"I guess we're properly partying at this point?" Sarah asked.

"What, is two in one night too many?" Sean replied.

Sarah gave him a flat look. "I can do, like, three before it's a problem. We just usually keep to one."

"Well, hey, it's a big night!" Kate said. She was one Old Fashioned in and already sounded loose. "I get to celebrate a big deal with my best friends! I love you guys."

"Aww," Sean said. "We love you too."

Kate took it as an invitation to lean on his shoulder, her thin tail wagging slightly. Lee gave Sarah a concerned look, but neither said anything. They knew what was going to happen next, Sean would pat her head with a platonic kindness, completely missing that when Kate said she loved "you guys" she meant him. She had admitted as much, outside of his company.

The group kept things going throughout the evening, each round followed by a fresh one. Matthew seemed to appreciate their presence, engaging in small talk as he came by. Sarah could even see him back behind the bar, chuckling at some of Sean's better jibes. Other than Sarah's group, the place was relatively quiet.

As the night carried on, conversations began to avoid crossing the table. Lee and Sarah discussed movies more than anything. Observations about cinematic techniques, trivia around Kubrick and Carpenter. Sarah felt herself get more talkative with each round. Lee might have been doing the same, or he was just appeasing her constant conversation. Either one was fine. It was idle, friendly chatter, more intellectual than emotional.

The tone on the other side was more romantic. Kate and Sean weren't a couple - Sarah couldn't even think of a time he had a girlfriend - but they were acting as if they had been for ages. At least, Kate was. Her cheeks were flush with liquor and infatuation, her playful kicks under the table occasionally nicked Sarah's leg out of carelessness.

Sarah assumed it was just how she behaved when drunk. She had never seen it before. Some of the loving tones were even lobbed carelessly across the table. They made Lee blush, clearly embarrassed.

*They'd either make a great couple or a terrible one. Now, Sean... Sean and I would work. Totally.*

She had nothing but a year of social events to base the idea on. Sure, they had movie nights alone, tended to sit next to each other in theaters or at soccer games, and were occasional confidants when the situation demanded it. But Sean never expressed interest. Even here, he didn't seem to be reacting to Kate's attempts. He seemed more groggy than cuddly.

It was nearly midnight when Sarah finally called a cab, five drinks in. She had paid for none of them. Kate made sure of that. She tossed the driver more than enough to cover the fare before they set off and slouched into the back seat. The streetlights blurred.

*Must be what it's like to be rich, Sarah thought, gradually, the evening's activities clouding her mind. Throwing drinks at your friends all night like it's nothing. Must be nice.*

The radio was playing oldies; Styx, The Eagles, and the like. She hated oldies. Having to listen to them felt like a deserved punishment. All her drinking would be a bad idea come morning. Accepting this, she righted herself in the seat, trying to avoid falling asleep.

## CHAPTER NINE

Sarah knew that putting herself within inches of a serious hangover was not the way to start a Monday morning. People loved to start their week with meetings, and they loved to drag her into them time and time again.

The actual hangover didn't bother her as much as the knowledge that it was unnecessary. She knew better; the poor decision was entirely her doing.

She couldn't call in sick. There was a long meeting starting that morning, one that she had been organizing and preparing for the entire week prior. There was a bit of space between her and the beginning of the meeting, but it wasn't a wide enough window to escape through.

The morning dragged her feet like a ball and chain, making the hike

to her desk all the more straining. The coffee was too far to consider. All she wanted to do was sit quietly and wait for the aspirin to kick in.

So of course, Michelle had to be unusually cheerful and bushy-tailed, her blouse blindingly bright. It could have just been the significant difference in moods tilting her perspective, but that didn't leave Sarah feeling any less insulted.

"Good morning! How was your weekend?" Michelle asked in a bouncing high tone as she arrived at her desk.

Sarah held out a paw and tipped it side to side, not bothering to look up.

Michelle huffed. "Rough, huh?" She inspected Sarah closer. "You do look kinda sick."

"Well, I'm feeling kinda sick, so that lines up."

"You could just take a sick day, you know."

Sarah finally picked her head up slightly. Her ears still lagged on the desk. "Not really. Wallace has their big meeting today. All heads. Can't get out of it."

"Can't work from home?"

"I'd still feel like shit." She leaned back, dropping her weight against the back of the chair. "I'll just grab some coffee and slap myself in the face."

"I can do that for you if it'd help."

"You mean grab coffee, right?" Sarah had moments where she wanted to slap Michelle in the face. She assumed the feeling was mutual.

"Pff, of course!" She trotted off with a slight spring in her step.

Sarah focused on merely trying to focus. She ran down the bullet points that they needed to cover. The list was on her computer, right in front of her, but the screen blurred in front of her eyes.

It wasn't going to be a good morning.

"Alright, here you go." Michelle delivered a mug, along with a few packets of sugar and creamer. "Wasn't sure how you do it."

"Eh. Might as well do black." She took a sip. It woke her up, but not the way she wanted. "Actually, no. No."

Michelle inspected her face again. "Oh... oh jeez. Are you hung over?"

"Well... I've had worse."

She let out equal parts giggle and chuckle. "Must've been a good weekend then! Didn't figure you partied that hard."

"I don't."

Between the aspirin and coffee, Sarah was slowly coming to. She dragged herself to the conference room, blending in with anyone else who resented Monday for the sin of existing.

9 o'clock came and went. She silently prayed that she would have to delay the meeting until another day. She sat across from Ash, a fellow rabbit from sales, and Omar, a red fox from design. Neither of them

seemed interested in being there either.

The video conference was empty. The team on Wallace's side was never late before.

"I'm giving them five more minutes," Omar said, filling the dead air.

"It's only been five minutes," Ash said.

"Exactly. Give them ten minutes. Then, fuck it. I've got other stuff to do."

"Not to make this any more annoying, but where's Brian?" Sarah asked.

"Do we really want him in this meeting?" Omar asked.

"No. And there shouldn't be any tech parts left anyway. I'll just need an excuse why he's not here."

The video finally lit up. A pair of badgers was on the other side. "Hey guys, sorry we're late," the one on the right said. "It's been a madhouse. End of quarter and all that."

"Been the same here," Omar said. "Think we've all gone mad."

"Good morning to you too, Omar," the other badger deadpanned.

"This everyone?"

"I think so," Sarah said. "Don't think there was anyone else on the invite."

"Is Brian around?" the first badger asked. "We may need to run a few things by him."

Omar sighed as he got up. "I'll go get him."

Sarah now had to bide for time. In many meetings, that felt like her primary responsibility. "So, Dan, should we wait for them, or can we get started?"

"Let's wait," the badger on the right said. "Don't want to have to repeat anything."

Sarah did her best to keep her grimace from showing. For as long as they had worked together, Dan was always more focused on moving things along. He usually was what made the group move forward without Sarah's help. She asked him as a gambit, and for the few dire minutes after it failed, small talk became the order of the day.

Omar returned with a tall coyote in tow. "Sorry I'm late, guys," he said. "Guess I didn't see the invite. Hey Dan, hey Allison."

"Hi Brian," they said in unison from the video screen.

"Alright," Sarah said, "we should probably get things moving here. Got lots to cover, lot of things are sort of smashing together at this point."

"Smashing together.' I like that," Allison said, holding in a laugh.

"Does feel like a car crash sometimes," Ash asked into her chest.

"Well, before we get rolling," Brian said, "can I just run one thing past everyone? I was checking in with Dan's team on Friday, just want to make sure everyone's good with some details on the tech side."

*There shouldn't be any tech stuff left,* Sarah repeated to herself, wanting to yell it. Instead, "Right, let's give that a quick minute, then we'll get on to collaterals" came out instead.



She wanted to kick herself. The headache from the hangover was gone, but a new one was taking its place.

By the time the meeting broke for lunch, Sarah had hoped to be discussing distribution. Omar had questions on that point, and she felt they were important. Instead, the subject was probably hours away, as Brian's one thing turned into a zombie, shambling along and refusing to die.

She downed lunch rapidly as if going fast here would make the rest of the day go fast as well. It would not.

Even if meetings were an important part of her job, Sarah never enjoyed them. She doubted anyone did. It was often a pain of boredom, of time consumed that didn't need consuming. They weren't stressful to her, just annoying.

This meeting was especially annoying. Miscommunications came to light while new ones seemed to form before her eyes. She had lost control of the schedule. All she could do was keep Dan and Omar from getting at each other's throats. It wasn't even a question of species animosity - she knew of no bad blood between foxes and badgers - they were just too stubborn about everything.

Eventually, the digressions were too much. "Alright! Alright, alright,

alright." Sarah had to raise her voice just to be heard. "Look. It's 4 o'clock here, it's 5 o'clock there, we still have a shitload of stuff to go over. We're done for today. I'm going to go, I'm going to filter all this down to whoever's in charge of what, and I'm going to send an email to each one of you. You tell me what's up, I'll put it together, send it to everyone, and then. Only then, if you want to keep arguing, then you can go for it. Right now, we need to head home."

It was the most she had talked in the entire meeting.

"Can I just-"

"No, Dan, no. We're good. We're done. Please, let's just get back to this tomorrow."

The emails she assigned herself took a long time. She always found it difficult to write while angry, and that meeting left her fuming. The words had to be squeezed out unnaturally. They took on a cynical cheerfulness, as though she was masking her feelings by inverting them.

She left the office almost two hours later, passing by the conference room on her way out. Dan and Omar were still going at it. Clearly, nobody else wanted any part of it.

## CHAPTER TEN

Rush hour should have finished by the time Sarah started cutting across downtown. Judging by the lines of cars and the red glow radiating above the streets, that wasn't the case. The glow was only red, no blue mixed in. Most likely, there were no accidents, nothing to reasonably cause the backup.

Though, perhaps it wasn't any worse. Maybe she was taking her work home with her, as she always did, and the sour mood had started to color her view of the traffic. Even mundane levels of traffic were bound to feel torturous. She honked angrily at every SUV and BMW that cut her off. The mildest traffic violation turned into a personal slight.

Her muscles held tight, her chest tensed and ached. She felt sick. The traffic gave her plenty of time to worry about that.

Just as the roads seemed stuffed to the brim with cars, so was her apartment building's parking lot. Cars filled her usual spots, even the convenient spot near the front that nobody ever seemed to claim. She settled for a spot on the street.

None of these nuisances were all that unusual. Some days, traffic was just heavy; sometimes the parking lot just filled up. But they interfered with her routine, and right now, she did not need anything interfering with her routine.

Getting inside provided calm. The mail room was the same old mail room it always was, lined with the same mailboxes, each stuffed with the same junk mail. The same ceiling light glowed yellow inside the same frosted dome. It was boring but consistent.

Sarah grabbed her mail. All junk mail. She sighed in relief; finally, something was back to normal.

As she walked to the elevator, she glanced around at the doors of the smaller, cheaper ground-level apartments. A scattered few had sheets of paper taped to them.

*Guess a lot of people didn't pay their rent. Wonder what happened. Or... wait, is that how Deborah handles it? Don't think I've ever seen it.*

She never saw any rent notice herself. Even if she had to cut it close,

she paid on time. There were few things more important to keep in good standing than a home.

There were more sheets taped to more doors when she arrived on her floor. They covered an entire wall of doors.

*Can't be rent. Not this many people. Has to be something else. Maybe something with Waterknell. Probably just how they spread the news.*

Waterknell wasn't in charge yet, but logistics can take time. Carl had spotted Andrew roaming the building on several occasions. Crews seemed to be doing inspections, taking stock of the place themselves.

Sarah preferred Deborah's letters. At least that way, she knew people got the message. As it was, she could just run down the hall grabbing every note off of the doors, and nobody would be any the wiser. It would be mean and pointless, but possible. And it would let off some steam.

Her wandering mind stopped in its tracks as she reached her door. It found the sense of fear and guilt it seemed to be seeking out. Her door had a note on it as well. She pulled it down, dropped her purse on her couch, and opened it.

\*\*\*

Residents,

We hope you've seen the news that your building is becoming another wonderful Waterknell Management property! This is a historic and unique building that we all share, and we want to do our best to treat it - and you - with care and respect.

Like any transition period, there will be a bit of dust. Our maintenance crew will be doing some guided inspections of the units starting this Wednesday. You won't have to be present, and per state law, we'll remind you the day before we enter your unit. For your own reference, we'll be taking a look at your unit 309 on Friday.

\*\*\*

The letter was typed, with the unit number and date stamped in their places, a small and impersonal touch. Still, it was no big deal. Just a maintenance note surrounded by typical corporate speak. The language could be more charming and inviting, but if this was Waterknell's style, then so be it.

Sarah was privately relieved, and then embarrassed that she was so concerned about something so seemingly minor. The note went on further.

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We will do our best to keep policies around noise, maintenance requests, rent payments and all the other details close to what you're already used to. These changes are always difficult, and we don't want to make things harder than they need to be.

There are, however, some changes that will need to be made, particularly in regards to your leases. Because of the change of ownership, each resident will need to sign a new lease with Waterknell Management. You'll have to sign by November 1<sup>st</sup>. We know that many residents are on month-to-month leases, and for those residents, we will continue to extend that option. As these are new leases, they will be brought closer in line with market expectations for this class of building. Your unit type and lease rate information are included below.

Residents who do not wish to sign a new lease with Waterknell will be required to vacate their units by November 1<sup>st</sup>. If necessary, we will work with residents who may need an additional day or two.

We apologize for any inconvenience, and we hope to have a chance to serve all of you as our latest Waterknell community!

Thanks,  
Andrew Casterwall

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"The fuck's going on?" Sarah asked nobody. She was used to corporate speak and euphemisms, so the meaning was hardly lost. Still, the entire situation left her uneasy.

She heard Carl's apartment door open. His didn't have a note on it, so he had apparently already read it. "Hey, Carl? Did you check this note out?"

"Yeah, it's fucking bullshit," he said.

"I know. It feels... bad."

"Of course it's bad. It's a goddamn eviction."

She stared at him blankly. "Seriously?" *Evicted? Us?*

"Sure as hell sounds like it. Look." Carl pointed at Sarah's note, still in her paw. "Look at what those motherfuckers are gonna charge us for the place."

Sarah checked the bottom of the note. The combined utility cost was the same, but her rent would be going up nearly \$500 a month. That would be a sizable chunk of what she was paying now. The jump was probably less painful for people who had just moved into the building, but for someone like Carl who had been there a decade...

"Did you talk to any of them?" Sarah asked.

"Yup. Andrew swung by. I read the note, nearly swung at him. Bastard's doubling my rent."

"Shit. I'm sorry dude."



"Goddamn out of towers," Carl said, limping down the hall. "Fucking up a perfectly good thing."

It was a good thing. Sarah grabbed her apartment when things were relatively cheap. Deborah was so concerned about the people living there that she barely raised rents when things started picking up. Sure, it meant maintenance fell to the side from time to time, but Sarah found no reason to complain.

Sean had moved more recently, though, and Kate always talked about the real estate market. It wasn't friendly. Those two could certainly handle it, and perhaps Sarah could too, but there was no way Carl could. He couldn't possibly have enough saved up in his retirement fund.

He was right to be angry.

Sarah hoped to find some help or advice she could give. She started half a dozen different sentences in her head before conceding that she had nothing. All she could do is let him vent. As Carl made his way to the elevator, Sarah could hear that he was taking every opportunity to do so.

Sarah brooded instead. The Deadline Cafe was the one place that felt most like home to her, but her own apartment was a strong runner up. She had everything settled from years of living in the apartment. The furniture had been rearranged several times over the years, and it now perfectly fit her routines. Likewise, her routines had come to fit her

apartment.

Perhaps that was what she was so attached to. Everything about the place was familiar - the slightly vaulted ceiling, the worn hardwood floor. It was routine, typical, safe. It was what she wanted. Now, even with the walls around her and floor below her, it felt as though everything she enjoyed had all vanished.

Grabbing her laptop, she vanished as well, walking down the street in the cooling September night.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sarah never went to the Deadline Cafe at night, when it turned into a bar. She definitely didn't want to drink, not after Sunday night. Though, after the Monday she'd had, the thought did occur to her.

"You guys still do coffee at this hour, right?" she asked the badger behind the counter. Her usual barista was nowhere to be found.

"I guess so," he said. "Nobody really asks."

There was hardly anybody around who could have asked. For as quiet as her usual Sunday afternoon visits were from time to time, the evening seemed completely dead. Yet, there was a small crowd, relaxing over cocktails and glasses of wine, more than could be said about the bar she was at on Sunday.

Sarah was jittery even before touching her latte. She put her laptop

on the table and scanned all of the possibilities she had been trying to budget. They were there in case something went wrong, and something had definitely now gone wrong.

She couldn't find any budgets in case she lost her apartment.

"Christ," she muttered to herself. "Why did I not think of this?"

The list of worries looked more like a list of fantasies. The scenarios she had planned for now, in hindsight, seemed ridiculous. Of course she wasn't going to lose her job, of course Sean wasn't going to move in with her, of course...

At least, there was groundwork laid. She had an excellent idea of how her finances moved around, all of it already logged. She had already identified areas of spending that could be improved. Adding another scenario to the list was comparatively easy work.

It was also scary work. She found herself tweaking numbers beyond reality to allow herself to stay where she was. She made optimistic assumptions that she knew deep down were false. Even with all of that fantasy, she didn't feel secure. The belt would be too tight.

She sighed. *I should've saved more. Probably could've bought me another five months. Maybe six. But, no, it's not enough, I'm not month-to-month. I'd have to sign a full year. Maybe I should finally make a move with*

*Sean, get a two bedroom with him. He just moved, though. And... no, there's no way he even would. Sheesh, come on Sarah. You need to be serious here, stop fucking around.*

She couldn't force herself to be optimistic. After hearing from Sean about his hunt, she dreaded going through it herself. There wasn't any other neighborhood that she particularly liked. They were all becoming too flashy, too upscale, too full of themselves. Or, they were neighborhoods so far from the center of town that they were functionally suburban.

She let herself wallow into her coffee for a few minutes, mind wandering aimlessly. Her attention floated to the artwork she would see every week, looking more sinister now in the limited light. The hanging pyramid of wires glowed orange in the dim light.

Nobody here was going to give her a pep talk. She would have to do it herself.

*Alright, rabbit. Two things. One. Text Sean. Tell him what's going on, find out whatever he knows, what advice he can give. Hopefully, he can help. Two. Figure out what your options are. Staying is not going to work. Anything cheaper, at least, give it a look.*

It was a plan. It was cobbled together and promised nothing, but it was a plan, and Sarah liked having a plan. She quickly sent Sean a text, hardly thinking about what she was saying, then started pulling up every

website for finding an apartment she could think of.

Her usual corner was now illuminated by a variety of colors emanating from her screen, the result of her wandering from website to website. The walls absorbed as much as they could to keep the subdued ambiance in the rest of the room. The painting, behind her as usual, was clearly illuminated by her screen; her ears, usually protecting it, fell flat alongside her head.

She decided, as a matter of principle, to ignore any of the buildings that Waterknell managed already. She wasn't going to go through the effort of getting away from them only to fall back into their claws. Besides, considering how much they were going to charge for her current apartment, anything cheaper they were offering had to be a noticeable step down.

Despite that limitation, the news looked good at first glance. There were plenty of apartments around town that she could look into. However, only a handful were less expensive than the rate she was threatened with. Those would still be a jump, and sometimes a large one, but she felt a little better about them. They would be difficult to manage, but they could work.

She had a handful saved when her phone buzzed. Sean had texted his reply. "What are you talking about?"

Sarah, in her mad and mindless rush to make progress, had apparently sent "Apart prob talk?" She could understand why Sean was

confused. She wasn't entirely sure what it was supposed to be either.

"Your apartment hunt, can we talk about it sometime? I'm getting kicked from my place," she sent.

Sean's reply came quickly. "Sorry :( Wanna swing by Wednesday after work?"

"Sure," Sarah sent, putting her phone down.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

A good week at work was not going to happen. The arguments with Wallace were either dying down or happening outside of her view, but Sarah knew they still existed. Either way, she held on to the hope that the project would clean up without any last-minute madness.

She was focused on her computer screen, typing an email, when Roger gave a knock at her desk.

"Hey, you got a moment?" he said.

Sarah shrugged, knowing she wasn't going to change the outcome.

"Let's grab one of the offices, I got some news for you."

Roger had always been difficult to pin down. Sarah found him hard to trust, but he never did anything to deserve the impression. He was just a fat, aging squirrel who still fidgeted as much as any squirrel did.



He knew how to be precise with his words. "I want to talk" always meant bad news, but never about the person hearing the news. Only when he went with "I'm gonna need to talk for a bit" were you in trouble.

"I got some news" was relatively accurate. It'd be news. Not necessarily good, or bad, or even relevant to the person receiving it.

But it still required a closed door, which Sarah learned only after entering the small office.

"So, what did I do this time?" Sarah asked, trying to lift her own mood. She knew his approach to language, so she knew the joke would be harmless.

"Well, there is the whole... no, I can't," Roger said. "Seriously, though, we're kinda gearing things up for the Q4 work."

Sarah nodded. "Good?"

"I guess," he said with a nervous laugh. "I mean, we've definitely had better, but it doesn't seem like it's the worst."

The worst resulted in layoffs, so she was happy that wasn't going to happen. "Guessing you need something from me, then?"

"Well, maybe." He hesitated. "So, the thing is, Thomas is going to leave."

Sarah hardly reacted. She and Thomas had only interacted once, maybe twice. They tended to cover widely different industries with their work, and besides, Sarah didn't really care to compete with the other marketing managers. They were partners, not enemies.

"All his stuff is gonna get moved around, obviously. Which, he's got a few things frozen, so right now, it's just the HiSense account."

She was a bit surprised that he only ran one campaign, but then, maybe it was a large one. Regardless, it was neutral news - not bad, not good, just a thing that happened. "Okay then," she said flatly, not sure how he expected her to react.

"Well, from what I understand, you've got some free space the next quarter or two?"

Sarah thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so. I mean, Wallace Sport is getting into execution mode. Unless Brian keeps fucking with the schedule."

"Oh, is he doing that again?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't get me started."

"Well, too late."

A polite chuckle. "But, yeah, they're not going to need me all that much at that point. They shouldn't, anyway."

"Good, good." His eyes wandered. "Well, to be fair, Vinish was on that one contract that ended up falling apart, so he's pretty light on stuff too. And Michelle's been saying she has space for a while."

"I can see that. She's been pretty chatty this quarter."

"Heh. Well, yeah, good luck with that I guess."

"It's not a problem."

"Good. But, yeah, losing Thomas means someone's gotta take over his stuff. So Gary and I are gonna have to decide who takes it over. Just wanted to make sure you knew it could be coming up."

"I guess this is where I should be all 'pick me, pick me,' right?" She

didn't want to do it, but she could at least pretend she cared that much.

"I mean, if you want," Roger said with a nervous laugh. "This is more just letting you know."

"You think it's going to fall into my lap?"

"I don't know, we haven't really discussed it much yet. Think it's an even chance between you and Vinish."

"Not Michelle?"

"Well, yeah, and Michelle. Of course."

Sarah returned to her desk. Her part of the building felt quieter than usual; she assumed it was just because Michelle had taken the day off. But she couldn't avoid feeling an ominous undercurrent. Strange, considering the news delivered was neutral. Good, potentially.

Maybe things with Wallace were going haywire again. She passed around a handful of emails, then started digging through the internal documentation on HiSense. She didn't want the extra work, ultimately, but she knew her reputation around the office. Roger was probably batting for her, and there was a fair chance he'd win.

The research soon became a necessary way to fill her day. Despite the humming, ever-present panic that marked the end of the quarter, her inbox was quiet. Apartment hunting was only providing so many leads and so much distraction. She needed something to keep her occupied until her dinner with Alex.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There were plenty of Portland's neighborhoods that Sarah would feel comfortable moving into. Alex's was not one of them. It would be affordable, almost astoundingly so, but it was cheap for a reason. It was an old industrial area, once a major center of commerce and productivity, now half-abandoned. Some of the warehouses had been converted to other uses. The work was generally cheap and quick, and it showed.

It became a gathering place for many of the city's poor and artistic. There were affordable places to live, even if a few were hardly a step up from a flophouse. The kind of reasonable studio that Alex had required a waiting list the length of which rivaled the most luxurious new condos.

The shops that lined the neighborhood's roads were all somewhat worn down. At least, they felt that way compared to the freshly-renovated downtown shops. Among them was a pizza place, a tight hole in the wall.

It wasn't fancy, but it wasn't expensive either. Even though the kangaroo behind the counter and many of the scraggly patrons made her nervous sometimes, Sarah liked the place. It felt honest.

Alex liked it too. He was the one that recommended it when they dated, and even now it served as an occasional base of operations. He never seemed nervous here; many of those scraggly patrons were his neighbors, his friends.

Sarah arrived with a mission. She wanted to vent about the eviction, primarily, but she also wanted to help Alex.

"So, I saw there's a place opening up downtown," she started.  
"Couple blocks from my office. Gallery kind of thing, I guess."

"Oh?" Alex asked, already sounding slightly dismissive.

"Yeah. It said they were looking for people who had work to sell. You should drop by and talk to them."

"Naw, I couldn't do that."

"You sure? I mean, I know I don't know the whole art scene very well, but I figured you could."

"It's... the whole scene is complicated." Alex took a bite, looking down at the table.

"Well, still. Could even just be another spot to work. Looked like they already had a little studio thing set up."

Alex looked up at the bare vents held together with duct tape. They didn't appear to be an aesthetic choice.

"I dunno. My place is fine."

"You like it there?" She tried to avoid a judgmental tone.

"I guess. Like, it's where I work, and it works." He shrugged. "I don't really think about it, honestly."

"It's inspiration?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I don't think so."

Sarah glanced around, wondering if anything in the pizza place could offer her inspiration. That is, assuming she was looking for it. "Well, maybe it's worth a try, but you don't have to."

"I know."

"It's just... you complain about the place a lot. Let's be honest."

Alex nodded. "It does kinda suck."

"I think the phrase you used was 'damp druggie shithole?'"

Alex smiled and giggled. He had a way of acting like a high school girl who had just set up one particularly mean prank.

Sarah narrowed her eyes. "What? What did..." Her eyes widened as she caught on. "Alex."

He kept laughing quietly. "I was gonna say 'it's my shithole,' but..."

Sarah burst out laughing. "Goddammit, Alex!"

"You were thinking it!"

"No, I wasn't!"

"What's going on over there?" the kangaroo behind the counter called out in a gravelly, aggravated voice. "Did Seinfeld show up when I wasn't looking?"

"I'm just fucking with her, Tommy," Alex called back. "Don't worry about it."

"Fine, there you go," he said.

Tommy was a gruff man who would be retired if he wasn't running the pizza place. He had a habit of interacting with customers, especially when they started getting loud. Sometimes, Sarah was grateful that he'd set a rowdy crowd straight; occasionally, it felt like he was mocking the customers instead. No matter the direction his comments were aimed in, it was uncomfortable to hear.

Still, better that than a disinterested barista.

"Come on," Alex said, "you like the jokes. Admit it."

"No, I don't!" Her laughter was slowly subsiding.

"Girls love a guy with a sense of humor, don't they?"

"Would- Seriously. Would you go for a guy just because he was funny? Honestly."

"I guess. I mean, if he was cute, sure."

"Well, duh, of course, you go for a guy if he's cute. I'm saying, sense of humor, nothing else."

"But I didn't say it's just a sense of humor. Like, it helps, it's an add-on, it makes the whole thing better."

Sarah didn't find it odd that she could discuss the relative virtues of potential boyfriends with her former boyfriend. She couldn't do it with any of her other exes, but then, she didn't remain friends with any of her other exes. And none of them were like Alex.

The two spent a few more minutes running through their playful arguments, debating the finer points of attractiveness. Sarah had to admit a disadvantage here. Since they broke up, she hadn't found another boyfriend. She rarely even found herself wanting one. Alex, meanwhile, had both another girlfriend and a boyfriend in the intervening year. Sarah never met either of them. She wondered how she compared.

At this point, they were both single again, spending time together as friends. Sarah found comfort in knowing that they could go through everything they'd gone through and still come out of it okay. She had initially worried that Alex would come to resent her, or that they would drift far apart, or any number of more absurd hesitations.

They had drifted apart, slightly. Alex wasn't interested in the movie group. Sarah continued to go to gallery showings and generally support Alex how she could, but it was much less than she used to.

The conversation stalled, having gotten too ridiculous for either to continue one-upping the other. "So. They're kicking you out, huh?" Alex finally asked.

"Yeah. That's how Carl's taking it, at least. It's not a real eviction, but it's like... Deborah got bought out, they jack up the rent, I don't know if I can afford it."

He nodded. "Man. Didn't think you'd get stuck with that."

"I know, it's kinda crazy."



"I mean, you're like... rich."

Sarah grimaced. "I'm not rich. Like, okay. I've been doing well, sure. But Sean makes, at least, thirty grand more a year than I do. And he doesn't even have student loans. Kate threw five or six rounds at the bar on Sunday night, like it was nothing. They're rich."

"Yeah, but you weren't worried about rent before this."

"I had cheap rent! I was lucky, that's all it was. I'm always lucky. Like, I lucked into my job, it's better than I probably deserve. I got lucky with the rent, and now that's gone, and it's like..."

She looked for a conclusion to her thought and came up empty. Rabbits were supposed to be lucky, so to Sarah, everything was luck. The thought that her success and comfort was the result of any work she put in seemed too distant to be real. Since everything was just luck, she couldn't shake the feeling that she ought to be struggling more. She was doing too well for how much effort she put in.

And here was Alex, always struggling. She always felt guilty about it, as if she had stolen all of his luck and kept it for herself. She wanted to give it back. Being nearby wouldn't help, considering luck isn't a communicable disease. But maybe she could do something for him. She certainly didn't want him to do anything for her. She could take care of herself.

"Well, I hope you end up finding something," Alex eventually said.  
"It's pretty shitty out there."

"I know. I was looking a bit at work, it's pretty stupid."

"Some of those are probably just jokes."

"They certainly feel like it," Sarah said, frustrated.

"Well, I mean, Darien likes doing that sort of thing."

"What, putting up fake apartment listings?"

Alex nodded with a subtle joy. "Yeah. They're obvious jokes, I think so anyway. Mostly making fun of the high-end shit out there. But sometimes, it's like, I wouldn't be surprised if someone bought it."

Sarah sighed. "That's not exactly going to help."

"Oh, come on. If you weren't hunting you'd find it funny."

"I dunno. Seems kinda mean."

"It's kinda cool. He's just poking the whole stupid thing in the eye. It's what he does. I paint things that scare people, he pisses on capitalism."

"Your stuff's not scary. It's just weird."

Alex smiled. "That's why I like you."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sean lived in one of the new apartments that popped up since Sarah first moved to town. It was flashy and modern, coated in glass and steel, part of a neighborhood that bloomed out of old breweries and factories. Alex's neighborhood was probably destined for the same fate. If Sean's building didn't have so many neighbors of similar style, it would stick out like an ominous spire along the river. Instead, it was one of a bouquet, a cluster that radiated the desires and mindset of the city's newest imports.

It wasn't Sarah's style. She didn't resent the buildings being there, unlike some of her more vocal coworkers. Sure, they could block some lovely views from Forest Park and caused some heavy traffic from time to time, but if people were going to move here anyway, they might as well build what they could. She didn't know of anything that neighborhood was being used for before they started popping up. Maybe her impending rent would be even worse without them.

The inside felt as utilitarian as the outside. The owners, whoever they were, clearly tried to make it more inviting. However, gray carpets and bare concrete pillars weren't "inviting" by Sarah's definition. Seeing the skeleton of the tower, freshly-built and well-engineered, felt more unsettling than seeing the splitting beams and stacks of brick that made up Alex's building. Something so polished, so precise, felt like it had to be hiding something.

She liked what Sean had done with his little slice of the building. His personality better matched the technical, perfected feel. He had built a shrine to the future in his apartment; computers and consoles sitting like sculptures on tall desks, monitors and TVs positioned like electronic paintings.

His selection of furniture was more random, a collection cobbled together by chance. Each piece looked either vintage or bargain, no two pieces matching, even fewer fitting together in style. It reminded her of the back part of the Deadline Cafe. She had wanted to do the same with her own decor, but she already had all the furniture she needed.

"Think you could stand a place like this?" Sean asked, laying on his bed. His apartment was a small studio, leaving few other places to sit. Despite his best efforts to create the illusion of a bedroom, the fact was inescapable.

"It's worth a try, at least," Sarah said, wandering around the space.

"Is the management all that bad?"

"They're fine. Far as I can tell. I only had one other place back home, so I don't have much reference."

"Roger. Kinda doubt they're as good as Deborah, anyway."

"She's the one that's booting you?"

"Not really. She sold, the new guys are raising rates."

"Gotcha. Heard they were pretty bad about that here, initially. The management changed maybe... two months after I moved in? Something like that."

"Pretty recent."

"Yeah. They've been okay so far. Don't have any of the community stuff anymore, though. Used to be like, something going on every other night. Now it's pretty quiet."

Sarah shrugged. "Quiet's good, honestly."

"I thought you liked to know your neighbors?"

"I like Carl. Carl's interesting."

"Thought you were like that with everyone."

"Nope. Just him. The people in the apartment next to me, I still don't know their names."

He sat up. "Well, I don't know any of my neighbors' names, so, welcome home!"

Sarah laughed, just nervous enough for her to notice. "Are the other apartments pretty similar? Far as you know?"

"Far as I know. They're all just copies," Sean said, gesturing at the walls. "I saw one a couple floors up before I moved in, was exactly the same as this. The one bedroom is funky, though. And huge."

"And way too much. I did some digging at work." She sat at one of the few chairs not situated in front of a computer. "Besides, this place is bigger than mine."

"You're kidding. Your place is definitely bigger."

"Five eighty-eight. This is six twenty, according to the site."

"Well, damn." He looked around. "Where'd all my space go?"

"Your computers are taking it all up. You should clearly get rid of those."

"Evil woman." He reached to grab a pillow. "Move over there, I don't wanna hit anything valuable."

"You'd miss anyway."

Sean put on fake gravitas. "Madam, I accept your challenge."

Sarah enjoyed teasing Sean. It was easy. "Well, hey, if I do wind up living around here you'll be able to bother me a lot more."

"So why would you want to live here? I'm annoying, we've agreed on this."

"It's an endearing kind of annoying. Otherwise, none of us would put up with you." Sean chuckled in agreement. "Besides, you're not that bad."

"Thank you. I've been trying."

Sarah blinked. He sounded surprisingly earnest. "Wait. Really?"

Sean dithered, as though he had shared too much. "Jessie's been biting at me lately about it. Guess I've been pissing him off too much."

"He's on your team?"

"Yep. Can't really avoid him."

"Well, I mean, it's just one opinion. You don't have to get along with everyone."

Sean pointed. "You do, though."

"Not really. Michelle hates me."

"I mean, the people you have to manage."

Sarah thought. "Eh, even they don't really like me. I don't think they hate me, but still."

"Well, either way, he's right. I should probably cut it down a little bit."

Sarah dropped onto the bed, laying next to Sean. "It's fine. It's just part of who you are."

"I guess."

"I mean, if you want to change, then sure, change. Just, don't do it just because one person doesn't like you. Go with what's in your heart."

Sean rolled over, looking at Sarah with a flat expression. "What are you, my mom?"

Sarah deserved it. She didn't know where the sappy sentiment came from. "Dude. No. You're older than me."

Sean grinned. "Okay. Sister?"

The grin alone was enough to get Sarah giggling. "God, I hope not. That'd be awful."

"Hey, you see me at Thanksgiving every year. That's a family thing."

"Only because my parents won't fly out here. They make me go back there for Christmas."

"How are the folks, by the way? Usual?"

"Far as I know," she said with a sigh. "Told mom about the apartment thing, she just gave me the whole 'you're a grown woman, you can figure it out' thing. Says that for everything."

"Oh well."

"Yeah. Your mom the same way?"

Sean hesitated. "Probably."

Sarah didn't know why she asked. He sounded uncomfortable, and it wasn't something she could help with anyway.

They talked idly for hours. By the time Sarah left, it was well past when she planned to have dinner. She grabbed some Chinese on the way home - Buddha's Delight, like she routinely had in her college days.

Those days were predictable. She always knew what to do next, what was coming next. The apartment she shared with an old classmate stayed the same year after year, no surprises or instability. Her boyfriend Zach was always available, right until he got his dream job in Belfast. Even that came with enough warning that Sarah was ready for it.

For whatever reason, as the rain started to fall from the dark gray sky, those days came into her head. They seemed so far away now. Sean and Zach were different animals, but they felt so much alike.

She went to sleep, relaxed. If luck were on her side, things would be relaxed in the office as well.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Initially, her luck seemed to hold out. She arrived at the office to find a cease-fire between Dan and Omar. Things could finally flow and finish up with much less interference. Wallace should finish on time, exactly as Sarah had hoped.

She sipped her coffee calmly, expecting a decent day.

"So."

Michelle wasn't bright or bubbly today. Her face hung flat, the corner of her mouth pulled back with just a hint of a sneer. Her tail dragged close behind her, lifeless. Sarah guessed she was either plotting something or resented something.

"So?" Sarah asked, confused, bending an ear forward. She put

down her coffee.

"Got a chance to catch up with Roger," she said. "Guess we're battling now."

"One way to look at it."

"You're not?"

Sarah leaned back in her chair. "I mean, if it was something either of us could do anything about, sure. But from what Roger said, he and Gary just have to work out who's gonna get it."

"Right. And you really don't think they're going to watch us from here on to decide?"

Sarah shrugged. "We've been here for years, if they're gonna base it on the next couple weeks, then they're idiots. They're not going to."

"But you don't know that."

"I don't really care," she said, spinning back to face her computer.

Michelle sat down, sliding her chair closer to Sarah's desk. "Well then, tell Roger that. Get yourself out of the running. Leave it to someone who needs it."

*Needs it?* Sarah thought. She turned back around to face Michelle, her ears folded back. "I'm not going to tell my boss that I don't care about my job. I mean, even if that's not what I say, I'm sure that's how he's going to take it."

"Just say you're not interested in this project. Make it really clear, really specific."

She looked narrowly at Michelle. "Why are you so insistent that I drop on this?"

"Why do you keep insisting not to?"

Sarah grimaced, uncertain of the answer herself. "They're going to give it to you anyway."

"How do you know?"

"I haven't done a thing in the tech sector. You have. You'd know it better than me. Besides, you're the senior."

"Exactly, they'll give the app company to the kid."

Sarah groaned. "Goddammit, you know what I meant. You've been here longer. You're better at this than I am. I barely have any apps on my phone as it is. Your kids probably know more about this stuff than I do."

"I don't let Oliver touch it," Michelle said proudly. "He always gets himself into trouble with a computer. He's just about broken his tablet, he put so much crap on the thing."

"There, exactly." She tried to sound encouraging. "You've got a subject matter expert in your freakin' home. You got this."

Michelle turned to face her computer, seeming to process the thought. Sarah turned as well, confident that the matter was dropped. She didn't want to keep arguing if she didn't have to.

"So are you gonna tell Roger you don't want to do it?"

Sarah hung her head and bit her lip. "If they know what they're doing, they'll give the account to the best person for it. That's not me. That's either you or Vinish and frankly, I think they'd pick you over him. But, if they want to give it to me, then fine, I'll take it. That's the job."

"They'll give it to you." She sounded defeated.

"You don't know that! We're not the ones making the decision, they

are. And they're not even deciding until October. Unless you go and, like, burn the place down and run off to a Mexican resort, you're going to be fine. They're going to give it to you."

"Then why not give it up? Get it off your mind?"

"It's not going to matter. It's not."

With that, Sarah walked off to another meeting. She knew she didn't want Thomas' project that badly, and she had even less interest in brown-nosing upper management. It would keep her workload reasonable, at least, and having something in the works might protect her in case anything started going south. But which project she had next, be it Thomas' or one that arrived next quarter, didn't matter.

But she didn't want to lose to a wolf. Rabbits always lost to wolves. The idea was drilled into her head her entire life, and it tinted how she saw the world. She had slowly learned not to be afraid of them, but it took conscious effort to actually fight back against one.

Fighting was scary. Fighting forced her to take a stand on something, which inevitably meant being against someone else. It made her attack and defend and try not to come out bloodied in one way or another, whether matted fur or bruised ego.

She spent the meeting calming down instead of paying attention. She knew it wasn't a large fight, but it still hit her adrenaline. Afterwards, she loitered in the office and waited until Michelle was away from her desk.

The opportunity opening, she grabbed her purse and made her way out the door.