The morning after our meeting with Virgil, new residency letters were posted to all tenants’ apartment doors.

To make a long story short, it involved me and Jasper. Or rather, the rumors and complaints from our neighbors against us. It reminded all residents that Atlantica Boardwalk Apartments held a zero-tolerance policy for leaseholders convicted of crimes while on A.B.A. property, and the conviction of such would result in immediate eviction. The letter then informed everyone how cameras existed within the building’s main lobby on the ground floor, the landlord’s office, and laundry room, and Atlantica Apts. reserved the right to turn over footage of a crime being committed to the local police, blah, blah, blah. It was clear Virgil didn’t tread lightly on letting his own tenants fight on what was essentially his property.

A week passed full of trial and error in finding a job. By the eighth day though, something miraculous happened. After waking up to an empty apartment and faintly remembering a peck on my cheek in the early hours of dawn, I expected to see nothing spectacular in the notifications on my fully charged phone.

Dad finally stopped sending me text messages. He also quit leaving bitter voicemails trying to weasel his way out of the situation he put himself in. A part of me though missed seeing the notifications of his attempts to justify what happened. Of course, I never fully read or listened to any of them, but a part of me also wondered why I didn’t just block the number outright.

An unsubtle knock at the front door pulled me from those thoughts. Pulling myself from bed that morning, I put on a pair of Jasper’s pajama bottoms and went to peer through the apartment’s peek hole. It was Rex and Henry; two of the dumbass triplets who attacked me the other day, as well as a lividly grumbling otter with arms each the size of tree trunks, and a rudder swishing behind him big enough to fill a portion of the narrow corridor hallway.

“Dude, you think they’re boning right now?” The mongoose asked his friend.

The otter blanched, “Gross, now it’s in my hea—Ow!”

The older mustelid promptly smacked the back of the younger otter’s head. “Quiet!” He snarled in a deep frown, then grabbed the mongoose’s shoulder, who’d been trying to step away from my door. “No, you don’t. We’re gonna wait here if it takes all day.”

“Why am I even here, again?” Henry pondered aloud.

“Cause your dad’s not doing anything about it,” the elder otter said, “so shut it.”

“You’re not my dad, Mr. Lutman,” the mongoose retorted.

“Damn right, I’m not,” Mr. Lutman countered without even blinking down at the smaller mammal, “but unless you’re eager to go to juvenile hall with Rex here, I’m not letting you out of my sight until we apologize to them dogs. Ya got it?”

Having heard enough to know I wasn’t in any danger, I quickly pulled away from the peephole. The instinctual side of me tried saying to walk away from the door. However, my curiosity won out enough for my right paw to get a mind of its own. Ears folded, I grudgingly unlocked the door, then opened it wide enough without unhooking the security chain. The teenagers didn’t dare look me in the eye as I stared at the other adult, who held a forced smile.

“M-May I help you?”

“Are you Jasper or Jackson Alnwick?” The middle-aged otter bluntly asked. “I got no idea which one you are, since you two, uh…well look alike.”

Again, my right paw had a mind of its own, unlatching the security chain so I could open it wider to see the three other tenants more visibly.

“I’m Jackson,” I answered him. “But who are you?”

Beneath the dirtied, oversized rock-and-roll t-shirt he wore had to be muscles heavy enough to prevent the mustelid from swimming in a pool. He’d likely fall to the bottom. What kept me from snickering at the mental image was the fact he visibly didn’t look happy to be in front of my apartment of all places.

“Alex Lutman, me and my family are several floors down,” he shifted between the two boys to shake my paw, albeit a little more aggressively than I’d expected, to the point I winced at his arm strength after pulling away. Alex laughed in a friendly manner that made me feel a little more at ease. “Listen, I drive trucks cross-country for a living, so I’m often away from the family. Now put yourself in my shoes, boy: you’ve been driving a big-rig five-hundred miles nonstop from here all the way to Ohio. You drop the cargo off, go to a truck stop, take a crap, shower, then have a hot meal before going to bed…” The otter’s smile completely vanished as I heard Rex gulp beside the hulking parent, “Only to get a phone call from your boy’s mother that he’s been getting into trouble with his friend again. I mean serious trouble like assault, the kind that could get you sent to juvie.”

My irises grew into reflective saucers. Henry and Rex didn’t look so mellow either.

“Imagine my wife’s surprise at being called down to Virgil’s office and shown some video of our son attacking a fellow resident, and imagine how fucking angry I felt to almost speed all the way back here if I weren’t stuck delivering some cargo for the past week,” he turned to glare at his shaking son, then at the boy’s cowering mongoose friend. The large mustelid snatched their arms and pushed them between us. “Say it.”

When neither Alex’s son nor the mongoose said anything, the muscular parent held their shoulders in a tighter death grip. “We’re sorry for harassing you!” Rex squeaked out painfully. “I’m so sorry for what I did, Mr. Alnwick!”

“S-Same here!” Henry finally proclaimed, looking up with genuinely fearful, remorseful eyes. “Please don’t press charges on us. I don’t wanna go to juvie!”

“Me neither!” Rex looked up too, and I could see he meant it.

I no longer saw two punks, but two scared teenagers experiencing consequences. I also saw a father attempting to genuinely own up to the actions of his son and his son’s best friend.

“Listen, I hope this will be enough to convince you not to press charges?” Alex pleaded stoically, momentarily growling down at his son and the mongoose. “They’re both good kids, but made a stupid, stupid mistake last week. The minute I got back home last night, I thought it’d be best to get them to apologize for what happened, and believe me when I say Rex is gonna be grounded for life, so please understand—”

“It’s okay, sir,” I spoke up over the talkative otter, then offered a faint smile. “I understand it. You should’ve seen the look on Jasper’s face when he found out.”

The otter smirked slightly, “I imagine he wanted to kill these brats, huh?”

“You’re telling me,” I huffed in agreement. “No, I’m not gonna press any charges on your kid, or him either,” I observed the mongoose, then frowned at him as well as his best friend. “Can’t say the same for next time though if—”

“Not gonna happen again.” Alex firmly glanced down at both teens. “Right?”

“No, sir.” They said in almost-unison.

“Good,” the elder otter let go of their shoulder, which they hesitantly started rubbing at. “I’m glad you’re not as mad about it as I expected, kid.”

“Heh, be happy my brother wasn’t who answered then,” I stated, which made the middle-aged mammal smirk. “Thank you, by the way. For coming all the way up here.”

“No problem,” he shook my paw again, this time without crushing my fingers. “If you or your brother ever wanna have a talk with me or Ellie, or need anything, just visit 23F.”

I looked back to Rex and Henry, who’d stopped looking directly at me and instead meandered down the hall. The otter didn’t seem to notice or care, and neither did I.

“Will do,” I beamed as my tail started to wag, “Thanks again, Mr. Lutman. Is there anything else you need, or anything I can do, neighbor-to-neighbor?”

Alex Lutman gave an affirmative grunt, but then had to ruin the end of our conversation by telling me, “Just keep that sinning against nature behind these walls, and we won’t have any problems. See you around, Alnwick.”

\*\*\*

Even if his remark soured the encounter a little, it didn’t prevent me from smiling throughout brunch. It faded with time the more I continued sifting through my inbox and notifications for a response.

I’d gone through all possible job openings I could find between the newspapers and local listings, the ones Virgil had offered me, as well as even some that happened to be deeper inland outside of Peninsula City. Jasper and I were already pulling teeth in keeping a budget, but the longer it went on without having two jobs to keep the apartment, the worse things would get for the two of us. He couldn’t work longer hours forever, and it broke my heart to see him tire away each day while actively being proud at skipping lunch breaks.

By midday, I finally had some luck. My fingers were mindlessly scrolling through the job app on my phone when a caller I.D. popped up onscreen.

“Don’t you fucking dare be a robocall…” I muttered bitterly before ultimately pressing the ‘answer’ button and putting it on speaker. “This is Jackson…”

“Jackson Alnwick?” Replied a female-sounding voice. Not robotic in the slightest, a good sign so far. “This is Nicole from Horizon Communications. You filled out the job application for an urgent remote position as a customer service representative earlier this week?”

I literally let my phone drop onto the couch, then hurriedly answer, “Yeah, I did!”

“I apologize for the time it took for me to get back with you,” the woman named Nicole explained, “but we were backlogged at this location and needed to sift through some resumes until we found the best option for us. Even though you’re new, I feel like based on what Virgil’s mentioned about you, you might be the best option there is.”

The only sounds I could hear for several seconds were my tail madly wagging, plus the way I held my breath in utter disbelief. Was this all a fever dream or something?

“Mr. Alnwick, are you still there?”

“Uh, yeah, yeah I am,” I answered right back, beaming again across my spotted muzzle. “Thank you, ma’am. Thank you!”

“My, aren’t we eager?” She giggled before clearing her throat into a professional tone, “I understand that you’re willing to work as soon as possible, but before we have you start working for Horizon Comm, I’m gonna need you to stop by our location so I can get some more information, like banking, identification, social security, etcetera, and this is stuff that can’t be discussed unless it’s in-person.”

“I completely understand,” came my swift reply. This had to be a fever dream.

“Excellent to hear. There’s also another thing I need to remind you of, however, Mr. Alnwick,” Nicole cut back in and explained, “As a remote customer service rep, you’ll need to possess some equipment and tools in order to communicate with the customers. We’ll be more than happy to give you a list once you come over here, but I thought it’d be best to warn you ahead of time, before you make a decision…”

“…what kind of tools and equipment?” I asked.

“A working laptop computer that’s virus-free, for one,” she told me. “You’ll also need high-speed Internet, a printer-slash-fax machine, and a few others. If you can’t afford the printer or fax machine, we’ll gladly provide you with one, but you’ll need to keep it in good condition…”

As Nicole went on about what I’d need, my mind fell back on the credit card me and Jasper kept stashed in our apartment. Until recently, we’d been frugal about spending too much each week. We loosened our rules after my ex-manager decided to fire me, only using it to purchase grocery items needed for cheap cooking; butter, milk, eggs, condiments, or bare necessities for in the bathroom. The biggest purchase made in the previous week had been when Jasper ordered online an air freshener set, saying that it’d help to have our apartment not smell like wet dog after a good shower together. In the end, I had to capitulate and let him spend the money, but now, I also needed to make big purchases.

“Are there any other questions you need to ask, Mr. Alnwick?”

“No…none that I can think of now, but thank you, Nicole,” I responded. “Thank you for making my day today.”

She giggled again, “It’s a pleasure to be working with you soon. I’ll see you tomorrow then?”

“Yeah,” I said, “See you tomorrow…bye.” I hung up.

My brother and I shared almost everything, I argued with myself. My starting salary for Horizon Comm would begin at $16.50/hour. It included dental, health insurance, vacation hours, a chance to get raises each year, everything me and Jasper needed to forge a life out along the East Coast. With all that, we’d be able to pay off the small indent in the debt within weeks.

“He’ll understand,” I said over and over. “He’ll be proud too.”

So, I grabbed the credit card. I didn’t wait for Jasper to return home and debate with me whether or not I needed to get a desktop or Wi-Fi router. The Atlantica certainly didn’t provide either of them. My fingers typed on my phone, found the recommended brands, I went to the website’s cart page, then filled out the information.

Guilt filled the pit of my stomach afterward. I couldn’t bear to look at the page congratulating me on making the purchase, and immediately deleted the tab. As much as I felt thrilled at finally getting a working job once again, the moment soured at what I’d done.

\*\*\*

“Honey, I’m home!”

I jolted awake and immediately groaned at my nap’s interruption. Blinking at the sight of a Jeopardy rerun playing on the TV, as well as feeling Jasper pat my head, I sat up and stretched my arms on the couch.

“Shit, what time is it?” I half-yawned, half-groaned.

“Half past five,” Jasper said as he started casually stripping down from his overalls. “You forgot to cook us some dinner, by the way, while you were taking a power nap.”

“I was actually thinking we could go out for dinner,” I said without thinking. When my twin paused midway from unbuttoning his past button, he saw my tail and knew why.

“Did you…?”

“Yeah, I got a job.”

“Fuck yeah!” Jasper yanked me into a hug and twirled me around once or twice, making me dizzy until he suddenly stopped to wince. “Ow…”

“Woah,” I watched as my brother set me aside to rub his right ribs. “You okay there?”

“S-Something—near accident—happened at work, it’s nothing,” he dismissed it and hid another groan with some chuckling. “Tell me about this job, Jackson. I gotta know!”

I should have pressed more about it but didn’t. The having-a-job high I was experiencing clouded everything else. My basic knowledge about Horizon Communications and what the customer service representative position entailed did impress the dalmatian. It really impressed him, but once I reached the part of the explanation involving how I’d get there, the mood changed.

“The job’s remote?”

“Yeah.”

“As in stay-at-home?” Jasper raised an eyebrow, then realized the obvious. “If you’re gonna be working from home, won’t this mean you’ll need stuff like electronics for the job?”

“Yeah,” I acknowledged, then decided to get the whole uncomfortable situation over with by adding, “I bought some today. Nicole from HR said I needed a computer, a printer, and such, so I ordered some with…with the credit card.”

A pin dropped somewhere in the background. “You did what?” He asked with alarm plastered across his face, then said before I could say anything else, “Please tell me you didn’t spend hundreds of dollars on some electronic crap without telling me first…”

“It’s an investment we would’ve needed anyway in the future,” I tried to argue, “Besides, I had no choice, Jasper! Without those things, I couldn’t have the job, but now, we’re gonna be able to pay back the credit card once I start working.”

“You need to spend money then to make money, huh?” He groaned at the absurdity of my own statement, “You were making fun of me for making that same kinda joke last month, but since you’re the one spending money on my credit card, that makes it okay?”

“There was a difference, Jas!” I countered with a rising voice, “Back then, we had no jobs, had just signed the lease for this place, and we couldn’t risk getting so behind in debt that we’d end up having zero savings! With this job though—”

“You couldn’t just wait to ask for my permission though?” Jasper asked, to which I couldn’t help but scoff. “What?”

“Your permission?” I repeated his words. “I thought we were sharing that card.”

“How much did you spend, Jackson?”

It was unwise for me to deflect the question, but I did. “I thought you’d be happy for me—”

“How much, Jackson?”

“Something like $590.50?” Jasper guffawed with incredulous skepticism as I felt my ears grow hot. “So, after spending six-hundred dollars in a single day, you’re suddenly proposing we spend even more money right now going out to dinner. Hey, while we’re at it, let’s go out to a strip club and give a couple hundreds to the dancers there!”

“I thought we deserved to celebrate, okay?” I sighed in exasperation, arms raised up and then down, “Sue me for wanting to have something different from frozen food or cheap ramen.”

“I’m just saying what you’ve been saying since we moved out here, bro!” Jasper shook his head. “You’re being so hypocritical, it’s not even funny. You have no idea how hard I’ve been working my butt off to even get us money for rent, the bills, the card, our fucking food we buy so we can eat. You’re the one who doesn’t support me!”

“I’ve got no idea?” I gasped incredulously. “I know you work hard, but where’s this coming from? I didn’t hide anything from you. I told you the truth that I spent some money. So what? I’m gonna be making us some money again.

“Oh, if you’re being honest then, let me be too: I feel like we’re in over our head here, Jackson!” He trembled slightly, as if saying anything required careful concentration. “Also, here’s another truth bombshell for you: my pervy assistant manager only just got fired today for sexually harassing me.”

Yet another pin dropped somewhere in the background. Was it the plumbing in the old building? Whatever the case, it sounded like a faint whisper compared to the shocked gasp I emitted as I stared in shock in front of my brother.

“Sexually harassing?” I echoed his words like they were a foreign language.

“Yeah…he was harassing me,” Jasper went on to rant, justifiably so, “This balding old bear named Pete’s been hitting on me since the moment I started working at the shop, but then it got worse when he found out I’ve got a twin brother living with me It started off small until every day, he patted me on the ass and asked if you were into threesomes! Just as soon as I had enough of his bullshit, he gropes me while I’m changing the oil under a goddamn car, so I decide to kick him in the shin. Old Pete doesn’t like that, so he pulls me out from under to yell at me. I tell him I already had a boyfriend, he asks who, then laughs like a lecherous bastard when I say your name, and tries to molest me again until I snap at his paw and he punches me.”

My brother motioned to the same area where he’d winced just minutes earlier. Seeing it caused a flicker of several dismissed memories broke through the façade of our happy homelife. I remembered various times when Jackson claimed to be too tired to have sex, but then spent longer than usual cuddling me in bed. Him being distant as we ate dinner. Him acting guilty when I asked about certain coworkers of his.

“I…I didn’t know, Jas…” I whined, stepping closer until he held up a paw.

“I wanted to fucking strangle him, but I didn’t. Thank Christ one of the others saw what happened though and backed me up,” he growled, apparently lost in his own growing anger like me, “I followed your example by not escalating things. And here you’ve been, acting all controlling and ungrateful for what I’ve been doing for you—for us. I’d been ignoring this closeted old pervert at work and didn’t get myself while you’ve spent the past week lying on your ass at home, and now your perfect little job’s gonna be doing the exact same thing while doing actual grueling work.”

We were both being immature. Then again, we were still angsty teenagers. Moving across the country and abandoning our childhood home didn’t make a single difference. If only we weren’t too consumed with our anger.

“Actual grueling work?” I scowled at him. “Actual grueling work!? You’re doing something you love. I’ll getting paid to deal with bitchy customers and you’re having fun tinkering with cars!”

“I did love it until Dad ruined my life and not yours,” he huffed, “You always were Dad’s favorite—”

“—until I stopped being that!” I exclaimed at his absurd reasoning. “I got disowned too!”

“He didn’t kick you out on your eighteenth birthday though!”

“He kicked out my other half!” My voice cracked in a louder tone than I wanted to.

“Well, your ‘other half’ became homeless all because you insisted we could get away with some birthday sex!” Jasper snarled in lost anger. “I had to pick through trash and froze my tail off while you stayed in that gilded cage of a fucking mansion and kissing off to Dad while probably sucking his dick off too!”

One final pin dropped before I realized it was my fuse. “You fucking…” I grabbed for his shirt collar, fangs bared as I tried to go for his throat. “You take that back right—ngh!”

Within seconds, we were clawing at each other like feral animals. One moment, we stood deadlocked until an adrenaline rush led to me pushing Jasper against the refrigerator. One of his elbows knocked down a cute magnet holding up a photo of us. The distraction of seeing it fall to the floor allowed my twin to push me back until my hip struck the side of our couch. My paw fought to grab his throat, but he reached for mine first, then almost squeezed if it weren’t for a sudden whimper from me.

Horror crossed our muzzles. Repressed memories of our father almost brought us back to that gilded mansion we grew up in over a dozen states away. Slowly, Jasper lowered his tense fingers until he barely touched me at all.

“We…I think we need to talk…about our future together.”

A pit grew in the bottom of my stomach. “Agreed,” I said. “We need to talk…”