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NOB HILL

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THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

Nob Hill is part one of a novel about Gen Z startup founders in San Francisco. These boys, all younger than twenty-two, left school during the pandemic to chase their dreams of becoming the next Mark Zuckerberg. Max, Diego, Arnav, Kevin, Gallagher, and Bryce rent the third floor of an old house in Nob Hill, a neighborhood that they wish had been further gentrified before their arrival. Max is the founder of an enterprise software company, and Diego and Arnav are his engineers. Arnav's recent embrace of a cult-like mentality he calls "Radical Openness" puts a strain on both their friendships and their company. Kevin and Gallagher are co-founders of a failing personal assistant app; an AI is supposed to do the assisting, but they haven't actually programmed it, so they secretly carry out all the tasks themselves. Bryce is a seventeen-year-old prodigy with a small fortune in cryptocurrency who Max and Diego are "raising" despite being just four years older.

During the early days of the pandemic, the boys were riding high, easily raising venture capital money for half-baked ideas and unfinished apps. But in the spring of 2022, the market crashes and investors start tightening their belts. *Nob Hill* begins in the early days of this crash, as the group contends with their new reality, and explores the delusion, exploitation, obsession with youth, and misogyny that run rampant in Silicon Valley.

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Chapter 1: Hit Piece

Max & Diego – April 15th

April 2022 and the market is in the toilet. Everyone in San Francisco wonders if this is the moment where it all falls apart...everyone who matters, that is. Diego has to call the Uber today because Max's rating has dropped so far it's impossible for him to get a driver; they did not appreciate the conversation, the crumbs in their cars, or the flatulence that occurred as a result of Max's unsuccessful attempt to cure his lactose intolerance by microdosing cheese. Tonight the two of them are headed to a book launch celebration, although neither of them have read a book in years. Max is tall and lanky and prone to jerky, enthusiastic hand gestures. His light brown hair hangs wild and frizzy around his shoulders and his skin is waxy from his semi-nocturnal lifestyle. Standing next to Max, Diego looks like the picture of health: olive skin, lean muscle, clean dark hair. He might be the only guy in their apartment of six with unchapped lips.

In the car, Diego lets Max talk. He starts with how they need to close more sales in Q2, but quickly moves on to a theory about how a Taylor Lorenz hit piece about their friend group might actually be good advertisement. Taylor is a Washington Post tech reporter who thinks that innovation is oppression and progress is dangerous; the libtards love her because she's a woman and the boys detest her for the same reason, although they would never admit that even to themselves. Max says, "Taylor shits on everyone good, so her trying to take us down can only help! Am I right or am I right?"

Diego agrees with this theory, but can't get a word in. Max's rant has already moved onto Shawn, the founder/author hosting the book launch. Shawn's the son of a partner at Greylock, the venture capital firm; his book is called *Getting There*, and it's about raising money without connections. The email invite promises free copies for everyone in attendance, but Diego and

Max couldn't give less of a shit about that. Max threatens arson if Shawn pretends not to know his name at this party. While Diego would also prefer if Shawn remembered his name, this kind of slight isn't intolerable for him the way it is for Max. "He better fucking not!" says Max, scratching at his wrist like the very thought makes his skin itch. Shawn isn't in their group; he's a few years older and several million dollars richer, at once an aspirational figure and a massive douche. Still, both Diego and Max agree that his recognition is one of the first steps towards being a real person.

The lumpy seat digs into Diego's back. Their Uber heads up Sacramento Street. The elderly driver plays loud EDM. Diego is too sober for this. Outside the window, the sidewalk looks dark and cold. Diego feels very tired for a moment. Just a few months ago, venture capitalists were frothing at the mouth to give money to young entrepreneurs like the boys in the group. Every night was a party. Every day held nothing but possibility. The group was safe and warm in the upper arm of the K-shaped Covid recovery. But lately, the market's taken a nosedive. Now every night is still a party, but with a palpable undercurrent of anxiety. All year, Max's parents reminded him about the '90s dotcom bubble, while he insisted that wouldn't happen to him. Diego's parents are only just beginning to speak to him again after a year of shunning, so the pending market crash hasn't come up with them yet. No matter what happens, he knows they won't send him money. This fact feels more daunting every day.

The party is in Pacific Heights, where the boys dream of living one day. Pacific Heights comes in a logical progression after the Marina, which they also can't afford. Their apartment in Nob Hill is tantalizingly close to higher ground, but the police still won't respond to anything short of a violent crime. In Pacific Heights, there are no homeless people or loose needles, only scenic hills and shiny windows. Shawn's house has an entirely glass front and a massive balcony;

the party is on the ground floor, which has skinny white support columns instead of interior walls. An open bar is set up on either side of the cavernous room. Max is unsurprised to see that Shawn has had a small wooden platform set up in the center of the room for his speech. Shawn is a short guy who is addicted to stimmies, attention, and asking rhetorical questions.

Inside the party, there are very few women. Some of them are San Francisco pretty, which is not as good as New York pretty or LA pretty, but still something. Most of the girls are Asian. The boys have all agreed this is because white girls are too scared to be competitive in tech and there's too many barriers for everyone else. They don't mind, anyway. Most of the straight couples in the room are white guys with Asian girls. Max and Diego like to play a game at parties; whoever finds an Asian guy with a white girl gets to hit the other one in the stomach, closed fist. They're still waiting to get the first punch in.

It's cocktail hour. Max drinks a vodka cran; Diego thinks he looks like a sorority girl who just turned 21. Not that most of the boys in the group finished college, which is for suckers and not for disruptors like them. Finishing school is embarrassing in their circle. Diego was so desperate to preserve his dropout narrative that he left college last year just two weeks before graduation. His dad drove down to Louisville, pounding on his door, ready to drag him across the stage, and Diego ran out the back and jumped the fence to get away. Diego's dad took a week off work to chase him, unsuccessfully. Diego crashed on some friends' couches, changing locations in the dead of night until his dad gave up. Afterwards, Diego bought a ticket to San Francisco and started as the lead engineer for Max's enterprise software company.

The two of them met on Clubhouse during Covid, back when the app was still exclusive. Diego hustled so hard to get his invite, begging a friend of a friend who'd moved out to San Francisco a year earlier. Those were the days, when everyone who was anyone would connect

and network until the sun came up. A few months later, they started giving out invites to just anyone. Now everyone knows Clubhouse is dead. Not one of the seventy or so people in this room would even think to open the app anymore.

Diego finishes his seltzer and asks for another. He reluctantly agreed to Max's three seltzer rule tonight, so Diego has to finish three before he can start really drinking. Most of the time, it's Diego who does his best to manage Max— keeping him manic enough to impress investors without letting him lose contact with reality— at parties, however, the roles reverse. Diego is helpless before an open bar. Max is too anal and suspicious to get wasted around investors, so he's in charge of managing Diego. Right now, it's too early for that. Diego keeps it together during cocktail hour. They sip their drinks and wait for the other four boys to arrive. The six of them live on the third floor of an old house on Washington Street, where the windows are painted shut and the toilet seat is sprinkled with pubes.

Arnav glides in first. Instead of his typical uniform of a gray t-shirt and black jeans, he's dressed noticeably similar to Max, in salmon shorts and a navy t-shirt. Arnav is short – he was a sickly child – but he compensates with ramrod straight posture and an overzealous fitness routine. Bryce trails behind Arnav. He's only seventeen. He attended an online high school for hacking geniuses created for Elon Musk's son; Elon closed the school when his son graduated, so Bryce bought a bus ticket to San Francisco, uninterested in a year of public school and listening to his parents argue. Last year, Max found Bryce sleeping under a table at their favorite WeWork and gave the child prodigy their spare room. Now, Max and Diego share custody of Bryce, a squirrely runaway who still dresses in Max's old clothes despite owning a small fortune in crypto. They taught him how to shake hands, how to make eye contact, and how to cross the street when a crazy guy starts screaming on the sidewalk.

Arnav, who is Max's number two engineer and number one headache, has been spending time with the kid recently, and Max is not pleased. At first, Arnav voted not to allow Bryce into the group. Things were simple then, back when investors were funding seed rounds first and asking questions later. Arnav hadn't started acting *weird* yet. Now he's attaching himself to Bryce as a way of fucking with Max.

Before coming over to say hello, Arnav goes straight to the bar and returns with a vodka cran. Max knows that Arnav prefers tequila and that Arnav deliberately bought salmon shorts and a navy t-shirt to copy him. In the two years that Max has known him, Arnav hasn't so much as sneezed without some kind of strategy. Besides, Arnav's done this three parties in a row, far too many times to even pretend it's a coincidence.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man?" says Max, cheeks flushed.

Arnav smiles serenely, an expression he only learned once he started doing molly a few months ago. "Max, brother, I don't know what you're talking about."

Max's eyes bulge. He can't fucking stand this zen shit. He turns to Diego, who shakes his head and mimes taking a deep breath. Max's blood only boils more. He opens his mouth to insult Arnav, but Bryce's big, painfully earnest eyes bore into him, and it feels too tragic. It would be wrong. It would be, but actually fuck that, it's his only fucking option, fuck this guy who Max has seen pulling trig on sidewalks. Who does he think he is, playing zen, when Max has watched him crying over his loser ex-boyfriend and his wealthy venture capital ex-boyfriend and offering drugs to high school aged children and punching a wall when he has a problem with his code? Oh, he's in for it now, Max is going to think of something so cruel, so soul-crushing that Arnav runs back to his parents in Atherton with his stupid navy t-shirt soaked in tears.

Just as the tirade is on the tip of his tongue, Shawn, their host, bounds over to the little group of four. Sure enough, he pretends not to know the group although they've met upwards of a dozen times. He reaches out his big hand for enthusiastic shakes, saying, "What's up, my guy? I'm Shawn!" and slaps Bryce on the back so hard that the boy stumbles forward a step. Arnav steadies him. Max glares.

"Are you guys Y combinator kids?" asks Shawn, who almost certainly knows that T3LESCOPE, their enterprise software company, was rejected from Peter Thiel's program two years ago. It's a low blow. Even though they know that proximity to His Highness Peter Thiel requires the signing of an NDA and the willful ignorance of his second-in-command's ...proclivities. Despite this, any of the boys would do anything to get in the room with Peter Thiel. Max thinks it would be fine; he's twenty-one and tall, not one of the prepubescent twinks the second-in-command usually goes for. Max's genius would protect him and he would get in a room with Peter Thiel. Max knows Shawn can just call up Peter Thiel at any time, what he would give to be able to do that...

Shawn grins as Max explains that they aren't Y combinator kids. The motherfucker holds a set of keys to everything Max wants, and clearly relishes dangling them out of his reach. But the group still got invited. Max's name was on that evite. Because Max is still relatively young, still relevant, even if he's too old to be hit on by powerful men. Shawn gets older every day, further from vitality and innovation. Max feels his heart rate slow to normal. His palms are dry. He says, "You know what, Shawn?" but Shawn says, "You'll have to tell me later, man. It's time for me to go on!"

Shawn bounds over to the wooden platform in the center of the room. He has to raise the mic stand to get it closer to his face; it's more than possible that he deliberately had it adjusted

too low to make him look taller. The seventy or eighty guests settle around the makeshift stage, crossing their arms or leaning to one side, ready to perform attentiveness in case they want something from Shawn in the future. When he clears his throat to begin speaking, they cheer so much that the man of the hour has to wave them off, grinning broadly. They nod like enraptured churchgoers as Shawn tells them, “That’s what it’s all about. The grind. The chase. Cold emails that lead to warm intros.” They explode into painful-looking laughter at the slightest suggestion of a joke – some reference to his girlfriend telling him to spend less time on the computer – falling over themselves to fill the silence whenever Shawn pauses.

During one of these pauses, Diego looks out the floor-to-ceiling windows and notices Gallagher and Kevin pull up in Gallagher’s dented Prius. These two are the last of the boys from the third floor. Gallagher is a big, lumbering white guy with deep acne scars up and down his cheeks. When Diego first met him, he automatically assumed that Gallagher was from Nebraska or North Dakota, but he’s actually from Orange County. Gallagher and Kevin are founders of a company that can only be described as a sinking ship: a personal assistant app meant to run on an AI that has not been trained. They keep saying they’re going to get around to it, but Gallagher has zero technological skill and Kevin can’t find the time between arguing with his co-founder, clinging onto their investors for dear life, and doing half of the nonexistent AI’s personal assistant work. That’s probably why they’re so late.

Diego is glad no one else is looking out the window. Gallagher and Kevin stumbling ungracefully up the front steps isn’t a great look. Gallagher is just clumsy, but Kevin actually has night blindness, an unfortunate side effect of the Accutane that cleared up his skin in high school. He can’t see shit after the sun sets, and almost killed them all a few months ago on the windy

road to Half Moon Bay. Now everyone refuses to ride in his beat-up Honda with the Canada plates. Kevin's from Toronto, but he's a dual citizen, so the government won't kick him out.

Shawn says, "Anyone can raise in less than a year. We started out with just three hundred grand and a dream. You know..." A loud noise distracts him. All eyes turn to Gallagher, who accidentally slammed the front door on his way in. The room titters.

Kevin is mortified to be standing nearby. He used to live with some other friends in Lower Nob Hill, which is a fake neighborhood for people who don't want to admit they live in the Tenderloin, but he blew his savings on veneers a couple months back, just before he and Gallagher lost a major investor and had to tighten their belts. Now, he has perfect teeth but also shares a bunk bed with Gallagher, who snores and thrashes in his sleep. Kevin can't stand Gallagher's ratty flannels and shoddy personal assistant work. He's the first Black friend Gallagher ever had, one of the only in their social circle, in this room, and in every room they walk into. It used to be funny to trick Gallagher into believing that he was related to famous rappers, but as the days pass and the money dries up and Gallagher's aw-shucks-ineptitude stops materializing into sales, Kevin just finds it depressing. How did he get here? When he and Gallagher reach the group, Kevin makes sure to stand as far away from him as possible.

Shawn is still speaking, and Max begins to notice his words losing their usual Adderall-fueled, rapid-fire cadence. Instead, Shawn talks like he's concussed, slow and disoriented in his orange Steely Dan t-shirt and white skinny jeans. "It's not easy to raise, but it also isn't so hard," he says, taking a long pause between each word. "Once you do, the trick is to never leave the beta stage. Revenue's pretty old school, right? Nothing kills a good story like revenue." Most people in the audience would do almost anything for a little bit of revenue, but they nod so hard their heads wobble on their necks. It is true that the safest thing to do is shelter

in beta behind your projected revenue for as long as possible. It's a lot easier to defend fake numbers than real ones. It's a lot easier to tell your investors about how much better things will work when, for example, you finish training your personal assistant AI any day now, than it is to reveal that your business is built on a swiss cheese foundation and that water is starting to leak out the sides. All the boys know this. All the boys are feeling the strain.

Max, Diego, and Arnav have a month of funds left before their company goes belly-up. Max feels like his father in 2008, trying desperately to hold things together and not let anyone see the strain. Diego doesn't have the money to go back to college, and would rather die than grovel to his parents that they were right all along. And Arnav... Arnav has been driving them crazy ever since he got into molly and started practicing radical openness. He smiles beatifically and uses spiritual language, but somehow the absolute value of his words doesn't feel too far from when his favorite phrases all included retard and pussy and dick. Arnav's always been a schemer, most of them are, and Diego and Max are acutely aware that something is brewing.

Shawn finally finishes. He pumps a fist in the air and cheerfully exclaims that, "It's time to build!" Gallagher turns to the boys and says that he can't wait to read the book. "You know how to read?" Max asks caustically. This kind of comment usually makes Gallagher's face fall, putting him back in his place and giving Max a little thrill. But Gallagher doesn't look down at the floor. Instead, he glances at Arnav for reassurance. Arnav's black eyes shine unnaturally bright. "I know how to read," says Gallagher, without a hint of defensiveness. Arnav nods at him encouragingly. "I am open to all the world's beautiful secrets."

Max and Diego exchange a look. Bryce takes a small step towards them, away from Arnav's side – the only sign he usually gives when he's unnerved. Max notices that Kevin doesn't seem surprised or freaked out in the slightest, and wonders what that's all about.

A low-level journalist they sort of know, a Wasian girl with bleached hair and bangs, approaches them, oblivious to whatever the hell is going on.

“Hey Katie what’s up!” says Max, the words rushing out and jumbling together, his voice a little lower than usual. Diego cringes inwardly.

Katie is unperturbed. “Great talk, right?” she says. Arnav perks up at this, because he wants to know what her angle is. There's no way that she possibly enjoyed Shawn’s speech, when even their group found it ridiculous and overly long.

“Oh, one hundred percent!” says Max, slightly too loud.

Katie leans forward. “Do you guys know Shawn well?”

Gallagher nods vigorously. “Yeah, yes, definitely. You know, this one time he said...uh... he said that...” Gallagher looks at Kevin for help, but Kevin refuses to make eye contact. Katie shifts her weight to her other foot, towards Max, Diego, and Arnav. “Can you confirm a tip?” she asks.

She looks around to make sure that no one else is listening. “I heard that Shawn is paying sex workers with the company card and writing it off on his taxes.”

They can all tell that she wants this to be true very badly, even though they don’t really see what difference it would make. “No comment,” says Diego reflexively. Even if they did know something, they’d never tell a journalist, especially not one who idolizes Taylor Lorenz and the Soy Boy Times. Katie’s a nice girl, but she is also only speaking to them to leech them dry and advance her career of shitting on a world that she desperately craves access to. That’s fine, because the boys are only speaking to her so they can get a call if something comes out about them. And, for the straight ones, because she’s medium pretty.

Katie walks away and Max seems invigorated. Bryce asks what's going on, but Max just stalks off at top speed. He's tall in this crowd and easily spots Shawn's buzzcut. There is an opportunity for a win here, and Max is not practicing radical kindness or radical openness or whatever the fuck else. He thinks of his favorite quote, about how the lion and the gazelle run every morning and if the lion stops he doesn't eat, but if the gazelle stops he dies. Something like that – he doesn't really remember – whatever! Max is going to do everything he can to be a lion. He can feel his pulse in his wrist.

“Shawn!” he calls out. “How're you doing, my guy?” Shawn looks momentarily surprised, then plasters his smile back on his face. “Can't complain, can't complain.” Max says he needs to talk to him for a sec, that it's urgent and important. Shawn is reluctant to step away from his conversation, but relents when he sees the slightly unhealthy gleam in Max's eyes. Then Max lets him know, just guy to guy, that some journalists are asking questions. He maybe implies that it's more journalists than it is, and that all of them have come to him for comments. It's important to appear plugged in; that's how you become actually connected. Shawn nods slowly. Then he chuckles to himself and claps Max on the shoulder, tilting his chin up to stare Max dead in the eyes.

“Let me ask you a question, Max,” he says. “You think hookers take Square?” He laughs again and thanks him for the heads up. Max says, “Any time, any time,” and tries to hide his elation. He hadn't repeated his name and Shawn said it anyway. He just made himself a person, to a capital p Person who matters. He's one gesture of goodwill closer to some money and to establishing himself as an in-network guy, a guy who knows things. It's all he can do not to skip back over to the boys, who pretend like they weren't intently watching his every move.

“You look happy,” observes Kevin.

“Eh, I’m ok,” says Max, smiling so hard his cheeks hurt. “Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving!”

The boys decide to Uber to their favorite diner, which is shaped like a boat and serves food that’s both expensive and mediocre. It’s open until 3 am and walking distance from their apartment, so they can forgive a lot. Before they go, Gallagher wants to know about the free copies of the book that Shawn promised to hand out. It turns out that nobody brought them to the party.

The diner is sparsely populated. Other patrons give them dirty looks for being loud and drunk, but the boys don’t care. They order lumberjack breakfasts and pancakes and extra sides of bacon. The last time they were here, they’d come from a club night promoted by a friend of a friend, some guy from Fresno. All the cocktail waitresses wore lingerie but also had adult braces. Everyone was visibly sweaty and Gallagher spilled 10 or 12 drinks. The question on everyone’s minds is, when will they be somewhere better than this? How can they be somewhere better than this?

Tomorrow they’re going to a gay venture capitalist’s party, Arnav’s powerful ex who he absolutely definitely was not involved with as a minor. The boys secured their invite through that connection, and because so many of the guests are interested in Diego. He gets lingering looks in the Equinox locker room and open invites to bring all his friends to all kinds of places. Diego isn’t gay, he insists that he isn’t, but it seems like no one else in the city gets the memo. Max always assures Diego that he believes him, but is still extremely aware of what allows them all to network so much. The precarity of the situation makes his hands shake. That’s why tonight with Shawn was such a win. Max needs to be his own guy. He needs to get in the door on his own merit, even with the straight venture capital guys.

They finish eating, leaving a 12% tip because the service was slow. It's a 10 minute walk home, and no one is particularly interested in talking. They're so full from their second dinner that they don't even stop for bacon-wrapped street meat from their favorite illegal hot dog cart. There's not enough room on the sidewalk for everyone. Max and Diego walk ahead, with Bryce trailing a few feet behind and Arnav, Kevin, and Gallagher bringing up the rear. Slow walking is yet another manifestation of Arnav's newfound spiritual peace. It seems like homeless people are huddled in every doorway that isn't on a hill. It's jarring when the boys consider their dwindling funds, even though they wouldn't become homeless like this if they lost it all. They'd crash on a couch, or return to their parents if necessary. Bryce can't go home to Oregon and hasn't returned since the day he ran away, but he's perfectly comfortable going back to sleeping under the table of a WeWork. He wouldn't have to, anyway. Max would figure out a place for him to go.

At last, they arrive home, past the rusted metal gate and up three flights of stairs. The apartment has a hallway leading to five bedrooms, three bathrooms, and no toilet paper. In the living room, there are big dirty windows and hand-me-down furniture, mostly from Arnav's parents. There's a sour odor in the kitchen, which has barely been cooked in. The granite countertop is strewn with greasy Insomnia cookie boxes and empty cans of Costco flavored seltzer. Arnav goes quickly into his room.

Max walks into the bathroom, closing the door heavily behind him. He cringes at the mysterious crust in the toilet and the empty toothpaste tubes all over the sink. He stares into the mirror, which is flecked with bits of plaque from his nightly floss, and thinks about how these people don't fucking clean and how he's already twenty one and he's only got six years, seven tops, before he is irrelevant and decrepit. Only a few years left, and Arnav is doing some kind of cult shit and he's losing control of the boys and he does not have time for this! His chest is tight.

His sister said that he was scaring her, that she couldn't sleep thinking about him going full Tony Hsieh. Max couldn't even if he wanted to. Tony Hsieh was successful before he burned himself alive. It's possible that Max will not be successful. Fuck, it makes him gag. He splashes water on his face, screams silently into the damp hand towel, and then exits the bathroom like nothing ever happened.

Back in the living room, all the other boys are gathered around the couch. "Are you guys waiting for me?" asks Max. He wanders over to the stainless steel fridge to grab a Costco-brand LaCroix and press it to his cheek. "Only if you want to come join the cuddle puddle," says Arnav. Max sneers. "I don't."

Arnav shrugs and walks towards the door, immediately followed by Gallagher. Kevin tenses like he's about to get up, but then stays put on the L-shaped sectional with Diego. Max stands in the middle of the hallway, clutching his can of seltzer. He almost drops it when Bryce rises from the floor and squeezes past him, heading back towards the door.

Arnav has his hand on the doorknob, looking back at Bryce, who is frozen between the door and the kitchen. Bryce looks back and forth, back and forth, then moves towards Arnav. Max clenches his jaw. But instead of heading out the front door, Bryce opens the door to his bedroom and disappears inside. Arnav shrugs and makes for the stairwell.

Down in the basement, Arnav and Gallagher lie on the floor. Gallagher doesn't feel anxiety – he feels the presence of his body on Earth, the light of his life force, each gorgeous fiber of the slightly damp carpet. He runs his hands over his arms, over his chest. It feels so delicious to be alive. He's sweating through his shirt, although he doesn't feel uncomfortably hot. He decides to take it off, to remove the unnatural barriers between his skin and the environment. He remembers Arnav's words, that they are simply leaves floating on currents of

vibrational energy, that nothing is real except for love and light and sensation. Gallagher looks at Arnav's dark shining eyes and everything is beautiful, everything means so much that he could cry. He's going to be alright after all.

Upstairs, Bryce reemerges from his room and sits down on the floor. Max, Diego, and Kevin are on the couch. Max turns his can of seltzer over and over in his hands.

"We should do fight club!" says Max.

Bryce frowns. "But it's Friday."

"Things can change, Bryce!" says Max. "Stability is an illusion. Fight club doesn't have to be on Thursday."

Max's hands shake, and he looks towards the shelf next to the window where the group's two sets of red boxing gloves live. Diego knows exactly what he's thinking. Normally, Gallagher would run and get the boxing gloves the second fight club came up in conversation. Gallagher loves Fight Club, which never hurts very much because none of them hit that hard. Headshots are off-limits, and the main attraction is playing around and imagining Taylor Lorenz writing a hit piece about their toxic masculinity.

Today, Gallagher isn't here. Diego gets the gloves against his better judgment and hands a pair to Max. "Let me know when you're ready, man," says Diego.

Max shakes his head. "I think you should give Kevin a turn."

Diego can tell that this won't end well. Max's eyes have an unhealthy gleam to them. Kevin is still a little drunk, flopped on the couch without wariness. Although neither skinny boy could be described as a fighter, Kevin is not prepared right now. Diego decides to let it happen anyway. He'd rather Kevin get hit a little too hard in the stomach a couple times than have Max unravel without an outlet. That would be bad for business.

The red gloves velcro over their hands, and Max and Kevin square up behind the couch, a safe distance from the sharp corners of the counter and the coffee table. Kevin laughs as they circle each other. Max does not.

“Maybe we should go down to the basement after this,” says Kevin, clumsily dodging a jab. “I think it wouldn’t be so bad. You might even have fun.”

Max scoffs. He catches Kevin’s return hit on his left arm and it does *not* hurt.

“Listen, I’m just saying,” says Kevin. “It’s not like molly would make you feel worse.”

They continue to circle each other, around and around and around, with cartoonishly gloved fists unsteadily raised.

Kevin says, “Honestly, dude, I know Arnav is being a freak right now. More than anybody. But it wouldn’t hurt to make peace with him.” Max’s glove slams into his stomach. He grunts. They keep circling.

“I’m not going down there! And neither are you guys.” says Max with an air of finality.

“Ok, Jesus,” says Kevin. “Can we take a thirty second break? I’m getting dizzy.” He lowers his gloves without waiting for a response. Max looks at Kevin swaying in front of him, Diego eyeing him with an unsubtle expression of concern, and Bryce’s wide eyes. Bryce really almost went downstairs with Arnav, who will not stop fucking with Max, who Max wishes he could actually fight. If Gallagher is a proxy for Arnav, and Kevin is a proxy for Gallagher, then this might be the closest he can get. No, that’s ridiculous. That’s ridiculous. Kevin just wants thirty seconds to regroup. Kevin’s eyes are half-closed. Kevin opens his mouth to say something else and Max, almost without conscious movement, is slamming his bright red glove into Kevin’s cheek.

“Fuck!” says Kevin.

Max seems stunned at his own actions, but he doesn't do apologies. He un-velcros his gloves, returns them to the shelf, and goes into his room without a word.

Kevin brings his hand up to his cheek, relieved to find only sweat and no blood. His face stings. Fight club on Friday, with headshots, and Arnav and Gallagher aren't even here. What the fuck is next?

Chapter 2: Room Temperature

Kevin & Gallagher – April 23rd

Kevin feels the hole in his basketball socks with every step towards the Willie Woo Woo Wong playground. The boys are on their way to Chinatown for their monthly pickup game. Although the playground isn't far, Kevin wishes they had Ubered; Max and Arnav wanted to walk, and nobody wanted to ruin a rare moment of harmony between those two. Kevin thinks it would be nice for someone to walk on eggshells around him for once. Lately, he feels fragile, like he could crack at any moment. Doing molly with Arnav is a good escape, sure, but the next day he always falls into a pit of despair so deep that he considers moving back to his mom's basement in the Toronto suburbs, or maybe just sticking a fork in the toaster. If he went home, he *would* be dead, at least to everyone important. Living in San Francisco, Kevin can pretend that in the event of an apocalypse he's only a phone call or two away from the last shuttle to Mars. He can't leave the city because fame and fortune and power are right there, just slightly out of his grasp.

Gallagher, in his ratty basketball shorts and oversized Stanford t-shirt, practically skips along next to Kevin. The boys used to tease him mercilessly for wearing this shirt, since he never went to college and was even rejected by Chico State. Gallagher doesn't care anymore. Everyone knows that Kevin, who went to Williams and actually graduated, is the brains of this currently flailing operation. Kevin's parents threatened to kill him if he dropped out of school and he wasn't willing to fuck around and find out.

These days, Kevin tells both of them – his mom back home and his dad in Boston – that things are going well. Things are not going well. And it feels even more insane, if that's possible, ever since Gallagher fully bought into Arnav's radical openness philosophy. Before radical

openness, Gallagher was prematurely balding; his anxiety was making him shed like a sick golden retriever. Now he looks healthy, with pink cheeks and a full head of hair. He floats around saying he feels like a summer breeze and other pussy shit like that while their business crumbles around them. God. What pisses Kevin off the most is that he's sure Gallagher will somehow come out of this unscathed, like when the sole survivor of a deadly car crash is a drunk driver. Kevin knows he won't get that lucky.

A feeling of calmness washes over Kevin when he sees the dragon-themed playground equipment and the bright blue court. He feels tenderness for the old Asian people sitting in the sun, the little kids shrieking, and the younger guys in sweats smoking weed along the sidelines. He misses being a winner, in any capacity. At least today, once they start playing basketball, he knows he'll totally destroy their opponents: six scrawny engineers who just happen to be their downstairs neighbors.

The starting lineup is all the guys minus Bryce, who is too tiny even for a game of startup geeks twenty-two and under. Gallagher taps Kevin on the shoulder while they shoot around beforehand. "Hey man, everything OK?" he asks. Kevin can't believe his ears.

"Are you joking?" he hisses. "We're not floating on a current of fucking light, Gallagher! We're going under!"

Gallagher gives Kevin that slack, contented look that sets his gorgeous new teeth on edge. "Just stop kicking, Kevin. Just relax. Let the waves envelope you like a warm hug. What happens happens."

Kevin shakes his head. "Why don't you go shoot your fucking layups, so you don't cost us the game again?"

Nothing. Not even a wince. God, Kevin misses Gallagher having shame and urgency. Kevin is not gonna let the waves envelope him like a warm hug. Fuck that. He is not going back to his mom's basement. Vineet matches up with Kevin. Kevin is ready to destroy him.

He knows Vineet is a little bitch because they went to Williams together. Freshman year, Vineet believed that his neighbor had stolen a girl from him, so he pissed on the carpet in front of the guy's room in retaliation. When he was confronted about it, Vineet was too chicken to fight and just mumbled, "Sorry" with his eyes on the floor. Kevin is going to eat him for lunch.

He pump fakes and blows by Vineet, straight to the hoop. He hits a three in Vineet's face and doesn't even smile. Oh yeah, this is every day for him. This is regular, this is casual. None of these idiots can touch him. Kevin could have walked onto the D3 team at Williams, the coach told him so.

Meanwhile, Max is limping because his one-size-too-small Jordans make his feet bleed and Gallagher is lumbering, late on every play. Diego can't hit an outside shot to save his life and Arnav, who used to be a foul machine, seems to have decided that playing defense isn't part of his new philosophy. So of course Kevin isn't going to pass. Why would he? Why would he give up his win when they're only going to fuck it up? Kevin's at the top of the key, ball over his head. Vineet is huffing and puffing, beads of sweat flying off his skinny arms as they wave around in Kevin's face.

Kevin grins to himself. Vineet is guarding him too tight, he's never going to be able to follow Kevin if he drives to the hoop. Kevin pictures Vineet stumbling, the ball glancing off the backboard, falling through the basket, everything exactly like it should be, going right for once. He plants his left foot and takes off hard and feels something *pop* in his knee. Motherfucker! It's a searing, burning pain. He's on the blue asphalt, too low to inhale the clouds of smoke from the

guys on the sidelines, level with everyone's knees. He can't stop himself from groaning. This might be the worst physical feeling of Kevin's entire life. Everyone is staring at him crumpled on the ground. Everything is even worse than it's been, and everything was already worse than it ever was.

Kevin grits his teeth, suppressing another groan. He knows he's not going to be able to finish the game, but in just a minute, he thinks he can pull himself up and limp off the court. Just another minute on the asphalt and he'll be up. A few ragged breaths and he'll be up. He plants his sweaty palms on the ground and pushes himself to a seated position as a start. That wasn't so bad, he thinks. Now just one more push. This one is less successful. The second his left foot touches the ground, he hisses and crumples again. He knew he couldn't count on Gallagher, but he's never been unable to count on his own body before. It's been less than five minutes and he already would do anything to end this state of being. Almost anything.

"Do you need to go to the emergency room?" asks Diego. Kevin can't stop himself from promising that he'll walk it off. Diego is skeptical, but doesn't push. He hooks his hands under Kevin's sweaty armpits and hauls him to his feet, holding him up when his knee buckles. Diego and Gallagher practically carry Kevin off the court, past the children on the playground and the old people in their puffer coats, while Max argues to Vineet's team that it's not a forfeit because the boys were winning when Kevin got hurt. This time, they call an Uber.

A few days pass. Kevin spends all his time rotting on the couch with his swollen knee. He doesn't need a doctor to manage his problems, he'll handle them all by himself. He self-medicates with bumps of ketamine. He tries unsuccessfully to order an IV online. Gallagher finds an abandoned wheelchair, which Max won't let him bring inside until it's disinfected, and Kevin starts wheeling around the living room in circles until he's dizzy. There's no time for the

doctor! There's no need! The only thing that matters is getting another fifty thousand dollars to keep their business going. They've already stopped paying the WeWork fee and are skipping out on sushi Thursday, a once unthinkable concession. The ketamine is an unavoidable expense, naturally, because Kevin thinks he might die without it.

Sober, Kevin feels the stabbing pains in his knee and the raw terror of failure. He feels guilt over never watching the TV shows his mom recommends, over never calling her to check in, and over turning down a six figure job at Google to create an app that's essentially a mechanical Turk with Gallagher inside. On ketamine, Kevin feels forty-five minutes of painless joy. He feels cocooned in cotton, protected from everything bad and everything boring. It's incredible. It's just what he needs to get through the day. He can't believe that he was only a sporadic user before the knee injury. Thank God Diego knows a good dealer. Kevin just has to conceal his enthusiasm, because he knows if he shows too much everyone might wonder if he has a problem. But even if they thought so, they'd probably ease into showing concern by mocking him for a few months. So he tries to not get too stressed over it.

Gallagher plops down next to Kevin on Arnav's parents' old couch. It's been a week since the injury, and Kevin hasn't been outside since they half-dragged him out of the Uber and up the stairs. They live in a walk-up and it's too much hassle to get the wheelchair down to the street. Even if they did, the building is on a hill. Kevin would probably roll right down it and injure himself even worse. Maybe that's what happened to the original owner of the busted-up wheelchair. It's not important, there's only now. Gallagher asks how Kevin's doing. Kevin still feels a little bit separate from their reality. He doesn't even notice Arnav sitting down on his other side.

"Kevin," says Arnav gently. "We're wondering how you're feeling today."

Kevin's acutely aware that his mind usually moves quicker than this. He can't figure out why Arnav and Gallagher are giving him such significant looks. Eventually he gives up and just says, "Fine, thanks, how are you?" like everyone in the world except for these two. Gallagher lights up at the half-hearted engagement.

He says, "Oh, today... today, I feel warm. I feel a warm glow in my heart and in my soul. And I took a satisfying dump this morning."

Arnav nods approvingly. He thanks Gallagher for sharing. He declines to answer himself. "I'm more interested in the struggles of others, today. Consider it impact investing."

This statement breaks through Kevin's haze a little bit. He runs his fingers across the blue couch cushion while he thinks. Arnav hates impact investing. Back before he started talking about spirituality, when he would scream "There are only two genders!" whenever he met a non-CS major from Cal, he used to mock SJW "investors" at every opportunity. Kevin says, "You? Impact investing?"

"Yes, brother," says Arnav. "And today I think you two need to be impacted. I'm going to give you a warm intro to Roger."

"You would do that for us?" says Kevin incredulously.

"I would do anything for a friend. Are you a friend?"

Gallagher nods vigorously.

Kevin says, "Uh, yeah. Yes. I'm a friend."

Kevin would be friends with Satan himself for an intro to Roger, a famous venture capitalist and libertarian doomsday prepper with a compound out in Napa. Arnav knows Roger through one of T3LESCOPE's seed round investors, a woman they met on Clubhouse during the manic nights of quarantine, when he, Max, and Diego networked until the sun rose.

The three of them have had several coffees with her; she has zero interest in her children, who went to high school fifteen minutes from Arnav's childhood home and play soccer with his younger siblings. All three guys find this very feminist. Taking her money is feminist by extension; they are big supporters of women. Sadly, she is not willing to support a company with as flimsy a foundation as Gallagher and Kevin's. But her friend Roger, who she once gave T3LESCOPE's members a warm intro to, is far less scrupulous.

Roger is a lot, even for Arnav. He has an underground bunker and is constantly paranoid about surveillance, which he knows is ubiquitous because he himself is invested in so many data mining operations. Some kind of data collection will probably be his first suggestion for how to monetize the personal assistant AI that Gallagher and Kevin have yet to build; the issue with this, of course, is that they can count their clients on one hand and Gallagher barely keeps records of their preferences (part of why "the AI" is so faulty). Roger also likes to deliberately unsettle people in order to test their loyalty. Arnav prefers to lead with love and light, but also, he prefers to be the one testing loyalty. Although he's been chafing under Max's leadership recently, he still agrees that asking Roger for help is a last resort.

For Kevin and Gallagher, an intro to Roger is still a favor. Things are looking grim. Arnav can tell Kevin's self-medication is well on its way to becoming a disaster. Kevin's not a man of strategy like him. For Arnav, molly is a way to open hearts and minds and encourage the sharing of secrets; once the bonds are cemented and he replaces Max as the center of gravity in the apartment, he's not planning to offer it around so much. Hopefully, that time will be coming soon.

He wishes Gallagher and Kevin good luck as they head out to Gallagher's car. Kevin has opted to leave his wheelchair behind; projecting weakness is always a mistake, especially to a

doomsday prepper with a firm belief in survival of the fittest. He sits down at the top of the staircase, with its dirty brown carpeting, and scoots himself down each step with painful slowness. The damp, worn carpet feels nasty on Kevin's palms. His left leg is extended straight out; his quads and arms are burning by the time he reaches the bottom.

Gallagher doesn't make fun of Kevin, even though almost anyone else in their lives would. He appreciates Kevin's commitment. This is an important opportunity for them, and Gallagher knows that he isn't equipped to do the talking by himself. Kevin is too short to put his arm around Gallagher's shoulders, so Gallagher hooks his right arm under Kevin's armpit and half-carries him the two blocks to the parking garage. Kevin finds himself unnerved by all the homeless people after so much time inside. Especially because most of them have some kind of a limp. He does his best to stand a little straighter. He doesn't want to live with a marker of not belonging. If this doesn't get better, he's going to have to start dressing business casual to distinguish himself as not one of them – a nightmare!

Gallagher helps Kevin into the passenger seat of his ratty gray Prius. Waze says they're an hour forty-five out from Napa. For a while, they drive in silence. The view from the freeway is beautiful enough to make a person cry, but Kevin can't focus on it. He feels shooting, stabbing pain in his bent knee and moves the seat back as far as it can go. He would groan if it didn't make him sound exactly like his arthritic grandfather. He wishes he had done another bump of ketamine before getting in the car. Medicine for his knee. He's sweating and his bones feel wobbly. The air in the car is stale. Gallagher doesn't like open windows on the freeway, says it messes with the air pressure.

Their exit is coming up. Gallagher turns to Kevin and reminds him that Roger is a survivalist. “Obsessed with adapt, improvise, overcome. Don’t turn him down, no matter what he asks you. My buddy wouldn’t eat a cricket and he pulled his offer.”

Kevin mulls this over. He doesn’t want to eat a cricket. He also doesn’t want to be broke. “I could do a cricket,” he says. “Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem.”

Gallagher shakes his head. “We don’t know it’ll be a cricket. Just that there will be a request. Remember what Arnav says. Be open to opportunity. Allow your boundaries to dissolve if the wind is strong enough.”

Kevin groans. His forehead is clammy. He has never before been in a situation where Gallagher is more prepared than him, and he doesn’t like the feeling. Or is that nausea? Maybe it’s both. Maybe it’s both, maybe this is a mistake, maybe Kevin should just go back to Toronto after all. No, he can’t! This is better. Is it better? Yes, no... Gallagher frowns at him.

“Kevin, you look sick. How are you feeling? Are you feeling—”

“I don’t feel warm!” lies Kevin. “I’m room temperature!”

Gallagher says, “Why are you sweating so much, then? Are you high?”

Kevin grits his teeth. “No, I’m open to opportunity.”

Finally, they arrive. Gallagher feels very aware of the dents and the dust on his Prius as they roll to a stop in front of a thick metal gate. A security guard, probably armed, calls in to confirm their permission to enter, then drags it open manually. Electronics can be hacked. Slowly, the enormous compound is revealed: three times the size of the boys’ four-floor building. The metal roof is covered in what seems like miles of solar panels, and a generator hums in the background. Roger would never be dependent on the public power grid. He’s not a fucking

chump. That much is clear to Kevin from the second the billionaire comes out onto his palatial porch.

Roger is tall, with paper white skin and bright red hair buzzed close to his head. He wears a light blue flannel shirt and loose black jeans, both nondescript, on top of a \$700 pair of Yeezys. He looks them up and down. Kevin does his best to stand up straight and distribute his weight evenly between his two feet. Gallagher extends his burly arm.

“Hey man, it’s so great to meet you!” he enthuses.

Roger crushes Gallagher’s palm in his ghostly hand, so hard that it’s all Gallagher can do to suppress an undignified squeak. It goes on and on, almost a full minute. Kevin stands a few feet back from the exchange. He’s nervous that his knee will buckle if he moves and doesn’t want to draw Roger’s attention. Kevin is so focused on staying upright that he doesn’t notice immediately that the handshake has concluded.

“What about you?” says Roger, raising an eyebrow at Kevin without moving an inch. Not an ounce of respect. Kevin knows he is the subordinate in this situation, that he needs to take the step and get his hand crushed. It’s honestly significant that Roger came outside for them at all. He should be flattered, but for the first time in weeks, a flicker of pride and indignation rises up inside him. Who the fuck does this guy think he is? But Kevin knows exactly who Roger thinks he is: the billionaire who’s going to survive the apocalypse. Kevin and Gallagher are beggars who know Python. Gallagher doesn’t even know Python! They’re already prepared to eat crickets. Kevin has to be prepared to eat shit too, so that one day, he can be a billionaire who can survive the apocalypse. Or at least have this one on speed dial.

He takes a shaky step forward, then another. His knee, which hasn’t held his full weight in so long, screams at him. But by some miracle it holds. Kevin keeps his face blank so Roger

doesn't smell blood in the water. He has to reach up to Roger, who remains on the porch. He doesn't dare to push his luck by attempting the stairs. By the time the handshake begins, it doesn't hurt at all compared to Kevin's knee.

“Good to meet you both,” says Roger. “You little shits ready to get your panties wet?”

Gallagher and Kevin are surprised. They'd heard Roger was a recluse.

“Oh, yeah,” says Roger. “Yeah, you're up for a trip. Walk with me.”

Roger hops off his porch and starts walking across his driveway without looking behind him. Gallagher shrugs. He and Kevin follow. Kevin's knee shoots such a searing pain through him that he thinks he might vomit. It almost feels like entering another dimension, but not the euphoria of ketamine – closer to hell.

Roger stops at the entrance to a cavernous garage. “Ten car!” he offers, rapping it with his fist. An attendant cranks the heavy door open. There's a Land Rover and a Hummer and a Ford F-150, but Roger heads straight for a yellow Ferrari, slapping his hand on the hood. Kevin and Gallagher hesitate. It looks like a two-seater, but there's three of them in the garage. “Which one of us?” asks Gallagher. Roger laughs and pulls the passenger seat forward, revealing a backseat more suited for a large purse than two adult men. “Both of you get in the back. There's no point in having you get out again when we pick up my date.”

Gallagher looks at Kevin. Neither had any idea Roger was bringing a date. The two of them fold themselves into the sorry excuse for a back seat. It's Gallagher's turn for extreme discomfort; Kevin's small and wiry, and just relieved to get off of his feet by any means necessary. Roger peels out of the driveway, barely giving the security guard time to get the gate open, and reaches into the glove compartment for a little plastic baggie of shrooms. He pops one in his mouth without slowing down, then flings it behind him in Kevin's general direction.

“Are you excited to take this journey with me?” he asks.

Kevin notices Gallagher gulp. It’s a relief to see that radical acceptance only goes so far. Kevin picks up the baggie and says, “Let’s do this!”

Gallagher is going to die. He’s almost certain of it. Squished in the backseat of a billionaire’s yellow Ferrari, sweating like a pig, while Kevin mutters unintelligible words to his still-swollen knee. This is not the kind of radical experience Arnav promised. This is actually the scariest thing that’s ever happened to him. And the worst part is that he’s the only one who seems to think so.

Up front, Roger is whooping with joy, driving the convertible with his knees so he can stretch out his arms and feel the wind between his fingers. He stops yelling to listen to Roger’s Tinder date talk about her libertarian beliefs. Gallagher can only hear snatches above the wind roaring in his ears; “only an idiot *wouldn’t* have a bunker,” and “can you believe the PC bullshit in that Stanford memo?” Gallagher’s on the verge of vomiting – because of the jerky driving, not the conversational content. He can see why Roger likes her. She’s a former Miss Asian San Francisco, with poreless skin and teeth so white they put Kevin’s veneers to shame. She’s small, but has enough lean muscle to stand a chance in the apocalyptic scenarios Roger preps for. She also seems to not mind that her date includes two unshowered boys who barely fit in the car and are incapable of normal speech.

As Gallagher tries not to vomit up this morning’s cornflakes, Kevin continues murmuring to himself. He runs his fingers over the side of the car, mesmerized. It’s the brightest, most beautiful yellow Kevin’s ever seen, pulsing brightly in the glow of the setting sun. God, this fucking sunset, man. Reds and oranges and pinks bleeding into one another, flowing across the

sky like he's the first to ever see them. The girl's black hair flying back behind her like a shiny, sexy cloud. Kevin doesn't know her name, so he decides to call her Shiny. The engine rumbles down to his bones, like the most intense bass he's ever felt, like he's connected to the road beneath him and the earth's core beneath that, it's all warming him, it's all cradling him in her palm, whose palm, who cares when everything is actually amazing for once. He yawns without covering his mouth. His ears pop. Feels fucking amazing. Arnav was right. The universe can provide everything you need, if you just relax and let it take you. Maybe he should apologize to Gallagher. This thought is here, then gone.

Gallagher pokes Kevin's skinny arm, but receives no response. The car swerves and Roger ignores them and Kevin ignores *him* and doesn't even seem to mind. He's never felt more like a ghost than he does right now. When will he be a person who people pay attention to? He barely even fits in this car. And he's sad, but Kevin isn't. That never happens. Is this what Kevin feels like all the time?

Roger takes a sharp turn into a parking lot full of glossy cars. Gallagher tries to read the restaurant's sign, but the lines keep waving around and eventually he just gives up. It's unsettling. He feels like a child without a parent. Next to him, Kevin is studying his hands like they're the most interesting thing in the world. "What is it?" Gallagher asks. Then, louder, "What the fuck is it?!" Kevin looks up and beams, such a bright smile that he looks like another person, maybe a distant relative of himself. "Look at my fingers!" He says. "They're ten feet long!" Gallagher feels scared by this information and unsure why. He doesn't answer, and Kevin doesn't seem to care.

"Let's go, pussies!" calls Roger from outside of the car. His date gives a tinkling laugh. So gorgeous. The boys squish and stumble their way out of the tiny backseat and somehow end

up at a four top table. The restaurant is nice. If they were sober, Kevin would be strategizing about the best item to order for their image; he'd hiss in Gallagher's ear, don't be greedy and order the steak, don't be a little bitch and order a vegetable, don't eat too fast or too slow! It's hard to know what to do without this information. It's hard to know how to behave when the Earth slopes underneath Gallagher's dirty sneakers and the menu swims in front of his face.

"You don't need that!" says Roger. "Only men order at my table."

Kevin laughs. "That's us!"

Roger laughs harder. "You motherfuckers are boys if I ever saw 'em. Right, Gordon?"

Gallagher nods. Moving his head brings another wave of nausea crashing over him. He can be Gordon for a couple hundred thousand. He'll throw up on the floor, and maybe eat it too, if that's what Roger wants. This is important, he knows it's important, but when he tries to keep it in his head, it starts to slip away. It's like he's dropping a rock in a pond and then retrieving it; every time, it falls a little deeper, it feels a little harder to get it back.

The waiter has one of those earrings that makes a big hole in the earlobe. Gallagher wonders where the skin went. Gallagher wonders whether his life has any meaning at all. Gallagher wonders what it means when Roger tells the waiter he wants, "The usual for everyone. Quickly, this time."

"So," says Roger's date, "How are you guys doing?" Her skin glows under the sustainably sourced light bulbs.

"Better now that I can look at you," says Kevin, like he's in a dream.

Roger laughs again. "Look, one of his balls just dropped!"

Kevin continues beaming, even as Shiny laughs at him, because actually both his balls dropped years ago and everything is wonderful. He can't even imagine feeling embarrassed, or

angry, or any of the aggrieved malice he tends to stew in. All those things are a million miles away, far from her luminous face and the white tablecloth that his unbelievably long fingers extend all the way across. Would his dick extend as long as his fingers? Could he check in the restaurant? Probably everyone would find that really cool. Everyone would want to see a miracle. People love miracles! But maybe he'll just check in the bathroom first. It would probably feel amazing to pee right now. Probably his pee would be like... really cool-looking.

The bathroom has one of those sinks that just looks fancy, like it would know not to turn on for a poor person. Kevin isn't a poor person, he's wealthy-in-waiting, with what he's pretty sure is a Guinness world record-breaking dick. Sometimes the sinks with the sensors only work for white people and he has to wave his hand underneath a bunch of times. But this sink knows him. It knows he's there. This whole building can feel Kevin's presence. Isn't it gorgeous? The water feels like soft kisses on his skin, beautiful bubbles over his enormous hands. Oh! His dick! Yes, he has to check. He unzips his jeans, pulls them down with his boxers. Holy fuck! He doesn't feel the gently weaving floor tiles, but he's pretty sure that his dick reaches them. Should he do porn? No, he won't need it, he'll be too rich. He'll just be popular instead. Another gift from the universe, the universe that always provides. So wonderful to be alive!

"Kev, did you fall in the toilet?" calls Gallagher from just outside the bathroom.

"Of course not, silly!" says Kevin, throwing the door open, remembering at the last moment to pull up his pants but not bothering to zip them.

Not sure what else to do, Gallagher enters. He wants to go home. He's never gone to the bathroom with Kevin before, because that shit is for girls. Kevin informs him that they're going to get the money because the sink worked so well. Gallagher isn't listening. He's gripping the

sides of the marble sink, staring at the mirror at what should be himself. It was vaguely unsettling to see other things distorted, but nothing can touch seeing his own reflection.

Pieces of his face drip down like melted wax, tan rivers running over his freckled cheeks, across his open mouth and jagged teeth. How can he breathe, like this? How can he breathe when his own skin is smothering him? He takes a ragged gasp. His eyes are uneven, his nostrils are gaping holes, what the fuck! Wet tears run down his cheeks. Or is this more skin? When he comes out, will he be all melty and fucked up? Has he always looked like this and nobody ever said? He doesn't want his mind opened! He wants his mind closed! He shuts his mouth, but his face keeps rippling in front of him, is still a horror movie in front of his eyes, what even will he—

Kevin pulls him away from the mirror. “Come on!” he chirps. “Let's go back to the table, big guy!”

Gallagher allows himself to be moved, but frantically pats his face. “Do I look normal?” he asks.

“Much as you ever do!” says Kevin. “All of Earth's creatures are something beautiful.”

Gallagher just gapes at Kevin as he's pulled past people clinking silverware and shoveling steak into their mouths. He can't seem to formulate what he wants to say. Even on molly, Kevin was never like this. He seems so genuinely filled with love. Is he really Kevin? Or has he been replaced with a robot or an alien? Is the real Kevin back where Gallagher's normal face is? Could Roger have taken them for an experiment, could this restaurant be a trap, had Arnav ever gone out to see Roger before sending the two of them to test the waters, were they part of a deal they don't understand?

“Are you alright, son?” asks an old man at the table next to theirs, startling Gallagher out of his spiral.

“Uh, yeah,” he manages to say. “Just hungry.”

Back at the table, massive steaks sit heavily on four plates. Gallagher hasn't eaten all day, but his stomach protests at the thought of the dripping hunk of meat in front of him. Roger and his date cut into theirs with relish. Even Kevin seems happy, although he's focusing more on chewing each bite to dust in his mouth than eating quickly.

“Don't you like it?” asks Roger.

Gallagher hastily nods.

“I appreciate when a person appreciates a good steak,” says Roger, gesturing at his date. “Red meat is good for the brain, good for the blood.”

“I used to be vegan, believe it or not,” she says. “In college, my sister and I only ate tofu to be healthy. But one day...”

Gallagher just stares back at her. He wants to focus, but all he can think about is how the steak, usually his favorite food, was once alive, once walked around as part of an actual cow. He has a piece of flesh in front of him. If he were cooked, would it smell this good? Gallagher notices her looking at him for a reaction and forces a laugh.

“What's so funny about my sister getting cancer?” she demands.

“Oh, uh, I'm so sorry! I didn't hear—”

“You weren't listening?!”

Roger places a hand on her arm. “He's high out of his mind, babe.”

“Aren't you?”

“Not everyone can handle themselves like I can.”

She accepts this, but looks unimpressed. Gallagher glances over at Kevin for a cue on how to respond, but Kevin is giving him nothing. Kevin is thinking about how he feels like he's

floating, how not just Shiny but also Roger and Gallagher and their greasy waiter are gorgeous manifestations of life. Roger's scruffy beard is probably supporting a colony of bacteria, but instead of recoiling at this, Kevin thinks of how all life came from single celled organisms, and how lovely it is that they continue to coexist with people, who are really just made up of cells and chemicals. Miracles! His body is more a suggestion than a non-negotiable presence. His soul is the thing that's alive.

Kevin looks across the table at Roger, and he thinks that Roger understands him. He tells Roger in his mind, I understand you. I understand you, man, my soul speaks to your soul, and even though we don't need it, if money will make you happy, I will make you money. I will triple your investment. I will accept your joy and blessings, then give them right back to you plus a million dollars. He looks across the table into Roger's watery blue eyes and feels Roger looking back at him, feels Roger's soul shaking hands with his own. He's so glad he came! He's so radiant with light! He's so happy to have the power to connect with Roger in his mind while Shiny tells Gallagher about the principles of libertarianism and how affordable housing quotas are destroying San Francisco. Gallagher doesn't follow. He can't access the things Kevin can access, probably because he's so slow in the head, but there's value to slowness. There's value to everything.

Roger smiles as the waiter brings the check. He pays in cash, slamming down five hundred dollar bills. "I like to be untraceable," he explains to his impressed date. Gallagher and Kevin watch with wide eyes. Kevin likes Roger's confidence. Gallagher wonders who is trying to trace them, and whether paying for everything on his Wells Fargo debit card is going to give away too much. No, he probably isn't important enough to trace. He's never had a hundred dollar bill. He can't carry that much cash in their neighborhood. What would a man with this much

money even want with them? He doesn't need their app; he can have a real personal assistant. He probably doesn't know anybody without a real personal assistant. What's the game? Kevin always tells him to think about what the game is, and he can never tell.

He's still trying to puzzle it out as they head to the parking lot and squeeze back into Roger's tiny backseat. Roger whoops as they speed out into the street. "No hands!" he yells over the roaring wind and the ear splitting honks of every other car. The street is long and straight, but the Ferrari weaves between lanes. Gallagher burps up some steak, wondering if this is what hell is, but Kevin is giggling. Kevin is leaning his head back, looking at the glowing silver moon peeking through the gaps of gorgeous green leaves, the gently twinkling stars, the velvety expanse of night. The cool air dances across his skin, sings in his ear, dries the sweat in his armpits and leaves him feeling clean and pure. Does it get better than this?

Roger swerves sharply, narrowly avoiding an 18-wheeler. The horns wash over Kevin like a sound bath, vibrating all through his body. The Ferrari runs off the road, screeching tires, bumping over sticks and leaves and grass, ka-dunk ka-dunk. Kevin keeps looking up at the sky, at the silver dripping down the tree branches. He knows that they'll be ok, and even if they're not, then what could be a better last view?

Next to Kevin, Gallagher begins to cry silently. He doesn't want to die. He doesn't want to die, but he doesn't want to be alive if this is all there is. He doesn't want to be anything. Roger swerves back onto the road, driving so fast that Gallagher's tears dry as quickly as they fall. Fuck, even his tears don't leave an impact on his face. If he can't even cry properly, what can he do? The trees are huge and menacing, knife-sharp skinny like Slenderman or knotted and gnarled like tumors, blocking off the moon and stars. And what horrors are up there, past the trees? Could they be even worse than down here? His body is so, so heavy. The steak sits like a rock in

his stomach. Queasy, shaking, crying. In *Napa*. What is he doing in Napa? He should never have come here.

It feels like years before Roger screeches to a halt in front of his tall metal gate. The armed security guards roll it open for them, diving out of the way to avoid being flattened as Roger hits the gas. In the garage, the boys tumble out of the backseat. Gallagher clings to Kevin's bony shoulder. Kevin stands on his knee without difficulty, so different from when they first arrived. Gallagher isn't sure how he's doing that, but keeps quiet. He doesn't want to spook Kevin into disability.

"It's been fun, boys," says Roger. "We're going inside, now."

"What about us?" says Gallagher.

Roger raises his eyebrows. Gallagher's starting to get nervous. He didn't think this far ahead when they were driving out here, just assumed they would shake hands on the investment maybe even before dinner. Now, he doesn't even know where they're gonna sleep or how they'll get home. He asks, "What are we supposed to do?"

"Fuck if I know!" says Roger. "Drive home? Suck each other's dicks? Not my problem!"

Gallagher grips Kevin's shoulder harder.

"Don't worry, Gallagher," says Kevin. "Roger's gonna give us the money. Our souls shook hands at dinner. He just wants to be left alone with Shiny right now."

Roger snorts. "You adorable little faggot!" he says. "There was no handshake."

Kevin is stunned. "But, I..."

"I saw your boy when we were driving. He feared death. Not the kind of shit I'm willing to invest in."

Roger and Shiny head inside. She waves over her shoulder without turning all the way around. Kevin and Gallagher stand, blinking under the fluorescent lights, for a long time. Then they climb into Gallagher's shitty Prius, too fucked up to even think about driving, and close their eyes.

Chapter 3: The Party

Arnav, Diego, & Max – April 30th

Arnav sprawls across an armchair in the living room, deliberately trying to appear relaxed. He looks straight ahead at Max and Diego, who are sitting tensely on the couch, looking sickly in the afternoon light. They're having a business meeting, naturally. Things aren't looking good. Arnav knows this, has known it for months, even as he maintains outward calm. This is a skill he's proud of, even though it would be better for him not to need it. Max doesn't have a good poker face. He looks down, twisting the discolored drawstrings on his ratty gray sweatpants, then back up, too forcefully to be natural. Arnav can tell Max is forcing himself to make eye contact. Whenever Max is uncomfortable, he attempts to appear confident so aggressively that it's off-putting instead of assertive. The financial situation might be even worse than it seems. Arnav always tries to find the silver lining in any scenario, and Max's discomfort might be one of the only ones.

"We have a month," blurts Max. "If we don't secure more funding, it's a month."

Arnav smirks. "What happened to your big pitches? Just the right amount of mania and they'd hand it right over?"

It's a low blow, but an accurate one. Even Max can't deny it, speaking before Diego can argue back. "Well, it was a little too much mania." He pauses. "We're going to get the money somehow." He nods to confirm his own statement.

"What's our play?" says Diego.

Max hesitates for a moment too long, long enough that Arnav catches a glimpse into his mind. There is no play. None at all! Say what you will about Max – and Arnav absolutely will – this has never happened before. Usually, Max's backup plans have backup plans, which a genius

like Arnav can recognize even as he's sure his own plans would perform better. Guess it's time to find out.

“I could always ask my dad for some money, just to keep us alive.”

There they are: the golden handcuffs. Arnav sees Max's jaw clench. He knows that Max doesn't want to be beholden to him like that, and has often said that he would rather die. But would he rather fail? Arnav isn't sure. In truth, Arnav would rather not be beholden to his father either. He left home for a reason. But if someone's father is going to keep them afloat, it's best for it to be his. If Max can't keep the finances together long enough to let Arnav and Diego focus on improving their product, then maybe he shouldn't call the shots.

“It could be our only option,” says Arnav.

Max says, “We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Let's see what investors are going to John's tonight.”

The three of them look at each other. A year ago, they called themselves the dream team without a hint of irony. Diego pinches the bridge of his nose. Arnav asks him what's wrong, but Diego only raises his eyebrows. Finally, Max says, “Nothing. Everything is great. We'll reconvene tomorrow.”

Arnav slowly rises from the couch. He likes that he left an indent in the cushion. He likes to see subtle evidence of his own existence. It's reaffirming. Over at the kitchen counter, Gallagher and Kevin sit and stare at nothing. Gallagher kicks his legs like a child, but Kevin is still. They both look up as Arnav approaches. They look up because Arnav is important, because he is a person who makes things happen. Unlike Max, these days. They're drawn to Arnav like a nostril to a line of coke. He elevates them. He did them a massive favor intro'ing them to his buddy Roger. Buddy might be a strong word. But the intro was made!

That big favor isn't paying off exactly like Arnav hoped. A week ago, Gallagher and Kevin returned to San Francisco, disheveled and reeking. They stumbled into their room and didn't come out for a full day and night. When Arnav asked how it went, they didn't give him the story he wanted. Gallagher ground out, "We didn't get the money," and volunteered no more.

He still looks sullen days later, so unlike the beaming smile he's sported for weeks. Gallagher is so mentally weak, it was child's play for Arnav to influence him. But the ease of it didn't take away from Arnav's satisfaction. He didn't used to know how to get people to like him. He tried lots of strategies: vulgarity, humor, aggression. But none of them worked quite like creating an emotional bonding experience with the help of MDMA and manipulating that foundation to encourage the sharing of a darkest secret and a wildest dream. Eventually, the molly wasn't even necessary. Gallagher was happy to unburden himself just because. He felt safe, and couldn't explain why. Arnav could explain why, but he wouldn't. He was so excited to finally unlock the secret to friendship and to power.

It went off without a hitch, even as he expanded the circle to Kevin, who was more resistant. But beneath Kevin's bitterness was a desire to be free. And Arnav did his best to unleash it. Clearly, some success had been had, because Kevin's facial expression can only be described as placid. His whole face looks different with his jaw unclenched and his eyes unsquinted.

"Good morning!" says Arnav. "How do you feel today?"

Kevin responds, "I feel warm and open to opportunity."

What a great answer! Positive. Follows procedure. Kevin's spine is straight and his shoulders are loose. Just as Arnav is congratulating himself on his successful influencing, Gallagher snorts. What the fuck? "Well, I'm... uh... I'm cold! And, um, closed to opportunity!"

This is the rudest Gallagher has ever been to Arnav, even back before Arnav introduced him to radical openness. Such hostility from Gallagher, his first disciple, is unnerving and needs to be crushed. How to respond... should he laugh? No, too validating. Scold? No, he can't show he's bothered. Arnav stretches his cheeks into a smile. "That's very interesting."

Gallagher's face falls a little. Perfect! Just the right note. Now Arnav needs to figure out what exactly is going on. He thinks the best option is to let Gallagher stew a little, and then the meat will fall right off the bone. Gallagher hasn't withheld information since Arnav started training him. He confessed so quickly to his app being a mess, to his insecurities about never attending college instead of dropping out, and even to his uncertainty about if he was wiping his ass correctly since it always took him a few passes to get everything.

So instead of asking Gallagher what the fuck his problem is, the way Max would have done, Arnav asks Kevin how his knee is feeling.

Kevin beams. "It doesn't hurt at all! It's amazing. I think that the shrooms rewired my neurons."

"Yeah?" says Arnav.

"Yeah!" says Kevin. "One day, terrible pain, torn ACL. The next, totally cured! When I got out of Gallagher's car I knew that everything was better now."

"Is everything better?" says Gallagher. "Because we're days from bankruptcy, and we wasted a full one getting driven around by a psycho!"

So Roger must have gone a little crazy. Arnav wonders how far things went. He can tell something intense happened when Kevin shrugs, like, what are you gonna do? Arnav was hoping for Kevin to relax, but not to detach entirely. Kevin appears totally unconcerned about the money. That's when Arnav realizes that he might have broken them accidentally. It's fine for

Gallagher to let go of materialism, because he isn't capable of managing the operation anyway. But if Kevin does it, there's no hands on the wheel. And although it's never bad to have friends with fewer prospects than you, it doesn't seem beneficial in the slightest to have friends with zero prospects.

Arnav does his best to soothe Gallagher, on autopilot. Historically, Gallagher's been very susceptible to platitudes, but today he appears unconvinced. It doesn't matter that much. When they go bankrupt, Arnav will move two new moderate losers with potential into their bunk beds, or maybe give the room to one almost superstar who isn't a loser at all. The new people will be with him from the start, plus his method is already perfected, next time he just won't send them out to Roger. The new people will take his side right away. There will be no neutral parties in the house, besides maybe Bryce, who is a nonentity in group decision-making but does appear to hold emotional significance for Max. Maybe he can sway Bryce too. Or maybe he'll replace Max and Diego too.

The future is happening today. The future is up for grabs. Arnav can't decide how he wants to shape it. He walks away from Gallagher and Kevin, back into the empty living room, and starts refolding the crumpled throw blankets that Max's mom bought last year. It would be a hassle to start a new business, especially in this economy. It would be better to break Max and Diego, or at the very least win a new balance of power, than to start from scratch. But he can still subtly undermine them psychologically. He could encourage Gallagher, while he's still here, to rearrange the kitchen and put all the lids in a different drawer from the pots. That would enrage Max. He could move Diego's weights around, so they're not a complete set or so that they're no longer in perfect numerical order, and then pretend he has no idea what happened. There's lots of options. Maybe it is best to have his father invest more money. He likes the thought of Max

having to take it, knowing that only Arnav stands between him and abject failure. But he isn't sure if he himself wants to give his dad that feeling about him. Maybe the solution is asking John at his party tonight.

Arnav fluffs a pillow violently. Would that be more humiliating than asking his dad? Especially when John has already invested. What if he said no? That would break Arnav's heart worse than when they broke up two years ago. Arnav ended things. It was sad, but amicable. He said he needed to go be twenty, to live in the startup house with the boys instead of in John's mansion. John, thirty-seven, understood. Arnav's more recent ex, Ryan, still uses John's gym. Arnav doesn't, because he prefers to be seen publicly exercising at Equinox. John already knows about his weightlifting, so it doesn't do much for Arnav's image.

What would asking for this money do for his image? Can he afford not to?

In the Equinox sauna, Max ponders a similar question. He and Diego are steaming in their towels at one of the locations where Max hasn't started a feud with the staff yet. It's not his fault! The VIP area should be open to him whether or not he pays for it, after all. But he doesn't have to get into it now. What's important is whether he needs to beg Arnav for help, and what he will need to give up to do so, and if he's being honest with himself, whether he has a choice at all.

The steam is heavy, sitting thickly in Max's lungs. It smells like Kiehl's lotion. Hints of B.O, but nothing unbearable. Max doesn't want to degrade himself to Arnav. He also doesn't want to fail, to lose money, to not be able to afford Equinox. One day, he wants a mansion with his own sauna. That's true luxury. Not just American luxury, which is lobster mac and cheese and

box seats at a basketball game, but European luxury. Who doesn't like feeling luxurious and purified?

Diego wipes his forehead. He is dripping sweat like a faucet. Once they leave, he will refer to this as cleansing, but he doesn't necessarily enjoy it while it happens. It's so hot and so hard to breathe. Plus, when he's at Equinox, he feels eyes linger on him in a way they just don't on Max. Venture capitalists in Nike bump into him and ask him questions they know the answers to. No one threatens him, or even overtly hits on him. But he feels aware of being perceived and followed, something he never experienced back in college.

Max finds it really shocking to have that happen to a straight guy, a friend of his, even. Could it be possible that the world is a fundamentally unsafe place? Probably not, but he still told his sister on the phone that it's harder to be a man now than it is to be a woman. She was beyond baited, got so triggered, but it wasn't as enjoyable as riling her up usually is. It just feels surprising that he or anyone could play a different role than he expected in life's constant games of power and ego. He always figured men were either neutral or predators, and women either lucky or prey (minus a few crazies).

Maybe if he'd been raised in the city he would have known earlier. When he told his dad about a famous venture capitalist who brought young founders to his house to surf and discuss their businesses, his dad told him to decline the invitation if he received it. He said the guy just wanted to take boys to a private beach in the wilderness and fondle their shriveled balls. Max thought this was just his dad being unnecessarily dark, the way he's always been, like how he always reminds Max and his sister that Easter and Christmas and Oktoberfest are Jew-killing holidays or that Walt Disney and Coco Chanel were Nazis. Sure, those other things were true, but it never occurred to Max that this would be too. Now he wasn't sure what to believe.

And although he's glad to be left alone in the sauna and on the street and at parties, he also feels a strange vulnerability. He knows that his only ins right now with the most important people in the world are through Arnav's connection to his famous venture capitalist ex-boyfriend and through that venture capitalist's friends finding Diego hot. That really stings in a moment like this one, where he needs an in so desperately.

Max has nothing concrete to stand on. Even if he was gay, it's already too late for him to get in that way. Arnav was a 17-year-old prodigy when he moved in with John, though he insists nothing happened for a year. Whatever happened, no one can deny that it helped Arnav, and also Max. John was their initial investor, and intro'ed them to most of the others they know. This is how you meet people, if you aren't the child of one. No one powerful is after Max. He's almost 22, he's not a wide-eyed boy, and he doesn't have a baby face like Diego does. So things are what they are, the clock ticking towards his own irrelevancy every second. To matter, you have to get rich long before your first wrinkle.

Max desperately wants to be his own force of gravity that others orbit, but in order to do that he has to cling to his peripheral position in orbit of the gay elite. Once he's ingratiated himself and they respect him, he can get intros to the straight elite, who are starting to return with their families from their second homes now that the pandemic is sufficiently over. Then, order will be restored.

But what will he do if they go out of business now? If Arnav makes a power grab? If Diego refuses to play the game? Arnav, before his zen shit, used to say that Diego was going to have to scratch a back sooner or later to keep getting invited to events. Max always told him to shut up, but privately he wondered if he was right. And wonders it especially today.

Diego raises his eyebrows at him. "What are you thinking so hard about?"

“Oh, nothing. Just what we should do for dinner.”

The party is in five hours. Back at the apartment, Gallagher hurls the lacrosse ball that Diego uses for self-massage at the wall, leaving little dents behind. Bryce watches from behind his laptop on the couch. He knows that Gallagher is risking a lot of anger right now; he’s touching Diego’s stuff, damaging the apartment, and not following Arnav’s directive to stay calm. But Bryce figures it isn’t his problem and goes back to typing.

Max and Diego return from Equinox with wet hair. They look marginally more relaxed than earlier. Gallagher throws the ball harder from his seat on the floor, pounding the plaster with the blue rubber ball. Boom, boom, boom, until Diego’s hand reaches in and grabs it.

“What the fuck?” says Gallagher, jumping to his feet.

“Don’t touch my shit,” says Diego calmly. “Rule one.”

It’s been a while since they’ve clashed. Gallagher isn’t turning the other cheek anymore, and thinks maybe he should even escalate. He turns to Max. “Aren’t you upset about the dent in the wall?”

“Nah,” says Max. “No deposits during Covid. We’re not paying to fix it.”

Gallagher remembers laughing at Kevin for picking fights and getting upset. He remembers it, but he has a hard time believing that that person was him. How did everything just roll off of him? Because actually, everyone here is fucking annoying, and nothing is going well. They won’t even let him throw a tantrum properly!

He thinks he has one thing that will cut. He fixes his eyes on Diego and says, “Excited for tonight?”

“Sure,” says Diego.

“Gonna finally throw one of the investors a bone? They might get tired of waiting soon... might stop inviting you around...”

This comment surprises Diego. Gallagher had been placid for a while, and before his brief enlightenment, his insults tended to be generic and largely inapplicable. Being called an idiot by an idiot was never a big deal. Now, Gallagher is trying to rile Diego up, and it's not quite enough, but it's closer than he's ever gotten before. Diego says, with that same calm from earlier, “Listen, Gallagher. You're upset, I get it. You're going under and that sucks. But now you have two choices. You can go out of business, or you can go out of business and also get the shit beaten out of you.”

Gallagher looks down at him for a long moment. Diego is muscular and Gallagher is more formless bulk, but he has the height advantage. It's just that his only move in a fight is to push someone over, and he knows that Diego did martial arts as a kid. Is Diego small enough that he'll fall over if Gallagher shoves? He doesn't want to get punched in the face right now.

Diego's eyes stare up at him. He's still barely breathing hard. Gallagher decides to leave it for now and stomps to his room.

John's party is already crowded when the boys arrive. It's at his compound; he's a billionaire, so of course he owns three houses in a row across from Lafayette Park in Pac Heights, the dream neighborhood. Tall, thin windows spaced every few feet offer glimpses at the city down below. Inside, everything is modern and so sleek you could slide right off it. The famous gym, a floor below them, is bigger than their entire apartment. All the toilets are fancy, from Japan, with heated seats and a built-in bidet.

There's enough room to maneuver without elbowing people out of your way, but just barely. The guests come in two types. There's other young founders, just like the boys, many of them also flailing in the current hostile market; there's also the venture capitalists, mid-thirties and up. They're not exactly thriving either, but they were doing a lot better to start with. For example, they're certain they'll have somewhere to live. No one's a small enough fish to be ruined, unless he put all his eggs in one basket, in which case the people who used to call him a genius will of course say he brought it upon himself.

The boys head for the bar. Kevin floats, Gallagher stomps, and Max, Diego, and Arnav walk purposefully. Bryce trails behind, ignored. No one has time to raise him right now. They're on a mission. What the mission is, exactly, no one is clear on. Arnav scans the room, looking for John. John is fastidious, with a completely hairless body and big green eyes that sparkle when he's excited. They're distinctive enough that they've been mentioned in several business profiles of him. Being pale works for John somehow. He looks like he did it on purpose, like a Chinese mom with an umbrella, instead of looking sickly because he never goes outside. John has a billion dollars and knows exactly what he wants in every moment. Arnav wants that for himself, and has ever since he first met John. He's not alone in this, even if the feelings aren't identical. Max and Diego are clearly looking for John too, and follow when Arnav starts to walk towards a dark head of hair that resembles his.

Arnav is well-experienced at spotting John at parties. He first met him at one just like this, albeit at someone else's house. Arnav, only seventeen, had just dropped out of Stanford after one semester. He grew up on the Peninsula, in Atherton, so he'd been no stranger to tech money, but John showed Arnav how to truly live. John drew people to him, something Arnav is only

starting to figure out, but he did it unconsciously, without strategizing. Even now, Arnav can see from across the room that John is surrounded by admirers.

It always felt good to be appreciated by someone that others valued so much. John was supportive of T3LESCOPE, even after their breakup, with words and with money. But would he be now? Arnav feels that old insecurity creep in, the one from before he was who he is – he knows that the markets are in freefall and that even billionaires are tightening their belts – he isn't sure he could live with the humiliation if he begged and John turned him down.

Arnav doesn't want to go back to striving so hard for his approval. But aren't things the same with his dad, maybe even worse? At least John actually likes him, at least he doesn't have to see him for birthdays and holidays. So John might be the option. Maybe.

Finally, Arnav makes eye contact with John, who smiles and takes a step away from his group. Diego and Max follow close on his heels. Their public front is relatively united, even as things unravel in the apartment. Arnav drinks a tequila soda; he doesn't actually like vodka crans, has only been ordering them recently to fuck with Max, and right now he'd rather enjoy his drink.

John reaches out his hand to pull Arnav into a short, slapping hug. It's friendly, but a little distant.

“Great to see you guys, glad you could make it!” says John.

“It's good to be here!” says Arnav.

John does the same shake and hug with Max and Diego. People pass by, jostling the boys, but they take care not to crash into John. It's hard to talk much; the music is very loud. It's mainstream rap now. Later, probably EDM, the only thing harder to talk over. But what today is about is, as always, leaving investors, hopefully John but possibly others, with a warm feeling

when they think of the boys. Then, a text or email about connecting the next day hopefully leads to a coffee, which can lead to another coffee, maybe a formal pitch, probably some money.

Arnav notices John's eyes lingering on Diego. He's not jealous, but he doesn't like it. He enjoys being the most linked to power, the most connected. In the days before his enlightenment, Arnav started calling Diego a straggot. He never actually thought Diego was gay, but he thinks that if Diego were smarter and more committed he could be opportunistically bi. Maybe a handjob, at the very least. What does that cost, really? Arnav would do the same if women controlled the valley. This, of course, is sort of an amusing thought. He smiles to himself.

"What's so funny?" says John over the music.

"Oh, nothing!" says Arnav. "I'm gonna get another drink!"

Hours later, Arnav is on the dance floor. Bodies press together. Sweaty. Shirtless. It smells like alcohol and B.O. There's not enough room to actually dance much. There's jumping or there's grinding, and that's about it. By the time it gets late, that's what happens at all of these parties. Arnav loves the game of it, how this can be so fun and also be important for business. Like, accepting poppers from an investor is actually far more efficient than messaging him on LinkedIn. How fucking incredible is that? The tequila is warm in his stomach and he feels confident. He knows he looks good. He knows that he's going to find a way for everything to be OK, somehow. He, Arnav, is not going to suffer no matter what happens to everyone else.

Diego looks away. He knows how ridiculous they look, but they have to be in this room just in case something happens, just so they can say they were there. It was necessary to be seen earlier, and it would be lame to leave now. The music pounds, the lights flash, and Diego feels a

little high from it even though he's just drunk. He looks back and accidentally makes eye contact with Arnav again. Fuck! Arnav cocks his head to the side, like, are you coming?

Diego thinks about it. He looks at the guys around him, practically clinging to their shirts although absolutely nobody has approached them. He looks at the dance floor, sprinkled with strangers and friends. Even Gallagher is out there, flailing all over the place. They look freer, that's for sure. Diego likes to dance. And dancing isn't sex. He's not the dad from Footloose, or anything. Plus, if he goes out there, he could move closer to having connections for himself. He could move closer to superseding Arnav, which could only be a good thing.

But he's also aware that it's sort of an invitation. There's not a person in this room who would feel bad for him if he complained about getting groped on that dance floor. That said, maybe he should queerbait a little. But maybe it's morally wrong. But maybe it's fiscally prudent.

He glances over at Max, who is firmly clothed. He's not even looking directly at the dance floor. Probably hoping to avoid any sort of eye contact. But he returns Diego's look.

"What should I do?" asks Diego.

Max pauses for a long moment. Longer than polite.

"What do you want to do?"

Now Diego is silent. Though Max is almost expressionless, like a good thoughtful friend, he is slightly tense. And Diego imagines he can hear his thoughts. Imagines, for a second, what went through Max's brain before asking such a simple and diplomatic question.

He was thinking he should go. Because it's good for Max, and really for all of them.

Diego can't be mad. How can he blame Max for having the same thought he's had himself?

He looks back towards the dance floor. Spots the guy who looked at him before. Spots Arnav, John, and probably twenty more guys he recognizes. All of them who aren't blacked out will remember whatever he does here.

And no one's telling him anything. No one's grabbing him, no one's coercing him, and no one's bribing him. It's just that this is where the energy in the room is. This is where the fun is. This is where he can find the promise of money, of connections, the glimmer of power that hangs over everything. These are the people who matter. Diego has always believed that every industry is tech, that there's really only one industry in the world, just money and power collapsing into a single plane. He's not going to the 4th floor orgy. But what does it cost to take off his shirt and dance a little? Today, it seems like it's not too much.

The boys leave a little after three. They're all together, wandering the sidewalk under the glow of the streetlamps, searching for an illegal hotdog cart. Max, Diego, Arnav, Gallagher, Kevin, and Bryce stumble down streets and around corners until finally they smell and hear a gorgeous sizzle. After a long night, nothing tastes better than crispy fat wrapped around gelatinous fat, even if it is an atomic bomb to your digestive system.

Diego orders in Spanish, getting a big smile and an extra squirt of ketchup in return. He prays to God Max doesn't break out the atrocity that is his "fluent in writing" high school Spanish. For once, he doesn't. Maybe he can see how Diego is not in the mood. Nothing happened at the party, per se. But Diego can't help but wonder whether all of life is this nakedly transactional, or if it only starts out like this. He's twenty-one and thinking about the future. Is there an age where you don't have to play? Will he go straight from being a tap dancing

bottom-feeder to a twenty-seven-year-old desperately clinging to youth to a thirty-something sucking the blood of fresh new college dropouts?

His first bite stops all the thoughts in his head. It's perfect. Seriously. Best thing he's ever tasted. The salt is so necessary, he thinks he'll die if he doesn't have more. He's torn between eating the whole thing in three bites and making it last the entire walk home. It reminds him of eating dessert as a kid, saving it as long as he could so that his brothers had to watch him finish it when theirs was already gone.

Everyone chews in silence, perhaps thinking similar thoughts. Except for Gallagher. He's drunker than anyone and he smells awful and he slurs out, "How was the 4th floor?"

"I wouldn't know," says Diego.

"Surrrrre," says Gallagher, with his mouth full of food.

"Ignore him," says Max.

"Gallagher, just shut the fuck up," says Diego.

Gallagher's watery blue eyes flash. His body language is petulant, childlike. He doesn't speak, but reaches over and knocks Diego's hot dog out of his hand. It splats into the dirty street that's full of piss and shit and disease. Diego hates Gallagher in this moment, hates him desperately and violently. The blood pounds in his ears and the rage churns his stomach.

"Fuck you!" he yells, shoving Gallagher back. Gallagher's bigger, but not stronger, and he's had so much to drink his breath is probably flammable. And Diego isn't just gonna take that! He pushes him back, another step, another step, off the edge of the sidewalk. He isn't just gonna take it! No more pussy fight club, no more rules! He draws back his arm under the streetlight and hopes he breaks Gallagher's stupid pimply nose.

He swings and misses, catches Gallagher on his right cheek as he tries to take a step forward, follows him as he's knocked back. Diego grabs Gallagher's t-shirt, he's gonna get him, he's gonna wish he'd never fucking been born, and no one is gonna intervene. But as he makes contact with Gallagher's face again, he hears what can only be described as a pitiful squeak.

He glances in the direction of the noise and sees Bryce's big liquid eyes. Taking it all in.

It's sobering enough for Diego to pause. Gallagher takes advantage of the window to shove Diego as hard as he can. Diego's surprised and stumbles backward. The curb catches his foot and he goes down, his back on the dirty sidewalk and his legs splayed in the street. Diego breathes heavily, head spinning. Everything reeks of alcohol. The street is hideous, littered with trash, but the sky is beautiful, stamped with dark clouds. Diego can't tear his eyes away.

Gallagher stands still, stunned that he somehow won the fight.

Max lets Diego look at the sky with his tongue hanging out for a minute or two, then drags him to his feet.

"Satisfied?" he asks.

Diego looks at him. "Never."

Both of them are suddenly laughing. Laughter bubbles out of them, uncontrollable, until their ribs hurt and their eyes water. Time is running out and their funds are dwindling and everyone they know has an undiagnosed personality disorder, but at least they're here, in the center of the universe. When they finally stop, gasping for air, Kevin lets out a desperate giggle, and it sets them off again. Gallagher's stunned mouth breathing turns to tentative laughter, then full-on cackling. Even Arnav joins in, the way he used to. Max feels affection blooming in his chest. These are his *boys*! They'll be ok!

But when Max glances to his right, he notices that Bryce isn't laughing. He isn't even smiling. He's standing apart, considering, like the day Max found him under that WeWork table and invited him to move in. Bryce pulls at the sleeve of his sweatshirt, a hand-me-down from Max. He's squirrely, even suspicious. He looks like a person preparing to run.