*“Good-bye, and good luck…I hope you two find that happiness of yours.”*

“Jack? Hey, you awake, bro?”

His familiar paw and enchanting voice coaxed me back to the waking world.

The ground rocked underneath my feet. A loud car horn blared somewhere outside the bus. My canine tail unwound itself when I gazed out the window, seeing and feeling our ride glide seamlessly down a random interstate highway. The lack of a visible sun suggested it had to be sometime after sunset, giving permission for nightlife to begin anew. The only signs of life came from the headlights of other vehicles piercing through the quasi-darkness of whichever city we’d passed through.

“H-How…” I asked groggily, still feeling the effects of sleep, “How…long was I out?”

“A few hours,” Jasper answered. “Give or take. The driver just said we passed through Philly. We’ve been in New Jersey for about five minutes or so…”

“We are?” My ears perked high, and my tail thumped at his side.

I glanced to my left, smiling at him. Seeing a handsome Dalmatian smile back caused my wagging tail to get more excited. Jasper then laced his spotted fingers with mine. We were getting closer to our new home.

The two of us had been travelling on a Greyhound bus for over three days. Three long days of sitting, watching farmlands blend with suburbia and the distant skylines of cities like St. Clarke and Christopher, only stepping off the bus for refuel breaks. The times we didn’t sleep or eat in mutual silence were spent talking, or even reflecting on our prolonged time apart.

“So that’s, what? An hour to Peninsula City?” I surmised, then leaned away from the cold window. “Time flies by, huh?”

“Can’t believe we’re almost nearly there?” Jasper asked, to which I nodded my head slightly. “Same. About time too. Then again, we’ve been on this same bus for an eternity, and I can’t remember the last time I slept in a real bed.”

“Tell me about it, dude,” I groaned as well, stretching my legs out under the seat in front of us until I felt the joints crack softly. “I miss beds. Miss food that isn’t fast food. And…”

Sharing them with him. Jasper didn’t need me to finish the sentence for him.

Me and my brother weren’t like most twins. Far from it, to be honest. For one, the two of us had endured the most tumultuous, stressful, emotional two months of our lives; Dad discovered us in bed on the night of our eighteenth birthdays, threw Jasper onto the street while effectively grounding me forever, then I spent several agonizing, tearful weeks planning out how I would find Jasper in Crossroads City, getting my savings and supplies together, until I finally gathered the courage to leave the Alnwick legacy behind.

“I do too,” he grinned back at me, still gently rubbing my relaxed palm with his calloused thumb. “I feel like I should’ve taken a small nap on the bed instead of…yeah. That way, I wouldn’t still be feeling the creaks in my neck from sleeping in that cot.”

“From the Rainbow Lodge?” I pondered.

He exhaled, “Yeah. Let me tell you, if I ever get to a computer when we’re all settled in, I am definitely gonna leave a bad review for them.”

“Would you rather me and Zack spent the entire week combing the other shelters?” I pointed out my brother’s absurdity. “If anything, we were lucky to find you there.”

“You’re right,” he agreed with a simple shrugged, “but that doesn’t mean I liked sleeping on an ancient cot with the worst lumbar support.”

“Cots don’t have lumbar support, Jasper,” I told the complaining canine. “Beds do.”

“Whatever,” he muttered amusedly, thumping his tail in kind.

The thought of a certain, older calico came to mind.

“Do you think he’s still getting crap from Dad?” I asked, then added, “Zack, I mean.”

“Probably not,” I sighed in near uncertainty. “No, Dad probably won’t risk exposing us.”

Neither Jasper nor I would ever forget Zack Leander’s help. Not only did he help find my homeless twin amongst the 1.2 million denizens living in Crossroads, but the tabby cat went above and beyond to distract our father so we could board the bus. Private detectives like him usually only cared about uncovering secrets, not maintaining them. If anything, I expected him to turn us over to Jackson Sr. after the incident in the motel room. The fact he pushed aside his discomfort towards our...um, ‘special bond’, enough to do such an act of kindness made me admire his professionalism.

Zack exchanged text messages with us an hour or so after we left the bus station. He told us that our father wouldn’t be a problem for us anymore, citing his fear of the press learning the truth of our taboo romance as a valid reason to walk away. Still, Zack recommended we keep our phone number of his in case we ever came to visit Utah again, he ever stopped by New Jersey, or if God forbid, we required his help again.

I tried thanking him again via text, but he only said not to mention it. Pocketing my phone once more and ignoring the mountains of other messages, I decided to turn it off first. I wasn’t too sure if we’d need to conserve electricity on it for the near future.

“So, Jackson,” Jasper mused aloud after a moment, “You think it’s gonna be loud?”

A quizzical, tired eyebrow of mine raised up, and I couldn’t help myself from laughing. “Of course, it’s gonna be loud, Jas.” I said, “It’s a city, ain’t it?”

“No, no, I mean is the apartment gonna be loud?” He corrected me, “It’s not ideal, but we got no clue if the neighbors’ll be loud or not.”

“Or nosy?” I added, eliciting a smirk from him.

“At this point I’m just praying the hovel has working water and a refrigerator.”

“We will, Jas,” I said casually, “Besides, there’s always melatonin. Right?”

He scoffed at my attempt of a joke, his smile breaking through. “Sure thing.”

Feeling Jasper rest his yawning muzzle on my shoulder, his thumb caressing my palm between us, and his tail tapping lightly at my coat, I exhaled. My tail happily relaxed in our continued contentment. For now, at least.

Over the course of three days, the two of us learned the main problem with interstate travel came down to one single word: boredom. My brother and I were completely bored being on a bus for seven-hour intervals. Besides taking a piss or applying much-needed deodorant in the bathroom in the back, we rarely moved out of our seats.

Simply put, the awe of watching towns and cities disappear grew dull after a while. The occasional spectacle of a real-life city neither of us had seen before, it didn’t have the same spark when it’s from a distance. Occasionally, I half-chuckled at seeing tied shoes on an actual powerline, or the bold graffiti painted on an impossible height. Otherwise, there wasn’t much to do during the long days. Sure, it felt cool to see a glimpse of Mountainburg or Lakertown’s skyline out the window, but not when it was speeding by just as fast as they appeared.

Electronics were out of the question too. Aside from my smartphone, we had not much to keep ourselves entertained. It wasn’t like the other occupants were very extroverted anyway, preferring to do their own things.

So, Jasper and I were just left in our seats staring out the windows in a daze, mulling over the past, the present, and our future together. Two Dalmatian twins against the world. We clearly wanted to board the bus, had been for months if not years, but at the same time, it felt hard not to think about how much the two of us gave up a comfortable lifestyle. Notably me.

I squeezed Jasper’s paw beneath our blanketed coats. Leaning down as soon as the coast was clear of watchful ears, I whispered, “Love you.”

“Hm. Love you too, you goof,” he squeezed back, though briefly, as if he were on the verge of falling asleep. “Wake me…when we stop again…”

Having nothing else to do, I mulled my head towards the window again.

Two or three hours went by. The inhabited houses and tall buildings and urban parks blurred together into neon and puke-stain yellow. I tried spending time noting whatever strange things caught my eye. For example, odd furs, odd structures, or an odd feeling as we waited for the next stop. There were plenty of weirdly dressed bikers speeding past us, an abandoned car pulled over into the ditch without a driver, some hitchhikers carrying scrawled signs, and cars decked out in enough bumper stickers to replace the bumper itself.

Nothing too noteworthy happened until finally, it did. The bus was making a rest stop.

As the bus started parking towards a truck stop, Jasper jerked awake beside me. “About fuckin’ time…” he panted in-between a yawn and an outstretching arm. “I’m starved!”

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The 24/7 Phoenix Fuel we arrived at lay around forty or fifty miles from Peninsula City. You could see it in the big-ass billboard advertising its casinos and hotels by the highway, as well as in the general nightly atmosphere. I was willing to bet a good portion of the parked tractor trailer trucks and large delivery vans tucked into the corner of the concrete lot were either coming to or from our destination.

Getting off the bus for what had to be the gazillionth time still felt so good. Cool night air washed our monochrome muzzles the same time I almost tripped in the middle of cracking a sore joint in my leg. Jasper murmured for me to watch my footing and helped me step onto the cracked concrete. I smiled at him, wincing at the luminous lights blinking down at us.

“Ngh, that smarts,” my twin muttered following a notable *crack* emitting from his neck. “That’s it. First thing we’re buying when we get there’s a big pillow.”

I groaned at how stiff my right shoulder felt, having been leaning against the bus’s interior for what felt like another round of eternity. “Not arguing with you there, Jasper.”

Other passengers stepped off without paying much attention to us. The feeling felt mutual, to be honest. A good one-third of them already made it straight for the convenience store, and another third already pulled out a lighter and huffed in deep drags on their cigarettes.

“C’mon, let’s get something to eat,” Jasper pulled me forward. “I’m starved!”

“Alright, alright,” I laughed behind the Dalmatian. “Jeez, we’re not in a big rush.”

“Fifteen minutes might as well be fifteen seconds, dude,” he pointed out. “Plus, who knows if this’ll be the last rest stop before we get there?”

“Point taken,” I huffed in slight adamance. “Let go of my wrist though, bro.”

He proceeded to do just that, already two strides ahead of me as we crossed our way inside. It seemed Jasper skipped lunch again without telling me.

An open ‘Mom & Pop’ restaurant could be found nestled into the Phoenix Fuel’s convenience store. If we didn’t have a good fifteen minutes or so to eat, let alone the extra cash to buy a hot meal, I’d have felt tempted to coax Jasper into treating ourselves. Rather than save our remaining money for the first month’s rent, future groceries, and the direct deposit to the landlord, we could purchase a pair of freshly grilled, East Coast hamburgers. Maybe even some salty French fries to go with it?

Fuck. The savory image made me drool in the corner of my spotted maw.

Unfortunately, the lack of time and impulse spending led us to snagging some wrapped chicken sandwiches and a bag of chips to share. Plus, an energy drink to share too.

“Twenty-one, thirty-five,” The college-aged lioness behind the corner register mumbled, clearly bored on her shift. When Jasper pulled out the credit card and swiped it, getting our receipt, the cashier wished us a good night. “Welcome to Jersey.”

I almost asked how she knew when our gazes fell on the Greyhound bus pumping gas, as well as the congregation of furs trickling back on board. Cigarette smoke hung heavily in the air. It refused to go away until a small gust of wind sent it southbound.

After placing the bag in his coat pocket, Jasper unwrapped one of the sandwiches. He sniffed it, handed it to me, then opened his own. We exchanged soft smiles and stopped at the curb, taking the extra effort to step away from the entrance to watch the bus being refueled. The thick scent of diesel shortly distracted me from the smell of pristine deli food in my paws. Looking down at it, it’d been likely left on the shelf a day or two past its expiration date.

“Bottoms up,” I said, taking a small nibble. Followed by a larger bite. “Mmm!”

“We’re gonna need some gym memberships by the time we get to Jersey,” Jasper stated in-between chewing and watching me mow my meal down.

“Absolutely,” I snorted, enjoying the cold mustard and ketchup already placed in the bun. Was spice added in? “I don’t wanna get fat so quickly and let all that swimming club training go to waste.”

“Even if it costs money?”

I jested, “Especially if it costs money.”

 “Would you let us get a treadmill and weight set then, if we got the apartment?”

 The image of us hauling workout equipment through a multi-story building’s stairs already caused me to break a small sweat. “I wouldn’t go so far as that, dude…”

“While we’re at it,” he jested right back, “let’s get a hot tub too.”

I perked a skeptical ear up. “Like the one back home?”

“Yeah!” Jasper nodded. The joking smile faltered a little. “Yeah, like…back home.”

An awkward silence hung in the air. Our tails curled at that word, the implication being that we weren’t, in fact, leaving everything and everyone we ever knew behind.

“Admit it, you’re also going to miss using it too, aren’t you?” He asked, grinning ear to ear, then commented before talking another bite, “I’m gonna miss it, I’m gonna miss plenty of things there, but there’s always a bathtub for us to…use.”

Nobody heard us, but I couldn’t help it. I blushed slightly, devouring the rest of the convenience store sandwich into my muzzle, and feverishly licking off some remaining sauce on my lips. Yeah, the hot tub would be missed. Particularly, when the two of us had the mansion to ourselves, and nobody to stop us from fooling around beneath the bubbles and starry sky in the backyard. The wintertime cold also made foreplay much more interesting between the tub and the deck leading inside.

However, luxuries like that were completely out of the picture. No more massive refrigerators, no more apathy to the electric bill, and no more endless money. At the same time though, Jasper had to agree with me when I said the two of us have never been freer before in our lives.

 *We’ll be able to do whatever we want; however we want it, together.*

My curious glances between the bus, between Jasper, and the nearby trucks led me to contemplate. Each trucker, passenger, and clerk currently at the Phoenix Fuel station had their own stories, hidden from view or actively playing out beneath a glaring fluorescent lightbulb. I couldn’t help but contemplate if there existed others like us in New Jersey, let alone Peninsula City. There had to be some, right? Brothers or sisters or both in an incestuously taboo relationship like me and Jasper were, hiding it from everybody.

Researching without leaving evidence for my watchful dad had been difficult, especially on the laptop. There were these two hare brothers from the Czech Republic. At the time it made fringe news, the brothers claimed to be in an open yet romantic relationship with each other, seeing themselves as two halves of the same whole. Years later, nobody knew much about the hares and their private lives. Anybody who looked up their recent activities found nothing but claims that one twin completely left the Internet to marry a woman. The other continued doing escort service for exclusive clients. That was it.

As Jasper guided me up the steep steps onto the bus, and we took our seats, I glanced one more time at the Phoenix Fuel station. Like its corporate namesake, me and my brother had reached an end as well as a beginning. It left me quietly wondering though, “How will this all unfold for us once we get there?”

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When we arrived at Peninsula City later that night, Jasper and I exited one limbo and temporarily entered another. It left us worried for many reasons.

See, our initial Greyhound schedule predicted that by the time our cross-country journey ended along the Atlantic coastline, there would still be a couple of hours before sundown to meet an older rabbit named Mr. Virgil Smith, who would then give us a tour of the available tenancy, then ask if we’d take it. Unfortunately for everybody, an extra hour at a rest stop in Iowa had been spent replacing a tire, followed a bad traffic jam in Lakertown resulted in a three-hour delay. Mr. Smith’s office already closed once we stepped off the interstate bus, then exited the interstate station. We were forced to spend money on the cheapest motel available.

To add insult upon injury, it was peak summer season and the three motels closest to the apartment block were completely full. Thank God the fourth one had several vacancies. As well as several potential health code violations, but beggars can’t be choosers.

Swiping the room key from the disinterested front desk clerk, Jasper begrudgingly wished the nameless wolf a good night as we made our way to our room. The carpet itched. The nightstand lamp flickered when I turned it on. The toilet appeared to be an old model from ten years back. No doubt the plumbing needed work too. One of the beds smelled like…well, New Jersey did. Only I noticed the smell of salt and unwashed spunk or bad cheese. The state of things made our room at the Motel 9 in Crossroads seem like a stay at a five-star resort.

The uncleaned bed did give us an excuse to share the other one. A lusting thought or two did cross my mind. I assume it crossed my twin’s mind too, but after days spent inside two or three interstate buses, all we could do was fall asleep. We didn’t even tear off our clothes, let alone go under the blanket to stay warm. We had each other to cuddle though.

I woke up ten hours later, only to find Jasper disappeared. He didn’t leave a paper note or indication that he went somewhere. The lack of his coat and our wallet led me to guessing my brother went out to grab us breakfast.

A nice shower remained out of the question. For one, I didn’t have any other clean clothes, and two, because I had a feeling it’d lead to me getting a nasty infection. Yet before I could so much as close my eyes in contemplation, the door sprung open. There my twin brother stood, grinning ear-to-ear with a half-eaten breakfast burrito in his maw, a small bag of what I presumed to be brunch in one paw and the access card in his other.

“Good morning, Jasper,” I mumbled, sitting up to watch him hastily chew and swallow the rest of his burrito. “Where’d you go?”

“Morning, babe,” he chirped, then licked his muzzle of crumbs. “There’s a minibar by the desk serving some breakfast, so I thought I’d get us some coffee too.”

I sniffed the air. “Decaf, some sugar, and cream?”

“They didn’t have enough cream, so I added a little more sugar for you,” Jasper half-nodded, then closed the door behind him to hand me the bag. “I also called Virgil.”

One of my ears perked up at hearing our (future?) landlord’s name. “You did?” I asked in slight astonishment. “What did he say to you? When’s the new tour?”

Fishing out the other breakfast burrito and cup of coffee for him, I sipped on mine. The extra sugar helped against the strong decaf flavor, allowing me to drink it further. A thankful smile led my protective twin to knowing he did good in the modification to my normal wake-up coffee cup we normally drank together.

“Virgil understood our late arrival,” Jasper sipped on his cup, wincing slightly at the heat. “He says he can give us a tour at noon, but if we skip that one, he’ll have no choice but to put it back on the market.”

 “Better get going soon then.” I chirped. “Bottom’s up.”

The liquid warmth coursed through me and made me want to get off the bed. Stretching my arms up while still gripping the coffee cup, I brought it down for another sip and sighed. I felt my tail wag in a way that reminded me we weren’t going onto any buses anymore. Well, unless the two of us needed to take one for our inevitable day jobs, of course.

Jasper leaned beside me, midway through enjoying his cup. “How’d you sleep?”

“Like the dead,” I joked while pointing to the unoccupied bed, “but I just hope the mattress at our new place will be better than this one. How about you?”

“I managed to get a few Z’s, but not much,” he shrugged between sips. His tail swished behind him like a rudder on a raft. “Still, I’m pretty sure I’ll take whatever we get.”

A part of me couldn’t believe we made it, while the other part reveled at seeing the rest of Peninsula City during daylight. It revealed all the previously hidden graffiti, occasional littering like empty bottles or used cigarettes, as well as the overlooking sky. More furs were out in the old streets, wearing loose clothing and some with only a minimum of a swimsuit and t-shirt on. It reminded me how close to the Atlantic Ocean we really were, and that the closest beach didn’t exist indoors.

Logic often won out over the urge to walk paw-in-paw with my brother. I yearned to feel his comforting thumb caress my palm, and mine to his. I was nervous. I wondered if the landlord we’d been in contact with still gave a damn about letting us sign the leases. I started overanalyzing twenty-three different ways we could get mugged, or worse, living in an area likely normalized with crime.

Without us even realizing it, our destination happened to be half a block away from Peninsula’s famous oceanside boardwalk trailing along the Atlantic coast. Sounds of seagulls and beachgoers mixed in with the noise of a coastal city quite well. A police or ambulance siren blared up somewhere faraway, only to be drown out by a group of chatting teenagers our age begging an older brother or cousin to go buy them some six-packs. The street we eventually found ourselves walking on had a long row of busy tourist shopfronts beneath crisscrossing power lines. To my amusement, one of them had several pairs of tied sneakers clinging on the wires like leather Christmas ornaments.

“If I ever need new shoes, we could always grab those,” I commented to Jasper, only to not hear an echoing chuckle. “Jasper?”

The object of his attention grabbed me too, as we shuffled down a crosswalk and saw it: a faded blue, circular apartment building no more than nine or ten stories tall, looking directly east from the row of shopfronts directly. From faraway, the apartment complex appeared no different than a smaller replica of the neon-tinted casinos and upscale hotels deeper inland. Like its first owner wanted it to be an imitation.

“There it is. Atlantica Boardwalk Apartments,” Jasper squinted his way to me with hidden concern on his beaming muzzle. “What do you think?”

My tail swished at the thought of seeing the inside. Before our eighteenth birthday, Jasper and I spent some nights looking at virtual tours of some of the apartments, but after…well, our dad found out, the options for us went lower. The fact Mr. Smith had something left was nothing short of a miracle.

“Let’s go see him,” I grinned back.

Grabbing the strap of my pack, then gripping his paw, we ran like giddy school cubs down the sidewalk. Jasper made a startled shout at first, only to join my excitement during the way there as we ignored confused eyes.

We entered the building once a homeless squirrel in his late fifties walked by us, scowling because we ignored his jingling plastic cup full of bills and coins. Mainly, it had less to do with us being strapped for cash, and more to do with the smell coming from him.

After making our way into the apartment building’s undecorated lobby and knocking three times on an office door, Jasper and I didn’t need to wait for long. An older, stocky, harlequin hare dressed in a long coat and a backwards-worn baseball cap stepped out the entrance, then glanced up to us.

“Virgil Smith?” Jasper spoke up.

“Jasper and Jackson?” He asked curiously. Me and my brother nodded simultaneously, and the hare emitted a satisfied chuckle. “About damn time you boys showed up here. I’ve been keeping yours off the market for too long.” The hare went and locked his office door, then started walking towards the elevators. “You two caught me at the right time between paperwork. Beatrice’s upstairs already, so let’s get started on this tour.”

*Thank God*, I thought to myself, feeling relief fill my veins.

We eagerly followed Mr. Smith past the elevator doors and stood in relative silence. A flickering light embedded into the above ceiling caught my attention.

“So, what do you think of New Jersey so far?” He spoke up before either of us could give an answer, “Don’t mind the bulb up there, by the way. Replacement’s on backorder.”

“Okay…” Jasper stretched the word after an awkward moment. “So, Mr. Smith—”

“Call me Virgil,” he interrupted. “Mr. Smith is my father, and let’s just say that he and I don’t talk anymore, y’know? Anyway, which of you’s Jackson and the other Jasper?”

“I’m Jasper, and he’s Jackson,” my brother butted in before the hare could interrupt us again. “We’re twins.”

“I can see that,” he grunted and scoffed at our obvious statement.

The door dinged open to reveal a long corridor. We followed directly behind Virgil as he went left down the curved hallway, but he did stop for two seconds in front of Apartment 7J, the door and plastered wall literally vibrating to repetitive drumming. Virgil snarled, then continued a few doors down until we saw a plainly clothed lynx in her late twenties or early thirties, a clipboard gripped in one paw and a set of keys in the other. An annoyed frown lay visible on her bristling cheekfur.

“He’s been at it for a good ten minutes,” she mentioned to the older herbivore. “I had to get the place ready for tours, and thought you’d have the honors to talk to him.”

“Thanks, Bea,” Virgil turned to her and gestured. “Boys, this is my assistant, Beatrice. Can’t survive without her. She’ll give you the tour, and if you both like what I got you, we’ll have you sign the lease downstairs.”

My tail wagged in pure excitement at seeing our dwelling. I could feel Jasper’s excitement as well when it smacked mine.

“Now if you’ll excuse me…duty calls,” he spoke before stomping over several doors down. Beatrice quickly unlocked Apartment 7F’s door as the sounds of a fist pounding against wood echoed down the curved hallway. “Oi! Johnson, I told ya to keep that crap down!”

 Beatrice started the apartment tour without further hassle for us. The front door unlocked to reveal a small rectangular living room to our left (plus two windows overlooking the Boardwalk and Atlantic Ocean, as promised in the ad), with a tiny corner kitchen complete with pantries, a stovetop oven, and a relatively used refrigerator. To our right was a short corridor connecting two empty bedrooms and a well-scrubbed bathroom. I could smell cleaning supplies fumigating all over the linoleum and porcelain.

Overall, two bedrooms and a single bath. The apartment’s size was approximately 950 square feet while the monthly rent went to $1,650. Oh, and did I mention how the apartment’s door handle came off midway through the tour? Beatrice, embarrassed and blushing beneath her fur, immediately went about fixing it, so she’d not pull it off again.

Honestly? If my brother and I were bolder, or maybe New Jersey even more sexually liberal than Amsterdam, we would’ve asked for a single bed and bath. Still, I could see why Jasper thought it’d be a good place for us. The P.C. Boardwalk lay right between it and the sandy beaches, sat not too far from the shops, and apparently had cheap rent. At least, compared to the more expensive neighborhoods of Peninsula City.

Beatrice led us around the rest of the Atlantica Apts. building, from the basement storage units to the small snack shots leased into the building’s exterior, a communal laundry room on the ground floor, and even the lounge area behind the elevators on the first floor.

“So, what do you think?” Beatrice asked us as soon as we stepped into the main lobby. “Do you two need time to think it over?”

Jasper exchanged a small glance with me. Our tails still swayed in tandem. As Beatrice looked away as if she were examining the paint on the walls, we turned our backs to her. We leaned in closer together to whisper our thoughts.

“Kinda expected it to look like a divorced dad’s place, honestly.”

“I know, right?” My brother chuckled. “It’s fuckin’ amazing.”

“Don’t you think we should ask for tours of single bedrooms though?”

“Nah,” Jasper shook his muzzle. “Shouldn’t risk giving ‘em hints. Plus, it’d be nice to have an extra room for something like an office or…”

I shrugged. “Well, if you’re for it, then I am.”

In response, Jasper smirked and turned back to Beatrice. “We’ll take it!”