

“So, you like someone, huh?”

My ears flicked forward, my eyes re-focused, I shifted a little in the seat I'd taken. Lexi sat atop the desk in front of me, the two of us the only people in this room; from outside rumbled the familiar dull roar of high school lunchtime, few voices rising up above everything else. You could hear it in the little bits of conversation that came through every now and then, like moments of clear radio between fields of static: everyone was excited about spring break next week. Really kinda came up out of nowhere.

The vixen sat with her elbows resting on her knees, muzzle forward and hazel-green eyes on mine. She had the slightest of smiles lifting the corners of her mouth, further evidence by the slow swaying of her tail behind her.

“I mean...” And I stretched my body out, reaching one arm up above my head and spreading my fingers all out. After astronomy yesterday, Tony and I walked each other out at the last bell, waved goodbye to each other by the buses, and each went on our own way - only for me to receive a message from him about two minutes after the bus started moving. He and his mom had finished getting unpacked, and he was all excited about finally having a suitable place to live and sleep and slack off.

He ended up inviting me over again this coming weekend (“*after all, we must work on our assignment some more*”, he claimed), and of course I agreed. However, I'd ended up paying a lot more attention to our conversation than to my homework, and as such I had to stay up a bit later than usual. So far today had gone by in a bit of a misty haze, but... my meeting with Lexi here had remained in the front of my mind, clear among everything else. I had *some* idea of what it was she wanted to talk about.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. No point hiding it, right? “I thought Ty told you that.”

“Oh, yeah, he did.” She shrugged, too. “You *bet* he did. Just about wouldn't shut up about it.”

“I'm not surprised. He's a good guy.”

“I would hope so! You two've been best friends for, what, freakin'... I don't even know. Years.” Lexi replicated my stretching and then leaned back, paws braced against the desk behind her. It wobbled briefly, one leg just a bit shorter than the others. “Said that you've gotta have your eye on some hot chick. He thinks you haven't told him who it is yet 'cause you're worried he'll wanna steal her from you.”

“Psh. As if he *could*. For some reason, I don't think...” Hesitation. “I don't think - the person I likes is attracted to Tyler like that.”

Even though I'd been careful about that, my words still caused the fox to raise an eyebrow, and tilt her head. "Is? So they've met already, then."

Oh. "Uh..."

She watched me for a moment longer, then turned her head further away. Whichever teacher occupied this classroom had put up a large map of the world, almost completely covering one wall of the room; someone had scrawled a big X over the approximate location of our city, with a badly-drawn skull right next to it. I wasn't exactly the kind of person who went out every night partying and messing shit up, but it seemed the general opinion from those kind of people was that we had nothing to do in this town, and had to travel about forty minutes in any direction to get to a city that *had* a nightlife.

"Matt..."

I looked up at her. She kept her muzzle pointed away, and then - returned my gaze. No humor, no screwing around in that expression. But, then again, it wasn't a *harsh* look, either. It just... *was*.

"Is it Tony?"

Oh. Whoa. Heart pounding, like when you almost drop your phone in the cafeteria, or when you think you forgot to flip over your exam and check to see if there was a backside. Lexi kept her eyes on me, and I think my changing expressions as I tried to figure out what to reply just gave her my answer.

"Huh? What?" Nervous laugh. I straightened up. "What would make you think that?"

"Look, Matthew..." Lexi rested her chin on her wrist again. "It's totally okay if it is. Actually - no, it's *great* if it is. Me and Tyler were there through your whole thing with Sasha. And you were not happy with her."

"Not all the time, no." There were some moments. But, *some moments* isn't enough to keep a relationship going.

"And you've known Tony, what - a week?" Here she turned back to me, scooting forward so her legs draped off the edge of the desk and rested in the seat of the chair. "And I've hardly been there for any of that. I'm always busy at lunch with clubs and talking to teachers and whatever. Heck - I'm skipping my college prep group to be here with you. And, you know what?"

Lexi didn't even really give me a chance to answer. "Wh-"

"I still think I've seen him make you smile better than she ever did. Not more, mind you - you

smiled a lot around Sasha. It's just that I could tell a lot of those smiles were fake." She scooted forward a little further. "But not with Tony. Right?"

I licked my lips, I swallowed, I looked away from her eyes... and I sighed. "Yeah. You're right."

"So..."

Look at me. Admitting to two people in two days that I like a guy. "It *is* Tony."

"When'd you figure it out?"

"I've... been thinking about that a lot, actually. Since, like, Saturday. And, uh..."

"Yeah?"

Over on the other side of the room, I could swear the door handle jiggled, so I clammed up right there for a few seconds. After nobody came in, though, I went on. "I'll be honest, I don't know. It's just, like... a feeling I guess I'm only kind of aware of. It's... not something I've really felt before. Wait-" Here, I squinted at her. It was her turn to look away. "You knew?"

She shrugged, phone in one paw. Between sentences, she looked down to type on it. "I mean, I figured. He likes you, too, you know. It's not hard to tell."

"What? Really?"

"Oh yeah. He's got it bad for you. I've got English class with him, and he's friendly enough, so people aren't afraid to talk to him and buddy up with him, but... *man*. When he's around you, he's got this look that I haven't seen him get from anyone else."

Wow. That felt... well, that certainly made me feel something. A bit of confidence, a bit of reassurance. Still, though, I wanted to ask-

Lexi tapped the claw of her thumb against her phone's screen. "Hey, d'ya mind if Sandra joins us?"

"Huh?" Last I heard, Sandra got suspended for... *something*. We're not, like, best friends in the whole world, but she *is* a solid member of our friend group. Actually, I think she shares her best friend card with this vixen right here, which is a bit of a surprise considering how... *different* these two are. "Sandra? Is she-"

"Got off suspension yesterday. None of us've heard from her since she lost her phone, too."

"Lost it, or..."

Hazel eyes levelled at mine again. "You know how her dad is."

I nodded. "Ah. Yeah."

"And, I mean, I just figured..." Lexi shrugged, and rested her phone face-down beside her. "She's a lesbian. *Has* been for... well, a while. I just thought she'd be able to give you some advice, y'know?"

I hadn't thought about that. If that gives any credence to what I said about us not really being best of friends. I mean, I *knew* she wasn't straight, but I guess that that just hadn't really... clicked in my head. Didn't really seem like an option. My relationship with Sandra is like... we're the kind of friends where we get along just fine when the rest of our group is there, but things get awkward and silent if it's just the two of us. At least, that's what I imagine it's like. We've never let it get to that point.

"I mean," and Lexi nodded over towards the door. The handle jiggled again. "She's already here, so I hope you're gonna say yes."

As if on cue, that handle turned from the outside, the door started to creak open... and in wafted the fuller, brighter sound of all those conversations from the halls, soon followed by the stout possum that I hadn't seen in a good two or three weeks. Sandra wore the same general outfit that she had the last time any of us had seen her: jeans clinging to her legs and torn at the knees, a cotton-candy pink hoodie with an all-over cartoon kitten print (she'd once socked a guy in the face for spilling chocolate milk on it), and one of those hats with the flat tops. Our school had a strict no-hats policy, but she still put it back on whenever she got the chance.

"Matt!" She grinned, and hurried on over. The door clicked shut behind her and once more blocked off a good amount of that noise. "How've ya been? Getting into trouble since I last saw ya?"

"No..." I shifted. I was expecting her to, like, shake my paw or forcibly give me a hug or something, but instead the possum just slouched down into the seat across from me. "Where'd you go? I haven't heard from you in weeks."

"Suspended." She whipped her hat off and ran her fingers over her thin ears. "What, did Lexi not tell you?"

I looked over to the vixen, whose tail had started swinging behind her a little more quickly. She gave me a bright grin. "I mean, yeah. I don't know *why* you got suspended this time, though."

"Oh. Ha. There's a story to that." Sandra slid her hat back on. "Boy oh boy, is there a story to that."

“So what happened?”

“Well, you know that spot behind the gyms? Between the buildings and the track. There’s that little dip between the hill and the wall, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Yeah, me n’ Mari were there. You know Mari?”

That name was vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t place from where. “I do not know Mari.”

“Hah. Well, she got suspended too. We both were skipping class, and were back there, and one of the coaches turned the corner and found us with my teeth in her neck, my paw under her panties, and my dildo about four inches between ‘er legs.”

“Sandra!”

She shrugged, maintaining her smile. I looked over to Lexi again, who had turned her head away and was trying to stifle a laugh. That wasn’t really like her.

“I mean, it was fun. I dunno why they bothered suspending us. No idea what they expected us to learn from that. Good thing Lexi didn’t tell you, too; I asked her not to...”

The vixen mirrored that smile, and leaned over. “She said she wanted to see the look on everyone’s face when they heard.”

“But. Anyway. That’s not why foxy called me here before you today.” The possum cleared her throat, straightened up, adjusted her bra (at least she was wearing one today), and looked right at me, unafraid to make eye contact. Ink-black eyes held me in place there. “I hear you’re crushin’ on someone, Matt. A boy. Tiger?”

“Cheetah,” Lexi corrected. She’d gone back to scanning over her phone.

“Cheetah! Even better. I hear they’re *great* bottoms. Slim hips like that, tight body, taut muscles... rrf.” Sandra clenched her fists and did a few little pelvic-thrusts while sitting. I rolled my eyes. “Anyway. Matt! How things change when you get suspended for two weeks. I didn’t know you were...”

And she trailed off. Maybe she was expecting me to put up a protest? I didn’t want to assume, though, so I let her finish her thought.

“...gay-”

"Hey. Okay. I'm not - not *sure* yet."

"We were just talking about it," Lexi interjected. "It's a new thing."

"Oh, yeah?" The possum looked from her back to me, and settled back in her seat to spend a moment in thought. From this distance it was easy to see the little pinprick-hole in her lower lip where she usually had a piercing. "How new?"

"Last week..."

"Dang. I *just* missed it, huh?" She leaned in again. "Have you kissed yet?"

"What? No."

"Gone on any dates? Hugged? Held paws? Done cute little nuzzles?"

"Well, I mean, I - went over to his house last weekend, and we... I guess we hugged?" I remember because it felt both out-of-place for me, as well as the right thing to do. And then there were those times his fingers brushed over mine while we were moving furniture and stuff...

"Does he know you like him?"

"I mean - probably?"

"Does he like you back?"

That one, I couldn't confidently answer. When I squeezed my lips together and looked away, I could see out of the corner of my eye Sandra turning to look at Lexi... only to have a grin blossom across her face a moment later. Then she straightened up, reached out, and rested her arm across my shoulders... and the soft yet acrid smell of cigarette smoke wafted gently off her short fur. I'm actually surprised it was just that, and not the brighter, skunkier aroma of weed as well.

"Okay." The possum waited until I looked up at her again to continue. "Matt. This boy makes you feel different, right? Like, gives you those warm chest fuzzies? Ohh, yeah, look at your face. Yeah. He does. You know I thought I was straight 'til, like, halfway through freshman year?"

"I think you've told me this story before." It was one of her favorites to recount when drunk. *Especially* the part where she and the other girl ended up sharing a bed that night.

"Yeah. Well, I was in the same boat as you back then. I think I'd just broken up with my boyfriend at the time, too, so - I was still in that kind of halfway point between *oh, the single life is great* and *goddamn, the single life sucks*, and since I was young, I wasn't really wary of getting into something that'd just turn out to be a rebound-

*Rebound.* I hadn't thought about that, and for a moment, that word hung in my head and my heart like a cold finger of wet ice. One semester was long enough, right?

"But. Yeah. Just kind of... hit me by surprise outta fuckin' nowhere, right? At first, I didn't know what to think about it. Thought I was just..." She shrugged. "I 'unno. Didn't occur to me that it might be attraction, yeah? I just went with it, went with how it felt, without really putting too much thought into it... and next thing y' know, I'm crawling up over her when I'm at her place for a sleepover one night, and she grabs my wrists and pulls me down, and... yeah."

So it sounded like everything went right for her. "So..."

"So, yeah, I got lucky, I think. Your boy isn't - isn't a closet case, is he? He doesn't, like, go around pushing people and calling 'em *faggot* and what have you?"

This time it was Lexi who answered again: "Oh, God, no. I get the impression that he's the kind who's shy about it, and who doesn't really go around blasting it to everyone he meets. But you can really tell, if you know what to look for."

"Hey," and I swivelled my head her way, "I couldn't tell.

"The only gay person you know is a lesbian, Matt." Lexi directed her paws towards the possum sitting across from me. "And she's *very* lesbian."

"Same goes for you, though!"

The vixen raised her eyebrows. "My brother..."

"What, really? I didn't... know that, either..."

My ears flicked back over as Sandra breathed a gentle chuckle. "Straight boys. Jesus Christ. Though - I guess that doesn't really count for you anymore, huh? Tell me, puppy: what're you gonna do about this whole thing? Are ya gonna, like... pin 'im to the wall after class and make out with him?"

"What? No, I-

"Gonna ask him out on a date? *Hey, wanna go out for milkshakes?* Something like that?"

"I..." ...looked down into my lap, and fiddled with a rebellious patch of fur on the back of one of my paws. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

Sandra waited where she sat for a moment, then leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed in front of her. "You could do what I did."

"Sleep over and then feel him up?" Somewhere, for some reason, that thought caused the slightest of twitches, down in my abdomen. That was odd.

"You could. Or, like... scout out a bit. Yeah? Find out what he likes, what he wants. How he feels around you." Another shrug. "If I were you, I'd try to get even more confidently on his good side. Make sure that he likes you and that you like him, and go from there."

Lexi tapped her claws on her desk to get our attention. I looked over at her. "Actually, that's not that bad of an id-"

"And *then* you fuck 'im. He's gotta be a bottom, right?" Sandra held her paw out first towards me, and then towards the vixen. "Lex?"

"Sandra..."

"What? It sounds bad, but in my experience, getting into someone's pants is a great way of finding out what they *really* want. You do that once, and then if they text you the next day asking for nudes or wanting to know when you'll be coming over next, well..." The possum rolled her shoulders, cracked her neck, licked her lips. She seemed totally unconcerned with all of this. "You know what kind of relationship it's gonna be. Something lost, something gained. Right?"

I mean. I *knew* she was kind of promiscuous. But that wasn't something we really ever talked about, and it didn't really interest me, so I just... stayed out of it. Hearing it from her now, though, in that comfortable voice and tone of hers, like there was nothing to worry about... really, it should've been comforting. But for some reason, it just felt like it complicated things further.

"Okay." This time when she held her paw out to me, she did so palm-down and fingers spread. "Whatever you do - it's up to you, Matt. Play it by ear. Right? But whatever you do, nothing's gonna go anywhere unless you *make* it go somewhere. Ain't nothin' gonna happen if you just continue on *thinking* you like him, and *thinking* he likes you back. Actually - *make sure* of that. Okay?"

"What, like... *tell* him?"

"Yeah!"

Lexi was already watching my muzzle when I turned to her. She gave an easy shrug. "It couldn't hurt. *I'm* pretty confident he's interested in you. You see each other, like, every day at lunch, right?"

I straightened up a bit. "Pretty much. We both have a free period Tuesdays and Thursdays, so I could go to see him once we're done here... but, like - we're gonna be hanging out this weekend again anyway. Wouldn't that be better?"

"Sooner the better," Sandra mused, "since the sooner you tell him, the sooner you'll get to-"

"But you also shouldn't push it," Lexi went on, talking over the possum. "Rushing is bad. It's like... well, it's like anything else. You need to find a balance that works for you. Figure out what you're comfortable with, and put all your confidence and focus into that."

"Gaaah." I turned forward in my chair and thumped my chin down against the cool surface of the desk. Up at the top of the wall across the room, the simple white analog clock tick, tick, ticked slowly closer to the end of lunch. "I don't remember having all of this trouble with Sasha."

My ears swivelled back towards Lexi behind me: "Matt, that's because she asked you out, you said yes, and within a few days you two were already going at it."

"God." For a few moments, I covered my muzzle with my paws, blocking out the fluorescent lights. "Don't remind me. What about Tyler? D'you guys think I should ask him about this?"

Silence. Conspicuous silence, actually, enough to bring me out of my slouch and to look between the two of them. Sandra avoided eye contact, and Lexi held my gaze in a way that just worried me even further.

I blinked, and looked between them again. "What?"

"I would... um." Lexi fidgeted. "I'd, maybe... hold off on letting Tyler know about this."

"What? He already thinks I like someone-"

"Thinks you like *a girl*." This time when Sandra leaned over, she braced her paw on my knee, and waited until I looked at her again. "You. A boy. Liking a girl. That's what he thinks. Tyler and I, uh..."

"Don't get along," Lexi finished. Her ears stood straight up, and her whiskers hung down. "You know, he's tried to get us to stop being friends on at least three different occasions."

"What? Really?" That didn't seem like him. "I've never noticed anything..."

“That’s because he always asks you to hang out with him. He’s never ‘forgotten’ to invite you to one of his parties, you’ve never ‘slipped his mind’ when he planned that road trip last summer...” The possum counted on her fingers. “He looks at you in the eye when he talks to you, he actually *addresses* you when he talks, he actually *talks to you*... Lexi, I don’t know why you haven’t *spoken* to him about it. I mean, it hurts when-”

“Sandy, I’ve tried. We can talk about that later, okay? Matt...” And this time, her touch against my shoulder made me jump. I was still looking at Sandra, watching the way this topic visibly upset her... I really hadn’t noticed anything like that before. But then, I guess I wasn’t really ever looking. “Tyler’s just, not... you know. Not really - *okay* with it. So I don’t think you should tell him. And if you do? Be careful about it. Okay?”

The bell rang just then, and buried her last few words beneath it. Still, though, I got the gist of it, and that echoed in my head as we all stood up and hugged each other goodbye for the day - “*seriously, though*,” Sandra said, her breath carrying the faint sting of alcohol. Some teachers had forbidden students to bring metal water bottles, on account of the prevalence of the less-respectable crowd filling theirs with vodka. Unsurprisingly, this possum was one of those, and also unsurprisingly, she ignored that rule. “*if you need advice with this whole thing, don’t be afraid to shoot me a text - gaah, shit, I mean, I’ll let you know when I get my phone back...*”

Lexi, meanwhile, briefly squeezed my wrist to keep me from leaving the room, and looked me square in the face for a moment.

“Look,” she said, “I’ll try to talk to Tyler some, okay? Just... don’t tell him yet.”

“Is it really that big a deal?”

“I...” Lexi fumbled over her words. “Just focus on you, okay? Focus on you and Tony. There’s potential for great things there. Text me, too, if you need anything, okay? I gotta... go to class...”

And she was gone, a few seconds later the door bursting back open with students filing into the room for class. I was left with some amount of warm comfort beating in my heart, but along with it came the cold trickle of worry and questioning.