

Book One of The Noctis Investigations

Like

IN

LLOYD



MATT ARMSTRONG

CHAPTER 01

The telltale shuffle of corduroy rubbing between thicker-than-average thighs grew close, the brisk and purposeful pace drawing my attention from my phone. I turned the screen off, leaving an article speculating about the lives of the cast of Seinfeld, if they existed in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and stood up from the double-sided park bench that was more comfortable than it appeared.

“Ahem,” said an older, heavy-set businessman, glancing pointedly between the park bench and me. I sat back down, crossed my legs, and pretended to be a casual birdwatcher, avoiding eye contact with him.

We’re playing this game, are we?

He was a short, stocky gentleman with gray hair styled in an unconvincing comb-over. He was wearing an untailored beige suit, two sizes too big, with cuffs hanging limply over his right palm (his left hand stuffed in his pocket), fastened together by expensive silver and gold cufflinks. A pair of uncomfortable-looking brown penny loafers adorned his feet, and a crisply folded newspaper was tucked under his arm. Sweat beaded on his forehead, likely from the effort of walking more than ten feet at once or the fact he was wearing corduroy in July. He appraised me hurriedly through his bifocals, giving me more judgment in two seconds than I ever received from all the girls in high school.

He sat behind me and dramatically flourished his newspaper. “Mister Gibson?” he asked with a husky voice without turning his head.

“Call me Lloyd.” I hated formalities and using my real name. I had used various aliases throughout my life, but those days were over. “Can I call you Bob?”

“No.”

“Hello, Mister Arsenal.”

“You look like you’re homeless,” he informed me. “Utterly unprofessional.”

“I’ll have you know, I’m wearing my Sunday best,” I said, offended. I was an average-looking Caucasian male in my late thirties, standing at six-foot-two with light brown hair and eyes. My eyebrows were bushier than I’d like, and I had the remnants of a scar on my nose from a nasty fall as a child. Today, I wore a breezy blue generic t-shirt from Old Navy, complemented by slightly wrinkled blue jeans with more than one hole in

them. Blue on blue, I was bringing it back. Scuff marks coated my Nikes, devaluing the most expensive item I currently owned (that I hadn't paid for). A white ball cap with a red maple leaf and the word "Sorry" embroidered in white block letters sat on my head, and my signature wraparound sunglasses, prescription due to severe light sensitivity, rested on my nose.

"I look spiffy."

Bob cleared his throat as he turned a page in his newspaper. "What did you find?"

"You do realize that newspaper makes us look even more suspicious, right?" I asked. "I mean, a lot of people *have* seen movies."

"*What did you find?*" he repeated through clenched teeth.

"Nothing," I said, patting a manila folder on the bench beside me. "I have all his recent bank records, which show no suspicious transactions or large withdrawals. I have photos of him going to and from work, with no stops for the last week. He's had no social visits, interacting with no one outside the office. I couldn't get into his phone records, but I did manage to sneak a look at his cell, and he has no outgoing calls, all his texts were work-related or spam, and no personal emails aside from subscriptions and promotions. He literally has no life." He needed a more secure password—figuring out it was his beloved cat's name wasn't hard.

"What about his work email?"

"What about it? You specifically told me not to enter the office," I reminded him.

"That was your problem to work around," he scolded.

"How? It's a secure intranet, only accessible from inside the building."

"You're the investigator—this is what I'm paying you for!" He shuffled through a few more pages, pretending to read.

"With a hand tied behind my back? I'm not a magician. Look, he's living the most mundane, boring life imaginable, and I wouldn't blame him for wanting a change. Still, there's no indication he's up to anything nefarious."

"He is. I know he is."

"Mr. Arsenal, by all indications, your son is not trying to kill you."

Bob sat silently for a long moment, his body tense, and he stopped flipping through the newspaper. "How much is he paying you?"

"Who?" I asked incredulously.

I knew where this was going. From the first time I spoke to this man, I knew I'd be getting screwed in the end, but I was desperate for money, so I took the risk.

"My son. How much is he paying you?" he demanded, the words hissing through his teeth, still refusing to look back at me.

I sighed, rubbing my thumb and forefinger over my eyes, beneath my shades. "You don't pay your son enough money for him to pay me anything."

Bob exhaled heavily through his nose and folded the newspaper on his lap. "Your work is shoddy, and you have proven nothing. I know he is trying to kill me. I've been informed."

This is why I ask for an upfront deposit before taking on a case. I was getting the sense that I was not collecting the rest of the payment.

"By whom?" I asked. "You keep saying that, but you won't tell me anything. If I knew where you received that information, I'd have something concrete to work with."

"It doesn't matter who told me, just that they did."

"Then we're done here," I said, rising to my feet. "You can keep the folder. I've taken this investigation as far as possible without further information, which you refuse to provide. So, I will take the rest of the payment, and our business will be concluded."

"I'm not paying you a damn thing!" he shouted, no longer choosing discretion. "You've proven nothing!"

I spun around and looked at him. "Prove what? One can prove that someone is doing something. It's impossible to conclusively prove they're not."

With the ridiculous charade over, Bob stood and looked at me with an intense glare. "You are the worst private investigator I have ever seen," he said, literally spitting his words.

A drop of saliva hit me in the face, which I wiped away immediately and glared back at him. "And you have absolutely no idea how any of this works," I argued in return. "I can't do what I require to get the information you need, and that's my fault? You're paranoid and delusional."

Bob's glare intensified, his limbs shaking with actual rage. "I know what I was told and trust my sources." His teeth were clenched so hard his jaw shook from the strain. I half expected his teeth to shatter.

“Your son barely interacts with anyone. So unless his source is his fucking cat, whoever is talking to you is lying.”

Bob’s eyes widened in a comically large expression of surprise. “How do you know about Mr. Neeners?”

I stared back at him, stunned, my mouth agape. “It—are you actually telling me the cat told you?”

His face suddenly turned from surprise to terror, the rage immediately replaced by fear. “Oh my God, you’re one of them!” he cried, pointing at me like a *Body Snatcher*. “You’re a changeling!”

“I’m a what?”

Rather than answering, Bob turned tail and ran away. Well, he shuffled at a moderately faster pace—a swift, drunken walk, really.

I watched as he stumbled away, rasping heavily in exertion, glancing back periodically to ensure I *wasn’t* pursuing. As he faded from sight, I sighed, gathered up the folder, and headed home. An entire week, wasted, with nothing to show for it. The majority of his deposit went toward bribing someone for those bank details.

Is this how life is going to be now? I lose everything, go straight, and put up with *this* bullshit? A year ago, I was living in a fucking mansion. Well, a two-story penthouse in New York City, but still. Now I live in a small, uninsulated warehouse, scraping by on the whims of *Calgary’s* paranoid delusional rich folks. I didn’t have much choice, as it was too risky to keep stealing things, but there had to be a better alternative.

This was a complete and absolute waste of having a superpower.