Parenting Through the Alphabet
by Bdoyle1807

Summary

Sequel to 'A Full Quiver' best to read it first
this is an AU story with Philinda raising their own brood of little ones

One shot chapters telling shrt storiex of the trials and tribulations of parenting. Each chapter is a stand alone view of a day or a few days with Phil and Melinda May Coulson as they stumble through raising their four adopted children.

Notes

with apologies to Maurice Sednak and the Nutshell Library
“Tienes que comer, pequeña,” Yoyo coaxed a stubborn two-year-old who had pursed her lips tightly shut and was currently shaking her head with eyes squeezed as tightly shut as her mouth.

“Nǐ yǔyào chī, bǎobèi.” Jemma attempted the same encouragement in her mother’s native tongue.

Fitz shoved a large piece of pancake into his mouth and caught the syrup dripping from his chin with his palm. He rubbed his hand on the napkin next to his plate and around his chewing he sighed. “She’s not about to eat in any language so I can’t figure why the both of you don’t just let her be.” Mack slid another pancake on the boy’s empty plate and shook his head with a knowing smile. Apparently he agreed with the small boy. Fitz smiled a wide smile and nodded his thanks before smothering the offering with more syrup and digging into it.

Yoyo reached across the table and procured the sticky condiment earning a quick frown from Fitz. “Suficiente jarabe para tu pequeño lobo.” She scolded with a grin.

The boy chewed quickly and swallowed before answering. “I am not a wolf, Yoyo and besides wolves are carnivores. I don’t believe they’d enjoy these marvelous delights Mack has served us. And if Skye doesn’t care for them and,” he jerked a thumb at his older sister. “We all know Jemma eats like a wee bird, so that just means more for me.” He turned the thumb toward himself and tapped his chest before gobbling another large bite.

Jemma shook her head and rolled her eyes. “That’s just nonsense Fitz. A chickadee can eat up to thirty-six percent of its body weight in food each day. Contrary to what most people believe, most birds consume much more food than humans do.”

Fitz wrinkled one side of his face in a half snarl, then laughed almost spewing his pancake across the table. He quickly put a hand over his mouth, chewed and swallowed before speaking. “That means you’ll need to consume about eighteen pounds of food per day.” He pointed at her plate with his fork. “You’ve had about two ounces. You’ve got quite a way to go then don’t you?”

Jemma huffed in defeat. “You’d not speak like that if Mama was here.”

“Of course I would,” the boy spread his arms wide and smiled just the same. “I’m but stating a fact, Jemma, just a fact.”
“Dios mio,” Yoyo sighed. “How does Melinda do this every morning? Aye-yi-yi…” She continued rattling on in Spanish, hoping the children had not yet mastered that part of her language.

Skye had pushed her plate away and now rested on her arms on the table. Mack scooped her up, sat down and plopped her in his lap. He kissed her head although she still held both arms across her face.

“I no want no brefuss, Mack. I no hungery.” She whined.

He wrapped his large arms around her, nearly encompassing her whole body. He kissed her again and rested his chin on her head as he rocked side to side. “I made these pancakes just for you. Your daddy told me they were your favorite and well, I gave him the recipe so I knew how to make them before he knew how.”

Fitz, Jemma and Yoyo rolled their eyes.

Mack shrugged his shoulders and tried again. “You didn’t eat much supper last night, Tremors. You’ve gotta be hungry.” He bent down to the little girl’s side trying to peek under her arms.

Skye shook her body. “My tummy hoerts for no food when mama bees gone so long times.”

“She means she doesn’t want to eat when…” Fitz started, but Mack held up a hand.

“I got it little man.” He looked back to the little girl on his lap. “Your mama and daddy have only been gone not even one day and they will be back in three days. They’re going to call every night and probably every time they can, so you can talk to them. Don’t you think mama will be sad if she knows you don’t want to eat.”

Skye dropped her arms, turned and looked into Mack’s face. “I sad acuz mama goed away. I tell hoer there bees a agalator unner my bed.” She held out her hand, bobbing it up and down as she spoke.

“Alligator,” Fitz translated as he swallowed the last of his breakfast.
Mack raised his eyebrows, “an alligator?” Skye nodded. “Under your bed?” She nodded faster. The large man shook his head and fought to contain his laughter.

“Una excusa tan tonta por no comer,” Yoyo threw up her hands and began collecting plates from the table. Jemma stood to help. “Oh no, jovencita, no tú también. Siéntese y termine su desayuno.” The woman gave Jemma a stern look and point to her plate. The young girl fell back into her chair, picked up her fork and began pushing food around on the plate. Yoyo picked up the rest of the dishes and utensils, piling them together began turning toward the sink. “Un panqueque, tu madre dijo que debes comer uno, Jemma. No un bocado, pero un panqueque entero. Ahora come.”

Fitz pushed himself back on his chair and patted his stomach with both hands. “Well then, I’ve had my fill.”

“And several others,” Jemma grumbled as she rested her head on her hand and forced a small piece of her meal into her mouth. She looked under her arm to Yoyo who now leaned against the counter tapping her foot. Mama could hold her calm for a long time and only needed to speak to any of her children in that quiet tone that let them know she meant business. Jemma figured it was her Chinese lineage, but Yoyo was a hot headed Latina. Things were much different with her. “I am eating, Yoyo. It just takes a bit longer what with Skye all upset and Fitz gobbling down everything in sight, I get a bit distracted.”

Fitz leaned forward on his hand, slamming both of his hands on the table. “Jemma Coulson-Simmons you are lying!” He pointed at her as he stood and began chanting as he danced around the table. “Jemma’s telling falsehoods. Jemma’s telling falsehoods.”

“Enough!” Yoyo bellowed, grabbing the boy by the arm and sending him out of the kitchen with a swat to his behind. “Go get dressed, salvaje! Ahora!” The boy laughed as he scrambled from the room and bounded up the stairs.

“You get the agalator outta my unner bed, Mack?” Skye ignored the battle between her siblings as she stared at the pancake the plate that the man had pulled back in front of her. She watched as he cut it into small bite-sized pieces.

“I tell you what, sweet pea, you eat just half this pancake and drink all your milk and we will get that old alligator and send him packing.” The large man smiled at the little girl staring up at him. He handed her the fork he was holding and motioned toward the plate.

Skye looked at the many pieces now scattered across her plate. “How manies is half, Mack? You
Half an hour later Skye stood watching Mack on his hands and knees peering under her bed. “Sorry, Tremors, I don’t see this alligator that’s got you all worried. Are you sure he’s under here.”

Skye squatted down on her haunches and lowered her head to look under the bed. “Him was unner there in the dark time. I heared him squewatching.”

Mack turned and sat on the floor facing the little girl. He rested his arms on his raised knees and held out a hand to her. “Maybe he just left on his own.” She shook her head and took a deep breath. “It is possible.” He reasoned. “Well, little one, there is no big ole green gator under there now.”

Skye stood up and shook her head. She put both hands out and bounced them, palms up, as she spoke. “Mack, the agalator is no goreen. Him is lello and him is liddle no big.” She tilted her head and stared at the man still seated on the floor.

“A yellow alligator?” Mack sighed. “Is it a baby?”

Skye shook her head. “Him bees a daddy.”

Mack pursed his lips and nodded, then dropped his head to hide the smile he could not contain. He pulled himself to his feet and lifted the little girl into his arms. “Well, Tremors, he’s not there now. Guess he must have found somewhere else to live, so you don’t have to worry about him anymore.” He tickled her belly and smiled at her giggles. “I bet Fitz and Jemma are waiting for you to find your bathing suit so we can go to the pool for a while.”

“I no hafta fine it, Mack. Jemma gots it wit hoers.”

The large man shook his head and exited the room. Skye looked over his shoulder, staring at the space under her bed.
An afternoon at the splash park left three children, and two adults, exhausted. Mack pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. He leaned forward resting his head on his hands still on the steering wheel.

Yoyo turned to look in the backseat then turned to her companion. “Sound asleep every one of them.” She smiled. “I will take the little one, you can get the others.” The big man yawned and nodded as she opened the door and stepped out of the SUV.

A few minutes later all three children were sprawled on a blanket spread on the family room floor. It was just easier to put them there than to transport all of them up the stairs. Besides, it was much easier for Yoyo’s untrained ear to hear them when they woke. Lord, knows what they might get into up there before she knew they were awake. Although she trusted Jemma to stay out of trouble the other two scamps were always a surprise. She and Mack dropped onto the couch and soon joined their small group in blessed slumber.

The sudden ringing of the telephone brought everyone awake. Fitz and Jemma scrambled to their feet both shouting they would get it as Skye raced behind them. Mack rubbed his eyes and clumsily tried to pull himself from the couch as Yoyo rolled to the floor on her knees and struggled to stand, both wondering how the children had woken so quickly.

Jemma made it to the hall telephone first slamming her hand on the receiver which was immediately snatched by Fitz as she lifted it from its cradle. Skye hopped up and down between them grabbing at it as well. It was quite the antique but their father loved the old stuff and it made for quite the conversation piece, which dad also loved for the pun. The children continued to clamor over the device as Yoyo stepped between them and took it while at the same time holding out a hand to quiet the roaring mass. Mack scooped up Fitz and Skye bringing them close to his face as he shushed them both. They struggled to get free but giggled at the man’s friendly entrapment.

“Pronto,” Yoyo spoke into the receiver. “Compañero, ¿cómo estás?” The children quieted as they listened to the one sided conversation. “¿Te estás divirtiendo?...bueno, bueno...¿Niños? Que niños No hay niños aquí.” She grinned into the phone.

“Yes, we are! Yes, we are! We’re here!” Jemma and Fitz sang in unison.

“Me too!” Skye added, a beat behind. “I heeor, mama. I heeor, daddy. I talk a you!” She reached for the phone, struggling to be released.

Yoyo handed the phone to Jemma who stood directly in front of her. Fitz pouted as his shoulder’s
dropped and Mack set him on the floor. Skye dropped her head on his shoulder and whimpered softly.

“Hello, mama,” Jemma spoke in her usual soft voice. “Are you and daddy having fun?...We miss you...Yes, we’re being well behaved...” She laughed as she looked at her brother. “Yes, he’s behaving as well...Okay, here’s Fitz.” She handed the phone to the little boy hopping from foot to foot behind her.

“Hi, mom, we went to the water park and Mack let me go down the big slide...no he was with me and I dived in the pool...yes, on the diving board...no the low one and I swam all the way across the pool...Mack was in the pool.” He nodded his head several times.

“She cannot see your head bobbing, Fitz.” Jemma giggled.

“Da...Da, I dived off the diving board...I did.” The little boy smiled ear to ear. “Okay, okay I will before she cries. I miss you da. I miss mom, too.” He turned and handed the receiver to Skye who remained in Mack’s arms.

“Daddy?” She wasn’t sure. “Daddy, there bees a agalator unner my bed an Mack nount see him.” She informed her father seriously. “You come back an get the agalator, daddy? Mama come too... MAMA!” Everyone laughed knowing Melinda’s voice had just reached her baby’s ear. “Mama, I mist you. My tummy hoerts, mama...” Skye shook her head vehemently. “No, mama, no tempachur. I no sick. Mama, there bees a agalator unner by bed still. You needa git em.”

The conversation continued for twenty minutes, until Phil and Melinda had to return to their meetings. All three children made a tearful goodbye and their parents promised to call to wish them goodnight. Fitz and Jemma moved on to an experiment Fitz had been working on while Mack continued to comfort a very distressed Skye.

“You no catch a agalator,” she sniffled as Mack held her on his large lap. “Daddy catch him foe me so he not squewatch unner my bed.” She rubbed the back of her hand under her nose before Mack could retrieve a tissue from the box next to the couch.

“I’m sorry, Tremors, but I just can’t see the alligator. How did he get there?” Mack tried to pacify the little girl, thinking the entire situation was an extension of missing her parents.

“Fizz put him inna box, but hims no like it.” She shook her head.
“Hmmm,” Mack tapped his finger on his chin and furrowed his brow. “Where did Fitz get this yellow alligator?”

Skye shrugged her shoulders and held out her hands. “I no know.” She leaned close to Mack and whispered. “Him was hyden.”

Mack raised his eyebrows and nodded his head.

Yoyo stood in the kitchen and debated on supper. Melinda had left a list of things the children liked or at least would eat. She also left a detailed list of how much of anything Jemma would have to eat since the Coulson’s continued to work on the little girl’s eating habits, now with the help of Dr. Stephens.

Melinda and Phil had left yesterday afternoon for a four day meeting/vacation in Chicago. They would spend two days with department heads from their various offices throughout the country and then have two days to spend together simply relaxing. Mack and Yoyo had volunteered to care for the younger kids while Trip and his grandmother traveled to Alabama for a week long church retreat.

Lunch had not been a problem. Apparently, swimming, climbing, diving and all that walking/running built up an appetite, that and the fact that Mack had no problem sharing a plethora of junk food with Fitz while Yoyo convinced the girls to try some pizza and a soft drink. Everyone enjoyed ice cream before leaving the park with Yoyo making a silent prayer than no one got sick before, or after, reaching home. The woman was not ready for a wrestling match like the one they had at breakfast. She considered suggesting dinner at a local eatery but she was definitely not ready for making a scene in public. Finally settling on a simple meal of chicken fingers, sweet potato fries and salad, she went about making preparations and hoping for the best.

Supper went better than expected with everyone eating at least a bit of their meal, except for Fitz who was more than willing to finish anything his sisters did not. He was the first to notice that all of Skye’s green vegetables where gone from her plate.

“You ate greens?” He asked as his eyebrows shot up.

Jemma looked under the table then sat back up. “You really ate them?”
Skye just smiled at her siblings and dipped her last bit of chicken in the ketchup Yoyo had reluctantly given to her.

After two hours of romping in the back yard with Mack the evening wound down to gathering around the fire pit with marshmallows, graham's and chocolate.

“My fing-ers is all icky.” Skye giggled showing how they stuck together then put her hands together and pulled at the same stickiness. Fitz laughed and showed his fingers did the same. “Them smashmolos maked me icky.”

“You are way more than sticky, little girl.” Mack laughed as he stood and held her back to his chest, effectively keeping the sticky away. “I think it’s time for a bath.” He took one step toward the house.

“No!” Skye squirmed fervently in attempt to escape. She kicked her feet, flailing her arms and almost screaming in protest.

“Hey, Tremors,” Mack was stunned. “Come on, you have to take a bath.”

Fitz rolled backward with laughter. He’d seen Skye made a fuss, but never like this.

Jemma tried to help calm her little sister. “It’s okay, bao bao, Mack just wants to help you get ready for bed. It is well past your bedtime. Look,” she pointed up to the sky. “The stars are blinking.”

Skye continued to struggle. “I do a bath on me.” She stopped for a breath and whispered to Jemma. “I no wan Mack a see my unnerwears, Jemma. He no a daddy.”

Jemma’s mouth formed a circle as Fitz set off on a new fit of laughter. Mack turned and handed the little girl to a waiting Yoyo. Then grabbed Fitz’s sneaker and yanked him a bit.

A few hours later the silence of the night was shattered by Skye’s screaming. Yoyo leapt from the bed and made it to the door before Mack was able to untangle himself from the sheets.

"I thought she didn’t have those night terrors anymore.” Mack breathed as he pulled on sweats as he hopped across the room. Yoyo groaned as she pulled on a bathrobe and hurried down the hall.
Skye stood on her bed, back against the wall, screaming as she bounced from foot to foot. Yoyo quickly moved to the edge of the mattress and caught the little girl as she practically dove into her arms.

“Him is squewatching unner my bed, Oyo. Mack didna get the agalator.” She was almost hysterical, clutching Yoyo tightly. “Pliece, get the agalator. I no like him unner there.”

Mack flicked on the light, dropped to his knees and peered under the bed. He noticed the small pile of lettuce and realized where Skye’s salad had gone. He picked it up and brought it to Yoyo’s attention before dropping it in the waste basket. The little girl was too upset to question but he was sure she’d stashed it in her pocket and at some point set it under the bed. He shook his head at his companion as she patted the little girl’s back and swayed side to side trying to comfort her.

The man reached up from the floor and took the small lamp from the nightstand. He removed the shade and once again went head first under the little girl’s bed, this time shining the lamp under it. He pulled back so fast he smacked her head against the bed frame.

“Damn it,” he whispered under his breath rubbing the back of his head.

“Que?” Yoyo stepped back.

Mack stood and scanned the room; picking up a small blanket folded on the back of the rocking chair then raised his finger to his lips motioning for Yoyo to be silent. Skye still whimpered but hid her face in Yoyo’s neck. She stepped back again, eyes wide and mouthed “what?” He shook his head as he slowly picked up the bottom of the bed and moved it a few inches from the wall.

Yoyo let out a surprised shriek and clutched Skye closer to her. The little girl screamed with fright. A small creature skittered along the wall before Mack tossed the blanket on top of it and snatched it from the floor in one swipe. He peeled back the blanket and held the small reptile in his hand. It squirmed free and crawled along one hand and then the other as he placed one in front of the other.

“You were right, Tremors, but I don’t think this little guy is an alligator.” Mack laughed.

Skye sniffed a few times and lifted her head, pushing her hair away from her face. She looked at the small animal and smiled as Yoyo stepped closer. “You caught him. I toed you him is lello.” She smiled as she watched the lizard travel from one of Mack’s hands to the other. “Do he pet?”
She asked as she timidly reached out to touch the creature.

Mack ran his finger along the lizard’s back and nodded toward her as he moved a little closer. At first Skye pulled back but after a few tries she gently touched the lizard, pulled her hand back quickly and giggled. She touched it again. “Him is cold. Him need a cover?”

“No, mommi, he is a lizard. It is okay for him to be cold.” Yoyo smiled.

“What’s all the noise?” Fitz yawned from the doorway, digging a fist into his eye.

“Looka, Fizz!” Skye squealed, still stroking the creature in Mack’s hand. “Mack caught the agalator. Him is lello.”

The little boy nodded his head. “That’s splendid.” He yawned again as he started to turn away. “Now, maybe we can get some sleep.”

“Hold on there, Turbo.” Mack snickered. Fitz stopped and turned, squinting at the large man. “Care to tell us how this little guy got in here?”

Fitz scratched his head and smacked his lips a few times before shrugging his shoulders. Jemma slid around the door frame resting her head against the wall. She pushed her disheveled hair away from her eyes and took a deep breath.

“LIZ!” She exclaimed as she stepped into the room and ran a finger down the lizard’s spine. “Where did you find her? Look Fitz,” she turned toward the little boy who was shaking his head. “Mack’s found Liz!”

“Him was unner my bed, Jemma,” Skye nodded as she spoke. “I toed you a agalator was unner my bed. I seed him goed unner. I gived him my letsus to make him get out.”

Fitz stepped into the room rocking his head from side to side. He reached up and gently took the reptile from Mack’s hands. “He is a she,” he began, “and she’s not an alligator she is a Sceloporus uniformis, more commonly known as the yellow-backed spiny lizard. She’s native to the Mojave Desert but she currently resides in our Science class with a few other reptiles. We’ve been studying them and their habitats.”
“It seems she currently resides under your little sister’s bed.” Yoyo glared at the boy.

“I…she…she was supposed to stay in her habitat. I suppose I didn’t latch it correctly when I fed her yesterday.” Fitz shrugged.

Mack squatted down in front of the boy. “What is the lizard doing here in the first place, Fitz?”

“Some of the older chaps were about to let the boa constrictor devour her.” He exclaimed, then added softly. “I couldn’t let that happen, so I sort of pinched her from the lab.”

“Fitz! You stole Liz?” Jemma was appalled.

“We gotz a agalator!” Skye clapped.

Yoyo let out a long breath. “Okay, Todos de vuelta a la cama. Back to bed, everyone. It is two o’clock. Put that reptile back in its cage and make sure it is closed and locked. We will talk more in the morning.”

Yoyo spent the next half hour settling an over excited Skye back to sleep while Mack tucked Jemma back in and kissed her goodnight for the second time. He walked into Fitz’s room as the boy was struggling to pull a large aquarium out of the closet. He smiled and shook his head then picked up the item and placed it on the boy’s desk. “How did you manage to get this up here?” He narrowed his eyes at the boy.

“Trip helped me,” Fitz shrugged. “I told him it was for a Science Club project.” He looked up at Mack and continued quickly. “It wasn’t really lying, animal research is science and well eventually I would have suggested it to the club as a project.”

“Uh huh,” Mack nodded.

Fitz let out a deep sigh as he took the lizard from the shoe box temporary home and softly placed it in the terrarium. “I think she’ll be happier here.” He pulled the metal lid closed and secured the latch then crossed the room and climbed into bed.
Mack watched for a moment before helping the boy to straighten his blankets and settle back onto his pillow. He sat down on the edge of the bed as Fitz folded his hands on his chest.

“I suppose you’ll be telling mom and da about this fiasco.” The little boy sighed.

Mack rubbed his hands together and looked at his palms. “No way, little man, you’re going to have to do that all on your own.”

Fitz slapped a hand on his forehead. “Stealing and lying? I’m dead.”

Mack laughed and tapped his hand on the boy’s leg. “Get some sleep, Turbo. You’ve got a three day reprieve before sentence is passed. Enjoy it. Oh, and keep that alligator,” he nodded toward the reptile blinking its large black eyes at them, “locked up tight.”

“Oh no,” Fitz sat up quickly. “I’m tellin’ them as soon as they call tomorrow. That will give them time to cool down a bit before they get back.”

Mack gave the boy a thumbs-up then pushed him back into his pillow. “Good night, Fitz.” The large man smiled as he rose to leave.

Fitz rolled on his side and pulled his legs up scrunching into his blankets. “Good morning, Mack.”

The ‘alligator’ spent the next day as the object of Skye’s devoted attention. The following day it was taken back to the school Science Camp with an explanation provide by Fitz which earned a stern lecture from the coordinator but also a promise that no one would feed Liz to the boa constrictor at any time.

It was hard to tell who missed the little critter more as both Fitz and Skye pouted until their parents returned with more surprises than anyone expected.
B - Bursting Balloons

Chapter Summary

Fitz finds a box of balloons and has a grand idea
Skye wants to help
Melinda does not find it amusing

Chapter Notes

Moved this part of series to this as a chapter
Series of One-shots on the every day life of 'growing a family'

“I don’t think I can fit any more in the car, Mel. There’s barely room to drive.” Phil smirked as he brushed his hands together. “I can take them to the new place. Mack will help me unload. You and kids can finish up here and I’ll be back for you,” he glanced at his watch, “by five…six at the latest.”

Melinda pushed up her sleeves and rolled her eyes. “You did this on purpose.” Her statement was flat, emotionless as both turned toward the loud thump and shrill laughter coming from the boys’ former bedroom.

“No really,” Phil defended himself as his wife turned and moved toward the sounds of their children and whatever mischief they were into now. “You were the one who wanted to get this done in as few trips as possible. Neither of us saw that flat tire on your SUV and whose fault is it there’s no spare?” He raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders as she turned and glared at him. “We can stop at the Italian’s for pizza on the way home.”

He thought about that for a moment as she disappeared down the hall. He could hear her calling the kids to order, doling out assignments and chiding them for whatever mess they’d created. Smiling he patted his pockets for his keys then noticed them on the top step leading to the foyer. He picked them up and opened the front door. Yes, he was off to their home, their new home where they had room to breathe and play and live together, not on top of each other like they had been doing in this small apartment.

Melinda stepped into the now almost empty bedroom Fitz and Trip had been sharing the last few
months. She let out an exasperated breath and almost smiled watching her brood laugh at Trip’s attempts at gymnastics. The loud thump was his failed cartwheel that ended with him tangled in his own gangly arms and legs. She shook her head and put her hands on her hips. “Alright, people lets get back to business. I thought you were going to have all this packed and sealed.”

Trip sat back and rubbed the back of his head, squinting up at the woman standing in the doorway. Skye scampered over to her mother reaching to be picked up, which Melinda obliged. Jemma grabbed a few items closest to her and pushed them into a box in front of the small closet. Fitz continued rolling on the floor in an effort to imitate his older brother’s crazy moves.

“Sorry,” the young boy smiled. “Guess we just needed a break.”

“Yeah,” Fitz laughed, “a break an arm...break a leg...break...” he demonstrated doing a Quasimodo walk around Trip.

“Not funny, Fitz,” Melinda warned in a voice that held no room for humor. “Come on guys, I’d like to get this done today, tomorrow at the latest.” She picked up a block of sorts with several wires protruding from every side. Fitz quickly took it from her and tossed it in the box next to the bed frame. “Really, Fitz,” she sighed, “what do you have in that box?” Melinda hiked Skye on to her opposite hip and reached for the box on the bottom bunk of the mattress-less bunk. The boy moved to intercept his mother, slapping his hand on the open flap.

“Them is hims tinks-a-jinks.” Skye pointed to the box and shook her head with a little pout. “Him no let me look eeder.”

Melinda stifled a laugh as she set her youngest on the floor and pulled her vibrating phone from her pocket. She held up a hand for the kids to quiet down and turned leaving the room in mid-conversation.

Trip still sat on the floor and leaned against the wall, staring at the door where Melinda had just exited. He was blindsided by a body slam from Fitz who knocked him sideways to the floor in a tangle of arms, legs, and good natured rough-housing. Skye joined the fray bouncing on her biggest brother’s stomach twice before he caught her under the arms and lifted her above him and Fitz in an awkward human bench press. Jemma frowned and considered scolding the lot of them, but laughed instead and continued pulling paraphernalia from the closet.

“Fitz…” the girl called to her brother as she struggled to close the full box on the floor. “Fitz!” She looked over her shoulder at her younger siblings who tried miserably to pin her older one to the floor. The laughter was contagious, but even so Jemma knew mom wanted this work done.
“FITZ!” She shouted and the three froze in place staring at her. Lowering her voice she continued, “This box is full, I need another.”

Fitz stood and pulled his twisted T-shirt into place covering his skinny ribs. “And ya don’t know where they are?” He accused.

“Everyone is supposed to be helping.” The little girl stood with her hands on her hips imitating her mother’s recent stance. “That means you as well. Now go out to the kitchen and bring back another box.”

“And who put you in charge of the whole lot then?” Fitz shot back.

Trip let out a spluttery laugh and butted the younger boy in the backside with the toe of his shoe as he fielded off an attacking Skye. “Just get the box, Fitz.”

The smaller boy threw his arms up in the air, dropped them quickly and shook his head as he stomped out of the room. Jemma watched for a moment then shook her head as well. She squinted up at a box tucked into the farthest corner of the top shelf. “You’ll need to help, Trip. I can not reach that last carton.” She pointed up toward it.

Trip ‘fake wrestled’ himself free of his baby sister, jumping to his feet and tossing her over his shoulder. Skye dangled over his back in a fit of giggles. The boy held fast to her small feet while reaching with the opposite arm to snag the item for Jemma. “Feels empty,” he announced, handing it to her.

Jemma jiggled the medium sized box close to her ear. Something rattled inside. Both children turned to Melinda as she stepped back into the room.

“Okay team, change of plans.” Melinda began looking concerned. “Drop what you’re doing. We’ve got to get to the office. Bobbi’s on her way.” She clapped her hands encouraging them to hurry. “Where is Fitz?” Melinda scanned the room. “Skye, where is your shoe?” She moved into the room picking up items that might be hiding a small sneaker.

Skye slid to the floor from Trip’s arms and looked at her shoeless foot. She shrugged her shoulders and held it out for closer examination. “I no know. It falldid offa my foots.”
Fitz skidded around the corner with a box over his head, his arms held out in front of his chest with his fingers curled into little claw-like pinchers. “Grrrrr,” he growled as he stomped into the room.

Melinda lifted the carton and turned up one side of her mouth. “Have you seen your sister’s shoe?” The boy jumped up trying to retrieve the box from her hold.

“Which one? Was it in the kitchen?” He asked between swiping bounces.

“Right and no,” Trip groaned as he dropped down to peer under the bed frame.

Fitz stopped bouncing and looked at Trip with a glare. “Not which shoe, nutter, which sister?”

Melinda pushed her hair behind her ear and rolled her eyes. “We don’t have time for this, guys. I’ve got a wigged out client at the office, someone screwed up an entire detail and the schedule is nowhere to be found. Bobbi should be here in less than five. We have to move.” She squatted down and took Skye by the shoulders. “Baby do you know where you lost your shoe?”

Skye giggled at her stocking foot. “It no losted, mama. It falldid off. I putted it inna box.”

Melinda’s head dropped and she blew out a breath over her lips. “Okay, sweetie, what box? Can you show mama?” Skye was already shaking her head.

“Daddy taked all the baloo bosses, mama. I is baloo.” She pointed proudly to herself.

Melinda’s shoulders fell in defeat. Phil had assigned everyone a color to help organize the boxes and get them to the right rooms in the new place. Skye was indeed blue…blue like the sky, Phil had told her handing her a bright blue marker. She’d colored on every box he gave until the marker went dry. She also colored her arms, legs, chest and face. “Permanent marker? Really Phil, you gave a permanent marker to our four-year-old?” She’d accused him after an hour long soak did nothing to dim the blue on her Smurf-baby. It had taken almost a week and an embarrassing explanation to Miss Tripani for all that marker to wear off.

Phil and his great ideas…he was on his way to Bethesda with all those boxes…and Skye’s right sneaker. “Okay, then…” Melinda pursed her lips and took a deep breath. She rubbed her hands across her thighs before standing. “I guess you go with one shoe.”
“I hop?” Skye’s eyebrows disappeared under her bangs. Fitz lifted one leg and began demonstrating around the room. The little girl tried a few times before hurrying to hold on to her brother in order to keep her balance. They both laughed uncontrollably.

Trip watched for a moment then stepped closer to Melinda. “I can watch them.” He suggested timidly. Melinda looked at him for a moment before starting to shake her head. “No, really. I can do it.” He insisted. “You can get your work done and we’ll finish packing all this last minute stuff. It’s almost three and Mr. C said he’d be back by five or six.”

“I don’t know, Trip.” Melinda looked toward her two youngest who continued hopping around the room, falling, rolling and starting all over. “Maybe, I should just take Skye.”

The boy smiled. “How you gonna get anything done with that little whirlwind breezing around the office?” They both laughed. “Besides,” he pointed out, “you haven’t got a car seat.”

Trip was right. She hadn’t even thought about that. The car seat was in her car…with the flat tire…in the garage in Bethesda. The extra one was on the floor in the foyer, taken out of Phil’s car to make room for all those damn boxes. She thought for a moment. They were safe here in the apartment. The electricity still worked. There were snacks and beverages. She thought for a moment. They were safe here in the apartment. The electricity still worked. There were snacks and beverages. She’d be a phone call away and that Mrs. Joyce was right down the hall in case of an emergency. “Are you sure, Trip?” Again she glanced at Fitz and Skye who now wriggled under the bed frame after an errant Lego figure.

“Sure, Mrs. C, lots of times I help out in the Cradle Roll at church.” At her confused look he explained. “It’s where the little kids have Sunday school.” Melinda nodded her understanding.

She thought for a moment. Without the kids, she could get more done in a shorter amount of time. With Bobbi’s help she could do it twice as fast. She could be back before Phil…with a new pair of sneakers for her one shoed toddler. Melinda let out the breath she was holding. “Okay,” she rested her hand on the boy’s shoulder. “But you call me if anything and I mean ANYTHING happens.”

Trip smiled and gave her a thumb’s up. Melinda turned to her young scamps and motioned them closer to her. “Mama’s got to go to work for a little bit. Trip’s in charge. You do as he says.”

“He’s gonna be bossin’ us about?” Fitz was indignant.
“Don’t interrupt,” Melinda shot her younger son a glare and pointed a finger in his direction. “And yes, he is the boss until either I or your father gets back. Understand?"

Jemma smiled and nodded quickly. Skye reached up for Trip to take her, then kissed his cheek in approval. Fitz folded his arms over his chest. He looked up at his brother with one eye closed. “How can we be sure he’s responsible enough for this position?”

“Fitz,” Melinda’s voice held a warning as well as threat.

The little boy let out a frustrated sigh and dropped his arms to his side. “Yes, ma’am, Trip’s the boss.” Melinda smiled and ruffled his hair before pulling him into a tight hug. She managed to kiss him twice before he wriggled free and scooted back under the bed frame.

Taking Skye into her arms she squeezed her baby tightly and pulled off the shoe still on her left foot. “It’s easier to walk when your feet are level, little one.” She pushed the sneaker into her jacket pocket, kissed the little girl on each cheek and set her down. Skye dropped to her knees and creeped quickly under the bed frame joining her brother.

After kissing Jemma on top of the head while the little girl continued to stuff the box Fitz had dropped at her feet and giving an embarrassed Trip a quick squeeze and peck on the cheek, Melinda gave a hesitant ‘see you later’ and made sure her eldest locked the door as she exited.

“I thought she’d never leave,” Fitz breathed as he slapped a hand on his forehead and fell back onto the floor bumping his head on the box Trip had fished from the high shelf. “Ouch!” He whined, sitting up and rubbing the back of his head as he pulled the box into his lap. Skye plopped down beside him waiting to see what treasures the container held. Fitz looked at his little sister and wriggled his eyebrows. “Now what could be in here, do you think?” He teased.

Skye shook her head and bounced with excitement. “I no know. Open it, Fitz.” She urged.

“We’re supposed to be working, not playing.” Jemma scolded.

Fitz slapped his hand on the box, causing Skye to jump. “Mom said Trip was in charge, Jemma. Don’t be such an old washer woman,” Skye giggled although she had no idea what a washer woman might be. “May I look, Trip?” He looked up at his brother with puppy-dog eyes. “Skye really wants to see what it contains.” He patted the box as she nodded.
Trip thought for a moment and let out a deep breath. What could it hurt? The box was light. If anything it was probably papers or just those packing peanut thingies. He looked at Jemma who seemed to disagree but felt if he said no they’d be arguing over it for hours. “Yeah, go ahead.”

Fitz didn’t need to be told twice. He pulled the tape he had already picked loose off the box and flipped open the flaps. “Now, what’s this?” He smiled as he stuffed his hand into a pile of deflated balloons in a rainbow of bright colors. Skye pulled out a purple one and put it to her lips, spitting more than blowing into it. Fitz made a ‘yuck face’ and pulled away from her. “Look,” he pulled one out and stretched it so the lettering on it was visible. “It’s da’s office name and logo. They must have used them for a celebration.”

Jemma stooped over and pulled out a bright pink balloon. She smiled imagining her parents celebrating their business opening. “Perhaps a grand celebration for their primary start,” she suggested.

Trip took a handful and let them drop one by one back into the box as Skye continued trying to inflate the now wet floppy balloon. “Must be leftovers,” he shrugged. “We’ll just put them with the rest of the boxes.”

“Bow dis, Fizz,” Skye shook the balloon in front of her brother.

“Eee ew, that’s bloody disgusting,” Fitz groaned scooting away from her.

Skye wrinkled up her face and stood with her balloon hand. “I wass it, Fizz, so it no be skusting.” Before anyone could snag her she was out the door on her way to the bathroom.

“No, Skye, wait,” Fitz scrambled after her with the box tucked under his arm.

Trip shook his head and turned to help Jemma with packing the remainder of the items in the room.

Skye struggled to reach the sink before big-brother Fitz opened the cabinet door below it and showed her how to stand on the shelf to gain access. She smiled as she was able to reach the spigot and turn on the water. It rushed out quickly and splashed both causing her to teeter back and almost lose her footing. Fitz quickly put a hand on her back and pushed her forward.
“You don’t have to wash that,” he nodded toward the balloon she was scrubbing between her hands under the running water. “We’ve got a box full of them.” Fitz gently moved his foot and bumped the box he had dropped on the floor before helping his little sister. He turned off the water and helped her down.

Skye held tightly to her purple balloon that now had collected a bit of water. She shook it and listened to the squishy sound the water made. “Looka Fizz, it a little wadder hodder.” Before he could stop her she put the end of the balloon in her mouth and sucked out the liquid. Immediately making a terrible grimace she coughed. “It yucky, Fizz.” The little girl stuck out her tongue and wiped it with the hem of her T-shirt. She turned the deflated object upside down and shook the rest of the water onto the bathroom floor.

Fitz watched for a moment, unconcerned with wiping up the spill, then smiled broadly. “You are not supposed to drink it, Skye, but that gives me a grand idea.” He patted the box he now held in his arms and moved back to the sink.

“You gotz a grandeeia? What you do, Fizz?” Skye buzzed as she climbed back on the shelf to watch her brother stretch the opening of a bright red balloon over the faucet and turn on the water. She tried to clap at the site of the growing balloon, again almost dropping backward to the floor. Fitz grabbed her waist and pushed her up to sit on the counter as he continued to fill one balloon after the other and place each gently into the bathtub. Skye was thrilled with the bright squishy balls her brother created.

“Hey!” Trip’s voice carried down the hallway, causing Fitz to jump. “What are you guys doing? What’s taking so long?”

Fitz lost his grip on the balloon he was filling. It sputtered around the sink, spurting water everywhere, including the perch where Skye sat. She slid to the side but the puddle crept under her wetting the back of her flowered pants.

Fitz pushed the water off, grabbed his little sister off the counter and moved to the door. “We… I…I’m helping Skye use the potty…” Before Skye could react he, clamped his hand over her mouth and motioned for her to be quiet.

“Oh, Fitz,” he heard Jemma’s sigh, “I’m coming, let me do that.”

“I’m more than capable.” Fitz called back.
In the boys’ former room Jemma looked up at Trip and smiled. “Oh if she needs to be cleaned, we’ll have a genuine mess to clean. He’ll probably vomit all over the bath.” She put down the items she held and took a step toward the door as the sound of the commode flushing echoed in the empty apartment.

“All done!” Fitz’s voice called up the hallway. “Just have to wash up.” He pushed the bathroom door closed with his foot and turned around to face Skye with a finger against his lips. “Shhhh,” he smiled as he latched the door then stood with his ear close to it, listening for his older siblings to approach. When he was sure they were not in the hall he took his hand from Skye’s mouth.

The little girl stood back and wrinkled her brow at her brother. “You smished my mout, Fizz. That not nice and you maked my pantses all wet. I no peepee my pantses, Fizz. Mama be mad to me.”

“No she won’t, Skye.” Fitz whispered pushing her backward, away from the door. “It’s only a little bit of water. It will dry.”

Skye held out both palms to her brother and bounced them up and down. “My unnerwears is wet, Fizz. I no like a it.”

The boy took a big breath and let it out in a huff then turned her toward the bright watery baubles in the bathtub. “Look,” he pointed at the treasure. “Don’t you want to see my grand idea? It is a marvelous plan.” He placed his hands on her shoulders and shook her gently. He reached into the mass and picked up a small purple ball, carefully placing it in her hands. Skye smiled and nodded taken in by the fascination with these wonderful orbs.

Once again he placed a finger to his lips and tiptoed to the door. He opened it and stuck his head out. “Maybe Skye and I could start in mom and da’s room and we can be finished all the more faster? No sense having the lot of us working in the same space all afternoon.” He waited for an answer while Skye placed the balloon back into the tub and picked up a bigger blue ball. She squeezed it just a bit and laughed at its bouncy texture.

“Yeah, sounds good,” Trip’s voice called back. “There’s not too much in there. Just give it a good check…and stay outta trouble.” He warned.

“No trouble, right.” Fitz called back. He turned to Skye, placing a hand on her chest. “You stay here and guard the tub. I will be right back.” She nodded once and dropped the blue balloon back into the tub, then reached for a yellow one.
Fitz was back in seconds carrying a large red pail he’d retrieved from the laundry room. He took the balloon from Skye and set it in the bottom of the bucket, showing her how to carefully load the container. Once full, he opened the bathroom door and peeked down the hall before grabbing the pail with both hands and struggled to carry it the few feet to his parents’ former bedroom. Skye followed behind still curious as to what her brother planned to do.

The master bedroom was empty. Unlike the kids rooms all of the furniture had already been moved to the house in Bethesda. They’d taken the kids mattresses and set up ‘campsites’ inside the new place for them to sleep until the new carpets were laid and Melinda was sure the drying paint would pose no danger to her brood. The kids loved the idea of bunking together in the large family room on the first floor, although Skye was much happier snuggled between her parents in this strange new place.

Fitz slid the bucket across the hardwood floor stopping at the curtain-less windows on the far side. He stood and peered down to the street, smiling at the fact that this room faced the front of the building and so many people walked back and forth this time of day. Skye stood next to him peering down as well and wondering what they might be looking for down there.

The boy reached up and unlatched the window then carefully pushed it up just enough to lean out a few inches. He smiled at his baby sister. “Watch,” he smiled at her as he reached into the bucket and lifted one of the balloons. He balanced it on his hand then carefully leaned out the window and let it drop. Fitz pulled his head in quickly and peer through one of the unopened panes. The ‘missile’ splashed on the sidewalk causing a man in a fine suit to jump back and look up, cursing a few times before shaking off his foot and storming away.

Fitz slapped his hands over his mouth to stifle his laughter as Skye shook her head. “That man no wants hims feets all wet, Fizz.” She looked back to the walk below as people sidestepped the puddle on the concrete. Fitz was already arming himself again, this time with one balloon in each hand. He dropped the first and then the other a second later. He could tell he’d hit a target by the yelling coming from the street. He peered through the window at the young man with spiky hair pulling ear buds from his head and glaring up into the sun. The front of his shirt was definitely wet as he shook his fist and bellowed some expletives the boy was sure his little sister shouldn’t hear. This time Skye giggled.

“I do?” She had a balloon in her hand as he nodded and grabbed her middle to help her reach the window. The balloon dropped from her hand and splashed to the sidewalk without causing any damage. The little girl frowned then looked to her older brother. “Again?” He nodded and the two happily began bombarding the passersby with their colorful water missiles. Once the bucket was emptied Fitz returned for a reload and when the tub was almost empty he simply filled more of the ammo in the box on the bathroom floor. Twice Skye squeezed a ball just a bit too hard and ended up drenching herself and the floor but Fitz’s laughter kept her from bursting into tears.
“They are having way too much fun to be doing any sort of work.” Jemma surmised as she taped the last box closed. Trip nodded as he added it to the pile near the door of the room.

“Well, at least we got this mess done without the ‘gruesome twosome’ making it more work than it had to be.” He brushed his hands together and looked at his watch. “Luckily there was probably nothing in there anyway so they couldn’t get in any trouble.” He smiled at his sister’s nod. “Mrs. C should be back soon. Better get whatever mess they made cleaned up and be ready when she gets here.”

“There are some snacks in the cooler, Uncle Phil brought into the kitchen. We can keep them busy with that for a little while.” She brushed her hands off on her jeans and followed Trip into the hallway.

“Okay, triple blast,” Fitz smiled as he took two large balloons and Skye held a third. He pushed her up until she balanced on her belly against the window frame then reached around her with his ‘ammo’. “On three,” he spoke into her ear, pressing his body against her to keep her from falling. “One…two…THREE!”

Skye’s balloon was a few seconds off, but the triple threat spun to the ground hitting its target dead on. The bellow followed by a string of what was probably cursing in a foreign tongue reached the open window before Fitz had the chance to pull his little sister inside. He wrapped his arms around her tummy and stepped back into the puddle on the floor slipping on the slick surface then landing on his bottom with Skye in his lap.

“What the hell?” Trip growled without thinking as he walked into the room just as the two hit the floor.

Jemma stepped around him, ignoring the comment. “FITZ!” Her eyes went wide as her younger siblings rolled on the floor in laughter.

“What are you doing?” Trip demanded as he rushed to the window and looked down to see a very familiar figure shaking off the water from the bomb that had dropped on her head. She peered up with sunglasses askew and a look that meant certain death. He quickly slammed the window shut.
and flicked the lock before turning on the two soaking children splashing in the mess on the floor.

Trip grabbed Fitz by the arm and yanked him to his feet. “What were you thinking you little numbskull?” He shook the boy hard. “Do you know what you just did? Who you soaked? Damn little man, your ass is grass!”

“Hey!” Fitz protested ignoring his brother’s scolding. “You’re hurting me. Mom said you could tell me what to do. She didn’t say you could manhandle me. Let go!” He tried to pull away, but his brother held on tightly.

Jemma struggled to keep her balance on the slippery floor as she pulled Skye to her feet. “Look at you. You’re positively soaked.” She tsked at the younger girl whose footing was a bit sturdier with her soggy stocking feet.

“I wet,” Skye smiled. “My sockasez is dippy.” Jemma drew a deep breath and pushed her sister down on a dry spot, pulled off her soaking socks with much difficulty and squeezed the water out of them into the now empty bucket.

“Damn it, Fitz!” Trip scolded the little boy again. “You are dead meat, little bro. Do you know who you just drenched down there?” He asked a second time.

Fitz shrugged his shoulders and grinned. “Some tourist I suspect. They’ll have a grand tale to tell when they get back, won’t they then.” He laughed and tried again to pull free of his brother who now dragged him toward the door leaving wet footprints all the way. “You should have seen the lad with the skateboard. He was the best. Got him right in the kisser when he looked up after a miss.”

Skye’s bare feet slapped on the floor as Jemma led her to the bathroom, hoping to find a least one towel that might help dry the little girl whose hair was plastered to her face and dripped everywhere. There was a large drop of water holding to the tip of her little nose and those on her earlobes resembled small crystal earrings. “Oh, Skye, we don’t even have extra clothing for you.” Jemma shook her head woefully.

Trip stood in the bathroom staring at the tub. “You intended to use ALL of these?” He shook his head at the amount of water balloons still in the basin.

Fitz shrugged. “We had them. Why not use them?”
Jemma had pulled the damp hand towel from the rack next to the sink and attempted to dry her sister’s hair. Skye pushed her hands away.

“No, Zemma. I no like it smells.” Skye whined, pulling away from her older sister.

“There’s towels in my gram’s bathroom. I’ll get them.” Trip announced as he pulled a keychain from his pocket. “You keep both of them here,” he told Jemma. He let go of Fitz’s arm and pushed him down to sit on the edge of the tub. “And no more balloons!” He ordered with a finger pointing in the Fitz’s face. The smaller boy curled his lip then laughed around Trip as he watched Skye attempt to pull off her wet T-shirt.

“I wet, Zemma. I code.” She spoke from inside the tangled material.

Trip rushed to the door and reached for the knob only to jump out of the way as the it slammed open against the wall. His eyes went wide as he stepped back and to the side, knocked speechless at the form that stood in the doorway for a second before stepping slowly inside, grabbing the knob and slamming the door closed just as hard.

When the tale was told in the future Trip would swear there was steam rising from the drenched form of Melinda May standing before him. She pulled off her sunglasses and used one hand to flip her wet hair away from her face. Mascara leaked black streaks down one side of her face and water dripped from her chin in a steady pace.

Trip opened his mouth to speak then snapped it shut at the glare he received. For a moment Melinda simply looked daggers at the boy, daring him to speak, to move, to make some kind of excuse for what had happened. He wanted to look away, to step...no to run as far as he could, but something kept him rooted to the spot looking back into those glowering eyes.

The boy took a breath and swallowed hard. “Towels…” he squeaked, pointing to the door and holding up the key he still held in his hand. She nodded. Well, he thought she did. It was so slight he might have imagined it, but she did not stop him as he reached for the door. He froze when her hand landed on his upper arm as he stepped into the hall. She raised one eyebrow and took a deep breath. “Bathroom,” he answered the unspoken question then prayed he could be back before she made him and Jemma her only children.
Jemma had stripped Skye down to her panties which stuck to her wet body exposing everything they were meant to cover. The smaller girl insisted on removing them much to her older sister’s objection.

“I no wan Frip a see my unnerwears,” Skye cried as she attempted to peel the wet garment from her body. It simply condensed into a rope-like tube, rolled over her little bottom and stuck at the top of her thighs. She cried harder finding it almost impossible to remove.

“Baby, if you take off your panties he will see then your bum,” Jemma reasoned as she slid the weird tube from where it stuck and watched it drop to the floor with a small thud. Skye shook her head and only cried harder although Jemma’s logic served to give Fitz a fit of laughter sending him backward and over the edge of the tub directly into the remaining water filled balloons.

The balls popped left and right as the boy struggled to right himself, laughing even harder as he failed to gain any success. Skye’s whining turned to a strange combination of tears and giggles as the water splashed in mini geysers drenching the boy even further.

Melinda stepped into the room and drew a sharp breath at the site that met her. Fitz was strewn on his back with one foot in and one out of the tub. A few balloons still wobbled around his frame but mostly the colorful remnants of burst rubber stuck to the boy and the sides of the tub. The rest floated in the water that remained since other rubber shards blocked the drain. Jemma knelt on the floor attempting to untangle what appeared to be a small swath of pink cotton cloth.

“Mama!” Her naked baby squealed as she pushed around her sister and scurried across the slick tile floor. Melinda caught her before she lost her footing, scooping her into her arms.

Skye pushed her still wet hair from her eyes and patted her mother’s clothing. She looked up at Melinda and touched her hair then the black streaks on her face. “Mama,” the little girl breathed. “You all wet.”

“Yes_I_am.” Melinda spoke through her teeth, glaring at the little boy staring up at her from the tub.

Skye wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck. “We haved a grandeeia! Me an Fizz do a grandeeia, mama. We didded.” She continued to nod and smile despite her mother’s scowl.
Trip stopped himself before crashing into the woman just inside the door, then held out a pile of towels. Melinda took one and wrapped it around a shivering Skye. She passed the baby to Trip and took the remainder of them. Taking one and placing the others on the counter she wiped her face then squeezed out the drips from her hair.

“Jemma, take Skye’s clothes and put them in the dryer.” Melinda ordered with object efficiency. “Don’t turn it on until I say.” The little girl nodded and gathered the clothing from the floor then slipped past Trip who stood in the doorway.

Melinda turned to the boy. “You take her out there and get her dry.” She tossed him two more towels. “Do not, absolutely DO NOT put her down.”

“Yes, ma’am…I mean no ma’am…er yes ma’am…” Trip backed out of the room halting his attempt to answer Melinda as she continued to glare at him.

“And close the door,” Trip merely nodded and swallowed deeply. He cringed in sympathy for the little boy now trapped inside with his incensed mother.

“Frip, you no looka my unnerwears,” Skye scolded as he pulled the door closed and turned toward the kitchen.

“No way, baby girl, I no looka. Promise.” He kissed her cheek and dropped down onto one of the chairs that had yet to be returned to his grandmother’s apartment.

Melinda crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at the boy who had pushed himself as far back into the tub as humanly possible. He smiled weakly.

“Out,” she commanded quietly, which was so much more threatening than shouting.

Fitz struggled to roll over and stand before stepping out onto the floor. His sneakers kept him from slipping on the wet tile. Melinda let the toilet seat lid drop with a bang then sat on it and motioned for the boy to come closer. Fitz swallowed hard then took a tentative step toward his mother.
“What are you about to do?” He asked softly as he stopped and stood his ground. Melinda pointed to the spot directly in front of her without taking her eyes from him. He took another step but stayed out of her reach. “You can’t kill me,” he laughed a little at his attempted joke. “I’m just a wee lad.” Her glare did not waver as she once again pointed to the same spot. “It’s just a bit of water.” He explained. “Just a bit of clean fun,” he tried a pun to no avail.

Melinda leaned forward and snagged his wrist pulling him gently to the spot she had determined. She stared at the little boy who simply blinked back at her. Fitz watched as she raised her hand and picked the piece of red rubber from his hair then flicked it into the sink. He raised his eyebrows and gave a tiny smile she did not return.

Giving a slight shake of her head in warning, Melinda grabbed the hem of his soaking shirt and pulled it up and over his head before he could protest. Lifting one foot and then the other she slipped off his sneakers and tossed all three items across the floor. With one move she undid his jeans then lowered him to the floor and rolled off his soaking socks. She grabbed the hems on the legs of his jeans and tugged until they began to pull free and bump off his wet legs. Those items were also tossed into the wet pile before she put out a hand and helped him to stand. The soaking white underwear did as much to cover him as his little sister’s had and suddenly Jemma’s logic didn’t seem quite so funny.

Fitz folded his hands in front of him and looked down at the floor. “I suppose you’re about to smack me, aren’t you?” He mumbled the question hoping she might not really understand him.

“Do you think you deserve to be smacked?” Melinda spoke for the first time, the anger hidden but still apparent in her voice.

“Well, if you’re letting me make the choice,” he smiled as he looked into her eyes and saw the stern look she cast back. His smile faded as he dropped his gaze again and left the statement unfinished.

“You’ve made enough poor choices, young man. Perhaps I should make this one.” Again, she spoke softly, making him feel even worse. “What if you hit an older person? Scared someone? Drove them into the street? What about children or someone in a wheelchair? Would that be just clean fun?” Fitz shrugged his shoulders and cringed at his mother’s deep sigh. “And what about Skye? What if she fell, Fitz? What if you fell? Do you know what kind of danger you put yourself in?”

Fitz took a shaky breath and brushed away the tear that rolled over his cheek. “I’m sorry I got you all wet.” He whispered.
One firm smack surprised the boy more than it stung. He drew a quick breath, swallowed hard and nodded toward his mother. He quickly swiped at the tears that threatened to fall and sniffed once as his mother helped him out of his wet drawers, wrapped him in two towels then gently gathered him on to her lap. She rubbed the water from his curls and pulled him to her chest placing a kiss on his forehead.

“You are my very, very brilliant little boy, Fitz and I love you so much more than you’ll ever understand.” Melinda let out a long cleansing breath and rested her chin on top of his head. She felt him let out a breath of his own. “I know you thought it was all in fun, but I think you are smarter than that.”

Fitz allowed himself to be snuggled and played with the large button on Melinda’s still damp blouse. “It was just a prank.” He sniffed, refusing to let himself cry even though he really wanted to. No one ever held him like this. Sometimes when his maw was so sick she could barely sit up, he would sit and hold her head in his lap. He’d pet her hair and kiss her warm forehead and pretend that she did the same for him, but it was just pretend. He knew she loved him, but she just never had the strength to do much cuddling. That’s what he told himself and that’s what he believed. Besides he needed to be tough, be a man, take care of his maw because no one else would do it.

But here, with Melinda – his American mostly Asian mom – it was different. Here he just had to be a boy...a little boy...a little boy that made bad choices and did dopey things and got his bum smacked for doing them. Here his mom held him and kissed him and told him he was smart and good and she loved him even when he did dopey things, even when she cuffed him. Melinda was wrong. He did understand that she loved him but she was the one who would never understand how much he loved her back.

“Wǒ fèicháng ài nǐ, mama.” Fitz breathed into Melinda’s neck so softly she wasn’t sure she heard, but smiled and hugged him tighter for it.

Melinda smiled and kissed the top of his head as she patted his bottom gently. “You need to think before you act, bāobèi nánhái. I know you how much you love a good prank. Nǐ hěn xiáng nǐ de fùqīn. This was a dangerous stunt, bāobèi.” She kissed him again. It was true, this little boy was so much like Phil she wondered if it was possible for DNA to rub off and be absorbed into their children.

Fitz sniffled and wiped his nose with the towel that was draped over his shoulders. “I’m sorry, mama.” He only called her that in private, when no one else heard. He snuggled into her embrace. “Please don’t smack, Skye. It wasn’t her idea. You can give me her smack. She’s just
a wee girl, mama.”

Melinda squeezed him tighter. He was Skye’s protector, always. She knew that. Sometimes the closeness between the two surprised her. All of the children were close but these two shared something special. Jemma and Trip had a chance to know their parents to know their mother’s love, even if it were for a short time. Fitz’s mother was sick most of his life. She loved him dearly, but he took care of her more than she did him and Skye had never known a mother’s love until Melinda wrapped her in it. Perhaps that was the bond they shared, the thing that brought them so close.

“You and I will talk to Skye,” she explained to him. “We will both tell her why she shouldn’t do something like this ever again. You will tell her how dangerous it is and how much trouble someone can get into for doing something without thinking.” He nodded into her chest.

“You mean being a dunderhead…” Fitz sighed into her embrace.

For a moment they sat in silence. Fitz barely noticed when Jemma opened the door and took all of his wet garments. Melinda nodded giving her permission to turn on the dryer. She waited for the little girl to leave before setting the boy on his feet.

“Okay, little man, you are going out to sit with Trip and Skye while I get this mess cleaned up and Jemma gets your clothes dried.” She pulled the towel she had wrapped around his waist a little snugger and tucked it in deeper.

Fitz nodded and walked into the hall then turned back. “Are you going to tell Da?”

Melinda pursed her lips and shook her head. “We’ll both talk to him.” He took a deep breath and nodded before walking away.

By the time Phil made it back, the mess was cleaned and everything was dry including two very contrite children. The family climbed into their vehicle and everyone cheered when he announced they were stopping at their favorite pizzeria for supper.

Once in the parking lot Trip unhooked a sleepy Skye from her seat and carried her as he hurried to
catch up to the ‘twins’ partly because she refused to walk on the gravel covered parking lot in her new pink and white sneakers. Phil and Melinda lagged behind. He pulled her hand into his.

“Remember when we used to come here and sit at that table for two way in the back?” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Melinda laughed. “Those were the days,” she jested as she shoulder bumped him. They watched their crew bound into the establishment and search for a table for six.

“By the way,” Phil started as he fished his hand into his jacket pocket. “Any idea where this came from,” he waggled a purple balloon piece in front of her, their business name just visible on the scrap. “Found it on the sidewalk in front of the building.” He wrinkled his brow in confusion.

Melinda reached up and snagged it from his fingers, stashing it in her own pocket. “Ask Fitz,” she suggested then thought again. “But ask him tomorrow, let’s just enjoy tonight.” She pulled herself up on his arm and kissed his cheek then pulled him to quicken his step before that crew they could see through the window ordered one of everything on the menu.
C - Catching Colds

Chapter Summary

Jemma falls ill right before the kids are to go to a pool party
Melinda frets about leaving her with Phil
Can Daddy handle the task?

Chapter Notes

Moved from series to part of this as chapters
Starting with 'H' all one-shots will be here and not stand alone as a series
I am not deleting as I do not want to lose comments from those who took time to write
All are one shot stories of every day life while 'growing a family'

Phil rolled over and rubbed one eye, awakened by the sudden beam of light from the master bathroom. It wasn’t unusual for May to make a visit during the night but it was odd that she had turned on the light. He could hear her fumbling with something in the medicine cabinet.

“May?” he called softly, “everything okay?” His eyes were closed but he listened for her reply. He opened them again as she flicked the light off and held up her trusty little white ‘someone’s got a fever’ case.

“Skye?” he guessed, raising up on one elbow.

“Sound asleep,” she answered as she started for the door.

“Fitz,” he stated, throwing off the blanket. May would need help with the boy, unless he was as sick as he had been a few months ago. That in itself was frightening and could mean a trip to the ER. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand.

“No, Phil.” Melinda stopped and spoke quietly. “Jemma’s up. She’s been coughing since dinner. I found her in the bathroom trying to quell it with gulps of water. She feels warm to me. I just want to be safe. I’ll call Dr. Stephens as soon as the office is opened.”
Phil stopped at the edge of the bed looking over his shoulder at his wife. He nodded as she exited the room and fell back against his pillow. He lay there half on the bed with his feet over the edge and considered getting something for the splitting headache that felt like it was melting his eyes then sneezed himself into a sitting position. After three more he dragged himself to the bathroom and flicked on the blinding light. There had to be something in there for headache accompanied by violent sneezing. He started fingering through the variety of boxes and bottles in his search.

A few minutes later he paced nervously outside his older daughter’s room, stopping when May slipped into the hall and closed the door silently. She turned to him and immediately put a finger over her lips signaling him to be silent.

“How is she?” He whispered hoarsely.

She stared at him for a second before answering. “One hundred point five, I gave her some Tylenol® and rubbed her chest with some menthol.” Phil nodded, sure his wife was doing what was best for their daughter. “It’s probably just a cold, but don’t want it to get worse.”

“No,” Phil shook his head, regretting it immediately. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them quickly when Melinda placed her hand on his forehead.

“You feel a little warm, too, daddy.” May frowned.

“I’m fine,” Phil held out a hand and took a step back eyeing Melinda’s little white case tucked neatly under her arm. “Took some of that cold medicine in the bathroom…few hours sleep and I’ll be good as new.

“Great, then let’s get back to bed before we wake up the whole crew.” She grabbed his arm and led him back toward their room.

A few hours later Melinda stood in the kitchen sipping a cup of tea. Jemma’s temperature had gone back up to one hundred point five but she had few symptoms other than that very tight cough. She wasn’t complaining of a sore throat or stuffy nose. Another dose of fever reducing medication and some menthol rub pacified the little girl who drifted back to sleep in relief. Dr. Stephens agreed it was probably a chest cold but just to be sure it didn’t become something worse she prescribed an antibiotic and an expectorant to ease the coughing. Unlike her younger siblings Jemma had no problem taking medication as directed. The physician’s office called the medications into the pharmacy where Melinda could pick them up in a few hours. She picked up
her head as Fitz wandered into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing one eye.

“Good morning,” Melinda greeted her drowsy little boy.

“G’morn,” Fitz answered, shuffling his bare feet across the tile. Melinda almost laughed at how he always looked so skinny still clad in pajamas. He slid onto a chair and dropped his head on the table.

“Maybe not so good, huh?” Melinda smiled as she bent down and kissed the back of his head. He whined a bit and waved her off with one hand. “Maybe you need to go back to bed for a little bit.”

“No, I’m awake.” The boy raised his head and rested it on one hand. “Today’s Mack’s party right?” He brightened up a bit, popping up straight with a huge smile.

“Ah, Fitz, about that…” Melinda started, hating to disappoint the boy who’d been looking forward to this party for so long.

“Mama!” Skye squealed as she scampered into the room wearing nothing but a white camisole. The tiny pink rose that decorated the very front bobbed up and down as she raced into her mother’s arms.

Melinda set down her cup and scooped her baby girl up, wrapping her robe around her as Fitz covered the giggle that escaped him with both hands. Melinda scowled at him over her baby’s head, trying to hide her own smile. “Where are your clothes, baobei?” She asked the small child.

“Them is all wet,” Skye frowned.

Melinda let out a fluttery breath. Great, a sick husband, one sick child and now she had to strip Skye’s bed and wash all of the bedding. Thank goodness for plastic mattress covers!

“Fizz dood it,” the little girl frowned as she leaned back to glare at her brother. Melinda raised her eyebrows and Skye nodded.

“Fitz wet your bed?” Melinda almost laughed.
“She dint wee her bed, mom.” Fitz rested his fists on his temples and shook his head.

“No my bed, he no made my bed wet. Fizz maked my panamas all wet.” Skye explained.

“I most certainly did not!” The boy protested, dropping his hands to the table and looking at her with wide eyes. “She just invited herself right into the loo just as I was cleaning my hands and I guess I hadn’t put down the lid and she just plopped into the bowl.” The little boy demonstrated with his hands. Melinda bit her lip as she listened to his explanation. “I did attempt to fish her out, but she made such a racket, ya think I was tryin a drown her. It isn’t my doing that her bum is so little she drops right down inside.”

“There you are!” Trip rushed into the room, almost out of breath holding a small pair of panties and dry pajamas. “I heard the commotion in the bathroom and found these two swimming in the bowl.” He explained.

“We were not swimming,” Fitz countered. “I was trying to get Skye out of the toilet. She was a bit slippery and I didn’t want to be just as wet.”

“Well, you made enough noise and it took three towels to wipe up all the water.” Trip informed him.

“She was squirming about like a frightened fish, of course there was water. It’s a toilet bowl, but the water was clean.” Fitz spread his arms and shook his head. “Good thing ya came along, Trip. Ya make a fine life guard.” The little boy smiled at his brother’s snarl.

“Why’d ya run off, baby girl? I told you I’d get dry clothes.” Trip shook his head at the small child wrapped in her mother’s robe.

“You no looka my unnerwears, Trip. I toed you a lotsa times.” Skye bounced her hands at the older boy.

“Why’s it you don’t care if old Fitzie here sees your ‘unnerwears’?” Trip jerked a finger at the boy giggling into his hands at the table.
“Frip,” Skye drew out his name and turned her head to the side as if she were scolding him. “Fizz is like-a me and you is like-a Mack.” She finished as if he should just know without being told.

Trip pulled his head back in shock, “Wooo-eeee, our baby girl is racist?” Melinda furrowed her brows at her little one. Where could Skye get an idea like that?

Fitz slapped a hand on his forehead and rolled his eyes. “Don’t be daft, ya dunderhead, she means your big like him and I’m little like her. Skye doesn’t even know you’re black.”

“I is not a raisin, Frip and you is no black.” She reached out and stroked her big brother’s cheek. “You is bow-ow-an.”

Melinda let her head fall onto Skye’s little chest and hid her laugh while Fitz once again doubled over in laughter while Trip just shook his head. He couldn’t imagine why anyone would ever not want this little imp that he was lucky enough to call baby sister.

The older boy held out his arms to Skye. “Come on, little girl. Let’s get you dressed.” He held out the clothing and she leaned out to him reaching with both arms.

Fitz let loose another cackle of laughter gaining everyone’s attention. “She won’t let him see her undergarments but she dives right to him in her birthday suit.” With that he rolled off the chair onto the floor and continued laughing histerically.

“Enough, Fitz. Get off the floor,” Melinda smiled, shook her head and reached for the items. She held on to Skye and spoke to Trip. “You sit down. Have some juice and give the joker some, too. I’ll take care of this.” She took the clothing from him and carried Skye to the powder room.

“It my birday, mama?” Skye wondered as they exited the kitchen.

A few minutes later Melinda returned with a fully dressed Skye. She plopped the little girl in her chair and turned to Trip. “Can you keep an eye on these two for a couple minutes while I throw on some clothes? I’ll wake up Phil so I can run to the pharmacy for Jemma’s prescriptions.”

“Can we have Froot Loops®?” Fitz smiled.
Melinda pulled the cereal from the cupboard and grabbed three bowls as she walked to the table. Fitz and Skye reached for the box that she held out of reach and handed to Trip. Fitz frowned and fell back in his chair with a mean pout. Skye reached for her favorite pink cereal bowl.

“Jemma’s sick?” Trip was alarmed. Jemma never got sick.

“Probably just a cold, but we want to be sure it doesn’t get worse.” Melinda smiled at his concern for the younger kids. “I’ll be quick.” She assured him as she passed him a bottle of milk and four spoons then turned to leave the room.

“We’ll be okay, no problems.” Trip called after her.

“I want Foop Loops too, Frip.” Skye squealed.

Melinda dressed quickly, throwing on sweats and a T-shirt. She tied her hair back in a ponytail. It was only a quick trip to the drug store, in and out at the drive through and she’d be back before Jemma woke again. Probably best to stop at the deli for some chicken soup, it was quicker than making it today. Maybe she could send Trip and Fitz to Mack’s place. He and Yoyo wouldn’t mind looking after then and Trip could keep his brother in line. Hundreds of thoughts ran through her head about how to handle the craziness that would be her day. She could hear Skye wailing as the boys set out for the party without her and wondered just how to amuse the little one all day while keeping her away from daddy and Jemma. Was it fair to ask Elena to deal with that little bundle of energy while entertaining…no way, Skye would have to deal.

“Phil,” she bent and whispered close to his ear. “Phil, come on it’s time to get up. I have to go out. The kids are downstairs.” He groaned once and rolled away from her. Melinda set her hands on her hips and turned up one side of her mouth. “Phil,” she spoke louder. “You need to get up.” He rolled back and forced open his blood shot eyes.

He pulled himself up then closed his eyes and brought his hand to his head. That skull cracking pain was back with a vengeance. “Gimme a minute,” he croaked as he threw his legs over the side of the bed and wobbled back and forth before attempting to stand. He only made a few inches off the mattress before dropping back with a hoarse groan.

“Crap!” Melinda snapped as she pressed her lips against his forehead then stormed into the bathroom returning with two capsules and a glass of water. “Take these. They’ll help.” She held them out to him. He squinted up at her and did as he was told, swallowing the pills and handing
back the glass that she set on the nightstand next to him. “Never mind, Phil, lay back and close your eyes. I’ll pick up some stronger cold tablets for you as well.” He nodded once as he fell back on to his pillow and threw his arm over his eyes.

“How’s Jemma?” He managed to croak before she pulled on her sneakers.

“She’s asleep. I’m going to pick up the medicine Maura called in for her. Trip can handle the little ones, I won’t be long.”

Phil nodded as she closed the door.

Fitz munched his Froot Loops® as he watched Skye pick all the green rings out of the bowl before she would allow Trip to pour on milk. “You know,” he swallowed and raised another spoonful holding it in front of his mouth. “They’re all the same flavor.” He popped the spoon into his mouth and chewed loudly.

“I no like-a the breen ones.” Skye informed him without looking up from her task.

“You eat green beans.” Fitz pointed out around his mouthful.

“Bean breens is not cerul, Fizz. Foop Loops is cerul and breen ones is not good.”

Trip just shook his head and gathered the green cereal bits from the table, dropping them into his bowl. Fitz shrugged his shoulders and shoveled more into his mouth, even the green ones.

Melinda hurried back into the room. “Trip, little change of plans. Think you can hold the fort while I run to the store. I promise I’ll be fast.”

“Mom, you need to buy cereal that has no green pieces.” Fitz informed her.

“Okay, sweetie. I’ll look for some.” She answered automatically as she breezed around the table planting a kiss on each head. “Thanks Trip, you are a trouper.” She hurried out the back door.
“Can I pour the milk, Skye?” Trip asked the little girl who was combing through the bowl of cereal.

“If she finds a green one after you pour the milk, she’ll not eat any of it.” Fitz informed his older brother. “She thinks it makes the milk taste green.” He tilted his head at Trip and reached to pour himself a second bowl.

When Melinda returned Trip had cleaned the kitchen and kept his younger siblings occupied in the family room with various toys and games. He was presently seated cross legged on the floor with Skye in his lap, constructing an elaborate Lego structure with Fitz directing the placement of each piece. She called in to let him know she was back.

Phil trudged down the stairs in his stocking feet and shuffled into the kitchen. Melinda rolled her eyes and shook her head. “What are you doing up?”

“It’s just a head cold, Mel.” He spoke nasally. “I really could use a coffee and maybe something to eat.”

“How ’bout some tea with honey and lemon?” Melinda suggested.

“How about some green Froot Loops?” Fitz asked from behind. “We’ve got a lot of them. Trip and I picked every single one out of the box. There were one hundred twenty-seven and that’s not counting the pieces Skye picked from her bowl.” He frowned. “Trip ate those.” He picked up the zip lock baggie from the counter and shook it at his dad.

Phil looked at the little boy and the baggie. “I think I’ll pass, buddy.”

Fitz put a hand to the side of his mouth and whispered, “they all taste the same, you know.”

Phil raised his eyebrows and nodded. Melinda smiled as she put away groceries and set the pharmacy bag on the counter.

Fitz pulled a banana from the bunch his mother had just set on the table. He pulled down the peel and took a bite then leaned on the table. “What time is the party, mom? Should I get ready?”
Melinda looked at Phil and bit her bottom lip. “Fitz, honey, you know Jemma’s not feeling well.”
The little boy nodded, swallowed and took another bite. “Well,” she looked at Phil again, hating to
disappoint her son.

“You’re mom is trying to say that I won’t be going with you today, Fitz. I don’t feel very well
myself so I’m staying home with Jemma while the rest of you get to try out Mack’s brand new
pool.”

Fitz swallowed the last of his banana and wrapped an arm around his father’s neck. “You don’t
really look too good, da. Perhaps a day of rest will do you well.” The little boy shook his head.

“Thank you, Fitz.” Phil smiled as Melinda took the boy and directed him out of the kitchen with a
gentle tap to his bottom.

xx

“You are absolutely certain you are up to this?” Melinda asked, raising a hand to Phil’s forehead.

He leaned back and away. “It’s a cold, Mel not malaria. I’m sure I can handle our most well
behaved, low maintenance child for a day.” Phil frowned then sniffed a little sniffle. His voice
was very nasal and a bit higher than usual.

“Still, you’re not a hundred per…” Melinda started, unsure if she were more concerned with her
husband or her sick child.

“Even at fifty percent, I think Jemma and I can handle it.” Phil laughed which turned into a tickly
cough. “You said she’s just got a cough and a smidge of a temp. I’m pretty sure I can tell time and
make sure she gets her medicine and stays comfortable.”

Melinda smiled at his willingness and rolled her eyes to the ceiling at the ruckus coming from the
room above them. She walked to the bottom of the staircase and called up. “Leopold James
Coulson-Fitz, if you aren’t down here in ten seconds….” She let the threat go unnamed as the
noise stopped dead. A few seconds later a door slammed and a skinny little boy ran down the
stairs dressed in bright yellow swim trunks, goggles secured on his face.

“I’m all ready, mom. I was just showing Jemma some diving skills. She’s quite disappointed
she’s not coming along.” Melinda put a hand to her mouth the hide her smile, feeling as if she were talking to a large yellow frog. “I’m gonna help Trip with the rest of the stuff.” Before she could stop him, Fitz was racing past his father and toward the back door.

“Think he’s excited?” Phil watched his younger son disappear out the back door and wondered how the little guy could see through those crazy goggles.

“I may need to ice him.” Melinda snorted, referring to their term for keeping the crew quiet. “Apparently, Jemma is awake.” She looked up the stairs. “I will take her temp before I leave. You’ll have to do it every four to six hours, unless she feels very warm or gets worse.”

Phil held up both hands. “Whoa, ho, ho…that is where I draw the line. I will do everything except…”

“Relax, Phil,” Melinda smirked from halfway up the stairs. “I’ve got one of those ear thermometers from Maura. She says it’s a bit more accurate,” she stopped and turned pointing a finger at him. “But if it gets even close to one hundred one you call me first and then Maura. Got it?”

“Absolutely!” He feigned jumping to attention and threw her a formal salute. She rolled her eyes and continued up the stairs to check on her ‘patient’.

Jemma rested back against her pillows and pulled her light blanket up to her chest. She wriggled down getting comfortable. Melinda looked at the thermometer in her hand and frowned. “Is it that bad?” Jemma’s brows went up high.

Looking at the blush on the little girl’s cheeks, Melinda brushed the stray hairs from her face and shook her head. “Not too bad, just a little over a hundred, but I feel bad leaving you all alone.”

The little girl pulled her hand from under the blanket and squeezed her mother’s hand. “I won’t be alone, da will be here. We will be just fine. I wish I could be with you today, but…” she was interrupted by a string of painful coughs. Melinda cringed in sympathy. “I do understand that is it better for everyone that I stay at home.” Her voice was deeper than normal, reverberating from her heavy chest.

Melinda squeezed the warm little hand that wrapped around her own and wished that Jemma was not so understanding. She wished her little girl could just be a little girl and be upset because she
couldn’t go to the pool party she had talked about since Mack had told the kids he was putting a pool in the yard of the new home he and Yoyo had purchased. Not that she wanted Jemma to be upset, but right now it seemed that the little girl was consoling her more than she was trying to make things easier for her.

“I’m so sorry, honey.” Melinda picked up the little hand and kissed it.

“There’ll be other opportunities for me to visit Mack and Yoyo. I’m not really much of a swimmer anyway.” Again, Jemma was doing the consoling.

Melinda shook her head and reached for the cough syrup on the nightstand. She poured out the proper dosage and handed the little plastic cup to the girl who drank it in one gulp without so much as a grimace. “I don’t really care for grape, but it isn’t too bad.” Jemma announced.

“How about a glass of water?” Melinda offered.

“Won’t that dilute the effects of the medication?” The little girl wondered.

“Mama!”

Melinda turned at the sound of her youngest racing into the room. Jemma sat up straight to see what the commotion might be. This time the little girl was fully naked. She stopped in front of Melinda, hesitant to climb onto her sick sister’s bed.

Bending down to the little girl’s level Melinda could not help the slight laugh. “Where are your clothes, baobei?” She felt a twinge of déjà vu, having asked the same question a few hours earlier.

“Fizz toed me I cood skimmy dip. Him sayed you doesn’t need no closes to skimmy dip.” She bounced her little hands on her mother’s knees. “We no finded my babing soup so him say just do natteral.” She shook her head. Jemma pulled the blanket up to her eyes and coughed a laugh.

“This is becoming a habit, little one. Wouldn’t you rather wear that beautiful new bathing suit we just picked out for the party?” Melinda grinned at her naked baby.

“But I no finded it.” Those little hands bounced again.
Melinda pulled the baby into her lap. “That’s because it is in Mama’s bag all ready to go to Mack and Yoyo’s house.”

Skye leaned back against her mother and blinked at her sister. “Jemma no come a us.” She shook her head.

“No she’s going to stay here with daddy and get better.” Melinda kissed the top of her head.

“Pooooo Jemma,” Skye shook her head. “I hug hoer.” She moved to climb across the bed, but was stopped quickly.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Skye.” Jemma spoke before her mother had a chance to respond. “I’ve a very bad cold, baby. I don’t want you to get sick again.” The little girl cast a sad puppy look at her little sister.

Skye turned to her mother quickly, “Jemma get aiyo, mama? I no want aiyo.” Her lip came out in a fine pout before she squirmed to escape her mother’s embrace.

“Nobody’s getting a shot,” Melinda assured Skye, then looked to Jemma, “at least not today.”

Jemma nodded at her mother’s gentle inference then covered her mouth to hide a yawn. The cough syrup contained codeine and made the little girl very sleepy. Melinda patted the sides of Skye’s thighs. “Okay, Lady Godiva, let’s let Jemma get some sleep.” She stood placing her little one on the floor, unable to snatch her as she ran for the door. She pulled the blanket up to Jemma’s chin and kissed her forehead. “Feel better, baby.” Jemma smiled a sleepy smile and nodded a few times before rolling to her side and closing her eyes.

xx

“Whoa, where are you going Streak?” Phil snagged Skye by the arm a few feet from the back door.

“I helup Fizz and Frip lobe the car. We go to Mack a Oyo’s to swim thems new poo-el.” She explained as she struggled to get free.
He considered pulling her onto his lap but refused to share his cold with one of the kids who never did anything small. A simple cold for him and Jemma could mean another bout of bronchitis or possibly pneumonia for this little one. ‘Where the hell is Melinda?’ he wondered.

“Hey, angel, where’s your clothes? Maybe you shouldn’t go out without them.” He smiled at the struggling toddler.


“Where is mama?” He asked as Skye began to whimper.

“Hoer is taken care to Jemma a cuz hoer is sick and no onies gonna get aiyo…today.” Skye whined.

Phil reached down and caught the little girl’s other arm, turning her toward him. Tears streamed over her cheeks. “Hey, sweet pickle…you don’t want to go out there Trip will see your unnerwears.” He smiled.

Skye stopped struggling and sniffled once. “Daddy, I is no a pickle and Frip no will see my unnerwears a cuz I gots none. Him ownee see my bum bum.”

Phil raised his eyebrows. “Ooooo, well that’s not good.”

“What’s not good?” May asked as she scooped Skye into her arms and sat on the nearest chair. She pulled a two piece blue polka dot bathing suit from somewhere and in a few minutes had the little girl smiling again.

Skye stood pushing her belly forward. “Looka Daddy, I gots poepa dops!” She pointed to the dots on her suit. She pulled the pink daisy that decorated the neckline toward her nose, “anna foer.” She wrinkled her nose. “It no smells.”

“That is a beautiful daisy, angel eyes.” Phil informed her.
Skye stared at her father for a moment then ran to the hall bathroom. She returned a few seconds later with a tissue in each hand. She held them out to Phil. “Daddy, you need to blow you noses a cuz you is snuffy.”

Phil took the offering and smiled weakly. “Thank you, Skye.”

“Now I go helup Fizz and Frip? I show them my davey!” She pulled on the pink flower and waited for a reply. At Phil’s nod she smiled broadly and dashed out the back door.

Melinda shook her head and pulled a large bag onto the chair she had just vacated. She pulled out a pair of small pink sandals and fingered through the contents triple checking that she had everything she needed. A second smaller bag set on the floor next to the chair. She resisted trying to zip the overstuffed bag closed and turned toward her husband who sat at the table nursing a now tepid cup of tea.

Melinda let out a breath and pushed her hair behind her ear. “Okay, Jemma is asleep. That cough syrup knocks her out for about two hours. She needs to eat and so do you.” She moved across the kitchen and opened the fridge. “I picked up some chicken soup at Schwartz’s. You’ll need to heat it. Use a pot, not the microwave please.” He nodded. She reached up to the cupboard and brought down a crinkly package. “Noodles...just follow the directions on the package. Use half, whole is too much.” He nodded again. “Her temp is still at a hundred. Give her ten ml of Tylenol® when she wakes and make sure she eats.” Phil nodded again and wondered when his wife would run out of breath. “I’d rather if she stays in bed but resting on the couch is okay for a little while.” She looked up when the car horn blasted.

Fitz was doing jumping jacks in the driveway and Skye, who had also donned a pair of bright pink goggles, was hanging out of the car window. Trip was fighting a losing battle trying to pull the little girl back inside. Melinda grabbed her large bag and slung it over her shoulder then hefted the smaller bag onto her arm.

“Please promise me you’ll take her temp and call me if it gets higher.”

Phil crossed his heart and blew her a kiss as she pulled the door open and the car horn blasted again. She stopped and readjusted the bags before kissing her fingers and returning his airborne kiss. He watched as Trip ran to take the bags. Melinda merely pointed at the car and both younger children fell in line. A few minutes later he waved from the doorway as she backed out of the driveway.
Jemma woke and listened to the unusual silence home. She took a deep breath resulting in another string of painful coughing then slide off the bed making a much needed trip to the bathroom. She stopped in front of her bedroom door and listened again. Unless the cold was affecting her ears there was no sound and she wondered if she was indeed alone. She pulled on a robe and slippers then padded quietly down the stairs.

Phil was asleep in the large recliner in the family room. The blinds were drawn and the room was dim and cool. Jemma tiptoed over to him and placed her hand on his forehead. He seemed a bit warm to her. She pulled the ear thermometer from her pocket where she had stashed it and slipped it next to his ear. It gave a soft blip and she turned it to see the output. The little girl shook her head. She pulled the throw from the back of the couch and carefully tucked it over her daddy then quietly moved to the kitchen. Noticing the package of noodles on the counter she pulled open the fridge and found the container of deli special chicken soup. She considered heating the soup and boiling some noodles but knew the rule was that she was not to use the stove or microwave without adult supervision. She weighed the consequences but still decided it was wiser to wait for da.

“Hey, princess,” Phil sounded groggy but he stood in the doorway. “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

“It was too quiet.” Jemma explained.

Phil laughed, “weird, isn’t it?”

“How do you feel, da?” Jemma stepped in front of him and rested a hand on his arm. “You’re a bit warm.” She pulled the thermometer out of her pocket and turned it for him to see. “One hundred point four, you should take some acetometophine.”

Phil shook his head and smiled. “I think I’m supposed to be taking care of you, Jems.”

“I’m feeling much better, da. I even took my own temperature with this little gizmo. It’s exactly one hundred, so you beat me.” Jemma smiled broadly then bit her lip and handed the thermometer to Phil. “But, maybe you should check just to be sure.” Suddenly, she felt as if she’d done something wrong. She stepped closer to her dad and pushed her hair back to expose her ear.

Phil looked at the instrument in his hand. He had no idea how to work the dang thing.

“Just push the little blue button and place it right here.” Jemma pointed to her ear and waited for
Phil to complete the task. She heard the little blip and moved her head away. “Now just look at the little screen.”

Phil squinted at the tiny screen. “Hmmm, how about one hundred point six? Seems like you win.” He tapped the little girl’s nose. “And maybe we both need a Tylenol cocktail.” He picked up the bottle Melinda had left on the table and poured out the dose. He’d become an expert at dosing the fever reducer having dealt with both Fitz and Skye’s recent illnesses. He handed it to her and held up a finger while he pulled a small bottle from his pocket and squeezed off the childproof top. He shook two white tablets into his hand and grabbed a small bottle of water from the fridge. “Bottoms up!” He smiled as he and his little girl downed their ‘cocktails’.

“How about we get that soup started?” Phil smiled and Jemma nodded. “You grab the pots and I’ll man the stove.”

Twenty minutes later father and daughter sat across from each other sipping the hot soup.

“Mmmm,” Phil waggled his eyebrows. “Bernie stills makes a great cup of soup.” Jemma nodded as she slurped a long egg noodle. “When I was a kid, my mom made the best chicken soup. Made it every time I had a cold. Fixed me right up. Jewish penicillin they called it.” He laughed as he blew across the hot liquid.

“Chicken soup really does have some medicinal qualities.” Jemma informed him. “Consuming chicken noodle soup can reduce upper respiratory cold symptoms by moving around neutrophils in the body.” She continued.

Phil nodded as he enjoyed the soup. He furrowed his brows a bit at the words she used.

“Neutrophils are a type of white blood cell that prevent infection in the body.” Jemma explained then went on. “The ingredients in chicken noodle soup provide the body with a boost of vitamin A and selenium.” Phil raised his brows as he swallowed. Jemma nodded and took a spoonful, swallowed and then continued. “Warm liquids, such as chicken broth, can be used to promote hydration and clear your nasal passages.”

“Fascinating,” Phil smiled at his little genius. “I had no idea.”

Jemma took a breath. “And there’s more, the vegetables contain vitamins A, C, and other antioxidants that boost the immune system. The chicken is packed with protein and the noodles give you a serving of carbohydrates. It’s just a perfect package.”
“I can’t say that my mom ever explained it like that. She just said it would help me feel better.”

Jemma chewed for a moment as she thought. “Some people think it’s just a comfort thing, but there have been scientific studies done. There is evidence that it does in fact help you get better. The bottom line is that soup is a liquid and plenty of liquids are the solution to healing the body from illness.”

“That is a great thing to know. I will share it with your mama. She’ll be just as fascinated, but I won’t be surprised if she doesn’t already know. Your Grandma May is a pretty good master of all things holistic and she makes a mean cup of soup herself. If she were here, we’d be inundated with her concoctions, like hot pepper tea.” He waved his hand in front of his sticking out tongue. Jemma giggled as she pushed her bowl away.

Phil frowned, she hadn’t eaten much but did a lot better than she had done a few weeks ago and besides the kid was sick. “Why don’t you go get comfy on the couch and I’ll clean up the mess.”

The little girl shook her head. “It wouldn’t be fair to you. I should help, after all it’s my fault you had to miss the party today. I am sorry, da.” She stood and picked up her bowl.

Phil reached across the table and took the bowl from her, then pulled her into his lap. “Hey, it is not your fault. I’m sick too.”

Jemma rested her head against his chest. “But it’s my fault you have a cold in the first place.” She sighed.

“And how do you,” he poked her belly, getting the desired giggle, “know I didn’t give you the cold. In fact, I think we might have both caught our own colds.”

“You know the incubation period for the common cold can be a little as ten hours from the time the virus enters the nasal passages.” Jemma sighed.

Phil hugged her tighter and kissed her warm forehead. “It doesn’t really matter. Do you think I would give up a whole day to spend with my princess? Just the two of us?”
Jemma turned into him and wrapped her thin arms around his middle. “Oh, da, you are the best. I do love you.”

“Love you too, Princess Jemma.” He squeezed her a bit pulling her closer. “Now, let’s get this mess cleaned up and you can choose a movie.” He looked up at the clock. “Two hours til your next dose of cough syrup, just enough time for a full feature.”

True to Melinda’s prediction, Jemma was sound asleep within fifteen minutes of taking the medication, breathing softly against Phil’s chest on the large recliner. He smiled down at her and flicked on the early edition news but fell asleep himself before the first story completed.

Melinda found them that way when she and Trip carried two exhausted swimmers into the house after an eventful day.
D - Doing Dishes

Chapter Summary

Jemma and Fitz break Melinda's favorite tea cup and the race is on to repair it before she finds out...and to keep Skye quiet.

Chapter Notes

Moved from series status to chapter in this tale
All are one shot glimpses of every day life while 'growing a family'

D – Doing Dishes

“I washed last time,” Fitz whined as he carried a stack of saucy dishes to the sink. He yuck-faced at them just imagining the orangey-red film spaghetti sauce would make on the water surface no matter how much they were rinsed.

“You most certainly did not.” Jemma scolded taking the pile from her brother and setting them in the hot water. “You wash and I’ll dry.” She smiled at him.

“Oh uh,” Fitz shook his head, crossing his arms over his skinny chest. “I’m not about to put my hands into that red greasy water. Just look at those suds! They’ve already got orange bubbles lurking about in them.” He pointed toward the sink. “It’s just bloody disgusting!” He whined.

Skye climbed onto a chair and peered into the sink. “I don’t see no blood innare, Fitz.”

Jemma shook a finger at her brother as she helped Skye off the chair. “You need to watch your language, Fitz. If she repeats that, you will be in so very much trouble.”

“Mama will whack your arse!” Skye giggled, covering her mouth.
“Skye!” both older children admonished.

The smaller girl shrugged her shoulders. “Arse ain’t a bad word. The bad word is a…”

Jemma clapped a hand over her little sister’s mouth and looked over her shoulder toward the door. She spun her around and shook a finger in her face. “If momma hears you, it won’t matter which is which. You will be the one in trouble. Furthermore, it isn’t really a bad word. It’s an animal, a beast of burden.”

Fitz couldn’t help laughing. “Then how is it you can’t bring yourself to say it?” He looked down at Skye and wriggled his eyebrows. The little girl laughed and attempted to imitate her brother’s action.

Jemma paused for a moment shaking her head at both of them. “You are just about wasting time, Fitz. These dishes are not going to wash themselves.”

Fitz turned from his eyebrow battle with Skye and faced his older sister. “Well, I am not about to wash them either, so I guess we have a bit of a problem.”

“I’ll do it!” Skye raised her arm in the air as if answering a teacher’s question.

Jemma smiled down at her. “Oh, no bao bao, you are still a might to young for this chore.”

Skye giggled at Fitz’s mocking of their sister behind her back then turned to Jemma and frowned. “I’m seven, Jemma. I ain’t a baby no more. I could do it.” She propped her hands on her hips and tried to take the same stance she’d seen her mother do when challenging an opponent.

“Don’t say ‘ain’t’ Skye.” Jemma breathed her frustration. “And you are still using double negatives.”

“Awww, give her a break, Jemma.” Fitz wrapped an arm around his younger sister. “Besides,” he addressed Skye, “you know you are still too young for this unpleasant task when you are too eager to do it.” He sighed as he moved back to the table to collect the odds and ends of what was still there. Skye set out a pout and followed.
“Where’s Trip?” Fitz wondered. “Isn’t he supposed to be doing his share?”

Jemma’s scowl turned to an excited grin as she bounced on her toes a few times before answering. “Trip’s got a date this evening. He is with Gram, getting ready. It’s so very exciting.” She clapped her hands gently. “Momma’s excused him just for tonight.”

“Hmph, maybe I should get a girl friend.” Fitz nodded down to Skye who stood at his side. They looked at each other for a few seconds mulling over the thought then shook their heads and chorused. “Nawwww!” Skye giggled as Fitz poked her with his elbow and whispered, “That would just give me a whole new set of unpleasant tasks.” The little girl nodded although she had no idea what her big brother meant.

“It took poor Trip all week to get up enough nerve to ask Jessica to go to the cinema with him.” Jemma shook her head as she stood at the kitchen window looking out toward the garage where Gram lived in the second floor apartment. Fitz turned up one side of his mouth and crossed his eyes causing Skye to giggle yet again. Jemma turned back and smiled broadly. “Daa is even letting him use the car!”

“Woo hoo!” Fitz twirled his finger in the air. “Taking a shower in the middle of the day and getting all dressed up just for a girl seems a bit daft to me.” He addressed his little sister who nodded in agreement. “I suppose he’ll be all goooy eyed over this girl as well.”

Jemma moved toward him, grinning wisely. “Oh, you will change your ways Leopold James Coulson. In a few years…perhaps months...” She winked at him. “Your hormones will become active and you will feel much differently about the opposite gender.”

Fitz tried to hide his blush. “That’s enough, Jemma. I’ve been sitting in the same sssss…” He looked down at Skye who was eyeing him with those large brown peepers. “The same adult life education classes as you have. I know as much about puberty as you, so don’t go all technical explanation on me.” He picked up his mother’s favorite tea cup and saucer from the table and pushed it toward his know-it-all sister. “And I’m still not washing those horrid sauce covered dishes.” Fitz was embarrassed as well as a tad angry.

Jemma reached for the cup and saucer trying to hold on to her own ire. They both watched as the items slipped from their hands and crashed to the tile floor scattering small pieces in all directions.

“Uh oh,” Skye grimaced as the handle of the delicate cup spun around on its edge and came to a stop at the tip of her sneaker.
“You did it!” Jemma and Fitz pointed at each other, accusing the other simultaneously.

“You dropped it!” Fitz pointed to his sister, frantic that she had let the precious cup and saucer fall.

“You let go before I had it!” She countered almost in tears.

“You guys ‘er in big, big trouble,” Skye shook her head and bit her bottom lip.

“Nāinai gave that to mom a long time ago.” Fitz whispered mostly to himself as he stood staring at the carnage.

“Don’t just stand there!” Jemma scolded. “We need to fix this.”

Skye was crouched down on her haunches examining the pieces. “I don’t think you could get all them pieces all together again. I think it’s like Humpty Dumpty.” She shook her head and scrunched up her face at her siblings.

“Well all the kings horses and all the kings men had better get busy before Mom comes in and sees this mess.” Fitz shook his head.

“What are we going to do, Fitz? This is Momma’s favorite cup. She has been using it forever.” Jemma sounded close to tears then noticed Skye poking at the pieces. “Don’t touch, Skye.” She warned. “You’ll cut your finger and we will have that to deal with.”

Skye pulled her hand back and rested both on her bent knees. She looked up at Jemma. “Then Fitz could say ‘bloody’?” Jemma rolled her eyes.

Fitz had moved to the pantry and returned with broom and dust pan. “I think we can salvage the saucer,” he commented thoughtfully. “It’s only broken in three pieces, but the cup might have to be sacrificed.”
“Wait,” Jemma had an idea. “Remember that compound that Stephen Weiss was developing for sealing aquariums?”

Fitz thought for a moment then nodded with a frown. “I do, Jemma, but when it dried it looked very much like spit.” He grimaced at Skye who crinkled her nose as she stood to listen to the ‘plan’.

“Yes, but I’m sure if we put our heads together we can improve on that.” Jemma was smiling again as she pulled a brown paper bag from under the sink and begin wrapping each piece of the saucer in paper toweling before setting it gently into the sack.

Now Fitz was frowning. “Like Weiss is going to let us anywhere near his pet project.” He shook his head.

Jemma began collecting the small pieces of the cup. “Stephen Weiss wants an ‘A’ on his project. The only way he can do that is if he lets Leopold Fitz help him. You simply offer to let him take all the credit and I am quite certain he will acquiesce.”

Fitz was all smiles until Jemma finished. “Are you bleedin’ doo-lally? Give that galoot all the credit for my work…because you know the lazy dolt will just sit back and watch and I’ll…”

“You’ll be responsible for fixing Momma’s favorite cup and…” Jemma smiled.

“And not gettin’ yer arse whacked!” Skye finished attempting to mimic her brother’s brogue.

“SKYE!” Both siblings admonished.

“Momma is not going to whack anyone, Skye. It was an accident.” Jemma assured her little sister as she placed the last piece, the intact cup handle, into the bag and folded it closed.

Skye leaned on arm on the table and scowled at her sister. “Well, she whacked me when I broke the glass on the patio and she made me stay in my room a long time.”

Fitz snorted as he put back the broom and dust pan. “You were throwin’ a bloomin’ fit because you wanted a different one. You threw the bloody thing. That was no accident, Skye and you know it.”
Skye shrugged her shoulders and turned up one side of her lip. “Still broke...same thing. You guys was fighting and it got broke so yer still in trouble.”

Jemma was suddenly concerned that little sister might spill the beans. “Come on now, Skye. You wouldn’t want Momma to be sad, would you?” She shook her head as she spoke. “This is her favorite cup. Fitz and I are going to take it to school and fix it for her. We’ll bring it back and it will be fine.”

Skye narrowed her eyes and drummed her little fingers on the table. “You sound like the Grinch¹, Jemma. ‘I’ll fix it up there and bring it back here.’” She quoted the Dr. Seuss tale.

Fitz rolled his eyes. “I told you it wasn’t a good idea to read that book to her so many times. She knows the bloody thing by heart.”

Jemma took a deep breath. “Skye, this needs to be our secret.” The little girl’s brows shot up.

“Momma said it ain’t good to keep secrets, Jemma.” She reminded her sister.

Jemma nodded, placing a hand on Skye’s shoulder. “Yes, sweetheart, you’re right. But this is a good secret and we’ll only keep it until the cup and saucer are repaired. We’ll bring them back and then all three of us will tell Momma all about the accident.”

Skye scowled at her sister and looked to her brother who nodded in agreement. It seemed a little silly to her to keep a secret and then tell anyway. Jemma realized she’d have to do a bit more than simply convince the little girl to keep quiet. She looked at Fitz and sighed. “You can help me wash the dishes. Would you like that?”

The little girl’s eyes opened wide as a smile spread across her face and she nodded vigorously.

Forty-five minutes later Jemma was mopping up the water from the kitchen floor and Fitz was attempting to quash all the suds from the sink when Melinda stepped into the room.

“What happened here?” She smiled at her brood.
“Well,” Fitz stepped back and shook the water from his hands. “It seems that adding extra soap to dissolve the saucy grease was not the best idea.”

Jemma brushed the hair from her face with the back of her hand and leaned on the mop she held. “And dumping a whole pot of water on top of them didn’t help either.” She let out an exasperated breath.

“Jemma let me help!” Skye smiled as she dashed toward her mother. Melinda stopped her at arm’s length. The little girl was soaked from her neck to her knees. Orange residue was evident on her clothing and her arms.

“I see.” Melinda grinned, noticing the other children were only a tad less drenched than this one.

Fitz watched as the last of the suds circled the drain then brushed his hands together. “But the dishes are washed, dried and back in the cupboards.” He smiled at his mother giving her a thumb’s up.

“And the floor has been scrubbed as an added bonus.” Jemma added with a tired smile.

“Okay,” Melinda sighed as she placed one hand on the top of Skye’s head and directed her toward the stairs. “Then how about we all get some dry clothes? And you,” she shook the little girl gently, “are going straight into the bathtub.”

Skye crinkled her nose. “I just washed, Momma. Why I gotta take a bath, too?” She leaned her head back and looked up through her mother’s fingers.

“Because, bao bao, you are the only one I know who can get dirty while getting clean.” She squeezed the fingers on her hand a few times and nudged the little girl forward.

Fitz and Jemma stood side by side watching until their mother and sister started up the stairs. “Where’s the bag?” Fitz whispered out of the side of his mouth. Jemma nodded toward the item setting in plain view on the counter top.

Melinda leaned over the railing and called back to her older children. “Let’s go you two. You are
just as wet as this one.” They could hear their baby sister giggling as she hurried up the stairs.

“Just finishing up a bit more,” Jemma called back.

“Don’t take too long,” Melinda warned.

Both kids listened as the sound of their mother’s footsteps went from the stairs to the upstairs hall and the telltale hum of water gushing into the bath met their ears.

“I’ll put it into my satchel.” Fitz informed his sister as he took the bag.

“Do be careful, Fitz. We don’t want the pieces to be any smaller.” Jemma gasped as he grabbed it.

“Oh, you’ve gone and wrapped them like archeological specimens.” He shook his head. “Even the Smithsonian would be proud.”

Jemma couldn’t help laughing at his comment as she followed him to the family room where their school bags were kept. The pieces would be safe and secure there until they got to school tomorrow.

xx

Stephen Weiss was a jerk and it took three days of constant badgering to convince him that he needed Fitz’s help. The fact that his adhesive let off the most obnoxious odor when he once again demonstrated to the class was a great help. Even the profession had to excuse himself from the classroom when the stuff started smoldering.

Fitz purchased several cups from the local dollar store in order to experiment and in a week had the solution down to a pearl colored paste that dried clear and had no scent at all. He tested one of the cups by dropping it then gluing the pieces together and filling it with hot water. Fitz and Weiss smacked a high five a few seconds before the pieces dropped away and the water leaked to the floor. Fitz tried cold water with the same result. Apparently, the glue worked as long as it didn’t get wet so it was back to the drawing board for both boys.

Jemma spent the time hoping to keep her mother from missing the cup and her sister from letting the proverbial cat out of the bag.
“Why would a cat be inna bag, Jemma?” Skye crinkled her nose at her sister’s comment. “He could just rip outta it.” The little girl looked up from the page she was coloring.

Jemma sighed, “It’s just an old saying Skye.” She explained.

“Oh,” the younger girl nodded. “Who sayed it?”

Jemma shook her head. “Said, Skye. Who said it?”

Skye shrugged her shoulders without looking up. “I dunno, Jemma, s’why I asked you.”

Jemma smiled at her little sister. “No one said it Skye.” She explained. “It’s just another way to say don’t blabber.”

“I didn’t do any blabber, Jemma.” Skye sighed.

“Hey, ladies, what are you up to on this rainy Saturday and where is your brother?” Melinda asked as she stepped over Skye who was lying on the floor with her book and crayons.

“He’s making glue.” Skye informed her mother as she fingered through the pile of colors searching for just the right one.

Melinda stopped mid-stride and furrowed her brow at the little girl. “He’s what?”

“School project,” Jemma squeaked before Skye could reply. “He’s working on a school project, it’s very intense. The deadline is approaching so he is hard at it.” She poked a fist across her midsection and smiled at her mother.

“And where exactly is he creating this glue?” Melinda inquired with trepidation. Fitz was know to create small explosions and had recently burned a hole in the rug of his bedroom with a failed experiment. She looked toward the ceiling.
“Oh, no, no, no,” Jemma assured her. “He learned his lesson last time. He’s out in the garage with a friend from school. They’re working on it together.”

“Does your father know?” Melinda wondered if Phil had given the little guy permission to work near his prized corvette and if Mrs. Triplett was safe in her apartment.

“Daddy took Lola fer a ride.” Skye turned and informed her mother. “He dint wanner get all sticky.”

“The worst that could happen is a terrible smell. He hasn’t put anything into it that might be combustible. Professor McAdams insisted that be part of the criteria.” Jemma nodded toward her mother.

“Good to know,” Melinda pursed her lips and nodded. “How about picking up some of this stuff in here?” She looked around at the various items strewn across the room. Reaching down she pulled a pink sneaker that poked out from under the sofa. “Isn’t this the shoe you’ve been looking for, shǎ gūniáng*? She bent down and tapped Skye’s bottom with the shoe.

“Xièxiè māmā,*” Skye smiled as she continued coloring a purple and green dog. “Nǐ xǐhuān wǒ de túpiàn ma?**

“I love it.” Melinda smiled. “I wish I had a purple dog.”

Skye flipped over and sat up. “Me too, mommy, a doggid be great! I love dogs.”

Melinda raised an eyebrow. “We’ve had this conversation, Skye.”

The little girl pouted then turned back to her coloring grumbling that when she grew up she was going to have ten dogs. Melinda shook her head. She picked up a sock, a yellow crayon and two Legos. “By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you ladies, have you seen my tea cup? I can’t seem to find it.”

Skye stopped coloring and looked up at Jemma who frozen in assembling a 3D model of the human heart. Jemma laughed nervously, “You don’t believe it’s in here, do you?”
“No, silly,” Melinda grinned as she dropped the crayon on Skye’s pile and tossed the Legos into a bin behind Jemma. “I just can’t imagine where it is. Maybe I left it at Gram’s when we had tea last week.” She seemed to be talking more to herself so Jemma let the subject drop. The woman picked up a few more items of scattered laundry, informed the girls she would be in the basement if needed and left the room.

Jemma let out a relieved sigh.

Skye sat up and crisscrossed her legs in front of her. “You lied, Jemma. Momma don’t like lies.” She shook her head and pushed her hair from her eyes.

“I did not lie.” Jemma retorted. “Fitz is truly working a school project and I didn’t say I hadn’t seen the cup I just questioned if she was looking for it in here.”

“Ain’t that a lie on admission?” Skye scrunched up her face and asked.

“O-omission,” Jemma corrected as she nibbled the end of her thumb nail and remembered the last time she found herself in a similar position.

xx

Fitz pushed the door to Jemma’s bedroom open and slipped inside. He tiptoed across the floor and shook the end of her bed.

“Jemma…Jemma,” he called in a loud whisper. “Are you sleeping?”

“You wouldn’t make a very good spy, Fitz. I heard you as soon as you opened the door and since I am speaking to you it is quite clear that I am not sleeping.” Jemma grinned as she sat up and flicked on the light. “What are you doing in here?”
The boy plopped down on his sister’s bed and held up one of the white mugs he’d been using as test subjects. He smiled as he held it out to her then brought it to his lips and sipped the liquid it held.

Jemma jumped to her knees and crawled across the bed to him. “You did it!” She squealed, then clapped a hand over her mouth. “You did it,” she whispered again.

“Works with both hot and cold and you can barely see the seams.” He slid his fingers across the surface of the cup proudly. “We tried it on several substances as well. It works on wood, plastic, glass and ceramic.”

Jemma’s smile faded. “What about china?”

“It’s bone china, Jemma. I had Mr. Cummings from Archeology look at the pieces. “He says it’s a type of soft-paste porcelain that is composed of bone ash, feldspathic material, and kaolin. It has been defined as ware with a translucent body containing a minimum of thirty percent of phosphate derived from animal bone and calculated calcium phosphate.” He looked at the cup in his hand and frowned. “I’m afraid it’s rather costly. One fine cup could cost up to seventy-five dollars.” He shook his head. “Even if I could afford to buy one I wouldn’t even know where to look and it would be a shame to break the thing, then wouldn’t it.”

“So you haven’t tested it on momma’s cup?” Jemma asked timidly.

“Not yet,” Fitz frowned again. “There’s a high probability it could cause it to disintegrate.”

“Maybe you could try it on something similar.” Jemma suggested.

“I suppose,” Fitz agreed but I’m not quite sure what I might use to simulate cow bone ash or any of the other components for that matter. I’m thinking I should just paste a few pieces together and see what happens.” He informed her, waiting for her approval or permission. Whatever came first.

They both jumped as the door opened. Fitz passed the now empty cup to Jemma who quickly stashed it under the blanket.

“What are you two doing up? Do you know what time it is?” Melinda whispered as she pushed the door open and glared at them.
“I…I’ve got a big test tomorrow and I was…a…just worried and couldn’t sleep.” Fitz stammered.

“So you thought you’d wake Jemma and have her join you?” Melinda scowled as she reached out a hand for him. “Let’s go, back to bed. I’m sure you’ll do fine on whatever test. You always do.”

Fitz looked over his shoulder as his mother dragged him from the room and cast his sister a quick wink. Jemma waited until the door clicked shut then pulled the small cup from beneath the blanket and stashed it in the nightstand drawer. She turned out the light and rolled back into her bed. Jemma Simmons knew she was smart, but Fitz? Fitz was a genius.

xx

Melinda stood at the kitchen window sipping tea from an everyday mug. She watched as Jemma and Skye slipped into the garage. Fitz had gone in a few minutes earlier.

“You know, Phil,” she said as she turned to her husband who sat reading a service proposal at the kitchen table. “I think those three are up to no good.”

Phil looked up and then around his wife, squinting at the large structure a few hundred feet from the patio. He pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Hmmm, Skye and Fitz maybe but not Jemma. She’d be eaten up by guilt.” He turned back to his reading.

“I don’t know,” Melinda turned back to the window and sipped her tea again. “They’ve been acting pretty strange.”

“We’ve got two geniuses and a child raised by wolves. They always act strange.” He laughed.

“I don’t think the sisters of St. Agnes would appreciate you comparing them to carnivorous animals, Phil.” Melinda scoffed.

“Have you met some of those ladies?” Phil asked over the rim of his glasses.
Melinda rolled her eyes and watched as Fitz stepped into the driveway and took a deep breath before hurrying back inside. “Do you know what Skye asked me this morning?” She asked as she sat at the table next to her husband.

“I can just imagine.” Phil replied as he flipped a page in the thick document he held.

“She wanted to know why a person would put a cat in a bag and if it could get out on its own.” Melinda shook her head and looked out at the garage again. “You don’t think they have an animal out there do you? Maybe we should check.”

Phil grabbed her arm and set down his paperwork. “There are no animals in the shed, Mel…well except for the ones we refer to as our kids.” He laughed as he placed his glasses on the table and stood to stretch his limbs. “Fitz is still working on that project of his. The girls are just curious.”

“Oh, Phil, if Skye gets into that glue she might stick herself to something we’ll have to pry her from.” Melinda worried.

Phil laughed, “Or he’ll have figured out a way to keep her in one place for more than ten seconds.”

“That’s not funny, Phil.” Melinda groaned as she stood and put her cup on the table. “We really should check on them.”

Phil grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “There’s no smoke and Jemma’s got a level head. She’ll keep them in line or let us know if we need to intercede or referee or issue a cease and desist order.”

Melinda thought for a moment. “I guess you’re right, but if there’s an animal involved someone is going to pay…big time.” She warned as he pulled her close and stopped her with a kiss.

xx

“How did you get it to adhere so perfectly?” Jemma marveled.

“I used the bones from the steak Da made on the grill a few days ago. I boiled them and then ground them in the rock tumbler at school. I added it to the compound and it worked perfectly.” Fitz boasted.
“It looks like it did before,” Skye remarked as she reached to touch the delicate blue flowered cup.

Fitz slapped her hand away. “Don’t touch!”

“Hey!” Skye pulled her hand back and hugged it to her chest. “Ya don’t hafta hit.”

“Fitz!” Jemma scolded.

“It isn’t dry yet.” The boy explained. “We can’t take any undue risks.” He looked at the dark frown on his little sister’s face. “I’m sorry, Skye. I didn’t mean to hurt you, but you can’t touch it yet.” The little girl nodded but continued to nurse her injured hand.

“Well, we can’t leave it here. Momma and Da are in and out all the time.” Jemma pointed out to her brother.

“That’s the beauty of it, Jemma. Don’t you see?” Fitz smiled.

Jemma shook her head while Skye stared at the cup wondering what she was supposed to see there.

“We just leave it here in plain sight.” Fitz explained. “Mom said she couldn’t find it, didn’t know where she left it. So we just let it set right here until she finds it and thinks she left it here.” He held out his hands and teetered his head at his own ingenuity.

“I don’t know, Fitz.” Jemma was doubtful.

“What if she don’t find it?” Skye pondered.

“Then someone else will.” Fitz smiled. “Da or Trip will come across it and carry it into the house. We won’t have to worry about how to get it inside without being caught.”

“I thought we was supposed to tell her what really happened.” Skye reminded her siblings.
“We were, Skye, were.” Jemma corrected.

“So now we not?” Skye bounced a hand in front of her, clearly confused.

“We’re not.” Fitz also corrected and Skye shook her head.

“Why we lyin’?” Skye moaned.


“Us,” Skye pointed to herself and then to each of them. “Lying in emission,” she explained.

“You had to explain that to her, didn’t you.” Fitz shook his head. “Omission, Skye. Emission is the exhaust that comes out from the car.”

“Oh,” Skye nodded, studying the small cup and saucer again.

“We’re just going to wait until Momma has the cup and sees that it is in perfect condition.” Jemma assured her little sister as Fitz nodded in agreement.

Fitz brushed his hands together and collected his tools, placing them in the box he kept under his father’s workbench. “Okay so we all keep quiet until we see Mom reunited with her cup. Agreed?”

The girls nodded as they followed their brother out of the garage.

The following morning Melinda sat at the breakfast table with her favorite cup and saucer in front of her. Fitz stopped in his tracks as he entered the room. Jemma crashed into his back sending him forward a few steps. Both stared at the cup in front of their mother.
“You found it!” Jemma smiled as she stepped around Fitz and tilted her head just a smidge urging him forward. She quickly kissed her mother’s cheek before dropping into her chair.

“No, Trip found it in the garage of all places.” Melinda smiled, eyeing both children warily.


Fitz moved to his seat and grabbed the box of cereal in the center of the table. “How’d it get in there, do you suppose?” He posed as he poured. Suddenly, keeping quiet and unfazed was not as easy as he expected.

“Can’t say,” Melinda breathed. “I don’t ever remember drinking tea in the garage and I’m positive your dad wasn’t using it.”

“G’morning, Momma,” Skye yawned as she slipped into her seat and frowned at the box of cereal. “I noen’t like th… Yer cup! You gots yer cup back!” She jumped off her chair and raced to the opposite side of the table wrapping her arms around her mother’s neck and kissing her cheek.

“I do,” Melinda smiled at her baby’s enthusiasm. She did not miss the glance exchanged by the older children.

“Are you happy, momma?” Skye smiled before kissing her mother’s cheek again.

“I am,” she tapped the little girl’s nose as she picked up the tea pot and poured the steamy reddish liquid into the delicate cup.

“Mornin’!” Trip beamed as he came through the back door. He grabbed a mug from the upper cupboard and poured a coffee into it. “Da says he’ll be right in. It took a bit longer than we thought it would to replace that water heater for Gram, but she says it’s working fine.” The young boy beamed at the recent accomplishment. “Mom’s got her cup back. Ya notice? Can’t believe it was in the garage all this time. Weird, huh?”

“Weird, yeah,” Fitz agreed as he poured milk onto his Cheerios™ and reached for a banana. Jemma simply nodded while Skye peeked around the box of cereal in front of her.

Trip sat down next to his baby sister and grabbed the box she hid behind. He smiled at her
surprised look. “Sorry, baby girl, were you using this?”

Skye shook her head. “I noen’t like them, Trip. Raisins is yuck.”

“Are,” everyone at the table correct without looking at the little girl who simply shrugged.

Melinda put her fingers on the handle of her cup. Fitz stopped a spoonful of Cheerios halfway to his open mouth. Jemma almost dropped the orange she had started to peel and Skye simply stared as their mother lifted the cup to her mouth, took a sip and set it back down on the saucer. Skye’s eyebrows shot up as both Jemma and Fitz exhaled before continuing their breakfast.

“I never realized my having a cup of tea was so mesmerizing.” She commented to Trip who just smirked at the younger kids. She crinkled her nose and smacked her lips a few times. “Funny, this tea tastes a little like charbroiled steak.”

Fitz almost spit his cereal back into the bowl but grabbed his juice instead taking a large gulp before setting it back on the table. Jemma’s orange slipped from her hand to the edge of her plate causing it to clatter a few times before sending her fork and spoon to the tiled floor with a round of clinking as they bounced around the legs of her chair. Skye pulled the Cheerios box in front of her suddenly very interested in the information listed on the back.

“You guys are just a bit weirder than usual this morning,” Trip mused. “What’s up?”

“We’re just happy that momma found her cup.” Jemma answered before the others. Fitz nodded while Skye just stared at the cup and saucer as she peeked around the box.

“Morning, all!” Phil smiled as he opened the back door.

“Daddy!” Skye squealed running and leaping into his arms. She hugged his neck and kissed his cheek. “I like French Toast cus it are not raisins.”

“Is,” the table chorused.

Skye dropped her head on Phil’s shoulder. “I never gets it right.” She sighed.
Phil smiled and kissed her head before setting her on her feet. “Don’t worry, sweet pickle, you will.”

“I not a pickle, daddy.” Skye frowned as she placed her hands on her hips.

Phil wriggled his eyebrows at her. “Let me wash my hands and then we will make some Toast a la France!” He started for the kitchen sink.

“Bathroom,” Melinda ordered without looking at him. She took another sip of tea and grimaced at the flavor.

Stepping behind his wife, Phil placed a quick kiss on top of her head and rested his hands on her shoulders. “Ah, momma’s got her cup back. How’s it working, dear?” The kids giggled at his antics.

“It works like a cup, but tastes like grilled T-bone.” She turned down the sides of her mouth.

Phil reached over his wife and picked up the cup by its sides. The kids held their breath and watched as he took a sip then put it back down. He smacked his lips a few times then nodded. “It is a little gamey.” He stuck out his tongue and shook his head.

Fitz and Jemma exchanged a quick glance while Skye watched both as if she was at a tennis match. Melinda slipped her finger in the handle once again and started to lift the cup just as a soft plink separated it from the cup. She raised her brows and tilted her head as she brought just the small round piece to eye level.

“Oh oh,” Skye grimaced.

Melinda glared at her brood while Phil stood back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Somebody better start talking.” She growled through her teeth.

Trip excused himself with a chuckle claiming complete innocence as well as ignorance of the whole affair. Phil and Melinda marched their pajama clad miscreants into the family room and lined all three up on the couch.
“Skye didn’t do it,” Fitz began, immediately protecting his baby sister. “I dropped the cup and broke it.” He wasn’t about to let Jemma take the blame either.

“Why didn’t you just tell me, Fitz?” Melinda asked.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “It’s your favorite, the one Nainai gave to you.”

“We dint want you to be sad, Momma.” Skye sniffled.

“We both broke it,” Jemma stared at her fingers. “It’s not all Fitz’s fault.”

“It’s just a cup, Jemma,” Melinda explained. “It can be replaced.”

“We have eleven more in a box in the attic.” Phil told them. “Nainai gave us a whole set when we were married. We just never had a reason to use them.”

“Actually, there are nine in that box.” Melinda corrected him. “Remember the one you knocked into the sink after that Christmas party?”

Phil nodded. “And the one Hunter knocked out of your hand a few summers ago.”

The kids looked at each other and took deep breaths. “We didn’t know.” Jemma spoke for the group.

“Cups can be replaced, but you covered up what you did and then lied about it.” Melinda pointed out with a frown.

“You’re mother’s right, cups can be replaced but once you break trust…well, that’s different.”

“We’re sorry, da.” Fitz sighed. Jemma wiped the tears that rolled over her cheeks but Skye could not contain her sobs.
“We didn’t want you to be sad, but I think being disappointed in us is much worse.” Jemma sniffed as she wrapped an arm around her little sister.

“We were going to tell you as soon as you got your cup back all in one piece.” Fitz offered without looking either parent in the eye.

“We wasn’t gonna mission anything.” Skye stammered through her tears.

Melinda turned away unable to face her penitent children whose only crime was trying to keep her from being saddened over the loss of that stupid cup. How could she punish any of them for that?

Fitz glanced sideways at Jemma. It had been a few years but he remembered the last time they did something sneaky and got caught in a lie. He figured she was thinking the same thing. Of course this time they didn’t do anything dangerous and nobody got hurt so that had to count for something.

Phil stood glaring at his contrite brood then looked to Melinda who still stood with her back to them. He caught her smile.

“Well,” Phil placed his hands on his hips and pursed his lips.

“Please da,” Fitz stopped him before he could continue. “Please don’t punish Skye. She only did what we said. She really is innocent in all of this.” He bounced to his feet in his effort to convince his father.

Melinda turned back and motioned to Phil that she would take over. He nodded and stepped back. “The first thing you are going to do is glue that handle back on my cup.” She pointed a finger at Fitz. He nodded quickly. “Then we are going to put it in the breakfront so we can see it and remember what we learned from it.” Jemma nodded along with her brother. “The three of you are going to bed one hour early for one whole week, two if I hear one complaint.” She held up two fingers. “And…”

Fitz and Jemma held their breath dreading whatever would come next.

“And you are going to tell me why that tea tasted like a burnt porterhouse.”
With that Melinda opened her arms and gathered her relieved crew for a family hug. Skye wriggled free and reached up to Phil who lifted her to his shoulder. She wiped the tears from her face with her sleeve and smiled at him.

“French Toast now, Daddy?” She smiled and he smiled back.

¹ How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Dr Seuss, Random House, 1956

*silly girl

** Thank you, mommy

*** Do you like my picture?
Trip raised his fists in the air and pranced around in a circle, mouth open in a soundless cheer. Three other teens watched and shook their heads.

“Three pointer, not bad Triplett,” an extremely tall, very dark skinned boy pursed his lips and nodded as he caught the basketball on the rebound.

“Practice, Nick my boy, lots and lots of practice,” Trip smiled as he bounced around the other boy and crouched in preparation to continue the game.

“Yeah, that and a little brother with an IQ of around five hundred and an eye for the technique of the game,” a third teen laughed.

Trip laughed back as he caught the ball and dribbled it a few times, “more like one sixty. Nobody is five hundred, geez, not even Einstein, probably have a head twice the size of this.” Trip held up then bounced the ball a few more times and sent it through the basket with a flying leap. Once again he raised his fists and congratulated himself.

“You’re five for five, Triplett,” the last boy shook his head as he took the ball and bounced it twice.

“Where is the little genius, anyway?” The boy asked. “We could use a little strategy help.”
Trip couldn’t help the snort that escaped him. “Little guy caused another explosion last night.” The three teens froze, one with the ball raised toward the basket. “Just a little one,” Trip continued. “But the bathroom still smells like rotten eggs.” He shook his head and reached for one of the water bottles in a large ice tub at the end of the paved court. “Banished to his room for the whole day and Da confiscated his tools for a week. Poor kid, he’s gonna have withdrawal pangs without those tools.” The teens laughed as they halted their play and each grabbed their own bottle of water.

Skye pushed her bike around the side of the garage, looked down and the flat tire that made motion difficult, pouting at the damage. The chain dragged the ground. Her sniffles were drawn out and dramatic.

“Hey, baby girl,” Trip remarked as he jumped from the chair he’d dropped into. “What’s the problem?”

The little girl looked up with a tear rolling over her cheek. “My bike falled apart, Terrip. It noent work no more. Lookit the wheel. It bees all down.”

Alec, the boy who wondered about Fitz, took the bike from the distraught little girl as Trip lifted her into his arms. He flipped it over so it rested on the seat and handlebars with the tires in the air. The boy dropped to his knees and examined the chain. “This shouldn’t be a big deal. I think I can get it back on in a couple minutes. Tire might be another story.” He put his finger into a small hole in the side of the front tire.

Skye rested her head on her brother’s shoulder and watched. “Where you been riding that thing, baby girl?” He bounced her gently then kissed her cheek.

The little girl wiped the tears from her cheek, leaving dirty streaks. “I ownee ride onna geroun, Terrip.” She looked directly in his eyes. Trip bit his lip to hold in the laugh.

“Ya got tools, Triplett?” Alec asked.

“In the garage,” Trip answered tossing his head toward the building. Alec stood and took a step toward the path that led around the side of the garage. “Wait,” Trip called after him as he set Skye on the ground. “I’ll get it. My da’s car’s in there. He’s kinda funny about people and his car.”
“No touch Lola,” Skye waved her finger back and forth. “You make my bike woerk, Alice?”

The boy cringed at the little girl’s pronunciation of his name, while the other boys did nothing to hide their snickers.

Trip trotted around the side of the garage as Alec dropped back down and began working the chain back on to the large gears on the small bicycle. Skye squatted down on her haunches to watch.

Nick and Barry, stood behind for a few minutes before the shorter boy knocked the ball from the taller one’s grip, caught it and began dribbling it across the half-court. Skye stood and watched as the ball bounced in front of the shorter boy. She cringed once or twice as the ball hit the pavement but remembered to take deep breaths and see the boys were only playing a game. She watched as Barry tossed the ball toward the basket and it bounced off to the ground, rolled a few feet and was snatched by the other boy.

Nick stuffed the ball under his arm and walked to the little girl. He stood towering over her. “Hey, Skye you wanna dunk one?” He held out the ball to her.

Skye looked all the way up at Nick. “Is you a giant?”

Nick laughed as he reached down and handed the little girl the ball then lifted her and walked to the basket. He held her up so she was even with rim. Skye smiled and dropped the ball through the net.

“And Coulson scores the winning point!” Nick announced as he transferred the little girl to his shoulders and held both her hands out at her sides. “The crowd roars, amazed at the ability of the star player!” He spun in circles as Skye giggled at his antics.

Trip rounded the corner with a wrench in each hand. He smiled up at his sister and his friend.

“I winned the game, Terrrip.” She laughed down at her brother.

“Wasn’t sure what size we need,” Trip announced as he dropped down next to Alec and watched as Barry attempted to show Skye how to dribble the ball, with Nick lifting her to drop the ball through the net every time they reached the basket.
“Ya know there ain’t no way we’re fixin’ that tire, right?” Alec whispered as he clicked the chain in place and spun the peddle a few times to test its strength.

“Yeah, I know,” Trip frowned as he worked at loosening the nut that held the small tire in place. “I figure I get the tire off then tell her we need to buy a new one. I’m sure mom will get us where we need to go. If not, I’ll take my bike to Fletchers and pick up a new one for her.”

“I get it!” Skye yelled as the ball bounced several times across the court then rolled to the walk and across the lawn disappearing under a large lilac shrub. “You terrow hawrd, Nick. That baptist ball goed far.” She scurried after the ball dropping to her hands and knees and crawling under the brush.

Trip laughed as he turned back to his work, finally pulling the tire free and stuffing the hardware in his pocket. “I’m gonna run this past my mom. Keep an eye on the munchkin for me, huh?” He grabbed the tire and hurried toward the house.

Alec looked at the black grease on his hands, shrugged his shoulders and wiped them twice on his thighs. Barry dropped into one of the chairs at the table set up at the edge of the court and took a drink of his water. Nick leaned back on a chair and rested his long legs on the chair Trip had vacated earlier. “Guess we’re timed out til the midget brings the ball back.” He looked over his shoulder at the spot where the little girl had disappeared. “Come on, team star! We need our ball!” He turned back and drained the bottle of water he’d grabbed from the ice tub.

Skye crawled under the thick green leaves. Her hands and knees sunk into the soft, moist dirt. For a moment she stared at the shimmering sunlight that filtered through the greenery and wondered why she’d never found this great place before. It was like something fairies or elves would create. She couldn’t wait to share this with Jemma. It was big enough for the both of them. Nick’s voice called her back from her thoughts as she spied the basket ball resting against the fence. She stood and walked across the open area inside the lilac hedges and bent down to retrieve it. It gave a little resistance so she pulled a little harder falling back when it came loose revealing a basketball sized hole.

Skye dropped the ball and fell back to all fours to peer through the hole. Since moving into this new house with this big yard she’d never seen what lay beyond that very tall wooden barrier that ran the perimeter of the area. She lay on her belly and shimmied through the opening then stood and brushed the dirt and twigs from her clothing.

She stood in a vast field covered with wild flowers of every color. The grass reached almost to her shoulders. Skye looked it all directions in awe of the color surrounding her. She took a step and
disappeared into the flora.

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Trip trotted back to his friends carrying the bicycle tire under his arm. He stopped and watched as the three boys mapped their movements across the court apparently using an invisible ball. Putting down the tire he eased into the play pretending to steal the ball and shoot from mid-court calling it the winning shot.

“No way, Triplett,” Barry snorted. “I had the ball, not Nick. You’re just shootin’ air, dork!”

“I thought I had the ball,” Alec looked at his hands as if something had disappeared.

Trip laughed through his nose, “Aaaa, yer all wrong. I had the ball.” He poked his thumb into his chest.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah…whatever,” Nick shook his head. “If I had the ball no one, and I mean no one,” he glared at Trip, “would get it from me.”

“Huh,” Barry huffed. “You mean nobody like that guy from Holy Cross two weeks ago. Man, he was all over you.”

“Oh, yeah,” Nick snarled in mock anger, “Like you did such a great job defending.”

Trip shuffled his feet and spun in a circle. “If it wasn’t for me and my lightening moves, that game would have been history.” The other boys broke into a fit of laughter throwing fake punches at each other.

Nick caught Trip in a choke hold and rubbed his knuckles on top of the smaller teen’s head. “Yeah, like you’re such a terrific player. Don’t know how we got along without you for the last few years.”

Trip pulled himself free and stepped back. “Hey, I was tearin’ up the court for John Philip Sousa!” He mimicked dribbling the bad across the court and tossing it into the basket. “I don’t
know how they’re managing without me.” He smiled broadly at the other three boys.

“Oh, yeah,” Nick teased, “I remember seein’ your name on all those recruitment posters. You’re about to make history as the Wizard’s youngest player ever.”

Trip stopped and thought for a moment. “Nah, turned them down, got my sights set on other opportunities, my man.”

The other boys laughed as Nick patted the top of Trip’s head. “You’re gonna hafta improve your game a whole lot if you think the Point is gonna offer you a scholarship.” Barry and Alec nodded in agreement.

Trip shook his head. “Not worried about a scholarship, I’ll just get in with my extreme intelligence and natural Triplett charm.”

Nick and Barry bent over with laughter as Alec shook his head. “I’m pretty sure charm is not one of the qualities the US Army requires.”

“Then I guess I’ll be the first.” Trip smiled his widest grin. “Maybe even be their secret weapon.”

“Keep dreamin’ short stuff,” Nick snorted as he landed a punch on the shorter boy’s shoulder.

“Speakin’ of short stuff, where’s the ball. Hey, Skye, how ‘bout the ball!” Alec called toward the hedge.

“Ta hell, with the ball,” Trip looked in all directions, noticing for the first time the little girl was missing. “Where’s Skye?”

All three teens nodded toward the lilac hedge. “Crawled under to get the ball, couple minutes ago,” Barry explained.

“Probably havin’ a conversation with some lonely ladybug,” Barry shook his head. “Come on Skye, you’re delaying the game big time.”
Trip pictured Skye lying on her tummy having a heart to heart with a tiny insect and laughed. “I’ll get her.” He announced as he trotted toward the bush and dropped down on all fours to attempt following his baby sister’s path. The other boys laughed at the sight of Trip trying to squeeze into the small opening. He pulled himself back and plucked the sticks and leaves from his hair. He stood and addressed the hedge. “Hey, Skye,” he began, looking back at his friends who waited impatiently. “How ‘bout tossin’ the ball out to us so we can finish the game?” He waited a few minutes then pushed the tangle of branches apart to see inside the large growth.

The basketball set, forgotten in the dark, damp soil. Trip looked back at the others. “I thought you said she went after the ball.” He almost accused them before pushed the branches farther apart and trying to step through.

The other boys dashed to the hedge, each taking a few branches and pushing them aside. Alec moved close to the fence and slid along it until he could drop down under the leafy dome. He stretched his arm to the ball and fingered it toward himself. Snagging it he turned his face toward the fence to prevent scraping against the sharp twigs. “Shit!” He spat more to himself than the others.

“I think we gotta problem here, guys.” He spoke as he pulled himself up and squeezed back out of the space.

Barry slapped a hand to his forehead. “Don’t tell me it’s deflated, that’s a brand new ball.” He moaned.

“No, ya thick shit,” Alec tossed the ball into the other boy’s midsection and looked directly at Trip. “There’s a Skye sized hole in the fence under there and no sign of the peanut.”

Trip pushed the boy aside and slid through the thin space as the others once again pushed the leaves and branches aside to peer into the dim interior. Trip ignored the scratches to his arms and face as he dropped down and stuck his head as far as possible through the small hole in the fence. “SKYE!” He shouted at the top of his lungs but only silence met his bellow and all he could see was the base of the tall grass that covered the field.

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Skye marveled at the tall grass and multitude of flowers. She’d never seen so many flowers almost taller than she was. She pushed through the grass startling a small rabbit that skittered through the
The little girl giggled at the animal and followed the path it had taken. Her sneaker caught in the muck created by a recent bout of rainy weather. The squishy dirt combined with the tangle of weeds made for a tight trap. She pulled her foot a few times before releasing it from her shoe which remained ensnared in the muddy mess. Skye sat on her bottom on the soggy ground then turned quickly at the sound of the grass rustling, expecting to see the little rabbit once again. A large black nose poked through the tall weeds followed by the shaggy body of a young setter.

The little girl froze, eyes wide at the sight of the large dog that sniffed her hair and wagged its whole body as it pranced around her licking her face clear of the dark streaks left by her dirty hands.

“Hi, doggie,” Skye giggled as she wrapped her arms around its neck and tried to hug it around the continuous licking. The large dog raised its head pulling the little girl to her feet. It squirmed free of her hug and ran a few feet into the grass then turned and hurried back, ran around the little girl then back into the field. Skye clapped her hands and smiled. She’d never really played with a dog before. She pet Mrs. Claven’s pug when she saw her in the apartment building’s hall and once a man on the bus let her pet his shepherd. The pug made a lot of snorky noises like a little pig and the shepherd licked her fingers but no dog ever was this happy to see her. The dog was so happy she couldn’t help being happy. Once again the large reddish animal bounded through the grass landing at her feet and licked her face until she fell back with laughter. It sat down and picked up its big paw and rested it in her lap. She looked it and then up at the dog’s panting tongue.

“You gotz big footses, doggie. No steppa me, kay?” She gently moved the dog’s paw and stood again. The dog stood as well and moved off into the brush sniffing the ground as it went. Skye followed, twisting and turning through the shoulder high brush leaving her muddy sneaker behind.

The two walked for what seemed like a very long time to Skye and little girls get tired long before young Irish Setters. She plopped down on the grass, pulling her legs crisscross in front of her. Skye looked at her one muddy wet sock and frowned. “My sockeses is yucky.” She tugged at the wet item in an effort to pull it off finally content to roll it off her foot which was just as muddy as the sock. She poked out her feet in front of her and tilted her head to look at them. She wiggled her toes and stared at the untied sneaker on the opposite foot. It too was covered with black sludge.

“Mama no like-a dis yucky mud in hoer kitsen.” She shrugged her shoulders and pulled off the muddy shoe and sock then smiled at her one pink foot and one black foot. She looked at the large dog lying a few feet from her. A long shrill whistle startled them both. The dog’s ears perked as it stood at attention. Skye watched with curiosity. The whistle came again, and the dog took off toward the sound.

Skye stood on her tip toes to look over the top of the grass and watched as the dog ran to meet a
young man who scratched its ears. The man turned and walked away with the dog at his heels.

“Bye bye, doggie.” Skye sighed as she watched her furry friend disappear. She followed the path the dog created through the grass and in a few minutes found herself on the sidewalk. She looked up and down the street. The man and the dog were gone and she recognized nothing. Skye took a deep breath and turned back looking at the field. She couldn’t see the tall fence that she knew surrounded her yard and walking in the picky grass with no shoes hurt her feet. The sidewalk was a little bit warm, but she could walk on it. The little girl turned in the direction she saw the dog go and walked toward the corner in the distance.

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Trip pushed the branches aside and stepped over them pushing himself free of the hedge. “You lost my sister?” He couldn’t help the squeak in his voice.

“We didn’t lose her!” Barry squeaked back, suddenly feeling his friend’s panic. “She went after the ball, how’re we spoz to know she’d pull a Houdini?”

“She’s Skye!” Trip bellowed throwing his arms up and dropping them back. “She can do anything.”

“How’re we gonna know that, man? She’s your sister!” Alec shot back.

Nick held up a hand. “Knock it off, guys. All we gotta do is go around the fence and get her. Geesh, she’s a little kid. She’s probably over there tryin’ figure out how to get back.” He turned and headed for the front of the house, motioning for them to follow.

Trip looked at the hedge and then at the back of the house. He debated going to get his mother, to tell her Skye was...was what? Gone? Missing? Oh, no he was not ready for that conversation in any language because he was pretty sure whatever words Melinda May Coulson used would be in Mandarin and would not be repeatable. He hurried to catch up to his friends.

The four boys ran to the front of the house then around the end of the large junipers that lined the edge of the property. They stopped in their tracks at the six foot chain link fence that ran across the empty lot between the Coulson house and their closest neighbor.

“Place burned down ‘bout ten years ago,” Barry explained. “Tore it down and never rebuilt on the property.” He shrugged his shoulders as he watched Trip yank on the fence causing it to ring as
the chain clanked against the posts.

Trip grabbed the fence and started climbing without a thought. The other boys watched for a second before following. All four dropped down into the tall grass and spent no time flattening it with large sneaker clad teenage boy feet.

“Here’s the hole!” Barry shouted from the fence. Trip practically leaped through the grass to get to him.

“Don’t step on anything. If she pushed down the grass we can follow her.” He screamed as he ran.

“Damn it, Trip,” Nick growled as he followed his friend. “She’s so little she’d barely make a dent.”

All four boys stood with their backs to the fence and scanned the field watching for any movement other than the breeze moving the weeds in nature’s rhythm. It took them a few minutes to find the small path the little girl had made through the grass but once they had it all four were in hot pursuit. It took only a few minutes to find the tangled shoe. Trip ripped it from the grassy hold and held it in his hand. He looked in all directions and shouted her name hoping she was merely sitting in the tall weeds and would pop up calling his name in her crazy Skye-speak. Barry stopped a few feet ahead and turned back to look at his fiend. He took a step and stopped when he stepped on the second sneaker and bent to pick it up. The teen frowned at the small shoe in his hand and walked to the edge of the field. A few seconds later the others joined him. Barry held up the small sneaker and turned up one side of his face as Trip took it.

Alec stood up from examining a muddy splotch on the concrete. “This might be a tiny Skye footprint…maybe,” he stared at Trip hopefully.

Trip looked at the mark and the few that continued down the walk. “Only if she was hopping,” he shook his head and stared at the dirty purple sneakers he held in his hands.

“Might be, though…I mean it couldn’t help to check it out…” Alec took a step in the direction of the splotches.

Trip shook his head. “You guys check it out. I gotta tell my mom.” He turned and walked back toward the chain link fence.
Jemma wiped her hands on the towel wrapped around her waist and smiled as she watched Melinda slide a tray full of small tarts into the oven. “My mum used to make these all the time. I hope they are just half as good as those.”

Melinda stood and put an arm around her older daughter. “I’m sure everyone will love them.”

Jemma laughed. “I’m sure Fitz will. That is if you’ll allow him to join us for dinner this evening.”

“I should banish him to bread and water,” Melinda frowned. “If that smell doesn’t come out of that bathroom…”

“It will dissipate. I’m sure, momma. I think he may have used a bit too much sulphur. It does cause an awful stench.” Jemma nodded. “But, on Fitz’s behalf, he really meant no harm.”

Melinda laughed. “I know that, sweetheart. He just needs to remember not to experiment inside the house.”

Both looked up as Trip came through the back door staring at something he held in his hands. “Trip,” Melinda smiled. “How ’bout getting Skye in here? She needs to have some lunch and then it is nap time.” She started to turn away when she noticed the look on his face. “Trip?” He looked up at her and she noticed the sneakers.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Melinda was half furious and half terrified. She pushed away the memory of her children disappearing a few months ago.

“There’s a hole in the fence behind the lilacs. I guess she just slipped through.” He tried to remain calm. “I…We searched the field. That’s all we got.” He nodded toward the sneakers that Melinda now held. “The guys are following some muddy blobs on the sidewalk…but…”

Melinda wasn’t listening. She’d moved the bottom of the stairs. “Fitz! Fitz, get down here, now!” A rustle at the top of the stairs announced the small boy who stopped and stared down at his now very angry mother.
“I didn’t do anything.” He assured her almost whining. “I was reading, really just reading.” He looked at her glare and let out a breath before slipping down a few steps. “The smell will go away, mom, I promise. It’s merely a temporary inconvenience.”

Melinda took a breath and reined in her anger. “It’s okay, Fitz, I just need you to come down here. I need your help.”

She swallowed her fear, her panic…that would do nothing to help the situation. Skye was four years old. She’d merely wandered away from their yard. How far could she go? Melinda pushed every thought of every faceless monster that stole away little children never to be seen again. Again she pushed down the fear that stood just outside her firm resolve.

Fitz and Jemma set out on their bicycles, following their mother’s orders to circle the block. She reminded them to look in every driveway and behind hedges and brush, that Skye was curious beyond measure and would be likely to investigate anything out of the ordinary and everything within it as well. Both children nodded and agreed to circle twice then return to the yard and stay put until their mother returned.

Trip and his friends, who had returned empty handed telling the boy that the foot blobs went about half the block and then gradually disappeared. The boys manned their bicycles as well and agreed to split up and got in all directions each taking one block outside the one the twins would circle then return to the front yard. They’d fan out as necessary. Trip shivered with the thought of the number of swimming pools between here and the few blocks they’d traverse. Every yard was fenced and fences were supposed to be locked, but Skye was resourceful and what if someone forgot. What if she got into one of those yards? What if she fell into someone’s pool? He felt the empty ache in the pit of his stomach and pushed it back refusing to believe that anything bad could happen to his baby sister.

xx

Skye walked down the concrete sidewalk. She looked at the houses, the yards and the driveways. Everything looked different, but she knew what her house looked like and all she had to do was keep looking. She’d gotten lost once at St. Agnes. Someone left open the gate and she just walked out. She walked and walked until someone found her and brought her back to the sisters. They were grateful, but angry. Skye hoped momma wasn’t angry. She didn’t mean to be lost but she couldn’t find that hole again.

The little girl looked up at a tall black and white house. It wasn’t hers and the car in the driveway wasn’t daddy’s black car. She knew her house was brown so she stopped in front of the brown
house, but the door wasn’t right. It was yellow and had a big green circle on it with a bow. Her
house didn’t have a bow and it didn’t have yellow flowers growing under the windows in the front
yard. She looked up and down the street and wondered why her house was not there. Skye
suddenly missed her momma and felt hungry and tired. She walked around the corner and watched
the cars go by. She took a big breath. There were two kids playing in a yard just a little bit farther
down the block. She walked that far and stood watching them laugh and roll in the soft grass. She
thought maybe it was Fitz and Jemma, but she’d never seen them play that way.

The kids didn’t talk to her and after a little while their mommy called them and they ran into their
house. She walked some more and wondered if maybe her house was on the other side of the
street. Momma had told her never to cross the street alone. She had to hold momma’s hand or
daddy’s or Trip’s but she was not to go alone, but if that was where her house was she’d need to get
there. Momma wouldn’t be mad if she just needed to get home. She stood on the curb and looked
at all the houses, lots of them were brown and one had to be hers. The small child stepped into the
street and ran to the other side seconds before a car sped through the neighborhood.

Skye walked a little bit and saw the house she knew was hers. It was brown with a red door and
just green bushes under the windows. She smiled and ran the short distance intending to race up
the walk and push open the front door. A man walked around the side of the large house pushing a
lawnmower. He smiled and waved at her as she stood watching. Her smiled faded. Only daddy
cut the grass at her house and sometimes Trip did it. She didn’t know this man. This wasn’t her
house. She sighed and continued to walk, brushing away the tears that started to fall. Before she
knew it she stood on another corner looking at another street. It didn’t seem that her house was
that far away. She plopped down on the curb with her feet in the road. She rested her elbows on
her knees and her chin on her fists. Maybe if she just sat there, momma would find her.

Momma found Fitz when he got losted. She brought him home and she wasn’t mad to him. She
was happy she found him. Momma and daddy looked for him and for Jemma and Trip and they
found them. Momma would find her too. Momma would come because momma told her she
would always come back. Momma never lied to her. Momma would come.

Skye folded her arms over her knees and laid her head on them, looking down the street at the
elephant dancing on the lawn of the smallest house she’d seen so far. She smiled at the sight. The
elephant was green. She’d never seen a green elephant. The little girl stood and walked across the
street heading for the object of her fascination. A car horn blew loudly as it passed her but she
only saw the elephant.

It took minutes to hurry down the sidewalk and soon Skye was standing in front of the elephant
hedge. It was really a dancing elephant made out of leaves and sticks and it was a plant and she
could not imagine how an elephant plant could grow. She walked all the way around it, gently
patting the soft green leaves. She squatted down and looked under the brush wondering what she
might find. She stood and smiled at the odd creature then turned and marveled at a second bush
also trimmed to look like a small pachyderm. She clapped her hands and walked around the other
elephant shaped bush before noticing several small ceramic elephants lining the walk that led to the
front stoop where yet another elephant stood. This one was almost as big as her and was decorated with yellow trim and tassels and jewels. Skye walked up to the small porch and reached out to touch the fantastical object.

“Don’t touch that!” A gruff voice commanded and the little girl froze then turned toward the sound.

An older woman stood glaring at her. She wore a large hat and thick glasses. The woman held a large floppy basket lined with all kinds of flowers. She had on yellow gloves covered with tiny red rose buds and held a bright green clipper in the hand she shook at Skye.

“You gotz lotsa ohfonts in you yarred.” The little girl smiled.

The woman pulled back her clippers and continued to glare down at the little girl. “You’re right. It is my yard and you need to get out. Go,” she pointed toward the sidewalk with her clipper. “Be on your way.”

Skye squinted up at the woman and smiled. “You talks like Jemma.” The woman snorted and placed her hand, still holding the clipper, on her hip. “I like you ohfonts. This one is pretty. Does hoer have a name?” Skye patted the decorative piece that set on the small porch. The woman cringed as the little girl’s action caused a clink against the delicate hollow elephant. She shoved her clipper into the basket she still held and reached out taking Skye by the arm.

“Little girl, I told you not to touch that.” She scolded as she pulled her away.

Skye moved with the woman. “She is real pretty. Alla you ohfonts are pretty. How you get them butches to be ohfonts?” She pointed toward the two that had drawn her attention to the small yard.

The woman didn’t respond but led Skye to the sidewalk and dropped her arm then turned back to her garden ignoring the little girl. Skye stood and watched as the woman went back to her gardening, kneeling down and tugging weeds from the flower beds that lined her front walk. She smiled as she bounced back to where the woman worked and stood watching.

“You gots lotsa flowers. They is pretty. I like-a them pourpul ones cuz pourpul is my favrit. Jemma like-as pink and red.” The woman continued her work. “I gots flowers in my yarred. Momma and Jemma maked them. Why you gotz alla these ohfonts?” Skye squatted down and gently tapped one of the small elephant statues that decorated the sides of the walk.
The woman shook her head and pushed up her glasses. “Did I tell you to go away?” She asked without looking up.

Skye leaned on her bent knees. “Na ah,” she shook her head. You toed me notta touch the pretty ohfont onna poach.” She pointed toward the glistening figure.

“Then I am telling you now. Go home and leave me alone.” The woman stated simply.

Skye sat down on the sidewalk and crisscrossed her legs. She brushed the dirt from her bare foot and wiggled her toes. “I can’t” She sighed.

The woman stopped her work and looked up for the first time, letting out a disgusted huff at the sight of the child parked on her front walk. She sat back on her knees. “And why can you not go home?”

Skye shrugged her shoulders and played with a small rock she found next to her knee.

The woman watched for a moment then shook her head. “That is not an answer, child.”

Skye looked at the woman over her brows. “My momma is losted.”

The woman took in the condition of the child. She was quite dirty and appeared to have been crying due to the dirty streaks on her face. Her clothes were covered with bits and pieces of various grasses and burrs. “I find it hard to believe that your mother has been lost. Perhaps it is you who has lost their way.”

Skye looked over her shoulder at the shrubs. “How you get them butches to look like ohfonts?” She asked again.

The woman shook her head and stood. “They are called topiaries and it takes a very long time to train the hedge to grow into the preferred shape.”
Skye nodded as she too stood and walked over to examine the shrubs again. “You maked them?” She looked up at the woman who now stood next to her.

“I trained them.” The woman corrected as she turned and began to collect her tools from the ground.

“You like-a ohfonts?” She squinted up at the woman.

“Elephants,” the woman corrected as she placed her basket on the porch and turned to the small child who followed behind. She turned and sat on the stoop then patted the spot next to her inviting the little girl to sit. “Tell me how your mother went missing.” She began.

“She no mission, hoer is losted.” Skye explained as she sat down.

The woman raised her brows and nodded. “I stand corrected.” She stated. “Where are your shoes child?” She pointed toward Skye’s very dirty bare feet.

“Them got losted too,” the child sighed. “My sockeses was too wet so I taked them offa my foots.”

“Maybe you should tell me your name.” The woman shook her head wanting to end this as soon as possible. She had work to do and it would not get done with this jabbering little girl following her around the yard.

“I usza be Mawy Soup but now I Skye.” She poked her thumbs at her chest. “The jud sayed I be Skye now. Him sayed I be Skye foe evva.” Skye smiled proudly.

The woman frowned. This child was difficult to understand. Her pronunciation was horrid and most of what she said made little sense. “So you are called Skye?”

“Yep,” the little girl nodded. “I is Skye Mawy Care Meing Coeson.” She smiled again. “I getted the big name cuz I the lit lest.”

“Do you know what your mother is called?” The woman asked.
Skye nodded. “Hoer is called momma, but Fittis says hoer is mom.”

The woman rubbed her temples. This was not going to be easy.

Skye scanned the woman’s yard and noticed the many different sized elephants that decorated it. Some were tiny and peeked out from under patches of flowers while others were big enough for a small girl to sit on and stood between small shrubs and grasses. Some were the color of real elephants, grey and wrinkly and others were every color of the rainbow decorated with sparkles and tiny jewels. The prettiest was the large one on the porch and the most interesting were those made out of bushes.

“Why you gots so much ohfonts?” Skye asked, bouncing her hands in front of her.

“Why do you ask so many questions?” The woman sighed quietly.

Skye thought for a moment. “Daddy sayses I curr…corr…chorus!” She announced.

“I believe you mean curious.” The woman corrected and Skye nodded in agreement.

“Him sayses I do currus too much some the time.” She shook her head and frowned.

“Perhaps that is how you came to be on my lawn?” The woman inquired.

“No,” Skye shook her head. “I just likeded you ohfont butches.”

“Topiaries,” the woman corrected with a defeated sigh.

“Toe parries,” Skye repeated. “We no gots any toe parries in my yarred.”

“I do not suppose you do. I also don’t suppose you know your house number or your phone.” She shook her head in disapproval.
“I no know lotsa nummers, but I is this many cuz I hadded a birtday.” Skye held up four fingers.

“Hmmm,” The woman pondered. “So your name is Skye and you are four years old and you don’t know your mother’s given name.”

“I giver name, Momma when she founded me.” Skye smiled. “Her looked for me a long long time.”

“So you have been missing before?” The woman shook her head. ‘What kind of parents lose their children and lose them more than once?’

“I no is missin’.” Skye shook her head and brushed her hair from her eyes. “Momma and daddy was missin’ cuz I was not losted. I was bein’ at Sagnes waitin’ for them. Then momma finded me at a doctor cuz I no like-a aiyo.” Skye pursed her lips and nodded her head.

The woman shook her head and pulled off her gloves then set them in her lap. The more this dirty little girl spoke the less she understood. “You must be new in this neighborhood as I have not seen you before. Have you lived in your house since you were a baby?” Maybe if she tried speaking to the child in the silly language she seemed to speak it might get her somewhere.

Skye thought for a moment then shook her head. “I’s a baby at Sagnes with Sisser Care. She not my mommy cuz she bees a sisser and sissers no be mommies.” She explained to the woman who knit her brows in confusion. “Then I goed to the bad boy’s house and he hoert my orms. I no like-a him.”

“I can understand that you would not.” The woman nodded, understanding that someone had hurt this child and wondering now if maybe she had run away and perhaps it was time to contact the authorities.

“When I goed with Salteed to live in the big house with a evalater then I have a momma and a daddy and a Fittiz and a Jemma and a Terrip. Them is my brudders and my sisser for real and foe ever, cuz the jud sayed we is a fam ill ee. Him writed it down so ever body would know foe ever.”

“You have so very much to say, don’t you?” The woman sighed tried to make sense of the entire story the tiny child told. Skye shrugged and then nodded, not sure which was the correct answer. If there was an elevator in the house where the little girl lived (and if evalater was kid-speak for
elevator) then she must have lived in an apartment. There were no apartment buildings in the immediate area. In fact it was more than a mile to the nearest thing that might be considered an apartment and none of those buildings had elevators. This little one must have lived in the city.

“Do you have an elevator where you live now?” The woman asked, hoping the answer was no because she could not imagine a child getting this far out of the city on her own.

Skye giggled and brought her hand to her mouth. She crunched up her whole body. “No, we ownee has stepases to walk up to upstairs. We got stepases to go to the bottom house too. Sun times Hunner and Bobbi sleeps there but theys gone to go far away. Hey!” Skye suddenly had a flash. “Hunner talks like you and Jemma. Him says bloke a lot and him says bad words. Momma no like it.” She shook her head and scrunched up one side of her face.

The woman understood that this ‘Hunner’ and ‘Jemma’ must be British since the child kept saying they all spoke like she did. She could only imagine that the child was referring to her accent.

“Why you gots so many ohfonts?” Skye asked again, staring at the yellow clad statue behind the woman.

The woman sighed. The child was nothing if not persistent. “If you must know, I just like them. My parents lived in India for a very long time. I was born there and there are many elephants in India. They remind me of my parents and give me comfort.” She sighed again. The afternoon sun was getting very strong and soon the heat of the day would overtake her need to prune her garden. She was usually finished with all of her yard work by this time and sitting in the cool shade of her back porch enjoying a cold lemonaid and a light lunch.

“I don’t suppose you have had a midday meal.” The woman wondered. Skye scrunched up her nose and tilted her head in confusion. “Lunch,” the woman amended. “Have you eaten lunch today?”

Skye shook her head. “Momma no call me yet. She make-a tarsis with Jemma for the bakes ale at hoer schoo. I no getta help cuz I spillded too much onna floer. I rided my bike but the ching comed offa it and the wheel got down to the ground. Alice and Terrip fixted it not enough then the baptist ball goed unner the lalics and I finded a big hoe inna fence. I fitted inna hoe and seed alla flowers and a bunny and a doggie then I finded you ohfonts.” She smiled up at the woman who let out a long breath.

“Well, it is getting rather warm. I think it would be preferable if we went inside to get out of the heat.” The woman suggested.
Skye stood and shook her head. “Momma telled me no go inna house with strane jors.”

“You have a very smart momma Skye but we’ve been sitting here talking for quite some time. Don’t you think we are becoming friends? We’ll just go through the house to the back porch and have a drink and a bite to eat. Then we will try to find your momma.” The woman reasoned, thinking that would probably be the same line of crap any pedophile would give a small impressionable child. “My name is Hermione Bingham.” She put out her hand to the little girl.

“Hermanee like in Hairy Potter? Jemma reads him to me!” Skye smiled and put her grubby hand into the woman’s.

The woman closed her eyes and shook her head. Damn that Rowling woman for giving that character that name. She’d been plagued with the comparison for years now. It was getting quite old. “Well, you may address me as Mrs. Bingham. Can you do that?” The woman stood and held the little girl’s hand as she stepped up on to the stoop and reached for the door knob.

xx

Melinda pushed open the large gate at the rear of the Coulson property and stepped into the walkway between the properties that bordered it. She walked to the right and followed the path that led to the sidewalk on the opposite side of the block. The boys had traced the paths through the grass to this area. She found the muddy splotches on the sidewalk quickly and followed them to the corner noting that there were at least three spots where they halted and turned toward the houses. She stopped as well and examined what her child must have been looking for at each stop. Every house was brown, similar or identical to the color of their own. She smiled knowing Skye was looking for home. She mentally beat herself for not insisting the little girl memorize her address. Was that something mothers did with four-year-olds? She really didn’t know and couldn’t remember. As a child she had lived in so many places she rarely had time to learn any address and most of the time her mother liked it that way. She had lived a life of anonymity. Melinda was sure the older kids knew their addresses. Trip was a teenager, of course he knew and the other two knew things Melinda wouldn’t even consider telling them. They could identify the type of grass that grew in the front yard and what in geographic era every rock had evolved. But, Skye, oh god how had she missed this? Yet, another epic failure in Melinda May’s Guide to Messed-Up Motherhood.

She hadn’t even called Phil yet. She expected to find her baby crying on the corner, hysterical at not being able to locate their home. But, Skye was too curious and too friend and too willing to go with whomever happened to be going in a direction that seemed interesting. Part of that stemmed from being four and part from living mostly on her own in the orphanage for the better part of her very short lifetime. Melinda did consider calling Sr. M Claire. If anyone knew Skye’s particular
quirks it was the little nun who loved the tiny girl almost as much as her momma. She shelved that thought knowing it would probably upset the woman way too much and anyway she wasn’t quite sure she wanted to broadcast her own stupidity.

Melinda stopped at the corner and peered across the street. She had warned her little one over and over about crossing the street alone, but Skye was Skye and there were at least three brown houses over there. If Skye noticed, and Melinda was sure she had, she would have forgone all lectures and dashed over to check them out. She watched a few cars speed by and wondered at their recklessness in an area with so many homes and so many children. Why hadn’t she noticed before?

Did she do the same on her daily commutes?

Reaching the opposite curb, Melinda stood for a moment and looked in both directions. Which way? The sound of childish laughter caught her attention and once again she moved to the right, hurrying down the block and stopping at a home that looked very much like her own. Had her little one thought the same? She considered knocking on the door. Perhaps Skye had done the same and some friendly neighbors were trying to make sense of her Skye-speak and get her home. Melinda did another mental check. ‘Make friends with the neighbors.’ She didn’t even know the names of the people who lived next door and here she was a block away hoping someone would recognize her baby.

A small boy ran across the walk a few yards ahead of her, chased by a girl perhaps a few years younger. She took long strides to make it to them before they disappeared behind their home.

“Hello,” Melinda remarked casually as she approached.

The children stopped and stared. The girl put an arm around her brother and took a few steps back. Melinda smiled. Their mother had warned them about strangers. She understood. She stepped back as well and held out a hand. “I’m Mrs. Coulson. I live on the next block.” She pointed behind her and looked at the wide-eyed children. “I’m looking for my little girl. I thought maybe you might have seen her. She’s really small and has dark hair.” She laughed a little. “I don’t think she’s wearing any shoes.”

The little boy looked up at his sister. The little girl scrunched up her face a bit then nodded. “She was watchin’ us for a little while, but she didn’t say nothing. Then we had ta go in.”

“She was real dirty.” The little boy added.
Melinda’s heart jumped. Skye had been here. She couldn’t have gone far. “Do you know how long ago that was or where she went.”

The little girl thought again. “It was right before lunch and she was just standin’ there when we went inside.”

“Oh, ah,” the little boy shook his head. “She went down the street.” He leaned forward and pointed toward the next corner.

Melinda looked in the direction the boy pointed, thanked the children and hurried that way. She reached the curb at the same time Trip and Alec arrived. They both stopped and waited for Melinda to reach them.

“Anything?” Trip asked hopefully.

“Two kids saw her about an hour ago,” Melinda informed him. “Said she went this way.”

“She’s got her directions all mixed up Mrs. C,” Alec shook his head. “Seems to be headin’ in the wrong direction.”

“She’s four, jerk-face,” Trip scowled. “She’s not out on patrol!” Alec shrugged.

Melinda shook her head. Had Skye crossed another street? “Okay, Trip go back to the house and make sure the twins are there. Then take them with you and circle this block. I’m going to the next.”

“Maybe we should call da.” Trip suggested. “Or the police…maybe.”

“Yeah, Mrs. C. ya never know what kinda pervs might be hanging around just lookin’ for a little…” Trip punched the boy’s arm so hard that he dropped his bike and grabbed his shoulder. “What the hell, man?” Alec snarled.

Melinda swallowed the fear once again. No, no one had taken Skye. She was off on a lark and they would find her. This was not a case of abduction it was just a little girl on a little stroll.
through the neighborhood.

“I’m sorry, mom.” Trip said softly. “I’ll get the kids and meet you back here in twenty.” He pulled his bike straight and pushed off with Alec a few feet behind.

Melinda didn’t stop to watch him leave. She crossed the street and continued in a straight line.

xx

Skye stepped into the dim coolness of Mrs. Bingham’s small house. It smelled old, like the attic at St. Agnes. Everything looked old like the rooms momma and daddy showed her in the museum. There were little frilly napkins on all the chairs. Momma said they were dollies. Skye didn’t think they looked like any dollies she’d ever seen. The rugs were big and covered with giant flowers and designs she didn’t recognize. There were vases of real flowers on every table and a fire place with no logs just another big vase filled with sunflowers. Any everywhere there were elephants.

There were elephants of all sizes. Some were made of wood and looked like carvings. Some were wooden and painted shiny like glass. Some had huge tusks and some had none. Some were so tiny Skye could hold a half dozen in her little hand. They were on shelves and in pots and on tables and the mantle and the floor. There was a whole family of them linked trunk to tail. The biggest one was the size of a foot stool and the smallest no bigger than a mouse. On the wall was a yellow carpet with an elephant man in the center.

He was sitting cross legged on a big chair and had a gold crown on top of his elephant head, but he had legs like a person. Skye’s eyes were wide with wonder and she wanted to go closer but Mrs. Bingham told her to stay put until she cleaned her feet. She stared at the picture. The elephant man had four arms and every one held something. One had a pink flower and one had a dish of something. One had a sun in the middle of its hand and the other looked like it had a baby’s rattle. There was a little mouse at the elephant man’s foot and all kinds of things on the floor. Skye couldn’t stop looking at it, even when Mrs. Bingham returned with a basin of water and a cloth.

Skye sat down on the floor as instructed but could not take her eyes from the elephant man. Mrs. Bingham smiled and followed the little girl’s gaze as she gentle washed the mud from her little feet.

“That is Ganesh. He is a Hindu god. People believe he is a protector and that he grants success and prosperity. He is very important to the Hindu people.” She explained to the little girl.
“Him is a ohfont man?” Skye whispered in the quiet of the house.

“He has the head of an elephant.” Mrs. Bingham agreed as she dried the girl’s feet and helped her to stand.

Skye walked across the soft carpet and stood directly in front of the tapestry. “How him get a ohfont head?”

Mrs. Bingham folded the towel and stood then picked up the basin. “Legend tells us that his father gave him the head of an elephant.”

Skye’s eyes went even wider. “Hees daddy doed that? Why him give him that head?” She nodded toward the picture.

“Elephants have very big ears and very small mouths.” Mrs. Bingham pointed out. “Perhaps his father wanted him to listen more and talk less.” Skye looked at the woman then back to the picture and nodded. “Come with me, Skye. We can clean your hands in the loo then we can go to the porch.” Skye nodded but kept her eye on the tapestry as she followed the woman into the small kitchen where her attention was once again taken by Mrs. Bingham’s collection of everything elephant.

On either side of the window over the sink were small semicircular shelves and each held one or two small elephants. Some resembled the decorated one on the front stoop and a few looked like they might be from the circus. Others just looked like elephants from picture books. There was a towel draped over the handle on the stove with a picture of two large elephants and every drawer and cabinet had a silver elephant knob. There were all sorts of elephant magnets on the refrigerator. Some looked like the real thing and others were more like cartoon elephants.

“You sure like-as alla these ohfonts a lot.” Skye breathed as she turned and took in all she could. Even the napkin holder was two ceramic pachyderms facing in opposite directions.

“They are very powerful creatures and yet gentle at the same time. They are very loving toward each other as well.” Mrs. Bingham smiled as she led the little girl to the washroom. “Can you do this yourself or do you need help.”

Skye looked at the very small bathroom with the still too tall sink. “I no reach up there.” She
pointed to the pedestal sink, knowing she could not use Fitz’s trick of opening the cabinet to stand on the shelf. “But I go the potty all myself.”

Mrs. Bingham nodded then stepped away and returned a few seconds later with a small step stool in the shape of a standing elephant. Skye was delighted. “I use it to reach items on the top shelves.” Mrs. Bingham told her as she placed it in front of the sink. “You do what you need to do and I will put our lunch on the porch.” Skye nodded and waited for the woman to step out before she hurried to use the bathroom.

A few minutes later the little girl stepped onto the porch hugging the small step stool. Mrs. Bingham smiled and relieved her of the burden, putting the item back into a small closet next to the refrigerator. Skye climbed up onto one of the chairs and looked at the plate the woman had set for her. There was a half sandwich cut into a triangle, three cucumbers and six green grapes. Next to the plate was a small glass of lemon aid.

“I hope you enjoy cream cheese and jelly.” Mrs. Bingham nodded as she picked up her own sandwich and took a delicate bite.

Skye watched for a moment then pulled herself up on her knees in order to reach the table and picked up her sandwich. She took a small bite and smiled at the sweet taste. She took a larger bite and chewed before speaking.

“My momma noen’t make this, but I like-a it. I like-a cumcubers, too.” She popped one in her mouth.

“We need to find your momma, Skye.” Mrs. Bingham said as she put down her sandwich.

Skye shook her head. “Her is losted.” The little girl repeated her earlier explanation.

“I think Skye is lost and she needs to help me to help her.” The woman considered walking a few blocks with the little girl to see if anything looked familiar but since the child had no shoes that might not be a good idea. The afternoon sun would make the concrete quite hot. “What can you tell me about your house?”

Skye munched on a cucumber and thought for a moment. “It bees brown with a red door and no circle thing on it.”
Mrs. Bingham mentally rolled her eyes. There were a lot of brown houses in this area and many different shades of brown as well. Lots of those houses had red doors as well. She really did not want to involve the authorities in this but she could see no other way to find this child’s parents. Maybe if she were a bit more cordial with the neighbors she might recognize the child or know of a new family that had moved into the area. Another thought struck her. Surely this child’s parents were also looking for her.

“We gots a big driveway but no for ridin’ bikes.” Skye spread her arms wide and shook her head. “Gam lives inna garage but her no touch Lola cuz her bees up the steps to the garage.” She nodded and popped a grape into her mouth and chewed while thinking. “We gots lots butches onna side anna big Christmas tree onna udder side, but it noen’t fit inna house ever.” She shook her head as she popped another grape. “They is a big, biggggg fence.” Skye spread her arms vertically and dragged out the word with her eyes opened wide. “It gived me slibbers that momma taked out and I crieded for a long time. I non’t touch it no more.” She held out both hands as if the woman could see where the splinters had been. “The big grass bees by the fence but out the hole not by my house.” She finished as she reached for her last grape.

Mrs. Bingham tried to picture the home. I had a driveway and a garage with an upstairs apartment. It was bordered with shrubbery and pines and apparently there was field next to it, a field separated from the home with a tall wooden fence. It helped but still left way too many homes in the area. Almost everyone with a garage had an upstairs apartment or storage area and most of the homes had wooden privacy fences. The child had not mentioned a swimming pool. She certainly would have if it were part of her environment. Kids loved swimming pools. That narrowed it down a bit, but she wasn’t even sure in what direction the child had come.

“Skye, I think we might have to call the police to find your momma.” Mrs. Bingham sighed sadly.

Skye smiled and chewed the last of her sandwich. “My daddy bees a pliest.”

“A priest?” Mrs. Bingham was almost shocked.

Skye laughed, “no like Fr. Joe. Him bees a pereest. Daddy bees a puliest.”

Mrs. Bingham smiled. “Fr. Joe from St. Bartholomew’s? You know Fr. Joe, Skye?”

Skye nodded as she took a drink of her lemon aid. She swallowed and wiped her mouth with the cloth napkin Mrs. Bingham had given her. “Him bees Sisser Mawy Cares friend. Him bees my friend too.”
Mrs. Bingham clapped her hands and smiled again. “Skye we are going to find your momma and I know just how to do it.”

xx

Melinda walked for ten minutes then turned back and returned to the corner a few minutes before Trip and the kids rode to a stop. The worry was apparent on everyone’s face.

“I’ve been down this way. I’m going to the end of this block and then…then I’m calling your father.” She tried to sound optimistic for the kids’ sake but Trip could see right through her. She was just as worried and probably more so than he was.

Trip swallowed the bile that had been threatening to rise since he found that damn hole in the fence. If they didn’t find her soon he was sure he’d be puking his guts out in the nearest storm drain. This whole fiasco was his fault. He should have taken her with it when he went into the kitchen. He shouldn’t have been gone so long. He should have looked for her as soon as he got back instead of horsing around with his friends. He should have paid more attention. He should have used his head.

“Are you coming?” Jemma’s voice brought him back.

Trip nodded and looked ahead. Fitz was halfway down the block with Melinda close behind. He pushed down on the peddle and rode after them keeping a close eye on the opposite side of the street. Jemma brought up the rear trying to look in all directions for her little sister.

Fitz broke fast as he approached the house with all the lawn decorations. He glared at the elephant topiaries and patches of bright colored flowers. The house was blue and white and much smaller than all the other houses on the street. In fact if it weren’t for those bushes he probably would have gone right past, but this was unique and crazy and if his little sister was attracted to anything it was ‘crazy’.

Trip continued past his younger brother intending to circle the block then meet his family on his return. His friends had taken it upon themselves to collect wood and nails to cover the hole where Skye had slipped away. They too felt guilty for losing the little girl and hoped to make amends. Barry pointed out that someone needed to stay just in case Skye found her way home. So while everyone was looking he sat on the front stoop and prayed every prayer he knew that she would be found. The boy closed his eyes and looked heavenward, trying to be as reverent as possible in his supplication.
“Deep in thought, Mr. Wysocki?” A deep voice startled the young boy.

“Holy shit! It worked!” The boy jumped to his feet and slapped a hand over his mouth. “I…I’m real sorry Father. I was…I…I…”

The priest laughed at the teen’s plight and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve heard much worse, Barry, believe me.” The boy looked at the ground to hide the blush on his cheeks. “Are the Coulson’s here? I need to see them.”

“Ah, no…no Father they…well, well, Skye kinda went for a walk and nobody can find her and well, me and guys we…I mean I thought somebody should stay here in case she came back so I…I mean I looked for her too, but then I thought…..” Barry stumbled over his words in order to explain.

The priest patted his shoulder. “Good thinking, son, but Skye is safe.”

“Ah….yeah…I know that God is lookin’ after her, Father but I think her mom….”

Fr. Joe laughed again. “No, Barry. I mean she’s okay. She’s with a friend. I’ve come to let the Coulsons know. I tried calling but…”

“She’s okay? You found her?” The boy was almost jumping up and down. “Hey, guys! Guys!” He called out as he ran toward the side of the house. “Guys! They found her! She’s okay! Hey Guys!”

The priest laughed as the boy disappeared around the house..

xx

Melinda stood next to her younger son and stared at the over decorated yard. “You’re right, Fitz,” she nodded. “She certainly would have been attracted to this, but seeing as everything looks like its in place I don’t think our little earthquake spent much time here.”
“But, mom, just look at that Indian Elephant on the porch! Skye would have been magnetized to it.” Fitz propped his bike on its kickstand and took a step toward the house stopped when Melinda put a hand on his arm.

“She, you can’t just march onto someone’s property.” She informed him.

xx

“You take-a me home now?” Skye looked up at Mrs. Bingham and rubbed her eye with one fist.

Mrs. Bingham had talked to someone on the phone while Skye stood next to her. She told the other person the story about the little girl and nodded her head a lot. She smiled too, so Skye knew it was a happy phone call not the kind you get when someone is hurt or in trouble. When she hung up she told the little girl that she’d be going home very soon and that her momma would be found.

Skye looked at the black and white elephant salt and pepper shakers on the table and wondered again why this lady had so many elephants in her house. “You gotsa real ohfont?” She asked the woman who was busy putting plates and cups back into the cupboard.

“I did a long time ago, but not anymore.” Mrs. Bingham shook her head. “Her name was Tillie.”

“You haved a real ohfont in you yarred?” Skye was delighted.

Mrs. Bingham laughed as she put up the last glass and closed the cabinet. “No it wasn’t here, dear. It was far away at a reserve in Africa. My husband was a doctor who took care of animals there and we had a baby elephant whose momma…” She thought for a moment about what to tell the wide eyed little girl. “Whose momma couldn’t care for her.”

Skye nodded her understanding. “So you beed hers momma.”

The woman smiled and patted the little girl’s hand. “I suppose I did. I gave her a bottle and fed her and kept her warm and I truly loved that little elephant until the day she left.”

Skye furrowed her brow. “Where’d her go?”
“Well,” Mrs. Bingham took Skye’s hand in her own and started walking toward the front door. “She grew up and got very big and strong and it was time for her to go to live with the other elephants. So one day we took her out to the brush and she saw all the others and went to make friends with them.”

“Then she was gone foe ever?” Skye frowned.

“Oh, no. I saw her quite often and she always remembered me. She would trumpet so loudly when she saw me. Elephants don’t live as long as people, but she might still be there. She is probably a grandmamma by now.” Mrs. Bingham smiled as she placed her hand on the door knob.

Melinda looked down at Fitz who stood at her side then back at Jemma who waited with the bikes and raised her hand to knock on the door that opened before she had the chance.

“MOMMA!” Skye squealed as she slammed into her mother’s legs, wrapping her arms around them tightly.

Melinda stared into the pale blue eyes of the woman who stood in the dim interior of the small house. Each held the same shocked expression.

“Momma, momma! Is my momma!” Skye jumped up and down before Melinda pulled her up into a giant hug.

“Baobei,” she whispered into the little girl’s hair.

“I knew it!” Fitz grinned, more at himself than the fact that his baby sister had been found.

Jemma let her bike fall into the other and both crashed to the ground as she race down the walk and threw her arms around her mother and sister. Tears of relief streamed down the little girl’s cheeks.

Fitz ran back to the sidewalk and screamed his brother’s name a few times before Melinda ordered him to stop. Instead he hopped on his bike and peddled in the direction he had seen Trip go before his mother could stop him.
Melinda smiled at the woman who stood at the door and set her baby on the ground. She squatted down in front of the little girl and raised a finger pointing at her.

“Momma was very scared, Skye. I couldn’t find you anywhere.” She scolded as Skye’s smile fell away and she dropped her gaze to her bare toes.


“Wǒ hěn bǎoqiàn, māmā.” Skye mumbled to her toes.

Wǒ zhīdào nǐ hěn bǎoqiàn, Skye.” Melinda sighed as Jemma placed an arm around her sister’s shoulders.

Fitz and a very relieved Trip ran up the walk to join their family. Trip reached down and took Skye into his arms as Melinda stood not quite finished with her tirade.

Trip kissed the little girl several times before she turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Girl, you scared me almost pink!” He laughed as she squeezed her tightly. “Don’t you ever do that again!” He scolded gently.

Fitz stepped to the woman who stood watching at the door. He put out a hand. “Hi, I’m Fitz. Don’t mind my family, they get a little overwhelmed at times. I hope Tremors here didn’t break anything. You’ve got quite a lot of statuary and knick knacks and the lot.” He smiled up at the woman who smiled at his accent and realized what Skye had been trying to tell her. “Oh, my mom goes all Mandarin when she’s angry and I suspect she’s pretty upset right now.” He looked over his shoulder at his brother holding Skye.

“Wǒ xiǎng wǒ xūyào gěi nǐ yīgè dǎ pigu.” Melinda scolded the little girl as she attempted to take her from her brother’s arms.

“NO!” Four voices chimed at once.

Trip pulled Skye back into his embrace and Fitz stepped between his mother and his brother holding up both hands. Jemma gasped and brought both hands to her face. Skye whimpered and
“She’s just a wee girl, mom. She didn’t know any better. She just got all turned around and couldn’t find her way back.”

Melinda laughed under her breath while glaring at the kids she knew would protect Skye with everything they had. Hell, they all protected each other the same way, but Skye…she was the baby and they would stand between her and…well between her and Hell if they had to.

“Nánhái shì zhèngquè de. Tā shìgè nǚ yīng.” Mrs. Bingham spoke for the first time.

Melinda looked at her and smiled. “Nǐ shuō pǔtōnghuà?”

“I’m sorry, yes, yes I do. My parents were missionaries. We lived in many places. I know several languages.” Mrs. Bingham explained. “I’m Hermione Bingham. Skye and I have had a lovely time together, but I think she is very tired and just wants to go home.” The older woman smiled her understanding.

“Melinda May Coulson,” Melinda took the woman’s hand. “I can’t thank you enough. I am truly sorry if she bothered you.”

The older woman smiled again. At first yes, the little girl was quite a bother but then again, not so much and well, she’d met a new neighbor. “Not at all, she is delightful. A bit hard to understand, but a delight none the less.”

Melinda nodded and put a hand on Fitz’s shoulder. “Next time, I’ll have to send her interpreter.”

“Any time, Mrs. Coulson. Please visit anytime.” The older woman smiled as she closed her door.

“Come, bao bao, let’s go home.” Melinda spoke softly as she took Skye from Trip.

The little girl nuzzled into her mother’s embrace. “Méiyǒu dǎ pìgu, momma?”
“No, baobei, no.  Momma is just happy to have you back safe and sound.” Melinda kissed the little girl’s head and headed for the sidewalk. Skye waved her fingers at her new friend who peeked through the curtains on her front window.

A black car pulled to the curb and Father Joe stepped out. He wrinkled his brow in confusion but shrugged as he hurried around the car to offer the mother and child a ride. The kids mounted their bikes and headed for home, Fitz challenging everyone to a race. Trip knew he could easily beat the little guy but let him get far ahead. He was content to just watch as the car pulled away and everyone headed home.

*You were very naughty. You left the yard without momma. You crossed the street, twice. Momma is very sad. Momma is very angry.

** I’m sorry, momma

*** I know you’re sorry, Skye

**** The boy is right. She is a very little girl.

***** You speak Mandarin?
F - Forever Fooling

Chapter Summary

Fitz and Skye set out to blast Trip with a super soaker, but hit the wrong target.
It's all fun and games until.....

Chapter Notes

moved from series to chapter

One shot glimpses of every day life while 'growing a family'

“Today, I will be victorious!” Fitz announced as he held the large water gun under the faucet in the family bathroom.

Skye stood behind him watching. “Momma be mad to you if you gets water all on the floer.” She nodded in agreement with herself.

“I’ll not get water on the floor, Skye. I’m takin’ this beauty outdoors to wait for Trip, then blam!”

Skye scrunched up her face. “Why you shoots Terrrip, Fizt? Him no like-a it.” She shook her head.

Fitz set the gun down and turned to his little sister. “He’s soaked me almost every day for a week now. But today I’ll be ready and he’ll be the one that gets the shower. I’ve got the biggest super soaker in the house and I intend to succeed.” He started to turn away then spun back and pointed a finger in Skye’s face. “And you are sworn to secrecy, you don’t say a word. Understand?”

Skye nodded quickly. “I can shoots you soaper, Fizt? I not make you wet.”

Fitz smiled at her and nodded. “Yes, you can use it. I am about to have a practice run to test my calculations. You can be my assistant.”

“You getz Terrrip wet now?” She asked with wide eyes.
“No, he’s at that basket ball camp thing until after lunch, by then we will be ready.” He turned off the water and pushed the plug into the soaker’s opening. Lifting the large water filled toy was a bit more difficult than he expected. Luckily it had a strap that he lifted across his chest and pulled the heavy item out of the tub almost losing his balance in the process. “Did you know this baby holds 3100 milliliters of water, which weighs approximately eight point sixty-nine US pounds?” He struggled to balance the heavy cannon on his body and walk toward the door.

“Oh,” Skye nodded. “It be heavy to you?”

“It is quite heavy,” the boy nodded then smiled causing his sister to smile as well. “But it is worth every tentative step.”

Skye clapped her hands and followed her brother toward the stairs.

xx

Fitz had a bit of a problem aiming the eight pound soaker as holding it and shooting it proved a bit much for his coordination. Skye watched intently as her brother continuously dropped the front of the toy and sprayed the pavement rather than the target he had set on the patio chair.

“You is missin’ the ball onna chayer, Fizt.” She shook her head.

“I can see that, thank you.” Fitz frowned. “Perhaps we need to rethink this a bit, Skye.” He set the heavy toy on the table and tapped his chin with his forefinger. Skye looked at the soaker and then up at her brother immediately imitating his action.

“What we bethinkin’?” The little girl asked after a few seconds.

“I need something to rest this on so I can pull the trigger without losing my grip. It is a might too heavy for me, I’m afraid.” Fitz looked around the small area checking out the patio railing, the table and chairs and a few small benches. Everything was either too high or too low and all of it was in the open. Trip would spot him as soon as he came up the driveway. This needed to be a
surprise. The little boy stepped down from the wooden deck and turned in all directions as Skye did the same from her perch above. He stopped, staring at a large rhododendron bush. His sister looked in the same direction, wondering what was making Fitz smile so widely.

“That’s it!” He shouted as he ran back to the patio deck and grabbed his toy weapon. Skye jumped at his voice then clapped her hands and ran to catch up.

Fitz squeezed himself between the branches of the large shrub closely followed by his little sister. It took very little time for him to find just the right ‘Y’ shaped branch at just the right height to balance his soaker. He unhooked the strap and laced it through the branches then reattached it to the small loop and tested the sturdiness. Once satisfied he pursed his lips and gave Skye a curt nod, which she gave right back to him.

“Now, we see if this thing works and just how far it shoots. We may have to make some trajectory adjustments, but I don’t see that as a large problem.” Skye nodded in agreement although she had no idea what he meant, but she liked the sound of it. He angled the toy weapon a few times and stood behind it squeezing one eye shut like he’d seen soldiers in movies or television do before firing on the enemy target. “Okay,” he whispered to Skye who still stood at his side. “You go make sure no one is coming. Wouldn’t want to soak Jemma or Mom, would we?”

Skye shook her head and pushed through the leaves then scurried across the yard to peer down the driveway. She turned back toward the hedge and yelled, “no Momma and no Jemma comin’!”

Fitz stuck his head out of the brush and scowled. “Skye, you’ve got to be quiet about all this. Remember we don’t want anyone to know we’re here.”

Skye took a deep breath and turned down her bottom lip. “I sorry, Fizt.” She cast her eyes to her bare feet. “I still play?”

The little boy rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Of course you can still play but you have to keep quiet. Okay?”

Skye put her hands on her hips and glared at her older brother. “How you heore me if I whipsper?”

Fitz had to admit, she had a point. He was too far away to hear her whisper, not that Skye ever whispered anyway. “You don’t have to whisper, Skye, just don’t shout. Got it?”
Skye smiled as she hopped up on the deck and ran to the back door to be sure momma and Jemma were not about to open it. She turned back to Fitz and let him know it was all clear without shouting or whispering.

Fitz smiled as he once again squinted into the small circle that was apparently the toy maker’s idea of a scope. He almost laughed at the futility of the plastic ‘O’ shape on the top of a short plastic rod. He moved a few leaves from the path his shot would take then checked his aim one more time before checking to see where Skye had disappeared to before he pulled the trigger.

The little girl was still standing in front of the back door, well out of range of his water jet spray. She watched as the yellow blow-up ball Fitz had drawn a target on with a red marker wobbled back and forth on the patio chair. The wind was just a bit stronger today than it had been and Skye’s eyebrows raised as the ball rolled from one side of the chair to the other. Being, Fitz’s assistant was a very important job to the little girl and she knew he wanted that ball to stay put so she hurried to roll it back in place.

Fitz lost sight of his baby sister a second after he checked her location. He looked through the make believe sight one last time and used both hands to pull the bright orange trigger plunger back as far as it went thereby releasing a significantly large amount of water. It hit Skye in the back with enough force to spin her around and knock her backward on to her backside with the large ball still in her hands.

Fitz looked up expecting to see the ball had been blasted off the chair only to see the chair had been overturned and his little sister’s tiny feet sticking straight up in the air. “Bloody hell!” he swore to himself as he crashed through the branches and raced to her side, expecting to pick up a screaming bundle of highly insulted sister.

The boy fell down on all fours and leaned over the little girl. “Skye, are you alright?” He placed his hand on her chest. Fitz wasn’t sure just how much water the gun had expelled with one mega shot but it must have been a significant amount since Skye was drenched through and through. She sat up slowly and blinked the drips off her eyelashes.

“I’m sorry, Skye. I’m really sorry. I didn’t see you.”

Skye rubbed her eyes and pushed her wet hair off her face. She looked down at her clothes. “Fitz, you maykted me all wet all my body.” She knit her brows at her brother.

“Are you hurt?” Fitz looked at her arms and legs then quickly checked her back and head for any sign of cuts or bruises.
“I no hoert.  I bees wet to all my unnerwears.”  She slapped at her wet clothes sending small splashes in all directions then smiled at the reaction and tried it again.  “You mayked it go inna my mout, Fitz and it no tastess good.  Blah!”  Skye stuck out her tongue and shook her head then pushed her self up and ran to retrieve the ball that had rolled off the deck and into the grass.  She wiped away the water that dripped from her hair into her eyes and ran back to set the ball on the chair Fitz had righted.  “Now, I gets to make it shoot a lotsa wadder?”

Fitz breathed a sigh of relief and nodded.  “Yes, Skye now you can try it as well.”

The trigger on the large soaker weapon proved a challenge for the tiny girl who had to use all the fingers of both hands to squeeze it and still needed Fitz’s help to get even a drop of water to expel.  She did manage to tilt the toy backward allowing half the volume of water to spill on to her already soaked T-shirt.

“I think you big skirter noen’t work, Fizt.”  Skye shook her head as she watched the water drip from both her hands.

“Perhaps your hands are a bit too small for this one, Skye.”  Fitz bit his bottom lip.  “We seem to be out of water as it is.”  He sighed, dreading the trudge back to the bathroom, filling the toy and then getting back to the shrub, all the while having a dripping little sister leaving a wet trail all over the house.  “I have an idea,” Fitz placed a hand on Skye’s chest, “but you have to wait for me right here.”

“I come witchu Fizt.”  Skye disagreed.  “I help.”

Fitz thought quickly.  “but, I need you to stay here and guard the weapon for me.  You’re the only one I trust for this mission of greatness.”  The boy smiled as he patted his little sister’s shoulder.  “Do you think you can do that?”

Skye’s smile broadened as she raised her brows and nodded vigorously.  Fitz gave a quick thumb’s up and took off running before she could change her mind.

He raced through the kitchen ignoring Melinda’s reminder to walk in the house and stormed up the stairs into his bedroom.  Once there he threw open the large trunk at the bottom of his bed and dug through the items stored inside.  It took a few seconds but he smiled as he held up a mini-version of the large soaker he’d left in his little sister’s care.  “Yes!” he congratulated himself, stood, ran to the door then turned back and slammed the top down on the chest.
Fitz went down the stairs so quickly he lost his footing once and grabbed the railing, sliding down four steps before regaining his balance and jumping off the last three. He hit the floor running and made a second dash through the kitchen.

“Fitz!” Melinda looked up from the files she had spread across the table. The boy nodded at his mother once and headed for the door, pulled it opened and slipped out before she could finish a second warning.

“Don’t slam the….” Fitz pulled the door closed with so much force the curtains bounced several times before coming to a halt. “Door,” Melinda finished, wondering where the boy was off to in such a hurry. He’d been busy all morning and Skye had been a step behind. He knew better than to experiment with anything dangerous, especially with his sister on his tail. At least she hoped he did. Melinda put down the papers she held, stood and moved to the door. She stepped onto the patio and scanned the area. Neither child was anywhere in sight.

“Fitz!” She bellowed.

“Right here, mom!” The boy answered sticking his head out of his leafy hideout.

Melinda eyed him for a moment, not at all fooled by his toothy smile. “What are you up to?”

“Just playing with Skye, mom, just keepin’ her happy.” Fitz smiled again.

“I right heeor, momma!” Skye’s voice came from the same area Fitz stood.

“We’ve made a fine, fort, here.” Fitz pointed to the hedge and Melinda could hear Skye’s happy giggle.

“We is hidin on Terrip. He no know wees innere.” The little girl laughed.

Melinda watched and listened to the childish voices for a moment. Then content that her youngest were simply engaged in some imaginary play, she returned to her work, leaving them with a warning not to come dashing through the kitchen again and to stay out of trouble. Two voice answered ‘Okay!’ in unison.
“This is a soaker just for you.” Fitz told Skye as he placed the small toy in her hands. “See, it looks just like mine, but it is small enough for you to manipulate.”

Skye took the toy and examined it then put her finger on the trigger and squeezed it easily. She frowned then turned it toward her face and squeezed it again. “It no works. It gots no wadder, Fitz.”

He quickly pushed the toy weapon away from his sister’s face. “Okay, the first rule is we don’t point the soaker end at our own faces. That is never a good idea.” Skye nodded as she pointed the soaker toward the ground. “And we are going to load our soakers right now.”

Skye smiled again. “We go the batroom and use a tub agin?”

Fitz shook his head. He’d already thought this through. “No, that is not a good plan. Mom would not be keen on us storming through the kitchen again and with you all wet and drippy she’d be throwing quite a fit.” Skye looked down at her wet clothes and nodded.

“Momma no like-a me puttin’ alla this wadder onna floor inna hows. Her be quewite cross.” She nodded and used the term she’d heard her brother and sister use.

“Yes,” Fitz smiled, “Momma will be quite cross if you get the house all wet so we are going to use the garden hose to fill our soakers and then put them in your dragon-wagon to pull them back here.”

Skye smiled and bounced up and down on the balls of her feet as she watched Fitz unravel his larger soaker from the branch of the large rhododendron. He peeked through the leaves and looked in all directions just in case their older brother decided to be early which was never going to happen because Trip would never leave a basketball game early. Fitz put a finger to his lips motioning for Skye to be quite then stepped out of the shrub holding his hand out behind him so that she would not follow.

Skye watched as Fitz moved slowly past the bush and looked in all directions before motioning for her to follow. She assumed his serious expression and tiptoed behind him toward the far side of the garage. They stopped once and pulled Skye’s small wagon from behind her bike that rested against the edge of the deck. The wagon had been a birthday gift a few months back. Fitz couldn’t remember who gave it to his sister but she spent a lot of time filling it with whatever she could find and transporting it from one place to another. One day Trip asked her was she was draggin’. From that point on Skye referred to the little red vehicle as her dragon-wagon. Trip had gotten her a load of stickers with a lot of sparkly dragons that she stuck all over the silly thing.
Filling the soaker with the hose was a bit more difficult than it had been in the tub. Fitz had to hold the soaker at the right angle while holding the nozzle of the hose over the hole. The water had to trickle into the opening. Holding the nozzle directly in the hole caused it to spray in all directions. Fitz’s wet chest and face were testament to his first try.

Skye held her small soaker while Fitz slowly filled it through the small opening then pressed the stopper firmly into the hole. She held the toy up and squeezed the trigger sending a long stream of liquid across the pavement. She giggled as it made wriggly trails in all directions. Fitz tried several ways of holding the larger soaker while he attempting to fill it. Mostly he wet himself.

“I need you to help me, Skye,” he sighed, hoping to get the water gun filled without involving his little sister. Skye pouted as the last of the water dribbled out of her soaker.

“You needa filla this agin, kay?” She held out her toy to her brother.

“Absolutely, but first we fill Big Bertha!” Fitz smiled as he patted the larger toy. “You hold it still and I’ll put in the water. Then we’ll fill your gun.”

“I wanna do a wadder, Fizt. I holda hoess.” Skye insisted, reaching for the hose.

Fitz blew out a long frustrated breath but realized that would probably make more sense. He could hold the big soaker a lot sturdier than Skye and with the hose turned on at a trickle, she could probably manage to get most of the water in the hole. The question would be if she could stand still long enough to do it.

“You needa make it come out more bigger.” Skye announced after a few minutes of holding the hose over the small opening. “My hands is tired, Fitz.” Before he could stop her, Skye dropped the hose and turned the spigot allowing the water to spray crazily until Fitz managed to step on the flailing hose. By that time both children were soaked, if it were possible for Skye to be any wetter than she already was.

Fitz thought for a moment as he shook the water off his hands and rubbed his eyes. In a few minutes he had solved both his problems with a bucket retrieved from the garage. He set it in the wagon and filled it with water then showed Skye how to dunk her small soaker into it and wait for the bubbles to stop, letting her know her little gun was full. The weight of the bucket pressed against his larger gun kept it stationary and allowed him to fill it while still adding more water to the bucket every time Skye filled her soaker or managed to splash most of the water out of it.

It took almost twenty minutes to fill the soaker using this method and another five or six to pull the
wagon across the grass to the giant shrub. Fitz breathed a sigh of relief as he once again secured his weapon on the ‘Y’ shaped branch. Skye was delighted to have her own little squirt gun and a large pail of water to keep it full. She also kept herself a bit wet as dunking the gun into the water involved a lot of splashing. Plunging into the pail up to her shoulders did help keep her dry either. Fitz smiled at his little sister’s antics as he waited for Trip to come around the side of the house. He looked at his watch and figured it wouldn’t be much longer.

Then he heard it…the sound of footfalls on the driveway. Fitz shivered with excitement, finally able to get revenge on the brother that had soaked him three days in a row. He reached behind and tapped Skye’s shoulder. “Shhh, he’s coming.” Fitz watched for his target to enter the strike zone and looked over his shoulder to check on his little co-conspirator noticing for the first time she was stark naked.

“Skye!” Fitz whisper-yelled. “Where are your clothes?”

“They is too wet, Fizt. They bees itchin’ me and too much drippy so I taked them offa me. I no like-a wet unnerwears.” She pointed to the pile of clothing that now set in a rather muddy blob near the base of the bucket.

Fitz rolled his eyes. Great, his assistant was a nudist. Of course he already knew Skye made it a habit of shedding her clothing for a myriad of reasons and always if they got wet. In fact it was a miracle she had kept them on as long as she had. He really couldn’t worry about it at the moment. He was about to soak his older brother and get him back for all the drenchings he’d taken since the beginning of summer. His plan was flawless. His excitement increased when he heard the ‘chink’ of a basketball hitting the pavement as Trip and his band of basketball buddies rounded the corner and pulled open the gate that separated the yard from the driveway. All he had to do was wait for Trip to step in front of the chair he’d set on the patio and…

“Terrip!!” Skye squealed as she broke from the hedge and dashed across the grass spraying water from her little soaker as she went.

Trip dropped the basketball as Barry slapped a hand over his eyes and Alec spun around facing in the opposite direction.

“Holy shit, Triplett, your sister is butt naked!” Nick half-smiled/half-gasped as he cast his gaze to his sneakers.

Trip whipped his T-shirt over his head and quickly slipped it over Skye turning her into ‘burrito’ as he quickly scooped her into his arms. She squirmed one arm into a large sleeve and managed to
pull the other through the collar opening giving herself a multi striped toga. Her free arm still held the little gun which she used to send a weak piddle of water onto her brother’s bare chest.

“I getted you, Terrip. I maked you wet.” She giggled.

“Yes, you did, baby girl.” Trip laughed.

Nick laughed and pulled on a strand of the little girl’s wet hair. “Charging at him in the buff was a great distraction, short-stuff.” Skye aimed her little weapon at the tall boy and squeezed the last of the drippy water toward him. The boy put out his hand and caught it then slapped his hands together sending out a spray of water. Skye laughed with delight.

Alec turned around with his eyes shut tightly, while Barry peeked through his fingers then sighed with relief when he saw Trip had covered the little girl sufficiently.

Skye wriggled and squirmed in an attempt to escape Trip’s hold. “I needs moe wadder, Terrip.” She turned completely around in Trip’s large T-shirt and simply slipped through it and his arms to the deck causing all three boys to once again turn their backs, although Alec had still not opened his eyes.

Melinda stepped through the back door just in time to snag her baby before the little girl escaped into the yard. “Whoa there, Gypsy Rose Lee, where are your clothes and why are you naked, again?!?” She pulled the little girl into her arms and held on despite her squirming.

“I needa go. I needa filp my soaper.” Skye whined.

“Oh, no, no, no my little streaker, you are going to have lunch and then take a nap after we get you dressed again.”

“I no wanna take a nap. I wanna play a Fizt and Terrip. I wanna make a wadder spray all onna chair.” Skye sobbed as Melinda walked into the house and closed the door. The boys standing on the deck could hear her continued protests as they moved farther into the house.

“Geez, Triplett your house is like a circus everyday.” Barry shook his head as he retrieved the basket ball. “My mom would need a chill pill if Skye was my sister.”
“She’s a real pistol.” Trip smiled. “Why don’t you guys go wait on the court while I grab some drinks and snacks.” The three boys nodded and headed around the side of the garage as Trip pulled open the back door and stepped inside.

Fitz stood almost in shock. Skye had taken away his opportunity for soaking their brother. He watched as she dribbled a few drops of water on him and held his breath expecting her to reveal his plan. He was pleasantly surprised when she said nothing about him or his hidden super soaker. He’d listened to the short conversation between Trip and his friends and couldn’t believe he’d been given a second chance. All he had to do was wait until his brother came back out of the house. He’d get him as he crossed the deck and headed for the basket ball court behind the garage. It was just a matter of time.

Trip walked into the kitchen and turned just in time to catch Skye before she dashed out the door again. “Hey, little girl, where you goin’? I thought Momma said you needed to have some lunch and a little siesta.”

“Nooooo,” Skye whined, throwing herself backward in his grasp. “I no wanna. I wanna go with Fizt.”

Melinda appeared in the doorway and shook her head. Skye was past tired and at this point would do more crying than eating. She scooped the little girl off the floor and dropped down onto the nearest chair plopping her baby in her lap. She quickly pulled a dry pair of panties and Skye sized T-shirt on the little girl.

“Can I take some food and drinks out to the guys?” Trip asked as he moved toward the refrigerator.

Melinda stood and sat Skye in her chair, placing a small sandwich and a few pieces of fruit in front of her. The little girl folded her arms on the table and dropped her head on to them crying bitterly.

“Take a couple bottles of water for now. I’ll get some sandwiches for you if you go to the basement and bring up those rolls in the fridge down there. I think we need some cheese and probably a bottle of mustard, too.” Melinda offered.

“You are one great mom, Mom.” Trip smiled as he headed for the basement door.
Phil stepped into the kitchen from his office, having taken the day to do some work at home. He took one look at the sobbing little girl at the table and started toward her. Melinda held up a hand. “Nope. Phil, let her be. She’s just mad because I won’t let her outside. She needs to eat her lunch and then she is definitely taking a nap.”

Skye gently pushed her plate across the table and cried louder. Melinda shook her head and let out a long sigh. “You have five minutes to start eating, xiǎo gūniáng, or you can take a nap with a hungry belly.”

“I no be hun gree, Momma. I bees ann gree to you!” Skye puppy growled between her tears.

Phil raised his eyebrows and turned down the corners of his mouth at his little angel’s behavior. Melinda merely shook her head. “Yěxǔ wǒ hùi zài nǐ chī wǔcān zhīqián gěi nǐ yídiǎn dà pígu. Ránhòu nǐ huì xiūxǐ yīxià.” Melinda threatened causing the little girl to cry harder.

Phil tilted his head at his wife, begging permission to comfort his baby daughter. Melinda took a deep breath and glared at him then opened the refrigerator and handed him a bottle of his favorite beer.

“Why don’t you go out and enjoy a nice cold drink while I deal with this little drama? I’m making some sandwiches for the boys. I’ll bring one for you too as soon as I get this little one to sleep.”

Phil took the bottle and the hint as Skye’s wailing wound down to sniffles and whimpers, although she had yet to take a bite of her lunch. The little girl was stubborn but he knew his wife could out stubborn any of their children, especially this one. He twisted the cap off his drink and tilted at Melinda before heading to the door.

Fitz tapped his fingers on his jeans and peered through his pseudo-scope at his target area. What was taking Trip so long? He shifted from foot to foot and resisted the urge to just pull the trigger and soak the deck in frustration. Then he heard it. The back door had opened and in a few seconds he’d have his target in his sights. The little boy wrapped both hands around the large trigger, not taking any chances on a misfire. He intended to empty as much of his liquid ammo as possible with the one shot he’d get. Fitz had to almost lay his head sideways in order to hold the trigger, keep his balance and peer through the little sight. As soon as the dark pants and white T-shirt passed his view he squeezed the trigger as hard as he could, squeezing his eyes tightly shut as well. Resting the side of his head on his weapon allowed him to hear the water as it splurged out and across the grass onto the deck.

“Yo!” Fitz heard the surprised yell of his target and grinned in satisfaction before allowing the trigger to reset and pulling it a second time before recognizing the drowning bellow. He let go of the trigger and dropped down to his haunches before attempting to peek through the thick foliage.
that had provided his cover.

“FITZ!” Phil roared and the little boy cringed.

He could stay put and hope he wouldn’t be found but that was highly unlikely. It wouldn’t take long for Da to figure out where the water had come from, heck he did that kinda thing for a living. Fitz took a deep breath, swallowed hard and stood. He stepped out of the hedge and smiled at his father. “Hi, da,” he called innocently.

Phil stood dripping yet still holding on to the bottle he had carried out of the kitchen. The little bit of hair he did have hung limply and dripped down over his eyes, causing him to blink rapidly. Tiny drips clung to his earlobes giving the appearance of crystal earrings. His T-shirt, which was something he rarely wore, clung to his chest and the splotch on water on the front of his pants create an embarrassing stream of water to run down both of his legs.

“FITZ!” He howled a second time. “Bring that thing over here, right now!”

Fitz did not stop to ask questions or play innocent he merely yanked the gun from its place and walked slowly toward his father, hoping his death would be quick and merciful. He couldn’t even think of an excuse or a reason, he just stopped in front of the man and held out the soaker without looking up at him.

Phil stood with his jaw set and glaring at the contrite little boy in front of him. He rested his hands on his hips and took a deep breath before snatching the large soaker out of Fitz’s hands. Fitz took a breath and swallowed hard.

“I…I…th-thought…” The little boy stammered, folding his hands behind his back and looking up at his father.

Phil held up one finger, silencing the boy as he examined the gun, shaking it to judge how much water might still be inside. Fitz shuffled his feet and waited for his father’s wrath to explode. Phil smiled down at the top of the boy’s head but kept his voice stern. He adjusted the gun in his grip holding it across his chest with one hand on the muzzle and the other on the trigger.

“You think hiding over there like a sniper and soaking your father is funny, young man?” Phil demanded.
“No, sir,” Fitz answered quickly, shaking his head and keeping his gaze to his feet.

“I never thought I’d see myself doing this, Fitz, but I think it’s time I took care of your behavior. Prepare yourself.” The man growled as he hefted the weapon up and pumped the extra tank that the little boy was probably not aware of when he filled it.

“Right here?” Fitz squeaked, “On the patio?”

“Right here, right now.” Phil snarled as he aimed the soaker at his small son.

Fitz raised his head slowly, ready to plead his case and found himself looking directly into the business end of his large water cannon. He raised both hands and turned to run. “No, Da! Don’t!” He squealed with laughter as Phil pulled the trigger and blasted his son with the remainder of the water. Fitz pulled himself into a small ball and covered his ears while shortling with laughter.

“Ah ha ha,” Phil chuckled with an evil banter as he emptied the water, shaking out the last bit then dropping the gun and pulling the little boy up into his arms. Fitz spit out the bits of water than ran down his cheeks into his mouth and squirmed with laughter as his father tickled his sides and threatened him with more watery abuse.

“I surrender. I surrender.” Fitz laughed as he grabbed his father’s hands in an attempt to still them.

Phil grabbed the boy’s wrists and crossed his arms over his body, holding him close to his chest. He leaned close to the little boy’s ear and whispered. “Now that you’ve surrendered, I expect a full disclosure. Who or what was your target, agent?”

“I was trying to get Trip,” Fitz laughed as he attempted to squirm free.

“Trip?” Phil stopped ‘torturing’ his younger son and set the boy on his feet. He squatted down and placed a hand on the Fitz’s shoulder. “You really thought you’d get Trip with that plan?” Phil dropped his gaze and shook his head. “Oh, little man, I thought I taught you better.”

Fitz wrinkled his brow and tried to look into his father’s face. “But he soaked me three times and gets me every day. I just wanted to get him too.” He stood up and let out a frustrated sigh. “I would have succeeded if Skye hadn’t run off all naked.” Phil stood and smiled down at the boy.
“I had the perfect shot.” Fitz almost whined as he looked up to his father.

“Maybe it’s time for a new partner,” Phil wriggled his eyebrows at the boy.

Fitz thought for a moment then laughed. “I guess I’ll not have to worry about you going all naked.”

“Not a chance,” Phil growled as he furrowed his brow put out a fist for his little son to bump.

A few minutes later Phil had placed the large soaker on the patio table and pulled the garden hose across the yard to the deck. Fitz squatted down on the far side of it with the spray nozzle in hand while Phil stood at the spigot. He’d told Fitz that Trip would be out soon and as soon as he saw him to give a thumb’s up. He’d turn on the water and Fitz could use his unending supply of ammo to soak his brother.

The plan went off without a hitch. Trip took a bit longer than expected since he had to retrieve a new T-shirt after using his to cover a certain little girl who’d lose her clothing. Since May was dealing with a cranky, tired Skye it would be a few minutes before she got to those sandwiches so the boy grabbed four bottle of water and headed out the back door.

Fitz waited this time to be sure it was the intended target, certain he did not want a repeat error with his mother, especially with his father’s new weapon. He smiled at his brother’s appearance and raised a thumb to Phil who quickly spun the water tap into action. Fitz sprang to his feet bellowing in the fashion of William Wallace’s warriors and squeezed the handle on the nozzle with both hands. Trip was taken off guard and dropped the water bottles sending them rolling in all directions. He hollered a few off color expletives before realizing both parents were within earshot, then fired several threats at his younger brother as the little boy’s laughter and glee melted the older boy’s ire and sent him charging at the trigger man. Phil watched as his sons wrestled over the hose knowing that Trip would hold back in favor of the weaker Fitz. The boys from the basketball court stepped around the garage and laughed as well watching the battle unfold and seeing that Fitz had the upper hand.

Trip finally took the lead and charged the little nozzle sprayer sliding across the wet grass and wrapping both arms around Fitz’s ankles taking him to the ground gently. The hose fell to the side, snapping off as it left the younger boy’s hand. Trip rolled them both over and held on to his slippery little brother until he wrapped his hand around the sprayer. Fitz pulled himself free and ran for the deck, hoping to reach the back door before Trip was able to right himself and take aim.

Trip fired over Fitz’s head, giving the smaller boy the advantage, then fired in front of him causing
Fitz to stop and change course. The little boy dashed up the three steps and made it to the top before turning and sticking out his tongue at his older brother. Trip fired again hoping to hit his brother in the foot but slipped on the wet grass and caught Fitz just behind his knee. The younger boy lost balance and slipped backward at the top of the steps spinning in midair and reaching out his arms to brace himself.

The crack that sounded as Fitz met with the concrete patio was rivaled only by his scream. The hose was dropped and Phil was at his side only a second before Melinda pulled open the back door. Trip half ran and half crawled across the lawn to his brother’s side. He looked up at his father who knelt next to Fitz. Melinda raced to the scene pushing both aside to get to the now almost hysterical little boy. She looked at his arm once and then looked to Phil and shook her head.

“Okay, buddy,” Phil spoke calmly as he gently lifted the boy into his arms. “Let’s get that looked at.” He stood and carried Fitz toward the car.

Melinda turned to Trip telling him that Skye was asleep and he needed to stay with her until Gram and Jemma returned from the church quilting bee. She dashed into the house and came back with a purse and car keys. She promised she would call as soon as she could then jumped behind the wheel of the car and pulled out of the driveway.

Trip watched the car as his friends stepped next to him. “Tough luck,” Barry shook his head as he held the basketball under one arm. Nick shook his head and Alec gritted his teeth in sympathy.

“Damn, I broke my brother,” Trip mumbled under his breath.

xx

Trip spent the next few hours pacing, explaining to his grandmother and sister what had happened, pacing some more and watching out the front window for the his parent’s return. Gram assured him it would be fine and Jemma fretted over Fitz’s bad luck. Skye woke two hours after the incident asking for lunch since she’d exhausted her mother with her stubborn refusal to eat and was sent to naptime without eating first. Gram was quick to prepare the little girl’s favorite toasted cheese sandwich but could not convince Trip to share the meal with his baby sister.

Melinda called as promised; informing the kids and Gram that Fitz had indeed broken his arm in two places and was waiting for the orthopedic doctor to see him. She told them it might be a few
hours but the radiologist felt it was a clean break and other than setting and casting the boy’s arm there should be little concern.

It was well after supper when the car pulled into the driveway and Trip watched as Jemma hurried to the door to greet her family. Trip sat with his hands in his lap on the large sofa in the family room and watched Skye play with a set of small colorful trains with happy faces. She spoke softly for them as she pushed them around the track he had built for her. He listened to the mumbled voices as his parents spoke quietly to his grandmother.

He listened as the footsteps came closer to the playroom and stopped at the door. Phil held a sleeping Fitz in his arms. The boy rested his head on his father’s shoulder. A dark navy sling held his casted arm in place. Trip had a hard time looking at his brother.

“They gave him something for pain at the ER,” Melinda smiled as she rubbed a hand on the little boy’s back. “We’re going to get him settled in bed and then we’ll talk.” Trip nodded once and watched as his parents walked toward the stairs.

Skye climbed into her big brother’s lap, unusually quiet and reserved. “Fitz gotz a sleef on his orm, Trip?” She snuggled into Trip, raising her thumb to her lip. He knew she was frightened. Seeing Fitz hurt probably brought back scary memories for the little girl. Trip wrapped his arms around her feeling double guilty. He’d traumatized both his youngest siblings. Skye stayed in his embrace until Phil and Melinda returned then quickly climbed into her mother’s lap as she sat down next to her brother.

“Melinda placed a hand on the boy’s knee. “He’s okay Trip. He’ll sleep all night and we’ve got something for him if he hurts tomorrow.”

Trip shook his head, dropping it into his hands. He knew he was way too old to cry but the feeling was overwhelming. “I’m really sorry,” he mumbled into them as he rested his elbows on his knees.

“It was an accident, Trip.” Phil rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder as he sat on the arm of the couch. “No one is blaming you.”

“I am.” Trip spoke as he raised his head and looked into his father’s eyes. “I should’ve been careful. I should’ve just stopped.”

“You were having fun, fooling around. It was just an accident. It could have happened to
anyone.” Melinda assured him as she rocked Skye back and forth. The little girl remained silent, watching her parents and her brother.

“He was pretty impressed with the cast and the three nurses that signed it before we left.” Phil laughed. “Tomorrow at this time he’ll be bragging about how brave he was and how he finally drenched you.”

Phil’s humor was lost on the downtrodden Trip. He shook his head. “He probably hates me.”

“No way!”

“Never.”

Phil and Melinda answered together.

“Fitz looks up to you, Trip. You’re his idol.” Phil reminded the boy. Trip would have blushed if he wasn’t feeling like a real creep.

“In a few weeks the cast will be off and he’ll forget all about it.” Melinda patted the boy’s leg.

“You is my bestest Terrip.” Skye spoke around the thumb that Melinda gently removed from her mouth. “Wǒ ài nǐ, mama.” She smiled up at her mother. Melinda shushed her with a kiss. Skye snuggled into her mother’s embrace.

“Yeah, well he might forget but I never will.” Trip shook his head as Melinda pulled him into a one arm hugged and Skye reached her arm around his neck.

xx

A few hours later Trip tiptoed into his bedroom, hoping to hop up on the top bunk without disturbing his little brother.

“Trip?” Fitz’s voice was groggy with pain medicine.
“Just me, little bro,” Trip answered quietly as he flopped into his bunk and pulled over the blanket.

“I got you real good, huh?” Fitz laughed.

“Yeah, ya did.” Trip answered dully.

“You’re not mad, are ya, Trip. I got you fair and square.” Fitz now sounded worried.

“Mad? Of course I’m not mad, ya little dope. You should be mad.” Trip put his hand behind his head and looked at the ceiling.

“Why? You did nothing. We were just having a go at it, just a bit of a lark.” Fitz sighed, sounding very much like he would drift off before the next sentence.

“And I broke your arm!” Trip groaned.

Fitz laughed a tired laugh. “I broke my arm. I fell off the step, ya bloody boob.”

For a moment it was quiet. Trip figured it was senseless to argue and that the kid had fallen back to sleep.

“Don’t tell Jemma but I managed to have the doctor give me my X-rays. She’ll be all willy nilly for days.” Fitz laughed, then fell silent again this time truly having fallen asleep.

Trip listened to his brother’s soft breathing then laughed. Mom and Dad were right, Fitz would be fine and he didn’t blame anyone. It had been a mistake, an accident and they’d all recover but Trip would never, ever forget.
Chapter Summary

Melinda is on the warpath trying to keep the kids in line and the house in shape before her mother arrives for a visit.
The kids are concerned.
Skye is not too sure about meeting her grandmother.

Chapter Notes

last part of series moved to chapter of this piece
beginning with 'H' all future pieces will be posted here
One shots taking a little glimpse into the everyday life while 'growing a family'

“Why Momma bees all grumpy?” Skye asked loudly as she was pulled into the boys’ room. Trip closed the door and put a finger to his lips indicating the little girl should be quiet. “Why Momma bees all grumpy?” She repeated in a tiny whisper.

“She’s not grumpy, sweetheart,” Jemma smiled as she took Skye by the hand and led her to sit on the lower bunk next to Fitz. “She’s just a bit apprehensive, that’s all.” Jemma explained as she sat next to her little sister.

Skye scrunched up her face in confusion. “Momma not apphemsid, Jemma,” Skye shook her head. “Her is no happy. Her yelldid at me two times and pulled my shoes on my feets.” She stuck out her feet and wriggled them side to side.

Fitz shook his head and stared at his little sister’s feet. “I agree with Skye, mom is really in a horrid mood. She nearly skinned me alive because I allowed the soap to drip on the countertop in the powder room.”

Trip leaned against the closed door with his arms crossed over his chest and observed his younger siblings’ conversation. He had to agree. Their mother had been very sensitive about pretty much everything the past few days. She even had him hose off the basketball court every time he and his
friends used it this week. He was starting to worry he might wash away some of the pavement.

“I no like a grumpy Momma. Hoer is scaring to me.” Skye pouted. “I wanna happy Momma to be heor.”

“Me too,” Fitz agreed.

“She’s just a bit anxious,” Jemma reasoned as she met Trip’s eyes. The older boy shrugged his shoulders and dropped his arms to his sides.

Before he could answer, the door bumped his back and he stepped aside. Melinda stepped breathlessly into the room. “Here you are,” she more accused than anything. “What are all of you doing? I asked you to clean up the toys in the family room and I meant right now.” She stood pointing toward the hall, glaring at her startled children.

Skye scooted from the bed and reached up to Trip who scooped her into his arms. Fitz followed suit and stood behind his much bigger brother.

“I want every toy picked up and put where it belongs and I want it to stay there.” She continued. “And I mean every single Lego, Leopold.” She peered directly at the boy who nodded quickly.

Three children stood and stared at their mother, the fourth buried her face in her big brother’s neck with both arms wrapped tightly around the same.

“Why are you just standing there? Let’s go! Move! I want that room cleaned and I want it to stay clean.” Melinda ordered stepping aside so the kids could scramble out the door. She stopped Trip as he attempted to follow the ‘twins’ who were already halfway down the stairs. “Hold it right there. Not you little one,” she took Skye by the waist and tugged her from Trip’s hold. She set the little girl on the floor and glared down at her with hands on her hips. “You and I are going to pick up all those crayons on the floor in your room and put away all the clothes someone pushed into the closet.” Skye stuck out her bottom lip and stared at the floor.

Trip smiled and put a hand on the little girl’s shoulder. He’d never seen Melinda act this way. “I can help her,” he offered.

“No, I need you to supervise the pair downstairs. I’ll take care of this one and then she’s going to
take a nap…a real nap…not fool around in her room for an hour and turn into a cranky mess by six o'clock.” She took Skye by the hand and walked quickly toward the little girl’s room. Skye practically had to run to keep up.

Trip watched for a few seconds before he bounced down the stairs. Skye was partly right. Melinda was not grumpy and she was not apprehensive she was down right miserable.

xx

Phil looked up at the soft tap on his office door. He’d been working at home for the past few days, trying to help his wife but finding more paper work to do here than he had at the office in the city. He listened for a moment thinking perhaps it was only someone passing by or an accidental bump by one of the crew. The kids had been warned to leave dad to his work and Melinda was busy with her unending preparations. But there it was again, that almost silent tap at the door.

“It’s open,” he called expecting his wife to enter telling him he should stop for lunch or that there was some pressing need he had to address. Instead, three very solemn youngsters slipped quietly into the room and stood in front of it staring at him. Before the door shut completely the fourth and tiniest child slipped inside and reached up to her older brother. He took her in his arms as the younger boy silently closed the door.

Phil sat frozen in place. The pen in his hand was poised to jot down notes on the file spread across his desk. His sleeves were turned up and he was unusually tie-free. For several seconds the children merely stood staring at their father as he stared back. But, Phil could only take so much. He clicked back into action and flipped the pen in his hand, lightly tapping it on the desk.

Rising slowly, Phil stepped to the front of his desk and leaned against it with his arms folded across his chest. He smiled at his brood but got nothing back. He looked away in an effort not to laugh, but needed to put an end to this. “Well, gang for as much fun as this staring match has been, I’ve really got work to do, soooooo, thanks for your time and your visit and…well, you can see yourselves out.” He motioned toward the door behind them.

Fitz folded his arms over his shoulders and imitated his father’s stance exactly. “Da, we need to talk.” He puppy snarled.
“Why?” Phil inquired, suddenly a little apprehensive. “What did you do?”

Trip let out a soft snort and shuffled his feet a bit. Skye held on a little tighter and looked at her brother with confusion. He shook his head to let her know to keep quiet...for now.

“We’ve done nothing, Da, truly nothing,” Jemma began taking a step toward her father. “Yet, it seems we are all in quite a bit of hot water for something.”

“Yes,” Fitz agreed, arms still across his chest, as he began tapping his foot as well. “We are quite curious about what it is we might have done or perhaps not done.”

Skye had somehow squirmed from Trip’s hold and ambled across the room without begin noticed. She tugged at Phil’s pants pocket. He looked down in surprise. “Why momma be so mad to us?” Her little eyebrows rose as she waited for his answer.

Phil looked to the others and found the same expression on all of their faces.

Trip stepped between the ‘twins’ and added to the conversation. He shook his head as he began. “Mom’s been on edge for days, ordering everyone to pick up toys and put away clothes, clean off the table and not made one fingerprint on the fixtures in any bathroom. She makes us change the towels if we so much as dry our hands.”

“She had me fold my dirty shorts before I tossed them in the hamper!” Fitz exclaimed.

“I had to line up all the socks in my sock drawer so they were in perfectly straight lines.” Jemma sighed.

Skye tugged on her father’s pants again. He looked down at her. “Momma maked me take a nap after I take-did one.” She bounced those little hands in front of her.

“She’s right Da,” Trip agreed. “She put Skye down for a nap after lunch and then again right before dinner. The poor kid was out of it. I had to rescue her, then hide her in Gram’s apartment til supper. Mom, didn’t even remember she put her in her room.”
“Is momma sick?” Jemma asked with trepidation.

“Is she losing her bloomin’ mind?” Fitz squeeked.

“Hoer is scaring to me?” Skye sniffled.

“Is everything alright?” Trip swallowed.

Phil let out a soft breath as he scooped up Skye and wrapped an arm around Jemma. “Momma is not sick.” He assured his older daughter. “And she hasn’t lost her mind,” he spoke directly to Fitz. “She’s not angry with any of you and she certainly isn’t trying to scare anyone.” He placed a quick kiss on Skye’s forehead.

Trip shook his head and placed his hands on Fitz’s shoulders as he stood behind his little brother. “Well, she’s freaked out about something and we’ve been trying to stay clear, but she keeps finding us.” Fitz looked back and up at his brother then to his father and nodded in agreement.

Phil smiled at the concern his children were showing, although some of it was for their own well being. “I assure you your mother is not ‘out to get you’.” He tried to hide the snicker in his comment.

“It’s not a laughing matter, Da.” Fitz did not miss his father’s jest. “I feel like I’ve joined the armed forces. Next thing you know she’ll be demanding I bounce a quarter off my just made bed.”

“He had to do it twice yesterday.” Trip turned up one side of his mouth and squeezed Fitz’s shoulders gently. “Make the bed…not the quarter thing,” he clarified. “And I had to scrub…scrub the basketball because she said it was grubby and making dark marks on the court…”

“Which he had already hosed off twice,” Fitz held up a finger and finished for his brother.

“Okay, okay,” Phil held up a hand. “I hear what you are saying and believe it or not there is a reason for all of this.”

“Perhaps she needs a holiday of some sort, a trip to the sea side or possibly a day at the spa. Four
kids can be a bit much for anyone.” Fitz shook his head.

Skye clapped her hands. “I nere went the sea side.” She smiled.

Phil turned his head and spoke to the little girl. “No one is going to the sea side.” Her smile turned to a fine pout. “Momma doesn’t need a vacation and she has no problem taking care of any of you. She’s just a little nervous right now.”

“Why?” A chorus of three voices inquired before he could continue.

“Well, momma is anxious because her mother is coming for a visit and she just wants everything to be perfect.” Phil explained. “Momma just wants everything to be perfect for that visit.” He smiled but even Skye could see it was weak.

“She’s not coming until Tuesday,” Trip groaned. “Mom’s been freakin’ out for a week.”

Phil hesitated for a bit, not wanting to influence the children’s opinion of the grandmother they had not yet met. “Well, Lian is a little particular about things and momma just wants to make a good impression.”

“Well, she might need new kids, because we are far from perfect.” Fitz snorted and Trip joined his little brother’s mirth.

“Momma get new kids?” Skye was alarmed. “Hoer no keeps us no mower?”

Phil bounced her a bit and hugged her tightly. “Momma already has the best kids and she is not looking for any replacements. She loves you.” He poked his youngest in the belly, giving her a gentle tickle and turning her frown into a squeaky giggle. “And you and you and you.” He squeezed Jemma, nodded to Trip and tousled Fitz’s curls.

“Is mom’s mother a mysophobic?” Fitz asked with a furrowed brow.

“Myso…what?” Phil was clearly confused. “English, Fitz, remember your old man only has one Master’s Degree.”
“It means she has an excessive fear of germs. It’s probably more commonly called germophobia.” Jemma explained.

Phil raised his brows in understanding as Trip hid a chuckle. “No, I’m pretty sure Lian May is one hundred percent phobia free. Although I can’t say there aren’t plenty of people with a Lian-o-phobia of varying degrees.”

“You wouldn’t be one of them, would you Da?” Trip mumbled to his father who threw him a dark look.

“Your grandmother is…she’s…well…” Phil hedged, not really knowing how to explain his mother-in-law’s idiosyncrasies. Four pairs of eyes waited expectantly.

“She likes things to be done perfectly all the time.” Melinda’s voice in the doorway startled everyone.

Fitz quickly slipped behind his much bigger brother, not even bothering to peek at his mother. Jemma stepped behind Phil and Skye buried her face in her father’s neck, wrapping her arms and legs around him tightly. Trip swallowed hard and put both hands behind his back, wrapping them around the little boy cowering there.

Melinda stood holding the door that no one heard her push open and glared at her husband and children. Phil smiled and tried to take a step forward but was held in place by the little girl behind him. He could see why his crew was suddenly a bit fearful of their mother and for a second felt that Lian herself was staring back at him.

“Melinda,” Phil greeted her with a smile. “The kids were just…” he looked around at his children. “They were just on their way out, right kids?” No one answered. No one moved.

Suddenly Trip took the hint and tried to pull Fitz to his side, but the boy refused to budge. “A…yeah, we…we were just leaving. Come on, kids.” He moved sideways toward his father with the intent of collecting the girls and heading for the door. Fitz slid along behind him, matching his footsteps exactly.

“Hold it right there.” Melinda spoke quietly but the kids froze at the sound. She walked the short distance across the office and lightly tapped her baby on the arm. “I thought I put you in your bed,
baobei. You’re supposed to be napping.”

Skye lifted her elbow and peeked at her mother under her arm. “I talk-a daddy too.” She mumbled.

Melinda paused for a moment staring into her husband’s eyes then reached to take the little girl. “Okay, talks over. Naptime, little one.” She put her hands on Skye’s hips and gave a gentle tug, but her baby whined and snuggled closer to her father. Melinda pulled back as if she’d been burned.

Phil put a hand to the child’s back and shushed her. “Hey, angel, it’s just momma. She wants you to have a little rest so you’re not all grouchy at supper time.” He spoke close to the little girl’s ear but looked at his wife. Skye shook her head and kicked her feet gently.

Melinda stepped back and took in the rest of the room. Fitz still hid completely behind Trip, only his knuckles dug into his brother’s T-shirt and the toes of his sneakers were visible. Jemma stood half behind her father and stared at her mother with wide eyes. Trip found his own sneakers quite interesting and kept his stare to the floor.

“The kids are a little concerned, Mel.” Phil began, still softly shushing a trembling Skye. “They think you’re angry with them.” He pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders.

“Wha…” Melinda’s jaw dropped as she looked around once more. “Angry? No, of course I’m not angry with them, why would I…”

“You’ve been pretty tough on them the last few days, Mel. Come on, folding dirty underwear?” Phil almost laughed as he swayed back and forth, feeling Skye relax in his arms. “I know you’re anxious about your mom’s visit, but Mel you’re going a bit too far. They’re only kids, Mel.” He spoke quietly to her.

Melinda stopped for a moment and thought about her own actions the past few days, about how much she had been acting exactly like her mother. Lian May was a strict, no nonsense mother who kept her only daughter towing the line constantly. Little Melinda May was expected to have an immaculately clean bedroom, clothing folded perfectly in drawers and closets kept in military precision. Her toys spent most of the time on the shelves since playing with them would cause a mess. She cleaned up after herself at meals, doing dishes and washing the table even after a simple snack. Mrs. May had no tolerance for her daughter’s breaking a rule or forgetting a chore. She loved her daughter but showed her affection through strict discipline and expectations of academic excellence. Snuggling, hugging, and good night kisses did not exist in Lian May’s idea of
Melinda had vowed never to treat her own children in such a fashion but the impending shadow of her mother coming to her home to meet these children had set the woman back. She pictured herself as her own mother looming over her own children and a shudder ran through her body.

“We’re sorry, momma.” Jemma spoke quietly as she stepped away from Phil and gently wrapped her arms around her mother. Melinda looked down at her for a moment and almost cried when she could not recall the last time one of her little ones hugged her. She hadn’t even tucked them into bed for the last few nights, leaving that task to her eldest who did it without question.

Melinda went down on one knee and looked her older daughter in the eye. “No, no bao bao, I’m sorry. I am so sorry.” She kissed the little girl’s forehead and hugged her tightly. Jemma hugged back just as tightly and sniffed back the tears that ran over her cheeks. From the corner of her eye Melinda caught Fitz peeking around his brother, watching his mother and sister. He chewed his bottom lip. She reached out quickly and snatched his wrist, pulling him into the hug. “Get over here, you.” She smiled as she covered his face with kisses and squished him into a three-way hug with Jemma. The little boy pretended to push away and scrub off the kisses with both hands but then wrapped his arms around his mother and squeezed just as tightly as his sister.

After a few seconds Melinda stood and faced her eldest child while still holding her ‘twins’ close. “Thank you for putting up with me, Trip. I don’t know what I would do without you.” She let go of her little ones for a moment and hugged the tall teen, softly kissing his cheek. The boy blushed but hugged her back, remaining speechless for the moment.

She turned to her baby and rubbed a hand on her youngest’s back. “Baobei, momma is so sorry. I did not mean to scare you. Please come to momma.” She waited for the little face to turn from her father’s neck. It only took a second for Skye to see the look on her mother’s face. She released her grip on Phil and dove into her momma’s arms, quickly snuggling into Melinda’s embrace. Melinda squeezed her tightly and kissed her cheek.

“Okay,” Melinda took a deep breath. “I’ve been a really crummy mom the last few days and none of you deserve that, so starting right now we just go back to being the messy, mixed up, wild family we are happy being. My mom, your grandmother is coming to visit and she is going to see exactly who we are and she’s just going to have to like us that way.” The kids smiled with relief.

“However,” she stopped them as their smiles turned to apprehension. “I will expect you to be on your best behavior and show your grandmother proper respect as long as she’s here. Deal?”
The kids exchanged glances.

“Deal,” Trip smiled giving a thumbs-up.

“Deal,” Jemma nodded.

“Dee-o,” Skye yawned.

Several seconds passed as all eyes turned to Fitz who made eye contact with none. He merely chewed his bottom lip, squinted one eye and looked up in thought.

“Fitz?” Phil prompted.

“I’m thinking…” the little boy explained.

“Fitz…” Phil warned.

“Deal,” Fitz answered quickly then joined in the laughter of his family.

xx

Lian arrived late Tuesday afternoon. She did not smile at her grandchildren, quietly approving their excellent behavior as they stood listening to Melinda and Phil introduce them. Skye clung to her father refusing to so much as look at the woman who stood staring at her brothers and sister.

Trip took his grandmother’s bag to the guestroom as the ‘twins’ lead her to the kitchen. Jemma explained that they had gone into the city to find her favorite tea and that Melinda had found a shop that had the item imported directly from China. Fitz carefully placed a plate of walnut cookies and sesame crisps on the table.
“We went to the Wok Bakery to get these.” He explained. “Mom let us taste them and a few other things, but she said these were your favorites. Skye bit one but we made sure it wasn’t on the plate.

“Qǐng xiǎngshòu, zǔmǔ.” Fitz smiled.

Lian nodded to the child, smiling with her eyes although her face remained stoic. “Wǒ shì nǐ de nǎinai.” She watched as Jemma poured water from the kettle into the fine china teapot and drop in the tea ball with the precise amount of tea. Lian nodded her approval. Fitz placed one of his mother’s fine tea cups and saucer in front of his grandmother and sat on the chair next to her. He pointed to the tea cup.

“This is one of mom’s favorite teacups. She uses one everyday when she has her tea.” Fitz informed her. “These are fine cups.”

Jemma rolled her eyes at her brother’s attempt to make sure their grandmother knew that their mother used the cups she had given her as a gift many years before.

“Will you be joining me?” Lian inquired as Jemma poured the steaming liquid into the small cup.

“No, ma’am,” Jemma smiled. “Momma doesn’t allow us to have tea. There is more than forty milligrams of caffeine in this Silver Jasmine tea. It is a bit higher than regular jasmine tea because it is made with black tea rather than green. Of course the caffeine is neutralized smidge because of the jasmine blossoms, but momma still feels it is way to much for either of us when we will be going to bed in just a few hours.” Jemma explained to Lian’s delight.

“You are a very intelligent and well spoken child, Jemma. It is well to see such astuteness in such a young child.” Lian spoke around a sip of the hot liquid.

Jemma beamed at the compliment. “Yes, grandmother, Fitz and I have tested in the genius level. We attend a school that offers a curriculum to meet our academic levels. We are both studying at a secondary level.”

“That would be high school here in the U.S.” Fitz explained. Lian nodded.

“Your brother also attends this school?” She asked.
“No,” Fitz shook his head and struggled to hold his giggle. “Trip would rather excel in basketball.”

“He plans on attending West Point after graduating.” Jemma added. “He has very good grades and Da says he should have no problem finding a sponsor.”

“Athletic ability is a valuable skill.” Lian spoke calmly, ignoring Fitz’s slight laugh. “I am sure Antoine is very good at what he does as well.” Fitz snickered again at his grandmother’s use of his brother’s given name.

Lian set down the cup on the saucer and picked up a sesame crisp. She set it down on her saucer. “And the small one, she has skills as well.”

Fitz could not contain his laughter. “She’s very good at getting into mischief and casting off her clothing to run bare naked with no inhibition at all.”

“Fitz,” Jemma scolded as she sat on the opposite side of her grandmother. “Skye came to us from a very depressing background, but she has come a long way in the short time we’ve been together.” She quickly explained. “She’s very timid around new people.”

“Except for mom,” Fitz nodded. “She never seemed fearful of her, not from the very start.”

Lian smiled a tiny smile and gave a curt nod, proud of her daughter’s accomplishment with these interesting children. “Do you think I will have a chance to meet her?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Jemma smiled. “Momma is probably just cleaning her up a smidge. She gets a bit ruffled while at preschool.”

Fitz let out a short whoop. “Yesterday she was completely blue! She got into the art area and she and her companion managed to paint each other before the teacher was able to stop them. Mom had her in the tub for an hour.”

“She is a tad busy at times.” Jemma tried to excuse her little sister’s misadventure.
“Thank you, Jemma and Fitz for keeping your grandmother company.” Melinda smiled nervously as she and Phil entered the kitchen. “Do you think you can keep an eye on Skye for a little while? She’s in the playroom.”

Phil smiled at his mother-in-law. “She’s not quite ready to make an appearance yet.”

“That might not be such a bad thing.” Fitz started as he stepped in front of his father. Phil set his hand gently over the boy’s mouth and gave an embarrassed smile. May shot Fitz a warning glare.

Jemma quickly took her brother’s hand. “Let’s go, Fitz. Skye’s waiting.”

Melinda watched as the ‘twins’ disappeared down the short hallway, Jemma softly scolding Fitz as they went.

Skye peeked around the door and stepped back as her siblings entered the room. “I no like-a that gamma lady. Hoer haves mean eyes to me.”

Jemma knelt down in front of her little sister. “Oh, sweetheart, grandmother is not mean, just a little more serious than we’re used to seeing.”

“Of course that could be misconstrued as mean…” Fitz posed.

“You are not helping,” Jemma growled at him. Fitz shrugged his shoulders and moved off to work on his K-nex® roller coaster.

“Grandmother would really like to meet you, Skye.” Jemma took one of the little girl’s hands and stood. Skye pulled away immediately and backed away shaking her head.

Fitz flipped the switch on his creation causing it to whir into motion but lose momentum as it approached the first inverted loop. The boy shook his head and disconnected the motor, grabbing a screwdriver and mumbling to himself. “You’ll really have no choice once dinner is served. Mom will expect all of us at the table.” He spoke without turning around or ceasing his tinkering.

“I not hun-gey.” Skye shook her head. She inched her way across the room and squeezed behind
the large recliner, pulling herself into a tight ball.

“Fitz you are absolutely no help at all.” Jemma threw her arms up in despair and moved to coax her sister from her hiding place.

Trip had spent the better part of the late afternoon working on a school report and studying for an algebra exam. By the time he strolled into the playroom, in an effort to avoid the uncomfortable adult conversation in the kitchen, Jemma and Fitz had exhausted their efforts to extract their little sister from her temporary haven. They explained the situation to their brother and watched as he tried smooth talking Skye out from behind the large chair. Fifteen minutes later, he too gave up and simply sat on the floor letting out a long exasperated sigh.

The three children looked toward the door as their mother’s voice drifted up the hall and into the room announcing that supper was on the table. The ‘twins’ looked at Trip waiting for his reaction. The young boy shrugged his shoulders, palms up and pushed himself off the floor.

“I guess that’s our cue.” He turned and spoke to the recliner. “Come on, Skye, Momma says dinner is ready.” His request was met with a whine and a soft kick to the back of the seat. Trip shook his head.

Fitz stared at the empty chair. “I suppose you could just move it. Then she would have to come out.”

Trip nodded then shook his head. “Naw, she’d crawl off behind or under something else before I could snatch her and the screaming would not go over well. I think Mom’s gonna have to handle this one.”

“She’s not about to be happy about that.” Fitz sighed.

Before Jemma could add to the conversation, Melinda’s voice called again, this time a little more urgent.

Three children ambled into the kitchen after stopping in the powder room to quickly wash their hands. Phil smiled as he set a large dish on the table. Melinda turned from her task at the stove and Lian merely watched the silent interaction. The children smiled back and slowly slipped into their usual places at the table.

Melinda set a large plate of steaming vegetables on the table and looked from one face to the other
already realizing she was one short. “Where’s Skye?” She asked trying very hard not to make eye contact with her mother.

Trip made a grand exercise of unfolding his napkin and spreading it across his lap. Jemma took a quick sip of her water. Fitz rolled his eyes and shook his head. “She’s taken up space behind Da’s recliner and has no plans to exit any time soon. Not that we haven’t had a go at it.”

Melinda sighed as she pushed the chair she was about to sit on, back into the table. “I apologize, Mother. Skye is a little shy.”

“And a lot stubborn, OUCH!” Fitz exclaimed at his brother’s under the table kick.

“I’ll get her. Please start without me.” Melinda nodded toward Phil who gave a quick nod in return as he sat in his usual spot.

Lian stood and Melinda held her breath, certain her mother would now critique her parenting skills and admonish the little girl’s actions.

“Please, Melinda, let me try.” Lian asked her daughter who stared for a moment before answering yes.

Fitz immediately stood to follow and observe his grandmother’s useless attempt to goad Skye into moving but was pushed back into his seat with one gentle shove from his mother. Phil shook his head and nodded toward the table. The boy let out a disgusted huff and glared at no one in particular.

Lian held up a hand stopping her daughter from following and the family watched as she walked down the hall and into the playroom.

“Think she’ll make any progress?” Phil queried.

“Not a bloomin’ chance,” Fitz shook his head.

“Mother has a lot of experience talking down suspects and she’s an expert hostage negotiator.”
Melinda reminded her husband as she stared in disbelief down the short hallway.

Lian walked into the room with no problem finding the large recliner. She let out a short breath and walked toward it then dropped down and crawled behind. Skye pulled herself farther into the small space and buried her head in her knees. She wrapped her arms tightly around her legs.

“Zhè shì yīgè fēicháng hǎo de kōngjiān, dànshì, tā fēicháng xiǎo.” Lian spoke softly. The little girl did not respond. “Sometimes a little one needs a small space. The world can be very big and frightening at times.” Skye squirmed a bit but did not answer. Lian began humming a familiar tune, one that Melinda sang to her baby many nights as she fell asleep. Skye peeked with one eye.

Lian watched from the corner of her eye, careful not to move quickly or look directly at the little girl. “I would hide in my grandfather’s work chest. It smelled of pine and green tea. I felt safe there.” She hummed more of her song but Skye turned her head and stared, clearly digesting the comment. Lian smiled a thin smile. “My little girl would crawl under the sink and stay there for hours. At times she would eat her dinner and fall asleep there. I would have to carry her to her bed.”

“You haves a liddle gorel?” Skye asked softly, without raising her head.

“It is an old song. My momma sang it to me as I slept and I sang to my Melinda when she was so little.” Lian remembered her tiny daughter long before she felt the girl needed to learn discipline and respect. She remembered just loving her baby, singing to her and holding her tiny form to her heart.

“I gots eyezes like-a momma. We the same.” Skye blinked several times at the woman next to her. “You haves eyezes lika-a momma, too. We the same, too?” The little girl asked, looking sideways at the woman.
Lian turned very slowly and looked at her youngest grandchild, the memory of her own tiny daughter flashed through her mind and she smiled a real smile. “I think that it might mean just that.” Skye smiled back.

The little girl pointed to the floor, tapping it with her fingertip. “This a my spot. It bees liddle. This,” she patted her palm on the back of the recliner, “bees daddy’s chayor. Him like-as it to sleep. Him snorgs louder.” Skye giggled.

Lian nodded. “I see.” She agreed.

“You momma’s mommy?” Skye narrowed her eyes but smiled as her grandmother nodded. “Where her daddy bees?” She inquired innocently.

Lian answered without missing a beat. “He is William. He lives far away on the other side of the country. He and I do not live together.”

Skye stared for a moment, trying to understand. “You no like-a him?”

“That is not something a small child should ask and surely does not need to know,” Lian answered calmly so as not to frighten the little girl.

“Suntines they no like-a me,” Skye sighed. “Then I go to Sagnes agin, but momma like-a me lotsa tines.” She nodded in agreement with herself.

“I cannot understand why anyone would not like you, Skye. I think I will like you very much, if you will let me.” Lian remained calm, waiting for the child to answer but her heart ached for a little girl who had such deep wounds for one so young.

Skye smiled again. “You like-a me, but I be with my momma and daddy. I no go with you no more. This my howz.” She patted the carpet gently.

“I promise I will honor your wishes, sunnu.” Lian agreed. “Everyone is waiting for us to join them for dinner. Do you think we could do that?”
“I helip momma make shockolate cake for zessert.” Skye smiled as she stood.

“We wouldn’t want to miss that would we?” Lian agreed as she pushed herself up and took the little girl’s outstretched hand.

The two walked into the kitchen to everyone’s surprise. Skye slipped her hand free and ran to Melinda wrapping both arms around her mother’s neck. “Momma, gamma no wanna you eat unner the sink, akay? We have cake, momma? Gamma like cake. We no miss at.” Skye shook her head rapidly as Melinda and Phil exchanged confused glances.

Fitz tried not to laugh with a mouthful of milk but could not hold back, splurting the liquid from his nose and mouth in his effort. Trip’s laughter was uncontrolled as Phil jumped up to aid his younger son with a handful of paper napkins. Jemma tried to remain composed but her tiny giggle joined her brothers as she covered her mouth with both hands.

Melinda tried to throw a warning glare at her brood but Skye’s little hands caught her cheeks. The little girl smiled into her mother’s face. “See momma, erryone bees happy. Erryone likes a gamma lady now.”

Lian looked across the table at her daughter, nodded her approval and gave a wide smile.

¹Please enjoy, grandmother
²Call me, grandma
³This is a very nice space, but it’s very small.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for following this series
Thanks for your comments and kind words!
H - Having Headaches

Chapter Summary

Phil's away
Melinda is having one of those days when absolutely nothing goes right
Lots of fluff...mega fluffiness

Chapter Notes

series is now posted as chapters rather than stand alone pieces

It started out like any other day. Rousing four grumbling children out of bed was just part of the routine. Getting them in and out of the bathroom and into various school uniforms was an ongoing challenge. Trip was easy. Once on his feet he seemed to move robotically, doing what he needed to get ready. Fitz was the most difficult and would fall back to sleep wherever his body stopped moving, including the closet floor if someone didn’t keep on him. Luckily, Phil was there to help move the boy along, most of the time, but not today.

Jemma wasn’t too bad. She walked around with her eyes closed for the first few minutes but managed to get herself dressed and down to breakfast before all of the others. Skye was generally up as soon as the sun peeked into her room and had a mess made in three other rooms before Melinda was able to corral her into the bathroom and then down to the breakfast table. This little one was the last to be dressed after breakfast as doing so before would only result in doing it twice.

Phase two of morning routine in Coulson Manor consisted of the twins arguing over some science project and who had the better idea for accomplishing their goal. Trip munched on some sugary cereal and tapping his feet to some music that only he heard as he kept his eyes closed and managed to pour milk on three bowls of the stuff without spilling a drop. Skye normally whined over what she would eat unless daddy had time to make pancakes or French toast. Cereal was a challenge with the little girl, especially any cereal with green bits. Melinda wracked herself silly in the cereal aisle at the grocery store selecting anything that did not sport anything green. Froot Loops were a favorite and Fitz would spend forever pouring the entire box into a giant bowl then picking out all the green loops before dumping it back into the box and storing the offensive greens in a large Tupperware container. Apple Jacks were definitely out since three quarters of the box were green. Cheerios were good but boring…as Melinda was told by Fitz. How can you start the day with boring cereal? Rice Krispies and Corn Flakes fell into the same category and anything shredded was considered nothing more than wood chips no matter how much ‘frosted’ was on it. Trix were out as were Fruity Pebbles, both contained more than their share of green cereal bits.
Melinda lived for the days Phil cooked breakfast and everyone ate and no one complained. No such luck today as Phil was on a three day job in New York City preparing for some visiting dignitary from Italy.

Phase three was the mad dash for one school bus and one school van. Trip snapped out of his morning funk about five minutes before he had to sprint to the corner for his bus. This was usually preceded by his mad search for some piece of paper or implement he desperately needed for the day along with Melinda’s questioning why he didn’t look for it last night or make sure it was where it was supposed to be before he went to bed. The thing was usually found under a couch cushion or crumpled into the bottom of a drawer or toy box courtesy of one baby sister. He’d spend a frantic few minutes trying to smooth out the wrinkles and grumbling over the fact that no teacher was going to believe his sibling used it as her dollie’s blanket. He never left without slamming the front door then racing back to grab his backpack or sack lunch. Melinda could not imagine how he did not miss the bus on a regular basis.

Jemma and Fitz were the opposite. Their back packs were pristine and everything in order waiting at the door for them. Fitz gave his usual fight over the need to brush his teeth despite Melinda’s threats of bodily harm, specifically on his vulnerable backside. His reasoning that too much abrasive action on the dentin would eventually damage his incisors and bicuspids, not to mention wear away the much needed enamel, failed every morning, but he persisted until it became a mad dash to the bathroom to outrun Melinda’s veiled threats. Jemma took care of all of her personal hygiene needs including her dental needs and generally stood at the door tapping her foot and checking the living room clock as she waited for her brother. Melinda got both of them out the door in plenty of time to meet the van that waited at the bottom of the driveway. She and Skye stood in the doorway and waved until the van was out of sight and no matter how many times she tried, Melinda just missed grabbing the little girl before she slipped off to pull out at least ten toys before mom made it to the playroom.

Dressing a squirming and over stimulated Skye was akin to sliding an octopus into a wetsuit. Just getting her out of her pajamas was an exercise in futility. The only saving grace was that Melinda did not have to argue over what to wear. Every morning she thanked fate for the red golf shirt and khaki skirt or shorts or slacks that the little girl wore to preschool. Shoes were another story. No matter how many time Melinda put them where she hoped to find them in the morning it always became a scavenger hunt to find one or both. For some bizarre reason they were always on different floors. On this particular morning one was behind the commode in the powder room while the other was under Fitz’s bunk. Melinda was too exasperated by eight in the morning to wonder how either got to that point. By the time she found both Skye had pulled out a tray of water colors and managed to get every color, especially black, smeared across the middle of her shirt and down one leg of her shorts. Melinda groaned as she went back to square one, scrubbing paint from the little girl’s hands and face and providing a complete change of clothing. She didn’t even want to know how Skye got purple paint on her underwear or three shades of blue on one sock while the other was yellow and she did it all in less than ten minutes. She blew an exasperated breath in the air causing her hair to flip up as she stuffed Skye’s feet into her shoes and buckled both while the little girl sang The Wheels on the Bus at the top of her lungs.
Drop off at preschool was usually an in and out affair but on this morning, Skye insisted on clinging. She needed one more hug and one more kiss before the tears started and she insisted on leaving with Melinda who could not convince her to play with any of her friends or take interest in any particular center. Miss Tripani made a valiant effort to pry the little girl from her mother but only seemed to make the matter worse. Miss Ginny tried as well, but Skye only wailed louder. Melinda resorted to taking her little girl into the hallway and sitting with her until she was calm. She assured Skye she would be back after snack time and they would go home to see Grams and the kids. She reminded her that Salty would be waiting for her as well and after twenty minutes Skye was her happy self. She kissed Melinda good bye and skipped off to dramatic play with Darienne and Chelsea.

Melinda breathed a sigh of relief as she walked to her car…but the day had just begun. Facing the hectic pace of a large working office would be a breeze compared to the morning she’d had. She stopped at the Wok Bakery, not for sweets but for the fresh brewed tea they served as well. Melinda very rarely treated herself to such a whim but this morning she just needed it. She spent a few minutes chatting with the owners Mr. and Mrs. Zheng who enjoyed the conversation in Mandarin. She left with a bag of walnut cookies for the kids. The Zheng’s were enamored of Skye and fascinated by the conversations they had with Jemma and Fitz. She thanked the elderly couple and hurried to her car, already late for a morning staff meeting.

She pulled the parking ticket from her window and pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. A quick look at the meter told her she still had three minutes before her time ran out. She resisted the urge to tear the ticket to shreds and instead quickly snapped a picture of the meter and the ticket. Melinda had every intention of reaming out someone as soon as she reached the phone in her office.

That would take some time as a minor fender bender six blocks away had traffic backed up for another hour while two police cruisers sorted out the details after breaking up the fight that erupted in the middle of the street. Melinda wanted to kick herself for wanting that tea. She called her office and gave her apologies telling her second in command to reschedule the meeting for tomorrow morning and send everyone back to their desks. She’d get there as soon as possible. She flipped her phone closed, drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and counted to ten in as many languages as she could remember.

Melinda May Coulson had very little patience and this morning had eaten up all of it before nine a.m. She rolled her eyes when her phone rang and for a moment she considered ignoring it. Whatever the problem was at the office, they could handle it. But there were too many unknown variables and she forced herself to bark into the small device, scaring the older woman on the other end into temporary silence. Melinda barked into the phone a second time and heard the other party clear their throat before asking to speak to Mrs. Coulson. She took a short breath and calmed her voice but not the urge to fling the phone through the window as traffic began to move at a snail’s pace.
The barely moving traffic became a moot point as Melinda turned off her course and backtracked to the twin’s school. Fitz had been hurt in a slight mishap that had him ‘walking into a door?’ The woman explained that he was not badly injured but it was school policy that any head injury be examined by a doctor. She let out an exasperated breath dreading the hours she would sit in the emergency room just so the doctor could tell her he had a bump on his head. It took twenty minutes more to get around the traffic nightmare and head back to the kids’ school. Then ten more minutes on the expressway. She calculated as she drove figuring she had spent the last two hours in her car.

Storming through the front doors of Fitz’s school after pressing the buzzer twice and waiting for the secretary to clear her to enter, Melinda frightened two young teens and forced several teachers to secure their classroom doors as she passed. Why the hell was the nurse’s office so damn far away from the front of the building? She had been along three hallways and down two flights of stairs and still hadn’t arrived. Damn, was this place subterranean? Her question was answered as she followed the sign that led to yet another flight of stairs, this time leading up to a small landing and one door labeled simply – Medical. She pushed the door open.

Fitz sat on the only chair in the small room with a large ice pack against the right side of his face. He raised one hand in a small wave as his mother approached. She dropped to one knee in front of him, forgetting all the frustration and insanity the instant she saw him. God, why did they always look so little when they were hurt? A middle aged nurse approached and Melinda held up a hand, stopping the woman from any explanation she might offer.

She smiled at her son’s one eyed gaze and tried to ignore the fact that he had been crying. Fitz needed to know he was brave. He considered crying a sign of weakness and she was careful not to baby him. Melinda gently reached up and lowered the large ice pack, wincing at the sight of the little boy’s bruised and swollen face. She bit her bottom lip in sympathy and allowed him to pull the ice back in place. She stood slowly and faced the woman behind her silently demanding the explanation she had halted seconds ago.

Boys will be boys and genius boys are in fact boys. Apparently a handful of nine and ten year olds were in a race to the boys’ lavatory between first and second period classes. Two of the boys were showing off their ability to slide across the newly waxed floor on their stocking feet. One of whom was Leopold James Coulson Fitz; the other name meant nothing to her. When they heard a door slam they scrambled for their shoes and to be the first into the bathroom. Unfortunately, one of the older boys reached the door ahead of Fitz and pulled it open cracking the younger boy with its edge directly across his right eye and cheek.

Melinda closed her eyes. That explained the long bluish purple line that ran from her son’s forehead to his bottom lip. It was an accident but he was not totally innocent. The nurse insisted Fitz keep the ice pack as she showed him and his mother to the elevator that would take them to the main floor and then the ramp that lead to the entrance. Melinda grit her teeth. Why hadn’t someone directed her there in the first place, instead of having her tour the building in search of the damn medical office?
She put an arm around her little boy’s shoulders and led him to the car, noticing for the first time the drops of blood on his dress shirt. The nurse assured her that Jemma would be informed her brother was picked up by mom but everything was fine. She also asked that Melinda phone the school after the doctor had seen Fitz. They would need the information for their records. She fumed as she signed release forms and accident reports but eventually escaped the medical room and ushered Fitz to the parking lot.

“I’m sorry, momma,” the little boy whispered from behind the ice pack as she buckled him into the rear seat of the car.

Melinda kissed the top of his head. “We’ll talk about it later. Right now we are going to see Dr. Stephens so she can make sure you haven’t knocked anything loose in there.” She kissed him again.

“I threw up.” Fitz sounded like he was making a confession.

“It happens sometimes when kids hit their heads.” Melinda told him as she stood, but made a mental note to make sure the doctor knew. “We’ll mention it to Dr. Stephens.” She closed his door and opened the front door then slid into her seat.

“Will I have to get a shot? I don’t like shots.” Fitz worried as he readjusted the ice. Melinda could hear it sloshing around in the pack.

“I know you don’t bao bao, and I’m sure you won’t need a shot today.” She turned the key and started the car. “How ‘bout we don’t worry about that?” Melinda adjusted the rearview mirror in order to see her son.

“I ne’er had a black eye before, this is splendid.” He sounded proud. “Wait til Trip sees it! And Da, wait til Da sees it! Do you think it will still be there when he comes home? Maybe we should take a photograph.”

Melinda chuckled as she pulled into traffic. Her little genius, her serious little man, sounded like an average run of the mill little boy, boasting over the injury he’d survived. “I don’t think you need to worry. It will still be plenty bruised and swollen when daddy gets back.”
Dr. Stephens welcomed Fitz into her clinic on the floor below her office. She did a quick visual exam of his injury and sent him off with a technician for X-rays. Melinda sat close by making yet another call to her office to let them know she would probably not make it in at all for the day. She explained her son’s condition and received the sympathy of her secretary who had four boys of her own. Unfortunately, the woman also reminded Melinda of the contract they had with the Mall that would host a teen idol meet and greet in two days. She had agreed to do a walk through in person with the head of security this afternoon. It was something that could not be rescheduled and since she had contracted to do it herself, she could not send another agent. She assured the secretary that she would see the man but it would be a bit later than planned. Her secretary would take care of those arrangements.

Maura assured Melinda that Fitz looked a lot worse than he was injured and it was mostly soft tissue bruising. He’d have a hell of a black eye and a fat lip to boot. He’d probably get a lot of that ‘hey, how’s the other guy’ questions in the next few days. They stood and examined the X-rays as one of the office nurses refilled Fitz’s ice pack. Although, the doctor felt the injury was not serious Melinda left with the usual warnings for any head injury. She knew to watch for excessive vomiting, uneven pupils or rolling eyes, double vision, loss of balance, disorientation and to wake Fitz every two hours throughout the night or if he fell asleep before bedtime. Most of this she did not need to be told, having dealt with more than her share of head injuries in her line of work.

The phone in Melinda’s pocket blared as she was escorting a very happy young boy back to the car. She’d told him they were off to the Mall and he would spend the afternoon with her there. She warned him he would take it easy and if he felt out of sorts at all he was to tell her immediately. If necessary she would park him in the security office while she checked the area with the supervisor. She pulled the phone and flipped it open with one hand while she opened the car door for her son with the other. Expecting it to be her secretary confirming the change in plans she simply asked the party to hold and dropped the open phone in her pocket while she helped Fitz back into the car and his seatbelt then pulled it out and to her ear.

“So, everything is set for what time?” She asked her secretary.

“I’m sorry,” an unfamiliar voice replied. “Is this Melinda Coulson?”

“Yes,” Melinda answered with some trepidation. The voice sounded concerned and had waited all that time to speak with her.

“Mrs. Coulson, this is Amanda West from Drake’s Academy. We had a little incident with Skye?”

Melinda almost dropped the phone. Two of them on one day? Now what? She kept her voice calm as the secretary explained that Skye had some sort of meltdown over a visitor who had come to talk to the class about fire safety. No one was able to calm the child and she had to be removed
from the classroom. She hoped Melinda could get there quickly before Skye hurt herself or someone else.

After a quick visual check to be sure Fitz was okay, Melinda pulled out of the parking lot and drove a little faster than usual to make the almost half hour trip across town to Skye’s preschool. She’d been through night terrors and staring matches with her baby but never a full fledged tantrum, which was what Miss West had described. And what could a fireman do or say that would set her off with such drastic measures. She considered speeding but with Fitz in the car… well it wasn’t going to happen.

“This is not the way to the mall, mom.” Fitz droned from the back seat, his words mumbly with a swollen lip and through a now filled ice pack.

Melinda rolled her eyes. He would notice. “Little detour, bao bao. We have to pick up Skye early today.”

“Is she sick?” Now he was concerned, the worry showed even in that one little blue eye staring at her in the mirror. He pulled himself up straight from his slouched position waiting for her answer.

“No, Fitz, she isn’t. She’s just a little upset and the school thinks she should go home so she can calm down a little.” Melinda half explained.

“A temper tantrum it is then, unusual for Skye. She’s more likely to just shut down completely.” Fitz shrugged as he sat back and considered his baby sister’s predicament.

‘Okay,’ Melinda thought, ‘nothing wrong with this one.’ She pulled back on to the expressway and headed for the preschool.

xx

Pulling into the parking lot of Skye’s school, Melinda realized Fitz had fallen asleep and hated having to wake him, but leaving a child in a car alone was never a smart move. The ice pack had slipped to the floor leaving a small dark circle where it lay. Melinda sighed as she shook the boy’s shoulder gently.

“Come on, bao bao, we’re here. Let’s get your sister then make a quick stop at the mall before we
“Go home for a nice nap.” She spoke softly to the little boy who opened his one good eye and blinked at her a few times before releasing his seatbelt and sliding off the seat. He took Melinda’s hand and about five steps before vomiting. She stepped quickly aside but not fast enough to avoid most of it hitting her shoe.

“Gāisī de!” Melinda swore under her breath as she shook off her shoe.

“Duìbùqǐ, māmā,” Fitz choked before tossing his cookies a second time. He’d never heard the word his mother used but was sure it was not nice.

Melinda stopped and pulled a pack of wet wipes from her purse, something she now carried as a rule. She learned quickly that children could make a mess with just about anything they ventured near. Pulling out two she wiped the little boy’s face and shirt, then pulled two more and swiped at her shoe while reassuring her son it was not his fault and everything was fine. Satisfied he was as clean as she could manage she took his hand, asked if he was okay and headed toward the building.

The screaming that echoed through the main foyer told Melinda exactly where her baby was and just how upset she had gotten herself in the time it took for her to make her way across town. The young secretary eyed Fitz with a grimace as she tried to speak over the rabble explaining that Skye was in the nurse’s office across the hall. Melinda explained Fitz’s mishap in the parking lot and the young woman smiled assuring her she would send the maintenance crew to handle it. For a moment Melinda considered sitting Fitz on the large sofa in the foyer just to have him wait until she collected her screaming Mimi, but reconsidered when he squeezed her hand tightly and put the other to his tummy. If he was going to lose it again, she’d rather not have him sitting alone and the nurse’s office would have proper equipment to handle the situation.

She knocked on the door twice before realizing those inside probably could not hear. Looking down at Fitz, Melinda raised her eyebrows as the little boy shrugged his shoulders. She turned the knob and pushed open the door which only intensified the sound coming from within.

Mrs. O’Boyle turned toward the door and sighed with relief. “Mrs. Coulson,” she breathed as she pushed a stray hair behind her ear. “I am so sorry we had to pull you away from…” she glanced at Fitz, who stood slightly behind his mother, then back at Melinda. “From your work,” she finished speaking loud enough to be heard over the screaming child in the background.

“Skye’s brother, Fitz,” Melinda introduced the boy, putting an arm around his shoulder. “He had a little mishap at school,” she explained to the unasked question in the director’s eyes. “We were at the doctor’s office when you called. I am sorry it took so long for me to get here.”
“Oh, my,” Mrs. O’Boyle reacted to Fitz’s bruises, then turned to Melinda. “No, no, I completely understand. I apologize for not being able to handle this situation. We have tried everything to calm her but we seem to be making things worse.”

Melinda looked over the woman’s shoulder through the window of the inner door watching the school nurse try to console Skye who was presently lying on the floor in full tantrum mode.

“I’m afraid she’s wet herself but will not let any of us change her.” The woman continued to apologize.

Melinda nodded as she pushed Fitz into a large leather chair and placed the waste basket in front of him. “You wait here for a bit, bao bao. Momma is going to help Skye and then we’ll be on our way.” Fitz looked to the frazzled woman standing ready to open the second door and nodded to his mother. Melinda took a deep breath and prepared to face Skye’s new trauma.

Quietly tapping the young nurse on the shoulder, Melinda tilted her head toward the door asking for privacy with her daughter. She stopped the woman and quickly explained Fitz’s situation before she exited the small infirmary. The nurse nodded her understanding and stepped out, pulling the door closed behind her.

Skye had grown quiet, still sobbing with her eyes squeezed shut. She dug her tiny fingers into the carpet beneath her as her little feet wobbled smacking into each other in an odd rhythm. Her breathing was rapid as she panted between her sobs. Melinda stood and watched for a moment judging how to approach this development and pondering just what could have sent her baby into this tizzy.

She squatted down on the floor. Skye immediately pulled away letting out a strangled screech. Melinda swallowed the lump in her throat and told herself not to take this personally. She reached out and rubbed just the tips of her fingers on the little girl’s arm. Skye screamed again and brushed her own fingers across the same spot as if she’d been burned.

Melinda let out a soft breath. This was going to take longer than she thought. She hoped the guy at the mall had a lot of patience.

“Momma’s here, baobei,” she whispered softly receiving no response other than the continued screaming. Soft and sweet was probably not going to get her anywhere as she assumed the teachers and director of the school had already exhausted that avenue. Skye was hysterical and beyond hearing anything anyone said. Melinda pulled off her jacket and sighed. She bent down and wrapped it around the little girl then pulled her into her arms. Skye struggled valiantly but was no
match for her mother’s experience.

Melinda pulled the jacket snug around her little girl and dropped into the only chair in the room. She held the squirming child on her lap avoiding the little feet that kicked with all of Skye’s tiny might. Melinda wrapped her arms around her baby and rocked back and forth first humming then singing the quiet song she used at bedtime. She whispered softly in the little girl’s ear, telling her she was with Momma and that momma would help her to be calm and feel better. She kissed her temple lightly at regular intervals and assured her that Momma would not let anyone hurt her or take her away. Melinda blinked away her own tears. Even after all these months, even after the judge had made everything legal, Skye still had to be told she was safe, that she was home forever and for good.

It took several minutes of rocking and shushing and humming and singing and hugging and kissing, but the screaming dissolved into whimpers and the fierce struggling became intermittent wriggles then complete calm. The hysteria turned to simple tears as Skye opened her eyes for the first time since this disaster began. She looked up at Melinda and blinked away the tears.

“Ma…ma,” Skye hiccupped trying to pull her little arms from her mother’s tight grip.

Melinda loosened the wrapping and allowed Skye to squirm free. The little girl wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck and fought to control her breathing. Melinda stroked her damp hair and patted her back softly.

“Do as Momma says, baobei,” she instructed and the little girl nodded into her mother’s neck. “Big breath through your nose, like this,” Melinda demonstrated and smiled as the little girl did the same. “Now blow it all out your mouth.” She blew the breath across Skye’s hair as the child exhaled across her mother’s chest. “Good girl,” Melinda smiled and hugged her baby closer. “Now we do it again, but this time we hold it. Okay? Now, with momma, big breath and hold.” Melinda again demonstrated with Skye following suit. She repeated the exercise until she felt her little girl had relaxed and was breathing properly. She held her tightly and rocked from side to side, humming softly as Skye snuggled into the embrace.

“I wet, Momma,” Skye breathed. “I no like-a it.”

“No, baobei, it is not nice to be wet.” Melinda felt the dampness against her own body and dreaded meeting the head of mall security reeking of vomit and urine, but on the other hand it might just make the task go faster. She kissed the little girl’s head and continued rocking for a few moments before continuing their conversation. “Can you tell momma why you were so upset?”
Skye shook her head and burrowed into Melinda. “The bad boy comed back to me. He hoerted my orms, momma. He pulldid me. I telled him no, momma.” The little girl spoke rapidly, mumbling most of what was said as tears threatened to fall again.

Melinda could not imagine what would make her baby think that monster, Harris Radcliffe, had come back. What, at her preschool, could make the child imagine that nightmare would return?

“No, baobei, he is gone far away. He cannot ever hurt you again. Momma and Daddy will never, ever let him hurt you.” She kissed the little girl several times.

Skye pushed back and looked into her mother’s eyes for the first time. “Him comed here, momma. Him comed in Miss Pani’s room, momma.” She shook her head.

“Okay, baby,” Melinda kissed her forehead. This was something she’d need to discuss at home and definitely with Skye’s counselor. She’d add that to the list of calls she’d make later. “He is gone, baby. I promise.” Another kiss and a big squeeze seemed to help Skye relax even more although Melinda was already preparing herself for the nightmares that would probably keep everyone up tonight. This day just refused to get any better.

The soft click of the door caught the attention of both mother and daughter. Skye’s grip tightened then relaxed as Fitz stepped into the room carrying her backpack.

“The teacher said, Skye’s extra clothes are here.” He held out the bag to his mother. She smiled her thanks as she took the bag.

Skye slid off her mother’s lap and stared at her brother for a moment before gently hugging him. Fitz grimaced at the wetness and the smell but accepted his baby sister’s hug. She stepped back and looked up at him.

“You gotz a big boo-boo, Fizt. Do it hoert you?” She wondered, tilting her head in sympathy.

“It does cause considerable pain,” Fitz nodded very slowly. “The doctor gave me some medication to help with that.”

Skye’s eyes went wide as Melinda took her hand and brought her to stand before her. She slipped Skye’s polo shirt over her head and removed her also damp camisole. “Did her shot you, Fizt?”
She turned back to her brother, pushing her hair from her face.

“No, but they took a lot of pictures of my head with a great machine. Jemma will be so very envious that she didn’t get to see it.” He smiled a smile that only reached one side of his very bruised face.

The two continued their conversation as Melinda peeled off Skye’s wet clothing, sponged her off with the wash cloth the nurse provided and redressed her. Whatever had sent Skye into hysteria had passed and the little girl had, much like after her night terrors, returned to her usual cheerful self. They made a quick trip back to Skye’s classroom to apologize to Miss Tripani. Melinda explained she would not force Skye to say she was sorry for something she could not understand, but that she was sorry for the disruption it had caused. She also informed the teacher that Skye would not attend tomorrow and would return to class on Monday if all was well and her doctor felt she was ready. Melinda would keep the teacher informed. With that she carried Skye and took Fitz by the hand heading for the car and the dreaded trip to the mall…now with two children in tow.

xx

Melinda spent another forty-five minutes in traffic crossing town to the mall that would host that meet and greet in two days. Once again she had to wake Fitz and this time a grumpy Skye to walk them the short distance to the security entrance. Fitz made it without another episode of vomiting but she had to carry Skye who continued to protest being woken when she wasn’t finished sleeping.

The Security Chief turned out to be a very impatient middle aged man who had probably never been within ten feet of a child except to throw them scary warning glances. He made no comment on Fitz’s condition although Melinda did not miss his brow raising and the disgusted look he threw her before introducing himself. He merely ignored the little girl asleep on her mother’s shoulder as Melinda explained the reason for her arriving late and having to reschedule twice. He made no attempt to even imply he accepted her non-apology. Melinda could feel the anger radiating off her over-protective son. She squeezed his hand a bit to get his attention and warned him to keep it in check with the raising of one eyebrow. Any hope of the lovely smells the trio emitted hurrying the man along evaporated. He snuffled constantly and his nasal voice let everyone know he either had a terrible head cold or suffered some airborne allergy that kept him permanently stuffy.

“It’s unfortunate you had no sitter today,” the man remarked, implying his disgust with having to deal with the security agent’s children. “I can have one of my female officers keep an eye on them while we check things out.”
Melinda sneered back. “I do not leave my children with ‘sitters’ nor do I leave them with people I do not know. They will stay with me.” She informed him leaving no room for argument. The man jerked his head toward the door and started in that direction expecting her to follow.

They spent the next fifteen minutes walking the length of the mall examining areas that might be considered security risks and places where extra officers and agents would be placed before, during and after the event. Skye woke during the tour and struggled to free herself from Melinda’s grasp in order to do a little exploring. Fitz volunteered to take her hand and the man rolled his eyes when Melinda acquiesced, knowing she could trust her small son.

The tour ended in center court where workers were busy preparing a small stage and barriers for the promotional happening. The Chief insisted Melinda sit at a small table set there to review the contract and plans with him one last time. She watched as Fitz and Skye stood next to the large fountain in the center of the court. The water display had a jumping squirt that bounced from one area to another as if it were alive. Both children were fascinated, Skye just by the fact that the water could do such a thing and Fitz trying to figure out how it was done. It did not take him long to figure out the pattern of the water and was able to direct Skye’s attention to that spot a second before it happened. The little girl clapped with delight.

She smiled at the pair and the fact that both had survived the traumas of the morning then turned to the ignorant man letting out disgusted huffs as he waited for her attention. He droned on pointing out aspects of the plan he disagreed with and places where he felt the security was either too intense or not strong enough. Melinda suspected he was just frustrated and repulsed by the fact that he would spend most of his Saturday surrounded by tweens and young teens. He’d probably quit, but she was sure no one else would have him.

“Momma, I hun-gee,” Skye’s little voice interrupted the man’s rant. He rolled his eyes again and Melinda was tempted to send them across the well waxed floor.

“I know baby,” she answered the little girl, brushing the hair from her face. It was definitely time for hair cuts. Fitz looked a bit shaggy as well. “As soon as I am finished talking to the nice man we will go to McDonald’s.”

“I have nuggins?” Skye’s eyebrows went high. Rarely did Melinda allow any of the children to have fast food, but today was definitely an unusual day. Skye’s face darkened as she stared at the Security Chief. “Him no a nice man, momma. Him haves mean eyeses.” She narrowed her own eyes at the man.

Melinda stifled a laugh and kissed the little girl on the head then sent her back to her brother who she suspected had sent her to get mom to hurry. Skye was still young enough to get away with interrupting without admonishment. The little boy gave a small finger wave and again that funny
half smile. The woman turned back to the contract and pointed out the areas that had already been agreed to and could not at this late point be changed. He argued that it was not unusual to make such changes. The banter went back and forth as Melinda had no intention of making any changes and felt the man was doing nothing more than trying to have his way with all of the security and was extremely resentful of the mall hiring Phil’s agency to provide the added protection. Since he could not take it out on his bosses he was doing a damn good job making Melinda’s day just more miserable than it already was.

“Mom,” Fitz’s voice now broke into the adult conversation. She held up a finger for him to wait as she made her point. The boy did not heed his mother’s warning. “Mom,” he spoke again. Again the finger told him to wait as the argument got more heated and the man’s language became rather offensive. She reminded him her children were present. He didn’t care.

“Mom,” Fitz’s voice came from farther away. Melinda barely heard as she and the chief rose to their feet, she slammed down the contract and used her own bit of colorful language to let him know she was not changing anything and if he did not like it he could take it up with his own superiors who had agreed to and signed the document without his input.

“MOM!” Fitz’s call was now urgent. Melinda spun toward the sound spying Fitz on the edge of the fountain with one foot raised over the water.

“STOP RIGHT THERE!” She commanded and the little boy stepped back as his mother rushed forward scanning the area for her baby girl.

“But, mom…” Fitz pointed to the water where Skye stood ready to catch the jumping water that would within seconds pop from the flower covered spout.

“Skye!” Melinda barked as the water sprang and hit the little girl’s hand sending it splashing in all directions. Skye laughed as it struck her already soaked polo shirt. “Skye Coulson you come out of that water right now!”

“But, Momma,” Skye smiled. “The wa’er dancedid and jumpdid all oer the place.” Another splurtdid of water jumped over the little girl’s head, well above her reach and dove into a large jug a few feet away. “See? Looka, momma. It bees magics.”

Melinda had reached the end of her rope. Her head was about to explode right here in the middle of the mall with an entire audience to watch. “Now, Skye, right now.”
“I’ll get her, mom.” Fitz offered, once again inching toward the fountain’s edge. Melinda grabbed his arm and held him back.

“Not a chance, little man.” She warned and Fitz understood the tone.

“She’s just a wee girl, momma. She didn’t know not to catch the water.” Fitz forever defended and protected his baby sister. Melinda gave him a quick nod.

As soon as Skye was within arm’s reach, Melinda snatched her out of the water and set her on the floor in front of her. She let out a long breath and resisted the urge to plant a swat on the little girl’s backside.

“It is time to go.” Melinda announced taking both children by the hands and marching toward the security office and exit to her car.

xx

Skye’s dip in the fountain nixed the trip to McDonald’s. Melinda could not imagine the looks she would get dragging in a dripping toddler and a battered little boy. The way the day was going she’d probably be hauled off by the police and forced to explain to Family Services just how her children happened to be in such condition. Nope, she was not taking that risk. But the kids were hungry…and tired…and cranky. Feeding them was the best idea so a quick trip through the drive through solved the problem although Melinda had to lift the ‘no eating in the car’ ban just this once.

One hour and two spills later Melinda pulled into the driveway. She glanced at the clock on the dashboard…three twenty five. The whole day, the whole damn day had been spent dealing with one problem after another. There was not enough aspirin in the world to relieve the headache that pounded behind her eyes. One more disaster and she would not be held responsible for her actions.

She ushered both children into the house and separate bathrooms for much bathing. Fitz started to protest and resist his mother’s help as the tub in the master bath filled. He stopped and gave in with one icy glare from his mom. The boy sensed she was close to the breaking point and slipped into the warm water as Skye sat on the floor singing some kooky song about a cow kicking over a lantern.

Melinda left him with orders to get clean, get out, get dry and get dressed, pointing out the clothes
she had set on the closed toilet lid. He nodded and began earnestly scrubbing with the soap and washcloth she’d provided. She scooped up Skye and headed for the kids bathroom, turned on the water and stripped the little girl with no arguments. Kneeling on the floor and bending over the edge of the tub did nothing for her head but she soaped her baby clean and pulled the plug before Skye could protest she had no time to play. Wrapping the little girl in a large towel she grabbed powder and the dry clothing she’d put on the counter top and carried her to the master bedroom. Fitz exited the bath just as she finished dressing Skye and stood for a moment just watching.

Melinda looked at her babies and let out a sigh. They were home. They were clean. They were safe.

“Okay, you two…on the bed.” She pointed to her bed and both children climbed up on to the pillows. She looked into the three eyes that waited for her to speak as she sat on the edge of the bed. “Momma is going to take a shower and you are going to stay right here on this bed. Both of you need to take a nap…” she held up a finger before Fitz could protest. “Both of you,” she tapped him on the chest. “It’s been a crazy day for you and for me, so we all need a rest.”

“You takes a nap, too momma,” Skye asked around a yawn.

Melinda nodded. “As soon as momma is clean, she is going to come lay right here with you.” She stood and kissed both on the forehead being very careful not to hurt Fitz anymore than he was already hurt. Then moved quickly into the bathroom taking clean sweats with her.

Ten minutes later she reentered the room finding her little ones sound asleep in the center of the king sized bed. She towel dried her hair and climbed in next to them. Skye snuggled closer, pulling herself into her mother’s chest as Fitz rolled toward them and wrapped his skinny arm over his little sister to reach his mother’s side.

Melinda let out a long cleansing breath. She’d left a note on the table for her older kids, letting them know the little ones were fine but needed a late nap. Gram Triplett had volunteered to make supper for the family long before this whacky day had begun. Jemma and Trip would probably spend some time in her apartment while the others napped.

Sure there were problems to solve, but that could wait. Right now she needed her babies and she hugged them closer. She breathed the smell of them and listened to their soft breathing.

No amount of aspirin would relieve her headache…but just holding her babies made everything better.
I - Imitating Indians

Chapter Summary

As the November holiday draws near, the Coulsons deal with a very bad tempered Fitz, Skye’s school celebration and a house full of company

Chapter Notes

Sorry it’s been so long. Work has been crazy and I’ve been pulled in a million directions at once. Tomorrow is Parent/Teacher Conference day, Ugh. Not my favorite day, but I’ve got a good group of kids and I know the only one I really need to see won’t show up. Enjoy the story and please let me know what you think. Any feedback is helpful.

(with apologies to anyone born in India and all Native Americans – I mean no disrespect)

November started crisp and cool, covering the Coulson yard in a myriad of colored leaves that delighted Skye and the twins. At the teacher’s request Skye proudly chose the prettiest, largest and smallest leaves she could find to create a fall collage. It hung in the family room at her eye level. She brought it to everyone’s attention.

A full year and then some had passed since the family began to take shape. Jemma had celebrated her tenth birthday mid-September claiming that she and Fitz could not be called ‘the twins’ until after the new year and Fitz’s tenth birthday. He snarled at being called the baby brother, but secretly enjoyed the extra attention it garnered from his mother. He and Skye spent hours in the backyard raking leaves into giant piles then jumping into them and spreading them all over the yard again. They also enjoyed hiding under the piles and leaping up to surprise anyone daring to pass by which earned them both a swift swat from Gram when they caused her to drop a dozen eggs she had just purchased. However, it did very little to discourage them from trying again.

Halloween had been a treat for everyone. Phil went overboard with decorations and celebrations. He was more of a kid than all of their children put together, insisting on dressing as his favorite superhero and accompanying the younger kids as they visited the houses throughout the neighborhood collecting more candy than they could eat in a year. Melinda made sure most of it disappeared into a bag and reappeared in bowls scattered throughout her office. She smirked at the fact that perhaps the sugar high would motivate some of the less enthusiastic staff.
Skye had dressed as a little black cat complimenting Jemma’s witch costume. Fitz donned a white lab coat and wild wig to be a mad scientist. Melinda fought quite a battle getting the three over excited children into bed on a school night, finally succeeding when Phil promised a Halloween story that scared the daylights out of all of them and had their bed full of children for the night. Skye insisted on wearing her costume to school the next day and cried all the way there when she could not. A compromise was made and the little girl wore the black leotard and tail with drawn on whiskers all weekend…and every evening the week after.

Jemma squealed with joy, jumping up and down through the hall and kitchen when she received a letter from Bobbi letting her know both she and Hunter would be in the States for Thanksgiving and would like nothing better than to celebrate with the family.

“It’s our first real Thanksgiving as a real family.” She smiled as she threw her arms around Melinda’s waist. “Last year I didn’t even think about it, but now there is so much to be thankful for.”

Skye swung her legs, thumping them against the vanity in the powder room. Melinda had sat her on the counter to examine the gash in her knee. After fifteen minutes of calming her down enough to simply lift her pant leg high enough to see the small injury, Melinda wiped it clean and covered it with a Monster’s Inc band aid. The little girl rubbed a dirty hand across her tear streaked face leaving a dirty swipe on her cheek. She sniffled a few times and looked to Jemma who stood in the doorway.

“I see Hunner and Bobbi comin to our howis?” She sniffled as she reached toward her sister.

“Oh, sweetie, there are no pictures. Bobbi merely sent me a note, a real note. Isn’t it just lovely?” She held the paper for Skye to examine while Melinda quickly washed the smaller girl’s hands and face. “This is stationery.” Jemma explained to her younger sister. She smiled widely at her mother. “Most people don’t use this. I wonder where she managed to find it. Don’t you think it is so thoughtful of Bobbi to send this?” The little girl bubbled with excitement as Melinda lifted Skye to the floor and led both girls from the powder room.

“I think it’s wonderful that Bobbi thought to send you such a fantastic gift.” Melinda smiled at her older daughter’s joy.

“Jemma gotz a gif? I see?” Skye walked on tiptoes to look at the paper Jemma still held with both hands.

“This is the gift.” Jemma smiled as she handed the sheet of mock vellum to the smaller girl. She
held the envelope and lightly passed her fingers over the British postage stamps. She knew it was one of the reasons Bobbi sent her regular mail rather than e-mail or a made mere phone call. Jemma loved seeing something from the UK, to hold it in her hands. Da had given her a cigar box to keep all of Bobbi’s letters safe.

Skye looked at the paper and the blue squiggly marks on it. She turned it in a circle and then back to front scrunching her face in confusion. “This not a good giff, Jemma. It bees a pita paypour. I gotsa lotsa paypour in my desksess. This non’t gotz even a pitcher.” The little girl handed it back and frowned at the broad smile on her big sister’s face.

Melinda laughed a small laugh as she scooped up her baby and plopped her in her booster seat. “Jemma is just happy to have something from Bobbi.” She explained to the little one.

“But it bees ownee a paypour, momma.” Skye wrinkled her nose and held out her palms in a bouncy motion that was typical of Skye.

“Yes, it is baobei,” Melinda smiled as she kissed the little girl on the tip of the nose. Skye smiled and closed her eyes as she pulled back gently. “But it bees a paper from Bobbi and that makes it sooo important to Jemma, just like all your pictures on the refrigerator make me so happy.” Melinda nodded toward the appliance that was almost totally covered with preschool artwork.

“You put you paypour onna fidgerador, Jemma?” Skye asked with wide eyes.

Jemma shook her head, rereading the letter for the countless time. “I’m going to keep in my room.”

Skye looked at her sister for a beat then let out a little breath. “Momma, I have peaba jelly bread?”

“Absolutely,” Melinda smiled at Skye’s abridged version of peanut butter and jelly. “I have some nice warm chicken soup from Grams to go with it. How’s that sound?”

“Mmmm,” Skye rubbed her belly. “I no like-a green soup, momma.” The little girl shook her head.

“Not one green chicken in the pot.” Melinda criss-crossed her heart as she turned toward the cabinet and withdrew four bowls.
“Momma,” Skye scolded. “Shickens not be green.”

Melinda watched as Jemma made her way down the hallway toward the stairs. “Jemma, come right back for lunch and tell your brother his sentence is commuted so he’d better get himself down here as well.”

“Yes, momma.” Jemma answered softly as she walked up the stairs still staring at the letter she held.

xx

Fitz dropped the book he’d been reading and rolled off his bed at the soft knock on his door. He’d been banished to his room for the last hour for talking back one too many times. It was more of a self proclaimed exile to avoid his mother’s threat of taking him there herself for more than just a bit of time to think about his snarky attitude.

It was just one of those days when Fitz was out of sorts, angry at everyone and everything. Twice he’d brought Skye to tears, which was very unlike the little boy who generally was the first to defend his little sister. He’d teased Jemma unmercifully and barked back at his mother when she asked him repeatedly to stop. Part of the whole thing was his foul mood and most of that was caused by the fact that Phil had taken Trip on a ‘mission’ with him today.

Trip got to go observe the security procedures Phil and his team were putting in place for a former Basketball star player who would address a group of college players at a banquet the following weekend. Fitz felt quite left out. Even if he wasn’t much of a basketball fan, he was an avid Phil fan. He was hurt since he hadn’t even been asked to go and angry because he didn’t beg to be part of the adventure. So he spent the morning taking out all of that on his mother and sisters.

“Look, Fitz!” Jemma smiled as she rushed into his room holding the letter out to him. “Bobbie and Hunter are coming for Thanksgiving.” She pulled the treasured letter back to her heart. “Isn’t that splendid?”

Fitz dropped down on the bed and snarled, “so what…who cares about a ridiculous Yank holiday…it’s just a stupid reason to overeat.” He folded his arms over his chest and jutted out his chin.
She frowned at him for a moment then smiled again. “Oh, Fitz it isn’t ridiculous, it’s a time to be thankful for all we have, for family and friends.”

“Well, I’m not feeling overly thankful right now so yes…it is ridiculous.” He puppy growled at her.

“You’re just resentful because momma made you stay in your room. She says to come for lunch.” Jemma sighed as she turned to leave the room.

“I sent myself to my room if you remember correctly, Jemma. And I don’t want any lunch.” Fitz called after her sarcastically.

A few minutes later Jemma walked back into the kitchen. Melinda sat at the table sipping her soup while Skye bit down the middle of half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich sending the opposite ends of it around her cheeks. She set the sandwich down revealing streaks of purple and tan on both. Jemma sat on her own chair, picked up her spoon and daintily sipped the broth.

“Fitz?” Melinda asked with one word.

“He says he doesn’t want lunch.” Jemma told her mother without looking up.

“Mmmm, hmmm,” Melinda raised one eyebrow as she rose and stormed to the bottom of the stairs.

Skye stopped her sandwich halfway to her open mouth. “Uh oh,” the little girl raised both brows as she watched her mother. One side of her oddly eaten sandwich dropped back to her plate. She picked it up and held one piece in each hand debating which to bite first.

“Serves him right,” Jemma spoke under her breath.

Melinda stood at the bottom of the stairs, closed her eyes and counted slowly. “Fitz!” she called just loud enough for the boy to hear. “Your lunch is on the table. I expect you to come down here.”

“I’m not a bit hungry.” Came his answer, apparently he was lying down in his room and had no
intention of getting up, even to reply.

Melinda put one foot on the first step. “Leopold James Coulson Fitz if I have to come up there neither of us is going to be very happy.”

“I’m already unhappy.” The little boy called back, almost daring her to carry through.

Melinda took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She really did not want to do this today. It was Saturday. She just wanted a nice quiet peaceful day with her little ones. She took another breath and exhaled. “Last chance, Fitz.”

“I said I’m not hungry. I’m not happy and I’m not about to come down there.” Fitz’s angry voice was a lot louder than it needed to be. That and the wicked slamming of his bedroom door were the straws that broke the veritable camel’s back.

Melinda shook her head. “Suit yourself, little man,” she whispered to herself as she started up the stairs. “Jemma,” she called to the kitchen. “Keep an eye on Skye, please. Your brother and I won’t be long.”

Skye slurped a noodle halfway into her mouth before catching it with her hand and helping it along. She chewed quickly and swallowed. “Jemma? Momma gonna be mad to Fitz?”

Jemma looked over her shoulder and shook her head before turning back to her sister. “Yes, Skye, I think momma is very angry toward Fitz.”

“Poowa Fitz. Him gonna be sad to momma.” Skye shook her head and slurped another noodle.

A few minutes later Melinda entered the kitchen with a very contrite Fitz in tow. He slumped into his chair and slid down until little more than his eyes showed over the edge of the table then folded his arms over his chest.

“Sit up, Fitz,” Melinda warned softly as she dished a bowl of soup. Fitz scrunched up his nose at his mother’s back, but did not do as he was told. Jemma shook her head as Skye watched over the edge of her bowl, slowly slurping noodles from her spoon.
Melinda set the bowl in front of her grumpy little boy and stood back, folding her own arms over her chest. She glared down at him, waiting for him to comply with her request. Both girls watched in silence. Their brother often challenged their mother’s authority. It never ended well for him.

“You gonna getsa a dà dǎ pigu, Fitz.” Skye giggled, covering her mouth with one hand.

“Zài tā luǒlú de dībù,” Jemma added with the exact same giggle.

The boy sneered at his sisters as he pushed himself upright on the chair then peered up at his mother. She smiled at his action, gave him a quick nod and turned to the amused girls.

“That’s enough, you two. Leave your brother alone and finish your lunch or there will be enough big spankings for everyone’s little bottom.” Melinda winked at Fitz as she sat back down to finish her own lunch. The girls took the hint and continued eating as well.

Fitz picked up his spoon and swirled it back and forth in the soup. He watched as the liquid twirled and the noodles spun in tiny whirlpools. He glanced at the half sandwich on the plate next to the bowl, ready to remind his mother that he did not like peanut butter or grape jelly, but realized it was cream cheese and marmalade. He glanced at her quickly and saw her look back with a smile.

“You aren’t dredging a pond, Fitz” Melinda remarked as she picked up her own spoon and nodded toward him.

The boy turned down the corners of his mouth and stilled his hand, but made no move to try his soup. He tapped the end of the spoon with one finger and swung his feet under the table. His brow was locked in a furious scowl but he stared into the bowl rather than anyone at the table.

Skye shrugged off her big brother’s crankiness, sat up straight and slurped the last of her noodles. She frowned at the broth left in her bowl. “Momma, I gots no mower bumps in mine soup. Now it just whattor.”

“It’s broth, sweetheart.” Jemma corrected as she tilted her bowl away from herself and finished the last of her soup. She too had lost interest in Fitz’s tantrum and simply let it go.

Skye leaned forward and stretched up to look into her bowl. She looked at Jemma then back to their mother. “I no like-a just brothe with no thing elless. It be just whattor.”
Melinda smiled as she added a few noodles to Skye’s bowl then sat back down after retrieving them from the large pot on the stove. She watched Fitz staring at his lunch. “Not enough bumps for you, Fitz?”

The boy looked at his mother over his brows and refused to even smile at her attempted humor. “I’m not hungry.” He mumbled as he dropped his spoon with a clink and slumped back against his chair, once again folding his arms over his chest.

“You are so very cross today, Fitz.” Jemma stated softly as she stood and carried her bowl to the sink. “Aren’t you the least bit excited about seeing Hunter again?”

Fitz rolled his eyes and let out a fluttery breath, but did not answer. He was sick of his sister’s fascination with the American holiday that would bring their friends to visit. He wasn’t about to share in anyone’s happiness when he felt so lousy just about everything. What he really wanted to do was shove that damn bowl right across the table, knock this stupid chair over and scream at the top of his lungs until he just couldn’t scream anymore. He closed his eyes and imagined the scene in his mind.

Jemma shook her head at her brother’s attempt to ignore her questions as she sat back down on her chair. Melinda placed a few slices of apple in front of her. She nodded her thanks and nibbled on a piece. Melinda motioned to Fitz with her eyes and gave Jemma a ‘give him a break’ look as Skye rambled on about her upcoming Thanksgiving pageant at school.

“I gonna be a indin at a big big dinnor in mine school. Miss Pani say it.” Skye nodded as she made her announcement. “I gots a head belt widda fetter.” She laid her hand atop her head as she spoke. “Momma and Daddy come to my school an eat atta taybo wit me.” She smiled at Melinda who smiled back. “You not be a indin, okay momma?” Skye shook her head as she spoke. “You just be a mine momma and daddy just be a daddy.”

Fitz rolled his eyes and shook his head. “It is not a belt, ninny. It is called a headband and Native Americans in the eastern part of the United States in all likelihood did not wear them. It is a sad bit of stereotyping.” Suddenly the boy felt hostile toward his little sister who would have all of their mother and father’s attention with her stupid inaccurate celebrate of (again) this insipid holiday he was being forced to endure. He kicked the table leg repeatedly, a bit harder each time.

“We will love being your lunch guests, baobei.” Melinda threw a warning glance at her son then smiled at her youngest as she took away her empty bowl and set a small plate of apple slices in front of her.
Skye scrunched up her nose and shook her head. “You no haffa guess, momma. I telled you lasterday, member?” It seemed the little girl was oblivious to her brother’s snide comments.

Jemma covered her giggle as Melinda winked at her. “I do remember, baobei. Daddy and I will be there for you and we won’t guess at all.”

Fitz sneered at all of them but stopped his foot an inch from the table leg at a warning glance from Melinda. Instead he again he picked up his spoon but tapped it hard on the place mat in an irritated tempo. His scowl deepened with each tap until Melinda casually removed the utensil from his hand. He narrowed one eye at her before resorting to using his knuckles to do the same thing.

“I wish I could be there as well.” Jemma added trying hard to ignore the altercation between her mother and her brother. “Your little pageant sounds lovely. I am sure you will be the grandest Indian there.” Skye smiled at her sister’s comment and munched on a piece of apple.

“I be a bestest indin with Chessie and Darenen.” She nodded before shaking her head and continuing with a frown. “Ryan no be a indin. Him be a pilrim. He no is happy to Miss Pani.”

Fitz glared at his mother and sisters, flicking his finger against the side of his bowl with a plink, plink, plink. “The correct terminology is Native American.” He scoffed, kicking the leg of the table in tandem with his flicking. He didn’t care if his mother didn’t like it. The rhythm of the knocks made his anger louder. “Indians are those born in India and have nothing to do with your ridiculous holiday.”

“Fitz,” Jemma sighed at her brother as Melinda tapped his knee in a not so gentle warning to stop.

“You know I’m correct, Jemma.” Fitz stilled his kicking, but continued to swing his feet angrily. “This Yank holiday is nothing more than a plot to defame James the first.” He snarled back.

Skye watched the conversation between her siblings as she nibbled her apple slices.

“It has little to do with that, Fitz.” Jemma countered. “It is about a people celebrating their bountiful harvest and their many new friendships in a new land. You and I can do the same.”
“A people who defied the King and ran off to do as they pleased all so they wouldn’t be expected to follow the law of the land.” Fitz’s voice grew louder as he leaned forward and poked his finger against the table. “You can do as you please…I’ll have no part of the nonsense.” He slapped his palm on the table causing both sisters to jump.

Melinda shook her head and began to speak but was interrupted by her youngest daughter. “They is no king in my dinnor, Fitz. They is ownee indins and pilrims havink a big dinnor wit mommas and daddies.” Skye corrected.

Fitz laughed through his nose and threw back his head. “See, she doesn’t even know what the whole bloody thing is about.”

“Fitz,” Melinda warned. The boy threw his hands in the air and let them drop with a slap on his thighs rather than risk slamming the table again. He turned to Skye. “You don’t know what your Thanksgiving is all about. You’re too little.”

“I not too liddle.” Skye shook her head and smiled at her brother. “It about saying tank you, Fitz. I say tank you for the boards that zing.” Skye nodded around an almost yawn.

Fitz rolled his eyes and let out a long breath. “No one cares about birds that sing and I don’t care about this dumb holiday.” He kicked the leg of the table hard, jarring everything on it then fell back against his chair again.

Skye’s bottom lip jutted out in a slight pout. “You no nice aday, Fitz.” The boy rolled his eyes, let out a breath and shook his head refusing to look at either sister. Once again the little boy folded his arms over his chest and glowered at the girls.

“Okay, enough,” Melinda warned making a ‘time out’ signal with her hands. “We are done.” She scooped Skye up from her chair, walked around the table and reached out a hand to Fitz. “Jemma, can you please clean off the table while I put your sister and your brother down for a nap.”

Jemma’s eyes went wide as Fitz stared open-mouthed at his mother’s outstretched hand. He leaned away from it. “I’m not a bloomin’ toddler. I’ll not be made to nap.” He glared up at his mother’s determined look.

Melinda placed Skye on the floor and turned to her older daughter. “Please, take your sister into the bathroom and help her wash her hands and face.” She tapped her baby’s nose. “And you, use
the potty while momma talks to your brother.”

Jemma quickly took Skye’s hand and directed her down the hall to do as she was asked. Melinda set her arms on her hips and glared down at Fitz who scowled right back.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you today, young man, but it is about to come to a screeching halt.” She was no longer trying to use humor to diffuse her son’s bad mood. Things had gone way past that and it was time to be totally serious. Her patience was wearing thin and Fitz wasn’t walking on thin ice, he had gone right through, dived through…head first.

Fitz swallowed hard but refused to back down. He pushed himself off the opposite side of the chair, stood next to it and glared at his mother. “I’m not about to take a nap and you can’t make me. I’m not a baby.”

Melinda folded her arms over her chest and took a deep breath. Fitz had his bad days, but today was the worst she could remember. Even those first days in Sheffield had nothing on the last five and a half hours. She fought the urge to throttle the little boy, hoping to use a calmer more understanding path. She took a breath to calm her voice and spoke as quietly as possible. “No, you’re not, but you are cranky and irritable. Maybe a nice long sleep will help your very nasty attitude before I choose to use an alternative method to adjust it for you.”

Fitz narrowed his eyes, set his own arms across his chest and shook his head.

Melinda counted to ten in her mind…very slowly then drew another breath and pointed toward the stairs. So much for calm, cool and understanding…now the frazzled mother fought just to keep from bellowing at the stubborn child. “You have exactly five seconds to get yourself up those stairs and into your room.” She glared at him, leaving no room to doubt her intention.

The little boy stared for a moment before sliding around the chair and stomping down the hall. “I’ll go to my room,” he growled as he stopped at the bottom of the stairs, looking back toward his mother who still stood pointing. “But I will not take a nap.” He shouted his last refusal and pounded up the stairs.

Melinda counted the seconds before she heard his bedroom door slam. She let out the breath she’d been holding, closed her eyes and took deep breaths to quell her growing anger. Skye was already hopping toward her and Jemma had that ‘oh, no poor Fitz’ look about her. She swallowed the anger she felt at her son’s behavior as she picked up her baby and headed up the stairs.
It took just about ten minutes to settle Skye into her bed, sing two songs and explain to her that Fitz was not angry with her before the little girl relaxed enough to drift off with Salty secure in her arms. Melinda slipped out the door, pulling it shut softly. She took a deep breath and crossed the hall, tapping twice on Fitz’s door before pushing it open.

The little boy stood looking out the window. He turned and glared at his mother with the same anger he’d had pounding up the steps.

“You’ve come to tan my backside now. Haven’t you?” He snarled at her. “I’m not afraid.” He lied, already failing to hide the shake in his voice.

Melinda’s tamed anger threatened to overtake her. She resisted the urge and refused to take a defensive stance with her nine year old son. “Is that what you think you deserve?” She asked calmly.

“I’m sure you do,” he barked back. “I’ve been a cheeky brat all day. I’m sure you’re only here to take me over your knee and teach me a lesson, then.”

She stared at him for a beat and knit her brow. “It had crossed my mind.” She answered honestly and almost smiled at the dread that crossed his face before he rolled his hands into tight fists. She turned and pulled the chair from his desk and sat down.

They stared at each other for a moment before Melinda spoke. “Come here, Fitz.” She jutted her chin at the spot in front of her.

Fitz’s hands went behind his back as he took a tentative step toward his mother, losing a bit of his bravado with each additional step that brought him closer to her. By the time he stood in front of her examining the toes of his stocking feet he’d lost most of the nerve he’d planned to use before his mother exacted his punishment. He glanced quickly at the shoes he’d kicked off after entering his room. One stood on its heel under the window he’d been standing in front of while the other lay upside down on the dresser. Just seeing them Melinda would know what he’d done…and he’d been warned on more than one occasion about that rather nasty habit.

Melinda looked at the top of his curly head and silently sighed. “This isn’t really the way I planned on spending such a beautiful Saturday afternoon.” She waited a few seconds for the boy’s reaction, which was basically just wriggling his toes. “Did you?” She asked quietly.
Fitz shook his head, but did not look at his mother.

“Not really sure how we got here, Fitz or why you’re so horrid with us today. It’s not like you to stay angry so long.” Again she waited for the response that did not come. She bent low to look into his face, but he turned away. “Did I do something to make you so very angry with me?” Melinda’s voice was soft and quiet. “I’m sorry if I did, but your behavior is no way to handle it.”

Fitz shook his head again, biting his bottom lip to stop its quivering. Melinda reached out and placed her hands on his upper arms. She rubbed them up and down slowly before sliding them down slowly until she pulled his hands forward and held them in her own. She pulled the little boy forward and he tensed, expecting the worst.

“Are you angry with Jemma or Skye?” Melinda almost whispered.

Fitz watched his mother’s hands massage his own and took a shaky breath. Again he shook his head and chewed his lip. Melinda placed her finger under his chin and raised his head to look at her. Fitz squeezed his eyes shut and bounced nervously on one foot. “Maybe we should talk about it, huh?” He shook his head rapidly but could not stop the tears that began to roll over his cheeks.

Melinda pulled him into a tight embrace which only gave the little boy permission to finally let go and sob deeply into his mother’s shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him onto her lap, rocking gently and shushing him softly. Waiting until those sobs turned to sniffles, Melinda rested her chin on top of her son’s head. “Tell momma, baobei…” She kissed the top of his head and waited for his reply.

Fitz took a deep breath and reached into his back pocket pulling out a crisp white handkerchief. Melinda smiled at the red embroidered letters on one corner ‘PRC’. She knew where her little man had gotten it. Fitz strove to be exactly like his father. It wasn’t surprising he’d tucked that hanky in his pocket ‘for emergencies’. He wiped his eyes, then his nose, folded it neatly then tucked it back into his pocket.

The little boy looked at his mother for the first time. “Why did Da not want me to go with him today? Why did he only want Trip?” He spoke through his tears then took a shaky breath and wiped a tear away with the back of his hand. “Is…is he ashamed of me because I’m not a normal kid like Trip…I don’t…can’t…”

Melinda stopped him, pulling him back to her chest. Suddenly, everything became very clear.
“Oh, my beautiful boy…no, no, no, your father is never, ever ashamed of you.” She hugged his closer. “He loves you very, very much and he doesn’t care at all if you aren’t athletic like your brother.” She kissed the top of his head as she felt him sob once again. “Listen to me, Fitz.” She pulled him back to look in his face. “Your dad…he’s not much of an athlete himself.” Fitz forced a weak smile. “He didn’t think you’d be interested…not like Trip.” She brushed his curls away from his forehead.

“I’m sorry, momma…” Fitz sobbed again as he fell back into her embrace. “I’m sorry I was so disrespectful to you. I’m sorry I was mean to Jemma and Skye.”

“Are you angry with your Da for taking Trip and not you?” Melinda asked into the little boy’s curls as she comforted him.

Fitz shook his head. “I was mad at me.” He sniffed twice before pulling his hanky out a second time. “Because I’m not like a real kid and because I didn’t even ask Da if he would take me along. I was afraid he would say no and I didn’t want to hear him say he didn’t want me with him.”

Melinda’s heart was breaking for her baby boy. “Baobei, your Da would have taken you in an instant. He just didn’t think you were interested. You should have come to me or to your dad, sweet boy. You should have let us know how you felt.” Melinda stated although she was sure the very intelligent little boy already realized that fact.

“I didna think I was so angry until Da and Trip left all happy to be together.” The little boy shrugged his shoulders. “I felt…angry at their happiness.” He swiped at the tears threatening to fall again. “What’s wrong with me momma? Why does it make me so angry to see them happy? It’s not normal, momma.” Fitz looked into his mother’s eyes searching for some explanation for the terrible feelings that had plagued him since Phil had planned this outing with his eldest.

Melinda pulled him close and kissed his forehead. “Oh, my sweet boy, you’re feeling jealous and that’s normal, so very normal.” She wrapped her arms around him and swayed a little as she smiled at her son’s brush with a very typical part of growing up. She was overjoyed that his little genius mind overlooked it and just reacted. She didn’t care much for his reaction, but Fitz rarely did anything small.

This little boy was so intelligent with numbers and design, so creative with everything he did but he struggled with understanding his own and other’s emotions. Melinda wondered if it were part of his genius or due to the difficult years he spent with a too young mother more dependent on chemicals than raising her child. Sometimes she greatly disliked Emelie Fitz, but she was eternally grateful for her gift of this beautiful boy…even when he was having a no good, very bad day like
They sat together for a few minutes as the tension between them dissipated. Fitz took a deep breath and played with the damp hanky he still held as he rested against Melinda’s shoulder. He released it in a long shaky exhale. “Are you going to spank me now?” He whispered into his own chest.

Melinda hugged him tighter and resisted the chuckle she felt. “You certainly deserve it, little man.” She hesitated, letting the little boy squirm for a bit, gently patted his bottom a few times then hugged him again. “No, my sweet baobei no…no spankings today…but…” Fitz looked up at her when she hesitated again. Melinda smiled down at him. “We are going to talk to Da about today and …”

Fitz’s face fell into a deep frown as he nodded slowly.

“You are going to take a nap.” Melinda squeezed his hand that she held as he opened his mouth to protest. She held up a finger and raised her brows. “Or we can rethink that spanking…”

Fitz yawned a wide exaggerated yawn. “All of a sudden I am awfully tired.” He almost smiled as he snuggled into his mother’s embrace.

Melinda smiled, kissed his head and stood, setting Fitz on his feet. They moved to the bed and she waited for him to lie down and get comfortable before sitting next to him and once again singing softly until her little one relaxed into slumber.

xx

A little after three Skye bounced down the stairs as Phil and Trip came through the back door. She raced to her father, shrieking his name and bouncing around him until he scooped her into a bear hug, kissing her over and over until her giggles had her breathless. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face there, inhaling the familiar smell of his cologne. A second later her head popped up and she looked at Phil with a serious glare.

“Fitz no beed a good boy aday, daddy. Him no talk nice at us.” She shook her head as Phil looked to Melinda.
“Okay, little broadcaster,” Melinda smiled as she took the little girl from her father and set her on the floor. “Go play with Jemma while I talk to Daddy.”

Trip beamed as he stood in a brand new basketball jersey and held an autographed ball under his arm. He held out a hand to his little sister. “Come on, baby girl, let’s go find Jemma.” He took her hand and led her from the room.

Melinda finished telling Phil all the gory details of the day about two minutes before Fitz shuffled into the kitchen. He stopped when he realized his parents were seated at the table speaking in quiet voices and was pretty sure what they were discussing.

Phil turned in his chair and eyed the little boy standing in the doorway. He crooked a finger at him then pointed to a spot next to his chair. Fitz blew out a quick breath and complied.

Melinda excused herself, slipping into the family room after placing a quick kiss on her little boy’s head. Phil’s discussion lasted about five minutes. It consisted of an apology for not inviting Fitz along for the day, a quick lecture on talking back to his mother, and a firm tap on the backside for even thinking Phil would ever be ashamed of him. It ended with a hug and a promise that Fitz would never let something make him so very angry and not talk to his mom or dad about it in the future. Father and son then entered the family room together.

“Hey, little man!” Trip greeted his brother with a wide smile. He pulled himself up from the couch and held out the bottom of his jersey. “Whadya think, bro? Cool huh?” He picked up the ball and bounced it once on the carpet, earning a glare from Melinda who was helping Skye snap together a few Legos into an airplane shape. Trip grimaced and shrugged once as he tucked the ball under his arm. Fitz smiled at his brother’s treasures. “This is nothing, Fitz, nothing at all. You wouldn’t believe it. Da told the guy all about you and how smart you are and how you helped me improve my game with all that math stuff and he was so impressed, man. He thinks you’re a star all on your own, Fitz.” He lightly socked the smaller boy on the shoulder. Fitz smiled as he rubbed the spot.

“Me?” The little boy asked in disbelief.

“Yeah, man. He wants to meet you, little guy, wants you to tell him all about those math things you used with me.”

“Really,” Fitz beamed as Phil placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders. Fitz tilted his head back and looked up at his father who nodded in agreement.
“Hey, man he invited all of us to his house next weekend. He’s got a real pool right inside his house!” Trip’s voice squeaked with his excitement. “And man, he’s got more Legos than you will ever see in your whole lifetime! Geez, Fitz you could build a full sized plane and walk around inside it!”

“I don’t know Trip, next week is Thanksgiving and well, Fitz’s behavior today doesn’t really beg reward.” Phil shook his head as he winked at Melinda.

Fitz let out a soft sigh as the weight of his father’s statement showed in his face. Trip’s mouth fell open as well before he shook it off and smiled. “Ya know, Da, you could always just give him a dozen or so whacks on the wazoo and call it even.”

“Hey!” Fitz quickly protested, causing everyone to break into laughter.

Xx

Hunter and Bobbi arrived on Tuesday morning, stopping at the Coulson’s office before settling in to the basement guestroom to sleep off their jet lag before the tribe arrived home after school. It was certain the holiday celebration scheduled for Thursday would have an early start.

Phil and Melinda left the office by eleven leaving themselves enough time to be seated at the festively decorated table in Skye’s classroom. They sat on kid sized chairs and smiled at their little Indian as she marched into the room with her class decked out in her purple headband adorned with several brightly colored feathers sans any shade of green. She stood proudly beside her fellow tribesmen singing “I am Thankful” at the top of her lungs. Melinda covered her mouth to hide the laugh and looked to other parents doing the same. Phil merely beamed with pride. When the little program ended the children formed a circle around their parents and joined hands.

“Thank you for the world so sweet.” Smiled Chelsea in her brown paper bag painted vest and deep blue head band.

“Thank you for the food we eat.” Ryan recited with a less than enthusiastic sigh.

“Tank you foe the boards that zing!” Skye bubbled with enough enthusiasm for both of them.
“Thank you, God, for everything.” The entire class sang as they raised their joined hands then dropped them and ran to their parents.

Everyone clapped, hugged and turned to the table for a midday meal that consisted of traditional Thanksgiving fair and ethnic dishes brought in by the children’s families including Skye’s favorite fried rice.

“I a good indin, momma?” Skye asked around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

Melinda quickly wiped the drips from her little girl’s chin. “You are a perfect Indian, baobei.” She smiled.

“Best Indian in the room,” Phil agreed. “The Pilgrims would be proud to have you at their feast.”

Skye smiled as she sampled a small slice of pumpkin pie covered in whipped cream. Phil wriggled his eyebrows at her treat as Melinda shook her head. The Coulsons, along with several other parents stayed to help with clean up and elected to take their little Indian home early, wishing everyone a safe and happy holiday before departing. Skye was asleep before they made it to the highway and stayed that way as Phil carried her to her bed when they arrived at home.

Jemma and Fitz stormed into the house a few hours later anxious to see their visitors and disappointed to find only mom and dad in the kitchen. Both their faces fell when Phil opened his arms in greeting. He wasn’t usually home this time of day.

He gripped his chest and squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m crushed,” he mock-whined. “My own children give me the cold shoulder.”

Jemma giggled at his jest as she ran to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Oh, Da, I always love you. I just expected to see Bobbi and well…”

He bent down and kissed her forehead. “I know princess…I just can’t compete with the amazing Bobbi.” He laughed again and wrapped his arms around the little girl.

“I knew you were teasing.” Fitz smiled as he moved closer to his father. Phil reached out and tousled his hand before pulling him into the group hug.
“What in bloody hell is all the noise about?” Hunter growled as he pushed open the basement door and marched into the kitchen feigning anger. “Can’t a bloke get a decent bit of sleep after crossing the pond in the middle of the night?”

The twins turned and backed into their father, eyes wide.

“Knock it off, Hunter, you’re scaring them.” Bobbie scolded as she slapped his shoulder and stepped around him. She spread her arms and stooped to gather the two smiling children into a welcome embrace, kissing both over and over.

“Ow,” Hunter whined as he massaged the spot Bobbi had struck. He watched the children greet his partner then cleared his throat with an exaggerated sound. “Hey, doesn’t a chap get a little bit of that?” He opened his arms and waited as the two children clung to Bobbi and merely blinked at him. He smiled wider and jerked his arms a few times urging them forward then looked at Bobbi when neither moved. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders.

“What? Nothing?” He looked at the kids with an rejected sulk.

Fitz broke first, smiling then laughing as he rushed to embrace his friend. Jemma followed close behind wrapping her arms around the scruffy man.

“Hunner!” Skye’s shrill shriek startled everyone as she dashed into the room and squirmed between her brother and sister to greet Hunter. He lifted her up pretending to struggle with the chore.

“What have you been feedin’ this imp, May? I can barely get her off the ground.” He lifted the little girl almost to his shoulder before Bobbi scooped her away and covered her with kisses.

“Nǐ hǎo bāobèi. Wǒ yǐjīng xiǎngniàn nǐle.” Bobbi smiled at Skye. “Wǒ cuòguòle nǐmen suǒyǒu rén.” She told the little girl and her siblings how much she missed them.

Skye merely smiled and hugged her friend. Jemma and Fitz took Hunter by the hands leading him to the family room already bombarding him in stereo with everything that had happened since they’d seen him last. Phil followed hoping to rescue the man before they scrambled his brain. Melinda watched for a moment before reaching to relieve Bobbi of her little bundle but the woman hugged the little one tighter and shook her head.
“Nope,” she smiled. “I got her…I’m keeping her.” She nuzzled the little girl causing her to giggle and push back from the woman.

“You ownee keep me a литил bit, Bowbi a-cuz I bees momma’s baobei.” She placed her hands on either side of Bobbi’s face. “Okay?” The tiny girl was totally serious and Bobbi had a very hard time doing the same as she nodded slowly. Melinda turned away to hide her smile.

By Thursday morning the kids had versed Hunter in all things Thanksgiving including Skye’s solo rendition of her school pageant complete with a personalized head belt made to order for the man. Skye colored strip of card stock with every color crayon in her box then taped feathers pulled from the hand held duster mom used to clean the furniture. Skye frowned at the fact they were all black, but Hunter explained it was his most favorite color and acquiesced to wear the headpiece for the day.

The house filled with wonderful smells and even more wonderful friends. Mack and Elena arrived with desserts and a few of their favorite dishes as well. Phil added two leaves to the dining room table making it long and large enough to accommodate everyone. Gram Triplet joined the family helping to stuff the turkey and keep it basted well, slapping the hand of anyone that so much as tried to open the oven door without her permission.

Trip carried extra folding chairs from the garage. Hunter entertained the younger kids or they did him, it was a toss up and point of argument later in the day. William May arrived late in the afternoon carrying gifts for all of his grandchildren and explaining why Lian was out of the country and could not join them.

At three o clock everyone sat down to dinner wondering where they would put all of the food spread across the table. Phil carved the large turkey and smiled at the family that had grown from just he and Melinda sharing a small turkey loaf and fries two years ago to this. He blinked back the tears as he watched his children interact with the others at the table.

Trip had grown at least three inches and now towered over his father. Jemma was eating again, maybe not as much as they wished, but she was eating without provocation or argument. Fitz had his moments of doubt but they grew farther apart. He had grown close to both parents and allowed both to hug and kiss him goodnight…a major accomplishment. Skye was their baby, their sweet baby girl who no longer screamed terrified in the night or feared being taken or sent away because she made a mistake or dared to be naughty.

Mack tapped his glass and cleared his throat, quieting the crowd at the table. He looked to Phil who gave him a quick nod as he sat at the head of the table. He watched at the large man took
Elena’s hand in his own and held out the other to Fitz. The little boy watched as his hand disappeared into that of his large friend and turned to take Bobbi’s hand on his opposite side. Around the table everyone did the same until the circle was complete and the big quiet man closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“Lord, we thank you for this bounty…this food and this family. Thank you for bringing these children to our hearts and for making all of us closer. Thank you for Miss Triplet’s health and for keeping everyone safe through all the troubles we’ve weathered. Thank you for smiles and laughter, for tears and sorrow. Thank you for parents that love and children that need love. Thank you for friends and for bringing us together on this day of Thanks. Amen.”

“Amen” everyone repeated as they dropped their hands and prepared to dig into their feast.

Skye still held on to Mack’s very large hand. He looked to her and smiled. “We not done.” She informed him softly. He raised his brows in question and she nodded.

Mack cleared his throat again and everyone looked. “Skye says we’re not done…so…” he closed his eyes and bowed his head again.

Everyone put down their forks and did the same. Skye looked around the table at everyone then cleared her own throat.

“And tank you foe the boards that zing.” She repeated with four year old reverence.

Everyone paused, waiting…

“Amen!” Fitz smiled, winking at his little sister.

She smiled back and picked up her fork.

Melinda took a breath to catch the happy sob in her throat and squeezed Phil’s hand.
Chapter Summary

Phil and Melinda must attend a funeral across the country and leave the younger kids with Lian at her farm in Pennsylvania. Skye and Fitz are a hard sell but it’s Jemma that has the worst time of it.

Chapter Notes

This is a lot longer than intended but it just got away from me.
Enjoy

“I no wanna go a Nainai’s howz.” Skye sniffed as she watched her sister pack a small suitcase.

“There’s no reason to be afraid, sweetheart,” Jemma consoled the smaller girl as she ceased her chore and sat on the bed next to her. “It’s only for a few days while Momma and Da take care of some adult affair they must attend.”

Skye blinked a few times at her older sister, not quite sure what that meant but understood that her mother and father were going somewhere. “I go wit Momma.” She nodded her head quickly.

Jemma took her little sister’s hand and smiled sadly. “I’m sorry, Skye, but this time we can’t go with Momma. She and Da have to do this without children to worry about.”

The little girl shook her head. “I no be whoa-ee to Momma. I promiss.” Skye was close to tears.

Jemma hugged the little girl as Fitz entered the room carrying his small satchel. “Well,” he huffed as he dropped the bag and fell back against Jemma’s door frame. “I’m ready, but not very willing. I am not sure I like this idea.” He folded his arms over his chest and shook his head.

Skye lifted her head from Jemma’s hug. She looked to her brother and then back to Jemma before
the wailing began.

Xx

Melinda moved across her room, dropping items into a suitcase spread across the bed. Phil moved at his own speed doing the same.

“You really have to calm down, Mel. They’ll be fine.” Phil smiled at the growl on his wife’s face.

“You’ve never lived with my mother.” She spoke through her teeth, looking at him over her brows.

“It’s only a few days and she’s happy to have them.” Phil dropped his shaving kit into his bag and stopped her from throwing another item into hers.

Melinda let out a long sigh. “I cannot believe that every person we know has somewhere to be this weekend.” She shook her head as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

Phil moved back to the task of packing. He opened the closet door and pulled out a dark suit then turned to Melinda. “Mack wouldn’t miss his kid brother’s wedding and Elena’s anxious to meet the family.” He smiled over his shoulder as he tucked the suit into a garment bag and began flipping through his collection of neck ties.

Melinda shook her head as she stepped next to him and slapped his hand free of the tie he held then slipped another from the rack and handed it to him. “It was very inconvenient for Professor Maxwell to pass away when everyone is so busy.”

Letting out a short laugh Phil shook his head. “I’m sure he didn’t plan on it.”

“Maybe I should just stay home. You can go without me, speak for both of us.” She looked at him expectedly.

Phil shook his head. “Mrs. Maxwell specifically asked for both of us. You were one of his prized pupils. It seems fitting you would speak at the service.”
“But not mandatory, Phil,” she paused for a moment and stared at the open door, listening to the mumbly voices of her children. “We could just take them with us.”

Phil laughed out loud. “Fitz and Skye in a hotel room? At a funeral service?” He simply looked at her in disbelief. “Might actually put the ‘fun’ in funeral.” He wriggled his eyebrows at her.

She rolled her eyes then shook her head, laughing slightly at the ridiculousness of his statement. “Why do Hunter and Bobbi have to be so far away?”

“They run the London office, Mel. It helps that they live close by.” Phil sniped as he snapped his suitcase closed. He looked at the haphazardly packed bag on the opposite side of the bed. “Not that I’m complaining, but you’ve pack four nightgowns and a pair of sweat socks. You might want to reconsider.” He slid his bag off the bed and set it on the floor.

Melinda shook her head and let out a frustrated huff. She marched to the bed and grabbed the lingerie out of the bag, pushing Phil aside. He laughed once and she slapped him away.

“Gram had to pick this weekend to visit New York and drag Trip along for the ride.” She growled as she threw the nighties back into the draw and dropped on to the small chair in front of the vanity.

“Come on, Mel. You know she’s been planning this excursion for months and Trip couldn’t wait. None of them realized something like this could happen. And all of them offered to change their plans. You were the one who insisted they go.” He reminded her.

Melinda took a deep breath. “That was before I knew Sr. Mary Clair would be off on a weeklong retreat and my mother would mysteriously find out we were desperate.” She narrowed her eyes, silently accusing him.

“Well, she is ex-CIA. She probably knows things before they happen.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe she’s got the house bugged.”

Melinda opened her mouth to reply but stopped with the piercing wail of her baby.

xx
“You are definitely not helping.” Jemma scolded Fitz as she tried in vain to calm her little sister.

The boy pointed to his own chest and raised his eyebrows in a ‘who me?’ expression. He stepped aside as his mother rushed into the room.

“What is going on in here?” Melinda demanded as she glanced from child to child and assured herself that no one was hurt. Skye had already wriggled from Jemma’s embrace, slid off her sister’s bed and was reaching up to her mother. Melinda picked her up and looked to the older girl for explanation.

Fitz spoke first. “She’s not keen on going to grandmother’s house.” He shook his head. “Maybe we shouldn’t upset her so.”

Melinda glared at him for moment. “You’re no help.”

Fitz shrugged his shoulders and looked back and up as his father entered the room and stood behind him. Phil placed his hands on his son’s shoulders and gave a gentle encouraging squeeze.

Melinda looked at her little crew and shook her head. She moved to the bed and sat down next to Jemma, sitting Skye on her lap. Phil pushed Fitz forward then sat on the other side of his older daughter and held the little boy in front of them. Skye continued to sob on her mother’s shoulder.

“Okay,” Melinda began. “We’ve talked about this. Momma and Daddy have to go to a funeral for a very old friend and it’s not a place for children. Nainai offered to have the three of you come visit her in Pennsylvania for a few days while we’re away. She has a big house and a lot of land for you to explore.”

“I no wanna splore.” Skye sniffed without taking her face out of her mother’s sweatshirt.

Melinda kissed the top of her head and smiled at Phil. “You don’t have to, but I bet you’ll want to when you see it.”

“Nainai has two fine goats, Skye. You’ve seen the pictures. I thought you wanted to pet them.” Jemma tried to help. Fitz rolled his eyes.
Skye shook her head into Melinda’s shirt. “I no wanna pet none. I no likes goatses. They is mean to me.”

Phil pulled Fitz into a hug to stop the little boy’s sniggering.

“They aren’t mean, Skye.” Melinda reassured her baby. “They are fine goats and they love to climb in a very big tree that Nainai has.”

The little girl sat back and looked up at her mother with a mini-scowl. “Goatses no climb trees, momma. They is no taygers, they is goatses.”

Melinda smiled as shook her head and hugged the little girl closer. “Oh, baobei these are very special goats and you will see they indeed do climb this tree.”

“Doesn’t that sound splendid, Skye?” Jemma asked, nodding her head quickly.

Skye eyed her sister for a second then shook her head. She looked up at her mother. “I no wanchu go to a fume a rall.”

“Professor Maxwell was a very good friend of momma and I, angel eyes.” Phil explained. “Everyone would be disappointed if we didn’t go.”

Skye was still shaking her head. “Why no Fesser Masell come to our howz to see you? Him could sleep in the cellar like Hunner and Bowbi.”

Fitz exploded with a loud laugh. “That would be splendid then, wouldn’t it? The bloke is d…”

Phil wrapped the little boy’s head in a bear hug and continued. “Done…done traveling. Professor Maxwell doesn’t travel anymore.”

Poking his hands and head up through his father’s embrace, Fitz added, “not in this plane of existence.” He finished with a giggle as he sunk back into Phil’s arms ignoring his mother’s glare.
“He can’t come here, baobei. Daddy and I have to go to Seattle to see him one last time.” Melinda spoke softly to Skye while frowning at Fitz. “You have nothing to be afraid of baobao. Jemma and Fitz will be right there with you the whole time.”

Jemma nodded and took her little sister’s hand. “You know Nainai likes you, Skye. Remember when she visited and you shared dessert with her? Remember she told you about momma when she was a little girl?”

Skye leaned against her mother’s shoulder and blinked at Jemma. “I no wanna go, momma.”

Melinda looked over the little girl’s head at Phil and sighed. This was not going to be easy, but there was no other choice. He could see the doubt in her eyes and knew they’d be up all night discussing this…again.

Phil moved Fitz aside, stood and took Skye in his arms. He held her close and rocked her gently as he paced across Jemma’s room. Fitz leaned against the foot of the bed and watched his father try to console his baby sister while his slightly older sister moved closer to their mother and wrapped her arms around her. Jemma was doing her own version of consolation.

“I really need your help, angel baby,” Phil whispered into Skye’s ear. “Momma needs to go to this special meeting and she needs you to be a big girl while she’s gone. She needs you to make sure Fitz stays out of trouble and Jemma eats all of her vegetables.” He bounced her a little, feeling the slight shake of her head against his chin. “Do you think you can do that for Momma? Can you help take care of Fitz and Jemma?”

Skye played with the button on her father’s shirt with one hand and twirled a piece of his fine hair between the fingers of the other. “Fizt no lisstins a me, daddy. Him no lisstins a Jemma, eetho.” She shook her head and sniffled. “I be a bozz?” Skye smiled for the first time all day as she leaned back and looked her father in the eye.

Phil turned so that the little girl’s back was to the others. He peeked over her shoulder and winked one eye at her. “It will be our little secret.” He whispered.

“Do Neenee know?” Skye raised her eyebrows.

“I will tell her all about it.” Phil assured her.
“You come back?” Skye whispered softly, once again playing with Phil’s shirt button with both hands.

There it was. The real issue. The bottom line. Skye’s perpetual fear of being abandoned could not be silenced.

Phil leaned forward until his forehead touched hers. He motioned with a crooking finger for Melinda to join them. She was there in a moment with Jemma and Fitz in tow. She wrapped her arm around her baby and rested her head on Phil’s shoulder. Fitz and Jemma squirmed between them in a giant group hug.

“Now,” Phil began. “We are a family. We are a family today and tomorrow and everyday. Always,” he kissed Skye’s forehead. “And forever,” he kissed Melinda’s. “Sometimes we have to be apart but we will always…ALWAYS…come back together.”

“Nainai is family, too, baobei. Grandmothers are part of your big family. Nainai is momma’s momma and she will take very good care of you until daddy and momma come back to get you.” Melinda spoke softly to the little girl while rubbing her hand on Fitz’s back. She knew he was nervous as well, but would never admit it. She smiled at Jemma who smiled back.

Everyone was quiet for a moment before Melinda spoke again. “Tomorrow we will all drive to Nainai’s house and spend the day together. We’ll have dinner and momma and daddy will tuck all of you in for the night.”

Skye let out a long shaky breath and fell forward on her father’s chest. “Then daddy and momma will go to the airport and on to Seattle. Two more sleeps and we’ll be back to take everyone home.”

Phil finished as he stood back from the group and allowed Melinda to take Skye from him. He quickly bent down and kissed Jemma’s head before pulling her into a tight hug. She smiled up at him.

“Okay, big guy,” Phil began clapping his hand together in front of him then rubbing them together. “Let’s get finished packing these bags so we can get them into the car. I’ll give yours the once over and the girls can help each other get all their stuff into their own.”

Fitz rolled his eyes and threw his head back as he stomped across the floor, snagged his bag and
dragged it out the door with Phil close behind. Melinda laughed at the boy’s plight before setting Skye on the floor and helping Jemma to get everything into her bag.

xx

The Coulson’s were on the road before sunrise the next morning. Jemma and Fitz stumbled out of bed, dressed and curled up together on the back seat of the SUV, back to sleep before Phil pulled out of the driveway. Skye was scooped up still asleep and strapped into her car seat clad in PJ’s and wrapped in her favorite blanket. It was agreed that Salty would stay at behind keeping constant vigil on the place that was their home. Jemma gifted her little sister with a small yellow striped kitten for emergency travel. Skye held it tightly.

By sunrise the kids were waking and hungry. Phil found a diner and pulled into the parking lot. Melinda slipped into the back seat to quickly dress Skye then joined the family at the booth they’d secured inside. Jemma and Fitz were fascinated with this taste of American culture. With very few customers at an early hour other than weary truck drivers, the family spent a leisurely hour enjoying their meal. Everyone made one last pit stop before climbing back into the car to continue their journey.

The usual two hour trip was stretched out to almost five as Phil made several stops at roadside attractions to keep the kids from getting too antsy with being strapped into their seats for long periods of time. It was five minutes past noon when he pulled the large black car onto the driveway that led to Lian May’s farmhouse. The rowdy bunch that bounced and sang in the back seat fell silent with the realization that this was it. This was real, they had arrived.

However, so had a late summer storm. The skies had grown heavy with gray clouds and thunder rumbled in the distance. The western horizon lit up with the promise of the lightening to come. The wind blew a chill into the air and brought with it a fine mist that would soon turn to heavy rain.

Sky peered through the back window at the dark clouds. “I no wanna go heore.” She sniffled, peering out at the impending storm.

Fitz slapped a hand to his forehead. “Not again,” he sighed.

Jemma patted her hand. “It’s okay, sweetheart. These storms don’t last very long. Look at all those pretty flowers.” She pointed toward a field of wild flowers. “They need the rain to grow.”
“They no need a lite-a-ling an tunner, Jemma. It bees too loud a me.” Skye shook her head as a low growl of thunder caused her to shiver.

Melinda eyed Phil. He raised his brows and turned down the corners of his mouth. They’d get through this. They had to.

xx

Lian met the family on the side porch seconds before the sky unzipped and the rain drenched the dusty ground. Phil set Skye on the wooden, screened in porch and sighed at the fact he had gotten all three children inside before it started but the luggage remained in the car. He looked up through the curtained window at a sky that did not promise a quick downpour. Nope, they were in for an all day rain. He frowned at Melinda as she herded the crew into the house behind her mother, flipped up his collar and pushed open the screen door.

By the time Phil unloaded the car, even with the help of Lian’s farmhand, Ben, he was soaked to the skin. Melinda, with the insistence of Lian, ushered him upstairs to the old fashioned bathroom for a hot bath and change of clothes. Their exit left three apprehensive children with the grandmother they barely knew.

Jemma looked from Fitz to Skye and smiled at the older woman. “It is very nice to see you again, Nainai and very kind of you to offer your home to us while our parents are away.” She tried stepping out of the tight armless embrace her siblings had created on either side of her.

Lian smiled back, or at least she thought the older woman smiled. It was hard to tell. “It is a parent’s job to help their children when they can just as it is a child’s job to be dutiful to their parents. I hope you will make them proud by your behavior in the next few days.”

Skye wriggled closer to Jemma. Fitz swallowed hard.

“Have you eaten?” Lian asked.

“We stopped at a diner for breakfast…” Fitz began, stopping when he noticed the look of disapproval that crossed his grandmother’s face.

“Mmmm,” Lian began, crossing her arms the same way Melinda did when she was not really happy with something. “Your mother allows you to eat such foods, full of so many things bad for your health. I taught her better.” She looked toward the stairs and shook her head.
“We do eat healthy foods at home, but that is not always easy when traveling.” Jemma defended her mother.

“And we were very hungry.” Fitz added. Skye wormed her small hand into her brother’s and nodded in agreement.

“And so we will have lunch,” Lian informed them. “Come.” She turned and walked toward the kitchen expecting them to follow. When they did not she stopped and raised one eyebrow at the trio.

Jemma tried to take a step, held in place by the close proximity of the smaller children. She let out a soft huff, grabbed their hands and tugged them forward.

Phil and Melinda joined their children at the table a few minutes later. Skye immediately relocated from the chair Lian put her into her father’s lap. She peered into the bowl of crinkly noodles, meat and vegetables. It looked like soup with no broth and smelled good. She looked up at Phil and back to the bowl.

Across the table Melinda picked up the chopsticks set next to her bowl and demonstrated to Jemma and Fitz the proper use. Both youngsters caught on quickly and experimented with the various foods in their bowls. Skye watched closely but refused to try.

Phil smiled and kissed the top of her head before offering her a spoon and helping to cut the long noodles smaller, making them more manageable. He winked at Lian when he noticed not one green veggie or smidge of seasoning in the little girl’s bowl. Grandmother had remembered.

The storm lasted the rest of the day, preventing Lian from giving the family the tour she had planned. That would have to wait until tomorrow. They spent the day together. Skye and Phil napped on the large bed in the guest room where the girls would be staying while Fitz checked out the large A-frame attic room that would be his for the next few days. It seemed like an adventure in the daylight but he tried to hide his apprehension of the fact he’d been up here…all alone…in the dark…all night…by himself.

While lunch had been a traditional Chinese fare, supper was a bit more American cuisine. Fried chicken, sweet corn, tossed salad, fresh rolls and apple pie had everyone rubbing their full tummies and congratulating the cook, Ben Watson.
Ben worked for Lian taking care of the farm, the animals and occasionally the cooking. His family had run a restaurant in the suburbs of Atlanta for most of his life. He’d learned to cook at his grandmother’s side and grew up working there. When the restaurant closed, after his grandfather’s death he moved north and spent years in New York City before meeting this woman and joining her on this acreage. It was quite a difference but he enjoyed the pastoral life.

Skye stared at the man despite being scolded by her mother twice. She stood next to him as he helped to clear the table and pass dishes to Melinda and Lian at the sink. He smiled down at her with a quick wink. She smiled back.

“You is barown like-a my Trip is.” She smiled as she gently rubbed her tiny hand over his large one. “Him is mine brudder.” The large man nodded his understanding.

“Skye!” Melinda tried to hush her baby and hide her own embarrassment. She lifted the little girl from the chair she had climbed onto and directed her toward the living room. “Go see what Daddy and the twins are doing.”

Ben laughed a deep laugh. “It’s no big deal, M’linda. She’s just a little bit and calls ‘em as she sees ‘em.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Besides, I am barown.” He finished using Skye’s pronunciation of the word brown.

Skye sidestepped her mother’s gentle push and moved back to stare up at the man who stood in her grandmother’s kitchen. “An you has eyes juss like mine momma and hoer momma,” she brushed her fingers over her own eyes and smiled. “An they bees like myun too.”

“Skye!” Melinda admonished the little girl again, this time scooping her up and landing a soft pat on her backside.

“No need for that, missy.” Ben furrowed his brows at Melinda. “I’ve heard much worse and this little lady is just a might curious.” He reached out and ruffled Skye’s hair. “It ain’t always easy being different, but I managed.”

“Ben’s momma was Chinese, like your momma and like I am.” Lian explained to her granddaughter. “His baba was African like your older brother, so he is a little bit of both.”

Skye shook her head. “Trip no is fricken, him is mine brudder. Him likeses baptist ball and him
haves eyes like hims gramma, too.”

“Well, I would like to meet this brother of yours little miss.” Ben smiled as Melinda set Skye back on the floor.

“Him is gone in N’yoke onna bus.” She lifted her hands, palms up as she shrugged her shoulders.

Ben smiled. “Well, maybe next time.” He reached out to take her hand. “How ‘bout we go see what your papa is up to and maybe get us a game of Parcheesi before you all turn in for the night.”

Skye took the man’s hand and turned to walk through the swinging door with him. “Him bees mine daddy and we non’t has a cheesey to turn.”

Melinda watched as they walked away then turned to help her mother finish the after-meal cleaning.

xx

By eight-thirty Melinda had moved all three children through the large claw foot bathtub that Skye insisted was a swimming pool right in the bathroom, wrestled her and Fitz into pajamas, combed through both daughters’ hair and after all three had said their good nights accompanied them back to the guestroom.

Fitz climbed onto the bed with his sisters. “I don’t want to sleep up there,” he motioned with his eyes toward the ceiling, “all by myself.” He pushed his feet under the covers and snuggled into the large down-filled pillows. “It’s much too cold up there.” He announced, pulling the blankets up around his chin.

“Fitz,” Jemma sighed. “It’s the end of August and probably at least thirty degrees Celsius!”

The little boy frowned at the sister who definitely saw through his ruse. He looked to his mother.

“Well the air conditioning sometimes makes it a bit cooler up there.” Melinda smiled as she tucked Skye into the space between Fitz and the wall. She quickly kissed the tip of his nose as she
moved back to the opposite side of the large bed. “And I think since it’s the last night we’ll spend together for a few days that daddy and I will squeeze into this big bed with the three of you and we will have a family slumber party tonight. What do you think of that?”

“We haves a poorty inna bed?” Skye asked around a wide yawn.

“Yes, baobei,” Melinda smiled as she sat on the bed and patted the mattress encouraging Jemma to climb in as well.”

“I’m not very tired.” The little girl hesitated. “Maybe I should stay up with you and da for a bit, just until I become sleepy.”

“Me too!” Fitz and Skye exclaimed together. Fitz had already kicked his feet free of blankets. Skye rolled over and was crawling out as well.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Melinda caught her son’s ankle and her baby’s hand directing them back to their respective spots. “It is bedtime for all of you. Let’s go Jemma, you too.” This time she held up the blanket and tilted her head in the direction the little girl should move.

Jemma let out a dejected sigh and did as she was told, climbing into the large bed and allowing Melinda to tuck the covers around her. When her mother bent to kiss her good night she wrapped her arms around her neck and held tightly. “I’m scared, momma.” Jemma whispered into Melinda’s ear, hoping her little brother did not hear.

Melinda hugged her older daughter tightly and whispered back. “Everything will be fine, Jemma. We will be fine.” She felt more than heard the sob come from the little girl. Staying with Lian was not Jemma’s fear; it was knowing her parents would board a plane in the morning. That fear was almost paralyzing.

“You can’t know that, momma. You can’t.” Jemma tried unsuccessfully to quell her tears.

Melinda sat back and looked down at the little girl, knowing the other two were paying close attention. They were now silenced by their normally calm and confident sister’s behavior. She wiped away Jemma’s tears with her thumb. “Baobei, don’t think that way, please. I promise we will call you every time we touch down and let you know we are okay.”
“But…” Jemma began.

Melinda shook her head and laid a finger on the little girl’s lips. “Mmm hmm, Jemma stop. You can’t let what happened make you so afraid.” She left out some of what needed to be said in order to keep the others from asking too many questions.

“It won’t happen again, Jemma. The chances are one in five million, three hundred and seventy one thousand, three hundred and sixty nine.” Fitz nodded as he rested his hand on his hand, leaning on his elbow. He stared at his sister seriously, with Skye resting her chin on his hip.

She cast him a weak smile.

“Okay, scoot over,” Melinda lifted the blanket as she kicked off her slippers and slid under it. She wrapped her arms around Jemma and pulled her close. Fitz snuggled closer as Skye wriggled over all of them to cuddle into her mother’s opposite side. Melinda squirmed to the center of the large bed and got comfortable amidst her brood.

“What about Da?” Jemma asked quietly not moving from the spot she had snuggled into.

Melinda cuddled closer to her daughter, resting her chin atop the little girl’s head as Skye pressed closer on her other side. “We’ll leave him some room on the edge.” She smiled as she closed her eyes.

xx

Melinda sat in the car forcing herself not to look back at two tearful children and one hysterical toddler as she and Phil drove away from the farm. She was sure she’d see a small dark haired girl racing behind them with her brother and sister close behind. She wiped a tear from her cheek and glanced at Phil whose knuckles were white on the steering wheel. He was putting up a good show of it just for her sake. She wasn’t sure and he would never admit it, but there might have been a tear slipping over his cheek as well. He wiped it away right before shooting her a quick smile.

xx

The rain had stopped during the night, followed by a warm wind that helped dry most of the land. The sky broke blue promising a picture perfect day. The Coulson children could not care less.
Jemma took her younger siblings in hand and led them back to the living room gathering both into her own comforting embrace while they sat on the overstuffed sofa.

Fitz brushed away his tears with the sleeve of his shirt and pushed himself away from his sisters. He kicked at the coffee table in front of them, the anger that usually followed his feeling of loss building. Jemma place a hand on his knee. He looked at her with a slight growl. She shook her head.

“Momma warned you Fitz. You know she means what she says.” She reminded him.

“I know.” He replied, falling back against the sofa.

Lian stood in the doorway watching. She understood her grandchildren missed their parents but this needed to end. She would not allow them to spend the next three days wallowing in misery. She stepped into the room and clapped her hands.

“The sun is shining on this day. It is time you saw what my farm has to offer. Let’s go.” She stepped back and swept one arm toward the back door.

Jemma and Fitz stared. Skye sniffled and wiped her nose with the back of her arm. Lian waited a few seconds.

“This is not a request. Up, up, up,” she pulled Fitz to his feet. Jemma stood and tugged at Skye to do the same.

“I no wan to see a farmer.” Skye sobbed, refusing to follow her brother and sister.

“No one is saying they do not want to, xiǎo sūnnu.” She informed the little girl. “Jemma, take your sister to the washroom and clean her hands and arms then meet young Fitz and I outside the back porch.” Lian took Fitz by the hand and tugged him along behind her not ever looking back to be sure the girl had done as she was told.

Jemma dragged a reluctant Skye out the door after doing as their grandmother had ordered. She stuffed her pocket with several tissues and informed her little sister that is was impolite to clean her nose with her arm or her fingers or her hands. If she needed to do so, she would provide the needed Kleenex. Skye nodded then promptly sniffled and rubbed her arm across her nose again. Jemma
washed the little girl again and repeated her tissue lecture before heading outside.

Nainai was waiting a few feet from the back porch steps. Fitz was noticeably absent. Jemma looked in all directions for her brother, finding no trace of him. A flush of alarm cross her as she helped Skye down the wooden stairs.

“He has gone ahead with Ben. The boy is impatient and felt you were taking longer than necessary.” Lian informed Jemma before the girl had a chance to ask. She motioned for the girls to follow and began a slow walk down a muddy walkway toward a structure at the bottom of the slope.

Jemma was glad for the muck boots her grandmother had provided for all of them and wondered how the woman had guessed their sizes correctly. Of course, momma could have told her but how would either of them have known about yesterday’s storm. She shrugged her shoulders as she watched her Lian walk ahead of her. Maybe Nainai had a room full of these boots in every available size, just in case. She shook off the thought as it was quite ridiculous. Skye stomped in the chocolate colored puddles sending sprays of mud in all directions. Jemma quietly scolded her, afraid that grandmother would strongly disapprove, but Lian said nothing. She simply walked ahead with her hands clasped behind her back squashing the soft mud with her own muck boots as she did.

The large building at the bottom of the slope almost a hundred feet from the house turned out to be a barn. Jemma smiled at the quaintness of it and Skye released her sister’s hand for the first time all morning to clap in recognition. It looked very much like any barn she had ever seen in picture books. The little girl immediately broke into a verse of ‘Ole McDonald’. Of course in Skye-speak it was more like ‘Oma Dawno’.

Lian smiled a very thin smile at the girls as she pushed open the large door and they peered into the dim interior. Skye raced forward before Jemma could snatch her but the older girl was relieved to spy Ben and Fitz at the far side of the building as her eyes adjusted to the change in light.

“She’s fine, Jemma. Ben is there. He will keep her from hurting herself…or anything else. I think she will be intrigued by what she finds.”

Skye crashed into her brother knocking him slightly off balance before Ben steadied both of them. She squeezed around Fitz to peek over the edge of the crate he was standing against. She squealed with delight as she wrapped her fingers around the edge of the large box.

Inside was a large yellow tiger cat with its eyes closed in light slumber. Four frisky kittens
scampered over their mother and scratched up at the sides of the box. Three were identical to mama cat while the fourth was a combination of yellow and gray with deep dark eyes.

“This is Miss Lizzie and her family.” Ben informed the girls as Jemma stood behind Skye and grinned at the little fuzz balls mewing in unison below. He reached down and gently lifted one of the kittens then squatted down to hold it at their eye level. The little creature fit in the palm of his hand. “This here little fella is Sebastian. He’s the big brother.” He handed the kitten to Fitz over Skye’s head. The little boy smiled as the kitten bounced its tiny pink nose against his chin. Skye bounced with excitement.

“I hode a kitty? I no squeeze him.” She shook her head seriously.

Ben tapped the end of her nose and reached into the box a second time lifting another yellow kitten. This one meowed loudly, showing its tiny white teeth. It pushed away from Ben’s hand and squirmed back toward the box.

Skye gave a little pout and shook her head. “Him misses hes momma. Him no wanna get hoded.” She knit her brows and pointed into the box at the large cat that had opened her eyes and sat up in alarm. “Him needs to be inna box wid hees momma, Bin. No make-a him cry.” She put her hand on the man’s large one and moved it toward the box, smiling when Ben gently set the kitten back inside. She watched as the small kitten scurried under its mother’s legs and peeked back at them.

“I call that one, Sniffles.” He smiled at Jemma as he caught the third yellow kitten. “This one is Sugar, because he is the sweetest.” He brought the docile little animal to his face and kissed its tiny head before handing it to Jemma. She held it close to her chest as it cuddled into a tight ball and closed its eyes. “He loves to be snuggled.” Ben informed her.

He looked to Fitz who held Sebastian on its back and wriggled his fingers at the animal who batted its tiny paws at them. Fitz smiled with delight. Jemma held the little cat and rocked back and forth cooing to it as if it were a baby. Skye looked back and forth as well then looked to Ben and tugged at his denim shirt. He looked to her and almost laughed at the scowl on her face and the little bootied foot that tapped impatiently.

“You no give me a kitty to hode, Bin. I not too liddle.” She held her palms up and scowled at the man. “You forgetted me.”

Ben put his head down to hide his laughter and shook his head. “No way, little bit. I did not forget you. I just saved both of you for last.” He reached down a final time and scooped up the grey and yellow kitten. “This little lady is Dusty. She is a little bit of her momma and a little bit like her
“Her gots hold-ons to me!” Skye smiled as she gently tried to pry the little kitten from her clothing. “Her is stuck a me. Her like-a me.” She grinned as she gently hugged the little animal at her chest.

Lian smiled at her grandchildren. She looked to Ben who smiled as well. He was her right hand here on the farm, caring for it as if it were his own even when she was away for months. He was good with the animals and even better with people, especially small people.

After an extended visit with the kittens and only getting them back into the box by convincing Skye they needed to snuggle with their momma and have some lunch the group moved to the enclosure outside the barn. Two black and white dairy cows waited for Ben to open the gate then ambled toward the pasture in the distance. Ben explained that Rosie and Eleanor would spend the day happily munching on grass and find their way back by mid-afternoon when he would show all of them the proper way to get farm fresh milk. He then took them to a small igloo shaped building that held a calf that stood taller than Skye. His name was Ronald and Eleanor was his mother. He was too little to go to the pasture but he was very hungry. Ben produced the biggest baby bottle Skye had ever seen and gave each child a turn to hold it while Ronald pulled at it voraciously. Lian stood back casually snapping pictures she would share with her daughter.

She’d missed all of this with Melinda, having given her time to her job and believing that being firm, strict and no nonsense was the best way to raise her own child. By the time Melinda was a few years older than the twins she’d been packed off to boarding school and spent most of her holidays with William. Her only daughter had chosen a much different method to raise the children that had become her own. Melinda had broken tradition, with the help and influence of her doting father and become a hands-on mom. Lian did not agree with everything her headstrong daughter did, but she was proud of her. She could see just by spending a short amount of time with these children how Melinda and Phil had fallen in love with all of them.

“She sees you goatses inna tree?” Skye broke her grandmother’s reverie with one word. “We see you goatses inna tree?”

“Goats are incredible climbers, however I do not know of any that climb trees.” Fitz smiled as the small calf suckled his fingers. He giggled at the strange feeling then grimaced at the slobber left behind. Jemma scrunched her face in semi-disgust. Ben laughed and pulled a large railroad hankie from his back pocket to clean the boy’s hand.

“Well, our goats will prove you wrong, bucko.” The large man laughed as he shoved the rag back into his pocket. “And I will introduce you to the lot of them right after we get cleaned up and have
a good lunch.” He tilted his head toward the house, ignoring the protests from the crew. “You
didn’t even notice your grandma wandered back to the house to make sure it’d be ready when I get
you there.”

The big man stood and wiped his hands on his jeans before pointing the kids in the direction of the
path that led back to the farm house. Fitz took off first claiming he would beat all of them to the
back porch. Jemma shook her head, refusing to engage in her brother’s antics she glanced around
for Skye who stood in the center of a large puddle. Jemma could not imagine how, but was not
surprised that her little sister had gotten there that quickly.

“Skye,” Jemma stomped her foot in anger. “You come out from there right now!”

Skye looked at her sister and frowned. “I not come out, Jemma.”

“This is no time to be naughty, Skye. I am not playing a game with you. You need to come out of
there this instant.” Jemma tried using her mother’s sternest voice.

Skye shook her head and wobbled side to side for a moment. “I not playin, Jemma. My foots is
stucked in this muddle. See?” She pulled at one foot then the other, but did not move. “I no
wanna stay heor, Jemma. You saves me?” She reached an arm toward her sister.

“Oh, Skye,” Jemma sighed and took a step toward her, stopped by Ben’s hand on her shoulder.

The man stepped into the water behind Skye and lifted her up and out of her boots. She stared
down at them open-mouthed. She looked at the man who now held her against his side then back
down. He smiled, leaned down and snagged the muck-boots by the loops at the tops and yanked
them free with a loud smacking sound. Skye giggled at the sound. The boots dripped with thick
light brown mud.

“Guess you’ll need a lift, won’t ya.” Ben smiled at the little girl in his arms then carried her and
the muddy boots toward the house with Jemma close behind.

xx

Lunch was chicken, rice and a variety of fresh vegetables shared by all. Clean up was quick and
Skye was whisked off for a quick bath and a nap that she fought until Nainai wondered what
Melinda might do with such a fussy little girl. That turned into a long sobbing session of missing momma and ended with the little girl crying herself to sleep on her grandmother’s shoulder. It had been a very long time since Lian had rocked a little girl to sleep. She did not realize how much she missed it.

Ben and the twins cleaned the kitchen then headed to the fields that bordered the north end of the property. He propped both children on the large tractor and rode through the acres that produced corn, wheat and an entire field of pumpkins. He explained the corn and wheat were grown mostly as feed and sold to other local farms for their live stock. There was a smaller field that yielded corn that would be part of their meals and sold at a roadside stand by a small group of kids that worked during the harvest. He also told them that the pumpkins were sold from the end of September until Halloween to local day care centers and elementary schools that came by the bus load to pick a perfect gourd to carve into a jack-o-lantern.

The best thing he showed them was a large clean pond set far behind the barn. There was a small flat bottom row boat overturned on the grass and a floating dock a few feet from the shore. On one side was a patio made with large flat rocks. There was a large covered swing, a round table complete with a bright yellow umbrella and lots of chairs.

“Little cool today, with all that rain yesterday, but tomorrow promises to be a hot one. I don’t suppose you’d be interested in tryin’ out the old swimmin’ hole.” He smiled at the twins as their eyes lit up with the promise of tomorrow’s treat.

By three the small group was back at the house ready to lead their baby sister to the promised reveal of those tree climbing goats. Skye was awake and ready to go. Her now clean boots were waiting on the porch and she pulled them on without being asked.

The walk to the goats’ enclosure was a little longer than Skye could manage. Ben had to carry her part of the way but by the time the area was within view she was running well ahead of the small group. Lian called to her three times before she stopped to wait but Jemma had already hurried ahead and caught her little sister by the hand.

“Skye, you must wait for all of us.” She softly scolded the little girl.

Lian stepped next to them and took Skye’s other hand. “I cannot run as fast as you, xiǎo sūnnǚ. You must wait for me.” She shook the little girl’s hand. “Do you understand, Skye?”

Fitz and Ben caught up and waited for Skye’s response. Once she nodded, the group continued along the narrow path.
In the distance was a large ash tree with massive branches that grew in haphazard directions. The tree looked as if someone had tried to bend it into the numeral four. The lower branches were void of leaves while the canopy provided a large swath of shade. Below the lowest branch was a square structure with a slanted roof. It was slightly larger than a big dog house and stood on short legs off the ground.

That lowest branch might have, at one time, been a shoot off of the trunk. It grew out of the main tree about four feet from the ground. On it rested a wide rung ladder. The ground was trodden and grassless. A large tire lay on the ground with a mental insert that held water and a long wooden triangular trough for feed and hay.

Skye slipped free of her grandmother’s hold a few feet from the fence that surrounded the area. She hooked her fingers through the openings in the framed chicken-wire. Fitz was first to join her looking in all directions for the talented goats. Jemma stood behind her siblings a bit disappointed to find the pen empty.

“Them is no heor.” Skye sighed. “Where them go?” She turned toward her grandmother who simply shrugged her shoulders.

“They were here yesterday, were they not, Ben?” She looked to her farm manager.

Ben tilted back his baseball cap and scratched his head. “They certainly were here yesterday. I made sure they had feed and water just after supper last night.”

“You left them out in the storm?” Fitz spun on the man in disbelief.

Ben snapped his fingers. “I bet that’s what happened.”

“Them blowed away?” Skye was flabbergasted.

“I’m sure they did not.” Jemma smiled. “The wind was not that strong.” She looked sidelong at Ben seeing through his teasing.

“No, little ones, I bet they’re just inside their hut. We should just check.” He was already unlatching the gate. Fitz hurried inside with Skye close behind. Jemma walked with her grandmother fully expecting the animals to trot out of the small hut as soon as Ben rousted them.
Fitz reached the small structure first and peered over the half door into the dark interior. Skye stood on tiptoes to see over it. The little boy turned and shook his head. “They’re not in here.”

Skye bounced on her toes until her brother wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her to see for herself. Ben stepped behind them and opened the small door. He poked his head inside then allowed both children to step into the hut. They emerged a few seconds later shaking their heads.

Ben looked at Lian and smiled. He winked at Jemma who played along. “I guess they must be off in the pasture. Perhaps visiting with the cows.” The young girl offered.

“Perhaps you are all looking in the wrong direction.” Lian suggested. “These are special goats. Where do you think they might be?”

“Inna tree! Inna tree!” Skye jumped up and down clapping her hands.

Everyone looked up and sure enough three goats were perched in the large branches above them. The largest of the tiny herd lay on the lowest branch with its legs folded under it. Its eyes were closed but its head upright as if it were meditating. The smallest goat stood in the yoke of the tree peering down at them with a suspicious glare and the third had climbed to a higher branch. It seemed to be staring off into the distance, ignoring not only the people who had invaded their space but the other goats as well.

“What’s thems names, Bin?” Skye breathed as she moved toward the wide rung ladder.

Ben had opened a large wooden bin and pulled out a bunch of carrots that still had the greens attached. All three goats seemed to be interested in what the man held as they each began to move slowly down from where they were perched. Skye noticed their movement and hurried back to her grandmother’s side.

“Hey there, Snickers,” Ben greeted the large black goat that stretched its neck toward the tasty treat the man held. He allowed the animal to take one of the big carrots.

Fitz laughed. “Do you call her that because she is nutty enough to sleep in the tree?”

Ben nodded as the goat continued to munch the carrot. “Absolutely, Fitz, very observant.”
Skye squatted down with her hands on her knees and peered at the goat’s mouth. “Him is a jeans. Momma toed me.”

The second goat had made her way to the ground and butted her way through the small group knocking Fitz to the ground in her hurry to get to the offering. She pushed the larger goat out of the way and jumped up like a dog resting her front hooves on Ben’s thick leather belt.

“Well, hello to you too.” The man smiled at the creature. “This is Skittles.”

Fitz stood and brushed the debris off his jeans. “I can’t guess that one.”

“No real reason,” Ben explained. “I just started callin’ that and she likes it.” He handed a few carrots to Fitz which Skittles followed pulling them from the boy’s hand before he could offer them. “She’s a little over anxious.”

Fitz laughed as he played tug-o-war with the brown and white goat that pulled gently on the carrots. Jemma smiled at her brother’s glee and Skye stepped closer to the animal to watch.

The smallest goat bounced off the second to last step and slipped behind the wide tree trunk. It peered around the trunk with the same look she’d given them from his perch above. “That there is Jelly Bean. She’s not too sure about us. It takes her a while to decide if she wants the carrot or if she’s gonna just pretend we aren’t here.”

“Perhaps she’s just shy.” Jemma proposed.

“I suppose.” Ben agreed. “Until her belly gets the better of her.” He held one of the carrots out to the girl and nodded toward the little goat. “You could give it a try.”

Jemma stared at the carrot for a moment then looked at the little animal peeking from behind the tree.

“Snickers and Skittles are sisters, came to us from a farm up the road a bit after the folks there decided to sell out. Jelly Bean…well, she had a different time of it. Seems her momma was pretty sick and couldn’t look after her, not enough milk so little Jelly Bean didn’t get too big. Her
momma passed and it took a long time to get the little one to eat. Could be why she’s so shy.” The man shrugged his shoulders. “She’s happy here, just not as friendly as the others.”

Jemma sighed, immediately feeling sympathy for the animal. She walked slowly across the pen, holding the carrot out in front of her. “It’s okay little goat. Come try a carrot. There’s no need to be frightened. I know how you feel.” She moved toward the animal that seemed more curious than nervous as it watched the little girl’s approach. It did not move toward the girl, but did not run away. Jemma smiled as she moved within arms reach and stopped. “Hello, Jelly Bean,” she spoke softly. “I’m Jemma. I lost my mum too, but I have a momma now and she loves me very much. I think Ben loves you and it looks like you have a nice family as well.” The goat moved its head side to side and took a tenuous step, stretching its neck to reach the offered carrot. Jemma smiled. “Come on, baby, it’s quite alright.” Jelly Bean took another step and then another bringing it close enough to nibble the end of the carrot. Jemma looked back at Ben who gave her a thumbs-up.

Skye was content to watch and shook her head at the carrot Ben offered. When the large goat moved toward her she reached up to Lian, practically climbing up her grandmother before the woman could lift her into her arms. She wrapped her arms tightly around her grandmother’s neck.

“Thems eyes is in wrong, Neenee. How them see me?” Skye shivered at the odd horizontal rectangular shaped goat eyes. “Why them go this way?” She rubbed her hands back and forth across her eyes and waited for her grandmother’s reply.

Lian paused for a moment stopping herself from telling the little girl it was a ridiculous question and she should not be concerned. She wondered how Melinda would respond, what Phil would say to this curious and now rather frightened little girl. Before she could form an answer, Fitz rescued his grandmother.

“It helps them to see when they are grazing. Their eyes stay parallel to the ground at any angle therefore they can see if any predators are upon them.” The boy smiled as Skittles yanked a second carrot from his hand then gently butted him looking for more.

Skye stared at Fitz waiting for him to repeat what he said in words she knew, like he always did but he was too busy with the silly goat. Jemma had coaxed Jelly Bean to the bottom of the ladder and was sitting on the wide rung speaking softly to the creature.

“It helps them to see when they are eating the grass.” Lian simplified.

Skye nodded then shook her head. “I no like-a them a look a me, Kay?” She buried her face in her grandmother’s neck. “I like them climb up inna tree. We go now?”
Lian nodded and carried her tiny granddaughter out of the pen letting Ben know he should catch up to her when the older kids had enough of the goats. She pushed the gate closed and took a few steps before feeling a slight buzz in her pocket. She pulled out her phone and recognized her daughter’s number.

xx

Lian held Skye’s hand as she spoke softly to her daughter telling her all was well and the children were doing fine. When Melinda asked to speak with Jemma, Lian turned and looked back the hundred feet or more that she had walked. Fitz and his sister were still busy with the odd little goats and content to help Ben with feeding and watering them. She sighed at the thought of walking all the way back and wrestling with the very apprehensive Skye in order to do so. Lian explained that the older children were in the fields with Ben and that she would let both know their parents had called to say they’d arrived safely.

Melinda thought for a moment before agreeing to what her mother proposed. She’d promised Jemma she would speak to her, to let her hear her voice and know all was well. But Phil had already hailed a cab and like always it was pouring rain in Seattle. They had to check it at the hotel and change in order to make it to the reception being given by Professor Maxwell’s family. They were pressed for time and Melinda knew that it would be well past the children’s bedtime before she could make a second call. She really wasn’t sure how her older daughter would take this, but Jemma was normally level headed and accepting of the changes that sometime had to be made. She considered speaking with Skye who she could hear singing in the background but decided it would probably start the little girl’s tears all over again. Making sure her mother promised to tell Jemma she had called and why she could not speak directly to her, Melinda reluctantly hung up and hurried to join Phil who was holding the cab door and a large umbrella.

Skye spun around and swung her grandmother’s arm while singing another farm themed song she had more than likely learned in preschool, oblivious to the fact the woman next to her was speaking to her mother a continent away. As Lian pushed the small phone back into her pocket, Skye twisted in a circle around the woman’s arm.

“Neenee, we see the kitties? Them has good eyes and them is okay a look a me.” She took a deep breath and looked up at her grandmother with ‘puppy dog eyes’.

Lian stilled the little girl and glared back down at her. “I would think you get your way many times with that look, xiao sunnu.”

“Why you call me sow soonoo, Neenee. I Skye.” She pointed to herself, clearly ignoring or
perhaps not even understanding her grandmother’s statement.

Lian smiled and squeezed the Skye’s hand a little. “Because you are my little granddaughter, Skye.” She looked back at the others still involved with the goats. “Come, we will make sure Miss Lizzie and her babies are in need of fresh milk.”

She began to walk toward the path that lead to the barn with Skye hopping along beside her. “You get a meolk fromma cow, Neenee. I helup?”

“I think for now we will take the milk from the jug.” She pointed toward the pasture in the distance. “Rosie and Elsie have not yet come back to the barn. I think they know to wait for Ben.”

Skye squinted in the late afternoon sun in the direction her grandmother pointed. “They bring a meolk to Ben?” She scrunched up her face with confusion.

“How about we let Ben show you that?” Lian let out a soft breath. How did her quiet daughter deal with this never ending questioning? “Let’s just worry about the kittens for now.”

Skye nodded and pulled her grandmother forward.

They arrived in the barn about ten minutes before they were joined by the others giving Skye ample time to climb into the large box while her grandmother turned to retrieve a saucer of warm milk for Miss Lizzie. Lian felt an unfamiliar twang of alarm when she turned back and did not see the little girl. She looked in all directions and stopped a second before calling her name when she heard the familiar giggle.

The little girl sat in the shredded material that lined the bottom of the kitten’s box, giggling at the three little creatures that climbed on her lap and chest. The fourth kitten remained close to Miss Lizzie whining in its loud scratchy voice.

Lian placed the bowl in the far corner of the box and reached down to lift her granddaughter out of the box. “Skye, you should not be there. The cat may take exception to you sitting with her kittens.”

Skye watched as the little fur balls fell away from her and squirmed to get back down. “I non’t hort them, Neenee. I bees gentil like Jemma telled me. Them is ownee babies and I non’t reach
over this bigga howz they in.” She peeked over the edge into the box when her grandmother set her down. The little girl had to stand on tiptoe to be eye level with it. She held out one arm toward Lian. “I gots liddle orms.” She demonstrated trying to reach over the box. “See, Neenee I non’t reach.”

Miss Lizzie suddenly leapt to the top of the box and slipped to the floor without a sound. All four kittens began protesting loudly. Skye watched as the cat padded to the door and disappeared. “Where her go? Her babies is crying, Neenee. Her no wan them no more?”

Lian was surprised at the look of fear on the child’s face. Melinda had told her the stories of all of her children. It took very little for the woman to see how Skye would think the mother cat was abandoning her kittens. “No, baobao, Miss Lizzie is only going to stretch her legs for a little while. Perhaps she needs to relieve herself. She will be back.”

Skye blinked a few times, digesting what her grandmother was saying then looked back into the box. “But them is scareded and them is sad thems momma is gone.” She looked up again realizing what she had said. “Thems momma is gone like my momma is gone.”

Lian could hear the beginning of tears in the little girl’s voice. “Perhaps they would feel better if you were to take care of them while their momma is away.” Before Skye could answer, Lian lifted her back into the box.

Skye folded her legs and sat back down, gathering all four kittens into her arms and shushing them softly. The yowled for a few seconds before finding this small human something to explore and began climbing and sniffing the little girl. Skye smiled up at her grandmother when the whiney little Sniffles curled into the crook formed in her lap and relaxed.

Jemma looked into the box a few minutes later and shook her head. “Oh dear, Skye, you’ll require another bath before bedtime.” She laughed at the condition of her baby sister.

Fitz followed Ben into the corral to let the cows in and then drove them into two separate stalls. Ben demonstrated the fine art of milking with Boss-man keeping close watch. Fitz paid close attention judging just how much pressure Ben used and the speed at which he tugged on the animal’s udders. He laughed as the large man aimed one udder toward the large grey cat that caught the spray of milk with practiced ease.

When finished, Ben lifted the large bucket of fresh milk and poured it into a tall galvanized tank. He picked up the small stool and set it next to the second bovine inviting Fitz to give it a try. Fitz eagerly sat on the seat as Jemma and Lian watched. He placed his small hands on two of the cows
udders and jumped with the animal let out a loud ‘moo’. Ben patted the boy’s shoulder to let him know it was normal and jutted his chin toward the target. Fitz pulled a few times with no success, let out a frustrated breath and tried again…with no success. Ben squatted down beside the boy and placed his large hands over Fitz’s, demonstrating the slow method that was his. Fitz matched the rhythm and nodded for the man to let him try again. This time the boy beamed with pride as the milk squirted into the bucket. Jemma clapped her approval and pride in her brother. Ben raised a thumb and Lian gave an approving nod.

Scooping Skye out of the box as Miss Lizzie slipped back in, Lian announced it was time to clean up for dinner and ordered all three children to the bath. Fitz quickly offered to be last, allowing the girls use of the giant tub while he continued to help Ben with the last of his chores. Lian eyed the boy suspiciously, but allowed him to stay as she ushered her granddaughters to the house.

Supper was served on the back porch, consisting of lean hamburgers grilled to perfection by Ben, salad which Skye absolutely refused having just too much green for her taste (but she enjoyed the tomatoes and carrots with no problem), fresh sweet corn and peach cobbler for dessert.

Jemma helped to clean up afterward, offering to wash the dishes and leaving her grandmother to dry and put them away. Ben entertained the younger kids with a large box of Legos he’d pulled from the top shelf in grandmother’s closet.

The little girl stood on a small step stool and rubbed a dishcloth around one of the flowered plates. She glanced up at the clock...seven ten...she wondered how long a flight to Seattle might take but did not want to cause her grandmother undue worry. She however had been trying to quell her fear since they’d walked from the goats’ pen. Jemma did not want to cause stress for her siblings. She knew how upset Skye and Fitz would become if she did not keep her cool.

Momma had promised she’d call and momma always kept her promises...unless she couldn’t... unless something was keeping her from keeping them. Jemma tried not to think about it. She’d tried to eat but ended up putting most of her food into her napkin, much like she’d done before her parents had caught on to her eating issue. Maybe Lian didn’t notice, but she had a feeling her grandmother was very much like her mother. If she did, Lian hadn’t said anything. Maybe she just thought Jemma was too polite to say she did not care for the cooking. Jemma mentally shook her head. Momma would have told her.

Jemma smiled at her grandmother, finished her chore then joined her brother and sister in the cozy living room. Neither Fitz nor Skye made it to their eight p.m. bedtime falling asleep on the large oval rug that covered Nainai’s hardwood floor. Ben easily carried both up the stairs, depositing Skye on the guestroom bed and moving on toward the third floor with Fitz.

“No,” Jemma stopped him. “Please put him with Skye.” She almost begged as she followed the
man into the hall.

Lian placed her hands on the girl’s shoulders. “Jemma, it isn’t proper for your brother to sleep with you girls. He needs his own bed.”

Jemma pulled away and turned back to protest. “You can’t put him up there all alone. He’s not used to being alone and he has terrible nightmares at times. He needs us to feel safe.” She tried in vain to control the anxiety in her voice.

“Fitz is perfectly safe in his own room.” Lian spoke calmly, nodding toward the stairs as indication for Ben to take the boy up to his room.

“No, you can’t!” Jemma grabbed the man’s elbow. “You can’t take him away like that. You just can’t!”

Ben looked to his boss and waited for her direction.

“He slept with us last night. He slept with us and with momma and da. Lots of times we all sleep together, when we’re scared or sick or just need to be close. You can’t leave him all alone.” She pleaded with her grandmother who did not seem to be changing her mind. “If you put him there he’ll wake up and just come down to our bed regardless.” She looked from Ben to Lian and felt the anger growing. “You absolutely must put him with us. I demand it! He is my brother. You cannot take him from me.” She stomped one foot and clenched her fists at her side.

Lian felt the hackles on her back rise at the child’s disrespect but at the same time she sensed the girl’s apprehension and need to protect her brother. She was torn between scolding the child and pacifying her. She knew exactly how she would handle her own daughter in this case, but Jemma was Melinda’s child. Melinda would not approve of Jemma’s method but she would not react as her Lian might.

“Put the boy in with his sister,” she spoke quietly to Ben who nodded and walked back into the room.

Lian eyed Jemma who now kept her gaze to the floor. “It is late, sunnu. You and I will have words in the morning. Sleep well.” She turned and walked down the stairs.
Jemma knew her grandmother was cross. She could feel it. Ben stepped around her, resting his
hand on her back for a second as he did. He wished her goodnight with a sympathetic smile and
moved down the stairs. She heard him wish Lian goodnight and waited in the hallway until she
heard the door close and knew he had gone.

The little girl stepped into the room and pulled the door closed. She quickly changed into her
nightclothes then sighed at her fully clothed brother and sister on the bed. It was a difficult task
but she’d seen momma and daddy do it many times. Skye was easy, she was so little and light. It
was easy for Jemma to wriggle her out of her clothing and into pajamas. Fitz...not so much. She
had no choice but to wake him and insist he change. He grumbled a lot but rolled off the bed and
began undressing. Jemma waited until he climbed back into the bed before turning out the light
and climbing in next to Skye. Fitz had curled up on the baby’s other side.

xx

Jemma tossed and turned until she fell into a fitful sleep filled with memory induced nightmares.
She woke with a start and stared at her siblings who slept soundly. It was much later; she could
tell by the silence and darkness that now engulfed the room.

Momma and Da had left a little after eight. That meant it was more than twelve hours and it
certainly didn’t take that long to fly across the United States. It only took nine hours for them to
fly all the way across the Atlantic. Nainai had no television that Jemma had seen, so she had no
idea if there had been any tragic accidents. No one had called during dinner and they’d all been
together all day. Momma hadn’t called...like she promised. Something had to be wrong.

Jemma felt sick. Her empty stomach churned with apprehension as she slipped out from under the
blanket and hurried to the door. She made it to the bathroom just in time, flushed the commode,
rinsed her mouth and tiptoed back to her room. Climbing back into bed she noticed Fitz sitting
against the wall.

He yawned and rubbed his eyes before speaking out loud. “Are you sick?”

Jemma shook her head and shushed him as Skye moaned and squirmed in her sleep.

“Are you sick?” Fitz asked again in a soft whisper. “I saw you hurry to the loo.”

Jemma sat against the headboard and looked down at her hands. “Momma didn’t call. She said
she would.” She whispered more to herself than to her brother.
Fitz thought for a moment. “Perhaps she and da are extremely busy.” He offered, realizing it was a ridiculous excuse. Neither parent had ever been too busy for any of them.

Jemma looked at her brother as the tears streamed over her cheeks. “Perhaps something dreadful has happened. Perhaps they know and refuse to tell us.”

“No,” Fitz reached across the sleeping baby between them. “No, Nainai wouldn’t do that and momma is fine. She is, Jemma. So is Da. They just went to their good friend’s funeral.”

Jemma shook her head. “But she said she’d call me. She promised.” The girl could not contain her sobs.

“The time difference…there’s a three hour difference.” Fitz smiled, hoping that was the answer. “Look, they would have to great the family somehow or at some event. If it were over even at ten p.m. it would already be one in the morning here. Mom wouldn’t call at one o’clock.”

“But she promised to call when they landed, Fitz and momma never breaks her promise.”

Fitz put a finger to his lips with Skye fussed again. He patted her back until she settled. “Their flight left at noon and went to Chicago then on to Seattle. With the time difference they most likely landed around…”

“It doesn’t matter, Fitz. Momma promised.” Jemma almost growled.

“Momma,” Skye whined, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. “Momma!”

“Oh, lovely,” Fitz smacked his forehead. “Now look what you’ve done.” He quickly wrapped his arms around his baby sister and pulled her close, shushing her softly.”

Jemma scooted closer to them and pulled both down on to their pillows. “Oh, Skye, sweetheart I’m so sorry I woke you. Shh, shh…go back to sleep baobei.” She lay down and wrapped her arms around Skye and Fitz comforting both until they all fell asleep.

xx
Fitz and Skye bounced into the kitchen ready for breakfast. Lian had a large basket on the table. Skye climbed on a chair to peek inside. Fitz stood on tiptoe to do the same. Lian shooed both to their seats for a meal of scrambled eggs and bacon.

“Is Jemma coming?” Lian asked as she set a third plate on the table.

Fitz shook his head but remembered to swallow before speaking. “She’s considering it, but she probably won’t eat.” He shoveled more eggs into his mouth and chewed slowly. “She rarely takes any food when she is in a mood.” He nodded at Skye who nodded back.

“Is she not feeling well?” Lian moved toward the swinging door.

“She’s just being Jemma.” Fitz sighed as he gulped down a swallow of milk. He pointed to the glass. “Is this the milk we took yesterday?”

Lian shook her head. “No Fitz, that milk must be processed before it can be used. It takes about a day. This is from last week. Ben takes some of it to local shelters so it is used before it spoils.” The woman spoke but seemed more interested in whether or not Jemma was on her way to the kitchen.

“Jemma non’t like egges, Neenee. Her non’t eat them at our howz.” Skye did not follow her brother’s example and spoke around the mouthful of toast she was chewing. She reached for the rather large glass of milk sloshing it out of the glass on both sides as she moved it toward herself. Lian helped by holding it for the little girl to drink, then poured it into a smaller cup and set it closer to Skye’s reach.

“She does eat toast.” Fitz pointed with his fork. “Ben said we might spend some time at your fine pond today. Do you think that would be possible?”

“I guess would depend on Jemma. We certainly cannot venture into the pond if she isn’t well.” Lian told him.

Fitz waved a hand at his grandmother. “Oh, she’s fine, you’ll see. She’s just having a mood, like I said before.” He stared down at his dish then looked to the one next to him. “She’s really not about to eat any of this,” he pointed with his thumb. “Perhaps I should just…” He swirled his finger around in circles above the plate.
Lian took the empty plate and slide the other in front of him. “There is plenty, Fitz. You only need to ask.”

The swinging door slowly opened as Jemma stepped into the kitchen. “Zǎo ān, nāinai.” She greeted her grandmother in Mandarin.

Lian moved to the little girl, placing her hand on the girl’s forehead. “We will take your temperature before we decide our plans for today.” She said, leaving no room for argument.

Fitz choked around a snigger as Jemma blanched. “I’m fine, Nainai. I didn’t sleep well, but I am fine.”

“Perhaps the bed was overcrowded.” Lian said with quiet sarcasm.

Fitz pushed himself away from the table and carried his plate to the table. “Okay, Jemma is not sick.” He turned and looked at his grandmother and sisters. “The plan to go to the pond for the say is fine, then?”

“I go too!” Skye announced trying to slide off the large chair.

Lian spun her back. “Finish your breakfast, Skye. Your sister will join you.” The little girl jutted out her bottom lip and scowled at her grandmother.

It was a struggle to have Skye finish and get Jemma to force down one slice of toast but Lian had the patience to do it. Her stubborn streak was twice that of her daughter and beyond both granddaughters. Breakfast took a lot longer than planned and Fitz spent a great deal of time sulking as he waited, but eventually the girls were finished, the kitchen was cleaned, the basket lunch was packed and everyone was dressed.

Ben arrived in what Nainai called the wagon, but it looked more like a small jeep with a trailer on back. Fitz and Jemma climbed into it with the large basket while a pouting Skye sat with her grandmother in the back of the jeep. It was a short drive to the pond but transporting three children, several towels, swim suits and enough drinks and snacks to keep them happy made it necessary.

The one thing not packed was Lian’s cell phone, left on the table to prevent being accidentally
knocked into the water by over zealous children. Something she rarely, if ever did, but this time felt it was the safest decision.

Melinda called an hour after Ben pulled away from the back door. She called two more times before she and Phil had to leave for the funeral service.

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Jemma was unusually quiet and reserved as her brother and sister splashed in the cool water. Fitz swam the short distance to the dock and showed off his many crazy dive moves while Skye doggie paddled in the shallow waters sporting a bright pink swim vest. Jemma barely got her suit wet and mostly strolled back and forth in the ankle deep water at the shore. She glanced at her grandmother every now and again, wondering just when they would have the ‘talk’ Lian had promised.

At noon Lian called everyone to the table and served a quick lunch. Both younger kids protest being slathered in sunscreen for the fourth time, but gave in when Lian told them they could have one more hour in the pond before they returning to the house. She kept the word ‘nap’ out of the conversation but found it unnecessary as Skye was asleep before the small jeep made it to the back porch. Once again Ben carried the little girl to the large bed and tucked a blanket around her before heading back down to the small family. Fitz had collapsed on the sofa and was snoring lightly.

Lian checked her messages when she saw she had missed two calls. Melinda was concerned but there was no way to contact her as the funeral had already begun and would continue with a gathering of family, friends and former students as memories were shared and the eulogy was given. It would be an all day event. She was sure she would speak to her daughter before the children went to bed this evening.

Jemma stood in the doorway and watched as her grandmother placed the phone on the table. She knit her brows as she stepped closer and pointed to the object. “Momma was supposed to call but she couldn’t if you left your phone here on the table and why don’t you have an actual phone.” The little girl demanded. “Don’t you want us to speak to her?” She stomped her foot and clenched her fists trying to contain her anger.

Lian took a breath. “Your mother called yesterday to say she had arrived and all was well. You were not present when I took the call and we became busy with so much that I neglected to tell you. For that I apologize. However, even that does not give you permission to speak to me in such a manner. It is unacceptable.”
“It is quite acceptable for me to be upset and I do not need permission to speak in any manner. You should have told me so that I was able to return momma’s call and hear her speak to me.” Jemma snarled.

“You have voiced your opinion, Jemma and I have apologized. Now it is wise to control yourself. If that is not possible perhaps it would be wise for you to go to the room that was to be your brother’s and calm yourself.” Lian was not threatening but she was not suggesting, it was more of an order.

Jemma blew out a frustrated breath, slammed the swinging door against the wall as she ran through it then stomped up two flights of stairs before throwing herself on the small bed in the A-framed room and sobbing into the pillows.

The rest of the day did not go well for the girl. She refused supper and elected to stay in the small room rather than deal with any of her family. While her brother once again visited the crazy goats and helped with the milking, Skye was content to hold her favorite kitten and attempt to make friends with Sniffles.

Jemma stormed down the stairs to take a bath. She slipped into her pajamas and helped to tuck Fitz and Skye into bed before her grandmother had a chance to try. She pushed her anger to the rear while she kissed Skye on both cheeks, just like momma did every night then sang to her softly until the little girl was sound asleep. Fitz jumped back and held both arms in front of him when she turned toward him.

“I’ll wait for momma, thank you.” He grimaced as he snuggled into his pillow and stared at her for a moment. “You shouldn’t be so cross with grandmother. She didn’t keep momma’s call from you to be cruel. Perhaps she didn’t want Skye to become upset again. She starts to cry if we so much as say momma or perhaps she merely forgot.” His eyebrows shot up. “She is an old woman you know.” Fitz wriggled into a more comfortable position. “In any case, Jemma, I think you may be in an awful lot of trouble.”

“I don’t care.” Jemma snorted.

Fitz yawned and shook his head. “You’re suppose to be a genius Jemma, think about what you’re saying.” He bounced his body again and snuggled into the pillow slowly closing his eyes.

Jemma turned to reply but realized her brother had fallen asleep. She folded her arms over her chest and stared into the darkness. Fitz was probably right she was in a lot of trouble and momma would not be happy but she couldn’t help it. She was angry…and scared and Nainai had broken
momma’s promise and maybe momma called again and maybe she didn’t tell her for some reason. She was so angry she couldn’t contain the tears that started falling again. Jemma closed her eyes drifted into a restless sleep.

xx

A little before twelve thirty a.m. Lian’s phone vibrated. She muted the small television in her bedroom that currently showed a continuous news broadcast and looked at Melinda’s number.

“Melinda?” Lian answered.

“There’s nothing wrong here, mama.” She assured her mother. “I tried calling you this afternoon but got no answer. I’ve been worried all day and this is the first opportunity I’ve had to call you again.”

“We were at the pond. My phone was safer in the kitchen.” Lian explained calmly. She hesitated for a moment before letting her daughter know what had transpired in the last twenty-four hours.

“Mama, you know Jemma lost her parents in an airplane crash. I promised I would let her know we were safe.” Melinda sighed.

“I understand that Melinda, but it does not give her permission to be disrespectful or to lose her temper so violently.” Lian replied quietly. “I would never allow you to speak to me the way this child has done.”

“I realize that mama, and I am not making excuses for her but this is very unlike her. Please let me speak to her.” Melinda sighed.

“The child is asleep Melinda. It is past midnight.” Lian scoffed.

“I know that, mama, but it is important. Please wake her and let me speak with her.” Melinda requested a second time.

Lian let out a frustrated breath and threw the blanket off her legs. She set the phone on the bed and
threw on a robe then picked it up and walked to the children’s room. Melinda listened to the sounds of her mother moving through her home. She heard one door open and a few seconds later a second, there was a long pause and the door closed. The sound of her mother’s steps changed. They were faster, more urgent. Melinda heard a light switch once and then again a few minutes before the sound of her mother’s feet on the wooden stairs told her the woman was on her way down to the first floor. She heard the creak of the swinging kitchen door and the groan of the screen that opened to the closed in side porch. The sounds caused her to anticipate a problem and she paced as she waited for her mother to speak again.

“She’s gone,” Lian stated quietly. “She’s not in her bed or any where in the house. I’m going to call Ben. She cannot be far, probably in the barn.”

“Mama,” Melinda began.

“I will find her Melinda. I will find her and call you in a few minutes.” Lian hung up before Melinda could answer.

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Ben shined a large flashlight in the corners of the barn and called Jemma’s name several times. He walked around the house and the outside of the barn looking under the porch and any place where a small girl could squeeze into and hide. He flipped the large switch in the power house that turned on the outside spotlights and looked in all directions as he started the small jeep and pulled onto the dirt road that lead to the highway about a mile away.

Lian paced in the kitchen, with Skye and Fitz asleep upstairs she could help the man to look for her granddaughter. She was a combination of furious and terrified. It was dark and there were dangers a small girl with Jemma’s background could not understand. What was that child thinking? Why would she do such a ridiculous thing in the middle of the night? The woman looked up at the clock and then at the phone in her hand. It had been almost an hour since she’d promised Melinda she’d call back.

She hit the redial button and listened to the ring four times before voice mail responded. She left only a message for Melinda to call her back but no more. Whatever was to be said should be said directly. Calling the police at this point would be useless. An angry child missing from her bed would not bring them rushing to the farmhouse. Ben would have more luck and Lian was sure the little girl would be found quickly.

xx
Jemma had seen Ben’s flashlight and moved behind the large tree trunk. She wasn’t ready to go back or to talk or to be lectured again. She needed time to herself, to control her anger and her fear. She watched as the man walked around the base of the large tree then climbed back into the small farm jeep and drove back toward the barn.

Jemma waited until the vehicle disappeared, until she could no longer hear the sound of the engine in the still night air then slipped back onto the wide branch and stepped down the wide rung ladder. She sat at the bottom for a few moments before Jelly Bean timidly approached.

“Hello, little one,” Jemma sniffled. “You understand don’t you?” She reached out and stroked the animal’s nose gently. “I can’t lose another momma, Jelly Bean. I don’t think I would survive it. Now, I’ve gone and made everyone mad at me. Even Fitz says I’m in an awful lot of trouble and I don’t know what to do.”

The little goat bleated softly causing Jemma to smile. It moved closer, stepping up to join her on the ladder. Jemma wrapped her arm around the little animal’s neck and wept into its coarse hide.

Jemma Coulson Simmons was not afraid of the dark. She was intelligent enough to know that everything that existed in the light of day was still there in the absence of that light. Darkness did not create or deplete anything. All of that nonsense came from the mind and the tricks it played on you. The little girl had learned long ago to control those silly childish fears. However, here in the rustic acreage of her grandmother’s farm it was not the lack of visual ability that frightened her. It was the unfamiliar sounds of the farm at night.

She held the little goat close and listened to its heart beating rapidly. Normal, she told herself, for a small animal. Somewhere another animal let out a long low moan. Jemma believed it was an owl, but could understand how less intelligent beings might mistake it for a wraith’s wail or even that of the dreaded ban sidhe. She shook away that thought as the moan sounded again just a little closer. Outside the fence the brush rustled with the night wind creating a scratchy sound. Jemma watched as a small dark animal scurried from beneath it and disappeared under another. The lack of light prevented her from seeing the creature’s color. She could not identify it as friend or foe.

It could have been a rabbit, she told the skittish goat, but then again it might have been a fox. Would a fox prey on a goat? Would the fence keep it out? Snickers and Skittles were bigger and had lovely horns atop their heads. Surely they could defend themselves if they were rousted from their comfy little hut, but poor Jelly Bean had but nubs and was much smaller. In fact, Jemma realized, the goat was more the size of a dog than the other two.

But Jelly Bean and her companions stayed here all night, every night and they were fine. She
pulled the carrot she had pushed into her pocket free and held it for her caprine friend. Jelly Bean nibbled happily. Something shrieked across the dark field causing Jemma to jump. The startled goat thumped on the wooden step and hopped up higher. Jemma looked up at it.

“Perhaps you’re right, Jelly Bean. We might be a bit more secure if we were to climb higher. I don’t believe foxes climb trees.” Jemma told the small animal, but then again until a yesterday she really didn’t believe goats climbed trees either.

The little girl wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her sweater and stood. She moved up the ladder to the wide branch then crawled across it to the yoke of the tree. There three large branches shot up from the main trunk creating almost a tripod that stretched to the sky. The leafy canopy drooped down around it. Jelly Bean hopped over the bark that spread between two of the trunks and seemed to look back inviting Jemma to follow. The girl put one hand on each of the study trunk-branches and stepped over the same piece. The three shoots had split and the space between them formed a flat surface big enough for one small girl and an even smaller goat. Jelly Bean folded its little legs under it and lay against the wall formed by nature. Jemma filled in the remaining space, resting her head on the animal’s side. She looked up through the leaves at the starry sky.

“I’ve made a terrible mess of things.” Jemma sighed. “I’m not sure how to fix it.”

The goat nibbled on the girl’s hair invoking a shiver. Jemma gently pushed it away. She peered at the stars for a moment then sighed.

“Fitz says stars are the windows of Heaven. He believes his maw is an angel and peeks down at him.” She pointed up around a sniffle. “It helps him to cope with his loss. I’ve not considered it, Jelly Bean.” She was quiet for a moment then continued. “Do you think that’s wrong of me…not to think my own parents are angels?”

The little goat bleated and nibbled again on her hair. Again she gently moved it away and smoothed down the now wet hair Jelly Bean had been enjoying.

“If they are looking down upon me, they are probably…” She sobbed heavily. “They are probably quite ashamed of my behavior. I am old enough to know Aunt Mel would not lie to me and that Lian truly meant to tell me but got so involved with Skye…and she is only a baby…and then there’s Fitz and he’s always into so much mischief.” She stopped, unable to continue for a few minutes. “I should have been helping, not whining and complaining and certainly not sassing back and demanding my needs be met. Oh, I’m such a disappointment to everyone.” Jemma turned on her side and cried until she exhausted herself into a fitful sleep.
Jelly Bean rested her small chin on the girl’s head and closed her eyes.

xx

Skye wandered into the kitchen a little before eight. She looked at the empty chairs and yawned before climbing onto the one she’d adopted as her own. “I non’t fide Jemma in a bed o a batroom. Where her is?”

Lian let out a sigh. Ben had searched all night and not found the little girl. At five a.m. she’d broken down and called the local sheriff. The man arrived a little after six and listened as Lian explained the situation. He was sure they’d find Jemma somewhere on the property hiding until things cooled off a little. He’d seen it before, did it himself as a kid when his dad boiled over some stupid stunt he’d pulled. Ben and the officer were searching again, keeping contact with Lian by phone.

Lian lifted the sleepy little girl and stood at the large window above the kitchen sink. The curtains had been pushed aside giving her a clear view of the front yard and fields beyond. “I believe Jemma went for a walk last night and has not yet found her way back.” She explained.

“Has she gone totally daft?” Fitz exclaimed as he joined his grandmother at the sink and jumped up and down trying to look at whatever she was looking at. “It is entirely improbably that she has forgotten what happened the last time!”

Lian looked down at the little boy then carried Skye to one of the large chairs. “Your sister has done this before?” She asked as she put the little girl on the chair and set a box of cereal and two bowls on the table.

Fitz tilted his head and scrunched up one side of his face. “Well, it was more of a joint effort and it did not turn out very well. We barely escaped with our lives.” He informed his grandmother as he pulled two spoons from the drawer behind him and joined his sister at the table. The little boy grimaced at his grandmother’s choice of cereal. Bran Flakes was not one of his favorites and he did not want to think about what it might do to Skye.

“This might not be the best choice, Nainai.” He tapped the box with his spoon.

Skye stared at the picture on the box and sighed. “I non’t like-a them kind, Neenee. It bees all mooshy inna meolk. I think mine belly hoerts if I eats it.”
Fitz leaned over and spoke to his grandmother behind his hand. “She tried it once at Grams’ house. Momma had to change her about twelve times before lunch.”

Lian pick up the box and turned it toward her. She hadn’t even realized what she’d put on the table. Shaking her head she slammed the box back into the cabinet and dropped a box of Cheerios on the table. The box teetered for a moment then dropped to its side.

“Duìbùqǐ,” Skye whispered around a pout as she slipped off her chair and joined Fitz on his, burying her face in his pajamas. Fitz rolled his eyes, wrapped an arm around his sister and grabbed the edge of the table to keep his balance.

“She doesn’t mean to cause a problem. She’s just a wee girl.” He threw his grandmother a scolding glance then comforted his sister. “Look Skye,” he smiled. “It’s the kind with the bee on the box and nothing at all is green.”

Skye shook her head without turning around. “I non’t wan Neenee be mad to me.” Her muffled voice came from against her brother’s chest.

Lian took a breath. She moved to the children’s side and took the little girl in her arms. “I am not angry with you, xiao sunnu. I am sorry I frightened you. I am merely concerned that Jemma has not returned.” She stopped and turned toward the window as the sound of a vehicle speeding to a halt caught her attention. It stopped beyond her view but she heard two doors open and slam a few seconds before the back door was thrown open.

“MOMMA!” Skye squealed as she slid out her grandmother’s arms and raced to her mother’s open arms. “Momma, momma, I misted you.” She kissed her mother’s cheek and wrapped her arms around her neck.

“Mom! Da!” Fitz was out of his chair and in his father’s arms a second after his sister plowed into their mother. He squeezed the man tightly before realizing what he was doing and slipping back to the floor. Phil smiled at the boy and pulled him into a hug before taking Skye from Melinda and covering her in kisses. Fitz wrapped his arms around his mother’s waist and kissed her back when she kissed his cheek. “I missed you.” He whispered so only she heard. She kissed him again before looking to her own mother.

“Anything?” She asked for a needed update with one word. Lian shook her head then nodded toward the door implying her daughter should follow her to the living room.
“Hey, Cheerios with the Bee!” Phil smiled as he propped Skye on one hip and reached for the box. “My favorite and boy am I hungry.” He told Melinda to go with one look then plopped Skye on her chair and poured the cereal in her bowl.

“We gots meolk outta a cow.” Skye informed him with wide eyes, as if she did not really believe it.

“Holy cow!” Phil exclaimed as he lifted the jug to pour it on the little girl’s cereal. He looked to Fitz who surely understood his mother needed to speak privately with Lian.

Fitz took a deep breath and gave a slight nod before sliding back on his chair and reaching for the cereal.

xx

Lian gave Melinda all the information she had up to and including the sheriff joining Ben in the search. She could not stop her daughter from storming out of the house to search for herself.

Melinda hadn’t been on the property for years and was never one to roam the fields. She was not familiar with the land but she was familiar with her daughter and after learning everything that had transpired she was sure Jemma had sought out a place to bury her insubordination. The little girl could handle just about anything with a level head…anything but guilt. Jemma rarely misbehaved and when she did she punished herself much more severely than her parents would imagine.

She’d sabotaged a science project of a rather uppity girl in her class, after the girl had bullied Fitz into tears and then made a laughing stock of him. The teacher demanded an explanation that never came and was forced to call Melinda and Phil to a conference. They chose to ground her for two weeks. Jemma insisted on one month after making a full confession to them. But before any of this Melinda had to talk her daughter out of a bathroom stall where she had chosen to hide her shame.

The worried mother was sure this was the same thing and Jemma had squeezed herself into some place to hide again. Lian and the younger kids began searching every small space in the house as if it were a game of hide and seek. With three floors and a cellar to search it would take at least two hours.
Phil tackled the back porch, the side porch, the crawl space and the barn opening storage boxes, feed containers and the farthest corner of every animal stall. Melinda moved to the field knowing that tall grass provided an excellent hiding place. She stopped at the top of the path and watched as Ben and the sheriff walked the perimeter of the pond.

The sheriff was speaking, waving his hands in all directions as Ben shook his head. No, Melinda squeezed her eyes shut. She would not go there…would not think that her beautiful girl had gone near that water in the dark. Jemma was not a good swimmer but she was not reckless. She would not do something so dangerous no matter how upset she was feeling. The sheriff threw his hands in the air and walked away. Ben watched for a moment before shaking his head and following. He glanced up and noticed Melinda. He gave a quick wave before disappearing behind the tree line.

Melinda waved back then continued through the field spying the goat enclosure in the distance. She’d walk that far then follow the path back to the barn. The vibrating of her phone alerted her and she said a silent prayer that Jemma had been found.

“Mel,” Phil’s voice was soft and quiet, a sure sign something was not right.

“Phil,” Melinda tried to keep the panic from her voice and he immediately knew he had made things worse.

“No, no, Mel there’s no news but…” he hesitated. There was no way to tell her what needed to be said. “The sheriff wants to drag the pond, Mel.” He failed to keep the crack in his voice from letting her know his own fear. “He insists.”

Melinda grit her teeth and marched forward. “She’s not there.” She growled. “Jemma would not do something so stupid, Phil. You tell that damn sheriff that our daughter would not go near that pond in the dark.”

Phil nodded, almost believing she could see her. “He’s already called in his team, Mel. I know they’ll find nothing.”

“They won’t.” She punched the off button on the phone, shoved it into her pocket, wiped the tear from her eye and stormed toward the goats.

Melinda kicked open the gate and marched to the small hut. She peered into the dim interior met
by a pair of odd rectangular eyes. Skittles balked a strangled bleat and galloped out of the hut, kicking up dirt in its wake. Snickers stared down from her usual perch on the thick branch above. Melinda shook her head and kicked a tuft of dirt after it.

Jemma slapped her hand over her mouth to cover the gasp. She could not see who was below her but she was sure someone had startled Skittles. She wasn’t ready to be found, in fact her plan was to walk back to the farmhouse, ‘turn herself in’ and take whatever punishment Nainai saw fit. She pretty much deserved it.

Melinda was angry, terrified and angry but not so much she didn’t hear the soft gasp that was definitely her child. She looked up into the tree just as Jelly Bean hopped out of the tripod branches. The little goat gave a weak bleat and walked across the horizontal branch to the top of the ladder steps. It stared down at Melinda for a moment before hopping to the ground and nuzzling her hand in search of a prized carrot.

“Sorry, Jelly Bean,” Melinda sighed. “I’ve got nothing for you.”

Jemma gasped a second time and bounced to her knees to peer through the smallest opening. She recognized her mother’s voice. “Momma,” she whispered.

Melinda smiled to herself as she scratched the insistent goat’s head. “Thank you for taking care of my girl, Jelly Bean.” She spoke quietly but loud enough for Jemma to hear. The woman sat on the second wide rung of the ladder and watched as the little goat tripped to the feed tough. “Hungry, huh? I think we all need some breakfast after the night we’ve had.”

Jemma sat down with her back against the tree wall. Momma had come…come all the way from Seattle because of her. Things were much worse than she had imagined. She felt her pulse quicken and her breaths grow fast and short.

“It would be a lot easier to talk to you if you came down here.” Melinda said calmly, without looking up into the tree.

Jemma stood slowly, not surprised that her mother knew she was hidden above. She stepped over the lip of bark that formed the enclosure and stepped onto the wide branch. The ground seemed to bounce up to her and then back. The height had not been so dizzying in the dark. She threw her arms out to her sides for balance.
“You got yourself up there, now you need to get yourself down.” Again Melinda spoke without looking at the girl.

Jemma took a deep breath, swallowed and stepped carefully across the branch without looking down. She reached the ladder faster than she thought and easily stepped down until she stood one rung above her mother. Melinda looked over her shoulder at the girl then patted the spot next to her. Jemma took another breath and dropped down in the spot.

Mother and daughter sat in silence for a long time. Melinda quelling the anger she felt while Jemma searched for what to say. It was the little girl who broke the quiet.

“I’m really sorry, momma.” She whispered as she spoke to the ground.

“You should be.” Melinda barked before she could stop herself. She took a deep breath and tried again. “You should be sorry, Jemma. You had to know how worried everyone would be.” It came out in a soft breath making the girl feel even worse.

“I am so very sorry, momma.” Jemma repeated the only thing she could.

Melinda wrapped an arm around the little girl who let the tears she had been holding fall free. She pulled her daughter into a tight hug and kissed the top of her head. Jemma sobbed until no more tears would fall.

“I was so angry, momma.” She sniffled as she sat back and looked into her mother’s eyes. “I wasn’t thinking. I was angry and afraid and I couldn’t stop thinking…” she stopped almost unable to go on. “I…I…was so afraid you wouldn’t come back that the plane…oh, momma I miss them so much and I love you and da so much and I couldn’t do it again. I needed to know you were safe and Nainai just forgot to tell me you called and…”

“Shhh, shhh,” Melinda stopped the little girl’s rambling, pulling her close and kissing her forehead. She rocked her child back and forth continuing to shush her softly.

“Oh, momma, she apologized and I still acted so badly…spoke to Nainai with such disrespect and then…” Jemma drew a shaky breath and sat up straight. “I just ran away from everything without any thought of what it would do to all of you.” She fell back into her mother’s arms.
“Baobei, I am sorry you are so afraid. I’m sorry Nainai didn’t tell you I called and so sorry I didn’t call back.” Melinda spoke into the little girl’s hair.

Jemma shook her head. “No, momma. This is all my fault. I am the one who needs to accept what is and move on.”

Melinda took Jemma by the shoulders, turning to face her. She gave her a firm but gently shake. “Who told you that?” She demanded.

“No one did.” Jemma shrugged her shoulders and sniffled. “But Fitz and Skye have survived terrible things and they don’t get all put out of sorts or cry themselves to sleep or…”

“Fitz and Skye spend plenty of time mourning their past. Jemma, you’ve seen or heard their nightmares. I’ve held Fitz many nights when he cannot stop crying. Skye is still afraid we’ll send her back to St. Agnes. Why do you think Salty is still sitting on her bed…at home? Every time your da and I go anywhere she is sure the social worker is coming to take her back.” She shook the little girl again. “Don’t you ever think they’ve forgotten or have just ‘moved on’ and don’t you dare either.” Jemma sobbed again and fell back into her mother’s embrace.

“I understand, Jemma.” Melinda sighed. “I truly do understand how you feel but it doesn’t mean you can be so reckless or insolent.” Jemma nodded inside her mother’s embrace and cried out her new flood of tears.

They spent at least an hour calming the girl and discussing the ramifications of her behavior. Jelly Bean tried several times butting the little girl to urge her toward the food bin. Jemma finally sniffled and pulled the tissues she had reserved for Skye from her pocket. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes then walked to the bin and pulled out two carrots and a large purple turnip for Jelly Bean. The little goat kicked up its back legs in appreciation. Snickers and Skittles made their way down the tree and helped themselves to the other vegetables Jemma laid in the trough.

Mother and daughter walked back toward the farmhouse hand in hand. Jemma listened as Melinda spoke to Phil, letting him know the little girl had been found and they were taking a slow stroll back. He offered to drive the jeep out to meet them but Melinda explained they needed the extra time and he understood.

When the house was in view Jemma hesitated, slowing down a few paces behind her mother. Melinda stopped and turned back questioning without words.
“I suppose I’m in for a good tanning.” Jemma sighed, unable to meet her mother’s eyes.

Melinda smiled and brushed the light hairs from the girl’s face. “I wouldn’t rule it out.” Melinda breathed morosely.

“I will apologize to Nainai and accept whatever punishment she sees fit.” Jemma offered quickly.

“I may have to draw the line there. Your father and I will talk and we’ll decide what happens. Nainai will have to understand and she feels very badly about all of this.”

Jemma squeezed her eyes shut to stop the tears from starting again.

“How about we just let Da and the kids know you’re alright and not worry about it for now?” She shook Jemma’s hand gently and started walking again.

Before they started up the last slope they heard Fitz and Skye calling and watched as they raced down the small hill ahead of their father. Phil raised his hand in a quick wave and hurried to pull Skye from the tall grass she had fallen into.

A few minutes later the family reunited in a group hug with Phil lifting a now sobbing Jemma into his arms. He hugged her tightly and kissed her several times before landing a firm swat on her backside. Jemma took a quick intake of air and wrapped her arms around her father’s neck.

“Don’t you ever pull a stunt like that again,” Phil breathed into her ear, hugging her even tighter. Jemma shook her head, unable to answer. He winked at Melinda over the girl’s shoulder as she held Skye and herded Fitz back toward the house.

They’d spend the next few days visiting with Lian. Melinda and Phil would meet the kittens and explain to Skye why they could not take them home. They’d try their hand at milking and traipse out to see the goats while Skye napped and Lian kept watch.

Phil and Melinda spoke at length about Jemma and what course her chastisement would take deciding Jemma should also have some input although both knew what the little girl would insist.
Phil took the younger kids to the pond while Melinda quickly doled out the agreed upon discipline.

A few minutes later Jemma lay on the bed in the guest room and wiped a tear from her cheek. She could hear her parents and siblings in the yard below the window.

Nainai and Ben had prepared a Barb-b-q that lasted well past dark. Jemma lay on a lawn chair and stared up at the millions of stars in the country sky. Melinda stepped next to her and motioned for her to scoot over and make room then wriggled into the space next to her daughter. They both had to lie on their sides to fit in the narrow chair. Melinda wrapped her arms around the girl and kissed her head. They watched as Fitz helped Skye catch lightening bugs in a glass container. Phil poked at the large bonfire, chatting amiably with Ben. Lian kept a close eye on the younger children but glanced at her daughter with a knowing smile.

“How you doing, baobei?” Melinda asked as she snuggled closer to Jemma. She rubbed her hand up and down the little girl’s back and patted her bottom lightly.

“It’s not so bad.” Jemma sighed as she too snuggled closer. “The stars are so much easier to see here without all the lights of the city. They are so beautiful.”

“Everyone last one,” Melinda agreed.

“Do you think…” Jemma started, and then stopped reconsidering.


“Do angels really watch down through them…like Fitz says?” Jemma whispered.

Melinda smiled and kissed her little girl again. Jemma rarely sounded like a child, but right now she was just a little girl with a big wonder. Jemma knew exactly what stars were and scientifically angels could not be proven.

“I think it’s possible.” Melinda sighed as she rested her cheek on the little girl’s head.

“My mum and dad are probably frowning down on me after today.” Jemma sighed.
“Oh I don’t think so, sweetie. I think they are very proud of you and how you apologized and accepted the consequences.” Melinda assured her.

Jemma thought for a moment. “They definitely would have agreed on the end result.” She frowned as Melinda snorted and hugged her tighter.

“Look at that!” Fitz shouted as he pointed to the sky causing all eyes to look in that direction. “It’s a genuine meteor.” His voice squeaked as he jumped up and down.

Skye’s eyes grew wide as she watched the small object streak across the sky. “Wow,” she whispered softly then joined her brother in hopping in all directions.

“There’s your answer, baobei. Your parents are putting on a light show just for you and don’t you ever forget it.”

Jemma watched the shooting star until it disappeared. She wished her parents a good night and thanked them for making sure this wonderful woman would be there for her. She snuggled closer to Melinda.

“I love you, momma.” The little girl sighed.
Feedback....please
Skye stood at the classroom pet’s habitat and watched as the little animal hopped from place to place, stopping to poke its whiskered nose in the air before hopping off again. She tapped lightly on the glass and pressed her face just close enough that it didn’t touch the thick glass.

“I gonna mist you Dunny.” She sighed as the small animal disappeared into a burrow in the soft dirt that covered the bottom of the habitat.

“Skye,” Miss Ginny called from across the large classroom. “Come to circle now. Dundee will be fine. I promise.”

The little girl placed the palm of her hand on the glass and slowly turned toward the group seated on the round carpet. She moved to the only spot left, dropped down on the tiger picture and rested her elbows on her folded legs. Skye dropped her chin into her hands and did nothing to hide her pout.

Miss Tripani looked around the circle at the glum faces of her students and took a quick breath. Days like this were not easy and she always dreaded disappointing her kids. The teacher forced a smile and tried to start the day as usual.

“Okay everybody up and we’ll do our circle song.” Miss Tripani clapped her hands and popped up from the small chair she sat. Twenty small children, along with Miss Ginny rose to their feet and sang along with the teacher with less than preschool enthusiasm.
Turn yourself around
Reach up high into the sky
And then down to the ground
Touch your head
Touch your hips
Give yourself a hug
Cross your feet and spin around
Then sit down on the rug
Boom!

Miss Tripani finished with a flair as she did each morning when she dropped back into her little chair. Normally her students would do the same as they bounced their little bottoms on the colorful rug. Today they simply sat down and looked to her with questioning eyes.

The teacher tried to continue with her morning routine singing the roll call, choosing daily chores and dreading the feelings chart. Joanne Tripani had no doubt what face every child would choose today. She plowed ahead regardless, holding up circles that displayed a green happy face, a red sad face, yellow just okay face, orange angry, blue tired and a purple scared face. Each child took a turn choosing their feeling and on any given day the feelings chart posted on the classroom wall showed a rainbow of emotions. Today it screamed in red and orange. Chelsea counted the small circles fixed to each child’s name that matched the larger circles Miss Tripani held. She stood in front of a line of numerals and chose two to add to the feelings chart. There were fifteen sad faces, four angry and one scared.

The reasons were similar. Every child related their feelings to the fact that Dundee, the kangaroo rat that had been the class pet for the last six months, was leaving today. Most of the kids were sad that they would not see their little animal friend anymore. Of course others were angry and Skye chose the blue scared face because that’s how Dundee would feel, scared when he had to go to a new house and a new family. Miss Ginny lifted her glasses and wiped her eyes quickly, understanding why the little girl would feel that way.

The rest of circle went pretty much the same way. No one was really interested in counting the hearts that decorated the February calendar although Martin did manage to choose the correct numeral to stick to the box under Wednesday. He slapped the heart labeled twenty-seven limply and did little to straighten it as it slipped sideways.

Finally, Miss Tripani could take no more. “Okay people, we’ve talked about this for a long time
and all of us understand that Dundee needs to move to a new house.” She looked to Skye quickly and could not help notice the little girl take a deep breath and sigh. She was, in all actuality, telling the children that Dundee, the kangaroo rat was not a ‘good fit’ for the classroom and needed to live somewhere else. It didn’t matter what kind of words she used, Skye had probably heard them all. But the truth of the matter was that the little creature was not thriving in the environment they could provide and needed much more. The teacher had accepted the gift of the animal from a parent that could not keep it in her apartment. She had gotten it from a boyfriend who thought it was a cute diversion from the usual. Now the poor little thing was moving again and although Joann had not thought of it before, its short life mirrored the little girl with the dark almond shaped eyes.

“Dundee is going to live at the zoo with a lot of other animals. He’ll have a very big space to run and hop and dig and three other kangaroo rats to keep him company.” Miss Tripani explained to the children. “If you visit, I’m sure the zookeepers will let you see him and how happy he is.”

Skye shook her head and spoke to the floor. “Ode famlees non’t bizit, Miss Pani. They is juss gone.” The little girl’s voice was flat. It held none of its usual vibrant curiosity. It broke her heart and for a split second she wished the little girl had not joined her class this year.

“Are wees all Dundee’s famalee?” Samantha asked, staring at Skye for a second before looking to her teacher for an answer.

“We aren’t animals!” Daniel laughed as he rolled backward on the floor.

“We feeded him and gived him water.” Lucas added.

“An we cleaned hims poop.” Aurelia giggled.

“Yes, we took very good care of Dundee.” Miss Tripani agreed. She looked around at all the little faces looking back, all but the one little girl picking at a string on her sock and avoiding everyone’s eyes. “And you all know how sick he was at Christmas time.”

“Him went the doctor.” Ben nodded and everyone did the same.

“Right and the doctor told us Dundee needed a new house and a lot of things we just don’t have room for in our room. The zoo has all of those things already and they are so happy that Dundee is coming to live with them.” Miss Tripani smiled, hoping the situation was resolving.
“But we love him,” Darienne sighed and everyone nodded or gave their own affirmative reply.

“When the lady come take him way?” Skye asked sadly.

Miss Ginny rose from her spot and sat behind the cheerless little girl, gathering her into the space in the crisscross of her legs. She wrapped her arms around Skye and took both the little hands into her own.

Miss Tripani smiled at her aid, who smiled back. “Mr. Pasternak is coming this afternoon. He’s bringing a special box for Dundee to travel in and he’s bringing special tickets for all of us to come see Dundee’s new house in the summer time.”

“My mommy don’t like the zoo.” Ryan sighed. “She says it’s too stinky.”

“Maybe you gramma take you.” Ethen consoled his best buddy.

“Maybe,” Miss Tripani breathed as she laid her hands on her knees. “Maybe, it’s time for us to pick centers and start our day. I think everyone will feel so much better if they are busy and having fun with their friends.”

The children spent the next few minutes choosing centers and moving off in small groups to engage in learning play. A group of boys decided to build a zoo in the block area and pulled out a box of wooden animals to live there. Ryan pulled a tall skinny wooden railroad conductor figure from another box and announced it would be the zookeeper. Another group gathered with Miss Ginny at the art table pulling out glue, glitter and all varieties of paper intending to create cards to send along with their furry friend on his new adventure. Darienne and Chelsea pulled out pans and plastic cupcakes as they shared ideas on how to make a cake for a giant birthday party. They lit into song as they moved around the dramatic play area. Puzzles were strewn across another table and several children hummed motor noises as they drove small vehicles across a small rug decorated with the outline of a small town.

Skye chose library. It had a large cozy cube just big enough for one child to cuddle up inside. Miss Tripani had filled it with big colorful pillows and the children could pull a blanket out of a special box to drag in with them. It was a great place to be alone with a good book but that was the last thing on the little girl’s mind this morning. She pulled the first blanket she found out of the box and crawled as far back into the cube as possible then pulled her body into the smallest possible ball that she could. The little girl rested her head on one of the large pillows, pulled the
blanket over her the best she could and allowed her thumb to find her bottom lip. She nibbled on her thumb nail for a few seconds before that thumb slipped inside her mouth.

Miss Tripani stacked papers and collected markers she would use to do a project with one of her learning groups then did the same for the lesson Miss Ginny would direct. She looked around the room at the controlled chaos taking note of the whereabouts of every one of her charges. She walked across the room and admired the job the boys had done building a zoo, sampled a few ‘treats’ in the kitchen, praised the creativity in art, helped find a missing puzzle piece and issued a ‘ticket’ to the boys diving their cars from the top of the shelf to the roads the girls had made below. She didn’t need to count to miss just one of her students.

The teacher peeked into the bathroom and the cubby before making another trip around the room in search of one little girl. She noticed a book on the floor near the library shelf and another leaning against the cozy cube. Squatting down on her haunches she peered into the three by three foot wooden box. Skye blinked back at her.

“What's up, sweetie?” Miss Tripani asked with a smile.

Skye shrugged her shoulders.

“Don’t you feel well?” The teacher reached out to feel the little girl’s forehead.

Another shrug

Miss Tripani sat down on the rug in front of the cube and waited for Skye to make the next move. It didn’t take long.

“I need momma.” Skye said quietly around her thumb.

There were no tears, no sobs or signs of hysteria, just an emotionless, broken statement in a voice that should never droned from a four-year-old. The sound of it worried the teacher much more than if the little girl had shrieked or demanded her need. All this going on with Dundee was hitting much too close to home for this little girl who needed to build the secure attachment all of the others had come to naturally.

Joann Tripani did not second guess herself or ask for anyone’s opinion. This was something she felt in her gut, she didn’t anymore than Skye’s little voice to urge her into action. She buzzed the office asking the secretary to come to her room for a few minutes then moved to that office and
dialed the phone. It took a few seconds for Melinda May Coulson to pick up but only a millisecond for her to understand her baby’s need.

Miss Tripani explained the situation the best she could, trying and failing to stop the tears then ran over her cheeks. She hung up and spent a few minutes in the restroom collecting her composure before returning to her class.

Melinda and Phil arrived thirty minutes later, rushing into the classroom as the kids sat in circle once again singing loudly about the days of the week and popping up and down holding colorful signs that showed the day being mentioned. They scanned the group quickly and were alarmed not to see their youngest child among the chorus.

Miss Tripani held up a finger to the couple and gave Miss Ginny a nod. The aid continued the music as the teacher rose and moved to greet the Coulsons. She thanked them for coming so quickly and apologized for her reaction to the situation, especially for alarming them. Both assured her she had done the right thing, speaking in quiet whispers. The teacher begged them toward the cozy cube whispering that nothing had changed since her call.

Skye had drifted into an almost sleep, her defense mechanism’s attempt to take her away from the feelings she could not understand. Fuzzy memories chewed at the edge of the little girl’s conscious. Homes that were flicks of things she never really thought about and faces that blurred into each other, all held together by the visage of Jade Johnson and her large satchel. Jade carrying her out of St. Agnes, taking her away from Sr. Clair...Jade roughly carrying her back and dropping her into Sr. Clair’s arms. Jade’s voice calling her things she didn’t understand but knew had to be bad. Skye closed her eyes and sucked her thumb listening to her heart beat in her ears. She felt hot and cold at the same time but crying was bad and it didn’t make it better or stop the bad from happening.

“Lái bǎituō nǐ de mǔqīn, wǒ de bāobèi.” Melinda spoke softly as she knelt in front of the cube. She held out her arms to the child.

Skye merely stared, not moving, not recognizing the face or the voice of the woman who spoke to her.

Melinda looked up at Phil who dropped to his knees beside his wife. “Come mon, angel eyes…” He put one arm around Melinda and reached out with the other.

“Skye? Baobei?” Melinda ducked her head into the box and laid her hand on the little girl’s cheek. “Lái bǎituō nǐ de mama.”
“Momma,” Skye breathed looking into Melinda’s eye. “Momma,” she dropped her thumb and climbed into her mother’s arms wrapping her arms around her tightly. “Momma,” she breathed into her mother’s neck. “You comed a me.”

“Always, baobei, always,” Melinda assured her between soft kisses as Phil helped her to her feet. He put his hand on the back of Skye’s head and pulled both into a hug.

Skye turned her head but kept it on Melinda’s shoulder refuses to relax her grip on the woman. “Daddy,” she told herself.

“Hey, angel eyes,” He smiled and kissed her cheek, then her forehead and then her cheek again.

Melinda held her baby with one arm and squeezed Miss Tripani’s hand with the other. “We’re going to take her home. I don’t think she should be here when…” She stopped and looked to her child and then to the animal that had been the source of the odd situation.

The teacher nodded her understanding. She could not imagine what reaction that might bring. They moved to the cubby area and collected Skye’s coat before quietly exiting the room.

Not able extract Skye from her hold, Melinda broke every traffic rule by sitting in the back seat with the little girl in her arms, rocking her gently during the drive home. She cried at the knowledge of how fragile Skye’s hold on her newfound security. They’d been through so much and yet so little a thing had broken the child’s trust of the system.

Phil held the door and helped Melinda exit the car. They walked into the house together dropping their coats across kitchen chairs and moving to the large comfy couch in the family room. Melinda sat with Skye still wrapped around her with Phil close enough to wrap an arm around both of them.

“Skye,” he urged the child to look at him. “Skye, angel, can you look at daddy, please.” He spoke quietly. She turned her head without lifting it, resting it on Melinda’s chest and listening to the calm thump of her mother’s heart.

“Do you remember the day we all went to see the judge?” Phil asked as Melinda smoothed her baby’s hair and kissed the top of her head.
Skye’s thumb found its way back to her lip as she nodded at her father. He smiled and moved a string of hair from the little girl’s eye.

“Do you remember what he told us that day?”

Skye shook her head. It was a long time ago and the man used a lot of words Skye didn’t understand and he banged his little hammer a lot.

“He told us you are our baby and we are your momma and daddy forever and for always. Nobody can ever take you away…ever, angel.” Phil told the little girl rubbing his hand up and down on her back. “You are Skye Coulson, my little girl and momma’s little girl.” He pointed to each of them as they were named.

Melinda kissed her again. “You don’t have to be afraid, baobei, not ever again.”

Skye dropped her thumb and stared at it before speaking for the first time. “Dunnee be ascared?”

Phil smiled at Melinda. “No, angel, he’s going to his home to be with his family just like you are with yours. He won’t be afraid. He’ll be happy forever and ever, just like you and Jemma and Fitz and Trip.”

“Him miss me?” She looked up at him with wide eyes.

Phil stopped for a moment looking to Melinda then went on. “He will and he’ll remember how much you loved him and took care of him and you can visit him just like Sr. Mary Clair still loves you and you miss her.”

Skye sat up, releasing Melinda from her death grip. “Hoer not take-a me, Daddy. Her just bees to come see me. This bees my howz.” She reached out to Phil who took her into a bear hug, kissing the top of her head as she relaxed into him.

“Yes, angel this is your house…our house.” Phil agreed as Melinda laid her head on his shoulder.

“Foe evore and evore,” Skye yawned as she snuggled into his embrace and gave into her exhaustion.
Melinda quickly wiped a tear from her eye and leaned closer to place a soft kiss on this wonderful man’s lips. He kissed her back, wrapped his arm around her and closed his eyes content to take advantage of an early afternoon nap.

It was the best nap all of them had in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

A short one that just came from nowhere...

love hearing from you!
Chapter Summary

Mack and Yoyo take young Skye to the zoo for the day. Melinda gives them fair warning but they forgo putting her in the stroller and learn just how quickly a little girl can disappear.

Skye is off to search for her friend Dundee

"Are you sure about this…I mean really sure?" Melinda raised her eyebrows as she stowed items in a bright pink duffle bag.

"Dios mio," Elena laughed. "It’s only a few hours, Melinda. Relax, she will be fine.”

Melinda rolled her eyes and shook her head. “It’s not her I’m worried about.” She chuckled.

“What? You think we cannot handle one little girl. This is not the first time I have cared for a child, my friend.” Elena assured her.

“I understand that, Elena, but none of them were Skye and she is a whole different ball game.” Melinda remarked over her shoulder as she pulled a small bottle of juice from the refrigerator and twisted off the top. She poured it into a larger bottle that already held a measured amount of water. “Remember, half water/half juice or you’ll spend more time in the restroom that the exhibits.”

“I know, I know. The little one cannot have one hundred percent juice, ice cream is a no-no, and nothing green. Aye, yi, yi, ¿Qué pasa con ese pequeño y el color verde?” Elena laughed as she crossed her arms over her chest and watched Melinda continue packing the small bag. “We are going for the afternoon, not for what’s left of the month.”

“Hmmm,” Melinda raised one brow. “Three changes and at least one extra pair of sneakers is traveling light, a full pack of wipies should last all afternoon, two bottles of diluted juice and a pack of goldfish crackers that should get you through the car ride.” She stopped and looked past Elena to the kitchen window facing the driveway. “Did Phil get her seat for Mack? I better be sure it’s installed right or she’ll have herself out of it before you get to the end of the driveway.” She set a small carton of cheesy fish crackers on the table and started for the door.
Elena cut her off, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Mack took care of that.” She smiled and tried to stifle a laugh. “You are una mamá muy nerviosa.” The woman tugged her friend back to the table and pulled out a chair. After pushing the woman into it, she sat next to her and took both Melinda’s hands in hers. Elena smiled at the questioning glare that met her. “You and Phil have not had one hour of time to spend together in all the months since you are parents. Even mama and papa need a little break, so let me and Mack help. Jemma and Fitz will be with the club for science at the museums all day and Trip is camping with the church group, let us take the little one for a few hours while you…” She stopped and smiled with a little wink.

Melinda shook her head as she pulled her hands away and swiped at her friend. “Right, we’ll probably sleep all afternoon…can you say exhaustion??” She jested.

Elena laughed. “Que resa! I have seen you awake for days and no problems…but, it is your time to do as you please.” She wriggled her eyebrows a few times. “So you will do what pleases you, yes?”

“Momma!”

Anything Melinda might have wanted to say was silenced as Skye raced into the room. She turned in her chair just in time to catch her little girl as she bounced into her mother’s arms.

“I have pancakes, momma?” Skye smiled as she held Melinda’s cheeks with both hands.

Melinda reached up and took the little girl’s wrists, gently sliding her hands away. “I wondered when my baobei would be hungry. I thought you forgot about breakfast.” She leaned forward causing Skye to lean back and giggle as she tipped off her mother’s lap. Melinda touched her forehead to the little girl’s then pulled her back to sit straddled on her knees.

“I no foeget, momma. I played witta eggos a couple whiles.” Skye’s eyebrows rose as she slid backward to her feet and pulled at Melinda’s hand. “Comma me and see I builded fer a efalent. Hees inna hows.” She tugged until her mother stood and allowed herself to be lead toward the family room. Skye stopped in the doorway, dropped her mother’s hand and marched back to Elena who had turned to watch the action. She stopped in front of the woman and placed her hands on her hips.

Elena covered her mouth to hide her grin. She cast a quick glance at Melinda before turning her attention back to the small powerhouse that stood before her.
Skye waited a moment then bounced her hands, palms up, in front of her. “Why you non’t comin, Oyo?” She reached out and took Elena by the hand, tugging the same way she had done with her mother. “Mon, Oyo, mon,” she tugged and turned toward her mother. “You see a hows I makeded.”

Elena stood and allowed herself to be yanked along, stopped for a moment for Skye to latch on to Melinda and pull her toward the goal as well.

xx

Skye stood next to Mack’s car with her arms folded across her chest, her bottom lip in a fine pout. “I no wanna sitna droller. I no is a baby.” She stomped her little white sneaker on the back top. “I big. I walk ona mine footses.”

Mack smiled and looked down on the little protester for a second before he squatted down to her level. He kept one hand on the umbrella stroller he had pulled from the car. “You know, Tremors, this park is pretty big and there’s a lot of walking to do. You might get awful tired.”

Skye pulled her arms tighter and shook her head as she turned from the man. “I no is ty-red, Mack. I sleepeded inna car a long times. I wakeded now.” She insisted.

Mack looked up at Elena who stood behind the little girl watching him try to negotiate. She had her own arms over her chest but smirked with amusement rather than resentment. He waited for her to help then rubbed his forehead when he realized he was on his own.

“Look, baby girl, look at your little legs, how are you going to keep up with us?” He slapped a hand on his thigh.

Skye pursed her lips and looked at the large man’s legs then swung around without moving her arms to look at Elena’s. She swung back and stomped her foot again. “Mine legs is bigger to me. I walk a big girl.”

Mack let out a long breath. “Well, I guess we’ll put your backpack and bag in the stroller and you can just walk along with us then, but,” he shook his head as he stood and look into the distance. “I’m not carrying you, Tremors. You’re on your own.”
Skye dropped her arms as a wide smile covered her face and she took a step toward the entrance to the large zoo. Elena caught her arm.

“Not so fast, mommi, you want to walk? Da me tu mano, ahora.” Elena put out her hand and waited for Skye to comply. When she didn’t and the pout started again, the woman wobbled her hand toward the little girl and raised one eyebrow. “Maybe you need to sit in the car to think about it.”

Skye scrunched up her face looking from Mack to Elena then back. “I hoed you hand, O-yo.” The little girl took Elena’s hand and waited for Mack to place the bags in the basket of the stroller.

The small group ambled across the parking lot and stood in line at the ticket booth. Skye pointed at the pictures on the large posters that lined the entranceway and asked repeatedly why they couldn’t just go in and what were they waiting for and how long would it take. She smiled at a girl no older than she was who sat in a stroller and smiled back. She puffed up her chest to show she did not need such a babyish thing.

A small boy stood in front of Skye staring up at Mack with his mouth agape. He looked down at the little girl standing with her tiny hand in the big man’s paw. “You’re daddy’s a giant.” The little boy stated in a hushed voice.

Skye giggled as she twirled in a circle without losing her grip. “Him non’t be my daddy. Him be mine Mack and him no is a giant.” She stopped her pirouette and stared up at her large friend. “Him just be up the sky.” She held her free hand as high as she could while standing on tiptoe.

The line moved forward admitting the little boy and his family through the turnstiles a moment before Mack, Elena and Skye did the same.

xx

“We see a taygers, Oyo?” Skye asked as she skipped between the couple, holding both their hands. There had been little problem with her walking to keep up with the adults while they in turn found it a bit more difficult keeping her in check.

Skye rarely walked, anywhere. She hopped and skipped, twirled and wriggled but mostly she ran. Luckily Mack’s long stride matched her little chugging legs and Elena pushed on but it was exhausting. Finally the group stopped and sat on a large bench. Mack pulled a squirming Skye on
to his lap and waited for her to calm before addressing the situation.

“We non’t needa sit, Mack. I no is tie-red.” Skye rocked side to side as she tried to pry the large hands apart that encircled her middle.

“We do need to talk, chiquita.” Elena informed the little girl, tapping her lightly on top of the head with one finger.

“You need to slow down, Tremors.” Mack laughed. “There’s no race. The animals will wait for us.”

“You telled me no bees a slope oke, Mack. I makes mine legses go big like a yous.” Skye explained, emphasizing with her palms up in front of her.

Mack shook his head and turned away to hide his smile, unable to respond to the little girl’s logic.

“That does not mean you must run so fast, pequena.” Elena explained. “If you cannot stay walk with us, I will put you in that stroller.” The woman nodded toward the item in question. “Do you hear me?”

Skye pouted for a moment before leaning back against Mack’s large chest. “You telled me not be slow and you telled me not be faster. How I go, Oyo?” She raised her eyebrows and waited for the woman’s reply.

“I think you will hold my hand and Mack’s hand. We will walk together.” Elena informed her.

“Then we see a taygers?” Skye inquired already pushing off Mack’s lap.

The man stood, taking Skye’s hand before she had a chance to take a step. Elena quickly grabbed the other and pushed the stroller with her free hand.

“Now we see the taygers!” Mack laughed and pointed in the direction they needed to take.
By lunchtime, the small group had seen tigers, lions, polar bears, gibbons, the reptile house where Skye was not impressed by the ‘wrong’ eyes of the snakes and lizards, made four trips to the restrooms, stopped at every water fountain for two or three drinks, fed the fish and avoided the petting zoo (Skye’s aversion to the goat’s eyes had her posted outside the gate shaking her head rapidly).

The group sat at a picnic table under a large umbrella. Skye actually knelt in order to reach the straw of her pink lemonade. Finding it impossible to take a sip without tipping the cup the little girl resorted to standing, then leaning onto the table top on both hands. Mack wrapped an arm around her for support before Elena had a chance to scold her for standing.

Skye plopped down on Mack’s lap and peeled back her hotdog bun like a banana before taking a bite of the meat within. “I like a kep sit to my dog dog. No onna bun juss onna pelate.” She tapped her finger on the paper plate that held her food then stopped and stared at the few French fries Elena had placed there. “Oyo, fish fives no is apposa bees gareen.” She pushed the plate away and took a second bite of her hot dog.

Mack pulled the plate back and examined the fries. The tip of one slice showed a hint of green below the fried surface. He picked it from the others and wrapped it in one of the many napkins on the table. “That’s just a spot that wasn’t ripe, Tremors.”

“I non’t like a sn’t ripe when it bees gareen. Kay, Mack?” The little girl leaned her head back and spoke to the man’s chin. “We see Dunny? Him live a wit hees famaly atta zoo. Miss Pani telled me. I no cry acuz him bees happy.”

Mack looked at Elena who shrugged her shoulders. “Dunny?” the woman repeated.

“Who’s Dunny?” Mack asked as he helped Skye to take a sip of her drink.

She swallowed and picked up a napkin to swipe across her lips. “No Dunny,” she corrected. “Dun – eeee.” The little girl stressed both syllables.

“Dun E?” Mack repeated.
Skye shook her head and let out a frustrated breath. “DUN NEE,” she said loud and slow. “Him bees a kanarude. Him haffa go a zoo acuz him bees no hetty. A doc-or tell Miss Pani him getted sick if him lives inna a gas houz.”

Mack shook his head as he looked at Elena. She blew out a breath with puffed cheeks. “Hablo español y ingles. No hablo ‘Skye’.”

“Solo Skye habla Skye y solo Fitz puede traducir.” Mack laughed as he squirted a blob of ketchup onto Skye’s plate.

“Fitz is no heore.” Skye commented, rubbing the tip of her ‘peeled’ hot dog into the red condiment. She squirmed a bit on Mack’s lap before dropping her half eaten sandwich. “Oyo, I needa pee-pee faster on now.” She turned and slid to the ground already running for the restroom she had used earlier. Elena was up and after her but still a few steps behind, grabbing the pink duffle from the stroller as she passed.

A few minutes later the girl’s rejoined Mack at the table. Skye sported a new outfit complete with a change of shoes. She walked slowly next to Elena staring at the ground and holding tightly to the woman’s hand. The little girl stopped at Mack’s side keeping her eyes to tips of her pink sparkly sneakers. Elena slipped the duffle from her shoulder, placing it back in the stroller’s basket. She threw Mack a pouty face and tossed her chin toward Skye with a wink.

“I no maked it.” Skye shook her downcast head. “Duìbùqǐ, Mack.” She sniffled in the language her mother used with her. “I no drinks no more pinkanade. It goes to pee pee too much.”

Mack rubbed a finger under his nose to hide his chuckle and scooped the contrite little girl into his arms. “Don’t worry, baby girl.” He held her upright on his lap, wrapping his large arms around the back of her legs for support. She leaned forward and rested her forehead against his. “Accidents happen and hey, you get a whole new look. You are really workin’ those sneakers and the lights…” He wriggled his eyebrows causing Skye to giggle. He kissed her forehead and set her on the ground as he stood. “How ‘bout you sit with Yoyo and finish your hot dog. I’ll be right back.”

“Where you go, Mack?” Skye inquired taking his hand to stop him.

Elena gently took the hand in her own and pulled the little girl onto her lap. “Mack doesn’t have another outfit, pequeña.” She smiled as the large man headed for the restrooms.

xx
Mack lifted Skye allowing her to see over the barrier into the enclosure that housed several very large kangaroos. He and Elena had deduced that the little girl was referring to the animals with her fractured vocabulary and ‘kanarude’. The large man reasoned that there was more than likely a kids’ cartoon or some story with an animal named Dunny and that was probably what she wanted to see. He held her high enough to view all of the large and small marsupials.

“Do you see your friend, mommi?” Elena smiled up at the little girl in the man’s arms.

Skye furrowed her brow. “Darenen and Shessie no live inna zoo, Oyo.” She shook her head at the silliness of the woman’s statement.

Elena looked at Mack’s smirk and shrugged her cheek. “Maybe Dunny is not here today.” She mumbled to the man hoping the child did not hear.

The little girl peered down at Elena. “Dunny no bees wit them big oneses. Him bees too liddle. Them squish him with thems bigga foots.” She shook her palms in the air to make a point.

Mack set the little girl on the ground. Skye placed her hands on the pickets of the fence and peered through it while the adults spoke above her.

“So much for the kangaroo idea,” Elena sighed as she leaned on her elbows atop the fence.

“Yeah, well she agreed with me when I asked if she meant kangaroo.” Mack shook his head and watched the animals hopping across the large enclosure. “Whadya call those little ones, wall a something.” He pondered.

“Wallabies,” Elena breathed.

“Wallaby,” Mack repeated. “Doesn’t sound anything like a kangaroo or kanarude.” He shrugged. “Maybe we ought to start watching those cartoon channels if we’re gonna help with this bunch.” He nodded down toward the space between them and stepped back when he did not see the little girl. Fully expecting her to be on his opposite side, he turned to the left, no Skye there. Leaning back he peered around Elena then quickly spun looking in all directions.
Elena turned as well, glancing down once. “What…” She did not finish the question as Mack moved away slipping between other visitors and looking in one direction then the other.

Skye was gone.

xx

Skye didn’t mean to lose Mack and Elena. She didn’t even realize she did until she wrapped her arm around the leg of a woman who smiled down at her and patted her head then stepped away. Skye stood still for a moment and looked at all the legs of all the big people that walked up and down the cobblestone pathway. She leaned against the rail of the exhibit and peered through it at the red pandas frolicking along the log in their pen. She’d walked past the kangaroo enclosure at some point, wandering in and out of the people who spun her in one direction and then the other. Slowly the little girl’s thumb made it to her lip and one finger twirled her shoulder length hair. A baby was wailing loudly and Skye watched as a woman lifted the infant to her shoulder and patted its back.

Skye did not cry. Crying didn’t help. ‘Crying isn’t going to get you out of anything!’ She heard Sr. Daniel’s voice scolding.

“Hey,” a man’s deep voice startled her and she turned toward it. “Look, they got them little kangaroo rats in a special exhibit. We otta git the kids down there. Them little guys are fascinatin’.” The man smiled at the woman standing next to him as he tapped the paper he held with the back of his fingers.

Skye stepped in front of the couple and stood on her tiptoes. “I see a kanarude?” She asked softly.

“Sure, sweetie,” the older man smiled as he turned the pamphlet he held toward her and pointed at the small picture. The woman patted her head and looked back and forth before speaking.

“Where is your mommy and daddy, darling?” The woman asked, concerned to find such a little one all alone.

“I comed wit Mack a Oyo. Them is lookin at a big kanarudes.” She pointed in the direction she thought was the kangaroo exhibit.
The woman looked in that direction spying an Asian couple speaking to each other. They looked back at her and waved once, setting the older woman’s mind to rest. The little one had not wandered too far.

“Here ya go, sweetie,” the man smiled as he handed the pamphlet to Skye who still peered at the small picture of a kangaroo rat. “You show that to yur folks. They can take ya cross the park to the small animal exhibits.” He pointed in the opposite direction and patted her head as he stood.

Skye nodded, still looking at the picture. She smiled to herself. “I see Dunny at hims howz.” She looked up and spotted the older couple disappearing into the crowd and followed.

xx

Elena looked at the terror in her partner’s face. “Okay, don’t panic. She did not go far. She’s just tiny, hard to see with all these people.” She ended speaking through her teeth as she pushed past a small crowd and brushed her long hair from her face.

“This place caters to families,” Mack reasoned trying to hold on to his alarm. “They’ve gotta have some kind of system in place for this kind of thing.” He was already moving up the walk way.

Grabbing his arm, Elena shook her head. “Wait, Mack. We don’t even know the way she might have gone.”

He stopped and realized she was right. They’d have to split up, go in different directions and hopefully find her merely draped over another railing peering at another exhibit. They’d find her in a few minutes and all of this would be just something to laugh about…two experienced security guards losing one small child…their boss’s child. Melinda would kill them both. Phil would hide the bodies.

xx

Skye followed a family with two big kids and two little kids in a stroller with two seats. She’d never seen a stroller with two seats and the kids in it looked just the same. They even wore the same clothes. The big kids weren’t nice like Jemma and Fitz. They pushed each other and called each other bad names she’d heard at St. Agnes. The daddy told them to ‘wise up’ and the momma made the biggest one push the big stroller til he bumped it into too many things. She took it back and pulled his hair. The big boy yelled and slapped his momma’s hand away. Skye didn’t like
these big kids and those babies cried a lot. She watched another mommy walk down a different path holding a little boy’s hand and pointing to the colorful birds in the trees above them.

Skye followed that mommy instead. She liked birds and there were a lot in this very shady place. There were a lot of people inside as well. It seemed damp and felt very warm. She heard people laughing and followed the sound finding a man with a tiny monkey entertaining a small group. The little animal sat on the man’s shoulder but he let a lady hold it and it climbed all the way up to the top of her straw hat and sat there just like it belonged. Skye giggled as she stared up at the sight. The man smiled at her and lifted the monkey from the lady. He held it down to Skye.

She stared at its small black eyes and fuzzy face, nodding slowly when the man asked if she’d like to hold his little friend. He told her the monkey was friendly and asked if she could be very gentle. Skye nodded again and held out her arm like the man showed her. The tiny animal was hesitant but carefully slipped from the man’s hand onto her arm. She shivered at the feeling of its little hands against her bare arms. It climbed to her shoulder and wrapped its long monkey arms around her head, holding on to the tip of her nose with one little hand. Skye stood very still and blinked at the man a few times. He smiled again and showed her how to hold the tiny thing. Skye smiled at its warm body against her own and wondered as she felt its rapidly beating heart beneath her own small hand. The man let her give the monkey a piece of banana before he took it back and thanked her for being so gentle. He moved away to another group and Skye was hustled away with the first. An older lady that must have been someone’s gramma smiled at her and said how lucky she was to hold the little animal.

“Where’s your mommy, little one?” The woman asked looking side to side for someone who might look like the little girl before her.

“Her non’t come a zoo aday.” Skye explained. “Mine Mack a Oyo brought me. I see Dunny in hims howz.” She raised her eyebrows and the woman nodded, clearly confused by the lopsided explanation.

“Are you lost, sweetheart?” She asked as a second grandmotherly woman stepped next to her.

Skye squinted at the woman and shook her head. “I no is losted no more acuz mine momma finded me at sagnes and now we hazza howz foe ebber. It bees mine howz and momma and daddy and Fizt and Jemma and Terrip.”

The first woman smiled and patted Skye’s head while the second merely stared. “Oh, my that is quite a story. Why don’t you point to your momma and we’ll take you to her? A little thing like you shouldn’t be so far from her parents.” The woman smiled all the while she spoke while her companion looked in all directions for a couple that might be Skye’s parents.
Skye furrowed her brow and let out a breath. “I no is haves mine momma heor. I ownee haves mine Mack a Oyo. Him bees big,” she raised her hand as far above her head as she could and stood on her tip toes. “And him bees barroun like Terrip and,” she giggled a little turning to whisper to the woman who sat on the bench before her. “Him gots no hairs, jussa shynee hade.”

“Millie,” the second woman sighed. “Maybe we need to speak to security. Perhaps she wandered away and they haven’t noticed.”

“Don’t be silly, Mary Ann,” the first woman scoffed. “People notice when they’ve lost a child and I think this one would be noticed very quickly.” She smiled and patted the bench next to her, inviting Skye to sit down.

The little girl shook her head. “I needa see Dunny. Him is inna big howz wit hees famalee cuz he non’t like a liddle gas howz no more. The man sayed him bees to this way.” She pointed down the path she had been following.

“Honey, maybe you should tell us your name and we can help you find your momma and daddy.” Millie suggested as she took Skye’s hand in her own and again urged her to be seated.

“Mine momma no is losted. Her bees to mine howz. I ownee haffa Mack a Oyo.” Skye let out a frustrated breath.

“Well, then we will help you find Matt Kaoyo.” Millie smiled, pulling the little girl up on to the bench. Mary Ann had spied a park ranger speaking to a small group and had moved off to let the man know about the little girl. They walked back to the bench together.

“Hello, there sweetheart,” the man spoke in a familiar accent as he removed his cap and squatted down to Skye’s level.

“You is like a Oyo.” Skye smiled. “Her bees to look at the kanarudes.” She pointed in the direction she had come then looked back at the man. “Them is too bigger, not like Dunny. Him bees liddle like this.” She held her hands a few inches apart and squinted her eyes almost shut. “I non’t hoed him acuz him non’t like a be hoeded.”

The man smiled and scratched his head before replacing his cap. “Ay yi yi, este pequeña no será fácil.” He stood and turned toward the two elderly women. “You say she just wandered up to you? You saw no one with her or nearby?” The ladies shook their heads.
“She was with the small group that was watching the small monkey a little while ago. The keeper let her hold the little thing. It was so cute. I hope her parents got a photo, but I think if they were with that group they might have noticed she didn’t follow along.” Millie informed the man.

“Someone really ought to be holding on to this little one,” Mary Ann grunted.

“I hoed Mack a Oyo.” Skye informed her as she slipped off the bench. “I see Dunny now?”

The guard shook his head again and squatted down a second time. “Sweetie, how about you tell me your name and we’ll take it from there.” He smiled.

Skye took a deep breath and quickly said, “Skymeling Maywee Care Coson.” She smiled with pride having remembered her whole name. She practiced it with momma every night and the judge said it was her real name forever and ever.

The guard closed his eyes and shook his head. He hadn’t understood one syllable. The ladies shook their heads as well. “Okay,” he started. “That’s a great name, but what does your mommy call you?”

Skye smiled. “Her cows me bow bay.”

Now the man was more confused. That sounded nothing like whatever the child had first said. He tried again. “How about daddy, what does he call you?”

Skye laughed out loud. “Him say sweet picko, but I no a picko. Then him saes ango ice.”

The man stood and looked at the two older women. He pulled a walkie talkie from his belt and pressed a button causing it to squelch. Turning away from the pair he spoke to the person on the other end, giving a quick explanation then turned back and smiled. “I think we can just page this Matt guy to the Rainforest Exhibit and solve this whole thing. Her parents are probably frantic. I’m sure they’ll make their way to a service post and report her missing before the announcement is even made.” The ladies nodded.

A few seconds passed before a woman’s voice came through the park loud speakers asking that
Matt Kaoyo meet his party in section R4.

The guard smiled and turned to let Skye know her parents would be there very soon. The little girl no longer stood in front of the bench or behind it or anywhere near it.

Skye Meiling Mary Claire Coulson was off again.

xx

“Dios mío, cuando encuentre a ese pequeño, le daré una palmada en el culo con tanta fuerza que aún recordará cuando sea abuela.” Elena huffed as she marched along the pathway.

Mack answered without taking his eyes off the crowd. “I think Melinda might take exception to you striking her child.”

“She is going to take plenty of exception to us losing her child.” The hot tempered woman barked back, grumbling under her breath in Spanish as she continued on her way.

“I think we just need to let park security know. They’ve got to have something in place for something like this. I mean come on, kids…they do this kind of stuff all the time…right?” Mack continued speaking over Elena’s grumbling.

“I am pretty sure that this kid does this kind of stuff all the time. You should have put her in that stroller and strapped her down.” Elena growled.

“Whoa, wait a minute…I should have? What about you? You could have just as easily sat her down and made her tow the line.” Mack stopped and stepped in front of his partner stopping her in her tracks.

“Oh, and who let go of her at the kangaroo pen?” Elena countered.

“She’s got two hands, I guess we both did.” Mack breathed as he turned and looked out over the crowd again. “It doesn’t really matter. We just have to find her.”
“Probably still looking for that Dun E thing or person or whatever she has in her head.” Elena dropped her hands against her sides and forced herself to swallow the panic and the fears that some crazy weirdo had snatched the little girl right under their eyes. No, she wasn’t going there. Skye just walked away and got lost in the crowd. She was tiny. She got turned around and…and…

“Why isn’t she crying? Screaming about being lost or not knowing where we are?”

“She’s an odd little kid, Yoyo. Who knows what she’s thinking? Probably has it in her head we’re just following her or thinks we just know where she is? Damn! I wish I knew what that Dun E stuff was all about.” Mack shook his head and pointed toward an information kiosk in the distance.

The couple walked up to the small structure and smiled at the woman inside. She smiled back and asked if she could direct them toward a specific exhibit.

Mack swallowed once. “Our…our…we’ve lost our little girl.” He stammered trying to phrase something that made sense and expecting the woman to glare at him.

Instead she smiled a concerned smile and lifted the telephone on the counter before her. She spoke calmly informing someone on the other end that there was a missing child. A few seconds later she turned to the couple.

“One of the park vehicles will be here shortly to take you to the security office. We’ve issued a code pink which means all of the exits to the park have been temporarily secured and no one will be allowed to leave the park with a child until we find her. I’ll need a complete description, her name and a few other things before the vehicle arrives.” The woman remained amazingly calm and looked up as the broadcast asking Matt Kaoyo to go to the Rainforest Exhibit was announced. “It seems we have a few children exploring on their own today.” She casually informed them.

Mack pulled a photo of Skye from his wallet, explaining it was her most recent as Elena explained the situation. The woman nodded her understanding and assured them that this is an every day event at the zoo and that Skye would be found shortly. Elena rolled her eyes.

This woman did not know Skye.

xx

Skye was tired…and thirsty. She looked for one of the water fountains that Mack had lifted up to
drink from. The water gurgled out over rocks like a stream and when Mack stepped on the lever it
squirted up so she could catch it. Her shirt got wet and once it hit her in the eye, but it was cold
and good and she really wished she could have some right now. A large poster of a giraffe hung on
one side of the walkway and Skye stood looking all the way up at the life sized print. She listened
as a family passed. The mommy was telling the boy that he could get a drink at the water
fountain. Skye followed. She’d get one too.

Finding the fountain was easy. Getting a drink was not. Skye couldn’t reach the squirty thing on
top and she had to press really hard on the lever to make it work. She tried a couple times before a
mommy who was helping her little girl asked if she needed help. Skye nodded and the lady lifted
her to take a long drink. She remembered to say thank you when the lady put her down and walked
away. She turned and crashed into a big boy who dropped his big drink on her feet, splashing ice
cold blue juice all over her pink sneakers and clean white socks. The sudden frigid water caused
the little girl to jump and almost cry when she felt her pants suddenly seem wet and warm as she
sat with a splat on the stone walkway.

“Jerk!” The boy yelled. “Look what ya made me do!” He yelled a lot of bad words and Skye
scooted as far away as she could across the ground until she bumped a bench, turned and climbed
under it.

Suddenly, it wasn’t so much fun trying to find Dunny. Suddenly, she missed Mack and Yoyo and
wished they would hurry to catch up her. Sr. Daniel always found her very fast. It usually meant a
very hard slap and a lot of scolding but she got found and that was okay. What was taking Mack so
long?

Skye kicked off her sodden shoes and rolled the sticky socks off her feet. “Uck!” The little girl
criinged as she set her blotchy blue feet on the warm walkway. She looked in all directions and
spotted a small fountain. Skye was not one to keep clean. In fact it wasn’t unusual for her to have
at least two baths per day and twice as many changes of clothing. Dirt was one thing but sticky
was something all together different. Skye hated sticky and would freeze if a drop of pancake
syrup made its way to her fingertips. It took very little time for her to plunge her now dirt covered
sticky feet into the fountain.

Several people mumbled their objection and others commented on how some people cannot
control their children as Skye walked across the fountain and exited on the opposite side. Her feet
were a bit cleaner but still held the bright blue stain of the boy’s raspberry frostie. She wriggled
her toes in the warm sand that lined the zoo’s walkway and tried not to think about her soggy
bottom. People weren’t being as nice as they had been when she was clean and dry. Now they
kind of just inched around her and wished someone would just take care of their child. One woman
made it a point to seek out a security person and wag her finger in Skye’s direction.

The little girl recognized the look on the woman’s face and even though she couldn’t hear what
was being said, she knew it meant she was in trouble. She hung her head and waited for the lady in
the police suit to walk toward her. She watched the large black boots stop in front of her and took a
big breath before blinking up at the woman. Skye was surprised to see a smiling face instead of the usual stern growl of one of the Sisters.

“Looks like you’ve had a little accident, huh?” The police lady smiled as she squatted down to the little girl’s level.

Skye chewed her lip but did not answer.

“Maybe I can help.” The lady said as she stood and held out a hand. “Somebody is looking for you. How about I take you to Mack and Elena?” Skye’s head came up as she reached to take the woman’s hand. Speaking into a radio she had on her shoulder, the woman explained she had found the lost child and was on her way to the security office.

“Oh, where are your shoes, honey?” The guard asked as she walked slowly back toward her small gold cart type vehicle.

“Thems got balloo to them. Them gotz sicky. I taked them offa mine foots.” Skye pointed in the direction she had dropped her pink sparkly sneakers. “The boy putted hims code balloo soda onna mine foots. Him pushded me down the groun.” She explained as the woman lifted her on to the seat. Skye looked at the cart and smiled. “Mine Nee Nee haves a car like a yours.”

“Okay, little one, hold on.” The woman smiled as she started the cart and moved slowly through the crowd.

xx

Elena paced back and forth in the large waiting room of the security office. “I thought they said they found her. What is taking so long?” She stopped at the large window that created one wall and peered out at the parking area.

“She was on the other side of the park. It takes a while to get here in one of those little carts. They aren’t very fast.” Mack tried to calm her.

“Rápido como una tortuga,” Elena huffed. Mack stifled a laugh.

“Maybe she is hurt,” Elena’s voiced turned from frustration to concern. “Maybe they could not
“bring her directly to us.”

“She’s not…” Mack began, holding the smaller woman’s shoulders.

“OYO!!” Skye’s voice shattered the calm in the room as she bolted away from the guard who had entered through a side door. “MACK!” She squealed as she wrapped herself around the man’s leg. “I misted you. You seed the kanarudes nuff, now?” She asked innocently. “I no seed you no more and I go find Dunny.”

Elena let out a frustrated breath and made a grand effort to contain her anger. “Skye…” she barked at the child causing her to jump and slide around Mack’s leg to peek out at her.

“I sorry, Oyo.” Skye spoke in a tiny voice. “You be mad to me?”

“¿Enojado? Oh, sí pequeño, estoy muy enojado. ¡Casi me das un ataque al corazón! Me doy vuelta y te has ido. No puedo encontrarte durante horas y ¿crees que no estoy enojado? Tienes suerte de no azotar tu trasero hasta que se vuelva morado.” Elena spoke so rapidly, Mack could barely translate.

The man bent down to speak to the little girl. “Yoyo is pretty angry, Tremors. You can’t just walk away. We were very scared when we didn’t see you.” He watched as Elena paced off her hot temper and nodded his thanks to the guard.

“She’s a little worse for wear,” the woman smiled. “I think she may have had a little accident and I haven’t been able to locate her shoes. Apparently someone spilled something on her and knocked her down. She took it upon herself to rinse off in one of the fountains. Gotta say she is quite resourceful.”

Mack nodded as he laid a hand atop the child’s head. “Thank you for finding her.” He smiled.

The woman nodded back. “There’s a washroom in the back. You can clean up there.” She looked at the stroller parked against the far wall. “Might be a good idea to use that as well.”

“Absolutely,” Elena agreed as she hefted the large pink duffle onto her shoulder. “Let’s go, Chiquita.” She took the child’s hand and tugged her toward the washroom.
“Lo siento, Oyo. Me azotes ahora.” The little girl asked as she ran to keep in step with the woman.

Elena looked back at Mack over her shoulder. He shook his head. She stopped and looked down at into the tear filled eyes that looked back. “We will clean you and change your clothing and then you sit in the stroller. Entiéndeme?”

Skye nodded and hurried to match Elena’s steps as she pushed open the washroom door.

xx

Ten minutes later Elena emerged with a shoeless Skye dressed in her third outfit of the day. Now the little girl was in the woman’s arms and put up no protest when she was plunked down into the large umbrella stroller. Elena pulled the shoulder harness up and lifted one eyebrow at Skye’s pout. The little girl immediately sucked in her lip and sat up straight allowing Elena to buckle the restraint across her chest and then her waist.

“We see Dunny now?” Skye asked softly.

“De nuevo con el Dunee! Vimos esos malditos canguros durante una hora y ella todavía busca esta.” Elena rambled rapidly throwing her arms in the air and walking away from Mack and the stroller. “Calm down, Yoyo.” Mack spoke softly. He smiled at the little girl who watched his partner and her wicked temper. “She’s just a kid. We’ll figure it out.” The park security guard still stood in the room. She pulled a green tri-fold brochure from the rack against the far wall and stepped toward them. “We have more than one exhibit for the kangaroos. There are several types. I believe you saw the standard exhibit. There are wallabies in this one.” She tapped the picture on the shiny paper. “And of course we have a wonderful exhibit in the new small animal area. It opened a few weeks ago. They’ve got a large run for the kangaroo rats.” Skye’s eyes widened as the guard pointed to the photo of the small creature. “It bees him! It bees Dunny. Him lived in mine schoo in a liddle howz.” She reached for the brochure which the woman handed to her with a smile then pulled a second one and gave it to Mack. Elena joined him to look.

“This tiny rodent is what caused all this…” she paused searching for the words in English, but resorted to her native language, “malita locura…” She turned and paced away and then back muttering under her breath. “Una tarde entera que es toda una malita locura. toda esta locura por una rata?”

“I sorry, Oyo.” Skye chewed her lip and played with the stroller’s harness. “I be bad, Oyo? You be mad to me now?” The little girl dropped her chin to her chest and took a shaky breath.
Elena crossed her arms over her chest and stared down at the contrite youngster. She tapped one foot impatiently, refusing to look at Mack who she knew had already forgiven the little imp and was ready to move on with their adventure. She let out a short breath and turned to look out the window for a few seconds before turning back to girl. “Mira, Skye, mirame.” The woman relaxed her stance as she waited. “Skye?”

Skye looked up with only her eyes, expecting the worst.

“You frightened us very badly. You know you cannot go away alone, without me or without Mack. I know you are sorry, and you will stay in that stroller until I put you into the car to go home. Then we will talk to your mama and papa. I think mama will be the one to decide what will happen.”

Skye swallowed. “Her be madder to me, Oyo.”

Elena nodded, then looked at Mack who was shaking his head. “That is probably true, but not something to think about now. Now, we will go to see this rodent. This Dun E you need to see so very badly.”

The little girl smiled as Mack pushed the stroller out of the security building and headed for the Small Mammal exhibit.

xx

Elena finally relented and released Skye from the harness long enough for Mack to lift her up to the glass enclosure to observe the family of Kangaroo Rats in the large building that housed them and a few other marsupials. The girl rambled on about the small creatures and how one had lived in her classroom but had to move to the zoo before it got sick. She watched, from Mack’s arms, as the animals burrowed in the soft sand and peeked through the foliage in the pen. She spoke to the animal she insisted was Dunny, asking it how it liked its new house and its new family. Each time Elena or Mack suggested they move on, Skye would find another reason to stay and continue her visit with the little rodent, speaking quietly to it through the glass. “Skye, perhaps your little friend needs to rest. You have been visiting a very long time.” Elena suggested, feeling almost silly for even making such a statement. “Yeah, Tremors, I’d really like to see those giraffe’s before it gets too late.” Mack tried to encourage her toward another exhibit. Skye leaned close to the glass and let out a soft breath. “Dunny like a hees new hows, Mack. Him bees happy?” She asked without turning toward the man. Mack looked at Elena then back to Skye. “Well, he looks happy to me. Look at him hopping around in there. He’s got so much room and so many places to hide if he wants to hide. He’s got a family to keep him company, too.” Skye pressed the tip of her index
finger against the glass. “Them bees him’s brudders and him’s sissers?” “I bet they are,” Mack smiled. The little girl looked at him for a beat. “Where bees the momma and daddy? Them’s gotta momma and a daddy?” She asked quietly, turning back to look through the thick glass. Elena leaned closed to Skye’s opposite side. “Si, bebe, Dun E has a momma and a poppa here. There is a whole family for him here.” Skye looked at Elena then up at Mack. She turned back and looked at the small group of tiny animals and nodded. “Him bees happy with a momma and a daddy and brudders and a sisser. Them bees a family.” She smiled up at Mack. “We see a ralphs now, Mack. They be big like you be big too.” Mack stood and carried the little girl out of the building, Elena followed, pushing the stroller. xx

The rest of the day was uneventful as the small group made their way through every exhibit in the large zoo. Dinner was at one of the park’s restaurants and by seven that evening they made their way to the car where Mack lifted a very sleepy little girl from the stroller and buckled her into her car seat. She was asleep before they left the parking lot.

Forty minutes later the large man carried Skye into through the kitchen door and delivered her into the arms of her waiting mother.

“Hi, momma,” Skye greeted her groggily as she snuggled into her mother’s neck. “I seed Dunny. Him bees happy wit hees famalee.”

Melinda kissed her head and smiled at the exhausted expression on her friends’ faces. “Why don’t you two sit down and have some coffee. I’ll put her into bed and send Phil out.” She nodded toward the fresh pot on the counter as she let the room.

A few minutes later Skye was changed and tucked into her bed, Salty secure in her arms. Melinda kissed her head and tucked the light blanket up to her chin. There would be plenty of time tomorrow for this little adventurer to share her experiences but for now she and Phil would get the story from their friends certain that it would be much different from the one they’d get from their daughter.

She could only imagine the torture her little angel had put Mack and Elena through as she made her way down the stairs.

“So,” Melinda began as she poured herself a cup of tea and sat at the table with Phil and their best agents. “Why are my baby’s feet blue and how did she lose her sparkly shoes?”

Mack and Elena looked at each other as each took a long sip from their large mugs.
Chapter Summary

Fitz and Jemma are home from university for the holiday
Trip is on leave from and Skye is thrilled to have them home
Waiting for Phil and Melinda to return from a last minute shopping trip they reminisce
about their first Christmas together.

Chapter Notes

Yes this is out of order and I was working on L when I became rather ill and caught
pnuemonia before it turned ugly. After four days of bed rest I decided to skip to M or it
would never get done before Christmas....so L will be the next installment after I
complete the next chapter of If the Frame Fits.

WARNING - About three quarters of the way through this gets a little racy but
hopefully it is in good taste. If this offends you please skip that section which is well
outlined in order for you to do so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Skye shoved the last of the chocolate chip cookie into her mouth and took a quick sip of cocoa
before running to pull open the front door. She slid the last two feet across the hardwood floor on
her stocking feet and pulled open the door as she swallowed the last of her mouthful. Lucky for the
young man standing behind two large cases that she did as her mouth dropped open at the sight.

“Fitz!” the young girl squealed as she pushed aside the suitcases and wrapped herself around her
older brother.

“Oomph,” Fitz replied stepping back to keep his balance and hold the cases steady on the snow
covered stoop.

“Skye!” another voice squealed in the same pitch with a much different accent.

Skye released her brother and pulled her sister into the same tight hug, forgetting she was standing
in ankle deep snow clad only in sweat-socks. “What are you guys doing here? We didn’t expect
you til the weekend.” She released Jemma for a second then pulled her into another tight hug
before reaching out and pulling Fitz into it as well.

“We caught an earlier flight.” The young man explained as a light snow began to fall. “Not that I don’t appreciate the welcome but do you think we can continue this inside.”

“Oh, geez, yeah…yeah…come on you guys…YOU GUYS!” Skye squealed again pulling both into the house and pulling off their coats before they had a chance to do so. She threw both on nearest piece of furniture much to Jemma’s dismay. “Gawd, I missed you guys!” The girl could not keep the squeal from her voice or the smile from her face. “Mom and Dad will flip when they see you! Damn, I should call them…” she pulled a phone from her pocket.

“NO!” Both answered, shocking Skye into silence.

“No,” Jemma repeated quietly, smiling at the fact they had halted their baby sister for one of a very few times. “We want it to be a surprise.”

Fitz dragged the two large cases into the parlor. “We can put these upstairs so they won’t see them.” He suggested as he reached for his jacket. “I’ll need to go out to the cabbie and get the rest and pay the man as well.”

“Cabbie?” Skye repeated. “Why didn’t you call? I would have picked you up!”

“Exactly why we didn’t,” Fitz tapped the end of his sister’s nose. “We’ve seen you drive and we wanted to get here in one piece.” He stepped past her and out the front door.

“Ha ha!” Skye smiled at her brother’s jest, standing in the open doorway and watching as he trudged down the walk to the cab at the curb.

Jemma stepped next to her, already slipping into her own coat. “Perhaps we should help?” She nodded at Skye as she slipped past and started down the stairs. “And Skye,” she remarked without turning back, “put on some shoes.”

Skye looked down at her now soggy socks, shrugged her shoulders and reached down to pull of the offensive footwear. She shoved her bare feet into the nearest pair of boots and tossed the socks over the stairway railing.
Jemma would scold her for an hour for not wearing a coat.

xx

Dark comes early in December especially in the eastern U.S. so by five p.m. Skye had flicked on the festive lights that decorated the front of the Coulson home and plugged in the twinkling blinkers on the eight foot tree that stood in parlor window. She and Jemma snuggled on the couch watching the lights as Fitz attempted to start a fire in the large fireplace on the opposite side of the room. They stopped, holding collective breaths as the back door opened and they heard someone step inside.

“Skye?” Trip’s voice rang through the quiet house. “Hey, I brought Chinese…got your favorites.” He laughed out loud, “all of them.”

Skye slid into the kitchen, across the tile once again in her stocking feet. “That’s good, because…”

Trip’s eyebrow’s rose as he waited for her to continue, then heard the faint sound of a soft giggle. “Because?” He narrowed his eyes. “What’re you up to, baby girl?” He teased using an old pet name for his baby sister.

“Surprise!” Jemma squealed as she stepped into the kitchen, dragging Fitz behind her.

“JEMMA!” Trip bellowed reaching his sister in two long strides, lifting her into his arms and spinning her in a circle before setting her down and kissing the top of her head. He grabbed Fitz before the younger man could protest and pulled him into a headlock, rubbing his knuckles across the ever present curls. “Little Man! Fitz, old boy.” Releasing his little brother he pulled him into a bear hug that Fitz returned with equal gusto.

“We didn’t know you were home,” Jemma smiled as she wrapped her arms around her brother and hugged him again.

“Seems, Skye had a surprise of her own,” Fitz smirked.

Skye shuffled her feet and tried to hide the blush. “He just got home yesterday.”
Trip smiled wide. “Managed to get a month’s leave before my next assignment,” he expression changed for a brief moment. “Not sure when I’ll get home again.” The he smiled again as he moved his siblings toward the table. “But for now, we’re here, all of us so let’s enjoy.” He spread his arms across the various bags he’d set on the table. “There’s enough here for everybody, especially since Skye’s favorites include just about everything. In fact,” he continued as he began pulling small white containers from the bags. “She the only person I know that eats more than Fitz.” He waggled his eyebrows at his little brother.

Even Fitz joined the laughter.

xx

Bellies full and kitchen cleaned the four Coulson siblings spread out in front of the fire Fitz and Trip had started. The glow of the flames and the sparkle of the Christmas tree lights brought a serene light to the room, lit only by those means.

“So you aren’t sure when they’ll be home,” Jemma asked trying to hide the anticipation in her voice.

Skye looked toward the large grandfather clock in the corner and smiled at the way the fire caused the large numerals on it to appear to glow in reds and golds. “It’s not even seven, they’re never home before eight and with the snow…well it could be later.”

“Mom said something about last minute shopping when they left this morning.” Trip mused staring into the mesmerizing flames. His head slipped off his hand where it rested as the pillow his youngest sister flung slammed into him.

“You didn’t tell me that!” Skye whined. “I had so many suggestions, too.”

Jemma poked her ribs. “You never change.”

Skye smiled. “You would have liked a lot of them.” Both girls giggled and leaned closer to each other bantering in talk or giggling or whatever it was girls talked about that made boys roll their eyes.
Fitz stretched out his legs and knocked a long stemmed basket from the stand next to the fireplace. He jumped and caught it before it hit the floor. Turning it toward himself and staring at it for a brief moment.

“Hey, great reflex improvement little bro!” Trip teased, landing a soft punch on his brother’s shoulder as he sat up and took the basket from Fitz. “Wow, the old popcorn basket,” he wobbled it back and forth. “Too bad we don’t have any,” he laughed for a moment. “Remember, remember the time we filled it and…and…” the man could not continue for the laughter.

“And the lid blew off…” Fitz added to the laughter.

“Popcorn all over the room!” Skye remembered.

“I think it kept popping for hours after Fitz spilled it into the fire.” Jemma laughed.

“Me!” Fitz pointed at his own chest. “Not me, it was Trip trying to come to the rescue and Jemma trying to keep Skye from jamming her little hands right into the hot mess.”

“Oh yeah, right blame me,” Skye laughed.

“I think mom picked up popcorn kernels for a year.” Trip snorted.

Jemma yanked a pillow from the sofa and threw it to the floor then laid down on it looking up at the brightly lit tree. Skye followed her example and snuggled up next to her big sister. Jemma smiled and kissed the younger girl’s temple as she wrapped an arm around her. Skye wrapped both her hands around her older sister’s.

“Remember when we used to do this while Da read the Night Before Christmas every Christmas Eve?” Jemma smiled as she cuddled into Skye.

“Right after we hung our stockings,” Skye smiled as well, closing her eyes and relishing the memory.

“Mom would give us hot cocoa and cookies,” Fitz stared up at the tree. “Only time we ever got such a great treat before bedtime.”
“You never made it to the end of the story,” Trip sighed. “Yep, fell asleep right there,” he pointed to the spot next to Jemma and Skye. “The three of you right there, like little Christmas gifts all cute and sleeping…” his voice changed into a silly sing-song as he teased his younger siblings who rolled their eyes at his nonsense. “Mom, Dad and I had to cart the lot of you up the stairs every time.”

Trip shook his head at the memory of carrying his little brother up the stairs and laying him in his bunk before Melinda would come to tuck him in and kiss him good night. Phil would follow after tucking in the girls and no matter how old or big he was Melinda kissed him too and Phil would pull him into a hug before wishing him a good night and a Merry Christmas.

Fitz pulled his legs criss cross in front of him and leaned forward to rest on his arms. “Do you remember that first Christmas?” He asked quietly.

Skye rolled over on her tummy and rested her chin on her folded hands. She peered into the small wooden stable under the tree. “You mean Bethlehem and the Star and the Baby?” She reached out and tapped a finger gently on the small plastic figure in the center of the crèche.

Fitz shook his head and looked directly at Jemma. “No, the first one…the first one we had…together.”

Jemma sat up and scooted closer to her brother, taking his hand in hers. “I remember.”

Skye rolled back and stared up through the branches of the tree she had managed to wriggle under. “I think the tree was about three feet higher.”

Trip gave her foot a gentle swat. “More like you were three feet shorter and they’re not talking about that Christmas.” His voice was more serious than it had been and Skye moved from beneath the tree to set next to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“It was before you came to us, bao bao.” Jemma explained and Skye smiled at the term of endearment.

“We were still in that little apartment.” Fitz recalled with a sad smile. “And the tree…wellll…”
The tree wasn’t very big, in fact it was more of a twig. Even Charlie Brown’s tree looked healthier. But the tree wasn’t the problem in the Coulson apartment. With just a week until the thrown-together family celebrated their first Christmas there was very little merry to be shared.

It was difficult easing three children through traumatic experiences every day and Christmas just made it harder. No one felt much like celebrating when everything about the holiday only served as a reminder of what they had lost, how their lives had been torn apart and how it would never again feel the same.

Jemma spent more time in the local library than anywhere else and when at home she hardly left her small bedroom. Both Phil and Melinda knew she was quietly sobbing, mourning her loss over and over but she resisted every effort they made to comfort her. The girl barely ate, if it was even possible for her to eat less than what she’d been eating. Three professors had called in three days to inquire about her well being, saying she was listless in class and not completing assignments.

Trip begged permission to spend time in his grandmother’s apartment, even sleeping there one or two nights a week. He spent hours going through the woman’s address book, carefully penning his grandmother’s name to Christmas cards he knew she would send. He fell into his own bed so Phil and Melinda and their little kids wouldn’t hear him cry himself to sleep. It was dumb and he knew it but he was so scared…scared his gram would not get better and what would happen to him…scared that he couldn’t do everything she did for the holiday…scared he couldn’t help all the people she did every year. He tried baking her cookies and burnt two batches before getting it right and delivering them to the church homeless shelter on his way to school. He’d fallen asleep in algebra class earning a call to Phil who threatened to take away his overnight privileges if it happened again. It didn’t. He made sure it didn’t.

Fitz…Fitz was the worst. His use of colorful, albeit unacceptable language became almost part of his everyday speech. Despite warning after warning and several hours spent in his room it only grew worse, along with is temper. He smashed a table full of beakers in chemistry class when an experiment failed and bloodied the nose of a classmate who sniggered at his lack of physical skill in gym class. Being Fitz he managed it with a well place volley ball, rather than a fist but he was fully responsible. Phil was called to the school both times at the little boy’s request knowing that the man would certainly read him the riot act but he wasn’t about to take any chances with that woman.

Even Melinda found she needed time away from her new family, heartbroken over the decision made by St. Agnes head social worker who had denied the Coulson’s custody of Skye for the holiday. The little girl had spent two weekends with them. Phil and Melinda thought all was well and prepared to bring her home for good by the twenty-third. Jade Johnson put an end to that with one swipe of her pen. She would make her final decision after the holiday and until then Mary Sue
Poots stayed right where she was. Almost all of the children at the orphanage spent the holidays with local families. Skye would spend it at there with a few older children and the few sisters who had not requested time to spend with their own families. The only redeeming grace was that Sr. M. Claire was one of them.

Still that did not stop Melinda from sobbing silently into her own pillow each night. Phil pulled her to his chest, trying in vain to comfort her. He’d pulled every string he could and then some but nothing and no one could change the social worker’s mind and pressing the issue could jeopardize their attempt to make Skye part of their family. Everything hinged on what that woman said and they did not want to take the risk. Still Melinda cried for the baby that would spend the holiday alone and for the ache in her heart that could not be healed.

The Coulsons had not made a big deal out of Halloween or Thanksgiving, making light of both holidays to help the children make the adjustment. They had hoped Christmas would be different. Phil brought the two foot tree from the basement storage area and set one box of small ornaments on the coffee table. He purchased a new set of lights in the hopes they would spend some time decorating it together. It wasn’t much and they certainly could afford more but the apartment was small and crowded and there was little room to spare for a much larger tree. He suggested a bigger tree but Melinda nixed the idea reminding him, on their way to the office, that they hoped to be in a much larger home by next Christmas.

The little tree was the one Phil and Melinda used every year since they’d moved into this apartment. It fit neatly on the two tiered table before the front window. It looked delightful from the street, giving the impression of a much bigger model and Melinda always laughed at how it fooled everyone. They had their own special little ornaments…one from their first Christmas together, one from a trip to Canada and several other places they visited throughout their marriage. Melinda had searched every shop in three states to find special trinkets for the kids to hang this year, even one for baby’s first. She knew Skye wasn’t a baby…but, hell yes it was her baby’s first Christmas…or it would have been. Now the little pram decorated in pink, only served as another reason to cry. She didn’t even mention the other ornaments feeling that the other kids would show no interest anyway. She actually envisioned Fitz using the glass bulbs as baseballs and pitching them against every wall in the place. He’d already pushed her to her limit and she wondered what kind of mother she would be branded for tanning his hide a week before the big day.

Phil was never one to give up and he smiled as the kids shuffled in from school. He and Melinda made it a point to be home by the time the children arrived. Jemma arrived first, announcing that Fitz had left something on the van and went back for it. She shrugged off her coat and hung it neatly in the hall closet, collected her backpack and headed for her bedroom ignoring what Phil was doing in the parlor. Fitz kicked open the door and threw his backpack on the floor before tossing his coat on the closet floor and leaving that door ajar. He dragged his bag across the floor without acknowledging Phil and slammed his bedroom door behind him. Trip was last, pushing open the door that Fitz hadn’t secured and picking up his little brother’s jacket as he hung his own. He waved to Phil with a half smile and hiked his backpack on his shoulder before asking for permission to do his homework across the hall. Doing it with Fitz had become almost impossible.
“I’d really like if you stuck around tonight, Trip. I need your help with this.” He stepped aside and revealed the little tree.

Trip stifled a laugh that probably would have come off as a sob. “Doesn’t look like much of a job, Mr. C.”

Phil had managed to bend and shape the branches into what resembled a small pine tree. He looked at the pitiful thing that always seemed so much more festive when he and Melinda sipped wine, played sappy Christmas music and somehow made it look better. “Yeah, but maybe you could help me get the kids to help.” He looked at the young boy and waited for the reply that didn’t come. “I know you’re not feeling very festive, Trip and I don’t blame you but this might help a little. Whadya say, help a guy out?”

Trip smiled. He knew what his gram would say…what she’d want him to do. He slid the backpack down and shuffled his feet a bit. “Sure, Mr. C. I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but I’ll give it a try.”

“Thanks, Trip. You can use my desk to do your homework. I know Fitz hasn’t been a lot of fun lately.” Phil adjusted the tree a bit more and stood back to check it out. “Still a little lopsided, huh?” He looked over his shoulder at Trip who nodded in agreement.

By the time Melinda called them for supper the tree was a straight as it was going to be. Phil had left Trip to his assignments and helped with dinner prep then knocked on two closed doors twice before opening both and ordering two grumpy children to the kitchen.

Jemma slid onto her chair and frowned at the meal set before her. Trip sat next to her and smiled as he pulled his napkin into his lap and said a quick prayer, like he and his gram did at every meal. He didn’t expect the Coulsons to do it and they didn’t mind that he did. Fitz flopped into his chair on the opposite side of the table and pushed the plate away.

“I’m not hungry.” He announced with a growl.

Melinda pushed it back gently. “Pretend you are…humor me.” The boy rolled his eyes and dropped his head onto his hand.

“You shouldn’t put your elbow on the table, Fitz.” Jemma remarked automatically.
“Don’t be putting your elbows on the table,” Fitz mocked her in a nasally snide voice. “I’ll put my bloody elbows wherever I damn well please to, Miss Manners.”

Jemma frowned and put down her head to hide the blush.

Melinda tapped the table and glared at the boy. “That’s enough Fitz and I’ve warned you about that language. Next time it won’t be a warning.”

Fitz turned up one side of his mouth and dropped his hands into his lap. He looked up at Melinda over his brows then did the same with Phil and Trip. He swung his legs under the table and tapped the end of the fork causing it to bounce up and down. Melinda picked it up and set it in his hand nodding toward his plate as incentive for him to start eating.

The boy poked at the chicken on his plate and watched as Phil and Trip dug into their own food. He rested his opposite elbow on the table and twirled one of his curls around his finger. “How come we never have mutton or haggis or salmon? Why always this garbage?”

“Fitz!” Four voices admonished the boy who looked up innocently.

“Well?” Fitz waited for answer as he flicked the green beans across his plate.

“Well,” Melinda began, looking up at Phil and trying not to feel the stares of the other two children at the table. “You never asked for anything like that, Fitz. I’ll see what I can do. Maybe you can help. I’m not really sure just what haggis is?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Fitz smirked. “I hate the bloody stuff. Far as it concerns me the mess tastes like sh…”

“Fitz!” Phil’s voice was firm and the boy snapped his mouth shut.

The table was silent for a moment as Jemma stared at her plate and Fitz poked at his. Trip finished and asked for seconds which Melinda obliged.

“I thought we might get some decorations up tonight.” Phil suggested without looking up from his
food. “Maybe get a little spirit in the place.”

The silence was deafening until Fitz started laughing. “You call that shabby little twig in there,” he hooked a thumb over his shoulder, “a Christmas tree? It’s the damn, bloodiest stupid thing I’ve seen in all my life.”

Phil smiled. It was a poor excuse for a tree. “Well, little man, I’m sorry it doesn’t meet your specifications but it’s all we’ve got.”

“Stands to reason,” Fitz mumbled as he squashed his mashed potatoes flat. “Dumb bloody tree for a bunch of damn, feckin’ kids nobody wants anyway.”

“What was that?” Phil asked, now completely focused on the little boy. “If you’ve got something to say Fitz, say it out loud.”

Fitz froze for a moment, staring at the table before throwing his fork down onto his plate causing Jemma to jump. He slammed his hands on the table and stood. “I said I’m not decorating any feckin tree and I’m not eating this f…”

Yep there it was the big bad ‘f’ word right out loud in front of them all. He said it once and they all just stared like they were frozen so he said it again and pounded his fist on the table, then again and pounded both fists. He would have said it again if Melinda didn’t have him by the wrist whisking him away from the table and the kitchen.

She slammed his bedroom door harder than he had earlier, yanked the chair from his desk, spun it around and slammed it down on the floor.

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“Damn, Fitz, you really said that?” Skye was between shock and humor. “And I wasn’t there to see it.”

“Oh, you were too young to remember anyway,” Jemma smiled.

“So what happened?” Skye leaned forward and rubbed her hands together. “Oh, I bet momma blistered your bahoochie.” She laughed.
Fitz blushed at an incident that happened so many years ago then laughed at his sister’s comment. “Well I wouldn’t say blistered but it was the worst, the last and the first.”

Skye scrunched up her face in confusion. Jemma shrugged and Trip shook his head. None had ever heard this part of the story although the thin walls of the apartment did allow them to hear the whalloping their brother got before he returned to the table and finished his meal without further incident.

“The worse language I ever used…the last time I used it and the first time mom dropped my drawers before she let me know how she felt about it and exactly what all those warning were about.” Fitz explained.

“Oh come on, Fitz, you know she smacked your bum when you used that language with the magistrate in Sheffield.” Jemma laughed, reminding him of another time he failed to heed her warnings.

“Believe me a couple swats on the backside in the doorway of my room was nothing compared to the Christmas Blitz.” He informed her.

Skye let out a wet laugh. “Really? You named it?” She snickered until Trip wrapped a hand around her mouth and pulled her back against his chest.

“He deserved it and leave it at that or I might have to share the story of the time someone I know found out where the fire started when they played with matches.” Trip whispered in her ear. Skye laughed and shook her head, trying to pull his hand away, although his grip was light. Fitz and Jemma laughed as well. Finally, Trip dropped his hand and the laughter faded.

“So then what happened?” Skye asked, needing to hear more of this ‘before you were born’ kinda story big brothers and sisters tell younger kids.

“Well, sad to say that poor little tree didn’t get decorated that night.” Jemma sighed.

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“I can’t help you if you won’t talk to me, Fitz.” Melinda held the little boy in front of her, wiping tears from his eyes.

“I don’t want to talk,” Fitz hiccoughed. “I don’t want to…” He sobbed but refused to allow her to comfort him.

“I’m very sorry, Fitz but I can’t allow this behavior, not now or ever.” Melinda spoke softly to the now very upset boy. “I’m sorry it had to come to this, but you’ve been told what would happen.” She gave him time to reply but he merely balled his small fists holding his arms straight at his sides. “Okay then, let’s go wash your face and then you can finish your dinner.” He looked at her in almost disbelief. “Yes, little boy, you are going to eat your dinner and then you will clean up this fine mess you’ve made.” She looked at the tossed room, apparently done by Fitz in a fit of temper after school. Books and toys lay strewn around everywhere, the lower bunk mattress pulled off and tilted to one side. “Then I will help you take a bath and it’s bedtime.”

Fitz rubbed a finger under his nose and sniffed deeply. “I di’ not need help bathing.” He mumbled as he stepped around Melinda heading for the bathroom.

“I think you do.” She smiled as she wrapped an arm around his shoulders. He shrugged her off and stepped faster to stay ahead of her. “Tonight you take a real bath, not just run the water and swish the soap around.” Melinda leaned against the door frame as Fitz stood on tiptoe to reach the sink and splash cool water on his cried out blotchy face. He pulled the small towel from the rack and rubbed the drops away then dropped it on the countertop. Melinda pointed to the rack and he complied, returning the item to its proper place. He stepped around her again and walked slowly back to the kitchen.

Phil had finished his meal and sat nursing a mug of coffee. He’d placed Melinda’s favorite china cup at her place. The matching tea pot was set there as well. Trip had cleaned away the dishes from his and Phil’s places, scraped, rinsed and placed them in the dishwasher. He enjoyed a mug of coffee with Phil as they shared a few cookies one of the neighbors had sent as a holiday gift. Jemma still moved the food around slowly on her plate, having nibbled on one green bean and swallowed two sips of milk. Phil lifted his head as Fitz slid slowly back on to his chair and picked up his fork.

Melinda gave her husband a quick nod and sat down. “Jemma, you need to eat more than one bite of a bean. I really do not have the energy to go through a second round of dinner drama but if I have to…” She smiled as the little girl forced a swallow of mashed potatoes followed by another polite sip of milk. The woman gave a quick smile. “Three beans, three tastes of potatoes and three bites of chicken,” she informed the girl. Jemma nodded and took another drink.

After dinner Trip cleaned the table with Jemma’s help. Fitz was excused from the nightly chore to
complete the directions Melinda had given him earlier. Melinda ran his bath and waited outside
the door until he was in the sudsy water. She’d added enough bubble bath to let him keep his
modesty as well as his mini-manhood and sat on the closed toilet lid making sure he scrubbed
everything scrubbable, including his curly hair. She squeezed her eyes tight and held out a large
towel for him to step into and rubbed him dry, speaking to him about mostly nothing, just trivial
things like the broadcast for snow and the fact that three tenants had been stuck in the elevator for a
half an hour that afternoon. She left the room for him to dress taking all the dirty laundry with her
and making sure he had clean undergarments as those she took looked to have been worn for at
least three days. She’d told him many times he did not need to wear the same shorts for days, that
he had a drawer full and if he grew out of them she would get him more.

Fitz hung up the towel he’d used and pulled the step Phil had provided for him and Jemma to the
front of the sink so he could look into the mirror while he brushed his teeth. He looked into the
mirror and frowned at himself for his rotten behavior. He wondered what his maw would think.
He wondered if she would think about it at all, not that she didn’t care, but she was so sick all the
time that she mostly didn’t notice his use of ‘colorful’ words or rather nasty comments. Either that
or she just accepted it a lot better than these Yanks with all their rules and baths and bedtimes.

It had been almost four months since he’d come to live with Phil Coulson and his wife. He still
didn’t think the woman liked him very much. She was always on him about something. Comb
your hair, Fitz. Tie your shoes, Fitz. Brush your teeth, make your bed, pick up your coat, watch
your mouth, take a bath, change your pants…she was always, always downn him about
something. He thought for a moment. She never went on about any of that nonsense with
Jemma…perfect Jemma who did everything right. Huh, except eating. She never ate anything,
spit most of it in her bl… He stopped himself mid-thought wondering if Melinda could hear him
thinking. Although the idea was preposterous he wasn’t taking any chances. His backside still
smarted from her last impression of his use of unacceptable vernacular. He finished brushing, used
the loo, washed his hands (because he knew she’d ask) and stepped into the hall.

Melinda was waiting and swept out an arm for him to proceed. Fitz took a few steps toward his
room and stopped. “You don’t have to tuck me in. I’m not a wee lad that needs all that fuss.” He
spoke without turning around.

“No you’re not, but I think I’d like to anyway. You might not need the fuss, but I think I do.”
Melinda smiled at the back of the little boy’s head.

A warm feeling spread over Fitz, one he didn’t really recognize but he liked it. Maybe she did like
him…a little bit anyway. “I’ll not get out of bed. I’ll do as you say.”

Melinda stepped behind him and ran a hand through his slightly damp locks. “I know you will,
bao bao.” She smiled, surprised and pleased when he didn’t brush her off.
“What’s bow bow?” The little boy asked as he allowed her to escort him through the door.

Melinda lifted the blankets and waited for Fitz to climb in. “It means sweetheart,” she lied, knowing the boy would be mortified to be called ‘baby’.

“Is it Chinese?” Fitz asked as he settled into his pillow and folded his hands over his chest.

“Mandarin,” Melinda nodded.

“Teach me?” Fitz asked quietly, looking away in case she refused.

Melinda sat on the edge of the bunk. “I would love to, baobao. We will start with something simple. “Wǒ ěi nǐ,” Melinda spoke slowly. She held out her hand in a stop motion repeating, whoa. She pointed to her eye and her then knee, repeating the other two syllables. Fitz repeated the phrase slowly then a little faster, trying to imitate her inflection as well as pronunciation.

The little boy smiled for the first time in weeks. Then repeated the phrase again. “What does it mean?”

“Before I tell you, I want you to know that is it the most important Mandarin phrase I will ever teach you and I will say it to you every day for as long as fate allows. Do you believe that?”

Fitz nodded and took a deep breath. It probably meant something like change your under-drawers every day.

“It means ‘I love you’ Fitz. I love you today and tomorrow and always, even when you’re a little hooligan.” Melinda smiled, ignoring the blush in the little boy’s cheeks.

He didn’t argue or protest just looked deep into her eyes searching for the truth in her statement, silently praying it was there somewhere he couldn’t see yet because deep down under all his anger and resentment he loved this woman more than he ever thought he would or could and despite all the nagging on him she was the best person in his life.

Melinda tucked the blankets up to his chin as Fitz rolled to his side and tucked his hands under his
cheek. She wanted so much to kiss him but knew he was not ready for that step. Instead she ran a hand over his hair and across his shoulder. “Wǎn’ān, Fitz.” She stood and walked toward the door as the little boy sat up quickly.

“Good night?” he smiled, already knowing the answer. She smiled and nodded as he lay down. Melinda flicked off the light and slowly pulled closed the door.

“Wǎn’ān, Mel…” he practiced the term out loud then turned into his pillow whispering, “wǒ ài nǐ.”

Melinda stood outside the door, wiping a tear formed on the breath of a little boy’s whisper

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Stepping into the living room she watched for a moment as Phil wrapped the new set of lights around the small tree. He plugged them in and stepped back to watch them twinkle in a rainbow of color.

“I thought you liked them all white.” She stated as she stepped behind him and placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

He smiled a sad smile. “I thought the kids would prefer a bit of color.” He let out a sigh. “I don’t think they care.

Melinda looked around at the empty room and asked with her eyes.

“Trip begged to go across the hall after Jemma complained of a stomach ache and went to her room.” Melinda took a step toward the girl’s door stopped by Phil’s hand on her wrist. “I’m pretty sure it was a ploy just to get out of this. I’m not going to force them Mel and after Fitz’s drama… well, I think the fun’s just gone out of it.” He frowned as he flicked off the lights. “Not that there was any to begin with.”

Melinda pulled her ‘big kid’ into a tight hug and kissed his temple. “Guess it’s just you and me then isn’t it.” She released him and picked up a shiny red bulb from the box then placed it on the tree. She turned as the voice of Bing Crosby crooning White Christmas filled the room. Phil appeared from the kitchen with two goblets and a bottle of wine. He popped the cork and poured
then held out a glass to her. Melinda took it and plinked it against his before taking a bit more than a sip.

Thirty minutes later, the couple sat on the couch and stared at the sad little tree. Melinda had chosen to forgo all of the ornaments they’d collected on their journeys and hung only plain green, red, blue and gold balls of varying sizes. A few strands of garland were wrapped around the little thing and a small gold star glittered at the top.

“It kinda looks like we all feel.” Phil remarked as he sipped his wine and wrapped his arm around his wife.

Melinda rested her head on his shoulder. “Do you think she’ll even get a gift? Do you think she knows about Santa? Oh, gawd, Phil what if…what if…” She was in tears before he could put down his drink and wrap her in his embrace.

“Don’t think that way, Mel.” Phil whispered in her ear. “It’ll work out. She’ll be here, one way or another. I know it. It’s just meant to be.” He tried to convince both of them as he kissed the top of her head. “I’m sure Mary Claire will make sure Skye has what she needs. And that Johnson bi… he stopped himself remembering Fitz’s predicament. “Witch,” he corrected. “That Johnson witch said she couldn’t come here. She didn’t say anything about us visiting her.”

Melinda sobbed harder. “I don’t think I could go there without taking her with me, Phil. I just can’t let her go again.”

“Aunt Mel?” Jemma’s soft voice interrupted.

Melinda quickly wiped her tears and sat up, pulling on a serious face. “Jemma, sweetie, what’s wrong?” she stood and took a step toward the girl.

“I’m fine, Aunt Mel, but…I just…just wanted to apologize for…for all this.” She held out her hand toward the room. “I’ve just been a horrid person and probably deserved just punishment.”

Melinda gathered the little girl into a hug. “Oh, baobao you’ve done nothing wrong. We’re all just having a hard time with all…this.” She put out her hand in the same way.

Phil stood as well. “Jemma, none of this is your fault. It’s just something none of us can control, but it will get better.” He put a hand on the back of the little girl’s head. “I know this is hard for everyone, but we’re here for you and for Fitz and for Trip. That’s what families do.”
“But are we, really,” Jemma looked up at him with tear filled eyes. “Are we really a family?”

“We’re trying to be.” Melinda smiled weakly. “I guess it’s a process, like anything else it takes time.”

Jemma looked down and felt a large tear drop on to the back of her hand. “I haven’t been trying very hard lately.” She mumbled.

Phil placed a finger under her chin and lifted her head. “I don’t think any of us have, princess. I think we’ve all been so stuck in our own troubles we haven’t been letting the others in to help. Maybe we should take a little baby step and see what happens.” Jemma pursed her lips and nodded as the tears ran over her cheeks. Phil scooped her up and kissed her temple.

“First we get you back to bed, it’s after ten and you need to be up early. Then I’m going to collect young Trip and get him into bed.” He smiled as he moved toward the little girl’s room with Melinda following.

While Melinda tucked an exhausted little girl who did allow kisses and hugs into bed, Phil tapped on the Triplett’s apartment door. It took a little longer than he liked for the young boy to pull it open just enough to stick out his head.

“S’getting late, bud. Time to turn in. School night, ya know.” He informed the boy, eyeing him suspiciously. Trip was almost fifteen and vulnerable to all the temptations of teens…visions of drugs and gangs swept across Phil’s mind each followed by a ‘no, not Trip’ voice in his head. ‘Yeah,’ he told himself. ‘So said every parent of every delinquent in juvy.’

Trip hemmed and hawed a bit and shuffled his feet in an attempt to keep the door not quite closed but certainly not opened. “Another twenty minutes, Mr. C, I promise, twenty minutes.” The boy seemed desperate as he looked over his shoulder into the apartment.

Phil sniffed once, then again. Was something burning? He put a hand on the door. “Something on fire, Trip?” He started to push against the door but the boy was already gone.

“Oh, no, no, no, no…” Trip was pleading as he rushed to the kitchen, pulled open the oven door and grabbed a sheet of blackened gingerbread men. He was almost in tears.
Phil looked around at the condition of the apartment. A small decorated tree twinkled in the corner of the parlor. Several wrapped gifts set under it. Every available flat surface was covered with dishes, boxes and platters of cookies. The sink was overflowing with bowls and cooking utensils and it seemed the floor was covered with a soft sheen of flour.

“Trip…I…I…really don’t even know what to say.” Phil was in awe.

“It was the last of them, only six…I still have four dozen.” He nodded toward the table where an army of decorated gingerbread men lay.

“I mean…I mean…” Phil spread his arms and Trip followed with his eyes.

The boy looked down, almost ashamed at the feat he had accomplished. “My…my gram makes cookies for the kids Christmas party at the church every year. I…I couldn’t let them down. It means a lot to her.” He spoke to his shoes.

Phil moved closer and wrapped an arm around the boy. “I am totally impressed.” He nodded as a wide smile covered his face and he one arm hugged Trip. “You did all this yourself? This is what you’ve been doing over here?” Trip nodded as he wiped his hands in the dish towel he still held.

“Are you mad?” The boy asked solemnly.

“Mad?” Phil looked around again and shook his head. “Well, yeah I guess I am…a little.”

Trip let out a breath and waited for the axe to fall.

“More like upset that you didn’t ask us for help, Trip. Melinda and I would have done whatever you needed and…where’d you get the money for all this?”

Trip stepped away and picked up a ceramic snowman. He removed its head and reached inside. “Me and gram put change and stuff in here all year. It’s our Christmas fund. We use it for this and in case we need something for someone. I used the money I saved myself too.” He pulled out a hand full of bills and change. “There’s still about five dollars left.” He smiled.
Phil pulled out his billfold and slid a twenty into the headless snowman. “That’s for the bunt ones.” He explained before Trip protested. “My bad,” he shrugged.

“You and Mrs. C’s got your hands full with the little ones and well they aren’t havin’ such a great time of it. I couldn’t ask you to do this too. It wouldn’t be fair after all you’ve done for me and gram, lettin’ me stay with you and all.”

Phil shook his head. “We would gladly help, Trip and I bet getting Fitz and Jemma involved would help them too. After all, the best way to forget your own troubles is to help someone else with theirs.”

Trip nodded. It made sense. Doing all this helped him forget how scared he was and talking to gram every night while he was here just to let her know everything was going to be ready for those kids at church made him feel even better. “Guess I wasn’t thinking, huh?” He asked with a shrug.

Phil smiled and mock cuffed him in the chin. “Come on, I’ll help you clean this up and get you to bed before midnight. Maybe even let you sleep in a little in the morning with an excuse for the principal.” The man let out a long breath, headed for the sink and began rinsing dishes before delving into washing them.

Trip smiled and grabbed a broom.

xx

The next week went a little smoother. Melinda and Phil met the kids at the Triplett’s apartment after school and helped with the rest of the baking, even getting the twins involved despite a hesitant start. Jemma suggested a cranberry orange biscuit and Melinda put everyone in the office on the hunt for a recipe.

Fitz wondered if they could create a shortbread. He’d never actually tasted it but it looked good and his maw had always promised someday…. Melinda jumped at the chance to grant his wish and quickly had a simple recipe from one of the secretaries at work. Grace MacLaughlin was a wonderful cook and her Scottish grandmother provided most of the recipes.

Trip took charge and gave the orders as the cookie loot built to the point Phil thought he’d need a hand truck to get them to the cars, yes cars. All of these goodies would not fit in just one and still
leave room for three kids and two adults.

Jemma’s cookies filled the kitchen with a spicy aroma. She smiled as she watched them rise in the oven and turn golden brown. Trip pulled out the two trays and set them to cool on the top of the stove. Jemma stood and took a deep breath then turned and smiled at her older brother.

“It smells like my house.” She stated before bursting into tears and running from the apartment with Melinda close behind.

Trip made to follow but Phil stopped him, telling him it would be fine. Melinda could handle it.

“She’s been pretty upset about Skye,” Phil explained and the boy nodded. “All this is helping her too and seeing to Jemma is something they both need.”

“Are we going to do the shortbread now?” Fitz’s voice piped up from between them. The little boy wiped the back of his hand across the tip of his nose leaving a spot of flour there. “I won’t cry or dash about. I just want to eat them.” He smiled.

Trip tousled his hair and Phil poked at his ribs bringing back the giggle he’d missed the past few weeks.

“Okay, men, I guess this one is up to us.” Phil announced as he grabbed a bowl and pointed to the recipe card.

By the time Melinda returned with Jemma in tow, Fitz had finished off half the shortbread. Trip and Phil were starting a second batch. The little boy sat on the counter and appeared to have more ingredients on him than there were in the bowl. Melinda shook her head.

“I tasted yours, too.” Fitz informed Jemma. “They’re quite good but not as delicious as these. He popped another shortbread in his mouth and rubbed his tummy with delight. “I think my maw would have liked these. Her maw used to make them but I dint know my gran so I guess these are the best.”

Jemma smiled politely and shook her head when Fitz held the plate of cranberry-orange cookies out to her.
The little boy leaned over and whispered to the girl. “Oh, come on then ya dolt. Ya went through all the trouble makin’ them, give a little taste.”

Jemma smiled and reluctantly took the smallest cookie she could find and nibbled the edge. She smiled and nodded at Fitz who set down the plate and shook his head.

Phil slapped his hands together and looked at his watch. “Eee-yaa, six o clock already…good thing it’s Friday. Let’s get this mess cleaned up and I’ll order the pizza. Any requests?” He asked as he pulled out his phone and began dialing. Everyone shouted a different topping as he tried to speak to the pizzeria above the clamor.

Saturday morning the make-shift family delivered all of the cookies to the Mt. Gilead Baptist Church. They agreed to stay as workers, not as guests and helped the staff of the community serve lunch, goodies and treats to over a hundred children. Melinda saw Skye’s face in every one of them but held back the tears hoping that across town some other generous souls were doing the same for the baby she would hold in her arms very soon. Before the children left there was a visit from Santa and every child received a new winter coat complete with hats, scarfs and mittens. The makeshift Coulson family shared a meal with the Pastor and his family before heading for home. Phil dropped Melinda and the kids at the apartment building where Melinda promised to bake yet another batch of shortbread for Fitz who had willingly given all of what Phil and Trip baked to the church.

Phil continued on with Trip and a plate full of goodies and thank you-s for his gram. They’d spend the rest of the evening with the woman as she shared small gifts with her grandson and made sure he’d take a few for the two new additions to the Coulson family. Trip worried to the point he felt he would vomit as he watched Phil speaking quietly and seriously with two of the doctors at the desk at the end of the hall. His grandmother pulled him to wheel her into the community room where she could join in the singing of carols with her fellow patients and the staff. Trip joined as well and was highly embarrassed when his grandmother pressed him into playing the piano for the group.

“I didn’t scrimp and save for all those lessons for nothing, boy.” She kissed his forehead and slapped his backside as he walked to the keyboard and did his best to lead the carolers.

By the time they arrived home the twins were long asleep and Melinda dozed on the couch. She rose as soon as they entered. Trip had stopped Phil outside the elevator finally getting up enough courage to ask if his grandmother was doing well. Phil looked at him with a furrowed brow and assured him everything was fine and she was doing better every day. Trip watched as the man walked away, not really believing him but also knowing Phil Coulson would not lie to him. He greeted Melinda with a nod, said good night and quietly slipped into the room he shared with Fitz.
“Any chance I can get some of that shortbread,” Phil smiled as he kissed Melinda who had wrapped her arms around his waist.

She nodded. “I made two batches. The plate is on the table.”

“Wooo-hooo, you left it out within his reach,” Phil laughed referring to the little boy with the bottomless pit for a stomach.

“I think he’s had his fill.” Melinda smiled as she patted his chest. “Threw up twice before I got him settled.”

Phil laughed as well as they walked together to the kitchen. “He’ll feel better and he’ll start all over in the morning.”

Melinda let out a long sigh. “Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve…”

“Yep,” he hugged her tighter.

xx

The day started like any other school holiday. The kids slept late and Phil prepared a big breakfast that included everything everyone liked. Fitz, true to form, had forgotten all about his upset tummy and dove into all of the breakfast foods he relished. Trip was no slouch. He was twice as big and ate three times as much as the little guy.

Jemma chose a slice of French Toast and a glass of orange juice, neither of which she finished even a quarter. Melinda frowned but let it go.

Phil gave up his Reformed Jewish tradition for this one night of the year and looked forward to the ham Melinda would bake with pineapples and cherries and cloves and brown sugar and his mouth watered just thinking about it. She’d make that pineapple casserole as well. He almost wished the day away.
Phil sent everyone to get dressed and volunteered to clean up the kitchen mess on his own. Once that was complete and everyone was dressed he handed them their coats and grabbed a strange shaped case from the back of the hall closet. Melinda smiled and walked back to the bedrooms emerging with an armful of heavy sweaters before following the crew out the door and into the elevator.

Although the kids begged for some kind of hint as to where they were going Phil kept his mouth closed and eyes on the road as they drove for what seemed like hours. They made one pit stop for gas and the necessary dashes to the rest rooms then continued on until he pulled off the road and followed a narrow winding rocky road to a stop in a grove of pine trees.

“I considered the rink.” He smiled at Melinda’s unasked question. “But I like it here a lot more.” He squeezed her hand and opened the door commanding that everyone else did the same.

Fitz blinked in the bright afternoon sun and pulled his cap over his ears. “It’s a bit nippy for a hike in the wild.” He shoved his mitten covered hands in his pockets and looked up at Trip with a hint of worry. Trip shrugged his shoulders as Jemma slid her hand into his.

Phil had moved the rear of the SUV and pulled open the door. “Okay, we’ve got a few things to do but I think we can get it done quickly. I used to be a Scout.” He nodded to Trip as the young boy moved next to him. “Made it all the way to Eagle,” he smiled with pride. “So,” he grunted as he pulled a cylindrical metallic object forward and passed it to Trip. The boy dropped his sister’s hand and wrapped his arms around the object.

“I’m always prepared.” Phil smiled as he reached inside again and pulled a bundle of sticks held together with twine free and dropped them into Fitz’s arms. “You guys take that over there,” he pointed toward a copse of trees about ten feet away as he pulled a large wheeled cooler out and set it on the ground. He handed Melinda three large thermoses, then pulled free a box and followed the crew to the spot he had pointed out.

Trip and Fitz had stopped as they emerged from the tree line, amazed at the view of the large frozen pond. A circle of rocks and large logs rounded a dark spot on the ground where Phil directed them to set the metal object as he walked around them. He waited until Trip set it down then pulled newspaper from the box he had set on a nearby boulder and rolled it into balls. “Okay, guys make about twenty of these and toss ‘em in here.” He lifted the top of the metal cylinder. “I’ll be right back.” He looked down at Jemma. “Come on, princess, you can help.”

Two trips later Phil had everything he needed. He took the sticks Fitz had carried and showed the kids how to create a teepee out of them on top of the wadded up paper then struck a stick match against the side of the metal and dropped it inside. The paper lit quickly and in no time transferred the flame to the dry kindling he had added. Carefully Phil added two large thick pieces of dried
pine to the flame and watched as they licked the sides igniting a healthy campfire.

“When I was a kid, we did this all the time.” He looked around at the barren landscape. “Course we had a lot more snow in Wisconsin. But this’ll do.” He nodded as he held his hands over the fire for a moment then joined Melinda and Jemma on one of the large flat logs.

Fitz looked around for a moment then turned back to Phil. “Someone must have been here in the past.” He surmised.

“Phil smiled as he put an arm around his wife. “Yep, Melinda and I’ve been here almost every year since we met. Used to come here with the other kids at the Academy, but things change and people grow away and have their lives. But, well we just kept coming back.” He leaned over and pulled a pair of black ice skates from behind the log. “Used to skate a lot as a kid, Wisconsin…ice hockey. Played a bit, never really good, but I liked skating and well Melinda…”

“You played hockey!” Trip’s eyes went wide as he stammered out the question before Fitz had a chance.

“Figure skating,” Melinda corrected as she pulled out the odd shaped case and opened it revealing her own white skates. “Competed until I was twelve.”

Jemma passed her hand gently over the gleaming skates. “Why did you stop?”

“I got tired of falling down,” Melinda laughed. “So I took up martial arts where the mats are a lot softer than the ice.” She tapped Jemma’s nose with her finger tip. “And a lot warmer too.”

Phil pulled the large box he’d carried from the car placed it in front of himself and opened it revealing four new sets of skates. “Guess you guys are going to have to take up the hobby as well, I mean you can’t just sit here and watch every year.”

Trip pulled out the largest pair of skates and stared at them. “You mean you want us to put these on and got out there?” He nodded toward the pond.

“Yep, and I’ve seen you on a skateboard and roller blades, Trip so I know you’ve got it in you.” Phil laughed at the pained look on the boy’s face.
“Yeah, but the pavement isn’t so….so….slippery.” Trip reasoned as he dropped down on the log opposite where the girls sat. Melinda was already lacing a skate on Jemma’s foot. It was just as white as hers but had bright pink sparkly laces.

Fitz picked up the last pair of black skates and tapped his finger on the thick blades. He sighed at the small white skates left in the box, quickly lowered the flap and pushed it aside as he dropped next to Jemma on the log. “I’m not all that certain my bum is ready to bounce around on that hard surface.” He moaned before looking at the blades a second time. “I believe the blades are thicker for beginners, giving them more sense of balance.”

“Very good, Fitz,” Melinda smiled as she tied Jemma’s second skate and began to put on her own.

Phil moved next to Fitz and slipped off his boot. “I’ll have you up and flying across that ice in no time, little man.” He smiled at Fitz’s worry then leaned forward and whispered. “Don’t worry the ice kinda numbs the pain.” The little boy’s eyebrows knit into a state of fear as Phil laughed again.

It took more than ‘no time’ but all three kids caught on quickly and with their teachers were soon trying it on their own. Trip found that in-line skating was in fact a lot like this ice stuff and was soon trying a few tricks of his own. Fitz did bounce his bottom off the ice more than a few times but got back up and kept trying, putting every mathematical theory in his little head to work to figure out a proper stance for balance. The first time he traveled the length of the pond on his own without falling he raised his arms in victory. Jemma took slow steady strides and did exactly as Melinda, imitating every move with exact precision and mastered the art a few minutes before young Fitz, but within the hour all had shed their heavy coats in favor of the sweaters Melinda had brought and were skating off on their own as Melinda and Phil went arm in arm around the perimeter of the pond.

When the cold and the hard surface finally got to everyone there was hot cocoa and wieners to roast on the now blazing fire. By the time they had one last skate and then one real last skate and then one really and truly last skate the sun was dropping low in the sky. Phil had let the fire die and placed the cylinder in the open field to let it cool before putting back in the SUV. Skates went back into the box with the promise of returning soon and visiting the nearby ice rink at home. The car was repacked and all three kids were asleep before Phil hit the highway and headed back to the city.

xx

It was well after six when they arrived home, with wide awake kids that teased and argued all the way up to their floor in the elevator about who did what the fastest and who could do what better
and what kind of tricks they’d be ready to try next time and when would they go again.

Melinda shuffled Jemma into a hot bath in the master suite and put Trip in charge of making sure Fitz did in fact get into the tub.

The apartment filled with the aroma of the ham she had left in the slow cooker while they were out. She threw together her pineapple casserole and popped it in the oven before fishing Jemma out of the tub and snuggling her into the special Christmas pajamas she had purchased. The little girl smiled down at the Santa suit clad teddy bears holding green and red packages and threw her arms around Melinda. She squeezed her tightly knowing that somewhere there was an identical pair a few sizes smaller.

Fitz emerged from the hall bathroom clad in deep red PJ’s trimmed in dark green. He smiled at Melinda and informed her Trip was in the shower, all the way in the shower. She tousled his hair and pointed both of them to the living room with the added instruction to stay out of trouble while she too washed off the day’s grime and warmed her body in a hot shower.

**WARNING-WARNING-WARNING-WARNING-WARNING-WARNING-WARNING**

The following paragraphs contain more mature subject matter

*If you find this offensive, please skip to end of this section*

Phil stepped in next to her and wrapped his arms around her from behind as she let the hot water drench her dark hair. She stepped back and turned into him. “Who’s minding the store?” She hummed as she let her head drop on his wet chest.”

“Oh, I think my man Trip has it covered. Love the t-shirt and sweats by the way.” Phil referred to the dark green sweats and gray T the boy sported as he shuffled into the living room. “I’m a big elf? Really, Mel? I think Fitz is still rolling on the floor…that is if Trip hasn’t tossed him into the hallway.”

“Hey, everyone needs Christmas PJ’s. Wait til you see yours…” She laughed into his chest.

Phil laughed back. “I think they enjoyed the day.”

“Mmmm, hmm,” Melinda hummed as she closed her eyes and let the water sting her back as she held Phil against her front. It was the most relaxed she’d felt in ages.
“He brought out Monopoly. The way Fitz goes at it, they’ll be busy for hours.” Phil smiled as he kissed the top of her head.

She leaned back and stared up at him for a moment before he took her in a passionate kiss, bringing her to her toes to meet him in it. When she fell back, only standing because he held her in place she took a moment to regain her breath. “Did you lock the door?” She exhaled close to him as he caressed her back, bringing a shiver although the water was still warm.

“Both of them,” Phil smiled with his eyes closed as he pulled her closer and felt her body meld into his. She moaned softly remembering the thin walls of the apartment and slowly wrapped her legs around his midsection completing the circle that made them one.

Phil lowered her back to the shower floor and let out a breath as he moved his face under the spray of water, turning her away from it. Her eyes were still closed as he pulled her back into his arms and she once again encircled him. He lifted her higher and watched as she arched back just enough for him to suckle one breast and then the other relishing the soft moans that came from her and the quiver that ran from her body into his. He lowered her slowly coming to her again as she met his hips. The water fell over both of them, igniting their passion as it ran cool over their hot bodies.

She pulled him closer vibrating with every second she felt him complete her, feeling the low growl in his chest resonate with her higher pitched sigh. He held her against him pushing both closer as each filled the other with their passion. When he finally withdrew and released her she slid limp in his arms as he nibbled her neck and leaned back against the cool tile of the shower in order to hold both steady.

He reached behind and turned off the water, then opened the sliding door and grabbed a towel large enough to wrap around them both. They stepped from the stall and moved toward the bed falling again to the call of their need for one another. He massaged her breasts as she gently pulled her short nails across his back, each bringing the other closer until he once again suckled her gently inciting that purr he could not resist. She pulled him up to once again share a kiss that sent him to her. He rolled to his back and exhaled as she allowed him entrance and swelled with his presence. She fell exhausted on to his chest allowing their bodies to simply touch as they recovered.

Melinda looked up and kissed him one last long time before rising. Both dressed and joined hands as they walked into the parlor and rejoined their family.

(Okay, so the kids wouldn’t have remembered this scene but it just fit and well, Phil and Mel haven’t had any adult time in a while and heck it needed a little Philinda…)
“Eewww, that’s disgusting!” Skye snarled as she hit Trip hard with the closest pillow she could grab.

“Well, they were in there an awfully long time…” Fitz smirked.

Skye threw the pillow at him, knocking him backward with the force. “You were just a kid, what did you know?”

“Enough,” Fitz laughed as he sat up and tossed the pillow back at her, which she easily deflected.

“Great now I need mind bleach, yech! I’ll never get that picture out of my head. Geez, Trip they’re our parents!” She socked him in the shoulder. He feigned the pain her small hand could not inflict on his muscular bicep.

“Well, that’s what I would have done if I had a beautiful wo…” He was silenced by the pillow shoved in his face.

“TRIP!” Skye shrieked. “Now I’ll need a double dose of that mind bleach.” She rose up on her knees and tried to force her brother over with the pillow still in his face. Jemma and Fitz laughed at their sibling’s folly.

Trip easily out maneuvered the young girl, quickly pulled her across his lap and raised a hand over her backside. She put her free hand back and kicked wildly as Trip hung on to the other arm. Trip laughed as he dropped his hand to an inch above its target. Skye screamed and struggled valiantly but in vain.

“Give it to her, Trip,” Fitz laughed. “She probably deserves it for something we aren’t aware she’s done or had some hand in.”

Jemma shook her head. “Okay, enough,” she warned softly. “Someone’s going to get hurt.”
“Playing favorites, Jemma? Didn’t seem so eager to stop the nonsense when this little one was trying to suffocate me,” Trip laughed through his teeth, again dropping his hand in jest.

Skye cringed in anticipation. “Come on, Trip, it’s not funny,” she whined trying to pull her arm from his grip.

“Nope,” he replied popping the ‘p’ as he let his hand drop firmly on Skye’s bottom. “It’s not, but you were asking for it.”

“OUCH!” Skye wailed as he released her and she immediately attempted to rub off the sting.

Jemma grimaced in sympathy.

“I’m tellin’!” Skye shrieked as she bounced up and down on her knees continuing to massage her indignation.

For a moment everyone was silent, staring from one to the other until they burst into laughter and Trip opened his arms to his baby sister. She fell into them and mocked cried. “That really hurt, Trip.”

He kissed the top of her head as she plunked down in the space created by his crisscrossed legs. “Good,” he laughed again as she pouted.

“So, do you want to hear the rest?” Jemma asked wriggling her eyebrows.

“Am I in it?” Skye continued to pout.

“We told you it was before you were here.” Fitz remarked as he tossed a nut into his mouth. He had snatched a handful from a nearby candy dish Melinda had strategically located throughout the house.

Skye slumped in Trip’s lap causing him to chuckle as he wrapped her in a bear hug. “Well, we all enjoyed the ham, pineapple casserole and whatever else we have had that night.” Trip continued as he rested his chin on Skye’s head. “Then things really got heavy…”
With the kitchen cleaned and everyone full of ham and casserole the odd little family relaxed in their sparsely decorated living room. Phil started to turn on the lights of the small sad tree but stopped when Jemma asked him to let it remain unlit. He nodded and sat back down, pulling the little girl close to his side. She snuggled into his hug.

The five sat in silence, each lost in their own thoughts, memories of Christmases past that brought some joy and others too much pain to face.

“The year my dad died, I just turned nine. It was the last day of school.” Phil broke the silence speaking to no one in particular but knowing all eyes as well as ears were on him. “He had a heart attack in the parking lot. He was gone before mom and I got to the hospital. We never got to really say goodbye.” He paused for a moment remembering a day he’d hadn’t thought about in a very long time. Jemma reached out and took his hand in hers. He smiled down at her.

“Things were different then. Kids were left out of a lot. I remember my mom crying and a lot of people hugging her and then me, before I even knew what happened. They didn’t let me see him, until the funeral home and no one took the time to explain anything. I don’t remember a lot because, well I just got shuffled from neighbor to neighbor to relative to neighbor until it was over and there was just my mom and I and the quiet.”

“That’s the worst part,” Jemma whispered. “When everyone is gone and all you have is the silence of them not being there.”

Phil pulled the little girl into his lap and kissed the top of her head as he looked to Melinda. Trip and Fitz sat on the floor shuffling cards on the coffee table as the elder boy tried to teach the younger the game of poker. Several foil covered chocolate balls were piled in a bowl in front of them.

Fitz kept quiet but knew that silence long before his knew his mother had passed. Trip blinked quickly suddenly hit with a memory of someone he’d all but forgotten.

“We kinda just went back to living our lives, doing what we needed to do to get by. We weren’t well off but my dad made sure we had enough to live on with is pension from the school and the money he’d put aside for years. Everything was sorta okay until Christmas.” He paused for a moment as Jemma turned her face into his shoulder. “That’s when it really hit home. Everything
we did together was just so hard without him and,” he laughed, “and we were Jewish…well half
anyway. My mom was Catholic so we always celebrated both…until that year. Hanukkah came
and went without me even knowing,” he thought for a moment. “Never really celebrated it again.”

Jemma let out a soft sob and he hugged her closer. “We put up a tree and decorated it, but mom
didn’t bake. There were presents, more than usual actually. I think I got everything I wanted and it
meant nothing because what I really wanted would never be there again. I went out the garage,
climbed into that old Chevy and cried for hours so my mom wouldn’t see.” He wiped a tear away
quickly as Melinda moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder.

“We used to walk down the streets and look into the windows of the houses with the best trees.
Maw and I would try to guess how many ornaments they had and how many people lived there.
Sometimes we’d go to church, cuz it was warm and you could stay as long as you liked and the
shops gave sweets away for nothing.” Fitz sighed as he looked away into the darkest corner of the
room, “once we had turkey dinner with some soldiers and one gave me a little pocket knife. I still
have it too.” He announced proudly then quickly added, “it’s put away, I never carry it about.”
Melinda smiled her approval while Phil gave him a quick wink and Trip offered a gentle shoulder
bump. He jumped up on his knees and rested his arms on the table. “The best was the time we had
a little flat and maw got a real tree. It dint have lights but we made decorations from paper and
tin. She dint get sick but once and there was a little present from Father Christmas under the tree
because we had a real place.” He sat back down and shook his head. “It was a mathematics book
with lots of problems. Some of the pages were torn and used but I finished all the others.” He sat
down and became quiet before barely speaking. “It was the last real Christmas we had.”

Melinda squeezed Phil’s hand realizing her little boy was so enthralled by something his mother
had probably pulled from someone’s trash. He remembered it as his best Christmas and it broke
her heart. Downstairs in that dark storage room was enough packages for Father Christmas to
make three or four trips up in the elevator and yet this would remain Fitz’s best.

“Ya’ll know what my gram and I do for Christmas.” Trip began, admiring Fitz’s bravery at sharing
his own story. “We’ve done it as long as I can remember and yeah the year my Pops died it was
real hard but gram said there were those who needed cheer more than we did because they felt bad
all the time not just once a year. So we did what we did.” Trip shrugged his shoulders as he dealt
the cards. He looked at Fitz for a long time and found it almost impossible that across a whole
ocean a little white kid was living almost the same life he had. “I hear ya, little man. My mom
was…” he looked to Melinda and then Phil, “well she was sick for a long time too and we didn’t
have much. Lived in an old car for a bit before the people from CYS took her away and brought
me to my Gram and Pops. She did get better once in a while and I’ve got a little green dump truck
Santa brought one year when we stayed at a shelter. I know she probably stole it but heck I was
five and it was a present.” He shrugged his shoulders again and motioned for Fitz to pick up his
cards.

Jemma wiggled out of Phil’s embrace and sat up on his lap. “We would have a grand party and all
those from the university would come. There would be a marvelous tree and all sorts of sweets.
I’d get to stay up late and watch it all. We’d sing carols and toast with homemade nog. When
they’d all go home we’d sit and admire our beautiful tree and dad would tell stories of Christmases
when he was a boy in Dover. I’d wake up in my bed the next morning not even remembering when I fell asleep.” The little girl smiled through her tears as Phil pulled her back into a warm hug.

Everyone looked to Melinda who had yet to share one of her memories. She’d listened to all and in between ran through the years she spent at boarding school and with her father in California. The years she and Phil had been together and that horrible December they learned they would never bring a child into the world. Nothing seemed appropriate to share and she was almost relieved when a soft rap at the door interrupted they little story telling session.

Phil looked at the clock as he passed Jemma to Melinda and rose to answer it. “Who in the world could be at our door at this hour? It’s half past nine.” He shrugged his shoulders and put out his hands as he peered through the peek hole. He could not contain the smile that crossed his lips as he opened all three locks and pulled the door open while at the same time calling to Melinda to join him.

“I really hope it isn’t too late,” Sr. Mary Clair smiled as she hefted a dozie Skye from one hip to the other. “I had to wait until…well until it was safe to travel.”

Melinda stood behind her husband in disbelief for a second before pushing him aside and pulling the woman inside. The nun held the little girl on her hip and a small pink cardboard suitcase in the other.

Skye yawned and swiped her face across the nun’s coat twice before digging a fist into her eye and turning toward the voices that disturbed her. She smiled a sleepy smile and reached out her tiny hands. “Momma,” she managed around another yawn.

Melinda pulled the little girl into a hug, covering her with kisses as she burrowed into the embrace. “Momma,” Skye breathed.

In an instant Melinda was surrounded by three squealing and bouncing children clamoring to be the first to steal the little one away from Melinda who had no intention of releasing her as she rocked side to side and kissed her over and over. She looked at the elderly woman still standing in the open doorway and asked one question. “How?”

“Oh, that yes well,” the woman hedged. “I really do hate to impose but I thought maybe you might agree to baby sit for oh about thirty six hours?”
Phil motioned for the woman to step inside as he closed the door and allowed her to continue. “Baby sit, Sister you wouldn’t be telling tales on Christmas Eve now would you?” He smiled.

“Telling tales?” she smiled as Trip took the small suitcase from her and pulled the twins away from the conversation. “Heavens no, I simply told the others I was taking Skye to visit family with me and I am in fact on my way to spend the evening with my cousin in Bethesda. He’s expecting me for midnight Mass so I don’t have a lot of time.”

Melinda looked up as she pulled Skye’s hand-me-down jacket from the little girl’s arms. It was a look of panic.

“Oh no, dear, no,” Sr. Claire assured her. “I’m not taking her that’s why I need a baby sitter while I help my cousin with his Christmas duties. A small child certainly couldn’t be expected to endure all of that and well I didn’t really say whose family she’d be visiting.” She smiled as Melinda extracted the child from her coat and boots then stood still hugging her tightly.

Skye rested her head on Melinda’s shoulder and waggled her fingers at Phil. “Hi, daddy. I misted you.” She spoke softly. He smiled and leaned down to kiss her cheek telling her softly that he’d missed her as well.

Mary Claire brushed a stray hair from the little girl’s eyes. “She fell asleep in the car. It’s been a long day, she’s a bit cranky I’m afraid.” She smiled at the child who looked so natural in this woman’s arms. This was a good match, a good fit and it would not be broken. “I know Jade is doing this out of spite because of…well because of Skye’s last placement. How can anyone do that to a child, especially on Christmas? I swear the woman has a rock hard piece of coal for a heart. She’s off to New York to spend the holidays with friends but I’ll have to have Skye back to St. Agnes first thing Monday morning and I will do everything in my power to have her in your home before the new year.” She leaned forward and kissed the little girl and then Melinda. “I promise.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Melinda breathed.

“She hasn’t had a bath and please promise you’ll take her to Mass tomorrow. There’s got to be a church around here somewhere. Or you can visit St. Benedict’s. I’d love to see my little sweetheart all decked out in her Christmas finest.”

“We will be there, Claire.” Phil grasped the woman’s hand and squeezed it.
“The latest Mass is at eleven,” she remarked as she squeezed back then quickly kissed the little girl again. “Good night, my love. I will see you soon.” She hugged Phil and then Melinda and called a Merry Christmas to the other children before she left.

Melinda stood for a moment staring at Phil who was speechless. “She’s here, Phil,” Melinda whispered a squeal as she threw her free arm around him. He hugged her back.

“I know she’s tired Phil but I’m going to bathe her and get her out of these clothes.” Melinda was away before he could answer.

He slapped his hands together and stepped toward the other children. “Okay, gang how about cookies and hot cocoa before I read a story and then it’s off to bed before Old St. Nick comes down the chimney.”

All three stood and headed for the kitchen to help. Fitz stopped and narrowed his eyes. “We haven’t got a chimney or a fireplace.” He pointed out.

“Not a problem, little man,” Phil explained as he placed a hand on the boy’s back. “He’ll just come down the main one on the roof and end up in the basement then use the elevator to get to everyone’s apartment before taking off for the next building.”

Fitz frowned and opened his mouth to continue. Trip pulled him forward. “Just go with it, man, just go with it.” He smiled at Phil as they pulled out a pan to make real honest to goodness Wisconsin hot cocoa.

Ten minutes later Melinda carried a freshly washed and changed Skye into the parlor. The little girl wriggled to the floor and joined the others kneeling at the coffee table. She held a small pink unicorn in one hand that she’d found on Jemma’s nightstand.

“I ownee hoed it, kay Zemma? I non’t keeps it, kay?”

Jemma nodded and opened her arms to hug the little girl. “Look, sweetheart, we have the same pajamas.”

“Thems is mines for keepin’? I non’t haффa puts em inna drou to get useded?” Skye asked pulling at the neck line of her PJ’s.
“Nope, they are for you and only you.” Trip explained as he pulled her into his lap.

“You gotz a eff on you seff, Frip.” Skye giggled at the silly picture on Trip’s T-shirt.

“Cuz he’s a big elf!” Fitz bounced with laughter as he bit into his third cookie.

“Him no a eff, him a Frip.” Skye tilted her head and looked into the older boy’s face. “You silly Fizz.” She watched him eat the star shaped cookie and looked to Melinda. “I haffa cookie, momma?”

Melinda let out a breath. She’d give this little one the world just at the sound of hearing her use that name. ‘Momma’…Skye hadn’t hesitated a moment. She called Melinda momma the second time she came to spend a weekend and never anything else. It melted her heart then and did the same now. “Yes, baobei, you may have any cookie you like.”

Phil set a small cup of warm cocoa in front of her. “Here you go, angel eyes.”

Skye looked at the two handled pink plastic mug. “I non’t has a zippy cuff. You be mad to me if I make a mezz. You sen me to sagnes.” She lowered her head and ended in little more than a whisper.

Phil scooped her up from the floor and kissed her twice. “Never, angel, never, never, ever. The only reason you are going back is to get all your things and then come back to stay forever no matter how many messes you make.” He picked up the cup and helped her to take a small sip. Skye smacked her lips and opened her mouth for more which Phil happily obliged.

“Okay,” he announced as he passed the baby to Melinda and picked up the book he’d placed on the table. “Last cookie, Fitz,” he warned as he turned and sat down. “Santa doesn’t want to visit homes where boys are up all night vomiting.” Trip grabbed the plate of cookies and moved them out of reach as Jemma slapped Fitz’s hand.

Skye’s mouth dropped open. “Sanata comes at this hows?” She shook her head. “Him non’t come at sagnes. Sisser says hims gotz too much howses a go to. We gotz a socking fromma ladies atta chorech.”
Melinda pulled her close and kissed her head. “Well, tonight he will find you right here.”

“Him give me a sut um jus foe me?” Skye pointed to her chest as she turned to face Melinda who raised her brows and nodded quickly.

“Maybe more than one.”

“I let Zemma and Fizz has some, kay?” The little girl asked with wide eyes. “And Frip too.”

“Yes, baobei, but first you have to go to sleep so put your head right here on Momma’s heart and close your eyes.” Melinda swallowed a sob as she spoke. Jemma and Fitz scrambled up onto the couch to sit on either side of the woman, both snuggling into her side perhaps unfettered by the action of the little girl she held.

Trip folded his hands behind his head and leaned back against the chair he’d been sitting near. He closed his eyes and listened to Phil’s soft voice.

“Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house…."

Xx

“Awww, that’s so sweet,” Skye sighed as she tipped her head back to look at Trip’s chin. “Did I get to stay?”

Fitz rolled his eyes. Jemma let out a soft snort as she covered her mouth.

Trip laughed his usual laugh. “You’re here aren’t you?”

“No, no, I mean did I get to stay from then.” Skye clarified bouncing up and down with excitement.

“Welllll,” Jemma started.
“Come on guys,” Skye squealed as she looked from brother to sister and back. “I really don’t remember any of this. Did that witch take me away? How’d you get me back? Did Dad pop her one? Did Mom?”

Trip wrapped his arms around her to stop her bouncing. “No, baby girl nothing like that, Sr. Mary Claire picked you up, kicking and screaming I may add…you not the nun…on Monday morning and delivered you back with that scrawny rabbit on Thursday. We decided to keep you both and had to put up with you ever since.”

Skye let her head drop sideways on her brother’s arm. “Don’t call Salty scrawny. It hurts his feelings.” She pouted.

“You still have that old thing?” Fitz laughed as the room lit up with the head lights of a car pulling into the driveway.

“They’re home!” Jemma squeaked as she and Fitz stood.

Trip pushed Skye to her feet and got to his own. “Quick, the powder room,” Skye giggled as she pushed her older brother and sister into the small room and pulled the door shut a moment before Phil and Melinda stomped through the back door carrying more bags than would hold a little last minute shopping. She hurried to help, reaching to take the sacks from her mother.

Melinda slapped her hands away. “No peeking, Skye, not even a little peek in any bag. Got it?” She warned.

“Okay-ay.” Skye sneered as she smiled at Phil. She waited a few moments then took her parents’ coats and hung them in the closet.

“You’re awful helpful, this evening,” Melinda mused as she filled the tea kettle and set it on the stove. “What kind of trouble are you in now? I swear Skye one call from one teacher and it won’t matter that Christmas is only a few days away.” She warned as she turned toward the girl who suddenly looked even more than guilty.

Trip shuffled into the room carrying the evening news under his arm. He kissed Melinda on the cheek as he passed and reached out a hand to meet Phil’s, then passed him the paper. “Coffee?” He asked his father in a word. Phil nodded and sat down with the paper, pulling his glasses from
his inside jacket pocket.

“Any idea what this one’s up to?” He nodded toward Skye looking over the rim of his spectacles. She raised her brows and poked a finger at her chest. Trip turned to hide his smile.

“Oh, you know Skye, Da, she’s always up to something.” He pushed down the button on the Kuerig and watched as the dark liquid ran into the mug below.

Skye twirled a strand of hair around her finger and spun around then back. “Ya know there was a little, kinda something in the bathroom.” Phil put down the paper and took off his glasses. “Not a real big one, just a kinda messy one and I cleaned it up almost.

“Oh Skye,” Melinda huffed as she turned off the screaming tea kettle. “Why didn’t you just tell us.” She pulled open the pantry door and grabbed a mop then headed for the powder room with Phil right behind.

Skye hurried to catch up, motioning for Trip to follow. “Mom, mom, don’t you’ll ruin your good clothes. It’s not that bad really just wait.”

Melinda threw the girl a look before yanking open the door.

“Surprise!” Fitz and Jemma bellowed as they wrapped her in a double hug. The mop hit the floor with a bang.

Phil stood in shock before moving into the hug as Skye and Trip stood back and watched the reunion. “Told them there was a problem in the bathroom,” Skye whispered to her brother. Everyone turned at the sound of the smack he landed for a second time that evening.

An hour later the family sat together, squeezed onto the large sofa that once held all six of them comfortably. Skye and Jemma snuggled close to their father while Melinda was sandwiched between her boys.

The lights twinkled in the darkness as the Coulson family reminisced once again on their best Christmas, each agreeing that the very first one might not have been the best but it would never be forgotten.
Fitz let out a soft snore and Trip lifted his head to glare at his already snoozing brother. “And I am not carrying him upstairs.”

Chapter End Notes

Feedback for Christmas??????
Part 2 of Making Merry

Chapter Summary

teen age Skye is keeping everyone up remember her first Christmas with her family in their big house

Chapter Notes

Couldn't stop thinking about this and how Skye had no memories to share so I had to get it out of my head

Making Merry - PART 2

Skye tossed and turned with unbridled excitement, just as full of Christmas Eve anxiety at sixteen as she was at six. She flipped from her side to her back and slammed her head back into the pillow.

“Skye,” Jemma breathed groggily from the other side of the bed. “If you cannot be still you will have to find somewhere else to do your exercising tonight.”

Skye let out a fluttery breath and flipped to her side, throwing one arm over her sister. “I’m sorry, Jemma. I just can’t get comfortable.

Jemma opened one eye and peeked at the small clock on the nightstand. “It’s almost two, Skye. Please go to sleep.” She patted the back of her little sister’s hand. “Santa will never come if you don’t.”

Skye let out a sputtery laugh and flipped to her back, folding her arms across her stomach. “I just can’t help it, Jems. The more I try to sleep the harder it is. Maybe I could wake Fitz and he could make some of that special eggnog he made that one year.”

Now it was Jemma’s turn to laugh as she slid to her back and turned to her little sister. They met nose to nose and both broke into a fit of giggles. “Momma was so mad,” She gasped through the laughter.
“Fitz wasn’t laughing,” Skye snorted, pulling the blanket up over her nose to muffle the sound.

Jemma was almost in tears. “I don’t think he sat down until the new year.”

“He…he…” Skye bit the blanket to try to stop her laughter. “He was still using a pillow on Valentine’s Day.” She laughed so hard, Jemma plopped her hand over her sister’s mouth and pulled her to her chest to silence her.

“Shhhhh, you will wake the whole house…” Jemma laughed just as heartily.

Both girls froze, feigning sleep as the door opened. They tried to hold their laughter but the blankets shook with their stifled giggles until they could no longer contain it.

“Some people are trying to sleep,” Fitz’s growled

His pseudo-anger only served as fodder for the girls’ hilarity. Both roared into renewed giggling, still hidden under the blankets they had pulled over their heads.

Jemma managed to pull herself together first. “Oh, Fitz…we…we were just remembering the time you spiked the eggnog and Skye slept almost twelve hours on Christmas Eve.” She burst into laughter again.

The young man shook his head. “I don’t recall the humor in that memory and I never told her to drink the bloody stuff.” He scoffed, still standing in the doorway.

“And momma was up all night checking on her. I never saw her so angry. I swear she had flames shooting out of her eyes.” Jemma stammered through uncontrollable giggling.

“Ha ha,” Fitz replied without emotion. “Again, some of us are trying to sleep but with all this racket…” he let the statement end with a huff.

“What is going on in here?!” Melinda demanded in a hoarse whisper as she stepped around Fitz. “Do you people know what time it is?” She glared at her crew.
Fitz shrugged his shoulders.

Jemma swallowed her silliness and folded her hands in front of her as she sat up on her bed.

Skye pushed the blanket to her mouth as she too sat up, but could not stop her laughter.

Melinda smiled at her child-grown ups and shook her head. “You,” she turned to Fitz, “back to bed.” She spun him around and gave him a gentle push.

The young man stopped and kissed her cheek. “Wo ai ni, momma,” he whispered as she smiled and gave him a second little push.

Turning to the girls, she pulled back her serious face and marched to the bed side. Melinda put out a hand and glared at Skye. “You, come with me and you…” she pointed a finger at Jemma’s nose. “lie down and go_to_sleep.” She took Skye’s hand and gently tugged her to the floor then bent to kiss Jemma’s forehead.

Jemma cuddled back into her pillow and pulled the blanket to her chin. “Wa an, momma…good luck, Skye,” she smiled as her mother pulled her little sister out of the room and shut the door.

Melinda lead a contrite Skye back to her own room. “You are getting much too old for this, Skye.” She smiled as she pulled back the covers and motioned for the teen to crawl into her own bed.

“I’m sorry, momma,” Skye sighed as she fell onto the mattress and stared up at the ceiling. “I just couldn’t sleep and…”

“You decided to wake your brother and sister as well?” Melinda sneered jovially.

“I thought I could sleep if I cuddled with Jemma, but…”

Melinda swatted the girl’s thigh to have her scoot over then climbed into the bed next to her and pulled the covers over them both. She pulled Skye into a hug as the girl rested her head on her mother’s chest. Melinda kissed her forehead and sighed. “It just wouldn’t be Christmas Eve without my baobei keeping us all awake.” She hugged the girl a bit tighter. “I will so miss this
“They were telling me about your first Christmas in the apartment.” Skye spoke in a small voice. “I don’t remember it.”

Melinda closed her eyes at the immediate punch of that memory, of the pain and joy of that night. She kissed the top of Skye’s head and smiled. “No, baobei, you were too young but I remember how happy you made all of us that night. You gave us the spirit we needed.”

“Thanks to Sr. Mary Clare…” Skye added.

“Thanks to her,” Melinda agreed as they both became silent.

Melinda remembered her joy when the little nun appeared at the door with her baby. She had never received a gift quite as memorable as that night when this little girl wrapped her arms around her neck and breathed ‘momma’ into her ear. She never cried as hard as when the nun returned for her the next day. Phil was torn trying to comfort his wife and assure the screaming child she’d be back very soon. Melinda never knew what forces moved the miracle that happened two days later when she sat in their tiny living room watching her other kids play a very solemn game of Clue when the phone rang.

Phil answered and she listened to his serious one sided mostly one word answer conversation. When he hung up he did not turn around immediately. He did not move or speak, simply stood staring at the wall before him. The silence terrified her and she stood unsure whether to approach him or to wait. She swallowed hard as he turned and realized that the kids too had stopped their game and were waiting for him to reveal whatever bad news he had just received.

The man stepped toward his wife as she approached him. He took her hands in his own and squeezed them tightly. He looked into her eyes.

“What, Phil…what…who…what happened?” She begged, hoping Mrs. Triplett had not suffered another stroke or even worse that she had… She could not even complete the thought as she already ran through how she would comfort Trip and what they would need to do to make him a permanent part of their family.

“Melinda…” he breathed her name, almost unable to speak as Jemma wrapped her arms around one side of her aunt and Fitz lead his head on the other.
Trip stood a step behind, listening to his heart beat faster than he though possible. If anything had happened to his gram he would be lost. Where would he go? Phil and Melinda couldn’t managed a third kid and he was not even a kid….

Melinda shook Phil’s hand and blinked back a tear that threatened to fall. “Phil…”

A small smile tickled the edges of the man’s mouth as he looked down at his hands entwined with his wife’s. “I…you…” he started then raised his head and looked at her as the smile spread across his face. “Let’s go get our baby.”

For a moment time stopped and Melinda wasn’t really sure what he said or even why he said it, for a moment it simply made no sense to her. Part of her was still waiting for some news of some disaster. He shook her hands again then let go and took her by the shoulders. “Mel? Did you hear what I said?”

One hand went to her mouth and she knew if two little bodies we’re attached to her hips and this man wasn’t holding her up she would have fallen to her knees. “Oh my God, Phil, Oh my God… our baby…our baby.”

“Our baby, Mel…ours…” he kissed her forehead and wrapped his arms around her pulling all of them into a hug. Then he held her back with his arms as Trip pulled the ‘twins’ into a hug of his own. “That was some Richard Mancuso or Mantusso or something or other from CYS. He said to come get her right now. Mary Clair will have her ready and she’s ours…ours, Mel, ours.”

Melinda fell against his chest and cried the happiest tears she’d ever cried, then turned and opened her arms to her ‘twins’ pulling both into a hug that even Fitz could not escape. She kissed them both and stood. Trip stepped forward and hugged her gently, then stronger as he felt her embrace him tightly.

“That’s great, Mrs. C.” the young boy smiled brightly. “I can managed these two until you all get back.” He wrapped one arm around each of the twins.

“No way,” Phil replied from the foyer as he pulled on his coat then held Melinda’s for her. “We are a family and we are all going to get our baby and bring her home.”

Melinda smiled at the memory and kissed Skye again as the girl lay quietly against her. She recalled the trip across town in holiday traffic and how Skye was sitting on a large chair in the
massive hallway of St. Agnes’ when they arrived. She held a scrawny one-eyed stuffed something that they’d come to know as Salty and that one little pink suitcase that held everything that was hers. Melinda already knew its contents…a few pair of dingy underwear, one pair of very worn and faded pajamas, two pairs of mismatched socks, two T-shirts and a pair of jeans. She never removed the items from the case. Skye had clean, new, fresh clothing in the dresser and the closet at the apartment. She was tempted to leave the little case but Skye knew if the case went she did, too. It was part of the process.

Even Richard Mantenesco could not keep the little girl from sliding off the large chair and dashing down the hall when she spied the Coulsons. “MOMMA!” she squealed as she almost leapt into Melinda’s arms then dove for Phil. There were hugs and kisses and tears and squealing and more hugging and kissing before Phil and Melinda disappeared into the office to sign paper after paper.

Sr. Mary Clair hugged the little girl tightly and brushed away her own tears as she kissed Salty on his black nose and told him this time he would not be coming back. She promised to stay in touch and stood in the doorway until the Coulson’s car disappeared.

Skye picked up her head, looked at her mother and noticed the tear on her cheek. “Momma, what’s wrong.” The teen tried to hide her alarm.

Melinda smiled and pushed a stray hair behind her daughter’s ear. “Nothing, baobei, just thinking of how happy I was the day you were mine for good.”

Skye smiled back and nestled back against her mother. “I’m sorry I don’t remember, momma. I only remember loving you so much I could just pop.” She snuggled closer and wrapped her arm around her mother. Melinda squeezed back, kissed the top of her baby’s head and hummed an old lullaby.

Lying still, listening to her mother’s heart beat beneath her, Skye pictured the tree that seemed to reach up forever as she stood at its base. She’d never seen such a tall Christmas tree. Actually she’d never been this close to any Christmas tree that she could remember. Daddy had held her up to hang shiny balls on the tree and there was a special one with her name on it. Jemma and Fitz and Trip had special ornaments too and they hung them where they felt they would look best. Trip’s was so high she couldn’t see it but there was Fitz’s just a little higher than her head. It was a soccer ball just the same size as Trip’s basketball. Jemma’s was a princess and hers was an angel. Momma said daddy picked out all of them this year.

“Hey, baby girl,” Trip smiled as he tousled her hair. “Whadya think, huh? Pretty sweet tree, Da chose this year.” He looked up at the star on top then back down at her. “How ‘bout I plug in the lights.” He stepped behind the large arbor before she could answer and she stepped back in awe as the lights burst into hundreds of colorful twinkles among the thick branches. “Beautiful isn’t it?”
Trip asked as he stepped back to her side. The tiny girl stood open mouthed and merely nodded as her brother scooped her up and stepped back even further for a better view.

“I am in charge of getting you upstairs. Momma finally fished old Fitz out of the tub and she says it is your turn.” Trip announced as he poke a gentle tickle into her tummy. Skye grabbed his hand and giggled as he trotted toward the stairs. She looked back over his shoulder at the wonder of the brightly lit tree.

Momma scrubbed her clean in a bubbly tub and washed her hair with the shampoo that never hurt her eyes. She wrapped her in a warm fuzzy towel and dried her before sprinkling that powder all over her. It always smelled so nice and made her feel soft and smooth and clean. The she helped her into a pair of My Little Pony panties and held her in front of her.

“Guess what I have for you.” Momma smiled, hiding something behind her back.

Skye shrugged her shoulders and leaned on her mother’s lap. “I no know, momma. I no can see it.”

Melinda held back her laugh and pulled a small package from behind her back. “Christmas jammies!” She smiled as she wobbled the package side to side.

Skye scrunched up her nose. She’d never heard of Christmas jammies, but watched as Melinda opened the cellophane and pulled out a one piece flannel red and white polka dot pair of footie pajamas. She shook it once and it unfolded exposing the smiling elf patch that covered one side of the chest. Skye’s eye brows rose as she examined the item giving a smile as her approval. Melinda pulled her into her lap and slipped Skye’s little feet into the garment then zipped up the front and snapped the flap at the neck. The little girl held out her arms and looked at the fit then pick up one foot then the other to admire them as well.

“My foots be into my two llamas.” She announced.

Melinda laughed at Skye pronunciation of pajamas as she picked up and hung towels on the racks in the room then picked up the baby and headed down stairs.

Phil had already gathered the older kids in the kitchen and was brewing his special Wisconsin Christmas Eve hot chocolate that could only be stirred with a candy cane. Fitz kneeled on one of the chairs at the table, sampling a selection of Christmas cookies while Jemma stood next to her
dad passing him the necessary ingredients as he called them out. Trip was at the sink rinsing out the Christmas mugs used by the family only on this special night.

Skye observed the activity from her mother’s arms. “Schnells good, momma. I like a shock lot.”

Phil turned and Melinda could not help the snort that escaped as she spied his frilly red, green and white apron. He danced across the kitchen causing Fitz to burst into laughter spraying cookie crumbs across the table. Phil took the baby from her mother then grabbed momma as well and cha-cha-ed around the table, poking the giggling Fitz as they passed. He took Skye as they reached the stove and held her in one arm while stirring the bubbling chocolate with the other.

“Heavy cream,” he announced and Jemma quickly handed him a perfectly measured cup. He nodded and poured it into the chocolate effectively dousing the boil then held out his hand doctor style to his older daughter. She slapped a thick candy cane into it and watched as he dipped it into the mixture and stirred slowly.

Skye peered down at the pot. “You make a mess, daddy.”

Phil kissed her cheek. “Yep, angel, I did but it is a yummy mess and I will clean up every bit.”

“Okay, baobei, time to come with momma. That’s gonna be hot and nobody is getting burned.” She took Skye in her arms and directly Jemma away from the stove then caught Fitz’s hand just above the dish of shortbread on the table. “We will meet you in the living room.” She smiled at Phil and Trip as she ushered the twins out the door.

Trip set a Santa shaped tea pot on the table and arranged six elf shaped mugs on a tray. Phil smiled as he poured the steaming liquid into the pot then inserted the peppermint stick that stuck out of the premade hole in Santa’s hat. He grabbed two holiday hot pads, used one to hold the handle of the pot and the other to balance it on his opposite hand.

“Okay, Trip lead on…we’ve got traditions to start.” Phil nodded toward the door and the young boy carried the tray with mugs and a variety of cookies to the living room where Melinda and the kids had gathered.

Trip set down his tray as Phil set the hot pad on the table and the pot on top. Clapping his hands and then rubbing them together Phil watched as Melinda attempted to keep Skye and the twins settled on the sofa. Fitz had bounced to the edge of the seat raring to go with Jemma not far
behind. Skye rested against her mother’s chest not quite sure of all this revelry.

“I think the best thing to do first is hang our stockings.” Phil suggested. “I mean what if we all fall asleep and forget.” He held up his hands in question.

“Right!” Fitz agreed jumping to his feet.

Phil opened a wooden box and took out six large red and green stockings each glistening with a different name. He held up the first and scratched his head. “Hmm, not quite sure who belongs to this one…”

“It’s mine!” Fitz hopped toward his father taking the prize in his hands.

Next came Trip’s and then Jemma’s followed by one for Daddy and another for Momma. Skye watched with curiosity, sneaking a thumb into her mouth until Phil pulled the last stocking from the box.

“I guess this one is forrrrrrrr…” he dragged out the word as he moved to sit next to Melinda and their baby. “I think it says S-K-Y-E.” He read each letter.

Skye sat up and dropped her thumb into her lap. “I gotsa effs in mine name, daddy. It bees myun?”

Phil pulled the little girl into a hug. “It bees especially for you, angel eyes.” He kissed her a half dozen times as he handed the stocking to her.

Skye frowned for a moment. “It bees bigga me, daddy an I gots two foots.” She held the item in front of her examining it closely.

Fitz burst into another fit of laughter, this time falling to the floor and rolling from side to side. Jemma rolled her eyes as Trip gave him a gentle kick with the toe of his slipper. The little boy stood up and held his own stocking in front of him.

“You do not wear them, Skye. You hang them.” He pointed back at the fireplace behind him.
“I’ll show you,” Phil whispered as she looked even more confused.

At four years old Skye had never hung a Christmas stocking or worn special pajamas or did any of the things most preschoolers did on this special night. Tonight that would end.

He carried the little girl to the fireplace and hooked the stocking with his name on it on a small hook. Melinda who had followed did the same as did Trip and Jemma. Fitz hesitated for a moment then hung his and stepped back. “Okay, angel, last hook is for you.” Phil tapped it with one finger then held Skye close enough to slip the loop on the top of her stocking over it.

The family stepped back and smiled.

“Okay,” Phil clapped his hands again. “I think that cocoa is just right.”

A few moments later Trip and the twins sat cross legged around the coffee table while Melinda held Skye on her lap next to Phil on the sofa. Everyone enjoyed their treat. Melinda nixed seconds as bedtime was not too far away. She also reminded Fitz what happened the last time he indulged in cookies and cocoa.

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Skye smiled at the pleasant memory, the first Christmas she really remembered. She breathed deeply and pictured that same sparkly stocking hanging on the mantle downstairs. Even at sixteen she wondered just what she’d find inside come morning.

“Momma?” she whispered softly, without raising her head.

“Hmmm?” Melinda answered, almost asleep.

“What’s your favorite Christmas?”

Melinda smiled giving Skye a bouncy hug. “All of them, baobei, every one with all of you, every year.”
Skye smiled, remembering bits and pieces of the Christmases the family had shared. She remembered her first pair of ice skates, a scooter and a skateboard she begged for for months. The laptop she received last year that had her up hiding in the closet for weeks, until her parents found her and confiscated it for a month. She remembered the year of the huge storm when Jemma and Fitz did not make it home and how she cried almost all day missing her brothers and sister. Trip was in the Middle East and could not even make a call like the twins had done. The memory made her sad but twice as glad that they would all be together tomorrow and into the New Year.

But all those memories took her back, back to that first year in their big house when the tree seemed fifty feet high and she experienced all the wonder of the holiday for the first time in all her four years.

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Skye snuggled into her daddy’s hug and stared at the six stockings hung across the mantle. She watched how the sparkly names shimmered in the lights of the tree. “Why we puts a socks onna fire, daddy?” She asked, resting against Phil’s chest.

Phil smiled down at his little cuddler as Jemma snuggled into his side. He bent to kiss both his daughters. “I guess it’s just easier for Santa to find them that way. Right, princess?” He smiled at Jemma who nodded quickly.

“Fitz should probably put his on the floor,” Trip chuckled. “It’ll be so full of coal it might topple the bricks.”

His comment drew a frown from the younger boy who suddenly looked about to cry. Melinda opened her arms to him and smiled as he climbed into her lap hiding his face in her robe. She kissed the top of his curly head. “Oh, he hasn’t been that naughty. I think Santa’s got a few surprises for our boy.” She kissed him again and felt him smile against her.

Trip reached out and tapped his little brother’s foot. “Come on, man, I was just kidding.”

“Sanna put cou inna sock?” Skye asked.

Phil took a deep breath. It hurt to think this little girl knew nothing of the traditions of Christmas handed down through generations. He didn’t blame the nuns of St. Agnes. How could they fill their little charges heads with dreams of things that would never come to pass? They kept them
ignorant in order to protect them. But, Skye was theirs and from this Christmas until she grew to have children of her own they would fill her head and her heart with the magic of the season. They would fill it along with the hearts of their older children and every year would be more magical that the one before.

“He puts good stuff in your stocking,” Fitz informed his little sister from his mother’s lap. “Like sweets and trinkets.”

“Special little presents, just for you,” Jemma elaborated.

“I bet yours will be stuffed to the top.” Trip assured her.

Skye smiled with wonder as she stared at the empty stockings.

“I think it’s time for a story.” Phil smiled as he leaned over the arm of the couch to retrieve a large book with a decorative cover. He brought it to his lap setting it on Skye. She ran her hand over the filigree that lined the front of the book and stared at the engraved letters across the front. “My grandmother used to read this to me when I was just a little guy.” He smiled. “It’s the same book she read to my mom when she was little.” He ran his hand over the book. “So in keeping with family tradition I get to read it to my own children.” Phil stopped for a moment, savoring that statement. ‘My own children’ – eighteen months ago he was sure that was something he’d never say and now…now…

Phil hugged his girls to him as Fitz squirmed over Jemma and Skye to squeeze into the space between his father and the arm of the sofa. Everyone shifted a little to make room then snuggled together in order to see the intricate pictures in the old book. Melinda patted the cushion next to her and Trip needed no other invitation. He joined the family with his mother’s arm around his shoulder and his head on her shoulder.

Phil spread the large book open on his lap directly in front of Skye but with enough room for the twins to see. Trip peered over them. Melinda caught Fitz digging a fist into one eye and the wide yawn that had Skye resting back against Phil’s chest as Jemma’s finger began twirling one strand of hair while she nuzzled into her father’s soft chamois shirt.

“Twas the night before Christmas…” Phil began.

Reading to Skye was normally a challenge as she questioned every page and pointed out every
detail in every picture wondering how and who and why and what was going on in each, but tonight she stared in awe until that little thumb made its way to her lip and her eyes fluttered closed. Melinda smiled at the soft rise and fall of her baby’s chest as Jemma turned into her mother and closed her eyes against Melinda’s breast. Fitz had pulled his knees up and wrapped his skinny arms around them but had also nestled into Skye and his father. His soft snore was more than adorable to her.

Phil read the last line of the classic poem and smiled at his wife. Trip let out a mighty yawn and stretched his long teenage legs. “They sure are cute when they sleep, aren’t they?” He sniggered.

Melinda hugged him tighter. “My beautiful little Christmas miracles,” she smiled then turned and kissed the boy’s cheek. “And my wonderful, strong young man who never ceases to make me proud.”

Even in the twinkling of the lighted tree she could see the blush on Trip’s cheeks. “I’ll carry the little guy upstairs. He eats like a horse and feels like nothing. Where does he put all that?” Trip shook his head as he started to rise, but Melinda caught his wrist and brought him back.

“Let’s just sit for a little,” she breathed quietly. “I don’t get to see them like this very often, all sweet and innocent.”

Phil stretched his arm out and pulled both Melinda and Trip into a family hug. This Christmas was so different than last with that scrawny tree and grumpy family. He understood all of it and yes there were a few days when all of them were sad or angry at the things they no longer had but Phil explained to the twins that memories were funny things and that all those things that made them feel so sad would turn into the things that would make them happy. “There’ll be a time when you will be more happy that you had your family in your life than you are sad you lost them. It will always be a happy pain, but you will enjoy those memories.” He was pretty sure neither believed him but he knew eventually it would happen. He knew it from experience. He’d lost his father as a child and his mother as a teen, they were not young parents when he was born and he’d spent years dreading the holiday but it got easier and better and now here he was with this brood and he wouldn’t change one minute of it. He knew his mom would love all of them so he loved them even more, just for her and this story was his way of sharing her with his children.

“Okay, time to tuck in the little ones. I think I heard some prancing and pawing of little hooves on the roof.” He jested as he wrestled his arm from under Fitz.

Trip gathered his little brother and headed for the stairs as Phil passed Skye to Melinda and gathered Jemma into his arms and followed.
Skye never really remembered going to bed on Christmas Eve until she was about twelve and even then it was all a blur. That first year was probably the only time she ever slept through the night. After that she understood all of the excitement and could not contain it long enough to stay asleep all night. She got put back in her bed several times throughout the night with the warning that no one got up until the sun made it light in their bedroom and NO ONE went downstairs before daddy and momma. She smiled knowing that in a few hours the sun would light up her room and still daddy and momma would precede them to the first floor. It was just tradition and she loved every minute of it.

The teen squirmed a bit and let out a low moan that earned her a firm swat on the backside. “Go to sleep, Skye.” Melinda warned groggily.

“I just can’t momma,” she whined. “I’m too excited.”

Melinda hugged her tighter and hummed softly while running her fingers through the girl’s soft hair. Skye listened to the sound in her mother’s chest and felt the rising and falling of her regulated breath. The soothing sound of her mother’s heartbeat synced with her own as she naturally matched her breathing as well. For a brief moment she remembered all the times momma had calmed her just like this. She remembered the first time she rested her head against Melinda May Coulson’s chest and listened to that heartbeat in the clinic and how it calmed her fears. She knew that sound. It was momma. It was safety. It was all the love that wrapped around her every day. It was the stuff that flooded her memories and held them all together.

Skye listened and slowly relaxed as sleep overtook her taking the memories of Christmas past with it and leaving the promise of Christmases to come.
Chapter Summary

A stranger contests Fitz's adoption sending the Coulson family into a tailspin as they and their friends struggle to find a way to stop the man before he takes away their son.

Chapter Notes

This got away from me a bit and although started out as a short story just kept growing and growing. It's much too long to post as one part but it is complete and I will post as quickly as I can proof it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

N – Nailing Nightmares

Part 1

“You’ve got a call on line three.” One of the secretaries announced as she poked her head into to Phil’s office.

He smiled and shook his head as he tapped a stack of paper into a neat pile and laid it in his open briefcase. “Take a message, Helen. I am out of here in…” he stopped and looked at his watch, “in just about now.” He dropped the top of the satchel closed and snapped the locks.

“Says it’s urgent, sir. Guy sounds pretty upset.” The woman informed him with eyes wide.

“Give it to Mack or Elena,” Phil informed her as he reached for his coat and took the briefcase in his hand.

“Tried that,” she countered. “Said he would speak with you only, told me not to give up until you took the call.”

Phil stopped and let out a long frustrated breath, dropped the briefcase back on the desk and his coat on the chair. “Fine, but it better be a real urgency not some ridiculous needy something or
other.” He reached for the phone as the woman started to pull out of the half opened doorway. “And call Skye’s school, tell them I’ll be a little late picking her up today.” Helen nodded as she disappeared and Phil Coulson picked up the black telephone receiver.

“Coulson,” he barked into it, already poised to chew out whoever it was.

“Coulson…”

Phil recognized the voice immediately.

“We have a situation….”

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Phil carried a jabbering Skye through the back door then set her down and pulled off her coat while she continued to regale him with the tales of everything that happened in preschool during the day. Ryan had hit Ethen with a block and sat in time out for a very long time. Chelsea had an accident and her mommy had to bring clothes. Darienne spilled her milk at lunch time and so on and so forth. At least that’s what he got out of Skye’s sideways descriptions.

Phil nodded although he was only half listening. His thoughts were a mile away…more like a continent away. He looked at the clock that hung above the kitchen doorway…half past four. He considered starting dinner. Trip was at basketball practice, would be until at least six and Melinda had taken the twins to a dentist appointment after school. (Hence his mission to retrieve Skye from preschool.) He stood staring at the clock, his mind a mix of the news he’d received as he left his office for the day and what needed to be done immediately as well as long term solutions to a very sensitive problem.

He felt a tug at the hem of his jacket and looked down at his youngest daughter’s quizzical scowl.


Phil’s mouth formed an ‘O’ as he hurried the little girl to the powder room. A few seconds later he held her up to the sink as she washed her hands, then carried her to her bedroom to quickly change from uniform to play clothes.
“So, angel, what do you want for supper?” He smiled as her head poked through the neck of her pink and purple sweatshirt.

“Why you cow me ain jo, daddy?” Skye responded as she pushed her hair away from her face and frowned at her father.

“Because you are a gift from heaven,” Phil smiled as he sat the little girl on her bed, slid her sneakers on her feet then tied them. Skye sang some song about an overweight dog. He plopped her down on the floor and asked again what she might like for supper.

Skye folded her arms atop the mattress that was chest high to her and stared up at her father for a moment. “Momma say we have asetti for supore.”

Phil laughed as he watched his little one’s serious tone. “Spaghetti, hmmm? Didn’t we just have spaghetti yesterday?”

“Daddy,” Skye sighed. “Asetti is good for supore. It haves no breen, ownee red.”

He smiled at the little girl’s reasoning. Spaghetti was one of the foods she would eat without worrying she’d come across something green. Green was a color Skye avoided at all costs, though no one had any idea why and she was not very forthcoming with the reason.

Phil stood and lifted the little girl into his arms as he headed back toward the kitchen. “I think we might need a little variety, don’t you?”

Skye thought for a moment as she bounced down the steps in her father’s arms. “I non’t eat biarity, daddy. It bees breen?”

Phil laughed as he walked back into the kitchen. “Sometimes, angel,” he kissed her head and lowered her into the nearest chair, “but not tonight.”

He’d pulled off his suit jacket, tie and dress shirt and now stood at the refrigerator door in a T-shirt and his suit pants. “I think some chicken…” He pulled a package out and set it on the table. “And some sweet potatoes…” four large tubers were set next to the chicken. Skye nodded at each item as her father continued. In the end Phil prepared baked chicken, candied sweet potatoes, rice, yellow beans (because they weren’t green) and salad for those who were not green avoidant. He
pulled an apple pie from the freezer and popped it in the oven, all with Skye’s attempt at helping. With any luck everything would be ready by the time Trip stomped in the back door.

“Daddy,” Skye sighed as she stooped and peered into the oven then turned to him. “I hungry. I have fitchies and grain jupes that no is pourpul?”

Phil wanted to smack himself in the head. He’d forgotten all about giving Skye an after school snack. It was generally a long wait for supper in the Coulson house and Melinda usually gave all the kids something light when they arrived home. He quickly poured a cup of white grape juice and grabbed a handful of those little cheesy fish crackers and set them on the table. Another trip to the powder room had Skye’s hands clean when he plopped her into her seat and watched as she took a drink and chomped on the little yellow crackers.

The back door opened emitting Melinda, Jemma and a very grumpy Fitz. The boy kept his gaze to the floor as he stomped past his father and headed for the stairs.

“No cavities,” Jemma smiled as she wrapped her arms around her Phil’s waist. “I’m going to change and start my homework.”

He kissed the top of her head and watched as she too headed for the stairs then turned to Melinda who already had Skye in her arms. “I take it Fitz didn’t do so well.”

Melinda shook her head as Skye slid a fish cracker into her mouth. She chewed quickly and nodded. “Two cavities, the doctor filled both. Our little man is not happy.” She smiled as she accepted another cracker from her baby. She and her husband were well aware of Fitz’s early life. Dental care was not on the top of Emilie Fitz’s child rearing practice. Neither was physical care. Neither could imagine how their young son retained his advanced intelligence given the poor nutrition and medical care he received…if he received any at all. Fitz was small for his age with an immune system that failed him miserably. If there was a virus in the wind the boy would surely be down with it. The family dentist worked hard at repairing what a lifetime of neglect had done to the boy’s teeth. Melinda strictly enforced brushing and flossing, especially with her younger son.

Phil looked toward the stairs debating on how to tell his wife the news he’d received earlier in the afternoon. Two cavities were nothing compared to what he had to tell. Hell a mouth full of cavities would be hard pressed to even compare to it. He watched as Melinda smiled at their youngest while sharing the little fish crackers. He mentally debated with himself. Should he spoil dinner for her, spoil the whole evening or wait until the kids were bathed and tucked in for the night? She had to know and neither of them would sleep tonight or any night until this fiasco was behind them.
He chose the latter keeping the horrifying news to himself for the remainder of the evening.

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“Okay, they’re all down and even Fitz is finally asleep,” Melinda breathed as she stepped into the kitchen and stared at the cup of tea Phil had set on the table. Something he rarely if ever did, this time of night. “You gonna tell me now?”

Phil tried not to smile. It wasn’t surprising. Melinda could read him like no one else. Hell, she knew what he was thinking before he did. Right now he wished he could turn off his mind, wished he would not have to see the look in her eyes when he told her…when she felt the ice cold dagger pierce through her heart…the same one that he could still not pull from his own.

“Mel,” he started, speaking softly as he took her hand in his. She pulled it back, immediately on guard, immediately expecting the worst.

“Just tell me, Phil, no sugar coating, no bush beating…just tell me.” Melinda growled, her anger already rearing its head to protect her from the fear that grew in its shadow. Fear and anger, the strongest of emotions vying for control, fight or flight and in Melinda May’s world the winner was always anger. Anger masked everything. Anger gave her control.

“I spoke to Hunter, today.” Phil began. “Someone’s come forward to contest Fitz’s adoption.” He said it quickly almost as if it hurt to roll off his tongue or he needed it to be out of his mouth because of the vile taste. He vaguely remembered being a kid and yanking off that band aid as fast as possible. Doing it slowly just drew out the pain.

For a moment Melinda said nothing, did nothing but stare into nothing. “Who…who, Phil? We searched, we all searched, every agency and found nothing, no one, not one living relative. Who now, after all this time….who?”

He heard the crack in her voice, but did not react. She wouldn’t let him, not yet.

“The guy claims to be Fitz’s father. Hunter and Bobbi are already on it.” Phil added but wasn’t sure if she was even listening.

“The bastard has nothing to do with him for ten years and all of a sudden crawls out from under a
rock to come after him. Damn it, Phil, there wasn’t even a father listed on the birth certificate. Where did this moron come from and how did he even know… Grant, that bastard Grant…”

“Melinda,” Phil spoke softly, “the man is dead…”

“Oh, I’m sure he had a lot of sleazy friends. It’s got to be one of them, Phil…it…” She stopped, her knuckles white in the grip she had on the back of chair. “No one is taking my son, no one.” Melinda spoke through her teeth.

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“Alistair Dunn,” Hunter spit as he slammed a large file on Phil’s office desk. “The bloody bastard,” he snarled as he turned and stormed across the room. It had been just over three weeks since his call to Coulson.

“Bobbi?” Phil asked as he opened the file and stared at the photo clipped to readouts on top.

“Went on to be with May,” he let out in a harsh breath, “picked up a rental at the airport.” He shook his head as he slammed the office door closed and marched back to the desk.

Phil flipped through the thick file. “This is everything?” He looked up at the angry man in front of his desk.

Hunter slammed a hand down on the desk then jammed his finger into the file emphasizing each word. “That is all we have on the damn piece of shit. Damn it, Coulson, he’s already filed a petition to nullify the adoption, says it was not legal.”

Shaking his head, Phil stared at the copy of the legal papers that would start an investigation into Fitz’s adoption. A chill ran through him as he read the man’s rant.

“Can you believe that load of bullcock? Says the lad’s mother refused to let him have anything to do with him, that she disappeared with the infant and he’s spent the last ten years searching! She disappeared….she!”
Again Phil reviewed the legal mumbo jumbo that said the same thing Hunter had just put into his own vernacular. He continued reading as Hunter continued ranting.

“I’m sure he did a lot of looking in Sydney and Johannesburg, like the lad’s mum had the means to go skippin’ about the globe like some bloody superstar!”

Phil spread the forms in a fan and picked up travel records for the man called Dunn showing he left London for Australia late in the eighties. Fitz would have been a toddler. Before that he had addresses in Manchester, Dublin and Bristol. According to the investigation Phil and his team had done on Emilie Fitz, she and her young son had not left Busby until Jamie Grant dragged Fitz to London. Nowhere was there evidence of the young woman crossing paths with Alistair Dunn.

“He’s a lot older than her,” Phil noted as he flipped a page over and continued scanning the rest. “According to this he never lived in Glasgow or Busby.” He looked to Hunter for more information.

“He was some sort of door to door,” Hunter huffed, “hawking everything from magazines to Hoovers. Far as we could find he never set down anywhere but we tracked him to a stay in Glasgow in March of eighty-seven.” Phil looked over the top of his glasses, eyebrows raised. “Do the math, boss…it’s exactly nine months from March to December.”

Phil took off his glasses and put the papers he held on his desk before turning to stare out the window into the distance.

“He was there a few days at the end of the month with some convention of some sort.” Hunter explained then hesitated, uncomfortably giving his boss the additional information he and his partner had uncovered. “Emilie was young,” he reasoned, “probably living on the street already and…”

Coulson closed his eyes against the truth he would never share with his son. Some things were never meant to be told and Fitz would never know this one. “And she sold the only thing she had to stay alive.” He finished for his agent.

“There’s nothing to show she was a slapper, for all we know it was just that one time. Maybe when she found out she was…” Hunter let the topic drop as Coulson turned back to him. “The bloke’s had more professions than we could count. All of them seemed to be no more than some sort of con, but he’s never been caught as far as we can tell, always manages to pass the blame to some flunky.”
“So what does he want with Fitz…after all this time, what’s his game?” Phil was thinking out loud more so than asking a question.

Hunter shook his head before realizing that fact. “The court is ordering a paternity test. What are you going to tell the lad?” Hunter dropped his chin to his chest and took a deep breath. “How are you going to tell him?” He let out on the exhale.

“Let’s hope we don’t have to,” Phil sighed as he stacked the paper on his desk into a neat pile and tucked it back into the large envelop Hunter had given him. “There is no way this son of a bitch is going to get his hands on my son. We don’t stop until we find out his endgame and make sure he doesn’t get within fifty feet of Fitz. With any luck the they’ll do the paternity test and it will be the end of it.”

“He’s arriving here come Monday.” Hunter reminded him.

“Then we have six days to fix this.” Phil commanded.

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Melinda pulled the front door open and stared at the figure standing on the front porch. She shifted the drowsy toddler on her hip to the opposite side and wrapped Bobbi in half a hug as she stepped inside. Skye let out a soft moan that might have been a mumbled ‘momma’ and snuggled into her mother’s embrace.

“Bobbi,” Melinda breathed, almost relieved to see her long time friend and associate. She knew why the agent had traveled across the Atlantic and showed up unannounced at her door. She knew the news could not be good but did not have the strength or the energy to ask.

The other woman smiled and pushed a stray hair off the little girl’s face. She bent close to Melinda and placed a soft kiss on the child’s flushed cheek then looked to her friend with concern. The dark circles under Melinda’s eyes did not go without noticing. Bobbi frowned at the obviously sick little girl in her friend’s arms.

“Just a little cold,” Melinda whispered. “She’s so stuffy I can’t lay her down. I’ve been walking the floor with her for about an hour hoping she’d drift off but…” She let the comment drop and looked toward the stairs.
Bobbi had known Melinda for many years. She never saw her so haggard. The constant worry over the last three weeks had taken their toll and having a sick child only made it more difficult.

“The other two fell asleep about fifteen minutes ago.” Melinda remarked as she swayed a bit when Skye whimpered softly. “They’ve all got it,” she sighed as she closed the door and started toward the kitchen motioning for Bobbi to follow. “Jemma came home sick on Monday and the other two woke up with it yesterday. I kept them all home. Jemma doesn’t do well with the cough syrup and this one…” she paused and took a deep breath as she cast her eyes toward her baby. “Well, let’s just say she and Fitz never do anything small. “Simple cold today, bronchitis tomorrow, pneumonia by the weekend,” she shook her head as she filled the tea kettle and set it on the stove.

Bobbi slid off her jacket and draped it on the back on one of the chairs. All three of the younger kids were sick and the couple had to deal with the Fitz thing as well. How was Melinda even standing? Bobbi reached out her arms. “Let me take her for a while, Mel. You need a break. Maybe you should consider a nap yourself.” She almost smiled but it looked more like a frown. Bobbie made to take the little girl from her mother but Skye’s whiny protest and a few kicks of her little feet ended that.

Melinda shook her head. “She won’t even let Phil or Trip take her when she gets like this.”

“Okay,” Bobbie nodded as she stepped back. “Then you need to get yourself into that big old recliner in the family room and let me help with the others. Geez, Mel, you’re dead on your feet.” She cast Melinda a knowing smile. “Get this little munchkin to sleep, we’ll share a cup of tea and I’ll fill you in on everything.”

“Momma…” a hoarse call came from the stairs, followed by a round of croupy coughing.

Melinda let out a long breath and took a step in the direction of the call only to be stopped by Bobbi’s hand on her shoulder. “Recliner, boss,” she took her friend by the elbow and escorted her to the family room door then gave her a gentle push toward the comfy chair in the corner. “I’ll take care of whatever it is, you get some rest.”

Twenty minutes later Bobbi tucked a soft blanket around a snoozing Melinda and a finally sound asleep Skye. She’d tucked Jemma back into bed, assuring her that all was well and she was there to help with whatever needed to be done. The little girl, in true Jemma fashion, apologized repeatedly for being a burden, for being sick, for needing so much attention. Bobbi located the children’s acetometophine gave it to the young patient for her headache complaint and assured her it was probably from the coughing. Jemma drifted off quickly. Bobbi pressed her lips to the girl’s head and found it cool. She smiled as she pulled the blanket over the child and tiptoed into the
She pushed open the door on the opposite side of that hall, hit immediately by the menthol smell in the room. Fitz seemed to be breathing with a bit of a snuffle but was sleeping soundly. She pressed a hand to his slightly warm forehead and made a mental note to keep Melinda informed. She put the little boy’s foot back under the blanket and quietly exited the room.

‘What a mess,’ she told herself as she walked down the stairs. “Damn that Dunn throwing Melinda’s world into turmoil. She hated the man with a fury she could not contain. She and Hunter had tracked him from Scotland to London to South Africa and Australia. He was a grifter, swindling people out of their life’s savings and managing to remain two steps ahead of the authorities for years. He posed as a salesman but it wasn’t sales he was after. She couldn’t imagine why he would have been involved with young Emilie Fitz except for a one night diversion that left the troubled girl with a child she could not care for and a habit she could not support. Fitz had been damned from the beginning and saved by the love of Melinda May and Phil Coulson. There was no way she was going to let that rat bastard take this little boy and destroy his life. Who knew what kind of monster Alistair Dunn would turn their sweet and always mischievous Fitz into with his corrupt lifestyle. And why…why would someone like him, who cared about no one, want this child. The possibilities turned Bobbi’s stomach and she knew Melinda’s mind had visited those places as well.

She and Hunter had not found any indication that the man, in addition to his other illicit undertakings, was or had any association with pedophiles but then again both were aware of sleazy bastards that profited from selling children to the low life scum that were. She drew a deep breath through her teeth knowing she’d snap his neck if she found the slightest clue that he was one of them. There was no way he wanted anything to do with this little boy unless it profited him in some way. The answer to the problem lay in them finding out what that was.

Bobbi stopped at the family room door and looked back at her friend then moved to the kitchen. A cup of tea might not be a bad idea. A soft sound her spun her around. A bleary eyed Fitz stood in at the base of the stairs. Apparently he wasn’t as sound asleep as she thought.

“Where’s my mom?” He asked around a cough.

Bobbi was surprised the boy offered no greeting and seemed unfazed at her unannounced arrival. She smiled at him, but he did not return it. ‘He’s not feeling well,’ she told herself and nodded toward the family room.

“Is she sick?” He asked as he leaned forward and peered at the form on the recliner.
“No, sweetie,” Bobbi assured him. “She’s just tired and your little sister has her worn out. I think.”

He looked at her and she knew immediately he did not believe a word of her explanation. Fitz had been lied to most of his life. He had an almost innate radar to be able to tell when someone was giving him a half truth or flat out telling him something to mask what they did not want him to know. Even with his bloodshot blue eyes, she could tell he was glaring at her.

“Hey,” Bobbi spoke softly. “You really should have something on your feet.”

Fitz looked down at and lifted his bare toes up and down a few times.

“Probably a robe or something,” she added. “Why don’t we get you warm and then we’ll both have a cup of tea. I bet your mom’s got some honey that will help with that nasty cough as well.”

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “Will you tell me what’s going on?” He asked in his hoarse nasal voice then waited for her answer, never looking away from her gaze.

Bobbi let out a short breath. They hadn’t told him. She wouldn’t have either, but he knew something was not right and now looked for answers. It wasn’t her place and she was glad for that. “We can talk, sure honey.” She put an arm around his shoulder and walked him toward the kitchen.

Fitz shook his head. “I want my mom,” he said so quietly she barely heard him. He slipped from her arm, headed into the room and toward Melinda.

Bobbi reached out to pull him back, afraid he’d wake both his mother and sister. She started to call him but stopped herself as Melinda lifted the blanket for him to crawl into her embrace. He snuggled into the space between his mother and the wide arm of the chair, content in the nook of her arm. He nuzzled into her chest as his eyes closed and he reached an arm across her. Melinda pulled the blanket around her little boy and mouthed a ‘thank you’ to Bobbi before once again closing her eyes.

XX

An hour later Jemma shuffled into the kitchen and dropped into her regular seat at the table. She
sniffled a few times and dug a fist into one eye.

“Feeling better?” Bobbi asked as she poured a cup of tea and set it in front of the girl with a small pot of honey on the side.

Jemma smiled and nodded as she scooped out the sweet nectar and added to her cup. She stirred it slowly and watched as the liquid swirled a tiny cyclone. Bobbi topped off her own mug, picked it up and took a sip.”

“How’s the headache?” She asked the quiet little girl.

“It’s not as severe as before. Dr. Stephens says I have rhinosinusitis. She’s given me augmentin and a saline spray which is quite uncomfortable.” Jemma answered in a comical nasal voice. She looked back into her cup and let out a soft sigh. “I’m so sorry I brought this home to Fitz and Skye.”

Bobbi set down her cup and squatted down to Jemma’s eye level. “Hey, none of that,” she wrapped an arm around the girl’s shoulders. “I’m sure there are kids sick all over. It’s just that time of year, sweetie.”

Jemma pursed her lips and nodded. It was unlike the girl to make such a statement. She knew more about viruses and contagion and medical terms than anyone in the family, probably as much if not more than her pediatrician.

Bobbi stood and kissed the girl on top of the head before sitting across from her. Jemma smiled as she looked around the kitchen.

“It was kind of you to clean up. I know momma’s been busy with Skye. She’s so little and she is so difficult with medicines and mentholated rub. She puts up such a battle.” Jemma smiled weakly. “It was also quite nice of you to insist that momma take a nap as well as the little ones, even though they are perched on her chest.” She attempted to smile again.

“Maybe you need a little more TLC yourself, huh?” Bobbi mock-pouted, thinking the child might be a bit envious of her siblings’ closeness to her mother.

“Oh, no, not at all,” Jemma stated calmly, as she pulled a Kleenex from her pocket and wiped her
nose. She pushed the tissue back into her pocket and pulled a small bottle of sanitizer from the opposite pocket, squirted it into her hands and rubbed vigorously before snapping the cap shut and stuffing it back into her robe.

“It’s okay to be sick, Jemma.” Bobbi reached across the table and patted the girl’s hand. “And it’s okay to want your mom’s attention as much as your brother and sister.”

“What’s really wrong with Fitz?” Jemma blurted out with a look of desperation that Bobbi had never expected.

She merely stared at the little girl for a moment before swallowing her shock. There was no way Melinda or Phil would have told their ten year old daughter the nightmare they were battling. There was no way the little girl could have found out. Phil had made it a point to have the matter discussed only at the office. Nothing was to be said in their home. Her hesitation in answering sent the child into an almost panic.

“He’s more than just sick isn’t he? He’s got some dreadful illness?” She threw a hand over her mouth. “Is he going to…to…”

Bobbi gathered the little girl into her arms before she could finish the sentence. “No, sweetie, no, Fitz has a little bug, just like you. You know how he is. He always gets a little bit sicker than you do. You know Fitz, he never does anything small.” She smiled and attempted a tiny hint of humor which Jemma ignored.

“But momma’s been so protective of him. She drives us to school and picks us up. She’s never done that before and when I got sick she just kept him home before he was even complaining. She wouldn’t let him go on the field trip with the science club last week and when he got all cheeky and quiet belligerent, she didn’t even punish him.” She paused and took a breath, pulling out another tissue and wiping her eyes and nose. “He stomped and carried on something dreadful. Normally he would have gotten quite the smacking, but momma just held him and I think she was crying. She would never let him get away with anything like that unless something was very wrong. And she talked to Dr. Stephens for such an awfully long time when she visited yesterday. Please, Bobbi, please tell me the truth, please.” Jemma had given up trying to catch her tears and her voice had turned to little more than a raspy whisper.

“Oh sweetheart,” Bobbie shushed the child and hugged her closer. “I promise you that Fitz has no terrible illness or any you need to worry about. The doctor had to talk to your momma about all three of you and Dr. Stephens and I’ll bet she probably scolded your mom about pushing herself too far as well. I know I did.”
“But,” Jemma swiped a tear from her cheek. “But, momma’s been so sad and she’s worried about something. I can tell by the way she’s been acting. She’s just…just different. Something’s wrong Bobbi. I know it.”

Bobbie held the little girl close and let out a long breath. Jemma would suspect. She was very in tune to others’ feelings. The woman was at a loss for what to tell this little girl. “Honey, I think your mom is just tired and I think you’ve been sick and everything is just all blown out of proportion.” She felt Jemma shake her head against her chest.

“And now you’re here, Bobbi, and Hunter is too, I suspect. You never just show up unless there is something very wrong.” Jemma sniffled softly. “Just like when that awful Jamie Grant tried to hurt us, but he’s…”

“You mean we can’t just visit?” Bobbi stopped her and tried to sound insulted. “Just missed our friends and their feisty kids and wanted to catch up with them?” Jemma actually laughed a funny weak laugh that lead to a cough. Bobbi smiled, hugged her again and kissed her temple. “I promise you, sweetie, if there is anything and I mean anything you need to know about, your mom and dad will tell all of you.” Jemma tilted her head back and looked up at the woman who quickly made an ‘X’ over her heart. “Cross my heart!” Bobbie held up her right hand in a sincere pledge as she secretly wished her friends would never have to do so.

XX

Hours later Phil made his way through the darkened house to the room he shared with his wife. He turned on no lights and walked softly across the room knowing she was aware he had entered the room. He stepped to the side of the bed as he loosened his tie and smiled at the dark little head snuggled into her mother’s embrace. Surprised not to see his son tucked into the space next to Skye, he slid the tie from his neck and tossed it over the back of the chair next to the closet. He moved to the bathroom, changed his clothing and slipped into his side of the bed without disturbing the child asleep next to her mother.

“Long day,” Melinda stated.

He could see the moonlight from the large window reflecting in her eyes and smiled, unsure if she was referring to his day or her own. “Sorry…” was all he could answer.

“Don’t be, I know you’re doing everything you can. Bobbi made sure I got some rest today and Hunter was a big help.” She spoke as she shifted and Skye let out a soft whimper. Shushing the little girl softly, Melinda motioned for him to wait before answering.
Phil smiled a crooked grin. “Yeah,” he spoke with a sarcastic drawl.

“No, really,” Melinda whispered as she ran her fingers through Skye’s soft hair. “Maura stopped again today and *everyone* got a shot.” Phil rolled his eyes, knowing his wife could have used his help with that situation. “Hunter got here about five minutes after she did and kept Fitz pretty calm with some silly argument over soccer.” She laughed silently, “had him so worked up over some game that Fitz wasn’t even aware of the injection until Maura was done.”

“I’m impressed.” Phil nodded. “Never would have pegged him for that duty.”

“Fitz was so upset afterward, I promised him he could watch a game with Hunter so he’s all tucked in down in the basement.” Melinda informed him. “He slept most of the day and Hunter promised to keep him in bed and watch his language.”

Phil laughed. “I wouldn’t hold him to that.” He listened for a moment to his wife’s steady breathing and thought she’d fallen asleep.

“Jemma was pretty good, but got a little teary in spite of herself.” Melinda spoke suddenly, startling him in the silence. “Bobbi’s bunking in with her for the night. “Jemma suspects something, Phil. She opened up to Bobbi this afternoon. I think our friend managed to calm her fears but we are going to have to tell her something or she will not let this rest.” She peered into her husband’s eyes until he nodded in agreement.

“And *this* one,” she glanced down at the little girl cuddled next to her.

Phil shook his head, knowing the struggle Skye would have put up when finding out she was about to receive a shot. He ran his hand along her arm and leaned over to kiss her head.

“ Took all three of us to hold her down, she carried on for three hours after. Had Jemma and Fitz more upset than they needed to be. Again, thank God for Bobbi and Hunter helping out with the other two.”

“I’m really sorry, Mel. I should have been here with you. I…”
She reached out her hand and placed a finger over his lips. “I know you would have been if it weren’t for that bastard Dunn.”

“He’s here, Mel.” He told her quickly. There was no way to do it gently. He held his breath waiting for her response. “Mel?” He prompted when none came.

“I heard you.” Her voice was hard and though he could not see her clearly in the darkness he knew her face was the same.

“He’s at the District. I made sure he was alone and stayed there, put two agents on him for the duration. Mack says he has an appointment with a lawyer tomorrow and they plan to file a petition to vacate the adoption. I’ve spoken to Alex. She says he has to prove paternity and that he is committed to raising…” he cast a quick glance at Skye. “To raising his alleged offspring,” he finished.

Melinda pulled her baby closer and squeezed the tears from her eyes. She took a deep breath. “The court will order a paternity test.” She paused and he waited for her to continue. Resting her cheek on Skye’s head she sighed. “It will be a cheek swab or a blood test…in either case we’ll have to tell him, Phil. It’s going to destroy him and his trust. We promised him, Phil.” She ended in little more than a whisper.

He moved quickly to her, taking her in his arms with Skye sandwiched between them. “We’re going to fight this Mel. That bastard ignored him for ten years. He’s not just going to waltz back in and pull him from everything he knows…from everything he loves.” He felt more than heard her sob and quickly kissed her forehead then her cheek. “We’re going to fight this and we’re going to win.”

“Momma,” a little voice mumbled, stopping their conversation flat.

Chapter End Notes

Need to know more.....

Let me know!
Chapter Summary

The Coulson kids recover from a bout with the flu as their parents prepare to tell Fitz a man claiming to be his father is taking them to court. Fitz's reaction is as expected and Melinda tries desperately to console her little boy

NAILING NIGHTMARES - PART 2

By Friday, three children were tired of being confined to being indoors and even more tired of each other. The ‘twins’ argued constantly over everything from the choice of breakfast cereal and which science program to view on television, to who left the mess in the bathroom and which one would be tucked in first. Skye whined incessantly, refused to eat anything and clung to Melinda like Velcro, bursting into tears if any of the other kids so much as looked at her the wrong way.

Saturday morning broke warm and sunny and to everyone’s relief Melinda sent the trio outside to play, with Hunter supervising or completing the crew by creating a quartet. He was little more than a big kid himself but the Coulson’s trusted him to keep the little ones out of trouble and safe while entertaining them as well.

Melinda stood at the kitchen window watching as Hunter crawled on all fours chasing a giggling Skye across the grass as Fitz pumped water into a rocket he’d created on paper during the week and had put together on the patio an hour ago. The doorbell rang unexpectedly for a Saturday and she turned to watch Phil amble down the hall and pull open the front door. She couldn’t see who was there as her husband’s body blocked her view but he appeared to be looking at something. A squeal of laughter took her attention back to the children and when she turned back Phil was walking toward her still staring at a letter sized piece of paper in his hand. When he looked up at her she knew it was not good.

“Phil?” She felt the teacup wobble in her hand and set it down before it crashed to the floor.

He looked up at her for a moment then back down at the form in his hand as if he could not look at her to tell her what he had. “We have to have him at the court appointed doctor’s office on Monday morning for the test.”

Melinda shook her head as she fell into his embrace. “This is happening.” She whispered as he held her.
“It’s just a test, Mel. It could turn out to be inconclusive or prove the guy is sucking wind.” Phil tried reassuring her.

“We both know it could go either way.” She breathed as she stood back and wiped errant tears from her cheeks. “We have to tell him, Phil.” Again she sought refuge in his embrace.

Phil held her close as he watched the children outside the window. Fitz threw his head back in laughter at some stunt Hunter played. Skye giggled next to him a second before throwing her arms around her brother and hugging him tightly. Jemma stood on the deck watching but laughing as well.

“After supper,” he kissed the top of his wife’s head, “we’ll tell him after supper.”

XX

“Am I in trouble?” Fitz squirmed as he sat in a large chair in his father’s office. Rarely, if ever were the children allowed in this room and then only because they were in some sort of hot water. His mother had led him there by the hand after everyone had finished dinner. Trip, who’d been banished to Gram’s apartment for the week since Melinda did not need a fourth sick child, gave him a wink and a smirk as he took plates from the table.

The little boy swallowed hard. He could not recall anything he’d done that would warrant a trip to Da’s private work space. Yeah, there was that talking back thing when mom said he couldn’t go on the science field trip but that was almost two weeks ago. She would never wait that long to give him his comeuppance. It all worked out anyway the kids said it was a wasted trip. They weren’t allowed to touch anything and some lady just droned on to them all day about what kinds of tech the company used and hoped to use in the future. They weren’t even allowed to ask questions.

He on the other hand got to spend the whole day in the tech lab, all alone…well, not really alone. There was one other guy, a senior who lost his field trip privilege for some prank he pulled in chemistry class. He didn’t talk a lot and Fitz didn’t care. He got to tinker with every project he rarely even got to look at and he got that dumb robot they’d been working on to take six steps across the room. With a lot more tinkering he got it to pour a cup of tea! Well, it was actually water, but Fitz bet it could pour tea just as easily. He was pretty angry that day but earned a big laugh out of the other guy in the room when he programmed the robot to mimic some rather rude hand gestures.
‘That must be it,’ he thought as mom motioned for him to sit in that big leather chair that faced Da’s desk. He was positive he deleted all those commands before he left for the day but what if that…no, the guy wasn’t tech savvy, he was more into string theory and finding life on Mars than anything as tangible as gadgets and gizmos.

He’d been pretty nasty to Jemma yesterday and used some colorful language with her when she barged into his bedroom to accuse him of putting all those hexbugs™ under her bed. Of course he did, but he wasn’t just going to admit it. She threw them across his room and he lost it, calling her everything he had in his arsenal before he realized his mother had the ears of a bat and was probably on her way to remind him, again, about his choice of language. But Jemma was not a tell-tale and mom hadn’t said a word about it. Of course that was yesterday…and now here he was with both of them staring at him. He swallowed again.

“Whatever I did, I didn’t do it,” he stammered then shook his head. “I mean I didn’t do what you think I did.” That didn’t sound much better. He looked from one parent to the other and sighed. “I’m totally innocent.”

Melinda sat on the chair next to him. There was plenty of room on the large seat along side his skinny body. “No, baobei, you did nothing. Your father and I just want to talk to you.”

He looked at her for a moment, narrowing his eyes and then to his father who leaned against his desk with his arms across his chest and stared at the floor. Fitz looked back to his mother who now looked at him with such apprehension it sent a shiver through him. He started to stand but Melinda stopped him, holding both his hands in hers.

“I’ve gone and failed the entrance test for the college prep courses this summer, haven’t I. I knew I should have studied longer. I didn’t need sleep. I needed to read more.” He tried to pull his hands from his mother’s without success. Then the boy looked quickly at Phil when he laid a hand on his shoulder.

“No, Fitz,” the man said softly as he stooped to his son’s level. “We need to tell you something and there’s no easy way to say it.”

Now the boy was scared. He squirmed back into the chair behind him and moved closer to his mother for support. His brain ran through hundreds of horrifying scenarios and stopped at one. He looked to his mother and then his father and then back. “Am I sick…sick like my maw was…do I have what she had? Am I going to get…will I…did, did I give it to Skye and J-Jemma?”

Melinda pulled him close. “No, no baobei, no you’re not sick. All of you are feeling better.” She
assured him.

He nodded and quickly wiped a tear from one eye then sat up and looked directly at Phil. “I’m sorry about the robot, Da. I thought I wiped its memory.”

Phil knit his brows for a moment and looked at Melinda who merely shrugged her shoulders. He looked back at Fitz. “Well, we’ll talk about that some other time. Right now your mother and I have to tell you about a man that’s come forward…” He stopped and looked to Melinda. Fitz followed his gaze and saw the look in his mother’s eyes. There was no sugar coating this. There was no way to say this without having Fitz’s world come crashing down around him. All they could do was help pick up the pieces and hold him together until this nightmare was over.

“What man?” Fitz’s voice broke his parents’ thoughts.

“A man…a man’s come forward to contest our adopting you. He claims he’s your biological father.” Phil spoke slowly and watched as the color drained from his little boy’s face.

Fitz swallowed again and shook his head, already trembling and afraid but having to ask the next questions. “Why?!” The boy squirmed sideways, facing his mother then spun back to look his father in the eye. “What does he want? Is he here? Has he come to take me away?” Each question sent the boy further into panic as his voice became shrill.

Melinda bit her lip and took a deep breath as Phil placed his hands on the boy’s shoulders and continued. “He is in the city Fitz. He won’t come here and he can’t take you anywhere. He wants the judge to say the adoption was illegal.”

“NO!” The boy shouted as he bounced to his feet coming eye to eye with Phil. “No, you said it was forever.” He paced away from his parents, stomping across the floor and waving his arms wildly then stomped back. “The judge said it was forever and ever and that no one could change it. You promised…you said I was…your…you…” Fitz was breathing rapidly. He threw a hand over his mouth and looked wide eyed at his father.

Melinda got a waste basket in front of him seconds before the little boy lost his supper. He threw up until all he could do was gag and cough. Phil pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the boy’s face before his mother pulled him into her lap on the large chair.

“You promised,” Fitz’s hoarse voice croaked. “You all promised.”
Phil knelt in front of them and placed a hand on the little boy’s head, brushing back his now sweaty curls. “No one is taking you anywhere, Fitz. We are going to fight this. Your mom and I and Hunter and Bobbi and Mack and Elena and you,” he gently poked a finger into the boy’s chest, “all of us are going to make sure this man sees you are our son and that is forever and ever.” He leaned forward and kissed the boy’s temple. “I promised you then and I promise you now.” Phil looked at Melinda then back to his son. “We both do.”

Fitz turned into his mother’s embrace and let his fear and anger loose in a torrent of tears.

XX

The DNA swab was painless, the blood draw horrific and the wait for the results even worse. The court would hear nothing until the judge had those results so the next two weeks droned on as if someone had switched the off button on time.

Fitz’s nightmares returned with a vengeance, making Skye’s night terrors seem tame. Melinda and Phil would race down the hall once again trying to calm their terrified child before he woke his siblings. Trip took to sleeping in the guest room or his gram’s couch since he’d smacked his head twice and stubbed three toes after being scared awake by his little brother’s early morning shrieks. Hunter offered to set up a cot next to the boy’s bed but the only real cure was Mom. Melinda held her trembling child, stroking his hair, rubbing his back and humming quietly until he calmed. Twice he’d wet himself in the throes of his nightmare then sobbed with embarrassment when Melinda helped him clean up and change. She assured him no one would ever know. After that he would race to the bathroom four, sometimes five times a night to prevent a reoccurrence. He also refused to drink anything after dinner. Sleeping between his parents seemed the only relief anyone got. He’d stay next to Melinda with one hand clenched on Phil throughout the night.

He never shared the content of his nightmares but his parents were sure it was of losing them both. Three of his teachers called to inquire about his health as his classroom performance had changed drastically and he’d fallen asleep on more than one occasion. By the end of the first week, Melinda had made up her mind to keep Fitz at home. He could study and do his school work there, where they’d both feel safest. A call from Dr. Stephens to the school counselor had Fitz excused for an indefinite amount of time. This only fed into Jemma’s fear that her brother suffered some incurable and probably terminal disease.

The little girl became so obsessed with her imagined situation that Phil and Melinda had no choice but to share the story with both Jemma and Trip, leaving Skye out of circumstances she would not understand. This relieved Jemma’s fear and fed into a new panic as she and Trip both dreaded the
loss of a different but just as permanent kind. Trip wanted, needed to help and was allowed to sort through files and documents obtained by Hunter while Bobbi agreed to keep Jemma informed of any new information she received. While it did not alleviate their fears it helped keep them busy and feeling as though they could help.

On Friday of the second week Phil looked up to see a courier of the court at his office door. The young man handed him a manila envelop, had him sign a receipt, thanked him for his time and left as quietly as he had come. Phil stood staring at the stamp in the envelope’s corner, the address of the lab that had done the testing. He knew what it was but could not bring himself to open it, yet he needed to know before he took it home to his wife and son. At best it would prove this Dunn character was no one and this whole mess would be over. At worst, Alistair Dunn would be Fitz’s biological father and the nightmare would be worse.

Phil slid the letter opener he retrieved from his desk under the seal and opened the small package. He pulled out the top form, the only one he really needed to see. Reading past all the legal mumbo jumbo he stopped and felt the ice cold knife go through his heart. The blood test was inconclusive. With Emilie’s and Fitz’s blood types pretty much any man with any blood type could be the boy’s father. Alistair was not ruled out. The DNA test however proved without a doubt that Alistair Dunn was the biological father of Leopold James Fitz.

Phil dropped into his chair and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

This had only just begun.

XX

Everyone was way too quiet at dinner…well, except for Skye who felt it necessary to share every detail of her day at preschool including how many times Ryan picked his nose and the fact that Chelsea wet her pants in the playground again and Miss Pani told her she would have to stay inside if it continued. Of course most of the group understood little of what she said and the others barely seemed to be listening. This concerned Jemma. She smiled and nodded at her little sister’s comments in the same manner she had seen her mother do on many occasions.

Clean up was pretty quiet as well, with Bobbi insisting on doing most of the work. Jemma watched as her parents looked at each other and made subtle glances toward Fitz but said very little. Da had come home right as they were sitting down to eat and squeezed Momma just a little too tightly and a little too long. She wasn’t sure but she thought Momma wiped a tear away when they parted. Jemma made it a point to keep watch on both parents.
Trip excused himself after scraping all the plates. He had a geometry exam in the morning and
needed to study...some place quiet. He gathered his backpack and followed Gram to her little
apartment. Skye tore around the table demonstrating her ability to make a big circle and some kind
of whirring engine noise until Momma scooted her out the door to run off her never ending
energy. Da followed, encouraging Fitz to grab a soccer ball and give him another lesson in the
boy’s idea of football. Jemma volunteered to help Bobbi, freeing Hunter to join the soccer game.

Fitz was thrilled to have Da’s attention and with a brand new ball, courtesy of Hunter, brought all
the way from Manchester. He ran to grab it from his dresser as Hunter and Phil accompanied an
overexcited Skye out the back door. The boy raced up the stairs and grabbed the ball, made a pit
stop in the bathroom then half ran/half slid down the steps and spun around the knob at the bottom
of the railing with one hand. The grand exit was a little more than the not so athletic Fitz did very
often, if at all. He lost his one armed hold on the ball that bounced against the floor, hit the wall
and ricocheted side to side until it hit the door of Phil’s office. The door opened allowing the ball
entrance. It bounced one more time hitting Phil’s briefcase exactly on the button that released the
clasp. The ball hit the floor, spun once then rolled to the far wall but not before the case slid off
the edge of the chair and spilled its contents onto the rug.

Fitz stood in the doorway and watched until the last of his father’s papers drifted to the floor in a
scattered mess. He glanced down the hallway at Bobbi and Jemma dancing around the kitchen to
some silly song that played on the radio then slipped into the forbidden room and quietly shut the
door. His first inclination was to grab the ball and get out as fast as possible. He hurried across the
room and snatched the ball ready to make a run for it. The mess on the floor stopped him. As
soon as Da found it he’d know exactly who was responsible. This had Fitz written all over it.

The little boy set the ball on the nearest chair and dropped to his knees scooping papers as quickly
and neatly as possible. He stacked them, tapped them evenly then turned the briefcase upright and
laid the pile inside. Fitz smiled at his accomplishment and reached to close the lid when he spied
one last large envelope that had slid under the desk. He flattened himself on his stomach and
reached under to snag it. Catching it by the bottom he pulled it out and up spilling its contents into
his lap as he sat up. The boy let out a frustrated sigh and started pushing the papers back inside.
When he held the last two forms he rose and knee-walked to the case to put the envelope with the
rest of the paperwork. Putting the forms together he turned them upright to slide them inside when
he noticed his name in large letters across the top of one form.

Fitz sat back and stared at his name for a moment, unwilling to let his gaze fall over the rest of the
paper. He wasn’t sure if it was because he knew it was wrong to read his father’s private papers or
if he just didn’t want to know. Curiosity won out and the boy dropped the forms to the floor as his
eyes filled with tears and his stomach threatened to toss the dinner he had just finished.

Fitz ignored both feelings rose to his feet and ran.
“Fitz, where’d you go for that ball?” Phil called as he stepped into the kitchen. He looked to Bobbi and Jemma with a silent question.

“He didn’t come through here.” Bobbi replied as she dried a plate and set it into the cabinet. Jemma shook her head in agreement.

Phil knit his brow. The boy had been more than excited to get his prize and join the others in the backyard. Shrugging his shoulders, Phil walked through the kitchen and headed for the stairs. He couldn’t imagine what could have distracted Fitz from his one and only sports passion.

The open door of his office stopped Phil half way to the stairs. He stood in the hall for a moment and glanced around the room but found nothing out of place until he spotted the blue and white soccer ball on the chair facing his desk. Phil stepped closer striking the toe of his shoe on his open brief case. He looked down at the two forms a few inches from it and the large manila envelope that lay half in/half out of the case.

Fitz knew.

XX

Phil searched his office first. He made his way through the living room, dining room and every closet and space where a small boy could squeeze himself before calmly going up the stairs and repeating the process there. Fitz was nowhere to be found and telling Melinda was going to be hell.

The shrill shriek of his youngest child brought him to the stairs. He quickly made his way to the powder room finding Melinda wrestling with the little girl who refused to allow her mother to look at the large abrasion on her knee.

“Noan tush it,” Skye squealed as she held both hands over her knee and turned her back to Melinda who picked up the little girl and plopped her on the counter top. Blood ran from the girl’s hand down to the tops of her socks and seeped into them.

“She fell on the driveway,” Melinda shook her head as she wet a washcloth and dabbed the little streaks of blood on the Skye’s shin. The little girl jumped with each touch. She looked at Phil and
knew immediately there was something wrong. He could not hide it from her, but Skye needed her attention right now.

“Momma will not hurt you, Skye. You know that.” Melinda assured her baby girl. “I just want to wash your boo-boo and put on a band aid.”

“I non’t wanna ban tade.” Skye sobbed. “Noan tush it, momma.”

“Hey, angel,” Phil spoke calmly as he moved closer. “How ‘bout we wash your hands then.” He pointed at the blood on her fingers. “You don’t want to be all sticky, do you?”

Skye chewed her lip for a second and shook her head.

“Okay, you let Daddy wash your hands and Momma will make you all better.” He smiled at her.

The little girl slowly held up her hands and allowed Phil to twist her upper body toward the sink. He stepped between her and Melinda and held her little hands under the cold running water, gently massaging soap into her palms, and singing that silly hand washing song he’d heard a million times, while his wife quickly cleaned the wounded knee and placed a large band aid over it.

Both parents breathed a sigh of relief as Skye examined the bandage and let out a shaky sob before reaching out to her mother. Melinda looked over the child’s shoulder at her husband still seeing the look of controlled panic there.

“Where’s Fitz?” She asked, surmising that he had come into the house for the boy who was nowhere to be seen.

Phil shook his head. “He knows.” He said softly.

“You told him?” She accused calmly, as they moved into the hall. She bounced the still sobbing Skye gently, shushing her with soft kisses and pats to her back.

Phil stopped at his office and stepped aside for her to witness the evidence. Melinda looked to him and swallowed hard. Fitz knew better than to run off. He’d felt the consequences for making that
decision quite a while ago, but the boy was terrified and terror is like holding on to a tornado even in the hands of an adult. Melinda imagined her little boy tearing down the streets of Bethesda in a blind panic.

Jemma and Skye were hurried into the safe care of Gram Triplet, while everyone else scoured the house and neighborhood in search of Fitz. Trip joined the effort much to Jemma’s protest, but she relented when reminded someone had to look after Skye.

Hunter and Bobbi drove along the few blocks the boy could have gotten to in the short amount of time, while Trip rode his bike to the local park and through the smaller alleys and paths between it and their home. Phil searched the large yard and brush, the tree house and gardener’s shed. Melinda went through the rooms in the basement.

An hour later the group met in the kitchen. No one had found a trace of the little boy.

Melinda was lost between panic and fury. “Why wasn’t your office locked?” She demanded, in effect blaming Phil for what had happened.

He stepped to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. This was no time to argue or point fingers.

“Maybe it’s time to call the authorities,” Hunter spoke quietly.

No one responded. No one wanted to respond or to admit that they could not find one scared little boy. The sound of Phil’s phone saved all of them from saying anything.

“But Coulson,” he answered and turned toward the back door. “Thank you,” he finished a few moments later. Phil flipped the phone closed and set it on the table. “We’ll be right back.” He took Melinda by the hand and led her out the back door.

They crossed the deck and patio, moving to the driveway where Phil lifted the garage door and flipped on the light as dusk left the large area dim. Melinda turned toward the sound of rustling in the back of the garage. Phil put a finger to his lips and stepped between his red Corvette and the wall heading toward the shelves in the rear. Moving slowly and quietly they stopped a few feet from the workbench that held most of Phil’s tools. Melinda caught the toe of a dirty sneaker as it was pulled quickly out of sight.
Phil dropped to his knees and climbed under the shelf, sitting down next to the little boy who had pulled himself as far into the corner as he could. Melinda followed suit, settling down next to her husband.

“Kinda cozy,” Phil smiled at Melinda who shook her head.

“Floor’s a little cold and pretty hard, don’t think I’d like it here very long,” she disagreed.

“Hmm,” Phil answered then looked at the little boy who tried to blink away tears. “What’d you think?”

Fitz just stared for a moment then shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t like the dark,” he sniffled as he rubbed a finger under his nose. His dirty hands had left smudges across both of his cheeks.

“I suppose that would be a major drawback,” Phil agreed, looking to Melinda as he nodded.

“Smell’s not so great,” she added. “And the neighbors hear everything.” She looked up with only her eyes.

“Be a shame taking up residence here, especially when you’ve got a great house and a nice warm bed just a stone’s throw away,” Phil nodded as he pointed toward the open door.

Fitz turned and climbed into his father’s lap, wrapping his cold arms around Phil’s neck. He sobbed for a moment before swiping his nose with the hem of his T-shirt and turning toward his mother. He slipped between his parents and let out a long breath.

“You had us pretty worried.” Phil remarked as he tapped the boy’s knee with one finger.

“We’ve been looking for you for more than an hour, Fitz. Didn’t you think we would be frightened?” Melinda sighed as she wrapped an arm around him and pulled him closer.

“I’m in trouble, right?” The boy sniffed, looking up at his mother.
“Yep,” she answered without pause as Phil chuckled under his breath.

“Were you going to tell me…tell me about that man being my…” Fitz looked at Phil and sniffed back a sob. “He’s not…he won’t ever be.” He broke into tears wrapping his arms around his father again. Phil embraced the boy and leaned down to kiss his head.

“We would have told you, Fitz. We would not keep that from you. I just got those results today. I didn’t even have a chance to talk your mother about them yet.” He looked at Melinda as he spoke.

“What are we going to do? I won’t go with him, I won’t. I’ll run away and hide until I’m old enough to do what I want. I will. I really will.” Fitz stammered between his angry tears. “You can find me and tan me good as many times as you want, but I’ll just keep running until I’m too old for him to be anything.” The little boy growled.

Melinda took his chin with two fingers and turned him toward her. “No one is running away and no one is taking you away from us. Do you understand me, Fitz? No one.”

Fitz squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed before letting out more sobs and falling back into Phil’s embrace. Melinda rubbed his back gently.

“I think a nice hot bath might be a good idea, get you warmed up. We’ll let everyone know you’re safe and then you and mom and I will talk.” Phil pulled himself up and out from under the shelf, helped Melinda to her feet then gathered the little boy into his arms.

Fitz wrapped his arms around his father’s neck and buried his face in his neck.

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Melinda switched off the light in Fitz’s room and stepped into the hall pulling the door closed with a soft click. She moved across the hall into Skye’s room and tiptoed across the floor. Placing a kiss on the little girl’s head, she picked up Salty from the floor and tucked the scrawny bunny under the covers next to her baby then kissed her again and tiptoed out of the room. After checking on Jemma, kissing and tucking her in as well, the woman slowly made her way to the kitchen where Phil and their best agents waited.

“Thank you so much for getting the girls settled.” She smiled weakly at Bobbi before she sat at
“Fitz is finally asleep, but I’m not sure how long it will last.” Melinda glanced at the clock above the stove and counted the hours until he would wake screaming from the nightmares that continued to haunt him.

Hunter tapped the side of his beer bottle with one finger and spoke to it more than the others at the table. “I wish there was a way to help the little nipper.” He glanced up at three pair of eyes staring at him. “I mean more personally…more than what we’re doing that he doesn’t know about or…”

“We understand.” Bobbie assured him.

“He’s terrified. My baby is terrified and I can’t make it go away.” Melinda sighed, almost in tears. Bobbi reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

A light tap at the door startled everyone. Phil went to answer it, expecting to find yet another clerk with another summons but was surprised to see Mack and Elena on the front stoop. He welcomed them inside and followed both to the kitchen where Mack dropped a large file on the table.

“Hope you have a lot more of that coffee,” he pointed toward Phil’s cup as he shrugged off his jacket and reached for a mug.

“What’ve you got?” Phil wasn’t wasting time.

Elena removed the thick rubber band that held the file closed and pulled out a magazine that looked like it belonged in an elementary school classroom. On the cover was a face they all recognized. Fitz stood in a white lab coat, sporting protective goggles and holding up a large test tube that appeared to be bubbling with some frothy liquid. The caption read, ‘Whiz Kids and the Future of Technology’.

Melinda picked it up and smiled. “We have this framed in Fitz’s room. It’s from an article they did after the Science Exhibition last spring. He won first prize.” She beamed with pride.

“Yeah, well it turns out Dunn’s got a copy as well.” Mack informed them as he carried two mugs to the table and handed one to Elena. “That magazine was published in May. Dunn showed up at the court in Glasgow mid June.” He continued.

“They’ll just say it was how he finally found the boy,” Hunter scoffed.
“But it begs the question, what was he doing with an elementary school periodical?” Phil pondered

“Any chance he had some kind of connection with that Grant jerk?” Mack asked as he sipped his hot beverage.

“We couldn’t find any. There’s no evidence they ever crossed paths.” Bobbi shook her head.

Phil paced the length of the kitchen, clearly losing what was left of his patience. “There’s no way this guy all of a sudden feels the need to raise his son. He’s got to have an angle.” He slapped the rolled magazine against his palm.

For a moment the room fell silent until Elena pulled another form from the envelope. “This Dunn says he has been looking for the boy for years, but we cannot find anything to show this. He hired no detective and never once contacted the social agencies in Glasgow or Busby.”

“He signed an affidavit saying he spent three months,” Mack flipped through the papers he held. “Three months from March til the end of May of ninety-one searching for the boy himself. Claims he was in London, Glasgow, Busby and Edinburgh.”

“There is no trace of him staying anywhere in any of those cities during that time.” Elena added.

“There’s also a letter from him to the court stating that he met with Emilie Fitz in February of ninety-four. He even gives the dates, February twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth. Says he offered her a substantial amount of money to let him meet his son, but she refused and then disappeared. Says the boy was with her on the second day but she took off before he could talk to him.” Mack flipped the page. “He claims that is how he recognized Fitz on the cover of the magazine.”

“That magazine is not something you find on a news stand. It’s distributed to schools only. So we’re back to how he got it in the first place.” Phil reminded them.

“It is distributed internationally through science clubs and interest groups in the elementary schools.” Bobbi explained. “I checked. Four schools in the London area subscribe and one in Glasgow. He could have picked it out of someone’s trash for all we know.” She shook her head.
“But why would he be looking in the trash in the first place?” Elena pondered.

Hunter shook his head. “There’s a pub in Glasgow keeps track of stuff like this.” He took the magazine from Phil and stared at the photo on the cover. “Family stuff and all,” he explained. “The guy’s got a wunderkind of his own.” He flipped a few pages and pointed to an article on a boy a few years older than Fitz who had developed a water filtration device for an apartment complex with pumping problems. “Here…here’s the lad himself. His father probably had it on display. If Dunn wandered in he could have recognized our Fitz.”

“But if he’d never seen the boy how would he know?” Mack posed, still unable to fathom the connection between Dunn and the magazine.

The conversation continued with everyone bantering back and forth, questioning questions that could not be answered. Phil made sure all four agents knew they were to keep digging until all the answers were uncovered and Dunn had nothing to use against them. The man was a con artist and a gold digger and they needed to prove it. It was just before midnight when Mack shushed everyone and jutted his chin toward the hallway.

Fitz shuffled toward them, digging a finger into one eye. He said nothing but moved directly to Melinda and crawled into her lap, resting his head on her shoulder.

“Hey, buddy, what are you doing up?” Phil asked quietly as he rubbed a hand on the boy’s back.

Fitz merely snuggled closer to his mother. She wrapped him in a tight hug and kissed the top of his head. “I think we’ve beat this up enough for one night. Mack, Elena?” She faced her friends as they stuffed all their acquired information back into the file. “You’re welcome to stay but you’ll have to bunk in the boys’ room. Trip’s been using the guest room since…” She cast a quick glance at the little boy asleep on her lap.

Phil took Fitz from his mother and turned toward the stairs. “I’ll put him in our bed. He’s gonna end up there anyway.” Fitz drew a shaky breath and hooked his hands together behind his father’s neck.

“Don’t let him take me, Da.” The boy mumbled groggily.

“Never, bao bao,” Melinda whispered close to Fitz’s ear as she stepped next to him then let out a sigh as she looked at the myriad of cups, mugs and snack leftovers strewn across the kitchen.
Bobbi followed her gaze. “You go, get the little guy to bed. We’ll take care of this mess and see you in the morning. We’ve got a lot of work to do.” She kissed Fitz’s temple, (something she’d never get away with if he were fully awake) and motioned for Hunter to start helping with clean-up.
N - Nailing Nightmares - PART 3

Chapter Summary

The first day in the court room does not bode well for young Fitz. Can his parents see him through this new trauma? By day's end the Coulsons have a sliver of hope. Will it be enough?

PART 3

Three days later Fitz walked between his parents holding tightly to their hands. They climbed the steep marble stairs outside the court house and stopped at the large wooden doors. Phil took a deep breath and smiled down at the little boy before pushing the doors open and stepping inside.

The benches outside the courtroom were empty. Only a few clerks and lawyers moved through the halls. Phil motioned for Melinda and their son to sit then walked the length of the hallway and peered around the corner. Apparently their lawyer, Alexandra Miles had not yet arrived.

Fitz wrapped his arms around his middle and rocked back and forth. “I think I’m about to be sick.” He moaned, puffing his cheeks full of air then blowing it out and repeating it over and over.

Melinda smiled and patted his knee. “It’s just nerves, baobei. You’re going to be fine. All you have to do is tell the truth. Just take deep breaths and relax.”

The boy shook his head and swallowed hard as his stomach clenched. “No, mom, really I’m about to be sick.” He threw a hand over his mouth and looked at her in panic.

Grabbing his hand, Melinda rushed to the nearest restroom, making it just in time to get him to the first stall. “Better?” Melinda asked when Fitz stood and took a step back. He nodded once then shook his head and bent back over the bowl, sick again. After five repeats, there was nothing left to come up. Fitz breathed heavily and made his way to the sink. Melinda wiped his face with cool towels and had him cup his hands to catch water and rinse his mouth. She looked at his flushed cheeks and felt his head with her lips.

“I’m okay, mom.” Fitz spoke with a shaky voice as Melinda dabbed the cool towel on his face again.
“Everything’s going to be okay, Fitz. Daddy and I will be with you. You don’t have to be afraid.” Melinda assured him. The boy nodded, took his mother’s hand and rejoined his father in the hall.

Melinda smiled as she walked toward Phil and recognized the small woman he spoke with. Sr. Mary Clair turned toward them and opened her arms. Melinda wrapped one arm around her, never letting go of Fitz with the other. The nun looked down at the little boy for a second before pulling him into a tight embrace.

There was a lot more activity in the hall now. People moved in and out of large doors, others stood in small groups speaking in hushed tones while others spoke in loud angry voices that echoed in the expansive hallway. The elevator door opened and closed at regular intervals emitting groups of people then taking others away. Fitz watched as two policeman led a handcuffed man past them and on down the hallway, disappearing around the corner. He tried to calm himself taking deep breaths and holding tightly to his mother’s hand.

“Sister Mary Clair is going to stay with you, Fitz.” Melinda was saying. It took Fitz a moment for it to register. He recognized the small stout woman smiling at him. She did not approach but stood near the bench they had been sitting on earlier.

“Where are you going?” He asked quickly, grabbing Melinda’s hand with both of his as she lowered herself to the bench and pulled him in front of her.

“Mom and I have to go into the courtroom, Fitz.” Phil explained, placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We think it would be better if you weren’t there until they need to talk to you. Sister’s just going to keep you company while we talk to the judge.”

“But…but,” Fitz started, blinking away the tears that were already falling. “What if…what if he comes and tries to take me?”

Phil dropped to the boy’s eye level. “He won’t. He can’t. He’s going to be in the courtroom Fitz. We’ll be able to see him at all times. He won’t be able to take you anywhere.”

“I’m sure there’s a room where we can wait.” Mary Clair suggested as she stepped closer and reached for the boy’s hand. “That way we won’t be right out here in all this comotion.”

The woman spoke from experience. She had spent many hours with children in the courthouse,
those waiting for adoption proceedings and those who had been neglected or abused. She knew there were rooms set up especially for those children she was sure she and Fitz could utilize one while they waited. The clerks and secretaries were familiar with the little nun.

A slender young woman approached the small group and gave a slight smile. “It’s time.” She said softly. Phil looked up and gave a slight nod.

“I promise, Fitz. We will be right here and you will be safe.” Phil wiped a tear from the boy’s cheek and pulled him into a quick hug then stood and looked to Melinda. She wrapped her son in a bear hug and kissed him twice then gently pushed him to the nun standing next to her. Unable to speak and hold back her emotion, she smiled and took Phil’s hand as they walked into the courtroom with their lawyer.

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“Your honor, my client is under the assumption that the boy was to be in the courtroom this morning.” A tall well dressed barrister with the slightest British accent remarked.

Before the judge could respond, Alex Miles stood. “If it please the court, your honor, we thought it best the child remain outside the proceedings until his testimony is needed.”

The sixty-ish judge took a deep breath and pushed his glasses up on his nose. He looked from one lawyer to the other and then to the ruddy faced man at one desk and the pale faced couple at the other. Looking over a form he held in one hand he asked, “Is the boy in the courthouse?”

“Yes, your honor. He is currently in one of the rooms reserved for juvenile witnesses, in the care of Sr. Mary Clair Reagan. I believe the court is familiar with her work with youngsters in the system.”

“I don’t see her mentioned in this order.” The judge scanned the pages he held then looked over his glasses at Alex.

“It was last minute, your honor. The child is extremely distressed and has been physically sick since arriving. His parents…”

“I AM HIS PARENT!” Alistair Dunn spoke for the first time. Rising to his feet and pounding a
fist on the table in front of him.

The judge banged the gavel twice. “Counselor, control your client.” He warned the barrister calmly as the man placed a hand on Dunn’s shoulder and spoke quietly in his ear.

Dunn scowled at the Coulsons as he dropped back into his seat. The courtroom fell into silence waiting for the judge to make a decision.

“An officer of the court will join the boy and his guardian until such time as he is needed. He is to remain in the courthouse.” He banged the gavel and turned to the Dunn and his lawyer. “Mr. Gordon, you may proceed.”

Alex sat down and waited for the other counsel to begin. Gordon cleared his throat and tapped the forms he had been holding a few times before setting them down and stepping around the table.”

“My client, Alistair Dunn maintains that his son was taken from his country and placed with an American couple without his permission. He also states he was not contacted or informed that the child had been abandoned by…”

“Objection, your honor, Ms. Fitz did not abandon her son. The woman had been the victim of a violent crime that my clients were instrumental in solving. The boy was considered an orphan by Scottish Social Service Council. The documentation has been submitted to the court.” Alex stood and informed the judge.

A clerk rose and handed a few documents to the bench. The judge flipped through the pages. “Sustained. Mr. Gordon?”

The man hesitated for a moment before continuing. “Regardless of how the boy was left without his mother, there was no effort made to contact his father regarding this matter.”

“Objection,” Alex stood again. “The service council and the firm owned and operated by Philip Coulson spent months searching for information on the child. The name of the father was not known, nor was it documented on his birth certificate or any records completed by Emilie Fitz, named as his birth mother. Ads requesting information were placed in newspapers throughout the Glasgow and London metropolitan area. Again, your honor this is part of the evidence submitted by this counsel.”
For the second time the clerk handed documents to the judge who scanned them and sustained the objection. During the next two hours the argument went back and forth as Gordon put forth reasons for Dunn’s contesting the adoption and Alex presented evidence to contradict them. Phil and Melinda started to feel less threatened and hoped the judge would just throw the whole thing out and send everyone home.

Gordon paused for a moment and took a drink before continuing. He smiled at Alex and the Coulsons as he picked up a form from the table and turned to the judge. “Despite all the failed searches and lack of documentation, my client has been proven beyond a doubt to be the biological father of Leopold James Fitz, which is why we are here, your honor. I believe the court has a copy of the blood test and DNA swab that was done three weeks ago. The blood test does not rule out Mr. Dunn and the DNA test speaks for itself. Alistair Dunn is the boy’s father and by law, both local and international, has the right to demand his child, who was taken from him illegally, be returned immediately.” He passed the form he held to the clerk who in turn gave it to the judge.

Gordon turned and offered Alex a smug smile.

Phil wrapped his arm around Melinda’s shoulders and gripped her hand tightly in his own. Both waited for the judge who examined two forms he held. The courtroom remained silent.

“Your honor…” Alex began and stopped when the man held up one finger. She looked to the Coulsons and took her seat.

The judge set the papers on the bench and peered at both parties. He drew a breath and gave what might be called a glare. “I appreciate your presentation of evidence, Mr. Gordon, however simply providing the biological means to create a child does by law give one the title of parent. It does not in any way express the ability of that same person to care for that child. Procreation does not make one a parent. I believe that is why we are here and I intend to hear all of the facts before I make any decision on what essentially is the rest of this boy’s life. I will certainly take this paternity test result under consideration but I assure both you and Ms Miles that it will not be the sole deciding factor in this matter.” The man drew a breath and looked from side to side before continuing. “Now, I believe you have both had the opportunity to provide opening statements. This court will recess until,” he looked to the large clock on the wall opposite the bench, “Two p.m. I expect both parties here as defense will provide testimony at that time.” With that statement he banged the gavel and all present in the courtroom rose until the man left the bench.

Dunn and his lawyer huddled in muffled conversation, both clearly aggravated by the judge’s last comments. Alex, stacked her notes and files then dropped them in a large satchel and turned to the Coulsons with no trace of a smile. Before she could speak William Gordon stepped to the end of the table and roughly cleared his throat.

“Miss Miles,” he began professionally. “My client, Mr. Dunn is hoping he will be meeting his son
this afternoon. Should you choose not to produce the boy, I will be filing a complaint with the court.’

Alex took a deep breath. Phil stood before Melinda had the chance to accost the young lawyer. “Mr. Gordon,” Alex replied as she slid her satchel from the table and held it in front of her with both hands. “Fitz is a very sensitive, not to mention traumatized child. He does not know your client and right now is terrified that he will be taken from the only family he’s had for the last eighteen months. I’m sure both you and Mr. Dunn understand if the boy is hesitant to make contact. I assure you that he is here in the courthouse and will be in the courtroom when needed. If Mr. Dunn feels the need to antagonize a small boy even further by demanding he be made to sit through testimony no child should be witness to, then by all means file your complaint.” She gave a curt nod then slipped past him to join the Coulsons as they exited the courtroom.

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Most of the afternoon’s testimony came from the people who knew Fitz or who were aware of the circumstances leading up to his coming to be a Coulson. Hunter, Bobbi, Mack and Elena took their turns on the stand regaling the horrid tale of James Grant and the nightmare he brought to Fitz and his family. Dr. Stephens testified to Fitz’s health problems when he first arrived, his battles with respiratory illnesses and the surgery she suggested to alleviate the problem. She also gave her expert opinion on why at age ten, Fitz was more the size of an eight year old, citing years of malnutrition and less than satisfactory living conditions as the cause. When asked, she stated she was sure he would, with the care he now received, catch up to children in his age group.

Fitz’s therapist and the school counselor both gave testimony as to the changes in Fitz in the time they treated him. Both talked about nightmares and disruption in sleep patterns that were slowly overcome in the months the boy saw both or either of them and both agreed the patience and understanding of Melinda and Phil Coulson greatly influenced the improvement. Both also agreed and were adamant in the fact that removing the boy from his present environment would be an enormous setback. Several of Fitz’s teachers also appeared, testifying to the concern and involvement of the Coulson’s in Fitz’s school life.

All of the witnesses stood up to cross examination without wavering in their opinions and statements. Affidavits were presented from several social workers in Glasgow who had assisted in the adoption proceedings and search for Fitz’s family there. Pastor Geoffrey Miller of St. Andrew’s Church in Sheffield submitted a lengthy affidavit documenting his time with the Coulsons during their stay in England. Gordon posed no objection to any of them.

By four thirty the judge seemed restless. Alex feared he would adjourn for the day forcing Fitz to spend another day of anxiety confined to a small room without his parents. The little boy was allowed to leave with them for lunch and fell asleep with his head on Melinda’s lap in the juvenile witness room an hour later. Sr. Mary Clair sent word into the courtroom via one of the bailiffs that
the boy had once again become physically ill and vomited the little he had eaten for lunch. The judge ordered a doctor be sent to the room. Luckily, Maura Stephens was still in the courthouse at the time. Finding no medical reason for Fitz’s upset tummy, she prescribed small sips of ginger ale until he could go home to his own bed with lots of mom’s TLC.

“Your honor,” Alex stood and addressed the court. “I realize the hour is late but I move that we heard testimony from Leopold Fitz before you adjourn for the day. The boy has been here all day and is extremely anxious. I am sure opposing counsel would agree that the sooner we hear from Leopold the better it will be.”

The judge looked at the large clock and then at his wristwatch. He tapped it a few times. “Does the plaintiff agree?” He looked to Gordon and his client.

Gordon stood. “We have no objection to this motion, your honor. However, should it become too much for the boy we stipulate that he be brought to the stand again tomorrow morning.”

The judge looked now to Alex who quickly agreed. He turned to the bailiff at the courtroom door and gave a curt nod. The man nodded back and exited the room. The judge banged the gavel. The clerk stood and spoke as if announcing an entrance. “The court calls Leopold James Fitz to the stand.”

Melinda felt her breath catch as the large double door opened at the rear of the court and Sr. Mary Clair entered, leading Fitz by the hand. It was everything she could do not to run to him. Phil squeezed her hand so hard it hurt, but not as much as the pain in her chest. Fitz looked to his parents as he passed and walked toward the large chair on the witness stand. The nun walked him all the way until he was seated. Melinda choked back a sob at how small he looked, how vulnerable he was in that seat.

“Good afternoon, young man,” the judge actually smiled at the boy as he motioned for Sr. M. Clair to return to the gallery.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Fitz spoke a hair above a whisper.

Again the judge smiled. “Can you tell me your full name son?” He asked.

Fitz nodded his head, keeping his gaze directly on Phil. He refused to look to the right, at the man who would try to take him from the one he considered the only father he’d ever known. “Leopold
James Coulson Fitz.” The boy answered, stressing the name given to him by another judge not so very long ago.

“That’s quite a name for a little fellow.” The judge remarked to which Fitz did not respond. “But, I understand you like to be called Fitz.” The boy nodded. “Can I call you Fitz?” He nodded again. “Okay, Fitz but you have to answer with words. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, sir,” Fitz answered shakily.

“Do you know the difference between the truth and a lie, son?” The judge asked calmly.

Fitz nodded again then quickly added, “Yes, sir but my Da told me not to be long winded so I will say that the truth is when you tell exactly the way things are or were and a lie is when you make things up to change how people see what really happened…” He stopped himself there, knowing he could elaborate much more. A quick wink from Phil made the boy smile slightly.

“That’s good, Fitz. Do you know what happens to people who lie in this court?” The judge inquired.

Fitz looked down at his hands that lay in his lap. He interlocked his fingers then separated them and set one hand on each knee. “Lying under oath is called perjury and carries a monetary fine of five thousand dollars plus a term of not more than ten years of incarceration.”

The judge raised his brows and nodded at the little boy’s swift and accurate answer. He smiled again. “Well, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that because I understand that you made an oath to tell the truth. Do you know what that means?”

Fitz nodded as he answered. “Yes sir, an oath means to swear a solemn promise to tell exactly the truth. But not swear like using unacceptable language.” He quickly added earning a soft chuckle from the court.

The judge looked to Gordon who nodded his acceptance of Fitz’s intent to tell the truth. He then looked to Alex. “Your witness, Ms Miles.”

Alex put on her best smile and approached the stand slowly. “Hello, Fitz,” she began. “I understand it’s been a rough day for you. How are you feeling?” She ignored Gordon tapping his
pen lightly on the desk behind her as she established an easy rapport with the boy.

Fitz tried to hide the blush on his cheeks and kept his head down. “I feel okay…now.” He mumbled.

“That’s good to know,” she smiled again. “But you need to let us know if you start to feel ill again and we’ll stop. Okay?”

The boy nodded then quickly looked up at the judge. “Yes, I understand.” He answered rapidly.

Alex turned toward the plaintiff’s table getting a quick nod from Gordon. She nodded back then faced Fitz again. “Fitz, I’d like to talk to you about your mom. Would that be okay?” The boy immediately made eye contact with Melinda. The lawyer followed the boy’s gaze then quickly clarified her statement. “I mean your birth mother, Fitz. Are you familiar with that term?”

Fitz nodded. “Yes, ma’am. You want to talk to me about my maw, Emilie.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Alex nodded. “Can you tell me where you lived with your maw, Fitz?” Alex began, using the boy’s term for his mother.

“We lived in Busby?”

“Always?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Do you remember your address there?”

Fitz hesitated, unsure how to answer the question, unwilling to betray his maw. “We had a lot of places.” He mumbled. “We dinna stay in one place very long.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Okay, then, tell me, did your maw have a job?”
Again the boy hesitated, squirming in the oversized chair. “She was a waitress for a bit but she got sick a lot so she got sacked. She helped out in the shops for a bit, but…” He stopped knowing he’d gone too far. His mother had been caught stealing from a pharmacy and arrested. She took a bottle of cough syrup for her suffering boy. The officer was soft hearted and offered to pay for the item, then accompanied Emilie to the shelter she was staying at with Fitz just to be sure. But the owner would have none of it and again Emilie was without employment.

“But?” Alex urged. Fitz shrugged his shoulders.

“I got sick and she had to take care of me.” He lyed a little, but part of it was the truth. She did steal to take care of him.

“Did your mother leave you alone when she went to work?” Alex changed the subject.

“Sometimes, but mostly she worked when I went to school.” Fitz replied with just a hint of anger brewing in his voice. Melinda shook her head, letting him know it was not acceptable.

“Did she work at night?”

“No, ma’am. We were together at night. We used to look at the stars.” The boy smiled at the memory as the anger lessened.

“So your mother never left you alone?”

“Once she got very sick and had to go to the hospital for a few days but I wasn’t alone. I stayed with Micki.” Fitz spoke just above a whisper.

“Micki?” Alex moved to the table and flipped through her notes then looked to Phil and Melinda. Both shook their heads.

“She was my maw’s friend. Her flat smelled like cigarettes and cats. It was not a pleasant experience.” The boy crinkled his nose as he spoke.
Alex grinned at the boy’s description and attempted to gain more information before Gordon realized this was not something she expected. “Did your maw work with Micki?” The lawyer asked hoping to find a clue to this new person’s identity and relationship to Emilie Fitz.

“No,” Fitz almost laughed. “Micki just helped her a bit sometimes when she was sick. She could get the medicine that helped my maw feel better. But she moved off to Edinburgh. We didn’t see her after that.” The boy stopped himself, remembering the appearance of James Grant not long after Micki disappeared. He wondered, for the first time, if maybe Micki never moved at all.

Alex’s questioning continued and established the fact that although Fitz and his mother did not by any means live an easy life, the woman did her best to care for the boy. It wasn’t until James Grant entered the picture that things changed. The lawyer did her best to avoid that topic.

“Okay, Fitz,” Alex smiled. “Are you okay? Do you need a break?”

Fitz shook his head. Answering the lawyer’s questions was better than imagining what it would be like to do so. He just wanted it to be over although a quick look at the clock told him that would not be the case.

“Fitz, can you do me a favor?” Alex asked, causing the boy to shiver with anticipation. “It’s an easy favor and you won’t have to do it if you don’t think you can.”

The boy took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “I’ll try.” He answered.

“Can you look toward the table to your right and tell me if you recognized anyone there?”

“Objection, your honor!” Gordon shouted, causing the boy to jump. “It has already been established that the boy has not met Mr. Dunn. There is no reason for this line of questioning.”

“Your honor, I understand that Mr. Dunn has had no formal contact with his son. However, it is possible the boy has seen him in passing. Mr. Dunn claims to have spent time in Busby and London in his attempt to find his son. He has even claimed to have spoken to Emilie Fitz on two occasions.”

The judge looked to both lawyers. “Over ruled,” he spoke calmly. “Continue, Ms Miles and please hurry this along.”
Alex nodded at the judge and turned back to Fitz. “Do you think you can do that?”

Fitz swallowed hard and looked to Phil who gave a very subtle thumbs up. “Yes, ma’am.” The boy looked slowly to the right, eyeing the lawyer first and then making eye contact with the ruddy faced man who sat next to him. Fitz couldn’t help staring at the man’s tightly curled hair, despite how short it was trimmed. The boy’s maw had poker straight hair and he never questioned it and never told her how much he feared any man with so much as a wave to his locks. He stared into the narrow, pale blue eyes that matched his exactly. Fitz could hear his own heart pounding in his head. He attempted to look at Melinda and tried to slow his breathing like she had taught him and his sisters to do when their fears threatened to overtake them.

Alex stepped between Fitz and Dunn, cutting off the glare that the little boy could not seem to break. “Do you recognize either gentleman, Fitz? Have you ever seen either before?”

“No ma’am.” Fitz answered in a breath, still trying to slow his rapid breathing.

The lawyer turned toward the judge. “I have no more questions for this witness, your honor, but I do reserve the right to recall him should it become necessary.”

Gordon stood, ready to begin his cross examination but was stopped by the banging of the gavel. Fitz jumped at the sound. “Mr. Gordon you will have to wait until tomorrow. This court is in recess until nine a.m. tomorrow morning.” He banged the gavel again then turned to Fitz. “Young man you are free to join your parents.” The judge banged the gavel then stood, as did the entire court, as he left the courtroom.

Fitz did not wait for Alex, he bolted from the stand, passed the table and wrapped himself around Phil before Gordon and Dunn took a step. Phil lifted the boy into his arms and Fitz clung for life. Melinda placed a hand on his back and kissed his cheek.

“I want to go home, Momma.” He whispered, not caring that his father heard him use Skye’s baby term for their mother.

“One stop, little man,” Phil assured him as he eyed Alistair Dunn then moved out of the courtroom with his wife and son.

XX
Melinda pulled a light blanket over Fitz who’d fallen asleep on the small leather couch in her office. She kissed him softly then walked through the door that joined her office to her husband’s. Phil stood sans his jacket with sleeves rolled to his elbows and his tie hanging loose around his neck. He stopped mid sentence as she entered.

“He’s asleep, so let’s keep it down.” Melinda spoke softly as she stepped next to her husband.

Phil nodded before continuing. “Hunter put everyone you’ve got in London on finding anything on this Micki. Fitz has never mentioned her before. We’ll see what he might remember tomorrow. He’s done with questions for today.”

Hunter shook his head. “We’re gonna need more than just Micki.”

“I’m sorry Hunter that’s all we’ve got so shake your ass and get on it!” Phil spoke with tempered anger, as his voice rose.

Hunter held up a hand and smiled. “I didn’t say we couldn’t do it.” He gave a nervous laugh. He reached for his phone then stopped and smacked his lips once. “You do realize it is only two a.m. in London.” He stated.

Phil moved close and poked a finger into the man’s shoulder. “Then wake someone up!” He over stressed each word.

“Phil,” Melinda spoke softly as she laid a hand on his shoulder. He turned to her hoping to mask the feeling of helplessness about to overtake him. She looked to Hunter who merely nodded and stepped back.

“I’ll get right on this, boss. We won’t let you down.” The man calmly assured Phil as he looked to Bobbi who nodded as well.

“They’re doing the best they can, Phil.” Melinda sighed as she rubbed a hand up and down her husband’s arm.

He was frustrated and she knew it. They had both hoped this whole thing would be over quickly,
but today’s slow moving testimony seemed a harbinger of the trails yet to come. This whole Micki thing could just be a waste of everyone’s time and did they want to waste that time. So far the judge seemed a bit hostile toward a man that waited ten years to try to find his son even though Dunn claimed to have been looking the whole time.

“We’ve got something,” Mack exclaimed as he burst through the door with Elena a few steps behind.

“Shhh,” all four occupants admonished.

“We found something,” the large man almost whispered as he looked around wondering why the odd greeting. Hunter jerked a thumb toward Melinda’s office then closed his eyes and laid his head on his prayer-folded hands. Mack nodded his understanding.

“Dunn says he tried to make a deal with Emilie on February twenty seventh and twenty eighth in nineteen ninety four.” Elena dropped a stack of paper on Phil’s desk with a smile.

Mack tapped his finger on the stack. “These records show Dunn was in Australia from January through April of that same year. In fact on those two dates he was sleeping it off in the custody of the local constabulary after taking part in some pub brawl that they’re pretty sure he started.”

Phil stared at the man for a moment before picking up the forms and scanning the information himself. A wary smile grew across his face as he turned toward the group still holding the forms. It wasn’t much, but it was a sliver of hope.

“Mom?” Fitz shuffled into the room, ignoring everyone but his mother.

“Baobei, I thought you were sleeping.” Melinda crooned as she wrapped an arm around him.

“Your sofa smells odd, like a nasty cleaning solution.” He yawned and rubbed one eye.

Hunter let out a snort as Bobbi stifled a snicker.

“I’m sorry, bao bao. Maybe we should get you home to your own bed. It’s been a long day.”
Melinda smiled as she pulled him into a hug. Phil nodded as he reached for his jacket.

“I think we all need some rest. We’ll pick this up in the morning.” He nodded to his team and followed his wife and son to her office.
Chapter Summary

Can Fitz hold up under cross examination? What information is Gordon looking to get from a small boy? Gordon's true colors begin to show.

PART 4

“Good morning, Leopold.” William Gordon greeted the young boy who had already been reminded he was still to tell the truth.

The morning had gone a bit smoother than yesterday, although Fitz refused any breakfast at all. He still took small sips of the ginger ale his pediatrician had suggested. Phil and Melinda decided not to force him and allow this small consideration due to circumstances. The family arrived at the courthouse a few minutes later than they had day before and were ushered immediately into the courtroom. Not having to spend that time anxiously waiting in the hallway helped calm the small boy.

“Good morning,” Fitz answered the lawyer. “I don’t like to be called Leopold.” He informed Gordon.

The lawyer smiled and turned back to Dunn. “That is your name, isn’t it?” He asked the boy.

“It is, but no one’s ever called me that, except teachers.” Fitz explained.

Gordon smiled a wide smile at his client and turned toward the boy. “Did you know your grandfather’s name was Leopold?”

Fitz shook his head. “No sir, I dinna know my granddad.”

“Perhaps you were named for him?” Gordon prodded.
Again Fitz shook his head. “No sir, I don’t reckon I was and no one calls me that, not even my teachers.”

“How about just Leo then?” Gordon suggested.

“I’m called Fitz.” He answered.

“That wouldn’t be your name at all, son. I believe you’d be Leopold Dunn. Children are generally given their father’s surname.” Gordon informed the boy.

Fitz squirmed in his seat and shook his head as he narrowed his eyes at this man he suddenly did not like. “No sir, Fitz was my maw’s name and she gave it to me. It is my name. My Da’s name is Coulson. I have his name too.” The boy’s stubborn streak was beginning to rear its head.


“My maw never talked about him.” Fitz answered honestly.

“Did you ask?” Gordon continued.

“No sir,” Fitz replied.

“You never once asked about your father? Never wanted to know anything about him or…”

“Objection, your honor,” Alex stood. “The question has been answered.”

“Sustained,” the judge agreed. “Move on, Mr. Gordon.”

Gordon moved to the table where Dunn sat, turned and tapped the corner of the same with one finger. “How many men did your mother see, Fitz? Did she have a lot of man friends?”
“Objection,” Alex snarled. “The witness is only ten years old and was only eight when he lost his mother. This is not a subject to be discussed with a child.”

“Your honor, the boy would have been the only witness to the company his mother kept.” Gordon countered.

“He has already testified that he and his mother were always together during the night.” Alex reminded him.

“And we all know that inter…” he looked at the boy who sat wide eyed watching the argument. “Interactions such as these can occur in daylight as well as the evening.” Gordon softened his comment for the child’s sake.

The judge considered both sides as the lawyers stood and waited for his decision. “Over ruled,” he remarked then turned toward Fitz. “You may answer the question, young man.”

Fitz blinked a few times and considered what was being asked. He cleared his throat twice. “She had friends that were men now and again.” Fitz spoke quietly.

“Did these men live with you?” Gordon went on.

“No, sir” Fitz answered quickly.

“Did you live with them?” The lawyer tried another approach.

“No, sir” Fitz repeated.

“Objection, your honor,” Alex stood again. “Emilie Fitz is not on trial here. How she lived her life has no bearing on Mr. Dunn’s claims.”

“I am attempting to show the woman’s lifestyle and how it led to her keeping the boy a secret from his natural father, your honor.” Gordon explained.
“She never made me a secret!” Fitz shouted as he stood pounding his small fist on the rail that bordered the large chair in which he sat. “She did not keep company with the likes of him,” he nodded toward Dunn, “or anyone like him!”

The judge banged the gavel several times as Melinda and Phil jumped to their feet and Alex approached the stand. “Order!” The man shouted over the rabble. “Young man, you will control yourself and limit your responses to answering counsel’s questions only.” He admonished Fitz as the courtroom quieted.

“He’s implying my maw was a bad person!” Fitz shouted as he pointed toward Gordon but refused to be seated. “My maw was sick and I took care of her. The only man we ever shared a flat with was that damn bloody Jamie Grant and I’m glad he’s dead. I hope he burns in Hell for what he did to my maw!”

The judge banged the gavel again. “Ms. Miles control your client or I will clear this courtroom.” He banged the gavel again. “We will take a fifteen minute break to see if we can calm everyone.” Again the gavel slammed against the bench a moment before the judge rose and exited.

Fitz glared at Gordon breathing heavy through puffed cheeks. Alex moved to the stand and offered the boy a glass of water which he pushed away. “I don’t want to talk to him anymore.” Fitz snarled.

“Okay, Fitz, how about we take a little walk and take a few breaths.” Alex suggested.

The boy looked to his mother noticing for the first time her look of disapproval. He grasped the rail tightly with both hands, swallowed hard and took a deep breath. “Can my mom come too?” He asked trying to quell his anger, speaking to Alex but looking directly at Melinda.

Alex looked over her shoulder then back to the boy. “No, Fitz, she can’t. The court would not approve that. She might influence what you say.” She kept her voice even.

“I don’t want to walk.” He let out a long breath. ‘I’ll just sit here then. I will be calm, but I still don’t want to talk to him.” He dropped back into the chair and moved only his eyes toward the other lawyer. Alex offered the water again. He took the glass and gulped the water twice then took a deep breath and sipped it slowly. Setting the glass on the rail he chewed his lip for a moment then asked quietly without raising his head. “Am I in trouble? I am fairly sure the judge is cross with me.” He looked up once then back down. “I know my mom is.” He last comment was made barely above a whisper.
“No, no Fitz. Everyone gets upset sometimes especially in times like this, even adults, but we take a break and start again.” Alex smiled. “Mr. Gordon is trying very hard to get you to remember how things were with your maw.”

“I remember everything.” Fitz sighed, wishing that he did not.

Alex patted his hand in an attempt to offer comfort. “I know that, Fitz, but he is trying to get you to remember things the way he wants the judge to hear them.”

Fitz looked toward the other lawyer who was bent close to Dunn in some hushed conversation. “Isn’t that the same as lying?” The little boy asked. “Does he want me to lie?”

Alex shook her head. “No Fitz, he wants you to tell the truth. We all do.”

“I am telling the truth. Why does he keep asking me the same damn things over and over? Does he think I’m lying? I don’t know how to say what he wants me to say.” Fitz shook his head and blew out a long breath trying to understand the workings of jurisprudence.

“I know it’s hard for you, but it’s almost over. You need to take a few breaths and calm down, let me do the yelling. Okay?” Alex smiled, bending down to look into the boy’s eyes.

The boy peaked around her and took another deep breath. “My mom is upset. Would you please tell her I’m sorry.” He mumbled without looking Alex in the eye.

The lawyer nodded. “I will make sure she knows, Fitz.” She handed him the glass of water again which he sipped slowly.

After the short break, the judge returned. He directed Gordon to continue and warned everyone that another outburst could mean penalties for both sides.

“Feeling better?” Gordon asked as he approached the boy on the stand.
“Yes,” Fitz answered calmly.

“I’m sorry my questions upset you.” Gordon stated just as calmly.

Fitz eyed him carefully before answering. “I don’t believe you.” He looked up to see his mom narrow her eyes and shake her head the sat back in the chair and took a deep breath. “I think you meant to make me angry, but I will be more careful. I will try not to be upset with your questions.”

“Well then, how about we talk about something else?” The man stifled a laugh. When Fitz did not respond he continued. “Tell how you met Phillip Coulson.”

Fitz looked at the man for a moment. “I met him on the street in London.”

“How did you meet?” He prodded.

Fitz let out a slow breath and told the story of how he had tried to pick Phil’s pocket and got caught. How Phil took him in and tried to find his mother. He left out no details in his short story.

“So Phillip Coulson took you from London without your mother’s permission?” Gordon implied.

“I wouldn’t tell him who she was. I wouldn’t tell him anything” Fitz shrugged. “He could have just had me locked up or tossed me off to the social service, but he fed me and gave me a place to sleep.”

“Werent you afraid when this stranger whisked you off without warning?” Gordon accused.

Fitz thought for a moment before replying. He shook his head. “I was a bit leery of the whole thing, but I was more afraid of Jamie Grant and what he might do to me.”

“Did Mr. Coulson threaten you?”

“No, sir.”
“Did he hurt you or force you to do anything you didn’t want to do?”

Fitz paused for a very long time scrunching his face in concentration.

“Do you need me to repeat the question?” Gordon asked as he turned toward the Coulsons and smiled swarthy smile.

The boy squirmed a little but remained silent until the judge leaned toward him. “You must answer the question, son.” He spoke quietly.

Gordon turned back toward the stand, allowing Fitz to look his father in the eye. Phil smiled and Fitz took a deep breath and dropped his gaze to the floor. Gordon smiled again, confident he had found something he could use against this seemingly perfect family.

“He made me take a bath and I had to wear Jemma’s clothes because he tossed all of mine in the trash bin.” Fitz could feel the heat on his cheeks and refused to raise his head. His words were mumbled into his chest.

“I’m sorry Fitz, but we can’t hear you when you don’t speak up.” Gordon warned.

“I said he threw my clothes in the trash bin and made me take a bath. I had to wear Jemma’s clothes while they went to the shops to get me more.” Fitz explained. “My da said I smelled quiet rancid, but Grant wasn’t much for personal hygiene.”

Gordon let out a frustrated sigh. “How long did Mr. Coulson force you to stay in Sheffield?”

“He didna force me to do anything,” Fitz started to yell but lowered his voice and continued. “After a bit, I wanted to stay with them. They were good to me…even Jemma.” He added with another blush.

“Did he make any attempt to contact your parents?” Gordon asked again.

“Objection, the boy has already told counsel he did not give the Coulsons any information.”
“Sustained” the judge replied.

“Let me asked then Fitz, did there come a time that you told the Coulsons about your parents?”

Fitz frowned again. “I told them about my maw and about that bastard Grant. They were tried to find my maw after I told them everything that happened.”

Gordon continued to question the boy on how Phil came to get the information and how long it took for the man to find Emilie. Fitz gave as much information as he could as Phil and Melinda protected him from most of the ugly details during the investigation. Gordon moved on asking the boy question after question about his home life and the tragedy that was James Grant. Melinda held her breath as her little boy answered questions about the man that nearly took his life.

“And your parents had no idea what you were planning?” Gordon asked as Fitz described his jaunt into the city on his own.

“No sir, I gave them no reason to suspect what I was about to do. That was part of the plan.” Fitz replied with a shake of his head.

“And what if anything did your parents do afterward?” Gordon urged the boy to continue.

“We were all punished for doing something so very stupid.” Fitz mumbled.

“Obj…” Alex began but was cut off by Gordon.

“Your honor, I am merely trying to show that the Coulsons are quick to use physical punishment…”

“Doctors, counselors and teachers have all testified that the Coulson children are not abused in any way.” Alex retaliated.
“I am more than satisfied with that testimony, Mr. Gordon. This young man has been on the stand for almost two hours. I suggest you finish your cross examination and move on. We have all read the documents in the case of James Grant and are familiar with the facts. There is no need to have this child continue. I myself am more than satisfied with Fitz’s testimony so unless you have something that will shed even more light on this case, please conclude.” He banged his gavel. “Objection, sustained.”

Gordon looked as if he was about to growl, but instead stormed back to the table and scanned a few documents on it. He looked up at Fitz stating he had no more questions and the witness was excused.

“Redirect, Ms Miles?” The judge asked Alex.

Alex approached the stand and smiled at the little boy. “Just a few more questions, Fitz.” At the boy’s nod, she continued. “I noticed you used a few…let’s call them ‘not so acceptable’ terms during your testimony.” Fitz chewed his lip and hung his head. “Are you afraid you will be punished?”

Fitz sighed and shook his head. “No, ma’am, I’m afraid I’ve disappointed my parents.”

“Are you afraid of your parents, Fitz?” Alex asked.

“No, ma’am,” Fitz shook his head rapidly. “I’m afraid of being taken from them.”

Alex nodded. “Thank you, Fitz.” She turned to judge and concluded, “I have no more questions for this witness, your honor.”

Fitz sat for a moment, waiting for someone to give him permission to leave. He looked to the judge. “You may step down, son.” The older man smiled.

“Can I go to my mom?” Fitz asked quietly as he stood. At the judge’s nod he moved around the railing that stood between him and the court then rushed to Phil and Melinda wrapping his arms around his mother and squirming to sit between his parents.

“Your honor, at this time we would like to request the court order the Coulsons to allow Alistair Dunn visitation with his son. It is clearly apparent that they are influencing the boy’s opinion and
judgment of a man he has spent no time with and has not had the opportunity to get to know. In that same sense, your honor, if this cannot be granted I move that the boy be placed in the care of social services until such time as a decision is made by this court.” Gordon demanded.

“Your honor, we have no objection to Fitz having a supervised visit with Mr. Dunn however to remove him from his home and away from his parents and siblings would be detrimental to his emotional and more than likely physical state. The boy has been having stomach issues since yesterday and should not be with strangers should he become ill.” Alex defended.

“Mr. Dunn has just as much access to medical care as do the Coulsons. If the boy becomes ill he can contact a physician or seek care at an emergency room.” Gordon argued.

The judge held up a hand, clearly frustrated with the entire argument. He spoke quietly and calmly. “I do not believe this is an issue that can be decided without careful deliberation. Therefore this court will recess for the next two hours. During that time I will consider the arguments of both sides and deliver my decision when we reconvene. Until that time the child will remain in the custody of his legal parents.” Gordon opened his mouth to object but with a bang of the gavel the judge had spoken. He rose and exited.

Dunn rose as the door to the judge’s chamber’s closed. He pointed at the Coulsons, speaking out for the first time. “You will not keep my son from me. He is my blood and I will not stop until he is at my side.” The man’s tone was harsh and threatening. Gordon moved to stand before him, silently attempted to calm the man. He shoved the lawyer aside as Melinda wrapped an arm around the trembling boy next to her and Phil stood to shield them both. Alex moved to do the same.

“You have no right to my boy, no right. You cannot keep him from me. No one can take away my God-given right. I fathered that child and that bitch kept him from me, you’ll not do the same!” He continued as Gordon forced him backward, still trying to silence his tirade. Fitz turned into Melinda, squeezing her tightly. Two court officers summoned by the bailiff entered the courtroom and physically removed Dunn, with his lawyer close behind. The man’s tirade continued until the doors closed behind him and even then he could be heard ranting in the hallway.

Gordon stopped in front of Phil. “I apologize for my client’s outburst. He has been under undue stress being kept from his son for so long.” He offered a sideways regret.

“This does not bode well for your client, Gordon. Don’t think the court won’t be aware of this outburst and how it has affected young Fitz.” Alex shot back before Phil could speak. She had stepped between them clearly cutting off her own client’s need to retaliate.
Gordon let out a hot breath through flared nostrils and followed his client into the hallway. Alex turned to Melinda sliding into the seat next to her and laying a hand on Fitz’s shoulder. The boy jumped and pulled closer to his mother. She pulled her hand back and apologized to Melinda with just a look.

“We’ll take the side exit.” She whispered as she stood.

Phil nodded and waited for his wife to stand with their son still wrapped tightly around her.

XX

Rather than taking their son out of the building the Coulson’s joined Alex in what seemed to be an employee or perhaps lawyer’s lounge. They ordered a quick lunch that was delivered by a local deli, a lunch that no one really ate least of all the little boy who was now on the verge of hysteria.

“You promised, Da, you promised you wouldn’t let him take me.” Fitz sobbed from the chair where he sat digging his fingers into his father’s jacket sleeves. Phil squatted at eye level in front of him.

“I will do everything in my power to keep that from happening, Fitz.” Phil tried to explain. “But, we have to follow the judge’s orders. He makes the rules.”

“Why?” The boy demanded, wiping his nose quickly with the back of his hand. “He doesn’t know us. He can’t just tell you you aren’t my Da!” The boy squeaked. “I don’t care if he makes the rules. I won’t obey them. I won’t.” He balled his small hands into fists and pounded them on his own knees.

Phil placed his hand around both and squeezed gently. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” He looked up at Alex who could not offer anything positive.

“Maybe we should send him home.” Melinda suggested as she sat and pulled the boy into her lap, trying desperately to console him. “I’m sure Mack or Hunter will come for him, Phil.”

Before Phil could agree, Alex shook her head. “We can’t do that, Melinda. It would be considered keeping Fitz from complying with any order. The judge would send court officers for him which would only make things worse.”
“What is wrong with these people?” Melinda spoke through her teeth, trying to hold on to the edge of her temper. “Can’t they see what this is doing to him?”

Alex let out a long breath. “Unfortunately, we are dealing with the law and not with how anyone feels. If the judge finds for Dunn we can only hope that he insists on a court supervised visit. I will motion to have Sr. Clair be Fitz’s advocate and be present during any court appointed visitations.”

“And worse case scenario?” Phil asked quietly, staring into Melinda’s eyes as she held their son who sobbed quietly.

The lawyer shook her head. “He could order Fitz into foster care until the case is decided.”

Phil felt his stomach clench. He excused himself quickly and sought out the nearest rest room.
Chapter Summary

Melinda and Phil have their chance to tell their story, the agents find a valuable witness and the judge orders Fitz to speak with him in chambers.

PART 5

At exactly two p.m., Alex and Phil entered the courtroom under the scrutiny of Dunn and his lawyer. Neither party spoke but rose as the judge entered the court and called everyone to order. As Alex expected Gordon spoke first.

“Your honor, we demand to know why Leopold Fitz has not returned to the courtroom.” He glared at Alex as he waited for the judge’s response.

“Ms. Miles?” The judge asked for an explanation using only her name.

“Your honor, the boy was hysterical for the better part of the recess. His mother chose to contact his pediatrician who administered a mild sedative. As Leopold has fallen asleep in the west hall lounge we felt it was not beneficial to wake him at this time. Melinda Coulson is with the boy along with an officer of the court. A second officer is standing outside the door.”

“I object your honor and demand counsel be charged with attempting to circumvent your decision by having the boy drugged and thereby unable to be present in the court.” Gordon growled as he placed a hand on Dunn’s shoulder, hoping to keep him from adding to the chaos.

“We could not have tried to keep the boy from following any order, as your honor has not yet given his decision.” Alex spoke calmly, directly to the judge ignoring her opponent’s ire.

The judge removed his glasses, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He let out a short breath and replaced the glasses. “I see no reason to wake the boy or to drag him into a situation that will only exaggerate his already fragile emotional state.” He looked at Dunn over the top of those glasses, “a state that your tantrum did nothing to alleviate.” The judge sat back and pushed his glasses up with one finger on the nose piece. “If that rant is any indication of your attempt at parenting, I assure you it will be a major consideration in this decision. Counselor, I
would suggest you insist your client control his temper for the rest of this proceeding.” The judge warned, then waited for both lawyers to be seated. “I am more than tempted to adjourn for the day giving everyone the opportunity to gain control of their emotions. My own emotional state is more than aggravated by this argument with the well being of a child at stake and I assure you one more outburst will result in just that, so tread lightly.”

“If it please the court, your honor,” Gordon began hesitantly. “Is there a decision on our previous motion.”

“I have not yet come to a decision.” The judge barked. “I will see young Master Fitz in my chambers first thing in the morning. You will have my decision after I speak with him. Until then…Ms. Miles,” he turned to Alex. “Call your next witness.”

With a bang of the gavel, the hearing proceeded.

Alex looked at her witness list. It would not be wise to ask to change it at this point. She had no choice. “We call Melinda May Coulson, to the stand.”

The judge glanced up at the lawyer then spoke to the bailiff. He let out a frustrated breath. “Ms. Miles, did you or did you not just tell this court that Mrs. Coulson was with her son in the west lounge? And are you now telling the same court that this witness is unavailable? I assure you Ms. Miles I have no patience for this nonsense.” He glared at her over the bench as Gordon anxiously awaited her attempt to explain.

“Your honor, as previously stated, this is an unexpected situation. Mrs. Coulson is available and can be summoned to the court, however I do not believe it would be wise to leave the child without at least one parent should he awaken.”

The judge removed his spectacles and drummed his fingers on the bench for a moment before ordering. “Please have a court officer escort Mr. Coulson to the lawyer’s lounge and then do the same to escort Mrs. Coulson to the stand.”

The bailiff gave a curt nod and walked to the courtroom doors, opened them and stepped outside for a moment before returning to his seat in the front of the court. An officer appeared in seconds and led Phil from the room, returning with Melinda a few minutes later. The courtroom remained silent in the interim.
Melinda took the stand and swore to tell the truth. Alex questioned her about meeting Fitz for the first time and again had the story of the Coulsons bringing the boy to the States and adopting him as their own. She gave complete disclosure on her occupation and what led to the death of James Grant. By the time Alex told the judge she had no more questions for her witness she was sure there was nothing left for Gordon to discover.

The opposing counsel approached the stand and smiled at Melinda. She did not return the smile. He walked back to the table where Dunn sat and picked up a piece of paper glanced at it and set it down. Melinda let out a frustrated breath. If the guy was trying to put her on guard with this ridiculous act he was doing a piss poor job.

“Mrs. Coulson,” he spoke in a loud tone, breaking the silence. Melinda remained at ease. “Do you know a young man called Martin La Carre?”

“No, I do not.” Melinda replied without emotion.

Gordon presented her with a large photo. She recognized the school uniform. He took the photo from her and handed to the judge who scanned and then passed it to the bailiff.

“Mr. La Carre is a student at the school Leopold attends.” He turned then spun back, sarcastically adding, “I’m sorry, Fitz…Fitz attends.”

“I have never met the boy and to the best of my knowledge Fitz has never mentioned him.” Melinda responded without taking the lawyer’s bait.

Gordon pursed his lips and nodded then turned and took a few steps away from the stand before turning back. “Do you recall a few weeks ago when you denied Fitz the opportunity to accompany a group on a science field trip?” Again he stressed the boy’s name. The lawyer hoped she would jump on the fact that he accused her of denying the boy something he enjoyed. He fully intended to pursue her reasoning.

“I do.” She answered simply and waited for him to continue. Melinda smiled at the look on the man’s face as his attempt to irk her had failed.

Gordon walked to his table and slid the forms there back and forth with one finger, then turned and walked slowly back to the stand. “Are you aware Fitz spent the day in the technology lab with Mr. La Carre and a teacher’s aid?” He smirked as he asked.
“Yes,” she answered remaining just as calm as she had been. “The school informed me where Fitz would be and who would be with him.”

“Do you know what went on that day?” Gordon went on, still attempting to accuse her with his questions. “And you agree the boy was unsupervised for a whole day?”

“I don’t believe it was a whole day.” Melinda replied. “More like a few hours.” She leaned forward and continued. “My son was not unsupervised, Mr. Gordon. I believe you just said he was with a teacher’s aid.”

Gordon glared at the woman. “Do you know what your son did during those few hours?”

“Fitz told us he spent the time working on projects in the tech lab, including a robot he’d been helping with. He told us he had some success with it and later told us he had it perform some rather rude hand gestures, which he deleted by day’s end.” Melinda smiled remembering how the boy’s guilt had gotten to him, forcing an unsolicited confession.

“Can you tell the court how a young boy would know such gestures?” Gordon raised his brows as he asked.

Melinda let out a small laugh. “He’s a boy, Mr. Gordon. He’s ten years old and extremely intelligent. He goes to school every day, granted he spends the day with other genius level children but I am sure they know just as many gestures and words as every other ten year old these days.”

“So, you are saying that Fitz never hears or sees these same gestures at home.” Gordon glared at the woman.

“My husband and I are not angels, Mr. Gordon. We’ve both been known to use more then our share of ‘off color’ language but certainly not in front of our children.” Melinda sighed as if she were tired of the man’s pestering.

“I see.” The lawyer nodded, standing directly in front of Melinda and tapping one finger on the rail of the stand. “Would it surprise you to know that Mr. La Carre is prepared to testify that Fitz told him he would be severely punished for doing just that.” Gordon stated quickly.
“Objections, here say, your honor.” Alex rose to her feet.

“Is there a question, Mr. Gordon?” The judge inquired.

“Your honor, I intend to show the Coulson’s own parenting choices can be what some may consider to be harsh and demanding.”

The judge thought for a moment. “I’ll allow it. Over ruled.”

Gordon turned back to Melinda moving very close to the railing that bordered the stand. “Was Fitz severely punished for his experimentation with the tech lab robot?”

Melinda shook her head but maintained her composure. “Absolutely not.”

“How you saying you did not punish him for something he’d been warned about on several occasions?” Gordon prodded.

“That is exactly what I am saying.” Melinda replied.

“Nothing, you did nothing?” The lawyer continued to ask.

“Your honor, witness has answered the question,” Alex objected.

“Move on, Mr. Gordon.” The judge warned.

For a few moments Gordon tapped his finger on the rail then let out a fluttery breath. “Do you punish your children, Mrs. Coulson?” He asked without picking up his head.

“If the situation warrants it,” she replied.
“And what does that punishment entail?” He grinned as he looked into her eyes.

“It depends on the situation.” She answered in the same tone staring right back at him until he was forced to look away.

“Grounding them?” He asked turning his back to her.

“Occasionally,” she replied.

He nodded as he looked to the floor and took a few steps away from the stand. “Lectures?”

“When it helps,” Melinda sighed as she crossed her legs at the knee and folded her hands on top.

“Take away privileges?” He breathed, still facing away from her.

“Of course,” she breathed as well.

“Do you beat your children occasionally?” He turned to her and continued before she could answer. “When it helps?” He stepped toward her with each word stopping directly in front of her. “As par for the course?” He asked the last question quietly with a sly smile.

“Objection! Your honor!” Alex sprang to her feet. “Counsel is implying Mrs. Coulson abuses her children.”

“I am merely looking for answers, trying to show that perhaps the Coulsons are not such perfect parents.” Gordon spoke at the same time making it difficult for the judge to hear either lawyer clearly.

“Your honor?” Melinda interrupted. “I would like to answer Mr. Gordon if I may.”

The judge looked to Alex, giving her speak space. “I withdraw my objection and reserve the right to redirect.”
“So noted,” he agreed then turned back to Melinda. “Mrs. Coulson you may continue.”

Melinda nodded then narrowed her eyes at Gordon. “I have never, ever beaten any of my children. However, I have spanked them when the situation warranted. I assure you and the court that it is not something I do without a lot of soul searching and discussion with their father before hand. It breaks my heart but there are times when a few swats on the backside keep them from doing something that may put them in serious jeopardy. I would rather see any of my children cry because their bottom smarts than cry myself because they are hurt or worse. And I always make sure they know exactly why they are being punished and that I love them no matter what. I never leave them to cry alone or to wallow in guilt or resentment over what they’ve done. I assure you Mr. Gordon that my children are not afraid of me or their father.”

Gordon stood for a moment gathering his thoughts, then turned to the judge. “No more questions your honor.”

The judge dismissed Melinda as Phil and a bleary eyed Fitz entered the room. Phil was called to the stand while the little boy dozed off and on against his mother’s side. Phil’s testimony was similar to Melinda’s with the only exceptions being the things he experienced with Fitz in London while she was in Sheffield with Jemma.

Gordon questioned his methods for trying to contact any of Fitz’s blood relatives and received all documentation of Coulson’s agency’s attempts to find anyone related to Fitz. There were several signed affidavits from the social agency in Glasgow, a copy of the boy’s birth certificate and a letter from the Intercountry Adoption - Bureau of Consular Affairs - Department of State noting that all regulations and standards had been met in the adoption process and were verified and acknowledged by the U.S. State Department as well as it’s reciprocal agency in Great Britain. Each agency also noted their individual attempt to contact family of the boy that included a search for his biological father which proved almost impossible as no one had the man’s name.

The lawyer could not shake any of the evidence and moved on to trying again to incite anger in the witness.

“Mr. Coulson am I right in saying you kidnapped this young boy off the streets of London?”
Gordon glared.

Phil sat back in the chair and stared at the man for a beat. “Fitz was alone and as far as I knew homeless when we first met. He tried to swipe my wallet and I caught him. I suppose I could have turned him over to the first policeman that crossed our path but when I saw how terrified he was I had second thoughts. My first inclination was to return him to his parents, but he wasn’t very
forthcoming with information.”

“So you just assumed the boy had no one and whisked him away.” Gordon almost laughed.

“I’ve been working with people for a long time, Mr. Gordon. I don’t make assumptions. Fitz and I spent some time together. I bought him lunch and he accompanied me to a property I was interested in purchasing. I offered to take him home and he broke down. Someone was hurting him, forcing him to pick pockets and who knew what else. I found out later it was James Grant.”

“And you know this James Grant was not the boy’s father?” Gordon prodded.

Phil smiled as he smoothed his hand over the leg of his trousers. “I didn’t at the time, but I did know he was hurting Fitz and I wasn’t about to take him back to that environment. It was late. I couldn’t leave him alone and he wouldn’t give any information so I took him with me with the intention of contacting the local Children Services in the morning.”

“And did you?”

Phil shook his head. “I did not. I decided to try to find his family with the help of my agency. It may not have been my best idea but the kid was scared and I couldn’t put him into danger.”

“The danger Children’s Services would put him in?” Gordon asked, feigning confusion.

“He was just as terrified of that plan as he was of going back to Grant.” Phil explained. “It took a few weeks to gain his trust and get the information about his mother, unfortunately she was already deceased. Once that was established there was no question that my wife and I would try to become his guardians. That and having a run in with Grant, who tried to harm not only Fitz but our daughter, Jemma as well.”

Gordon continued pressing Phil for details regarding his taking Fitz from Sheffield but every ‘t’ was crossed and every ‘i’ was dotted. There was no way to shake the story. The Coulson’s had done everything they should have done and did it correctly. With no further questions Gordon ended his cross examination and dropped into his seat next to Dunn.

The judge adjourned for the day by four thirty and reminded the Coulsons to have Fitz in his chambers at ten o’clock the next morning. The older man smiled saying he would give them an
extra hour for the boy to sleep off the remnants of the doctor’s sedative.

Melinda sighed as Phil carried a drowsy Fitz to the car. The judge had no idea what kind of night they would have. Once that sedative wore off the last thing any of them would do was sleep.

XX

“And you are sure of this,” Phil asked over the form he held in one hand while sipping coffee with the other.

“Positively,” Mack nodded

“Absolutely,” Hunter said at the same time.

“Every item has been verified, sir.” Bobbi added. “Elena is bringing the woman herself.”

“Turns out she was not what any of us imagined,” Hunter smiled. “Got to get our minds out of the gutter then don’t we?” Bobbi lightly backhanded him across the shoulder.

“How did you find her?” Phil asked as he poured a second cup of coffee and stirred sugar and cream into it.

“When Emilie found out she was pregnant she tried to get clean. Michaela Clark was her mentor. Stayed with her for years after, trying to keep her that way. The medicine Fitz talked about was methadone. I guess she fell off the wagon quite a few times and found her way back to Micki, as the girl was known. We found her accidentally actually,” Bobbi admitted with a crooked smile.

“Our agents went to inquire at rehabs in the Edinburgh area thinking she was an addict and hoping someone recognized the name. A tip sent them to the local hospital where they were pretty sure they’d be speaking to a coroner. Turned out she was still in the area. She took a job at a hospital in Edinburgh. They tracked her down and she was more than willing to tell them everything she knew about Emilie Fitz and Alistair Dunn. Apparently, she was Emilie’s confidant for all those years.” Mack filled him in with more details.
“And, she stills keeps her cats…although she has managed to kick the nicotine habit.” Hunter jested as he leaned back on the chair he had plopped into a few minutes earlier.

Phil looked at the clock. It was seven a.m. Melinda was still asleep with Fitz snuggled close to her. Skye had also joined them at some point during the night, more than likely missing her parents’ attention in the last few days. The little girl was cuddled up to her brother probably giving him more support than he realized he needed. He’d been restless until his little sister joined the slumber party in their parents’ bed. Phil wondered how he would wake Skye without disturbing Melinda or Fitz.

Despite the ongoing chaos of this asinine trial, the Coulson did their best to keep a normal routine with their other children and that meant waking everyone by seven thirty to start the mad morning preparation for the school day. The judge’s granting of extra time on this morning meant he and Melinda could drop off Skye at preschool thereby avoiding the bellowing protests she would put up when Bobbi and Hunter attempted to do so. Jemma and Trip would board their respective buses by eight thirty.

Phil let out a sigh and opened the refrigerator. He stood staring into its depths debating on what the breakfast menu would be that morning.

“Hey, I got this,” Mack smiled as he reached past the man and snagged a carton of eggs. “You take care of the rousting and I’ll make sure they’re fed.” He was already pulling out utensils and pans as Bobbi pulled the toaster from its spot on the counter and a loaf of bread from the cabinet.

Hunter raised his hands. “I’m not much of a cook, but I’m a master at clean up.” He smiled as Coulson let out a less than amused laugh and headed for the stairs.

xx

Picking up Skye and carrying her from the room was easier than Phil thought. Fitz stirred a little feeling the loss of the warm body next to him which Phil quickly replaced with a pillow and blanket. He whisked Skye from the room before she had a chance to make a sound and hurried into Jemma’s room where he gently shook her shoulder and smiled when she blinked up at him a still snoozing Skye. As usual the little girl slipped out of bed and hurried to use the bathroom. He knew she would take care of her own needs and be dressed and at the table before he could wrestle Skye out of her PJ’s.

Trip woke with his own alarm. He’d already showered and met his father in the hall with a quick good morning before he lightly bounced down the stairs. Phil stepped into his youngest daughter’s
room, took a deep breath and shook Skye awake.

She pushed back the hair from her eyes and smiled. “Hi, daddy.”

“G’morning, angel eyes,” Phil smiled as he pressed his forehead to hers.

Skye let out a long yawn and stretched as Phil set her on the floor. “Where momma?” She looked in all directions and started for the door before Phil grabbed her hand and put a finger over her lips.

“Momma is very sleepy this morning,” he whispered. “We’re going to let her stay in bed a little longer.” He waited, expecting and preparing for the wail that would come as Skye’s bottom lip turned out for a moment as she looked toward the door.

“Fitz be noan happy. Him bees frade, daddy. I hoed him tight.” She turned back to Phil nodding in agreement with herself.

He let out the breath he was holding. For as much as this little one had experienced she still showed so much concern for her brothers and sister, almost knowing when they were hurt or sick and needed comfort.

“Yes, angel, Fitz is not happy and you were such a big helper but he needs momma right now. He needs to feel safe.” Phil assured her as he pulled her closer.

“Momma noan happy, daddy?” Skye asked with wide eyes.

Phil lifted the little girl into his arms. “Momma is trying very hard to be happy for all of us, angel. I think that might be why she needs to sleep a little longer.”

“I non’t make no noises, daddy. I be too quite.” She wriggled from his grip and slid to the floor once again heading for the door, this time on tiptoe.

Once again, Phil grabbed her hand. She turned back to her father and frowned. “I gotsa pee-pee, daddy.” The man dropped his head and smiled then scooped her up and hurried to the bathroom.
Melinda made her way down the stairs in time to kiss her elder children and bid them a good day before they were out the door to school. Jemma hugged her a little tighter and a lot longer than usual then looked over her shoulder twice before boarding the school van. Melinda braced herself as her youngest plowed into her bouncing to be picked up.

“You take-a me a skoo aday!” She smiled as she wrapped her arms around Melinda’s neck and planted a sloppy kiss on her cheek. She leaned back and studied her mother’s face for a moment. “You feole moer to happy now you sleeped moer, momma?” She looked around her mother on the left and then the right. “Where Fizt? Him sleep a-moer?”

Melinda held her close and kissed her cheek. “He’s coming bao bei.” She turned with the little girl in her arms and watched as her little boy made his way slowly down the stairs. She wrapped an arm around him as he joined her then walked her younger children to the kitchen.

Phil was on the phone speaking softly to, she presumed, their lawyer from what she could hear of the conversation. Hunter stood at the sink washing dishes and whistling some soft tune that probably had words children should not hear. Bobbi was nowhere to be seen and she caught a glimpse of Mack’s car as he backed out of the driveway.

“He’s picking her up at two…directly to the courthouse…there won’t be time for that…yes, I’ve got the disposition from my team…ten, yes we will be there…..” Phil finished the conversation and turned to his family.

“Hey, you,” he smiley glared at Skye. “I thought we were going to let momma and Fitz sleep.”

“I no wake-a momma.” Skye giggled as she shook her head.

Melinda bent around her baby to kiss her husband. Fitz still held tightly to her waist. “She’s innocent, Phil. We woke on our own, right Fitz?” She looked down at him. The boy yawned and nodded slowly.

Phil took Skye from his wife and pulled out a chair for Melinda to sit. Hunter turned and smiled. “Got your tea, luv.” He pulled a china cup and saucer from the cabinet and carried it and the tea pot to the table setting it next to her. “Bobbi’s in the shower downstairs, but she made extra. I can
“Pop it in the nuker for you.” He offered.

Phil placed Skye on the floor and helped Fitz into a chair of his own, giving Melinda the chance to take a breath. She poured the tea into her cup and let it set for a second before taking a sip and shaking her head at Hunter’s offer. He shrugged and turned to Fitz.

“How ‘bout you mate? Breakfast?” He smiled at the boy.

“You should probably have something, Fitz.” Phil told him.

“You wan own jews?” Skye asked as she wriggled between her brother’s chair and her father’s legs. “I git it.” She wriggled away just as quickly.

Fitz smiled as his little sister disappeared behind their parents then shook his head. “I don’t care for any, Skye.” He looked to his father. “May I have tea with dry toast?” Phil nodded and Hunter clapped his hands together then rubbed them quickly.

“Now that’s a breakfast I can handle.” He smiled as he wriggled his eyebrows and pulled the loaf of bread from where Bobbi had put it.

“You take-a me a skool aday, Fizt.” Skye informed her brother. He looked to his parents for verification.

Phil nodded. “We don’t have to be at court until ten this morning.”

Fitz put a hand to his head and rested his elbow on the table. “I don’t want to go.” He mumbled

“I know, bao bao but we have to go. The judge wants to talk to you, just you.” Melinda rubbed her hand on his back as she spoke.

“Why?” The boy was alarmed and sat upright quickly. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Fizt get a go my skoo agin?” Skye chirped as she stood on a chair and poured orange juice…
Melinda sat on a wooden bench in the wide courthouse hallway. Fitz sat next to her as Phil spoke with Alex a few feet away. She glanced up at the large clock on the opposite wall…nine forty five. Smiling down at her little boy, she squeezed his cold hand. He did not smile back. Alex approached slowly, holding her briefcase in front of her with two hands.

“It’s almost time, Fitz. Are you ready?” She asked quietly.

The little boy shook his head and scooted closer to his mother. “Why can’t mom and da take me? Why can they just walk with me to the door?” He asked without looking up at the lawyer.

“We’ll be right here, Fitz. You just have to walk down the hall with Alex. You’ll be able to see us all the while.” Phil assured him.

Melinda wrapped an arm around the little boy, pulling him closer. “We talked about this Fitz. All the judge wants to do is talk to you. You aren’t in any trouble. It will just be him and you for a little while.”

“I don’t like to talk.” Fitz mumbled into his mother’s side. He looked up at her. “What if I say the wrong thing or make all of this worse. I always make things worse. I just want to go home.” He ended in little more than a whisper meant only for Melinda’s ears.

Melinda pulled the child to his feet and stood her in front of him. “Fitz, you are the bravest little boy I know. You are my hero over and over again. You might get yourself in trouble more often than not, but you do say the right thing and you make things better for me and daddy and your brother and sisters more times than you know.” She put a finger under the boy’s chin and raised his head to look her in the eye. “You go in there and you tell the truth and you answer the questions. We’ll be here when you come out and it will be all over.”

Fitz let out a defeated sigh and tilted his head to one side. “Like the dentist…” he breathed.

Melinda laughed as she pulled him into a hug. “Yes, bao boa, like the dentist.” It was their little bit of encouragement. Fitz hated the dentist. Melinda would tell him to just think about how he
would feel when he was finished and they were on their way home. She realized she’d just said exactly the same thing she did every time he dragged himself into the dentist’s chair. She squeezed him again looking over his head at Alex who gave a quick ‘it’s time’ nod. With a swift kiss she stood him up and Phil pulled him into another tight hug before Alex reached out a hand. Fitz looked at it for a second before taking it in his own and following her down the hall.

He didn’t look back. He knew his parents were there…watching him. He knew if he turned around he would race back and never let go. Alex smiled down at him before she turned the large black door knob and opened the oversized door
PART 6

“Good morning, Fitz” Judge Harmon smiled as he stepped from behind his desk. Fitz stared for a moment, taking in the man’s appearance sans his long black robe and dark rimmed spectacles. Was it possible the man was smaller?

“Good morning, sir” The little boy replied just a bit above a whisper after Alex shook the hand, she still held, lightly.

Judge Harmon gave Alex a nod letting her know it was time to leave. She quietly said a quick good bye and promised to be back for him as soon as the judge called then exited the room leaving the little boy facing the man who looked a lot taller up close.

Fitz took in the office walls lined with shelves full of thick tomes. The little boy could smell the musty odor of old books. The desk was messy, covered with papers and files, certainly not neat and orderly like Da’s desk in his office at home. There were three big leather chairs that also looked worn and old. Dark blotches stained the top of the back rests and arms where years of occupants had left their marks. Even the rug was worn where people scuffed their feet while seated there. A woman sat at a small table in the rear of the room with a stenograph machine in front of her. She did not react to him seeing her, almost as if she was trying to blend into the background. Fitz took a deep breath and looked up at the judge.

“That is Mrs. Bonivitch. She is the court…” the judge started.

“Stenographer,” Fitz finished. “She keeps the transcripts of what we say.” He said looking back at the woman.

“Yes,” the judge smiled and motioned toward one of the leather chairs. “Would you like to sit down?” He asked, impressed by the boy’s knowledge and command of language. He pointed to a small table in front of his desk. “I’ve had some sweets brought in…thought you might enjoy a doughnut or maybe a sweet roll.”

Fitz shoved his hands into his pockets, looked at the dish of assorted treats and shook his head. “No thank you, sir. My mom doesn’t like us to eat sweets so early in the morning. She’s says it’s not a proper way to start the day.”

“Hmmm,” Judge Harmon nodded as he bit into a powdery white donut wrapped in a napkin. He chewed as he walked to his desk then set it down and wiped the sugar from his mouth and tie. “You’re not allowed some special privileges once in a while?” He asked around a final swallow.

Fitz nodded. “Yes sir, we have dessert almost every night, but mom says it’s not good to start the day full of sugar. Mostly we have eggs or omelets that Da makes for us.”
Taking a sip from a Styrofoam cup on the desk Harmon turned back to the boy. “I see, so she’d be angry if you did indulge?” He raised his eyebrows with curiosity.

The boy shrugged his shoulders, looking longingly at the dish where he spied his favorite Boston Cream.

“She won’t know if you change your mind.” The judge noticed the boy’s wishful look and sniggered as he took another bite.

“I’d know.” Fitz remarked as he turned from the plate and wriggled on to one of the large chairs, hands still deep in both pockets.

“I see,” the judge pursed his lips and nodded a few times. “You think you’d be punished?”

Fitz furrowed his brow and shook his head. “No sir, but my mom would be disappointed.”

“It’s important…how your mother feels?” The judge inquired nonchalantly.

Fitz frowned and looked at the man as if he should know the answer. “She’s my mom.” He corrected the man.

The judge nodded as he finished the last of his doughnut and wiped his mouth and fingers. He drained his coffee cup and dropped it into the waste basket. “Do you know why we’re here, Fitz?”

“You wanted to talk to me, sir, but I suspect you mean why are we here at all…the reason for all of this.” Fitz replied as he pulled his hands free.

“Exactly,” the judge sat in his chair and folded his hands on his desk. “I’m told you are a very smart young man.”

Fitz swallowed then took a deep breath. He didn’t really care if the judge thought he was smart or if the man was trying to give him some kind of compliment. He just wanted this to be over. “You are going to decide if I get to stay with my parents or go with Mr. Dunn.” He paused for a moment and looked at his own hands folded in his lap. For a few moments he said nothing and the judge allowed the silence, not pressing the boy to say more than he wanted. Fitz squirmed a little and mumbled. “I don’t want to go with him.” He shook his head. “I don’t know him and I am quite sure I don’t like him.”

“You didn’t always know the Coulsons, did you?” The judge remarked as he looked at the forms on his desk. “You only met them just a little over a year ago. Did you like them when you first met?”

“They wanted to help me. I was all alone and that…” The boy’s face grew dark as he looked to the window and drew a very deep breath. “That bloody bastard, Grant, took away my maw.” Fitz pulled his hands into tight fists and thumped them on his knees. “He was a terrible man and I’m glad he’s dead. My mom saved me or he would have killed me as well and who knows what he would have done to Jemma and Trip!” Without realizing it, Fitz stood and moved to the judge’s desk slamming his small fist on it with each word.

The judge watched the boy but did not react. He neither encouraged nor discouraged the boy’s anger. “Can you tell me about your maw, Fitz?” The man asked calmly interlacing his fingers and resting his hands in front of him on the desk.

Fitz looked at his fist and slowly slid it off the judge’s desk, dropping his arm to his side. Realizing
how rapidly his breath was coming, the boy took small deep breaths to calm himself before continuing. “Sometimes I miss her so much it hurts to breathe.” He remarked as he backed to the chair and leaned against the edge of the seat. “My mom says that’s okay. She says I’ll always miss her and someday it won’t hurt so much. She tells me it’s okay to love my maw even though she’s not here with me. She tells me she loves me.”

“And that’s okay… that your mom loves you when you really love your maw.” The judge was careful to use the correct terminology.

The little boy nodded as he took another deep breath. “I grew inside my maw and she birthed me but she was sick and couldn’t take care of me as well as some mothers, but she loved me and I loved her.” He stopped for a moment and swallowed the urge to let himself cry. “My mom tells us we grew in her heart and my da’s heart too. I don’t know how to explain that to you.” He looked up at the judge. “I know what it means because she grew in my heart too. My mom tells me she has to love me twice as much because she loves me for my maw, too. She says that’s what mothers do. I believe her because I love her, not like I loved my maw. It’s different, but it’s still love.”

“But you didn’t always love her, did you?” The judge prodded.

Fitz smiled a tiny bit. “I didn’t always know her, but I do now and now I love her. When I was with my maw, lots of times I was hungry or cold. Sometimes we had no place to live so we stayed in the park or went to a shelter when it was really cold or rainy. I tried to take care of her. My mom says I was brave but I was really scared all the time. Then my maw fell in with Grant and I was more scared than ever. It was difficult being scared all the time. Sometimes I was afraid to sleep because I didn’t know what he would do to me or my maw. He hurt me…” Fitz paused, blocking the memory of James Grant and his belt. “Then my da found me I was scared when he first took me to Sheffield, but scared like I was with Grant. My mom scared me a little because I thought she was always so cross, but she was really just worried about a lot. I dint know what would happen but they just made sure I had food and clothes and a place to sleep.”

“So you stopped being afraid?” The judge asked.

“No,” Fitz shook his head. “I was then afraid they’d go away and leave me or hand me off to social services, but they didn’t, even when I was cheeky or a rascal. They just kept treating me the same. Then we came here and Trip came to live with us and then Skye and we made a family, all of us together.” Fitz voice began to rise again. “We need each other, all of us.”

“But, Fitz, you know that the tests show that Mr. Dunn is your father.” The judge explained. “He’d like a chance to show you that.”

“He’s not my father!” Fitz shouted balling his fists. “He is just a man that wants to take me away from my family. My da is Phil Coulson. He’s the only da I ever had and the only one I ever want to have.”

“Okay, Fitz, let’s take a few minutes and calm down. Would you like a drink?” The man spoke evenly as he pointed toward a large water cooler but the boy shook his head and took several deep breaths, letting them out slowly. He pushed himself back as far on the large chair as he could and tried to relax his hands as he rested them on the wide arm rests.

“What would you say to just talking with Mr. Dunn? You could meet him right here in my office. Do you think you could do that?” The judge asked quietly as the boy continued to breathe rapidly.

Fitz blew short breaths out of puffed cheeks and dug his nails into the soft leather of the chair’s arm rests. He took the time he needed to calm himself, then spoke. “Will my mom and da be here
The judge shook his head as he stood, walked around the desk then leaned back on it. “I don’t think that would be fair to Mr. Dunn. He’d like a chance to talk just to you. I will make sure there is a court officer here with you.” He explained.

Fitz shook his head. “I don’t want to give him a chance. I just want to go home.” Suddenly, he sounded more like a scared little boy than a child genius.

The judge leaned back on his desk, pausing for a moment before posing his next question. “Maybe you can help me to understand, Fitz. Can you tell me how the Coulsons are so different than Mr. Dunn?” The judge asked.

Fitz looked toward the large windows covered with heavy curtains, blinking away errant tears. “I told you that I grew in my parents’ hearts just like I grew inside my maw. Then they grew in my heart. That’s how you know you love someone. That’s how you become a family.” He stopped and waited for the judge to react. When he did not, the boy continued. Turning to the judge, he tried to explain. “Mr. Dunn didn’t even know I grew in my maw. My maw didn’t talk about him or miss him like my mom misses my da when he goes away. I didn’t grow inside him.” Fitz shook his head as he looked down at his hands. “I didn’t grow in his heart either. He looks at me like he’s angry with me, not like da looks at me even when I mess up really bad. He wasn’t even that angry when I pinched his wallet and his phone.” The boy shook his head and let out a frustrated breath thinking the man could not possibly understand. He looked at the judge and quickly swiped a tear from his eye. “Your honor,” he addressed the man as he’d heard Alex do in the courtroom and waited to be acknowledged.

“Yes, Fitz…”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore. I think I really need my mom now.” His voice cracked.

The man nodded and pushed a button on his desk. A few seconds later Alex entered the room and ushered the boy back to his parents.

XX

Alex smiled as she led Fitz from the room through a different door than they had entered. She explained to the boy she was in a different part of the courthouse and had to grab a few notes from her clerk before heading for the courtroom. Fitz nodded his understanding and hoped it wouldn’t take long.

They turned down two different halls before he spied a young woman heading toward them. She did not look happy and held a large file with both hands. Alex must have thought the same thing. She stopped and let out a loud sigh then turned to Fitz.

“How about you sit here for a second while I take care of this? It will be quick I promise.” She pointed toward one of the now very familiar wooden benches that were placed in every hallway. Fitz nodded and walked the short distance to the seat then plopped down at the far end. He rested his elbow on the arm rest and his chin on his hand as he watched the two women move to the large windowsill and open the file. It didn’t appear it would be very quick.

Fitz rubbed his arm across his eyes, erasing the end of his tears. He swung his feet back and forth and looked up and down the hallway for a clock wondering if his mom was watching the big clock in the hall where she waited. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back until it bumped the wall behind him then peeked through a little crack in his eyelids at the women who now appeared to be
arguing. He let out a silent sigh.

Maybe if he’d kept his eyes open he would have seen the large hand that grabbed his wrist and pulled him up from the bench and around the thin wall that formed a walkway to the nearest rest rooms. His eyes sprung wide open as he looked into the glare of Alistair Dunn.

“Hello, Leopold,” the man smiled as he pushed one hand against the boy’s mouth and held his shoulder in a pinching grip with the other. Fitz let out a tiny protest, silenced by the man pressing his hand harder and pinching tighter.

“Sad that this is the way I have to meet my only son,” Dunn sneered. Fitz tried to shake his head but the pain in his neck and shoulder stopped him. “Oh, yes laddie you are my flesh and blood and when this is over,” He paused and glanced around the wall, probably checking to see if Alex had noticed the boy was no longer there. Turning back to Fitz he spoke in a hoarse whisper close enough to the boy’s face that he could smell the stale tobacco on his breath. “When this whole bloody damn farce is over, you and me will be back to the highlands where you’ll be earning your keep with that big brain of yours.” He let go of Fitz’s shoulder just long enough to roughly poke his temple to emphasize the last of his statement. The boy sunk with a short reprieve before the man grabbed the same spot with renewed pressure as he pulled his hand from Fitz’s mouth and warned him with a finger to his lips to stay quiet.

“You’re hurting me….” Fitz sighed.

“You think this is pain?” The man almost laughed in his odd whisper. He squeezed harder and shook the boy. Fitz reached up to grab the hand that held him. “You’ll learn quick, lad, you’ll learn to mind me and do as yer told. I understand you have some talent with mechanics that might come in useful in my line and I’ve a few ideas myself for gadgets that will be all the more useful, laddie. You’ll be using those smarts to put your ole da in the lifestyle he deserves.”

“I’ll not help you, not ever.” Fitz groaned.

Alistair shook him roughly, bringing a new level of pain to the boy’s shoulder. “A few licks of the strap’ll teach ya to do as I say as soon as I say it and there’ll be no snivelin’ like a wee babe. No, my genius son…and that ya got from me not yer worthless addict mother…”

Fitz started to protest but was silenced by the hand and the pinch that proceeded a snap that made the boy’s legs turn to jelly. He knew if the man wasn’t holding him he would be on the floor. Dunn shook him again.

“Not a word, boy…” he pointed a finger in Fitz’s face. “Not one word or I won’t wait for that damn yank judge…I’ll come creepin’ into yer very home and no one’ll see the likes of you again.” He pulled the boy close and spoke close to his ear, a wide toothy smile across his face. “I’ll be sure to take care of those perfect Coulsons as well, the whole lot of them.” With that he spun Fitz back around the corner and forced him into the seat then quickly disappeared down the short hallway toward the rest rooms.

Fitz pushed himself up from the position Dunn dropped him. Alex and the other woman were still speaking as they pushed papers back into the file. The lawyer turned and smiled at the boy before dismissing the clerk and motioning for him to join her. She frowned as he ignored the silent request. He was probably upset she’d made him wait so long. Taking a deep breath, Alex sighed and crossed the hall to stand in front of the boy.

“Sorry that took a little longer than I thought, Fitz. Let’s go find your mom.” Alex smiled as she held out a hand toward him. The boy stared at it blankly, silently refusing to accept the lawyer’s
offer. Alex let her hand drop slowly, assuming Fitz was upset she’d made him wait was probably right. He must have been fidgeting something fierce as his shirt was pulled from his belt on one side and his hair looked a bit more disheveled than usual. “Okay,” she breathed with a hint of frustration. “Come on then, but stay close.” She took a few steps and turned back to see he had not moved. “I said I was sorry Fitz, but it was very important.” She held out the hand that was not clutching her briefcase. When he still did not respond she took a step toward him. “Fitz, honey, are you alright?” She moved to place a hand on his shoulder. He stared up at her, stood then walked in the direction she had been heading.

Alex shrugged her shoulders and followed.

XX

Melinda paced in front of the courtroom doors as Phil sat and bounced his heels on the well polished marble floor. Alex rounded the corner with Fitz a few steps behind and wriggled her fingers at the couple. Melinda breathed a sigh of relief. Phil stood and brushed his hands together.

Alex had paused to tidy up her young client before returning him to his parents. No sense having either think she shirked the responsibility they’d entrusted to her. He’d been less than cooperative but she brushed it off as him being a ten year old boy who probably wasn’t too keen on being fussed over by some very inexperienced woman.

Melinda smiled and took the little boy’s hand a moment before the courtroom doors opened and the bailiff informed them the proceedings were about to begin. The group entered the large room and stood as the judge took his seat at the bench.

With a bang of the gavel, court was in session.

Fitz sat on the far side of Melinda and sat back against the bench refusing to look toward Dunn and his lawyer. That changed when William Gordon called his one and only witness to the stand… Alistair Dunn.

The man’s tie was now straight and his hair slicked back. He smirked at Fitz at he took the stand and gave a fast wink. The boy felt his stomach turn and looked down as Melinda grasped his hand. Even that simple form of support sent shards of pain from his finger tips to his jaw.

He pulled his hand away and stared ahead. One look at his mom would break his resolve and he would collapse into her. Melinda knew something was wrong. She turned to her son and noticed the sheen of sweat on his brow…at the slight shiver that ran through him every few seconds. Looking to the stand she assumed the presence of the man there was the reason. She leaned down and whispered in Fitz’s ear.

“Do you want to wait in the lounge, Fitz? I don’t think they’re going to need you here.”

“No,” he answered quickly, a bit too loud as every eye turned toward them. Fitz looked to the floor and whispered, “no, I want to stay with you and da.” He moved closer to Melinda but held his left hand on his lap protectively.

Dunn swore to tell the truth, stated his name and address for the record then waited for Gordon to begin. Fitz couldn’t help notice the difference in the tone of the man’s voice. Gone was the hoarse growl as he now spoke in a quiet reserved manner.

The lawyer smiled as he approached the stand. “Mr. Dunn can you tell the court when and how you came to know Emilie Fitz?”
Dunn smiled widely and leaned forward. “I met sweet Emmy at a Christmas party in Glasgow. It was for the company I worked and she was there with a friend. We had a few drinks and one thing led to another. We ended up at the pub later in the evening. We saw each other quite a few times after and every time I was in Glasgow.”

“So you knew each other well?” Gordon asked as he turned to Alex.

“We did.” The man responded.

“And what can you tell me about your relationship?”

“Like I said…we saw each other as often as we could. I was doing a bit of traveling but I always made it a point to see her when I could but things started to change.”

“Can you tell us how?”

Dunn took a deep dramatic breath. “She just seemed different. I guess that was when she started using drugs an….”

“Objection,” Alex stood, “the witness is making an assumption that cannot be proved or disproved.”

“Sustained,” the judge agreed.

Gordon nodded. “So you felt she was acting differently, did you ever see her use drugs or know of anyone giving her drugs?”

Dunn shook his head. “No sir, never saw her use but there were these people she would meet when we were about. They’d pass her small bits of something. I didn’t ask what it was but later she’d act dazed or confused, like she might need to sleep it off.”

“Objection,” Alex repeated.

“Sustained,” the judge agreed again. “Move along Mr. Gordon we get the idea.”

“So when is the last time you saw Ms. Fitz?”

“Round the end of March of eighty seven,” Dunn answered calmly.

“And did you ever see her again?” Gordon continued.

“Twice,” Dunn answered. “Both times in the summer of ninety four, she was looking for money. That’s when I found out about my son.” He added. “She looked like bloody hell, hardly recognized her. I told her I needed to see the lad, told her I’d take him…make it easier for her. I offered her quite a bit of money in return for the lad. She agreed to meet me with him the following day, but ran off before I could do anything.”

“Did you think she was capable for caring for the boy?”

“Objection,” Alex spoke again. “Mr. Dunn is not an expert in child care or social service. He cannot make that determination.”

“Sustained,” the judge sighed.

Gordon smiled. “Let me rephrase that question. Mr. Dunn did you feel Emilie Fitz was well enough to care for the child?”
“Objection,” Alex stood again. “Mr. Dunn is not a doctor. He could not determine Ms. Fitz’s state of being at the time.”

Fitz squirmed a bit in his seat causing Melinda to wrap an arm around him. “Shhh,” she started to comfort him but the boy let out a whimper that turned into a sob. He wrapped his right hand around his left elbow.

“Don’t…please,” he cried weakly.

Melinda again noticed the sweat on his brow and put a hand to his head, feeling the heat beneath it.

“Is there a problem, Mrs. Coulson?” The judge asked as once again all attention turned to her and Fitz.

She looked to the little boy who stared up at her with tears streaming over his cheeks. “He hurt me, mom…” Fitz whispered to his mother and nodded toward the man on the stand.

Melinda reached to examine her son, kicking herself mentally for not realizing his pain earlier. He pleaded with her not to touch him but she unbuttoned his shirt and immediately saw the large bruise between his neck and shoulder. She looked to Phil who stood and glared at Dunn.

“Is there a problem, Mrs. Coulson?” The judge asked again. Both lawyers faced the Coulsons but looked back toward the judge and waited for a response.

“Who hurt you Fitz? Who did this to you?” Melinda’s anger simmered. She could not believe the judge would harm a child, but Fitz had spent the last hour with the man and now this. She glanced at Alex who seemed just as confused.

The young lawyer shook her head. “He was fine when he left the judge’s chamber. We came straight to you…” She stopped remembering she'd been distracted by the clerk in the hallway. Alex put a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my gawd…”

The gavel banged causing everyone to jump. Fitz groaned loudly as he slumped against his mother.

“Fitz?” She asked again.

“Young man, can you tell us who caused this injury?” The judge was on his feet, directing the bailiff toward the Coulson’s.

Fitz raised his uninjured arm and pointed to Dunn. “It was him did it. He hurt me.” The boy spoke loud enough to be heard across the courtroom.

“The boy is clearly lying,” Dunn shouted as he rose to his feet. “I’ve had no contact with him, thanks to this farce and yer all witness to that. I’ve been sittin’ in this room with you all day to day trying to get back what’s been taken from me” He slammed his hands on the railing that encircled the stand.

“He hurt me mom,” Fitz finally gave into his tears and sobbed into his mother’s gentle embrace. Phil took a few steps toward the stand. A few nights in a cell would be a small price to pay for breaking that bastard’s face. Melinda grabbed his wrist and stopped him glancing at their son who writhed in her arms. Phil dropped to one knee next to the boy and gently massaged his thigh in support.

“Hang on, buddy. Help’s on the way.”

The judge banged the gavel several times calling for order in the court. “Bailiff, have the court
officers take Mr. Dunn into custody until we sort this out and get medical attention for this child.”
Before Gordon could object, he banged the gavel again. “This court is in recess until the local police speak with young Mr. Fitz.”

Dunn roughly pulled his arm away from the officers as Gordon stepped back out of the way. “You cannot do this. You have no proof, nothing. He was with you!” He pointed toward Judge Harmon. “If the boy is hurt, it’s your bloody damn doin’!” He continued shouting as he was cuffed and escorted from the courtroom.

XX

Melinda sat next to the bed in the private hospital room. Phil stood outside the door speaking with two detectives. She looked at the little boy sleeping with the help of a strong sedative. For the time being the boy’s arm and shoulder were immobilized with a wrap and plenty of ice. Tomorrow he’d be fitted for a sling that would hold both in place until his broken clavicle healed. A complete examination also found bruising inside the boy’s mouth where his teeth had ground into his lip.

Fitz tearfully related the story of Dunn accosting him in the hall while he waited for Alex to finish her business. The lawyer herself was in tears wrought with guilt for what she had not even seen happen. Phil tried to console her while just a look from Melinda was enough to cause her to tremble.

The emergency room was full of photographers and the doctors took swabs of the inside of the boy’s mouth. His clothes were bagged and labeled as the incident was being treated as an assault…a crime against a child.

Melinda stood at the window clenching and unclenching her fists when Phil reentered the room. He paused at the bed to check his son then stepped behind his wife.

“I’d like to rip out his throat,” she growled low and threatening. “How could he put Fitz through this?” She spun into Phil’s embrace. “Do you know what this means?” She couldn’t cry. She was too angry.

Phil didn’t answer. He didn’t have to…he knew she how she felt. He felt the same. The only good thing was that this would end any chance of Dunn ever nullifying their adoption. The flip side was that Fitz would again have to face the man in court.

“I know,” he whispered into her hair.

Melinda pulled back and moved to sit on the end of the bed. “They’re going to keep him overnight, just for observation. We can take him home tomorrow. How much more can he take, Phil? He’s been through so much trauma. He’s just a little boy and it just doesn’t end.”

Phil stood next to his son and brushed his hand across the boy’s curls. “He’s tough, Mel, tougher than we think. We’ll get him through this, just like everything else.”

“He threatened to break into our house and take him, Phil. That bastard threatened our family…my babies.” She drew a ragged breath. “He broke our child’s shoulder and…terrorized him right in the same building…where we thought he was safe…where we told him he was safe. God, how can he ever trust us again?” She finished in little more than a whisper.

“Maybe you should get some rest, Mel.” Phil sighed.

“I’m staying right here, Phil. I won’t leave him alone again, ever.” Melinda swore.
Phil wrapped an arm around her and kissed her forehead. “You can’t hold him forever, Mel.”

“Watch me,” she growled back.

Both turned toward the soft knock on the door but before either could answer it opened admitting a sniffling Jemma who ran to her mother, wrapping her arms around her tightly. Trip followed close behind, carrying an unusually quiet Skye who reached out to her father as soon as she spotted him. Bobbi entered last giving both of her bosses a weak smile.

“I’m really sorry, but they just wouldn’t take no for an answer. If I didn’t bring them, no one would have gotten any rest.” She explained. Phil smiled and gave her a quick nod as he rocked his baby gently.

“I’m sorry, Da,” Trip shook his head. “We had to see the little guy. We needed to see for ourselves he was okay. Bobbi told me what happened. That bas…” He paused with a quick glance around the room. “I’d like to give that jerk someone his own size to pick on…”

Phil smiled at his eldest, resting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, he gave a firm squeeze. “Dunn is right where he belongs, Trip.”

“Oh, momma…” Jemma sobbed. “Poor Fitz, he’s always the one to be hurt.” She looked at her brother and sobbed harder.

“It’s okay, bao bao. The doctors gave him something to help him sleep and to stop the pain. We won’t see him til morning so why don’t all of you go with Bobbi and get a good night’s rest. The doctor said we can bring Fitz home tomorrow.”

“No way, mom,” Trip shook his head. “We’re his family. We’re here for him and for you. We aren’t leaving.”

Jemma shook her head, agreeing with her older brother. “We were worried about all of you.”

Bobbi shrugged her shoulders. “Like I said…there was no changing their minds.”

“I stay to Fitz, too.” Skye nodded. “Him bees mine brudder foe ebber and ebber.”

Phil looked to Melinda and smiled again. She bent to place a kiss on Jemma’s head and pulled Trip into the hug they shared. The young boy was right. They were a family and they would stand together even if it meant spending the night in a small hospital room.

XX

Two weeks later the Coulsons once again entered the courtroom. Fitz stayed close, still bound by a shoulder/arm immobilizer that he’d wear for at least the three more weeks.

Judge Harmon called the session to order. Alex informed him she had no questions for Alistair Dunn after the judge informed the man he was still under oath. He also made a point of letting both lawyers know that Mr. Dunn was being held without bail in the matter of assault in addition to other charges. As Gordon has no other witnesses, Alex asked to call a rebuttal witness and Michaela Clark was sworn in to testify.

The woman spent no time negating pretty much everything Dunn had said a few weeks earlier. Yes, Emilie Fitz was an addict but she tried desperately to get clean. From the moment she found she was pregnant until Fitz was almost two she succeeded, took a few classes, held down a part time job and shared an apartment with another single mother as part of a government rehab
program. When the funding ran out, Emilie lost her apartment and the means to continue her studies. It was easy to slip back into her old habits, with a few half hearted attempts to try again. Fitz had just turned eight when Micki moved to Edinburgh and lost contact with her friend. Micki told the court that Emilie had worked as a waitress on several occasions. The woman had a an unforgiving life but she was adamant she would never ever sell her favors to support her child or her habit.

When asked about Dunn Micki said she’d never heard the man’s name but Emilie had told her about the man she met in a bar one night when she was clear headed enough to remember what she had done. It was March and it was cold and raining and he offered her a hot meal and a warm bed. She accepted, knowing what the price would be. In the morning he was gone. He left her the equivalent of fifty U.S. dollars and…Fitz. She never saw the man again.

Emilie swore she had never done anything like it before and never again. Micki had no reason not to believe her. She described the man she knew to be Fitz’s father specifically remembering a large red birthmark behind the man’s ear. It was clearly apparent that Dunn had the same.

The dates of February twenty seventh and twenty eighth of ninety four were clear in Micki’s memory. Emilie and Fitz had spent several nights on the streets of Busby, unable to find shelter in the cold. The by the time the young woman made her way to Micki’s flat she was feverish and weak. It was the last week of February and Emilie spent it on the local hospital recovering from pneumonia and leaving Fitz in Micki’s care.

Gordon did not object to any of the testimony.

When both sides rested the judge informed everyone he would deliberate on everything and have a decision for them by days end. He was true to his word. All parties were called back to the courtroom by five p.m.

Judge Harmon sat for a moment and stacked the forms he held on his desk. He looked over his glasses at Dunn then removed them and smiled at Fitz who was pressed into his mother’s side with his father close as well. He took a deep breath before announcing his decision.

“This has been an experience I would not soon like to repeat.” The judge began. “I’m sure most of you feel the same. I have heard a multitude of testimony from Ms. Miles and find the Coulsons have provided Leopold James Fitz with emotional and physical support from the day he came to be in their care. While there have been incidents that are far from normal for a child, the Coulsons have seen to it that Fitz has received medical as well as psychological care to overcome it. The teachers, clergy and colleagues that testified here had nothing but praise for the Coulsons and their parenting of not only Leopold but the three other children they have also adopted.” Before Phil and Melinda could breathe a sigh of relief the man continued. “However, I cannot over look the fact that Alistair Dunn is the biological parent of Leopold James Fitz.” Dunn sat up straighter and smirked at his believed success.

“As such, Mr. Dunn, I cannot help but wonder why you had not contacted the boy or his mother in all the time since his birth. I am appalled at the lies you fabricated in this courtroom. You stated you spoke with the boy’s mother in February of ninety four and yet the defense has brought forth evidence clearly showing you were being held in a local constabulary for public brawling in Canberra, Australia on the very same dates. While on the same date Emilie Fitz was hospitalized for which we have documentation from the doctors who treated her there.” The judge dropped the forms he held on the desk and once again peered at the man who sat before him. “I cannot imagine what the reason is that brought you here Mr. Dunn other than the small amount of information the authorities got from a terrified child. Is it even possible that you intended to make a profit off of the
intelligence of this boy? That he will…” he looked back down at the forms and sorted through them for a few seconds before he continued. “That he will ‘earn his keep and do as he is told with the help of the strap’. Tell me Mr. Dunn did you tell your son that before or after you snapped his collarbone.”

“I had the unfortunate experience of witnessing your reaction to your son’s injury, Mr. Dunn or shall I say you lack of reaction. Not once did you inquire what had happened or how the boy was hurt, in fact according to my sources you also did not once during the last two weeks, ask for any information on the boy’s condition.” The judge continued.

Alistair Dunn refused to look away. “It doesn’t change the fact that he is my blood. You and your court cannot keep him from me.” He protested as Gordon tried in vain to silence him.

Fitz buried his face in Phil’s jacket as the judge banged the gavel and smiled. “Well, Mr. Dunn you are right about the DNA and it works in a lot of ways.” He sorted through the forms again. “It seems that young Mr. Fitz left a bit of his own on the hand you used to force his silence. Lucky for you it is a perfect match once again. This can only mean that young Mr. Fitz was more than honest in telling us all about your little conversation in the hallway.”

Dunn stood and raised a fist before Gordon could stop him. Two officers moved to the table. “I demand…” he began.

“Sit down, Mr. Dunn, your demands on this court are exhausted.” He banged his gavel once. “Motion to nullify the adoption of Leopold James Fitz by Phillip and Melinda May Coulson is denied.” He banged the gavel again.

“I will take this to the high courts in Britain,” Dunn spat. “You will not deny me that boy.”

“Not only will I deny you Leopold James Coulson Fitz, but I will give you one and only one opportunity to avoid serving the next ten years of your life behind bars.” The judge now took on a growl of his own.

Dunn dropped into his seat.

Judge Harmon continued. “Rather than putting young Fitz through a second round of you lying your way through a trial I will give you the opportunity to plead guilty to the charges of assaulting a minor, threatening a minor, and kidnapping. I believe you have also been charged with perjury which in itself holds a penalty of five thousand dollars and an additional ten year sentence. I believe that makes twenty years, Mr. Dunn.”

“Your honor,” Gordon began. “Is there a plea bargain on the table?”

“As I stated, Mr. Gordon, your client can plead guilty to the charges as read. He can then sign away any parental rights he never had and agree to leave the county immediately. As long as he agrees to stay out of the country the charges will be vacated with prejudice. Should he return or make any attempt to make contact with the Coulson family he will be immediately arrested and sentenced accordingly. I will give you and your client time to discuss this and will expect an answer by week’s end.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Coulson?” The judge turned to the opposite side of the courtroom. Phil and Melinda stood with Fitz still sandwiched between them. “I thank you for your patience and candor in this matter and Fitz, I apologize for the fact that you had to endure any of it.” He slammed the gavel once more. “Phillip and Melinda May Coulson, you may take Leopold James Coulson Fitz home.” He smiled at the family and banged the gavel one last time. “This court stands adjourned.”
The celebration at the Coulson home lasted well into the evening and once again had Melinda battling to get two small girls into bed before midnight. Fitz had fallen asleep on his father’s large recliner in the family room before ten. She checked his bed before grabbing Skye from the top of the stairs for the third time.

“No, no, no baobei. It is bedtime for little girls.” She crooned as she scooped the little girl into her arms.

“I non’t ty-red, momma. I go a pardee.” Skye giggled as she attempted to escape.

Melinda kissed her forehead and laughed. “No more ‘pardee’, Skye. It is way past your bedtime.”

“I sleep-a Jemma’s bed, momma.” The little girl pulled toward her sister’s door as Melinda set her on the floor.

“Nope,” Melinda popped the ‘p’ and scooped her up again as she bumped the bedroom door open with her backside then spun around quickly allowing the little girl to lean back into the twirl. She stopped at the bed and plopped Skye onto her pillow then tapped the end of her nose. “This time you stay in bed and go to sleep. No more fooling because next time momma will not be smiling.”

Skye’s lip came out in a pout before Melinda leaned down and kissed her again. Three songs later the little girl was sound asleep. Turning to leave the room, Melinda was startled to find Jemma in the doorway.

Okay, Jemma you need to get back in bed and please go to sleep.” She rose and walked to the door resting an arm around the little girl’s shoulders and driving her back to her own bed.

“Momma,” Jemma spoke just above a whisper. “I can’t help but worry about Fitz. What if that horrid man returns?”

Melinda helped the little girl climb into bed and tucked the covers around her. “That is not going to happen Jemma. That man is either going to prison for a very long time or he is going away forever. We don’t have to worry about him.” She sat down on the bed next to her older daughter.

“But what if someone else tries to take him or Skye or me? What if someone is looking for one of us and…” Jemma worried.

Placing a finger over the little girl’s lips stopped her before she could finish. “Whatever happens, Jemma, daddy and I will be here to protect all of you. Your mother and father took care of everything so you would never have to worry about things like that. Daddy and I have signed all the papers and done everything we had to do. No one is looking to take you away.” Jemma started to speak but Melinda stopped her a second time. “And Skye had no one, so we are the only family she will ever know. So stop worrying, close your eyes and go to sleep.” She kissed the girl with each word then began softly humming until her second child was finally asleep.

Melinda pulled Jemma’s door shut and started toward the stairs able to hear the low mumble of conversation from the first floor but her motherly ear detected the soft sound of stifled sobs. She pushed open the Fitz’s door and moved to his bed.

“Hey, bao bao, bad dream?”

Fitz rolled toward her and shook his head. He dove into his mother’s embrace and stayed that way for several seconds before speaking into it. “Do you still love me, momma?”
Melinda was shocked. She pushed him back just to look in his eyes. “Fitz, I will always love you, always.”

The boy cried even harder as he pulled back into the hug. “He’s why I’m so bad…I don’t want to be like him…not ever.” He continued speaking into Melinda’s chest.

“Baobei, you are nothing like that man. You are my sweet little boy and you will not ever be like him.” She rocked him back and forth placing soft kisses on his head.

He turned and looked up at her. “But I’ll grow up and I’ve got his DNA in me and…and…”

“Fitz, you, more than anyone, know that that is not the only thing that makes a man what he is.”

“But, I’m the one always in trouble and I get all angry and bang and slam and yell and use terrible language and make trouble for everyone. I’m the one that always ends up getting my bum smacked.” He sniffled.

Melinda smiled. “Yes, you do my beautiful boy, and I still love you to the stars and back and I will never let you become that kind of man.” She hugged him tighter and rocked back and forth.

“But what if I can’t help it…” Fitz whispered.

“Then I guess you’ll just get your bum smacked an awful lot more often.” Melinda laughed as she squeezed him and kissed him again. Fitz, groaned and returned the hug.

“I love you, momma, I love you forever.” He snuggled into her embrace and closed his eyes. “Promise I won’t be like him?” He needed reassurance.

“I promise, baobei. I promise we,” she knew her husband had joined them. “We will not let you be anything like him, not ever.” She began rocking again and humming the same lullaby that put her girls to sleep. He’d drift off quickly, but would end up in their bed in a few hours needing more reassurance. It would last for weeks, but they’d get through it together.

Phil stood in the doorway and smiled at the sight of Melinda and their son…

HIS son

Leopold James Coulson Fitz…

the boy that would never, ever be anything like the monster that was Alistair Dunn.
Overcoming Obstacles

Chapter Summary

One night in the Coulson home, as mom and dad deal with the continued anxieties of their crew. Trip's got a special request and the little ones are sent into a panic when Skye spills a glass of milk

O – Overcoming Obstacles

Trip paced back and forth across the floor of the bedroom he shared with his younger brother. He glanced quickly at the clock then stopped at the window and peered out into the driveway below. He walked back to the door and let out a long breath then walked back to the window to look out again, already knowing there would be no car parked in front of the garage. The lanky boy dropped into the chair in front of the desk against the far wall and slouched back staring up at the ceiling. He reached forward and tapped his long fingers on the edge of the desk in a nervous rhythm.

Picking up the yellow form on the desk, the boy read over it for the third time since he dropped his backpack on the floor next to the chair. He read it from top to bottom and stopped at the bold black line asking for ‘signature of parent/guardian’. Trip had considered on his two block walk from the bus stop just handing the form to his grandmother, getting a quick signature and handing back to his teacher in the morning, but that would certainly backfire and cause more trouble than he cared to handle now or ever. Heck, he was the good kid, the one that never got in any trouble. The dopiest thing he ever did was haul off with Jemma in search of Fitz when that Grant monster was threatening them. And the only trouble he could remember was the Christmas cookie thing, besides that couldn’t really be considered trouble because it helped more than anything. So, no he wasn’t about to be the cause of controversy now. Anyway, Gram was probably getting ready for her weekly ladies’ night event with the group from church.

The teen stood again and resumed pacing. It was Thursday. Mom was at Karate class with Skye. He laughed at the thought of his baby sister in that white dobok with the little orange belt around her waist. The activity had been suggested to help give little Skye self confidence, what it did was provide quite the bit of comedy relief for the family as she returned from each class performing demonstrations complete with lopsided explanations. The twins had some kind of science club function on Thursdays and since Da worked late he’d pick them up on the way home. That left Trip to his own devices for at least three or four hours after school since it was the only day of the week there was no basketball practice. Normally, he’d be thrilled to have this much time to enjoy the peace and quiet or use the computer without Skye wriggling on to his lap to ‘help’ or Fitz standing behind him giving pointers on the correct way to do whatever he was doing. Tonight they were just long drawn out hours of waiting and trying to figure out just what to say and how to say it.
The boy picked up the yellow paper and folded into a neat square then stuffed it into his back pocket as he stood. He let out a long breath, crossed the room and dropped down on his brother’s bunk. Trip fell back and stared at the underside of his own bed. It suddenly occurred to him that Fitz actually slept under his bed. He laughed once as he laced his fingers together across his belly and tapped one finger up and down repeatedly. The boy closed his eyes and listened to the sounds of the empty house...he didn’t remember falling asleep.

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“Why you sleep on Fizt bed, Terrip? It not be naptime.” Skye spoke so close to his face he felt her breath against his cheek and jumped back startling her as much as he did him. The little girl jumped back landing flat on her bottom before he could grab her. Before her pout could turn into a wail, Trip was standing with his little sister in his arms.

“Hey, baby girl,” he smiled. “You scared me silly.” He crossed his eyes, stuck out his tongue and wagged his head making a goofy sound. Skye giggled as she watched.

“You maked me fall on mine pigu, Terrip.” The little girl frowned at her big brother.

“Awww, I’m sorry baby girl.” He leaned his forehead against hers and imitated her pout. “Is it broken?” He tickled her belly.

Skye grabbed Trips fingers and laughed out loud. “You no break a bum-bum, Terrip. It bees too smooshy.”

He kissed her on both cheeks then set her on the floor. She stood staring up at him. “Momma say you come to suppore. I git you, kay?” She held out a hand and waited for him to take it.

Trip let out a breath through his nose. He really hoped to catch his parents before the family sat down to their meal, but his unplanned nap made that impossible. Taking Skye’s little hand in his own, he allowed her to pull him out the door and down the stairs.

“Hey, Trip!” Fitz greeted his brother as he set small plates around the table. “Da stopped at the Italian’s on the way home and let us pick what we liked. We got that sausage stomboli you love and a free order of garlic knots.” The younger boy smiled as he set the last plate and grabbed a stack of forks from the end of the table.
“We also have three kinds of pizza.” Jemma added.

Skye stood on a chair and peered at the food spread across it. “I non’t want no breen one.” She shook her head.

“Okay, no broccoli pizza for Skye,” Melinda announced as she set the little girl on the floor. “Everybody wash hands and get back here while it’s still hot.”

The three younger Coulsons cheered and made for the powder room each yelling they would be first. Melinda shook her head and stepped in the same direction but stopped as Trip cut in front of her. “I’ll take care of it, mom.” He smiled as he headed toward the sound of six hands vying for one faucet.

Dinner went pretty much as usual. Fitz sampled everything offered then asked for more of the things he truly liked. Jemma picked at a small salad and one slice of plain pizza until Melinda tapped the edge of her plate with her fork. It was their wordless way of telling the little girl she needed to finish her dinner. As usual, Jemma complied. Skye babbled between bites as she fingered through her pizza and a half slice of stomboli making sure no one had snuck a flake of anything green into her food. Phil and Melinda alternated between discussing the day’s events and listening to their children’s stories of their own day. Trip was unusually quiet which did not go unnoticed by either parent.

“So how’s your day?” Phil asked Trip before chomping a slice of pepperoni pizza.

“Him knockted me to my pigu.” Skye answered with a mouthful of crust. Melinda reached to swipe a napkin at the sauce on the little girl’s chin. “It not breaked cuz it bees smooshy.”

Fitz burst into laughter spraying milk in all directions before slapping a napkin over his own mouth. Jemma couldn’t help a small giggle, already pressing her napkin to her lips. Skye looked at her siblings and burst into laughter herself over-exaggerating as she squirmed in her seat and knocking her full glass of milk over into Fitz’s lap then dripping down to create a large white puddle on the floor.

The laughter stopped as Fitz jumped to his feet sending his plate crashing to the floor sending his food in all directions. He groaned at the large wet spot in his lap and drew a deep breath through his teeth at the cold that seeped between his legs.
Skye clapped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut tight, shrieking “I sowry, I sowry, I sowry” in an endless chant. Melinda grabbed the tablecloth and pushed it back before Fitz pulled everything from the table having caught the cloth in his hand as he grabbed his napkin. Phil righted Skye’s cup before snatching her up from her chair and shushing her until Melinda finished with Fitz.

Trip stood and shook his head. “I’ll get it Mom,” he said as he moved to the pantry and grabbed a broom. “You take care of the little ones.” He nodded toward Fitz and Skye.

Jemma was already on her feet reaching for a roll of paper towels to soak up the puddle on the floor. “I can help too. You and Da can see to Fitz and Skye.”

Melinda let out a sigh followed by a quick smile and a nod. She reached for the still screaming Skye from Phil, wrapping her in a tight hug as the little girl squealed “No, no, no…I sowry” as if it were a very loud, high pitched mantra. She looked at Phil who gave her a curt nod before she took her baby from the room and headed to the parlor where things were calm and quiet. No doubt Skye had been severely punished at some point for spilling something. Melinda held her own tears at the thought that someone had traumatized her baby so badly that she would need to comfort her for an hour before she was calm enough to even speak.

Phil moved to help Fitz, picking bits of pepperoni and cheese from the boy’s shirt. Fitz stood hold his soaked shirt away from his skin with two fingers of each hand. He grit his teeth and shivered as he tried to move out of the puddle around his sodden sneakers. Who knew a glass of milk could hold enough liquid to drench a small boy.

“Jemma, how bout you step out for a moment,” Phil smiled as he jerked his chin toward the family room. The little girl nodded and handed the mop she held to Trip. Phil waited until his daughter closed the door of the large room then helped Fitz out of his wet clothing and sent the little boy dashing upstairs in his skivvies.

Phil gave his oldest a weak smile as he picked up the now smelly wet clothing from the floor and set Fitz’s wet sneakers on top.

“Leave ‘em, Da. I’ll throw them in the utility sink to soak after I get this mess cleaned up.” Trip smiled as he began mopping the mess under the table.

“Trip…I…you shouldn’t have to do this all alone.” Phil sighed as he set his load on the floor at
the basement door.

“Really, Da, it’s no big deal.” The boy smiled. “Besides, Jemma’s gonna help. You and mom just get them settled.”

“Thanks, bud,” Phil smiled. He walked toward the stairs knocking on the family room door as he passed, letting Jemma know she could return to help her older brother. He nodded to Melinda as he passed. She still held the hysterical child who squirmed trying to escape the comfort her mother offered.

Skye squirmed out of Melinda’s arms and slid to the floor. “I non’t do it no more,” the little girl shook her head and struggled to pull her wrists free of her mother’s grip. “I sowry…”

Melinda knew if the little girl broke free she would squeeze herself behind a chair or under whatever she could wriggle to making it even harder to calm her. She vowed to find an answer to this panicked drama and relieve her baby of this burden. Pulling the little girl back to her chest she hummed a familiar song and rocked back and forth, kissing the child over and over until the shrieks became sobs and the sobs became sniffles and Skye wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck.

“Momma,” Skye sniffled as if she only just realized he mother was there. “Momma,” she breathed with relief. “You mad to me?” She whispered softly.

“No, bao bei, no, shhhh, shhhh” Melinda continued to shush the little girl as she rocked her gently.

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Fitz stood in the bathroom shivering as the water splashed into the tub. Phil moved around the boy and tested the temperature, then increased the hot to warm him as well as get rid of the sour smell. He watched the level rise and turned off the tap when it was satisfactory then turned to the boy who had not moved.

“Come on, little man, let’s get out of the rest of those wet clothes.” Phil waited a few minutes watching Fitz shift from foot to foot with his arms wrapped around his middle. The boy made no move to undress. Phil smiled. “Okay, you need me to give you some privacy, huh? Not a problem.” He started toward the door keeping his eye on the quiet child.
Fitz was shaking his head as he stared into space. “Why does she scream like that, Da? Does she think you’ll hurt her because she made a mistake?” He looked into Phil’s eyes waiting for an answer.

Phil dropped down to the boy’s level. “No, no Fitz, no,” he assured the little boy. “I’m sure Skye knows she’s safe here but…but she…”

“Someone hurt her didn’t they? Someone made her afraid like that?” The little boy’s hands balled into tight fists.

Phil ran his hands down his son’s arms and massaged those little fists until they relaxed. “I don’t know Fitz. There’s a lot we don’t know about Skye and she is too little to tell us. By the time she is, she probably won’t remember.”

“She might,” Fitz whispered. “Sometimes you can’t forget. Sometimes it’s just too terrible to forget.” The boy dropped the rest of his wet clothing and stepped into the warm water. Phil let out a long breath wondering what dreadful memory Skye’s hysteria had conjured in her brother.

Phil sat on the closed toilet lid with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands folded in front of him. “You want to talk about Fitz?” He asked as the boy rubbed the floating soap into a dark blue washcloth and rubbed the suds over his chest.

Fitz stared at the bubbles floating around him. “I’ll never let anyone hurt her, Da, never.” He shook his head. “She’s so little. I’ll protect her. I promise.”

“I know you will, Fitz.” Phil sighed. ‘And I will protect you while you do, little man.’ He thought. “Did someone hurt you Fitz?”

The boy scrubbed one leg and then the other, before rinsing the rag and soaping it again to scrub his arms and neck. “It was an accident.” He mumbled without looking up.

Phil nodded but said nothing, giving the little boy the option to continue.

Fitz shook his head and swallowed before looking up at his father with just his eyes. “It wasn’t really though. I meant to break it. My maw needed medicine and he had the money but he bought his liquor instead. I smashed it to the floor before he got one snort.” A satisfied smile crossed the
boy’s face as he rubbed the washcloth in circles on his stomach.

“You were angry, Fitz.” Phil told the boy. “We all make mistakes when we’re angry.”

“He broke my arm,” Fitz whispered looking down at the arm he spoke of, “in three places.” He squeezed the washcloth and watched the water dribble into the floating suds. “He kicked me so hard I thought I would die. I couldn’t breathe.” The boy looked down at his chest remembering the shoe print that remained there for days, remembering how hard it was to take a deep breath. “The woman who ran the shop downstairs took me to hospital the next day. I told them all I fell down the stairs and I got the bruise in a school yard brawl.”

Phil stood next to the tub and held a large towel. Fitz stood and stepped into it a moment before Phil wrapped him in a hug. “I will never let anyone hurt you Fitz. I will protect you with every thing in my power, little man.”

The little boy turned and wrapped his arms around his father’s neck. “I love you, Da. I’m sorry I made you sad. I’m sorry.”

By the time Phil comforted Fitz and the boy was clad in clean pajamas, May had calmed and bathed Skye. Both little ones were asleep within the hour and tucked into their own beds, for the time being. Phil shared Fitz’s story with his wife and held her until she exhausted her own tears. Their little ones came with a lot of baggage and slowly the Coulsons were unpacking all of it.

Melinda spent the rest of the evening with Jemma, giving the little girl some much needed one on one Mom time. She assured the ever concerned youngster that her younger siblings were fine and had only had a rough time with some bad memories. Jemma offered to climb in bed with Skye and keep her company but Melinda was sure it wouldn’t be long before one or both of her babies were nestled between her and Phil in their king sized bed. Tomorrow was an inservice school day for the twins, so Skye would stay home as well. Maybe everyone could sleep in.

Phil retreated to his office to pace off some anger. He thanked fate that Jamie Grant was already dead and he didn’t have to track him down to beat the life out of him. A soft knock at the door stopped his pacing. “It’s open,” he called.

Trip entered slowly, closing the door behind him. “I…I know it’s been a wild night, but…” The boy hesitated. “I mean you’ve got your hands full with the kids and all and I don’t want to…”
Phil stepped closer to the boy. “Talk to me Trip, I’ve got time for all my kids.” He smiled.

“Well…you know I’ll be sixteen in a couple months, right?” He gauged his father’s reaction.

“It does follow fifteen as a rule,” Phil remarked.

“Well…sixteen…I’ll be old enough to…well, to learn to…” Trip hedged.

“Nothing like getting behind the wheel, son,” Phil smiled as Trips face lit up with knowing his father understood.

The boy pulled the form from his pocket and handed to Phil. “They’ve got this program at school. They’ll let me have driving practice…only on school property, never out on the regular streets. I just need your permission.” He pointed to the signature line. “It says something about insurance but I’ve already got a plan for that. I mean I wouldn’t expect you to pay my way.” He spoke rapidly betraying his nervousness. “I…I already talked to Mr. Flynn at the diner down on Woodmont. He says I can work weekends and days off until summer and it won’t be late or on school nights. I can bus tables and help with clean up. It doesn’t pay much but I’m good at saving.” Again he spoke so fast, Phil wasn’t sure he understood every word.

“Whoa, slow down, bud. I’m only getting parts of what you’re saying.” He laid the form on his desk and signed it before handing it back to the boy. “I’ve got no problem with this pre-driving practice, but you don’t have to…”

“Yes, yes I do. I need to pay my way, Da. You and mom have enough to worry about with Skye and Fitz and Jemma. My gram lives on her social security and I won’t ask her to pay it either. I gotta do this for me, Da. Please let me tell Mr. Flynn I’ll take the job.”

Phil took a deep breath and let it out. “How about you let me talk to your mom about it then we’ll all talk, your gram included. Deal?” He held out a hand to the boy. Trip considered for a moment then put his hand in his father’s and gave a strong shake. Phil didn’t let go, but pulled the boy into a hug. “You’re a good man, Trip.” He spoke quietly to the boy.

Trip nodded. “I’ve got a great role model.”

Phil felt the blush cover his cheeks. “School night, bud,” he patted the boy’s shoulder.
Trip walked to the door and pulled it open. He stepped into the hall and turned back. “Night, Da,” he smiled as he closed the door.

An hour later Phil turned out the lights, made his way up the stairs and stopped first to check on his baby. He picked up Salty from the floor and tucked him next to Skye, smiling as he kissed her forehead. Next door he slipped Jemma’s feet under the blanket and kissed her cheek as she pulled herself into a tight ball. Trip was already snoring softly when he entered the boys’ room. He gave the boy’s calf a gentle pat then looked into the glassy eyes of his younger son. Fitz blinked up at him. Phil smiled and pulled the little boy into his arms carrying him down the hall and lowering him into the large bed next to his mother. Melinda set the book she was reading on the nightstand and pulled her son into her arms, kissing the top of his head and shushing him softly back to sleep.

Phil stepped into the bath to wash and change. He thought about his life just a little over a year ago, about the nights he slept undisturbed and the dinners that were quiet and neat. He wondered how he’d lived such a boring existence. These kids had changed everything about his life with Melinda and nothing was easy or undisturbed or quiet and almost never neat. Their bed was regularly full of kids that needed extra comforting because their monsters were real. He loved every minute of it.

He loved the smile it brought to Melinda and the glow that surrounded her whenever she interacted with any or all of them. She was meant to be a mother and by the grace of God she was given the opportunity to love this bunch. She was strict and loving, no-nonsense and compassionate, She was adamantly rule driven and fiercely protective. Melinda was everything a mother needed to be, never too busy to comfort a hurt or banish a fear and never afraid to discipline with love.

The man stepped back into the bedroom clad in gray sweats and a tee-shirt. He smiled at the sight of Skye now nestled between Fitz and Melinda. He bent over the group and kissed each before stepping around the bed and climbing in to join the slumber party. Fitz rolled closer and threw a skinny arm over his father’s chest, snuggling into his side. Phil wrapped an arm around the boy and turned to his wife. He mouthed ‘good night’ and she did the same.

Each drifted off to sleep knowing they wouldn’t change a thing.
“Call on line four, boss,” Melinda’s secretary called as she struggled to carry a large file box toward the office storage area.

Melinda looked up from the file she was studying, asking with only her eyes.

The secretary let out a loud huff as she jacked the box against the edge of her desk and tossed a sympathetic frown toward her employer. “It’s the school again,” she pursed her lips and shrugged before hefting up the box with renewed strength. “Sorry,” she groaned as she waddled away with her load.

Melinda dropped the form in her hands and let out a frustrated sigh, counted to ten in two languages, took a deep cleansing breath and greeted the caller with the most cordial ‘hello’ she could manage.

“What did he do now, Karen?” Melinda sighed, cutting the woman off and dropping her head onto her hand. She desperately tried not to sound as frustrated as she felt. Fitz’s antics usually meant at least two calls to Phil or Melinda every other week. Mostly it was just tomfoolery, but occasionally the boy got into more hot water than he could handle and that meant either mom or dad had to make a trip to the dean’s office for a long conference regarding school policy. Fitz was smart enough, or maybe just lucky enough to stay on this side of a school suspension, but sooner or later that luck would run out. His intelligence, however grew faster than he did. Hopefully, this was one of those quick calls telling her he did such and such as a result would be banned from the cafeteria, like last month when he thought it would be hilarious to inject a package of cherry tomatoes with baking soda causing it to erupt when one of senior students added a vinaigrette dressing to her salad. Of course, no one was hurt but the mess was horrendous. A long lecture from a very amused dad, followed by a session with a highly less amused mom had Fitz seated on a rather large pillow for supper than evening and right now mom was considering a trip to the school
just to apply her seal of disapproval immediately. She waited for the veritable axe to fall but was met with complete silence.

A school secretary suddenly falling completely speechless was never a good sign. Listening to it forced Melinda to sit up straight hoping she’d been cut off before the school secretary spoke again. “No, Mrs. Coulson, I’m not calling about Fitz. I’m afraid it’s Jemma.” The woman sounded slightly confused, as if she wasn’t sure she was doing the right thing.

“Jemma?” Melinda was halfway between humor and shock. She thought for a moment. If Jemma was sick or hurt, she’d be talking to the school nurse not the dean’s secretary, but things change… or maybe it was too serious for the medical staff. “Is she alright?” Melinda’s concern mounted.

“Oh, yes, yes she’s fine, absolutely fine,” the secretary spoke quickly, realizing she probably caused the mother undue alarm. “She wasn’t hurt at all.”

“Wasn’t hurt?” Melinda was standing. “What happened?” A dozen scenarios rocketed through her mind…lab explosions, chemical spills, dangerous experiments, sharp instruments…

“Well,” the woman’s voice remained unusually calm, putting Melinda even more on guard. “There was a bit of a scuffle in the common area and a few children were…”

“Jemma was involved in a fight?” Melinda dropped back into her seat. Hell, did kids with genius IQ’s even have fist fights in the school yard?

“I wouldn’t call it a fight, Mrs. Coulson, more of a rather slight disagreement would be an accurate description.” Karen explained, again remaining overly calm.

Melinda rolled her eyes and grit her teeth. Sometimes dealing with the staff of the twins’ school was extremely frustrating. Most were highly intelligent like the students they managed and severely lacking in the basic social graces. “So someone had a disagreement with Jemma and it came to a physical altercation?” She chose her words carefully, keeping her voice slow and even.

“Yes,” Karen agreed and Melinda could tell she was smiling. “Yes, physical altercation…that is exactly what happened but Jemma was the antagonist, Mrs. Coulson. She is responsible for the event in the students’ common area this afternoon.”
Melinda dropped into her chair for a second time and took a moment to recover. "Jemma?" She breathed. "My Jemma?"

“Yes, Jemma Coulson Simmons. I’m sure that is the name I was given. I’m sure there was no mistake and I am positive it is she who is seated outside the dean’s office at this moment.”

“The other children were hurt?” Melinda asked, not believing her gentle daughter could harm anyone.

“Nothing a few band aids could not alleviate.” Karen assured her. There was a long pause before the woman spoke again. “I am sorry, Mrs. Coulson but it is school policy that you come in to speak with the dean regarding this matter. I know Jemma has never been in any sort of disciplinary situation in the past but we cannot make exceptions. You do understand?”

“Of course…yes, yes I do,” Melinda spoke quietly. “I’ll be there as soon as possible, thank you.” She lowered the phone to its cradle and sat back to give herself a moment to clear her mind.

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After a quick call to Phil, who was with a client discussing protection for a visiting dignitary from some country no one could actually pronounce, Melinda drove the twenty minutes to Jemma’s school in Bethesda. The drive gave her time to run through a myriad of reactions. She was at first baffled as to what would push docile and ever understanding Jemma to actually ‘pick a fight’ and just how the little girl would even accomplish the feat. Jemma rarely even raised her voice, unless arguing with Fitz, but never, never, ever had the little girl come to blows with her brother even when he pushed her to the edge of her patience.

There had to be a mistake, she told herself. The school had to be wrong in accusing Jemma. But why, why would the administration of the school that had already admitted Jemma had never been in trouble suddenly believe she could be at the center of this ‘altercation’. Unless…unless she actually was…

Disbelief turned to anger. Why would Jemma do something so…so…un-Jemma? Why would she suddenly, out of the blue break a rule she absolutely knew would result in such serious consequences? Fighting, no, physical altercation, of any kind at the twins’ school meant a three day suspension. The fact that it would also be part of Jemma’s permanent pristine record would devastate the little girl. It would be like a scar she could not cover or erase.
Anger melted into sympathy for her daughter that in a moment of anger, over what was still to be determined, made a dreadful mistake. It had to be a mistake. Jemma just wouldn’t. Melinda pulled into the parking lot picturing her daughter sobbing her heart out seated alone on a bench outside the dean’s office. She stepped into the lot and hurried toward the door, berating herself for taking as long as she did to get here.

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Melinda checked in at the receptionist office and clipped a visitor’s badge to her jacket before making her way down the carpeted hallway toward the Dean’s office. She stepped in front of the Dean’s secretary finding it unnecessary to introduce herself. Both women knew her on sight having dealt with young Fitz on more occasions than they could count. The young woman who called her stood and approached with an outstretched hand. Melinda took it. Karen squeezed gently and offered a sympathetic smile.

“Right this way, Mrs. Coulson. Dean Matthews is waiting for you.” The girl urged calmly as she pushed open a large wooden door.

The short hallway between the offices was well lit and had a long wooden bench on one side with a giant fireplace on the other. Jemma sat alone at the far end of the bench, her brows set in a dreadful scowl, arms crossed over her chest and one foot swinging back and forth like a clock wound a bit too tightly while the other ground into the floor. It was certainly not the Jemma Melinda pictured. Before she could approach her daughter the door on the opposite wall opened and the dean stepped out to greet her. The man might be considered intimidating due to his large frame, but the perpetual smile on his mustached face betrayed his attempt at playing up the authoritarian version of his title.

“Mrs. Coulson,” he grinned, taking her hand into his. “Please, please come in. I’m so sorry we had to have you come all the way out here this afternoon, but I’m sure we can resolve this matter quickly.” He stepped aside and swung an arm toward his office motioning her inside. “Jemma?” He spoke to the little girl on the bench. “Please join us.” He smiled at her and kept his arm out until Jemma rose and walked slowly into the large office behind her mother.

Dean Matthews closed the door and walked around his desk inviting Melinda to be seated in one of the large leather chairs that faced it, before sitting down himself. The man looked to the little girl who still held her arms across her chest and stared out the window behind the desk, thereby avoiding any eye contact with the other occupants of the room.

“Please, Jemma, sit down and relax.” He smiled at the girl as he nodded toward a second chair before his desk.
Jemma sat on the very edge of the large wing-backed and let out a short breath. Melinda stared at the child as if she were a stranger, some child she’d never met and found completely belligerent. She could not believe this was the same little girl she watched walk to the bus stop, laughing at some silly joke her brother was telling about a monkey, only a few hours ago. She could not imagine what could have happened to change her daughter into the dark brooding little person that sat a few feet from her.

“As you know, Mrs. Coulson,” the Dean began, taking Melinda’s attention away from Jemma. He smiled broadly when she looked directly at him. “We seem to have had a little misunderstanding this afternoon and I’m hoping you can help us sort it out.”

Jemma narrowed her eyes at the dean’s description of the situation. She understood perfectly what had happened and right now she was angry. Jemma Simmons had not been angry in a very long time. She really never let herself get angry, not like this…not since, well…not for a long time. But right now she was angry and it felt good and she was going to stay angry because…because the situation called for it and she was going to answer until it stopped calling and that meant she had no intention of answering any of Mr. Smiley Dean’s questions. She had no intention of looking at him or her mother because all she was going to do right now was hold on to that anger.

The little girl let out a frustrated breath that caused both adults to pause and stare at her expecting some sort of comment that did not come.

The dean started again. “As I said, Mrs. Coulson, I am hoping you can help sort this out because no one seems to be very talkative regarding the matter.”

Melinda struggled to maintain her own anger. “What happened, exactly?” She asked the man.

“Jemma?” The dean addressed the student. “Would you like to give us your deposition on what occurred earlier?”

Jemma let out a small huff and turned even farther to the left and away from the adults. She bit the inside of her bottom lip and tapped one foot defiantly. Melinda grit her teeth at the Dean’s choice of words, speaking to a ten year old as if she were being interrogated by legal authorities.

After waiting a few moments the Dean cleared his throat and continued. “Well, let me see if I can piece together as much as we’ve been able to determine.” He folded his hands in front of him and addressed Melinda. “It seems Jemma and two other students were at odds about something upon
arrival this morning and the bickering continued through a.m. classes then into lunch period. My understanding is that it came to a head in the commons during afternoon break. Jemma took it upon herself to silence the others with physical force.”

Melinda looked at the back of her daughter’s head and shook her own in disbelief. “Let me get this straight,” she sighed. “Jemma hit someone, actually struck another child?”

Again Jemma let out a huff as the Dean shook his head. “No, no, Mrs. Coulson, absolutely not, Jemma did not raise a hand to anyone.”

Melinda took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Then how, may I ask, do you consider this a physical altercation?” Her patience was waning.

“It seems one of the other students was forcibly knocked to the ground.” He explained. “The second landed on one of the aesthetic structures in the yard and a third, who came to assist the others, was thrust into a row of rhododendron.”

Melinda raised one eyebrow. “So you’re saying they were pushed.” She attempted to clarify the man’s statement.

“For lack of a better description, yes, I believe they were pushed, quietly heartily pushed.” Dean Matthew agreed.

“And Jemma did this pushing?” Melinda leaned forward a little and cocked her head to one side.

“I assure you, Mrs. Coulson, that is the only thing that all parties involved were willing to state, including young Jemma.” He nodded toward the girl who still stared out of the window. “What no one seems to care to share is why this entire situation took place or how it originated. Believe me I have spoken to all parties at length and not one is willing to make a statement.”

“And the others were not seriously hurt?” Melinda inquired.

The Dean shook his head. “A few bumps and scratches and from what I ascertained a lot of humiliation, but no, no one was injured.”
Melinda breathed again and looked to her daughter. “Jemma, I think you owe the Dean an explanation. Please, turn around and talk to us.” She spoke calmly but her voice was firm.

Jemma narrowed her eyes as she stared at a large pine tree on the far end of the school campus. It was her focal point. Staring at it kept her concentration as she basked in the heat of her anger, refusing to let it dissipate. Now, even with her mother’s voice still echoing in her ear she refused to turn toward the adults. She shook her head slowly, refusing even to speak her reply.

“Jemma?” Melinda spoke again, the warning eminent in the way she said her daughter’s name.

The little girl pulled her arms tighter across her chest and bounced herself further to the left.

Before Melinda could speak again the dean interrupted. “We haven’t been able to get much more out of her or the others, I’m afraid.” He shook his head. “Unfortunately, I do have to suspend Jemma for the next three days according to school policy. I also must insist that she see the school counselor before returning, unless of course you’d like to see a private therapist in which case I will need documentation to verify the visit.” Dean Matthews began wrapping up their attempt to solve this mystery. “Jemma,” he turned toward the girl. “Mrs. Eberly will accompany you to your locker to secure what you feel is necessary to take with you. She will remain with you in the foyer until your mother meets you there.” He pressed a button on his desk and a few seconds later an older woman opened the door and motioned for Jemma to accompany her. The girl complied without turning toward the dean or her mother.

Melinda rose as Jemma exited with the secretary. “I am truly sorry for whatever it is that happened, Dean Matthews.” Melinda offered. “But I am sure there is a good explanation which I assure I intend to get to the bottom of once Jemma is not so very angry. In all honestly, I have never seen her like this.”

The Dean stood as well and walked around his desk to accompany Melinda to the door. “We have never seen it either, but as I said no one was hurt so perhaps we should consider ourselves lucky.” He paused and chuckled. “I do have to admit I was positive I’d be having this suspension conversation with you eventually but I honestly believe we would be discussing Leopold. I never expected Jemma to be seated in my office like this.”

They stopped at the door. “That makes two of us, Dean Matthews.” She reached out a hand and he shook it lightly. “I will contact you if…” she paused and thought again, “when I find out exactly what happened.”
Jemma stormed out of the school in front of her mother just far enough to be able to hear her footsteps on the pavement. It wasn’t hard to find the black SUV in the visitor’s parking lot. She marched to the back door and waited to hear the click of her mother unlocking the doors with the remote she held in one hand. The girl pulled it opened and threw backpack across the seat before slamming herself into the same and jamming the seatbelt into its lock. She pulled the door with all her might but failed to make it slam the way she intended. Once again she bounced her arms across her chest and stared out the window at the red brick wall that lined the small parking area.

Melinda closed her eyes and let out a long breath. If this was the beginning of puberty she was all for having her children put into stasis until their twenty first birthdays. What the hell could have gotten into Jemma that would make her toss not one, but three other children to the ground? Right now Melinda couldn’t sort out her own emotions let alone try to make sense of her daughter’s. She rounded the car, got inside and started the engine.

The drive home was deafeningly quiet. Melinda had already decided Jemma would have to make the first move. She would not force the girl to speak or chastise her for her feelings. Melinda would just wait it out. How to convince Phil to do the same was not going to be so easy. She drove in silence forcing her brain to think ‘normal’ thoughts, like what to have for supper and whether to pick up Skye at preschool before heading home. She peeked into the rear view mirror at varying intervals but Jemma remained in the same position staring out the window as the world spend past her. Melinda noticed the girl’s breathing had not relaxed and her arms were still tight across her chest, both hands balled into white knuckled fists. Nope, Jemma didn’t hit anyone but Melinda was sure she wanted to do just that. She flipped her dashboard phone on and quickly called Elena to pick up Skye then made a second call to the preschool to let them know there’d be an alternate pick up today. After which the hum of the car’s engine was the only sound.

Melinda pulled into the driveway and barely had the key out of the ignition before Jemma was out of the car, this time able to use all of her strength to slam the car door as hard as she could. By the time Melinda walked around the vehicle her daughter was standing at the back door, back pack slung over one shoulder and those damn arms still across her chest. Melinda was starting to wonder if maybe someone had bound them there. She took a deep breath and walked calmly across the driveway, the patio, the stairs and the deck before stepping around her taciturn child to unlock the door.

As soon as Melinda turned the knob, Jemma pushed past her and marched into the kitchen dropping her pack just inside. As she moved she slid her jacket off her shoulders and slung it over the closest chair. The girl took a few steps, stopped when she heard her mother close the back door softly. She let out a disgusted sigh and finally let her arms fall to her sides unwilling to admit the ache in each from holding them in one position so tightly for so long.

Melinda dropped her keys onto one of the small hooks next to the door and slid her arms out of her coat then folded it over her arms and again stared at the back of her child’s head. She watched
Jemma’s shoulders rise and fall with her heated breathing until they began to slow to a normal rhythm and finally fall indicating the child was either about to bolt or finally speak.

“Are you going to punish me now?” Jemma’s voice was low and spoken with a bite.

Melinda shook her head and took a step toward the girl, stopping when she saw her body tense. “No, Jemma, no sweetheart, but I think we should talk. Don’t you?” Her voice was soft and understanding.

Jemma’s head dropped for a moment and Melinda felt she had broken through the anger. “Then I’ll be in my room when you are ready.” Before Melinda could answer, the girl stormed out of the room, down the hall and up the stairs.

As expected…she slammed her bedroom door with vigor.

xx

Fitz flew through the back door, tossing his backpack on the kitchen table and bellowing for his mother while squirming out of his jacket. He pulled one arm free and struggled with the other as he wandered down the hall continuing his shouting. Opening the hall closet he tossed his jacket inside then kicked off his shoes sending both into the dark of the large wardrobe. Kicking his coat away from preventing the door’s closing he grabbed the knob and pushed the large wooden panel inward.

“Mo…” the boy yelled toward the stairs but stopped flat when Melinda appeared behind the half open door. Fitz jumped at the sight, then smiled up at her. “Mom,” he greeted her.

Melinda let out a frustrated breath as she opened the door and nodded toward her son’s jacket on the closet floor. He looked at it, then back to her, then back to it before he making an ‘oh yeah’ face and snatch it up to a hook Phil had fastened on the inner wall so the kids could hang their belongings without jumping or climbing to reach hangers.

Giving her son a nod of approval, Melinda sighed. “What is all the shouting about, Fitz?”

“Mom,” Fitz exhaled with both hands outstretched. “Mom, you will not believe it.” He actually hopped around her heading back toward the kitchen. The boy walked backward speaking to his
mother, more animated than she’d seen him in longer than she could remember. “Mom, they said Jemma blasted some older girls in the commons and she gave it to one of the guys as well. Jemma, Mom, Jemma. It’s all over school how she let them have it then got herself dragged off to the headmaster’s office. Can you believe it, Mom? Jemma! Who would think she’d ever…” He stopped, finally noticing the look on his mother’s face. The little boy stood next to the table and traced the pattern in the wood with one finger. “You know don’t you?” He knew it was a rhetorical question, of course she knew. But, holy hell…Jemma!

Fitz moved to look past his mother on one side and then the other. “So where is she? Did the headmaster call you to his office? Was he totally beside himself? What did she say? Oh, bloody hell did give her a grand smacking?” He stopped realizing what he’d said and slapped a hand over his mouth.

Melinda raised one eyebrow and crooked a finger at the little boy, beckoning him to her. Fitz swallowed hard and took a tentative step. “I’m sorry, mom, it slipped. I was just so flabbergasted that Jemma would do such a thing. I didn’t mean it, really.” He tried explaining with each additional step, stopping directly in front of her and looking up with the saddest puppy dog eyes he could muster.

Melinda probably would have chuckled if it weren’t for the situation. She placed her hands on Fitz’s shoulders and shook her head. “You know we’ve talked about the language over and over, don’t you?” The little boy nodded and dropped his gaze to the floor. Melinda shook her head.

“Jemma is in her room. Yes, I spoke to Dean Matthews and no, he was not overly upset. Jemma said nothing.” She put two fingers under his chin and lifted his head to look him in the eye. “I haven’t yet decided what to do about your sister and you owe me one half hour in your room…no computer.”

Fitz let out a fluttery breath and frowned before attempting one reprieve. “But…”

His mother held up a finger. “Half an hour, Leopold,” she stepped aside and pointed down the hall.

She never called him that unless she was totally serious. The little boy scrunched up his face in defeat and took a step in that direction, helped along with a quick but gentle swat on the backside. It hurried him along as he dashed down the hall and up the stairs. Melinda waited until she heard the sound of his door closing.

Before she had a chance to take a breath and recover from this situation the back door opened as Elena entered carrying a distraught Skye. The little girl rested her head on the woman’s shoulder,
her body hung limp against Elena. Melinda looked to the ceiling and blew a breath up over her nose.

“You see, I told you. Here is momma, now.” Elena spoke to the little girl’s ear.

Skye’s head popped up as she turned toward Melinda. “Momma!” she squealed as she reached out with both arms.

Melinda gathered her baby into her arms and held her tightly, kissing the top of her head. “Wèishéme nǐ fèicháng shāngxīn, wǒ de bǎobèi?” She whispered into Skye’s hair while smiling at Elena.

“I misted you, momma. I maked you a neck-a-liss to put on you fer suprise but you no comed a me.” The little girl’s lip formed a fine pout earning a smile from her mother as well as Elena.

“She was one pequeño campista infeliz when I came to the door.” Elena smiled as she set Skye’s bag on the nearest chair.

Melinda kissed her baby a second time and squeezed her tighter. “I would love to wear the necklace you made, bao bei. I’m sorry I didn’t pick you up but Jemma needed momma today.”

Skye leaned back and looked into her mother’s face. “Her bees sick and haves a tempachur?” She asked with concern.

Not missing the look of concern on Elena’s face, Melinda stood Skye on one of the chairs and tugged off her coat. The little girl immediately spun around and plunked down on the seat. “Daddy buyed me barown appo jews, lasterday. I have some witch crackos?”

Elena furrowed brow. “Galletas de bruja?” She stage whispered to her friend.

Smiling at how easily Skye’s problem was solved and her mangled use of language, Melinda nodded at Elena as she pulled a jug of apple cider from the refrigerator. Elena pulled a small cup from the cupboard and set it on the table, still waiting for a translation. Melinda reached into a cabinet next to the fridge and pulled out a box of Ritz™ Crackers, shaking them over her head before turning back to the table. Elena nodded her understanding as Melinda counted out six crackers with Skye’s help. The little girl smiled up at her mother before biting into one of the


bumpy round treats. She chewed for a moment before speaking.

“I leeded you neck-a-liss in mine cubby cuz you no comed a me. Onna morrow I put it on you fer you wear a woreck.” She swallowed once then picked up her cider and took a small sip. “Daddy sayed this bees appo spider.” She peered into the cup for a few seconds then scrunched up her face and shook her head. “I no like a spider in my jews.” She looked at Melinda and laughed. “Daddy bees a silly.” She picked up another cracker and munched happily.

Melinda turned to her friend and shook her head. Elena smiled. “Problems with Jemma?” she asked quietly. Melinda gave a quick nod.

“I’m not even sure what the problem is, but she’s been suspended from school for the next three days for causing a physical altercation.” Melinda exhaled, using the dean’s words to describe the incident.

“Jemma estabe golpeando a alguien?” Elena was appalled to think her little friend would strike someone.

“Pushing, is what the dean called it.” Melinda explained with a roll of her eyes.

“Why would she…” Elena started.

“I have no idea.” Melinda sighed as she moved Skye’s cup out of the ‘spill zone’. “She’s only said about a dozen words since it happened.” She shook her head. “She’s been in her room since I got her home.” She answered her friend’s next question before it was asked.

“What will you do?” Elena wondered out loud.

Shaking her head, Melinda replied, “I thought if I gave her some time and space she’d come to me, but I don’t think that’s worked too well. I’m hoping Phil has some ideas when he gets home.”

Before Elena could respond, both women turned toward the sound of a loud thump from the second floor. It was followed by a crash and then a strangled wail. Melinda was on her way toward the disturbance before Elena could react. She moved to follow then realized leaving Skye to her own devices would not be wise…beside, Melinda had enough to deal with at the moment.
Fitz sat in the middle of the hallway floor with both hands to the back of his head. He blinked away tears as he rocked back and forth and bounced one sock clad foot against the carpet.

Melinda hurried to him then helped him to stand.

“She pushed me!” He exclaimed almost in shock. “I knocked first and she opened the door and just shoved me like I was an unwanted suitor! Knocked my head against that blasted table and upset the little figure there.” Fitz pointed toward the broken knick knack on the floor. “I’m sorry, mom, I didn’t mean to break it.”

Melinda turned the boy around, moved his hands and spread his curls to examine the bruise on his head. “I think you’ll live.” She spun him to face her. “But a little ice won’t hurt and I thought I told you to stay in your room.”

Fitz rubbed his head and winced at the dull pain. “You said one half hour. It was up ten minutes ago.” He smiled then looked at his sister’s closed door. “What has her knickers all in a twist, then? I just wanted to find out what happened.”

Melinda let out a sigh, put an arm around his shoulders and led him toward the stairs. “I’d like to know that myself, Fitz, but I think we just have to give her a little more time?”

“Give her time?” Fitz squeaked as he stopped before stepping down the first step. He turned to his mother, eyes wide with exasperation. “If I’d done such a daft thing you’d whack my bahoochie but good!”

Melinda smiled as she turned from the step she had stopped on and pulled her little boy into a hug and kissed his forehead. “I’m sorry, bao bao. You’re probably right, but you also wouldn’t clam up like your sister and refuse to tell me what happened. I can’t punish her when I don’t know what she’s done.”

He pulled back and looked up at her for a moment then pointed to his head. “Well, you know she knocked my head off the floor for practically nothing.”
“So you think I should march in there and give her a few swats?” Melinda took a step toward her daughter’s room only to have her son grab her hand.

“No, no…I just…well, you know Jemma. She just needs to think things over a bit before she’s ready to talk about it.” He stopped and drew a breath through his teeth then put a hand to his head. “I think I really need that ice, mom.” He pulled her toward the stairs.

Melinda nodded and followed her little boy, knowing he would put himself in front of her door to protect his sister.

xx

Jemma slammed her door for the second time since she’d gotten home then leaned against it and slid to the floor covering her face with both hands. The little girl sat in the gathering gloom fighting the exhaustion her anger had wrought. She hadn’t realized how much energy it took to hold on to being so totally enraged. Tears streamed down her cheeks no matter how hard she tried to stop them. The little girl told herself they were angry tears, furious tears. She pictured those two girls pointing at her and giggling into their hands. Their cruel comments played over and over in her head. She recalled their smug grins right before she blasted Stephanie to the ground and shoved Camilla into that dumb statue before she had a chance to react. The little girl almost smiled with the satisfaction of knocking Brandon on his arse in the shrubbery. It was all worth it and they deserved it and she’d do it again because all that anger just felt powerful and Jemma was tired of feeling weak and afraid.

She was pretty sure she was in for some serious punishment. Mom had only smacked her once but she figured that record was about to be broken and when she heard the light tap on the door she truly expected her mother to enter not Fitz all bubbly with his questions and accusations. He made her angry all over and she shoved him hard.

Leaning right here on the other side of the door she heard him wail and sniffle a few times before mom came to his rescue. She knew she hurt him, but she never intended to do that. She was just so angry and maybe being angry wasn’t such a great thing. She hurt her brother and wondered if he was bleeding or perhaps sustained a concussion. Part of her wanted to race downstairs to be sure he was okay and the rest just wanted to sit here and cry.

xx

By the time Phil arrived home, Elena had departed with the promise to call tomorrow to check on everyone. Trip had carried Skye and dragged Fitz to Gram’s apartment for supper and an evening
of board games with his little brother while Skye was allowed to hold Mrs. Triplett’s large docile and very tolerant yellow tabby, Spunk. Skye fractured that into skunk, making Trip glad the animal looked more like a small tiger. The little girl was also fascinated with Gram’s collection of dolls with ‘baroun skin juss like a Terrip’. Grandma Triplett was happy to keep the little ones promising to have them back by bedtime, while Phil and Melinda dealt with the serious situation together.

The couple sat together at the table sharing a light dinner while Melinda gave her husband a review of what had occurred since lunch that day. Jemma refused any supper including the small sandwich Melinda left on a try outside her door.

“You have no idea what started this?” Phil asked again.

Melinda shook her head and sipped her tea. “I hoped she would have come to me by now, but I don’t think that is going to happen. I can’t imagine what would make Jemma so angry she would stay that way so long.”

Phil swallowed the last bite of his dinner and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Three days,” he shook his head. “Suspended for three days?”

“And she has to see a counselor before she can return.” Melinda added. “I called Dr. McGreevy. She can see her tomorrow afternoon.” She let out a long breath. “I don’t even know if it’s worth the trip. She won’t say a word, won’t even look at me.”

Phil stood and walked to the counter, poured himself a cup of coffee and returned to his seat. “How ‘bout Fitz, he’s okay?” He asked as he stirred cream and sugar into his cup.

“His pride was hurt more than anything. Trip’s pretty concerned. He thinks she acted in self defense and he’s ready to take on whoever to make sure they never put her in that position again. I had to talk him down for about twenty minutes. Skye thinks she has a ‘temp-a-chur’ so I let her.”

The man nodded as he sipped the hot liquid from his mug. “I can just imagine the tales she’d tell tomorrow.”

Melinda sighed. “I guess we’re lucky she speaks some wacky combination of English and Skye lingo. There aren’t many who understand her.” She let out a weak laugh as Phil reached across the table and squeezed her hand. She stared at his strong fingers intertwined with her own and
sighed. “Remember the break through in Sheffield when she finally opened up to us after trashing
the garden shed.” She looked up at him and waited for his reply.

Phil rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. “Took six stitches to close that gash on her
palm,” he remembered.

“You didn’t see her that day, Phil. She was so angry.” Melinda shook her head.

“She was consumed with grief, Mel. It was part of the process.” He reminded her.

Melinda looked away for a moment. “What if she’s still grieving, Phil? She lost her parents in
such a tragedy. How does a child ever get past that? We think she is our easy kid, that she never
has a problem or gives us one, but what if it’s all just Jemma holding everything in, pretending
everything is fine when she’s tearing apart inside and we just never noticed with all of Skye’s
dilemma’s and Fitz’s antics. She’s just a little girl, Phil and she’s so very mature that I forget
sometimes.”

“Mel,” he squeezed her hand tighter. “Don’t think like that. You’re right, she’s a little girl not an
operative trained to keep emotions buried from everyone around her. If Jemma had a problem I’m
sure you would notice.” He assured her with a small smile.

“What about the eating, Phil? Look how long it took us to figure that out.” She sighed.

“But we did and we fixed it,” he smiled again. “We’ll get to the bottom of this as well. Horses,
Mel, remember horses.”

She looked at him with knitted brows. “Horses?”

Phil chuckled. “I recall Dr. Stephens telling you more than once to look for horses when you hear
hoof beats, not zebras.”

Melinda quirked up one side of her face and shook her head. “In this house, it’s always zebras or
buffalo or reindeer or even unicorns.” She scoffed. “When is anything ever simple around here?
Damn it, Phil, a milk spill can set off hours of hysteria and a damn little fuzz ball animal moving to
the zoo can mean a month of nightmares. How is any of that simple?”
“Hey,” he stood and moved next to her pulling her into a tight hug. “We knew this wasn’t going to be easy. We’ve got a houseful of kids with all kinds of monsters in their closets, under their beds and behind every shadow. All we can do is keep turning on the lights and chasing ’em out of town. Look how far they’ve come.”

For a moment Melinda basked in the warmth and safety of his embrace, breathing in the smell of his cologne and listening to the sound of his heart beating beneath her ear. “I wouldn’t change it for a thing, Phil. I just hate to see any of them in such pain knowing I could have…should have prevented it.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Whatever it is, we’ll get through it.” He felt her nod against him. “And I think we’ve given her enough time to come to us. It’s time we faced this head on.”

xx

Phil tapped on his daughter’s door. “Jemma, your mother and I would like you to come down to my office. We need to talk about this.” He waited a few moments for the little girl to reply. “Jemma,” he tapped again, a little harder. “That’s not a request, princess. We’ll give you a few minutes, but sweetie if I have to come up here again I will carry you down.” Again he waited and heard nothing. “Okay, Jemma, three minutes.” He let out a deep breath and walked away from the door.

Melinda stood at the window of Phil’s office staring at the soft light of sunset in the west. She turned as her husband entered immediately frowning when she realized he was alone. He held up a hand before she spoke.

“I gave her three minutes.” He looked at his watch. “She has two and change to make up her mind.”

“And then?” Melinda pressed.

“He would carry me to his office.” Jemma’s soft voice came from the doorway. Phil and Melinda turned toward it.

Gone was the tense, furious child Melinda had driven home hours before. She smiled at her little girl and hurried to gather her in the hug she’d been saving. Jemma did not hug back but did not
“I’m sorry about Fitz.” She spoke from inside her mother’s embrace. “I never meant to hurt him.”

“I know, bao bei,” Melinda whispered to her. She stepped back and smiled at the little girl. “Do you think we can talk about what happened now?”

“I’m not sure I can.” Jemma whispered back. “I’m not sure I won’t feel all that anger come flooding right back. I don’t think I can control it.”

“We’ll be right here,” Melinda assured her.

Phil stepped behind his daughter and put an arm around her. “We’ll take it slow and if it gets too much we’ll just stop. How’s that?”

Jemma looked back at him and gave a small nod.

Melinda helped her daughter to one of the chairs that faced Phil’s desk while he lowered himself to a small table next to it. Both waited for Jemma to speak.

“I’m so sorry, momma. I didn’t want all of this to happen but I was so very angry.” She began, looking to her fingers rather than her parents. She picked at a small hangnail on one finger.

Melinda covered Jemma’s hand with her own. “We know you were angry, bao bei. We don’t understand why. What was so terrible?”

Jemma shook her head and shivered slightly. “They just would not stop. They were so horrid, not just to me but to everyone.” She brushed a tear from her cheek and took a breath.

“Who, Jemma?” Melinda encouraged. Phil reached out and squeezed the little girl’s hand.

“Stephanie and Camilla,” Jemma’s voice cracked with emotion as her hands pulled into tight fists. “They said horrid things and then they’d just laugh. They would mimic my way of speaking and
say…” she hesitated, looking from one parent to the other. “They’d say I didn’t belong to you, that I was a little orphan Annie and that you…you just collected thrown away children because you couldn’t have your own.” She drew a deep breath and thumped one fist on the arm of the chair. Melinda covered it with her hand and patted it gently. “Camilla said no one would ever believe you were my mom. She said you weren’t like us.” She spoke directly to Melinda. “She told all the other kids it was stupid for an Asia woman to masquerade as a parent to little Limey.” Her lip quivered as she spoke but she held back her tears.

Melinda pulled her into a hug, but Jemma shook it off. She glared at her mother with tear filled eyes. Phil ran a hand along the girl’s back but she stood and faced both her parents, anger brewing once again. “They are so cruel…I…I’m not sorry, momma, I’m sorry I’m not sorry.”

Melinda caught her wrist before she could run. “Jemma you should have come to us, let us help.” She reached up and gently tucked a stray hair behind the girl’s ear.

“No, no, I couldn’t, I couldn’t,” Jemma shook her head as she struggled to free her hand from her mother’s grip. “They said…he said…said he’d hurt Fitz. He said Fitz was nothing but a cry baby and he’d make him cry loud enough for the whole academy to hear.”

“Yes, Jemma, who said he’d hurt Fitz?” Phil felt his own anger start to boil.

“Brandon….Camilla’s boyfriend…he said he’d hurt him and that our Neanderthal brother would be able to do nothing.” She looked at Melinda and then to Phil and back as tears fell freely. “He meant Trip, momma. He said Trip was nothing but a mindless hulk and he couldn’t protect us at all. He said security wouldn’t let people like him on campus unless he was caged.” The little girl pushed her mother’s attempts to comfort away with her free hand. “No…no, it…I…everything just made me so very angry. If mummy and daddy hadn’t gone on that dreadful plane none of this would have ever happened…I couldn’t stop anything.

Melinda tried to shush her child not seeing how the altercation with school bullies had pushed Jemma to the anger she felt over her parents’ deaths, yet at the same time she understood the little girl’s pain. “Jemma, bao bei, it’s alright. There was nothing you could do about any of it.” She looked to Phil who seemed just as baffled…just as helpless in this trauma.

“Maybe, I should call Maura,” he suggested softly. Melinda shook her head. Hopefully they could resolve this without the need to sedate their child.

“Stephanie said…she said Skye was mentally deficient and should be locked away in an institute before she turned into some inhuman creature that would be a hazard to every normal person. She
said her real parents were probably drug dependent morons or some kind of dreadful monsters who left her for dead because they had no idea what she was.” Jemma took a deep breath after sobbing all of that at once. She looked at her mother and tried desperately to hold back her emotions. “Oh, momma, how could she be so very cruel to our baby…our sweet baby, momma…why?”

Again, Melinda tried to pull the little girl to her bosom, to comfort and hold her until she could banish all of the pain Jemma had taken on herself. But the little girl would have none of it. “If I stayed in Sheffield, none of this would happened. If they didn’t go on that trip they’d be there and I would have my parents and not have to worry about hurting any of you because I…I…”

“Jemma, princess, listen to me,” Phil dropped to his knees in front of the little girl and held her upper arms in a firm, but gentle grasp. “You did nothing to deserve this.”

Jemma struggled against his hold and shook her head. “I did…I did…on family weekend…I did, Da. I did. I…bested them in the science exhibit. They…they always took first prize, every year until I ruined everything for them. They hate me and all of you because you brought me here. You brought me here because my parents left me and I hate them…I hate them for dying and leaving me…for making me a burden to everyone.”

“Jemma!” Melinda took a firmer stand. “You have never been a burden. You are part of this family and we love you very much.” Again Melinda failed to comprehend how the child was leaping from one concept to the other or even how she was linking both together.

Struggling to now escape the hold of both parents, Jemma cried harder. “You would not have to love me if all of this just didn’t happen.”

“We don’t love you because we have to, Jemma.” Phil assured her attempting to hold on without hurting her at the same time. He pulled her to his chest and wrapped both arms around her, keeping her tightly to him despite her struggle to escape. “We love you Jemma, we won’t let go. We’re sorry all of this happened but we will make it right, all of it.” He spoke to his wife with only his eyes, letting her know as well that this was something they would get through. Melinda tried and failed to hold back her own tears as she fell to her knees and wrapped her arms around him cocooning Jemma’s trembling form between them.

For as valiant as the little girl struggled she was no match for her parents and their determination to convince her of their compassion and understanding. Her cries became hysterical before she gave in to the comfort they offered and slowly returned her father’s embrace. Phil let out the breath he held, allowing himself to relax into his little girl’s hug. Melinda did the same as the three of them melted to the floor and rested against Phil’s large desk. He held Jemma on his lap, still pressed against his chest while Melinda rested her head on his shoulder and her arm around her little girl.
“I’m so sorry,” Jemma hiccuped between sobs and small gasps for breath.

“Shhh,” Melinda shushed her. “Shhh, bao bei, just relax, quiet…breath slowly, don’t talk right now.”

“But,” Jemma tried again. Melinda put a finger over the little girl’s lips as Phil kissed the top of her head.

“We all need to take a breath,” He spoke softly.

Jemma closed her eyes and nodded against Phil’s chest. She listened to the gentle sound of his heart beating and felt his chest rise and fall with his easy deep breaths. Melinda was pressed close to her side so that she felt her mother’s breathing as well. Jemma found the pattern in her parents’ respiration and slowly brought hers to match theirs, taking slow deep breaths and exhaling just as slowly. The three sat that way for what seemed like an hour before any dared to break the silence.

Melinda smiled down at her little girl and bent to kiss her forehead. “Those girls and their friend are bullies, Jemma. They are the problem not you or your family and definitely not your parents. They need to feel powerful and they do that by making you and probably others feel weak.”

Phil nodded as he hugged her tighter. “Giving in to their taunting and striking out is normal, princess but it just fuels their fire. They wouldn’t say a word because they want you to take all the blame, to feel like you’ve wronged them. There are times when we need to fight for what we believe, Jemma, but it isn’t always with our fists or by shoving our problems to the ground.”

Jemma nodded, but didn’t really understand. “Then how do I make them stop?”

“We make them stop, Jemma. This isn’t something you can do all by yourself. We talk to the dean and to their parents and we let everyone we can know exactly what is going on. We take away their power.” Melinda explained.

“How?” Jemma sniffled.

“First, you promise to tell us every time any of them or anyone ever threatens you in any way.”
Phil squeezed her to his chest and kissed her head again.

“And we talk about *everything*. I know that words hurt, bao bei, but just because these girls are bigger than you or snottier,” Melinda raised her brows at Phil. What other term could she use? “It doesn’t make what they say true. Fitz has a lot of things he is working through and crying does not make him weak. Trip is big and strong and sweet and loving. He loves you very much and there is probably no one that could keep him from protecting any of you.”

“If ole Trip gets on that campus, Brandon better be the one in a cage if he knows what’s good for him.” Phil jested, earning the first attempt at a smile from his little girl.

Melinda smiled as well. “And Skye…she’s fine, Jemma. She is bright and eager and just wants to be part of everything. We all help her everyday and although she is a little slower at all the things most kids her age are doing, she will catch up. Remember she didn’t have a mum like you did to teach her all the wonderful things you know…but she has you and Fitz and Trip to show her so much now. She’s tiny and funny and a bundle of energy, but you will see that she’ll be a power house all on her own some day. Just like you.” Melinda tapped one finger on her daughter’s chest.

“You have to know those things in your heart and hold on to them with all your might. You can’t let anyone shake them or make you feel anything else. You have to know that your mom and I and your brothers and sister will always be here for you, no matter what.” Phil smiled down at the child in his lap.

Jemma let out a breath and snuggled into Phil’s embrace. She looked up at Melinda and chewed her lip. “I don’t hate them…my parents, I mean. I just get so angry sometimes because they left me, because everything changed and got so hard. I’m sorry, I said those things. I did not mean to hurt you or make you feel badly.”

Melinda shifted and pulled the little girl into her arms then leaned both of them into Phil. “It’s okay to be angry, Jemma. We understand and even being angry at your parents is normal. You won’t always feel that way, but you can’t keep everything all bottled up inside. You need to come to us when you feel bad or you have a problem. We will listen, we will talk and we’ll find an answer.”

“But, I don’t want to be a burden.” The little girl sighed.

“Never,” Phil assured her. “You are never a burden, princess.”
Again the room fell silent for a few moments. Jemma took a very deep breath and let it out. “Are you going to punish me. I certainly did cause a lot of difficulties and truly deserve it.”

Phil and Melinda exchanged glances. He shrugged as she rolled her eyes. “I suppose there will be some consequences for your actions.” Melinda replied. “Da and I will have to discuss it a little bit.”

Jemma frowned and shook her head. “I think I would sleep a lot better tonight not having to worry about what might happen tomorrow. If you’re going to tan my bum, I’d rather have it done now than to spend the night in anticipation.”

Melinda stifled a laugh and turned her head as Phil replied. “I think we can take bum tanning off the table. What’d ya say, mom?”

“I think in this case it is officially ruled out, although I believe Fitz is going to put up a cry of preferential treatment. But, we’ll pacific him.” Melinda chuckled.

Phil turned to meet his daughter’s gaze. “What you did today was not something to take on by yourself, Jemma.” He furrowed brow. His tone became firm and serious. “Don’t you ever pull a stunt like that again, because if you do, tan will be the least likely color your bum will sport, understood?” At her wide eyed quick nod he smiled and added. “We love you Jemma, we will always be here for you.” He pulled her and Melinda into a tight hug then kissed them both.

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Melinda, Phil and Jemma emerged from the office almost tiptoeing into the quiet of their home. Melinda let her head drop back and sighed, looking at the time. It was already after nine and getting Skye and Fitz from Gram’s apartment then into the tub and settled enough to sleep would take the better part of an hour. They’d both be up well after ten and be grumpy trolls when she had to roust them from bed before seven the next morning. A slight sound from the kitchen caught everyone’s attention.

In the soft glow of the range hood light she could just make out Trip, seated at the table with a text book and paper spread before him. She flicked on the overhead light causing the boy to jump in surprise.

“You’re going to ruin your eyes,” she grinned as Phil and Jemma stepped around her.
Phil looked around expecting to find the other two into something they shouldn’t be in the overwhelming quiet of the room. “Where’s Pinky and the Brain?” He joked, earning a giggle from Jemma.

Trip set down his pencil and grinned. “Put them to bed about an hour ago. Just checked on ‘em too, they’re both down for the count.” He beamed with pride.

“Both of them?” Melinda was shocked.

“I’m impressed.” Phil smiled, giving the boy a thumb’s up.

“Well, gram helped. You know Skye and all that ‘unnerwears’ stuff. Wouldn’t let me even run the bath water.” He chuckled at his little sister’s insistence he never see her underwear but had no problem streaking from the bath to her bedroom in plain view.

“You bathed them too!?” Melinda was almost flabbergasted. The boy merely shrugged.

“Fitz put up a fight, but finally gave in. He held out the longest but like I said, he’s out cold now.” The boy stood and carried the empty glass, he held, from the table to the sink. “Gram sang a couple church songs to Skye and she was out too.” He smiled with a distant memory. “Used to put me out when I was that little.” He turned back toward his parents. “She was going to just keep them for the night but thought it would be a little hard with all the morning stuff and school and all.” He shrugged again and nodded toward the table. “I still have a little algebra to finish. Wasn’t easy getting homework done and playing referee at the same time, so I saved math for last.”

“Need some help?” Jemma offered.

“Only two more problems and I’m done.” He shook his head.

“And I think you’ve done enough for one day, xiǎo gūniáng. Let’s get you tucked in, too.” Melinda took Jemma’s hand and led her toward the stairs. “Not too long, Trip. You have to get up early tomorrow.” He reminded him.

He nodded toward her. “Almost done,” he repeated.
Phil waited until he knew his wife and daughter were out of ear shot and sat down next to his son. “Trip you're a good man,” he smiled as he patted the boy’s back. “I’m proud of you.”

The boy smiled an embarrassed smile. “No problem, Da…ya know anything about algebra? These last two problems are murder.” Phil smiled and gave a quick nod. He turned the book toward him and read through the problems before starting to explain.

Trip cocked an ear and listened as his father explained….

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Two days later Brandon Coxton, Stephanie Thornton and Camilla Blake spent more than an hour in the dean’s office with their parents and the Coulsons. All three teens were suspended for the week and given written warnings that included mandatory counseling three times per week at least until the end of the school term. The counselor would determine if further sessions were necessary. In addition the trio was to have direct supervision at all times while on campus.

The senior students were also told that their intimidation of younger children could be considered criminal and if in was repeated or continued in any way the local authorities would be involved. The Dean then sentenced them to his version of community service. They would all work as cafeteria aids with the elementary levels for the remainder of the school year.

The following Monday morning Brandon arrived at school sporting a nasty black eye, for which he offered no explanation.

Antoine Triplett was just as tight lipped about the bruises on his knuckles.
Chapter Summary

An end of season snow storm has Gram Triplett bunking in with the Coulsons and everyone working through the difficulties a storm brings, as the power goes out and Skye decides to do some exploring.

The snow started slowly, with large feathery flakes that lit on the still brown grass and the long soft needles of evergreens that lined the streets as the Coulson family returned from Sunday morning services. Phil had accompanied Fitz and Jemma to St. Luke’s while Melinda and Sr. M. Claire attempted to keep Skye quiet at St. Bartholomew’s. Trip and Gram spent the morning at First Baptist. Phil then made the circle through Bethesda gathering his clan and taking a slow careful drive back home.

Skye pulled at the restraints in her safety seat, eager to prance in the fluffy almost Spring snow. It was mid-March, an odd time for snow to fall so aggressively. She slid once in patent leather Mary Janes, easily escaping her mother’s grip as she wriggled out of the car. It hadn’t been snowing when the family left earlier in the morning but now the ground had an almost translucent covering that the little girl delighted in making foot prints. Melinda hurried to catch up to her intrepid toddler.

Phil frowned at the light slippery frosting on the stairs that lead to Gram’s apartment over the garage. Trip followed his gaze as he helped his grandmother across the driveway. “I’ll get a broom and sweep those stairs for you Gram. They look a little slick.”

“Come on, Bernice,” Phil smiled as he reached out to take the woman’s arm. “How about brunch with the Coulson’s today?”

Jemma stepped carefully to help as well. Fitz slid across the blacktop noticing how easily his dress shoes became ice skates on the slick surface. He lost his footing and slipped back then forward before feeling his father’s strong grip on his upper arm. The boy’s feet made a cartoonish shuffle before he gained his balance and walked slowly across the driveway toward the patio.

Gram Triplett stepped carefully across the expanse between the car and the patio, holding on to Phil and Jemma. She called back over her shoulder. “Antoine, you grab that bin of blueberries from the icebox. If I’m going to share a meal with you fine folks, then I’ll be helping with the
cooking.” She smiled at Phil.

“Blueberries,” Fitz breathed. “Pancakes?” He whispered around his father to his sister. Jemma rolled her eyes and shook her head. No one could eat as many blueberry pancakes as Fitz.

“Nothing but the best,” Gram smiled back at the little boy. “That is if you all manage to get these old bones into the kitchen in one piece.” The round little woman laughed heartily giving permission for the twins to join her.

“Watch this!” Fitz exclaimed as he slipped from Phil’s grip and took a few quick steps before sliding sideways across the patio. He beamed a toothy smile before landing on his duff in the light snow. Jemma quickly covered her giggle as Phil pulled the boy to his feet with a chuckle. Fitz didn’t find it quite so amusing.

“Fitz!” Melinda scolded, reaching for an exuberant Skye, “enough acrobatics, we don’t need any broken bones today.” She let out an exasperated sigh as her toddler knelt on the patio to make handprints in the tiny fluffs of snow. Melinda reached to snatch the little girl before she could cover herself with anymore of the frozen precipitation.

Skye evaded her mother’s grasp scurrying across the patio to the deck stairs which she scaled on all fours. Before Melinda could stop her the little girl swiped her hand across the covered table and sucked in a mouthful of the soft white snow off her palm.

“Oh, Skye, don’t put that in your mouth. Yuck!” Melinda grimaced as she carefully stepped across the slick surface of the deck and reached to brush the rest of the snow from Skye’s frozen hand.

“It non’t bees doorty momma,” Skye smiled as she looked at her now empty hand. She pointed toward the snow that remained on the table. “It bees onna tabul, it non’t bee onna garown, see?”

Melinda grimaced again and scooped up her now soggy child, brushing bits of whatnot from her baby’s chin and rubbing her ice-cold hand inside her own. Skye looked up into the grey sky and blinked as the large snowflakes lit on her eyelashes.

“Alla snope lakes bees stuck agetter, momma. Them looka like fetters.” She held out her now bright red hand to catch the cold flakes.
“Yes, baobei, they look very much like feathers.” Melinda smiled as she unlocked the door and stepped inside. She stomped the snow from her shoes and shook it from her coat as she set Skye on the floor and tugged off her now very wet coat and hung it on the back of the nearest chair. The little girl dropped to the floor and yanked off her shoes and pulled valiantly at her soggy socks.

“Momma,” she breathed heavily between her words. “Mine sockases bees all wet and stuckted onna mine foots.”

“Yes, they are,” Melinda laughed as she picked the little girl up from the floor in order to make room for the rest of the family as they piled into the kitchen stomping and shaking off their own layers of snow. She turned with Skye on her hip and issued an order.

“Okay, everyone upstairs and change your clothes. Hang wet coats on the back of the chairs to dry and take off your shoes so you do not slip on the floor. Fitz get out of those wet trousers and anything else wet and hang them to dry.” She spoke as she worked at getting Skye’s wet socks from her feet as the little girl’s protests were unending.

Fitz and Jemma immediately did as they were told, happily discussing the possibility of an unexpected snow day as they pulled off their shoes and raced up the stairs to change. Melinda let out a sigh and followed with Skye still firmly planted on her hip.

Phil smiled at Bernice as he helped her remove her coat. “I’m sure she doesn’t mean you.” He laughed a short snort. “I’ll have Trip bring your slippers so you can get out of those wet shoes. Anything else you need?” He asked as he draped her coat over a chair. “I’ll give the kid a hand and get whatever you need. You might be here a bit.”

“Oh, no need to be fussin’ over me, Phillip Coulson.” Gram Triplett smiled as she slipped off her wet shoes. “You just tell Antoine to get my sneakers and a nice warm pair of sock. Remind him not to forget those blueberries. I’ll just get busy whipping up brunch for the lot of you.”

Phil let out a soft laugh and shook his head. “We didn’t ask you here to be the cook. Sit down, relax…”

Gram brushed him off. “Not gonna happen, Phillip. Those babies are expectin’ blueberry pancakes and that’s what I’ll be making. You just go do your thing. I can find my way around this kitchen whilst Melinda keeps those little ones in line.” She shooed him out the door then began pulling out what she needed to do her favorite chore…cooking.
Bernice Triplett hummed one of her favorite hymns as she stirred her pancake batter, adding ingredients from memory rather than recipe. She had donned an apron she pulled from the pantry to cover her Sunday service dress and slid her now sock covered feet into the sneakers Trip had provided on his way to change and warm up after cleaning the apartment stairs.

Phil stomped his feet clean and tugged off his snow covered jacket then shook his head. The snow was coming down faster and heavier and he was more than certain Gram would not be heading to her apartment any time soon. He offered to help with breakfast prep, but was waved off with a warning to get himself as warm and as dry as he insisted his children were told to do. Phil smiled as he pulled off his shoes and headed toward the stairs, leaving Gram to her baking.

A soft sound brought the woman to turn toward the back door. She laughed under her breath as she set down the wooden spoon she was using. “And just where do you think you’re going there, little missy?” She smiled down at the little girl who stopped with one hand on the door knob.

“I go da hep Terrrip.” Skye stated matter of factly, peeking at the woman with the one eye that was not covered by the large knit hat she’d pulled over her head.

Gram wiped her hands on her apron and stepped toward the little girl who stood in a red sweat shirt she’d pulled on backward, one boot and one heavy knee high sock. The woman smiled wide and shook her head. “Lord, little lamb you will freeze your baby booty out there in that nastiness.” She smiled as she reached for the little girl.

“I gotsa a mintten.” Skye held up one mittened hand and pushed up the hat on her head only to have it slip down over the opposite eye.

“Yes, you do,” Gram chuckled as she lifted the little girl out of her large boot and pushed the fuzzy hat back far enough for Skye to see with both eyes. “Where are your pants, lamb?” She patted the toddler’s bottom gently.

“I no know.” Skye shrugged. “Jemma non’t gib dem to me. Hoer say a wait but hoer non’t come back.” She shrugged again. “Mine short bees longa to me. My unnerwears no bees out.” She squirmed to try to look behind herself.

“Skye! There you are.” Jemma breathed as she hurried into the kitchen. “Why didn’t you stay in
your room?” She held a pair of black and red leggings and the other heavy stocking in one hand as she reached for her little sister with the other. “Oh, Skye,” she sighed.

“I helip Terrip.” Skye announced for the second time as Gram set her on the floor.

Jemma shook her head as she pulled her sister’s arms from her sweater and turned it correctly. “See, baobei, the big penguin goes in the front.”

Skye smiled down at the fuzzy black and white penguin that covered the front of her red sweatshirt. “Him bees a pink win. I non’t know where he went.” She laughed at herself. “Him beed ona mine back.” She giggled as she held on to Jemma and placed one foot into the leggings the older girl held out for her.

Jemma waited until Skye had both feet in the legs of her pants then pulled them up snugly on the smaller girl’s waist. She helped her little sister onto a chair and slipped on the other stocking, then let her slip back to the floor. “It isn’t wise for you to go into the snow now, darling. Trip is all finished. He’s upstairs changing, but perhaps you can help the next time he goes outside.”

Skye’s face fell as she peered at the red, white and blue mitten on her left hand. “You helip me a find a udther minten foer mine hand? I needa go inna snow, Jemma.”

“No one is going out in the snow, right now.” Melinda announced as she entered the kitchen. “It is too cold and much too windy for playing outdoors. Daddy just listened to the weather report and he says this storm is going to get worse before it gets better.”

Skye plopped down on the floor with a grand pout. She poked her legs out in front of her then pulled them back into a criss-cross position. A second later Fitz raced down the hallway from the stairs and slid across the slick tile kitchen floor in his stocking feet, stopping inches before tumbling on top of his baby sister.

“Fitz!” Melinda warned as she grabbed his arm preventing him from landing flat on the floor. “This is not an Olympic event and I’ve warned you more than once about it.” She landed a light swat on his backside.

Fitz snarled at his mother and brushed off the slight castigation with a shrug. “Sorry, mom,” he smiled up at her as she released his arm and he slid on to one of the chairs. “It smells glorious in here, Gram.”
Bernice smiled and brushed a hand through his hair as she stepped past him to peer down at the grouchy little one seated on the floor. “Well, little lamb this sure won’t do us any good...all this fussin’ and frownin’ on the Lord’s Day.” She bent down and lifted Skye into her arms, turning the little girl to look into her eyes.

“Momma non’t lemme go the snow,” Skye pouted while fingering the gold chain the older woman wore around her neck. “I bit a snopen and make a snobalst widda mine mintens.” She spread her fingers in front of her surrogate grandmother’s face.

Bernice took one of the little girl’s hands and looked at it carefully. “I think I might just need these little hands to help mix my batter. I am so glad you are not going out in that old storm.” She turned the child toward the window and pointed. Skye’s eyebrows rose at the sight of the blinding snow that now blocked the view of the garage just a few hundred feet away. She squirmed a little before the woman set her on the floor.

“Momma!” Skye squealed reaching up to her mother. “Alla snow is down the sky to the garown!” She tried to explain, breathlessly. “Look, momma.” She placed her tiny hands on Melinda’s cheeks and turned her head toward the back door.

Fitz and Jemma hurried to the window to peer out at the now swirling snowstorm. They looked to each other and then back outside. There would definitely be no school tomorrow. Skye’s smile quickly turned to a look of panic as she pulled her mother’s face back to look into her own.

“Momma, where Daddy? Him bees inna snow? How we fine a him?” The little girl was almost in tears.

Melinda opened her mouth to reply but was stopped by a chuckle from Fitz. “Da’s not out there, Skye. Look,” the little boy pointed to a pair of black dress shoes next to the door. “There are his spats.”

“Daddy is upstairs, Skye.” Melinda told her quietly.

Skye looked at the shoes and then at her mother before letting her body turn to ‘jelly’ and easily slipping from Melinda’s grip to the floor. “I see him.” She announced as she scampered away down the hall toward the stairs before Melinda could catch her.
“I’ll get her!” The twins shouted in unison as they lit after their little sister who was already halfway up the staircase.

Melinda shook her head as the threesome thundered up the steps, then turned to collect wet coats and cast off shoes. Bernice shook her head and smiled as she returned to her brunch preparation. “Woo-eee, Melinda I do not envy you one bit. I had me just one to chase and then Antoine was one laid back little baby. How you manage all these little ones is a blessing, a real blessing.” She let out a soft whistle as she picked up a large bowl and began beating the batter inside.

Smiling, Melinda carried the bundle of coats to the closet and set each on a hanger before placing them inside. She rolled her eyes at the sound of squeals and giggles coming from the second floor and shook her head at the deep sound of Phil’s voice combined with those of their children. She wasn’t sure if ‘blessing’ was the word she’d use on some days but she wouldn’t trade one minute of it. This day…Sunday…was the only day of the week everyone spent the morning together and the storm that was slowly turning into a blizzard would keep them together for most if not all of the day.

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By the time the family sat down to brunch the storm had turned brutal. Wind rattled the windows and small icy flakes tapped at the glass. The white stuff fell as if it were being churned by a Hollywood snow machine shrinking visibility to less than two or three feet. Within an hour it had reached the level of the first step on the patio with no signs of slowing.

Skye stared at the whirling mass of flakes outside the window in the back door. “Mine howz go unner the snow, Momma?” She asked with a look of worry that concerned Melinda immediately. Mealtime meltdowns were not unusual with her baby.

Fitz laughed out loud around a mouthful of blueberry pancakes. “It’s not a second ice age, Skye, merely a rather intense storm.”

Jemma shook her head and reached for her little sister’s hand while narrowing her gaze at her brother. “No, darling, the snow will not reach over the house.”

Skye looked to her siblings then back at the sight just beyond the window. “I non’t see a gradge, Jemma. It all snowed?”
Phil reached out and pulled Skye from her booster seat to his lap, then slid her plate in front of her. He kissed the top of her head. “Nope, angel, that’s just the snow falling so heavy we can’t see through it.”

The little girl leaned back against her father. “We go out the side, daddy? We see a snow gradge?”

Phil looked to Melinda who smiled but shook her head. “When all the snow stops, I will take everyone outside to see the garage.” He smiled down at her looking up at him then turned to Bernice. “Looks like you’ll be our guest for a bit, Gram.”

The older woman shook her head as she rose to pour another cup of coffee. She held the pot out silently asking Phil if he wanted a refresher. He shook his head. Bernice squinted her eyes and looked toward the garage. “S’just a little white stuff, Phillip. I’ve lived through my share of this. Lordy, when I was this little lamb’s age we had a storm so fierce the drifts reached my bedroom window in my granddad’s old farmhouse. This is nothing.” She laughed her usual deep belly laugh.

Melinda shook her head as she set her tea cup down. “I think we’d all feel better if you stayed here with us. We don’t know how long it will last or how bad it will get. You shouldn’t be over there all alone.”

“I could…” Trip started.

“No,” Melinda cut him off with a gentle smile. “You’ll both stay here with us, all of us together, end of discussion.” She ended, leaving no room for disagreement.

Bernice sat back down and looked at the child who now waited to see if their grandmother would question their mother’s authority. Fitz chewed slowly, while Jemma pursed her lips and Skye cuddled closer to her father. Trip found the last of his hash browns very interesting and avoided looking at either woman.

“Well, it looks like I’ve been out done now doesn’t it?” She laughed at herself then leaned forward addressing the younger members of the family. “Your momma is the boss, gotta do as she says now don’t we?”

Trip let out the breath he held while Jemma smiled and helped herself to a few sections of tangerine that Melinda had added to her plate. Fitz snapped his mouth shut, gave a nod and dug
back into his stack of pancakes.

“Momma bees a boss, daddy.” Skye whispered up to her father. He smiled back at her with a nod.

Melinda took a long drink of her tea and set the cup down, swallowed and nodded toward her husband. “And don’t you forget it.”

The family froze for a beat before Fitz broke the silence with a snigger that turned into a full fledged laugh that everyone joined.

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The remaining hours of the early day went smoothly, with the exception of Skye’s protest when Phil and Trip trekked across the yard to retrieve Bernice’s ‘Justin Case’ from her apartment. Bernice called after them making sure Trip put enough food and water in Spunk’s dishes to last until tomorrow. Fitz scratched his head and asked just who was Justin and when did move into the apartment.

Bernice laughed as she hugged the little boy to her ample bosom. “It’s not a who, Fitz baby, it’s a what,” which only confused the little boy further.

Trip chuckled as he pulled on his jacket and tied his boots. “It’s Gram’s name for the bag she keeps just in case someone needs her for a spell, like one of her church ladies or the pastor’s wife or even Mom.” He explained.

“Oh,” Jemma smiled. “Just in case…Justin Case,” she elbowed Fitz. “Get it, Justin Case.” The little girl giggled at the pun.

Fitz rolled his eyes and shook his head. “That’s just daft, it is.” He grumbled as the older woman pulled him into a great hug and kissed him before he could get away. “Don’t you dare be pulling away from my sugar, little boy. I got ya and I’m keepin’ ya.” She hugged him tighter, placing kisses all over his cheeks as he turned his head side to side and laughed despite himself.

Melinda smiled at the sight of her little boy, who once would not allow so much as a touch, easily relaxing into the affection his adopted grandmother lavished on him and all of the children. She then turned to her bellowing baby and did everything in her power to distract and redirect her little
hellion while Daddy and big brother disappeared into the blinding whiteness.

Jemma and Fitz knelt on the window seat watching as the dark blobs of their father and brother grew smaller and smaller until they were invisible then calculated how long it would take for them to trudge back through the already knee deep snow pack. Bernice tried singing louder than Skye was wailing in an effort to gain the little one’s attention. The woman exhausted her voice while the child continued bellowing.

Melinda thought back to her mother’s solution to such an ordeal. The elder May’s voice echoed in her daughter’s memory. ‘Rúguǒ nǐ jīxù zuò zhèyàng de shìqíng, wǒ huì gěi nǐ yīgè zhèyàng zuò de lǐguó.’ She smiled as she held on to the squirming bundle of furious toddler. How ridiculous was it to swat a child and expect him or her to stop making a fuss? Although after the last five minutes of kicking and screaming she was tempted to reassess her mother’s methods.

“I’m sorry this makes you so upset, baobei,” Melinda crooned close to her little one’s ear. “But, you are not going out there.” Skye’s reply was incomprehensible, as her sobbing combined with her crazy pronunciations made her impossible to understand. She squirmed and twisted so intensely her sweat shirt rode up under her arms exposing her belly underneath. Twice Melinda hiked her baby up onto her hip and righted her clothing but Skye quickly slipped back, expecting to be released as she had always’ been in the past.

“Daddy!” Skye wailed the only word anyone understood and the twins covered their ears as they watched for any sign of Phil and Trip’s return. “DAA DEE!” She screeched louder.

Melinda spun the little girl around and plopped her on her hip, tugging down her sweatshirt and bouncing her with a ‘shh shh’ sound. Skye arched her back and threw herself in reverse as she continued to wail. Looking up at the clock, Melinda shook her head. Now was the perfect time for a nap but she was sure Skye would never relax until Phil was back. She took a deep breath and plunked her little siren on the floor, kneeling down to her level. She grasped the little girl’s upper arms and gave her a gentle nudge. The sudden change in position silenced the claxon and before Skye could draw a breath and restart her engine, Melinda spoke to her in a firm, no nonsense tone.

“That is enough Skye.” She narrowed her brows and looked directly at the little girl. “It is too windy, too cold and the snow is too deep for you to go out there. Daddy and Trip will be back very soon and then everyone is staying inside. You do not need to scream because it is not helping at all and if you do not stop, momma will spank your little bottom.” She immediately regretted the threat, but frustration is a mindless force.

Skye dug both fists into her eyes and rubbed vigorously. She let out a few sobs and took small puffs of breath. Dropping her fists to her sides she stared at her mother and drew a few ragged
breaths. “I…non’t…wanno…you…pank…a…mine…ba-um…” Her words came out bouncy between her quick breaths. “I…wan…go…a…da…dee…” And the crying started all over again, minus the screaming, kicking and fighting every effort Melinda made to console her youngest. Skye fell into her mother’s embrace, sobbing quietly on her shoulder as Melinda stood and looked helplessly at Bernice who merely smiled her understanding.

Fitz and Jemma turned back to the window as the altercation seemed have been resolved, each dropping their hands from their ears. Skye’s protest was now reduced to a smothered sob buried in Melinda’s neck. Leaning close to his sister’s ear, Fitz whispered, “that was nearly a rather bad turn for our wee sister. I believe mom is at the end of her wits.”

Jemma nodded her agreement then bolted up on her knees and smiled. “Here they come!” She turned back to Melinda and pointed in the direction two back blobs were emerging through the white-out. Fitz slid backward off the seat and rushed to the door, pushing aside the curtain and peering out to be ready when his dad and big brother made it that far. Skye’s head popped up as the last of her sniffles drifted away and Bernice took a damp paper towel to wipe away the remnants of her tirade. The little girl wriggled to escape her mother’s hold then stopped and looked up at Melinda.

“I see?” She asked softly.

Melinda smiled and hugged her baby tightly before setting her down and watching as she scurried across the kitchen and climbed up to stand next to Jemma. The older girl tapped a finger against the glass and wrapped a supportive arm around her little sister. “See darling, right there. Do you see them coming?”

Skye’s lip turned down as she shook her head and squeezed her eyes tightly to see through the cascade of snowflakes. “Where, Jemma? I non’t see a Daddy o Terrip.”

“Just watch, baobei, you will.” Jemma assured her with a gentle squeeze.

A few seconds later the two blobs took shape as the snow covered pair made their way back to the house.

“Daddy!” Skye clapped her hands and turned back to Melinda. “Momma, Daddy comin inna snow. Him gots snope lakes sticked on him’s coat and him’s hat. Daddy bees a snoppan, Momma!” The little voice that a few minutes ago was mournfully wailing was now comically delighted.
Moments later the sound of the pair stomping off snow was right outside the door. Melinda pulled Fitz aside, ignoring his soft growl. She and Bernice threw a few towels and an old carpet down on the floor a second before Phil pushed it open, shoved Trip inside and followed behind. He reached out to grab the storm door that squealed in protest as the wind whipped it back against the house. Once able to pull it closed and keep it latched he closed the inside door and turned toward his family.

“Wow!” Fitz exclaimed. “You look absolutely abominable!” He grabbed a handful of snow from the floor and squeezed it into a tight ball.

“Don’t you dare.” Melinda warned as she placed one hand over his and stopped Skye from sampling a handful of her own at the same time. “Both of you, up on the seat until we get this mess cleaned up.” She pointed to the window seat where Jemma sat with hands folded in her lap.

“Justin needs some snow tires, Gram,” Trip smiled. “Didn’t do too well in the mess out there.” He nodded down at the very wet suitcase that stood at his side.

“Not to worry, honey,” Bernice smiled. “Might get a bit wet on the outside but as long as my unmentionables are dry there’s no problem.” She took the piece by its extended handle and wheeled it onto another towel where it could dry before being moved to the bedroom.

Fitz grumbled at being sent to sit with the girls. He felt he was more than up to helping with this bit of the chore. After all he wasn’t demure little Jemma and he certainly was not baby Skye. He folded his arms over his chest and sneered at his mother, but kept any comment to himself. Skye had already pushed her pretty far and he was not about to take the swat his little sister had someone avoided. Skye stood on the edge of the window seat and bounced up and down, reaching with both hands toward Phil and almost tumbling head first to the floor. Jemma grabbed her from behind and Fitz slid to stand in front of her before anyone noticed the almost accident.

“It is brutal out there,” Phil shivered as he pulled off his cap and shook the snow from his shoulders. It fell in a mini blizzard to the towels below. Tufts of little snow balls clung to his jeans as far up as his knees. Each dripped randomly as the heat of the warm kitchen melted them free. He slipped out of his jacket and let it drop to the floor before pulling off one boot then the other and resting them against the door. Trip managed to do the same and both soon stood in an island of snowy wet clothing and the remnants of melting snow ‘cling-ons’.

“You need to get out of those wet things and into a hot shower.” Bernice huffed as she began collecting Trip’s cast offs from the floor.
“No, gram, let me do this,” Trip reached to take the items only to have his hand slapped away.

“No, no, you stay out of it. I want to do it. And don’t say a word,” Bernice warned. “I don’t need you snifflin’ and sneezin’ for days on end. Git your booty up those stairs, now.” She sent her grandson off with a swat to his seat and a blush on his cheeks. Trip stepped over the clothing and hurried out of the kitchen careful not to leave a mess in his wake.

Fitz began a snicker but was stopped by a glare from his mother. Skye still danced at the edge of the window seat wriggling her fingers toward Phil until he snatched her up and kissed her cheek.

The little girl pushed back and smacked both hands over the spot he touched on her cheek. “You code, Daddy.” She announced with wide eyes.

“It is very cold out there, angel eyes,” he spoke through his teeth in a shivery voice as he slipped his hand under her shirt and rested it on her warm belly. The little girl screamed into a giggle as she pushed him away and reached for Melinda. He relinquished his hold on his baby and tousled a still grumpy Fitz’s hair. He winked at Jemma and was rewarded with a quick smile.

“I am going to follow Gram’s advice and get myself warm and changed.” He announced as he place a quick cold kiss on Melinda’s cheek. “And then,” he clapped his hands together and waggled his eye brows.

“And then, Skye is going to take a nap.” Melinda announced before her husband proposed something that would send the little one into another tailspin when she so desperately needed a few hours sleep.

“And Skye is going to take a nap!” Phil clapped again as he snatched the little girl from her mother and cradled her in his arms, rocking her quickly side to side before flipping her up on his hip. “And I,” he kissed Melinda’s cheek again, “will take care of her on my way to the shower.”

Before Melinda could answer he was dancing down the hallway with a giggling Skye bouncing up and down in his arms. She laughed once then started to pick up the now soggy items from the floor. Jemma slid from the seat, grabbed her father’s boots and took them to the mud room where they could dry without messing the kitchen floor. Fitz let out a long frustrated breath and did the same with Trip’s.
Skye exerted all of her energy in her no-snow protest and was soon cuddled in her parents’ bed drifting away on the sound of the shower in the master bathroom and her father’s serenade of golden oldies, especially ‘My Girl²’, her favorite. Phil was pretty sure that putting the little girl in their bed was not what his wife had in mind, but it was a great way to ‘kill two birds with one stone’.

xx

Two and a half hours without Skye was an afternoon breather for everyone. Fitz spent the time working on his K’nex machine. He wasn’t quite sure what he wanted it to be, or to do for that matter, but it was a lot easier planning and designing without his little sister there to ‘help’. Jemma spent the time working ahead in her calculus and physics texts. If she was going to be away from school for a few days because of this storm there was really no sense in falling behind. Fitz rolled his eyes at her silliness. Jemma loved homework more than anything else in the whole wide world and he figured she was just a bit daft because of it. He had a lot to do and create and homework only got in the way. Anyway, he’d be prepared for class too...he just always knew the answers.

Trip’s passion had to wait. He’d planned to spend the day at the neighborhood gym. There was an inside basketball court and his buddies used it religiously every Sunday afternoon. Gram would probably bop him for just the thought…‘sacrilegious’ she’d accuse all of them. He stood at the large window in the family room and stared into the white nothingness, ignoring the itch to dribble a ball across the room.

Phil stepped behind him and patted his shoulder in sympathy. “No games to watch today?” He inquired.

The boy shook his head. “Off week, college games were on yesterday…” He let out a disgusted sigh. “I suppose I could take a hint from Jemma and get in some studying. Got a history exam on Friday…wouldn’t hurt.” He shoved his hands in his pockets as his shoulders drooped in defeat.

“Yeah,” Phil sighed, “I guess you could.” He almost laughed as the boy turned to him. “Or you could spend some time trying this out…” Phil held out a NBA Game Extreme game. “We were saving it for Easter, but…well, I think you really need it today.”

Trip’s jaw dropped as he took the offering and stared at it a second before slamming into his adopted father. “Really?” He almost squeaked. “Really…this is…oh my lordy lord…”

“Antoine Raymond Triplett, don’t you dare use the Lord’s name in vain especially on the Sabbath.” Bernice warned as she stepped into the room carrying her knitting bag, throwing him a
look that stopped even Melinda.

Trip swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Gram.” He looked heavenward and closed his eyes. “I am truly sorry, Lord,” then looked at his grandmother for her approving smile, which he received. Turning to Phil he smiled broadly before wrapping his arms around the man. Phil smiled back as the boy skirted out of the room, whooping once as he slid on stocking feet down the hallway toward the basement where the new video gaming platform had been relocated after Skye inserted a Pop Tart and short circuited the previous model. The new location kept the system Skye-proofed as well as sound-proofed for the more excitable moments of play. It also served as a source of amusement for Hunter on his regular visits, much to Bobbi’s dismay.

Phil folded his arms over his chest as he leaned on the large toy cabinet proud of his accomplishment. Melinda moved next to him, wrapping one arm around his waist and resting her head on his shoulder. “Smooth move, dad,” she said softly. He hummed a slight chuckle and kissed the top of her head.

They looked around the room at the tranquility of their family and breathed a sigh of contentment.

xx

Skye wandered down from her nap by three thirty and joined Jemma for a few moments looking at the pictures in a large book. Fitz managed to get his creation up and out of her reach before she meandered over to him, wrapping one arm around his waist and resting her head on his shoulder. “Smooth move, dad,” she said softly. He hummed a slight chuckle and added the top of her head.

By supper the snow was still falling and the wind whipped it into towering drifts against the garage and over Phil’s car. Reports of power outages and downed trees topped the reports on the late afternoon news. Phil and Melinda made the decision to close their office the next day, keeping all of their employees safe then excused themselves to his office to begin making phone calls. Bernice volunteered to clean up after the meal giving a nod to Trip that let him know he’d be doing the same. Jemma and Fitz were put in charge of keeping Skye busy in the family room, which lasted all of ten minutes before Bernice interceded and had the little girl up to her elbows in sudsy water while standing on a kitchen chair. The mess was astronomical but the child was contained until the job was complete.

As Phil finished the last phone call the lights blinked twice. He and Melinda looked at each other before hurrying to head off the hysteria that a blackout would produce. They found their brood in the family room happily at play with Bernice quietly clicking her knitting needles and keeping a close eye on the action. Trip and Fitz had built a zoo with K’Nex and Legos that thrilled their little
sister who filled it with a collection of plastic and stuffed animals. Everyone looked up as the lights flickered twice, went out and came back on in seconds.

The quick flick of darkness was enough for Skye. She climbed over her brothers and made a bee-line for Melinda who gathered her up assuring her there was no reason to be frightened. A second later the lights extinguished without warning and the silence that followed the lack of all electrical activity hushed the family.

“Okay, everyone stay right where you are. Nobody move.” Phil announced.

“Momma,” Skye whined as she held tightly to Melinda who shushed her calmly. “It’s okay baobei.”

Phil made his way through the darkness to the kitchen as Fitz and Jemma moved closer to Trip and Bernice set down her knitting. A few minutes later the man bellowed “FITZ!” causing the boy to dive into his older brother’s side, hiding his face. The flashlight, Phil had carefully maneuvered through the darkness to retrieve, was in pieces in the drawer at the end of the kitchen counter. Once again the boy had dismantled a torch in search of components for something he was creating, either that or he just needed more batteries. In either case the flashlight was useless and additional lights could only be found in the basement laundry room or the toolbox in the garage. Phil did not wish to trudge through the snow a second time, especially since it was at least four inches deeper than it had been. A jaunt to the basement in the dark would be hazardous but at least he’d return warm and dry. He made a mental note to invest in a carton of batteries and a plethora of various sized flashlights for his young engineer...after he dusted his britches once or twice.

Melinda stood in the doorway of the family room peering down the dark hall toward the kitchen. She rocked her baby side to side and placed a hand over the little girl’s ear, pressing her head to her own chest as she listened to Phil swearing under his breath. The rustle of chairs and other objects in the kitchen meant he was either losing his footing in the darkness or had taken out his frustration on the furniture although she was not quite sure Fitz would not feel some of his father’s ire.

“Phil,” she called out to him, her voice sounding odd in the dark silence. “There’s a box of candles in the utility closet and more on the top shelf in the hall closet.” She hoped to stop him before he stumbled down to the laundry room and found the second dismantled flashlight she had discovered a few days ago. That would really put him over the edge. “Don’t go trying to find anything in that basement. It’s dark as a cave down there when the electricity is working and who the hell knows what’s on the floor down there.”

Skye looked up at her mother’s chin and tapped her little hand on Melinda’s shoulder. “Momma, you saydid a bad woerd.”
“Shhh,” was her only answer as she rocked again and patted the child’s back. She glared at Fitz who she could just make out in the dark room, curled tightly into his brother’s side. Trip was mumbling to him, probably teasing about what was going to happen when their father got back. She couldn’t hear well enough to know for sure, but she could hear the older boy’s chuckle and the younger one’s soft whine.

“Daddy make a lights go on?” Skye asked with a shaky voice as Melinda made her way carefully across the room. There was just enough dim light coming through the large window to silhouette Bernice’s form on the recliner. She stopped in front of the woman and gently pried Skye from her neck to lower her into Bernice’s outstretched arms. The little girl put up an immediate protest.

“Skye,” Melinda was firm but gentle. “Momma needs you to stay here with Grams for just a little while so I can help Daddy.” She eased Skye into Bernice’s arms with a kiss and stepped away quickly.

“Momma!” Skye squawked, reaching out for her mother but Bernice folded the little girl into her ample embrace, easily holding on to the squirming child. “Shhh, shhhh, little lamb. We are gonna sit here and just wait out this old storm.” She began humming close to the child’s ear, then lifted her voice in a simple hymn. “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine…this little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine…”

Trip joined in hoping to help soothe his little sister as he wrapped an arm around Fitz and began swaying to the music. “Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”

Jemma moved closer to her brother, certainly not afraid in the absence of light. She knew everything that existed in the light remained in the dark. There were no creatures or monsters sneaking out of the shadows. The only real fear was moving about. A person could trip over something they could not see or fall into something they were not aware of in the dark. She knew that Momma and Da knew the layout of their home and was secure in the fact they would be safe, but she also knew her baby sister was terrified and she wanted to help. She swayed in time with Trip and joined in the song.

“Everywhere I go, I’m going to let it shine…everywhere I go, I’m going to let it shine…” the little girl’s voice blended in harmony with Trip and Gram even though she refused to use incorrect grammar. They finished the verse with a still sobbing Skye joining in on “let it shine.”

“Fitzie’s little butt, it’s really gonna shine, Fitzie’s little butt, it’s really gonna shine, Fitzie’s little butt, it’s really gonna shine…when Da gives him a piece of his mind.” Trip sang, rocking into his brother jovially. The smaller boy huffed and pushed away from him as Jemma failed to suppress a
giggle and Gram scolded her grandson before sniggering herself. Even Skye let out a little giggle before Phil appeared at the door carrying a long taper with a single flame. The little girl’s eyes grew wide as she clapped her hands together and sniffed back her tears.

“Okay, everybody into the living room. I’m going to light the fireplace. We’ll have light and heat.” Phil announced as Melinda stepped around him with a smaller chubby candle. They’d realized their gas furnace would not work without power and although it would take a bit before anyone was truly cold, they were not about to take chances.

Trip pushed himself up off the floor and moved to his grandmother’s side, scooping Skye into his arms and reaching to help the older woman stand. Melinda reached out a hand motioning for Jemma to move toward her, while Fitz sat with his knees up and his face buried behind them. She shook her head at the boy and looked up at Phil. The man stepped aside as Bernice, Trip and Skye exited the room then winked at Melinda as she and Jemma moved to lead the small group to the fireplace. Fitz peeked once at his father then quickly pulled his head back down, mumbling that he’d just stay put.

“Let’s go, MacGyver,” Phil snarled, still slightly upset with the young tinkerer.

Fitz looked up again with a weak smile then pushed himself to stand. He merely stood at his father’s flickering face behind the small light and shuddered at how it made him look demonic. He wrinkled his face and shrugged his shoulders.

“We’ve talked about this, little man.” Phil shook his head. “If you need parts for something, you need to ask. You know I’ll help you find what you need or we’ll get it if it isn’t here.”

Fitz shrugged again. “I guess I forgot.”

“Maybe you need a little reminder?” Phil raised his brows as the boy quickly shook his head and shot both hands behind for protection. “This is why you need to stop taking the flashlights apart, Fitz. What if we had no candles? What if someone was hurt?”

The boy hung his head and mumbled. “I’m sorry, Da.”

Phil pursed his lips and shook his head. “Sometimes sorry’s not enough, buddy, especially when it keeps happening.”
Fitz let out a heavy breath and nodded his agreement. “I won’t do it again.” He looked up and swallowed once. “It won’t happen again, Da. I promise.”

Phil didn’t answer but turned enough to allow the boy to pass into the hall. Fitz looked at him, chewed his lip and took a few steps toward the door never turning his back to his dad. Phil glared down at him as he inched past into the hallway and skirted off toward the light of his mother’s candle. “We’re not done with this Leopold.” Phil called after him, smiling only when he was sure the boy was out of sight. He let out a soft chuckle as he joined his family.

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The fire crackled in the large fireplace casting wriggly shadows on the opposite wall that had Skye just a little apprehensive. She wriggled into the space formed by Trip’s criss crossed legs and watched as he held a long poker topped with a marshmallow into the fire. Melinda had pulled a stack of frozen chocolate bars she’d pulled from the kids’ Halloween bags a few months ago from the back of the freezer. With that, a bag of marshmallows and a box of grahams Trip introduced his younger siblings to the delight of S’mores.

Phil happily volunteered to sample the first attempt taking half the square with his first bite. Skye’s eyebrows reached her bangs as Fitz licked his lips in anticipation. Jemma was not quite so sure, but withstood the sticky mess once she tasted the treat. Skye rapidly became a sticky chocolate mess that she shared with Trip’s, legs, arms and chest as she squirmed and turned to watch the action. The young boy took it all in stride.

Skye squished marshmallow between her fingers as she licked the chocolate off others. “Looka Momma, I gotz pider wezz on mine handses.” She slapped her hands together then pulled them apart slowly causing the sticky mess to string across the space between them. She giggled at the sight then pressed her hands together and repeated it.

“Okay,” Melinda smiled, “I think that’s enough.” She stood and took the little girl into her arms. “Let’s get cleaned up before you are stuck to the floor.”

“I not stuct to a floer, Momma. It bees a coorput. See…” she held out one hand. “It make a futz on mine zingers.”

Melinda grabbed the little hand before it could make contact and noticed Fitz licking the same chocolate marshmallow from his fingers. “Well, we are going to wash anyway. Let’s go Fitz.” The little boy looked up in surprise for a moment before frowning.
“They no lights, Momma.” Skye reminded Melinda as Fitz stepped next to them.

“But there’s lots of water,” Melinda smiled as she kissed the little girl’s cheek quickly, licked the chocolate off her own lips then made her way down the candle lit hallway to the bathroom that sported it’s own collection of small votive lights. She and Phil and lit every candle they could find from long dinner tapers to Christmas gift’s they’d collected over the years and forgotten, to the small votive lights they found in an old box on the closet shelf. It gave the house a rather sacred appearance, especially after Skye announced in a small whisper that they made a ‘choerch’.

Fitz stood at the sink with his hands under the warm running water while Melinda sat Skye on the closed toilet lid and scrubbed her hands and face. “Do you think Da is still mad at me?” He asked without turning to face his mother.

Melinda let out a sigh and snatched Skye’s hand before she could push the washcloth away. “I don’t know Fitz. You might want to talk to him about it.”

The boy let out a fluttery breath and leaned his head on his shoulder. “Trip said I’ma gonna get it. I don’t suppose ‘it’ is a good thing.”

“It not be good, Fizt.” Skye spoke trying to avoid Melinda’s scrubbing as she tossed her head side to side.

Melinda stood back satisfied with what she could clean from Skye’s sticky hands and face then turned, tossed the washrag into the sink and reached over her son to turn off the water. She spun him around and frowned. His hands were more than clean but his face looked as bad as his sister’s. She turned the water on again and rinsed out the rag before taking it to scrub his face as well. He was no easier than Skye and struggled to escape his mother’s ministrations. Backing away from her he stopped when he felt another presence in the doorway.

“Daddy!” Skye squeaked as she reached up wiggly fingers to him. He obliged quickly then gave his wife a quick wink and tossed his head toward the living room as a hint. Fitz backed against the vanity and stared up at his father. Melinda took Skye, patted Fitz’s shoulder and exited the small room.

Phil folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorframe. He narrowed his brow and started to speak, only to be stopped by Fitz’s immediate protest. The little boy held one hand in front of him and one behind.
“You can’t throttle me here, Da.” He spat out quickly. “Everyone will hear.” His worried expression cast a quick glance toward the living room.

“Hmmm,” Phil replied with a slight nod. “I suppose we could step next door, into my office.” He struggled to stifle a smile having come into the room merely to see if Melinda needed help, but couldn’t resist the tease when he saw Fitz’s reaction.

Fitz watched his own feet shuffle a bit, chewed his bottom lip and gave the slightest nod he could manage. Phil stepped back and held out a hand for the boy to pass. Fitz drew a deep breath and let it out slowly before pushing himself away from the cabinet and moving past his father. Phil landed a quick meaningful swat on the boy’s backside that caused Fitz to spin back and throw both hands over his bottom.

Raising one brow, with his hands on his hips, Phil glared down at the boy. “Consider that a last warning. One more and I mean one, Fitz, one more flashlight in pieces and you won’t sit down until I put it back together. Got it?”

Fitz looked up at his father with wide eyes, massaging the slight sting off his posterior. He nodded slowly, knowing that his dad would have a very difficult time reassembling anything if he could do it at all. Nope all those little springs and light bulbs inside a flashlight were not worth a toasted tush.

Phil relaxed his stance and smiled, reaching out a hand to the boy. Fitz returned the smile and took his father’s hand walking back to join the family in the living room.

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Trip used a candle to help his grandmother to the guest room upstairs and stood in the dark hallway while she used it to light the bathroom. He waited in the hall again as she dressed for bed, then kissed her goodnight and made his way back to the family in the living room.

Phil had pulled two large air mattresses from the recesses of the hall closet. He and Melinda had purchased them ages ago when they shared a small apartment in Virginia. The reasoning was perfectly logical. In the three-room flat there was little space for visitors but if they had an overnight guest they’d need something to offer. Both remained unopened since purchased. Phil laughed as he tossed one to Trip and carried the other to the center of the room.
“See, I told you they’d come in handy someday.” Phil smiled at Melinda, who merely rolled her eyes as an answer.

“Momma, how we sleep inna doerk?” Skye pondered as she watched her parents interact. Fitz rolled over in laughter, stopping only when Trip gave him a soft kick with the tip of his sneaker.

“It’s always dark when we sleep, darling.” Jemma explained. “You just don’t see it.”

“I non’t like a doerk.” Skye shook her head. “I non’t like a sleep ina doerk.” Her bottom lip quivered as she looked at her big sister.

“Girl, you don’t have to be scared. We’re gonna have us a big old slumber party.” Trip smiled as he spread one of the mattresses flat on the floor and pulled the switch that self inflated it.

Skye jumped at the pop and soft hissing noise, moving closer to Jemma as their parents did the same with the other mattress. A few minutes later two large brown air filled beds lay on the floor in front of the fireplace.

“We go inna wadder, Momma?” Skye asked with raised brows.

“No baobei, these are special beds for sleeping on the floor.” Melinda explained, shooting a warning glance to the once again hysterically laughing Fitz.

“Them bees all blowed up like a waffs in O-yos poo el. Them big bloats?” Skye was confused and Fitz roared even louder.

“She is correct.” Jemma smiled. “These air mattresses would make excellent floats for Mack’s pool. Several people could use one simultaneously.”

“It would be a island!” Fitz spit through his laughter, moving out of his mother’s reach as she continued to glare at him.
“I non’t wanna sleep inna O-yo’s poo el inna doerk snow.” Skye whined as she leaned on her mother who still knelt on the floor next to the second mattress.

Melinda pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. “We’ll just sleep right here in the living room, baobei.” She pursed her lips and threw Fitz another warning look. The boy threw a hand over his mouth then turned and pushed his face into one of the large throw pillows on the floor. Melinda shook her head and let out a small laugh at his antics.

Phil and Trip made a second trip up the stairs for pillows and blankets, stopping to grab PJ’s for the younger kids. Within a half hour everyone was changed and sorted into sleeping partners for the night. The argument that ensued over who would sleep with whom was soon solved when Phil simply pushed the mattresses together, creating one large sleep-space. The entire family cuddled together in the light of the fire and slept away the storm that lasted through the night and into the next morning.

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Skye was the first to wake, sitting up and rubbing one eye before blinking at the dull light that shone through the front window. She smiled at the forms of her family spread around her. At some point during the night Trip had given up wrestling Fitz for bed space and crawled onto the couch. His sock covered feet stuck up over the end of his new resting spot. Fitz was sprawled out across the mattress with Jemma curled up on the seam that joined the two pseudo-beds together. Momma and Daddy were on either side of her as she squirmed out from beneath the blanket and crawled to the bottom of the makeshift bed and sat for a second before standing. She padded over to her brother and stood watching him sleep. He made funny little noises that almost sounded like Daddy but were not as loud.

The little girl smiled as she turned and walked away from her brother making a stop in the bathroom before heading for the kitchen. She climbed onto the window seat and stood, pushing the curtains apart to peer out into the winter wonderland that now filled the back yard. The snow was still falling but not as hard as the day before. Skye could see the garage and the cars in the driveway that looked mostly like mountains of white. The snow was now even with the deck outside the backdoor and the little girl wondered if she could just walk across it. She turned and plopped down listening to the clock ticking above her. Rarely was it quiet in the Coulson household and rarely was Skye part of that quiet.

She slid to the floor with a gentle thud and wandered into the mud room. If she was going to walk across that big snow she’d need her boots. Skye looked at the row of boots then frowned at the fact that hers were last in the line. She dropped to the floor and pulled one shiny red boot on to the wrong foot, wiggling her bare toes in the soft fur that lined the inside. Once the second boot was snug on the opposite foot, the little girl stood and walked back to the door that led to the deck. She turned the little flat button on the knob that unlocked the door and looked up at the chain that
Daddy always slipped across it at night, but it was dark and they didn’t come to the kitchen so he must have forgotten because it dangled against the frame. She smiled as she used two hands to turn the knob and pull the door open. The gust of cold air surprised but did not deter the little girl.

Everything was white. The table on the deck sported what looked to Skye like a giant cake. It was completely round and stood higher than she could reach. The chairs looked like they wore puffy white coats. The rail that encompassed the deck had the same pile of snow, so high Skye could not see over it. She pushed against the outer storm door then pressed her nose against the cold glass to see why it would not move. The snow that had fallen on the deck was piled almost to the bottom of the window. Skye frowned at the fact that it might keep her from her target then used both hands and all of her tiny might to push against the aluminum door until the white stuff moved just enough for her to squeeze her skinny body outside. The wind blew the door shut with a bang and Skye stood almost waist deep in the snow clad in red snow boots and Elmo PJ’s.

Melinda jumped at the sound of the loud bang and reached out to calm her baby quickly opening her eyes when she did not immediately feel the little body between her and Phil. She sat up and looked from side to side, checking to see if Skye had cuddled up next to one of the other kids. Fitz and Jemma were still asleep, with him sideways across the bed while she stretched out on the edge. Not seeing Trip she breathed easy for a moment, thinking the older boy had risen with or before their little whirlwind and was keeping her quiet in the playroom. That thought dissolved when she heard the soft snore from her eldest half on/half off the sofa.

“Great,” she grumbled as she squinted at the grandfather clock in the corner. It was almost seven and her littlest was already up and at ’em. Melinda wriggled herself free of blankets and children and slid to the bottom of the mattress, sliding off onto her knees before standing. Phil mumbled something then turned over and snored again.

Melinda put her hands on her back and stretched in reverse. Sleeping on a crap mattress shared with five other people was murder on the spine. She smiled at her spouse sarcastically. “No, no don’t get up…I’m fine. I’ll take care of everything.” She grumbled quietly as she headed for the family room.

“Oh, baobei, what are you int…” she stopped, staring into the empty, quiet room and looked in all directions before stepping back out and into the powder room. It was apparent the little girl had been there. The tissue was wound down to the floor, vanity door ajar and the water not quite turned off all the way. She would get points for flushing, though. Melinda rewound the paper, closed the door and turned off the spigot before stepping out of the room and calling the little girl’s name softly.

“Well,” Bernice’s jovial voice came from above as she walked down the stairs. Melinda looked up and smiled.
“How was the little camping expedition? Sleep well?” The older woman asked as she stepped next to Melinda and rubbed a warm hand up and down her back.

“Ugh,” Melinda groaned. “Now, I know why I never took up scouting.”

Both women laughed. “Well, I’ll just put on a kettle and we’ll share a nice cup of tea before the rest of the troupe is awake.” Bernice smiled.

Melinda shook her head. “Too late, my little yěshēng hóuzǐ³ and probably into something already.”

Bernice put an arm around the younger woman’s shoulders and gave her a quick half hug. “Lord, you have your hands full with that one. She is a hornet in a handbag.” She laughed as the women walked toward the kitchen.

The outside air had pulled the back door closed enough that neither noticed and the outside door was closed enough to prevent a quickly noticeable draft. Bernice filled the kettle and set it on the stove. Melinda was sure she would find Skye with her hand in a bag of cookies or pulling out a juice box from the refrigerator. Not seeing the little girl had her worried. If her baby was upstairs, surely Bernice would have noticed. The soft thud of the back door bumping against the frame caught both women’s attention.

“Skye,” Melinda breathed as she raced to pull the door open. Bernice was a few steps behind frantically saying something about bare feet. Melinda pushed the screen door open as far as it would go and felt the bottom of her gut drop as she stared at the Skye sized patch plowed through snow and the two tiny handprints in the tall snowdrift that was the outside table. She ran across the deck as quickly as the snow pile would allow and looked down at the little body poking out of a large drift on the back stairs. She grabbed the child and pulled her up, wrapping her in a tight embrace and rushing back to the door where Bernice waited with a blanket she had grabbed from the back of the family room sofa.

Melinda stared at the little girl, whose lips were tinged a purplish blue. Skye was awake and alert, frowning at her mother. “Mine bootses comed out inna snow. You no let me getted them. I needa walk inna top but it bees too smushie.” She complained.

Melinda breathed a sigh of relief as she stood her baby on the table and pulled off the wet pajamas dropping them to the floor. Skye’s body was ice cold and Melinda’s relief slowly turned to distress with the little girl. She let out a breath and landed two firm pops on the little girl’s unclad
“Don’t you ever do anything like that again, Skye!” She shook a finger at the little girl’s nose then pulled her into a tight hug as Bernice wrapped the now naked little girl in the large covering.

Skye was wailing as Phil rushed bleary eyed into the kitchen, finally roused by the commotion. He blinked a few times before asking what the problem was, then cringed as he stepped onto Skye’s freezing sodden pajamas still on the floor. Melinda sat with a bundled Skye in her lap, rocking the sobbing child while tears ran over her own cheeks. Why hadn’t she checked the kitchen first? Dear God, what if she hadn’t found her?

Phil stared at his wife and the form of his baby covered completely in the blanket that usually graced the back of the couch in the family room. Bernice explained as she pulled Melinda to her feet and headed for the stairs. Skye needed to get warm and the best way to do that was a nice warm bath. She’d get the little girl into the tub and make sure Melinda warmed up as well.

An hour later both Melinda and Skye were warm and dry. Phil had fished Skye’s boots out of the snow bank and set them to dry well out of her reach. He also apologized repeatedly for neglecting to fasten the chain lock, something Melinda told him they would discuss later. Jemma was appalled that her little sister would venture out into the cold without proper clothing and lit into a more than vivid description of frostbite, examining Skye’s little fingers and toes just to be sure.

Fitz was amazed at Skye’s intrepid style and Trip marveled, “Girl, you are gonna be the death of all of us with your wild ideas.” He shook his head and kissed her cheek as he bounced her on his hip.

“No jump me, Terrip,” Skye frowned. “Momma put a spank on mine bum-bum right heeore.” She pointed toward her backside and jutted out her bottom lip.

Trip leaned forward and rested his forehead against hers. “You scared Momma, big time baby girl. You can’t go wanderin’ out in the too deep snow all by your lonesome. What would we do if we lost you?” He sort of baby talked to her.

Skye shrugged her shoulders as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “I non’t be lostid onna poretch, Terrip.”

Melinda smiled as she took the little girl from her brother and sat her in her chair at the table. “And Skye will never ever do that again or Momma will put a lot more spank on her bum-bum.” She tapped the little girl’s nose as Bernice set a plate of waffles piled with strawberries and whipped cream in front of her.
Skye jutted out her bottom lip and looked over her brows at her mother. “Māmā wǒ ài ni,” she whispered softly. “I stay heere foe ebber still?”

Melinda bent down to hug her little one. “I love you very, very much bao bao and I…we would be very sad if something happened to you. The snow is very cold and can make you very sick or hurt you so much Momma wouldn’t be able to help you.” She spoke as she brushed the hair from Skye’s face. “And yes, baobei, you will stay here forever.”

“If you don’t manage to kill yourself doing something so daft,” Fitz mumbled.

“Fitz,” Melinda growled a slow warning. “Would you like a spank of your own?”

The little boy shook his head and quickly dug into his breakfast. This time Trip and Jemma laughed.

Trip sat down next to his baby sister and dug into his own portion of the great breakfast Gram had prepared. Fitz was already on his second helping and Jemma had managed to eat all of the strawberries off the top of her waffle. Phil wrapped his arm around Melinda well aware of the shiver still going through her. They’d narrowly missed a tragedy and they knew it. He kissed her cheek and pulled her close.

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By noon the snow had finally stopped after dumping almost two feet across the region. Everyone suited up in jackets, snow pants and boots to begin the clean up process. For as much as Skye begged and insisted on going out in the wonderland she wore out quickly, finding it very difficult to move through snow that rose to her underarms. She plodded along behind her father and Trip as they dug their way to the driveway then followed the paths Fitz plowed through the drifts with his body, although he too had a difficult time maneuvering in the deep white stuff. In truth the little girl lasted longer than anyone thought she would but after a half and hour of battling the terrain Skye was done. Before Melinda had her fully undressed her baby was asleep. The power had come back on right before the family went outside so Skye was tucked safely in her own bed to nap for the afternoon.

Bernice was anxious to get back to her apartment and especially to check on Spunk although she
was pretty sure the old tabby probably slept through everything. She busied herself with baking two batches of cookies and a large pot of steaming hot cocoa for the workers when they tired of digging. It would probably take most of the afternoon and probably tomorrow to get everything dug out.

The family shared a fine stew created by what Bernice described as something thrown together when it’s time to clean out the fridge. There was no recipe to share because it just was a little of this and little of that. Almost everyone had seconds then enjoyed a slice of fresh baked cherry pie. Trip escorted his grandmother to her apartment then stayed for the night. The rest of the Coulson family enjoyed the comforts of the own beds although Skye wondered when they could sleep on the rafts again.

Schools remained closed for the week and the family weathered the ‘storm’ of being a little too close together. By midweek Phil traipsed all the kids to the local park for an afternoon of sledding that had the entire crew down for the night by seven and gave mom and dad the whole evening to spend together.

Skye finally got to make her ‘snopen’ which turned out to be a snowman, complete with stick arms, a carrot nose and an old derby Phil pulled out of a box in the garage. It stood for about a week before the warm rays of Spring sun shine melted it back into nature. At the little girl’s pout Jemma explained.

“He’s just gone back into the earth, Skye and next time it snows we’ll be able to build him again. We’ll keep all of his buttons and cap until then. And if you leave the carrot under the brush in the garden, the bunnies will have a feast.”

Skye smiled and pulled the now wilted carrot from the pile of slush, took Jemma’s hand and raced toward the back yard.

¹ If you continue to make such a fuss, I will give you a reason to cry.

² My Girl’ - The Temptations (1964), Motown Records
Melinda stood at the ticket counter, bouncing a restless Skye on one hip and balancing a large bag on the opposite shoulder. Jemma stood on tiptoe next to her, trying to peer over the tall desk. The woman let out a frustrated breath as the clerk walked away for the third time. More and more she realized what an asinine plan this was.

Phil had taken the boys to New York City with him two days previously, saying it was a great time to do some father/son bonding. All of the local schools where on Spring break so neither Fitz nor Trip would miss any school time. He’d be sure to take them to Madison Square Garden for a Nicks game and hit at least one or two of the museums on Fitz’s very long list. Melinda would follow with the girls on the weekend, giving her time to complete plans for a concert venue in Baltimore and give Jemma time to recover from oral surgery planned for Thursday. Both parents were more than sure Skye would not enjoy the plans daddy had for sports and engineering. Saturday would be time for the Central Park Zoo. Of course no trip to the Big Apple would be complete without a visit to Lady Liberty and Ellis Island. Phil had already secured tickets for Cats at the Winter Garden. Everything was laid out and planned.

Except the damn, ticket mix up at Union Station…

“I am truly sorry for the mix-up, ma’am.” The young woman in the starched white shirt frowned up at Melinda.

“So you’ve said,” Melinda sighed, grabbing Skye’s hand before she snatched a handful of pens from a cup on the counter. She shook her head at her baby and looked back to the young woman. “I don’t understand what the problem is. My husband purchased all of the tickets a month ago.”

“Yes, ma’am, we have verified the sale, but apparently someone overbooked the car and sold the same tickets twice. I assure you, we will have you on the train. We are just working out the details.” The clerk explained again.
“I be wit Jemma, momma? I be down the groun?” Skye pleaded, placing both palms on her mother’s cheeks to pull her head come face to face.

“No, baobei,” Melinda whispered as she shook her head. “You stay with momma right now.”

Despite the fact that Melinda was as quiet and gentle as possible, given the situation, Skye had had enough. She panted a few times before throwing back her head and letting out a wail that stopped everyone within earshot. Melinda cringed, knowing this would last longer than it took Miss Clerk to figure out the ticket mess and she had no intention of apologizing for her distraught child since she pretty much felt like screaming herself.

“I can hold her, Momma. Perhaps we can stroll a bit, just here near the counter.” Jemma offered

Melinda looked down at her older daughter and shook her head. She trusted Jemma wholeheartedly, but Skye, especially an upset Skye was like trying to hold on to a Tasmanian Devil on speed. “Thank you, Jemma, but we’ll be finished shortly.” She rocked Skye a little faster, while patting her back and trying to push the little girl’s head down to rest on her shoulder.

The young clerk returned holding an envelope which she passed under the grate to Melinda and spoke loud enough to be heard over Skye’s bellowing. “We’ve upgraded your tickets to first class, including all of the other passengers as well.” She smiled broadly. “I hope we were able to satisfy your needs today and you will consider traveling with us in the future.”

Anything Melinda might have said could not have been said in front of her children, although neither could possibly hear her. She merely glared at he woman, adjusted her screaming, squirming baby, grabbed Jemma’s hand and set off toward the boarding platform.

Ten minutes later, Melinda plunked a now sniffling Skye onto the large leather seat and directed Jemma to join her. She set the large bag she’d been carrying on to seat with the intention of dropping on down on the one opposite her children. With any luck Skye would be asleep within the hour and Jemma was never a problem, Melinda would rest her eyes a bit before the first stop in Philadelphia. It was a little over two hours and then another two to Gran Central. That should have been a quick trip, with her little one asleep for most of it. The snafu with the tickets had added another forty-five minutes to the mix.

Now, Skye was grumpy and Jemma was anxious due to her sister’s outburst. Melinda smiled at both of them as she helped them get comfortable and pulled Skye’s favorite blanket from the large bag. Her bottom almost touched down on the soft seat when the conductor tapped her on the shoulder. She stood up and looked at the man who smiled an odd smile as he shook his head.
“I’m sorry, ma’am, but there is an issue with your baggage. If you can just step out of the car with me for a few minutes, I am sure we can resolve the matter quickly.” The man sighed.

Melinda let out something between a frustrated breath and a ferocious snarl. The man stepped back quickly. She smiled with just her lips and turned back to her daughters. “Jemma, I have to go with the conductor for just a little bit. I need you to stay right here with Skye.” She spoke firmly to the little girl.

Jemma nodded and reached for her sister’s hand. “Yes, momma, I understand.”

“Do not leave this seat, either of you.” Melinda warned as she tucked Skye’s blanket around her and placed a kiss on both girls’ foreheads before following the middle-aged man back out to the platform.

Skye pulled herself to her knees and turned to watch over the back of the seat. “Momma leaf us here, Jemma. Hoer come back a us?”

Jemma watched the heated argument her mother and two well dressed gentlemen were having outside the car. She let out a soft breath and reached to help Skye return to her seat. “No, darling, momma is just talking with the conductor and his friend. She’ll be back very soon.” She smiled.

Skye bounced back to her knees and pushed her face against the window. “Momma look mad to them guys, Jemma.” She looked back over her shoulder. “Hoer gonna be non’t happy to emmybody.”

“It’s okay, baobei,” Jemma crooned as she pulled her little sister away from the window and wrapped an arm around her. “Momma’s just tired.”

“No, needa take a nap, Jemma?” Skye looked up at her sister who smiled and nodded back.

For a few minutes Skye was quiet, resting her head against Jemma’s shoulder while picking at the fuzz on the pale blue blanket. Her thumb slowly found its way to her lips and Jemma was sure the little girl had drifted off to sleep. She smiled and rested her head against the tall seat back. She looked out the window at her mother standing with her arms over her chest glaring at the two men.
“Jemma?” Skye’s voice caused the older girl to jump just a bit. She looked down at her little sister silently answering her. “I haffa pee-pee.”

“Oh, Skye, do you really? Can’t you wait for momma?” Jemma looked to see if her mother was heading back to the car.

Skye shook her head rapidly. “I no wait a mint, Jemma. The pee-pee comin’ now.” She slid off the seat and bounced on her toes.

Jemma looked from her sister to her mother, weighing the consequences of disobeying against the muddle of Skye having an ‘accident’ that could have been prevented. Besides if momma didn’t get back quickly Skye would shed her soiled clothing and be more than content to sit in her birthday suit while she waited. She looked in all directions. There had to be a rest room. People could not be expected to travel long distances without one.

Skye took her sister’s hand and tugged. “Mon, Jemma, I needa pee-pee faster.”

Jemma slipped to the floor and wrapped her little sister’s hand in her own. “You mustn’t let go of my hand, Skye.” She looked left and right then spotted a sign at the far end of the car. Making her way around the passengers who had entered and were stowing their bags, Jemma kept a tight hold on Skye. Finally reaching the door she pressed on the odd shaped handle but it did not release. She tried again using one hand since she refused to release Skye to try with two.

“It’s not working.” A snarky voice sounded from behind her.

Jemma spun to see a young boy, a few years older than her pointing up to the red light lit at the top of the door. How could it be out of order? What would the passengers do on their journey?

“There’s another in the next car.” The boy remarked as he slouched down in his seat away from them.

Jemma already felt apprehensive about leaving the seat her mother had insisted she and Skye remain in until she returned, leaving the car was almost traumatic. Skye was jumping up and down and Jemma knew she did not have much time. She quietly thanked the boy and tugged Skye toward the cabin door.

The girls had very little luck at the second restroom door as the red light was lit above it as well and now Skye was almost in tears. A rather large older woman attempted to squeeze by the girls
carrying one bag and dragging a second. “Hello, ladies,” she smiled down at them. “Are you trying to use the ladies room?” Jemma nodded as Skye tuck a hand between her legs and bounced from foot to foot. “Oh, sweetie, they won’t work until the train is moving, but you can just make it to the restroom if you hurry.” She nodded toward the window then sidestepped her way down the aisle toward her seat.

Jemma looked in the direction the woman nodded and spied the station restroom across the platform. She looked down at her desperate sister and let out a quick breath. “Come, Skye we must hurry. Momma will not be happy that we’ve left our seat.” She pulled the smaller girl toward the door and stepped down the metal steps. Skye had to run to keep up but both girls pushed into the ladies room within seconds. Jemma slammed open the first stall door, yanked her little sister’s jeans to her ankles and plopped her on the bowl just in time.

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Melinda pulled her wallet from the inside pocket of her jacket and flipped her badge toward the conductor and the Marshall that questioned the weapon found in her baggage. She explained over and over her business and the fact that she and her husband always carried their weapons when traveling, but always in checked luggage. CHECKED luggage! What was the problem? Did they think she was about to sneak into the baggage car dragging a cranky toddler and small girl behind her? It was checked, locked….damn it, double locked to prevent any accident and the damn thing wasn’t loaded. She would never carry a loaded weapon unless she was working and that work required it.

“Is that the only weapon you are traveling with, Mrs. Coulson?” The Marshall accused more than inquired.

Melinda closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I have already explained to you what I do for a living and I’ve shown you my ID and license. The weapon is checked in baggage. I don’t understand the problem.” She looked over her shoulder at the car where she left her girls and hoped Jemma was not having a problem with her sister.

The conductor looked at the Marshall then looked away quickly. “We are aware of the altercation with the ticket clerk, ma’am. We just want to be sure you’re not harboring pent up anger over the situation?” The Marshall smiled.

“Altercation?” Melinda growled. “There was no altercation. Your company screwed up the tickets and had no intention of owning up to their mistake.”

“Things did get a little out of control.” The man raised his brows.
“Out of control?” Melinda narrowed her eyes. What the hell was this guy talking about? She had not even raised her voice at that moronic clerk who did nothing but double talk and took her good natured time to do anything other that stare at the tickets.

“Perhaps a little loud would be a more appropriate description.” The man corrected himself.

Melinda grit her teeth and clenched her fists doing everything possible to hold her temper. “Are you referring to my child’s crying?” The man pursed his lips and nodded. Melinda took a step toward him. “She is four years old and she’d had enough. She is tired and was forced to stand listening to that clerk make excuses for almost an hour. I had no intention of putting her down or letting her run wild in your station, so she let everyone know just how she felt. Is that what you are calling an altercation? Are you accusing a child because…”

The Marshall smiled and held out both hands. “No, no, that’s not what I’m saying. We are just concerned after finding your weapon, but I see now that everything is order and I’m sure there will be no further outbursts.”

Melinda snorted as a wide smile crossed her face. “You don’t know Skye.” She scoffed.

The train whistle sounded once, alerting passengers to prepare for motion. The steam engines hissed and the train lurched forward an inch. “You’d best get aboard, ma’am.” The conductor held out a hand toward the car. Melinda shook her head and let out a long breath then stepped passed the man. “Have a pleasant journey.” He commented as she climbed the short stairs. Melinda did not turn or respond.

She took three steps into the car before the train started moving and had to dig her nails into the closest seat holding on until her equilibrium matched that of the train’s motion. She took a deep breath and reigned in the anger she did not wish to release on her girls. Slowly making her way toward her seat she smiled at passengers who looked up as she passed.

“Okay, ladies,” she smiled as she reached the seat where she’d left her daughters. “We…Damn!” she spit seeing the empty seat. “What the hell else…” She turned and looked in both directions looking for the girls. Hopefully they’d just moved to look out a window. She told herself then laughed silently. She walked the length of the car and then back peering into every seat. Skye was a busy body and it would be just like her to go visiting anyone that looked interesting or had any item that held even the slightest curiosity. Melinda made her way back to her seat and pushed down the panic that threatened to take over her resolve. For a moment she stared at the white call button on the wall that would summon that damn conductor. She wasn’t even sure she could look at the man let alone speak to him again. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and hit it hard.
Jemma righted her little sister’s clothing, smiling at the fact they’d both avoiding certain disaster. She pushed the flusher with her foot and pulled the stall door open, ushering Skye into the dim interior of the rail station rest room. Jemma frowned at the row of sinks that would be impossible for the smaller girl to reach until spying the last sink in the row and thanking whoever was responsible for the ADA¹ in the station. She hurried Skye to the lower sink and held her up so she could wash her hands.

“Why this sink be liddle, Jemma?” Skye asked as the water ran over her hands. “It be foe liddle kid a like me?”

“It’s for those who use wheel chairs, sweetheart. They aren’t able to reach the higher sinks.” Jemma explained, looking over her sister’s shoulder to be sure she did in fact use soap and water.

“I no haffa weed chayer. It okay I use a liddle sink?” Skye wondered.

“Of course it is, baobei.” Jemma assure her as she set her on the floor and pulled out a few paper towels to help Skye dry her hands. “Now, we must hurry back so momma isn’t all out of sorts because we left our seat.” She smiled at Skye who smiled back and took her sister’s hand.

Jemma maneuvered through the ladies waiting for stalls and those primping in front of mirrors to push open the large door and step into the crowded platform area. She stopped for a moment looking for the correct platform number then started in that direction, pulling Skye behind her. The girls weaved in and out of tourists and business people, skirted around pieces of luggage and slipped around a large cart before stopping at the boarding area for the train they had left a few minutes ago.

Jemma’s mouth dropped open at the site of the empty track. Skye looked up and down the line then shrugged her shoulders. “Sun bunny take-ed our chayors onna choo choo, Jemma. Where it go?” She raised the hand Jemma wasn’t holding as she asked.

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“They’ve probably just made their way into another car.” The conductor suggested, keeping his
distance from the angry woman. “Perhaps they were hungry and sought out the dining car.”

“I told them to stay put.” Melinda repeated as she followed the man toward the door that lead to the adjoining car.

He laughed under his breath. “Children don’t always do as they’re told now, do they.” He smiled back.

“My children do.” May exhaled.

‘Sure they do,’ the man rolled his eyes, thankful the woman was behind him. ‘Your kids are just perfect. I bet.’ He slid open the door on the next car and waited for her to step through before following.

For the next ten minutes the conductor, Harry James, and Melinda searched each car then turned and searched again on the way back. Melinda had opened the restroom doors on every car and waited if any were occupied to greet the person exiting. She repeated the action on the return trip waiting at the door of the stall in the car before first class. She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot then smiled at the stout little woman who stepped next to her, apparently thinking Melinda was waiting to use the facilities.

“Didn’t you come through ere just a few minutes ago, dear?” The little woman smiled. Melinda nodded. “The conductor asked if anyone had seen two children. Are you looking for a little girl with an adorable British accent?” She raised her eyebrows and smiled even wider.

Melinda dropped her arms and grabbed the woman’s shoulders. “You saw them?”

The woman looked at the hands grasping her and then into the face of the woman who seemed quite beside herself. “Yes, dear. They were right here. The little one didn’t say a word but I suspect she needed to use the potty.” She smiled and tossed her head toward the restroom door.

“Where did they go?” Melinda forced herself not to shake the older woman.

“Well dear, the toilets don’t work when the train is stopped. I pointed out the restroom out on the platform and told the little Brit she would need to hur…”
Melinda was gone before the woman finished. She slammed the door aside and passed into the first class car on the heels of the conductor catching him by the collar and spinning him to face her. “That woman told you about my girls and you chose not to tell me?” Now, she was yelling. Now, this was an altercation and if so many eyes weren’t watching she knew she would throttle the man.

He looked at her with wide eyes. “The kid was British…I didn’t…you…she…”

Melinda gave the man a rough shake and released him. He fell backward grabbing the seats on either side of the aisle to keep from landing on his backside between them. She snatched his collar yanking him back up, then shook him again.

“You!” she pointed in his face, so close that he squeezed his eyes shut. Melinda pulled the man close. She lowered her voice and growled in his ear. “You are going to stop this train.”

He was shaking his head before she released him. “I…I…c-can’t do that. N-no one c-can.” He stammered.

She spun him around and shoved him hard. “Move,” she commanded, pushing him forward toward the exit door that led to the engine. “Let’s find someone who can.”

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Jemma stood for a few seconds, rapidly going through the steps she now needed to take. She blinked back the tears of panic that threatened to break her and smiled down at the little girl next to her. The first step would be explaining the situation to Skye without sending her into another screaming session.

“It appears the train has left, Skye.” She smiled again.

Skye looked down the track and then back up at her sister. “It come back?” She furrowed her brows, clearly confused by the explanation then looked over her shoulder before turning completely around without losing her sister’s grip. “Where Momma?”
Jemma tensed. The tone in Skye’s voice was definitely a harbinger to her wailing and there was no way she’d be able to comfort her. The fact was if Skye started sobbing, Jemma was pretty sure she would just sit down and join her. This was a horrid situation and in her panic she was having a very difficult time planning what she should do and just how to do it.

“Jemma,” Skye was tugging on her jacket. “Where Momma, Jemma?” She tugged again. “Momma onna choo choo, Jemma?” The little girl’s voice cracked.

Jemma wasn’t taking any chances. She pulled Skye from the end of the platform toward a row of wooden benches and moved to the farthest corner of that area. She pushed her little sister on to the bench and sat down beside her then wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

“I think Momma, might be on the train Skye.” Jemma whispered.

Skye was shaking her head. “No, no, no, Jemma. Momma not go way. Who watch us?” Skye spoke through her tears, scrubbing them away from her eyes as quickly as they trickled down. “I needa Momma, hoer is mine momma. Her no leff me heore.” Skye sobbed. Jemma could feel the little girl shaking and knew she was doing so as well. She pulled her little sister closer and held her tightly.

“It’s okay, baobei,” Jemma lied. “We’re going to be quite alright. Momma will find us. We’ll go talk to the nice clerk that momma spoke to earlier. I’m sure she’ll know what to do.” She kissed the top of Skye’s head, stood and help her down from the bench.

Skye wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve, causing Jemma to cringe. Momma would have Kleenex. She’d make sure Skye was clean and sanitary.

“How no bees a nice lady, Jemma. Hoer make-ed momma mad to her. Momma non’t like-a that lady. No me like-a hoer too.” Skye shook her head as she followed her big sister, then stopped effectively halting Jemma as well. “Why we go na baffroom? I non’t haffa go pee-pee. You haffa pee-pee?”

Jemma blushed at the people smiling as they passed. Skye was nothing if not loud. “No, dear, but you do need to wash your hands and I am hoping there are tissues available there.” The smaller girl scrunched up her face and shrugged her shoulders before starting again.

xx
“What do you mean, you can’t stop?” Melinda growled at the assistant conductor, who seemed to have more on the ball than his superior.

“It’s not like a car, Mrs. Coulson. We can’t just pull over. Stopping could be a catastrophe. All trains run on strict schedules. It’s like a domino effect. If we stop this train, we mess up a lot of others and if they don’t stop fast enough it could mean a disaster.” He frowned as he shook his head. “We’ll be in Phillie in about…” he pulled a trademark pocket watch from his vest “…forty minutes.”

“You don’t understand my nine-year-old and my four-year-old are alone in that station.” Melinda was almost pleading.

“I do understand, ma’am. I’ve got kids of my own and I’d be frantic if I were you. Even if we could stop, we’re in the middle of nowhere. You’d be stranded. We’ve called the station to make them aware of the situation. They’ve probably got your girls nice and cozy in some muckity-muck’s office by now. We’ll get you on a return train at Thirtieth Street and have you back in DC in a few hours.”

Melinda let out a frustrated breath as she looked away from the man. She knew he was right. There was nothing she could do. Even if it were possible to contact Phil, there was nothing he could do except worry and she didn’t want him feeling as she did. He’d probably be shuffling the boys into the first train he could and heading back himself. She almost laughed at the absurdity. It would be close to three hours before he could get back to Union Station. She’d be there before that. Melinda looked at the man, who had been calm and patient with her tirade.

By the time Melinda returned to her seat she was mentally exhausted. She dropped down and stared at the foliage as the train passed. She could hear Skye’s many questions and Jemma’s more than detailed explanations. The soft blue blanket still lay on the seat opposite her. She pulled it into her arms hugging it close. The scent of Skye’s shampoo and baby bath lingered in the material. She rubbed it against her cheek to catch the tears she could not stop.

xx

Apparently the proximity of a lavatory had a definite effect on the elimination system of a four year old because as soon as Jemma led her baby sister into the ladies room, Skye announced in her loudest voice that she did indeed have to go. Once again Jemma pushed open the stall door and ushered Skye inside. A few seconds later she hefted the smaller girl up to one of the sinks to wash her hands. This lavatory had no paper hand towels but used forced air to dry freshly washed hands. Those machines stood much higher than the average four year old stood and Skye was
quite less than average height. Even on her tip toes she barely reached the breeze but found standing under the nozzle while her hair blew in all directions absolutely fascinating.

“Looka me, Jemma!” The little girl giggled. “The wind blowded mine hairs all in everywhere.” She turned in a circle allowing the air to toss her shoulder length hair wildly.

Jemma shook her head. “It is quite amusing, Skye, but you’re to be drying your hands.”

Skye continued to spin in a circle. “I non’t reach a it.” She threw her hands above her head and spun in the opposite direction, lost her balance and sat down with a thud. Jemma held her breath, certain her little sister would begin wailing in distress, but instead Skye giggled again as she wobbled side to side. “Jemma, the baffroom goin’ round a round.”

Now, Jemma giggled as she reached to help Skye stand. “No, darling. You’ve just destabilized your equilibrium by rotating for such an extended amount of time.” Jemma let out a long breath. “And now you will need to wash your hands again. This floor is quite unsanitary.” With that she turned back toward the sink before realizing that Skye would be wobbling more than walking until she heard the clunk followed by the familiar squeal of ‘Skye’s been hurt’.

“Momma!” Skye wailed, pushing her sister’s attempted comfort aside.

Jemma winced at the large blue bump at her little sister’s hairline. “Oh, baobei,” she shushed the little girl, tugging her to her feet and wrapping her in the most affectionate hug she could manage. Jemma knew something cold would help with Skye’s bump, but also knew Skye would fight tooth and nail to keep anyone or anything from touching the injury.

“I bleedin, Jemma?” Skye sobbed into her sister’s belly.

“No, no, bao bao, there is no blood, just a bump.” Jemma soothed her sister.

Skye sobbed for a few seconds before looking up at her big sister. “I non’t wanna bant ade on to mine head.” She reached up with one hand to cover the spot.

Jemma shook her head. “No, baobei, no patch, nothing at all, just a little kiss to make it better.” She bent down and placed a soft kiss on the top of Skye’s head, careful not to touch anywhere near the slight injury.
“I wan momma.” Skye sniffled as she hugged her sister again. “I needa hoer to make mine boo-boo to be gone.”

“Alright, sweetheart, let’s wash your hands and face, first. We’ll see Momma soon.” Jemma smiled down at her little sister.

Skye pressed closer to Jemma and shook her head. “I non’t wanna wash-a mine hands o faces, Jemma. The towl wind make me to fall down all again. I no like-a it noen more.”

Jemma sighed. It really wasn’t worth the battle to force Skye to wash but now she was a teary, sniffly mess and truly needed to be tidied up more than just a little bit. Momma would have wipies in her bag. Momma would have everything they needed. Right now, she just wanted to clean her sister and get out of this lavatory. Women were staring and she had no problem overhearing some of the comments they made.

Most of the ladies that moved in and out of the restroom merely ‘tsk-tsked’ the pair, others simply ignored them but some said things about how some mother’s did not care much for their children or where was the mother and why was that little girl responsible for that baby. The scariest thing Jemma overheard was one woman who felt she and her companion should alert the station police and have these children turned over to social services. After all they were unaccompanied and probably neglected as well. The friend asked if perhaps they could have been abandoned or maybe homeless waifs living in the station illegally.

Jemma watched as the two women glared at her and Skye before they exited the lavatory, still discussing what they should do as concerned citizens. If Skye wasn’t all slobbery she would just take her and make a dash for the ticket office where she could speak to the clerk and tell her what had happened.

“Excuse me, sweetie…”

Jemma jumped at the soft touch to her shoulder and looked up into the eyes of a woman who held a baby much younger than Skye in her arms. She held Skye closer and moved away.

“It’s okay, honey. I just thought you might be able to use these. They have no towels or anything to wash little ones hands or faces and well…you seem to have your hands full.” The woman held out a small pack of ‘wet ones’. When Jemma just stared back and made no move to accept the offering, the woman smiled again and shook the pack gently. “It’s okay, I’ve got more. You can have these.”
“Thank you,” Jemma whispered as she took the pack.

The woman stood and adjusted the baby on her hip. She looked from side to side then back to the little girls before her. “Where’s your mommy? Is she here?”

Jemma thought for a moment. It probably would not be wise to tell this lady or anyone the truth. That other lady said that Children Services should take her and Skye. Jemma knew what that meant. A social worker would take them, maybe even keep them away from Momma and Da. They’d blame Momma for losing them and maybe say she couldn’t be their Momma any more. She wasn’t sure that could happen but she didn’t know much about the law or how adoptions worked exactly. It didn’t seem like they could take them away but she knew a social worker would terrify Skye and she would not let that happen.

“She’s got a terrible stomach ache and had to use the loo. I’m just looking after my sister for a bit. I’m afraid I’ve not done a very good job. She has quiet a contusion on her head. Momma will be concerned.” Jemma frowned.

The woman looked at the row of stalls, each occupied, and nodded her understanding. “I’m sure she’ll understand and it doesn’t look to be very serious, just a little bump.” The baby on the woman’s hip began to fuss and she bounced him a little bit.

“Thank you again for the wipes.” Jemma smiled, hoping the woman would go away.

“I’m glad I could help, honey.” The baby began to cry. The woman shushed him and bounced again as she turned to leave. “Have a nice trip, hope your mom feels better.” She backed away a few steps then turned, pushed open the door and disappeared into the crowd.

Skye released her grip on her sister as Jemma let out a relieved sigh. “You tellded a lie, Jemma. Sisser Dannel sayed it be a sinna tella lie. Hoer sayed if you tellded a lie you go da Hell for all ever.” The little girl nodded her head as she explained this fact.

Jemma pulled a wet wipe from the small package and began wiping Skye’s face. “Sometimes it is necessary to tell an untruth in order to avert something worse.” The older girl breathed. “And you should not say Hell, Skye.”

Skye scrunched up her face as she tried to avoid her sister’s attention. Sometimes it was very hard
to understand her big sister and Fitz wasn’t there to help. “Sisser Danell sayed it. I non’t say it. Momma put a spank on Fitz when he sayed bad woerds. I non’t want no spank on mine bum.”

Jemma stood back a bit and looked at her little sister. Satisfied that she was clean, she snapped the small pack of wipies closed and pushed them into her jacket pocket. She was certain she’d need them again.

“Okay,” she smiled with false confidence. “Let’s go find Momma.” Taking Skye’s hand in her own she led the smaller girl out of the restroom and into the hustle of the busy rail station.

xx

Harry James wasn’t a vengeful man, but he was six months shy of retiring from this job. He’d worked almost thirty years and had every intention of collecting every cent of his pension. He made the call to Union Station. He told the security person he believed a woman on his train had left her children in the station. The woman asked if it was purposefully. Harry paused for a moment and told her he wasn’t really sure, which was not actually a lie. Maybe that bitch did leave those kids. He didn’t really care.

She’d held up his train for almost an hour. Harry had spent that hour walking up and down the cars assuring the passengers that the train would leave as soon as a small issue was resolved. That woman had tried to board with a ticket that was invalid. She had the gall to tell him it was the company’s error then marched off to read someone the riot act. Almost an hour later she was back. Not only did she have three brand new tickets but they’d been upgraded to first class. He couldn’t believe she’d been rewarded for the trouble she caused, but showed her to her new accommodations.

Five minutes later the station police did a spot check and as luck would have it, pulled that Coulson woman’s bag only to find a weapon. Another fifteen minutes of arguing and verifying her claim put his train even further behind schedule.

They finally start moving and now her kids are missing. Harry spent another thirty minutes going from car to car helping her search, all the while forcing himself to smile and console her. He spoke to that fat old bat who told him about the British kid. How the hell was he supposed to know that this Asian bitch had a kid that didn’t even sound like her let alone look anything like her? Then she makes a fool out of him tossing him around the car like a rag doll.

The engineer sent him to cool off…to make that damn phone call…while the assistant conductor held her hand and coddled her into some pseudo-calm and got her to sit down and finally be quiet. He was pretty sure he’d be written up for the incident. Just what he needed, another write up.
So, yeah he made the call and gave security just enough information on those two brats to let them make their own assumptions. He was sure they’d be found and probably shipped off to Children’s Services. Nothing would happen to those kids. They’d be safe, but their trouble making mother would pay for what she put him through. Yeah, he smiled, let her go through hell getting them back. Let her be accused of something over which she had no control, just like she’d done to him. Maybe they’d even toss her in jail for a bit, give her time to 'cool off'.

Harry James leaned back on his bunk, pulled his hat down over his eyes, folded his arms across his chest and relaxed into the rhythm of the wheels below him. The engineer told him to take time and cool off.

He intended to do just that.

xx

Jemma led Skye across the platform to the escalator that would take them back to the ticket offices. It took a little longer than she expected trying to get through the crowd and see the signs that were much too high for her to see properly. Skye really wasn’t a lot of help. She whined about walking too fast and being pulled when she really needed to rest a little bit. Jemma smiled at her little sister and slowed her steps. Skye was little, but Jemma was no giant. There was no way she could carry the littler girl.

Finally reaching the office where momma had spoken to the clerk, Jemma paused and pulled Skye back against the wall before opening the door. She took a deep breath and smiled down at her little sister.

“Skye,” Jemma began. “I have to speak to the nice lady about what happened with the train. I need you to be very quiet and very well behaved. Do you know what that means?”

The smaller girl scrunched up her face and shook her head. “Jemma, I beed hayved. I non’t make a noises.”

“Good girl,” Jemma smiled. For the first time since all of this started, Jemma felt confident that everything would work out fine. All she had to do what explain what happened and someone would contact that train to let Momma know she and Skye were fine. Momma would know what to do. She wrapped Skye’s hand in her own and reached for the door knob.
The door opened quickly before Jemma touched it. She moved back quickly, pushing Skye behind her to protect her from being stepped on by the number of people who moved through the portal. The last person out pulled the door closed and a very large man and woman stepped to the door.

“You’ll have to wait about a half hour,” someone told them. “Clerk’s on break.”

There was a lot of grumbling and Jemma let out a frustrated breath. There was no way she could stand her with Skye for thirty minutes. Maybe someone else could help. She wanted to ask but the very large man was grumbling and complaining so much she couldn’t say anything. Finally someone else spoke.

“Listen, buddy, I’m sorry you’ve got a problem but some damn woman abandoned her kids her a little while ago. The Clerk’s speaking to DYS right now, so why don’t you get a coffee or something while you wait.” The man speaking wasn’t angry or demeaning, just trying to keep things smooth.

Jemma took advantage of the couple’s large size and pulled Skye back and around the corner then hurried down the hall and back out into the station. She looked in all directions then hurried to a bench at the farthest end of the concourse, partially hidden by a row of lockers. The little girl spun around, almost knocking her smaller sister to the floor. Skye looked up at her with wide eyes, her thumb stuck firmly between her lips.

“Oh, baobei, I am so sorry,” she pulled Skye to the bench, cast a quick look over her shoulder then pushed the little girl up on to it. “I did not mean to frighten you, Skye. I just needed you to hurry.”

“You make ted me run too much, Jemma.” Skye whined as she dropped her thumb to her lap. “Why you not talk a the mean lady? How we fine momma? Her heore?”

Jemma looked in all directions. She really wanted to sit down and cry. This was getting so much worse and how could she tell Skye what was happening. It was like a terrible nightmare. She took a shaky breath and patted her little sister’s shoulder.

“The lady wasn’t in her office right now. She had to go…”

“To a baffroom?” Skye raised her eyebrows and waited for Jemma’s answer.
Jemma smiled and nodded. “Yes, yes baobei, the lady had to go to the lavatory so we have to wait for just a bit. I thought it would be nicer here where it’s quiet.” She looked over her shoulder again. “There are so many people walking about.”

Skye leaned forward and peeked around her sister then dug her fist into one eye and gave a mighty yawn. “I tired, Jemma. I non’t wanna run no moer. A kay?” She rubbed both eyes and shook her head.

Jemma nodded as she watched a maintenance person pull a large cart through a door at the opposite end of the benches. The man smiled at her as he passed. Jemma watched him move away into the crowd then looked back to the door and thought through her plan.

Sky was tired and would probably fall asleep but this was not a safe place. It was okay to rest here but they would be easily spotted once the entire station knew they needed to be found. She drummed her fingers on her knee as her little sister snuggled against her.

“Would you like to play a game, Skye?” Jemma smiled, making the decision to put her plan into action.

Skye shook her head. “I non’t wanna. I tired at now.” She yawned again.

“It’s one of your favorites and if we win we get to see Momma.” Jemma encouraged with a wider smile.

Skye pouted a bit before answering. “I needa Momma for a hug me. Hoer be mad to us acuz we not inna choo choo chair? Her put a spank onnus?” She shook her head and brushed her hair from her face.

“No, no baobei. Momma won’t be angry, she will be very pleased.” Jemma helped to tuck the little girl’s hair behind her ear. She crinkled her brow and shook her head. “And she is not about to punish anyone.” Jemma hoped their mother understood how this crazy incident occurred.

“Okay, I pulay. What we do?” Skye sat up straight and waited for Jemma’s directions.

Jemma smiled again. “We are going to play hide and seek. You like that don’t you?” She nodded at the smaller girl who was nodding back, suddenly very interested in the game.
“I hidin forist.” Skye slid off the bench, ready to run. “You haffa fine me.” She giggled.

Jemma grabbed her arm and stood quickly. “No, Skye we both have to hide.”

Skye scrunched up her face and held up one palm, shaking it at her sister. “Jemma, how we hidin if none buddy looka foer usses? That not how a pulay it.”

Jemma almost laughed. “Oh, yes I know that baobei and there are a lot of people looking for us. We have to hide so they don’t find us. If they do we won’t see Momma so we have to be very good at hiding and very, very quiet.” She put one finger over her lips. “Do you understand that?”

Skye tilted her head to one side and crinkled her brow. “Where they are, Jemma? I non’t see em looka foer usses.”

Jemma nodded as she began leading Skye toward the maintenance door. She pointed toward the crowd behind them. “That’s what makes it so much fun. Everyone out there is looking for us and they are all strangers. We do not want to go with any of them.”

Skye’s eyes grew wide as she looked toward the crowd and nodded. She remembered momma telling her about talking to people she did not know or going with anyone that was not a friend. She held Jemma’s hand tighter and watched as her big sister pulled open the big wooden door to the dark closet.

xx

Melinda folded the small blue blanket covered with stars and set it on her lap. She rubbed her fingers through its soft fibers. Skye would be tired by now, well past her nap time, probably cranky too. Jemma was smart and independent but caring for Skye was more than difficult, even for Momma. She pictured her baby standing in the midst of the Union Station mob wailing at the top of her lungs. Would Jemma be able to console her?

And what of Jemma? Yes she was smart and independent in addition to mature beyond her years but she was still a little girl and now alone and probably terribly frightened. Melinda stared at the bag on the seat across from her for a moment before leaning forward and grabbing it. She pulled the zipper open and rifled through the contents a moment before pulling Jemma’s small black shoulder bag free.
The little girl had tucked a portion of her savings into the bag. ‘Just in case I see some lovely souvenir I just can’t be without,’ she’d giggled as she packed her bag for their journey. Even after Melinda assured her she could have whatever she wanted, she still insisted she wanted to be able to pay for something all on her own. So she folded two tens and a five into neat rectangles and slipped them into the small satchel.

Now, Melinda unsnapped the little purse and hoped she would not find that money inside. Her spirit fell even farther when she did. Jemma and Skye were alone in the station and had no means to buy so much as a bottle of water or a candy bar. Hunger was another of Skye’s triggers and she would not understand that her sister could not get anything for her. Multitudes of wailing scenarios haunted Melinda’s mind. She checked the time on her phone. It was still a half hour before they’d be in Phillie.

She tucked Jemma’s purse inside Skye’s blanket and held both. Even after she exited the train in Philadelphia she’d have to wait for a return train and then ride for almost two hours before making it back to her children. The wait for the train could be an hour or more. She considered renting a car and driving back but would probably be arrested if not for speeding, probably for aggressive driving. She took several deep breaths to clear her head…to think without the clouds of panic blinding her logic.

“Mack,” she said out loud. “Mack,” she repeated. If she was thinking with a clear mind she would have had the idea earlier. She’d call Mack from the station. He and Elena could get to Union Station in minutes. They could get to her girls and they’d be safe…with people they knew…people who would comfort them…assure them. She’d have Mack and Elena ride the train with the girls to Philadelphia. It would cut the time by two hours. She stood, still hugging the blanket wrapped purse. She’d speak to that assistant conductor and have him make the arrangements. She’d give him Mack’s information and have the station police contact him to come for Jemma and Skye. The sooner this got done the sooner everything could be put right.

xx

Jemma pulled Skye into the large closet and let the door close softly. She breathed a sigh of relief that the door had not been locked. Skye tugged back.

“I non’t like a it heore. It doerk. I non’t lika a doerk.” Skye whined.

“Shhh,” Jemma warned, gently. “It’s okay. This is the best of hiding places.’ She smiled. “In a few moments your eyes will adjust to the difference in light and you’ll be able to see and this is a fine place to rest for a while.”
Jemma tried to assure her little sister as she led her farther into the room. Making her way along the tall supply shelf she turned the corner and walked the length of the area. At the end was a shelf of clean linen. Jemma wondered for a moment what it might be used for but in the end it didn’t matter. It was clean and soft. She pulled an armful down and dragged a still whiney Skye back as far as possible behind the last shelf. Jemma spread one of the towels on the floor and bent down to pat it.

“See, we can rest here for a little bit and no one will find us.” Jemma encouraged but Skye shook her head.

Jemma let out a little sigh and sat down, crossing her legs in front of her. She patted the spot next to her. “Please sit with me Skye.” She raised her brows and gave the smaller her best sad face. “I promise it won’t be for very long.”

Skye stepped around her sister and folded herself to the floor. Jemma leaned back against the wall and let relief flow over her as Skye slipped her thumb into her mouth and snuggled against her. The girls sat in silence for a few minutes before Jemma realized her little sister’s breathing had become soft and steady. Skye was asleep. Jemma slid the smaller girl down to rest on her lap then covered her with one of the towels. Someone would be back eventually, but it was quiet and safe.

The little girl closed her eyes and pictured the train schedule she’d seen in the clerk’s office. By now momma had figured out what had happened and would be on her way back for them. It would be just a tiny bit more than two hours before the train was in Philadelphia and then the same amount of time for momma to come back. Jemma estimated that almost two hours had already passed. If Skye slept her normal two hour nap, she’d only have to keep them hidden in the station for about an hour.

Skye whimpered a little. Jemma pet her head like she’d seen momma do and shushed her softly until she quieted. It would be a long two hours.

xx

Allan Jeffers, assistant conductor met Melinda at the door of the first class door. He’d been on his way to check on her and let her know they were fifteen minutes from the station. She gave him the information to contact Mack but he informed her that as soon as they arrived he would escort her to the main office and she could make any calls she wished. He was sure there would be a message there telling her that her girls were fine and waiting to be collected. Harry James had also returned to his job, concentrating his attention to the last of the cars effectively avoiding the crazy woman who had ruined his day.
By the time the train pulled into the boarding platform, Melinda had the girls’ things in the large bag and was waiting to exit. Jeffers had told her he would meet her near the baggage claim as soon. Melinda waited impatiently as the young couple in the first seat collected their bags and side walked to the exit then again while a woman who appeared to be a nurse helped an elderly gentleman there before she stepped down the metal stairs and looked for directions to the baggage claim. She moved in that direction.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” a deep voice slowed but did not stop her. “Ma’am?” the voice was louder, but Melinda had no time for solicitors or whatever the hell this guy was selling. She walked faster.

“Ma’am, I’m going to have to ask you to stop right there.” A second man spoke, standing in her path. He held out his hand displaying a badge that she stared at for a second as she stopped, finding herself almost surrounded by three other plain clothes security guards. “You need to come with me.” The man spoke calmly.

Melinda felt her breath catch. Skye…Jemma…what if? No, nothing could have happened. They were fine…safe with the security police at Union Station. “Is this about my children?” She asked as she yanked her arm away from the officer who had stepped next to her. He wrapped a firm hand around it again, as did the man on the opposite side. The third one took the bag she’d carried from the train. Melinda looked from one man to the other, struggling to free her arms. The guy in charge gave a quick nod and she felt the cuffs snap around her wrists as they pulled her arms behind her.

“What the hell?” May spat through clenched teeth. She stomped hard on the left guy’s instep and pulled away from the other, stepping very close to the ‘in charge’ guy. He merely glared back as the others regained their stance, grabbed her arms and dragged her toward the escalator that led to the main floor. People stopped and stared, quickly moving out of the way and mumbling their concerns as they watched the scene play out before them.

Harry James watched from his perch on the metal steps of the last car and smiled. Now that bitch would get what she had coming to her. He turned to view Jeffers fawning over passengers as they snagged their bags from the revolving style then waved as they drifted off into the massive crowd. “Jerk,” he mumbled under his breath. “All that effort for nothing…you give a job everything you’ve got and it means nothing.” He growled to himself as he turned and re-entered the last car. There was a thirty minute lay over. He’d use it to coddle a few passengers of his own and maybe make things just a little difficult for that fat bitch that added to this mess.

xx
Allan Jeffers looked at his pocket watch and then toward the train that waited for new passengers to board. He had hoped to get Mrs. Coulson to the security office and on the next train back to DC as quickly as possible. He had two toddlers of his own and could not imagine the anguish she was feeling about her children. Yet, there was no sign of the woman. He’d heard the passersby mumbling about some commotion after his passengers exited but most of it was mumbo jumbo about some crazed person being dragged off yelling and shouting obscenities and fighting with security. He shook his head at the absurdity of how people reacted to things these days.

There was no need to check Mrs. Coulson’s luggage. It was going on to NYC with a message to hold it for pick up later in the day. He figured with the return to DC and then the direct line to Grand Central, the woman and her children would be there sometime this evening. Since, Melinda was nowhere to be seen he made his way to the ticket office to check the schedules and have an itinerary ready for her when she came to make plans. If all else failed he could have her paged to the office or send security to find and bring her there.

“Hey, Cheryl,” Allan smiled as he made his way around the ticket cages and tapped a finger on the edge of the woman’s desk.

She looked up at him over the rims of her glasses, “Allan.” She smiled as she pushed up her spectacles and folded her hands in front of her chin. “Something I can do for you?”

“Had a passenger run into some pretty nasty luck on the way up. Thought I’d get things straightened out for her,” he smiled.

Cheryl nodded and pulled a form from her desk drawer. “She filing a complaint?” She sighed.

Allan thought for a moment and shook his head. “I don’t think so, really wasn’t anyone’s fault, just a crazy mix up. Anyway I want you to put her in first class on the next trip back to Union.”

“Damn, what’s with that place today?” Cheryl shook her head as she began writing. “Security’s got some crazy in their office right now waiting for transport to the 35th.”

Jeffers propped one hip on the edge of the woman’s desk and sighed. “Must have been what all that craziness was down on the platform. What the hell is with people?” He shook his head as she did the same.

“What’s your passenger’s name? I can get her on the 10:45. Leaves track 5C7. She’ll have to
move fast.” The woman glanced at the clock then back to the man half-seated on her desk.

“Don’t think that’ll be a problem. She’s in a bit of a hurry. You’ll have to page her to the platform. I kinda lost track of her in the crowd. Just give me the ticket and I’ll get it to Jerry with the whole schmeal.” He smiled.

“How ‘bout a name, Jeffers?” Cheryl asked again.

He snorted as he brushed off the leg of his trousers. “Coulson, Melinda Coulson…traveling alone but I’ll need a direction route to NYC from DC for three as well.”

Cheryl started typing the name into her computer then stopped and looked over her glasses at the man again. “Coulson?” She repeated.

Jeffers pulled a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and stared at it for a moment. “Yeah, C-o-u…”

“I know how to spell it.” She frowned. “Melinda Coulson?”

“Melinda Coulson,” he repeated. “You know her?” He scratched his head at Cheryl’s crazy reaction to the name.

She shook her head. “Name only,” she sneered. “Seems this lowlife abandoned her kids back at Union. Security’s waiting to take her into custody, no wonder you lost her on the platform.”

“What?” Allan stood as his mouth dropped opened. “She didn’t…what!...how the hell?” He rambled as he turned and took a few steps then walked back. “Sweet Jesus, how did…what in…”

“Honey, if you want an answer to any of those questions, you are going to have to finish what you’re saying. I am telling you we got a call that this woman left her kids, got on the train and just went on her merry way. Now, that’s what’s called abandoning them. One’s just four years old, I think.” She rifled through a pile of paper on her desk and pulled out a form that she held out to him.

“Guess security there is having a hard time locating these kids. Maybe she didn’t just abandon them. Damn worthless woman, if you don’t want your kids there are people who will take ‘em and
love then like their own.”

Jeffers stared at the paper in his hand. It was a call record from his train made a little more than an hour ago by Harry James. He had no idea what Harry told the operator or how or why he said it the way he did but this note did not in any way match what had happened on his train. Allan shook his head.

“No way, Cheryl. This lady did not abandon her kids, there was a mix up and the kids got off the train without her. We were moving before she realized they’d gotten off.” He laughed a weak laugh. “The little one needed to use the rest room. I guess they lost track of time.”

Cheryl tapped the edge of the paper. “Maybe that’s what she told you, but that’s not what we got. Did you see these kids?” She raised one eyebrow at him.

Jeffers thought for a moment. No, he had not seen either child but he watched her hold that little blanket, the one she did not let go of until she got off the train. This woman was totally distraught there was no way she did this intentionally. He shook his head. “No, I did not see the kids but I spoke to the mom for some time. Almost had to stop her from jumping. She is rabid to get back to DC.”

Cheryl turned up one side of her face and scowled. “Then where is she, Jeffers? She fed you a line and let’s face it guys like you always look for the good in people.”

He shook his head again. “You got a recording of Harry’s report? I want to hear exactly what he said.”

She nodded and pushed her wheeled desk chair back then rose and strode across the room. Flicking a few buttons on a large switch board she waited a moment then adjusted the volume and listed to Harry James’ voice as he described the situation. Allan was shaking his head.

“He left out just enough to let everyone here make assumptions that just aren’t true. That woman is desperate to get to her kids.” He insisted again then stopped and swallowed hard. “The person security has in their office…is it a woman…is it her?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He was out the door and racing toward the office before she could reply.
Melinda took deep breaths to calm herself. She was not getting out of this if she continued to act like a psychopath. Sitting back on the chair where the guy had tossed her she pushed herself into a more comfortable position and adjusted her bent back arms to relieve the pressure on her wrists. She smiled at the man sitting at the desk next to her.

“What is it you think I’ve done? I already explained to your officer why I had a weapon. I thought we had this cleared up before I boarded. My ID and registration are in my bag, but I’m sure you’ve already searched it.” She tried desperately not to sound as sarcastic as she felt.

The man simply stared. “We take child abuse very seriously.” He stated without emotion.

“Child…what!” She stammered.

“Abandonment is pretty serious as well, if that is what you’ve done. We haven’t found your children anywhere at Union. What did you do to them, Mrs. Coulson?” He accused in the same emotionless voice.

Melinda merely stared, collecting herself from the shock of the statement and convincing herself not to head slam this moron, get out of this damn office and worrying about the cuffs later. “Abandoned? Are you insane? My daughters were left behind because of the stupidity of your company and the drama they put me through at that station. If I was in the car with them instead of trying to explain to that moron conductor why my weapon was in my checked luggage where I had absolutely no access to it, none of this would have happened.”

“You left two small children alone in the car, yet no one seems to have seen them.” The man almost smiled but caught himself.

“What do you mean no one say them?” Melinda narrowed her brows. “That jerk conductor helped me get them to their seat and the woman in the next car told him they tried to use the rest room there. Idiot never mentioned it until that same woman told me. If I could I would have drop kicked him off the damn train. How did all of that turn into me abandoning my daughters?” She squirmed to the edge of the chair and thanked fate for the cuffs that were stopping her from strangling this guy.

He stared at her for a moment. “That’s not the story the conductor gave our office, ma’am. We’re
going to have to have the authorities sort this out.”

Melinda shook her head to sort out the insanity of this never ending situation. Suddenly one thing ran clear. “You haven’t found them?” She stood and was immediately pushed back into the chair by another guard she had not noticed standing next to her. “What do you mean you haven’t found them? Jemma would have known to go to a police officer or security guard for help.” She reasoned to herself more than explaining to the officer.

“Your daughter is nine years old? She’s just a kid, Mrs. Coulson and she’s probably terrified. Odds are she’s not thinking logically.” He shook his head, almost laughing at her statement.

“Jemma is very intelligent. She would know what to do.” Again she tried to console herself because thinking of all of terrors that could befall two little girls in that overcrowded mass of humans was too horrifying. What if Jemma somehow lost Skye in the shuffle? What if some predator followed and whisked one or both of them away? What if her baby had fallen on to the tracks and… No she stopped herself, catching her breath and the tears that threatened to fall.

Melinda turned sideways and shook her bound hands at the officer. “Get these things off me. I need to make a call.”

Now he did laugh. “That’s for the police to decide ma’am. You’ll get your phone call at the precinct. For now, just sit tight. We’ve got this under control.” He tapped a few papers on the desk as he stood and nodded to the other officer. “And if,” he raised one brow and leaned toward her, “if they find those kids at Union Station, CYS is already there to take them where they’ll be safe.”

Melinda dropped back, leaned her head against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut. She could not stop the tears from streaming over her cheeks.

xx

Allan Jeffers debated on whether he wanted to plant his fist in James’ face or rescue Mrs. Coulson from the security office before she was arrested. That woman certainly didn’t deserve what happened. He was having a hard time believing Cheryl, the usually optimistic ticket officer, was so quick to believe the convoluted story Harry James had woven. He’d listened to that call twice and could not say that James actually pointed any fingers but he certainly left out just enough detail for anyone to misinterpret the whole incident. Jeffers had to admit if he hadn’t been involved he might think the same thing. That fact that he’d not seen either child didn’t help, but he knew Harry had seen them and so did that woman in the second car.
The man checked the time and quickened his step toward the security office. He wasn’t sure what he would say or how he would convince the authorities that Melinda Coulson was a victim and needed their help, not their condemnation but he had to try.

xx

Jemma jumped with a start at the cold hand against her cheek. She didn’t remember falling asleep but the dark room, the quiet and Skye’s soft breathing had helped her to relax. She blinked a few times to focus in the dim light then stared into her little sister’s wide eyes. Skye was kneeling in front of her with one little hand on each of her cheeks.

“Nap over, Jemma. It bees time a wake up.” Skye nodded at her. “It still doerk in heore.” The little girl sat back on her bent legs and looked up at her sister. “We fine momma now? I no wanna pulay this game no more. I hungery and…” she bounced up and down a little. “I needa pee-pee again.” The little girl let out a sad sigh. “I no like a that big labatony, Jemma. I bees too menies people and I no like a wash my handses inair. I needa go home now, akay?” She tilted her head in her little Skye way, and bounced a little more.

Jemma pushed herself up to stand and let out a long breath. Naptime certainly was over and now Skye was hungry and she would get hungrier and a lot cranky before she could figure out how to get something for her. She’d left her purse on the train, never expecting to end up in this situation. And now Skye had to use the bathroom, again. How could she need to go so much when she hadn’t even had a drink since they’d left the house this morning?

“Okay,” Jemma breathed, “we can’t go home just yet, baobei, and we’ll have to use the big lavatory if you really have to go.” She put out a hand to Skye then froze when the door of the room opened and the lights flicked on. Grabbing Skye she pulled her as far back behind the shelf as they could squeeze and placed her hand over the little girl’s mouth. She put a finger to her mouth indicating they needed to be quiet.

Jemma’s heart beat so loudly she barely heard anything else. Her face burned with the fear it ignited and Skye wrapping herself around her middle nearly cut off her ability to breathe. Someone was in the room, moving from shelf to shelf and…humming…someone was humming. She heard the shuffle of feet and the scraping of things being slipped off the shelves. A bucket rattled and a mop slammed to the floor causing her to jump and Skye to squeak into her midsection. Jemma held her breath hoping the someone hadn’t heard. She wrapped her arms around Skye’s head and held her closer.

The someone swore a few times. The bucket rattled again and she heard the mop handle bump
against the wall before the shuffling footsteps came closer. Jemma pulled herself and Skye against the wall and squeezed her eyes closed, immediately telling herself how silly it was to think closing them would help hide them. A moment later she heard the sound of a door click, then the familiar sound of flushing. The shuffle moved back across the floor, now whistling instead of humming. The door opened and the lights went out throwing the room into darkness once again before Jemma heard the door close again and everything was silent.

For a few seconds she remained pressed against the wall, arms around her little sister, just listening. Slowly Jemma released Skye and looked down at her. She could see the fear in Skye’s eyes and smiled to help ease that fear.

“I want momma,” Skye sniffled, tears brimming in her eyes.

“Yes, angel, I do too, but right now we just have each other and we have to be brave. Can you be brave?” Jemma raised her brows and nodded at her little sister.

Skye shook her head. “I non’t wanna be brave. I needa see momma. I need heor to hug me.” Now she was crying.

Jemma wrapped her arms around her little sister. “I can hug you Skye and you can hug me until we find momma.” The older girl sniffed and quickly swiped away an errant tear.

“You non’t hug like momma doos. I needa momma hug to me, Jemma.” Skye sobbed into her sister’s belly.

Jemma knew exactly what Skye meant because there was nothing more she’d like right now than to fall into her mother’s embrace and let all her bravery just fall off so she could cry just like Skye was doing. Instead she drew a deep breath and forced a smile.

“Guess what, baobei?” She looked down at Skye who sniffled again. “There is a powder room right here. You don’t have to use the lavatory. Why don’t we do what we have to, wash up and see if we can’t find you a little snack.” She didn’t wait for Skye to answer, just took her hand and started in the direction she had heard the flush come from a few minutes ago. Maybe it was time to use the bathroom herself.

xx
Allan burst into the security office almost out of breath. The secretary looked up at him and waited for him to take a few deep gulps of air before speaking. She was sure he was about to reveal some new catastrophe.

“The woman they brought from number seven fifteen is she still here?” He blurted out in one breath.

The young secretary looked at him and blinked as if she did not understand the question and waiting for further explanation.

“Station police took a woman off the train on C platform and brought her here.” He pointed to the floor. “Is she still here?” He asked again and again the girl just stared at him.

“They think she left her kids in DC! She’s going to be arrested! Is she here?!” He yelled at the girl wondering if she had zoned out while he was speaking.

A large man stepped through a door behind the girl. “You got a problem, buddy?” He growled, stepping in front of the young secretary.

“Yeah,” Jeffers barked back, then reconsidered and took a quick breath. “No, no sir…not a problem just a question.” He looked at the girl again then back at the large man. “The guards took a woman, Melinda Coulson, off seven fifteen. I just want to know if she’s still here.”

The guy narrowed his eyes. “What’s it to ya?”

“Seven fifteen is my train. I need to speak to someone about what happened. You’ve got this all wrong. She never left her kids…” he thought for a moment. “I mean, yeah, the kids got left but it was an accident.”

“What kind of accident?” The guy seemed interested now.

“No, not that kind of accident…can I just talk to someone before it’s too late?” Jeffers almost begged.
“Too late, huh? You got something to do with those kids disappearing?” The guy accused.

“Disa…what?...no, they just got off and…” Allan shook his head as the guy took his arm and ushered him through the door he’d come through. This just kept getting worse.

Melinda looked up as Allan was practically dragged into the office. The large office plopped him in a chair across the room from where she sat. “Allan?” She was surprised to see him.

“So you two know each other?” The big guy smiled.

“He was the conductor on the train.” Melinda growled understanding his implication.

“Look,” Allan started as he stood. “This is all a terrible mistake. This lady did nothing wrong she’s just trying to get her kids back.”

“That’ll be up to the courts.” The original officer commented.

“I would never abandon my children!” Melinda screeched as she stood again. “Why don’t you morons just listen to what this guy is saying or at least talk to someone who knows what’s going on.”

“James, Harry James,” Allan added as he was forced back into his chair. “He’s the conductor on seven fifteen. He knows what happened. Get him up here. The passengers on that train…it’s still on the platform. They’ll tell you the same thing. This lady did not just leave her kids, it was a terrible misunderstanding and keeping her here is just keeping her from getting back to them.”

For a moment the two officers just stood, looking at one another in some weird nonverbal conversation. The one, who seemed to be in charge, barked orders to three others who scrambled to follow them. He gave a quick nod to the large guy who smiled and left the room.

“So if all this is true, tell me, why is it my people in DC can’t find these kids?” He raised a brow and glared at Melinda.

xx
“Hey, Da,” Trip called as he entered the hotel suite and tossed his key on the closest table. He set down the newspaper he carried and stood waiting for his father to reply.

Phil turned from flopping a towel across Fitz’s hair and acknowledged his older son before looking down at the other. “That’s the best we can do, little man. Get dressed. I’m sure mom will know what to do.” He shook his head as his younger son scurried off into the bathroom clad in nothing more than a towel around his waist.

Trip couldn’t help laughing. “He still smells like a Mrs. Morrison’s rose garden.”

“Yeah, well that’ll teach him to just pour a whole bottle of rose water on his head.” Phil shook his head and sniffed the towel he held. “What the hell is in that stuff? He took three showers. Probably won’t get him in the bath for a week. Maybe we should try tomato juice.” He wondered out loud.

“Tomato juice?” Trip scrunched up his face and repeated the last of what was said.

Phil shrugged as he threw the towel over his shoulder, immediately grimaced and dropped it to the floor. “It works for skunk stink and this is just a little less…” he searched for the right word.

“Powerful?” Trip offered.

Phil winked and shot a finger at the boy. “You were about to tell me something?”

Trip thought for a second. “Oh, yeah. The guy at the desk said to tell you the train is running late. Said there was a problem in DC and the train had to make a stop in Philly. Some passenger went ballistic or something and had to be taken off in cuffs.” Trip shook his head and smiled. “Nothing like that happened with us, just dull old clickety clack for three hours. But the little guy liked it so…it was worth it.”

Phil picked up the newspaper and flipped it open. “Your mother is probably not so thrilled. She’s going to be like a bear when she gets here.”

The boy laughed again. “Wait til she gets a sniff of old Fitzie Rose Lee.” He jerked a thumb
toward the bathroom.

xx

Harry James stormed into the security office, followed by two station police. The stout older woman who had directed Jemma to the restrooms on the platform followed with another officer. “I can’t believe you are holding up my train for this nonsense.” James grumbled.

“Nonsense?” The security chief repeated. “Is that what you think this is? Two kids are missing and a woman is accused of being responsible and you consider it nonsense?” He pulled open the inside door and motioned for Harry to enter then smiled at the woman and stepped aside for her to follow.

“James!” Allan barked as his boss entered the room. “Thank god, tell them what happened.”

In an instant Harry James realized what he’d done. Melinda Coulson sat cuffed to the arm of a chair. He could see how upset she was. He looked away quickly, swallowing the bile of guilt that grew in his gut.

“Oh, my land!” the older woman exclaimed. “My dear, what happened?” She hurried across the room and placed a hand on Melinda’s shoulder.

“Who wants to start?” The security chief asked, glaring at the population of the room.

“The kids got left by accident,” Harry mumbled. “It wasn’t her fault, just a dumb accident.”

“The little one needed to use the potty and they got off because the lavatory was not yet working.” The woman added. “Why is she being restrained? Oh my land, did something happen to the children?” She covered her mouth with one hand.

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, James.” The chief barked as he released the cuffs on Melinda’s wrists. “Mrs. Coulson, I apologize…”
“I’ll deal with you later,” Melinda growled at the man. “I need a phone right now.” She ordered.

The man turned the phone on his desk toward her. She punched in the number and glared at Harry James as it rang once…twice…then connected.

“Mack,” she breathed, knowing this catastrophe was coming to an end when the man’s deep voice responded.

xx

Jemma opened the door slowly and peered out before stepping into the locker area with Skye close behind. The locker area was still quiet, with just a few people opening and closing the thin cabinets then moving back to blend into the crowded station lobby. She moved to the archway that separated the two areas and waited until a family passed then hurried Skye to walk as close as possible to the two children that followed their parents through the concourse.

Mack and Elena stood at the entrance with two security guards. They peered across the crowd and contemplated how to pinpoint two little girls in all of the people that milled through the station.

“You’re sure they didn’t get on another train.” Mack stated to no one in particular.

“No sir,” the younger office replied. “That was the first thing we checked. Not one conductor has or had two unaccompanied children on their train.”

“We checked in both directions.” The female officer added.

Mack nodded. Elena smiled. “Ese pequeño gato salvaje no podría estar fuera de problemas por tanto tiempo. Jemma debe haberla noqueado.”

Looking at his watch, Mack let out a snort. “Well, it’s past naptime so the clock’s ticking.”

“I’m sorry sir,” the young female officer remarked. “I don’t understand. We’ve looked everywhere.”
“What my friend is saying,” Elena smiled at Mack then turned to the officer. “is we might not have to look. Perhaps this little one will find us.”

xx

Jemma slipped away from the family, pulling Skye behind a large kiosk. “Why we hidin, Jemma? I toed you I no wanna pulay no more.” Skye shook her head, but stayed close to her sister.

“We have to hide, Skye. It is important.” Jemma did not want to scare the little girl but it seemed she might have no other choice. “We don’t want them to find us. Remember if they do we won’t be able to see momma.”

Skye set her bottom lip in a fine pout and plopped down on the floor. “I no wanna pulay. I wanna go home.” She wasn’t whispering anymore.

Jemma turned and squatted down. “Are you still hungry, Skye. I think I can get one of those lovely crumpets over there.” She pointed toward a sweet shop that had a small display on the outer counter. “They have chocolate.” Jemma drew a deep breath. She’d never stolen anything in her life and fully intended to make sure the shop was compensated just as soon as she got back to her mother, but Skye needed something to eat and this was the best she could do.

Skye looked in the direction her sister pointed and sniffled. “I likes shockolit. Momma non’t let me haffa donut fer lunch, Jemma. Hoer be mad to me.”

Jemma smiled as she stood and reached out a hand to Skye. “I think just this once she will say it is alright.”

Skye did not need convincing. A chocolate donut for lunch was quite a treat. She allowed Jemma to lead her across the small space to the sweet shop then watched as her sister lifted the pastry and quickly move away. Jemma handed to Skye and watched as she took a large bite. Skye smiled a chocolaty grin as she chewed, swallowed and chomped another bite.

“You gonna pay for that, sweet heart?” A man snarled as he leaned over the counter.
Jemma jumped at the sound. “Oh, why yes, yes of course…our mother is just over there.” She nodded in the direction of a small group of people. “She’ll be paying you directly.” The little girl lied then cringed at the thought of doing so.

The guy grunted at them then walked away, leaving Jemma to breathe a sigh of relief. “Hey,” she jumped again as the man stepped around the counter and barked at her second time. ‘Ain’t you that kid they’re all lookin’ for?” He glared at her as she grabbed Skye’s hand and turned to run. “Yeah, you are both of yas are.”

Jemma took a step but was stopped as the guy grabbed her arm. “Let go!” she squealed, grabbing at his hand with both of her own and thereby losing her grip on Skye.

“Hold on there, girlie. Everybody’s been lookin’ for you all day.” He called to someone in the sweet shop. “Call security, tell ‘em we found them kids.”

Jemma turned back to Skye who stood wide eyed watching the man hold on to her struggling sister. The chocolate donut lay on the floor at her feet. Her little fists curled at her sides, her arms stiff.

The scream that left the tiny girl’s lungs stopped everyone in the station.

xx

Mack stepped down three of the stairs before hearing the scream that echoed through the large station. He turned to Elena, a step behind him, and smiled. The two security officers moved to pass the agents in an effort to reach whatever incident had caused the wail from below. The large man placed a hand on the young agent’s chest, stopping him and his partner.

“Let us,” he smiled. “They’ve been avoiding you all day.” With that he turned and hurried down the stairs with Elena at his side.

They pushed through the crowd toward the telltale sound of Skye Coulson’s claxon.

xx

Jemma struggled valiantly against the man’s grip, kicking his leg and pinching the back of his
hand until he could take no more. He released her, allowing the little girl to fall to the floor. Jemma scrambled back to her feet, grabbed her screaming sister’s hand and ran blindly into the crowd. The tears that filled her eyes were no help. She scrubbed her arm across her face to get rid of them and yanked Skye harder to keep her on her feet.

“Jemma!”

She heard her name and panic stabbed her heart causing the tears to fall faster. Jemma sobbed as Skye continued screaming.

“Jemma, stop!” A deep voice commanded, sounding closer than it had a moment ago.

“Jemma,” another voice…a woman called.

The little girl furiously pushed people aside, knocking luggage and carts to the floor as she pulled her little sister toward the wide glass doors that would allow them outside of the station into the fresh air and away from the people trying to take them away from their family. She had to get away.

Skye screamed again as she tripped over a small case and sprawled across the floor, losing her sister’s hand as she fell. Jemma fell forward as Skye went back. She landed on her knees and crawled forward rising to her feet before turning back. In her panic she started to run away but stopped and turned back to once again grab her wailing sister but was too late. Skye had been scooped up off the floor into a woman’s arms. Jemma screamed through her tears and slammed into them pulling at Skye in a desperate attempt to free her.

“Let her go…let go…” Jemma wailed.

“Hey, hey…Jemma, Jemma stop…” A deep calm voice spoke close to her as powerful arms surrounded her.

“No!” The little girl struggled, tossing back her head and flailing her arms and legs as she turned to fight off the large man. “No, let me go…you have to let me go…”

“Jemma, Jemma, it’s me. It’s Mack, Jemma…look at me.” He still spoke softly, holding the little girl close as she continued to sob and fight.
“O-yo,” Skye sobbed softly as she wrapped her arms around the woman’s neck. “You take me a momma now.” She nodded as she dropped her head on Elena’s shoulder and continued crying.

Elena smiled at Mack who still struggled with Jemma as the crowd looked on and security held them back. She knelt down without losing her grip on the little girl she held and whispered close to Jemma’s ear.

“Está bien, cariña. Tu mamá nos envió a ayudarte. Estás a salvo, Skye está a salvo. Shh, bebé, estás a salvo.” Elena spoke in her native tongue, calming the child slowly.

Jemma still struggled to free herself as the panic subsided, turning into fear and then relief as she allowed herself to recognize the voices, the feeling of safety both gave her and slumped into Mack’s arms. “Yoyo,” she whispered then turned to the man who held her. “Mack, oh Mack…it’s you.” The tears fell again, but not in panic or fight but simple relief as she wrapped her arms around the man and sobbed heartily into his shoulder.

Both agents stood, each holding tightly to one exhausted little girl. Skye lifted her head and looked into Elena’s eyes still holding tightly to her neck. “Jemma cryin?” Elena nodded. “Her bees sad to Mack?”

Elena smiled and shook her head. “No, mommi, she is happy.”

Skye thought for a moment then dropped her head back to Elena’s shoulder. “Ine happy you fine us, O-yo.” She gently patted Elena’s shoulder.

The woman kissed the little girl’s cheek. “Me too, now let’s go to make momma happy.” She smiled at Mack who gently rubbed a hand up and down Jemma’s back, quieting but not stilling the heavy sobs.

They followed the security officers to the station office where two EMT’s waited to assess the girls. Both were found slightly dehydrated but otherwise fine. Jemma resisted the exam until Elena explained the logic in it and that once done they would be on the road to Philadelphia were Melinda was waiting. One of the officers supplied Skye with a carton of milk and a fresh donut to replace the one squished into the floor in the rescue fracas. Jemma refused anything but a bottle of cool water. The head of security made a call to Thirtieth Street and had Melinda on the phone within minutes. He assured her both of her children were fine and would be safe until she made her way back to the station. She demanded to speak with both.
“Momma!” Skye’s little voice squeaked into the phone. “I gotsa big schocholate donut and Mack takeded a monser bit to it.” Melinda brushed away tears as she ooded and awed over her baby’s total oblivious sense of the insanity of the afternoon. Skye giggled that whimsical little snigger of hers and Melinda laughed through her own tears. “The udder donut gotted squished by the man inna shiny shoesh. Him gotted me anudder one. I get a donut foer lunch aday, momma!”

“Just today, baobei.” Melinda replied and wondered why her little one had grown so quiet.

“I needa hug you, momma. You come a get me, now?” Skye was suddenly serious and Melinda could hear Elena comforting her, explaining that Jemma wanted a turn to speak to momma too. “You talk a Jemma, now o Mack a eat all up mine donut.” Before Melinda could respond Skye had dropped the phone. She could hear the little giggle as Mack teased her with her treat.

“I’m sorry, momma,” Jemma breathed into the phone. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” The little girl’s voice cracked and bumped between her sobs.

Melinda pushed away her tears again and hated the fact she was not there to hold her babies. “Shh, shh, bao bao. None of this is your fault, none of it. It was all just a terrible mix up and it’s over. Mack and Elena are going to make sure you get here safely.” Melinda tried to console her older daughter, who had the polar opposite reaction of her sister.

After a fifteen minute conversation Melinda reluctantly told the girls she would see them soon. Mack insisted on taking them to Philadelphia by car and after a very short argument had both girls secure in the back of his SUV. The couple had spent so much time with their smallest passenger that they’d purchased a safety seat and once Skye was secure they were on the road.

Slightly more than two hours later Melinda held her babies in her arms, covering both with kisses and quickly doing a visual check to be sure they were indeed unharmed. She wrapped her arms around Mack and Elena as well, thanking them for being their saviors. Skye held tightly to her mother refusing to be put down while Jemma wrapped her arms around her mother’s waist and managed to stop crying for short periods of time.

Mack had no intention of leaving this emotional group alone or putting them in or on any vehicle other than his own. He ignored Melinda’s protest and packed the family into his car for the two hour trip to Manhattan. He made it perfectly clear he had no intention of letting them out of his sight until he delivered them to the Plaza and one Phil Coulson.

Melinda did not call Phil or tell him anything about her day of insanity. She did not feel he needed to experience the anxiety she had felt and there was no need to traumatize Fitz or Trip. Relaxing in
the back seat of Mack’s SUV, Melinda pulled a sleeping Jemma to rest her head in her lap. The girl had finally exhausted herself with her crying.

Skye rambled on with questions and comments about everything from the big bathrooms at the train station to playing hide and seek all day to the merits of having donuts for lunch. She sang every song she’d learned since starting preschool. Melinda smiled and sang along even with the mangled lyrics Skye invented. When the little girl began rubbing the soft fluff of her blue blanket against her cheek and across her forehead, Melinda knew her baby would be joining her sister in sleep very shortly. Once her girls were quiet, the exhausted mother closed her eyes and relaxed with one arm protectively over Jemma and the other holding tightly to her baby’s hand.

Mack jerked his head back toward the ‘ladies’ and Elena turned to take in the scene. She smiled at the large man with his hands on the wheel and gave a nod. They’d be in the city within the hour, spend at least another explaining the insanity to Phil and then treat themselves to dinner in one of those fancy restaurants, grab a room and head back in the morning.

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Harry James left the security office with the station director. He cleaned out his locker and submitted his identification badge to the head clerk. Security escorted him to his car and off of the property.

He did not make it to his retirement date or collect a full pension.

It took three weeks for the black eye to heal and his nose bled off and on for almost a month.

Not one security officer could remember how the man had come by the injuries.

Allan James accepted the promotion to conductor.

The Coulson family rented a car for the return trip to Bethesda.
Lian tries to convince Melinda that she is letting Skye get away will way too much and probably creating a monster.
Trip slips again and uses some language mom doesn't like then of course pays the price
Melinda and Phil discuss whether Lian's accusations bare merit

“Momma!” Skye squealed as she barreled through the back door, leaving it wide open. She carried a bucket of muddy water against her chest as it sloshed over her and across the floor. She crossed the room and headed down the hall leaving a trail of milky brown muck in her wake. “Momma, Terrip take a my wadder!”

“Zài nàlǐ tíng xiàlái, xiǎo nǚhái. Nǐ zhēn tiáopí. Kàn kàn zhège làntānzì” Lian bellowed as she jumped from the table, upsetting her teacup. She grabbed a napkin to catch the amber liquid and swore under her breath.

Skye ignored her grandmother’s command and continued on her way sloshing her sloppy concoction across the kitchen floor.

Melinda stepped from the powder room swiping the bucket from the little girl and stopping her in her tracks. She looked to the mess through two rooms. “Skye…what…oh, Skye…” she shook the mud from her hand and looked down at the dirty little face looking up at her.

“Terrip torned offa mine wadder fer to makin mine schoclit cakeses.” She pouted.

Trip stumbled through the back door grimacing at the mess as he sidestepped the plops of poop colored mud on the white kitchen floor. He smacked a hand on his forehead and cringed at the look his grandmother threw him. She spoke rapidly in Mandarin making him very happy he did not understand most of what she was saying. Melinda entered the room carrying the bucket and leading a very distraught Skye.

“I’m so sorry, mom. She just got away from me. I’ll…I’ll clean this up…I…” Trip apologized.
Melinda held up a hand. “It’s not your fault Trip. We’ll get it.” She handed him the bucket and nodded toward the door as Skye crossed her arms over her chest and dropped to the floor.

Trip smiled at his little sister’s plight. “Sorry, baby girl. This is not a good idea.” He pointed to the bucket as he backed out the door and pulled it closed.

“It myon!” She slapped her hand down on a splot of mud sending it in all directions. Melinda let out a fluttery breath and scooped her up from the floor. “You gived Terrip mine payo fer to make a mine cakeses.” She grit her little teeth and sneered at her mother.

“Mud cakes stay outside, baobei.” Melinda turned and pointed to the mess on the floor. “Look at this big mess it made.”

Skye peered at the mud blops and shook her head. “Them is no mestes. Them is mine liddo cakeses.” She bounced her little hand and leaned forward to escape her mother’s hold. Then threw herself back and kicked her feet when she could not.

Melinda smiled and pulled her close, placing a kiss on her head.

Lian stood and glared at her daughter, watching the scene unfold. “Melinda!” She exhaled. “This child is out of control.”

Melinda hugged and rocked Skye back and forth, in an attempt to calm her struggle to get down. “Mom, she’s just a baby. She doesn’t realize.”

“She is four years old, Melinda. She is not a baby and she is out of control. Here you stand coddling her for this!” Lian spread her hand out across the mud that covered the floor. “Do you know what I would have done had you pulled such a stunt?”

Melinda glared at her mother. “I know exactly what you would have done mother and I am not you. Skye has been through a lot for such a little girl. I won’t add to that.”

Lian let out an exasperated sigh. “I am only trying to help, Melinda. This will not get better. She will only push farther and get much worse.”
Melinda matched her mother’s sigh. “If you really want to help, mother, please keep an eye on the others while I get this one into the tub.” She turned her attention to Skye whispering in her ear as she turned toward the stairs. “How about if you play in some clean water for a little bit?” She crooned as she kissed the squirming toddler’s temple.

“She does not need a bath, Melinda. She needs a well placed swat on the backside.” Lian called after her.

Melinda ignored her mother’s comment, walking slowly up the stairs with Skye still squirming in her arms. She shushed the little girl and sang softly to her in Mandarin, a song she remembered her father singing so many times.

Lian shook her head and grumbled in a combination of English and Mandarin about how spoiled her granddaughter was and how her own daughter should know better and maybe it wasn’t Skye who needed to be taught a lesson and how she was going to sit that girl down and have a long discussion and how Phil needed to put a foot down on this little one’s behavior and how did either of them manage to run a house full of children with no rules what-so-ever! She sopped up the tea that had spilled on the table and slammed the paper towels into the waste basket then marched across the kitchen to the broom closet to fish out a mop and bucket. Maybe Melinda could let this mess sit while she molly coddled that little hellion but she was not about to sit here in this kitchen and stare at it until it became hardened clay. Although she considered it, since it would make it all that much more difficult for her daughter to get off her pristine white tile. And how dare she expect that wonderfully polite young Trip to do it…she’d scrub it herself before she let that boy take the responsibility. She threw open the door, grabbed the first mop she saw and practically kicked a bucket out and across the floor. The woman swore in five languages as she snatched a bottle of Mr. Clean from the top shelf and slammed it down on the counter.

“Crivens! She’s done it again!” Fitz exclaimed as he stood frozen just inside the back door. He looked up at his grandmother before stepping around the blob of mud in front of him.

Lian dropped the bucket into the sink and forced on the hot water. She turned toward the boy. “This happened before?” She let out a disgusted sigh.

Fitz nodded as he inched his way toward her. “Last time was much worse, but not quite so,” the little boy sniggered, “poopy looking.” He stared at the trail of mud that wound into the dining room and down the hall. “Nope, last time she actually took a mud bath.” He looked up at Lian and nodded. “Yep, shed all her clothes and sat right down in it. She actually looked as if she’d been chocolate covered then popped right into the house to show Da. There were wee slimy brown footprints from the deck all the way to Da’s office. That’s where Mom finally caught her.” He tossed back his head. “What a mess, took three days to get it all out and mom had to get a professional to do the hardwood and the carpets.”
Lian shook her head as she turned off the water so hard it actually let out a squeak. “And just what did your mother do about it?”

Fitz tilted his head and stared at his grandmother for a moment then shrugged his shoulders. “She called the carpet guy and stayed home while he got all the muck out.”

“And what about your sister?” Lian asked with a raised eyebrow. “Skye,” she clarified.

Fitz shrugged again. “They put her in one of those little blue plastic pools and filled it with a lot of warm water and bubbles. She played in it til she was recognizable. I think they changed the water four times and then Mom gave her a bath anyway.” He pursed his lips and shook his head.

“And?” Lian encouraged, looking over he spectacles at the boy.

Fitz raised his brows, then scrunched up his face wondering what more he could say. “Aaaannndddd…then we went out for supper because the kitchen smelled like disinfectant. It was quite nasty.” He showed her his best stink-face.

Lian dropped the bucket to the floor causing water to slosh out on both sides. Fitz jumped back and looked at her in surprise. “And she was not reprimanded for this behavior?”

“Skye?” Fitz’s eyebrows went high. “She’s just a wee girl, Nainai. Mom wouldn’t skelp her little bahoochie.” He laughed once then continued, “that means…”

Lian glared at the boy. “I know exactly what that means, young man.”

Fitz’s mouth snapped shut as he shoved his hands in his pockets and looked to the floor. “Sometimes, mom makes Skye sit in her chair if she’s being unruly, but she’d never spank her. She’s just a baby.” He tried to reason with his grandmother.

Lian jammed the mop into the water and added a capful of the cleaner. “And what if it were you or Jemma that created this mess, then what?”
Fitz rolled his eyes. “Jemma?” he laughed. “Jemma’d never get this much muck anywhere. She abhors a mess.” He leaned forward and whispered, “she even folds her under…girlie things.” He blushed a bit then took a breath. “If it was me…” the boy grit his teeth. “First of all, Nainai, you must understand that I would never do such a thing.” He looked at her with a sideways glance. “But if, and that is a big if, I temporarily lost my mind and did run amuck…” he thought for a moment. “Well, mom would not hesitate to blister my bahoochie.” He rubbed both hands on his backside and sucked in a trail of air.

“Exactly,” Lian frowned as she wrung the mop and slapped it on the floor. “And your sister should earn the same.”

“But, Nainai, Skye’s but baby,” Fitz smiled.

Lian shook her head and pressed all of her aggravation into her mopping. “Did you need something, Fitz? If not you’ll need to get out so I can take care of this.” She nodded toward the drying muck.

The boy thought for a moment. “I was looking for mom. I wanted to tell her ab…something.”

“Upstairs…not punishing your very spoiled little sister,” Lian responded, nodding toward the stairs as she scrubbed at the stains on the tile floor.

Fitz watched for a second then shrugged his shoulders and tiptoed around the mud stream and blops to get to the staircase.

xx

Melinda wrestled Skye out of her muddy clothing and slipped her into a tub full of Lavender Baby Bath. The little girl kicked and squealed creating tiny tidal waves in the water. Melinda hummed softly as she dribbled the warm water over Skye’s back and shoulders. The child screamed and pulled away as if scalded, slipping sideways in the water. Melinda caught her just before she totally submerged.

The shock silenced the crying for the first time. Skye rubbed her bubbly hands over her muddy face creating alternating streaks of dirty and almost clean. Melinda squeaked a small blue whale then dropped it into the bubbles where it sunk slowly to tub water level and disappeared in the suds. Skye wobbled her feet and smiled at the toy. An orange and white fish followed, then a
purple octopus and a yellow starfish. Melinda squeaked each before diving them into the foamy water. Skye sniffled as she watched them disappear. She drew a shaky breath and swished her little hands below the bubbles to find the toy sea creatures. Melinda did the same, finding the starfish and squeezing it below the surface.

Tiny bubbles drifted to the surface left suds-free by Melinda’s hand. She smiled and slowly drew the little squishy toy from the water, wriggling it at Skye before she squeezed it sending a light stream of water on to the little girl’s belly. Skye giggled through her-shaky breathing and reached for the little starfish.

“There’s my baobei.” Melinda smiled as she began massaging the soft soapy water into Skye’s muddy feet with a soft washcloth.

Skye relaxed into the warm water and lavender scented bath. She found her ‘sea creatures’ and lined them up on the lip of the tub against the wall as she babbled to them and alternately splashed them into the water then flew them back to the edge of the tub.

Melinda smiled as she reached for the baby shampoo.

“Mmmmmoooommm!" Fitz called as he stomped into the room and stopped a few inches behind Melinda.

Skye knelt with her back to them, her bubble streaked bottom just inches above the water line. “Look mine fitches, Fizt. Them is dining like a the lympic guyses.” She picked up the whale, held it high over her head and let it drop into the water.

Fitz threw one hand over his eyes and shook his head. Skye never seemed to care that anyone saw her naked, but freaked out if one of the big kids saw her underwear.

Melinda smiled at the antics of both her children. She set down the shampoo bottle and squeezed out the washcloth then folded it over the water spigot. “What do you need, Fitz?” She smiled at her son who stood eye to eye with her as she knelt at the side of the tub. She reached to Skye and lifted her just enough to have her sit in the tub. “Sit down, baobei, you are going to slip again.” Fitz giggled a little and dropped the hand from his eyes, but Skye was back up on her knees before her bottom hit the porcelain.

“I non’t reacha mine aminals if I sittin inna buzzles, momma.” She explained without looking at
her mother. Melinda shook her head and turned to Fitz who now stood with his eyes squeezed shut.

She reached out and tickled his tummy. “That’s enough, silly. You’ve seen Skye in her birthday suit plenty of times.” She leaned forward, touching her forehead against his. “We all have…she wears it often enough.”

Fitz let out a little laugh as he opened his eyes and stared into his mother’s only inches away. They both turned left then right and crossed their eyes at each other.

“What do you want, little man?” Melinda asked again, poking Fitz’s belly with each word.

He laughed and pushed her hand away. “I just needed to tell you that Trip took the hose off the spigot and hung it up high on the holder Da put on the garage.”

“Okay,” Melinda responded, narrowing her eyes. “You came all the way up here for that?”

Fitz drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, actually no. I really wanted to ask if I can go with Trip to the basketball court at St. Bart’s. I’ll be real careful and I’ll do as he tells me. I promise.”

“I don’t know, Fitz.” Melinda hedged. “That’s a long walk.”

Fitz beamed. “That’s the beauty of it, mom. I can ride my bike with Trip and Alec.” He threw out his arms to emphasize the point.

Melinda was shaking her head. Fitz was not the most coordinated of their children and he’d already had several spills on that damn bike, none very serious, but why take chances. “That is much too far for you to go on a bicycle, Fitz.”

“I can do it, mom. I’ve been practicing and Trip says it’s okay if you say I can. Come on, mom the team needs my help with their game.” Fitz pleaded his case.

“How about if you let me finish with Skye and I’ll take you to the court?” Melinda suggested.
“Like a wee bairn? I’m not a baby, mom. I can do this. You have to let me.” Now the little boy was begging.

Melinda put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Fitz. I just don’t think it a good idea and I don’t want you hurt.”

The boy shook off his mother’s touch. “I won’t get hurt. It’s only one point two, eight, nine kilometers. That isn’t far.” Fitz stomped a foot.

“That’s almost a mile, Fitz and too far for you. I’m sorry, but the answer is no.” Melinda reiterated.

“That’s not fair!” Fitz moaned, slamming his arms over his chest and stomping the same foot.

Skye dropped the toy she was holding, plopped down in the water and watched her brother with wide eyes.

“Maybe not, but the answer is still no. You are too young to be going off that far on a bike.” Melinda shook her head.

“You’re treating me like a wee toddler! I’ll not have it.” Fitz growled kicking over the shampoo bottle Melinda had set on the floor next to the tub. “I should have just gone and not bothered coming up here to be told I’m a bloody bairn.” The little boy yelled as he turned and headed for the door.

Melinda caught his arm and turned him back. “And you’re very lucky you didn’t make such a poor choice, little man. So let’s just take a breath and calm down.”

Fitz yanked his arm free. “I don’t want to calm down. I want to go with the guys and not be treated like a feckin’ baby.”

“Uh oh,” Skye whispered, her mouth hanging open as she sat stone still in the bubbles.
Fitz froze as well, realizing seconds too late what had slipped his lips. “I… I…”

Melinda’s eyebrow was raised… never a good sign. She pointed to the door. “To your room, Fitz now.” He remained rooted to the spot, glaring at his mother drawing small, quick breaths. She glared back and drew a deep breath of her own. “Now, Fitz or I will spank your bare butt right here.”

Fitz glared for a few seconds then stormed out of the room and down the hall, ending his stand with the slam of his bedroom door. He was already in for it. Slamming the door was just for spite.

Melinda closed her eyes and dropped her chin to her chest.

“You mad to Fizt, momma?” Skye’s little voice broke through her calming technique.

Melinda looked at her baby standing in the tub with bubbles sliding down her wet body. “Sit down, Skye.” She reached out quickly and lowered the little girl back into the water. “Momma needs to get the mud out of your hair. She looked at the murky water and reached to pull the plug.

“NO!” Skye screeched, grabbing her arm. “I not done wit mine aminals. Them wants a swimore.”

“We need clean water for the fishies, Skye.” Melinda explained as she flipped open the stopper. Skye wailed and bounced up and down in the draining water stopping only when Melinda turned on the spigot and flipped the plug closed.

Fifteen minutes later Melinda fought the battle of getting her baby out of the tub. She’d scrubbed Skye’s hair twice with the, once again, lavender baby shampoo then emptied the water from the tub and even used a gentle spray with the hand held shower to rinse away the bubbles and most of the grime left behind. Skye kicked and screamed once again and Melinda wondered just how much lavender scent it would take to calm her little spit fire. She wrapped the little girl in a large towel, grabbed the large bottle of baby lotion from the counter and headed for Skye’s bedroom.

Skye battled her mother’s ministrations as she toweled her dry and rubbed the moisture from her bobbed hair. Melinda sang softly as she massaged the, yes, lavender baby lotion into the little girl’s arms and legs, her tummy and shoulders and pretty much every inch of her almost exhausted little body. She slipped a pair of pink panties and a crisp white camisole on the little girl and gathered her into her arms, sat in the large white rocking chair and slowly urged her baby to sleep with soft lullabies.
After tucking Skye into her bed, she collected the towel and lotion and headed back to clean the bathroom then deal with Fitz.

xx

Walking into Fitz’s room after he’d had a meltdown was usually an exercise in caution. The little boy still wrestled with anger issues, but now limited his tantrums to tossing his own room. This normally included tipped over chairs and treasured science projects strewn across the floor which was a lot better than the days when he overturned his mattress, pulled out and emptied drawers and once pulled the drapes from both windows. Melinda was not surprised by the overturned wastebasket or the tennis shoe on the dresser. She scanned the room for the other shoe but it was not immediately visible.

Fitz was curled into a tight ball facing the wall. Melinda knew he was not asleep. She picked her way across the floor and sat on the tangled blanket at the edge of the bed then stood quickly. The missing sneaker had been found. She pulled it from the tangle, set it on the floor and sat back down.

Melinda shook her head and let out a soft breath. Maybe that lavender stuff did work. She wasn’t half as angry as she thought she’d be. Putting a hand on Fitz’s leg she jostled him gently. The boy turned and stretched out his body. He blinked a few times and she could tell he’d been crying. He scrubbed his fists against his eyes and blinked again.

“You’re going to spank me, right?” He mumbled to his shoulder.

Melinda exhaled and shook her head. “You certainly deserve it, wǒ měili de nánhái.? You know how I feel about that language, Fitz.”

The little boy nodded and quickly wiped away a tear. “I didn’t mean to say it, momma. I was just angry and it slipped.” His voice cracked, but he managed to stop the tears.

“And we’ve talked about that. Haven’t we?” Melinda nodded.

Fitz sat up, slid his legs over the edge of the bed and leaned into his mother. “I’m really sorry.” He whispered. “I really would rather if you didn’t.” He said even softer as he rubbed his hand against the back of hers.
“And I really don’t want to, but I can’t have you just spouting off whenever you’re angry, Fitz. You know that.” Melinda answered just as softly.

“I know that, you don’t have to remind me.” He smiled up at her.

Melinda pursed her lips and smiled. “I think what happened earlier means you do need a reminder.” She raised her brows and nodded slowly. “And in front of Skye? Fitz, what if she starts imitating you? What if she uses those words at school or when we’re out?” The little boy shrugged and cuddled closer to his mother.

“I truly don’t believe anyone would understand what she was saying.” He sighed.

Wrapping one arm around the boy and giving him a tight squeeze, Melinda drew a quick breath. “That isn’t funny, Fitz and you know it.” He slumped against her and sighed in defeat. They sat that way for a few minutes, each contemplating what was to come.

Fitz stood and faced his mother. He took a deep breath. She did the same as she took his hands in hers. “You’re going to put the room back together.” Fitz bit his lip and nodded. “Then you will stay here until supper.”

“You mean take a nap, right?” Fitz sought clarification. Melinda nodded and the boy felt a glimmer of relief. “So you aren’t going to tan my backside?” He raised his brows and smiled.

Tilting her head to one side, Melinda let out a soft breath. “You know the punishment for that language, Fitz…”

“But, I won’t…” he stopped her, pulling on her hands and leaning back with a whine.

She pulled him forward. “But, you did.” She reminded him.

“But, I didn’t want to…” he argued, changing direction.
Melinda smiled at his antics. “You were angry. I don’t think you knew what you wanted.”

“Are you angry?” Fitz jumped at the suggestion. “Maybe you’re not really sure what you want to do. I’ll be fine with you taking some time to think about it a bit more.”

“I’m sure you would.” Melinda smiled as she leaned forward and touched her forehead to his. “Now, what kind of mom would I be if I set rules and consequences and then just threw them to the wind because my cheeky little lad tried to use his cuteness on me?”

“Kind and forgiving?” Fitz hoped. “Understanding and loving?”

Melinda closed her eyes and sat back. “Leopold James Coulson-Fitz, I love you to the moon and back and I will always forgive you. I totally understand you were angry and let what you were thinking slip right out into this predicament.” She tapped her index finger lightly on his chest. And I am also the kind of mother that does not make threats. I simply tell you what will happen when you disregard a rule and then, unfortunately for both of us, have to follow through with that.”

Fitz let out a long breath. He was fighting a losing battle and he knew it. There was no wearing his mother down. The consequence for using less than appropriate language was a close up view of his bedroom carpet and a very well warmed backside. He was only delaying the inevitable and mom played along. He wriggled through her lap and rested his head on her shoulder. She wrapped her arms around him and gently patted his bottom.

They stayed that way for a moment then Melinda gently pushed him to stand and dropped her hands to her lap. “Okay, let’s be done with this.”

Fitz drew a deep breath as she gently tugged him forward.

xx

Melinda walked into the kitchen after spending ten minutes consoling her very contrite little boy. He cried himself out and drifted to sleep secure in her arms. She’d kissed his brow and laid him in his bed. He’d sleep a few hours and put his room back in order before the family sat down to supper at six. She also snuck a quick peek to check on Skye.

Now, she stood in the center of her clean kitchen and turned back realizing the mud trail through
the hall and dining room was gone. Her first inclination was that Trip had given in to his guilt and cleaned up the mess his baby sister had left. She smiled and shook her head then turned as the basement door opened and her mother stomped out into the kitchen.

“I’ve put the towels into the washing machine. The mop did very little in some places.” She simply stated as she moved to the stove and turned on the burner under the tea kettle.

“Mother,” Melinda huffed. “You did not have to clean that mess. I would have taken care of it as soon as I was finished…”

“Coddling your little hellion?” Lian shook her head as she pulled two tea cups and saucers from the cupboard and placed them on the table. “You are creating a very bad situation, Melinda.”

Melinda grit her teeth. “It is a situation I have under control and one you do not have to concern yourself with at all.”

“I am trying to help, daughter. It is very clear you cannot see what is happening with that little one.” She cast her eyes toward the stairs. “You are enabling her to manipulate you, Melinda.”

Pinching off the headache that was starting, Melinda squeezed the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes. “Mother, Skye is just a baby. She is not manipulating anything or anyone. She has been through things no child should and has had more than her share of abuse. I do not intend to add to that trauma.”

Lian let out a huff and dropped two spoons on the table. “I am not telling you to beat the child, Melinda. You do not have to take a cane to her or flay off a layer of skin! I am not a monster, Melinda.” She thumped her forefinger against the table as she spoke. “Perhaps you still see Skye as a baby, but even so, she will not be one forever. I understand this is not the first time she’s done this very same thing.”

“She doesn’t understand mother. She hasn’t had anyone to teach her right from wrong.” Melinda shot back.

“Melinda,” Lian frowned. “The Sisters of St. Agnes may not have been the most affectionate caregivers but I am sure they attempt to instill the concept of right and wrong to their young charges. What about that Mary Clare you are so fond of…don’t you think she kept this little one on the right track?”
“Sr. Mary Clare did what she could to keep Skye safe and loved. It was probably the only tenderness that baby had in her short lifetime.” Melinda’s voice rose as her temper frayed.

Lian smiled. “So she is just as guilty as you in this fiasco.”

“Mother, please, if you must have one of my children taken to task I can assure you that Fitz will thinking about his behavior for a while.” Melinda shot back.

Lian glared for a moment. “I wondered where my brilliant grandson had gone. He was off to ask a question, I believe. This resulted in your paddling the boy?”

“First, mother, I did not nor will I ever paddle my children. Fitz has a penchant for using very unacceptable language when he is angry or things don’t go his way. This is ongoing. We’re working on it.” Melinda explained through her clenched teeth.

“So this little boy mouths off a few colorful terms and gets his backside warmed while his sister trots a gallon of mud through the house then throws a tantrum when stopped and receives a warm bath and an hour of cuddling. I cannot believe my own daughter does not see the miscarriage of justice in this situation.” Lian growled back.

“Mother…” Melinda began.

“Melinda,” Lian cut her off. “If you had done what that little one did, you would have helped to clean the mess after I swatted your little behind quite a few times.” She stepped closer to her daughter and raised one finger at her. “I love my grandchildren, Melinda, every one of them are treasures and that little one is easy to fall in love with, but mark my words, daughter, you will come to regret spoiling her so badly.”

Melinda narrowed her lips and took quick short breaths as she looked away from her mother’s accusation then turned back. “Skye is not spoiled.” She breathed just above a whisper.

Lian held up her hands, closed her eyes and gave a quick nod. “I do not want to be the one to tell you I told you so in the future.” With that, Lian moved to silence the screaming tea kettle. She removed it from the heat and poured the steaming water into a small ceramic pot, then stepped around Melinda and moved to the table. She sat down and calmly poured the liquid over the tea ball inside the dainty cup then did the same with the second cup.
Melinda stood with her arms across her chest staring into nothing as she drew deep breaths and let them out slowly in an effort to calm herself. Lian waited for her tea to steep and watched. After a few minutes she removed the tea ball from her cup and set in the small dish next to the saucer. She stirred in a dollop of honey before she spoke quietly and calmly.

“Please sit, Melinda. Your tea will get cold. Come share a bit of quiet with me.” Lian picked up the cup and blew a soft breath over it before taking a sip then set it back in the saucer and waited for her daughter’s response without looking up.

Melinda let out one last long breath and turned toward her mother. She should have felt infuriated by her mother’s serenity instead she calmly joined the older woman and prepared her cup of tea before taking a long slow drink.

xx

The rest of the day was uneventful. A long discussion with Trip revealed that he had not asked Fitz to accompany him to the basketball court only referred to the fact that Melinda would never okay the excursion. That in turn resulted in another discussion with Fitz on the merits of telling the truth entirely, without embellishments or inferences and a firm swat on the backside just to drive home the point. Fitz figured he got off easy.

Skye woke happy and content, wandering into the family room in a backward pajama top that belonged to Jemma and served as an ill-fitting dress. Melinda quickly whisked her off for a change. Jemma returned from a trip to Bernice’s church joining the woman’s group on a visit to a flower show in the city. She spent the remainder of the afternoon helping Nainai with preparing a traditional Chinese dinner for the family.

Melinda and Lian remained aloof but civil through the evening meal and cleanup as Phil tried to figure out just what set them off this time. The boys cleaned up since the girls prepared and the family moved outdoors to enjoy the warm summer evening. Trip helped Skye catch lightening bugs in an old mason jar. Jemma pointed out the variety of small plants she had chosen for her garden in the backyard to Lian who gushed over her granddaughter’s knowledge of each. Fitz and Phil enjoyed a game of backgammon. Melinda was content just to sit and watch her family soak up this shared time.

After a treat of ice cream sundaes the family sat around the large table on the deck and shared stories of their day, a few silly jokes and plans for tomorrow. When three young Coulson’s began yawning and rubbing their eyes, Melinda announced it was bedtime and within an hour had all of her little ones tubbed, scrubbed, kissed (several times) and tucked into their respective beds. Trip
excused himself and disappeared into the room he shared with his little brother and hour later and soon the house fell into its late night sigh of silence.

xx

Melinda lay in on her back staring at the ceiling with her hands folded across her midsection. One finger tapped up and down as she watched the lights of passing traffic out on the street track across the room. Phil snored quietly, curled into his pillow on the opposite side of the bed.

“Phil,” she said softly.

He snorted and bounced a bit, but did not reply. Melinda waited and watched as another car passed by silently then tried again.

“Phil,” this time just a whisper louder.

A snuffly groan came back and she turned toward the man with his back to her.

“Phil,” she said out loud, placed a hand on his shoulder and gave him a shake. “Phil!”

He rolled toward her, scrubbed his hand over his face and grumbled some sort of reply without opening his eyes.

“Phil, we need to talk…” Melinda started, shaking him again, this time a little more roughly.

“Talk,” he repeated, smacking his lips and scrunching his pillow into a more comfortable ball.

Melinda let out a frustrated huff and yanked the pillow from under his head. “PHIL!”

The man dropped his head to the mattress and rolled on to his back running both hands through his thinning hair. He reached for the pillow she held against her chest and attempted to pull it back with no success.
“Melina,” he breathed. “Unless someone is bleeding, can this wait til morning?” His voice was thick and groggy.

“I need your opinion.” She ignored his question.

“I think sleep is a good idea.” He curled back to his side, this time facing her and tucked his folded hands under his cheek.

“I’m serious, Phil.” She sighed then landed a punch on his shoulder when he answered with a snore.

Phil jumped then let out a breath that fluttered over his lips. He raised a hand then let it fall on the mattress between them and opened one eye. He drew a breath before speaking.

“Okay…okay, tell me…er…ask, ask me…” he grumbled, still only half awake.

She flipped to her side and stared at him. “Are you awake?”

“Hmmm, uh huh,” he answered with both eyes closed again.

“Phil!” she poked him and his eyes sprang wide open.

“Yeah, yeah, awake…I’m awake.” He rubbed both eyes and blinked several times then stared at her.

Melinda stared back and wondered if her husband could sleep with his eyes opened. Phil squeezed his eyes shut tightly then opened them again, smacked his lips and swallowed.

Staring at him for a moment, Melinda frowned. “Phil,” she began.

“Mmm hmm…” he sighed, struggling to keep his eyes from closing. He opened them as wide as
possible as his mouth did the same.

“Phil,” she started again. “I’ve been giving this a lot of thought and…”

He drew a breath and blinked several times, concentrating more on staying awake than on what she was saying.

“Do you think Skye is spoiled?” Melinda blurted out, then stared waiting for his answer.

Phil raised one eyebrow and scraped a hand over his face before answering. “Nope,” he sighed as he bounced himself into a more comfortable position, gently pulling the pillow behind his head into place. “Uh huh, I think she smells fresh as a daisy.”

The pillow that struck him finally brought him fully awake.

Melinda was on her side up on one elbow, glaring at him. “I am totally serious, Phil. Do you think our baby is spoiled?” She repeated the question emphasizing every word.

Phil rubbed one eye with one finger. He could not imagine what would bring his wife to such a cockamamie question at…he turned and glanced at the clock…two forty five in the morning. “Mel,” he began with a much clearer tone. “Bad dream?” he wondered.

“No, I am not dreaming.” She dropped back to her original position. “My mother…”

“That explains it.” Phil grinned as he fell into the same position as his wife. “I thought something felt a little off.”

“She’s convinced we are spoiling her rotten, that we let her get away with anything she wants. She almost ordered me to spank her after that little mud drama this afternoon.” She rambled.

Phil thought for a moment about how to respond without making things worse. “It was a little extreme, Mel especially after the last time.”
“Are you agreeing with my mother?” Melinda accused.

“No, no, absolutely not…not me…just making a point that’s all.” Phil clarified, realizing he was speaking to the ceiling, but so was Melinda.

“Phil, she’s so little and all that baggage…” Melinda’s voice cracked.

Phil moved closer and pulled her into his arms, kissing the top of her head as she rested on his shoulder. “And cute as a little bug’s ear to boot,” he chuckled. “And…well, I think we’re both guilty of falling under that little one’s spell. She does get into more than her share of mischief.”

They both laughed at his statement.

“What am I going to do, Phil? I just can’t bring myself to…to discipline her. I just keep seeing that monster Radcliffe and his spawn hurting her so badly she screamed in fear for years. I just can’t.”

Phil laughed under his breath. “Huh, you had no problem dusting our boy’s britches after that little talk about being truthful.” He looked down at her as she looked up at him. “What was that all about anyway?”

Melinda lowered her gaze and patted his chest lightly as he rested his chin on her head. “Oh, Fitz just blurted out another verse of his not so child friendly language.”

“Ah ha,” Phil nodded against her head. “And you provided the usual reminder, I suppose.”

“He talked me into a lot less than he deserved.” Melinda huffed.

They lay in silence for a few moments, Phil gently stroking his wife’s back in an effort to comfort her. She met the rhythm of his hand with her own as she tapped a hand gently against his chest.

“Do you think Fitz resents you correcting him?” Phil broke the silence.
“What kind of a question is that?” Melinda rose up and looked directly into Phil’s eyes. “I am sure he resents having his little butt spanked, but I’ve never left him in tears or alone to wallow in the thought that I resent him. I always make sure he knows I love him no matter what he’s done or said.”

“Of course you do,” Phil smiled. “You love that little guy to the moon and back and yet have no problem letting him know, in no uncertain terms, when’s he’s stepped out of line. And I know for a fact he loves you right back, probably more.”

She breathed a soft breath and laid back against his chest. “He’s had his share of trauma as well, hasn’t he and that Grant creep put him through his own hell.” She thought about that for a moment before continuing. “But, that’s different Phil. That bastard just bullied our little boy, threatened him and hurt him to make him comply. Fitz knows we would never do that. He knows how much I…we love him. He knows I discipline him because I love him. He knows that. I make sure he does.”

“And so does Skye,” Phil reminded her. “I know she’s little and we certainly can’t expect her to understand things the way Jemma and Fitz do, or for that matter Trip, but maybe we need to take a stronger stand on some things.” He suggested. “I mean we wouldn’t want to break her spirit.”

Melinda laughed. She was more than sure it would take a lot to do that.

“I think we just need to keep a closer eye on our baby’s behavior and set some limits and make her aware of some consequences.” Phil suggested. “She won’t be a baby forever.”

Melinda snorted, “that’s just what my mother said.” She thought for a moment. “I think you have a point, but…” she stopped.

“But?” he waited for her to finish.

“I’m not telling my mother she was right.” Melinda let out a heavy breath.

Phil squeezed her tightly with both arms. “Never,” he chuckled as they snuggled together and let themselves drift to sleep.
1 Stop right there, little girl. You are very naughty. Look at this mess.

2My beautiful boy
Chapter Summary

Skye’s having temper tantrums and as they persist and grow in intensity the entire family is on edge. Phil and Melinda hesitate to do more than attempting a time out solution. A near tragedy at Mack’s pool forces Melinda's hand.

“I go out and step inna muddles, Momma?” Skye asked as she knelt on the window seat and watched the rain splash in the small pools of water on the driveway.

Melinda smiled at the little girl as she set a box of cereal on the table next to the stack of bowls she’d also put there. “I don’t think that’s going to happen, Skye. The rain is very hard and the weather man says there will be thunder and lightening today. We can’t play in a storm.” She jutted out her lip in a mock pout and shook her head.

Skye stared at her mother for a beat and matched the pout then turned back to the window. “I non’t see none thunner and lightling.”

“Well, even so, the rain is too heavy for little girls to step in the “muddles”, maybe tomorrow.” Melinda continued as she scooped the little girl from the seat and plopped her on her hip. Skye dropped her head to her mother’s shoulder and gave her best ‘boo-boo face’. Melinda smiled and jiggled the little girl’s chin. “Sorry, baobei, even that little face is not going to change my mind so let’s see if we can get the rest of the kids out of bed and have some breakfast.”

“I needa go out the side, Momma. I got a boots with laney buds on ‘em for to step inna muddles.” Skye nodded close to her mother’s face. “O-yo give-ed them to me, member Momma?” She squirmed a little to be put down, but Melinda held on.

“You have beautiful lady bug rain boots from Elena, but we won’t be using them today, Skye.” Melinda smiled at her baby.

“I needa…” Skye whined as she struggled to escape her mother’s embrace.
Melinda smiled and kissed the little girl’s temple as she turned toward the staircase. “You need to have some breakfast and then we’ll get dressed and then…”

Skye bounced up and down as her whine turned into a wail. “I geddown, Momma. I getta mine boots ferda go out the side.” She babbled so quickly it sounded like one word.

Melinda stopped and stared at the little storm in her arms. She let out a frustrated breath. “Maybe you need to sit in your chair for a little bit and think about it, hmmm?”

“I no wanna sit inna chayor. I needa go inna muddles.” Skye squawked as she shook her head.

Melinda shook her head. This was becoming a daily ritual and the recourse she and Phil had devised was not doing much to alleviate the problem. A visit to Dr. Stephens to rule out any physical issues found their youngest in perfect health. Maura smiled when she told Melinda that she should be happy with her baby’s new behaviors. The fact that Skye was now ‘acting out’ more than likely showed that the little girl was secure enough in her environment to trust she would not be sent away for misbehaving. According to the doctor it was a giant step in Skye’s arrested development.

“She trusts you enough to be a naughty little girl.” The doctor smiled at the Coulson’s plight. “Now you need to trust yourself enough to let her know you have limits and she is testing them mightily. Time for momma and daddy to let her know they love her immensely but won’t put up with undesirable behavior.” Maura shook her head at the pained look on Melinda’s face. “You’ve got to stick to you guns, Mel. You’ve got no problems with Fitz or Jemma. You’ve got to do the same with Skye.”

Melina heard the pediatrician’s voice in her head as she stood in the hall and listened to Skye chatter on about how she needed to go outside and wanted her boots right now. The little girl bounced and rocked vigorously in her attempt to get down. Melinda let out another frustrated sigh and headed back to the kitchen stopping next to a small blue wooden chair against the far wall. “Okay, baobei time to sit in your chair for a bit.” She bent to deposit Skye on the seat.

“NO!” The little girl screamed. “I non’t wanna sit onna liddle chayor.” She bounced up as soon as her bottom touched the chair.

Melinda squatted down in front of her baby and gently pressed her back to the seat. Skye sat, but screamed, bounced and kicked in protest. “I’m sorry, baobei, but you’re going to sit here until you calm down.”
“I no wanna sidown!” Skye squealed as she bounced up and down with each word. She kicked her little feet rapidly.

“I’m sorry you’re sad, baobei but you are being very naughty right now.” Melinda swallowed the urge to pull the little girl into her arms and hold her until this passed. “Momma is going to wake the other kids and Skye is going to stay right here on this chair.” She spoke firmly, and just loud enough to be heard over the little girl’s protests. She stood slowly and waited a moment before taking a step away. Immediately, Skye threw herself face down on the floor and kicked the small chair on its side as she continued wailing.

Melinda turned back and gently righted the chair then picked up the screaming child and sat her back down on it. “Momma said sit on the chair Skye. That is what you need to do.”

Skye’s answer was nothing more than a series of sobs, wails and shrieks as she continued bouncing up and down on the chair and kicking her feet.

“What’s she done this time?” Fitz yawned as he shuffled around his mother into the kitchen. He stopped and stared at his baby sister for a moment before looking up at his frazzled mother. “Perhaps you should rethink the chair.” He suggested rubbing one eye.

Melinda let out a snort and wrapped an arm around her son. “How ‘bout some breakfast, little man?” She turned him toward the table as Skye continued to throw her tantrum.

“Wow,” Trip shook a finger in one ear as he joined the family and dropped into a chair at the table. “Nothing like a little Skye serenade to start the day,” he chuckled. “Won’t be long I’ll know this song by heart.”

Fitz sniggered at his brother’s comment. “If you start caterwauling on your chair, I’m having my cereal in the garage.”

Skye let out an extremely loud and long squeal, causing Fitz to throw his hands over his ears and Trip to grimace. Melinda let out a sigh and shook her head.

“I don’t think this time out thing is working.” Fitz shouted with his eyes closed and ears covered. “The rest of us are going to be deaf before she wears out.”
“Oh, Skye, darling, not another tantrum.” Jemma rushed into the kitchen, stopping in front of her screaming sister. Melinda stopped her a second before she pulled Skye into her arms.

“Jemma,” she smiled as she took the little girl’s hand. “Remember what we talked about, Skye needs to learn about consequences.”

“But. Momma…” Jemma sniffled. “Look at her, she’s positively hysterical. We can’t…”

“Shhhh,” Melinda assured the child as the boys watched from the table. “Skye is angry because she can’t have her own way. She’s just letting us know how she feels and we’re letting her know it’s okay to be angry but she still has to follow the rules.”

“It seems so cruel.” Jemma sobbed into her mother’s midsection. She looked up at Melinda. “Isn’t there an easier way?”

Melinda paused. Her older daughter was voicing every doubt she had herself and every feeling she had tried to push away.

“It’d be a lot easier to just let her do what she wants,” Trip pointed out around a mouthful of cereal. “Of course then she’d just expect us to just give in all the time. Could get real ugly.”

Fitz nodded as he poured cereal into a bowl. “It wouldn’t be wise to just let her go on having her way and getting into all sorts of trouble.”

“She might hurt herself or worse if she doesn’t learn about consequences.” Jemma agreed as she pulled a Kleenex from her robe pocket and dabbed her eyes. She smiled at her mother and wrapped her arms around her middle. “It’s okay, momma…it will be okay.”

Melinda hugged her little girl and smiled at her boys. Here they were, her children comforting and encouraging her without realizing they could do so. She stopped for a moment suddenly feeling a second set of little arms around her thigh. Everyone noticed the silence at the same time.

“I hungary, momma.” Skye sniffled as she reached up to her mother. Melinda smiled and reached down to pick up her baby without breaking Jemma’s embrace. The little girl drew a deep breath and rubbed both hands over her eyes. “I have pingk icks?” Skye sniffled as she wrapped her arms around Melinda’s neck.
Another battle won, Melinda signed to herself. Skye put up a good fight but stayed on her chair, well mostly stayed on it and she did not give in to the protests. For now it was over and all was back to as normal as it got in a house full of kids with all sorts of issues. Melinda ushered Jemma to the table with a gentle reminder to eat breakfast not just watch the boys eat theirs then hurried Skye off to the powder room.

“You washa mine sads all away, momma?” Skye sniffled from her perch on the counter top as Melinda used a cool washrag to wipe the little girl’s face. “I no like-a liddle chayor, Momma.” She announced as she squeezed her eyes closed and held her head back.

Melinda merely listened as she completed her chore.

“Daddy pudda chayor in a gratch?” Skye nodded at her mother.

Melinda gently tapped the little girl’s nose, causing her to blink once. “Momma thinks it’s a good little chair.”

Skye scowled. “I no like-a siddon it no mores, a kay?”

“Hmmm,” Melinda smiled as she leaned forward to touch her forehead to her baby’s. “I think we’ll keep it just in case.” She stood back and lifted Skye to the floor and took her hand as they exited the room and headed for the kitchen.

“I non’t haves none uncase no mower.” Skye announced.

Melinda smiled down at her baby. It would be wonderful if it was that easy, but she knew it was not quite over.

xx

A long rainy day spent in the house with four siblings is never a good thing and always a recipe for disaster. Fitz earned himself an hour in his room after slamming his hands on the table after Skye touched his K’nex¹ structure. Trip banished himself to the basement for a few hours of kid free quiet and Skye free PlayStation time. Even Jemma was worn down by the gloominess of the day,
snapping at her brothers when they teased her just a bit too much. Before she could be scolded the little girl sent herself to her room where Melinda found her sound asleep twenty minutes later. Skye was the worst of the crew spending another spell in her chair for throwing toys across the room which resulted in another fifteen minutes of screaming, kicking and throwing herself on the floor. Lunch went without incident as the family enjoyed grilled cheese and tomato soup, everyone’s favorite. The mere suggestion of naptime sent the youngest Coulson into another downward spiral. Melinda felt it counterproductive to have the little girl sit so she could calm down enough to sleep, but Skye actually wore herself out with the ultra-tantrum and fell asleep on the kitchen floor.

After carrying the sleeping toddler to her bed and making sure Salty was secure in her arms, Melinda practically fell onto the couch and just stared at the myriad of toys spread across the family room. She envied Phil working at the office on this dreary day, dealing with grumpy clients demanding details and complaining about costs and contracts. She closed her eyes and let her head drop back against the couch. She looked down quickly when the cushion next to her dipped slightly. Opening her eyes without moving her head she smiled at Fitz who quickly snuggled next to her. She wrapped an arm around him and pulled him closer. He wrapped his arms around her and drew a deep breath.

“Wǒ ài nǐ, Māmā,” the little boy whispered.

She smiled as she rubbed a hand up and down on his back. “Wǒ měi lì de nánhái, wǒ gèng ài nǐ.”

A few seconds later a flash of lightening brightened the darkened sky. A loud clap of thunder followed and shook the room causing the little boy to bury his head in his mother’s embrace. Melinda squeezed him a little tighter and listened for the sound of the girls racing from the second floor, but heard nothing.

Fitz let out a breath and lifted his head. “Would you like me to tidy up the toys?”

“Nope,” Melinda answered without opening her eyes. “Just sit here with me and listen to the quiet.” Again the thunder rumbled behind the lightening.

“It actually isn’t so very quiet,” Fitz sniggered.

“Shhhh,” Melinda hushed him. “It’s Skye quiet. Let’s just listen for a little while.”
Fitz smiled and snuggled closer, closing his eyes and doing just that.

xx

Three days of rain and tantrums finally turned into clear skies and sunshine by the weekend. Phil and Melinda had taken turns spending the days with the kids as summer break had everyone out of school for the next two months. Melinda was more than thankful that Miss Tripani did not have to deal with this new development in Skye’s behavior. Phil secretly wished the teacher could give them a break from his little claxon that sounded at least once per day.

One of the worst was the day Phil decided to do a little grocery shopping, hoping the change would help deal with the never ending rain. Everyone donned slickers and rain boots and set off to fill the family coffers before Melinda returned for the day. To save time Phil divided the shopping list in two, assigning half to Trip and Jemma while he plopped Skye in the cart and recruited Fitz as his navigator. It started off so well. They moved up and down the aisles dropping items into the cart and crossing them off the list. Skye shivered as they moved through the frozen food and dairy section. Fitz bumped the cart to the left as they moved toward the snack aisle, whispering to Phil that is was not very wise to take his little sister there as she would demand some of every snack item she could reach. What neither of them realized was that the cereal aisle would evoke pretty much the same reaction.

“I non’t like-a ohmeole, Daddy.” Skye shook her head as they entered the aisle. She pointed to the cylindrical boxes lining the shelves at her eye level. “It bees all smooshy alla time.” Fitz, nodded his agreement.

Phil looked at the list. Melinda really hadn’t specified any particular brand or kind only that it should not have anything green included. They still had not figured out the reasoning behind Skye’s aversion to anything that color.

Fitz walked slowly in front of the cart scanning the shelves from top to bottom. “Mom, doesn’t like us to have all the sugary stuff.” He informed his father. “And then there’s the green taboo, so our choices are limited.” He stopped and looked up to the top shelves, scrunching up his nose at the selection. Skye watched for a moment and imitated her brother’s expression. “No flaky stuff like Raisin Bran or Corn Flakes. They break down much too quickly in the milk and turn into floppy little skins.” He turned to Phil and turned very serious. “They are not very appealing.”

Phil stifled a laugh and nodded his agreement.

“I hellup Fizt fina cerell, akay?” Skye was already pushing herself up from her seat in the cart.
“That,” the little boy pointed at his sister with wide eyes, “would be a very bad idea.”

Phil looked from one child to the other as Skye stood in the seat section of the shopping cart. Fitz pulled an exaggerated frowning face and stepped back a few paces.

“I think you can help from right here from the cart, angel.” Phil spoke calmly as he tapped the handle of the cart and attempted to sit the little girl back down in the seat.

“I look it the pitzurs onna bosses on my foots.” The cart wobbled slightly as Skye jumped up and down, keeping her balance only because Phil was holding her hips.

He leaned forward and spoke quietly. “You can see the pictures on the boxes while you sit on your bottom. You’re eyes will still work.”

Fitz shook his head and backed up a few more steps. “Uh oh, here it comes. She’s going full throttle, Da. You best prepare yourself.” He warned as he clapped his hands over his ears.

Skye let out a scream as Phil pulled her booted feet back through the leg holes on the metal cart. She kicked so hard both lady bug boots flew in different directions, bouncing off the neatly stocked cereal shelves. Two boxes of cheerios flipped to the floor on one side of the aisle while a piled display of Breakfast Bars toppled. Fitz jumped out of the way avoiding the crash.

“Hey,” Phil tried the calm approach, afraid to collect the little boots and leave Skye’s side. Surely, she’d stand again and more than likely fall to the floor. “Those lady bugs are not going to be allowed in this store if they knock things off the shelves.” He laughed a not real laugh.

Skye gripped the handle of the cart and bounced up and down as she wailed, repeating over and over that she wanted to get down. She kicked her now stocking feet rapidly, hitting the metal grid of the cart with each swing. Fitz scurried down the aisle and grabbed a box of Trix and one of Berry Kix then ran back and tossed them into the cart. He wrapped his fingers through the tiny bars and pulled it forward, hoping that a change of scenery in the canned vegetable aisle might give his baby sister a new point of view. Skye wasn’t really interested in staring at boring old pictures of vegetables especially when most of them were some shade of green.

“Time to go, Da.” He called as Phil grabbed the boots and hurried to catch up, throwing a box of Rice Krispies into the cart as he passed them.
Skye’s wailing and fighting to escape the cart continued.

By the time Phil pushed his hysterical child to the checkout line, Trip and Jemma had joined him following the sound of their sister’s protest. Canned veggies regardless of their color did nothing to alleviate Skye’s explosion of emotion. Several older women shook their heads as they walked past the frazzled father, murmuring how it was sad that some people could not control their children. No amount of control could calm this little Tasmania Devil right now. Phil had no choice but to direct his brood to the doors after make arrangements with the manager to return for his groceries within the hour. A difficult task as being heard over Skye’s bellowing was almost impossible and watching Trip trying to contain her was definitely unbearable.

Driving home through pelting rain while listening to the continued screaming and the kicking against the back of the seat was no easy task but it was much less stressful than it had been trying to force the incensed preschooler into her safety seat while she was in full tantrum mode. Phil was almost thrilled when he clipped the last restraint and felt a bit guilty for the feeling of satisfaction it brought. He wondered if he could just lift the little hellion seat and all to transport her into the house.

Fitz plugged his ears chanting some crazy mathematical formulas at the top of his lungs. Jemma tried unsuccessfully not to join her sister with sympathy tears and was soon sniffing back tears as she just as miserably tried to console her. Trip flicked on the radio at an ear piercing volume only adding to the cacophony in the vehicle. Phil wondered if this could be considered battle duty and why it seemed the five miles he had to drive seemed more like fifty.

Once inside their home, Phil plopped his screaming mimi on her little blue chair while the other kids scattered to the four corners of the house seeking some kind of refuge from their sister’s rampage. She threw herself to the floor, kicking the chair over and away all the while screaming that she was not going to sit on it ever again. Of course between the wailing and her mangled language skills it was mostly garble. Phil stood with his hands on his hips and watched her flail and roll back and forth in her anger. He really considered joining her because he felt pretty much the same way.

Melinda was right this ‘time out sitting’ practice was for the birds. It was more torture for the rest of the family than it was helping to correct or even lesson Skye’s unacceptable behavior. If someone were to ask, Phil would have to say it was probably making things worse. Maura and Skye’s counselor had told them things would get much worse before they got better but no one could have prepared them for this.

Skye continued screaming as she stood and pulled off her slicker tossing it across the floor pounding her stocking feet on the floor like some crazed dancer. Phil took a breath and set the
little chair back on its feet. He gently took his squirming child and sat her down on it only to have her bounce right back up and let out another ear splitting scream. Again, the frustrated father plopped her back down and placed a firm hand on her mid section holding her there.

“I know you can’t hear me, angel eyes,” he sighed. “But you are going to sit on your chair until you’re all finished with this tantrum.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” Skye wailed as she bounced her hands up and down at her sides. “I non’t wanna sidonna chayor no moer foever.”

The screaming continued for five more minutes before dwindling down to a sniffling sob as the little girl fell forward laying her head on her own lap. She took short shaky breaths. Phil watched for a moment before lifting her into his arms as he stood. Her shaky breathing continued as she laid her head on his shoulder and was asleep before he got her to her bed.

Leaving Trip in charge, only because he knew Skye would nap for at least two and a half hours, Phil and Fitz returned to the grocery store to collect their supplies and offer their apologies.

xx

Melinda was not amused when Phil informed her they probably would not be welcome in Giant Market for a few weeks….maybe months…and definitely without their little fire engine in tow. He gave her a blow by blow account of the day’s fiasco before any of the kids could elaborate on Skye’s performance at the supermarket.

She stood at the back door and watched as their baby happily played with her sister on the deck, pouring water from a small plastic teapot into matching plastic cups as Jemma explained tea time. She smiled at the child’s glee in her fantasy. It was hard to believe that this same happy child could turn into a torrent of fury, kicking and spitting fire in the blink of an eye.

“I don’t think this is working, Mel.” Phil commented as he stepped next to his wife and smiled at his daughters’ play. “I know Maura said it would take time but it’s been a month and…”

“It’s just getting worse.” She finished for him, shaking her head as she turned from the window and sat at the table. She stared into the reflection in her tea cup and let out a soft sigh. “I know she needs limits and consequences but it just seemed so much easier when we…”
“Let her do as she pleased?” Phil finished this time around a sip of his coffee. “Seems like we’re
damned either way,” he shrugged as he continued watching Jemma giggle at something Skye was
trying to tell her.

“I’m not ready to take that step, Phil.” Melinda cautioned.

He turned and smiled at her. “I was pretty close this afternoon.” He admitted.

Melinda raised her eyebrows. “You?” She smiled at his confession, almost laughing at his blush.
Phil was no pushover. He made sure all of the kids towed the line and was not averse to raising
his voice to make a point. He threatened on occasion but never had cause to carry through on any
of them. For some reason every…no, make that three out of four kids believed daddy when he
promised a very uncomfortable conversation to anyone who came close to crossing a line. He read
Trip the riot act when the young boy ignored curfew and had both he and Melinda cruising local
pizza parlors in search of their teen. And that was pretty much the worse with the exception of the
seat dusting he applied to Jemma when she a disappearing act while staying at Lian’s farm a few
weeks ago. Yep, he seemed the calmer parent but seventy-five percent of their kids were careful
not to cross him.

“You know, Maura said she’s just testing us.” Phil offered, ignoring Melinda’s implication.

“And we are failing miserably,” Melinda deadpanned.

Phil raised his coffee mug in an affirmative toast.

They both turned as Fitz shuffled into the room carrying some sort of contraption he slid onto the
table and frowned at for a moment before speaking. “This component right here,” he tapped the
item, “just won’t cooperate.” He looked up sideways at his father. “If I had a soldering gun I
could secure it firmly and would most likely function properly.”

Phil smiled as he set down his cup and sat down on the chair closest to Fitz’s gadget and examined
it for a few seconds before turning to his son, who was waiting for an answer. “If you had a
soldering gun you’d probably have eleven burned fingertips.” He commented without looking at
the little boy.

Fitz’s shoulders slumped. “That is physically impossible, Da. I have only ten digits.” He frowned
as he touched each finger with the respective thumb.
Melinda smiled at her son’s plight as she set down her teacup. “I think your Da means your bottom would be smoldering after you burned holes into all of the furniture.” She sniggered.

“I would certainly not use such a tool in the house, mom. I’d just need a bit of workspace in the garage or perhaps my own work shop.” Fitz hinted.

Phil sat back and took a deep breath. “We talked about this Fitz.” He reminded the little boy. “Your mom and I just don’t feel comfortable with you having dangerous tools or working anywhere without supervision. When you’re older…”

“But, Da…” Fitz interrupted. “I’m in my prime, by the time I’m fifteen or sixteen I may be burnt out.”

Melinda smiled. Their children never surprised her with their dramatics.

“I think you’ve got a few more miles on you, little man.” Phil smiled as he pulled the little boy into a quick hug. “Tell you what,” he tapped Fitz’s nose once. “Let’s take this baby out to the garage and you can show me what you need soldered.” He stood and caught Melinda’s look of panic. “Not to worry Mom, I’d do the work. Fitz here will just be my assistant.” He picked up Fitz’s creation as he stood and motioned toward the door.

“Phil…” she called after them. “If he gets hurt…” But there were already across the deck and heading for the garage.

xx

The morning of Mack’s birthday dawned bright and muggy, a perfect day for a pool party. The large man had joked for months with Fitz about throwing himself a birthday bash and had every intention of seeing it through, all for the benefit of the Coulson children whom he and Elena considered nieces and nephews. Although the adults planned a relaxing day of friendly banter and cool drinks, there would be cake and ice cream and lots of balloons (as per Skye’s instructions). The kids would have all day to splash and dive in the pool while the adults cooled off and kept a close eye on the water play. The biggest surprise of the day would be the arrival of Hunter and Bobbi who had arrived last night and planned to make a big splash after everyone else arrived.

Fitz stood leaning against the doorframe of the powder room, watching his mother brush his baby
sister’s hair and attempt to keep a bow that matched her nautical themed sundress in place. “I don’t see why you are making such a fuss to make her look so fancy when we’ll all just put on swim suits as soon as we arrive.” He shrugged his shoulders and picked at the collar of the golf shirt he wore. “It seems a waste of time.”

Melinda looked up from her task. “You,” she pointed to the little boy, “and your sisters are going to stay looking fancy until I decide it’s swim suit time.”

The little boy’s shoulders fell as he let out a fluttery sigh. “It’s to be a pool party, mom.” He reminded her. “That in itself infers one should wear a swim suit as proper attire.” Her look silenced him as he offered an innocent smile.

Twisting a quick ponie into Skye’s fine hair she snapped a red and white bow over it and smiled at the accomplishment. Skye turned and smiled, holding up a baby doll with several pony tails sticking out in all directions.

“Looka, momma, I makeded mine baby have pureddy hayor juss like-a myon.” The little girl smiled.

Fitz’s eyes went wide. Melinda cast him a warning glare.

“She is a fine baby, Skye.” Fitz smiled as he wrapped an arm around the little girl and walked her into the hall.

Melinda tossed hair paraphernalia into a basket below the sink and called after them. “Stay in the kitchen and out of trouble. As soon as Daddy comes downstairs we are leaving.” She stepped into the hall and watched her two youngest walk toward the kitchen then moved to the bottom of the stairs to hurry Phil and Jemma along before she had to redress her least likely to stay clean children. Trip had already packed the car and tried one more time to convince his grandmother to accompany them to the party.

Phil pulled the black SUV into Mack’s wide driveway and cast a quick glance at his wife. She returned the look, both mentally crossing their fingers. Skye had had no eruptive behavior since yesterday morning when she could not accompany Jemma on a trip to the library. It lasted almost twenty five minutes and had Melinda close to tears herself. As usual, the little girl recovered and moved on without incident, but mom’s nerves remained on edge for hours after.

It had been twenty seven hours. Phil and Melinda hoped it was a good sign. They hoped.
Fitz had the car door open as Phil turned off the engine. He was one foot on the pavement and set to run when his mother’s order to stop froze him in place. Jemma giggled at his brother’s plight as Trip helped Bernice out of the seat his little brother had slipped over in order to be first out of the vehicle. The older woman merely laughed at Fitz’s exuberance.

“Me too, me too,” Skye pleaded as she pulled at the clasps on her safety seat. She kicked her feet with the excitement of arriving at their destination.

Phil let out a breath and smiled at Melinda who had already exited and had a firm grip on their son. The little boy sported a fine pout but followed his mother’s orders and stayed put. Phil closed his door and opened the rear to extricate Skye from her seat. She wriggled her fingers at him as rapidly as her little sandaled feet kicked.

“Hurvy, hurvy, daddy. I geddout too.” She squealed as she tried to help him undo the buckles that held her in place.

Phil laughed as he pulled each lose and caught his little girl as she nearly jumped out once free. “Whoa, there angel eyes,” he smiled as he brought her up to eye level. “Don’t want to start the day needing more bandaids.” He nodded toward the Little Mermaid patch on her left knee, earned with a spill from her bike the day before.

Skye squirmed in order to get down but stopped when Phil gave her a gentle shake and looked into her eyes. “I will put you down, but you have to hold daddy’s hand.” He nodded and waited for her reply. It came immediately. The little girl nodded rapidly. Phil smiled and kissed her cheek then lowered her to the ground and took her by the hand. He noticed Elena coming toward them with Mack a few feet behind.

Trip had gathered most of the ‘baggage’ from the back of the car. Bernice had one twin by the hand as Melinda waited for Phil and their baby to round the car to join them.

“O-YO!” Skye’s screech stopped everyone as she tore across the blacktop toward the woman.

Melinda realized Phil had lost his hold on the little girl just by his glance over the hood of the car. He leaned forward to catch her but she was already out of reach.

“Skye!” both parents bellowed after her, but she weaved between the parked cars heading for the
backyard.

Elena and Mack turned in two directions intending to head off the little girl before she made it to the large locked gate. Melinda and Phil advanced from the other direction. Bernice tightened her hold on Fitz who was more than willing to join in the chase. He grimaced up at her.

The squealing wail that emitted from an area no one could see let the entire party know one little girl had gone down on the macadam. Jemma gasped. Fitz shook his head.

Melinda was first on scene as she pulled Skye up from the pavement. She turned the little girl toward her. Skye’s face was pinched in a silent scream that Melinda release with a quick puff of air blown toward the little girl. She exhaled with the force of a claxon. Momma quickly assessed the damages as Daddy arrived to offer support and sympathy.

With no major injuries found other than a small brushburn on the heel of one hand, Melinda held her baby close and shushed her with rocking and quick kisses. “This is why daddy told you knot to run, baobei.” She shushed her again. “No booboos, no blood…” she assured the little girl as Phil and the others helped get all of the bags into the house.

Elena wrapped ice in a soft washcloth and gave it to Skye to hold until her hand stopped hurting which Skye assured everyone would be ‘nevore, evore, nevore, fernevore’. When Fitz appeared on the deck in his bright yellow swim trunks and electric green goggles, she was miraculously cured.

“I needa babing soup too, momma. I swimmina poowell wit Fizt.” The little girl sniffled as she slipped off Melinda’s lap and handed Elena the now soggy wash cloth.

Melinda smiled at Skye’s recovery and tapped a finger lightly on her nose. “Momma will get your bathing suit, but you need to wait for me or daddy to go in the pool.”

“I go wid Fizt.” Skye nodded at her brother’s goofy smile squished by his goggles.

Melinda shook her head. “No, baobei, not with Fitz. He is too little to watch you in the water. You need to be with momma or daddy.”

“Why don’t you come to help me while your momma gets ready?” Elena put out her arms to the little girl who was already backing away and shaking her head.
“No, I go inna poowell wid Fitz now. I non’t wanna to waid a liddle bit fer momma.” Skye whined.

Melinda took a cautious breath and said a quick plea that this would not turn into an explosion. She shook her head when Elena attempted another redirection. Skye saw around that every time.

“You come with Momma, and we will change together.” Melinda stood and reached out a hand to the little girl. Phil looked up from across the deck, realizing his little girl was very close to meltdown. He set down his drink and walked away from Mack who was mid-sentence, hoping to get to his wife and daughter before that happened.

Melinda was already face to face with their little ball of fire. “Skye,” she spoke calmly but firmly. “You need to do as Momma asks. Fitz is going to wait for me too. Aren’t you?” She looked up at the little boy who stood with his mouth agape. “Aren’t you?” She asked again, in a tone that demanded an affirmative reply.

“Mom,” Fitz whined as she shoulders fell. “I’m not a b…”

“Aren’t you?” She glared at him.

Fitz swallowed quickly and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” He looked to Elena who gave him a quick look of sympathy.

“Fitz non’t gotsa wade a minute. Him gotsa baby soup and gongles. Him gonina poowell. I jump offa side wid Fitz. He hold mine hand.” Skye whined and bounced as she tried to pull away from her mother.

“Hey, angel,” Phil squatted down next to his little girl and spoke quietly. “You don’t want to have to sit and think about calming down, do you?”

Skye shook her head. “No liddle chayor heore. I non’t gonna siddown. I gowin a poowell.”

Elena shook her head and threw up her arms. Her friends were trying to reason with a four-year-old. “¡Esto es ridículo! ¿Tratas de explicar la lógica a un bebé?”
Melinda frowned at her friend’s reaction then turned back to the stubborn little girl facing her father. “I’m sorry, Skye, but that is not going to happen.” She shook her head and reached for the child’s hand.

Skye pulled away immediately turning her bones to jelly (as children are eerily able to do) and dissolved into a screaming, kicking mass at Phil’s feet. He closed his eyes and took a breath, looking up at Elena. “I’m really sorry about this, guys. Maybe we should leave.” He stood but did not miss the look of utter despair on Fitz as the little boy’s shoulders drooped.

“Don’t be still more ridiculous,” Elena frowned as she placed her hands on Fitz’s shoulders and urged him toward the pool where Trip had just back flipped from the diving board and Jemma sat with her feet in the shallow end, clapping for her older brother. “Vas a la piscina, pequeño hombre. Diviértete, nada, bucea, chapotea con Jemma y Trip. Tu hermanita está siendo muy traviesa. Creo que ella necesita más que una silla.” She bent and kissed the little boy on the head as she gave him a gentle nudge forward.

Fitz took two steps toward the pool then turned back to look at his parents. Phil smiled as Melinda nodded. The boy’s smile returned broader than it had been. “Sabía que te amaba, Yoyo.” He whispered to Elena before letting out a whoop and racing toward the crystal clear water.

For a second Skye’s wailing halted as she watched Fitz race across the grass and cannonball into the water without hesitating. Jemma raised her hands in defense of the splash, but smiled at her brother’s tomfoolery. Bernice rose from the shady area where she had taken up residency for the afternoon and waited for the boy to resurface. She smiled broadly and sat back with her lemonade and crocheting as Fitz paddled his way to the opposite end of the pool, surely in an effort to get his sister to join in the fun.

“I gowin a poowell with Fitz!” Skye resumed her wailing as she stood and took a step in the direction her brother had gone, stopped in her tracks by Phil’s gentle grasp. He stood taking her with him, but her struggle to escape continued as she squirmed, squealed and squawked to be put down.

“Maybe, I should take her home til she calms down.” He suggested again as he turned toward the gate that lead back to the driveway. Skye squealed louder but now her words were lost in the emotion of the tantrum.

Melinda rolled her eyes. Despite the situation, Phil coming back if he were to leave would be hours and that would certainly defeat the purpose of a family outing. She reached to take the struggling child from his arms.
“With the others there is no problem,” Elena began, throwing her arms in the air. She was unaccustomed to seeing her friends lose control over any situation let alone one cause by one tiny girl. “What is so hard with this one?” She turned away and then back, rambling in her native tongue rapidly as her voice reached a peaked crescendo. “Si esto fuera Fitz o Jemma, no habría problema. Mamá o papá no dudarían en darle una buena bofetada en el culo.”

Phil pursed his lips and gave a quick shrug. Maybe it was because Skye was so little or so much younger and maybe it was because of the little girl’s past, but both he and Melinda had a difficult time disciplining their youngest. It made no sense at all and yet he fell into the same mindset as his wife. He loved the little girl’s wild spirit, her imagination and determination. Maybe he was afraid of breaking all of that if he put his foot down. He looked into his wife’s eyes as he loosened his grip on their baby. She was more than likely thinking a lot of the same thoughts.

Skye took advantage of her father’s lessened grip and squirmed free of his hold before Melinda was able to take her. The little girl slid to the ground and ran, slipping through Elena’s attempt to snatch her as she passed.

Children have some innate ability to move quickly, perhaps due to their size or maybe because adults just never think they can do just that. Skye Coulson was no exception. She had one target and was determined to get to it despite the obstacles in her path.

“Skye!” Phil and Melinda bellowed as both broke into a run attempting to catch their fleeing escapee.

Elena stopped for an instant, gained her bearings and lit off as well, calling for Mack as she did. The large man turned from the grill he was preparing and watched as his partner and their friends raced across the lawn. He grimaced for a second as he tried to imagine why they would be doing so then caught the little spec of red and white they were pursuing. He broke into a run, also heading for the pool.

Trip had pulled himself out of the water and used one of the towels to wipe his face. He took a long drink of the cold soft drink he’d left on one of the small tables around the pool. Noticing his siblings jump to their feet, at the same time he heard his parent shriek their baby sister’s name. he spun around and almost choked on the swallow. Skye was inches from the edge of the deepest part of Mack’s oversized pool.

The young boy watched as everything happened in slow motion. Skye did not stop at the edge. She just kept running and for a split second she seemed suspended over the deep blue water before just disappearing beneath it, barely making a splash. Trip didn’t remember dropping his glass or diving into the pool. He didn’t hear his grandmother scream to Fitz and Jemma to stop or see her struggling to hold on to his brother with one hand while comforting his sister with the other. He
felt more than heard three addition splashes into the water almost at the same time, followed closely by two more.

Suddenly there were more arms and legs in the pool than he could imagine. It was like swimming in a school of squid, if there were such a thing, and despite his effort to find his baby sister, his lungs screamed for air and he pushed his way to the surface. Trip gasped for breath, hearing his grandmother screaming his given name and turning to see her standing, knee deep in the water with Jemma and Fitz still in tow. He turned back quickly, took a deep breath and dived again, Bernice’s voice still echoing in his head. A strong hand grabbed his forearm and pulled him back to the surface. He turned ready for a fight, astonished to see Hunter’s just as astonished face looking back.

“It’s okay, mate. Mack’s got her.” The Brit assured the boy as he pulled him to the side of the large pool.

Mack had reached the water at the same time Phil and Melinda dove in after their baby. His long powerful form not bogged down by street clothes making it easier to reach to the bottom of the pool faster than either. He grabbed the little form and pushed her up as far as his arms could reach, feeling her pulled away as he pushed with all his strength against the bottom to reach the surface. He and Phil surfaced together with Skye held well above the water level. Melinda’s head popped up a second later, Bobbi at her side pulling her toward the ladder where she pushed Melinda up first.

Skye coughed and spluttered the water from her nose and mouth, until most of it came out as vomit. Mack held the little girl over his arm, face down and thumped her back repeatedly helping to release the water she had swallowed more than breathed. She gasped a few times before gaining her breath then let out a healthy wail, followed by sobs that were a definite call for Momma. Melinda grabbed her child and pulled her close, wrapping her in an embrace that was joined by a soggy Phil, who kissed the little girl’s head and pulled both into a hug.

Hunter bent forward resting his hands on his knees and took deep breaths. “That’s got to be the most dramatic entrance I’ve ever made.” He laughed despite the situation. Bobbi threw the towel she held at him, but smiled nonetheless.

Bernice released the twins who ran to join their parents. She wrapped a towel around her shivering grandson, knowing he was not trembling with the cold but with the fear of what could have happened. Elena wrapped her arms around Mack and squeezed hard enough to let him know she was glad he acted as quickly as he did.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief before stepping back to let the sheen of terror evaporate. Melinda took a very deep breath and glared at her youngest. Fitz took a few steps back and
swallowed hard before grabbing Jemma’s hand and pulling her with him.

“Come on, Jemma, this is not going to turn out very well.” The little boy shook his head as he led his sister back toward Trip and their adopted grandmother.

Melinda used the towel someone had wrapped around both her and Skye to wipe the little girl’s face then went down on one knee placing her child on the ground in front of her. She used one finger to raise the little girl’s head to face her. Skye took a shaky breath and let out a few more sobs. “Skye,” Melinda struggled to keep a firm voice as Phil stood beside them. “That was a very, very naughty and dangerous thing to do. You scared momma and daddy and everyone here.” She spread one arm in a wide circle as the others began moving away to give the parents and their child some privacy.

“I non’t wanna siddon a chayor, momma…” Skye whined a sob, anticipating her consequences.

Melinda looked up at Phil. He raised his brows and gave an almost imperceptible nod. She took another deep breath before continuing.

“No, Skye you will not sit on a chair. You and I are going into the house and I will be the one sitting down. You are going to listen to momma and then…” she looked up at Phil again. “And then your little bottom will not want to sit on anything for a little while.” She pursed her lips, nodded once, scooped up her child and headed for the house before anyone or anything could lessen her resolve. Skye had crossed the line and things were going to be a bit uncomfortable for a time.

Twenty minutes later, Melinda returned with a sniffling Skye by the hand. Both now sported swim suits, although Melinda chose to also don a terry cover-up. She smiled as she joined the party of friends who had either dried in the sun or changed from their recent fully dressed dive into the pool.

“Well, there’s the little mermaid.” Hunter jested, putting down his drink and reaching for the little girl clad in a pink and purple one piece swimsuit. “Don’t you look just darling,” he smiled.

Skye did not move toward him, but took a very shaky breath and swallowed a little sob. She looked up to her mother who nodded toward Phil sitting next to their friend. Melinda released the little girl’s hand and watched as she scurried to her father, reaching up to him as she got to his side. Phil pulled Skye into his lap and kissed the top of her head. She sat back against him and sniffled again.
“Skye is going to sit with Daddy for a bit while Momma spends some time with Fitz and Jemma. She is going to think about doing as she is told without making a fuss and never, ever running away from momma or daddy again.” She gave a quick nod to Phil as Hunter’s mouth formed an ‘O’ of understanding. “Do you hear momma, Skye?”

The little girl nodded quickly, sniffled and squirmed closer to Phil. “Mom-ma putted lotsa spanks onna mine bum, da-dee. I non’t gonna run way no moer foever. I be gonna listen, akay?” Skye spoke quietly in staccato verse between short sobby breaths to her father.

Phil looked up at his wife and raised his brows. She returned a quick nod then turned toward her twins splashing in the shallow end of the pool. Fitz urged her to come see him dive and Jemma was more than happy to show her how long she could stay underwater. She smiled at both as she walked toward them, joined by Elena who put an arm around her shoulders and Bobbi who offered her a drink.

“I’m sure she did, angel eyes.” Phil crooned as he kissed his little girl again. “Momma was very scared and she never wants you to do something so naughty again. Daddy doesn’t want you to either.” He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her gently.

“Hoer love me, daddy. Hoer mine momma foever.” Skye sniffled into his embrace.

“Yes, angel. Momma will love you forever and always.” Phil assured her, “even when she puts a spank on your bum.” He smiled at the look Hunter cast. “We both do.” He kissed her again as she turned and snuggled into his embrace.

“Daddy?” Skye’s little voice came muffled from against his chest.

“Hmmm,” he breathed as he watched his wife in the water with the twins.

“I go inna poowell now?”

Phil chuckled. Skye was nothing if not persistent. “Not just yet, angel. We’ll wait for momma to tell us.” He felt the little girl take a deep breath against him. He braced himself for the wail that would follow.
Skye squirmed a little in his arms and drew a breath. She turned slowly and looked at her mother then up at her father. “I wade fo momma, daddy. I non’t be noddy no moer aday.”

Hunter smiled. “Smart kid,” he tipped his amber bottle toward them. “Momma May makes the rules.”

xx

Hours later Phil carried a sleeping Jemma into the house as Trip hefted Fitz onto his shoulder from the car. He gave his grandmother a quick kiss before she headed for her apartment then followed Melinda who held Skye to her shoulder.

Once the twins were tucked into their beds and Trip said goodnight, the Coulsons stood in the doorway of their baby’s bedroom. Melinda let out a soft breath and rested her head on Phil’s shoulder.

“My god Phil, what if…” she choked back a sob as she brought her hand to her lips.

“It didn’t.” He stopped her, pulling her close and kissing her temple.

“I never should have let it go that far, Phil. I never…”

“Shhh,” he kissed her again. “WE…we won’t let it get that far again.”

“Never…” she breathed against him.

They stood in silence blinking away the vision of the tragedy they’d avoided today, blaming themselves for letting things get to that point.

“You think that’s the end of the tantrums?” She mused, listening to his heartbeat and already knowing the answer.

“Not a chance,” he chuckled. “But she might think twice about just how long she holds out. I
Melinda laughed lightly and patted his chest before moving toward her sleeping baby and placing a soft kiss on her forehead. Skye whimpered a bit then pulled Salty close and curled into a tight ball.

“Wǒ ài nǐ, jīshǐ nǐ tiáopí, wǒ de bāobèi. Tiánmì de mèng⁵.” Melinda smiled as she brushed the hair from Skye’s face.

“Mom…” a groggy voice came from the doorway.

Melinda turned to see Fitz leaning against the doorframe with both arms wrapped around his middle. Phil looked down as if the boy had just magically appeared next to him.

“My stomach doesn’t feel ve…” Fitz started then slapped a hand over his mouth. Phil grabbed the waste basket next to Skye’s dresser and pushed it in front of the boy in the nick of time. He held it but grimaced at Melinda who blew a soft breath over her lip and reached to take it from him.

She wrapped an arm around the little boy turning toward the bathroom and placed a quick kiss on Phil’s cheek as she passed.

“I don’t think I should have eaten all those hot dogs.” Fitz lamented before retching into the little pink waste basket again.

Melinda shook her head as she helped him into the room. She give him some anti-nausea medicine, a lot of sympathy and plenty of TLC before he’d drift back to sleep snuggled against her on the large recliner in the family room.

It wasn’t easy being a mother…especially when thrust into it so quickly and without warning…but Melinda May Coulson wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Note: While temper tantrums are used as a plot line here, they are nothing to be scoffed at. It is normal for children to sometimes have extreme tantrums, by the age of three they should be learning to calm themselves. Constant extreme tantrums, especially those in which children harm themselves or others should not be overlooked. If you feel your child has more extreme tantrums or you cannot calm your child after twenty minutes please speak to you pediatrician. It is never too early to seek intervention and make things easier for your child and for yourself.
K’Nex is a construction toy system invented by Joel Glickman. Introduced to the U.S. in 1992, K’Nex is currently designed and produced by K’Nex Industries Inc. of Hatfield, Pennsylvania

My beautiful boy, I love you more.

This is ridiculous. You are trying to reason with a baby.

You go to the pool, little man. Have fun, swim, dive, splash with Jemma and Trip. Your little sister is being very naughty. I think she needs more than a chair."

I love you, even when you’re naughty, my baby. Sweet dreams
Melinda and the girls are off for a girl's day of shopping and pampering while Phil and the guys clear the back yard for some renovating. Melinda's not so sure about the plan but reluctantly agrees. A bee sting turns into an emergency that the usually calm Melinda has a hard time forgiving.

It started out as a great idea, most things do and like most things it soon disintegrated into something much less ideal. The Coulsons were nothing if not driven and continuously strove to just be a normal-run-of-the-mill-everyday-family. That seldom worked out for any of them.

Spring had finally sprung and the last vestiges of winter evaporated in the late April sunshine. The skies were brilliant blue and casting off all of the clutter the cold of the Northeast leaves behind was on everyone’s to do list. Yard work was at the top of that list but so was providing seasonal clothing for four growing children. It was a toss up as to what would be done first and through a long and heated discussion it was decided that come Saturday, Melinda would enlist the help of Elena to take the girls shopping for the day.

Skye definitely needed a haircut and Jemma could use a summer trim. Both girls needed new shoes and had grown out of the clothing put away last fall. Fitz was in just as much need but whined incessantly over having to endure a day of trying on clothing and having everyone oooo and awww over him. In the end Phil and Trip came to the little boy’s aid and insisted he spend the day with them and Mack, clearing the debris from the farthest part of the yard and assembling the large play scape Phil insisted the children needed. Melinda rolled her eyes at the thought of Fitz involved in such an enterprise but when Trip pointed out that as the resident engineer his little brother’s expertise would be essential the hesitant mother had no choice but to acquiesce.

Mack and Elena arrived the morning of the big day at half past seven bringing a brand new Belgium waffle maker and everything needed to make a whopper of a breakfast for everyone. Skye pulled the door open and stood staring up at the couple with one eye closed and slept-in-hair poking out in odd angles.

“Trippis still in his bed. He non’t wake up yet, Mack.” She yawned as she dug a fist into one eye.

Mack let out a chuckle as Elena smiled and scooped the little girl up, planting a kiss on her cheek.
“Oye, pequeña,” she tapped the little girl on the tip of the nose with one finger, causing Skye to blink twice. “Se supone que no debes abrir la puerta tú solo. ¿Dónde está tu mamá?”

Skye dropped her head on Elena’s shoulder and mumbled, “momma’s esta inna bonyo.” She pointed to the door of the powder room halfway down the hall. “Daddy bees up the steps, still.” She yawned and pointed up before snuggling into the woman’s embrace. “The big kids is still inner beds.”

Elena hugged the little girl tighter and kissed the back of her head. Mack squeezed around them. “Lazy bunch, aren’t they.” Skye nodded but kept her eyes closed as Elena bounced gently and swayed side to side.

“I think someone else should still be in her bed.” She whispered as she smiled at her partner.

Mack made his way to the kitchen determined to get started with his breakfast fit for royalty. Plans were to have the girls out the door by nine, but that was flexible. Melinda stepped out of the powder room and almost headlong into Mack as he passed. She stepped back as her eyebrows rose.

“Breakfast is on us, this morning.” He smiled as he continued on his way. Melinda nodded then turned toward Elena and a very sleepy Skye.

She shook her head as she stepped toward her friend. “She’s been up since five.” Melinda sighed. “I’ve been trying to get her back to sleep but…”

Elena put a finger to her lips, motioning for silence then turned so Melinda could see her little one was indeed sleeping. Melinda smiled at her blissfully snoozing baby and stepped aside for Elena to lay her on the couch in the family room and tuck a soft blanket around her. Skye whined a few times and the women froze. The little girl squirmed to her side and pulled herself into a tight ball but did not rouse. They tiptoed from the room, smiling at each other.

Within the hour the Coulson children dribbled into the kitchen one by one. Trip was first to join the quartet of adults that sat at the table sharing hot beverages and quiet conversation. He smiled at the scent of freshly made bacon and couldn’t help snagging one piece from the piled high plate Mack had provided. He shot the man a thumb’s up and helped himself to a cup of coffee before sliding on to a seat at the table.
Jemma arrived fully dressed and ready for the day’s outing. She poured a large glass of orange juice and sat next to her brother. Her eyes widened as Mack set a large pile of waffles covered with strawberries and whipped cream in front of the older boy then added a second plate piled with bacon. Trip dug in without waiting for an invitation.


Jemma shook her head, still staring at Trip’s monster breakfast. “I don’t think…”

“Trip here’s got the Emperor’s portion,” Mack chuckled as he gave the boy a firm pat on the back. Trip slipped forward almost losing the forkful he was about to consume them immediately recovered and went right back to his feast. “I’ve got just a dainty little portion for you, sweetie.”

Jemma smiled and nodded slightly. “Just a little bit for me, then.” Mack smiled back and resumed his waffle baking.

Several sneezes preceded Fitz’s arrival to the kitchen. He stopped at the door and sneezed again before taking the last few steps to the table. Melinda looked into his red rimmed eyes and shook her head.

“I still don’t think it’s such a good idea to have him out in all that pollen all day long, Phil.” Melinda sighed as she pushed herself up and took Fitz by the hand. “Look at him, his eyes already look like they’re on fire.”

“I’m f…” Another round of sneezing stopped the little boy from completing his protest. He scrubbed his arm across his nose when it stopped then sniffled twice. “I’m okay, mom.” He squinted up at his mother through teary eyes.

“Mmm hmmm,” Melinda frowned as she tugged him toward the powder room. A dose of his allergy medicine would alleviate the problem for about six hours. She’d have to count on Phil to dose him again this afternoon.

Fitz sighed from his perch on the closed toilet seat. “The medicine will help, mom.” He sniffled again but stopped before swiping his nose with his sleeve as Melinda handed him a tissue. After blowing his nose hard, Fitz tossed the Kleenex in the waste basket and rose to wash his hands.

Melinda shook her head and held out two purple tablets and a cup of water. Fitz grimaced but took the pills and swallowed them quickly. She watched to be sure he little trickster actually swallowed
both then shook her head again. “Fitz, you’re going to be miserable in the yard all day.”

The little boy shook his head and swallowed a second gulp of water. “No, no I won’t. The medicine really helps. I never have a problem at school when I take it.”

Now Melinda sat on the lid and pulled him closer. “You are not outside all day when you’re at school.” She held his hands in hers and squeezed a bit.

Fitz let out a sigh. “I promise if it gets bad I’ll come inside and just watch.”

Melinda bit her bottom lip and turned her head to the side. “Oh, baobei that is no fun at all, to just watch.” She sympathized.

Fitz drew a breath and let it out slowly. “It’s better than dragging around a shopping mall all day.”

Laughing, Melinda pulled him into a hug. “Oh, bao bao, I wish I could take this all away.”

“But look,” Fitz pulled back and raised his brows. “It’s working already. I haven’t sneezed in at least five minutes!”

Melinda smiled at the little boy’s exaggeration and wrapped an arm around his shoulders as they stepped into the hall. Fitz sneezed three times before taking two steps.

“Bless soo,” Skye’s little voice came from the doorway of the family room as she shuffled into the hall as well.

“Thanks,” Fitz frowned as his mother scooped up his baby sister and kissed her cheek. Melinda frowned as well, wrapped one arm around his shoulders and kissed the top of his head before leading them to the kitchen.

Getting everyone fed, clean, dressed and out the door took a bit longer than anticipated but by ten
Melinda had both girls secured in the SUV with Elena riding shotgun. She hesitated at the back door, grinning at Phil in well worn jeans and a superhero T-shirt. Even the sneakers on his feet were frayed and scuffed giving the illusion the man spent hours in manual labor. He took one look at her, shook his head and pulled her into a hug.

“He’ll be fine, Mel.” He kissed the top of her head. “I promise. I’ll watch him like a hawk.”

Melinda closed her eyes and drew a deep breath against her husband’s chest, breathing in the smell of his cologne. She smiled at the irony. He was trying so hard to look like a landscaper but the scent of his white collar life gave him away instantly. “Allergy meds at two thirty and if he gets drowsy…”

“I will hog tie him until he agrees to nap for at least an hour.” Phil chuckled as she slapped his shoulder. He kissed her again. “Seriously, Mel, I will make sure he’s okay. Now, go before Skye chews through her restraints.”

This time Melinda chuckled. She kissed him quickly and moved to the car, waving once before getting inside and pulling out of the driveway. Phil stood on the deck and watched then shook his head and laughed as the car pulled immediately back to the garage. The driver’s door opened, Melinda stepped out and pulled open the back door on the same side. A few minutes later she brushed past Phil with Skye in her arms.

“I gotta pee-pee,” the little girl explained to her daddy as they passed.

Phil’s mouth formed an understanding ‘O’ as he nodded and tried not to laugh again.

The second time Melinda pulled the SUV out of the driveway; she tooted the horn and waved then continued to the intersection and around the corner toward the shopping district.

xx

Mack swiped the sweat from his brow with the side of his arm and let out a long breath. He looked down at the small boy struggling with a large log that he’d pulled from a mound of debris piled against the back fence of the Coulson’s property. Fitz wobbled the piece of wood back and forth in an effort to topple it. The little boy was not about to attempt to carry it, but if he could knock it to its side he could definitely roll it to the area where his father intended to create a fire pit. He smiled up at Mack and quickly wiped a hand under his still sniffly nose, leaving a dirty smudge.
“Let me give you a hand there, Turbo.” Mack chuckled, easily pushing the log over with one foot.

Fitz watched then stepped back and scratched his head. “Technically, you’ve given me a foot, but I am grateful.” The little boy shorted as he leaned over the coarse bark of the log and began pushing it out of the big man’s way.

Mack chuckled as he watched Fitz continue to struggle with the log until Trip stepped along side his little brother and assisted in rolling the thing across the yard. He turned to Phil who was hacking at a rather nasty piece of brush covered with thick thorns. He’d banished the boys from the job since their mother would be none too pleased to see them covered with scratches at day’s end.

“This must have been here since the place was built.” Phil huffed as he tugged at a more difficult root.

“Might need more than just a hatchet to pull that free,” Mack shook his head. “I’ve got a chain in the truck. We can yank it out with that…be a lot easier.”

“Faster too,” Phil breathed heavily as he stood back and wiped his face with the back of his hand.

Mack stepped to the side and looked around the thick brush. “Probably gonna have to replace this section of fence, all this moisture’s got it pretty rotten back here.”

Phil let out a frustrated huff.

“Not too bad,” Mack’s voice came from behind a large shade tree. “Maybe five or six slats, shouldn’t take long.” He stepped back and brushed the dirt from his hands. “Once we get this monster out of the way we can get a better look.”

Fitz let out a heavy breath and plopped down on the log he and Trip had finally managed to roll to the opposite side of the large back lot of their yard. He wiped his hands on the thighs of his jeans a second before sniffling into a stream of sneezes.

Trip repeated ‘bless you’ several times then stopped, deciding to wait until the wave passed and he
could cover it all with one all encompassing comment. He tried not to laugh at his brother who in his sneeze fit reminded him very much of his grandmother’s tabby cat that did the same when Gram sprayed air freshener in the bathroom.

Finally stopping, Fitz wiped his eyes and nose with both hands. The dirt from them transferred to his face leaving him looking like someone preparing to either go on a heck of a secret mission or take part in some not so legal undertaking.

“God bless you,” the older boy laughed.

Fitz nodded his thanks and ran the back of his arm across his nose.

“Man, you are just making it worse.” Trip smiled. “If dirt was blue you could march into battle with William Wallace.”

Fitz scrunched up his nose then grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and scrubbed his face with it. It helped very little only smearing the dirt more evenly and leaving a matching smudge on the boy’s shirt. Trip shook his head.

“Come on,” He tilted his head motioning for Fitz to follow then led the smaller boy to the hose where he helped him splash some water on his face and hands. It wasn’t great but it was better.

Both boys looked up as their father pulled open the large double gate that faced the court behind their property. Mack backed his large blue pick-up through a few seconds later. Fitz took off at a run to stand next to his father. Trip looked in all directions wondering why the change in plans before he too jogged over to meet the others.

Mack jumped out of the cab and grabbed a large dark chain from the bed of the truck. He tossed it over his shoulder and marched toward the area they’d been clearing, with Fitz close behind. Phil and Trip followed.

The quartet stood in front of the overgrown hedge and stared for a few minutes, Mack mentally sizing up a method to wrap the chain around the beast. Phil did pretty much the same. Getting behind that brush would be hazardous unless the sad soul was clad in chain mail. Fitz looked up at Trip who merely shrugged his shoulders having just as little idea as his kid brother about what was going on.
Mack gave a quick nod. “I can squeeze between the fence and the tree then toss the chain around behind. You grab it on the other side. I’ll climb under and secure it.”

“It would be easier to climb under first.” Fitz chimed in as he stepped between the two men. “The distance around the base of the hedge is considerably smaller. You could swing the chain around if we were to lop off about a foot of brush. It would give a better hold as well.”

Both men looked down at the small boy then back to the shrub.

“You know he’s right.” Phil remarked without looking at Mack.

“I’ll get the loppers.” Mack huffed, dropping the chain to the ground.

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Fitz squatted down on his haunches and watched as Mack wrapped the large chain around the now trimmed base of the brush. He snaked it through the thickest branches then pulled it together and secured it with a large lock. Before extracting himself from the tangle and standing he glanced back at the little boy who smiled and offered a thumb’s up. Mack smiled, stood and yanked on the chain a few times to gauge its grip. This time he offered the upward thumb. Fitz turned and cupped his hands to his face.

“Okay, Da we’re secure.” The little boy turned and smiled up at his friend.

Mack wrapped an arm around Fitz’s shoulders and stepped back and out of the way as Phil made a final check of the chain’s attachment to the rear of Mack’s truck then slapped the bumper twice signaling Trip to start the engine.

The young teen grinned with satisfaction as he turned the key and lightly tapped the gas. He was still not over Mack trusting him to complete this task, let alone actually move his treasured pick up. The truck bumped forward slowly. Trip felt the resistance of the object they attempted to pull from the ground.

“Easy…nice and easy,” Phil spoke calmly from the side of the truck, watching behind as he guided the boy forward.
The chain when taunt, temporarily stilling the truck as Trip pulled his foot from the gas to the brake, fearing what might yank off the back of the vehicle. He looked to his father for instruction. Phil in turn held up a finger and looked to Mack. Fitz was again in a squat peering under the hedge from his spot next to Mack.

“Looks good here,” Mack called at Fitz’s nod. “Give it a little gas, pull it out gently.”

Phil gave a nod then turned to Trip and nodded again. Trip tapped the gas and sent the truck ahead a few inches, almost in a tug of war with the bush that had probably been tangling itself around the rocks and soil in the back of the property since before Trip was born. He tapped the pedal again, gaining another few inches.

Fitz looked up to Mack as the bush shimmied against the tug of the chain. It crunched and crackled its protest. The little boy stepped back, for an instant seeing the large thorny shrub as an entity moving on its own volition. He shook off the silly thought and watched as the chain yanked two then three times before it went slack as the bush pulled up from the soil. He heard Mack and his father encourage Trip to try it again. The chain once again went tight and with one good tap on the gas the truck lurched forward and the monstrosity came free popping up once then falling like a large dead beast as it dragged across the ground behind the truck.

“Yeah!” Fitz jumped in the air with a grand fist pump. “We did it!” He ran to inspect the large hole the bush had left when it pulled out of the ground.

Trip jumped from the truck and smiled at the slap on the shoulder his father delivered. They walked together to join Mack who was already pulling the chain free. Together they tossed the beast into the bed of the trunk. Phil looked over his shoulder toward Fitz who stood on the edge of the gap in the ground.

“Watch your step, buddy. You fall in that pit and break a leg your mother’ll have my hide.” He smiled.

“It isn’t really deep enough to cause any real damage, Da. At the most I’d get terribly dirty and that we could remedy with a quick soak.” Fitz replied staring into the hole.

Mack lowered his head to hide the laugh as Trip shook his head. Phil turned and took a few steps toward his younger son. Fitz turned toward his father at the same time and took one step before letting out a scream that froze everyone. The little boy leaned forward grabbing his calf as Phil
broke into a run. Mack and Trip were a few steps behind.

Phil went to one knee in front of the little boy who repeated ‘OW’ over and over while clutching his bare leg. Phil spun the boy around to inspect for whatever was causing the distress. A large deep red welt rose on the back of Fitz’s leg. Mack stepped quickly on the bee that struggled in the dust.

“Damn,” Trip whistled under his breath.

Mack pulled out a pocket knife and flipped it open, turned the boy away from him and quickly ran the edge against the welt dragging the stinger from the wound. Fitz grit his teeth and squeezed his father’s arm in an effort to keep from sobbing like a toddler.

“Hey, it’s okay. Mack’s got the stinger. We’ll get some ice and I’m sure mom’s got something to help in the medicine cabinet.” Phil reassured the boy.

“I…” Fitz began. His eyes grew large as he let out a second shrill screech.

Phil quickly scanned every inch of his son but saw no second bee. The first sting could not have given the boy reason to react that way. Fitz pulled away, jumping up and down before grabbing the waist band of his shorts and yanking them to his knees.

Trip’s eyes went wide. Had his little brother gone completely mad?

It was Phil’s turn to bark, “Damn!”, as Mack grabbed the boy and the woozy bee fell to the ground leaving the tiny black stinger adhered to Fitz’s white briefs. He scooped up the boy and moved quickly for the back door, leaving the denim shorts on the ground. Phil hurried behind.

Fitz forgot about being brave in front of his brother and wailed with the added heat of the second sting.

Mack stood the little boy on a kitchen chair and spoke calmly. “We’re gonna have to take a look, Turbo.” He turned to Phil. “Grab some ice for his leg, and Trip get a soapy washcloth.”
“I don’t feel so good, Mack.” Fitz stammered then looked to Phil. “Da…”

Phil knew the look. He swept the little boy off the chair and made it to the powder room just in time. It was not unlike Fitz to be physically ill when faced with extreme stress. He rubbed the little boy’s back and assured him he’d be fine.

Fitz shook his head. “No, Da, something’s not right.” Fitz’s voice sounded raspy. His breath came in short puffs before he turned back and lost the contents of his stomach for a second time.

Phil glanced down at the boy’s leg now covered with large red splotches. When Fitz stood straight and turned to his father, Phil was taken back by the same splotches that now peppered his son’s face.

Trip spun around the side of the bathroom door with a gray cylinder in hand. He grabbed his little brother and slammed the object into Fitz’s thigh. Once again the smaller boy let out a wail of pain.

“Epi-pen®,” Trip explained at his father’s look. “Dr. Stephen’s showed us how to use it, just in case. Mack’s already called 911.”

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Trip paced back and forth across the waiting area as Mack leaned his elbows on his knees. He rested his head against his hands and closed his eyes in quiet prayer for the little boy he held close to his heart.

“I should call mom.” Trip remarked, stopping in front of the large pious man.

Mack lifted his head. “Let’s wait to hear from your dad. I tried Yoyo, went straight to voicemail but she’ll get back to me as soon as she can.” He assured the boy.

“You know, that kid’s got the worst luck.” Trip shook his head. “It’s just not fair how he always gets the crap end of the stick.” He took a few steps away then turned back. “He’s just a little guy and he was just trying to help…” Trip’s voice cracked. He swiped away a lone tear and paced away from the large man, stopping at a large poster on the opposite side of the room. Closing his eyes, he tried to push away the memory of his kid brother’s swollen face as he gasped for small sips of air or the look of sheer terror when the ambulance roared into the driveway and two
uniformed EMT’s whisked him away from Phil to a stretcher that made the kid look even smaller and skinnier.

Everything happened so fast and yet it seemed like it was slow motion. The techs barked statistics into small radios attached to their uniforms. One slipped an oxygen mask over Fitz’s face while the other started an IV, both blocking Phil from offering any comfort. Trip knew they were doing their job, but he resented the fact that job put Fitz into more anxiety. One of the men ran a scissors up the front of the little boy’s t-shirt, effectively slicing it in half then slapped adhesive leads on the kid’s bony little chest. Monitors bleeped and blipped, adding to the chaos in the driveway as the men pulled the stretcher and snapped it to a workable height. They reassured Fitz, repeatedly carefully explaining what was happening and how they were helping. Trip almost laughed at his little brother nodding at their attempts. He could tell by the look in the kid’s eyes that it meant nothing to him. They pushed the stretcher into the back of the ambulance, collapsing the legs in a cacophony of metal clangs then turned to Phil informing him he could accompany his son. The man bounced into the vehicle and took the terrified little guy’s hand in his as one tech slammed closed the door then jumped into the driver’s seat. Trip could still hear the sound of the siren as it screamed up the street.

He looked down at Mack’s hand as it dropped on his shoulder.

“He’s going to be alright, Trip. You did all the right things. You kept a calm head and grabbed that pen when your dad and I weren’t even thinking about it.” He encouraged.

Trip shrugged off the praise but before he could response with more than a humble smile, Phil stepped into the room.

“He’s looking better.” He breathed a sigh of relief as he ran a hand through is hair.

By the time the ambulance reached the hospital Fitz’s lips had swollen to monstrous size. His eyes were swollen shut and his breathing was frightening. He fought for every bit of air despite the oxygen mask. The EMT administered a second pump of an Epi-pen, assuring Phil it was okay to do so. The man pulled off Fitz’s sneaker and sock. Phil was surprised at the swelling there. The little boy’s leg had also grown shiny and fat with the effect of the sting. The tech gently laid ice packs on either side causing the boy to shiver despite the sweat that now beaded on his head and cheeks. Even Fitz’s small fingers had grown in size making it almost impossible for him to grip his father’s hand. Phil placed his hand over his son’s holding it between both as he spoke softly to the boy, telling him they were almost there and everything was going to be fine.

Now he looked at that hand realizing none of them had taken the time to wash or even throw on clean clothing. No wonder every other person in the room had taken seats on the opposite side of the large room. He rubbed his hands on the sides of his jeans and shrugged off the self conscious
feeling it brought. “They put him on an IV to take care of the reaction. I don’t remember…
Melinda would know…she…damn, I need to call…” He shook his head and patted his pockets in
search of his phone then let out a frustrated breath picturing it safe from yard work on the kitchen
counter.

“Got it covered, boss,” Mack spoke quietly.

Phil thanked the man with a look. “ER doc says it was probably the second sting that put him into
shock. Maura’s on call. She’ll be here soon and they’re probably going to keep him over night.
Right now, he just wants mom.”

“Must have been a nest of them around that bush,” Trip shook his head and shuffled his feet. “I’ve
seen ‘em back there, Da. I should have said something.”

“No way, kid.” Mack sighed as he rubbed a hand across his stubbly beard. “I should have checked
before we even started.”

“It was an accident.” Phil breathed then looked to the clock. “Maybe we should try the girls
again.”

xx

Except for a very brief struggle with a stubborn Skye over using a stroller, the girl’s shopping
excursion went without incident. After exiting the car in the parking lot, Melinda pulled the folded
carriage from the hatch and was met with a stern faced, arm crossed little girl who glared her
defiance.

Elena shook her head. She was not about to repeat the zoo fiasco and hoped Mama Melinda was a
lot more adamant with her little protester than she’d been in the past. “¡Aquí vamos de nuevo!
¡Basta de esto! Una pequeña bofetada en el culo y ella se sienta en el cochecito de bebé.” The
woman mumbled under her breath.

“You need to sit in your stroller, darling.” Jemma attempted reasoning in her gentle voice.

“I’n not a liddle baby. I’n five now.” Skye argued, holding up five fingers before immediately
regaining her stubborn stance.
“Yes, but you still have such little legs and you’ll have a very hard time keeping up. You will become cranky and tired. You don’t want that now, do you?” Jemma smiled, feeling she had solved the issue.

Skye narrowed her eyes and stomped one foot before turning her back on her sister. Melinda opened the pink and purple umbrella stroller with one foot and pushed it to the side then spun her little warrior around with a gentle hand on top of the child’s head. She dropped into a squat to face the little girl, pulling the stroller back to her side and patting the seat.

Jemma recognized the look on her mom’s face and attempted to diffuse the situation. “The current theory of child development says in cases like these, parents should offer their child a suitable choice so that both sides are able to compromise and agree to a happy decision.”

Elena rolled her eyes and turned away, once again mumbling in her mother tongue. Skye looked at her sister and then her mother and narrowed her eyes as if daring one of them to make the first move.

“Thank you, Jemma.” Melinda smiled at her older daughter. “That seems like a fair suggestion.”

Elena threw her arms in the air and used a few choice Spanish terms that Melinda hoped her children did not understand. She chuckled under her breath at her friend’s reaction then turned to Skye placing her hands on the little girl’s shoulders.

“Okay, baobei, momma will give you a choice.” She patted the seat of the stroller again and smiled. “You can put your little bottom on this seat with or without momma helping it along.” She smiled at the little girl and waited. Skye looked at the stroller then back at her mother, determined to challenge her authority.

Melinda raised one eyebrow and pulled the little girl close enough to whisper in one ear. “Nǐ kěyǐ zuò zài zhèlǐ, huòzhě wǒmen kěyǐ huí dào chē lǐ. Zài nǐ zuò xià zhīqián, māmā huì dà nǐ de xiǎo pigu.”

Again Skye looked her mother in the eye. Melinda smiled and gave a quick nod before she stood but the little girl did not budge. Letting out a soft sigh, Melinda put out a hand and waited for Skye to take it.
Skye dropped her arms and shook her head. “I siddown now.” She plopped herself into the stroller and snapped the light belt around her waist.

Melinda held up a thumb.

“That was a wise choice, Skye.” Jemma smiled as she took the handle of the little vehicle and pushed it toward the walkway.

Elena shook her head. “Always a challenge, that one, no?”

“Always,” Melinda snorted as the women followed the girls toward the shops.

xx

The rest of the morning went well, with Skye’s good behavior being rewarded by allowing her to walk hand in hand with Jemma at various intervals or until she became too tired or too rambunctious to handle. Most of the time the little girl asked to return to her mode of transportation, despite being five she was still the size of a three year old and tired easily. Dr. Stephens promised she would catch up to children her own age but it might not be until the growth spurt of puberty. Melinda was fine with that. Both her babies were small for their age and that just meant she could keep them in her arms even longer.

That thought brought Fitz to mind and she glanced at her watch, still two and a half more hours before she’d need to remind Phil about the allergy pills in the powder room cabinet. Until then she promised herself she would not call or become a suffocating mother that could not spend a day away from her child. He was with his father, she told herself and he was more than capable for caring for their children. Jemma brought her attention to a pair of shoes that would be perfect for Skye and she shook off her worry.

By the time the group decided it was time for a quick lunch, Skye had visited almost every restroom in the shopping area. It was a general agreement that the food court would be a wise choice since taking their little whirlwind into a fancy sit-down establishment would probably earn them a persona non grata status rather quickly.

Melinda pushed the stroller, now over burdened with packages they had draped over the handle bars, into the large cafeteria-esque room and chose the cleanest table she could locate. Skye was out of her seat and on to the closest chair before anyone could ask what the lunch choices would
"I have chicken nuggins, momma? I have keppich, too?" She smiled as she knelt on one of the heavy metal chairs and rested her elbows on the table.

Melinda smiled her agreement and looked for the venue that would offer that menu. Once she let go of the stroller it tipped backward with the weight of the packages. She and Elena picked up each and plopped them on the seat of the buggy while Jemma made sure Skye did not topple to the floor.

"Perhaps, I take these to the car?" Elena suggested. "Any more and we’ll be pushing packages and chasing that little road runner all over the mall." She nodded toward Skye who was now standing on the chair and pointing toward something in the distance. Jemma stood with her arm around her sister’s legs.

Melinda agreed and after grabbing chicken nuggets for Skye, with plenty of ketchup and a Caesar Salad for Jemma, she joined her girls and watched as Elena wheeled the well packed little buggy toward the exit.

xx

Elena pushed the last package into the hatch of the large SUV and brought down the door. She took a deep breath of the fresh air and smiled at the clear blue of the sky. Winter had been long and gloomy with storm after storm and enough snow to last the Latina a lifetime. At first the Mexican born and raised woman found the white stuff a novelty but after almost six months of shoveling and navigating the streets and highways in ice, sleet and slush, she had quite enough. In fact, she was pretty sure she’d had enough to last her a lifetime. Mack assured her it had been an unusually snowy season and that some years there was barely a flake. Yeah, well the freezing cold was no picnic either.

The soft familiar chime of her phone brought her back to the present. She pulled it from her pocket and smiled at the name on the screen a second before realizing it was now a reminder that Mack had left a message more than an hour ago. How could she not have known? Granted, it was a quiet afternoon and she’d silenced the thing once they arrived at the mall. She was taking the afternoon off and that meant no worries or contact or issues with any work nonsense. Although she was pretty sure she’d left it on vibrate, but could be mistaken. She shrugged once and smiled remembering he’d asked her to pick up a few items for him on her travels. Maybe he’d thought of something else. She pressed a few clicks and listened to his short message. He sounded like the usually cool Mack but stressed that she call him as soon as she got it.
Elena pressed the return call key and waited a few seconds for Mack to answer. She smiled at the sound of his voice as she walked back toward the mall entrance.

“Hey, Turtle Man…miss me?” She laughed as her smile broadened.

“Elena,” Mack’s voice was calm but serious

Elena froze at the sound. Rarely, if ever did he call her by her given name.

“There’s been an accident…” He began.

“Dios mio…” she breathed, “que pasó?”

Mack offered a brief explanation which was all Elena needed. She understood, tell Melinda because she shouldn’t hear this over the phone and get to the hospital as quickly as possible. The woman pushed the phone into her pocket and pushed the empty stroller through the door.

From across the large expanse of the Food Court Elena could see Melinda enjoying a meal with her girls. It wasn’t often she saw such a large smile on her friend and employer. Theirs was a serious business and left little time for frivolity. The Melinda Coulson who was mother to four quite different children was not the same woman as the Melinda May who ran the security agency in DC. However, Elena was one of the very few who had witnessed the woman transform from one persona to the other in a heartbeat. She dreaded having to be the one to shatter the enjoyment of the day and fought the urge to approach slowly rather than dashing to the table. Walking at a normal rate was the best choice and doing so without giving away the anxiety she felt was just as difficult.

Elena was about twenty feet from the table when Melinda spotted her. The change in Melinda’s demeanor was enough to let the woman know her expression had given it away.

“What is it?” Melinda met her halfway, leaving the girls wide eyed at their mother’s sudden departure.

Elena looked to the girls first and stepped toward them, hoping Melinda would follow. She’d rather if they were seated and the kids were close, but Melinda grabbed her arm stopping her.
“Elena, what…tell me.” She softly demanded though the look in her eyes was much more authoritative.

“We should sit.” Elena nodded toward the table. Jemma looked back with the same look of expectation her mother wore. Skye blissfully drew squiggles with one finger in the ketchup puddle on her plate.

Melinda stepped in front of her friend. “Someone’s hurt,” she stated, taking her cue from Elena’s expression.

“Fitz…” Elena barely had the name out of her mouth when Melinda turned back to the girls and began clearing the table. She pulled a packet of wipes from her bag and swiped Skye’s hands and mouth then quickly deposited her in the stroller. Jemma hurried to help, still unaware of the situation but knowing it was time to move quickly.

Elena shook her head and tried again. “He…” she paused for a second lapsing into her own language in her anxiety. “Él tuvo una mala reacción al aguijón de una abeja. Phil está con él en la sala de emergencias. Trip está con Mack. Necesitamos apresurarnos, pero no podemos asustar a las chicas.”

Melinda nodded her understanding but did not speak. Jemma looked up at the explanation and hurried to match her mother’s stride as the group made their way out of the court and into the shopping area. Even Skye seemed to know something was not right. She held tightly to the sides of her little buggy and forgot all about her request for ice cream.

Halfway across the concourse, Melinda stopped and pulled her little one into her arms, easily flipping the stroller closed with one foot. She hefted Skye to her hip and shoved the now folded buggy toward Elena.

“Stairs,” she barked and the others understood. The elevator would take too long and Melinda had no patience for waiting at this point. If she could have pulled Jemma into her arms and sprinted to the car she would already be there. As it was they fought the crowd and made it to the car in record time.

Melinda dropped Skye into her seat and snapped the restraints around her while Jemma watched then unsnapped and untwisted them in order to make her little sister more comfortable. The agitated mother pulled her keys from her bag and put a hand on the driver’s door a second before
Elena relieved her of both.

“I will drive. You are in no condition…” she didn’t finish the statement, merely nodded toward the passenger side and waited for Melinda to comply.

There was no time to argue the point, Melinda let out a quick breath and slid around the car then dropped into the seat as Elena started the engine. Jemma snapped her seat belt as the car pulled from the space.

xx

“How ya doing, little man?” Phil asked softly as he held Fitz’s hand in his own. He tried not to look at the wires and tubes that connected his son to the many beeping machines surrounding his bed. The oxygen mask was replaced by a cannula, making it easier to understand the boy when he tried to speak.

“They…rip…ripped…my shirt…” Fitz sighed between short breaths.

Phil smiled, as if that were the worst of it. “We’ll get you another one.” He assured his son.

“It…was…m…my…Cap…sh…shirt.” He looked to his father with a small pout.

“Yeah,” Phil nodded. “I think I might have one I can lend you til we find a replacement.”

Fitz smiled and closed his eyes at the silliness of his father’s offer. Phil’s t-shirt would fit him for a dress, but having it would be the best thing ever. Da loved his Captain America T-shirts and so the reason Fitz had one in the first place.

“I…m…sorry…Da…” Fitz whispered when he noticed his father looking away.

“Hey, buddy, you didn’t do anything wrong.” Phil squeezed the little boy’s hand. “These things just happen. They happen to everyone.”
“Es…pecially me…” Fitz wheezed.

“Naw,” Phil smiled. “I’ve been stung plenty of times. When I was your age got one right on the lip. Damn bee was on my soda can and when I took a drink….POW!”

Fitz tried to laugh, but it came out more of a sleazy cartoon villain hiss. It took him a moment to catch enough breath to reply. “Bet…you…di…ent…nee…d…am…bu…lance…”

Phil shook his head. “No, but I had a fat lip for days. I looked like some cartoon freak.” Fitz wheezed a little laugh. Phil smiled and shook his head, relieved to hear his little boy’s laughter albeit restrained. “Hey, one of the kids in my class started calling me Mrs. Potato Head. It was not pleasant.” Again the little boy laughed so hard he began gasping for breath and coughing a wheezy cough.

The tone on one of the machines changed in pitch and frequency causing Phil to jump to his feet. He peered down at his son who now seemed to gasp for air.

A nurse arrived before Phil could make a call. “Okay, sweetie,” the large, dark woman smiled. “Take it easy, just gotta make a little adjustment here and there.” She pulled a stethoscope from one of her deep pockets and listened for a few seconds as Fitz attempted to regulate his breath. She smiled and patted his shoulder then turned and increased the oxygen level above his bed. “Gonna take a peek at those nasty stings,” she warned before lifting the blanket and sucking in a quick breath that only Phil noticed. “Must have been some hungry critters out there today,” she smiled as she gently put down the light cover. Due to the location of Fitz’s injuries the staff had rolled a blanket and set it behind the boy to keep him from lying directly on the wounds. “We’re going to get you some medicine for that as soon as the doc sees you.” She patted his hip gently then turned to Phil.

“How ‘bout we keep this little guy quiet for a while?” Turning to Fitz she added, “less talking, more breathing. Got it?” Fitz gave a quick nod. She stepped around the bed, checked the IV in the boy’s arm and the infuser at his side before giving a large smile and exiting the area.

Phil waited until the curtain closed then frowned at his son. “Guess she’s the warden, huh?”

Fitz gave a weak smile.

xx
Melinda entered the ER with Skye on her hip. Elena followed, leading Jemma by the hand. She scanned the large waiting area but Mack had already spotted her and rose from his seat. The large man was hard to miss. He made his way across the room to meet the women.

“Six,” he nodded to Melinda as he took Skye from her arms. The little girl did not protest and had remained quiet almost sensing the mood of the adults around her. “Come on, Tremors,” he smiled at her and reached out for Jemma’s hand. “Someone told me you’re in the mood for some ice cream and I know just where to get it.” He nodded at Melinda and led the girls away.

“Go,” Elena told her friend. “They’ll be fine. Mack and I will make sure they’re okay. You just keep us informed.” She turned to follow Mack, nodding to Trip who had been standing at the seat he’d vacated, watching the action. He nodded to his mother as Elena took his arm.

Melinda took a deep breath to quell both her fear and her anger. She wasn’t quite sure what she felt more. How could this happen? Why wasn’t Phil more careful? How many times was he stung? How bad was it? Could it get worse? The questions swirled in her mind as she approached the window where a young man sat speaking to anxious family members. She waited until the older woman in front of her passed through the large double doors then stepped up and gave her name.

“My son was brought in…Fitz…Leopold Coulson Fitz…” She waited as the young man smiled and turned to the computer screen before him. He tapped a few keys. She could not wait. “He’s in six, please just let me go to him.” Melinda hoped that did not sound too demanding or too desperate. The young man nodded and pressed a large button. A buzzer sounded and Melinda was through the door before he could give her further directions. The first examining room was twelve. She marched past ignoring the hustle and bustle of the ER.

“Damn, who designs these things,” she mumbled to herself as the next room was nine and the one after was fifteen. She peered down the hallway hoping to see some sort of arrow to point her in the right direction but most of anything that was on the wall was blocked by the people either on gurneys or in wheelchairs waiting to be seen or moved to another area. Melinda fought the urge to scream.

“Can I help you ma’am?” A very young nurse asked when they crashed into each other.

“My son…” Melinda began then swallowed and started again. “Just point me to room six.”

The girl smiled and pointed straight ahead. “Take a right at the end of the hall and then left at the
next. Six is the third on your left.” The girl continued as Melinda was already on her way.

xx

Phil sat listening to the steady bleeps of the monitors as Fitz stared at the long board strapped to his arm. He didn’t really remember them putting it there and figured it was to keep him from getting at the IV needle, not that he’d ever dream of doing anything so foolish. But, to the doctors and nurses he was just a kid. They had no idea he was smart enough and just squeamish enough to leave well such things alone. He opened his fingers and stared at the red lines across the back of his hand. Jamie Grant had left welts on him just like that on more than one occasion. The little boy closed his eyes tight and shook off the memory.

The large heavy curtain that covered the opening of the treatment area scraped open with a squelch causing Phil to jump and Fitz to lift his head as Melinda stepped inside and pulled it closed behind her. She glared once at her husband and hurried to her child.

“Momma,” Fitz breathed as the tears he’d been holding broke forth in a flash flood.

Phil stepped aside as she leaned over and took the small boy in her arms, holding him gently and whispering comfort into his ear. She kissed his head several times before laying him back and smoothing the hair from his face.

Melinda took in his condition, slowly scanning the room and his features. Fitz’s face was streaked with long red stripes, his eyes bloodshot and swollen. She could see the red welts reached into his hair line and across his chin to his neck then disappeared under the blue airplane motif hospital gown. Both arms were also striped and she imagined the rest of his body was the same. She could not see any sign of where he’d been stung. Wires led from the little boy’s chest to the heart monitors on the wall and three IV bags hung over the infuser at the head of the bead. She noted the oxygen level on the wall and gently adjusted the cannula on her child’s nose as she rose and turned to face her husband.

“What happened?” She spoke through her teeth. “Where was he stung?”

“It was so fast, Mel.” Phil explained. “We were just standing there and he started screaming. We didn’t even know…”

“You weren’t watching him?” She growled.
“Wha…watching him?” Phil wasn’t even sure he’d heard correctly. “Of course I was. He was looking into the damn hole the shrub made when we yanked it out. How the hell was I supposed to know about the bees?” He shot back, now defending himself.

The curtain squelched again as Dr. Stephens entered and picked up the clip board that hung at the end of Fitz’s bed, effectively silencing his parents.

“Hey, Fitz,” she smiled. “Heard you had a run in with some nasty apis mellifera.” She squeezed his foot gently. “Crappy reaction, huh?” The doctor frowned. Fitz did not reply. She stepped closer and held her stethoscope to his chest and then his back, listening carefully to his labored breathing and rapid heart beat.

“How ‘bout we assess the damages?” She smiled at Fitz then stepped to the opposite side of the bed.

Melinda looked to Phil who nodded then joined the doctor as she lifted the blanket and revealed the boy’s injury. Melinda stifled a gasp at the sight of her son’s swollen body. Fitz’s left leg from his toes to his waist was almost twice its size and red raw. The doctor gently examined the large white circle on the boy’s calf then moved to do the same on the second circle about two inches above the top of his thigh, smack in the middle of his bum. Fitz jumped at each touch despite the doctor’s assurance that she would not hurt him or make things worse.

“The swelling is due to the venom and of course Fitz’s allergies more than likely exasperated the effect. We’re treating him with epinephrine, glucocorticoid and antihistamines to help him breathe easier.” She laid her hand on the boy’s hip and massaged gently. “I’m going to give him something for the pain and itch as well.”

Fitz whimpered and squeezed Phil’s hand. When Dr. Stephens used that language it usually meant a shot and he was certain he could not handle that.

“No worries, Fitz, just some nice cool topical cream and Tylenol.” She turned to Melinda. “I won’t give him anything stronger due to the breathing trouble. He may have some trouble sleeping tonight but we are going to keep him a few days just to be sure.” She nodded to Phil and squeezed Melinda’s hand. “These things happen. It’s nobody’s fault.”

Melinda felt her face flush. The doctor must have heard her accusing her husband before she entered the small room.
“Your dad told us you’ve been vomiting so,” she turned to Phil. “We’ve given him something for his tummy. Again that is a normal reaction as are belly pain and possibly diarrhea.”

Fitz let out a mortified whimper. The doctor chuckled. “No worries, Fitz, the medicine will take care of that too. I’m going to order some breathing treatments, might make him a little jumpy. We’ll keep him on a light diet and send you home with some new allergy medicine and of course a new Epi-Pen®. Good thing your dad used it so quickly and got you here as fast as he did.” She smiled at the little boy and squeezed his foot again. This time Fitz smiled back.

The curtain was pushed open to its extent as a large man stepped into the room. He smiled and nodded to the doctor then began moving equipment to the sides of Fitz’s bed.

“Afternoon, young man,” he smiled broadly as he held out his hand. “I’m Luca and I will be your pilot today.” Fitz took the hand and gave a limp shake. “Gonna hafta work on that, kiddo.” The man smiled as he released the brake on the large bed and began moving it into the hall. He grinned as he passed Phil and Melinda giving a slight nod for them to follow. “We’ll be flying at the amazing height of ground level as we ascend the passenger elevation device to Pediatrics on the ninth floor. Please keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times.” He continued as he snapped up the side rails and attached the oxygen line to a temporary transport tank. Fitz laughed a tiny laugh.

“And the guy’s sense of humor was not effected,” Luca grinned as he stopped and tapped the clipboard the doctor still held. “Be sure to mark that down doc.” He looked down at the little boy on the gurney and spoke out of the side of his mouth. “Ya know most folks who get bee bit on the derrière lose almost all of their laughter as well…odd isn’t it? Didn’t think yer arse was connected to yer funny bone did ya?” Fitz let out a soft snort as they made their way down the hall.

“Don’t…let…my mom…hear…you…say that.” The little boy warned.

Luca winked and offered a thumb’s up. He looked back over his shoulder at Melinda who smiled back.

Dr. Stephens smiled as well then patted Melinda’s hand and nodded to Phil. “I will see you later, once Fitz is settled into his room.” She slipped out of the room and disappeared into the controlled chaos of the ER.

Phil stepped next to his wife and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.
“I’m sorry, Phil. I shouldn’t…” She began.

“It was Trip that remembered the Pen.” He told her. “And Mack called the ambulance. I just…”

“Stayed with him and kept him calm because that’s what you do.” She smiled. “Because you’re his father and you would never leave him.”

He kissed her cheek as they exited the room and followed their son to the elevator.

The kids were allowed a brief visit to say goodnight to their brother then were off to spend the night with Mack and Elena although they argued valiantly to stay with their parents. Trip especially insisted on staying but agreed that their friends would need all the help they could get with his Tasmanian Devil baby sister and the overly sensitive Jemma. Having him close would help both of them.

It would be a rough sleepless night.

xx

Three days later Fitz was forced to spend the day on the couch in the family room despite having a clean bill of health. An exterminator was hired to clear the back yard of any hidden bee hives and Melinda considered never letting her little boy out of the house again.

“They’re going to build the gym without me.” Fitz pouted as he rested his chin on his hand, elbow on the arm of the sofa.

“I’m sure they know what they’re doing.” Melinda sympathized as she rubbed a hand on his back.

“But I was supposed to help.” He breathed, blinking back tears.

Melinda matched his pout and pulled him into a hug, kissing the top of his head. “Oh, I know bao bao, but you’re only home one say and I just want to be sure everything is okay.”
“I’m fine, mom.” He pulled back and looked her in the eye. He drew a deep breath and released it. “See breathing just like new.” He kicked both legs rapidly then bounced up and down on his bottom. “No pain, no swelling, nothing…I really fine.”

Melinda let out a sigh. She’d already had this same conversation with Phil, then Trip, Mack and even Elena but she was adamant that Fitz rest at least one more day. However the look on her son’s face was melting her resolve.

“Please, mom…” he begged with a slight tilt of his head. “I’ll be really careful and I won’t go near any flowers or bushes. If I see one bee I’ll come inside straight away.”

She pulled him into another hug and rocked slowly. Fitz had no idea how close they came… She could not even bring herself to think of what could have happened or how she would have survived losing her sweet boy. At the same time she knew she could not keep him in a bubble for the rest of his life. She let out a long breath.

“Even if it’s in the next yard?” She whispered into his soft curls.

Fitz nodded slowly before his mother’s words finally sunk in. He sat back and smiled, eyes wide. “Really? You mean I can go…I can help?”

Melinda nodded and Fitz was on his feet in an instant. If Melinda hadn’t grabbed his hand he’d already be halfway across the deck. “Only if your silly mother comes too,” she grinned.

Fitz’s smiled broadened a second before he threw his arms around her neck. “Always, momma,” he whispered in her ear before placing a soft kiss on her cheek. “Wǒ ài nǐ, mama.”

He pulled his mother to his feet and led her to the deck. “Hey, guys!” The little boy yelled as he jumped from the top step of the deck and ran toward the back yard. “Hey guys, I’m back!”

Melinda hurried to catch up and stood watching as her little man joined the rest of the family welcomed with hugs and pats on the back. She shook her head and patted her pocket just to be sure that Epi-Pen was handy.
She couldn’t protect him from life, but she’d make damn sure he lived every moment of it.

¹Hey, little girl, you are not supposed to be opening the door all by yourself. Where is your momma?
Things start off badly and the Coulsons are convinced it is time to get away from it all. A trip to the sand and surf is what everyone needs to relax and refresh. A trip to the pink sands of Bermuda is just the thing where Trip meets the girl of his dreams, Jemma is fascinated by the flora and fauna and Skye and Fitz find just as much trouble as usual. New friends, new places and new discoveries for everyone.

Fitz paced back and forth across his bedroom, stopping each time to peer out the window into the yard of the next door neighbor. He watched as the vulgar man puffed on a cigarette then dropped it to the bare ground and stomped it into the dirt. He grimaced at the number of butts crushed into the soil in a wide circle. The man picked up a pair of small sheers and turned to trim his flowering rose bushes. Fitz sneered at the irony of the man’s ugly habit and the beauty of the plants.

That jerk was the reason the boy paced and tried to shake off his anger. Mom had already been here and exacted her opinion of his throwing the moron a one finger salute. She also demanded he apologize, which Fitz adamantly refused to do. He was given one half hour to reconsider with the threat of ‘mom’s discipline part two’ as an alternative. Fitz had already decided that part two was better than having to grovel for forgiveness at that big fat dork’s feet. He’d probably end up using some not so choice words that would end up with him getting the same dose of whatever was coming anyway.

He turned at the slight knock on his door, prepared to tell his mother he was not now, nor ever going to apologize to that creep and he didn’t care how many times she walloped his backside. Some things were just worth it and Fitz intended to stand his ground. He balled his fists and blinked back his angry tears.

“Hey, buddy,” Phil greeted him as he stepped around the half open door.

Fitz let out a sigh of relief. Maybe mom had reconsidered…or Da had talked her out of it. Then again maybe Da was here to exact part two. Of course that would be a very long boring lecture.
and a lot of comments that would make him feel quite guilty. Da wielded guilt like mom used her palm. Fitz wasn’t sure what was worse. He relaxed his fists and stared at the floor waiting for his father to speak.

“Rough day, huh?” Phil remarked as he lowered himself on to Fitz’s bed.

Okay, that was a good sign.

“I’ll not tell him I’m sorry, Da. So if yer here to give me a smacking we might as well just get to it, then.” Fitz breathed. He knew his da would not resort to that sort of punishment but he figured he’d make it look good.

Phil chuckled at his son’s expense and patted the mattress next to him. “How ’bout we just talk a bit?” He suggested, nodding for Fitz to sit down.

The boy let out a huff and dragged his feet to the bed. “I’ll not change my mind. I’ve had plenty of time to think and I won’t.” Fitz shook his head as he dropped down on the bed.

Phil dropped a hand on the boy’s knee and squeezed gently. “I didn’t expect you would.” He smiled. “Maybe we can work out a compromise.”

“If it saves me a second view of the carpet, I’m all for it.” Fitz groaned. “I know Mom does not approve of off color language, but I swear, Da, I didn’t say a word to him.”

Phil frowned. “I think you know your mother includes vulgar gestures as well, little man.”

Fitz shrugged his shoulders. “I guess.” He mumbled. “So is she waiting to see what happens?”

Phil shook his head. “Nope, told her I would handle this. She’s still pretty angry but, well, she’s working on it.”

Fitz let out a short breath and nodded his understanding.
“Okay, then,” Phil slapped his hands on his knees. “I’ve heard your mom’s version and Skye’s convoluted description of events.” He paused and chuckled. “I did not get much out of that one.”

Fitz snickered. “She is getting a little better, but she gets all turned around mostly.” He agreed.

“So, tell me what happened.”

The boy took a deep breath. “You know Skye really wants those training wheels off her bicycle.” Fitz waited for Phil to agree. After his nod, the boy continued. “I was trying to help. I raised them up just a wee bit and watched her ride in the driveway. I never let her go near the street.” He added quickly, shaking his head.

“Okay,” Phil nodded, “seems innocent enough.”

“We weren’t making a lot of noise, but Skye was laughing and cheering when she knew she was balancing. I cheered, too. Mr. Snyder was in his yard doing whatever he does and started telling us to find somewhere else to make noise. But I remembered what you said. I just ignored him. I tried to keep Skye from talking back to him, but you know how she is. She told him about the training wheels and he laughed. He told me to just take them off and that maybe she’d fall off and crack her head open then he wouldn’t have to put up with her noise anymore.”

“And that’s when you…” Phil raised his hand and made a waving motion.

Fitz shook his head. “No, Da. I just…well, I just went and got my own bike and we both rode in the driveway. He said we were a nuisance and he was sick of it. He said he was going to throw tacks over the hedge so our tires would go flat.” Phil’s eyebrows rose. Fitz held up a hand. “He wouldn’t. He’s mostly just a big wind, Da.”

“So you…” Phil asked again.

Fitz shook his head again. “Then he started telling Skye she would never learn to ride her bike because she was afraid. She told him she wasn’t and he started making fun of how she was talking. That’s when she almost fell, but I caught the handle bars and stopped her from hitting the pavement. He just laughed and said I should have let her break a leg then she wouldn’t be able to ride.”
Phil pursed his lips and nodded. He raised his brows ready to ask the question again but again Fitz gave a nonverbal negative reply.

“Skye started to cry and she told him he was a bad man. He just laughed so Skye said she was going to tell mom. She dropped her bike and ran into the house.” Fitz drew a deep breath. “That’s when I told him he was a bully picking on a wee girl, but he wasn’t listening. He said nobody would understand Skye anyway since she never learned how to talk and that he was sick of the messed up kids you brought to the neighborhood. I got mad and threw my bike against the hedge and he went insane. He told me to pick it up and keep it from the bushes unless I wanted a big problem. He kept yelling about it and I just…well, I just,” suddenly the boy became more interested in his fingers than relating the story. He looked up over his brows waiting for his father to ask the same question, but Phil remained quiet.

Fitz blew out a fluttery breath. “That’s when I flipped him off.”

“I see.” Phil stated calmly

“I didn’t know mom was on the deck with Skye.” He mumbled and Phil suppressed a laugh. No one had worse luck than Fitz.

Phil scrubbed a hand over his face and stared at the carpet while Fitz waited nervously for him to have some kind of reaction. He dropped his hands to his knees then rubbed them back and forth on his lap. Finally he turned and stared at his son.

Fitz drew another nervous breath. He did not really like the look his father was giving him.

“I think,” Phil began, narrowing his brow.

Fitz chewed his lip.

“I think you and I should pay Mr. Synder a visit.” Phil finished.

“I’m not apologizing.” Fitz shook his head.
“No you’re not,” Phil agreed. “In fact you don’t have to say a word. I’ll do all the talking.” The man smiled at the boy who hesitantly smiled back. “Get your shoes,” He directed as he stood and cocked his head toward the door motioning for Fitz to follow.

The boy did as he was told and hurried to catch up to his father almost crashing into him as Phil stopped with his hand on the door knob. He turned back to a slightly confused Fitz and put a finger to his lips. “Not a word to your mother, understand?”

The boy gave a quick smile and followed his father into the hall.

xx

Melinda smiled as she watched Phil and their son slip out the front door. She stood at the window and watched them make their way down the driveway and disappear around the copse of trees that separated their property from the neighbor. She was happy Phil had convinced Fitz to offer an apology because she certainly did not want to carry through on her promise to convince his backside to get moving.

xx

Phil smiled down at Fitz as he raised his hand to knock on the door. The boy stepped behind his father when it began to open.

“Hello, Mr. Snyder. I’m Phil Co…” Phil extended an open hand to the man who opened the door.

The man took a drag on the cigarette he held in his teeth and squinted at Phil through the smoke that encircled his head. He held his breath as he flicked the butt over Phil’s shoulder and off the side of his small front porch.

Exhaling a long fume of stale smoke, he grumbled, “yeah, I know who you are.”

Phil waved the smoke away from his face and smiled at the man. Fitz stepped farther behind his father.
Snyder laughed a cough and leaned over to peer at the boy. “Not so brave up close, are ya girlie boy?”

Phil side stepped to address the man, never losing his smile. “I understand there was a bit of a misunderstanding this afternoon. I thought maybe you and I could straighten things out.”

The man stood in a smudged t-shirt and jeans. His feet were bare. Apparently he hadn’t had a chance to clean up after gardening. He looked Phil up and down, gave a snort and leaned out the door looking toward the Coulson’s home. “Yer wife send ya over here?” He snorted again. “Seems like she’s the boss.”

Phil took a breath and forced the smile to stay in place. “Yeah, well Melinda likes to keep things in order.” He agreed.

Synder leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms over his chest. “Maybe she otta keep those brats of your in order. Bunch a’ freaky kids ya got there Coulson. Specially that little one, what the hell language does it speak?” He wasn’t laughing but there was amusement in his voice.

Phil had a flashback of playground bullies. “Takes all kinds,” he grinned.

“Seems you got one of each,” he sneered and waiting for a reaction that did not come. The large man let out a bored huff. “You want something Coulson, ya selling cookies or something?”

Phil laughed as he turned away and then back. “No, no nothing like that. I thought I’d just let you know that my children will be playing or riding bikes or bouncing balls or skipping rope or whatever they feel like doing in our driveway for as long as they like. I’ll thank you to keep your comments to yourself, especially when it comes to my youngest.”

Synder pushed himself upright, dropped his arms to his sides and took a step outside his door. Phil held his ground as Fitz moved to the side.

“And by the way, those are my shrubs…on my property and if my kids want to pull on them or drop their bikes against them or just stand next to them you really have nothing to say about it.” He spoke into the man’s face, his voice no longer cordial or calm.

“Get off my porch, Coulson.” Synder growled through his teeth, poking Phil’s shoulder with each
“Stay away from my kids,” Phil poked right back, snarling just as aggravated through his own teeth.

Fitz jumped down the steps to the ground and threw his hands over his eyes, peeking only when he felt the thump of a large body hit the dirt at his feet.

**xx**

Phil sat at the table with a bag of frozen peas pressed to his right eye. Skye stood at his side, her arms folded on the table just high enough for her to rest her chin on top of them. She squinted at her father.

“Why you gots piece on yoer face, daddy?” The little girl wondered. She jumped as Melinda slammed another bag on the table then pulled the bag from Phil, glared at him and stormed away.

He smiled at Skye whose eyes opened wide at the large bruise that had her father’s eye swollen shut.

“Daddy, you gots a big boo boo on yoer eye. It hoerts, Daddy?” Skye sucked in a breath as she back away then laid a hand on Phil’s arm. “I kiss it, foer you, akay.”

Phil smiled at the little girl. “How ‘bout you just blow Daddy a kiss, angel.”

Skye stuck out her bottom lip in a sympathetic pout then kissed her hand and stood on her tip toes to reach Phil’s head. He leaned down so she could place a gentle pat on his cheek. He smiled a thank you and laid the fresh pack of frozen peas against the bruise. Skye laid her head on his elbow and hugged his arm.

Fitz smiled from the other side of the table. “You should have seen it. Mr. Snyder hit the dust like a big rock. BAM!” He slammed his fist into the air. “There was blood everywhere. I think Da busted his nose.” The little boy smiled.
Melinda glared from her perch in front of the sink. She leaned back against it with arms crossed over her chest.

“Fitz,” she barked and the little boy jumped, turning to face her. She dropped her gaze to the floor for a second seeing the alarm in his eyes. Her anger was leaking and she had not meant for it to splash on her son.

“Fitz,” Melinda spoke calmly. “Please take your sister to the family room so Daddy and I can talk for a little bit.”

The little boy glanced at his baby sister then back at his mother. “Don’t be mad at Da, mom.” He shook his head. “Mr. Synder started it. He…”

“Fitz, do as your mother says.” Phil spoke calmly, extracting Skye from his arm. “Go with Fitz, angel eyes.” He crooned to the little girl as Fitz stepped next to her.

Fitz took Skye’s hand and turned toward the hall just as the back door opened admitting Jemma and Trip.

“Da!” Jemma exclaimed as she rushed to Phil’s side.

“Oooo weee,” Trip whistled.

“Okay, all of you to the family room, now.” Melinda ordered, raising one arm and pointing in that direction.

“Come on, Jems.” Trip put his hands on Jemma’s shoulders and drove her toward the hall where Fitz and Skye still stood hand in hand. The older boy scooped up his baby sister as he passed, gathered the twins with his other arm and nodded at Melinda letting her know he would keep the kids occupied as long as she needed him to do so.

Skye looked over her shoulder at the very angry expression on her mother’s face and let out a little sigh as Trip carried her through the family room doorway. “Momma gonna put a big spank on Daddy, Trip.” The little girl frowned and shook her head as Jemma covered the giggle that escaped her with one hand and Fitz dropped to the floor rolling with laughter.
An hour later the kids looked up from the movie Trip had chosen when the doorbell rang. Fitz and Jemma jumped up both announcing they’d get it before their older brother could slip Skye off his lap to catch them. Fitz pulled the family room double door open nearly running headlong into Melinda who carried three trays of pizza.

She stopped and held the boxes high as the little boy slipped around her. Letting out a quick breath of relief she gave him a look before she smiled. “Okay, dinner in five. Get washed and to the kitchen if you want it while it’s hot.” She quickly stepped out of the way to get to the kitchen and out of way of the stampede to the powder room.

xx

The family ate mostly in silence although Skye, who could not let the quiet go for long. She hummed, sang songs she’d learned in preschool and babbled on about the mean man next door and how there were little green dots on some of the pizza. Trip solved the problem by cutting off the crust, called ‘the bone’ by Skye, from a slice and allowing her to dip it into the marinara sauce the family always ordered as an extra. It worked out well since Jemma never ate ‘the bone’ so the girls merely shared a slice.

Phil tipped back his bottle of beer and smiled at Melinda who still held a bit of her anger in her eyes. He set down the bottle and cleared his throat halting Skye’s version of what he was pretty sure was ‘I’ve Been Working on the Railroad’. While the words were jumbled the tune was familiar.

Your mother and I have something to tell you.” He began.

Trip dropped the slice he was holding on to his plate. Fitz stopped chewing for a second before gulping down what was in his mouth and wiping it with the back of his hand. Jemma set down her fork gently as Skye licked the sauce from her finger tips.

Phil looked around the table at the anxious looks of his children. He smiled and continued. “It’s something we’ve been thinking about for a long time but didn’t want to tell you until we were sure.”

Fitz stood, suddenly trembling with emotion. “I’m sorry, Mom. I really am sorry. I’ll tell Mr. Snyder I’m sorry. I’ll tell him right now.”
Both Melinda and Phil looked at their son with surprise, unsure what could have brought on this reaction. Melinda stood and grabbed his arm before he could dash out the back door. She pulled him back intending to ask what brought on his outburst when he wrapped his arms around her waist and was suddenly sobbing. She looked back to Phil and shrugged once before embracing Fitz and bending to kiss the top of his head. Pulling him to her seat she tugged him into her lap and shushed him quietly then gave Phil a quick nod. The other children merely stared, even Skye had grown quiet.

For a moment Phil ignored the children and spoke directly to his wife. “I’m sorry Mel. I thought we were done with all of that.” He rose from his seat and moved to place a hand on Fitz’s shoulder giving it a gentle squeeze.

Trip cleared his throat and looked to Jemma before speaking. “Whatever it is Da, we…we,” he looked to Jemma a second time.

“Perhaps we’ve all been a bit too much for you all these months,” Jemma gushed. “Taking on all four of us was quite an endeavor.”

“Yes,” Trip agreed, “what she said.” The boy swallowed hard. “We understand. I can move my stuff in with Gram. She won’t mind.” He started to stand.

“We don’t want to see you argue or be cross with each other due to the silly blunders we’ve made.” Jemma’s voice shook with emotion.

Fitz pulled closer into his mother’s embrace repeating his earlier apology. Skye munched on her pizza bone and swung her feet under her chair a few times before sliding to floor and reaching up to Phil. He picked her up and glanced around the table wondering how the hell they’d gotten to this point.

“Hold on,” Phil raised a hand. He looked into the chocolate brown eyes staring into his own. “You go back and finish your bone.” He kissed Skye’s cheek and set her on the floor. She paused for a second staring up at him until he pointed to her chair and poked her belly. The little girl giggled then skipped back toward her chair snagged her crust and climbed into Trip’s lap as he dropped back into his own seat.

“Nobody is moving their stuff anywhere.” Phil looked at Trip as the boy pulled his baby sister into a hug then turned to Jemma. “And no one is now or has ever been too much for either or both of us
The little girl hung her head for a moment before looking up at her father. “I just thought…”

“You were wrong, Jemma.” Phil spoke softly as he opened his arms to her. She accepted the invitation and hurried into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “We have loved every blunder you’ve put us through.” He smiled as Melinda hugged Fitz closer.

“Where did all of this come from?” Melinda asked over Fitz’s head still buried in her embrace.

“You got socked.” Jemma sniffled up at her father.

“It was my fault.” Fitz’s voice was muffled but audible.

“We know you were upset.” Jemma added.

“I put on the loudest movie I could find but even Star Wars couldn’t drown out your voices.” Trip sighed as Skye slid a large piece of cheese off of his pizza and took a big sloppy bite. He grabbed a napkin to catch the dripping sauce.

“You pudda spank on Daddy, momma? You mad to him a lots.” Skye added around her mouthful.

Melinda stifled a laugh. “No baobei, momma is not angry with daddy. Momma didn’t like what happened with Mr. Snyder.”

“You telled him reoll loud, momma.” Skye nodded as she swallowed. Trip chuckled as he wiped the sauce from her chin.

“Yes, baobei, I did.” Melinda agreed. “Sometimes mommas and daddies talk very loud when they’re angry, but we were not angry with any of you.” She assured her littlest child.

Fitz sat up and wiped his cheek with the palm of his hand. “Just me,” he sighed.
“No, bao bao, not even you,” Melinda leaned forward and touched her forehead to his. “You and I have already discussed your behavior…at length.” She raised one brow and gently patted his backside. Fitz gave a weak smile and leaned against her shoulder.

“Okay,” Phil smiled, “now that we’ve cleared all that up and we’re all back on the same page, let’s start again. “We,” he made a circle with his finger around the entire family, “together as a family, because that is what we are, we are taking some time off from our crazy life and we are going to spend it on a nice warm beach with sand and surf and…” He didn’t get to finish. The kids erupted in cheers and hoots of happiness as Fitz jumped to his feet taking Jemma’s hands and hopping around their father with excitement. Trip stood and tossed Skye up then caught her and swung her in a circle. The youngest Coulson wasn’t sure why everyone was so happy but she was glad to join in the celebration.

Melinda stood and wrapped an arm around Phil’s waist. “I think they like the idea.” She smiled.

Phil smiled wide, then winced at the twinge of pain it sent to his swollen eye.

xx

Skye sat on the bed watching Melinda fold her clothes and place them in the suitcase she’d placed there. Salty rested on the little girl’s lap and she ran her hand up and down the scrawny bunny’s ear as she watched.

“Now, you remember what we talked about don’t you, baobei?” Melinda asked as she worked.

Skye rubbed the rabbit’s ear under her nose and nodded slowly. Melinda pursed her lips and set down the handful of tiny panties she’d taken from Skye’s dresser. She sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the little girl with her bunny on to her lap.

“How do you know what momma is doing, Skye?” Melinda asked, leaning over to look in the child’s face.

Skye turned and peered into the suitcase and then turned back to her mother. She nodded once before resting her thumb on her bottom lip. Melinda gently took the little girl’s hand and held it in her own.
“Tell momma,” she smiled.

“You puddin mine clozes inna box.” Skye mumbled softly.

Melinda nodded. “It’s a suitcase, Skye. Momma is putting your clothes inside so we can take them with us when we go on the airplane. This side of this big case is for you and the other side is for Jemma. You can share.” She smiled at the sullen child and let out a soft breath.

She and Phil had anticipated this. Skye was not a fan of suitcases. To her, the packing of a bag meant it was time to move on, to leave the place she though would be home. Once she’d been placed in their home permanently they made a grand display of disposing of the cardboard suitcase and its contents that the little girl had carried from house to house. They’d hoped it help her believe she would never leave again. Now as they tried to help her overcome her fear they’d purchased a small doll sized suitcase and sat down with their baby trying to explain.

“This dollie is going to visit her grandma.” Phil smiled picking up one of Skye’s baby dolls. “She’s taking her blanket and her…” he stared at the item he held between his finger and thumb with no clue what it could be.

“Hoer dipore.” Skye smiled as she took it from him.

“Her diaper,” Phil nodded as he gently took it back and put it and the small blanket into the little suitcase. He picked up the dollie and the now closed case and carried it across the room placing it on the large recliner. “She’s happy to see her grandma.” He picked up the doll’s hand and waved it toward Skye then opened the suitcase and took out the items.

Skye looked up at Melinda who sat next to her on the couch and giggled. “Daddy bees silly.”

“Daddy wants you to see that the doll is only on vacation. She’s going to come back.” Melinda explained.

Phil had already repacked the little bag and stood. “Bye bye, grandma.” He waved as he walked away from the chair and back to sit next to his youngest daughter. “Hi, mommy!” Phil spoke in a high pitched baby voice. “I’m back. I had fun. Here’s my suitcase.” He passed the doll to Skye and opened the case taking out the contents.
Skye giggled at her father’s play. “Baby non’t talk, Daddy. Hoer is a baby. Hoer haves no teeths.” She held up the doll for him to see.

Melinda turned up one side of her face and let out a short breath. It was worth a try but she wasn’t sure Skye was getting it. Phil frowned.

“Okay, but she did have a good time and now she is back because this is her home and she will always come back.” He explained.

“Hoer ownee goed to a chayor with you Daddy. Hoer not go way far cuz hoer a baby and hoer non’t wanna go way to udder howz.” Skye smiled. “Hoer like it heeore.”

Strike One!

A few days later Melinda spoke to Skye as she enjoyed her afternoon snack of cheese and crackers with apple juice.

“Remember when you went to see Nai Nai at her farm?” Melinda asked as she sliced the cheddar cheese to match the size of the crackers.

Skye nodded as she chewed.

“Momma packed a bag for you and Jemma and Fitz so you would have clothes to wear while you were there.” Melinda informed her regretting the fact that she and Phil had chosen to keep that from the little girl at the time.

They had packed the bag and stowed it in the car long before the kids were ready to travel and taken out after they’d entered the house with Lian. Melinda had given her mother strict instructions not to keep it anywhere Skye might find it.

Skye shook her head. “We seed the goatses and the kitties and Jemma goed to hide inna doerk.”
“Yes, she did.” Melinda recalled. “But you stayed at Nai Nai’s house while momma and daddy were away and then we all came back to our house.”

“I non’t like it for you a go way, momma. I crided. Fitz crided inna bed but him sayed shhhh a me.” Skye held a finger in front of her lips as she spoke. “Him beed sad to you be gone. Him non’t wanna Jemma o nee nee a know it. I non’t tell onnem.”

Melinda kissed Skye’s head and turned to place the cheese slicer in the sink. “No baobei, you didn’t.” She walked back and sat next to the little girl. “I know you didn’t like daddy and I being away but we did come back just like we told you. Didn’t we?”

Skye nodded around a bite then drank the last of her juice. “I ride my bike now, momma?” She smiled.

Strike Two!

So now, Melinda was packing the suitcase with Skye’s help, or supervision as it was. The little girl did not look comfortable with the situation and her tight grip on Salty with a thumb almost in her mouth was not a good sign.

“This suitcase is for you and Jemma to use for vacation. Fitz and Trip have one and the last is for daddy and I. We put our clothes inside so we have them when we get to the beach. See,” Melinda lifted an item from the case. “Here’s the brand new bathing suit we bought last night and your new cover up and even your new pajamas. We’ll take everything we need to have a good time.”

“Salty non’t wanna come to bay kay shun.” Skye mumbled into the bunny’s sparse fur. “Him like it heore onna mine bed foever.”

“And that’s exactly where he will be when we come back. I know Salty doesn’t like to leave home and he will wait for you to come back.” Melinda assured her.

“Salty want all erree bunny come home. Jemma and Fitz too and Trip and momma and daddy.” Skye added.

“Absolutely baobei,” Melinda made a cross over her heart. “We will all go together and come back together.”
Skye nodded then watched as Melinda placed the last of her clothing into the bag, closed it and snapped it shut. She wheeled the large case into the hallway and set it next to the others that Phil and Trip would transport to the car before morning. Skye stood in her room, still hugging Salty and watched.

Hours later Melinda sprang out of bed at the sound of her baby’s scream. It had been months since Skye had woke in the middle of the night. Melinda had no doubt what the cause was. She gathered the little girl into her arms and tucked her in between Phil and her self before the other kids were also awakened.

xx

The trip to the airport was eventless. Trip and Phil had loaded the car the night before and just to save time and avoid an explosion Melinda and Phil decided to check the luggage without Skye’s help. Melinda would keep the little girl occupied while Phil took care of getting the bags to the check in point. Of course they did not consider the fact that every person in the airport would be carrying some sort of suitcase or backpack or duffle bag. Other than wondering where everyone was going, Skye did not seem phased by them.

Boarding was a breeze with Skye eagerly greeting all passengers and crew with enthusiasm and informing all she was on ‘bay kay shun’. Jemma was apprehensive but grateful for Fitz’s hand in hers and Trip’s little pep talk. She’d been alright with the flight from the UK to the US, but it was the last time she’d been on a plane and the thought still gave her nightmares.

Melinda had second guessed this plan several times over the last week, dealing with her girls’ apprehension. Both had nightmares and ended up in bed with her and Phil at least three out of the last seven days. Phil hugged his princess to him and kissed her forehead as he smiled across the darkness of their room. He reassured his wife and told her that they would never alleviate the kids’ fears if they did not help them through it. She reluctantly agreed.

Phil took advantage of their company’s reputation and the fact that being a successful businessman could well afford it and booked the family in first class. It was a luxury he and Melinda rarely, if ever, used for themselves but he did it more for the other passengers. He could not imagine anyone having to deal with Skye and/or Fitz and any combination of them for the length of the flight. He even timed the flight for late morning hoping the soft hum of the engine would lull their little one to sleep for a few hours.

All went well and with the extra space, fewer passengers and the toys and activities Melinda packed. The kids were excited and moderately well behaved, even with Skye’s repeated trips to
the restroom and Fitz’s requests for extra drinks just to sample every flavor available. Peering out the window was not a battle since all of the children were able, at some point, to catch the view.

Phil felt the change in cabin pressure as the plane began descending and cast Melinda a wide smile. He was super satisfied with his planning and the success of it. That began to crumble when Skye began whining and climbed in Melinda’s lap, within minutes she was wailing and everyone was at a loss for a reason. The little girl’s distress grew until even Melinda could not console her. A few minutes later Fitz looked to Phil with tears streaming down both cheeks and struggled to contain his own version of his baby sister’s caterwauling.

Phil pulled the little boy close. Fitz pushed his head into his father’s chest and covered his ear on the opposite side.

“Are my ears bleeding?” He whispered to his father. “I don’t want anyone to see.”

Phil looked down quickly, shocked that the little boy would ask such a question.

The flight attendant who had been enthralled by the Coulson kids for the entire flight appeared carrying four large plastic cups. She smiled in sympathy and spoke to Phil and Melinda over their children’s cries.

“It’s the change in cabin pressure affecting their ears. It happens with so many little ones.” She held out the cups and produced two water bottles with sipping tops. “I know this is a little out of the box but I saw it done on a flight over the Alps years ago and it really does help.”

Phil took the cups and felt the warmth. He peered inside.

“Moist towels,” she explained. “I micro waved them. Put the cups over their ears and hold them firmly. Have them suck on the bottles at the same time. It should help to open up the tubes and relieve the pressure. After we land some pain reliever should do the trick.”

Melinda shrugged her shoulders, but was willing to do anything to relieve her babies’ pain. It took a few minutes to convince Skye, but Fitz was more than happy to comply. He sat with his back against Phil’s chest and blinked the tears from his eyes as his dad held the cups to his head and he sucked the water bottle with the gusto of a newborn. Once Melinda was able to situate Skye and cover her ears with the warm cups she took the water bottle from her mother and imitated her brother.
The next thirty minutes were uncomfortable for all, but two repeats of warm towels and a second bottle of water for each kept both children from the severe pain they could have experienced.

xx

“Great start,” Melinda sighed as she smoothed Skye’s hair from her face.

“Not what we planned, huh,” Phil let out a sigh of his own as he pulled off Fitz’s shoes and tossed a light blanket over him and Skye. Both children were asleep on their parents’ bed in the guest house Phil had secured for their two week stay in Bermuda. A light breeze blew the fine curtains that covered the large window. The soft sound of the ocean filtered through the room.

“Let’s hope the antihistamine the doctor gave them helps. They should sleep four a few hours.” Melinda remarked, placing a light kiss on both her babies before following Phil out of the room. She left the door ajar. She wanted to hear if either of the children awoke and to be sure neither would be startled waking in a strange room.

“This place is really something.” Trip spoke in awe from the wide open door that faced the ocean. “Man, I’ve seen the shore but never anything like this. Look at that water, man it is really blue not like that mossy green in Atlantic City.

He’d only been there once and it was years ago. Trip was probably nine or ten and went with a church group for a long weekend. It was his only memory of seeing the shore or spending time on any beach. He recalled all the people crowded across the hot brownish sand, the gulls squawking in the sky and the frothy waves knocking him to the ocean floor over and over as he tried to wade into the cold surf.

The boy took a deep breath of the tropical air and turned smiling broadly at his parents. Phil smiled back, thrilled that the boy was so enthralled with this paradise. Trip was a good kid. He worked hard and asked for very little. He cared for the younger kids, worshipped his grandmother and showed the greatest respect for Phil and Melinda. He fiercely protected Fitz, Jemma and Skye while putting up with all of their idiosyncrasies, fears and shenanigans. Even through all of the nightmares and sleepless nights the young boy never complained. There were many nights when Phil found him with one arm wrapped around his little brother, both sound asleep in the bottom bunk. So being able to give him this bit of relief from all the hustle and bustle of every day life was as thrilling for Phil as it was for Trip.
“I know it’s kind of late in the day to do much sight seeing, but maybe we can take a walk along the shore before it gets too dark.” Phil suggested. Leaving late in the afternoon and spending almost two hours in a local doctor’s office after landing had eaten up most of their first day.

“Momma,” Jemma breathed as she spun around the end of the short hallway that led to the two bedrooms on the opposite end of the house. “Oh, momma, you must come see this room. It is ever so splendid. And it has its own terrace with a little table and the most precious tropical garden. I’ve never seen so many beautiful flowers.” She wrapped her arms around Melinda’s waist and smiled up at her.

Of all their children, Jemma was the only one that had certainly been on many holidays with her parents. Elizabeth and Benjamin Simmons were well traveled professionals and had taken their little girl on many excursions in the short lifetime they had as a family. Jemma had been to the seashore on many occasions. The little girl kept a scrapbook under her bed, taken out on many occasions and wept over as she gently caressed the photos of her mother and father enjoying the times the three of them spent together. Melinda and Phil had no intention of replacing those memories but hoped to start building new ones…perhaps giving Jemma a holiday to bring smiles rather than tears. From the little girl’s first reaction it seemed a good start.

“Everything is so bright and colorful,” Jemma gushed. “And we can just walk out the door onto the sand. Is it truly ours, da?” She turned to Phil for reassurance.

“For the next two weeks, princess.” He smiled back.

Suddenly the little girl’s expression grew dark. She stepped back and placed a hand over her mouth. Melinda held her breath. Could something have triggered a memory that would spoil this perfect moment?

“Oh momma, I am so sorry.” Jemma spoke through her fingers. “I don’t mean to be insensitive to Fitz and Skye. How are they? Can I help?”

Melinda smiled and opened her arms to the little girl, who gladly obliged the invitation. She glanced up at Phil, giving him a quick look of relief. It was just their wonderful Jemma, always sympathetic to her siblings needs. She bent down and kissed the top of the little girl’s head.

“They’re fine, baobei.” Melinda assured her. “Both sound asleep. They’ll be wrecking havoc before we know it and you can show them around this beautiful house when they do.”
Jemma smiled and looked around the wide open area, noticing the open doors and the soft breeze blowing the light curtains that hung on every opening. “Momma,” she breathed. “However will we keep Skye from dashing right out into the ocean.”

Phil chuckled under his breath. “We did consider a leash…” he joked.

Melinda shook her head. “We will not let her out of our sight for a second. I think there are enough of us to hold on to her.”

“And Fitz,” Trip added with a bit of an eye roll.

xx

Phil made good on his offer to take a walk on the beach with Jemma and Trip despite the fact that Melinda and the two youngest Coulsons had to stay behind. Melinda snuck a short nap, not even realizing how exhausted she was after getting her family started on this excursion. She stood in the doorway and watched Phil walk hand in hand with Jemma as Trip moved a few feet ahead, pointing out details as he went. She smiled at the easy picture it formed then dropped into one of the large fluffy chairs in the living room of their rental, falling asleep before she knew it.

She woke to a soft knock on the door.

“Good evening,” A dark slender woman greeted her with a distinct accent and wide smile, exposing perfect white teeth. “I am Isabella Outerbridge. This is my daughter, Keazjah. We’ve come to prepare the evening meal.” She stepped aside to reveal a young girl, no more than sixteen and probably of mixed race with a smile that matched her mother’s.

Melinda’s eyebrows rose. Phil had planned for everything. It wouldn’t be much of a vacation if either of them was tied to running the household, just the same old thing in a different place.

Isabella’s face changed as she seemed unsure. “You are Mrs. Coulson?” She looked at a small note in the palm of her hand.

“Yes, yes I am. Please come in. You’ll have to excuse me I…” Melinda began.
“No need to apologize, Mrs. Traveling can be tiresome.” Isabella smiled as she picked up a large sack and nodded for her daughter to retrieve a second then stepped through the door.

Melinda noticed two motor scooters in the driveway next to their rental car and wondered why she had not heard them drive up to the house. She brushed a stray hair from her face and shook her head thinking about how tired she must have been.

“I had no idea you were coming.” Melinda smiled.

“Oh, Misses you are here for holiday. There is no reason for you to be cooking and cleaning. Keazjah and I have been doing this forever.” Isabella smiled.

Melinda looked at the young girl. “Seems forever hasn’t been very long.”

Isabella began unpacking on of the sacks she had carried and smiled. “She’s been coming along with me since she was just out of diapers.” Keazjah kept her head low to hide the blush.

“We did not know what your family preferred or enjoyed so we thought tonight Mango Apricot Chicken Breasts. I understand you have little ones, so we will keep the spiciness to a minimum. Perhaps tomorrow we can talk about what your family enjoys.” Isabella smiled as she pulled on an apron and began slicing chicken breasts into long strips. Keazjah had already begun preparing the ripe fruits.

“I’ve brought rum cake dessert. Something I hope your little ones will enjoy.”

A shrill scream shattered the tranquility of the retreat before Melinda could respond. Isabella and her daughter jumped at the sound, catching a handful of sliced apricot before it met the floor. Melinda turned and hurried from the room.

“Momma!” Skye shrieked from her spot on the large white bed. Tears streamed down the little girl’s face as she trembled, terrified to slide to the floor. Fitz sat on the opposite side of the mattress wide eyed and confused.

Melinda rushed to her baby, snatching her into her arms then spun around to the other side and pulled Fitz into a quick embrace.
Skye’s grip was vice-like while Fitz seemed sleepily limp. Skye squirmed trying to pull herself closer to her mother as Melinda shushed and comforted her. She realized both children were disoriented from their recent experience and the medication the doctor had suggested.

“Momma,” Skye repeated over and over until it became just a whisper as she relaxed into Melinda’s nuzzling.

Fitz merely snuggled closer, breathing a sigh of relief while wrapping his fist into his mother’s loose fitting sun dress.

“Momma, who bees to this howz? I non’t like a here. Where bees mine Daddy?” Skye sobbed into Melinda neck.

“I’m so sleepy, mom. My head is all woozy.” Fitz seemed to giggle from inside her embrace.

Melinda gently bounced both of them. “Shh, shh,” she crooned. “You’re both fine now, momma’s here.” She kissed both heads and rocked back and forth until Skye lifted her head and looked into her mother’s eyes.

The little girl wiped her eyes with both hands and sniffled mightily then looked around the room and at the curtain fluttering on the large window that faced the ocean. She blinked a few times then wiped her eyes again. “Momma, we to the bay cay shun?”

“Yes, baobei we are at the vacation.” Melinda laughed as she kissed the little girl’s cheek.

Fitz rubbed a hand under his nose several times and yawned. “I’m too tired for vacation, momma. I’d like to nap a bit more.” He nodded his head and closed his eyes.

“I pulay inna big sandbox, momma?” Skye pointed to the window, squirming to get to the floor.

Melinda held on and kissed her again. “Yes, baobei, as soon as your brother wakes up a little bit more.”
“I wake him up, momma.” Skye reached out placing her hand on Fitz’s head. She gave a little shake. “Wake up, Fitz. You needa see a big sandbox we pulay in.” She leaned forward and down to look into her brother’s face while still in her mother’s grip. “Ommon Fitz, you sleeped a long time fromma air a pulane. It bees time a wake up. Wakie wakie.” She imitated her mother’s wake up call and tapped Fitz on the head lightly.

Fitz brushed her hand away and snuggled closer to his mother with a slight whine.

Skye gave a little pout. “Him no wanna wake up, momma. We go the beast with no Fitz?”

Melinda smiled and shook her little boy gently. “Come on, Fitz. I think if you get up and walk around a bit you’ll feel a little more awake.” She stood with Skye still in her arms and gently pulled Fitz with her. She walked back to the kitchen with the boy shuffling along beside her.

“Here are the little ones I was told of,” Isabella smiled as she turned from the stove and wiped her hands in her apron.

Melinda smiled. “Isabella this is Skye.” She nodded toward the little girl who buried her face in her mother’s neck. “And this is Fitz,” She hugged the boy still firmly attached to her side. He opened one eye and gave a not so enthusiastic wave.

“We had some trouble with landing earlier,” Melinda frowned as she explained. “Believe me they are rarely this quiet.”

Isabella sighed her sympathy. “So many suffer with the ear on the plane,” she shook her head. “Perhaps a drink will help.” She opened the large refrigerator and pulled out a large pitcher. “Keazjah and I made the trip yesterday to be sure there was enough here for you in our absence.” She offered as explanation then nodded to Fitz as she poured the deep red liquid into a tall glass and popped a straw into it before placing it on the table.

Before the boy could decide his next move Jemma entered through the large open double door. “Momma, it is so beautiful. You must come with us and see. We found the most delightful cove with the calmest water and so many shells just everywhere. Look,” she held up a large conch shell. “This was just lying on the sand. And Momma, it is pink! The sand is truly pink! I examined it and…” the little girl noticed her brother for the first time. “And Fitz you will absolutely have to see it as well.”
Melinda had never seen Jemma so excited about anything. She smiled over the little girl’s head at Phil who entered the room a few steps behind their daughter. Skye immediately put out her arms to her father wriggling her fingers and bouncing toward him. He took her from Melinda, placing a kiss on her cheek before she was able to wrap her arms around his neck.

Jemma smiled at her mother and noticed the woman in the kitchen. The little girl became quiet and stepped back. “Excuse me, I didn’t intend to interrupt.” Jemma breathed.

“There is no need to apologize, little one. There is so much to see here and you have found the cove so soon.” Isabella smiled, reacting with the same enthusiasm Jemma had used a few minutes earlier. Keazjah chuckled at the child’s excitement and her mother’s reaction.

“This is Jemma.” Melinda smiled.

Skye watched the interaction and knit her brow in confusion. “This you howz, Illabilla?” She tilted her head and waited for an answer. “I pulay in you big sand box?”

Isabella laughed a hearty laugh as she poured her special punch into enough glasses for everyone. “No, sweet baby. You and your family have this house for as long as you are here and yes you can play as much as you wish in the sand.” She held up a large glass to Phil who took it, sipped and smiled his approval.

Skye bounced her little hand toward Melinda. “Momma, Illabilla say I pulay inna sand box.” She turned to Phil almost nose to nose with him. “We go Daddy?”

Melinda laughed at her little one’s antics and reached to take her from Phil. “How about we change you and then yes, baobei, we will play in the sand.”

“Hey, little man! You’re finally back on your feet. Man, I thought you were going to sleep the whole trip away.” Trip teased his little brother with a gentle sock to his shoulder. “We found this cave right out in this mammoth rock thing and the water is probably only up to your chest. We can check it out and Da talked to this guy about snorkeling. We’re gonna give it a try tomor…”

“Trip, this is Isabella and her daughter Keazjah.” Melinda introduced their new friends.

“Hi,” the boy waved to the woman at the stove.
“The tide creates the caves in the rock formations,” Isabella smiled. “They are very popular with our children. Is that not right Keazjah?” She smiled toward her daughter who was chopping vegetable for a salad. The girl nodded but remained silent. “Keazjah has done plenty of exploring in that cove.”

Trip looked to the young teen and suddenly seemed very concerned with his own appearance. He stood straight, push a hand over his short hair and pulled the light shirt he wore to seem neater. He stared for a few minutes before Phil smiled and brought him out of his stupor with a gentle pat on the back.

The boy swallowed hard and dropped his head to hide the blush. Fitz stood at the counter in the center of the kitchen and took a long sip from the straw in his drink. He drummed his fingers on the surface and tilted his head looking at his brother then turned to Keazjah. “I think Trip might fancy you a bit.”

“Fitz!” Melinda and Phil admonished at the same time.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. “Just look at him,” Fitz smiled. “He’s all smitten with her. She is quite pretty.” He nodded as he took another drink.

Now, Keazjah also turned to avoid letting the family see her blush.

Melinda smiled as she held out a hand. “Okay, Fitz lets go.”

“I was just saying…” the boy started as he turned toward his mother.

“I think you’ve said enough.” Phil smiled as he put his hands on both the boy’s shoulders and steered him toward his mother.

Fitz took Melinda’s hand and followed her and Skye back toward the bedroom, defending his need to comment and the fact that he hadn’t done anything anyway.

xx
Getting Skye out of the sand and into the house for dinner was not an easy task but once done the little girl was more than impressed that the woman she had just met managed to make a complete meal with not a green speck in sight. Eating late had its advantages as the kids finished dessert and were ushered to the bath, said their goodnights and were tucked into their respective beds by eight thirty.

Skye made several trips to the patio to ask a myriad of questions only to be carried back to her bed in the room she shared with Jemma each time. Fitz complained that he had to sleep in an unfamiliar room all alone while Trip was not forced to go to bed as early. Putting the little boy in with his sisters proved a rather bad idea as the three youngest Coulson’s wasted no time discovering they could easily slip out the large doorway into the garden and then around the house to watch the moonlight dance on the gentle ocean waves.

Fitz put a finger to his lips to hush his sisters and pointed to Trip who sat on the short wall that separated the garden from the sand with Keazjah while she waited for her mother to say goodnight and make breakfast arrangements. The little boy pointed to their older brother and motioned for both sisters to duck behind the large flowering shrubs close to the house.

“You live close by?” Trip asked without looking at the girl. She nodded, without looking back.

“Mama and I are not far away.” She spoke softly, swinging her legs against the rock wall. Trip nodded.

“Must be something living so close to the ocean like this.” He mumbled, desperately searching for something to say that wouldn’t make him sound as stupid as he felt.

“Our house is in town, but I spend much time at the shore.” Keazjah smiled.

“Do any snorkeling?” The boy asked, then cringed at the dopey question. He turned slightly, looking over his shoulder. Was that a giggle he heard?

Keazjah nodded. “You should see my Uncle Stefan. He can be sure you have what you need. He can provide a guide as well.”

“Maybe you could show me.” Trip shrugged, hoping it didn’t sound goofy. Keazjah shrugged. “I mean…well, if your mother approves and well…if you aren’t busy with cooking and all.” The boy
rolled his eyes at his clumsiness. He turned again positive he’d heard something.

Trip chuckled a little and leaned forward to see his parents still speaking with Isabella. He sat back and gently scooted a bit closer to the young girl. Again the sound of sniggering came from behind. He stared at the garden for moment before turning back to Keazjah. “Aren’t any dangerous creatures sneaking around the place in the dark, I hope.” He joked.

Keazjah shook her head. “Mostly small lizards,” she nodded toward the water. “Crabs and turtles on the sand and perhaps you may see a rat but nothing that would cause you harm and of course nothing that makes the sound of your younger brother and sisters.” The girl giggled as Trip stood and peered into the flower filled garden. She brought a hand to her mouth and laughed a little louder. “They have been there for some time. I believe they are spying on their big brother.”

Trip pulled his hands to his hips and narrowed his eyes. “Alright, the three of you back to bed right now, before I have to come help you.” He clapped his hands together. “Move it!” He barked into the darkness only to be met by a round of the harmonic giggles of Jemma, Fitz and Skye blended together.

Phil stood from the table on the terrace above the teens and called down to his son. “Everything okay down there kiddo?”

Trip stepped back and shook his head. “I think we may have a problem with pests, Da. Pests that should probably be asleep by this time.” He finished in a huff as Isabella descended the circular rock stairs and motioned for Keazjah to join her.

“Good night, Antoine,” the girl smiled as she joined her mother. “I shall see you in the morning. I will tell my uncle you are interested in snorkeling in the cove, perhaps I can bring what you need.” She bowed her head in a soft gesture then turned to the garden. “Good night, little ones. I shall see you as well.”

Isabella smiled as she put an arm around her daughter’s shoulder and also looked to the garden. She nodded to Trip then turned and walked toward the scooters in the driveway. Keazjah smiled as she pulled on her helmet then started the small vehicle a second after her mother. Trip watched until they were out of sight.

“Oh, Keazjah wouldn’t you like to stroll across the sand and watch the turtles with me?” Fitz stood in the garden and spoke in a high pitched love-sick voice, holding his hands in front of him fingers interlocked in a pleading gesture.
Jemma gave him a gentle shove. “Oh Fitz, Trip doesn’t sound at all like that. He is much more timid in his approach.” She giggled in spite of herself.

“I like Kisha, Terrip. I see a tore toes with hoer.” Skye squeezed between Jemma and Fitz and smiled up at him.

Phil had climbed down the stairs and stood next to Trip who glared down at his siblings. The man patted his son on the shoulder and shook his head before stepping around the wall and into the garden to collect the others. He shook his head as he scooped up Skye and pushed the twins ahead of him. “If I’m not mistaken your mother put you all to bed at least three times already. She’s not really happy.” He motioned up to the terrace where Melinda stood with her arms crossed over her chest and one eyebrow raised.

“Oh, I hope mom warms your bottom good before she puts you back in your bed, little bro.” Trip laughed as he bounced up the stairs and set Fitz on his feet in front of Melinda. Phil followed a few steps behind dropping Jemma’s hand as he stood next to Fitz and putting Skye on her feet in front of them. Melinda glared down at them then cast Phil a quick wink.

“I really tyord, Momma.” Skye yawned and rubbed a hand into one eye.

“Oh, I hope mom warms your bottom good before she puts you back in your bed, little bro.” Trip laughed as he bounced up the stairs and set Fitz on his feet in front of Melinda. Phil followed a few steps behind dropping Jemma’s hand as she stood next to Fitz and putting Skye on her feet in front of them. Melinda glared down at them then cast Phil a quick wink.

“I really tyord, Momma.” Skye yawned and rubbed a hand into one eye.

“Me too,” Fitz mirrored his little sisters action. Jemma nodded.
“Mmm hmm,” Melinda snarled gently. “Then maybe it is time you stayed in bed because this is vacation and I am really hoping no one needs a little spank while we are here.”

“Not me!” Fitz piped covering his backside with both hands.

Skye shook her head, jutted out her bottom lip and reached up to her mother. Jemma hung her head. Melinda smiled at her little miscreants and looked to Phil whose smile matched hers. Trip however still looked crest fallen. She picked up Skye and stared down at the twins.

“Do you have anything to say to your brother?” She asked, fully expecting an answer.

Fitz turned up one side of his mouth and tilted his head to peer up at Trip. “You really need to work on your…” A quick swat from mom stopped him. Fitz again whipped both hands to cover his bottom and swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Trip. I acted like a real stinker.” He shrugged his shoulders and hung his head.

“I’m sorry, Trip. It was very unkind of us all. Please forgive me.” Jemma sighed, almost in tears.

“I’n sowry to you, Terrrip. I no be noddy to you no more a day.” Skye shook her head then dropped it to Melinda’s shoulder.

Trip glared at the younger children, not sure he wanted to let go of his anger just yet. The family waited in an uncomfortable silence for a few moments.

Phil put a hand on Trip’s shoulder. “I think they’re waiting for you to say something, kiddo.” He nodded toward the kids.

Trip drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked from truly contrite Jemma, to a very sleepy Skye and then to Fitz who amazingly did not smirk at him but looked like he might just cry. Skye turned from Melinda’s embrace and reached out to him. The boy could not resist. He took his baby sister into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her head on his shoulder. Trip smiled at his parents and kissed Skye’s cheek.

“I’ll tuck them in,” he grinned eliciting smiles from the twins as well. “Let’s go,” he motioned for Jemma and Fitz to move ahead. Both giggled with renewed excitement and hurried toward the bedrooms.
An hour after Phil and Melinda shared a glass of wine and some snuggling as they enjoyed the view of the ocean from the terrace they found the kids, all four of them, sprawled out on pillows and blankets between the twin beds on the floor in the boys’ room. They stood in the doorway and smiled.

“Should we move them?” Phil smiled draping an arm around Melinda’s shoulders

“I think they’ll keep.” Melinda smiled as she kissed his cheek.

Phil’s eyebrows rose. “We get a whole bed to ourselves?”

She smiled as she took his hand and walked across the house to the master suite.

xx

Isabella and Keazjah arrived as promised by seven thirty and had breakfast on the table by eight. The tall slender cook called it the American breakfast and dished out a stack of pancakes with bacon and tropical fruit salad on the side. The syrup gave off the aroma of fresh coconut with just a hint of pineapple and Trip was sure if it were possible he would drink a glassful. It was warm and sweet and when mixed with the butter on top of pancakes made with a secret recipe that Isabella’s grandmother passed to her but included a hint of corn meal and heavy cream became something Trip knew he would never find in any diner on the mainland. It was a contest to see who could consume more between the teen and his younger brother with Skye running a very close third. Even Jemma asked for a second helping, which consisted of just one but Melinda was impressed nonetheless.

Keazjah announced Uncle Stefan, her mother’s older brother, had agreed to provide snorkeling equipment and would arrive some time after lunch. Melinda smirked at her boys unable to tell which was more excited, although Trip made a grand show of being cool about the almost four hour wait.

“I sparkle too, Momma?” Skye wondered as Melinda took her from her chair, trying not to become part of the sticky mess the little girl had created.

“Oh baobei, you always sparkle.” Melinda smiled as she carried her baby to the bath. A simple washing would not suffice cleaning the amount of syrup Skye managed to get even on her bare
“Look Momma,” Skye squeaked, holding up her hands in front of her. “Mine fing-ers stickted agetter like a galue at mine skoo.” She giggled as she pulled her little fingers apart with mild difficulty then stuck them back together.

“Girl, you are so sticky momma could let go and you would stick right where you are.” Trip chuckled. Fitz wrapped his arms around his middle and joined in the laughter almost losing the mouthful he was chewing.

“No led go me, Momma.” Skye’s eyes went wide as she wrapped her sticky arms around her mother’s neck.

Melinda cringed at the feel of her baby’s messy hug and placed a kiss on Skye’s cheek. “Mmmm, you taste so sweet.” She braced a hand on the back of the little girl’s head and spun her in a half circle. “Time for a bath, Wǒ de niánxing yīng’ér.”

“I nown take a bat inna moening, Momma.” Skye smiled as she continued to play with her syrupy fingers, sticking and unsticking them.

“Today you do,” Melinda kissed her again. “Or when you play in the big sand box it will stick all over your everywhere.” She laughed as she finished in Skye-speak.

Fitz nearly giggled off his chair as Jemma pushed herself away from the table and shook her head at her brother’s silliness. She hurried to help her mother with her wriggly little sister.

Melinda smiled back over her shoulder. “You’re next Fitz.” Then she turned back winking down at Jemma who giggled silently beside her.

“Wha…” Fitz’s laughter snapped off as his mouth dropped open. He held up one hand then let it fall against the side of his head as he dropped his elbow on the table. The little boy attempted to shake his head but found his syrup covered hand loosely adhered to his curly hair and cheek. He pulled it free with a crinkly sound and a puppy snarl before attempting to wipe it across his pajama top.

Trip nearly choked on his own breakfast as he elbowed the little boy next to him and chuckled at
his plight. Fitz raised both hands and crooked his ‘monster’ fingers at his older brother, threatening to christen the older boy’s crisp white shirt with syrup sticky hands.

“Enough, guys,” Phil smiled over the rim of his coffee mug. “Isabella, you have once again delighted us with this meal. As you can see my children thoroughly enjoyed it.”

“Some more thoroughly than others,” Trip nodded his head toward his little brother with a soft snigger. Fitz narrowed his eyes.

“I really dislike repeating myself gents,” Phil reminded them.

Isabella took a stack of dishes from the table then tapped Fitz on the nose with one finger. “It is good to see a little man enjoy his breakfast with such gusto.” She smiled. He smiled back. “It is a grand compliment my young friend.”

Fitz smiled broadly. “You are very welcome, Isabella. I agree with my da, you are quite an excellent culinarian. I would recommend you to anyone.” The little boy started to rise but was stopped with Phil’s hand on his shoulder.

“Whoa there, gooey guy,” Phil laughed. “I think we’d all be better off if you stayed right where you are until your mother calls you.” He gently urged the little boy to sit back down.

Fitz dropped back to the seat with a fine pout, propping up his head with both sticky hands. He frowned for a second before popping up straight. “Well, if I have to sit here…” he wriggled his eyebrows at his father then looked to Isabella. “Can I have more pancakes?”

The woman looked into the large bowl she held, shook her head and smiled. “I suppose I can coax one more out of this batter.” She looked to Phil who gave a quick nod.

Trip wiped his mouth, dropped his napkin and stood. “Whoo eee, little guy, I do not know where you put it all.” He smiled and shook his head as he carried his dishes and utensils to the sink, met halfway by Keazjah who smiled up at him shyly.

Before the boy could respond Skye streaked around the corner calling Fitz’s name as her little feet slapped across the cool tile. Jemma was a few feet behind with a large towel outstretched before her.
Skye stopped as she rested her hands on her bother’s hip. “Fitz, momma say it be yooer torn.”

Fitz threw a hand over his eyes. He was used to having his baby sister race through the house in her birthday suit, usually with momma right behind, but not in front of strangers…even if they weren’t really strangers by now.”

“I’m sorry, da.” Jemma frowned attempting to wrap her wriggly sister in the towel. “Momma is trying to get the syrup from her hair and well, this one is so fast.” The little girl shrugged her shoulders and gave up with the towel as Skye danced around Fitz’s chair urging him to follow their mother’s orders. “She just got away from me.” Jemma sighed.

Isabella opened her eyes wide looking down at the naked little girl while she slid the last pancake on to Fitz’s plate. “Well, this little girl is dressed fine for a day at the beach.” She stood back and crossed her arms over her chest still holding the spatula. “You might find the sun is not so kind on your little rump, sweet bebe.” The woman smiled down at the giggling little girl whose wet hair swayed side to side as she swung on the back of her brother’s chair.

Phil took the towel from Jemma, stood and enfolded his baby girl in it as he pulled her into his arms. He kissed her quickly then smiled at Isabella as he pulled her close. “You’ll have to excuse Skye.” He laughed as he tickled the little girl’s belly and gushed at the sound of her giggle. “She’s a bit of a free spirit.”

“No need to apologize, Mr. Phillip.” Isabella smiled as she moved to the sink and deposited the utensil she wielded. “I had one of the very same a number of years ago.” She smiled a sly smile at her daughter who immediately blushed and turned away from Trip. The boy blushed as well and hurried to leave the room and allow the girl to save face.

Both adults smiled at the teens’ reaction. Phil looked down at Fitz who was busy enjoying the last of his breakfast. “I’ll tell your mom you are on your way.” He grinned at the boy who was now even more syrupy then turned to Jemma. “Come on, princess. You can guard the door while I wrestle this little one into a more acceptable line of fashion.” Jemma giggled as she followed her father.

Phil turned back and rolled his eyes as Fitz wiped the last of his breakfast off his face with the sleeve of his PJ top then gulped down the last of his milk and hopped off the chair.

“Coming,” Fitz called after his father. “I’ll take a bath but I’m putting on my swim suit because
getting dressed would just be useless as I plan to spend the whole day in the ocean!”

Jemma jumped back as her brother raced around her heading for the large bathroom and yelling to let their mother know he was on his way.

xx

Uncle Stefan arrived ten minutes after noon and was immediately met by an over anxious Fitz who scolded the man for his tardiness and began a lecture on the value of punctuality until Melinda pulled him aside to point out the value of respect as well as discretion. After fifteen minutes in his room contemplating his mother’s words the little boy was once again full of curiosity and excitement as Stefan explained the use of the equipment and fitted both the boys and Phil with what they needed to begin their adventure.

Skye protested mightily, kicking and wailing when she could not accompany her older siblings, insisting she needed to ‘sparkle’ along with them. The protest turned into an all out tantrum, brought quickly to an end with a very firm glare and the threat of ‘dǎjí nǐ de dīwù’ from momma. Melinda excused herself from the afternoon excursion waving to her family from the terrace with a still sniffing Skye in her arms.

Isabella frowned at her own daughter’s forlorn look for a moment before calling to her brother who stopped and turned toward her. She looked at Keazjah and sighed as she brushed a stray hair from the girl’s face.

“Hold up there, Stefan.” Isabella smiled. “That is quite a crew you have there and I know you will be spending much time with the little ones. Perhaps Keazjah would be of help to you this afternoon. She can certainly show young Antoine a bit more than you will be doing with Jemma and that little scamp.” She nodded toward the children but did not miss the wide smile that crossed her own child’s face.

Trip’s face perked up as well which Phil noticed and gave a quick wink to the boy. Trip ducked his head to hide the blush. Phil elbowed him gently. “She’s a beauty, kiddo.” He whispered.

Keazjah threw her arms around her mother and kissed both her cheeks. “Thank you, mama, thank you, thank you.”

Isabella held her daughter at arms length and smiled broadly. “Go, go before I change my mind.”
The girl kissed her mother one last time and skipped down the stairs then ran across the sand into her uncle’s arms. She paused and waved back as the group started moving again.

“Ou gade ki bèl jenn gason ak ti fi dous mwen, Stefan!” Isabella chuckled as she waved to her brother.

The man flagged her over his shoulder. “Petèt li se ti fi dous ou mwen pral gade, sè.”

Isabella smiled as she turned away.

Melinda watched as her family disappeared around a large wall formed by jagged rock formations, rocking and shushing a still upset Skye. She turned and walked into the kitchen, cooled by the light afternoon breeze. Isabella hummed a soft tune as she cleaned the area after the luncheon meal.

“I thought I detected a bit of Creole in your accent, Isabella.” Melinda spoke softly as she swayed back and forth holding her baby’s head to her shoulder.

“My grandparents, yes, they were raised in Jamaica and came here to care for Stefan and I and our younger sister after our parents were lost. They did not speak English, so we had to learn. I suppose it is a gift to speak so many languages. I hear your little ones speaking yours as well.” She smiled as she continued to work.

Melinda kissed her now calm baby then lifted her little hand and let it drop gently. Skye was asleep.

Isabella smiled knowingly. “Nothing but innocence in slumber, no?”

Melinda squeezed the little girl a little tighter then turned and carried her to her room. When she returned Isabella was wiping the countertop. Everything else was in its place. She nodded at Melinda as the woman moved to the terrace and looked in the direction Phil and the kids had gone.

Isabella stepped behind her and looked that way as well. “They grow so fast. One day you hold them in your arms, the next you hold them in your heart. It seems only yesterday I rocked my baby
Keazjah and now she smiles coyly at your son.”

Melinda snorted a small laugh.

“You should hold every second.” Isabella nodded toward the cove. “Perhaps I stay while the baby sleeps. You go be with them, share their joy.” She smiled although Melinda was already shaking her head.

“I can’t ask you to give up your afternoon, Isabella. I’m sure you have plenty to do. Skye is hell on wheels but she is a sleeper. She’s good for two or three hours.” Melinda smiled at the woman.

Isabella placed a hand on Melinda’s arm and grinned. “It is no problem, Mrs. Melinda. There are a few things to do here and I will bring her to you as soon as she wakes. You go, be with the little scamp and that fine man of yours.” She smiled at the look on Melinda’s face. “I am sure your quiet little girl would love time with her momma as well. Go, please. Your dous ti bebe will be fine, just fine.”

Melinda looked toward the small bedroom where Skye was curled in a tight ball covered with her soft pink, white and blue bunny blanket then back toward the cove where she knew Fitz was taking more chances and swimming much too far out for comfort, where Jemma was timidly strolling along the water’s edge and where Trip…well, where Trip was probably looking for a space away from his brother and sister and Phil was not having any fun trying to hold on to the three of them. She took a deep breath and let it out then placed a hand on top of Isabella’s.

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely,” Isabella smiled again.

“Thank you,” Melinda breathed as she slipped into the master bedroom to quickly change.

She hurried to the cove where she was met with open arms.

When Skye woke two hours later she shuffled out to the living room dragging the fuzzy blanket behind her. She stood for a moment listening to the sound of the quiet, unfamiliar at anytime in the Coulson home, even the Coulson vacation home. The smell of something wonderful drew the little girl to the kitchen. She stood in the breezeway watching Isabella hum and dance around the
kitchen as she lifted a pan of golden buns from the oven and placed them on the stove next to another pan of what looked like snowballs to the little girl.

Isabella turned at the soft sound of the child. “Bebe, I did not see you there.” She wiped her hands on the apron she wore and stepped toward the little one. “Oooo, bon tifi where are your clothes?” She hid the laugh behind her smile as she took in the little girl standing in nothing more than her panties.

Skye looked down at her belly and wriggly toes. “They bees too hot to me.” She explained. “I need mine momma.” She added with just the hint of a sob.

“Oh, bebe, she is waiting for me to bring you to her.” Isabella scooped up the little girl and her blanket then moved toward the room Skye had just exited. “We will get you into your chòtdeben and find her and your papa.”

Skye rubbed a small fist into one eye and looked directly into Isabella’s face. “I non’t has a show ben, Illabilla.”

The woman laughed heartily as she pulled the little yellow daisy printed bathing suit from a small wooden hook in the bedroom. “Then how about we use this?” She smiled as Skye nodded and quickly shed her pink polka dot panties and lifted a little foot.

“I sparkle wid mine Terrip now? I take-ed a nap for this much.” She spread her arms as far as they would reach while Isabella slipped the suit over her hips.

“Let’s go find out if Stefan has flippers for such tiny feet.” Isabella slipped the thin straps over Skye’s shoulders and lifted her as she stood.

The little girl shook her head. “You non’t puts you slippores inna wadder.” Skye scolded Isabella as she picked up the bag Melinda had left and headed for the cove.

xx

The family spent the rest of the day and most of the warm evening in the cove. The twins showed off their new found skill of snorkeling displaying the many treasures found at the bottom of the chest deep water. Fitz sulked at the loss of the small purple octopus he discovered under a pile of
rock on the ocean floor. Jemma beamed over the starfish she brought to show Skye then held her little sister’s hand as they set it free in the warm water.

Melinda held her breath as Stefan helped Skye to try her hand at snorkeling which lasted only until the little girl took in a mouthful of water and choked until everyone was sure she would vomit profusely. She clung to her mother for quite some time afterward, refusing to so much as step into the too salty water. While Phil and Melinda regretted the fact that their youngest was not enjoying the surf with her siblings they were relieved not to hover over her for the hour or so that she was cautious. Of course with Skye that didn’t last very long and Fitz was not content to watch his little sister sit in the sand while he was dashing in and out of the calm waves with endless glee. Skye giggled at his antics and before long was chasing both he and Jemma in a small tide pool that barely covered her ankles.

Trip and Keazjah explored the small cave carved into the rock by a century of high and low tides, finding only hollowed out rock in the drippy cool grotto. The boy was careful to pick a few shells and interesting pebbles from the pocks to return to Jemma who already had quite a collection. He made it a point to snap a few pictures with the special water resistant camera Phil had purchased for the occasion. The teens found a spot to sit and watch the surf crash against the sand bars farther out in the ocean while at the same time able to see their families on the shore behind. The quite time away from Fitz’s teasing, Jemma’s silly smile and Skye’s curiosity was a relief for both.

Uncle Stefan suggested a beach buffet and soon all of the kids were searching for drift wood dry enough to create a fire. Phil and Trip helped dig spot in the sand to drop it and before long Stefan had coaxed a fine blaze. Melinda insisted on helping Isabella carry steaks and a myriad of fruits and vegetables from the house to the beach while Keazjah showed the twins the best spot for catching a few fish they could add to the beach barbeque. Jemma did her best to keep the fish away from her pole but Fitz beamed as he carried one large sea bass back to Stefan and promptly loss the contents of his stomach as the man gutted and cleaned it. Melinda wrapped an arm around him in comfort as Trip took his turn at teasing because let’s face it…payback is hell.

By the time the sun was setting and the fire turning to glistening embers under the twinkling stars, Skye was sound asleep on Melinda shoulder with Jemma and Fitz close behind. The group made their way back to the house under the light of the full moon. Fitz dragged his feet so slowly that Phil scooped him up just to hurry things along. The little boy was softly snoring five steps later. Jemma let out a soft sigh then let out a wide yawn as she too tried to catch up only to be rescued by Trip who smiled as he lifted his little sister to his shoulder. She too was asleep before the family reached their temporary home.

With three children changed and tucked into their beds the adults gathered around the table on the terrace for dessert and coffee, or tea depending on their tastes, and quiet conversation. Trip and Keazjah volunteered hike back to the cove to recover all of the snorkeling equipment and to be sure the fire had gone out completely.
Phil smiled as the young boy’s fingers interlocked with the pretty young girl’s. He nudged Melinda and nodded toward them as they walked slowly down the incline that lead to the sandy inlet. She smiled over her tea cup and cast her husband a tiny glare.

Phil understood. “Hey, kiddo,” he called after Trip who stopped and turned, being sure to use his body to hide the clasped hands behind him. He looked back and waited for his father to continue. “One hour,” Phil tapped his wrist as if a watch might be there.

Trip nodded and held up a thumb, acknowledging his father’s order.

Stefan leaned forward in his seat. “Don’t make me come looking, boy.” He laughed.

Isabella rose and began cleaning the table, stacking plates and utensils. Melinda moved to help.

“No, no Mrs. Melinda. We have already overstepped our roles. Let us finish while the young ones say goodnight. You and your mister enjoy the moonlight and each other’s company.” She turned to her brother. “Come Stefan, we can finish in the kitchen.”

“Please, Isabella, sit.” Phil smiled. “We’ve enjoyed your company and all of the help with the kids today. I’ve never seen them so excited.”

Isabella shook her head. “There is work to finish and I’ve lost my assistant for the night.” She nodded to Stefan with a look Phil recognized.

Stefan finished the last of his coffee and smiled as he stood and collected the rest of the dishes. “Gwo sè a is in charge.” He bowed toward Isabella who rolled her eyes and brushed him off as she turned toward the kitchen.

“Enough of your nonsense, let’s be done before Keajah returns. Perhaps young Antoine can help put the Vespas into your pick-up and you can take us home.” She called over her shoulder as she disappeared into the house.

Stefan bent to whisper to Phil. “See they have our whole lives planned. Do they not?” He cast a wide smile to Melinda and hurried after his sister.
Trip kicked the sand over the charred wood while Keazjah collected the last of the snorkeling equipment. He watched as she moved gracefully across the sand and wondered just how much his grandmother would miss him if he dropped out of school to take up residence on this beautiful island. Suddenly all of the boy’s West Point dreams seemed secondary. There were no girls like Keazjah in Bethesda. She turned and smiled at him as she pushed a long kinky curl behind her ear. The soft gown she’d wrapped around her swimsuit wafted in the light breeze.

Trip drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was thankful for the breeze that blew over his hot skin and considered a plunge into the now cool water. Problem solved as he noticed Skye’s pink bucket on its edge in the sand. He bent and swept it up as he marched into the water to his knees, filled it then carried it back and emptied into the pit that held their bonfire. When he turned back, Keasjah stood in the moonlight watching.

“Just…just making sure…” he nodded toward the now fully extinguished fire and mentally kicked himself for sounding so stupid.

“Yes,” she smiled. “There is little to burn here but the embers might ignite the brush.” She nodded toward the patch of weeds swaying in the breeze a few feet above them. She moved closer to him and lowered herself to the sand the patted the spot next to her. “Sit,” she smiled. “I think we have a few more minutes before Uncle Stefan comes looking.”

Trip immediately looked toward the house then shook his head at the sound of her soft laughter.

“Sit? Please?” She smiled up at him.

The boy dropped down, pulling his knees up in front of him. The sound of the ocean lapping against the shore filled the night except for the sound of the seconds ticking by in Trip’s head. He frantically searched for something to say as he absently sifted both hands in the soft sand on either side of him then froze when Keazjah’s warm hand wrapped around his. He looked at it for a second before looking into her eyes.

“I had a wonderful time today, Trip.” The girl spoke softly, a small smile on her lips. “Your brother and sisters are adorable. You are so lucky to have them.”

Trip laughed. It was wonderful having those little nippers around, most of the time. “You have
brothers and sisters?” He smiled back then frowned just a bit when she shook her head. The boy shrugged and almost gasped as she laid her head on his shoulder. “It wasn’t always like this.” His voice started out high and squeaky. He fought to bring it back to normal, feigning a quick cough. “I mean I didn’t always have them…” He shook his head. “We…we didn’t have th…they, they didn’t…”

Keazjah squeezed his hand. “Families come in all kinds, Trip. It is easy to see your mama and papa put together this perfect blend. You should be quite proud.”

“Yeah,” Trip nodded his head. “We kinda just found each other. I mean really they did find Fitz and Skye, just like a miracle threw us all in the same place at the right time.” He smiled more at the fact that it was true than that he said it to her. He never really thought much about it, but he really loved the Coulsons just as much as he did his gram. They were family, all of them.

“I think you are all very lucky to have each other.” The girl smiled as she snuggled closer to him and once again Trip felt the heat rise within him. He nodded, afraid to do much more.

Keazjah stood and brushed the sand from her shift. She reached down for Trip’s hand. “I think we should go.” She looked to the sky.

Trip pulled himself to his feet and smiled as they came almost nose to nose. He stared at her for a moment then acted without thinking…he kissed her, just kissed her and hoped for the best. A second later he stood back and opened his eyes slowly. She stood before him, smiling. She was still smiling as she picked up Skye’s bucket now filled with snorkeling stuff, took his hand and pulled him toward the house.

He didn’t remember the walk until he was waving good night from the driveway.

Phil slapped a hand on the boy’s back, sending him forward a step. “Nice cool shower’ll help with all that…um…sand, Romeo.” He winked at the boy who could do nothing but smile.

Trip turned and walked toward the door. He stopped and kissed Melinda on the forehead. “Good night, mom,” he sighed and took a few steps before stepped back. He wrapped Melinda in a hug and kissed her cheek. “I love you mom.” He smiled and squeezed her again. “Good night” He smiled broadly as he almost skipped to the bathroom between the two smaller bedrooms.

Phil stood in the doorway and watched until Trip was out of sight then turned to Melinda who was
smiling as well. “Oh, he’s got it bad.” He shook his head as he chuckled under his breath.

They looked at each other before laughing together for a moment before Melinda stood and wrapped her arms around Phil’s waist. She rested her head on his chest and swayed back and forth to an unheard melody.

“You need to talk to him, Phil.” Melinda sighed. “I hate to see him hurt.”

He enfolded her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. “Summer lovin’ had me a blast…” he sang softly.

Melinda slapped him but laughed at his silliness. “I’m serious, Phil.” She tried to sound more serious than she felt. “I don’t want him hurt. You need to talk to him.”

Phil hummed more of his Grease⁴ melody as he rocked her to and fro. “I am pretty sure Trip is familiar with tweets and buzzing.” He smiled.

She swatted him again. “That isn’t what I mean. Just make sure he knows…”

“I know…it’s just a summer fling.” He sighed. “It’s gonna hurt like hell, Mel.” He frowned and she hugged him tighter.

They swayed to Phil’s rendition of ‘Hopelessly Devoted to You” for a few moments before he tilted her head back and kissed her deeply.

“I’ll talk to him.” He sighed as their foreheads met and both exhaled deeply.

xx

The next few days were filled with site seeing, cave exploring with a group tour, a trip to the aquarium and a walk through the jungle that included swimming in a pool deep within a cave. Phil and Melinda could not decide who was more excited about swimming with the dolphins. Skye actually trembled with her emotion as the sleek mammal slid along side her.
“Him bees soft to me, momma.” She giggled in Melinda’s arms as the animal brushed against her leg. The dolphin playfully tossed tiny splashes of water at the little girl who gently splashed back. Melinda eased her baby clad in a tiny wetsuit and bright orange life jacket into the water where the dolphin softly nudged her, almost as if it knew how delicate the little girl could be. Skye wrapped and arm around it and kissed its side. The dolphin, called Emmy, whistled softly as if it understood all the pain this baby had survived.

Fitz stood in almost neck deep water with Phil behind him. He watched as the large bluish grey animal swam back and forth across the pool. “Did you know a bottlenose dolphin can have eighty to one hundred conical shaped teeth?” He looked up and back at his father nervously. “They’re used primarily for chewing and cracking their prey.” He looked back at the animal that was a bit closer than it had been a few seconds ago.

“He’s not going to eat you and you are certainly not prey.” Phil chuckled as he assured the boy. “Just relax. I’m right here with you.”

“What if he doesn’t like me?” Fitz mumbled, backing closer to his father.

“Phil rested his hands on Fitz’s shoulders and gave a gentle squeeze. “What’s not to love, hmmm?”

Fitz attempted a laugh but it turned into a quick intake of air as the dolphin slowly approached, stopping about a foot from the little boy. The trainer tweeted her whistle and told the boy to hold out his hand just above the water. Fitz hesitated but did as he was told. A moment later the animal bumped its nose against that hand. Fitz jumped but giggled just a bit as he looked up at Phil. He looked to the pool adjacent to the one he shared with his father and the large animal. Trip and Jemma were having no difficulty acquainting themselves with the much smaller dolphin they’d been paired with by the trainers.

“Samson is one of our gentlest residents.” The trainer assured a still timid Fitz. “He’s been here the longest. He was pretty sick when the fisherman brought him to us, just a little fella. Probably lost his momma and was almost starved to death.” She went on with the animal’s history as she tweeted the whistle and put him through his paces. “He’s had a tough life. We tried to reintroduce him to the wild three times but he kept coming back.” She smiled as the dolphin cackled quietly, almost as if it were laughing. “We gave up and he’s been here ever since.”

Fitz cocked his head and looked at the mammal. “He knows you love him. He doesn’t want to leave you.” The boy reasoned as he moved toward the animal and reached out his hand this time remaining calm as the dolphin bumped his palm. He smiled as it swam around him, gently
swiping by his side.

The trainer slipped into the water and helped Fitz to slide his hand on the dorsal fin and allow the animal to tug him through the cool water. Phil smiled at the ease of the boy’s transition from fear to trust remembering the first few months Fitz shared with him and Melinda.

The family enjoyed lunch at a local pub listening to all four children regaling their experience with the gentle friendly ocean mammals.

xx

While the days were full of family sightseeing and adventure, evenings were spent at the rental house in time for a late supper. Keazjah accompanied her mother daily and stayed after Isabella left. She was an adapt and careful Vespa driver and lived only minutes away giving her that last few hours of the day to spend with Trip, walking the length of the shore from one end of the property to the other.

They walked on the water’s edge, their footprints washed away by the lapping waves as they strolled along. The full moon that graced the sky on the night they kissed grew smaller with each passing day. Trip watched and tried not to think that it also meant his time here was growing short. He’d walked this same route with Phil after breakfast a few days ago. They talked for a long time about summer crushes and how far it was from this island to their home. Phil told him about his first love and how he thought he’d never find anyone like her.

He hung his head as he told Trip he never did. He never found another like the girl he met at summer camp when he was fifteen. He smiled when he remembered kissing her in a row boat on the lake long after ‘lights out’ and how he thought his heart would burst out of his chest when their two weeks together was done. They both promised to write, but life just got in the way and so did everything that went with it. He never went to summer camp again. Life changed in a heartbeat and a few years later he found himself at the Academy studying to enforce the law and provide protection for those who would always need it. And then he met Melinda May and knew he’d spend the rest of his life with her.

Trip knew Phil meant well, but he could not even think about saying goodbye to Keazjah. Yet, he also knew there was no way this could work. It would be so hard to say good bye and he’d promise to come back and find her, but Da was right...life would get in the way. He took a deep breath, blinked away the embarrassing tears and squeezed her hand. She smiled up at him.

“Three more days,” Trip breathed. She nodded her understanding. “I’ll go back to my life in
Bethesda and you’ll forget all about me.”

Keazjah stopped and shook her head. “I will not forget you Antoine Triplett. You are the sweetest boy I’ve met and you will always be here with me.” She tapped her chest lightly. “We will both have these weeks to remember for all time.” She smiled at him and kissed his cheek lightly. “And I will always miss you, Trip.” She whispered softly.

Trip swallowed the lump in his throat. “I’ve had a great time, Key.” He wrapped his arms around her. “I won’t forget it or you.” He whispered close to her cheek before kissing her just a little deeper than he had before.

They sunk to the sand and shared their tears until Phil and Melinda found them there an hour later.

xx

Fitz slid out of bed, snagged his swimsuit and tiptoed out of the bedroom he shared with his older brother. In the bathroom he pulled off his pajamas and yanked his bright yellow swim trunks into place. He opened the door and listened before he moved across the living room and eased open the sliding door on the terrace. Once outside he smiled at the early morning sun before dropping down on the top step and gently pulling goggles, a snorkel and a matching pair of flippers from the large bucket on the second step.

Stefan was coming today to pick up the equipment he’d leant the family. Tomorrow they would board the plane that would take them home. Mom and Da had plans for the day that did not include snorkeling and Fitz was determined to investigate that cave just at the edge of the cove. Trip had spent so much time with that silly girl he’d forgotten about taking his little brother out to the grotto. So Fitz just decided to take investigating it upon himself.

He’d do a bit of exploring and be back before anyone missed him. Trip would sleep forever and he could sneak in the big window that faced the garden before Mom came to wake them for breakfast. She’d even told them they could sleep in since it was really their last full day to spend in this marvelous place. Da promised they’d come back for another holiday, but Fitz couldn’t wait that long.

The determined little boy put a hand above his eyes and looked in all directions. He wasn’t sure what time Isabella would show up and he did not want to run into her before he could get to his goal. He turned to check the house one more time and almost fell backward down the stairs when he found himself nose to nose with his baby sister standing two steps above him.
Skye stood on there on the stone terrace with that fuzzy blanket in one hand and her thumb in her mouth with the other. He slapped a hand on his chest as she dropped her hand to her side.

“You almost knocked me on my keister.” He whisper shouted at her.

“Why you gotz sparkle slippers, Fitz?” Skye asked in a voice that was always too loud.

“Shhhhhhhhh!” the little boy growled as he grabbed her arm, pulled her away from the door and made a quick check to be sure no one else was there. He put a finger to his lips, slapped a hand over her mouth and shushed her again. “I’ve got to do something before everyone wakes. They’re all too wishy-washy and won’t let me do it alone so I’m off to show them I can.”

Skye pushed his hand away. “I come witchu.” Again too loud and again he covered her mouth with a shush.

“I come witchu,” Skye said again in a soft voice that wasn’t really a whisper.

Fitz rolled his eyes and pulled her down the stairs to the cobble stone walkway below. Skye lost her hold on the pink and blue blanket leaving it draped over two steps. “You’re too little and you don’t like to snorkel.” He shook his head.

The girl’s lip came out in a fine pout. “I non’t be liddle Fizt. I be bigger. I pulay inna big sand box witchu.”

Fitz scrunched up his face and scratched his head. If he told her no or just left her behind she’d be caterwauling like a bean sidhe before he made it a few steps down the path. He couldn’t risk that and beside she’d just play in the sand. Skye didn’t like the salty water unless mom or da was holding her in it. He let out a fluttery breath and ran back up the stairs to retrieve his equipment then grabbed her pink pail and shovel as well. He hurried back down pushed the bucket at her, grabbed her hand and started toward the cove.

Skye pulled him to a stop. “I non’t go a beets immye two llamas. I needa babing suke.” She knit her eye brows and glared at her brother.
Fitz let out a breath and tossed back his head. He wanted to scream but that would be counterproductive so he growled instead. “We can’t risk going back into the house after you were so very loud, Skye. You’ll have to use your panties.”

Skye tilted her head to one side then pulled the elastic waist of her pj’s away from her tummy. She smiled at the little mermaids on her underwear. “I gotz fitches on mine pantiezies. They be okay?” She nodded more to herself than to her brother as he wagged his head, let out a frustrated breath and tugged her forward.

xx

Skye shook her head as Fitz folded her pajamas over a large rock. “We gotz no sum scream, Fitz. Momma non’t like us a bee inna beets with no sum scream.”

Fitz smiled and pulled a tube of sun screen from inside his flipper. He squeezed a blob on to his palm and rubbed his hands together before slathering it on Skye’s tummy, back and arms. He glopped a second dose and did the same then covered the little girl’s legs, neck and ears. After ordering her to closer her eyes he carefully rubbed her forehead, nose and cheeks. He did the same with his own tummy, arms, legs and face than grabbed Skye’s hand and squished a dollop on her palm.

“Now, you do my back.” He smiled at his sister as he turned away from her and knelt in the sand. She rubbed it in wide circles on his back and shoulders leaving globs dripping in long slippery strands then wiped the excess on the hips of her panties.

Standing up and turning around, Fitz scratched his head and grimaced. The stuff didn’t go on as easy as it did for mom. Skye kinda looked like a greasy ghost, but he figured the extra would last longer. He wouldn’t have to worry about slathering her up again. He looked at the directions on the tube and read that it needed to be reapplied in eighty minutes then looked at his little sister again. Yep, she had at least one hundred and sixty minutes worth of the goop on her. He smiled and nodded as she squinted up at him.

Fitz pulled the goggles on, resting them on his forehead. “Okay, now you stay right here and dig in the sand box.” He raised a finger in front of her and used his best Melinda voice. “Absolutely no water without me. Got it?” He frowned at his little sister who nodded her agreement, which for Skye meant pretty much nothing. “You’ve got to promise, Skye.” He insisted. “You can’t go in the water by yourself. You’re just too little.” He thought for a moment then smiled again. “They’ve put extra salt in it today and you don’t want that in your mouth do you?”
“Yuck,” Skye closed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. “It made me throw up inna pink sand. I non’t like it.” She shook her head. “I pour-omiss I non’t go inna wadder for you.” She kissed her finger tips and touched her chest the way momma did when she promised something.

Fitz stared at her for a moment before handing her the bucket he’d been holding. He picked up his flippers and headed for the surf. He turned back once and gave her a thumb’s up before pulling them on his feet and splashing into the water. Skye watched for a moment as her brother swam into the surf then dropped to her knees and pushed her shovel into the soft pink sand.

xx

Melinda woke, opening her eyes slowly. She smiled at how relaxed her husband had been the last two weeks and watched him sleep. They’d taken advantage of the fact the kids were exhausted and sound asleep on the opposite side of the house to engage in a little mommy/daddy activities late into the night. She slipped out of the bed and slid her nightgown over her head before pulling on a light robe and skipping the slippers. The cool tile felt good on her bare feet.

Stepping out of the room, she pulled the door closed hoping to give Phil a few extra minutes of sleep before the crew was up and at ‘em. Letting out a soft yawn and padding over the tile in the foyer, she headed for the kitchen but noticed the door facing the beach opened just a bit letting in the early morning breeze. Melinda smiled at the scent of surf and tropical flora. The deep reds of the rising sun cast a glow of fire on the pink sand below. She would miss this view, this peace and this time to spend with family without worry or stress.

The open door was not alarming. Isabella often left it open a bit when she arrived, just to let in the fresh air and wonderful smells Melinda commented on daily. It was odd that there was so little sound coming from the usually busy kitchen but perhaps Keazjah chose to stay at home today unwilling to say goodbye a second time. Maybe they were just being extra quiet on the families last day of vacation. Melinda smiled at the thoughtfulness of the woman who had come to be a good friend despite the fact that Isabella insisted she was an employee only. She would be missed.

Melinda moved closer to the door, noticing the table was still bare and suddenly a bit concerned that there was no sound at all. Something caught her eye on the stone stairs, it fluttered a bit in the slight breeze and yet was certainly out of place. She pushed the door open enough to slip outside and felt her breath catch. The fuzzy pinkish blanket fluttered up then down before sliding down another step. Skye’s blanket…Melinda rushed to the stairs and snatched it up, looking in all directions.

Skye…the door was open just enough…but how did she reach the clasp…how did she push it open? Melinda ran the memory of putting her baby to sleep last night. Maybe she had left the blanket on the terrace when she carried her to her bed…maybe Skye never had it…maybe. She
was across the living area with her hand on the girls’ bedroom door in a breath and paused to collect herself, to tell herself Skye was sound asleep sprawled across the small bed. Melinda smiled a false smile and pushed open the door.

Skye’s bed was empty.

She wanted to scream for Phil to scream Skye’s name to run, to search every inch of the house and the property, to push the terrifying thoughts of her baby walking into the ocean… She took a deep breath and quietly stepped back into the hall, pulling the door closed softly.

The sound of the toilet flushing caused her to release the breath she was holding and almost laugh. Her little one had simply made her way to the bathroom as she did so many times when she woke before everyone else at home…before she shuffled down the hall and crawled over the edge of their bed to nestle between Phil and her then drift back to sleep for at least another hour. She stood waiting for the door to open…Skye never closed the door…to scoop her up and carry her back to snuggle with her daddy.

The knob jiggled and Melinda forced herself not to pull it open, afraid of frightening the child. Trip stumbled out of the bathroom in his boxers, one eye still closed and in the middle of a long, mewly yawn. He stopped short of bumping into Melinda.

“Hey, mom…” he smacked a little as he scratched the back of his head. “Little guy’s up early, huh?” The teen smiled sleepily as she inched around his mother and schlepped back to his room.

Melinda was in the room a step ahead of him, staring breathlessly at a second empty bed. She turned and grabbed Trip by both arms, shook the sleep off of him and forgot about being quiet or calm.

“Where is he? Where’s Fitz?” She demanded of the boy.

Trip opened both eyes and blinked a few times before shrugging. “kitchen?”

Melinda dropped her arms and hurried around her son calling her husband’s name repeatedly as she went.

Trip squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them. He turned, looked at his brother’s empty bed and
Phil shook his head. “Damn it, little man, what are you up to now?”

xx

Phil was up and halfway across the room, stubbing his toe twice before realizing he’d need to throw on a bit of clothing before rushing to answer Melinda’s call. He had one leg in a pair of loose shorts when she threw open the door.

“They’re gone!” She let out in a frantic breath, almost falling into him.

“Damn,” his only reply. There was no need to ask who or how. If there was some…no make that any kind of catastrophe, Skye and/or Fitz in any combination were certainly responsible.

He stood, pulled on the shorts and grabbed her hand pulling her close. “Hey, hey calm down,” he smiled. “They’re probably out in the garden or examining all those shells Jemma’s been setting out on the patio. You know she won’t let them near them.”

Melinda swallowed and forced a smile. Maybe he was right, but she knew her little connivers and they did nothing small. There were shells everywhere and both had long since lost interest in Jemma’s collection.

Phil held her hand and led her out of the room to the terrace. Trip stood in the center of the living room, waiting for whatever he’d need to do. Phil smiled at him as they passed so he dropped to the large couch. He’d wait. The little goof ball was probably out there playing some dopey game or trying out some wacky thing-a-ma-jig he put together in the bathroom with a rubber band and a bar of soap. Trip threw his arm over his eyes and let out a frustrated breath.

Melinda stood at the top of the stairs as Phil bounced down three. He noticed immediately that Skye’s bucket was gone as well as the lime green flippers Fitz had adopted as his own. He glanced into the large black bucket that held the snorkeling equipment. Sure enough, the smallest pair of goggles and the longest snorkel were also missing. It didn’t take much to figure out where his young son had gone. Did he take his little sister along or had she just ambled out on the terrace and followed after him? He drew a breath and ran his hand through his still uncombed hair. He turned and reached out a hand to Melinda, calling to Trip at the same time.

“I know where they are.” He spoke calmly to his wife then looked up at the teen standing in the doorway. “Stay here with Jemma. Let Isabella know what’s happened.” He nodded to the boy
who quickly nodded back.

Something in his father’s look told him this was something more than one of Fitz’s harebrained ideas.

Melinda took her husband’s hand and followed him down the stone steps that led to the gravelly path. Within a few feet she was sure where they were heading.

“Oh my gawd, Phil….no!” She pulled her hand from his and broke into a run. He was at her side in seconds.

xx

The couple hit the beach in the cove at the same time, rounding the large rock formations that kept it secluded and private. Melinda put a hand above her eyes and scanned the sand looking for her children repeating every prayer she had ever ignored from every religion she could remember including some she just made up. The sun glinted off the water as it rose higher in the sky making visibility just a little difficult. A flip of sand into the air caught her eye once, twice, three times. She ran toward it and fell to her knees finding Skye on her own knees at the bottom of a rather large hole. She threw a hand over her mouth to stifle the sob and sat back on her heels. The little girl looked up and smiled innocently.

“Hi momma,” Skye grinned as if it was just normal for Melinda to be sitting there. “I finded him inna little wadder.” She pointed to a small sand crab in the bottom of the pail she had next to her. “He bites wit he’s fing-ers.” She giggled as she waved the plastic shovel in front of the crustacean. It snapped one tiny claw at it. “He bited mine fing-er.” She held up one pointer finger and pointed at a small red spot. “He letted go cuz I shake-ted him offa me.” She stood and shook the same finger at the animal. “I telled him non’t do that no mower.”

Melinda sobbed a tiny sobbed and brushed the tears from her cheeks as she reached down and pulled the little girl into her arms.

“I keep him momma. I take him onna pulane a me to home.” She squirmed to look at her pet as Melinda pressed a kiss to her cheek and squeezed her to her breast. “Momma, you skawishing me too much.” Skye let out an exaggerated breath.

Melinda drew a shaky breath. “Baobei where are your clothes?” She twittered at her now naked
baby.

Skye shrugged. “Fitz sayed I no need a babing suke. He sayed just be in mine pantiezes but they getted sand all in to be itsy. I non’t like it.” She shook her head.

Melinda sighed and kissed her again as tears rolled freely over her cheeks.

Phil watched his wife and daughter, thanking the Almighty for keeping their baby safe. He ran to the far end of the small beach where the large rocks formed an impregnable wall. There a small outcropping made for a tide pool where small sea creatures would congregate. Fitz was enthralled every morning to find them there. Phil was sure he’d find the little boy seated in the warm pool gently fingering the creatures. His heart fell when the pool was empty. He ran back toward his wife slowing his steps as he recognized the look on her face.

Melinda stood with Skye pressed to her shoulder staring out at the surf. He followed her line of sight to the bright yellow form that floated lifelessly twenty yards from shore. The man was knee deep in the water before he took a breath and dove into the surf. Phil was never a strong swimmer but the water moved pasted him as if he were cutting through melted butter. It took only seconds to reach the small body in water that Phil could just keep his head above standing on tip toe. He grabbed the boy around his middle and flipped up upright.

Fitz let out a cough as the start forced him to swallow a mouthful of salty water. “Hey!” he squeaked kicking to escape whoever or whatever had snatched him.

Phil stroked backward, pulling Fitz to his chest as he kicked his feet until they reached water where he could stand. He waded the rest of the way with a still protesting Fitz under one arm. When the water was ankle deep he dropped to one knee and stood the boy in front of him and whipped off the goggles throwing to the sand a few feet away.

Grabbing the boy by both shoulders, Phil gave him a firm shake. “Damn it, Fitz, what were you thinking?” He barked. “Do you know…what if…” The man could not string a sentence together. He was a mess of anger, relief, shock, and a litany of emotions that were probably not even named. Without a second thought he flipped the little boy over the knee still upright and landed a half dozen firm swats on his soggy backside then pulled him back to stand in front of him. “Don’t you ever, ever pull a stupid stunt like that again. Do you understand me? Never!”

Fitz stared at his father, mouth open unable to even gasp at the smacking he’d been given. He’d never seen a look like the one Phil wore. Fitz had seen anger, hate, resentment, fear and even morbid curiosity but never whatever his father was looking through right now. Before he could try
to put a name to it, Phil pulled him into a bear hug and for the first time ever he felt his father sob…a deep strange noise. Fitz never knew a man to cry. It was the worst sound he ever heard.

Phil stood with his small son still embraced against him. He and Melinda met within a few feet and wrapped their arms around both children. She kissed both little heads over and over, then kissed her husband’s cheek. They stood until they stopped shaking and carried their trouble makers back to the house.

xx

Fitz sat on his bed clad in nothing but his skivvies, knees drawn up to his chest. His arms were wrapped around his legs, his head resting on those bony knees. He could hear the adult voices off in the kitchen but really couldn’t make out what they were saying. He rocked side to side still nursing the smart on his backside, still finding it hard to believe his father…his Da had walloped his bottom like that. Da never…

His thought stopped as the voices grew silent and someone was coming. He knew that walk. He knew the sound and the cadence. Mom was on her way.

He pulled his knees closer and swallowed hard. A door opened but it wasn’t his. Mom had gone into the girls’ room where Skye had been banished to wait out her punishment for their early morning escapade. He’d begged his parents to pardon her. After all she was just a baby and it was his idea and well, they just told him to go to his room while they talked. His little sister put up a fuss but stayed put. He was pretty sure she witnessed his indignity on the beach and wasn’t anxious to share his fate.

But now Mom was in her room. Fitz pushed his head down between his knees and squeezed his legs against his ears. The walls in the vacation house were thin but the bathroom was between the rooms but Skye could shatter glass with her wailing. He didn’t want to hear it and know it was his fault his baby sister was compromised. He stayed that way until he felt a slight depression on his mattress.

Melinda sat on the edge of Fitz’s bed staring at the wall, hands folded on her lap. He slowly slid his head from between his knees and peeked at her. She sat quietly, just breathing and staring and not looking like she was going to say anything. The boy pushed back and sat up with his arms still around his legs. His mother remained in place, still staring, still perfectly still. Fitz blinked a few times expecting her to turn and glare at him, but nothing. He sniffled a little, cleared his throat then dropped his hands to the mattress. Still no reaction.
Without realizing it, Fitz wriggled to the edge of the bed and mirrored his mother’s position. He cast a sideways glance at her then quickly looked back at his own hands folded on his lap. He absently swung his legs that did not quite reach the floor.

“Are you going to say something?” The little boy spoke just above a whisper.

Melinda spread her fingers and rested her hands on her knees before taking a small breath. “I don’t really know what to say, Fitz.”

“You’re angry.” He sighed.

“Oh, bao bao I am so much more than angry.” She snorted, still refusing to look at him.

Fitz nodded and chewed his bottom lip. “It’s kinda like the roof, huh?” He mumbled, recalling the time he’d taken his baby sister to look at the stars.

“Worse,” she shook her head. “Fitz…” Melinda breathed as she dropped her head then raised it and finally looked at him. This time he did not look back. “I am angry and terrified and disappointed and so many things I can’t even tell you. Why…no, I know why…Fitz you are a very smart little boy and yet you put your sister and your self in so much danger.”

“She promised she wouldn’t go in the water and I checked on her. I really did.” He defended.

Melinda shook her head.

Fitz looked at her for a second then looked at the floor. “She only put her feet in to get water in her bucket.” He shrugged.

“And what if she fell or wandered off or a million other things?” Melinda asked making the boy feel guiltier.

“She didn’t.” He mumbled again.
“Fitz that is not the point. It was a dangerous, stupid thing to do and you know that.” Melinda barked then pulled her calm back into place. “And what about you? Do you know how much danger you put your self in?”

The little boy shrugged his shoulders.

“Did you…is Skye okay?” He asked quietly, remorse in every word.

“Don’t worry about Skye.” She sighed.

“I know how much you love her, momma. I know you would be so devastated if you lost her. I am so sorry I put her in danger. I shouldn’t have done that.” Fitz sobbed.

Melinda opened her arms and pulled him close, kissing the top of his head. “Oh, Fitz after all this time don’t you know I love you just as much, just the same and my heart would be torn apart if I lost you…any of you.” Tears ran over her cheeks as her little boy burrowed into her embrace.

“She’s just a wee baby, momma. I know she needs you and you need her.” Fitz sobbed.

She pushed him out enough to look into his eyes. “Fitz,” she took a deep breath. “You know how much you think I love Skye?”

The little boy nodded.

Melinda laid her hand on her son’s chest. “You take that love and you multiply it by the largest number you know and you will have how much I love you and Jemma and Trip and Skye and then add even more.”

“Infinity,” Fitz sniffled.

“Infinity,” she repeated pulling him back into her hug.

“Are you going to spank me?” The boy’s voice was muffled and small from inside the hug.
Melinda kissed the top of his head. “Oh, my naughty little bao bao you so much deserve it but I think your Da already took care of that.”

For a moment they were silent, simply comforting each other.

“He’s probably going to be angry at me forever. Maybe he won’t even like me anymore.” Fitz sniffled as she looked up at his mother.

“Infinity,” Melinda repeated as she brushed the tears from his cheeks. “Maybe he thinks you’re mad at him.”

Fitz ran his arm across his nose and sniffled again. “Infinity,” he sighed.

xx

Phil sat on the terrace nursing his third cup of coffee. He turned at the soft sound of Melinda standing in the doorway. A shirtless Fitz stood in front of her with his hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts and staring at his wriggling toes. She urged him forward gently then stepped away from the door to give father and son some time alone.

Fitz took a few steps and stood next to his father’s arm. Phil took a sip of his drink then set the mug on the table. He looked at the top of the boy’s head and tapped the side of his mug with one finger.

“Your mom toast your tail?” He grinned.

Fitz shook his head and interlaced his fingers behind him. “I didn’t mean to frighten you, Da. I didn’t mean to disappoint you or hurt you or make you hate me.”

“Hate you?” Phil was shocked. He turned and grabbed Fitz’s arms tugging him closer. “Why would you think I…” He stopped, picturing himself on the beach turning his little boy over his knee in anger. He dropped his hands from the boy’s arms and sat back. “Fitz…I…”
“It’s okay.” Fitz mumbled. “It’s not like you’re really my dad.”

“Fitz!” Phil barked as he reached out and pulled Fitz even closer. He put a finger under the boy’s chin and lifted his head to look into his eyes. “I am really your dad no matter what you do or how angry I get. I’m sorry I whacked you back there….I just…I shouldn’t have let myself act when I was so…angry. I mean I wasn’t angry.” He pulled the little boy into a hug. “Damn, I don’t know what I was but whatever it was I love you…” Phil stopped unable to put that feeling into words.

He looked into the little boy’s crystal blue eyes. “I am so sorry, Fitz.”

Fitz smiled. “I don’t think it works that way. You’re not supposed to be sorry for teaching me a lesson.” He patted his hand on Phil’s shoulder. “Mom always hugs me and tells me she loves me even when I do stupid things but she tells me she’s only sorry it came to that point.”

“Guess I really screwed up, huh?” Phil frowned.

Fitz shook his head. “Don’t tell mom, but it’s okay you smacked me cuz mom is much worse.” He whispered close to his father’s ear.

Phil chuckled and pulled Fitz close to his lap. “Maybe I should practice a little more, hmmm?”

Fitz’s eyes went wide as he covered his backside and shook his head. “No, you did fine, just different than mom. I got the message, really.” He nodded and tried to step back.

Phil laughed at the boy’s reaction and pulled him into a tight hug. “Oh, little man, do you know just how much I love you?”

“Infinity?” Fitz asked as he wrapped his arms around his father.

“Sounds right.” Phil smiled. He hugged the little boy for a few more moments, winking at Melinda as she stood just inside the door sipping her tea.

“Did I ruin everything?” Fitz asked, feeling that he had done just that.
Phil shook his head. “Scared the hell out of me, little man, no you haven’t ruined anything. But, if you ever…”

“I know,” Fitz sighed, “go off by myself without telling you or mom again…”

Phil stopped him. “There’s that and I’m sure your mom let take care of it much better than I can, but if you ever and I mean ever say or even think that I’m not your real father or you’re not my real son again, I promise you won’t soon forget the walloping you’ll get.”

“I love you, Dad.” Fitz smiled as he wrapped his arms around Phil again.

“Love you, little man,” Phil sighed with relief again, as he smothered the little boy in his embrace.

Xx

Saying goodbye is never easy and many tears were shed on both sides, but the Coulson family boarded their flight back to DC the next morning, giving them plenty of time to be home and rested before facing the real world again the next day.

Addresses were exchanged and promises were made. Photographs of family and new friends were taken and retaken. Small tokens were exchanged and memories were made.

The Coulsons would return to their vacation spot several times through the years, once or twice crossing paths with Isabella and her family again, but as with so many things, never again as full of wonder as that first time.

Trip never forgot the bittersweet experience of his first love and managed to keep in touch with Keazjah until they went off to college.

Fitz never again felt Phil was not his real father but on a number of occasions made less than brilliant choices which never worked out well for him in the end.
Skye had absolutely no recollection of her trip to the beach or the little crab that stayed behind in the pink sand.
W - Wild About Wednesday

Chapter Summary

The family is trying to prepare for a special event but ridiculous accidents, absent husband and a very uncooperative Skye are making it increasingly difficult. Melinda is at her wits end until Phil helps smooth things over and everyone is thrilled with Trip’s surprise.

Chapter Notes

There is a well marked section containing more mature subject matter. If this offends you please skip that section and enjoy the rest of the story.

W – Wild About Wednesday

“Momma! I can’t find my sneakers!” The desperate cry came from somewhere in the house. Melinda could not judge where since it was muffled a bit by whatever or wherever the seeker had her head stuffed.

“You are not wearing sneakers.” She called back, knowing the child would deny ever hearing the order even though it had been repeated several times in the last few days. The silence that followed was evidence of just that. Melinda smiled as she put the finishing touches on her make up and pictured her youngest plopped on her bottom grumbling over the fact that she would have to wear real shoes in addition to the dress she was being forced into.

Jemma slipped into the room behind her mother and smiled broadly. “You look radiant, Momma.” She stooped to kiss her mother’s cheek. “You’ll teach me?”

Melinda set down the mascara and smiled back at the young teen. “A few more years,” she grinned at the fall of her daughter’s smile. Turning she took the girl’s hands in her own and pulled her on to her lap. “I just need you to be my little girl for just a bit longer.” She placed a quick kiss on Jemma’s cheek.
The girl’s smile was back. “Oh, Momma I barely fit on your lap anymore.” She wrapped her arms around Melinda’s neck and offered a quick hug. “But I do like it,” she whispered into her mother’s ear before standing and placing her hands on Melinda’s shoulders. She let out a soft breath.

“You’ve so much to do and Da isn’t home yet. Fitz is all upset not able to tie a proper Full Windsor. And you need to get yourself ready as well. Can I help?”

“Momma,” a high pitched whine interrupted the mother-daughter conversation. “I can’t wear those dumb sandals they hurt my feet and all the little rocks and crappy stuff gets under there. You want me ta get all blisteried.”

Melinda smiled at Jemma and turned to Skye. She let out a frustrated breath. “They are brand new sandals that don’t hurt your feet and you are going to wear them for the few hours you’ll be sitting tonight.”

Skye threw back her head and groaned as she slid down the doorframe to the floor dropping her head in her hands. Her short braids swayed side to side as she shook her head, despite the fact that one had lost its pony band and was dangerously close to untwisting. “I can’t wear that dress,” she held out one hand and sucked back a teary sob. “It itches my armpits.”

Melinda shook her head at the drama her youngest had down to perfection. She also grimaced at the condition of her little girl. Clad in an oversized Orioles T-shirt and dark shorts covered in grass stains and what looked like some kind of green paint, the child drew her blackened knees to her chest. They were only out cruddied by the color of her bare feet. Considering the dark streaks on both of Skye’s cheeks, Melinda was sure her hands were just as dirty since she’d been swiping at tears with both.

The frustrated mother shook her head again. “Skye where have you been and how in the world did you get so dirty?”

Skye threw her arms out to the side and looked down at her self as she poked her legs out straight before her. “Mrs. Norton’s dog got stuck under the deck again.”

“And you were sure to volunteer to rescue him,” Jemma tsked.

“I couldn’t just leave him there Jemma,” Skye was almost unbelieving as she looked up at her sister and bounced her hands where they still hung. “Did you wan’em to starve ta death or die of
thirst? And what about poor old Mrs. Norton? She can’t go scratchin’ around under there.”

Jemma shook her head. “I didn’t say you shouldn’t, Skye only that you are always the first to volunteer.”

Skye looked down at the two green hand shaped smudge prints on her shirt and giggled. She pulled the hem of the shirt away from her skinny frame. “I kinda touched Mr. Skutnik’s fence. I didna know he jus painted it. Boy was he mad. I had a run all the way through the alley and under the fence ta get ta the tree house.” She looked up at her mother’s raised eyebrow and held up a hand. “I said I’s sorry, but he didna have no wet paint signs and how’s I s’pose to know?”

“Any,” Jemma sighed. “He did not have any signs.” She just shook her head at the rest of the fractured grammar her sister used when she rushed through her wordy explanations.

Skye scrunched up one side of her face. “Yeah, he did not.” She shrugged her shoulders once and twisted both arms to look at her elbows, then lifted one thigh and examined the long muddy green streak. She pointed to it with one finger and laughed. “This, this was so fun! The grass on that big lot ‘hind Colander’s house was all wet and soggy. I guess somebody watered it or somethin’. It was like sleddin’ on grass. We must a went down a hundred times and this one right here,” she pointed again to her thigh, pulling back her shorts with the opposite hand. “This one goes right up my bahoochie cuz my pants went right into a nasty wedgie.” She shook as she grimaced.

“Skye,” Melinda let out in a frustrated breath. “That is newly planted…” she stopped and shook her head, looking at her wide eyed baby. A thought suddenly occurred to the woman as she pointed to the little girl’s almost black feet. “Have you been running all over the neighborhood in your bare feet?”

Skye looked at her feet and wriggled her toes. Turning down both sides of her mouth she shrugged again. “Well, I can’t find my sneakers…”

“That is so very dangerous, Skye.” Jemma scolded as Melinda closed her eyes and took another breath. “What if you’d cut yourself or stepped on some filthy object? There are so many diseases out there.”

“Jemma,” Skye rolled her eyes. “There’s dirt and rocks and grass and when the sidewalk ‘s too hot I walk on the side. The only cut I got is right here and it’s almost gone.” The little girl pulled her knee to her chin with one arm and picked at a small scab with the opposite hand.”
“Skye, do not touch that abrasion with those most dirty hands,” Jemma warned.

“Ah, don’t be such a…” Skye retorted.

“Enough!” Melinda ordered as she stood and held out a hand. “You,” she pointed at Skye, narrowing her eyebrows. “Get your little bahoochie in the tub and hopefully we can scrub the day off of you.”

Skye pushed her self up along the same frame she slid down. “A bath? Now? Momma it’s only… we have a million hours before we hafta be there!”

“It’s closer to five before we have to leave and you’re going to need at least two to soak that crud loose.” Melinda warned. She turned to Jemma. “You want to help? Get your sister in the tub and don’t let her out until she’s back to human color.”

Skye had already slid around the doorway, hoping to make a quick exit. She could be to the tree house in about ten seconds.

“Stop right there,” Melinda’s command froze the little girl in place. She moved into the hallway and stood in front of her youngest and most difficult child, folded her arms over her chest and tapped one foot on the soft carpet. Skye peeked up over her brows and took a quick breath.

Melinda took the little girl’s chin in one hand and gently raised her head to meet her eyes. “You have two choices Skye.” She spoke with just a little smile on her lips.

“Is one not wearing a dumb dress that strangles my arms?” Skye smiled as she slipped both hands behind her.

Melinda shook her head and smiled again at the little girl’s pout. “That is nonnegotiable, got it?” The little girl looked to the floor giving a quick nod. “Now, you can take a bath with or without my handprint on your stubborn little pigu.” She released the little girl’s chin and stood back, once again crossing her arms over her chest. “What’s it gonna be, because I can go either way.”

Skye’s eyes darted around the hallway stopping every few seconds but not making contact with her mother. She squinted one eye closed and chewed her lip but never took her hands from the target it protected.
“Skye?” Melinda warned.

“I’m thinking.” The little girl responded, drawing out the word.

Melinda shook her head, snatched the little girl’s elbow and turned her sideways landing one firm swat on her bottom. “Decision made,” she announced and pointed toward the bathroom door.

“OW!” Skye squawked as she rubbed a hand on the spot. “That hurt and I wasn’t ready even.” She grumbled.

“Are we done?” Melinda asked, glaring down at her daughter.

Again the little girl hesitated.

Melinda counted to ten in her mind. “You have exactly two seconds, Skye and then I will help you into the bath after I put about six more spanks on that not even ready bottom.” She was certainly exaggerating, but Skye didn’t need to know that. “One…”

She didn’t get to two. A thump from the boys’ room followed by a soft moan pulled her attention to another dilemma.

Jemma stepped from her parents’ room, took her little sister by the shoulders and half steered/half pushed her into the bathroom. “Don’t be a ninny, Skye,” she warned. “Momma is past upset and you really do not want to go there.” She got Skye into the room and quickly closed the door.

xx

Melinda pushed open the door to the boys’ room. “What the hell is go…” was out and stopped flat before she poked her head around it.

Fitz was sprawled on the floor one hand bracing himself up, the other attempting to stop the gush of blood from his nose. It already covered his white dress shirt and was dripping on to the lap of
his khaki shorts. Trip, in a sleeveless T-shirt and dress pants knelt at his side uselessly trying to jam what looked like another T-shirt under the flow while simultaneously and just as uselessly attempting to pry the younger boy’s hand aside.

The young man cast a quick look over his shoulder and thrust out a palm toward his mother. “It’s cool, Mom, cool. Just a little bump. We’re good. I got this.” He shot back nervously, hopping his little brother’s nose was not broken.

Melinda pulled her robe tighter and tested the sash before dropping to her knees beside the moaning boy. “Give me that,” she barked at Trip as she yanked the shirt from his hand and looked at it. “Really, Trip? I just bought these yesterday.” She huffed as she recognized the brand new Hanes.

The young man shrugged. “It was right there and…” he ended in a mumble realizing it was a rhetorical question.

She tugged her younger son forward. “Let me see, Fitz,” she sighed as he tried pushing her away. “Fitz,” she warned and he looked up at her with watery eyes. Melinda shook her head as the boy lowered his hand and folded his legs in front of him. She drew a quick breath through her teeth at the rapidly deepening bruise under his left eye. Shooting a quick glare at Trip she held the T-shirt under Fitz’s nose and gently pressed her fingers along it.

“Owwww,” Fitz moaned as he closed his eyes allowing the tears to run over his cheeks. He lifted both hands and shook them hard.

Melinda shook her head and pressed the cloth to her son’s face. “Sit up and lean forward,” she ordered pushing him gently into position. She rolled her eyes at the condition of his clothing, “so much for the new clothes.”

Fitz attempted to pick up his head but found himself held in place by his mother’s firm hand on the back of his neck. It was probably better to just stay where he was anyway. She didn’t look very happy.

Looking at the overturned desk chair and scattered items across the room she pursed her lips and glared at her older son. “What went on in here?” She demanded in a low soft voice that sent chills down his spine despite the fact he stood a least a foot taller than the petite woman.

Trip glanced around the room. “We were…I…it,” he found himself stammering as he tried to put some believable as well as reasonable explanation together in his mind before attempting to spill it
They weren’t really doing anything. Trip had been taking his time making sure everything was spit polished and ready for the evening’s event. His uniform jacket hung on the back of the closet door, shirt and tie were draped over his desk chair. The young man knew it was early but he needed to be there before the rest and he had a little last minute practicing to do…just to be sure. He stood in front of the mirror and rubbed a hand over his freshly shaven cheek.

Fitz practically fell into the room wrapped in nothing more than the towel secured at his waist. Beads of water clung to his ever curly hair. Trip stepped back to avoid the collision.

“Where ya goin’ in such a hurry, little man?” He smiled at his younger brother. “Hot date?”

Fitz grabbed the towel before it slid to the floor. “Ha ha,” he frowned at Trip. “I was doin’ my best to be in and out of the loo before the girls got in there with all their primping and pampering.” He pranced across the room swaying his hips and pumping a palm up and down. Trip let out a snort as the boy stopped and turned to face him. “Besides, I’m not the one all fresh and smellin’ like that new cologne you had hidden in the back of the desk drawer there.” He laughed as he wagged a finger in the direction.

Trip looked at his brother then to the drawer and then back. He pulled on his most stern face and pointed a finger of his own, stepping closer to Fitz with each word. “You been goin’ through my stuff, little man? You been in my business? Lookin’ for trouble?” He stopped when Fitz had backed to the wall and his finger was in the center of the younger boy’s chest.

Fitz looked up at his brother wide eyed and opened his mouth but nothing came out.

“Got nothin’ to say now, do ya smart ass?” Trip narrowed his eyes glaring at his brother in mock anger then yanked Fitz’s towel away and stepped back.

The younger boy dropped his hands to cover himself. “Hey! Give it back!” He tried to swipe at the towel with one hand while keeping his dignity with the other.

“Oh ho ho, now you’ve gone and crossed the line Lee O Pold…” Trip teased as he spun the damp towel into a long rope.

“I didn’t,” Fitz squeaked frantically looking for an escape but as it was Trip stood in front of the door and well, he was in no position to go skelping down the hallway. “I saw you put it there just
“Ahh, I see,” Trip paced a little side to side still twisting the towel in his hands. “Spying on me, was it then?” He stopped and raised an eyebrow then snapped the towel out narrowly missing his brother. He suppressed a snort at Fitz’s reaction.

“Me…me, a spy?” the younger boy’s voice was high with anticipation as he inched along the wall heading for the space between their two desks.

Trip snapped the towel again, cutting off Fitz’s escape.

“Come on, Trip,” the young teen pleaded. “This isn’t funny.”

“Nope, nope it is certainly not funny, not at all,” Trip chuckled as he spun the towel again. “You know I though I caught a little whiff of Armani at dinner last night.” He took a few steps, shaking his head. “Thought maybe Da upgraded.” He stopped and spun on his younger brother, pointing one finger without losing the towel weapon. “It was you!” He smiled broadly. “You tried a little yourself didn’t you? You little bugger.”

Fitz shook his head rapidly. “It was an…an accident.”

Trip rolled his eyes and let out a huff as his shoulders dropped slightly. “Man, you think I just fell off the turnip truck?” He used one of his grandmother’s favorite sayings. “How do you accidentally use my…MY brand new cologne that I stuffed all the way back in my own private personal desk drawer.”

“Ya well why’d ya have to go and hide it anyway? It’s not like we don’t know you use it.” Fitz shot back with a bit of false bravado.

Trip snapped the towel again causing the younger boy to jump back. “Hmmm, going through my things, spying and stealing…” He smiled an evil smile and waggled his eyebrows at Fitz. “Know what that gets ya?”

Before the boy could answer Trip snapped the towel to his left. Fitz ducked right. He snapped it right and the boy went left but the third snap caught him square on one unprotected cheek. Fitz yowled as he shot a hand to his indignity, tripped over a cast aside sneaker and grabbed the back of
Trip’s desk chair. He lost his balance slipping off the shirt and tie hanging there and headed face first for the floor, stopped only by his brother’s strong hand.

Trip pulled him back to his feet, stood back and laughed again. The towel lay puddled on the floor. Fitz massaged the injury forgetting all about his nakedness.

“That hurt,” he growled through his teeth.

Trip laughed again and threw a pair of shorts at the boys hitting him square in the face. “Get dressed, little man.”

Fitz caught the garment and quickly stuffed his legs into it before rubbing his backside again. “It’s probably going to leave a mark.” He complained.

Trip chuckled as he pulled a clean white t-shirt over his head. The original now just a little sweaty. “Nobody’ll see it.”

Huffing his disgust with his brother’s teasing, Fitz dressed in silence doing his best to ignore the fact they were even in the same room. He couldn’t hold a grudge long and found himself standing in front of his brother’s dress jacket examining the ribbons pined to the left chest pocket.

“You got all of these in just four years?” Fitz asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

Trip tied his shoe and dropped his foot to the floor. He gave a shrug. “Just doin’ my best, little man.” It was something Gramps used to say to him when he was just a little guy himself.

“Mom and Da are awfully proud of you,” the younger boy remarked, more of an escaped thought.

Ruffling his younger brother’s soft curls, Trip grinned. “Proud of you too, little man. Hey, you managed to make it to commencement a whole year before me.” He pointed a finger at Fitz as he slid on his other shoe and tied it.

Fitz turned and hung his head. “But not like you…you’re normal,” he mumbled. “You did it the way you’re supposed to, not all mixed up and rush, rush like me.” Fitz shoved his hands in his
pockets and wriggled his bare toes into the carpet pile.

Trip was on his feet and had the boy in a pseudo head lock before Fitz knew what was happening. He rubbed his knuckles softly on his brother’s head. “You are sure a dumb ass for being a genius.” He laughed as he released the boy and set a hand on his shoulder. “No kidding, Fitz, you are a genius. Own that, little man, it’s who you are. You are goin’ places. You can do anything, man.” He wrapped an arm around the boy and dropped down on the bed and pointed to the spot next to him. Fitz complied with a huff.

“Hey, who fixed the dryer last week when Jemma was all in a snit about not having that whatever the hell such and such she needed for whatever?”

Fitz shrugged his shoulders.

“And who fandangled that thing a ma bob Da needed when he couldn’t get the part to fix Lola’s tranny?” Trip poked a finger into Fitz’s skinny chest. “And, and how about when Skye was all heartbroken that the music box Sr. Clair gave her wasn’t working anymore? Man, it was you brought the smile back to that baby girl.” He smiled at Fitz who still hung his head.

“Yeah, but I can’t play basketball.” Fitz mumbled to his fingers.

“I suck at soccer.” Trip countered. “And, you make one hell of a coach. We never would have taken States this year if it weren’t for you and all that math, physics, mumbo jumbo. Hell, if it weren’t for you we woulda lost Gavin. You got him through calculus, man. He pulled a damn B-!”

Fitz looked up at his brother for the first time and swiped away the tear that threatened to fall. “But I want to be like you, Trip.” He blinked a few times then looked away. “You’re going away and you’ve got all these plans. I’m just going to be here in a house full of crazy women and who’s going to teach me to be cool and talk to girls and…”

Trip was dumbstruck for a moment just listening to his little brother continue. He shook his head to suck back his own tears. Fitz had been a little tag along, followed him like a puppy and interjected himself into almost everything Trip did even when the kid had absolutely no talent for it. But Fitz never stropped trying. He gave everything all he had. Trip just never thought about how much the kid idolized him. He blinked again and brushed a tear from the corner of his eye.
“Hey, what do you think Da is for?” He laughed as he stopped Fitz’s litany.

The younger boy took a deep breath and turned up one side of his face. “Da? Seriously, you think he knows anything about girls?”

Trip laughed out loud and wrapped an arm around Fitz’s head pulling him into a brotherly hug. He mock punched the small boy in the stomach making an explosion sound with his lips. Then whispered, “how the hell to you think he got Mom?”

Fitz let out a snort and fell silent for a beat. “Trip,” he started quietly.

“Yeah?” the older boy replied just as quietly.

“Momma’s gonna open a can a whop ass on you when she finds out you’ve been swearing at me.” The younger boy imitated his brother’s African American lingo and smiled inside the huggy headlock.

“Oh yeah,” Trip squeezed a little tighter, causing Fitz to groan. “And just how’s she gonna find out?” He pulled Fitz over his lap and raised a hand over his unprotected backside. “You gonna rat me out, brudda? Cuz I gots me a cure for that.”

“No, no…don’t…” Fitz laughed as he kicked and squirmed to escape. “I was just teasing. I won’t say…”

Trip let his hand fall with a smart smack then let the smaller boy roll to the floor. Fitz landed on his knees rubbing the sting off his posterior. He narrowed his eyes and grit his teeth before launching himself into Trip’s midsection, knocking the older boy off his guard and back against the wall. Trip’s head thumped off the plaster.

“Ahh, did that hurt?” Fitz pouted.

Trip rubbed the back of his head. “Yeah,” he snarled jokingly. “As a matter of fact it did.”

“Good!” Fitz smiled and dove on top of the bigger boy.
They wrestled for a few minutes, pushing each other back and forth across the mattress as Trip allowed his younger brother the upper hand while being careful not to get too enthusiastic. At fourteen Fitz could still be considered a pipsqueak and Trip was already the size of a man. The younger boy landed a full punch into his brother’s well-muscled abs. Trip feigned a reaction wrapping his arms around his middle and letting out an exaggerated ooff. He bent at the waist and held up a hand in surrender.

Fitz stood on the bed and raised his arms over his head in a Rocky style cheer. Trip stood and laughed at his kid brother’s celebration then lowered his brow.

“No for long fool,” he used his best Mr. T impression and grabbed the boy tossing him over his shoulder and using the power of tickle to defeat his mini attacker. “I will never be defeated as long as you are the most ticklish little Scot in all the world.” Trip snickered in an evil villain with a hint of brogue accent.

“Oh, that’s dreadful,” Fitz moaned as he kicked, punched and thrashed to halt the torture.

Trip laughed again and bounced the smaller boy twice before stepping back with the intention of dropping him back on the bed, but there was that damn sneaker and the overturned chair and that towel and the pillows and comforter and Trip’s untied shoe and everything together had him falling back and then forward before losing his grip on his brother. He tried to turn, to stop the brunt of the fall but heard the thump a second before he saw Fitz’s head bounce off the arm of that damn tipped up chair.

And there they were when Mom pushed open the door and demanded an explanation. Now she knelt a few feet from him waiting for an answer.

He let out a fluttery breath. “We were just horsing around and…”

“You’re lucky it’s not broken.” She stopped him, apparently less interested in the explanation than Fitz’s current condition. Melinda stood and pulled Fitz to his feet telling him to keep his head down. She let out a frustrated sigh. She looked up at her older son taking in the condition of his attire. Luckily and miraculously he was blood free because there was no backup set of clothing for him.

Trip flipped up the chair that caused the whole catastrophe and eased Fitz toward it. Melinda shook her head again.
“Okay Fitz, get out of those clothes.” She waited a half second before starting to unbutton his shirt. “Now, Fitz. With any luck we can soak the blood out of them. She pulled the shirt off his shoulders as Trip held the large cloth to his brother’s nose. Melinda groaned at the seconded bloodied T-shirt as Fitz shook his khakis to the floor and kicked them off his foot.

The frustrated mother raised a finger to her very tall son and opened her mouth to start barking orders when the sound of Skye’s screech and Jemma’s quick but calmly chattered reassurance cut through the room. She turned toward it but kept the finger leveled at Trip.

“What the hell now?” She grumbled under her breath. She barked orders to the boys as she backed out of the room. “You get this place cleaned up and sit him down until that bleeding stops.” She pointed to the chair. And turned marching toward the bathroom swearing rapidly in Mandarin.

“What do you want?” Fitz’s voice came nasal and muffled from behind the wadded shirt.

“Whoa, little man I did not know Mom knew those words…in any language?”

xx

Melinda slammed the bathroom door against the wall. She was way past done with this whole circus and it was time to put the monkeys back in their cages. Her jaw dropped at the sight of a fully naked and still filthy Skye standing on the vanity with Jemma holding a small bottle of something in an attempt to ‘talk her down’.

“Momma!” the younger girl squealed as she leapt from straddling the sink into her quick thinking mother’s arms.

“Gǎo shénme guǐ?” The woman growled as she absorbed the little girl’s impact.

“Don’t let her, momma! Don’t let her!” Skye squealed even higher, if that was possible, wrapping her arms and legs around her mother like a wiry little critter.

Melinda took another deep breath, probably the hundredth in less than twenty minutes. At this rate
she’d probably hyperventilate and drop like a stone. Which was not a bad idea, when she considered it. She pried Skye free and set her on the floor.

“You said a bad word, momma.” The little girl smiled and held up a palm. “That’s another dollar.”

She glared until the little girl slipped both hands behind her back and backed into the cabinet doors.

“What is she screaming about?” She barked at Jemma. “And why are you still not in that tub?” She demanded of Skye. “And what is going on in here!” She yelled at the ceiling.

Jemma and Skye exchanged a quick glance before both started at the same time, each voice vying for volume as well as screech value. Melinda prayed for a quick death…but not before she strangled the man that was a half an hour late.

xx

While Melinda had been dealing with the boys, the girls were on a mission. Skye had finally given up and resolved herself to at least soak in the tub. She had not yet committed to soap.

Jemma turned on the tap and tested the water temp making sure it was not going ‘burn off my skin’ or ‘freeze me to death’ as Skye would usually bellow when forced into the water. She sat on the side of the tub and poured a capful of lavender bath into the water, thought for a second then squeezed a healthy extra dollop in for good measure. She was aware of the research on lavender helping to soothe and calm but was pretty sure Skye would have to be dipped into a hundred gallon vat in order for it to have any effect.

“I hope you are undressing,” she instructed without turning toward her little sister. “Momma should probably just burn that horrid clothing. It will probably never come clean.” She shook her head and adjusted the water again.

“You think she really meant it?” Skye’s voice sounded odd.

“Meant what?” Jemma repeated, swirling the water around and wondering of Gavin Paulson’s brother would be at the ceremony this evening.
“Ya think she really put it there?” Skye sounded even stranger.

“Put what where?” Jemma sighed as she stopped the water and turned around.

“A handprint on my pigu.” Skye explained, standing naked on top of the vanity over the sink with her back to the mirror. She was contorted into a weird shape trying to look at her bottom.

“Skye,” Jemma inhaled, finger tips to her lips. “What are you doing?” She tried not to yell and startle her little sister to the floor.

“Tryna see, Jemma.” She turned her back to her sister and wiggled a little. “Did she? Cuz that would be cool, like a taddoo or suntin.”

“You need to get down Skye, before you hurt yourself.” Jemma spoke softly as she stood and took a step toward her.

Skye shook her head and turned back to the mirror. “But ya dint answer me. Do I have momma’s handprint on my butt? I needa know.” She looked at her sister and bounced her hands, palms up at her sides.

“Okay, okay…” Jemma decided to pacify the child but really wanted to add a handprint of her own. “Stand very still and I’ll just take a peek.”

It really wasn’t surprising to see Skye in her birthday suit, after all she’d been perfecting the art of streaking since she started walking. However, seeing her covered in everything she’d marched through during the day standing atop the bathroom vanity trying to see her bottom over her shoulder was just too much.

Jemma shook her head and let out a quick breath. She considered calling for Momma but she was taking care of whatever the boys were up to and it would probably cause Skye to jump from the sink directly into the bath and probably break some bone in the process. Of course it was ridiculous to even think there’d be a handprint on Skye’s bottom. Momma would never.

“Okay, baobei just stand very still.” Jemma blinked a few times then cringed. There was absolutely no handprint but the grass/mud streak Skye was so proud of did indeed swipe all the way from her thigh to the top of her bottom. Jemma shook her head at that weird description.
What appeared to be just more dirt was in fact dried blood covering a rather nasty scratch in the center of the swipe."

“Oooo, Skye…” she cringed.

“It’s there isn’t it! It’s there.” Skye hopped up and down with glee. “I gotta see it. Show me where.” Again the little girl attempted to twist the top of her body around to peer at the back of it. Skye never believed in impossibilities.

Jemma ignored the girl’s glee. “You have a dreadful laceration. We are going to have to clean it and apply antiseptic. Oh, it has been so dirty for so long, you could already have the workings of a serious infection.”

“A what?” Skye twisted to the left then tried again going right to see whatever Jemma was looking at behind her. “A lesser shun? Where? Is it alive?” She glanced at her sister with wide eyes. “Can we catch it? I don’t feel it.” She brushed both sides of her bottom with the matching hand.

“Get into the tub, Skye. We will soak it clean and then use some of this…”

“Oh no…no, no, no,” Skye turned and backed against the mirror. “That’s the stuff Momma put on my knee when I fell off my bike. It makes fire under yer skin. You ain’t no way puttin’ that on my butt!” She shook her head.

Jemma stomped a foot on the floor. “Stop acting like a baby, Skye and get down off that sink before you break your leg.” She demanded.

“Uh huh, no way,” the smaller girl shook her head. “You ain’t puttin’ that on me either. Momma promised. I’m tellin’ MOMMA!!” She screeched over and over as she threw her hands over her ears to drown out her sister’s negotiations.

Jemma held the small brown bottle in her fist and tried hopelessly to quiet her little sister as well as keep her from falling to the floor or slipping into the sink.

It was right about then Melinda slammed the door to the wall.
“She’s tryna set my butt on fire!” Skye bellowed, backing into her mother’s legs with both hands protecting the target.

“She’s going to have to stand in line,” Melinda growled through her teeth as she spun the little girl around to face her and held out a hand to Jemma who dropped the small bottle into it.

Melinda glanced at the item before setting it down hard on the counter top and glaring at her older daughter.

“She’s got a gash this long!” Jemma held her fingers a foot apart then pointed to Skye.

Once again Melinda spun her youngest and glanced at the wound. “It’s a scratch. She’ll live.” She growled at no one in particular then spun Skye back again.

The little girl slapped her hands against her temples. “Yer makin’ me dizzy, Momma.”

“What were doing on that counter top?” She demanded.

Skye shrugged. “I was tryna see the print.”

Melinda threw a ‘what’ face at Jemma who merely shrugged. “She thinks she has your hand print on her bum, like a tattoo.”

“Wángbā dàn. Jīntiān huì gèng zāo ma?” Melinda growled through her teeth.

Skye spun herself around and faced her mother with one palm up. “Two dollars for sayin’ bad words in other languages.” She smiled.

Melinda sucked in a breath again through her teeth. “You, out!” She barked at Jemma and hiked a thumb over her shoulder. The girl nodded once and skirted around her mother quickly.
“You want handprints?” She snarled at Skye as she turned her to the tub and sent her there with three quick swats.

The little girl let out a dramatic wail but stepped into the warm water and plunked down into the sweet smelling bubbles. Melinda immediately regretted her action as Skye would more than likely carry on for hours. She dropped down on her knees and fished the washcloth from the water. She rubbed soap into it and lifted one of her baby’s dirty legs and began scrubbing.

“You’re scrubbin’ my skin off.” Skye growled, attempting to pull her limb back. “Ouch, that’s my scrape. My arm’s gonna come off.” The water sloshed side to side as the little girl attempted to escape her mother’s frantic scrubbing.

Melinda ignored the complaints and scrubbed lavender shampoo into the girl’s hair. Then continued scrubbing until even the bubbles turned brown. She pulled the plug and glared at her daughter when she started to stand. “Stay right there,” she ordered as she refilled the tub and added another dose of lavender. Hell, they both needed it.

“Mom,” Trip’s urgent voice had her turn and rise as Skye sunk beneath the suds. “It’s not stopping and I really gotta go.”

He stood holding the same rag to Fitz’s nose. The younger boy stood still clad in only his boxers and stained t-shirt. He looked up with only his eyes.

“Go,” she breathed, knowing Trip had to be at the venue within the hour.

He smiled at her and turned to leave. She grabbed his arm with one hand and Fitz with the other. “Good luck, baobei. We’ll see you later.”

He smiled again, gave a small wave and headed for the stairs. The young man had finished dressing. She beamed with pride just seeing him.

Walking Fitz to the sink she dropped the bloody rag into the waste basket, grabbed a washrag from the shelf and plunked him down on the closed toilet seat. She handed him a Kleenex and ran warm water over the rag, squeezing it out before gently cleaning his face. A tiny trickle of blood ran over his lip, caught by another Kleenex.
“Holy shit, Fitz what happened?” Skye wowed, resting her chin on the side of the tub while keeping her now clean self covered by bubbles.

“Skye!” Melinda threw her head back and bit her tongue before spewing even worse expletives.

The little girl took a deep breath and sunk under the water.

Melinda looked down at her son.

“It was just a stupid accident, mom.” He said softly. “We’re both to blame.”

She shook her head. “Okay, I think you’re good. Keep some Kleenex. We’re going downstairs to get you some ice.” She grimaced a little as she lifted his chin and inspected his face. “You are going to have two very black eyes, bao bao.”

He shrugged as he stood and pulled a handful of tissues from the box. Melinda put an arm around his shoulders. This kid still had the worst luck. She directed him to the hall then stopped and turned back to the tub as Skye peeked over the edge.

“Out, dry and in your room by the time I get back, apparently you haven’t had your share of handprints for the day.”

Skye rolled her eyes and sunk back under the bubbles.

xx

Thirty minutes later Fitz was fully dressed, again, and under Jemma’s watchful eye as he held an ice pack to his eyes. She ignored his complaint that the fluid in his eyes had frozen telling him it was not possible given the temperature of the ice.

Melinda sat in the large rocking chair in Skye’s room with her sniffling baby curled into her lap. She rocked and hummed to the little girl clad only in a pair of light purple panties.
“Are there handprints?” She asked in a shaky voice.

Melinda laughed under her breath. “No baobei, not a one.” She answered as she gently patted the little girl’s bottom.

“Why not?” Skye sniffled.

“Because, I would never hurt you, Skye. I just want you to know there is a line you cannot cross. And today you have done nothing but dance up and down on that line just daring me to catch you slip.” She kissed the top of the little girl’s head.

The little girl did not respond, just sniffed a few more times and played with the small button on her mother’s robe. Melinda waited. She knew there would be more, there always was. She kissed the top of her baby’s head and rocked slowly.

“So you still love me, Momma?” Skye sniffled against her mother’s chest.

“Always,” Melinda smiled as she rested her head against the soft cushion on the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

“Even though I’m incorrigible?” She took in a shaky breath.

“Incorrigible,” Melinda corrected with a smile as she continued to rock. She leaned forward and kissed Skye’s sweet smelling hair. “And you aren’t.”

“Sister James says I am.” Skye countered.

“She doesn’t know everything,” Melinda assured her baby.

“Do you always love me?”
“Yep”

“Even today?”

“Every day”

“Even when you spank me?”

“All the time, every day, every minute, even when you’re sleeping or sliding down Colander’s hill or complaining about wearing a pretty dress, or walking that line you love to cross,” Melinda smiled.

It was a ritual. Something they went through every time Skye was in trouble at school or at home, every time she was disciplined in any way. Even after all this time she still needed that reassurance and Melinda was always ready to give it.

“But ya just spanked me yesterday,” Skye pouted.

“Mmm, hmm,” Melinda agreed. “I couldn’t find you for a whole hour after you rode your bike to the park without permission and that is why said bike is locked in the garage for one month.”

“A month’s a long time, Momma.” Skye spoke in a tiny voice laced with remorse. Melinda nodded her agreement. “I might forget.”

Melinda laughed through her nose. “No worries, baobei, I will remind you as many times as it takes.”

Skye let out a frustrated huff and swiped a finger under her nose. Melinda pulled a tissue from her pocket and handed to the little girl.

“What about Monday?” She asked after a few silent seconds.

“Throwing rocks at Mr. Snyder’s garbage cans,” Melinda shook her head then smiled bending
down to look into her little one’s face. “But Sunday…you took the day off, huh?”

Skye giggled. “And made it all the way to bed time on Saturday before I called Fitz a big…”

Melinda laid a gentle finger over her little girl’s lips and shook her head. “Don’t want to make that mistake again.” She warned softly, leaning back to hide her smile.

“Maybe you should give me back,” Skye sighed dramatically. “I’m not such a good kid after all.”

Melinda let out a dramatic sigh of her own. “I suppose I could but I do love a challenge and it would break my heart into so many pieces I don’t think anyone but you could ever fix it.” She sighed again when Skye did not react. “But I suppose if that’s what you want I would have to be sad for the rest of my life as long as you were happy.”

Skye shook her head and snuggled closer. “I wouldn’t be happy Momma,” she pouted. “I won’t ever leave you.”

Melinda smiled and patted her bottom, softly humming an unnamed tune.

“You love me even though I didn’t grow from you?” The little girl patted her fingers gently over her mother’s heart.

Melinda closed her hand over it. “Right there, baobei, that’s where you grew, right inside my heart.” She lifted the little hand and kissed the tips of Skye’s fingers. “I loved you before I looked into those little eyes and before I felt your sweet breath against my cheek.” She felt the little girl smile against her.

“How momma? How could you love me before you knew about me?” Skye wondered.

She knew this was her baby’s favorite part of their routine. “Because that’s what momma’s do. They know there is a baby waiting for them, a baby that they’ve been waiting for and I just knew it was you. I saved up all that love and kept it right here.” She tapped the little hand that still lay over her heart. “I kept it locked in a special place because I knew I would need so very much of it for my baby and then…”
“Bam!” Skye spoke a little louder around a yawn.

Melinda chuckled. “Bam, there you were wrapped around me like a cute little monkey and all those places where I locked away all that love just opened up and I knew I found you and you found me. That love spilled right down on top of you and covered every inch of you. It splashed back over me and the twins and Daddy and Trip and we knew we couldn’t be a family without you. Then daddy and I brought you home forever and ever.”

Skye nodded against her mother’s chest as her breathing grew steady and slow. Melinda hummed a lullaby before carrying her still much too little for a nine year old child to her bed and tucked a light blanket over her. She glanced at the clock.

An hour and a half nap for this little spitfire would do wonders for everyone.

xx

Melinda pulled the door closed softly and turned into the hall, crashing into an almost breathless Phil.

“I know, I know…I’m late but there was…never mind I’ll explain later…gonna hop in the shower. I will be ready in no time.” He gave her no chance to respond as he back peddled down the hall into their room.

The woman shook her head and followed dropping on to the chair in front of the vanity where this whole crazy afternoon started. She looked at the small framed photo at the back of the counter and smiled at the memory. Her babies were there frozen in a simple moment. Trip with his wide smile, sweet Jemma with her arms draped around his neck trying so hard to hide her new braces with her silly smile and Fitz leaning into his older brother apparently laughing at something someone had said or done. His smile, as always was infectious. The little boy’s arms were wrapped around Skye’s middle as he hugged her and she tangled her little fingers around his. Her baby also wore a bright smile almost looking away from the camera but caught just in time. She remembered the day. She remembered the moment. They were celebrating. Fitz just had the cast removed from his arm and if you looked very closely you could see the difference just around his elbow.

Where did the time go?
Melinda glanced at the clock, almost four. With any luck Skye would sleep just long enough for everyone to be dressed and ready. She’d get that little hellion into her dress and those sandals, make sure her hair was just perfect and they would be out the door with time to spare.

Wednesday…she stared at the LED letters that spelled out the day. It was Wednesday.

*Wednesday’s child is full of woe.*

The old nursery rhyme played in her head. It was a Wednesday when she’d gotten that fateful call from the State Department and Wednesday when she and Phil climbed the stairs of the foundling home in London. Phil dragged Fitz into the cottage in Sheffield on a Wednesday and it was early Wednesday morning when Trip frantically knocked on their door begging for help. She had thought these thoughts before, not often but every time someone brought up how odd things happen or how weird some coincidences could be. It was a Wednesday morning she took Jemma and Fitz into that horrid clinic and lost her heart to a half naked half Asian little hellion. She and Phil had been married on a Saturday but their first date was most definitely on a Wednesday. It was the only day of the week Carmine’s served Vodka Sauce and he was dying for her to try it.

Wednesday…she thought of another Wednesday, cold and dismal three weeks before Christmas. She sat in the waiting room watching the clock, hoping Phil would make it before the doctor was ready to see her. She wasn’t sure she could hear what he had to say alone. She wanted to pace across the small area or even go out to the parking lot where the heat that fueled her fear could be dampened by the snowy day. She looked up as the door opened and a young smiling couple stepped inside before it closed. Phil squeezed in before it shut completely and was there next to her holding her hand, looking at her with that forever optimistic grin.

Forty minutes later he held her in the back seat of his car as she cried until there were no tears left. Nothing had ever hurt as much or left her so empty. He cried too. She never told him she knew but she felt his deep sobs and it only made her cry harder.

It was their third trip to the third doctor only to hear the same thing. This one was said to be the best and he smiled at their first meeting promising to do everything possible to help. On the second visit, after a battery of invasive, not so invasive and extremely embarrassing tests, he confirmed what the other two physicians had already told them. There was no way they would get pregnant. The only thing he offered that they didn’t was in vetro fertilization. He explained it, showed them studies, histories, letters from other couples and pictures of happy healthy smiling babies.

Round one left Melinda constantly ill and almost unable to function. None of the three embryos succeeded. They tried again with four and once again were disappointed. Three times a charm, the doctor smiled and once again Melinda underwent the procedure implanting four Philitized
eggs. They crossed their fingers and prayed for a miracle.

That cold snowy day in December their miracle was gone. She could not do it again and Phil wouldn’t let her go through the pain or the loss a fourth time. They cried for weeks then started life over, putting away their dreams of ballet classes and little league. For months Melinda could not bare to look at a child. She crossed the street if a woman with a stroller came close. She’d left the mall twice when mothers and their children became overwhelming. She politely refused invitations to baby showers and sent cards but did not visit friends or colleagues that had new infants. The couple even left a restaurant one evening when a family with a small child was seated at the next table. They did not return for months.

Phil respected his wife’s need to grieve the loss of the child they would never have and did the same in his own way. He smiled at small kids in the park or store or subway, imagining himself holding that little hand or sharing that ice cream cone. He cried silent tears on his way to the office every morning and all the way home at night until she was well enough to return with him. It was an odd pain, not like when he lost his parents but somehow borne of the same grief. He lay awake a night watching her sleep and staring at the ceiling wondering how he could miss someone so much when they never really existed. There were days when just drawing a breath drove a pike through his heart.

It hurt for a very long time yet they had no choice but to keep on living and resigned themselves to the fact they would never be parents. They went through their paces until it just became normal, but he’d still find her sobbing in the middle of the night or when they pushed every bit of excess ‘stuff’ into the small room that might have become a nursery.

And then there was Wednesday in London and a frightened little girl with no one but Melinda May and Phil Coulson. She wasn’t sure what would happen when she boarded the plan that evening. She wasn’t even sure she would accept this responsibility, but one look at that frail, sad little person and her heart cracked. All of the pain she’d been holding on to dissolved in the feelings that poured out for this child.

And then Phil brought home that dirty little ragamuffin and he wormed his way so far into her heart she couldn’t imagine life without him even with all that horrible language and dreadful history. Skye? Skye was her baby, the baby she prayed for, born of someone else but hers from the beginning. She sometimes imagined that one of those fertilized eggs made its way to wrong woman and somehow that woman knew this baby had to find her. A tiny quiet infant was left on the steps of a decades old church and there was her sweet child…fate brought them to the same place at the same time…on a Wednesday.

And Trip, her strong, handsome young man had been right under her nose for all those years, right across the hall and she’d never even seen him…not really. He was just a noisy little boy with a big smile and perfect manners. He accidentally joined the family but she would not change a thing.
He even brought a bonus grandmother along for good measure.

THE FOLLOWING SECTION CONTAINS MATURE SUBJECT MATTER. IF THIS OFFENDS YOU PLEASE SKIP TO THE END OF THE SECTION AND ENJOY THE REST OF THE STORY

She felt Phil’s hands on her shoulders before she knew he was there. She looked up at him in the mirror. He smiled that smile she loved and bent to kiss her. They parted slowly.

“So Fitz has two black eyes, Jemma’s sweet on some boy called Travis and Skye’s had her daily paddy whacks…so what else happened today?” He chuckled at her groan and pulled her to her feet, dropping his towel and wrapping her in a tight squeeze. Before she could respond he pulled her into a passionate kiss, bringing her to her toes.

He let her breathe for a beat. “The kids, she pointed toward the door…”

“Locked,” he hummed as he swayed to some unheard tune and she allowed herself to sway in the same rhythm.

“You’re late,” she sighed against his bare chest as he slipped the robe off her shoulders letting it drop to the floor.

“Mmm hmm,” he agreed sliding his hands feather light down her back and over her bottom as he brought her to his hips.

She smiled and wrapped her legs around him, looking him in the eye before returning the kiss he had offered a few seconds before.

They parted with a soft breath. “You know I’ll have to do my make up again.”

“Oh ha,” he smiled slipping back to sit on the bed with her still straddling his midsection.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he around her back as she rocked slowly until he found her and she allowed him in. He felt the soft growl in her neck and matched it with one of his own
as they filled each other’s need once and then again with more enthusiasm. Slowly he eased them back until she lay on top of him and his hands pulled her bottom closer, rocking back into the place where they found each other. Again her soft moans brought him to fulfill her need as she released his.

Relaxing their taunt bodies she lay atop him as he continued his soft feathery massage and she softly placed breathy kisses on his neck and chest. He rolled to his side and smiled down at her twirling her hair around his finger before slipping down to place his own kisses on her neck. She ran her nails gently over his biceps and shoulders as he sunk lower and kissed her breasts one then the other sending a shiver through her body. He smiled at her reaction and repeated the action just a few inches lower. The shiver sent him lower as he pulled one into his lips and sucked until she felt her go limp beside him, releasing her he kissed the spot softly causing a slight whimper of anticipation as he moved to the opposite breast and pulled it into his mouth giving the first a soft massage with one hand. The other slid up and down her soft bottom until once again she went limp.

Again they rolled as one as he straddled her with one hand on either side of her shoulders. She smiled up at him as he bent and kissed her again, pressing his hips against her as he braced his weight on his arms. Again the rhythm of their love took over and he rocked his body gently against hers. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling herself from the mattress giving him unspoken permission to bring himself into her. He obliged without hesitation.

They fit together perfectly. His arms relaxed as he lowered himself and her slowly rocking, slowly loving her…inside and out. He pulled her closer as he rolled to the side and allowed her control finding her own rhythm and comfort. They stayed together, holding on to each other until neither had the energy to continue then eased apart, merely holding each other until their breath slowed.

He kissed her forehead. She kissed his chin.

“I love you, Melinda May.” He spoke softly, smiling into her eyes. “Happy Wednesday.”

“I know,” she smiled back. “I love you, Phillip Coulson.”

For a moment she rested her head on his chest, listening to the strong beat of his heart. He drew small circles with the tips of his fingers on her back. She drew a long breath and kissed his cheek.

“It will still be Wednesday when we get home,” she promised as she stood and headed for the bath. She turned back and smiled, “and Bernice is keeping the kids all night long."
A second shower and a quick make-up redo had Melinda ready to throw on the dress she had for the ceremony at the stadium. She smiled thinking about all the black dress functions she and Phil had attended over the years and all the boring speeches and wind bag politicians and strong armed lobbyists they’d survived. Tonight she pulled on a tasteful yet casual cotton item that accentuated her shape but would be comfortable and cool for the big event. She slipped on her sandals and dropped a lipstick into the small bag she carried.

Now to wrestle Skye into her clothing without another scene. She stopped at the little girl’s door expecting to roust a grumpy little girl but found the room empty. She looked to the empty hanger on the back of the closet door and the just as empty shoe box on the floor then hurried down the stairs. Visions of Skye mangling the dress after burying the sandals somewhere in the backyard strangled the calm she had enjoyed the last two hours.

Phil was putting the finishing touches on Fitz’s tie while explaining the steps in making the perfect Windsor Knot. The boy looked up at her showing off his accomplishment. She stifled the laugh at how much he looked like a very well dressed raccoon. Jemma was snapping pictures and turned to capture her mother at the foot of the stairs.

“Oh, Momma, you are so elegant,” she smiled lowering the camera.

“Where is Skye?” Melinda let out the question imagining her youngest baracaded in a foxhole under the deck already refusing any and all negotiations to surrender and give herself up.

“I’m right here,” the little girl stepped from her father’s side fully dressed with her hair neatly combed. A long thin white ribbon that matched her dress hung from the braid on the back of her head. She turned to show it off. “Jemma fixed it for me.” She announced.

Melinda let out a breath and smiled as she looked at her crew. “Then I think we’re ready.”

The family sat together in the first row of the large stadium along with Bernice who had brought a small pack of tissues for everyone. She gave Fitz two after seeing his bruises and the slight trickle of light pink that seemed to require a lot of nose swiping. He sat between her and Phil since she
had even more in her really big bag.

The graduates marched onto the stage to the ever popular theme of Pomp and Circumstance with the audience standing and snapping so many pictures that Jemma was sure no one was really watching. Phil was glad they had the seats right up front since neither Fitz nor Skye would be able to see a thing.

The principal made his opening remarks and everyone pledged the flag then stood as the band played the national anthem. A woman stood and read off the names of the students graduating with honors. Trip’s name was almost the last one. Fitz cheered as loud as he could despite the pain it brought to his head. Skye whistled through her teeth and jumped up and down until Phil pulled her on to his lap wrapping his arms around her middle. That did not stop her whistling. The youngest Coulson squirmed a little and used the restroom twice during the speeches by the school director and some guy she didn’t really know, but remembered to be on her best behavior.

“This is Trip’s special night.” Melinda reminded her as they stepped out of the car in the parking lot. “Let’s make sure he has a good one.” She nodded as she took her mother’s hand and skipped toward their seats.

A man in uniform took the podium and cleared his throat. He read a list of names too. They were the students in the JROTC program. He talked about what they accomplished and how everyone should be proud of them. Everyone clapped.

He waited until they were done and continued. “Ladies and gentlemen, parents and families I have been given a great honor this evening. I’d like to tell you about a young man that came into my office four years ago asking for admittance into this program. He seemed a little unsure, but promised to dedicate himself to whatever it took. He talked about his great-grandfather and how he had a need to fill those very big shoes. You see he had a dream and he intended to reach it. This kid didn’t have a great life. His father disappeared before he was two and his mother fell on hard times as a victim of her addiction. He lived in shelters, the back of a car and even the cellar of a condemned building before he was taken to the care of Children and Youth. He was there a year before his grandparents found him and his life began to change. He’d missed so much school he spent two years in the first grade, but did his best on both tries. When his grandfather passed away he made it his mission to care for his grandmother and follow her example in helping the community and keeping his faith. When that woman was stricken ill he found his way to the family he now calls his own and has continued to do his best in everything he dedicates himself to doing. This young man led this year’s basketball team to the State Championship.” The man paused as the crowd roared. He waited for them to finish then smiled and went on. “He has served his church and their mission in helping the homeless and down fallen while holding down a part time job and maintaining a four point O average. He has grown in statue and maturity in the last four years and has achieved the distinction of being the only cadet to receive every award the program has to offer, with the exception of those reserved for female cadets.” A soft laughter rolled over the crowd.
Melinda wiped the tears that ran over her cheeks. Bernice followed suit as did Jemma, each using almost all of their tiny tissue packs.

“Ladies and gentlemen, parents, families and friends, it is my honor to present the Association of Military Colleges and Schools of the United States Award and the Association of the United States Army Award to Cadet Colonel Antoine Raymond Coulson-Triplett.”

Trip stood in full dress uniform, including his Warrior Battalion Graduation Cord. He walked tall and proud to the podium and stood before the commander and offered a stiff salute. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Fitz doing the same. He did not break form but a smile grew inside his head in the pride he had for that little guy. The commanding officer returned the salute read the standards of each award and handed Trip two plaques and two medals that included ribbons to be added to his already full chest. The man saluted and Trip returned it then turned to his father and saluted again.

The young man stood in place as the applause quieted. The officer who had spoken returned to his seat as the principal again stood at the mike. He smiled and cleared his throat. “Ladies and gentleman the valedictorian of our class Cadet Colonel Antoine Raymond Coulson-Triplett.”

Again the family was on their feet. Melinda had finished the second pack of tissues. Bernice pulled off her glasses and rubbed the lenses clean with a flowery hankie. “I can’t even see for the tears,” her voice shook with nervous laughter. Fitz looked for a moment then took her hand in his. She smiled at the boy and patted his hand.

Trip moved to the podium and removed his cap setting it on the wooden surface. He looked out at the crowd and drew a deep breath.

“I promise to be brief,” he assured the crowd who returned a soft chuckle. He cleared his throat and glanced at the neatly printed paper he had placed before him. Looking up again he gave a quick smile then quickly glanced at his family a few feet away. Skye flashed him a thumb’s up and he almost chuckled at her quick wink.

“I’m here today to let all of you know that I did not get here on my own. None of us did. Some of you out there are parents and some are grandparents, brothers and sisters and probably a few aunts and uncles. All of you are family and all families are not the same. We all have a man and woman responsible for our creation, two people who came together for whatever reason and in that joining a spark was ignited and we came kicking and screaming into this world. Most of you still live and love those two people, your mom and your dad. The past few years have probably not been easy for any of you.” He paused while the crowd laughed again then let out a shaky breath and
continued.

“I said most of you, but not all of you and that is something that does not show no matter what color your skin or the shape of your eyes or the language you speak. I know beside myself there are three people here tonight that did not have the opportunity to be connected to that man and that woman who gave them life but for one reason or some tragedy were not able to share it. For a long time I thought that made me different, that it made me less but I was wrong. What it did was make me strong and determined to show the world I was just as good as kids who grew up in a normal home, than kids who grew up normal.” He quickly glanced at Fitz who smiled back.

“I was lucky enough to have my grandparents and a neighbor who always had time to say hello or just to smile at a dopey kid hanging out on the front stoop because his grandma would beat the black off him if he dared go any farther. I was lucky enough to have that neighbor when my grandmother almost lost her life and I am lucky enough today to call that neighbor Dad. I am lucky enough to have that Dad and a Mom who have absolutely no DNA connection to me but have taught me that that is not all it takes to make a family.

They taught me that things aren’t always easy and that sometimes monsters are real and they don’t live under your bed but right out there on the street. But they also taught me it was okay to be afraid, just don’t let that stop you. My little brother, who is the whitest little blue eyed kid you’ll ever meet was born ‘across the pond’ as they say. He’s got a great accent and the worst luck but he is the bravest kid I’ve ever met.” Trip paused and took a breath to stop the catch in his voice. The crowd remained quiet in anticipation. The young man took a breath and continued.

“A few years back one of those monsters tried to take away my family and that skinny little guy saved my life. Our sister’s as well. And he’s a genius to boot. Lots of times he thinks he’s not normal because he’d rather do calculus or take apart and put together just about any contraption you give him with nothing left over then have it running better than it did in the first place. He thinks he’s different because he can’t shoot a basket but can mentally put together all the physics it takes to teach the entire team how to do just that and do it better that every other team in the state. He thinks he’s not normal because at fourteen he’ll be a year and probably then some ahead of me in college. I tell him he doesn’t need to be normal. He just needs to be himself and he needs to own that. To be the best version of himself because that’s all any of us need to do.

In my home I’ve learned patience, flexibility, tolerance and a lot about diversity. My grandmother is the great granddaughter of a man who was brought to this country without his permission. He was sold into slavery and lived long enough to see his son be a free man. My great grandfather was a Howling Commando in the World War Two and helped bring the Third Rank to its knees. My grandfather served three tours in Vietnam before being wounded gave him an honorable discharge. My adopted grandfather grew up in China and came here as a young man. He too dealt with bigotry and prejudice, but he holds no grudge and has always held himself proud and strong. He plays golf in California. US Army retired. I’m not quite sure what my Chinese grandmother does. She doesn’t talk about it much, but I know she does it well.
The point I am trying to make is that the color of your skin or the way you came into the world does not make you who you are. You do that. You do that by the choices you make and the people you love. The people that love you back. You decide what you believe and who you believe in, who you trust and who you protect. No one makes you do anything and the sooner you take responsibility for your own actions the sooner you will find yourself right where you need to be.

I’ve watched my parents deal with things I never imagined and things I didn’t think happened to little white kids with Harry Potter accents or little Asian babies left on church steps. I’ve seen them risk everything to keep us…not just to keep us safe or clothed or fed or even healthy, just to keep us to fight for us and never give up on any of us.

I know it isn’t always easy and sometimes we are a lot more trouble than they deserve, but they never give up. They hold us together because we are a family, a place where we belong, where we’re all normal even when we think we aren’t because in truth nobody is really normal. It’s only something we think other people are.

Finally, what I’m trying to say is that family is important, essential to every kid everywhere. You need to hold on to it, make it the thing that you fight for not against, forget all the arguments and disagreements and hold on to that thing that gives you roots and allows you to soar. Then one day have the courage to create your own whether it be by that spark of life or because there’s a little kid that really needs you as much as you need them.

To paraphrase American author Regina Bett, family is more than DNA. It’s about people who care and take care of each other. It’s more than who you ever were and much more than you can ever imagine you’ll become.”

The crowd roared with applause but none louder than the six people in the first row. It was matched only by the whoops and squeals when Trip’s name was read as he received his diploma and it was announced he had been accepted at West Point for the fall term.

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After the graduates posed for dozens of pictures with family and friends small groups milled around the field while younger children raced across the yard lines under the setting sun. Fitz stood with one of Trip’s medals in each hand still staring in awe at both. He didn’t see his brother step behind him and wrap an arm around his head.
“Hey,” Trip laughed as he stepped back and pointed to the felt boxes. “You’ll take care of those for me, right?”

Fitz nodded as two other graduates slapped Trip on the back and laughed over something the younger boy paid no attention to as he stood. He looked up when the laughter grew louder. “Trip,” he called after his brother who was a few feet away. The young man jutted his chin in response. Fitz smiled. “Thanks.”

Trip shot a thumb’s up before walking away.

“Trip,” Melinda called after the young man who turned and walked back, kissing her softly on the cheek. She reached up and straightened his lapel. “One o’clock,” she reminded him. He nodded before giving her a quick salute.

“Ma’am, yes ma’am!” He practiced then turned and let out an ooff as Skye plowed into his midsection.

Melinda shook her head as she walked back to Phil who was speaking with one of the other parents.

The little girl held her sandals conveniently held behind her back so Momma would not notice her bare feet and squeaked as he picked her up and spun her around. “You are the prettiest girl on the field, baby girl.” He kissed her cheek and held her in front of him.

“I liked your talk, Trip. You said some good stuff. Did you know Momma never leaves handprints?” She shook her head as she wriggled to the ground and dashed off. He scrunched up his face as she ran to catch up to Fitz and Bernice who were chatting over the prized medals. She had planned on displaying them alongside her husband and his father’s. Trip made her promise they’d be put in the bedroom he’d shared with his little brother. He’d already been squeezed half to death by his grandmother before she met a few church ladies who could not tell her enough about how handsome and wise her boy had turned out to be.

“Don’t ask,” Jemma shook her head. “Have a wonderful time tonight Trip. I’m so proud of you!” She smiled then stood on tiptoe as he bent down to let her kiss his cheek. The young girl shook her head. “Skye you put your shoes on before you step on something horrid!” She called as she hurried toward her little sister.
Phil stepped behind the young man and extended his hand. “That was quite a speech you gave kid.” He paused and shook his head. “Guess you’re not a kid anymore, son.” He squeezed Trip’s hand and gave a firm shake. “I think Fitz will be on cloud nine for a while. Thanks for always supporting the little guy.”

“Hey, that’s what brothers are for, aren’t they?” He smiled back.

“Trip! Come on, let’s go!” Nick called from across the field, waving the young man toward him.

Trip looked to him then back to Phil.

“Go, have a good time.” Phil slapped the young man’s back. “And no later…” he called after him.

“I know!” Trip smiled as he ran backward holding up one finger.

Phil smiled back and waved as Melinda slipped her arm around his. They watched as their eldest joined his friends and disappeared over the hill on the opposite side of the field. “He’s a smart kid, Mel. He won’t do anything to jeopardize his place at the Point.”

She smiled and laid her head on his shoulder. “He won’t do anything to antagonize his mother.” She snorted.

“That too,” he laughed as they walked toward their family.

“Quite a crew we’ve got there, Mrs. Coulson.” Phil nodded toward them.

“More than they ever were and not half as much as they will ever be,” she agreed then narrowed her brows as they were a few feet away.

“Skye! Where are your shoes?”

Phil scooped up his youngest in two long strides. “Who wantsa pizza?” He asked with a silly Italian accent. He smiled at the chorus of yeses. “Andiamo!” He commanded pointing toward the
Melinda shook her head as she stepped to his side and glared at Skye.

“My feet were hot!” the little girl whined. She watched as her mother’s glare did not falter. “But they’re not anymore.” She dropped the slip on sandals to the ground and squirmed out of her father’s embrace. “See?” Skye grinned as she shot her feet into the shoes and ran after her siblings before her mother could answer.

Melinda wrapped her arm around Phil’s again as they strolled casually after their family. “That one,” she nodded at the little girl chattering between her brother and sister. “She is going to…”

“Keep us young, Mel. She’s going to keep us on our toes for a very long time.”

Melinda let out a fluttery laugh as she watched her kids hover over their little sister and laugh over some inside kid nonsense. She and Phil strolled slowly behind them, watching as the stadium lights went out one at time.

“Something I forgot to ask with all the hoopala,” Phil started. Melinda smiled and looked to him to continue. “Did I just imagine it or is there a Skye sized butt print on the bathroom mirror?” He scrunched his face with a disbelieving smile.

Letting out a half sigh/half chuckle, she dropped her head against his arm. “Long story…”

“Aren’t they all?” He snorted back.

They moved along as other’s passed merely enjoying the cool breeze and the company. Melinda looked ahead at the sound of Fitz’s laughter then tripped over something small and white, only her hold on Phil’s arm kept her steady. She looked to see what was on the path and quickly recognized the not so white sandals.

“SKYE!”
X - X-ing X-rays

Chapter Summary

Phil and Melinda are off scouting a safe house leaving the younger kids with Mack and Elena for the day. Skye being her usual spitfire self gets into more mischief than most and has an unexpected mishap sending the group to the ER where Jemma finds a bit of trouble on her own. Phil and Melinda get turned around and a bit mixed up in rural PA, finding themselves unable to contact their kids. The day just continues to fall to pieces as one bit of bad luck leads to another, but Momma Melinda puts all the pieces back together by day's end.

“Hand me that torque, will ya Turbo?” Mack’s deep voice resonated, even in the large garage off his and Elena’s shared residence.

Fitz stood up from his bent over position and scanned the bench behind him. He grabbed the requested tool and slapped into his large friend’s hand much like one would hand off to a surgeon. Mack smiled his approval.

“Do you truly believe you’ll get it to work properly? It’s rather old.” Fitz shook his head.

Mack chuckled as he too stood and wiped the grease from his hands on the rather grimy rag that dangled from his back pocket.

“This here is a classic, Fitz. I’ve been working on it for as long as I can remember. My Pops was a mechanic back in the day. He carried this baby home in parts and I’ve been collecting the ones he didn’t have ever since.” He squatted back down and worked at a rather difficult bolt.

Fitz scrunched up his nose for a second. “That is certainly not possible Mack. Even if your granddad made his way home on the last day of the Second World War it is unlikely that you had even been born. Your own dad was probably a wee lad himself.” Fitz shrugged again.

Mack turned a wide smile toward the boy and ruffled his hair. “Just a little exaggeration, Turbo,” he laughed again.
“Pops brought a lot of parts home when he was discharged. They got tossed in a box in the back of his garage for a couple years until he and my Dad started tinkering with it. I guess I just picked up where they left off.” The large man explained. “This baby was one of the experimental motorcycles of the war, built in forty two. It was a flat-twin shaft drive had a boxer engine was extremely reliable and low maintenance. There were only a thousand of these babies ever made. Parts are hard to come by, believe me I know.”

“Where do you find parts that are more than fifty years old and are you certain they’ll work when you do?” Fitz was astounded.

“Hardest thing to find was that knucklehead.” Mack nodded toward an almost rectangular item that lay on the counter. To Fitz it resembled a very dirty cake pan with several holes along its edge.

“It’s truly called a knucklehead?” The boy laughed.

Mack laughed as well. “Yep, but officially it’s a 1942 Harley XA WLC WLA TA Military 45 Flathead Knucklehead OEM Crankcase Oil Pan.” The man spit out.

Fitz nodded. “Knucklehead is a lot easier, I suppose, but it is a rather nonsensical title.” The boy finished seriously.

“The Army has a way of nicknaming pretty much everything.” Mack smiled as the bolt came free with a small pop and he bounced once to keep his balance.

Fitz considered for a moment. “Were you?” He asked and at Mack’s confused look he added, “in the army, like your pops and your dad?”

“Me?” The big man chuckled a bit. “Naw, my number was pretty high, never got the call and then…well I got another call and…” He stood straight and spread his arms, “…here I am.”

“You might have enlisted then.” Fitz pondered.

Mack moved to the bench where he had spread his many tools. He surveyed them looking for just the right one. “You might say I did, Turbo, just not like most guys. There’s a lot of ways to serve your country. I guess I just took another path to get to the same destination.” He pulled a large wrench, gave a quick nod and turned back to his work.
Fitz nodded. He was never really quite sure what Mack did, or his parents for that matter. He was sure it was more than just providing security, but whatever it was they did he knew they were the absolute best at doing it. That was enough.

Mack flicked a finger on the collar of Fitz’s starched plaid oxford. “Your mom gonna be all out of sorts if you mess up that brand new shirt?” He smiled at the boy.

Fitz looked down and shrugged. “It’s all I’ve got.” He scrunched up one side of his face. “I suppose mom wouldn’t be very happy if I went all grease monkey on it.”

The boy’s face fell as he realized helping Mack with his restoration work would not be possible now. He shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at a small pebble on the garage floor. Fitz stood looking at the motorcycle parts, picturing the vehicle together with all those parts working perfectly. He stared at a mostly bent muffler pipe and envisioned the method he could use to correct it. He knew Mack trusted him with his tools and those he was unfamiliar with…well, the man would simply guide his hands until that little thing in his head clicked and he’d know exactly what to do. Of course all of that meant getting your hands quite dirty and wiping them on your pants or shirt was inevitable. Fitz looked up at Mack in his T-shirt and jeans and wondered why he didn’t have more sense than to throw on a new dress shirt and shorts to visit his favorite mechanic. The only other clothing he had was a swimsuit but that wouldn’t be very practical.

“Too bad you haven’t got some sorta coveralls you could throw on over your streets or even just put on instead.” Mack sucked in his lips and shook his head slowly, sympathizing with the boy. “I really could use your help, Turbo. Gotta few things here that have me perplexed.”

Fitz let out a sigh and glanced up at Mack over his brows. Mom and Da had to go out of town for the day and Bernice was busy preparing for a church dinner. Trip had also volunteered to help his grandmother so the three youngest Coulsons were packed off to spend the day with Elena and Mack. Jemma insisted she was more than capable of caring for her younger siblings for one day, pointing out that their grandmother would be home by suppertime. Phil and Melinda were quick to nix the idea, not that they didn’t trust their very mature daughter, but Fitz and Skye were more than capable of performing the unexpected on their own and together…well that was just too much to even imagine. Jemma was disappointed but happy to spend the day with their extended family members. (Especially since Mack lived just three doors from Travis Paulson and there was always the chance he might just stroll by…she could only hope.)

Skye showed up at the breakfast table in her bathing suit and was immediately sent back to her room to put on more suitable clothing. She marched off with a pout, slouched over like the Hunchback of Notre Dam. She returned a few minutes later and was once again sent back to her room to remove the suit that now served as undergarments and with the threat that mom would
come help if she couldn’t accomplish the order the second time.

All in all it went well from then on, with Phil and Melinda reminding all three of them and especially their youngest hellion of specific expectations while they were visiting. There was a lot of head nodding and yeses and ‘I understand-s’, although Fitz was pretty sure Skye hadn’t heard a thing since she was looking out the window as they drove and just going through the motions. He laughed under his breath wondering just what kind of trouble his crazy sister would get herself into this time.

So now, here he stood, mentally kicking himself for not remembering how Mack loved working on this piece of equipment on weekends and just how much he loved helping.

“I guess I’ll go see what the girls are doing.” Fitz mumbled as he turned toward the large open garage door. He took a few steps and stopped when he heard something flop down on the concrete floor behind him.

“I figured you might need that sooner or later.” Mack nodded at the large wad of material on the floor. “Might be a bit big but you’ll grow into it.” He smiled as Fitz picked up the item and shook it out.

“It’s for me?” Fitz grimaced at the high pitched sound of his voice.

Mack pointed a screw driver at him. “Like I said, you’re gonna need it if you’re gonna be any help to me.” He cocked his head toward the small restroom in the rear of the garage. “Pretty hot in here…” But the boy had already kicked off his sneakers and shed his clothing, driving one leg and then the other into the greenish denim jump suit. He flipped it up over his shoulders and pulled the zipper up as far as it would go then smiled at Mack as he held out his arms and admired it.

Mack smiled back and stepped toward the boy. “It is a little big, but like I said…”

“No, no it’s perfect,” Fitz laughed shoving his feet back into his sneakers.

Mack shook his head as he rolled up the sleeves of the coverall and cinched it a bit at the waist. He nodded to the clothing strewn on the floor. “Better stow that or this,” he tugged at the collar of the boy’s new garb, “won’t make much difference.”
“Right,” Fitz agreed then picked up his shirt and shorts, folded them and tucked them into a small locker at the back of the garage. He stood for a moment and brushed his fingers over the embroidered name tag on the pocket of his new coverall. ‘Turbo’, it read in bright yellow letters on a black background. The boy had never been so proud to wear such clothing in all his life. He slapped his hands together and hurried back to get started on that muffler.

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“How long does it take to make fruit salad?” Skye whined as she threw back her head in her usual dramatic fashion.

Elena laughed as Jemma rolled her eyes. “It depends on just how much fruit we want to add, pequeña.”

“Then watermelon and strawberries are enough,” the little girl let out in a huff.

“Seriously, Skye, you need to develop a bit of patience.” Jemma shook her head. “Yoyo has all of this wonderful fresh fruit for us to enjoy. You could help, you know, it would make the time go faster and we could possibly finish a bit sooner.”

Skye plunked her head on her hand with one elbow resting on the table. “Well, if ya’d give me a knife I could do that.” She grumbled.

“Oh, no, no, mi pequeña amiga, last time it was six stitches and Mack almost had to sit on you. No, today I return you to your mama and poppi in one piece and none of it sown back together.”

“Then how do you expect me to help?” Skye asked, bouncing a hand in front of her. “And anyway I was only eight when that happened.” She held her thumb up and examined the tiny white scar that ran along the outer side then shrugged and waited for someone to reply.

“And that was just last March, so you are a full four months older,” Jemma scolded, eyebrows raised.

Skye let out a huff and turned up one side of her mouth. “How my `spose to learn if ya don’t gimme a chance?” She wondered.
Jemma let out a sputtery laugh of her own. “You only have a finite amount of fingers Skye. Do you want to have a scar on each?”

“It was a accident, Jemma.” Skye wriggled her fingers at her sister using a snarky voice.

“An accident,” Jemma corrected with a smirk. “And I know it was an accident, we just don’t want another.”

“¡Basta! Aye, yi, yi ¡No sé cómo lo hace tu madre con todos los argumentos!” Elena slipped into her native tongue in frustration.

Jemma giggled. “Por lo general, termina con Skye con dolor en las nalgas.”

“That’s not funny, Jemma.” Skye scowled. “And I’m not the only one Momma swats when we get too loud or too…too…arguey.”

“Oh, that’s not even a word, baobei.” Jemma laughed again. “And you get more swats than all of us put together, even Fitz and he held the record for a very long time.”

“Okay, I have an idea.” Elena marched across the kitchen and rifled through a draw then pulled out a wicked looking instrument that resembled something a very bad dentist might use. She shook it at Skye as she yanked open the refrigerator and grabbed a large bowl of almost purple cherries.

Setting the bowl on the table in front of the girl she held out the tool to demonstrate. “This is a…” she paused for a moment staring at the tool. It was metal, resembling a large scissors or better yet, pliers. One side had a small round stem and the other a little band about the size of one cherry. “It is a…”

Skye took if from her hand and squeezed it a few times. “It’s a pliers.” She shrugged. “I think Daddy has one for putting holes in things. Maybe it’s a big hole puncher, my teacher gots one in school.”

“Has!” she barked at her sister, correcting herself before Jemma could form the word.
“I believe it is a rather old fashioned cherry pitter.” Jemma smiled.

Skye stared at the item, turning it over in her hand. “No way, nobody’s pickin’ cherries with this little thing. It’d take a million years.”

“Pitter, Skye, pitter,” Jemma repeated, stressing the t’s. “And must you exaggerate so? Nothing takes a million years, Skye.”

“Dinosaurs do,” Skye smirked. Jemma shook her head and took the tool from her little sister. She placed a cherry in the small band and squeezed. Out popped the pit. Skye blinked once before her eyebrows rose in amazement.

“Wow, and I been spitting them out all this time.” She smiled as she took the tool back, extracted the pit less cherry and popped it in her mouth.

Jemma let the grammar go this time as she watched Skye imitate what she had done, stick her tongue out to one side and squeeze the tool with both hands. Again the pit fell to the table and Skye quickly gobbled the juicy fruit.

“Okay, monstruo de cereza,” Elena laughed as she tugged on one of Skye’s short braids. “Everyone would like a few of those, so you pop out the pits here,” she placed a pot next to the large bowl. “And the whole cherries, here,” she set a second bowl on the opposite side of the first.

Skye looked into the first bowl. “There’s a bazillion cherries in here, Oyo! I’ll never get to swim.” Once again a full pout covered the little girl’s face.

“Once begun is half done,” Jemma chirped.

“That’s dumb,” Skye grumbled. “If I done one, there’ll still be a million left.”

“A bazillion minus one is not a million.” Jemma sighed as she sliced into a ripe cantaloupe. “In fact bazillion isn’t a number at all. Zillion isn’t a even number. There are lots of large numbers, with lots of zeros and strange, wonderful words that label them. A great real word to use is googol, which means one followed by one hundred zeros.” She elaborated. “And that minus one would be
“In fact there are twenty five billion billions in a googol.” She smiled with satisfaction. “And should we have that many cherries it would fill up the entire state. You would not live long enough to pop all of those pits. Furthermore, it would take over ten millennia to count that high.”

Elena held up a hand to Jemma and pointed to Skye. “Let’s settle for a few pounds and get to work.”

Skye nodded and after several squished fruits and lots of ‘tastes’ she pitted the entire amount then stared at her blood red fingers. She sucked each one then held up her hands. “I got no cuts but it looks cool, like I was really cut all apart.” She waggled her fingers at Jemma and laughed as her sister pulled back.

“Your face is not much better,” Jemma scowled as she dropped the last of the melon into the hollowed out watermelon rind.

“I gotta see!” Skye squeaked as she held up her hands and ran for the powder room.

“¡No toques mis toallas limpias!” Elena called after the little girl.

“¡I’ll make sure she washes completely before she does.” Jemma shook her head and followed her little sister but found the bathroom empty, two cherry colored handprints on the vanity.

Skye dragged herself into the garage zombie style, drooling cherry juice and bits of the small fruit
from the corner of her mouth. She held out both hands in front of her and dragged one foot as she moaned mournfully.

Mack and Fitz were bent over, head to head, discussing an unforeseen problem as the little girl limped around the garage door and fell to the ground, dragging herself forward with her arms only. Mack turned at the sound and jumped up at the sight. “Sweet lord!” He exclaimed as he rushed to pick the child up and examine her injuries. He looked over his shoulder unable to imagine how this could have happened and why Elena hadn’t called to him. Several horrific scenes spilled across his mind before Skye’s laughter shook them away.

Fitz stood staring as he dropped the ratchet to the ground.

“What the…” Mack dropped to his haunches, pulled Skye to her feet, held the child by the shoulders at arm’s length and looked her up and down.

Skye sucked in the cherry debris and laughed again. “Got ya!” she pointed with one finger, unable to free her arms from the large man’s grip.

Mack lowered his head and let out a relieved breath. “What is the matter with you girl?” He did not sound amused. “You scared the crap outta me, Skye.” He gave her a gentle shake. “What is this?” He nodded toward her hands that he now held up in front of him.

“Cherries,” she smiled. “Makes great blood.” She stuck her finger tips together then pulled them apart. “Kinda sticky like blood too.”

“You bloody almost gave me a heart attack!” Fitz bellowed as he stepped next to Mack. “Have you gone totally daft?”

“Ooooo,” Skye laughed. “Momma’s gonna whack your bahoochie!”

“Yeah?” Fitz shot back. “And yours won’t sit til next Tuesday when she finds out about this little performance!”

Mack lowered his head and took a breath. “Hold it, both of you.” He looked over his shoulder at Fitz and pulled Skye closer. “Your momma doesn’t need to know about any of this.” He spun Skye around and sent her toward the house with a quick but gentle swat. “Go get cleaned up.” He
ordered as the little girl dusted off the seat of her pants and scowled back at him. He took a half step toward her and she ran for the house.

Fitz laughed at his sister’s expense for a second before Mack landed a meaningful punch on his shoulder. The boy reached for the spot as his mouth formed but did not speak a definite ‘ow!’.

“Mind your language,” Mack grumbled as he moved back toward the bike, muttering under his breath.

Fitz stood for a moment, expecting to be dismissed much like Skye had been. He kept a hand on his smarting shoulder and waited for his large friend to at least look at him. When Mack continued working, the boy turned and started for the door.

“Grab that torque, Fitz,” he called after him. “I think I’ve got this figured out.”

Fitz grinned ear to ear and hurried to snatch the tool.

xx

Jemma caught up to her little sister parked at the top of the front steps with her head in her hands. Cherry juice stains ran down both sides of the smaller girl’s mouth and now two dirty, sticky, cherry hand prints marked both her cheeks.

“Skye,” Jemma breathed, standing over her with hands on her hips. “What are you doing? I’ve been looking for you and…oh, look at yourself. You are an absolute mess.” She shook her head. “Yoyo is going to make you take a complete bath before she lets you into the pool.”

“I don’t care.” Skye grumbled.

Jemma paused for a moment. “Well, I do and I’m sure she does as well. You can’t be taking all of that sticky grime into that clean water.”

“I don’t care.” Skye repeated.
“Then I don’t suppose you’ll be doing any swimming this afternoon.” Jemma sighed, eyebrows raised as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“I…”

“Don’t care,” Jemma finished for her little sister as she sat down next to her. “But, I know you do, so tell me what ever happened in the short amount of time since you sprinted out of the kitchen.”

Skye mumbled something unintelligible and kicked at the small stones on the brick step below where she sat. She pulled her sticky hands from her face and slapped them onto her knees.

“I’m sorry, Skye, but I did not understand a word of that.” Jemma sighed.

“I said, Mack smacked me.” The little girl mumbled again, a little clearer.

Jemma’s eye’s widened. “He did?” She paused for a moment then narrowed her eyes. It would take a lot for the gentle giant to take such an action. “What did you do?”

“I was just kiddin’.” Skye answered in her trademark whine.

“About?” Jemma took a sterner stance. “What exactly did you do?”

“I played a little joke, a tiny little joke.” Skye narrowed her eyes and held her finger and thumb less than a quarter inch apart then dropped her hand to her knee again. “He didn’t think it was funny.”

“Skye,” Jemma warned. “What did you do?”

“This cherry stuff looks a lot like blood, Jemma. Doesn’t it?” She smiled at her sister as she held out both dirty hands. “If you squish one in yer mouth and let it drip it out, it looks even cooler.” The smiled turned to a frown at Jemma’s glare. The little girl shrugged once and turned away dropping her head back into her sticky hands. “Anyway, I was just foolin’ around.”
“You didn’t.” Jemma shook her head. Skye did not react. “You did not pretend you were injured and let Mack think… Oh, Skye that is a horrid thing to do to anyone. You probably scared him terribly.”

“I told him it was just kiddin’ around.” Skye mumbled.

“Momma is not going to be happy. She told you no shenanigans.” Jemma reminded her.

Skye scrunched up her face, turned and pointed a finger at her older sister. “Momma never says shenanigans. She said no trouble. You say shenanigans. And Mack said he wouldn’t tell. Are you gonna be a snitch, cuz if you are, Fitz said bloody and…”

“Now so did you,” Jemma smiled at the little girl.

“Yeah, but I didn’t really say bloody like Fitz said I bloody gave him a heart attack. I was just sayin’ it to tell you he said it.”

“And now you’ve said it again, twice.” Jemma laughed.

Skye opened her mouth to reply then snapped it shut and glared at her sister. Jemma stood and shook her head. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up so we can have a swim before lunch.” She started toward the walkway that led around the large house then looked back to be sure Skye was following.

“Yer not really gonna tell on us are you, Jems? Cuz we were just kidding and Mack already smacked me and maybe Fitz too. And Momma’s gonna be real tired when she gets home tonight and you don’t want…”

Skye’s rambling continued all the way to the large glass door on the back deck.

xx
Twenty minutes of scrubbing and a lot of whining later Skye still had remnants of cherry juice on her fingers, cheeks and knees. Jemma did the best she could but Elena assured her the smaller girl was clean enough and that the chlorinated pool water would more than likely do the rest of the job.

Jemma surrendered. She wasn’t quite sure she could take much more of Skye’s wailing and complaining she was pulling off her skin. Anyway, Elena had none of that wonderful lavender soap Momma always used and Jemma wasn’t sure if was her imagination that Skye was much worse without it. She held up a large towel and motioned for Skye to step out of the tub which the little girl did without a second request.

“Momma never scrubs me so hard.” She complained. “You can’t just keep rubbing til a person’s skin comes loose.”

“Oh, don’t exaggerate so, Skye. Your skin is perfectly intact.” She scolded as she rubbed the little girl dry.

Skye grabbed the towel with both hands. “I can do this myself, ya know. I’m not a baby.”

“No, you’re not.” Jemma sighed as she dropped her hands into the angled lap formed by sitting back on her heels. “But you do a terrible job,” she added with a laugh as she pulled the towel around Skye’s chest and tucked it in toga style.

“I don’t need clothes, Jemma.” Skye smiled. “I’m wearing my swim suit until Momma comes to get us.” She was gone before Jemma could answer.

The older girl shook her head and began picking up the debris left behind.

xx

Sitting on the side of the pool, Skye kicked her feet in the warm water. “How come I gotta wait for Jemma? Why can’t you just watch me?” She grumbled at Elena who was busy rubbing sunscreen across the little girl’s shoulders.

“Why, why…all the time why, pequeña. Why don’t you just do as you’re told? Hmmm?” Elena grinned at the child.
Skye shrugged her shoulders. “Everybody always tell me I gotta wait. It makes me tired.” She kicked harder sending splashes in all directions.

Elena moved to one side and smeared lotion on Skye’s arm, gently rubbing up and down.

“This stuff smells like glue.” The little girl crinkled up her nose. “Feels like it too. How, do you know it’s really sun screen?”

“Because you are not una langosta roja,” Elena laughed, pulled the girl’s opposite arm closer and rubbed in the sunscreen.

Skye sighed and churned the water faster. “Lobsters are black, Oyo.” She replied without emotion.

Elena turned down the sides of her mouth and sniffed. “Okay, una langosta hervida.” She agreed.

Jemma arrived wrapped in a towel with her own sunscreen in hand. Skye cheered once and moved to push herself into the water.

“Un momento, mi Sirenita…” Elena put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. Skye let out a fake sob. “We need to sunscreen your sister as well.”

Skye let out a groan and fell backward to the ground, kicking her feet wildly. “It’s gonna be Christmas before we get to swim.” Elena chuckled as she rubbed lotion on Jemma’s back and shoulders. Skye spread out her arms and legs, squeezed her eyes shut and lay motionless. “I think I’m gonna die.” She moaned as she let out a breath and held it.

Elena laughed again. “No habrá personas muertas en la piscina hoy.”

“Then ya gotta let me go in now afore it’s too late.” Skye croaked with her hands around her throat. She finished with a grand expelling of breath and dropped her head to one side, tongue lolling out.
“Cannon ball!!” Fitz’s voice came from everywhere a second before the sound of him plunging through the surface sent water splashing over Skye’s body.

“No fair!” She giggled as she sat up and pushed off the side of the rough slip resistance edge, ignoring the small brush-burns to both sides of her bottom.

Jemma shook her head as she dropped the towel and eased her way down the steps into the water. She was surely not going to go larking about like her younger brother and sister. She moved gracefully out into the deeper water and swam slowly across the pool.

“Hey, Jemma watch this!” Fitz called from the side before he flipped in the air into the pool a few feet from her. The wake rolled over her face causing her to take in a mouthful. She coughed it off and latched on to the side, scowling at the boy who surfaced with a smile.

“I can do that too!” Skye proclaimed a second later and managed a slight imitation of Fitz’s wild dive. She too landed close enough to shower Jemma with a wall of water.

This time the older girl turned her head to avoid a second unwanted ‘drink.’ “You are both quite childish.” She admonished the pair.

Skye giggled as she kicked and paddled to stay above the surface. “That’s cuz we’re…” she ducked under and came right back with her eyes closed. “We are kids.” She finished, spitting out a spray of water. The little girl turned and paddled to the side, pushing herself up to try again.

Jemma shook her head and swam back to the shallow end where neither of her siblings could, would or should do any diving. She let out a disgusted huff at their silliness.

Mack stood just beyond the surface that surrounded the pool with his hands on his hips. He watched the action in the pool for a moment, smiled and shook his head. Elena placed a tube of sunscreen on one of the round tables and stepped to his side. She held the other for him to see. "Did you cover that little white boy with enough of this stuff?"

The man let out a chuckle and nodded. “Yep, slathered him up like a Christmas goose, used almost the whole tube.” He pulled a flattened container from his back pocket. Elena smiled her approval for a second before dashing across the patio and plunging into the cool water. She surfaced just in time to see Mack pull off his T-shirt and followed suit.
Fitz and Skye let out a round of cheers and whistles. Jemma smiled from her perch on the steps.

xx

After a quick lunch of grilled burgers, corn on the cob and lots of fruit salad Skye was more than ready to plunge back into the water. She slunk into her chair when told she’d have to wait until clean up was complete. Mack let out a laugh and handed the little girl several plates to carry into the house.

“Come on Tremors,” he smiled as he took a taller stack. “You wash, I’ll dry…you can get some water play in before taking another dive.”

“It’s not the same,” Skye grumbled as she dragged herself behind him.

With everyone helping clean up was done in less than twenty minutes but Skye growled when Jemma chose to relax on one of the lounge chairs with a book on something the younger girl could not begin to decipher rather than slip back into the water. Fitz asked Mack if they’d be working on the bike and seemed a little depressed when he was told they’d have to wait until some of the parts he’d managed to find were shipped from three different parts of the country.

The young boy began explaining how they could MacGyver a few of the items in the garage into a piece missing from the carburetor. Mack listened for a moment, nodding his head as Fitz spoke. He slapped the boy on the shoulder and decided they’d give it a try. Fitz smiled, telling the man it would take him only a few seconds to get back into his new cover-alls. They were gone before Skye could object.

Elena frowned as she stared at the crestfallen little girl. Skye loved the pool and would spend hours in it if she wasn’t dragged out, and yes sometimes that meant someone physically dragging her kicking and screaming from the water to eat, to drink, to rest or just to de-prune for a bit.

“You know, cara mía, I was hoping you would like to swim a little more since I have no one to keep me company while I prefect my diving skills.” Elena pouted.

“Really? You mean it?” Skye squealed as she grabbed both of Elena’s hands. “Can you watch me dive off the board and show me how to do it right?”
“Hmmm,” Elena frowned. “I’m not so good at that. Maybe we try together.” She smiled and gave a quick nod.

Skye was off, jumping from the top step of the deck and sprinting across the yard as Elena warned her not to take the plunge before she was close enough to supervise. The little girl half turned and gave a quick wave.

Elena really wasn’t sure what happened next or how it happened, but Skye seemed to slip throwing her legs up and then falling back landing hard on the ground. The wail that followed brought Jemma racing from her seat as the book fell the ground, pages flapping in the slight breeze. They dropped down on either side of the little girl at the same time.

Skye was screaming so loudly she barely heard her sister or Elena who both tried to help her sit up. The action only brought a stronger scream as Skye rolled to her side writhing in pain. Jemma gasped as she looked to Elena. The angle at which the little girl’s arm was bent was far from normal. Jemma could see a slight bulge under the skin just below Skye’s elbow.

“Don’t touch me…don’t touch it…don’t touch it…” Skye repeated over and over as she rolled back and forth.

“Momi, we need to see…” Elena explained softly, trying to assess the damage. She looked up at Jemma and tossed her head toward the garage. The girl understood immediately and raced toward it.

“No, no,” Skye wailed. “Momma, I want Momma…don’t touch it.”

Mack was across the yard in less than ten long strides with Fitz and Jemma racing behind. Jemma was in tears as Fitz took deep breaths to control his own fears. Skye was hurt and Momma was not there. He tried to quell his growing panic telling himself Mack and Elena would know what to do.

The large man took one look at the child and started barking orders. “Fitz, there’s a newspaper on the kitchen table, get it now. Jemma pull the straps off those goggles and give them to me. Elena pull the car to the front and keep it running.”

With quick nods everyone ran in different directions doing exactly as Mack had instructed. He knelt at Skye’s side. He spoke softly to her.
“Hey, Tremors,” he smiled as he ran a hand over her head attempting to calm her. “Some trick you pulled there but you know we’re gonna have to fix that arm.”

Skye was shaking her head, jamming her bare feet into the grass to push herself away from him. “No, Mack, no…don’t…don’t help me.” Her sobs did not lessen. “I just need my Momma, okay? I need her.”

“I know, sweetheart, I know.” The man sympathized. “But your Momma can’t come right now.” Skye cried harder, closing her eyes and letting out a long shaky breath. “It’s okay, we’ll call her and she’ll come as fast as she can but right now you need to let me help.”

Skye was still shaking her head as Fitz slid across the grass and pushed the rolled up newspaper to Mack. Jemma was a few seconds behind holding one hot pink and one bright yellow rubber strap in her hand.

Mack took the paper, folded it and rolled it again giving Fitz a quick nod. “Okay, Tremors, we’re just put this around your arm and then we’re off.”

“NO!” the little girl shrieked, kicking both feet to keep him away.

Mack cocked his head toward them motioning for Fitz to secure his little sister’s feet. He took the straps from Jemma and motioned for her to do the same with Skye’s opposite arm. Both teens did their best. Fitz had to straddle the skinny little legs that suddenly had a lot more power than he imagined as Jemma laid her chest against Skye’s whispering reassurances close to her little sister’s ear.

Gently wrapping the paper around Skye’s arm, and pulling the straps secure, Mack ignored the spew of language that came from the little girl as he scooped her into his arms and stood.

Fitz’s eyes went wide as he sat back and looked up at Mack. “Don’t look at me.” He pointed to himself. “She did not learn any of that from these lips. Hell, momma’d have the skin worn off me if I ever…” He slapped a hand over his mouth realizing what he’d said.

Jemma was too emotional to even notice as she grabbed her terrycloth cover-up and pulled it over her swimsuit then grabbed Elena’s and followed Mack and Fitz to the car.
Mack placed the still wailing little girl on a stretcher explaining rapidly what had happened. Elena held the phone to her ear and shook her head at him as she ushered Fitz and Jemma into the large waiting area. Skye was whisked away but her wail could be heard throughout the ER.

Fitz looked around the unfamiliar hospital. “Dr. Stephens doesn’t have privileges here.” He whispered to Jemma, tears still streaming down her cheeks. “And Momma’s not answering.”

“Are you with the child just brought in?” A young nurse inquired trying not to obviously stare at the clothing this odd family wore. At Elena’s nod she continued. “I need you to answer a few questions.” She motioned for the woman to follow her.

Jemma was probably the least odd of the bunch in a blue one piece jumper that snapped up the front. Fitz still wore the slightly large coverall, now christened with several splotches of deep black grease, both knees green with the grass stains earned when he slid across the lawn to his sister’s aid. His hands were far from clean. Elena pulled the robe Jemma had given her over her two piece swimsuit. It covered most of her but barely reached past the tops of her thighs. Even Mack, wherever he was, was splattered with grease and grime from his work in the garage.

Elena turned to the twins. “You stay right here. I will be right back. Do not move. Understand?”

Fitz nodded as he wrapped an arm around his sister’s shoulders. “Is Mack with Skye?” He asked. “She’s very frightened.” Elena nodded although she wasn’t really sure where her partner had gone.

“Can you tell me what happened?” The young nurse asked, holding her pen over a large clipboard.

“She fell…slipped on something in the yard.” She watched the nurse jot something down. “Name…the child’s name.” She asked.

“Skye Coulson, she’s nine years old.” Elena offered.

“Your daughter?”
“No,” Elena responded. “She’s…she…my boss, she’s my bosses’ daughter. They’re out of town. I’m having some trouble contacting them…perhaps they have no service.” She offered.

After exchanging Phil and Melinda’s information, including phone numbers, Elena made her way back to the twins and found Mack seated with an arm around each. She sat next to Jemma, taking the girl’s hand in hers.

“They gave her something to calm her down.” Mack said without looking at her. “Took her to radiology.”

“So we wait,” Elena nodded, smiling at Jemma.

“I’m sure it’s broken.” The little girl sniffled.

“Momma’s gonna have a cow.” Fitz shook his head.

Mack and Elena shared a concerned glance.

“Coulson?” A young man announced from the doorway.

Mack pulled his arms from the twin’s shoulders and stood. The man smiled and told him they all could accompany him to Skye’s room.

“She’s sedated, so she’s a little loopy but you can talk to her and let her know you’re here. She’s asking for her mom.” He smiled at Elena. “Guess you were at the pool, having a great time when this happened. Always when you least expect it, huh?”

Mack nodded as they turned the corner and walked down a long congested hallway. The aid stopped at the second to last curtain and stepped aside. “He she is.” He smiled. “The doctor will be in as soon as he reviews the X-rays.”

The family nodded and moved into the small room, surrounding the bed that made the little girl look even smaller. She was now clad in a pink and yellow flowered hospital gown and covered with a light blanket. Her red and blue swimsuit was in a blue patient property bag.
Jemma took a quick breath, placing a hand over her mouth. Skye’s arm was now raised in an inflated splint, her small fingers swollen and shiny. Wires led to the monitors over the little girl’s head and a thin tube connected her to a clear IV solution. It was one thing to know what all of this was and how it helped a patient, it was another to see her baby sister lying there looking so very helpless. She reached out and took Skye’s uninjured hand, relieved to feel the little girl squeeze back.

Elena flipped out her phone and shook her head. “No service in here. I’ll have to go outside to try again.” She dreaded going into the parking lot in her current outfit and hoped Mack would volunteer to make the call. Another different nurse entered carrying a set of scrubs she passed to the woman.

“I thought you might be more comfortable with these,” She smiled. “Can’t help what we’re wearing when the unexpected happens. Brought my little one in with a raging fever, all I had was a robe.” She smiled. “Glad someone had the sense to help me out, so I thought I’d pay it forward.” Elena nodded her thanks and slipped on the garments over her two-piece. She smiled at Mack and slipped out to try Phil and Melinda again.

“Momma,” Skye whimpered in a small tired voice.

“It’s okay, baobei.” Jemma hushed her, kissing her hand. “Momma will be here soon. Just sleep, bao bao.” She felt the little squeeze again and quickly wiped the tear from her cheek.

A doctor walked in a moment later, he smiled at the twins and extended a hand to Mack. “Hello, I’m Dr. Yevitz. How’s everyone doing?”

“Well, Skye’s not doing very well at the moment.” Fitz sneered, thinking it was a rather insipid question.

The doctor smiled. “I don’t suppose she is.” He stepped to the little girl and pulled his stethoscope to his ears then listened to her heart and respiration. Taking his small pen light, he looked into her eyes then stood back and took a breath. “She’s got a closed fracture about an inch below the right humerus and a second hairline fracture about two inches above the same. No sign of head trauma and back and neck checked out fine. We’re waiting for the orthopedic doc from peeds to take a second look.” He patted the little girl’s left arm. “We’ll give her something for pain in the meantime.” He nodded toward Mack. “She slipped and did this?”
Fitz let a flutter escape his lips. “Skye never does anything small.”

Mack put his hands on the boy’s shoulders and squeezed softly, letting Fitz know he needed to be quiet.

“I wasn’t there, I mean not right there when it happened. She was running toward the pool and slipped on the wet grass. My…partner says she went up in the air and came down hard.” The doctor nodded.

“I’m pretty sure it’s just a simple set and cast, but the ortho guy will know better. Nurse will be in with a little injection in a bit.” He reached out and took Mack’s hand again.

“Crap, butt shots,” Fitz groaned. “She is going to be seriously pi…perturbed…seriously.”

“Nice save,” Mack smiled jostling the boy by the shoulders he still held.

“I hope that night-night stuff doesn’t wear off before that nurse gets here.” Fitz shook his head. “I don’t think there are sufficient people here to hold her down if she wakes up first.”

Elena walked back into the room. Just her look told Mack she had not yet been able to reach the Coulsons. He couldn’t imagine them turning off their phones being so far away from their kids. He filled her in on the doctor’s visit and both moved to the side when the nurse entered with a small hypodermic.

“Okay, gents, you want to step into the hall for a bit?” The large woman smiled at the group. “Ladies you can stay.”

“Huh,” Fitz smirked. “Like we haven’t seen enough of that little bahoochie.”

Mack gave the boy a nudge toward the door and stepped out behind him.

“Okay, sweetie,” the nurse crooned to the little girl. “We’re going to roll you to the left a little bit,” she spoke as she gently pushed the blanket aside and turned Skye away from her injured arm. Skye put up no fight, simply slumped in that direction. “Little pinch, little burn…” she gave a quiet
warning before pushing the needle to its target. Skye let out a sad whimper as the nurse laid her back and tucked the blanket around her. Discarding the sharp she checked the monitors and IV infuser before smiling at Elena. She placed the call button on the side of the bed. “If you need anything just buzz.” With that she stepped out.

xx

Two hours later the small group still waited for the orthopedic doctor. Fitz paced back and forth across the small room, glancing at the small television screen with volume that only the person on the bed could hear. Some goofy cartoon was playing, since the last nurse that came in to check on things figured it was the only thing kids ever watched. He wondered if this was what it felt like to be in prison and vowed never ever to break the smallest law, no matter how goofy it was.

Jemma, though still heartsick over her little sister’s pain, watched the monitors and infusers taking in every bit of every blip and beep. Twice she left the room to stroll through the hall and assess other patients’ injuries and illnesses. Fitz’s stomach turned just thinking about it.

Elena tried twice and Mack three times to contact Phil or Melinda or both but had no success. It was beyond frustrating. How could they just disappear? Mack knew they had traveled someplace in rural Pennsylvania scoping out a safehouse for some family that needed protection during a nasty trial. Could it be that secluded they had no service at all? Could it take that long to check out this place and then drive back? Where the hell were they?

“I’ve left four messages and sent three emails, they have to get one eventually.” Elena growled as she paced in the opposite direction Fitz had traveled before Mack sent him and Jemma to the commissary if for nothing more than a long walk. Both were ordered to have something to eat and drink and not return for at least an hour.

“MACK!” Fitz’s voice startled the man out of his seat before the boy even entered the room. “Mack!” he repeated breathlessly as he skidded around the door.

“Fitz,” Mack bellowed in an angry whisper. “You can’t be carrying on like that here.”

Grabbing Mack’s hand he tried pulling him toward the door. “You have to come, Mack. Jemma, she…come on, Mack.” He tugged at the man who threw a confused look at Elena. “You’re not going to believe it, Mack.”
Shrugging his shoulders, Mack rose and followed the boy motioning for Elena to stay with Skye. Fitz pulled him the length of the hallway and into the last room against the far wall.

“Fitz, what the…” the large man protested as the boy threw the curtain aside and held out a hand.

Mack’s eyes went wide as Jemma waved from the bed, a large ice pack held against her midsection. The man pulled his hand from Fitz’s and rushed to the side of the bed. “What the…” he started.

“She got her foot caught in the chairs in that big cafeteria and some big guy that was all yelling and carrying on about some sort gave it a shove and BAM!” Fitz slammed his hand against the counter top causing a bang that startled everyone within earshot. “Down she went,” he shot his hand up in the air then straight down with a whistle and a crash sound as he did. “Bam! She hit the floor like a paratrooper without a chute. BAM!” He called again.

“Fitz,” Mack warned. “Keep it down.”

“There were doctors everywhere.” Fitz was still excited. “Whisked her off like she was royalty.” He turned his back to his sister and whispered around his hand. “They think it’s broken.”

Mack raised his hand to his eyes and massaged the headache that was growing there. They hadn’t had these kids twelve hours and they’d already broken two of them. He considered sending Fitz back to get Elena, but changed his mind.

“Okay, you stay right here with Jemma. Do not leave this room. Understand?” Mack sounded totally defeated. Fitz saluted and gave a quick nod.

“Don’t worry Mack,” Jemma assure him. “I’ll make sure he stays with me.”

Mack gave half a smile and a sad nod.

xx

“¡Dios mío! ¿Qué diablos puede pasar? ¿Dos de ellos? ¿Dos niños rotos? ¡Nunca volverán a
confiar en nosotros!” Elena threw her hands up at Mack’s tale and wondered just how she could be in two places at once.

“Hola, soy el doctor Alcaldo. ¿Hay algún problema?” A tall thin man entered the room looking very concerned.

Mack turned to him. “No, no problem just…two kids on opposite ends of the hall”

The doctor looked at a pad he pulled from his pocket. “Skye Coulson, nine, double fracture, humerus and radius?” Mack nodded. The doctor smiled and looked at the next page on his pad. “Jemma Coulson, fourteen, simple fracture, scaphoid?” Mack looked to Elena who shrugged, neither had the chance to speak to a doctor about Jemma.

The doctor smiled. “Guess you’re here for the special then, two for one day.” He laughed but neither Mack nor Elena seemed amused. “Okay, Mr. Coulson we’re going to treat this little lady first and then see to your other daughter.”

Mack opened his mouth to correct the man, but Elena put a hand on his arm and her look told him to just let it go.

xx

“Lost?” Melinda was between a laugh and a growl as she exited the car and marched around it. “How the hell are we lost?”

“One rock looks pretty much like another, Mel. And these trees,” Phil swept an arm toward the brush as he stared at the phone in his hand. “They are not great landmarks either.”

“Directions?” She snarled.

Phil dropped the phone into his pocket and frowned. “Unless you see a talkative raccoon or maybe a personable porcupine, we’re pretty much on our own.”

Melinda looked to the skyline and shook her head. “You found the place with no problems.” She
looked at her watch. “Just backtrack.”

“If it were that easy we wouldn’t be twenty miles west of nowhere.” Phil deadpanned. He turned and took in the forest scenery. “On the bright side we know they won’t be easy to find.”

Melinda glanced at her own phone for a moment then jammed it back into her pocket. “Or get in touch with them,” she glared.

“They’ll have a sat-phone for emergencies.” Phil responded automatically.

“We should be so lucky,” she growled.

“East,” Phil answered.

“East,” She repeated.

“The safe house is west of Philly. We just need to head east. It’s after noon, so we keep the sun at our back and we’re bound to find some kind of civilization.” He smiled.

“Or the Atlantic,” Melinda sneered as she yanked open the car door and dropped into the seat.

Phil glanced down the road at the miles of pine trees. “Or the Atlantic,” he frowned.

xx

“Hey, Tremors,” Mack smiled at the little girl now sitting up against the raised bed in the ER. “That is one bright pink cast you’ve got there.” He pointed to the shoulder to fingertip fiberglass sleeve on the girl’s right arm.

Skye blinked her wide eyes and stared at the thing that was her arm. She held it with the opposite arm as if it were a separate piece or a strange toy she’d somehow acquired. She watched the tops of her fingers and thumb as they moved slowly, wondering if they were somehow doing on their own.
The nurse who had given Elena the scrubs stood next to the bed and smiled at Mack. “She’s still a little woozy from the sedative and the pain meds they gave her. She hears you, but she’s not quite with us yet, are you sweetie?” She turned to Skye and patted her leg.

Skye continued watching her fingers, almost trance-like and gave a very small nod. She did not react when Elena wheeled Jemma into the room. The older girl sported a shorter cast from her fingers to her elbow. She’d chosen bright green as the color for it. Fitz stepped around them into the room.

“It’s rather ridiculous that they have her in that wheelchair. She is perfectly able to walk with a broken wrist.” The young boy smiled.

“I believe it has a lot to do with liability, Fitz. If I were to fall again or if someone might injure me somehow the hospital would be responsible. I think they may just be aware of their own responsibilities for their patients.” Jemma explained.

Fitz shrugged his shoulders. “Still seems like a waste.” He turned to his younger sister. “Hey, Skye do you like the color I chose for you?” He lightly rubbed his hand across her cast.

Skye looked up at him, staring as if she wasn’t sure who he was or how he’d gotten there. She blinked a few times as he smiled at her.

The nurse rubbed a hand across Fitz’s curls and laughed a small laugh. “Doctor’s prescribed some pain meds just in case you need them, for both and an antibiotic just in case. You’ll want to schedule a follow up with your pediatrician within ten days and Dr. Alcaldo wants to see both girls in two weeks. The time and date of the appointment is with your discharge forms.” She smiled at Mack and Elena who nodded their understanding.

“You want to have them wriggle their fingers to increase circulation and contact the doctor if either has increased pain or fever of one hundred one or higher. Watch for swelling above or below the cast and again, contact the doctor if their fingers become cold or numb.” She looked at Jemma who was listening intently and nodded at each instruction. “If the pain becomes intense and cannot be relieved by the medication you’ll need to call.” Jemma nodded again.

“Well, I guess that’s it for the rest of the summer,” Fitz frowned. “Of course I’ll have the whole pool to myself then won’t I?” He smiled.
“Mmmm,” the nurse frowned. “Jemma?” She pointed her pen toward the girl in the wheelchair. Jemma nodded. “Probably about six weeks.” Jemma nodded her understanding. “The little one more like eight to ten weeks, but doctor will be able to tell more when you see him in two weeks.”

“Still,” Fitz shook his head. “That is most of the summer. Skye will be quite pi…pitterbed…” Fitz grimaced.

Elena glared at him over her brows as Mack stifled a laugh.

“She loves the pool more than an otter!” He explained. “You might need to give us more of whatever turned her into…whatever she is right now.” He nodded to the nurse who stood next to him.

“Not to worry, young man. Dr. Alcaldo knows a lot about kids and summer. He made sure both your sisters have water resistant casts. They should be able to spend some time in the water, but I doubt they’ll be bouncing cannon balls or going off the high dive.” She smiled.

Fitz shook his head. “That’s probably just fine for Jemma, but you really don’t know Skye.” He looked at his little sister who had fallen into a light slumber. “She’s capable of pretty much anything.”

The nurse smiled as she tapped the forms she had been reviewing together and turned the clipboard toward Mack. “All we need is a signature and you are free to go. Your prescriptions are attached. I would advise filling them before this evening, just in case sleeping is difficult.”

Mack nodded as he took the item and scribbled his name across the bottom lines.

xx

Phil pulled into the parking lot of what might have been a gas station or possibly some back woods Honky Tonk. It was difficult to tell, but he and Melinda entered the dimly lit establishment hoping to find directions to the interstate and a working landline.

The air was full of stale cigarette smoke. Some twangy music played on what was probably one
those old juke boxes that sat in 1960’s restaurant booths. The place was sparsely populated but hummed with a mixture of quiet conversations, interspersed with rounds of laughter.

The couple traded a tentative glance as they approached what seemed to be bar but was more like an old door spread across two barrels.

“Evenin’ folks,” the bartender smiled through a toothless grin. “Ya must be lost, cuz ya sure ain’t from ‘round here. Git ya somethin’ cool ta wet yer whistle?”

Phil smiled back as he let out a relieved sigh. This place gave him visions of Deliverance her could definitely live without. He felt Melinda’s relief as she let her guard down about twenty percent. She was not so easily convinced.

“No, no thank you.” He replied.

“Ya need gas then,” he turned toward a group of men gathered around another small door set on yet another barrel serving as a small table. “Yo Zig, ya wanna man the pumps? Better check the oil fer this guy too, he’s got himself all turned around.” He turned back to Phil as one of the men rose and started for the door. “Lookin’ fer the interstate are ya?” He almost laughed.

“Not a lot of road signs around here,” Phil tried not to sound as embarrassed as he felt. “And yeah, fill the tank, please.”

The bartender laughed and was joined by most of the patrons in the place. “Ziggy’ll get ya there. He’s darn good at pointin’ it out. Most folks end up here soon’r later. Sure, I can’t intrest ya in a cold one?” He held up an empty mug.

Phil held up a hand. “No, no thanks, got a long drive ahead of us.”

“No problem,” the older man smiled as he turned and clinked a few bottles together as he rifled through a small cooler. “How’s this suit ya?” He held up two bottles of cold cola with an even larger smile.

Phil smiled as he stepped forward and gave a nod. He reached for his wallet but the man shook his head. “Nope, no charge...we give these here free with a full tank and directions.”
Phil smiled back and took the offering. “You wouldn’t have a telephone we could use?”

The man reached under the makeshift bar and brought up a black rotary dial phone. Phil smiled at the object as well as the memories it brought back. He picked the receiver out of the cradle and put it to his ear, holding it in place with his shoulder as he held the heavy phone and dialed the number. He smiled at the clickety sound of the dial spinning back into place with each number spun. The sound of a ring tone was almost unfamiliar. He smiled at Melinda as he waited for an answer that did not come. He placed the receiver back and thanked the man behind the bar.

“Maybe they’re visiting that new ice cream parlor they’re always talking about.” He grinned at Melinda who had that ‘look’.

“Maybe,” she replied as she followed him out the door.

Ziggy had finished pumping the gas. He bent over the front of the car washing the windshield and turned to the couple as they approached. With one hand he brushed his long hair away from his face while shoving the rag he held into his back pocket with the other.

“Tank’s full, oil’s fine and got all the bugs off the windows,” he pointed to the pump. “That’ll be thirty-two eighty.” Phil counted out the bills and held them out to the young man. “Let me get your change, only be a minute.” He turned toward the building but was stopped by Phil’s hand on his arm.

“Keep the change, Zig.” He smiled. “Just tell us how to get to the highway.”

“Sure,” the young man smiled. “Just keep on the way you’re headed about fifteen miles, go right at the ‘Y’ and then in five or six miles you should see the signs, when you have to turn go right again and you’ll be about a mile from the what we call the shops. You know supermarket, WalMart and all. Just past there you’ll hit the interstate. You should have cell service by the time you get to the ‘Y’.” Ziggy smiled. He watched as Phil attempted to turn the top off the cola bottle. “Let me get that for you.” He took both bottles and walked to an old soda dispenser on the side of the building and used the cap remover to open them then walked back and handed them to the couple.

Phil smiled his thanks and took a long drink before joining his wife in their vehicle. They waved to Ziggy as they pulled back onto the road.
Half an hour later Melinda was listening to the message on Mack’s voice mail after doing the same with Elena’s number. She looked at Phil, worry growing on her face.

xx

The long streaks of reds and yellows stretched across the late evening sky as Mack pulled the car into his driveway. Elena helped Jemma to undo her seatbelt and slide to the ground as Mack took Skye in his arms and carried her toward the house. The doctor had told them she would probably sleep for the next few hours if not through the night.

Jemma insisted she was not in any pain although the look on her face did not say the same. Fitz stood and stared at her knowing she was definitely lying because she never wanted anyone fussing over her. He picked up one of the prescription bottles they had waited for at the pharmacy and read the directions.

“It says here you can have one every six hours for pain.” He informed his sister.

Jemma daintily snorted. “Don’t be silly, Fitz. I’m not in any pain, just a bit uncomfortable.” She held the small cast in the opposite hand as she slid on to one of the kitchen chair. She turned to Elena as she entered the room. “How’s Skye? Is she still asking for momma? Perhaps we should try to call her.” The young girl worried.

Elena smiled at the girl as she took the prescription bottle from her brother and unscrewed the cap. She shook out one pill and put it into Jemma’s hand then pulled a water from the fridge. “You need to take that, momi. No arguing.” She held a hand to the girl’s forehead. “Your mama and papa are on their way.” She assured the girl. “Take that and you can rest while you wait.”

Jemma did as she was told then set the water bottle on the table. “I am really not a bit tired, Elena. Perhaps I should see to Skye, sit with her in case she wakes before Momma gets here. She will be terribly upset.”

Elena was already shaking her head. “Skye is sleeping and will sleep a very long time. You need to rest as well.” Fitz nodded his agreement. “Come, the couch is big and comfortable. There are plenty of movies you can choose.”

“Mack’s got the new Star Wars film.” Fitz encouraged her. “It may make the time go a bit faster.”
“Fitz, you know that is ridiculous. Time cannot move any faster or slower than it does. It only seems that way because we are not watching it.” Jemma spoke around the yawn she tried to hide.

Fitz smiled. “Then let’s watch the movie instead of the clock until Mom gets here.” Jemma nodded and followed him and Elena to the living room.

Once she had them settled with their movie and a few snacks, Elena walked back to the spare bedroom where Mack sat watching Skye sleep. She stepped into the room and rested a hand on the large man’s shoulder.

“She will be okay, Mack.” She assured him.

Mack nodded, leaned forward and rested his head on his hands. “She looks so calm, innocent…” He almost whispered.

“It was an accident, Mack. It’s no one’s fault.” Elena whispered as she squeezed his shoulder.

“Two accidents,” he reminded her, “on our watch.”

Elena nodded. “Yes, Mack, accidents, something we could not see happening and could not stop.”

Mack laughed through his nose. “Let’s hope Melinda sees it that way.”

Elena cringed a bit but nodded. “She will understand. She knows her children, especially this little alborotador.” She sniggered.

Mack smiled and shook his head. “Jemma?”

“Probably asleep as well.” She smiled. “Melinda left a message about an hour ago. They’ll be later than expected.”
“Got lost,” Mack nodded still staring at the small girl asleep a few feet away. He meant to stay as long as Skye slept. He had no intention of allowing her to slip off the bed onto the floor and do even more damage.

Elena nodded. “She’s okay, Mack, really.”

He looked at her for the first time and smiled a sad smile. “I’m just going to sit here and make sure.” Mack spoke softly, with a hint of profound sadness hidden in his deep voice.

Elena kissed his forehead. She knew. She knew he sometimes felt the loss of his own child so deeply she could not touch his pain. She understood right now he needed to comfort Skye more than the little girl needed it and despite the fact she even knew he was there. She kissed him again and quietly left him to guard his memories.

xx

Phil pulled into the driveway well after dark and let out a sigh of relief. It was like some bizarre game and they had finally reached the goal line. Melinda was already out of the car and halfway across the walk before she turned back. He sat with his forehead resting on the steering wheel that he still held with both hands. She walked back and knocked lightly on the window. He turned slowly without lifting his head. Her eyes asked if he was coming. He sat back and took a breath, rubbed a hand through his hair and opened the door.

xx

“Hey mom!” Fitz exclaimed quietly as he pulled the front door open and gave her a quick hug. He stepped aside and smiled as Phil slapped a hand on his shoulder. “Hi, Da. You really missed a wild day.”

“We had some wild of our own, little man.” Phil laughed.

“Where is everyone?” Melinda asked suddenly very suspicious of the silence that met her.

Fitz raised his brows and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, Jemma fell asleep while watching a rather sad prequel to one of our favorite movies and Mack is upstairs with Skye. Elena said she was going to make some tea or coffee so you could talk when you got here. I’m supposed to get
Mack without waking Skye.  I think I’m to take his place when I do.”

Melinda furrowed her brow.  “Why does someone have to stay with Skye?”  She was already on her way toward the spare bedroom.

Fitz hopped sideways to cut her off.  “Wait, mom, you really need to talk to Elena before you…”  he stopped at his mother’s glare.  “Really, Skye is fine now.  Everything is fine now, the excitement is all over and she’ll probably sleep til morning.  The doctor said…”  Fitz stopped himself realizing, too late that he’d said too much.

“Doctor?”  Phil and Melinda repeated together, both approaching their son.

Fitz stepped back and swallowed hard.  “M-maybe you should talk to Elena…”

Melinda moved the boy aside gently.  “I need to see my baby first.”

Fitz nodded.  “You’ll need to see Jemma as well.  She’s a bit better but not one hundred percent perfect.”  He sighed.

Phil gave Melinda a curt nod, letting her know he would see to their older daughter then looked to Fitz who shrugged again and led his father to his sleeping sister.

Phil stood over the couch and stared down at Jemma who was curled into the corner of the large sofa.  Her bright green cast was not hard to miss as she still cradled it with the opposite hand.  He brushed a stray hair from her face then bent and placed a soft kiss on her forehead.  Turning to Fitz he raised his brows then motioned for the boy to be quiet as he pulled a light blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over the girl.  He motioned for the boy to follow him from the room.

“It was an accident.”  Fitz began without being asked.  “She got her foot all jumbled in the leg of a chair and some bloke pushed off on his own causing her to fall.  It’s a common happenstance when a person tries to break their fall and the doctor said it should be healed in a little more than a month.”  He spoke quickly, trying to get everything said in one breath.

Phil knit his brow.  “Where…”
“In the cafeteria,” Fitz answered before the question was completed. “Mack sent us for a snack because we’d been waiting so long for the orthopedic doctor and…”

“He sent Jemma for a snack when she was hurt?” Phil was more than confused.

Fitz paused for a moment and knit his brow, wondering how his father had gotten mixed up, then continued. “No, it was before all that. She was injured while we were having the snack.” He smiled at his explanation.

Phil closed his eyes and took a breath. It had been a long exasperating day and it was not getting any better. He tried to remain calm. “Fitz…” he began.

“It’s only a simple fracture of the metacarpal bone…the wrist,” he simplified. “She chose the bright green herself but we, the both of us, thought Skye would prefer the bright pink. It’s much more like her and…”

“Skye?” Phil questioned, stopping the boy’s further explanation.

“Yes, we were waiting for the orthopedic pediatric specialist to see her when Jemma lost her footing and…”

“Broke her wrist,” Phil exhaled. He took a breath and swallowed once. “What happened to Skye?”

“She’s got a cast from here to here,” Fitz ran his finger from the knuckles on his right hand to his right shoulder. “Two fractures, one here and one here,” he pointed to a spot below his elbow and one on his bicep. “I think one might be where that Radcliffe guy hurt her when she was a wee girl.”

Phil put his fingers to the bridge of his nose and massaged for a moment before he smiled at his son. “Let’s go see if Elena has something a little stronger than coffee.” He put an arm around Fitz’s shoulders and moved toward the kitchen.

xx
Melinda pushed the door open on the spare bedroom and stepped inside. Mack still sat on the small chair resting his chin on his folded hands. His eyes were closed in a silent prayer, which was not usual for the big man of even bigger faith. Mack gave his troubles to the Lord and believed in the power of prayer.

The worried mother stepped around him to the side of the bed and gently moved the blanket from her child. She stifled the gasp at the shoulder to finger cast that covered her little girl’s arm. She quickly leaned forward and placed her lips on Skye’s forehead, checking for the slightest warmth. Relieved to find none, she tucked the blanket back around her baby and turned to the dark man seated at the foot of the bed.

“She slipped on the wet grass, landed hard on a rock in the yard. I’m really sorry, Melinda. I didn’t even know it was there.” Mack shook his head and blinked the tears from his eyes.

“Running” She smiled as she brushed Skye’s hair from her face. “Always in a hurry, this one.”

“I was…” he stopped wishing he had been there, wishing he had been there to stop it before it happened. “I was working on my bike. I’m sorry. I should have been watching her.”

“I don’t think it would have mattered.” Melinda assured him. “Unless you tied her down you couldn’t keep her from running.”

“But…” he started.

Melinda shook her head. “Accidents happen, Mack. I’m just glad she was with you and you were with her.” She stepped to him and patted his shoulder. “Fitz, says Elena’s got some tea brewing. How about we join her and you can fill us in on your day?”

The big man shook his head. “Don’t want anymore accidents today, two is more than enough.”

“Two?” Melinda’s eyebrows rose.

Mack shook his head. “Guess you haven’t seen Jemma.” He sighed.
Melinda let out a soft sigh. “Guess we have a lot to talk about.”

Mack nodded as he stood and followed her from the room, leaving the door opened.

xx

By the time Melinda tucked Skye into her own bed it was well after midnight. She kissed her baby and checked again for any sign of fever before moving to Jemma’s room. The older girl had managed to change and climb into her own bed before momma came to pull up the blankets and sit next to her.

“There will be no pretending it doesn’t hurt. Right, Jemma?” Melinda pseudo-scolded her young teen.

Jemma shook her head. “No, Momma, but that pain reliever makes me so very sleepy. I really don’t like that feeling. Can we try just a bit of ibuprofen instead? I promise I will tell you if it isn’t relieving the pain. Please?”

Melinda tucked the blankets around the girl and smiled. “We’ll see how you feel tomorrow.”

Jemma let out a small breath and nodded then frowned. “I’m so very sorry about Skye, Momma. I should have been watching instead of reading and just lying there. She wanted to go back into the pool and I just…well, I should have taken her in with me, should have been more help to Elena and then none of this would have happened…”

Melinda laid a finger lightly on Jemma’s lips. “This is no one’s fault and least of all yours. It was an accident, Jemma.

“But...” the young girl began as her mother moved her finger slightly then quickly back.

“It was an accident, Jemma.” Melinda warned and the girl nodded. Melinda smiled and kissed her daughter on both cheeks before rising and kissing her again. “Sleep now, it’s very late and I’m sure Skye will be full of dramatics tomorrow.” She smiled at the girl’s giggle, kissed her again, turned out the light and shut the door as she left, meeting her husband in the hall.
“Whatever they gave Skye we ought to get for emergencies.” He laughed. “She is out cold.”

“Mack said they had to double dose her.” Melinda shook her head. “I’m surprised that’s all it took. I’m sure she put up quite a fight.”

“Jemma?” Phil asked as he stepped to her door.

“Almost out, but no fever.” Melinda smiled. “I’m sure she’s waiting for you.”

Phil smiled back as he opened the door.

She nodded and moved to the last goodnight knocking lightly on the door before entering Fitz’s room. The boy jumped a bit and turned away quickly dropping his hand to his side.

Melinda tilted her head just a smidge as she eyed him suspiciously. “Thought you’d be in bed already, it’s pretty late, bao bao.”

“Just about to climb under the covers,” he smiled back kicking small bits of paper under the bed with one bare foot.

Melinda easily recognized the remnants of band aids. She pursed her lips and put out a hand. “Let’s see the damages.” She ordered.

Fitz swallowed once then lifted his hand to his mother’s revealing a nasty gash across the heel of his palm. Melinda grimaced and sucked in a breath through her teeth.

“I…it’s not bad. I cleaned it but the plasters won’t adhere. I suppose my hand is too sweaty.” He explained.

“And you said nothing because?”

“Well,” Fitz hesitated. “Jemma and Skye needed a lot more attention and I did take care of it myself. It’s not in need of any sutures, just a wicked gash.” He shrugged as Melinda led him to the
bathroom and forced his hand into the sink. She gently washed the injury.

“When Skye screamed, Mack went racing out of the garage and I guess I jumped a bit. The screwdriver slipped and well…” He pointed to his hand. “I just wrapped a clean rag around it and then everything just happened so I kept quiet. But when we got back to Mack’s house I washed it and poured some peroxide on it as well.”

Melinda shook her head then pulled her young man into a tight hug. When she released him she shook a finger in his face. “Don’t you ever pull stunt like that again. Got it?” She pulled a tube of Neosporin, a gauze pad and a roll of the same from the medicine cabinet and began dressing the wound. Once it was done she applied adhesive tape and admired her work before placing a kiss on the boy’s hand.

“We’ll see Dr. Stephen’s tomorrow, just to be sure.” She smiled at him. “I think you might be due for a tetanus shot anyway.” Fitz groaned as she put an arm around him and kissed the top of his head. “I’m pretty sure they give those in the arm these days.” She assured him as she walked him back to his room.

“I’m really too old to be getting tucked in,” Fitz frowned as he climbed into his bed and snuggled into the pillows.

Melinda smiled as she sat on the edge of his bed and twirled a finger in one of his curls. “I think I’ll decide when you’re too big for me to just sit here and love being with my beautiful boy.” She smiled at the blush on his cheeks then tucked the blanket up to his chin. “Thank you for taking care of your sisters today, bao bao.” She smiled at him smiling back at her.

A moment later he was sitting up wrapping his arms around her. “I really love you, Momma.” He whispered close to her ear. “I’m glad you don’t think I’m too big.”

Melinda blinked a tear away and hugged him back.
Skye’s in trouble again. She just can’t seem to hold her tongue
A little chat with big brother Fitz might help, but when Momma comes to chat things
just fall apart
Luckily Momma tempers discipline with understanding and chatting with her youngest
relaxes both

“Hey, mom!” Fitz smiled as he dropped his backpack inside the back door and grabbed a still
warm cookie from the cooling rack on the kitchen table.

Melinda turned from pulling another tray from the oven and glared at the sack on the floor.

“I won’t leave it there.” The boy defended himself around a mouthful as he reached for another.

Melinda set down her tray and shook her head. “You’re going to spoil your dinner and those are
for the school bake sale on Saturday.”

Fitz smiled. “They’ll be the best seller. I’m quite certain.” He dodged her swat as he grabbed a
third cookie. “No one makes chocolate cherry cookies like you, mom.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Fitz.” Melinda grinned as she slid the new batch to the cooling
racks on the table.

Fitz munched for a moment then noticed something missing. “I thought Skye was supposed to be
helping. Isn’t this for her school?”

“Your sister is spending a little time contemplating the value of discretion.” Melinda huffed as she
continued her work.

“Mmmm,” Fitz nodded around his chewing. “Attitude difficulties?”
“Nothing I can’t adjust,” Melinda answered. “It seems Skye disagrees with that.”

Fitz laughed as he reached for his backpack. “Perhaps it has to do with her turning ten in a few weeks. She’s entering early adolescence.” He shook his head. “I believe something may occur in the brain during that time that makes young people forget everything they’ve been taught and think they know more than every other person.”

Melinda stood back and snorted. “You certainly did.”

Fitz blushed then laughed. “And you certainly did show me I did not.”

Melinda moved close to her son and took his face in her hands. “And look what a beautiful, well mannered young man you’ve become.” She kissed his forehead and patted his cheeks gently.

Fitz hiked his backpack on to one shoulder and smirked as his mother stood back. He turned to leave then looked over his shoulder with a frown. “I wouldn’t hold out much hope for young Skye. She is definitely in a league of her own.”

Melinda moved to begin cleaning up the kitchen mess but smiled at her son. “Ah yes, but I am still team manager and for the time being she is benched.”

The boy laughed as he made his way down the hall and up the stairs.

xx

Fitz dropped his pack inside the door of his bedroom then proceeded down the hall to the room closest to his parents. Finding it slightly ajar he pushed it open and found Skye perpendicular across the bed with tips of her toes against the wall and her head a few inches from the floor. Her hair hung down in long strands. He leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms over his chest.

“So, what did you do this time?” He snorted at his little sister.
Skye let her arms fall down so each lay on either side of her head. “How long does it take all the blood to run to your head and kill you?” She moaned. “Will your eyes pop out or do you drown in your own spit?”

Fitz rolled his eyes. “You’d have to be there a considerable amount of time, most likely hours and the cause of death is generally asphyxia or brain hemorrhage. Your body wasn’t made to hang upside down, hence your lungs are on top.” He turned his head to look at her inverted form. “Technically you are not hanging nor are you upside down, just bent over the edge of the bed which might help stretch the kinks out of your neck or give you a nasty headache, but certainly won’t kill you.”

Skye let out a fluttery breath and rolled over, still hanging over the bed. She bounced the tips of her fingers on the floor causing her body to rock up and down and let out an ooff with each bounce.

“And that, little sister,” Fitz sighed, “will more than likely cause you to vomit.”

Sliding forward, the little girl slowly and gently flipped backward and landed spread eagle on the floor. She stared at the ceiling and let out a long breath. “Momma thinks I’m a baby.”

“You are her baby.” Fitz smirked, “always will be.”

Skye lifted all four limbs and let them fall back to the floor. She turned her head to the side and let her tongue loll out while she crossed her eyes. “M ot m ba ba” she spoke around her tongue.

“So what did you do?” Fitz asked again.

Rolling to her tummy, Skye propped her chin on her hands and kicked her bare feet back and forth. “I didn’t do anything.”

Fitz looked at the floor and let out a snort. “Mom sent you to your room to exercise, is it then?”

Skye spun around, sat up and bounced her head against the side of the bed. “Oh, you know her, always thinking you say the wrong thing the wrong way and getting all upset when you try to explain something she just won’t understand.”
“Ahhh, talking back was it then?” Fitz smiled, already knowing the answer.

“I wasn’t talking back,” Skye threw her head back and spoke through her teeth. “I was just trying to make her see my point.”

Fitz nodded as he walked across the room and plopped down on the edge of Skye’s bed. She was still staring up at the ceiling. “What exactly was your point?”

Looking at her older brother with just her eyes she growled. “I want to ride my bike to school.”

Fitz laughed out loud. “Skye, don’t be ridiculous that is almost two miles.”

“That is not far on a bike, Fitz, and lots of kids ride their bikes to school.” Skye argued.

“Those that live much closer I am sure.” Fitz informed her.

Skye shook her head. “Brently Marshall lives almost three miles away and he rides every day.”

Fitz looked at her and shook his head. “Brently Marshall lives with his grandmother two blocks from St. Barts. His mother lives three miles away and he only sees her on weekends.”

Skye slapped her arms over her chest and let out a huff. “That’s still three miles. I shoulda just did it without asking. Then there wouldn’t be so much of everybody telling me I can’t.”

The older boy tousled his baby sister’s hair. “If you did that you’d be in a lot more trouble than you are now and you’d probably never see that bike again, even if you could manage to sit on the seat.”

Pulling her knees up to her chest, Skye wrapped her arms around them and hid her face behind them. “She’d have to catch me first.” She mumbled inside.
“Don’t get any stupid ideas, Skye.” Fitz warned as he stood. “Mom’s almost done in the kitchen. She’ll be up here to talk to you soon so you best start adjusting your attitude.”

Skye’s head popped up. “Is she still really angry like talking all quiet and making her eyes squinty?” She imitated the look Fitz knew very well. He chuckled at how much she resembled their mother.

Stopping at the door, Fitz turned and shook his head. “No, but she’s only about this far from it.” He held his finger and thumb about a half inch apart.

Skye let out an exaggerated sigh and slid sideways to the floor then rolled and planted her face in the rug.

xx

Fitz was very wrong. It was a long, long time before Momma knocked on the door and in those fifteen minutes Skye managed to roll under the bed and find the sneaker she’d thought she’d lost, seventy-five cents, a purple crayon, two pencils and the lollipop she’d stashed in her nightstand for emergencies. She figured she must have fallen asleep with it in her mouth and it just slipped down between the bed and the wall. She rolled back out and lay on the floor staring at it. It didn’t look too bad, just had a bunch of rug fuzz stuck to it. She could probably just wash it off in the tub the next time Momma made her take a bath and it would be fine. She shrugged once and tossed it into the drawer along with the change, the crayon and the pencils.

Skye stood and let out a long frustrated breath then let herself fall face first on to her mattress burying her face in her pillows. Salty flopped to one side. She reached out and pulled the ratty old stuffed animal into a one armed hug, lifted both legs from the knee down and dropped them over and over on the bed.

Melinda entered the room and stood with her hands on her hips watching her youngest in the throes of a prepubescent temper tantrum. She gave the girl a few seconds then cleared her throat and waited. Skye’s feet dropped a second before she rolled over and sat up.

“Hi, Momma,” she greeted Melinda with a little finger-wiggle-wave.

“Hmmm,” Melinda glared then sat down next to her little girl. She stared into Skye’s eyes with her most intense glare. “So, have you changed your mind?”
“Have you?” Skye’s eyebrows shot up in anticipation.

“Skye,” Melinda warned as her voice rose in pitch.

“Momma,” Skye whined back. “You gotta stop treating me like a baby.”

Melinda clenched her teeth and counted to ten in her mind. “Skye,” she breathed. “This has nothing to do with being a baby and everything to do with safety. You are absolutely not going to ride your bike to school. End of discussion.”

“But, Momma,” the girl whined again.

“Enough, Skye, I’m done. No more.” Melinda warned.

Skye stood and stomped one foot. “You never let me do anything!”

Melinda folded her arms over her chest. “Absolutely, I keep you locked away never allowing you to swim or skate or what was that you wanted last weekend….” She tapped a finger on her temple and looked to the ceiling. “Oh yeah, paintball and climbing that rock wall and let’s see soccer and basketball and…”

“That’s not what I mean.” Skye shouted. “I mean things I want to do.”

Melinda half smiled a little inverted pout and pointed to herself. “You’re saying I made you do all those things?”

Skye shook her head. “No, but you won’t let me do what I want.” She drew a deep breath determined not to cry.

“Baobei, what you want to do is dangerous and it is much too far for you to go alone and we have been all over this.” Melinda took the girl’s hands in her own and explained again.
Skye pulled free and stomped again. “It’s not fair!” She quickly pointed a finger at her mother. “And don’t tell me life isn’t fair! That’s not fair either!”

“You are getting dangerously close to a very uncomfortable situation, Skye. I’ve had just about enough of this whole thing.” Melinda warned as her eyes narrowed, but her little girl did not take the hint.

“So have I!” Skye shouted, fists clenched at her side.

Melinda drew a deep breath, took her little girl by the upper arms and sat her down on the bed. “I think it’s time you took a breath and reined it in. Apparently, an hour was not nearly enough time for you to calm yourself.”

“There aren’t enough hours,” Skye mumbled into her own chest.

Melinda put a finger under the girl’s chin and lifted it to look into her eyes. “If you have something to say, I suggest you say it out loud.”

Skye pulled her head away. “No, you’ll just get mad.”

“Oh, I am way past angry, Skye and you are way past a few hours in your room.” Melinda exhaled.

“I don’t care!” The little girl shot back.

Melinda stood and glared down at her defiant child. “Then it won’t matter that you stay here while I take a few minutes to calm down.”

“Whatever,” Skye growled back.

Melinda drew a very deep breath and narrowed her eyes and lowered her voice to a calm, quiet growl. “No bicycle until you understand the dangers I’ve explained three times.”
Skye’s mouth dropped opened. “You can’t!”

“Can’t I?” Melinda replied as she moved to the door. She pulled it open and turned back to the little girl still snarling silently. “You can stay here and wait for me because when I return you and I are going to have that very uncomfortable conversation and I promise you will remembering it for quite a while.” She exited the room and pulled the door closed quietly.

Skye waited until she was sure her mother had gone to the first floor. She grabbed the pillow from the bed and flung it at the door. “I don’t care!” She shouted at it.

But she did and Momma was really mad and she was really gonna get it and she really needed to learn when to stop yakking.

Maybe she was crazy…

xx

It lasted longer than Skye thought and Momma was right she wasn’t going to forget it for a long time. She was pretty sure there were handprints this time because she could feel them simmering on her seat even though she was curled into Melinda’s lap on that ever present rocking chair. In times like this she was glad she was petite and still fit comfortably.

Momma let her cry and didn’t lecture. It wasn’t necessary. They’d been through it all before Momma pulled her over her knees. Her attitude was uncalled for and totally disrespectful, there were no excuses and if this was the way it was going to be they would be having an awful lot of these discussions.

“Momma, do you think I’m crazy?” Skye asked around a sniffle.

Melinda smiled and patted the girl’s backside gently. She kissed the top of her head. “No, baobei I think you’re growing up and sometimes getting just a little too big for your breeches.”

Skye sniffled into the tissue she held. “I don’t have britches.” Melinda chuckled and kissed the girl again.
“But I could be crazy. Jemma says that doing the same thing over and over and thinking things will be different is being crazy. She says some people think Einstein said that and he’s the smartest guy ever. But it coulda been Ben Franklin or Mark Twain.”

“You are not crazy, baobei. I promise you are just having a hard time understanding you aren’t an adult and I am having a hard time letting you turn into one.” She hugged the little girl closer.

“Does that mean I can ride my…” Skye started, hushed with Melinda’s finger over her lips.

“Does it also mean you want another spanking?” Melinda whispered close to her ear. Skye shook her head and snuggled closer to her mother.

“See, I’m doing it again. You keep telling me about my sucky attitude and I keep doing it anyway and then you tan my butt and I just do it again.”

“Don’t say sucky, Skye.” Melinda sighed.

“What if the lady that birthed me was crazy? What if that’s why she left me at St. Agnes? What if I’m crazy like her?” Skye sat up, put her hands on Melinda’s shoulders and stared into her face.

Melinda tucked the girl’s hair behind her ears then took her hands into her own and kissed both. She looked back into her baby’s eyes. “Honestly, Skye we don’t know anything about your birth mother. She left no clues and no one has ever come forward. Some people think she was crazy for leaving you, but I always believed she was brave and loved you very much but just couldn’t give you everything you needed so she put you where she knew someone would find you and make sure you got to the family who would do just that.”

Skye searched her mother’s eyes and found the truth then laid her head back against Melinda’s shoulder. She listened to Melinda’s heartbeat and relaxed into the back and forth motion of the rocking chair.

“Momma?” Skye sniffled.

“Mmmm?” Melinda smiled.
“I’m sorry.” The little girl whispered. “I’m sorry I talked back and hurt your feelings.”

“Hurt my feelings?” Melinda wondered. She felt Skye nod against her chest.

“It hurts when people you love talk mean to you, even if you’re a mom. I was really mean so I’m sorry.” Skye breathed.

Melinda smiled. “Well, thank you Skye. That means a lot.” She kissed the girl’s head and rocked a bit slower.

“Momma?”

“Yes, Skye,” Melinda smiled again

“Do I have to grow up?”

“I think it just happens, baobei. No one can stop it.”

“But we won’t be able to talk like this anymore.” The little girl sniffled and quickly wiped her nose.

Melinda hugged her closer. “Oh, baobei I will always have time to talk with you no matter how big you get.”

“But I’ll be too big to sit on your lap and rock in this chair.” Skye sighed.

“Mmmm,” Melinda chuckled. “Then maybe I’ll sit on your lap.”

Skye laughed. “That would be silly. Maybe we can get a bigger rocker and we can both sit in it.”

“Maybe we can, but for right now we can just sit here and enjoy being close.” Melinda sighed.
Skye nodded and was quiet for a few moments. “Momma?”

“Yes, baobei.”

“I think I’d like our talks more if they didn’t have a spanking with them.”

“Me too, baobei.”

“Maybe we could do this everyday, like when I was really little.”

“I’d like that.”

“Me too”

“Momma?”

“Mmmm”

“Can you show me how to Tai Chi?

Melinda stopped rocking and looked down at her daughter. Skye had often sat and watched as she went through the calming exercise but had never shown interest in participating. “Of course, baobei. I would love to teach you.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Melinda resumed the slowly rhythmic rocking.

“Momma?” Skye asked around a yawn.
“Skye?” Melinda smiled.

“I want to be just like you.” The little girl sighed as her eyes fluttered closed and her breathing became slow and steady.

Melinda rocked, patting her child’s back softly. She recalled the many times she’d sat with her mother and talked well into the night about important things and about nothing. She thought of the times she spent chatting with Fitz when he could not sleep and the many conversations she shared with Jemma.

Yes, she would be there for her baby and yes eventually she would have to let go and let her youngest spread her wings despite the dangers out there…but not today.

Today she’d rock and hum and maybe just close her eyes and remember.
Zigging a Zag

Chapter Summary

Skye's in trouble again, but this time she gets a reprieve. The little girl is searching for answers that no one can give. This is a little different, offering a tale the Coulson family will never realize.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Trip half walked/half stumbled into the kitchen, one eye closed the other only half opened. He rubbed the back of his head and dragged his bare feet to the coffee pot on the counter. Fitz plopped a mug down a second before his brother poured the hot liquid onto that counter.

“Don’t think you’re quite awake yet, are you?” He smirked as Trip jumped at his voice. “Late night?” Fitz waggled his brows.

Trip snorted once as he hip butt his younger brother aside and reached for the sugar bowl. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Not really,” Fitz remarked as he watched Trip shovel several spoons of sugar into his cup. “Mom would probably tell you that was way too much sugar.”

“Probably,” Trip agreed around a yawn. “Get the milk, little man,” he smiled as he hip-butted Fitz toward the refrigerator.

Fitz opened the refrigerator door and grabbed the milk, setting it on the table at the same time his brother slid onto a chair. “I think breakfast is done, but we’ve got some of that cereal with the raisins in it.” He offered.

Trip held up one hand, shook his head and rubbed his eyes with the finger and thumb of the other hand. “No, no this is good.”

Fitz sat down and watched as his older brother poured a bit of milk into his java and stirred it without once opening his eyes. “Is this how it’s done at the Point?” He wondered.
Trip let his hand fall to the table and stared at his brother as if the kid was speaking in some foreign language he’d never heard. He blinked a few times then shook his head. “No, Fitz, I’m just tired. I got in late last night.”

“More like early this morning,” Fitz guffawed.

“I had a late class and I missed the bus. I wanted to get here….” He stopped and rubbed his eyes again, looking toward the commotion just outside the back door. “What is all the yelling about?” He started to stand but stopped when Fitz put a hand on his forearm.

“It’s just Skye up to one of her shenanigans. Mom’s been calling her for about an hour and she hasn’t answered. She’s put herself well past the angry point.” He shook his head.

Trip took a breath and sat back down. He took a gulp of coffee and Fitz wondered how he could drink it when it was so hot. “What ya mean, shenanigans?” He looked at his younger brother who did not seem disturbed by their baby sister’s apparent disappearance.

Fitz shrugged his shoulders. “You know, shenanigans, tomfoolery, monkey business or as usual in Skye’s case willful disobedience.” He shook his head. “She’ll more than likely be spending the afternoon in her room nursing the sting off her arse.”

Trip almost laughed the hot coffee into his nostrils. Fitz was so blunt and so blasé at the same time.

“It isn’t funny, Trip.” The younger boy reasoned. “She’s done this a few too many times and Mom has warned her about it as well. Some things just don’t seem to click with our little sister until Mom drives home the point. If you know what I mean.”

Trip swallowed another gulp of coffee and smiled at his brother. “Hmmm, speaking from experience are you?”

“Perhaps,” Fitz nodded. “But I don’t think I was ever as pigheaded as that one.”

The both turned as the back door opened and a frazzled Melinda stormed into the room. Jemma
followed a few steps behind looking much more worried than her mother was angry. “She hasn’t
gone far, Momma. Her bicycle is still in the yard and her sneakers are on the deck.”

“And when has going barefoot ever stopped Skye?” Melinda growled through her teeth. “Damn it,
I won’t be surprised if we find her butt naked dancing down the middle of main street.”

Fitz snickered but stopped abruptly at his mother’s glare. He swallowed once then wondered.
“Did you look beneath the deck?”

“First thing,” Jemma nodded.

“She’s nowhere in the house, then,” Fitz added. “I’ve checked every room twice and every closet
three times.”

“What about the garage?” Trip asked, finishing the last mouthful of coffee.

Jemma shook her head. “Not there either, but you never know with Skye. She could be right under
our noses and wouldn’t make a peep.”

“Some kind of super sleuth,” Fitz smiled. “Da says she’ll make a great spy someday.”

“If she lives that long,” Melinda growled, pulling open the basement door.

“Looked down there,” Fitz called after her as she descended the stairs. He shook his head and
turned to his brother and sister. “Twice, actually and no she’s not in that space behind the wash
machine. That was last time and baby sister never does the same thing twice.” He shrugged his
shoulders and headed for the back door. “Guess it’s time to circle the block.” Looking over his
shoulder at Jemma, he quipped. “East or west?”

The young girl sighed as she followed him out the door. “I took west last time.”

“East it is then,” Fitz sighed as he pulled the door closed.
Trip stood for a moment listening to the quiet of the kitchen and his mother’s mumbled Mandarin cursing a floor below. He shook his head. Apparently nothing had changed in the months he had been away at college.

xx

Ten minutes later Trip had changed from grey sweatpants and a bare chest to every day street clothes. He stood on the deck and surveyed his parent’s property. Jemma was correct. Skye’s bike and sneakers were cast off and lying on the grass a few feet from the bottom step. If he wasn’t aware of the current situation he would just assume the kid had dropped them there before skirting into the house. But it had already been determined that Skye was not inside the house.

Trip bounced down the stairs and headed for the basketball court. He paused at the enormous lilac hedge covered in light purple blooms and recalled the day his baby sister disappeared through a hole in the fence. It had long since been repaired, even replaced by a new fence just last spring. Even so, he was pretty sure Skye would not fit through that hole these days. He took a few steps then stopped and looked at the bush again. Oh, what the hell? It was worth a look anyway. He parted the foliage and peered into the shady underbrush. The arched hide away was still there and from the looks of it, well used. He pictured his little sister there, scheming her schemes and plotting her exploits or just daydreaming as she looked up through the mottled light the leaves provided. It was a perfect Skyed-away.

But not today.

Trip stepped back and moved to the basketball court, now used by his little sister since Fitz’s path had taken him in a different direction. Not that Trip ever doubted it would. He picked up the basketball from one of the chairs around the old metal table, dribbled it twice and tipped it toward the basket. It sailed right through, just like Fitz had told him it would if he remembered his formulas correctly. The young man smiled at the memory and the fact that Fitz probably understood the game better than any of the coaches in any league.

He watched the ball bounce until it simply rolled to the back of the garage and wobbled a bit before stopping. Another memory of this basketball court made him shiver. He shook it off.

Where the hell was Skye?

Past the court and around a row of chest high shrubs Trip stood and looked across the pool the family had installed a few months back. It was still covered for the season. May was just a bit too cool for swimming and if Phil had removed the cover Skye would pester every day to dive in even
if the temperatures were still in the mid sixties. He shook his head and walked around the locked gate and fence that circled the area then stood glancing across the wide back yard. He wondered if Fitz had mastered the art of that old ride-on lawn mower, then laughed at the very thought. Hell, the kid had probably taken it apart and built a whole new engine. Maybe he even got it to run itself like the kid always imagined it would.

The yard sloped down at an easy angle where the dirt path led through a shaded area to the back gate. He could see from where he stood it was closed and locked. So unless his baby sister had scaled the old wooden fence she hadn’t left that way. In the corner of that part of the yard was Jemma’s potting shed. He remembered building it with Da and Fitz while the little girl stood and doled out directions. She used it regularly and in the shade of the ancient oak Da had put a swing big enough for two. He smiled to himself thinking the man had put it there more for himself and Mom on those cool summer evenings than he had for Jemma’s enjoyment in the afternoon’s warmth.

Above in the same tree was the tree house, also built by the three Coulson Carpenters to give Fitz a special place just like Jemma’s. He and his kid brother had spent many summer nights sleeping out in their tree fort.

‘Hide-out,’ Trip thought as he looked up through the branches at the study structure. “It couldn’t be that simple. Could it?” He asked himself, out loud.

There was a rope ladder that led to the fort but Fitz was not such an athletic kid and froze halfway up on two occasions. Da hammered slats into the tree to create a ladder the boy could more easily climb which solved the problem. Trip looked at it for moment then tested the first rung. It held, to his surprise as he pulled himself up the ten feet from the ground and poked his head through the hole that served as an entrance.

It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior, his head and shoulders in the tree house while the rest of him remained on the ladder. It didn’t look much different. A few crates served as seats and tables. Goofy collections of rocks and gears and jars of whatever the hell they put in them lined the walls. A dark make-shift curtain hung over the one window and there in the corner just behind a rather tall on end crate stuck out a very familiar line of toes. The pink sparkly polish was a dead give away.

Trip shook his head and pulled the rest of his body into the fort, keeping his head low before sitting down and folding his long legs in front of him. “Girl, have you lost your mind?” He smiled as the toes disappeared into the shadow. “Too late, baby girl, too late,” he laughed.

Skye pushed aside a flimsy black shade that hung from the ceiling and peered out at him. “Is Momma real mad?” She scrunched up her face as she stood and brushed the twigs from her hair.
“Is Momma mad?” Trip repeated, incredulously.

Skye flopped down and folded her own legs in front of her. “Guess I’m in trouble again.” She groaned as she dropped her head into her hands, elbows resting on her knees.

“Guess you get what you go looking for, girl.” Trip reached out and ruffled her hair with one hand.

Skye let out a fluttery breath but said nothing. Trip glanced around the small area and smiled. “Like what you’ve done to the place. The lilac paint gives it a whole new atmosphere.”

“Jemma was crying.” Skye answered, pretty much ignoring her brother’s remark. “I heard her.”

Trip was confused. He narrowed his brow and looked at the little girl who was staring at the floor. “Jemma’s fine, Skye. I just saw her.”

Shaking her head, but not looking up, Skye disagreed. “No, in the night, she was crying in the night. I heard her and I went in her room. I wanted to make her not be sad but she told me to get out. She said it was none of my business.” The little girl let out a long sad sigh and mumbled. “I just wanted to help.”

Trip scratched his head. He didn’t remember anyone crying, but his room was quite a distance from the girls’ since he’d moved to the spare one on the other end of the house, giving him and Fitz a little breathing room. Before he spoke again he noticed a framed picture on one of the small shelves attached to the wall. He knew it had not been there when he used this space as a hide out. It was definitely Jemma, but she was much younger and smiling even though her front teeth were missing. There was a woman holding her, smiling just as broadly and Trip knew it was Elizabeth Simmons. He’d never met the woman but he’d seen that photograph many times…on the dresser in Jemma’s bedroom. It had been there since the family moved into this house more than five years ago. He reached over Skye’s head and took the frame.

“Where did you get this?” He asked without trying to sound accusing.

“I took it.” Skye shrugged.
“Because she told you to get out?” Trip was appalled. Skye was many things but never vindictive and certainly not mean.

“No,” the little girl wagged her head, drawing out the word into almost a tune. “I took it a long time ago. She turned and pulled a second frame from the shelf then handed it to him. “I took that one too.” She huffed and dropped her forehead to her knees.

Trip held one frame in each hand and stared at them alternately. He recognized the second one despite its blurry focus. A stout woman holding a curly tow-headed toddler, that was no doubt Fitz, stared back. The young man shook his head. “Why would you take these Skye? You know how much they mean to Fitz and to Jemma.”

Skye shrugged her shoulders without looking up and spoke into her knees, “dunno…”

Trip pursed his lips. He could not imagine what would make his sweet little sister do something so spiteful. “Skye, these are the memories the twins have of their moms. You have to give them back.” He said as his eyes widened.

Skye looked up with tears in her eyes. “It isn’t fair.” She almost shouted, reining in her voice at the last minute. “They know the ladies that made them alive and I don’t have anything. They get to look at their eyes and remember and Momma lets them, but I can’t…I can’t see my lady.” The little girl swiped her arm across her nose and scrubbed away unwanted tears.

Trip drew in a breath and felt the little girl’s pain. He had very little memory of his own mother, but there was that little bit. He looked at the shelf again and noticed the corner of something jutting up. He reached and took it. Sure enough it was a creased and crinkled photo of Sheela Triplett holding a tiny pinched faced infant. It was probably the only photo he had of his mother and he kept it hidden in the back of his desk drawer. He was pretty sure no one ever knew he had it, not even Gram. He let out a long whistlely breath and shook his head.

Skye peeked up at him from beneath her arm that wrapped around her knees. “That one was hard to find.”

Trip’s brows narrowed as his tone became firm. “Girl, I should take you over my knee myself. Scratchin’ around in my personal belongings…in my room…” He shook his head and regretted his words as the little girl scooted back and out of his reach. He rolled his eyes and took in the size of the place. “You don’t have to worry. There’s not enough room in here for a proper swat.” He let out a frustrated breath then drew in a cleansing one. “I’m not mad at you, Skye. I just don’t understand. You took these because you didn’t want us to remember our birth mothers?”
Skye shook her head and still spoke into her knees. “I took ‘em because I wanted to have memories. I look at them and pretend the lady that made me a baby loved me like your ladies did.”

It occurred to Trip that Skye never referred to those ladies as mothers. To the little girl that was all they were, ladies in photos from times she never knew, lifetimes she never shared.

“Why didn’t she want me, Trip? Why don’t I have a picture like all of you do?” The little girl finally looked up, tears streaming down her face.

“Com’ere,” Trip whispered softly as he reached across the short expanse and pulled her into the cradle of his cross-legged lap. He squeezed her and rocked just a little then kissed the top of her head. “I know Momma and Daddy have told you the story of how the Sister’s found you, Skye. I know you know there wasn’t much, but how about we do this.” He bent low to look into her eyes. She merely raised her eyebrows in response.

Picking up the pictures he’d laid on the floor he held them out to her. “We’ll put these back where they belong and you apologize to the twins.”

“They’ll hate me,” she sniffled.

Trip smiled and one-arm hugged her, resting his chin on top of her head. “Never,” he assured her. “They might be a little upset but I think they’ll understand.”

Skye let out a breath over her lip, ending with a pop sound but nodded her agreement.

“Good girl,” Trip smiled. “And I promise I will do whatever it takes to find out as much as I can about how you got left on those church steps.”

“Really?” The little girl’s mood brightened. “You’ll find out what happened.”

Trip put a finger over Skye’s lips. “No promises. They never found out anything when it happened so we don’t have much to go on and it might take a very long time.”
Skye wrapped her arms around her big brother’s neck and kissed his cheek. “I love you, Trip. Not just cuz a this. I just love you all the time.”

He hugged her back and kissed her temple. “Okay, then let’s get out of this mini mansion before I can never straighten my big body again.” Skye giggled at his comment as she crawled off his lap and stood.

Trip pushed his long legs out and let them drop into the hole in the bottom of the tree house then sat a bit as the feeling came back to them. He pushed himself forward and let his body slip through the opening then climbed down into the cool fresh air. Skye followed down the first few rungs then jumped to the soft grass at the base of the tree. She reached up and took his hand but after a few steps pulled him to a stop.

“Do you think Momma’s real mad?” She squinted up at him.

He reached down and swept her up into his arms, laughing. “Oh, baby girl, she is way past mad.”

“Do you think she’ll spank me?” Skye’s look turned desperate.

Again the young man laughed and patted the little girl’s backside. “I think you’re gonna be in the hot seat for quite a while, girl.”

Skye let out a long sigh and wrapped her arms around her brother’s neck as he marched toward the house.

xx

Melinda was beyond angry, bellowing at the little girl that hid behind her brother’s legs. She pointed toward the stairs and ordered her to her room ignoring any explanation the child might attempt to offer. Skye scurried past her mother, down the hall and up the steps before her older brother began offering an explanation of his own.

Melinda dropped into one of the kitchen chairs as tears ran down her cheeks. Skye had never said anything and yes, Jemma was crying. Yesterday was Elizabeth Simmons’ birthday. It was always
hard for the young girl and the only day of the year that Jemma was cross and belligerent. Melinda allowed it, knowing it would end in a flood of tears and regrets. She too had heard the girl’s sobbing and gently took her into her arms, letting her release all of that anguish despite being told to ‘bug off’. It was a ritual. Jemma would cry herself to sleep and wake in the morning back to herself. One day to mourn for the mother who would not be there for all of her accomplishments and milestones, Jemma let herself have that one day.

She stared at the three photographs spread across the table and felt at a loss for a solution to this unforeseen problem although she and Phil had always known the day would come. They knew that Skye would question her birth and the circumstances surrounding her abandonment but she thought it would be years away. She looked at the damaged photo of Trip and his mother.

“She was a beautiful girl,” she breathed, handing it back to her eldest son.

Trip took the photo and stared at it for a moment. “I don’t remember,” he sighed. “She wasn’t around much and then…” He looked up as he pulled out his wallet and tucked the photo into it. “Then there was Gram and Pops and well,” he felt his cheeks grow hot. “I’ve got a mom. I don’t need to look at someone I don’t even remember in an old photograph.” He pushed the wallet back into his pocket and bent to kiss Melinda’s cheek. She smiled and gently patted his cheek. Trip stood and looked toward the stairs. “Go easy on the kid,” he smiled.

Melinda let out a breath and shook her head. This was not going to be easy.

xx

At first Skye was resigned to just take her punishment and be done with it, but when Melinda entered the room the little girl broke into uncontrollable tears. It wasn’t unusual for Skye to be crying when Momma came to deliver what she’d earned for whatever hare-brained scheme she’d created, but this was different. This wasn’t a ploy to get Melinda’s sympathy and perhaps rethink the walloping she deserved. It wasn’t for the coming sting of Momma’s hand on her backside, it was truly a heartbroken sobbing.

Melinda sat on the edge of the bed and opened her arms. Her baby dove into them and cried bitterly. She tried speaking through the tears but nothing was intelligible so Melinda just rubbed her back and rocked gently, holding the little girl close. After a lot of those tears and a lot of tissues to match, the sobbing quieted and Skye drew shaky breaths against her mother’s chest.

“I’m sorry, Momma.” The little girl cried in staccato speech.
Melinda pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. “Hush, baobei, you need to calm down. Just breathe with Momma for a little bit.” She drew deep breaths and motioned for Skye to do the same.

The little girl did as she was told, breathing in rhythm with her mother until she drew and exhaled in a normal pattern. She closed her eyes and relaxed against her mother’s chest listening to the thumping of her heart and the familiar tempo that calmed her dread. Melinda continued her slow rocking and gentle rubbing of the child’s back. After a few minutes, Skye sat up straight and looked into her mother’s eyes. She swallowed hard and blinked away the tears that lay on her lashes.

“Is it time?” She asked just above a whisper.

Melinda tucked the little girl’s stray hair behind her ear and shook her head. “No, spankings today, baobei.” Then she furrowed her brow and scolded. “But you really deserve one.” She leaned forward and let her forehead touch her baby’s. “We’ll just call it an IOU.” Melinda smiled.

Skye looked confused. “Why, momma?”

“Why?” Melinda laughed. “I thought you’d be happy, but if you’d rather…” She tugged the little girl toward her lap.

“No…” Skye easily squirmed out of her mother’s grip. “I just don’t know why not, when you’re so mad at me.” She sniffled twice and took the tissue Melinda offered.

Letting out a soft sigh, Melinda explained. “Trip told me about your little talk in the tree house.” She bit her bottom lip as Skye’s gaze fell to the floor. “Baobei, why didn’t you talk to me? Why didn’t you come to daddy and me when you were so upset?”

Skye shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t want you to get mad at me.” She mumbled.

Melinda placed two fingers under the little girl’s chin and drew her head up to look in her eyes. “Skye, daddy and I would never be angry with you for trying to find out about your mother.”
Skye shook her head. “You’re my mother! My Momma, my only momma that I love forever and ever,” she almost shouted at Melinda. “You…only you. I don’t need to know about any other mother only you.” Tears were streaming down the little girl’s cheeks again as she gasped for each breath. “And Daddy is my daddy, my real and only daddy in the whole wide world.” She wrapped her arms around Melinda as if clinging for life. “I don’t want anybody else…” she sobbed into the embrace.

Once again, Melinda shushed and rocked the little girl, helping her to regain her calm with slow breathing and listening quietly to her mother’s heartbeat. When the little girl could speak again she drew a shaky breath.

“I only want to know what happened, Momma. I just want to know why, like Trip and Jemma and Fitz know why they’re here instead of with the ladies that made them be born. I don’t have any rememories like they do.” Skye explained in a quivering voice.

Melinda smiled at the fractured language her youngest still used when upset or nervous. “Oh, baobei you were so little. I don’t think anyone can remember back that far. People don’t remember things that happened before they were three and, my sweet baobei, that’s when you came to us.” Melinda kissed the little girl’s hand that she now held in her own.


“Yes, you do, sweetie, because she’s always been a part of your life. She always will.” Melinda assured her.

“Do you not want me to want to find out?” Skye looked up over her brows, not sure she wanted to hear the answer.

Melinda thought for a moment then pulled the little girl back to her heart. “Oh, baobei I wish there was a way we could find out but everything the Sisters knew is in your records and I’ve always told you the truth. That’s all there is.”

“Trip said he would try,” Skye sniffled with the tiniest shred of hope.

Melinda wasn’t sure if she wanted to hug her eldest or slug him. Hope was great thing, but some things were lost forever they could not be hoped back into existence. She held her baby close and rocked her gently. “I know you want there to be something, Skye so I will talk to Daddy. We’ll
decide what we might do to help you, but…” She pushed the little girl back to look into her eyes. “You’ll have to understand that we might not find anything more than we already know.”

Skye bit her lip and nodded.

Melinda smiled and took a deep breath before letting her hands drop to her knees. “Okay, then lets go wash your face so you can talk to your brother and sister about what happened to their photographs. Then you can spend the afternoon in your room thinking about how important it is to answer me when I call you.”

Skye’s eyes popped opened as her chin dropped. “But…”

Melinda raised a finger. “I said no spanking. I did not say no punishment.” She tilted her head and raised her brows.

Skye let out a heavy breath as her shoulders dropped. She stood and schlepped toward the door then turned back to look up at her mother. “Momma?”

“Yes, Skye,” Melinda smiled.

“Does the IOU mean I get a spanking when I didn’t do anything or I get two next time I’m in trouble?” She scrunched up her face as she asked.

Melinda tapped the little girl’s nose with the tip of her index finger. “I guess we’ll just have to wait and see, won’t we.” She grinned as she set a hand on Skye’s head and spun her easily toward the door.

The little girl rolled her eyes and tossed back her head as her mother steered her down the hall.

xx

*Everything has a story...so does everyone. Even the things we will never know have a history, scenes to play out with a beginning, a middle and, sometimes sadly, an end. This is one of those stories...what happened on that rainy night and what lead to it.*
This is story Skye Mary Claire Mieying Coulson would never know, a story lost in oblivion, known only to time.

May 1992

She stood watching the slow moving car that passed outside the ramshackle building. Another drug deal, she supposed or some John trolling for a not so high end call girl. This wasn’t the best part of town. Fact was it would have to step up to be in line for the worst. The light that shone through the boarded window wasn’t nearly enough to illuminate the room and the batteries in the lantern she’d stolen from someone’s porch were almost dead. She only used it when she absolutely had to have light.

A soft snuffly noise drew her attention and she moved from the window across the dark room. Looking into the small crate she sighed, unsure of what to do or how to do it but definitely ready to try. She lifted the tiny form and held it close, tugging up her dirty shirt until the newborn found its way to its source of nourishment. The girl never imagined herself nursing an infant. She remembered how she turned up her nose and gagged at the disgusting prospect of it, but babies need to eat and she could not steal formula as easily as she pilfered other things.

The girl also never thought she would bring a tiny baby into the world on her own, without a doctor or a hospital but she’d managed right here in this horribly dirty building infested by more cats than she’d seen in her lifetime. At first that seemed terrible but it turned out the cats yowls sounded eerily like a crying baby so no one would notice the new tenant and as a bonus they kept the rats away.

She looked down at the tiny form that suckled with more strength than she imagined something so small could have. This baby was small, a lot smaller than she thought babies should be but she’d had no prenatal care, no doctors or visits or vitamins or even good nutrition. She was amazed that after everything they’d been through that both of them had survived this long. The infant pulled away from sucking and blinked its almond shaped eyes at her. She wrapped the blanket with pink and blue bunnies that she had stolen from the Thrift Shop around it and gently propped it up on her shoulder, patting gently like she’d seen women do in the past. She didn’t really remember where but somehow she knew a well fed baby needed to burp. The infant did not disappoint and offered a small urp after only a few seconds. She bounced the little bundle as she paced across the floor and wiped the tear from her cheek.

“We can’t stay here much longer, baby.” She told the little thing. “I don’t think it’s very safe for us”
February 1991

She’d been alone for almost two years, living in cars, boxes, even an industrial sized dryer. For a while, when it got too cold to sleep outside, she’d found shelter in the library. It was big and warm and no one really bothered you if you kept quiet and took care with the books. She’d raided another Thrift Shop and even stopped at one of those church charity things where they just gave you clothes in an effort to make herself look presentable.

It was where she met him. It was where she met Matthew.

It was an accident really. She’d crashed into him as they rounded the end of a row of shelves, she with a copy of Great Expectations¹ and he with a stack of books on subjects she could barely pronounce. She helped him pick them up quickly, fearful of the watchful librarian that might toss her out for causing a ruckus. He smiled as he handed her the small book that was definitely not one of his.

“Dickens,” he nodded. “Lit major?”

She couldn’t believe it. Here she was barely fifteen and he thought she was a college student. She let him. It was just easier than having to explain why she was in the public library at one in the afternoon. They sat at the same table that afternoon quietly discussing the weather and other things that meant a lot of nothing. She watched him go, to return to his studies at Georgetown and smiled at the one on one attention she’d shared for the first time in forever.

The library was a great place. It was huge and had so many little nooks and crannies where a person could get lost…or hide until the lights were extinguished and the doors were locked. The girl enjoyed the long quiet, warm nights especially after she found her way to the basement and a large washroom that was probably used by the cleaning crew. She was able to bathe or at least wash in the large tub with hot, HOT running water and curl up near the steam pipes that lead from the bowels of the city into the old building keeping it toasty while the snow swirled outside. She trained herself to wake before the morning crew arrived and found another place to hide until the place got busy. She also remembered to visit a different section everyday so no one started to get suspicious. Reading was never her strong suit but she started to enjoy the different titles she chose as the days rolled past.

It was a week before she saw him again in the same place, at the same table. She wondered if it was on purpose, if maybe he was looking for her. But that would be silly. Who would look for her? Then he saw her…from across the large room…he saw her and waved. She looked around before wriggling her fingers back to him. He pulled out a chair and pointed to it with a smile and a nod. She tried not to run, not to look as needy as she felt as she moved toward it.
“Hi,” he said simply as she sat on the offered chair then slid a small book toward her. “Silas Marner²,” he nodded toward it. “I thought you might enjoy it.”

She nodded and they met every Wednesday after, discussing the books he offered every time. She made sure she finished each within the span of that week. She never thought she’d enjoy discussing stuff like classical literature but Matthew’s soft voice made it sound like some kind of hypnotic music.

He bought her lunch and they walked in the park. He invited her for supper and she panicked until he agreed it would be something light and casual, nothing fancy. They enjoyed a Big Mac at the nearest McDonalds and laughed over the silliness of it. He promised next time it would be a little less fast foody. She didn’t care. It was the finest meal she’d had in months.

They spent more time together than she imagined and the winter melted away, March became April and April slid into May. All that time she managed to hide her social status as well as her age a secret. He invited her to his campus, introduced her to his friends and finally took her to his room.

It wasn’t the first time for her. There had been others but not like this. He was kind and gentle, never asking for more than she was willing to give, never giving more than she wanted. She woke in the morning with him smiling at her. They dressed and shared breakfast in the university cafeteria. Then he was off to finals and she floated across the campus to the subway that would take her back to the library.

At first she walked on air feeling the first tendrils of real love wrap around her but the fear set in quickly. She was fifteen, he was nineteen, almost twenty. She was a fair haired girl from the Midwest, alone in a city she had run to escaping a violent home life. He was a handsome second generation Chinese-American man from a very well to do family. Even if their ages were similar this would never work. She valued his friendship but this had to be the one and only time. She made her way back to the library and found herself in a small study room sobbing into a wad of towels she’d taken from the lavatory.

But it wasn’t the last time. They met again a few days later and the week after that and finally the last day of the school term. That morning she did not wake to his smile but to a concern that opened a gap in the pit of her stomach. He had to return home, he told her, Aberdeen, Texas. His father’s business was there and he expected the young man’s help throughout the summer. She understood and nodded when he said they would keep in touch. He asked for her phone number.

She made it up.
Same with email

And Matthew disappeared from her life.

A month later she knew she was pregnant. The test she stole from CVS confirmed it.

The same day she stopped at the bottom of the library steps as two police officers started down. The head librarian stood at the top glaring at her.

And she ran.

It was summer and the group that lived in a homeless community under the bridge outside of town accepted her readily. She stayed there until the authorities forced them to move on. Temporary friends moved away and the girl started over again. For a few months she managed to hold down a job as a waitress, earning a meager wage, but enough to buy food and actually purchase a warm coat from the Thrift Shop. It ended when the owner found her sleeping in one of the booths during the first snow of the season. The money ran out quickly and more than once she felt the stillness in her belly meant the baby had not survived.

There was a church that offered cots on cold stormy nights and she found herself there more often than not, refusing any help any of the Sisters tried to offer. She told them it was temporary and she would be home soon. She told them her family was coming for her and didn’t care if they believed her.

April 1992

She found the run down cat infested building a week before the pains began. She thought she was dying. There had been no way to keep track of time and she wasn’t really sure when it had actually happened. The puddle that formed on the floor between her legs was a shock and the pains came fast and furious. Two hours later the baby slipped out and she collapsed. When she woke she was bloody and weak. For a moment the world was a blur then the scratching scuffly noises brought her to her senses. She crawled across the floor and picked up the bluish body that lay there, crying at the thought that the little life had been snuffed out before they had a chance to meet. She was wrong, the cold little body moved the slightest bit and she cried again. She cried for the child that did not then pulled off the hoodie she wore and wrapped the tiny creature in it. She used a piece of glass from the jagged window frame to cut the cord and tied it tightly with the string she pulled from the same hoodie. They slept the rest of that day and most of the next, curled into a tight ball
while those blessed cats kept the rats at bay.

The crate wasn’t hard to find. Someone tossed it next to one of the dumpsters on the next block. Water was a little more difficult but it collected in an old wheelbarrow she pushed under a hole in the roof.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” She cried as she wiped the grime from the baby girl with the cold liquid. The baby’s lip quivered but she did not cry. She hardly ever cried and when she did it was so little she barely heard.

The first week was hard and she struggled to keep her own strength so the baby could eat. She stole the blanket a few days after giving birth but dared not return to the store fearing the grumpy woman who collected the few dollars people who had money could afford to pay. Diapers were almost impossible but she managed to steal a few towels from an open linen truck and ripped them into several more to keep the baby clothed. Washing them proved a bit more difficult and after a few days she risked sneaking out of the supermarket with several new born Pampers she pulled from the box she accidentally opened while examining it. They were so little they fit in most of the spaces created by her too large clothing.

June 1992

But time was not on her side and things quickly got out of hand. After a month the girl could barely care for herself let alone a tiny newborn that needed so very much more. It looked like Matthew with dark hair and big brown almond shaped eyes. She let the little thing nurse then wrapped it in the blanket and sat against the wall staring down at it.

“It’s not your fault, baby, but this isn’t going to work. We’re both going to starve and that’s not fair to you. We can’t stay here. It’s dangerous for both of us.” She shivered at the fact that her foot had gone through the floor of the rotting structure just this morning. Even most of the cats had started to disappear.

Outside the thunder rolled and the room lit with a flash of lightning. She pulled the blanket over the little form and moved away from the leak in the flimsy roof. The storm lasted for more than an hour and the odd creaking in the structure began to frighten her. Now the rats were gone and somewhere in her mind she remembered someone saying that rats would desert a sinking ship. She struggled to her feet, pulled the bundle to her chest and stepped carefully to the rickety staircase that led to the exit. It groaned beneath her feet and she hurried to get to the bottom. It pulled away from the wall and rocked back and forth as she screamed and reached for the rail with one hand, gripping the baby tightly with the other. It fell away leaving her stranded at least four feet from the ground. The rocking slowed and she moved down three steps before jumping the rest of the way. Keeping her balance she ran for the door and burst into the street blinking up through
the rain as several crashes echoed inside the rotted building. Puffs of dust exhaled out the spaces between the old wood like some big dragon had just collapsed inside. She was sure the second floor was now part of the first.

Before she could react the lights of a car wobbled down the dark street and she pulled behind a row of barrels to stay out of sight. She held her breath as the vehicle slowed to a stop then eased past and disappeared into the darkness at the end of the road. She pulled her light sweater around her neck and hurried toward the intersection that led to a more lighted area.

The girl walked until she had to stop. The baby was fussing, probably hungry or needed a change but she hadn’t thought to take anything other than the blanket. It was late, probably after midnight. She slipped into the doorway of a closed market and lifted her soggy sweater to let the little thing eat. The strength of that little mouth made her smile. This baby was a fighter. This baby had a chance.

But not with her

This baby needed more.

She burped the little thing and stood once again walking toward the lights of the city. There were places, safe havens they called them, places where someone could leave a baby and no one would ask a question. She hugged the little thing closer. It would be warm and dry and have diapers and clothes and food that would help it grow. She hoped it would grow because she hadn’t given the poor little thing such a great start. The tears mingled with the raindrops on her cheeks almost blinding her to the police car that approached. She ducked into the dark space between two buildings and waited for it to pass. She saw it then, almost glowing in the eerie light formed by the pouring rain. A gold cross, high above the other structures in the neighborhood she had wandered into aimlessly. She’d hoped to make it to a fire station or a hospital where medical care would be available immediately, but a church was the next best thing. She looked toward the lights still miles away. She had no money for the subway and someone there would surely report her to the transit police.

Crossing the street she changed direction and headed in the toward the cross. It was farther than she thought. Six blocks and two turns later she still had a way to go and fatigue as well as disorientation slowed her. She stumbled twice almost losing her grip on the now slippery wet blanket. The third time she went down on both knees and one palm but never lost the bundle she cradled close to her chest. She sat and watched the rain wash the blood from her scraped knees but the baby was safe, asleep in her arms. The girl pushed herself up, crossed the street and rounded the corner. She stopped and looked up at the large church in the middle of the block.

She rushed up the stairs with the last of her strength and pulled on the massive door. Locked. She
leaned against it and slid to the concrete landing below. “I’m sorry, baby. I don’t know what else to do.” The little almond shaped eyes stared up at her as the tiny arms flailed without reason. The baby blinked and the girl used her thumb to gently wipe the water from the long lashes and the tiny thing smiled.

The girl looked up into the falling rain. “I can’t keep you, baby. I can’t give you what you need. You need someone to love you, and I’m afraid to do that. If I love you I can’t do what’s best. But I can’t help it. I just want you to know I’m not leaving you because I don’t want you, but I love you too much to let you live like I have to. You’re too little and too beautiful to have to be so tortured.” She slipped to the side and laid the little form on the wet step. “Don’t worry, someone will come. They’ll find you and everything will be alright. I promise. Someone will love you as much as I do right now and they’ll love you forever. I know it.” She sobbed as she picked the little bundle up and kissed its head, one tiny hand rested on her cheek and a deeper sob escaped her throat.

“You won’t remember me baby, but I’ll always remember you.” She whispered, putting the bundle down then stood. “Be strong, baby, be strong.” She stepped backward down one step then ran down three more before she turned and stared at the tiny form, arms still waving in the rain. She stepped up one step then turned and ran, wiping tears and rain and rain and tears as fast as she could.

The girl ran blindly until she thought her chest would burst. She ran without direction and without stopping for anything. She did not see the car or hear the horn.

An hour later, Father Anthony Serefini found the bundle wailing in front of the church’s main door. He’d come from a visit at a local hospital, giving last rites to an elderly parishioner. He gathered the little girl into his arms and made his way around the church and down the block to the Sisters of St. Agnes.

**Present Day**

“It’s unusual to have a former resident visit after so long,” the tall slender nun smiled as she led Phil and Melinda down the hall to her office. Skye walked between them gripping their hands tightly. “We did look into your inquiry and you must understand that in most cases this information is considered confidential. In your little girl’s case, there is very little to tell. We have no record of a birth mother or father.” She shook her head and addressed the wide eyed little girl. “I’m very sorry, Skye.”

“Father Serefini found you early in the morning.” She told Skye what she already knew. “He passed away two years ago.” The nun shook her head as she spoke to Phil and Melinda. “The police were notified and I believe they investigated for months but found nothing. There was a
terrible storm that night, if there was any trace of your mother left behind it was washed away. I’m sorry.” She said again and Skye believed she was.

“We don’t have any police records here.” Again she addressed Phil and Melinda, “but I am sure if you asked they would tell you almost the same thing. I believe it’s called cold case.” Phil nodded his understanding. “I searched this myself,” she sighed. “I hoped with a new set of eyes I might find something they missed. I did find something.” She smiled.

Skye blinked a few times then looked to her parents. The nun moved to a box that sat on the desk. She pulled out a baby quilt, white and covered with pink and blue bunnies. She held it out to the little girl. “It’s the blanket they found you in, Skye. It’s yours if you want it.” The nun smiled and waited for the little girl to take the item.

Again Skye looked to Phil and Melinda, wordlessly begging permission. Phil nodded and she ran a hand gently over the fabric before taking it from the tall nun. “It’s really mine from before, from the lady that put me there.”

“Your mother, yes,” the nun smiled.

Skye stared at the blanket then looked up at the Sister. “Not my mother, just the lady that wanted me to find my Momma. She made me be borned so my Momma’s heart would pour her love all over me.”

The nun nodded her understanding. What a wonderful way for the little girl to understand adoption.

Melinda pulled her baby into a tight embrace, hugging the blanket as well, the only link she had to the woman who gave her this precious gift she could never repay. She blinked away the tears that threatened to fall as she mouthed ‘thank you’ to the nun who nodded back.

Hours later she tucked Skye into bed with Salty at her side. The blanket lay folded under the little girl’s pillow. One corner stuck out and Melinda could not help staring at it. The feeling in her stomach was a mixture of nausea and impossibility. It terrified and mesmerized her. Of course there had to be hundreds of these blankets, maybe thousands across the country but she recognized the pattern. It was the one and only thing she had purchased when she actually believed that in vetro fertilization doctor could perform a miracle. She’d kept it folded in the bottom of a drawer planning to give it to Phil when she was definitely with child.
That never happened and when it was more than apparent she would never carry a child to term, she pulled it out and dropped it into a donation barrel at some church. It had to be at least two years before her baby was even conceived. Was it possible that that very same blanket somehow made its way to protect the child that was left on the steps of St. Agnes? Was it possible it found its way to the baby that would fill the emptiness in her heart?

That was impossible. Melinda knew that. She bent and kissed the little girl’s cheek.

But miracles do happen.

xx

Skye climbed into Melinda’s lap two days later and wrapped the blanket she’d been fascinated with since Monday around them both. She smiled at her oldest brother as he watched from across the deck.

“Take our picture now, Trip.” She wrapped her arm around Melinda’s neck and smiled at the young man.

He nodded and clicked the digital camera three times just to be sure. Skye bounced up and ran to see the image on the small camera screen.

“Can you make it now?” She bounced in front of her brother already tugging him toward the house.

Twenty minutes later she hopped back into Melinda’s lap with a framed picture in hand. “Look, Momma! Me and you with my blanket from when I got borned. Me and my momma I get to remember just like the other kids.” She kissed Melinda’s cheek. “I’m gonna put it on my dresser just like Jemma!” She smiled as she squirmed to the deck and rushed toward the door. “First I’m gonna show Daddy.” She stopped with one hand on the door knob. “Trip don’t put yer camera away, kay? Momma kin I have anudder frame just like this one…no, kin I have two?”

Before Melinda could answer, the little girl continued. “Please, Momma. Pleeeseeeeze?”

Melinda nodded and Skye jumped up and down before racing back and kissing her over and over. “I gotta get Daddy. Don’t move, kay Momma? Stay right here. I needa picture with Daddy and
then one with you *and* Daddy.” The little girl stood on tiptoes as she drew out the word. She was already through the door and yelling for Phil before her mother could respond.

Melinda smiled as Trip shook his head. He nodded toward the blanket now folded on Melinda’s lap. “I guess she just needed a connection,” he smiled.

Melinda patted the item and smiled back, the miracle would be her secret. Maybe it wasn’t true. Maybe she just needed Skye to have that connection. Maybe the lady that borned her needed it too.

“She’s already got a momma.” He smiled as he snapped a picture of the woman who was Mother to them all. He’d add it to the framed pictures that lined the shelf in his dorm room. Bending down, he kissed the woman’s cheek. “We all do.”

xx

The girl never made it to the hospital. She gave up her life en route. Cause of death was listed as blunt force trauma caused by vehicle mishap. The driver was not charged. No one claimed the body so the girl, determined to be between fourteen and eighteen, was laid to rest in potter’s field.

The case remains opened.


²*Silas Marner*, George Elliot, 1861, Blackwood, Edinburg, Scotland

Chapter End Notes

And so we come to the end of the Alphabet. Some readers have asked for more, I’m open to suggestions and opinions

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!