Square Pegs

by MelyndaR

Summary

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Again, Riley quickly put that photo behind the others, but it was harder to brush that one off as a joke then it had been the others. In their own way, all of those in fact very “incriminating” photos had seemed “real,” but the one in the hospital… it meant something when people took photos like that, didn’t it?

Something unsettling curled in Riley’s stomach, poked up in the back of her mind, but she did her best to shove it away.
“I didn’t realize they even still had cameras whose pictures had to be developed like this,” Maya said, laughter in her voice as she walked out of Walgreens with Riley.

Riley shot her a quizzical look. “You were there when Shawn gave me the camera, Maya. Christmas? The first time you two met? Remember?”

Maya grinned back at her as they took the stairs to the subway. “I guess I just thought it was one of the cameras that spit out the picture automatically.”

“Those are even older,” Riley informed her as they sat down beside one another. “Besides, didn’t you ever notice how a photo never came out when I took a picture?”

“You use the camera so rarely, I guess not,” Maya said. “After all, look at how long it’s been: I had just met Shawn versus now, where I am a Hunter. Anyway let’s take a look at what pictures you even have.”

Riley peeled open the packet of photos with a smile, but her brows furrowed as she looked at the top of the stack. “Who—What even is this?” She moved the photo so that Maya could get a better look.

It was an awkward angle, cutting off the top third of the subjects’ faces and leaving a tangle of three pairs of arms and legs and one slightly extended stomach in the middle of the photo. All three people were laying together on a ratty-looking brown couch.

She caught sight of a blonde braid then, noticing the pair of boxing gloves one man wore on a chain around his neck, and the goatee another sported. “Oh!” The pieces fit easily together. “Shawn and my parents.”

“Must’ve been before you were born,” Maya said with a small smile.

“Shawn did say he hadn’t used this camera since that year they lived together in New York after they graduated from college,” Riley remembered. “He said he didn’t think there was anything ‘incriminating’ on it, so I could keep whatever of the photos I wanted.”

She slid the first photo to the back of the pile as they moved onto the next. The second photo was a much better one. Where the first looked like Shawn had tried to take a selfie and angled the camera wrong, the second was a photo of her parents kissing, Topanga’s now even-larger stomach between them to make the attempt at romance seem a little more difficult. In the third photo, Topanga was laughing while Cory pointed directly at Shawn behind the camera – a much more candid photo.

Maya chuckled beside her, but when Riley moved them onto the fourth photo both girls froze. It was the exact same setting, the exact same day… but this time Shawn was the one kissing Topanga. And they appeared very happy and at ease with it.

“What?” Maya asked blankly.

“I’m sure it was just a joke or something,” Riley said, quickly moving onto the next photo – where Shawn and Cory were doing the same exact thing.

With shaking fingers, Riley moved onto the sixth photo just as quickly – and released a breath. There was another nice, normal picture. Her parents were at the hospital now, Cory hovering over Topanga’s shoulder as she lay in a hospital bed with baby Riley in her arms.
“See,” she said, though she wasn’t sure if it was to herself or Maya. “Those last ones were just people joking around, but now they’re back to normal.”

She said it, and Maya nodded with an odd, tightlipped smile as she cooed, “You were such a cute baby, Riles!”

Riley chuckled, switching to the next picture. Cory holding Riley, once again kissing his wife.

The eighth picture made her stomach flop again, tightening horribly. Because Shawn had taken Cory’s place. *Holding Riley, kissing Topanga. This picture made it seem like he could be her dad just as easily as her dad was!*

Again, Riley quickly put that photo behind the others, but it was harder to brush that one off as a joke then it had been the others. In their own way, all of those in fact *very* “incriminating” photos had seemed “real,” but the one in the hospital… it meant something when people took photos like that, didn’t it?

Something unsettling curled in Riley’s stomach, poked up in the back of her mind, but she did her best to shove it away as, abruptly, the time sped forward and the next photo was one that Riley had taken herself.

“Shawn left New York City that night,” Maya murmured, and when Riley looked at her best friend, she still had that blank, unnerved look in her blue eyes.

“I’m sure it was all just a joke, back when they were dumb college kids,” Riley said again, though she wasn’t sure of any such thing.

She turned Maya’s focus, and her own, onto the photo that she had taken of them all at Christmas, but even then she found herself drawn into analyzing how Shawn was leaning into her dad even as Cory put his arm around Topanga. She definitely had questions now – a lot of them – and a niggling in the back of her mind that was harder to still than anything, but she didn’t have any idea of how to go about getting answers to any of it… so she said nothing, just let the subway take them back towards her apartment as she and Maya looked through pictures of themselves and their friends.

As they approached their stop, Riley put all the pictures back in their bag, and put that into her backpack. Though the girls had made a good show of forgetting the first pictures, Maya shot Riley a… well, a fearful look as they made it to the sidewalk above the tubes. She slipped her hand into Riley’s as she asked, “Are you going to say anything about those pictures of our parents?”

Riley shrugged, her expression taut even though she didn’t really meet Maya’s gaze. She didn’t even comment on the fact that Maya had referenced Shawn as her dad. “I don’t know. Maybe they’re nothing. What should I say – even to you? Or is there something I should ask my parents?” She looked fully at Maya then, with turbulence badly disguised in her eyes, and the falsest smile Maya had ever seen on her face. “No, I bet it’s just a big joke from a few post-college kids, and I don’t want to make a big deal out of something dumb.”

Maya arched her eyebrows disbelievingly. “But you’re Riley. Making a big deal out of things is what you do! The last time you didn’t was with the triangle, and your bully.” Then she got it. “Things that scared you…” She led Riley into the lobby of the Matthews’ apartment building, then stood off to the side of the room and squeezed her hand as she asked softly, “This really scares you, doesn’t it?”

Riley definitely wasn’t looking at her now. “I don’t know. Not really.”
“Look at me, honey,” Maya said softly, and when Riley obeyed she was shocked to see tears in her friend’s eyes. “Then why are you so upset – and don’t tell me you’re not.”

Riley sighed, swallowed what she was about to say, and started again. “What if it’s not a joke, Maya? What if he really loved my parents… and then having a baby added to it – what if I – scared him off? You heard him the night you two met. He left when I was born.”

Maya’s heart sank, landing like a stone in the pit of her stomach. She wasn’t sure how to pick apart and figure out what she was feeling; she just knew that it wasn’t good. But Riley needed straightening out more than her own emotions did. “I heard him say very plainly that it was not your fault, Riles.”

“But what if—”

“No. Okay,” Maya said, tightening her grip on Riley’s hand and half-dragging her across the lobby. She stole Riley’s backpack as she pushed the button to the intercom. “Let us up; we have a question that needs answering right now.” Releasing the intercom button, she informed Riley, “You are not going to feel these things over an ‘if,’ a ‘maybe.’ We’re going to get this figured out right now.”
“I really don’t want to, Maya,” Riley pleaded, hoping her pitiful tone would change Maya’s mind as they walked down the hall towards her apartment.

It didn’t.

Maya glanced back at her. “Think of it this way, then. Shawn is my dad now; don’t I deserve an answer to all of this too?”

“Not as much as I do,” Riley said, not caring if it sounded like she was pouting. “Not if I’m the one who ran him off.”

Maya glared at her, opening the door to the apartment and pulling her in. “And that is why we really need answers.”

“Who did Riley run off?” Katy asked with an amused smile.

Maya and Riley both screamed as the former swung the apartment door closed. “Mom! Dad!” the blonde gasped.

“What are you doing here?” Riley asked flatly.

“Haven’t you noticed we practically live here?” Shawn asked her with a teasing smile.

Riley didn’t smile back, but no one seemed to notice as Cory asked, “So, who do you think you ran off, Riley?”

“This guy,” Maya muttered, rooting around in Riley’s backpack until she found the pictures. “She finally took enough pictures on the camera that Shawn gave her that she needed to develop the photos, so we did. And we found these.”

Maya held the photos of Shawn, Cory, and Topanga out to the adults, but Riley grabbed her wrist, eyes wide as she said, “Maya, your mom!”

Maya glanced at her, then between Shawn and Katy, then back to Riley. “I’m pretty sure everyone here right now has seen these relationships enough to question what exactly they are. Mom’s no different, I bet. Maybe this is proof of something.”

“Maybe it’s nothing!” Riley repeated desperately.

Maya sighed, shook her hand off, and handed the photos to Shawn, saying, “I guess you forgot these were on the camera. Do you have an explanation for them?”

“What?” Shawn smirked at the first couple of photos, though Riley privately thought that his eyes were already growing more worried rather than amused – as if he was trying to recall what photos might be coming next. “It’s a young married couple kissing; my apologies if that insults your amazingly delicate sophomore sensibilities.”

“Yes, Shawn, those two are of Mr. and Mrs. Matthews,” Maya said even as her frown deepened and she requested, “Now look at the next one.”

Shawn and her mom, Riley recalled clearly. In her mind’s eye, a memory flashed, sudden and startling:
“Shawnie!” Daddy called gladly, jumping down the step between the kitchen and the hall to the bedrooms.

“You’re back!” Mommy beamed, beating Daddy to Papa.

Riley heard a smacking kiss as she tried to scramble down from the kitchen table on her toddler legs. Mommy laughed, Papa said “I told you I’d only be gone for three weeks,” and Daddy made it across the room for his own kiss as Riley’s feet hit the ground and she ran to hug Papa around the legs. She screamed his title, and he hefted her into his arms with a grunt, declaring, “I think you’ve gotten bigger since I left!”

Mommy chuckled, kissing her cheek, Daddy leaned into Papa who hugged Riley even tighter, and everything was warm and safe and never going to change. Riley didn’t think she had ever been happier.

“Riley?” Topanga was invading her space when she snapped out of it, her face hovering very near Riley’s. “What’s the matter? Why are you crying?”

“I’m no—”

“Yes, you are,” Maya interrupted, her tone hardening.

Topanga wiped at her daughter’s damp cheeks as if to prove the point.

“When you looked at Shawn again, he had become pale, and was fighting not to stammer as he flipped quickly through the rest of the pictures he’d been handed. “I can explain.”

“I really hope so.”

Shawn tossed the photos onto the table, and Cory practically pounced on them before he gasped dramatically as he realized what they pictured.

“Riley,” Topanga asked again. “Why are you crying? What’s in those photos, Cory?”

He glanced worriedly at Katy before saying, “Nothing.”

Katy started looking appraisingly between everyone else as Riley whispered, “Papa.”

“What did you say?” Topanga asked, turning her attention back to Riley and speaking as if she genuinely hadn’t heard.

Maya realized, though, Riley could tell by the startled expression that flashed across her face.

“It’s… the pictures – I saw them, and I thought it… sparked something, a memory – but, no, I’m sure it’s just… stupid. It’s fake. It’s a brain trick or something. Nothing happened like that.” She looked to her mom, desperate for reassurance as she repeated, “Nothing happened, right?”

Topanga looked baffled. Maya fixed Shawn with another glare. “You said you could explain?”

“I—” Shawn ran a hand through his hair, looking absolutely distraught. “I gave you that camera, Riley, because I thought it would be cool for you to have the one I used wile I lived in New York with your parents. I really thought there were no photos on that roll of film. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not an explanation!” Maya managed to say what Riley was thinking. “That’s an excuse. We want an explanation as to why and how those photos exist in the first place!”
“What’s in those pictures?!” Topanga demanded again, her tone becoming more irritated the longer the question went unanswered.

“You,” Riley answered before anyone else even tried to, her eyes and tone still teary. “And Dad, and…” she hesitated, suddenly not sure what to call him in this context, and ultimately pointed to Shawn. “And him.”

Topanga raised her eyebrows, looking between the two men, and Riley knew a silent conversation happening between adults when she saw one. Her dad frowned sadly, handing the photos to Topanga.

She glanced down at them, then looked between Shawn and Katy as she worried at her bottom lip. “How much does she know?” She gestured to Katy while talking to Shawn.

Shawn shrugged uncomfortably. “Everything. There’s only been arguably two noteworthy relationships in my life, and it only seemed right to tell her about both.” He glanced at Riley, asking her parents, “How much does sh—”

Right beside Riley, Topanga shook her head sharply, eyes widening.

“Oh.” Shawn nodded. “Okay. That’s good. I guess that’s good.”

Riley wanted to shrivel up on the spot, or at least run up to her room and lock them and this conversation out, but she couldn’t seem to make herself move. Topanga, at least, sensed her growing upset and hugged her close to her side even though Riley stayed rigid.

“May I see those please?” Katy asked Cory calmly, and he handed the photos over, though he still looked wary. She glanced quickly through them, appearing perfectly calm about it all, before she turned her attention to the two girls. “Riley, Maya, listen to me for a minute. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m not upset about any of this. These three need each other, and they always have, and in some ways they always will. That’s fine. I’m not upset.” There was an unshakable, maternal air about Katy as she took her time to meet both girl’s eyes – Riley, then Maya, then settling on Riley again – as she said, “But I would really like to know why this is upsetting you two so much.”

Riley’s heart jumped up into her throat, and she knew she was doing a terrible job of masking the disbelief on her face. She’d laughed – a short huff of shock – before she even realized it. “Ask Shawn why he left them in the first place.”

Katy looked to Shawn, keeping one eye on Riley, as Shawn’s shoulders fell. He shook his head, beginning, “Riley, if this is about… is this still about…”

“It’s about what we talked about the night I met you,” Maya butted in.

Shawn sighed deeply, and Riley was startled to see something that might’ve been tears start to glisten in his eyes as he met her gaze. “What did I tell you then? Do you not believe me?”

“I— I don’t know. You look happy in those pictures… and I was the only thing that changed. I must have scared you away, I must be the reason you left.”

“You’re not.”

“Then why did you leave!?”

“I told you – I just didn’t fit in anymore, but that had nothing to do with you, okay?”
Riley knew that was what he really wanted to hear – that she didn’t blame herself, or even him, and that she was okay with what he had done. And maybe she was okay with it; she just wanted to understand it. “Why didn’t you ‘fit?’” Riley asked.

“I told you, I felt like I was falling behind. I wasn’t married, I didn’t have kids, your parents didn’t need me… so I left. Nothing big and dramatic, nothing… intentionally cruel. I swear to you, I wasn’t trying to,” he nearly choked on the word. “Abandon you, if that’s what you think.”

Riley stared at him, admitting softly, “I don’t know what I think. I just don’t want,” to hurt anyone, let alone what you have with Maya and Katy. “I don’t want anything to change.”

“It doesn’t have to,” Shawn said instantly. “Nothing does. I just want to know that you’re okay. I don’t want to have hurt you.”

Riley nodded, let herself consider that for a moment – she heard the irony in the similarity to her own thoughts – before she said, “I… don’t think you did. I just wanted to make sure that you…” she smiled hesitantly. “That you hadn’t been hurt by me.”

“Definitely not,” Shawn promised. He opened his arms to her, his eyes belaying a caution that he was obviously trying to keep from his expression as he smiled hopefully at her.

Riley swallowed, smiled back at him, and stepped into the hug. “You sure you’re okay with not being with my parents anymore?”

Shawn shrugged, the cloth of his jacket rubbing her cheek with the motion. “I’ve learned to be, yeah.” His tone was teasing as he suggested, “Besides, the Hart ladies are a lot for any one man, don’t you think?”

Riley smiled at his teasing, tried not to think to hard about what they’d all just said.
“You know she’s still hurting, right?” Katy asked the moment Shawn shut the door of their apartment behind him.

“What? Who?”

Maya had spent the night with the Matthews, so Shawn had expected Katy to want to… elaborate on the conversation that they’d had there, but he hadn’t expected it to begin the moment they walked in their own door.

“Riley, Shawn – and Maya, too, in a different sort of way.”

“I thought she said she understood,” Shawn frowned deeply, shrugging off his jacket.

“I think she does understand what you said, but I think that what you said didn’t put an end to her questions.”

Shawn frowned, trying not to think about what he would do if she approached him about the subject again. “Maybe she’s just shocked and taking time to absorb. I know I would be if I suddenly found out my parents had been polyamorous.”

Katy gave him a strange look, almost rolling her eyes. “I think in this case it might be less of a stretch then normal – if there is such a thing as normal in situations like this.”

“I’m not sure there are ‘situations like this.’”

Katy sat down, toed off her shoes, and stared at him. “Do you miss them?”

Shawn sank down onto the couch beside his wife, tried to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach as he played stupid and asked again, “What? Who?”

Katy narrowed her eyes, swatted his arm in a way that was only halfway teasing, and said nothing because she could see straight through what he was trying to do.

Shawn scrubbed at his eyes before admitting honestly, “Some days I get nostalgic, yeah, but… I’d like to think I’ve moved on. Especially since I’m a married man now!”

“I don’t think you have moved on,” Katy informed him with a kind smile. “I see the way you look at them – both of them – even now, and I— Shawn, stop panicking and let me talk, please, I’m not accusing you of anything, so take a breath and listen. Please, honey, let me say this.” She took a deep breath, watching the moment of panic pass from Shawn’s face before she continued. “I think I get that.”

“How could you possibly ‘get that’?”

Katy was quiet for a beat, and Shawn kind of regretted interrupting her – especially when she came back with, “Do you know who held my hand when Angela came back that one day?” His brow furrowed and he shook his head. She smiled, answering, “Cory Matthews. The entire time, he sat outside with me at that table and kept a hand on my arm, tried to make me smile while we both tried to listen to what was going on inside. He’s a great man.”

“Yeah,” Shawn agreed slowly. “But we both knew that already.”
“And Topanga…” Katy hesitated, a small smile coming onto her face. “Where do I start with Topanga? She’s my best friend, Shawn, and the two of them have done so much for us… I don’t know, I love them to death at this point.”

It was Shawn’s turn to narrow his eyes. “Is there anything in particular you’re after here, Katy?”

Katy shrugged, evading eye contact as she asked him a second time, “Do you miss them? Because if you wanted to go back to them—”

“I’m never going to leave you!”

“Shawn.” She shot him a slightly scathing look, and he nearly bit his tongue as he realized he’d interrupted her too soon a second time. “I know that. I mean… if you want to be with me and them, I would understand that. I’d be fine with it.”

Shawn just stared at her for a moment, opening and closing his mouth a couple of times before he managed to say carefully, “That sort of setup is pretty difficult to manage in my experience, no matter how much the people involved love one another, and, honestly, I’m just not okay with the idea of doing something like that without you. I’m not going to put you in a position to feel left out.”

“What are we?” Katy smiled. “Five? I’ll manage.”

He frowned. “I’m serious, Katy.”

“I…” Katy acted as if she was going to say more – Shawn could tell that she wanted to – but she didn’t, instead closing her mouth and looking down at her hands even as she shook her head. “Okay. If that’s the case… why don’t we – both of us – go talk to Cory and Topanga about it tomorrow?”

“What?” Shawn stared at her. “Seriously? You… Are you saying you’d be interested in dating them too? Because those would be my terms, sweetheart… Yet I can’t imagine how we would make that work.”

“Exactly that. We’d find a way to make it work, because if, somehow, they love us too, then the work would be worth it, right?”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “That makes sense— Hold on, are you saying that you… are extremely fond of them too?”

Katy swallowed, nodded as she replied nervously. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

The way Shawn had teased Riley the day before about living in her apartment had been something like the truth, Katy realized as she sat down at the Matthews’ kitchen table. Cory was at the head of the table, Topanga sitting across from Katy while Shawn sat beside her. While it was nothing special at all anymore for Shawn and/or Katy to spend hours at a time at their apartment, it had taken the other couple all of thirty seconds to see that this visit was different, that the Hunters had something on their collective mind, as it were.

Five minutes after walking in the door, the quartet was sitting at the table with steaming beverages in front of them – tea for Katy, coffee for the rest – and the blonde was glad this was beginning so quickly. Otherwise she was afraid she might lose her nerve.

What if they said ‘no’? What if they only wanted Shawn back, but didn’t want to make room in their lives for her? Not that she would blame them, she thought, ignoring the way her heart twisted at the idea, but how would she handle it after what Shawn had told her the night before? She didn’t want
to be the reason the three of them weren’t… pursuing the most… committed sort of relationship that
they might be interested in, but if she was being honest with herself, she really wanted this to become
a thing with them for her own reasons, too.

“Everything okay in there?” Topanga asked Katy worriedly, tilting her head indicatively towards
Katy’s forehead.

“Yeah!” Katy’s hands tightened around her mug as she stretched a wide smile across her face.

“Then what’s up?” Cory asked, keeping a studious gaze going back and forth between her and
Shawn.

Shawn folded his hands on the table, saying, “Katy and I had a talk once we got home last night.”

“You guys too, huh?” Cory asked as he and Topanga shared a telling glance.

“Surely they weren’t thinking the same thing already, were they?!”

“That depends on what everyone talked about,” Topanga pointed out, mimicking Shawn’s posture as
she asked, “What did you talk about?”

Shawn looked at Katy, but if he thought she had any idea how to start this conversation he was sadly
mistaken. He saw her hesitancy in the space of a breath, and kept control of “their” side of the
conversation, admitting pointedly, “You guys – or. The three of us. Four of us.”

Cory’s eyebrows rose and Topanga leaned in closer as she repeated, “‘Four of us’? In what
context?” Shawn hesitated even as Cory began to beam, already growing certain of where this was
going. Topanga smirked, teasing lightly, “C’mon, Hunter, I know you can say the word. It’s not like
you’re any stranger to it.”

“Dating?” Shawn breathed, like he was testing the word out to see if it fit what he wanted to say.

“Yeah,” he nodded, deciding that was the right term. “The four of us dating. Like the three of us
used to, just…” He took Katy’s hand from her mug, held it in his own as he gave her a bright, loving
smile. “With an added bonus.”

Topanga shook her head, reached across the table to take Katy’s free hand. “That’s not just a
‘bonus,’ Shawn, that’s a whole fourth partner we’re talking about here.” The lawyer frowned
thoughtfully, and Katy’s heart sank. This was the part where they – where she – was turned down,
right? But Topanga only asked her, “For who?”

Katy blinked, not understanding. “I’m sorry?”

“If we do this, if you’re married to Shawn, but dating other people, who are you interested in dating
too? Who are you interested in actively being another partner for?”

When Katy looked into Topanga’s eyes, really looked, she saw something she wasn’t used to seeing
there. Uncertainty.

And a fear of rejection that baffled her and stole her breath away all at once.

Because they all knew that Katy was into guys, but… oh.

She smiled softly at Topanga, glanced at Shawn and Cory to gage their reactions to her first instinct.
Cory didn’t get it, was looking between the two women obliviously, but Shawn had chosen that
moment to stare directly into his coffee cup with a nearly amused smirk on his face.
“We’re doing this, aren’t we?” Cory asked, looking between the other three.

“I would really like to,” Shawn admitted.

“Okay,” Cory nodded, smiling even wider. “That’s good enough for me.”

“And me,” Topanga added, “As long as it’s good enough for you?” she checked with Katy.

“More than enough for me,” Katy promised, not letting go of Topanga’s hand as she stood and rounded the table to sit directly beside her. She didn’t realize she was trembling until she lifted her free hand to cup Topanga’s cheek as she asked, “May I kiss you?”

“We have to talk about how exactly this is going to work,” Topanga said, ever the voice of reason, but then she smiled, bright and beautiful, that uncertainty disappearing from her eyes. “But we can do that in a minute. Right now: please do.”
Bay window right after school.

Riley had sent out a text at the beginning of the school day, and so that was where the kids found themselves after the end of it. Riley, Maya, Farkle, Lucas, Zay, and Isadora, all six were sitting in or around the bay window as Riley and Maya revealed what they’d discovered about their parents the day before. Riley even talked about things that she hadn’t yet told Maya – memories and moments that had slipped back to remembrance or that suddenly made so much more sense now that she understood her parents’ past with Shawn.

They had begun dating as a triad very soon after moving to New York, and for a year things had been perfect between them. Then Riley had been born, and Shawn had taken his photography job – which required very frequent travel – at the same time. He had begun to disappear, accidentally-on-purpose, for weeks at a time… then months… then just Christmas and birthdays. Somewhere in there he had asked Cory and Topanga to ask Riley to start calling him “Uncle Shawn” instead of “Papa,” and that was when things had been definitively changed. Shawn and the Matthews were no longer a triad; now it was the Matthews who’s friend Shawn occasionally bunked on their couch. Over the years, the older Riley got, it had stayed that way.

And, come to think of it, she’d never really thought to question those times when Shawn had been visiting but the couch hadn’t looked as if anyone had come near unto sleeping on it… which had been most of the times Shawn had stayed at the apartment, up until he’d met Katy.

“Whoa.” Zay was the first to speak after Riley had poured out the whole story – such as she knew it – with Maya occasionally chiming in. But even Zay couldn’t seem to find anything else to say.

“It’s not actually as strange as I’m sure it seems right now,” Smackle pointed out after a moment. “There are plenty of cultures based around a family structure of nonmonogamy, and even a growing number of people who practice the same in the US.”

“While that’s true,” Farkle pointed out. “Seeing as it isn’t the norm in our culture, it then comes as an understandable shock.”

“Though…” Lucas said hesitantly. “Maybe it’s not as startling as it could be, given who we’re talking about?”

“What are you talking about?” Maya asked him.

He shrugged. “Shawn has always seemed very close to Riley’s parents; Maya, you admitted even you called him Mr. Matthews’ boyfriend before you met him.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t mean it like… as a part of reality! And Matthews denied it!”

“Because at the time of the accusation,” Isadora said sensibly. “Mr. Hunter wasn’t his boyfriend.”

“And he isn’t now!” Maya added emphatically.

“Of course not,” Lucas said soothingly, reaching around Riley to put a hand on Maya’s arm as he noticed the way Isadora leaned away from her, startled at the little outburst.

“Guys,” Farkle looked between Riley and Maya even as he took one of Isadora’s hands – and Zay took the other, both meaning to quietly reassure and support her. “No one intentionally misled either
of you, I’m sure.”

“It just sounds like most relationships that have been really left in the past,” Zay seconded. “They don’t really matter anymore, so they aren’t brought up anymore. Nothing… What’s the word, Farkle?”

“Nothing malicious about it?” Farkle suggested.

“Exactly. No one tried to lie, it just… never happened to come up because it is unimportant.”

Riley was pretty sure she didn’t believe a word they were saying, but they were trying to help, so she smiled and nodded, if for no other reason then to get them to stop trying to convince her and Maya. Usually they were a helpful group; today they just seemed to want to talk her down alongside Maya. Which they also did frequently. But this time she just had to disagree. She couldn’t see Shawn’s relationship with her parents – any part of it, be it platonic, romantic, or otherwise – coming to a point where it just… didn’t matter.

“Okay,” she agreed. “I understand now. I believe you. Shawn’s past of holding that place in our lives doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Papa,” the voice Riley recognized as her younger self echoed in her mind, and she fought against a sudden onslaught of tears springing into her eyes. “I can’t sleep. Tell me a bedtime story?”

“You don’t look like you believe it,” Farkle informed her gently, even while his gaze studied her expression shrewdly.

She and Maya didn’t give Farkle enough credit, Riley thought for the thousandth time. It had been the three of them, really, from practically the very beginning. He knew them as well as they knew each other. Sometimes – like now – he knew them better than they knew themselves.

“What do you mean?” she asked, hating that her voice was an octave above normal.

“Because, that face,” he pointed to Riley. “I’ve seen before. On her.” He pointed to Maya.

“I…” Riley wanted desperately to refute that as she looked towards Maya, watched all color drain from her best friend’s face. “It’s not—”

“Riley,” Farkle interrupted gently, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

“It is the same thing,” Lucas continued just as carefully. “In its own way.”

“And if that’s something you need to address,” Farkle said, still gentle, but his tone becoming firmer as he knew he got closer to one of Riley’s issues with the whole situation. “That’s okay.”

She shook her head mutely.

“Why?” Maya asked suddenly, rhetorically. “Because you’re afraid it’ll… upset me? Strike a nerve? I’m already… rattled. The nerve is struck. So forget about trying to protect me, and… deal with this. Don’t sit on this, do not let it… fester. Deal with it. However you need to do it, you deal with it. Okay?”

Again, Riley found herself faltering, but she could tell Maya caught the split-second during which she glanced towards the door, out to where the adults were talking. Discussing what, she could only imagine.
“Is that what you need?” Zay asked immediately. “You wanna go talk to them?”

Riley answered just as quickly. “No.”

“Do you need to go talk to them?” Lucas queried.

“No.”

Maya grabbed Riley’s hand away from Farkle’s, tugged her onto her feet. “Come on. We’re doing it anyway.”

“I don’t want to, Maya,” Riley practically whined.

“No,” Maya agreed. “I don’t want to either, but you need to. We need to. So we’re doing it.”

“Do you want some company?” Lucas offered, looking worriedly between the two girls.

“No thanks, Huckleberry.” Riley held her free hand out to him despite Maya’s answer, and Lucas raised his eyebrows at the blonde, who shrugged, seeming more indifferent then anything. “Sure, why not? Far be it from me to keep a girlfriend from her boyfriend.”

Lucas smiled gratefully at Maya, and took Riley’s hand. Riley took a deep breath and led the way towards the living room. She poked her head into the kitchen before they even left the hallway, and she gaped at the unexpected sight before her.

Topanga had taken off her shoes and suit jacket after work, and she was sitting on the end of the couch with her laptop on the arm of it. Cory’s head was in her lap, and he was lying on his back, scoring a paper that he was holding up in the air to read. It was the fact that he was also lying across Shawn and Katy – who were also sitting on the couch – that really caught Riley off-guard. One of Katy’s hands were toying lazily with Cory’s curls as she sat between Shawn and Topanga and peered over her husband’s shoulder. Shawn’s laptop was sitting atop Cory’s ankles as Shawn studied something on it.

It was an odd, yet somehow perfect picture of peace, and the adults were acting as if it had happened a hundred times before exactly like this when Riley knew for a fact that it hadn’t.

“Maya!” Riley gasped out, almost silently, lest they be discovered.

Lucas popped up above Riley’s head, and Maya did the same beneath it. There was absolute silence between the trio as they absorbed what they were seeing. Just as quickly as had all froze, Maya suddenly dashed down the steps into the living room before Riley could stop her.
Back in Riley’s bedroom, Isadora moved to sit beside Farkle in the bay window. She looked cautiously between him and Zay before she asked, “Is no one going to point out the fact that we were just presented with the perfect resolution to Riley, Maya, and Lucas’ triangle?”

“No,” Zay replied, plopping down beside Isadora. “They say they resolved it, and that Riley won. We all know that.”

“But we all also realize what they don’t – that is only a temporary fix.”

“You’re right,” Farkle agreed. “But so is Zay. The three of them are smart. They’ll figure it out for themselves when the time is right.”

“Hey, Matthews,” Maya stopped beside Topanga as she addressed her teacher nonchalantly. “I get that you’re a touchy-feely sort of person, but don’t you think that,” she gestured to him stretched across the couch. “That is a little bit much?”

Cory looked at her upside down from where he was lying; he didn’t move, and he calmly said only, “No, not really. We all four fit on the couch this way.”

“Which is important why?”

“Maya.” Shawn turned away from his laptop and towards her with a deadpan expression and tone. “That question shouldn’t – doesn’t – deserve a response. You can figure it out for yourselves.”

Maya blinked at Shawn, at his nearly short tone. “Are you scared?” she asked him suddenly.

His eyebrows drew together. He thought for a second before asking, “Wouldn’t you be?”

Maya drew in a slow breath, glancing back towards where Riley and Lucas were hiding out. “Fair enough.”

“More importantly,” Riley stepped up to stand beside Maya, with Lucas a step behind her. Her spine was rigid, her jaw a little too firm. “I take it you’ve already discussed… something about…”

“Being… together?” Katy suggested.

“Yeah.”

Topanga nodded. “Yes, we discussed it.” She looked between Cory, Shawn, and Katy, checking their unspoken opinions before they seemed to come to a unanimous conclusion, and she added, “In fact, go get your brother, please. We’d like to talk to you two and Maya.”

“I’ll go grab Auggie,” Maya volunteered, disappearing in that direction.

“Ah…” Lucas moved as if to leave, but Cory sat up with a little difficulty, saying, “You can stay.”

“Zay, Farkle, and Smackle are still here too,” Riley reminded them softly.

“Then they can stay, too,” Topanga said. “They’re here enough, it’s probably best for them to hear it outright, too.”
“I’ll go get them,” Lucas said, hurrying off.

Then Riley was left standing alone by the couch as the adults wiggled around enough that they could all fit there in some way. Shawn ultimately just sat on the arm of the couch beside Cory, and Katy remained between the Matthews.

“You know where this is going, right?” Topanga asked Riley carefully.

Riley flapped down onto the loveseat across from the couch, answering with an unconvincing smile, “Yes.”

“You have anything you wanna say about it before we have an audience?” Shawn asked her hesitantly.

“No,” she replied lightly.

What she thought, sudden and fierce, was: If you hurt Auggie, I’ll rip your face off the same way he did my bear.

“Uh-huh,” Katy said flatly, and Riley got the feeling that she was even less convinced of her mindset then Shawn was. She nearly winced at how sharply her insides twisted at the idea.

“Well,” Shawn said. “If you ever want to talk about it, I’d be happy to.”

“Nooo…” Maya drawled, returning to the room with Auggie and Ava. “You won’t be happy with that conversation. You might even both cry by the time it’s done.”

She sat down beside Riley, Ava crawled into her lap, and Auggie sat on Riley’s when she reached for him. “Why would people cry?” he asked.

Maya put her chin on Ava’s shoulder, stared straight ahead, and answered dispassionately, “Dad – Shawn – he hurt Riley.”

“He is your dad, Maya,” Riley said firmly. “Do not second-guess that.”

Maya turned ever-so-slightly towards her. “I don’t.” Her mouth was still open to say more, but the others traipsed into the room, and she closed it instead.

“You wanted to tell us something?” Lucas asked, moving to stand like a sentry behind where Riley and Maya were sitting.

“We did, yeah,” Cory nodded, looking over the assembled group of kids. “We do, actually.”

“You want to guess what it is?” Topanga asked, taking the hand of the person beside her as she smiled encouragingly.

There was a long, drawn-out silence before Maya hazarded on a breath, “You three are back together again, aren’t you? You, Matthews, and Shawn.”

“We are,” Shawn nodded, squeezing Katy’s hand in his. “With… adaptations.”

“So the three of you and Ms. Katy…” Farkle began.

“…Are all four dating each other,” Smackle finished.

“Sort of,” Katy agreed.
Maya asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” Shawn answered. “I’m dating the Matthews, and married to Katy, and Katy’s married to me, but dating the Matthews.”

“That sounds simple enough,” Isadora remarked.

“I bet it’s not, though,” Farkle replied.

“It may not be easy,” Zay said, looking between the adults. “But if it’s worth it to them, then I say go for it.”

“Thanks for your blessing, Zay,” Cory said dryly. “But it’s not exactly yours that you’re looking for.”

“I know that,” he replied, looking to Riley and Maya.

Maya agreed, “We all do. And… while, yeah, I’m reserving judgement until I see how this actually works – sure, you have my blessing to try it.”

“And mine,” Auggie seconded, even though, judging by the look in his eye, Riley had to wonder if he really even understood what they were discussing.

There was a pause, and she was so lost in her thoughts that it took her a moment to notice that they were all looking at her, waiting for her to say something. “Oh yeah,” she said a little too brightly. “What Maya said.”

Katy hummed, and it had been a long time since Riley had seen the waitress with such a perceptive look in her eyes. It made her want to squirm. Auggie squirmed in Riley’s lap instead as Katy asked her, “Are you sure you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah, of course.” Riley forced a smile, asking, “Why wouldn’t I be? I love you and Uncle Shawn.”

She forced the title past stiff lips, even though it felt like a dig and a fib in her own heart. She had hoped it might help Maya and the adults relax, but Katy answered gently, “Oh, I know you love all of us. We all know that. That’s why I think you would tell us what we want to hear.”
Chapter 6

Riley summoned her brightest, most convincing smile, and pointed it right at Katy. “That’s not what I’m doing. Besides, it’s not like the three of them haven’t been dating in some form for practically forever. It’s like Maya and I talked about – even she thought he was dating Dad at first.”

“Was he?” Ava spoke up.

Riley looked at her in confusion, not understanding her question. “What?”

Ava narrowed her eyes, clearly studying Riley as she rephrased her question. “Has he ever dated your parents in the past, that you remember?”

Riley chewed on her bottom lip as she tried for a second to find the right way to phrase her answer. She was hyperaware of how many people were staring at her as she replied carefully, “Looking back now, I see that’s what was going on in my memories, yeah. I guess I always thought… that was just what the three of them did, that it was normal. And that’s true, for them… that is normal – or… it was. And I thought,” she swallowed, a little roughly. “That I was just eccentric and dramatic, and that it was just my way of loving too freely when I called him—when I—”

“Goodnight, Papa.” “I love you, Papa.” “Tell me a story, Papa.” “Pick me up, Papa.” “What did you see this time, Papa.” Papapapapapapapapapa…

Riley moved to spring up, to lift Auggie from her lap and run before she could delve that far into the conversation. Her little brother, however, dug in his heels, gripping the cloth of their chair in his little hands and saying firmly, “No, Riley.”

“Auggie,” Riley huffed, flopping back on the couch for a second. “Please let me up. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“But maybe that’s why you need to,” he answered softly, his gaze so very gentle as he turned to look her in the eyes.

“You can’t say that. You don’t know; you don’t understand.”

“He doesn’t understand what?” Farkle asked.

She shook her head, refusing to talk anymore while Shawn was still near. As it was, his expression was slowly starting to crumble anyway, and that was exactly what she didn’t want. She couldn’t even look at Maya, couldn’t bear to see the agony growing her best friend’s gaze.

Ava was still thinking far too much for any seven-year-old, but after a silent moment, she slid off of Maya’s lap and took Auggie’s hand in hers, pulling him away from Riley. As Riley sprang up, though, Ava took her hand, too, commanding, “Bay window, right now.”

“You can’t say that!” Riley objected. “It’s my room!”

Ava ignored her, and Riley could feel all of her well-meant plans and masks unravelling at her feet. Instead, Ava turned to look at Farkle and ordered, “You’re coming too.”

“Why?” Farkle asked in surprise, even as he stood to his feet.

“Because Maya’s the night, and Riley’s supposed to be the light, and you love them both, and you
love your girlfriend, and you were there when they couldn’t find the other one’s daddy, right?”

Farkle took a deep breath, looking gravely at Riley as he answered, “I was.”

“Good. Come on.”

“I don’t need this, Ava,” Riley objected, even as Farkle moved to put his arm around her shoulders and lead her towards her bedroom. “I’m fine.”

“You will be,” Maya spoke up, smiling bravely at her. “And in the meantime, I’m going to stay here and talk to my parents and yours, and we’re going to figure some things out for ourselves, okay?”

Slightly reassured that Maya, at least, was going to be okay, Riley allowed herself to be led into her bedroom. She sat down in her bay window between Farkle and Ava, and Auggie crawled back into her lap, wrapping his arms tightly around her. He was so small, they didn’t even reach all the way around her waist, but still he was the one trying to help her.

“Do you feel like he – Shawn – abandoned you?” Ava asked her frankly.

“No,” Riley answered immediately, but then, “Maybe. I don’t know. Mostly I feel like I pushed him away.”

“You told me that he said that wasn’t true years ago,” Farkle reminded her.

“I know what I said. And I know what he said, but I also know how I feel. And I thought I was over it… but maybe I’m not. I just… don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

“Maya,” Farkle surmised.

“This could ruin her trust in him,” Riley said softly. “I didn’t… realize some of this – I didn’t understand or remember it all properly when I got Shawn and Katy together, and now…”

Farkle shook his head. “You may have helped get Shawn and Katy together, Riley, but it’s not all on you. That’s life. Life got them together. They decided to be together – and Mrs. Hunter did that already knowing about Shawn’s past with your parents, I’m sure of it. So that part is not your problem. Your problem is what you do with what’s going on now.”

“What do you think I should do?” Riley asked Farkle.

“What do you want to do?”

“I think it… really is only fair for me to wait and see what happens next before I do anything.”

He didn’t point out that her answer had very little with what she wanted to do, and Riley was grateful for that. Instead, he nodded, agreeing, “That sounds like a good plan, especially if you’re unsure how you feel. Reserve judgement and observe; I think that may be the most scientific approach I’ve ever seen you take.”

“But we’re not talking about science,” Auggie reminded him with confusion in his eyes. “We’re talking about feelings.”

“Promise me something,” Ava requested of Riley, her eyes firm and a little sad, in contrast with Auggie’s.

“Promise what?” Riley asked her.
“Keep talking about it. Talking helps me figure things out; I bet it’ll help you too. So, work on figuring it out. Talk to Farkle or Lucas or me and Auggie or your teachers. Okay?”

Riley hesitated, and Farkle took her hand and squeezed it, pressing gently, “Okay, Riley?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Good.” Ava smiled at her, and it struck Riley how encouraging the girl was trying to be. “That’s all I think anybody should want right now –“ She included Auggie in her statement, adding, “From either of you.”

Auggie shrugged. “It’s Uncle Shawn and Miss Katy; I trust them, and if they make Mommy and Daddy happy, then I’m okay with it.”

Riley felt a stab of guilt at her brother’s innocent, sincere reply. Why couldn’t she be that trusting? She trusted him with Maya, didn’t she, and wasn’t that as big a deal as trusting him with anyone else they were talking about?

But you didn’t remember… you didn’t know everything then, her conscience argued.

Except… she had, vaguely. But she had thought it a dream, or a child’s misinterpretation of reality. It had taken the photos, and confronting Shawn and her parents with them, for her to fully remember the truth.

And now… now she felt like she should’ve been excited, or at least more relaxed about it, like Auggie, but she wasn’t. She was scared – that Shawn was going to leave her parents again and hurt them, or hurt Maya and Auggie, or Katy.

“Hey,” Farkle reached out and waved a hand in front of her eyes. “Earth to Riley. Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“You looked like you were thinking pretty hard.”

She shrugged. “Not too hard.” It was a reminder to both of them as she said, “I said I was reserving judgement for now, and I really did mean it.”

It might just be harder than she had expected it to be.

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