**The Britin Trap**

by *Tagsit*

**Summary**

What if Brian agreed to the unthinkable and offered to start a family with Justin . . . and then it all went to hell? Set post series.

**********STORY IS NOW COMPLETE - HAPPY READING!**********

**Notes**

This is how it all began... Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter One - You’re Fucking Good With Kids.

“Ooooo! Look at that one, Jus! It’s so big. And it’s such a pretty blue.” The little boy standing in front of the huge wall of plate glass windows was so excited by the view of all the planes taxiing in off the runway that he was literally bouncing in place as he pointed out his favorites. “It even has a crown on it. I betcha it’s for a prince!”

“That’s a KLM plane, Gus. It’s a Dutch airline and the crown means it was founded by the Queen of the Netherlands,” explained the youthful-looking blond man who was hunkered down on one knee next to the boy. “But you might be right. There just might be a prince or princess on that plane.”

“Isn’t that the airline EmmyLou’s friend, Dijon, flies for?” a taller, dark-haired man standing behind the pair at the windows interjected. “If so, I can almost guarantee that there’s at least one big Queen aboard.”

“A Queen? Wow!” Gus gushed, stepping forward so that he could rest both hands against the pane of glass as the jetway was unfurled towards the plane in question.
Justin stood up, ruffling the child’s hair and shaking his head. He gave the smirking older man a side-eye and a chuckle but didn’t say anything. His partner had always had a quirky sense of humor. It wasn’t worth the effort to explain the joke to Gus, though. He might as well let the kid envision whatever kind of queen he wanted.

“Okay, guys, we’re all ready.” The little group standing at the windows was joined by a tall, willowy blonde holding an infant. “JR is changed and officially poop free. Let’s just hope she stays that way until we make it home. There’s nothing more difficult than changing a diaper in those tiny airplane bathrooms.” Then the woman smiled down at the boy. “You ready to go home, Lambskin?”

“No. I don’t wanna,” Gus pouted, crossing his arms and giving his mother the five year old version of a death stare. “I wanna stay with Daddy and Jussin.”

“Hey, Buddy, we talked about this already. Remember?” Justin intervened, moving over so he could once more kneel down next to the boy. “Just because you’re going back to Toronto and we’re staying here in Pittsburgh, doesn’t mean we can’t stay in touch. I promise to make sure your dad calls you every week. And you’re coming back to stay with us for March Break, right?”

“Yeah . . .” the child still looked unconvinced despite his reluctant admission.

“Well, then, there’s no need to be sad. That’s only three months away. You’ll see, the time will just fly by.” Justin leaned in to affectionately kiss Gus’ peachfuzzed cheek. “Besides, if you stay here, you’ll miss out on all the fun things your teacher has planned at school. You don’t want that, do you?”

Gus appeared to think about that factor for a bit before he shook his head and let his arms fall open again. “Nah . . . But you PROMISE to make Daddy call me? He forgits a lot, ya know.”

“I promise, Gus. Cross my heart and hope to die. Brian will call you every single Sunday or I’ll kick his butt,” Justin swore, going so far as to make the motion of crossing his heart with an index finger.

The promise of his father getting his butt kicked caused Gus to giggle. He finally smiled as he leaned in to give Justin a hug that almost strangled the man as the little arms cinched tightly around his neck. The blond was hugging back almost as tightly though. It was hard for him to say goodbye as well. As soon as Justin was done, Brian swooped in, gathering Gus into his arms and hefting the gangling child up into his arms for his own hug. Gus hugged back even more desperately.
“Now, you be good for your moms, Sonny Boy. Okay?” Brian said, pulling back when he felt the hugging had gone on long enough that it was getting slightly embarrassing.

“Okay, Daddy. I love you.”

“Ditto, Kiddo.”

“I’m gonna miss you, Daddy,” the boy replied, his big brown eyes getting glassy with tears that were just barely held back.

Brian, who appeared too choked up to respond, gave his son one last hug, looking over the boy’s shoulder towards Justin with a mute plea for assistance.

“Your Dad’s going to miss you too, Gus,” Justin quickly jumped in, laying consoling hands on both big and little shoulders. “Now, the sooner you get on that plane and go, the sooner you’ll be back, right?”

This awkward logic seemed to resonate with the boy, who nodded eagerly and began to squirm to get down. Brian set him on his feet, taking one last opportunity to run his fingers through the baby-fine stands of auburn floss so like his own. Mom, however, was more than ready to get this show on the road so she could deposit both kids into their airplane seats and sit herself for awhile. She handed her daughter off to a smiling Justin - who took the chance to thoroughly kiss and snuggle the sweet-smelling bundle of baby - while she turned to offer a goodbye hug to Brian. The two old friends clutched at each other for a moment or two.

“Call if you need anything, Wendy” Brian whispered when the woman gave him a peck on the cheek and pulled away.

“We’ll be fine, Peter,” she replied with a playful wink. The she turned to Justin and held her arms out for the baby.

Justin reluctantly gave his burden up. “Thanks for letting me get my baby fix, Linds,” he said with a sheepish grin as he handed the infant over. “Don’t forget to call when you land so we know you made it okay.”
Lindsey smiled as she loaded the baby into an umbrella stroller and hoisted the overful diaper bag to her shoulder before grabbing Gus with her free hand. There were more lingering goodbyes and kisses, including another round of tearful complaints from the boy, but in the end the young mother finally got all of them into the security line. Brian and Justin waited until the little family had made it all the way out of sight before they turned as one and began to walk towards the exit leading to the airport’s parking structure.

They were halfway to the garage when Justin finally spoke up. “Shit, I’m going to miss Gus so fucking much,” Justin finally voiced the thought they were both having. “The house is going to be way too quiet without him around. Of course, I’ll finally be able to get back to painting again, but . . .”

“Yeah,” Brian agreed with a huge sigh that conveyed his emotions sufficiently even though he hadn’t voiced his feelings verbally.

Apparently there was more to be said, though, because as soon as Brian had paid the parking fees and negotiated the car out through the airport traffic back onto the highway, he spoke up again.

“You’re fucking good with kids, you know?”

Justin laughed and graced his partner with one of the bright, beaming smiles that had earned him his nickname. “That’s only because I love your son so much. Plus, he’s an easy kid.”

“You’re even good with JR and she’s definitely not easy,” Brian insisted.

Justin shrugged. “She’s just a baby. Gus took a lot more effort when he was that age too. But look at him now; he’s so smart and kind and curious. I love spending time with both the kids. Besides, a gay man needs to get his kid fix whenever and wherever he can, right? I mean, even though I’m thrilled that we worked things out and went through with the wedding after all, it’s not like you and I are going to settle down into domesticity and start our own family any time soon.”

Brian took a minute to signal a lane change and move the Vette in between two semis hogging the fast lane before he responded. It took so long that Justin, who was busy looking out the window at the passing scenery and whose thoughts had already moved on to other matters, had already lost the thread of the conversation. So, when Brian hesitantly began to speak again, it took Justin a second or two to fully comprehend what was being offered.
“Why not?” Brian asked, darting an almost shy glance sideways at his passenger. “There’s nothing stopping us. If you want a family, we could always find a surrogate or something.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Brian could see Justin turning in his seat to stare confusedly in his direction. It was almost as if Brian had just spoken in an alien language. And maybe he had. Even Brian couldn’t believe he’d just said what he’d said. But Brian Kinney offering to start a family with his newlywed husband wasn’t any more outlandish than having admitted to loving Justin and asking him to marry him in the first place, right? And that had gone just fine.

Over the past year they’d worked through most of the glitches that had almost scared them both off the idea of getting married. After just two miserable weeks apart, with Justin in New York and Brian missing him so badly he’d felt like he was losing his mind, the former Stud had called and practically begged his younger lover to come back. Emmett had been happy to revive their wedding plans, with only a slight delay in execution, and they were married later that summer. Since then they had settled into Britin together, Justin had re-enrolled in PIFA and was now almost done with his degree, plus he’d managed to paint a whole slew of amazing artwork and been included in two more shows that were very positively reviewed. Brian found himself enjoying the country life in his big old manor and hadn’t really felt the same drive to maintain his old social life, although he and Justin did still have a regular ‘date night’ every week where whatever urges he had to trick were satisfied. Meanwhile, his professional life remained fulfilling and Kinnetik had been enormously profitable. They were ridiculously happy, actually.

So Brian was as shocked as anyone that he’d started to think about messing up the perfection they’d finally found by adding a child to the mix. The time they’d spent with Gus over this past week had been what had finally pushed him to mention it. Watching his son over the holidays, and seeing the way Justin and the boy had bonded, had opened Brian’s eyes to all they joys he was missing out on by only being an occasional father. He really hadn’t wanted to give Gus back at the end of the week. Especially not when the kid would be going all the way back to Canada for another three months with his mothers. Brian found himself thinking about what it would be like to have a child that he didn’t have to give back to someone else at the end of the day. What it would be like to see all the special moments he’d missed when Gus was a baby and he was still so caught up in his own debased life to care. Plus, seeing Justin with the kids - especially little JR - made Brian wonder if his husband had ever wanted to have a child of his own. They’d never really discussed it. So, this was him broaching the idea, even though it felt completely foreign to even dare to voice such an insane idea.

He waited a full five minutes and, when Justin still hadn’t responded, Brian pulled the car over to the shoulder of the highway, turning on the flashers as soon as he’d parked, and then twisting to face his disbelieving partner.

“Don’t tell me I’ve finally found a way to shut you up after all these years?”
“Sorry, but I think I’m hallucinating. Did you really just ask me if I wanted to start a family? Or was that a flashback to the acid we dropped two weeks ago?” Justin queried incredulously.

“You’re not tripping, Sunshine. At least I don’t think so,” Brian chuckled, rather enjoying the adorably shocked expression he’d managed to engender on his partner’s face - he’d always liked being unpredictable. “Come on, it’s not THAT inconceivable that you and I could do the whole family thing. Is it? I mean, feel like I’ve mastered the ‘husband’ shit pretty well, even though nobody thought I could do that either. And you’re the one who’s always telling me what a great father I am. Maybe I just want to try it out for real. You know, with a kid we don’t have to hand off to someone else all the time. So what do you say? Wanna make a baby with me, Sunshine?”

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Thirteen years later.

“Well, it’s small but that’s pretty much expected for a dorm room,” Justin said as he dropped the overfilled suitcase just inside the door and looked around at the compact space. “You want me to help you unpack before orientation?”

“Daaaaaadddd! You really need to stop hovering. I’m twelve, not two. I can unpack for myself,” the blond pre-teen who’d followed him into the room complained. She offloaded her messenger bag containing all her electronics onto the desk and then flopped down on the plain but sturdy bed, twisting around so she could look out the window at the same time. “This summer is going to be so dope. I can’t believe I get to go to a real college and live in a dorm and everything. Alyssa is going to be so jelly when I send her pictures of all this. I can’t wait to see the rest of campus.”

Justin pulled out the desk chair and slumped down into the seat with a lot less enthusiasm than his daughter. “I can’t believe you talked me into this, Qianna. What was I thinking? I can’t leave my twelve-year-old daughter alone for three months on a college campus halfway across the country.”

“Oh, Dad,” Qianna sighed, rolling her eyes with an indulgent smile for her overprotective parent. “We’ve already talked about this. A ton. I’ll be fine. We’ll be with the camp counsellors all the time and once we start the STEM curriculum I’ll be too busy to get into much trouble.”

“I know, but . . .”
“No buts, Dad. You know I’ve wanted to do this program ever since I first heard about it back in elementary school. I mean, the Colorado School of Mines is, like, the best engineering and architecture school in the country. We’re going to do all sorts of amazing STEM stuff all summer long. We even get to use the college labs. And I get advanced credit for high school. There’s no way I’m going home now.”

“Damn it. Why’d I have to go and have a daughter who’s so smart and talented?” Justin teased, finally breaking into a bit of a nervous smile.

“It’s a burden, I know, but you’ll just have to learn to deal with it, Dad,” his daughter kidded him right back. Then she jumped up off the bed and rushed over to give her father a big hug. “I promise, I’ll be just fine. I’m going to have fun, learn lots, and be safe - just like you ordered. If I need you, I’ve got a phone and a computer and I know how to call and email and skype and text and chat . . .” She ticked off all the known methods of modern communication on her fingers as she listed them for her worried father, before bestowing a sunshiny smile on the worried man. “You don’t have to worry about me so much all the time, Dad. I’m a big girl. Now, just kiss me goodbye and get out of here so I can unpack in time for orientation.”

Justin took a deep breath before getting to his feet. “I’m going to miss you so much, QiQi.”

“Me too, Dad. But it’s only three months. And we’re both going to be so busy this summer the time will just fly by, right?” Qianna countered as she reached up to wrap her arms around her father’s neck so she could pull him down for a kiss goodbye. “Now, seriously, stop worrying and go already. Please.”

“Fine. I’ll go. But you can’t make me stop worrying. I’m a dad. That’s what we do,” Justin relented and gave his girl a squeeze. “Be good and have fun, Qi. And make sure you send me pictures so I don’t end up missing you too much. Okay?”

“Deal!”

“Love you, Peanut,” Justin said, using the childhood nickname his daughter had almost grown out of.

“Love you too, Dad.”

Once she’d finally pushed her father out the door, Qianna set about unpacking. It only took her
about ten minutes before she was satisfied with the way everything was arranged. Then she settled atop her bed with the folder of information they’d given her upon arrival, looking through the packet of schedules, safety directives, maps and contact lists. She could barely wait to get started on the classes that would begin the following day. This summer was going to be so much fun. She was so engrossed in reading through the lab protocol for the first unit - a robotics block that looked like it would be a real challenge - that she was startled when one of the counsellors knocked on the door about fifteen minutes later to tell her it was time to meet in the lounge for the orientation meeting. She was vaguely surprised that her roommate for the summer hadn’t yet arrived, but forgot about that anomaly by the time she got downstairs and the orientation began.

They were halfway through one of those annoying ‘get to know everyone’ games when there was a commotion at the door to the dormitory lounge area and another student appeared with one parent in tow.

“I know we’re late. Bad weather. Our flight got delayed,” the tall, dark-haired man was saying to the counsellor who’d met the newbies.

Qianna didn’t pay much attention to the distraction. She turned back to the small group of students she was supposed to be doing Science Pictionary with and totally forgot about the new arrival. It wasn’t till the newcomers walked closer, talking loud enough to interrupt the flow of their game, that all the kids looked up again.

“You sure you’re okay with me just dropping you off and running like this, Sparky?” the man asked, looking around him like he was a little lost. “We haven’t even seen your room or anything . . . .”

“I’ll help Quinne get up to her room later, Mr. Kinney. After we finish the orientation we’re going to take the kids on a short tour of the campus but then we’ve got a break before dinner. She’ll have plenty of time to get moved in then,” Counsellor ‘Pooh Bear’ - her summer camp moniker - advised the nervous father as she tried to gently urge him away from the busy group of children.

“Okay . . . well, I guess I’ll just go then.” The man turned away from Pooh Bear and looked down on his daughter with an indulgent fondness. “You got this, Sparky?”

“Yeah, Pops. I got this. Get out of here already, so I can get my science on, okay?” the girl with the curly mop of long auburn curls said, her borderline harsh words belied by the genuine smile she beamed up at her father.

“Fine. I’m outta here. Don’t get into too much trouble, Sparky.”
“Love you, Pops.” The brunette girl lifted up onto her tiptoes to leave a kiss on her father’s cheek, which he returned.

“Ditto, Kiddo!”

Then the man backed away a few steps, giving a nod and a smile before turning and leaving without any more fuss. The girl immediately directed her attention towards the group of students with an interested gleam in her eye. The boy sitting next to Qianna scrunched over, making a little gap in their circle, allotting the new girl a space to join them.

“You guys have about twenty minutes more to finish up here and then we’re going to head out for a Campus Tour. Have fun,” Pooh Bear warned before she left them to make their own introductions.

“Hi, everybody. I’m Quinne,” the new girl spoke up right away, obviously not the shy type. “So, what did I miss?”

When nobody answered her right away, the newcomer looked around at the group, all of whom seemed to be looking back and forth between Quinne and the girl with the short blond hair who had been doing the drawing when the new addition had arrived. Qianna herself was still sitting there, pencil suspended over the paper, not really knowing what to do or say. She was staring at the new girl with her mouth hanging open and a confused look on her face.

“Wow. You two look like you could be twins or something. Except for the hair, of course,” the girl who’d introduced herself to Quinne earlier as ‘Max’ declared, voicing the sentiment that everyone was thinking.

Quinne was now staring back, looking equally perplexed.

“Hi. I’m Qianna. Qianna Taylor. I’m from Palo Alto, California.” Qianna waved from across the circle of campers.

“I’m Quinne Kinney. From Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania . . . This is weird, huh?”
“REALLY weird,” Qianna agreed. “So, uh . . . why do you look like me?”

“I don’t. You look like ME,” Quinne insisted with a smile.

Qianna thought to herself that this summer was going to be even more interesting than she’d anticipated.

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PS, as always, I’m writing online and I welcome anyone who wants to stop by and read along, catch my typos or offer suggestions. Feel freed to join me at: The Britin Trap. *Spoiler alert*, though, since I’ve already outlined pretty much the whole story.
As it turned out, Quinne was Qianna’s missing roommate. So, after they were finished with all the group activities for the day, the two girls finally got to settle into their room. They’d just finished putting all of Quinne’s clothing away in her closet and were standing shoulder to shoulder in front of the big mirror affixed to the inside of the closet door when they both paused to really look at the image they made together.

At first glance it was uncanny how similar they looked despite the obvious difference of their hair color. A random observer would automatically think they were related. And yet they weren’t completely identical. Upon closer examination, you could see lots of tiny differences between the two.

To start with, Qianna’s skin was a shade or two paler than Quinne’s, whose more swarthy skin tone matched her long, curly, auburn hair. Quinne was also a good inch taller than the blond with the short, straight hair, and generally had a leaner build. Qianna was slightly rounder in all the right places, even though she was still slim overall.

Their faces, when seen side by side, also showed many minute differences. Quinne’s face was longer and thinner, more of a triangular shape. Qianna had a more oval face and her cheeks were rounder, especially when she smiled. Qianna’s nose turned up a little more at the tip, giving her a more playful and less serious expression. Qianna also had a wider mouth and slightly fleshy lips that accentuated her big, bright smile. Quinne had a much more serious demeanor and a more subtle smile. The one thing, though, that was identical between the two of them were their eyes - they both had beautiful, almond-shaped, hazel eyes with long, thick lashes. That one similarity was striking enough, and eye-catching enough too, that most viewers would probably overlook all their other differences.

“Wow,” Quinne finally broke the silence, shaking her head at their combined images in the mirror. “I read once that everyone has a double somewhere in the world, but I never thought I’d find mine the summer I went to Science Camp.”

“I know. It’s crazy. How can two people who come from states thousands of miles apart look so..."
much alike?” Qianna echoed her roommate’s amazement. “If I dyed my hair, I could easily pass for your twin.”

“Well, that, and if you grew an inch or two,” Quinne teased, her smile offsetting any edge to the comment.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you’re a giant,” Qianne kidded right back, knocking shoulders with the other girl as she moved to close the closet door before heading over to flop down on one of the beds.

Quinne followed her new friend, settling onto her own bed a little more gently, and carefully arranging the pillows so that she was propped up against the wall. They both sat there quietly for a minute or two, lost in their own thoughts.

Quinne was the one who finally broke the silence. “You know, genetics are pretty amazing and all, but somehow I don’t see how we could have separately evolved to be almost identical without there being some connection. My dad always told me that there’s no such thing as a coincidence. There’s got to be some explanation - some connection - that we’re just not seeing. Right?”

“I don’t see how. You said you’re from Pittsburgh, right? Well, as far as I know I’ve never been there. My dad and I have lived in California my whole life. Your family didn’t ever live on the west coast, did you?”

“Nope. We did visit Disneyland once when I was about five, but that’s the only time I’ve been to California and that doesn’t explain why we look alike.” Quinne paused and thought through things for a bit before theorizing, “maybe we have some long lost distant ancestor in common or something. You know, like how people can look eerily like their great-great grandmother or something? My dad’s family is Irish and immigrated to the US in the 1920s. You’re not Irish, are you?”

“No. Not that I know of,” Qianna answered, looking doubtful. “My grandma told me her family was old money - really old - like Daughters of the American Revolution and Mayflower old. But I don’t really know much about the rest of the family. It’s always been just my dad and I.”

“Hmmmm. Well, that’s clearly not it. But there’s got to be some logical explanation. We just have to find it . . .”
Quinne began chewing at her thumbnail in a gesture that caused Qianna to laugh, since she did that too.

“What?” Quinne asked when she heard the giggle.

“That thing you’re doing - chewing your thumbnail when you’re thinking - I do the same thing.” Qianna held out her right hand which showed a mangled and uneven thumbnail. “My grandmother’s always lecturing me about it, telling me it’s a horrible habit, and warning me I’ll never have nice nails if I don’t stop.”

“See, that’s just one more piece of evidence. There’s GOT to be something that connects us. I’m sure of it. We just have to find that missing connection,” Quinne insisted, leaning forward expectantly. “Let’s figure this out. You said it’s just you and your father. We can start there. Tell me about him.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Qianna explained. “He’s actually pretty boring, to be honest. He doesn’t do anything other than work all the time. Although he does have a pretty cool job - he’s the Assistant Art Director for a big-name animation studio that’s worked on pretty much every single animated movie out there. He’s sort of halfway famous, although you’d never know it by how we live since he’s kind of a hermit. We do get to go to some awesome parties sometimes though.”

“Sweet.” Quinne enthused. “My brother, Gus, would probably go ape shit insane if he knew I was rooming with someone whose dad was a famous animator. That’s what he wants to do when he grows up. He’s actually going to the Pittsburgh Institute of Fine Arts, starting next fall, to learn just that. And he and my Uncle Michael have been working on this comic book together for the past year or so that they want to try and get published. Do you think your dad would give me an autograph for Gus or something?”

“Sure. He generally hates dealing with any fans, but I’m sure he’d do it for me. I am his only kid, after all. There’s got to be a few perks for being an only child, right? . . . So, what’s it like having a big brother?”

“Some days I’d kill to be an only child,” Quinne laughed but quickly relented. “Okay, that’s an exaggeration. Gus is actually pretty cool most of the time. But he’s six years older than me so we don’t have a lot in common. And he also lives with his moms most of the time; I only have to deal with him on the weekends when he comes to the house to hang out with me and dad.”

“Moms?” Qianna questioned, not sure she’d heard that correctly.
“Yeah, Gus’ bio mom is a lesbian so, when she and Aunt Mel wanted to start a family, they came to my dad for the necessary ingredients. They have another kid too - fathered by my Uncle Michael - who’s only a couple years older than me, but . . . well, JR and I don’t really get along all that well. She’s annoying and totally vain and only interested in how popular she is. I’ve got better things to do with my time than obsessing over whether or not I make the cheerleading squad. But, whatever, right?”

“It sounds like you’ve got a wild family,” Qianna replied, looking at her new friend with an almost hungry gleam in her eye. “I’m totally jelly. I always wanted a big family. Like I said, it’s just me and my dad. My grandmother lives in Virginia and she only comes to visit us a couple times a year, and I’ve also got an Aunt that lives in Washington DC, but she and my dad don’t talk since Molly ended up siding with her father who kicked my dad out before he even finished high school - long story - but that’s about it for family on my side . . . What about your mom? You haven’t mentioned her.”

“That’s ‘cause there is no ‘mom’. My dad’s about as gay as they come,” Quinne announced proudly. “Which is just fine with me. I’ve got plenty of feminine influence in life already. There’s my Auntie Em - who’s really my Uncle Emmett only he’s the kind of ‘uncle’ that likes to dress in women’s clothing - a half dozen other gay ‘uncles’ of various types, and my Grandma Deb, who’s like a tornado of twenty grandmothers all rolled into one. Hell, even my dad’s a total drama queen half the time, not to mention that he’s way more into fashion than any girl I’ve ever met. Oh, and he also has this shoe fetish thing going for him. So, no, I’m pretty sure I don’t need a mother. You know, except for my Aunt Mel, who’s about as masculine as dykes come, I’m kinda lacking in MALE influences, to be honest.”

Both girls were rocking back and forth with laughter by the time Quinne was done detailing her eclectic family.

“That sounds wonderful if you ask me,” Qianna chimed in when she’d finally quelled her giggles. “My dad’s gay too, actually, but he tries to play it all butch most of the time. He fails, but at least he tries.” They both laughed again, bonding instantly over the tribulations of raising a gay father. “Except for all his boyfriends, who come and go on a pretty regular basis, most of the time I’m the only femme in the house.”

“Wait, so your dad’s gay too?” Quinne sat up, now excited by the turn the conversation had taken. “So how’d he get you? My dad used a surrogate . . .”

“No way! My dad used a surrogate too!” Qianna interrupted, sitting up as well and scooting over to the edge of her mattress. “Do you think . . .”
“That they maybe used the same surrogate and that’s why we look so much alike?” Quinne finished Qianna’s sentence for her. “It’s possible. But . . . how would one surrogate have two kids that are so close in age? We’re both going into eighth grade so you have to be around thirteen, right?

“Actually, I’m only twelve. I don’t turn thirteen until November. I skipped a grade in elementary school so I’m on the young side for this program,” Qianna explained with her usual pride in that achievement.

“Get out!” Quinne leapt to her feet and grabbed Qianna’s hands in her own. “We’re the same age! I skipped second grade myself and MY birthday is in November too. November 10th.”

“No way! That’s my exact birthday too!” Qianna was now on her feet as well, both girls literally bouncing with excitement as they crept closer to an answer. “I’m with your dad, here, Quinne. All these coincidences can’t be just random chance. We look alike, we have the same birthday, we even have some of the same mannerisms. And we both have gay dads who used a surrogate to get a daughter. There’s got to be more here.”

“I agree . . .” Quinne hesitated, her mouth pursing up into a twist as she thought through matters. “There’s only two problems. If we really ARE sisters, then how come we’ve never even heard of each other. And, maybe more to the point, how can we have DIFFERENT fathers? Because, I don’t know about you, but I’ve been told about a hundred times that I look like Gus, my biological brother, so I’m pretty sure my dad IS my dad.”

“That is weird. Everyone says I have the same smile as my dad, too. And you and I aren’t EXACTLY alike so . . . I know twins don’t always look alike but can they have different dads altogether?” Qianna looked as confused as her doppelganger by that point.

Quinne grinned and spun around, picking up her tablet computer off the desk behind her. “I don’t know, but I bet Google knows! Are you up for some research?”

The next hour was spent clicking around from site to site, reading through everything the girls could find on the biology of twins. What they found wasn’t always easy to understand for two twelve year olds, but they were both smart and curious and driven. Before long, with the help of Wikipedia, YouTube, the NIH and a score of other random sites they’d found, they’d mastered pretty much everything you ever wanted to know about how twins happened. They knew all about the differences between identical and fraternal twins. They discovered the strange term, ‘Superfecundation’ - the fertilization of two or more ova from the same cycle by sperm from different donors. And finally, just as the counsellors were coming around and knocking on doors to tell the students it was time for lights out, they finished watching a highly educational video about ‘Heteropaternal Superfecundation’. According to all their research it seemed that, in rare situations,
fraternal twins could indeed have different fathers if two separate ova were fertilized by two different fathers' sperm. The video even noted that this occurred more frequently in cases of artificial insemination than in nature, which would fit perfectly with their circumstances. The resulting offspring would be genetically only half siblings rather than true genetic twins, but since they had the same mother, they would still potentially share a lot of similarities. So it WAS possible, if improbable, that they might be related.

“Computers off, ladies,” Pooh Bear ordered as she reached the girls’ room. “We’ve got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow and you’re going to want to be rested and ready to do some serious science in the morning. Good night.”

Quinne obediently set her tablet aside on the desk as Pooh Bear turned off the big overhead lights and pulled the door shut. The girls weren’t the least bit sleepy though. They were too jazzed by their crazy discovery.

“So it IS possible that we’re related even if we have two different fathers,” Qianna whispered excitedly. “I wonder how we prove it though?”

“That’s easy. There’s all sorts of companies these days that you can pay to get DNA tests done. Hell, we can probably do some basic tests ourselves if we can use the equipment in one of those cool labs we saw on the tour today.” Quinne sounded confident that they could do all the science needed by themselves if given the chance. “The bigger question is HOW did this happen? What’s the connection between our dads and why did we get separated?”

“Yeah, why . . .” Qianna’s voice, coming out of the darkness from the bed on the right side of the room, sounded a little angry. “You know, I can’t believe my dad would do something like this. He knows how much I’ve always wanted a bigger family. When I was, like, five, I even asked him to give me a little brother or sister - I spent a whole year asking for that as my present for every holiday and my birthday - and he just told me that it probably wouldn’t ever happen. And now I find that I’ve had a sister - a twin sister - that he’s kept secret from me this whole time? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think it was intentional. My father never lies - at least not to me - and he didn’t tell me about you either,” Quinne insisted. “Which leads me to think that something really out of the ordinary must have happened. Maybe there was a mix up at the lab or something - like that case they were talking about in the video?”

“That doesn’t make any sense, though,” Qianna puzzled through the confusion. “I mean, the surrogate would have had to know she had twins when we were born, right? So even if there was a mix up at a lab, they obviously knew there were two babies. And if they knew we had separate fathers, and that was why they divided us up, then why not tell us? None of this makes any sense.”
“Why would both our fathers have been using the same surrogate at the same time anyway?” Quinne agreed with her newfound sibling. “Something had to have gone seriously wrong here. But I still don’t think my Pops would have hidden this from me. Or, if he did, there had to be a pretty damn good reason. It’s just not like him. Brian Kinney’s not the kind of person to hide ANYTHING - the good, the bad, or the ugly - he always owns up to pretty much everything, whether I want to know about it or not. And it’s not like I don’t already have a half-brother and a sorta sister from a different father. Why wouldn’t he have just brought you and your dad into our crazy extended family? Trust me, he wouldn’t keep something this important from me unless he had to.”

“So what are we gonna do? Should we confront them about it? Ask why they separated us and demand the truth?” Qianna asked, not quite as sure as Quinne about whether or not her father would have kept such a secret.

“I say we keep quiet for now. At least until we confirm for sure that we ARE really twins.”

“Good idea. And in the meantime we can do a little more digging around, maybe ask a few careful questions, and try to figure this out on our own. Or at least have a better idea of what we’re accusing our fathers of doing.”

They both fell silent, caught up in their own thoughts for a moment, until Qianna finally broke the peace one last time. “Hey, Quinne? I hope it’s true, because I’d really like a sister like you.”

“Ditto, Qianna,” the other girl answered sincerely. “Night, sis.”

“Night, sis,” came the echo from the opposite bed before they both drifted off to sleep.

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*Waving hello to the other science nerds* Who wants to learn all about Heteropaternal Superfecundation?

Chapter End Notes

9/21/18 - LOL. Yes, this really is a thing. But it’s going to take our junior supersleuths
a little more work to figure out HOW it all came to pass. Hope you’re enjoying my twist on the original here! TAG
Why Are Parents Always So Difficult

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Chapter 3 - Why Are Parents Always So Difficult.

Unfortunately, the girls didn’t get very far with their investigations that first week of camp.

The STEM camp agenda was so packed, full of exciting and interesting tasks, that their entire attention was taken up pretty much from dawn till dusk. And both girls enjoyed the first learning block - a Robotics unit that involved designing, building and programming a robot, culminating in a huge competition at the end of the week - so much so that they ended up devoting pretty much all their free time to the project. The block was taught by grad students from the engineering school, who also acted as coaches for the various camp teams.

Qianna turned out to be the best designer in their group and, with sketch pad in hand, she was always ready to revise and update their robot’s design to meet every challenge. Quinne, on the other hand, was the most proficient coder in the bunch and ended up spending many hours on her trusty tablet computer. Their teamwork paid off, earning them first place in the Friday afternoon competition when their bot managed to complete all the required tasks a full ten minutes before the next challenger.

“Way to go, guys!” Their coach, who went by the camp name ‘T-Rex’, congratulated them afterwards. “QiQi, that catapult arm you designed worked perfectly. You definitely have a future in engineering if you want it. And, Q, that coding sequence you added at the last minute that got us around the blocker was brilliant. I’m really proud of all of you guys!”

Both girls glowed with pride as they accepted the streams of praise from the coach and their teammates. It felt good to have their talents appreciated, and it felt even better that they had done this thing together. For the two girls who had both seen themselves as outsiders, it felt like they had each finally found a long lost soulmate.

They were both still soaring on that emotional high, walking arm in arm on the way back to the dorm after the celebratory pizza party that followed the competition, when Qianna’s phone begin
to vibrate indicating an incoming call.

“It’s my dad,” she announced as soon as she saw the caller ID. “I can’t wait to tell him that we won. He’ll be glad to know my artistic talents helped save the day.” She quickly tapped the icon to accept the call and hit the speaker button so Quinne could listen in on the conversation. “Hey, Dad! Guess what? Our team won the robotics competition. And the coach said my design was perfect!”

“Congratulations, Peanut!” Justin’s voice sounded tinny coming out of the small speaker at the bottom of the phone. “So, I assume that’s the reason why you haven’t called me or answered any of my texts for the last two days?”

“Sorry, dad. I didn’t mean to blow you off. We’ve just been sooo busy,” Qianna was quick to apologize. “Don’t tell anyone, but last night our whole team even snuck out after lights out and went back to the lab to finish working on our bot so we could get it done on time. THAT’s how busy I’ve been.”

“Qianna, I thought I told you to be good and stay safe.” Justin sounded a tiny bit angry as he voiced the anxiety all parents feel for their kids. “Sneaking around late at night without any adults knowing where you’re at does not sound like you were being safe.”

Qianna shook her head and rolled her eyes at what she perceived as her father’s overprotectiveness, earning a quickly squelched giggle from Quinne. “Stop, dad. It was fine. There were eight of us altogether, and we only went one building over from the dorm to the lab. Nothing bad happened.”

“But it could’ve. That’s the point, Qi.” They could hear Justin taking a deep breath on his end of the phone call and then he started off again in a less accusatory tone. “I’m glad you’re having a good time, and I appreciate all the hard work you probably put into the project in order to win, but I just want to know that you’re safe, Honey. So, please, don’t be running off without telling someone where you’re going from here on out. Okay?”

Qianna huffed a resigned sigh but eventually responded, “okay, Dad. I promise I’ll tell someone before I go anywhere from here on out. You happy now?”

“I suppose. I just don’t want you to do anything stupid, Sweetie. I don’t know what I’d do if anything ever happened to you.”
“Nothing’s going to happen to me, Dad,” the independent young woman answered predictably. “So, did you just call to lecture me, or what?”

“No. I actually called to relay some really great news,” Justin stated, and then paused dramatically before making his big announcement. “Okay, so, hold onto your hat because this is probably going to blow you away. Are you ready? . . . Alex proposed to me over dinner tonight and I accepted! I’m getting married!”

Quinne could hear the enthusiasm in the voice coming out of the phone speaker, but the result on their end of the phone line was the exact opposite. Qianna froze in place, right in the middle of the sidewalk about ten feet from the door to their dormitory. Without any warning, she sank down till she was seated on the curb, the phone held out limply in front of her, and a devastated look on her face. Quinne immediately hunkered down next to her friend, putting a consoling arm around Qianna’s shoulders.

“Qianna? QiQi? Are you still there, Honey?” Justin’s voice chirped out, unanswered, through the warm early summer air. “Qianna, please say something so I know you’re still there.”

Quinne nudged her friend gently and then nodded at the phone.

“Um . . . Yeah, I’m still here,” Qianna answered, her voice sounding dull and inflectionless.

“Well, what do you think, Honey? Isn’t this incredible news? Alex and I are getting married!”

“Alex? Hairy all over Alex? Uses all the hot water when he stays over Alex?” Qianna asked, a note of disdain creeping into her voice.

“No, the other Alex I’ve been dating for four months,” Justin returned sarcastically. “Come on, Qi. This can’t come as a complete surprise. He’s been living here for almost a month now.”

“But isn’t this a little sudden, Dad? You dated Chris for over a year before he moved in and that ended in less than two months. And there was that Channing guy that you dated for over six months. And . . .”

Qianna’s list of Justin’s failed relationships was interrupted by her father’s exasperated explanation. “It’s different this time, Qi. Sometimes you just know when it’s right.”
Qianna frowned at her phone, pausing a moment to think of how to phrase her next question. “Do you really love him, though? I mean, REALLY love him. Like, your socks melting off when he kisses you love? Because if you do, I haven’t seen it.”

“Honey . . .” Justin’s deep sigh could clearly be heard. “Not all love is like that, Qi. And sometimes that kind of love is actually more painful than uplifting. Trust me, I know . . . Sometimes all you want - all you need - is a stable, steady, comfortable relationship with somebody you can rely on. And that’s what Alex is offering, Honey. I can love him for being that person for me. Do you understand? Can you please just be happy for me and support me in this, Peanut?”

“I guess,” Qianna grudgingly relented.

“Thank you, Honey. Now, I’m gonna let you go so Alex and I can have that second glass of champagne to celebrate. I just stepped out so I could call you right away and share the big news. I’ll call you back later this weekend to update you on all the plans, okay?”

“Kay.”

“Love you, Peanut. Be good!”

“Love you too, Dad. Nite.”

Qianna ended the call but continued to just sit there staring blankly at her phone. Quinne could tell she hadn’t been reassured by her father’s attempt to explain his decision. She didn’t know the man, or this new fiancé, but she could tell her friend was worried.

“So I take it we do not like this Alex guy?” Quinne asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Definitely NOT!” Qianna insisted loudly. “He’s horrible. He thinks he’s some dope hipster dude but mostly he’s just this shallow, pretentious loser. And he’s got this huge, bushy beard with a long mustache he’s always playing with and curling around his fingers. He looks like a yeti. He’s never said a single nice word to me - mostly he just ignores me completely, except when my dad’s around. And he’s so manipulative. That’s how he got my dad to let him move in - he pretended he was about to be evicted but I later heard him talking on the phone and laughing about how easy it was to get my Dad to agree to him moving in. I’m pretty sure he’s just after my dad’s money.”
“That sucks. He sounds awful,” Quinne agreed.

“He’s horrible,” Qianna asserted. “But the worst part is that my dad doesn’t even really love him. You heard what he said. He thinks Alex is ‘stable’. Is that a good reason to marry someone? I mean, if dad really loved this guy - I mean head over heels loved him - I could deal with not liking Alex. I want my dad to be happy. But I want him to find somebody he can really LOVE. Not someone he’s just settling for.”

“I’m sorry, QiQi. I wish there was something I could do or say that would help,”

“Me too,” Qianna agreed. “Why are adults so stupid sometimes? I mean, I’m only twelve and even I can see this marriage is going to be a huge mistake. Why are parents always so difficult to manage?”

Quinne got to her feet and held out a hand to help her friend up as she answered. “I don’t know. My pops is just as bad sometimes, only he goes to the other extreme. He refuses to date anyone. He always says that he tried the ‘relationship thing’ once and it didn’t work out for him so he’s not going to make that mistake a second time. I can tell he’s lonely, but whenever somebody tries to set him up with a guy he turns them down. I wish he wasn’t so damn stubborn.”

“Father’s can be such a pain sometimes,” Qianna agreed wholeheartedly.

Before they could commiserate further, though, they were interrupted by the arrival of Counsellor Pooh Bear ushering a gaggle of stragglers home from the pizza party. “It’s time to come inside, ladies. We’re gonna have movies and popcorn in the lounge in about a half hour.”

The girls compliantly followed along behind the rest of the group, all of them heading inside and migrating towards the elevators up to their rooms on the floors above. Just as the elevator doors were opening, though, Quinne’s phone began to vibrate in her pocket, so she stepped aside to answer it. Qianna waved at the rest of their group to go ahead while she waited for her friend.

“Hey, Em! What’s up?” Quinne answered eagerly.

“Hey, Girlfriend! How’s science camp? Have you solved the world’s energy crisis and sent the first woman to Mars yet?” replied a voice that was so animated and loud that Qianna could clearly hear the words even though it wasn’t on speaker.
“Not yet, Em. But it’s only been a week. Give me time,” Quinne laughed.

“Well don’t take too long, y’hear? I miss my weekend sleepover buddy,” Qianna could hear the distinct twang of a slight southern accent in the man’s tone. “I mean, here it is, Friday night, and I started to get out my pedicure kit like we always do, and then I remembered you were gone. I almost lost it, Sweetie. Who’s going to help me pick out the right shade of toenail polish with you gone all summer, Sparky?”

“No problem. Go with the sparkly blue. You know that’s your favorite, Aunty Em,” Quinne directed, earning a giggle from the eavesdropping Qianna.

“But I think blue might clash with the new gym shorts I got this week . . . Oh, damn! That’s the doorbell. I think the pizza I talked Drewsie into ordering is here. Can I call you right back, Sparky? Five minutes. Ta!”

The phone went dead before Quinne could even say goodbye.

“That, in case you couldn’t tell, was the famous Aunty Em,” Quinne explained as the two girls walked back over towards the elevator. “He’s the kindest and most loyal guy you will ever meet . . . But he’s also just a tad flighty.”

“I could tell,” Qianna chuckled. “Blue toenails will clash with his shorts?”

They were both laughing outright when the elevator doors sprung open, allowing them to climb aboard.

“If you’d met him, it would totally make sense,” Quinne reassured her friend. “Friday night pedicures have always been our thing. I’ve spent pretty much every single Friday night of my entire life with Em. That’s the night my dad goes out and gets his stud thing on. And then I used to stay at grandma Deb’s on Saturdays if dad needed a second night of fun. You know, I really enjoyed the robotics unit, and I know we’ve been busy and all, but I’m sort of missing all of them tonight.”

“I can relate. I miss my dad something fierce,” Qianna agreed. “And I bet if I’d been there, this mess with Hairy Alex would never have got traction to begin with.”
The girls arrived at their dorm room door and went inside. Quinne immediately flopped down on her bed holding her phone out in anticipation of Emmett calling back. Meanwhile, Qianna advised she was going to go jump in the shower real quick so she could get ready for bed and be in her comfy warm pajamas before the movie started. But, when she got back ten minutes later, all fresh and squeaky clean and dressed only in a robe with a towel wrapping her hair, Quinne was still sitting there staring at her phone and looking a little peeved.

“Aunty Em didn’t call you back yet?”

“No,” Quinne sighed. “Did I mention he was flighty and also easily distracted?” They both giggled at the obviously true description. “I really don’t want to miss his call when he finally does remember, but I would kill for a shower right now too. Do you think you could answer my phone for me if it rings before I get back?”

“No problem. Go. I’ll bring your phone to you if he calls.”

Less than five minutes later, while Qiana was still puttering around, it was Quinne’s tablet instead of her phone that started to ring with that special chime indicating a Skype call was coming in. She trotted over to where the tablet was propped up in its charging stand on the desk, and tapped the icon to accept the call.

“Hi. Sorry, but Quinne isn’t here right now. She just stepped down the hall, I can go get her if you want to hang on a sec,” Qianna said when she answered the call.

“Haha! Nice try, Sparky. But you’ve only been gone a week, I haven’t forgot what you look like this soon, girlfriend!” The man with the big gap-toothed smile on the screen said.

At first Qianna was confused. Why was this person who’d known Quinne all her life mistaking the two of them? But then she looked down at the little inset picture at the bottom of the screen that reflected her own image back at her. With the towel wrapped around her head, concealing her blond hair, and only a small portion of her face showing on the skype screen, it really was hard to tell the difference between herself and Quinne.

Before she could make the situation clear to Quinne’s caller, though, the man had already begun prattling off about a string of incomprehensible gobbledygook. “... So, I can’t talk for long tonight, Baby. See Drewsie and I got in this horrible fight last night - over, of all things, how to decorate the living room. But I’m like, Honey, before you found me you thought hanging all your
football trophies on the walls constituted decorating, so you’re not really one to talk. Am I right? I mean, I LOVE that man to pieces, but no football player should be allowed to decorate anything outside of their man caves. I am not going with ‘Testosterone Chic’ in my own damn living room. But if I’m to get laid again anytime in the next month, I’m going to have to go make nice with him. Never fear, though, I’ll talk him around to my way soon enough. My ass can be VERY convincing . . .”

Qianna just listened with growing amusement as this outlandish friend of Qianna’s revealed more and more intimate secrets about his life. She felt like a voyeur but probably couldn’t have got a word in edgewise to stop him even if she’d wanted to. And, to be honest, she was enjoying the glimpse into Quinne’s life too much to stop. If all her crazy big family were like this man, it must have been a wild way to grow up. Qianna was even more jealous of her friend than before.

“Okay, well, I probably shouldn’t keep you any longer, Girlfriend. I’m sure you’ve got something brilliant and scieney to get back to. I just missed you so much I had to check in. Make sure you send me some pics of you being a genius to add to my collection,” Emmett finally slowed down a little after talking for a solid three or four minutes. “Oh, and make sure to call your Dad sometime soon, okay? He’d never admit it but I think he’s missing you something awful. Drew and I offered to go out with him tonight on his regular weekend hunting expedition and he actually turned us down. If you can believe it, our resident Stud said he was just going to stay in and read a book this weekend - don’t worry, though, if it gets any worse, we’ll hold an intervention and get him a stripper or something to get him through his depression. You just stay there and keep being brilliant and learning how to rule the world, Baby. We’ll take care of your dad for you. Okay, now I’ve got to go before Drewsie eats the entire pizza without me. Love you, Sparky. Ta!”

Qianna barely had time to say a return ‘Goodbye’ before the screen went blank again. And ten seconds later, while she was still sitting there smiling at the tablet, Quinne came back in with all her shower stuff in hand.

“Sorry, Q, but you just missed your friend. I answered the call and tried to get him to wait for you, but he mistook me for you and thought I was playing a joke. And then he just started talking and talking and didn’t stop till he hung up. It was . . .”

“It was typical Em, that’s what it was. Hahaha!” Quinne didn’t sound too upset about the missed call. “He really thought you were me?”

“Yep. I guess with my hair covered up there’s not much to differentiate between us,” Qianna replied as she finally pulled the towel off her head, exposing her thick, short blond hair.
“That’s crazy,” Quinne was smiling at her friend as she started getting into her own pajamas. “This just goes to show that we really MUST be related - shit, even our oldest friends can’t tell us apart.”

“Yeah, I just wish you’d been around when I was younger,” Qianna teased as she brushed out her still-damp hair. “I could have blamed all the naughty stuff I did on you and got away with a lot more stuff.”

Quinne laughed and shook her head. “No way. I’d have retaliated and blamed you for my bad stuff, so we would have just ended up in trouble the same amount of time. Although, with the two of us together, I bet we could have gotten into even MORE trouble . . .”

“Movie time, girls,” came the announcement along with a knock on the door, and the topic of how much trouble they might get into was put on hold for the rest of that night.

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Chapter End Notes

9/23/18 - Hope you’re enjoying my version of the classic Parent Trap story. Keep in mind, MY twins aren’t just cutie little girls. My girls are brilliant, STEM students, and will be instrumental in figuring out the mystery of how they got separated. And, *spoiler*, it’s not going to be the same as the story you think you know, so hang on and keep reading. TAG
Chapter 4 - She Was Just A Surrogate.

The camp agenda for the weekends was generally a little more relaxed than what they tried to cram in during the week. On Saturdays the camp was scheduled to go on various field trips to educational yet fun sites all over the front range. Sundays were the only real free days, allowing the kids to just relax or to take side trips into town to shop or engage in recreational offerings.

This first Saturday of the camp, the plan was to take a hike through the famous Seven Falls Canyon in the hills above the Broadmoor Resort. They’d be escorted by a local geologist who would walk them through the intricate geological history of Colorado’s front range as well as the specific history of Cheyenne Mountain itself. At the end of the hike, they’d all get a chance to experience the adventure of zip-lining hundreds of feet above the gorge, before spending the rest of the afternoon splashing in the Broadmoor’s pools. Needless to say, the camp’s denizens were more than looking forward to the outing.

The girls were no exception. The series of seven magnificent waterfalls filling the 1,400 foot-tall box canyon were spectacular. They also learned a lot about the geological stratification of the rocks that made up the canyon, going back to the days when the land they were standing on had been at the bottom of a shallow inland ocean. Their guide was extremely knowledgeable and showed them several secrets that the average hiker on the trail wouldn’t have seen, including the fossilized imprint of dinosaur’s footprint and a 2,000-year old petroglyph. The two curious girls were so fascinated by everything they were learning that they were almost disappointed when the hike ended at the top of the gorge.

That feeling immediately dissipated when the prospect of soaring through the air on a zip-line became a reality. The delicious tendrils of fear and anticipation both felt contemplating something neither had done before, were only matched by the exhilaration of the flight itself. The only bad part was that the experience only lasted a mere ninety seconds or so. But everyone agreed it was well
worth the long hike up the hill. And then it was on to the beautiful outdoor infinity pool, which was not only huge and set against the backdrop of Cheyenne Mountain itself, but came with two fabulous water slides that kept the camp kids entertained for a good three hours.

The day was a perfect combination of educational, adventurous and fun. It was also exhausting. So by the end, the girls were well done with all the fun and content to just lounge on recliners at the edge of the pool catching some sun.

Qianna was busy slathering on more sunscreen in an attempt to keep her pale skin from burning, when the pair was approached by one of the pool’s lifeguards. “Hey, Ladies. Welcome to the Broadmoor. Enjoying the sun?”

Qianna looked up at the tall, athletic-looking boy, a little bit surprised to be approached by such a handsome young man. “Um . . . yeah. Except that I think I’m starting to burn.”

“The sun here in Colorado will do that to you. Folks burn a lot faster here since we’re at a higher altitude,” the trim youth in the tight red swim trunks advised them. “I take it you ladies aren’t from around here?”

Quinne spoke up for the both of them since Qianna seemed a little tongue-tied by all the attention directed at her by the young hunk. “Not hardly. I’m from Pittsburgh and she’s from California. But we already knew about the altitude thing. Thanks.”

“Huh?” Their questioner looked perplexed. “How can identical twins be from different states?”

“Who said we were identical, let alone twins?” Quinne asked cheekily, directing a challenging look up at the boy.

“Like, duh! Look at you two. Except for the hair . . .” The boy stood there pointing at the pair of girls like his conclusion was obvious. “You even have the same birthmark.”

Qianna and Quinne both looked down at themselves at the same time, their identical movements reinforcing their similarities at that moment. Quinne sat up, twisting around so that she was sitting sideways on her lounger and facing Qianna, who was still reclining on the chair to Quinne’s left. Seated that way, they could clearly see that they did indeed share the same small, heart-shaped mole high up on their right thighs. They hadn’t noticed this peculiar similarity before, but with
nothing on other than their swimwear, it was plain as day. The lifeguard boy had a point.

To cover up their own moment of confusion and excitement, the bolder Quinne turned back to the boy smirking down at them. “You could have continued ogling our thighs from the other side of the pool. Was there some reason you came over here?”

“Well, yeah, um . . . I get off in about a half hour and I was going to offer to buy you two a soda, if . . .”

“What’s the square root of sixteen?” Quinne interrupted the boy before he could even finish his offer.

“Huh?”

“What’s the square root of sixteen? It’s a simple question. If you can answer that, we’ll have a soda with you. Otherwise, you’re not up to our standards and should probably just keep on walking,” Quinne challenged, looking at the boy with an assessing glare.

“That’s . . . weird,” the boy responded, backing away from the pair as if whatever strange disorder this overly-bold girl had might be catching.

Quinne didn’t seem at all flustered by the reaction she got. Instead, she just laughed at the confused look on the boy’s face. That caused their potential suitor to turn all the way around and stride away from them even more rapidly. Qianna reached out and slapped with the back of her hand against her friend’s arm, snorting with laughter at the joke.

“What was that all about?” Qianna asked when the lifeguard was out of earshot.

“My Pops always says I should never date any guy who isn’t my equal - either intellectually or otherwise. So, awhile back, I started asking any guy who claimed to be interested in me simple math questions. If they can’t answer something as simple as that, they aren’t worth my time to even get to know them better,” Quinne explained succinctly.

“Have you actually been on a date?” Qianna asked, seemingly in awe of her friend.
"Sorta. If you can call coffee at the Diner my Grandma manages - with my Pops and three of my uncles sitting one table over - a date." They both chuckled at the image. "They totally scared the guy off. Pity. He was a freshman in high school, the running back on the JV Football team, and a total hottie. But Pops was right - he was dumb as dirt. Nice to look at though."

"At least you got that much. My dad told me I can’t date till I’m twenty-one,” Qianna complained, causing them both to start giggling again. “I wonder if all single dads are this overprotective or if it’s just the gay ones?”

“I don’t know but I suspect my Pops would give your dad a run for his money in the overprotective category,” Quinne replied. “Which makes no sense considering the stories he’s told me - and worse, the stories I’ve overheard when they didn’t know I was listening - about what HE did when he was younger. Hell, he’s STILL a bit of a player, even though he’s almost fifty. But I guess that just proves he knows what he’s talking about and I probably should listen, huh?”

“You’re so lucky. My dad’s practically a saint. I bet he never did anything wrong in his life,” Qianna griped. “I wish he’d loosen up a bit and take a few chances once in a while. At least your dad sounds like he’d be understanding if you did something a little bit crazy. My dad would just lecture me endlessly about how HE would never have done whatever it was. He’s such a goody-two-shoes it makes me sick sometimes. And the endless PSAs are a total drag.”

By that point the girls had completely forgotten about the lifeguard boy and just spent the rest of their time at the pool sharing stories about their respective fathers until it was time to head back to campus and their dorm for another night.

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Sunday was the camp’s day off. Everyone was just lounging around, going down to breakfast in their pajamas, and generally being lazy. There was some desultory talk about getting together a group to go to the local mall later in the afternoon and both girls agreed that would be a good plan. Meanwhile, Qianna was sacked out in a comfortable chair in the lounge, munching on a bagel, and sketching her campmates. Quinne was sitting nearby, playing some online computer game that involved lots of muttering under her breath and occasional cursing. The game was interrupted a minute later, though, when Quinne’s phone started blaring out the melody to ‘It's Raining Men’.

She immediately dropped her tablet and picked up the phone with a happy grin on her face. “Hey, Pops! Perfect timing - I just got taken out by the Beef Boss in Fortnite.” Quinne jumped up, gathering her stuff and tipping her head first in Qianna’s direction then towards to the elevators in a gesture inviting the other girl to join her.
She also hit the speaker button so that Qianna could hear the reply from Quinne’s father. “Hey, Sparks. That sounds ominous. I thought you were supposed to be solving the problem of cold fusion or something like that, not spending your time playing fucking computer games.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think we’ll be getting to cold fusion until later in the summer,” Quinne responded with a chuckle. “So, are you missing me already?”

“Your Auntie Em sure is. I saw him at the gym yesterday and he was moaning about not having anyone to paint his damn toenails. It was fucking embarrassing. I may have to start interviewing new friends.” The girls could hear the mixture of exasperation and grudging humor in the voice coming through the speaker.

“You can’t get rid of Em now, Pops. You owe him for all those years of babysitting me every weekend so you could go out and ‘get your needs met’,” Quinne reminded him.

“I suppose. You better hurry up and get back here, though, or he’ll have ME painting his fucking toes.” Qianna had to put her hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter at that point, but luckily the sound of the elevator doors opening up on their floor covered any sounds she might have made. “So, what amazing discoveries have you made at this science camp so far?”

“I’ve only been here a week, Pops, so no publishable discoveries yet.” Quinne tried to temper her father’s expectations. “We did kick ass in the robotics competition last week though. My coding was epic and my roommate, QiQi, designed this totally lit catapult arm thing. We beat the next best team by eons.”

“Of course you did - you’re my kid after all,” Brian bragged, his pride coming out clearly in his tone.

“Next week is geology and archeology - which could be really dope since we’re gonna get to help out in the college archeology lab on a project about preserving some actual Precambrian fossils they discovered in the mountains west of Denver. I’m totally stoked,” Quinne boasted.

“Glad you’re enjoying yourself, Spark. Sounds like my money is being well spent. Just don’t have so much fun you forget to come home. This house is way too quiet without you around. Even Gus agreed when he came out here last night.”

“You two are probably just pissed that I’m not there to do all your laundry when Ms. Ortiz isn’t
around,” Quinne teased as she shut the door to their room behind them and flopped down on her bed.

“No problem. I’m sure I can find someone to fill in as ‘house boy’ for the summer while you’re gone.”

“Don’t get into too much trouble while I’m gone, Pops.”

“Me? Never.” Qianna could hear the suppressed laughter in the man’s tone and thought his voice was rather pleasing. “You know me; I’m a fucking choir boy. I’m just going to stay home and take up needlepoint till you get back.” They all laughed at that. “So, what else is on the science camp agenda? Anything I need to be prepared for or that’ll require me to refill my Xanax prescription? You’re not skydiving over the Mojave Desert or touring the core of a nuclear reactor or anything, right?”

“No. But we did zipline over a thousand foot deep canyon yesterday. Does that count?”

“I’m glad I didn’t find out until after you survived.”

Quinne chuckled and winked at her friend, remembering their conversation about overprotective fathers. “You can relax, Pops. The most dangerous thing on today’s agenda is a trip to the mall for some junk food and shopping.”

“Now I AM scared. You know I don’t approve of being ‘malled’. Kinneys only shop at REAL stores.”

“Sorry, but I don’t get to pick out which stores we visit. And I’m sure nobody else here has your Prada fetish.”

“Hey, don’t make fun of my shoes. A man can never have too many pairs of Prada. It’s in the gay men’s handbook.” Brian insisted vociferously. “If you’re not good, I’m going to turn your room into a second shoe closet and you’ll have to move into the garage when you get back.”

“That’s all we need, more shoes in the house,” Quinne groaned theatrically. Then, with another wink to her friend, she turned to the topic they both really wanted to hear about. “Before you go, Pops, there is one thing I need your input on. See, we’re going to be doing this Genetics project
coming up in a couple of weeks - I was reading ahead in the schedule, you know - and it would really help if I knew something more about my mother.”

There was instant silence on the other end of the phone line.

“You still there, Pops?”

“Yeah . . . What did you need to know?” All humor had disappeared from the man’s voice.

“Whatever you can tell me. Her name, what she looked like, her medical history . . . Anything that might have a bearing on my genetic makeup.”

“Sparks . . . She was just a surrogate. She wasn’t meant to have any ongoing ties to you or our family. I’m not sure what the point of this is.”

“I know that, Pops. I’m not looking for a mother figure or anything like that. You and Gus and the rest of our family have always been more than enough for me. I promise,” Quinne tried to reassure her father. “But I am curious. I want to know stuff about what makes me ME, you know?”

Brian hesitated several seconds before answering in a much more subdued voice. “Her name was Lizette Richards, but I know she got married, so that probably won’t help. No idea what her married name is.”

“Well, that’s a start,” Quinne seemed cheered by even that small scrap of info. “Do you have any contact info on her? I know it was a long time ago, but maybe I could track her down.”

“No. I have no idea where she is these days. I haven’t talked to her since the day she gave you to me.”

Qianna scribbled something on the corner of her sketch pad and showed it to Quinne, who nodded.

“Was she from a surrogacy agency? If so, maybe I could find her through them.”
“No. She was just a friend of Ju . . . a friend of a friend,” Brian explained, sounding even more flustered.

“Damn. Well . . .” Qianna circled her own face with an index finger, gesturing to Quinne to ask about the surrogate’s appearance. “What did she look like, then? I know everybody says I look like you but is that cuz she resembled you too?”

“You expect ME to remember what some chick looked like?” Brian complained, sounding a bit more like himself. “Now, if she’d been a guy with a hot ass, I might have remembered, but . . .”

“Pops, be serious for a minute. Please. This is important,” Quinne admonished.

“Fine,” he sighed deeply. “She was shorter than me by about a head. Slim build. Blond hair . . .”

Qianna gasped loudly enough that Brian obviously heard. “Why blond?” Quinne asked to cover up her friend’s interruption.

“We were kinda hoping for a baby with blond hair but, lucky you, you got my coloring.”

“And your eyes too.”

“At least that part went according to plan - the surrogate had hazel eyes as well,” Brian disclosed, a strange sort of regretfulness tingeing his voice.

Neither girl knew what to ask next, so there was a moment of silence all round. Quinne was confused by how evasive her father was being. Usually Brian was brutally direct about everything. He hadn’t batted an eye when she’d first asked about her missing mother back when she’d been about five. Brian had immediately launched into a full explanation about surrogacy, interspersed with a modified ‘Birds ‘n Bees’ tutorial, all without even a modicum of embarrassment. But now, when Quinne was asking more personal questions about her biological mother, her dad seemed to clam up. It didn’t make sense.

Qianna finally interrupted the moment of silent contemplation, thinking of one last question, and quickly scribbling it onto her sketch pad.
Quinne read it, nodded and asked, “Did you think to ask her for medical records or anything like that? In case I ever need to know about that stuff in the future?”

“Of course we did, but . . . I don’t have it,” Brian admitted, again sounding so curt and unlike himself that Quinne was stymied.

“Okay, well . . . I guess I’ll just wing the genetics project then. Thanks anyway, Pops. But if you do think of anything more that would be helpful, could you text it to me?”

“Uh, yeah,” Brian didn’t sound like he was interested in following up on that request. “Hey, Sparks, I’ve got to go. I’m taking Gus to go pick out a new computer - that’s what he says he wants for a graduation present.”

“Sounds like fun. Tell Gus I love him and I’m sorry I won’t be there for his graduation next weekend.”

“Will Do. Be good and have fun, Sparks.”

“Always. Love you, Pops.”

“Ditto, Kiddo. Later.”

The second she disconnected the call, Quinne was up, leaping off her bed and landing on Qianna’s. “THAT was the weirdest conversation I’ve ever had with my Pops.”

“Why? Just because he didn’t know anything helpful?” Qianna asked, genuinely lost as to why her friend seemed so upset by what she’d seen as a run-of-the-mill phone call.

“If you knew my dad, you wouldn’t be asking that,” Quinne insisted. “First of all, he’s never that quiet and reserved about shit. He usually can’t say more than a sentence or two without getting sarcastic or cursing or making some off-color remark. His whole tone was just off, you know? It was totally weird.” Qianna just shrugged, taking her roommate’s word for it. “And secondly, what’s with him saying ‘we’ all the time? ‘We’ who? There’s never been a ‘we’ . . .”
“Never?”

“Never! My dad’s famous for being a bit of a lone wolf. I told you that he refuses to even date. So who would he have been consulting about over the surrogate he used?” Quinne insisted adamantly. “He said ‘WE were hoping for a baby with blond hair’ and ‘of course WE got the medical records for the surrogate’ but that ‘HE didn’t have them’ anymore. Who is this other person?”

“There’s got to be some sort of explanation. Maybe he’s just referring to a friend or one of your ‘uncles’?” Qianna suggested.

“Maybe. But it just seems . . . It seems like he’s hiding something. And he’s never hidden anything from me before,” Quinne explained, sounding a little hurt by her father’s apparent secretiveness.

Qianna leaned sideways so she could rest her head on the taller girl’s shoulder in a comforting manner. “I’m sure he’s got a good reason for not telling you the whole story, Quinne. If he’s really as overprotective as you’ve told me, maybe that’s the answer. Maybe he’s just trying to protect you from something he thinks will hurt you?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t like it,” Quinne replied, sounding annoyed and resolute at the same time. “And I WILL get to the bottom of whatever is going on here.”

“No, WE will get to the bottom of it,” Qianna piped up, joining her will to that of her friend. “Let’s try asking my dad next and see if he can add anything.”

“Excellent idea,” Quinne agreed and reached over to the desk to grab Qianna’s phone out of the charger. “Why don’t you Skype him, so you can see his face while you talk? If he’s as evasive as my Pops was, we might at least get some clue about what’s going on if we can at least see him.”

“Okay . . .”

Qianna tapped at her phone a couple times until the call went through. Quinne scooted backward so she wouldn’t be within camera range. The phone only rang twice before the call was accepted. Only, it wasn’t Qianna’s father whose image appeared on the screen.

“Hey, Shrimp. What’s up?” asked the bored-sounding bearded face.
“Alex? Why are you answering my dad’s phone?”

“My FIANCE is in the shower,” he explained.

“So? I repeat, why are you answering his phone?” Qianna demanded, her belligerence clearly coming through.

“Did you want something? ‘Cause if you’re just going to be a brat, I’m hanging up now.”

Qianna actually growled a little under her breath but knew better than to voice her anger with her father’s cretin of a boyfriend. “Just tell Dad to call me back, okay?”

“Whatever,” Hairy Alex replied and ended the call without even a goodbye.

“Your father is engaged to marry THAT asshole?” Quinne asked as soon as the call disconnected. “Seriously?”

“I know! I told you how horrible he is. I can’t believe Dad fell for his BS.” Qianna protested bitterly. “And that was him being almost friendly. You should see how he treats me when he’s not in a good mood.”

“Sorry, QiQi. I can see why you hate him. I hate him and I haven’t even really met the guy,” Quinne sympathized, leaning in to give a reassuring hug to her buddy. “And I see what you meant by hairy. Sheesh, he looks like he’s wearing one of those huge fake beards you hook over your ears that you buy in a costume shop.” Both girls laughed weakly at the apt analogy. “I bet kissing him is like trying to find a pair of lips in the middle of one of those scrubby things you use to clean dishes.”

But Qianna was too despondent to succumb to the humor in her friend’s comment. “I wish I wasn’t going to be gone all summer. If I was home, I could maybe find some way to stop this stupid engagement. By the time August comes, it’ll probably be too late.”

“We’ll think of something, QiQi. I promise. I won’t let you go back to a lifetime of Hairy Alex.”
“Thanks, Q. You’re the best,” Qianna answered with a sorrowful smile for her supporter. “Sorry we didn’t get any more info on our surrogate mystery, though. I wonder if we’ll ever figure this thing out?”

“Don’t give up already. We haven’t even started on our real investigation” Quinne assured.

And the glint of determination in the young woman’s eye was proof that she meant what she’d promised.

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It’s Raining Men by The Weathergirls.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 4 End Notes - I know it’s an oldie, but we’re just going to pretend a modern teen would know that song, okay? Now, I get to finally start writing the sciencey part of the story. Be still my nerdy heart! Lol. TAG
Welcome to Biology 101

Chapter Notes

More clues . . . Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 5 - Welcome to Biology 101.

Geology week at the camp flew by. Both girls were fascinated by everything they were learning and got totally caught up in the heretofore unknown intricacies of rocks. It was a subject that neither girl had ever spent much time on, so it was relatively new to both.

Quinne was especially interested in the complicated processes of finding, unearthing and dating fossils. She was thrilled when the professor guiding the group praised her steady hand and sharp eye while assisting in the cleaning of a fossil of an ancient marine plant. The professor even let her help in the lab while the grad students were doing the radiographic analysis that would help date the find.

Qianna, on the other hand, found herself more interested in the stratigraphy of the various rock formations they were studying. Who knew rocks could be so complicated or so beautiful. From the grey-blue granites that make up the bulk of the Rocky Mountains that towered over Colorado Springs, to the blood-red Jurassic-era rocks of the Morrison Formation - the rock formation that gave the state they were in its name as well as being the rocks where the majority of all US dinosaur fossils are found - the rocks of Colorado’s front range were amazing. On their field trip the following Saturday to the Garden of the Gods - an outcropping of Fountain Formation rocks that have been tilted upright by the subsequent rise of the mountains underneath - Qianna found herself inspired to draw the dramatic scenes over and over again. If she’d had her paints with her, she would have been in heaven trying to match the virtual rainbow of rock colors she saw.

At the end of the tour of the Garden of the Gods, they all got to try their skills at rock climbing. Quinne, who’d done something similar at a climbing gym back in Pittsburgh, excelled at the task. Everyone else had a good time trying it out, though, and even Qianna made it to the top of the rock spur with a little help from the spotters. Then, on the way back, the entire camp invaded a tiny
little ice cream shop called the Colorado City Creamery, for a cool, sweet treat after all their exertions out in the sun.

What with all that going on, it was understandable that the girls didn’t get much further on their investigations during the week. Even Qianna’s ongoing attempts to contact and question her father weren’t getting anywhere much. Justin had responded to a text his daughter had sent early in the week, saying that he was swamped at work trying to get the final touches done on some animation for a tight production deadline, and would call her when he was done.

When they were finally back at the dorm Saturday evening, pleasurably exhausted from the adventurous day, both girls immediately retreated to the peace of their dorm room. Quinne used her tablet to play some soft spanish jazz and then got lost in a trashy paperback novel. Qianna pulled out her watercolors and tried to match the colors of the rocks she’d seen that afternoon. It was a relaxing, comfortable, friendly moment, and helped both to rejuvenate a bit.

The quiet of the evening was interrupted about an hour later by the chirping of Quinne’s phone when she received a text message. Picking up the device, Quinne looked at the screen and started to giggle. Qianna looked up from her painting with a questioning glance so Quinne turned the phone around and let her friend see the picture that had been sent to her.

The text read: “Too much?” And the accompanying picture showed a pair of long-toed feet with sparkly purple toenail polish.

“OMG! Your Auntie Em is hilarious!” Qianna exclaimed with a huge ear-to-ear grin.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Quinne agreed as she tapped at the phone screen to call the man back.

“What do you think?” was the way Emmett answered the phone call.

“I think it’s totally YOU!” Quinne asserted. “And I love the two-toned look with the big toe being a different purple. So, what did Uncle Drew think?”

“Oh, Honey, you know my Drewsie. He’s ALL MAN, so of course he complains about shit like that, but then later, when we’re in bed . . . Well, let’s just say I like having my feet worshiped along
with the other parts of me,” Emmett elucidated, then broke out into a rather girly giggle of delight.

“TMI, Em! TMI!” Quinne protested.

“Sorry, Sweetie,” Em apologized. “So, how’s Colorado? Any cute boys there? I love a good summer romance story.”

“Nobody worth my time,” Quinne replied dismissively. “Besides, I’m too busy getting my science on to care about boys.”

“You go, Girlfriend. When you’ve won the Nobel Prize for science you can have your pick of the boys. But you are allowed to have SOME fun along the way, aren’t you? It’s summer break after all. You’re not studying all the time, right?”

“No worries. We’re having loads of fun,” Quinne explained, and then went on to detail all the happenings of the past two weeks for her pedicure buddy.

“Well, as long as you’re having a good time.” Em sounded reassured by all the tales of adventure. “So what’s the plan for tonight. It’s Saturday, you know. Are you going out to paint the town red?”

“Uh, Em, did you forget that I’m only twelve?” Quinne chuckled. “Actually, my roommate, QiQi, and I are just hanging out taking it easy tonight. Say ‘hi’, QiQi.”

“Hi!” Qianna sang from her side of the room.

“Oh, hey there! Nice to meet you, QiQi,” Emmett returned. “Okay, so now that I have your approval on my polish choice, Sparky, I’ve got to let you go. I talked Drewsie into taking me out for the night. We’re going to join your dad at his club and get our dance thing on. I haven’t been out in AGES, so I’m totally pumped. I better jump in the shower, though, if I want to be ready in time. Chat later, okay? Ta!”

“I love your Emmett,” Qianna stated as soon as the big queen had rung off. “He’s so authentic.”

“Right? He’s probably the best friend I had growing up. I kinda miss hanging out with him,”
Quinne admitted and then relented. “But at least I’ve found you, so it’s all good, right?”

“Definitely!” Qianna agreed.

After a few minutes of silence, Quinne added, “darn, I forgot to ask Em about the surrogate thing. I’m sure he’d tell me more than Pops has let on. It’s probably too late to get him back now, though.”

“You can try him again tomorrow. And maybe I’ll finally be able to reach my dad then too,” Qianna suggested with a frown. “I’m actually getting kinda worried, you know? I can’t believe I haven’t heard more than a text or two from my dad all week. It’s not like him. I bet stupid Hairy Alex never told him about me calling last weekend. That would totally be like the jerk.”

But before they could delve deeper into the possibility that Qianna’s soon-to-be-stepdad might be blocking her communications with her father, the girls were interrupted by Pooh Bear knocking on their door. “Movie time, ladies. We’re watching ‘Get Smart’ tonight so you don’t want to miss it. Popcorn’s waiting.”

And the topic of fathers, ‘aunts’ and their ongoing personal mystery was put off yet again.

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Sunday came and went and Qianna was still unable to touch base with her father. By that point she was starting to get more than a little concerned. It wasn’t unknown for her dad to get caught up in his work, but he’d never just totally blown her off like this before. And the longer she went without a substantive conversation with her father, the more worried she got. But calls and texts to his phone went unanswered and even the email she sent only got an auto response. Quinne tried her best to cheer her friend up, resorting to the distraction of a shopping trip that afternoon when all else failed.

For kicks, the girls decided to just go with the whole twins thing and get their hair cut in identical styles. It would require Quinne to blow dry out her natural curls, but when done right, it made the similarities between the two even more starkly noticeable. To top it all off, they went out and bought identical outfits. And, by the time the got back to campus that night, they looked as much like one another as was possible without coloring their hair. The rest of the their camp friends exclaimed over the transformation and the counsellors declared they would now start calling the girls Q1 and Q2.
Stella, one of the girls who lived in the room across from them in the dorm, plopped down at the cafeteria table next to Quinne and looked the two of them over before voicing what everyone around was thinking. “Are you guys SURE you aren’t related?”

“Actually, no,” Quinne replied, and after getting a go-ahead nod from her double, she launched into a full explanation of the whole surrogate mystery.

The group that had gathered around them seemed captivated by the odd story. By the time the girls were done relating all the clues they’d already gathered, the entire gaggle of students were ready to dive in and help them figure out what was going on. Before dinner was even over, the crew had pulled out their various smartphones, tablets and laptops and begun researching. That was the benefit of going to summer camp with a bunch of geniuses.

It took no time at all for them to delve into the particular phenotypes - i.e. the outward physical characteristics that evidence a person's underlying genetic makeup - that the girls shared, which strengthened the assumption that they were, indeed, related. Both girls had the recessive trait that meant they couldn’t roll their tongues. Both exhibited an inward bend in the last joint on their right pinky finger - a trait that is recessive in females - meaning that they had to get that trait from their mother. Most of the other characteristics they exhibited were standard dominant traits, like having detached earlobes and placing their left thumb over their right when they interlocked their fingers. But there were enough oddities that the evidence they were related began to mount.

By the time the students were ready to head off to bed, everyone in the research group was convinced that the girls had to be maternally related. It still wasn’t clear what had happened with the surrogate that their respective fathers had used, but it was obvious that something strange had occurred. However, short of doing a full DNA test, there wasn’t any way to absolutely prove their ancestry. Unfortunately, those sorts of tests required a parent’s authorization and the girls weren’t prepared to go there yet. At least not before they’d done some more sleuthing on their own. Luckily for all, the upcoming week was devoted to Biology and Genetics and the hope was that they’d be able to convince the professor teaching the unit to give them some help.

“Welcome to Biology 101,” Professor Steadman announced as soon as all 100 of the campers were seated in the large auditorium in the science building. “You are definitely the youngest class of students I’ve ever taught, but since the camp directors tell me you’re all geniuses, I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt. I plan to teach this class the same way I’d teach any freshman intro class at CU. So, be prepared, since I only have three weeks to teach you basically an entire semester’s worth of material.”
There were a couple groans from the audience, but for the most part the middle-school students all seemed excited by the idea of taking a college level science course. Notebooks were out, pens were held ready and handouts had already been scanned. Since the professor didn’t hear any objections, she smiled and continued her lecture.

“Okay. So let’s do this,” Steadman moved to her next point. “You’ve all been assigned to a lab section led by one of my grad students. You’ll be meeting with them every afternoon to put what we’re learning to the test. Morning lectures will start at ten. And, if you manage to absorb everything I’m going to teach you, we’ll be able to solve a series of genetics mysteries that I’ll pose to you every Friday. So, who’s ready to learn about what makes every single living organism on the planet tick?”

There was a huge roar of enthusiasm at the end of this speech. The girls joined in, smiling at each other. A genetic mystery was just what they needed to solve and hopefully this unit would help them figure out their own puzzle right along with the class projects.

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The first week’s genetics mystery was to figure out if two babies were inadvertently switched at birth by the hospital. It involved the genetics of blood typing. After the initial lecture, the camp kids had lunch and then moved off to their various lab assignments. Quinne and Qianna were happily assigned to the same lab group. Everyone was suited up in a lab coat, shown to a bench, and handed the lab protocol for the day. Today’s labs were actually simple. They were going to be doing saliva swab blood typing.

Following the directions in the protocol, the students swabbed each other’s cheeks and then processed the saliva they obtained to determine each teen’s blood type. They got to use all sorts of interesting machines that many of them hadn’t ever had access to, including the university’s centrifuges. About 20% of the students didn’t secrete enough of the proper antibodies to determine their blood type, but the rest of the them were able to proceed to the next step and figure out which of the four ABO blood types they had. It was an incredibly fun, hands-on activity, and even the folks who couldn’t determine their own blood types had fun helping the rest.

At the end of the day, the girls were delighted to discover that each of them had both A and B antigens in their blood. Since the AB blood type is relatively rare - that blood type is found in less than 4% of the Caucasian population - they had even more evidence that they were likely to be related. So far everything they’d observed pointed to that same, unmistakable, conclusion.

The only question they still had was HOW had this happened?
And to answer that, they were going to have to pressure their families for more information.

It was late afternoon on Wednesday before Qianna finally heard back from her father. Except for a few additional text messages saying he was still tied up at work, she’d heard nothing. Meanwhile, she’d left at least three voicemail messages and sent daily texts and was starting to get seriously concerned. So, when the call did come just as the girls were leaving their afternoon lab session, she immediately handed off her books to Quinne and answered the call right there and then.

“DAD! Finally! I’ve been trying to reach you for a week now. Is everything okay?” Qianna practically shouted into the phone.

“Hey, Peanut. I’m sorry I wasn’t around when you called. I misplaced my phone last week and I was too busy at work to do anything about it. I didn’t mean to worry you,” Justin apologized. “We finally put the film we were working on in the can at 3:00 am this morning. Then I came home, crashed for eight hours, and just finally managed to locate my darn phone. Somehow it got buried under a pile of papers in my studio - no idea how it ended up there since I haven’t touched that stack of paperwork in over a month, but whatever. How are you? How’s the camp going?”

“You haven’t had your phone all week?” Qianna asked to be certain.

“Nope. I hadn’t seen it since a week ago Sunday. Thank goodness I found it today - I was just about to run out and get another if it hadn’t turned up,” Justin confessed. “I really am sorry if you were trying to reach me. Everything’s okay there, isn’t it? You know you could have tried me at work if it were an emergency, right?”

“I know, Dad. And no, nothing’s wrong here. I was just freaking out a little when you never called me back. Didn’t Alex tell you that I’d called?”

“Alex? No, he didn’t mention it. But then again, I’ve been so busy the past week he might have just forgotten to tell me. You’ve got me now, though, so tell me everything I missed.”

While they continued to walk back to the dorms, Qianna launched into a fully detailed explanation of everything they’d done so far at camp. Justin was interested in hearing all about their projects and demanded pictures. Qianna told him she’d already sent two emails with pictures, and Justin
again apologized for not having gone through his emails yet either. Quinne could tell her friend was angry with her father even though she was holding it back. The ‘What I’ve Done So Far This Summer’ portion of the call ended just as they reached the dorm. Quinne guided her friend in through the doors and over to a quiet corner of the main lounge area.

“. . . So, like I said, this week we’re doing a really sweet project on genetics,” Qianna launched into the meat of the subject, “which is another reason why I’m glad you called. It’s made me curious about my own genetics and the surrogate you used. You’ve never told me much about her.”

Unlike Brian, the girls didn’t sense any diffidence from Justin. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything really. What was her name? What was she like? Did you get any information about her genetic history? How did you pick her? Stuff like that, you know?”

“Okay . . . Well, her name was Lizette. She was an artist too, with a lot of raw talent, but she was really struggling financially at the time. So, when I told her I was looking for a surrogate, she jumped at the chance to not only do something for a friend but to make some money at the same time.”

Both girls were riveted as soon as they heard the name ‘Lizette’ mentioned. Quinne pumped a fist in victory and gestured to her friend, encouraging her to get more information. Qianna was already on it though.

“So what happened to her? Are you still in contact? I’ve got tons of questions . . .”

“Sorry, Sweetheart, but I have no idea what happened to Lizette. She kinda just disappeared after you were born. I tried to call her when you turned one, to invite her to your birthday party, but the number I had was disconnected,” Justin explained. “I suspect it had something to do with the guy she ended up marrying. He was one of those Evangelical Christian types; I’m sure you can guess what he thought of his girlfriend acting as a surrogate for fags. I’m just glad that, in the end, he wasn’t able to talk her into backing out of the surrogacy contract altogether.”

This disclosure brought up another thousand additional questions the girls wanted to ask, but right as Qianna was about to open her mouth to speak, another voice came over the line.

“Hey, Babe. We gotta go or we’ll be late.”
“One sec,” Justin advised before returning his attention briefly to his daughter. “Sorry, Honey, but I’m going to have to cut this short. Alex and I have an appointment to look at a possible wedding venue this afternoon and I don’t want to be late. I wish you were here to join in on all the wedding fun, Peanut - I’m sure you’d be better at this than I am - but I swear on a stack of Picassos that I’ll email you with a full accounting later tonight. Okay?”

“But, Dad, wait. I need to tell you . . .”

“Sorry, QiQi. Alex is already giving me that look. Gotta go. I love you. Keep up the good work at camp, Sweetie. Talk to you soon . . .”

The phone call ended abruptly before Justin had even said goodbye. Qianna was left sitting there, scowling at the device as though wishing she could jump through it to get to her dad. But behind the outward anger, Quinne could tell her friend was hurt and confused by the way her father seemed so dismissive.

“Cheer up, QiQi, I’m sure your dad is going to come to his senses sooner or later. I mean, it’s so obvious that Hairy Alex is a total poser. And no way is he going to get away with hiding your dad’s phone again - all you need to do is tell him about the texts that HE supposedly sent last week when he didn’t have his phone, and that should put paid to Mr. Hairy Alex.”

“Yeah, I hope, because I seriously can NOT deal with the idea of Alex being my Stepfather. Seriously . . .” Qianna grumbled, still looking at her phone as if it was the culprit and not the gold-digger currently after her naive father. Then she shook her head, took a deep breath, and finally tossed the phone aside onto the bed. “In the meantime, though, we at least got one part of our mystery solved . . . There can’t possibly be two different surrogates named ‘Lizette’ who gave birth on the exact same day to baby girls that look almost identical. Right, Sis?”

Quinne beamed over at her newly confirmed sister with a smile that almost matched Qianna’s ear-to-ear grin. “I’d say it’s as close to 100% sure as we’ll get, shy of an actual DNA test, Sis.”

“This is so sweet! I have a SISTER! You don’t know how long I’ve wanted this,” Qianna asserted, tears coming to her beautiful hazel eyes.

“Ditto, Sis,” Quinne agreed, moving over to give her emotional sister a hug. “I’m just glad we managed to find each other.”
There was a long interval with both girls holding onto each other, a little tearful, but extremely happy that they could finally put all doubt to rest. For the two outsiders, it was wonderful to know that they had finally found the one person that understood them the best. Not just a friend or a parent, but someone closer. It was almost as if they completed each other, the way only a twin could. So it was understandable if they both let their emotions get away from them for a few minutes.

“Now . . .” Quinne announced when she eventually pulled away and swiped at her wet eyes, “the question that still remains is how the fuck did this happen? I mean, how did Lizette manage to have two babies with two different fathers who live on opposite sides of the country?”

“And if that WAS what happened, how did we get separated?” Qianna added. “I know my dad - there’s no way he would have agreed to anything like that. At least I don’t think he would. He knows how much I’ve always wanted more family. I can’t imagine him keeping me away from you if he knew I had a sister out there somewhere.”

“I agree. Same for my Pops. There’s definitely something fishy with this Lizette person. I think it’s time to find her and confront her about this mess.”

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Human Phenotypes

Chapter End Notes

10/2/18 - Full disclosure: I grew up in Colorado and I’ve been to all the places I’m writing about in this story. Colorado Springs is a beautiful place and well worth a visit if you ever get the chance! I DO love the beauty of the rocks around the area. These pictures can’t really convey the colors or the intricacy of the formations. You really do need to see it in person. Also, my step-nephew goes to the Colorado School of Mines - a great engineering school! Special thanks go out to Patricia for her help on the science stuff. Nerds Unite! If you want to know more about peculiar genetic quirks in humans, check out the link at the end of the chapter. Also, there were a LOT of pics in this chapter and it's just too much of a pain to put them in here on AO3, so if you want to see them all, please visit my home site: www.Kinnetikdreams.com. Now, time for the girls to hit Google, I think . . . TAG
The girls were up way past lights-out that night, doing their best to find out more about the mysterious Lizette. Unfortunately, they didn’t get very far. The problem was that they just didn’t have very much information; only a maiden name, the fact she was once an aspiring artist, and a vague description that she had blond hair and hazel eyes. It wasn’t much to go on.

Searching for ‘Lizette Artist’ got them nowhere. There were tens of thousands of women with the name Lizette and there was no way they were going to wade through that list. Searching Lizette Richards - the surrogate’s maiden name - whittled the list down to a couple dozen, but none of the names that came up sounded like their mother. It probably wasn’t the fifty-five year old nurse from Maine, or the hispanic pro-golfer from Miami, or the twenty year old actress from the London. There were a couple of maybes though - there was a LinkedIn profile they found for a Lizette Richards who was a lawyer in a prestigious DC firm, but she was only thirty years old and that would make her on the young side for someone who’d had a baby twelve years before. There was also a Lizette who designed and sold jewelry through an Etsy account - which would fit nicely for someone who was once an artist - but they couldn’t find anything more about the woman so it was a tenuous connection at best.

By the time they gave up and crashed, they didn’t feel like they were any closer to finding their missing mother than they had been when they’d started.

They were still unhappily mulling over the problem the next morning when their friend, Stella, sat her breakfast tray down at the table across from them.

“We just don’t have enough information about her. It’s hopeless,” Qianna complained as she picked at her bagel sandwich.
“What’s hopeless?” Stella asked sympathetically.

The girls brought their friend up to speed on what they’d learned from talking with Justin the night before. They even detailed their Lizette search efforts so far, explaining how frustrated they were. Stella, who’d been one of the most enthusiastic of their supporters from the beginning, clearly appreciated the girls’ dilemma.

“I’m pretty good at researching stuff,” Stella offered, pushing aside her breakfast tray and setting up her laptop in its place. “Let me try and see if I can’t find something for you about this missing surrogate.”

Stella’s offer to help reinvigorated the girls to some extent, and they returned to their own breakfasts with more interest while their friend tapped away at her computer. It only took about five minutes before Stella seemed to find something that interested her. With a muttered ‘oh!’ she sat up straighter and smiled down at whatever her efforts had uncovered.

“Wow! QiQi, you didn’t tell me your dad was THAT Justin Taylor. He’s famous,” Stella raved, sounding like the perfect fangirl.

“Yeah, sorta.” Qianna shrugged, having heard similar accolades too many times to let it go to her head. “Why are you looking up my dad, though? He’s not the one we’re trying to find.”

“Well, I thought that maybe, if I linked the name ‘Lizette’ with your father’s name, that might turn up some hits and limit the number of ‘Lizette’s we needed to look through. I didn’t get any hits on her though. Just a lot of stuff about your dad,” Stella explained! “Sweet! I didn’t know he won an Oscar!”

“Yep. That WAS pretty neat. He and a friend did this short animated film called ‘Sunbeam’ when I was little. It was sorta about me and how, he said, sunshine used to follow me around wherever I went. It’s one of my favorites of his. And they won the Oscar for Best Animated Short that year.”

“Neat? You had a movie made about you? That’s more than neat, girl - that’s epic!” Quinne praised her sister. “In fact, I think I know that film. It’s one of my brother, Gus’, favorites. He’ll flip when I tell him it was actually about you.”

Stella, who’d only been listening to the conversation with half an ear while she continued to scroll
through pages of information on Justin, finally stopped on one with another exclamation of “Wow!” The girls looked over at her expectantly. “Your dad is hot, QiQi. You sure he’s gay?”

Qianna laughed out loud. “Sorry, Stella, he’s soooooo gay. You’d never have a chance even if you were old enough. Trust me.”

“He looks pretty young, though. If he weren’t gay, I’d be happy to ask him to wait for me,” Stella asserted with a chuckle. “Here, take a look. There’s no way this guy looks old enough to have a teenage daughter.”

Stella turned her computer around so that the two girls sitting on the opposite side of the table could see the picture she’d been ogling. It showed a debonair-looking Justin standing in front of a banner like the kind you’d see at some type of Broadway screening event. He was wearing a pair of light brown, horn-rimmed glasses that made him look quasi-intellectual. His casual jacket, unbuttoned shirt, and gelled hair added to the hipness factor. He truly was a handsome man.

“Wait! THAT’S your father?” Quinne interrupted right as Qianna was about to explain the circumstances behind the picture. “OMG! OMG! OMG!” Quinne picked up her bag and rifled through it until she found her phone, tapping at the screen like crazy. “Hang on a sec. OMG! Where is it? Where . . . Finally. Look!”

Quinne turned the phone around so they could all see what it was that had her so excited. There on the tiny screen was a black and white photo showing two men - one blond, the other a slightly older brunet - looking at each other with naked adoration. Since there was nothing else in the picture other than the two men, you couldn’t tell how old it was, but if the blond was Qianna’s father, it had to have been taken quite a while ago.

“Is this your father?” Quinne demanded.

“He’s looking away from the camera, so it’s hard to tell . . . And he’s so young here . . . But, yeah, I think that’s my dad,” Qianna confirmed with wonder. “How did you get a picture of my father? And who’s the other guy?”

“That’s MY father. Brian Kinney!”
“Our fathers knew each other?” Qianna reached the same conclusion a second later. “But how? Where’d you get this picture?”

“I found it hidden in an old book of poetry my dad had that I borrowed one time. I think he’d probably forgotten it was there,” Quinne explained. “I loved it so much I scanned it and keep it on my phone. It’s one of the only pictures I have of my dad smiling. Usually, when he smiles, it’s in a joking or sarcastic way. You hardly ever see him smiling like that - looking truly happy. It’s always been one of my favorite pictures of him. But I never thought to ask about the other guy in the picture. He’s never once mentioned anything about your dad - I would have remembered since Gus is such a fan - but it’s pretty clear they did know each other at one time.”

“They more than knew each other,” Stella insisted, reaching out to point at the photo again. “See how they’re looking at each other. That look . . . They were in love.”

All of them could see the plain evidence of Stella’s assertion. The glint in Brian’s eyes and the joyous smile. And the way Justin was leaning towards the taller man with that confidential smile on his lips. It was clear that there was something more to their glance than mere acquaintance. But that only brought up even more questions for the two sisters that had been kept apart their whole lives and only inadvertently found each other. The implications were so overwhelming, that both Qianna and Quinne had fallen silent while they tried to corral their spinning thoughts.

Stella, though, had returned to her computer where she’d only been typing and clicking away for about sixty seconds before announcing another discovery. “Aha! I thought so . . . When you search both your fathers’ names together you get dozens of new hits . . . Uh oh . . . Damn. Qianna, did you know about THIS?”

She once more turned the laptop around displaying a newspaper article she’d found showing pictures of both men under the headline, ‘Local Teen Attacked at Prom in Critical Condition’. Underneath, the subheading read, ‘Witnesses Say Accused Attacker Incited by Flagrant Homosexual Display’. All three girls quickly scanned through the article which detailed how Justin Taylor, a senior at St. James Academy, was attacked after attending his high school prom where he’d been joined and danced with one Brian Kinney. The paper referred to Brian as Justin’s ‘older, male lover’. The attacker, Christopher Mark Hobbs, was said to have been in police custody, while Taylor’s condition was uncertain at the time the article was published.

“I had no idea . . .” Qianna muttered, looking devastated by this unexpected news. “My dad never said . . .”

Quinne put her arm around Qianna’s shoulder and hugged her tightly. “I can’t believe this kind of shit still happens, let alone to OUR fathers. This is . . .” As she continued to read her expression became more and more disgusted. “This is just . . . horrible.”
When they’d all finished reading through the article, Stella briefly took back her computer, copied the link to the page and texted it to both girls in case they wanted to read it again later. Then she returned to her prior search - the one that had turned up the bashing article in the first place - and clicked through several other references to the prom incident. There had been a few follow up pieces; one that elaborated on the events at the prom, another that followed along with Justin’s progress and announced his release from the hospital, and a final one that detailed the outcome of Chris Hobbs’ trial and the outrage that lenient sentence engendered from LGBTQ+ activists around the country. It was all fascinating reading. But this news left the girls just as confused as before.

“My dad complains all the time about his hand - it gives out on him if he overworks it sometimes - but he never explained any of THIS,” Qianna pointed to the computer. “All he ever told me was that he’d had ‘an accident’ when he was younger. He actually said it was probably a good thing, because it pushed him into a career in computer animation instead of spending a lifetime as an unknown and starving painter.”

“T’m glad he recovered, and that he’s been successful despite this shit, but it must have been so hard,” Quinne voiced what they all were thinking. “The thing I can’t get over, though, is that my Pops has never said anything about it either. I mean, this is big. Really big. And NOBODY in my family has ever said word one about ANY of it. Which makes no sense at all. My family can’t keep a secret about anything - but they’ve all kept THIS quiet for twelve years? Why? It’s not like I would have been upset by this or anything. My dad wasn’t hurt by the attacker and I didn’t even know your dad, so why the secrecy? Something just isn’t right here.”

They spent the next fifteen minutes or so discussing their discovery while Stella pulled up more and more information on the Prom Bashing story for them. Everyone agreed that it was tragic, but it was clear that the bashing itself wasn’t the whole story. And how the bashing related to their mother, Lizette, and the fact that they were split up as infants, was likewise unclear. It felt like the girls were being deliberately kept in the dark about something - something even bigger than the bashing. For the two girls who had both grown up thinking they had especially close relationships with their dads, it was a real blow. They felt lied to, even if it was only a lie of omission.

“Time to get to class, ladies,” Pooh Bear interrupted the discussion as she rounded up all the students still lingering in the cafeteria. “You’ve got two minutes to gather at the front of the building before we head over to the Biology classroom.”

“I don’t know about you, Q,” Qianna stated as she followed the others to drop off her dirty tray at the kitchen, “but I’m almost glad I haven’t had a chance to explain what’s going on to my father. I want to know a lot more about all this before I reveal that I’ve found you. I don’t know what reason my dad might have had for keeping his past a secret, but whatever it is, he shouldn’t have kept you and your dad a secret too. I’m not sure I can forgive him for that.”
“I agree,” Quinne replied as they all walked over to join the group milling around by the front door. “I’m pretty pissed off at my Pops right now, to be honest. Maybe he had what HE thinks is a good excuse for hiding all this, but I don’t see what it could be. And, no matter what happens, I’m not giving you up for anything, Sis. Now that we’ve finally found each other, there’s no way they can keep us apart.”

“Agreed,” Qianna declared with a resolute nod of her head. “So, we keep quiet about the two of us for now?” Quinne nodded back. “Good. And in the meantime we can keep digging for answers. With the two of us working together, I doubt they’ll be able to keep their secrets for long.”

Despite the fact that the girls generally found their biology lectures fascinating, they were both having trouble concentrating that morning. It was hard to get past the suspicion that the fathers they’d loved and trusted all their lives might have been responsible for something as reprehensible as keeping twin sisters separated. Even more troubling though, was how two twelve year old girls were going to fix this huge and very obvious wrong.

Such heavy thoughts weighed on the girls all through their morning lectures, a quiet lunch, and even as they made their way towards the lab later that afternoon. It wasn’t until they got caught up in the elaborate protocols for that afternoon’s experiment that they started to regain their equilibrium. The lab they were doing that afternoon was both complicated and fun, though, and the curious younglings were soon so caught up that they momentarily forgot their problems.

That day’s lab involved working with the DNA obtained from the saliva samples they’d taken earlier in the week - after it had been chemically amplified and ‘cut’ into microscopic pieces with enzymes - and using a process known as Gel Electrophoresis to analyze the results. The resulting strands of DNA could be dyed and thus seen as they sorted themselves into distinctive bands. This created a sort of DNA fingerprint that could be used to differentiate between various individuals. It wasn’t as precise as a full blown DNA analysis, but was sufficient for the students’ purposes - namely, the task of determining which set of parents the two babies in their hypothetical lab experiment were related to. And since the students were using their own DNA samples as controls, they also got to see their personal DNA fingerprints.

The lab took several hours to finish, so there were significant blocks of downtime in between processes. During one of these gaps, while the gel was running, Quinne logged onto her tablet to look up some references for the lab write up and immediately got pinged with an incoming text message. Since the text was from Stella, Quinne couldn’t resist looking at it.

“Look what else I found!” The text read and then, below, there was a screenshot of another item the girl had found in her research about Brian and Justin.
The article Stella had sent was from a newspaper called ‘Pittsburgh Out’ and dated more than thirteen years earlier. At the top of the small block of text were the names ‘Kinney - Taylor’ in large, bold print. Underneath that title was a larger, color version, of the picture that Quinne had shown the others just that morning. But it was the words written in the body of the clip that were the most surprising.

“They were MARRIED!” Quinne shouted so loudly that everyone in the lab was startled into looking up. “Sorry,” she immediately apologized, holding up a hand in a stop gesture and cringing a little, before shoving her tablet sideways so Qianna could see what had caused the uproar.

“What the hell . . .” Qianna managed not to yell, but was still visibly upset by the revelation. “I can’t believe our dads were MARRIED and never told us about it!”

Quinne, who had re-read the article over her sister’s shoulder, was still just as shocked. “Well, probably not married, because same sex marriage wasn’t legal back then, but they at least had a commitment ceremony, so it’s as good as . . . And they kept it secret from us all these years!”

Just then Ammar, one of the other students in their lab group, announced that their gel was done, and diverted the girls’ attention back to the work at hand. They still had to do some work to see the results, but the additional process of staining the gel and then taking pictures under ultraviolet light to see the fluorescing bands, was fairly straightforward. When they were done, they had a graphic image showing the DNA patterns of all their subjects. And, since they had set the lab up as recommended by the TA - with a ladder in the first and last lanes to help measure the bands, followed by Baby #1, Baby #2, Control #1, Control #2, Parent #1, and Parent #2 - it was clear as day that there was something odd about the results. Both the Controls - in this case the DNA samples from Quinne and Qianna - were nearly identical.

“Aren’t the Controls supposed to show differently?” Ammar asked, looking over the photo of the gel as he worked to complete his lab journal for the day. “It says in the protocol that if your Controls don’t work then the whole thing is a bust.”

The TA was called over and the oddity examined, along with a brief explanation from the girls about their special circumstances. The TA looked through the rest of their notes and determined that they’d done the gel correctly. She advised them to go ahead and write it all up, including the unusual results, but otherwise it looked fine.

“As if we needed more proof we’re sisters,” Quinne grumbled as she used her phone to take an extra picture of the gel results. “I can’t believe our dads split us up. I’m so furious I could scream.”
Quinne continued to quietly fume as they cleaned up their lab station and gathered together their belongings. Meanwhile, Qianna was just as quiet, but from her expression you could see she was pensive rather than angry. Something just didn’t add up here and Qianna was becoming more and more determined to figure it out.

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Gel Electrophoresis.

Chapter End Notes

10/4/18 - Raise your hand if you’re a science nerd and know was Gel Electrophoresis is. LOL. If not, and you want more info, there’s a brief Wikipedia explainer for you at the end of the chapter. I love sciencey stuff. Credit goes out to all the readers who commented to push me to having the girls realize that Google was their friend. They have a lot of clues now, but still don’t know the whole story. Let the speculation begin... I can’t wait to hear what you surmise. TAG
“Okay, let’s try and figure this out,” Qianna suggested as the sisters huddled together in their room later that evening. “I know you’re furious - I am too - but somehow I just don’t believe my dad would do something like splitting us up. I just CAN’T see him doing that. He’s pretty much the best dad anyone could hope for, despite his current Hairy Alex-Induced stupidity. We’ve always been super close. We talk about everything. I’ve told him so many times how much I really wanted a brother or a sister, and every single time he’s said that he wanted that for me too. I almost think that’s why he’s so intent on settling down with Alex. He wants to have a family almost as much as I do, or at least a bigger family than just the two of us. He’s been so lonely for so long that I think he finally just gave up and that’s why he’s agreed to marry Alex. So, if he knew that I had a sister out there, I’m positive he would have told me about you.”

Quinne listened to her sister and let the words slowly drown out the anger she’d been feeling all day. “I want to believe that you’re right, QiQi, but it’s hard for me to get there. I mean, how could they NOT have known?”

“Well, let’s look at this logically.” Qianna took out a notebook, opened it to a blank page and sat poised with a pen hovering over the paper. “Let’s write down everything we absolutely KNOW and see where there are gaps. That should at least lead us to the right questions to find out more.”

“Good idea,” Quinne agreed, moving over to sit on the same bed as her sister while they went through what they did and did not know.

The list they came up with had a lot of gaps.
1. Justin Taylor and Brian Kinney met sometime during Justin’s senior year of High School.
2. Justin’s father found out he was gay and kicked him out of the house when he was seventeen, during his senior year of high school. (Did this have anything to do with Brian?) Justin’s parents got divorced soon after this.
3. Brian showed up at Justin’s senior prom. According to the news reports, Justin was eighteen and Brian was thirty at the time. (Age gap ?). They danced in front of the whole school. After the prom, Chris Hobbs attacked them and injured Justin. Justin recovered but was never quite the same.
4. (What happened between the men after prom?)
5. Five years after the prom bashing, Brian and Justin got married/committed.
6. Just over a year later, Lizette Richards (? married name), gave birth to two baby girls. (Where?)
7. Qianna grew up in California - doesn’t remember ever living anywhere else.
8. Quinne grew up in Pittsburgh - where all prior events happened and where family has lived since Brian was in high school. Also, Pittsburgh is where the wedding happened.
9. (What happened between birth and age twelve? Where is Lizette?)
10. Quinne & Qianna meet in Colorado by accident at age twelve.

“So I didn’t put it down as a fact,” Qianna surmised after they’d spent several minutes looking over their completed list, “but I think it’s safe to assume that our dads continued to see each other between the date of the prom and the time they were married. Which means they were together for, like, six years or so. That’s a long time.”

“Yeah. Especially for someone as allergic to commitment as my father,” Quinne agreed. “I think it’s safe to say that your dad must be the one romantic relationship my father has alluded to - the one he uses as the excuse for not ever having another. Based on everything he’s let slip, it obviously ended badly. I mean, my Pops would rather be alone for the rest of his life than even TRY for another relationship. So, really, really, badly, I’d say.”

“Maybe, but the question is WHY?” Qianna pressed. “Because they’d already been through a lot - getting through the bashing and all the treatment my dad would have needed afterwards according to all the reports we’ve read, would have been hard, you know - and yet they were still together five years later. Plus they must have still been happy together or they wouldn’t have gotten married, right? So what happened?”

Quinne looked over the timeline they’d developed one more time. “Judging by the timing alone, it would seem like they had to have hired Lizette to be their surrogate within only a few months after the commitment ceremony. Do you think it’s safe to assume that they were still together when they decided to have kids? I don’t know about your dad, but my Pops probably wouldn’t have hired a surrogate to have me if he’d just broken up with the one guy he ever cared about enough to marry.”

“Definitely,” Qianna agreed, pencilling that assumption into their timeline. “Especially since my dad was only twenty-two at the time and didn’t have any career to speak of. He’d never do anything as financially irresponsible as starting a family when he didn’t have the ability to support
a kid; he’s kinda miserly about money stuff, and worries all the time about not saving enough, so it would be totally out of character for him. Not to mention that he probably wouldn’t have had the money to pay for a surrogate on his own. I think it’s a given that our dads were still together when they decided to hire Lizette.”

“I think we can get even more precise than that. Clearly, if they’d broken up after the surrogacy contract was signed but before we were conceived, they would have just backed out of the contract, right? So whatever happened, didn’t happen until after Lizette got pregnant.”

“Yes!” Qianna replied, sounding much more enthusiastic now that they seemed to be getting somewhere. “So, whatever happened - and it had to be something massive to break them up when they were expecting a baby in the not too distant future - had to have occurred sometime after say . . . February first.” She marked that date on their list and underlined it multiple times for emphasis.

Quinne nodded, biting at her lip in a quizzical fashion. “But, if we’re still going with the assumption that neither of our dads knew we were a twin, then wouldn’t their big break up have to have been before we were born? Because if they were still together at that point, they would know about us, right? Although I STILL don’t see how that’s possible . . .”

“What if they broke up really early after the pregnancy started?” Qianna insisted. “Like, before the surrogate knew she was having twins, maybe? I remember reading a story once about how this mother didn’t know she was having twins until they were born, so it’s conceivable that our dads might not have known they were getting twins before they broke up. Maybe?”

“Maybe. At least we don’t have any better explanation for now. But if that’s so, then we can narrow down the date even further,” Quinne thought for a minute and then grabbed the notebook away from her sister, marking down ‘August 1st’ as the presumed end date of their period of inquiry. “I think it’s reasonable to say that most mothers realize they’re having twins by the start of the third trimester, wouldn’t you?” Qianna nodded her agreement. “Okay. So, whatever happened to our dads, probably happened in this six month window. But whatever that thing was . . .” She gave up and just shrugged.

“I have no idea either,” Qianna agreed. “But at least we have a good idea of WHEN it happened. Now, if we only knew what questions to ask.”

“Or better yet, WHO to ask,” Quinne responded, nibbling at her thumbnail as she mulled over the problem. “Especially if we don’t want to give ourselves away in the process.”
The girls still hadn’t devised a plan to find out what they needed to know by the time the weekend rolled around. They were still pondering the problem on Saturday when the camp headed off on busses to visit the Denver Zoo’s Conservation Lab. The Zoo was a participant in the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ Species Survival Plan Program. Together with Zoos all over the world, Denver’s team of biologists and conservation experts are working to make sure that we preserve the zoological biodiversity of the world. To do this, they are maintaining the most comprehensive DNA database of animals in history. The goal is to make sure that they breed their animals in the most successful and efficient way possible in order to preserve even the most endangered of species. This goal, of course, involves a lot of bio lab work, which is why the students were so interested in seeing the lab and breeding facilities that the zoo maintained.

After getting a full tour of the Zoo’s labs, and visiting some of the more interesting - and generally off limits - areas of the zoo, they were all very enthusiastic about the possibilities for future careers in biology. The kids were then divided into smaller groups and sent off to explore the zoo for the rest of the afternoon. Qianna was particularly fascinated by the Giraffe Encounter, where guests are permitted to feed fruit to some of the zoo’s tallest inhabitants. QiQi couldn’t get over the fact that they all had black tongues or the scratchy feel as they would lick her. Stella, on the other hand, got the biggest kick out of the Penguin Encounter - even though the fish they let you feed to the birds were smelly as hell - because they were so very sociable. Quinne, personally, thought they were both crazy, and instead preferred to just look at all the strange creatures from behind the glass or metal barriers of most of the exhibits.

When it was time for dinner, they gorged themselves on burgers and hotdogs. Then the whole troupe got to see a concert put on by an eclectic band called ‘Pink Martini’ in nearby City Park. The music was a wonderfully strange mixture that crossed the genres of classical music, classic pop, Latin music, and jazz. Quinne loved it - she’d been a fan of the group for years but had never had a chance to see them live. Qianna liked it okay but got a little bored - she was a more a rock ‘n roll girl. They agreed to disagree on musical tastes afterwards.

The concert didn’t end till late and then they still had the long bus ride back to Colorado Springs, so the campers weren’t back at the dorms until almost 1:00 am. It had been a very busy and fun day but it meant the girls didn’t get a chance to do any more research on their personal mystery project. It also meant that Sunday got off to a slow, lazy, tired start for all.

Qianna slept right through breakfast and only made her way downstairs about the time the kitchen started to set out lunch. She grabbed a bagel and some OJ and then joined Quinne and Stella in the lounge area. Stella was, as usual, on her computer, only coming up for a spoonful of cereal every two or three minutes. Quinne had her nose buried in a book. Qianna liked the comfortable quiet of their little group; she curled up in a big armchair and started to sketch her two friends.
They spent the next half hour or so like that, just doing nothing much and enjoying the hell out of it. Stella eventually got up and wandered away, intent on finding someone willing to go out with her to find some coffee - a treat that the middle school students at the camp weren’t supposed to have. Neither Qianna nor Quinne felt up to that much exercise yet, so they stayed put and made due with the juice and tea the kitchen offered. Just about the time that Qianna was starting to drift off, her eyelids feeling heavier than the pencil she’d been using to draw with, the dozy peace of their little corner of the lounge was interrupted by the ringing of Quinne’s phone. Quinne almost jumped out of her chair at the unexpected noise. She dropped her book and cursed at the fact that she’d lost her place but still managed to answer the call before it went to voicemail.

“Hey, Em!” Quinne muttered through a yawn.

“Well, now, I’ve had more animated greetings,” Emmett’s twanging voice echoed out of the phone’s speaker. “What’s up, Sparky?”

“Sorry, Em. We were up late last night,” Quinne apologized.

“Oooo - doing something fun and naughty, I hope,” the big queen burbled. “Dish!”

“Oh, Em . . . You do realize you’re a bad influence, right?” Quinne chuckled but you could hear how much she loved the man she was talking to even though she chided him. “And, yes, it was fun but not very naughty.”

Quinne proceeded to detail for her Pittsburgh friend the entire Denver day, the zoo trip, and even the concert.

“I LOVE that band!” Emmett gushed as soon as he heard that they’d seen Pink Martini. “Their music makes you think of some big, elegant, debutante ball from the old south. And that lead singer - I think her name is ‘China’, right? - Lord she has the most magnificent gowns. I saw her a few years ago and she was wearing this absolutely SMASHING fuschia pink dress, low cut and tight through the waist, but with all these gorgeous ruffles making up the skirt. Girlfriend, I would literally KILL for that gown. Can’t you just see me at Pride in that kind of dress?”

Both girls were laughing outright by the time Emmett got through with his dress-gasms.

“I’m sure you’d look fabulous in that gown, Auntie Em.”
“You SAY that, Little Bit, but I can hear you laughing,” Em replied, only slightly put off by the hilarity he knew he’d engendered. “Do I hear another laugh in the background too?”

“That’s just my roommate. Say ‘hi’ QiQi.”

“Hi!” Qianna replied obediently. “Don’t mind me, Miss Em. I’m 100% in favor of your idea for the next Pride Parade. I think you’d be a huge hit. Maybe you could even ride in one of the cars with the Pride Court or something.”

“Exactly!” Emmett agreed readily. “You’ll have to plan on coming and watching the parade though, so I have plenty of support. What do you say?”

“I’d love to. When is your Pride in Pittsburgh?” Qianna inquired, already loving the idea of joining her sister in Pennsylvania, and not JUST for Pride.

“This year it’s right at the end of summer, about two weeks after our Q gets home from camp. And we’d simply LOVE to have you join us if you can get your folks to let you. Can you just imagine all the trouble the three of us ladies will get up to together? Gracious!”

“I’ll see what I can arrange. Maybe I could talk my dad into coming too. He’s always been a big fan of Pride - we usually go up to the big parade in San Francisco every year,” Qianna explained, looking over at her sister who was nodding very enthusiastically about the idea.

“Sounds like a plan to me!” Emmett voiced his approval. “I’d better start planning though. I only have a little over two months. These things take time to arrange you know.” The girls laughed again and Em joined them. “So, how’s the rest of the camp stuff going? It seems like you’re having a lot of fun but are you learning anything?”

“Tons! Like, literally tons. My brain actually hurts a little some days, I’m cramming so much new stuff in there,” Quinne declared, and then proceeded to detail a sampling of what they’d learned over the past week or so.

“Wow. That sounds . . . complicated. Science was never really my thing, you know” Emmett confessed. “In fact, the only class I ever got an ‘A’ in was Home Ec. So I guess I’ll leave the science stuff to you, Sparky.”
“That works for me,” Quinne responded lightly, but then saw an opening to ask some more pertinent questions and decided to plow in through. “Maybe you could help me with something I need for our biology project though. See, I asked Pops about it last weekend but he was a bit tight-lipped and didn’t give me a very helpful answer.”

“If I can, I’d be happy to help, Spark. Shoot!”

“We’re doing this genetics unit, see, so I asked Pops about my mother. He didn’t tell me much and he seemed really hesitant. I’m not sure why. Do you know anything about the surrogate he used?”

“Oh, sorry, Sweetie, but I can’t help you there. I know nothing at all about the woman. I never met her. In fact, nobody did. You were already a done deal before anyone in the family knew it was even a possibility,” Emmett elucidated. “It was a real shock, I can tell you! I mean, one day your dad was just floundering away, caught up to his usual ‘Sex and Substance Abuse’ brand of pain management, and then the next day he showed up, sober as a judge, with a three-month old baby in his arms, and declared he was now going to be a full-time father. We were all floored. NOBODY saw that coming, trust me on that. Well, except maybe for Teddy because he probably handled the money, but Teddy’s too loyal to say a peep. It's a good thing you did come into Brian’s life though, Honey, because that man was about to sink before you arrived and gave him an anchor to hold onto. We’d even discussed doing an intervention - not that your dad would have listened to us if we had, of course - but as soon as he got you, he turned his whole life around.”

“Pain management?” Qianna asked, butting into the conversation again.

“That’s what we always used to call it when your dad was battling his demons by doing all sorts of self-destructive shit,” Emmett answered, apparently not realizing the voice that had asked the question wasn’t his niece’s. “Not to tell tales out of school or anything, but your Dad used to go on some pretty wild benders sometimes.”

“What do you mean by ‘demons’?” Qianna pressed.

“Oh, Honey, you know your father. He’d been through all nine levels of hell before he turned thirty-five. Poor man.”

“I know my father had a tough childhood,” Quinne intervened. “He’s mentioned it several times, although he never told me any details. But why would he still be dealing with that by the time I was born? He was, like, thirty-five then, wasn’t he?”
“Well, see, there was other stuff going on, and . . . You know, I really shouldn’t say any more. It’s not my story to tell.”

“Emmett!” Quinne almost shouted at her phone out of irritation. “C’mon. I already asked my dad and he wouldn’t tell me anything. I know something weird went down and I suspect it had something to do with my mother. Why the huge secret? What is everyone hiding from me?”

“Aw, Honey, nobody’s trying to hide anything from YOU. It’s just that . . .” Emmett sighed heavily. “That whole time period was really hard for Brian. He was going through a lot of personal stuff and it kinda made him a little nuts. I think it’s perfectly understandable that he asked us not to make it worse by discussing it all the time.” Then the girls heard a quiet chuckle before Em elaborated, “well, actually, Brian threatened to castrate the first person who even mentioned the subject again - and I don’t think he was kidding either - so, since I’m really rather fond of my balls, I swore I would never ever speak about what happened. Besides, talking about HIM just makes us all sad, so it’s better to let sleeping possums lie, don’t you think?”

“HIM? You mean Justin Taylor, right?” Quinne pressed.

“Where’d you ever hear THAT name?”

“It doesn’t matter where I heard it, Em. That’s who you’re talking about, isn’t it? He’s the guy Pops is referring to when he says he tried a relationship once and he’s never doing it again. Right? I don’t get why it’s such a big freaking deal that everyone’s afraid to even say the man’s name!”

“I’m sorry, Quinne, Baby, but I really, really, REALLY, think you should let your dad explain that to you,” Emmett maintained.

And despite a few more minutes of pleading, Emmett refused to give up any more dirt on the topic of Mr. Taylor. The phone call ended on a stilted note when Emmett realized she wasn’t going to let it go. He apologized and again told her she’d have to talk to her dad about Justin before offering a hasty goodbye and hanging up.

“Well, so much for thinking that Em would be the weak link and tell us everything we wanted to know,” Quinne grumbled as she slumped back into her chair.

“Yeah, but we did learn two important details,” Qianna replied. “First, he confirmed what we
already knew about our dads breaking up right before we were born.” Quinne nodded and shrugged, apparently not thinking that was much use. “And second,” Qianna continued, “he gave us a new clue about your dad not getting you until you were three months old. What happened between the day we were born and then? Don’t most surrogates just hand the baby right over?”

“That is weird. But I doubt we’re going to figure out what happened unless we can either find Lizette Richards or force my dad to start talking,” Quinne lamented.

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[AZA’s Species Survival Plan Program](#).

Chapter End Notes

10/6/18 - Psych - those of you who thought Emmett would sing like a bird are probably disappointed, huh? But I couldn’t let him give everything away this early in the story, right? Now, I feel like this story is getting too heavy on dialogue and needs more action, any requests/suggestions? TAG
Chapter 8 - We Have To Tread Lightly.

Most of Sunday passed without either of the girls coming up with any better ideas about how they were going to find their missing mother. They debated which of their other friends or relatives might be coerced into spilling the beans about their dads’ breakup. Nobody seemed likely to help them, though.

Quinne argued that Emmett should have been the easiest of her ‘uncles’ to crack - Em was notorious for being the biggest gossip in the gayborhood - and if he hadn’t been willing to talk, it wasn’t likely anyone else would either. She thought there was a slight possibility she could get her Grandma Deb to help them, but there was also the possibility that Deb would rat them out to Brian, thinking it was her duty to tell him what was going on. The only person Quinne thought she could trust one hundred percent was her brother, Gus, but since he was only a child at the time all this stuff had happened, it was doubtful he’d know very much.

On Qianna’s side, there really wasn’t anyone she could ask. She only had her dad and her Grandmother and that was it. It was a given that anything she said to her Grandmother would be immediately relayed to her father, so that was out too. She wasn’t going to be any help.

Which left the girls without many other research options.

Quinne gave up the effort soon after lunch and decided to accept an offer to join a group of students starting a soccer game out on the quad. Qianna, who wasn’t athletically inclined, demurred and opted instead to go sightseeing in town with a group of girls. They’d been practically joined at the hip ever since they met, so it actually felt a little strange for the two newly-minted sisters to go off in different directions for a change. It was sometimes hard to remember that they still had separate lives and separate interests, but was undoubtedly healthier for them to spend at least some time apart.
Qianna was sitting at a cafe in downtown Colorado Springs, enjoying an Iced Coffee while she sketched street scenes, when she got a text from Quinne. She quickly responded, telling her sister where to meet her, and then went back to her drawing until Quinne showed up. She wasn’t expecting Quinne to arrive still dressed in her sweaty, muddy soccer shorts, with at least three of her teammates in tow. The rowdy group invaded the quiet of the sleepy little cafe, causing a ruckus and virtually taking over Qianna’s table.

“You should have been there, QiQi!” Quinne announced loudly as she plopped into the seat next to her sister. “We totally kicked ass today. And I had the BEST head-shot goal of my career. My Pops would have been so proud - I can’t wait to tell him.”

“Q has some mad skillz,” announced the boy that took over the chair next to Quinne - he was someone Qianna had seen around at camp but never really spent any time with and whose name she couldn’t recall at the moment. “I love that move you did when Tyler checked you. You just rolled into the fall and then popped up on the backside of the roll, right onto your feet again. You took Ty totally by surprise. He was still standing there blinking when you were halfway down the field with the ball. You are definitely legit, Q”

“Was there ever any doubt?” Quinne crowed with a boastful smile. “I’ve only been playing soccer since I was, like, three. My Pops has coached our team for years - he played in college, so he knows what he’s doing. But you’re not so bad yourself, Chase.”

“Thanks, Q. But I haven’t been playing as long as you. I did qualify for the junior varsity team next year in high school, though, so I guess I’m not too shabby,” the boy, Chase, bragged with a wink in Quinne’s direction.

“It sounds like you had fun,” Qianna offered, feeling a little left out of the camaraderie.

She might have said more, but Qianna was interrupted by the advent of a gaggle of other soccer players, laden with drinks and food, appropriating two nearby tables and moving them over so the whole big group could mass together. The next hour or so was spent reliving the soccer game, talking about other soccer games the players had once experienced, and discussing the merits of various professional soccer clubs. Since Qianna barely knew the difference between a soccer ball and a basketball, she ended up being mostly excluded from the conversation. Quinne, on the other hand was the center of the whole milling hive of kids, acting like a queen bee who was happy to accept the attentions of her minions.

When Qianna had finally had enough, she pushed back her chair and started to gather together her belongings. Quinne looked up, startled, and almost as if she’d forgotten her sister was even there
for a moment. She frowned when she saw the mirroring frown on Qianna’s face.

“You’re leaving already, Sis?” Quinne asked.

“Yeah. I thought I’d get started on the reading for tomorrow’s lab,” Qianna answered with what she hoped sounded like a plausible excuse for cutting out early.

Quinne looked like she was about to argue the point but the comment became moot when Chase also stood up and grabbed his bag.

“That sounds like a good plan. I’ll walk back with you, QiQi,” Chase announced as he followed Qianna.

“Hold up, guys,” Quinne hollered as she hastily grabbed her own stuff. “I’m coming too.”

Qianna and Chase paused briefly to let Quinne catch up with them before the trio continued on their way back towards the campus and their dorm building. They all three chatted amiably as they walked. Chase told them about how he wanted to get a medical degree, but instead of being a practicing he wanted to go into medical research - which was why he was so interested in the biology unit they were doing. When he found out that Qianna was from San Jose, he practically swooned, saying that Stanford was his first choice school for college. The two of them nattered on, talking about the area, Stanford, and California in general, with Chase suggesting that maybe he could come visit sometime so Qianna could show him the campus. It seemed like it was Quinne’s turn to feel a little left out.

Luckily, when they got back to the dorm, Stella was waiting for them with her computer and immediately pulled the girls aside. Chase offered up a fleeting goodbye as they forgot about him almost before he’d uttered the words. While the three girlfriends bustled off, the tall, handsome young man turned around and slowly made his way off alone, looking back over his shoulder at the group once before he started up the stairs.

“You guys HAVE to do this right away,” Stella insisted as she pulled a sister down to sit, one on each side of her. “This is the only other way I can think of that you might find your mother.”

She quickly opened up her laptop and pointed to the page she already had loaded. The computer screen displayed the home page for one of those DNA kit companies. This one advertised that one of it’s specialities was that it allowed you the option to contact living relatives.
“See! They’ll hook you up with anyone you find that’s a match,” Stella was explaining. “I know it’s a stretch, but if your mother has done a similar test, you could maybe reach her this way. And, even if SHE hasn’t done the test, maybe you’ll at least find a relative of hers that will know how to reach her. I’ve done the research into all the different DNA services and this one seems to have the biggest reach, so it’s probably your best shot. But it takes a minimum of six weeks so, if you want the results back before camp is over, you need to order your kits TODAY!”

Both girls leaned in to check out the information offered by the company. They pointed to where they wanted Stella to click as they read through page after page. It did seem that Stella had found an avenue of research that they hadn’t pursued yet. Granted, there was no guarantee that either their mother or a close relative on her side of the family would be found, but it was at least better than doing nothing. So Quinne quickly pulled out her ‘emergency’ credit card - the one her Pops gave her and then warned her never to use unless she was in the hospital or came across a Prada sale - and immediately paid for two tests with expedited shipping.

“This is a great idea, Stella! Thank you for finding this for us,” Qianna offered, with a hug for her friend. “And even if we don’t find our mother, it might come in handy to have written DNA test results on hand. We don’t really need any more proof that we’re related - not after the test we ran ourselves the other day in the lab - but it can’t hurt to have more proof to show our dads when we do finally confront them about all this.”

“So why HAVEN’T you just confronted them already?” Stella asked, genuinely confused on that point.

“We talked about that,” Quinne confessed, “but I guess we’re both just too scared to go there yet.”

“Scared? Why? It sounds to me like both your dads are pretty okay.”

“Yeah, but what if we’re wrong? What if our dads aren’t the good guys we’ve always thought they were and, instead, they intentionally kept us separate all these years?” Qianna pointed out. “I kinda don’t really want to find out that the father I’ve looked up to all these years could really be that cruel.”

“And worse - what if, once they find out we’ve accidentally found each other, they still insist on keeping us apart? I refuse to let that happen. Now that I’ve found you, Sis, I’ll fight to keep you,” Quinne vowed, reaching out to grab Qianna’s hand and squeeze it tightly.
“Agreed!” Qianna echoed. “But there’s no reason to fight that fight until we get a little more information. Which is why this DNA thing you found is so helpful, Stella.” Then she turned to face her sister. “So, what’s next? What else can we do?”

“I don’t know,” Quinne conceded. “We have to tread lightly . . .”

They continued to discuss their dwindling options all through dinner without coming up with any great ideas. But the matter was decided for them when Quinne got a FaceTime call on her tablet the minute they made it back to their room. The caller ID said it was her brother, Gus, someone they’d already debated about letting into their secret. Quinne shrugged when she saw Gus’ name come up on the screen, thinking that maybe fate had decided the matter for them, as she flopped down on her bed and tapped at the screen to accept the call.

“Hey, Sparky! How’s college life?” Gus’ smiling mug asked her. “And here I thought the older child would get to go to university first.”

“Dream on, Gus Gus! You know I always hated waiting around for anything.”

“Don’t I know it. I’m still pissed that you always get to do everything six years earlier than I did,” he complained, although there wasn’t any real anger behind the words. “So, how’s camp. You finally learn something useful?”

“Nothing that will help me get rid of you yet, I’m afraid,” she teased. “But we start on a Chemistry unit the week after next and I’m hoping to maybe learn how to build a stink bomb that I can set off in your bedroom.”

“Pops would LOVE that,” he chuckled. “Looks like it’s a good thing I’ll be moving out and living in the dorms this year after all.”

“Hey, how was your graduation last week?” Quinne asked. “I’m so bummed that I missed it. I bet you looked extra pretty in your big blue dress and all.”

“Fuck you, Sis!” the boy cursed her good-naturedly. “But, since you asked, I looked totally hot in my ROBE. And for my Graduation present, Mom and Pops got me that new computer I wanted with all the graphics programs. It’s totally lit. I’m going to so kick ass at PIFA.”
That seemed to be the opening that Quinne had been waiting for. With a sideways look over to Qianna’s bed - her sister shrugging back at her to let Quinne know it was her choice - the bold young woman decided to test the waters a little bit.

“Speaking of graphics - you’ll never guess who my roommate this summer is. I’ll give you a hint; her father is someone you’d kill to meet . . .”

“I didn’t know that Andy Warhol had a daughter. I thought he was gay and claimed to have died a virgin?” Gus posited with a naughty little chuckle.

“You’re not even close,” Quinne laughed at her brother outright. “Think movies. Think Oscar winner. Think about the guy you said inspired you to go into graphic arts as a career . . .”

“No way! You’re serious? Your roommate is related to Justin Taylor? Wow, small fucking world!” Gus sounded floored by this revelation. “But I thought he was gay too?”

“Duh! But so is our dad and he still managed to have two kids.” Quinne shook her head at the computer screen. “What century are you living in anyway?”

“True. Sorry. I just didn’t realize Justin had any family. It’s not in any of the stuff I’ve read about him.”

“That’s because he’s always tried to keep me out of the spotlight,” Qianna quipped from her side of the room.

“Say ‘hi’ to QiQi, my roommate,” Quinne demanded, quickly twisting the tablet around so Gus could see the girl sitting on the far bed.

Because the lighting in the tiny dorm room wasn’t the best, and also because of the way Qianna was slouched over on the bed with her huge sketchpad blocking most of her face, Gus only got a very vague image of the girl. Still, he waved hello to the screen on his end and offered up a big smile.

“Wow! It’s totally dope meeting you,” he gushed. “I’m a huge fan of your father’s. I’ve been following his work since I was practically a baby. You wouldn’t, by any chance, be able to get me an autograph or something, would you?”
“No problem. I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear he’s inspiring the next generation of artists.” Qianna offered, trying to sound erudite and worldly.

“You know, I actually knew your dad when I was little,” Gus volunteered. “He grew up in Pittsburgh and he and Pops used to know each other. I was really little at the time, so I don’t remember much, but I have little flashes of times hanging out with him and Justin coloring with me. I have this one really distinct memory of him teaching me how to draw a cat using basic shapes. He told me that a cat is just a bunch of circles and triangles. I’ve never forgotten that. He’s, like, the major reason I want to be an artist.”

“Really? You remember my dad?” Qianna was fascinated by that fact. “He taught me how to draw the same way. He always said that everything can be reduced to just a few basic shapes. That an artist is someone who sees the shapes underneath the camouflage.”

Quinne turned the tablet back around so it was facing her directly. “How come you never told me about knowing Justin Taylor?”

“I don’t know. I guess it just never came up,” Gus shrugged off the question. “He moved away from Pittsburgh before you were even born. By the time you were old enough to care, I suppose it just wasn’t news anymore. Besides, you know how hush-hush Pops has always been about his private life - I always assumed that Justin was the one who got away and that’s why he doesn’t want to talk about it, you know?”

“So Justin Taylor really is the ‘Guy Who Got Away’? The one Pops is always alluding to but won’t talk about?” Quinne attempted to clarify. “Do you know what really happened between them?”

“Nah. I don’t think anyone really does. I’ve heard the Moms talking about it before and they didn’t sound like they knew what happened either. One day Justin was just gone. I remember one time, back when we were living in Toronto and I was maybe five or six, I was supposed to go to Pittsburgh and stay with Pops for Spring Break but it got cancelled at the last minute and then I never saw Justin again. I was pretty upset about it at the time. But I never really heard a good explanation of why he left. Of course, I was just a kid so nobody ever really told me much back then.”

“I wish there was some way we could find out what happened . . .” Quinne mused, more to herself than her brother.
“Good luck with that. Have you met our Pops? He’s not really much for talking . . .”

“True dat,” Quinne agreed, before backing off the subject since it appeared Gus would be no help to them. “So, what are the rest of your summer plans, Bro?”

The two siblings talked for a while longer, sharing updates on their lives and making plans for later in the summer after Quinne finally got home. It sounded like Gus was going to be busy with his summer job as a day camp counselor for the local Parks & Rec agency as well as planning some weekend trips with his friends. When they’d finally hung up, Quinne turned to her new-found sister looking a little let down.

“Sorry we didn’t get more from Gus. I was afraid that he was too young at the time to remember much. I don’t know who else we can ask, though,” Quinne bemoaned the effort.

“Well, we did learn at least one more important piece of info,” Qianna noted. “He said that whatever happened between our dads, it went down right before Gus was supposed to come home for Spring Break. That meshes perfectly with our timeline. See?” She held out the notebook where they’d been writing stuff down. “And, it lends some credence to the theory that they didn’t know about the surrogate having twins. Our mother couldn’t have been more than a couple months along at the time they broke up.”

“I hope so. But the bigger question is what happened between March and when I showed up almost a full year later? They could have still found about about the twin thing when we were born and that might have been why they separated us. Right?” Quinne asked, looking at the timeline with a worried frown. “I say we still need to be cautious with our dads.”

“I don’t disagree,” Qianna replied. “But at least it’s a good sign.”

“Maybe,” the more skeptical Quinne responded.

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Drawing a Cat with Basic Shapes.

Chapter End Notes
10/7/18 - I just love doling the clues out for you guys one at a time like this. So far, only one person has even come close to guessing what really happened. You guys are so smart though, I’m sure you’ll figure it out before too much longer. Happy puzzling!

TAG
Chapter 9 - Time To Chase Chase?

The following week at camp was an extension of the genetics unit they’d done the week before. The focus of the week, however, was even more intricate. In the lecture that Monday morning they learned all about Epigenetics - the study of how the genes encoded by your DNA get turned on or off depending on various factors including one’s environment, heredity and even, in some cases, one’s stress level. It was a fascinating study subject. This was a topic neither of the girls had even heard about before and they were transfixed. Especially interesting were the Twins Studies where identical twins, with identical DNA and therefore the same genetic propensity to get a particular disease or condition, had different outcomes because of differing environments, resulting in one twin avoiding the disease.

The goal for that week was to delve into the practice of epigenetics - they would be going back to the lab to run tests that would tell them if certain genes associated with a particular type of cancer would be likely to be ‘turned on’ or not for a patient. Then they’d have to determine a plan of action for counselling that patient about her disease potential. So, not only did the group have to learn about the science behind what they were doing, but also the ethics involved in doing genetic counselling. It was going to be an engrossing week.

The only glitch in the works was that Quinne and Qianna got assigned to different lab groups for the week. Quinne and Stella were going to be together, so at least they had each other. But the notably less bold Qianna was put into a group where she didn’t know many people. Luckily, while she stood just inside the doorway looking around for a seat, Chase came into the room and immediately went up to her.

“Hey, QiQi,” he greeted her with a welcoming grin. “Glad to see a friendly face in here. Where’s your sister?”
“She got put into a different lab group this time around,” Qianna answered briefly.

“That’s too bad. From what I’ve seen, you two make a great team. But her loss is my win. You want to be my lab partner this go round?” Chase beamed at her with his brilliant, toothy smile.

“Thanks. That would be great,” Qianna agreed and followed her new lab partner over to an empty space at one of the nearby benches.

The rest of the lab went well. The group was learning how to do a Bisulfite DNA Sequencing Analysis. It was a lengthy process and easily would take them the entire rest of the week to finish. The end product, though, would allow them to see whether or not the gene they were interested in - one of the genes regularly associated with an increased risk of breast cancer - would be turned on and therefore likely to cause that patient to develop cancer. The first step was to take the DNA sample they were given and treat it with a chemical formulation that would allow them to see which parts of the DNA strands were methylated - i.e. which genes were protected by a methyl molecule and therefore would remain unexpressed - then amplify the DNA. It was a very complicated process with a lot of different steps. In between the various steps, Qianna and Chase helped each other out with writing up the day’s notes in their lab notebooks.

“Wow! Here’s a statistic I didn’t know,” Chase elaborated as he read something off a site he’d gone to for more information about the sequencing they were going. “It says here that, ‘If you stretched the DNA in one cell all the way out, it would be about two meters long - which is larger than most humans are tall - and all the DNA in all your cells put together end to end would be about twice the diameter of the Solar System’. That’s nuts, dontcha think?”

Qianna readily agreed, reading the next portion of the quote Chase was looking at, “‘But the way DNA is coiled up in the cell allows the three billion base pairs of a DNA strand to fit into a space just six microns across.’ That’s crazy. Who knew there was all that information stuffed into each and every cell on the human body. It’s like having NASA’s biggest supercomputer shrunk down to the size of pinhead and then duplicated thirty-seven trillion times and having all those computers working in tandem.”

“No wonder medicine is so complicated, huh?” Chase asked as he jotted down more notes for their experiment. “I can’t wait till I’m in college for real and I get to play with this stuff every day.”

“But that just brings up the second half of this week’s topic - the ethics of the whole thing,” kind-hearted Qianna voiced her own point of interest. “I mean, just cuz we can now see and maybe manipulate this stuff, SHOULD we? What if we do manage to increase the average human’s lifespan twenty, fifty or more years? We’ve already overpopulated the Earth and that many additional people would make the planet unlivable. Not to mention, who would be allowed to access all these miraculous advances and who would pay for it? Would only rich people be
allowed to live forever? It’s a nightmare just waiting to happen.”

Chase agreed with Qianna that there would be huge issues if this kind of technology advanced faster than medical ethics could keep up, but he was more of an optimist. QiQi was more of an empath and worried that the technology would be misused. They had a pretty intense debate the entire time they were working together. Even after they’d cleaned up for the day and started to head back to the dorms, their discussion continued. In fact, they were so absorbed in what they were talking about that neither noticed Quinne coming up next to them until she’d actually waved a hand in front of her sister’s nose.

“HELLOOOO! Earth to Q2? Anybody in there?” Quinne asked, looking a little miffed that she was being virtually ignored by the pair.

“Sorry, Quinne,” Chase spoke up, apologizing for them both. “We didn’t see you; we were so caught up in the topic we were debating all through lab. Your sister has a fresh take on genetics that I hadn’t ever thought about. It was fun to fight about it a little.” He ended by smiling at his debate partner and chuckling quietly.

Qianna shyly smiled back, feeling her pale cheeks flushing with warmth at the unexpected compliment. She wasn’t used to having an attractive boy saying such nice things about her. Usually the good-looking boys were turned off by her nerdiness. It felt really amazing to have someone—especially someone who was as handsome and popular as Chase—paying attention to HER for a change.

To cover up her discomfiture, Qianna quickly turned to her sister. “How did your lab go? Did you get through the PCR stuff? It was really complicated, huh?”

“I didn’t think it was that hard. Stella and I were done early so I even got a head start on my lab write up,” Quinne declared, bragging a bit, which wasn’t unusual for her. Then she looked up at Chase and asked, “you want to go kick around a soccer ball for a bit or something? I could use some active time after sitting in classrooms and labs all day.”

“Sorry. I’m not as far ahead as it sounds like you are,” Chase excused himself. “I think I’m going to finish my lab write up and then I plan to check out that article you sent me the link on, QiQi. Maybe we can get a game together tomorrow after labs if there’s time?”

“Sure. Whatever,” Quinne responded, trying unsuccessfully to hide her disappointment.
“Great. I’m off then. See you tomorrow, QiQi.” Chase clapped his lab partner on the shoulder affably and then smiled at Quinne before heading off towards the stairs on his own.

“Well, that was kinda rude,” Quinne said as soon as Chase was far enough away that he couldn’t hear her. “We had fun yesterday and I thought maybe he was interested but I guess he doesn’t know a good thing when he sees it.”

“I didn’t think he was THAT rude. We really didn’t get very far on our lab write ups - we were too busy having this really interesting discussion about medical ethics. I might have even persuaded him to my point of view. It was fun talking with him, though. He’s really smart,” Qianna defended the boy as she turned towards the lounge area where she planned to spread out her work while she finished the assignment that needed to be turned in the next day.

“Whatever,” Quinne dismissed Chase and everything else as she picked up her own bookbag and followed Qianna. “How about, I help you finish up your lab write up so you can get done quicker, and then we grab some other girls and all go to the rec center and have a swim tonight before dinner? Sound like a plan?”

“Okay. Deal,” Qianna gladly accepted the offer and the help.

The plan worked wonderfully and the girls were just coming back from the pool a couple hours later when Qianna dropped behind the rest of the group to respond to a text she’d received.

The other girls were several meters down the path before Quinne looked back and saw her sister standing there glaring down at her phone. She waved the rest of their group on, telling them not to wait, and returned to her sister’s side. Just as she stepped up beside Qianna, Quinne heard the girl grumbling at her phone as she typed.

“C’mon, Dad. Nobody’s THAT gay . . .”

“What’s the problem, QiQi?” Quinne inquired, trying to look over the shorter girl’s shoulder to see what she was typing.

“My Dad sent me a text asking for input on his ‘colors’ for the damn wedding. He said he wants to go with shades of blue - says it will match his eyes . . . And what the hell is this? It looks like he’s got an artichoke pinned to his lapel. I can’t do this. I really can’t . . .” QiQi complained with a loud groan and turned the phone screen around so her sister could see the ghastly boutonniere.
“Here. Give it to me,” Quinne demanded. “My Auntie Em is the premier party planner in SW Pennsylvania so I’ve dealt with this stuff all my life. And your dad’s right that the colors you choose dictate everything else about the wedding, so it’s an important decision.” She typed at the phone for a minute or two, even going online to pull up some other suggestions. “The shades of blue idea isn’t bad, but the flower selection is definitely horrible. There . . . Okay, I sent him some better pics. I’m sure he’ll find something that works.”

“Thanks, Sis,” Qianna replied as she accepted the return of her phone. “I just don’t want to deal with any of this wedding crap. If I had my way, there wouldn’t BE a wedding. At least not to Horrible Hairy Alex.”

“I’m with you there. That guy is trouble. But there’s no use trying to tell your dad that. People only hear what they wanna hear, you know?” Quinn gave her sister is sympathetic look. “All you can do is be there for him, give him whatever support you can, and then be ready to pick up the pieces when it inevitably falls apart later.”

“You’re right. I know that. But I really just can’t bring myself to get involved with the wedding stuff. That’s going to far. I want nothing to do with anything related to Hairy Alex,” she insisted. “How about I let you handle any wedding stuff from here on out? You’re probably better at it than I am anyway.”

“Deal. But, in exchange, you get to handle all of my dad’s ongoing shoe obsession issues, okay?”

“No problem. I think your dad’s hilarious. I’ll take him and his shoes over Hairy Alex any day of the week.”

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For the rest of the week the girls had fun with their father exchange idea. They even went so far as to give each other their account login information so that they didn’t have to hand off their phones all the time; Qianna simply logged in as Quinne and vice versa whenever they needed to reply to the other’s dad. They were both having a blast with the little deception. The dads also seemed thrilled that ‘their’ daughter was finally showing some interest in what they were doing. Justin started sending daily updates on the wedding plans, which Quinne responded to, assiduously doing whatever additional research was needed to help him out. Meanwhile, Brian and Quinne went on a fantasy shoe shopping extravaganza, each texting the other back with their latest online shoe finds, some of which Brian actually ended up ordering.
Outside of their parent swap, though, things were a little bit less rosy for the pair. The week’s epigenetics project was much more difficult than either was prepared for and took up a lot of time. And, since they had been put in separate lab groups for the week, they didn’t get to see each other as much as they had been. Qianna was spending a lot of time doing research with Chase. Same for Quinne and Stella. They barely saw each other for meals before they’d have to rush off to one thing or another. It was a lot more than either had expected. By the end of the week they were both exhausted and, despite the fact that both found the genetics unit interesting, they were glad the camp was moving on the next week to a different topic.

When Friday finally came, and they all handed in their final project write ups, it was a huge relief. Everyone was looking forward to a weekend of more relaxing fun. Saturday’s field trip was going to be a good one too - they were going to be doing a Multisensory Learning Project through the local Apple Store. Quinne was especially interested in this offering because coding and computers were her thing. Unfortunately, the store could only accommodate 25 students at a time, so they had to take turns. The students who weren’t busy doing their coding project would be taking a walking tour of downtown Colorado Springs.

Once again the girls got split up for the day’s events. This was a huge disappointment. It wasn’t like they NEEDED to be together all the time or anything, but since they’d only just found each other they wanted to spend as much time together as possible. After all, who knew what the future was likely to bring or if they’d be able to maintain the same close relationship when the summer was over.

As they were milling around outside the entrance to the Apple Store, bemoaning their separate group assignments, Chase came bounding over, grinning like a big, happy lapdog. “Hey, guys!” he greeted them exuberantly. “What group are you in. I’ve got ‘D’, which means I’m one of the last ones to go today. Annoying, huh?”

“I’m ‘D’ too,” Qianna announced, smiling up at the tall Chase, glad she’d have someone familiar to hang out with.

“SWEET!” Chase cheered, holding up his hand to fist bump with his former lab partner. Then he turned to the other two girls and remembered to ask, “how about you ladies?”

“Quinne and Stella are ‘B’ group,” Qianna answered for them, interrupting Quinne who’d just opened up her mouth to speak for herself. “I’m really glad you’re going to me in my group, though, Chase. Coding is one of my weaker skills. I’m probably going to need some help.”
“Oh, I’m sure you’ll do great. From what I understand, the project we’re working on today incorporates art and music as well, which is all right up your alley, Ms. Artiste,” Chase reassured her. “So, I don’t think our tour group is going to be leaving for a little while. Want to go get some coffee with me before we leave?”

“Sounds good,” Qianna agreed cheerfully without even looking towards her sister or Stella. In fact, she’d already walked at least a couple meters away before she seemed to remember them, turning so she was walking backwards as she yelled back at the other girls. “See you guys later, ‘kay?”

And, without waiting for any response, she returned her attention to Chase and was gone.

Quinne stood there, watching her sister’s retreating back, with a pinched look maring her beautiful face. It wasn’t clear whether her angry glare was directed at Chase or Qianna. Stella remained silent, not wanting to take sides on the matter, although it seemed clear that trouble was brewing between the two sisters over this boy. Quinne still hadn’t forgotten her sister’s abandonment when their group was called up and their tour guide headed off down the street.

At the same time, Qianna and Chase were just coming out of a coffee shop going by the name of ‘The Perk’ with their drinks in hand. Qianna really didn’t care that much for coffee, but she hadn’t wanted to look like a baby next to Chase, so she’d ordered a caramel mocha with lots of froth and cream and sugar, which diluted it to the point she hoped it would be drinkable. Chase still teased her about the wimpy coffee . . . and then he went and ordered a cup of Earl Grey tea for himself. Then they both laughed at each other and confessed they hated coffee.

The morning flew by for Qianna. She really liked spending time with Chase. She’d led a fairly sheltered life and her father had always been overprotective, so she’d never had the freedom to spend time alone with a boy like that. It was especially nice to have someone she found physically attractive paying attention to her. It was such heady stuff, to be honest, that she sorta forgot all about her sister for the day. And, when they finally got to do their turn at the Apple Store, she and Chase were having so much fun working with the new Skoog Music Cube that she got totally caught up in it and didn’t want to leave when their time was up. The toy/instrument really spoke to her creative side, a part of her that hadn’t had much rein so far that summer.

When Chase finally dragged her away from the Apple Store, Qianna was still raving about the experience. At least until her phone began to chime with the special sound she used to alert her to messages coming in from Quinne’s father. She quickly pulled her phone out and started to tap at the screen.

“Sorry, Chase. I just need to respond to this text really quick. If I don’t, Quinne’s dad is probably going to buy me - I mean her - a pair of really awful dusty rose suede pumps.” They both chuckled
at the image that brought up - the athletic, laid back, tomboyish Quinne in pink pumps - before Qianna concentrated on the phone again. “Yep. Brian’s being so stubborn about those damn pumps. For someone who has great taste in men’s fashion, he seems to have no clue what a teen girl would want to wear.”

She twisted the phone around so that Chase could see the pair of shoes Brian was threatening to buy, which caused the poor boy to guffaw loudly. Qianna nodded her head and grimaced. She quickly typed out a response, with a big ‘NO!’ and several vomiting emojis.

“Hopefully that will stave him off for a bit,” Qianna announced with sigh. “I don’t care if they ARE Prada, Quinne would never go for that.”

“I’m pretty sure Quinne would rather have a new pair of soccer cleats,” Chase offered, causing them both to chuckle again. “She’s an amazing soccer player though. Way better than me. And maybe even smarter than me too. To be honest, she intimidates me a little bit.”

“That’s silly. Quinne is the nicest person you’ve ever met. I mean, I know she tends to brag a lot, but she doesn’t do it to put anyone else down. She’s just proud of herself and wants to let everyone know it. I wish I were more like that,” Qianna replied, standing up for her sister.

“You should be proud. You’re just as smart and a lot more creatively talented,” Chase responded, giving the girl walking next to him a shy, geeky smile that raised a blush to Qianna’s cheeks.

She was so flustered by all this that, when her phone rang, she didn’t even look at the caller ID before she answered with a breathless, “Hey!”

“Qianna? Are you okay?” Justin’s voice asked, sounding worried.

“Dad? Hi. Yeah, I’m fine. What’s up?” Qianna answered, finally focusing on her phone call.

“You sounded . . . off. And your text had me worried,” Justin explained.

“Huh?” was all Qianna had, not sure what text he was referring to.
“Your last text? The one where you said you were bummed that your roommate had abandoned you for some boy?” Justin elaborated. “Listen, QiQi. I’m sorry you’re having issues with your roommate, Honey, but just give her a chance. I’m sure she wasn’t blowing you off on purpose. Whatever it is with this boy will pass and she’ll be back to being your friend again in no time,” Justin counselled sagely. “Remember, friendship is always more important than any boy - trust me on that one. I’ve been there, done that, and still regret it,” He laughed sadly to himself. “Thank goodness YOU haven’t discovered boys yet. I’m not sure I’m ready for my little girl to turn into a full-fledged teenager already.”

“Um . . . okay . . .” Qianna didn’t know how to react to her father’s assertions. Apparently Quinne must have sent him a text complaining when she’d gone off with Chase and now her dad thought she was the good one who wasn’t interested in boys . . . Can you say, ‘awkward’?

“Well, good. Just don’t let it get you down, okay?” Justin restated and waited till he heard Qianna’s mumble of acceptance. “So, what did you decide on the invitations?”

“Invitations?” Qianna repeated, now completely lost.

“Yeah, should I go with the more traditional one or the fancy one? You said you were going to think it over and maybe look for some alternatives,” Justin elucidated. “By the way, thank you so much for helping me out with all this. I’m impressed how good you are at wedding planning. It’s a huge help to me. I don’t know what I would have done without you to talk me down from those flowers.”

“Uh, Dad, could I get back to you on that?” Qianna delayed, having no idea at all what her father was talking about since she’d carefully avoided talking about the wedding planning with Quinne. “I need to get back to the rest of the group and we’re about to head home to the dorms. I’ll text you back later, okay?”

“No problem, Sweetheart,” Justin easily conceded. “I’ll let you go back to your camp stuff. I’m sure it’s more interesting than planning your dad’s wedding for him. Thanks again, though. I love you, Honey.”

“Love you too, Dad. Bye.”

Qianna finished her call but then stood there looking down at her phone for at least a minute more. Her father had inadvertently given away the fact that Quinne was upset with her. Now that she thought about it, she had kinda blown off her friends as soon as Chase had come up and asked her to go with him for coffee. She hadn’t meant anything by it. She was just so thrilled that a boy -
ANY boy, let alone a cute one - might be interested in her, that she hadn’t thought out what she was doing or how it would seem to anyone else. She realized now that she hadn’t been acting like a good friend. It was time to make up for that.

They’d continued walking while Qianna had been talking to her father and she’d finished just as they reached the location where all the groups of camp kids were meeting to get on the busses. At the far edge of the sidewalk, Qianna could see her sister and Stella standing together. Just the sight of her sibling - who’d rapidly become her best friend - made Qianna smile. She knew it was time to make things right.

“Thanks for hanging out with me all day, Chase,” she said to her companion. “It’s been fun but I really need to go catch up with Quinne and Stella. See you around, okay?”

Chase seemed a little bummed that he would no longer have Qianna to himself but he didn’t say anything outright. They said their goodbyes and he headed off towards a group of boys getting on the first bus. Then Qianna eagerly skipped over to her sister’s side, ending up with her arms around the slightly taller girl, hugging for all she was worth.

“Hey, Sis. I missed seeing you all day. How did your turn at the Skoog thing go?” she asked and was happy to see Quinne turn to her with an answering smile.

“It was fun,” Quinne responded, but her smile slipped as she looked around at the large group of milling students. “So, where’s your tall, geeky shadow?”

Qianna laughed at the barely concealed animosity in her sister’s question. “It was nice having someone I knew to hang out with today, but I would have rather been with you guys. Besides, I don’t have time to chase Chase. You and I have way too much catching up to do to waste the few weeks we have together here. I want to make the most of our Sister Time.”

The conciliatory statement earned her a truly happy smile from her sister and a return hug. That was all it took to make up the little rift that had grown between them. They spent the bus ride back to the dorms laughing at Justin’s attempts to pick out appropriate wedding invites and Brian’s horrible taste in women’s shoes. And all was once again right in their corner of the world.

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Bisulfite DNA Sequencing .  Skoog Music Cube .

Chapter End Notes
10/10/18 - Sorry about letting my inner science geek run amok a bit here. I just couldn’t help it. This shit is majorly interesting to me. Imagine if we could figure out how to turn a cancer gene off - the implications are mind-blowing, and not really that far out of possibility based on today’s science. If you haven’t read about Epigenetics, you really should. (You can also check out the link I put at the bottom of the chapter for more sciencey stuff.) And it also worked as a great foil for introducing a little bit of plot tension, right? But then again, have you ever met teenage girls? They LIVE for drama. Even our level-headed heroines, unfortunately. LOL. Also, I added an link to the new Apple thing I was referencing - it’s really cool. Alas, I think poor Chase was not long meant for this story, and we will bid him a hasty adieu for now... TAG
A Brilliant Idea!

Chapter Notes

The girls have a plan . . . Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 10 - A Brilliant Idea!

Quinne handed back Qianna’s laptop with a smug grin. “There. I’ve imported all your music to our new Python database. With all the music from the five of us, we’re going to have an awesome music library once the project is complete,” she announced proudly.

Qianna just nodded, not nearly as interested in the coding project they were supposed to be working on that week as her sister was. She’d always found coding to be a bit dull - it was so rigid and dependant on following set rules, that it grated against her creative nature. She WAS looking forward to the final results of the project their group had chosen - which was to put together a combined database made up of all the downloaded music each of them had on their various devices and make it available to all of them through a shared API - but was happy to let Quinne take the lead on the majority of the tasks.

Meanwhile, Qianna was busy reading through the most recent email from Quinne’s father. The family back in Pittsburgh had thrown a big shindig the prior weekend, complete with a backyard barbeque and swimming. Everyone looked like they were having the best time. Qianna was jealous.

“I think I love your family,” Qianna announced with a huge sigh. “It’s not fair that you got to grow up with all these people and I got Hairy Alex.”

Quinne giggled at that assessment. “They aren’t always that fun to be around. Trust me. Having a huge extended family full of nosy busy-bodies can be a pain in the ass. Some days I’d be happy to trade.”
“Well, it sounds like heaven to me,” Qianna maintained, scrolling through the pictures again. “Help me out here, Q - I know the tall guy in the middle is your dad, you’ve shown me lots of pics of him, but who are all the rest?”

Quinne sat down next to her sister on the narrow dorm room bed so she could look over Qianna’s shoulder. “The guy on the end in the brown jacket is my Uncle Ted,” she pointed one by one to the people in the picture. “Ted’s the sweetest guy you’ll ever meet but he also has the most biting sense of humor, so you don’t want to get on his bad side. Then, that’s my Grandma Debbie - I’m so glad she stopped wearing that awful, cheap old red wig of hers and has decided to just go with her natural grey - she looks so much better. My dad, of course, trying to look stylish and hip. And the guy on his left is my Uncle Ben - Ben’s married to my Uncle Michael, who’s Debbie’s son. Looks like the picture was taken on the back patio at Britin. We’ve had some major parties out there, like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Britin?” Qianna asked, catching the odd name. “You guys seriously named your house? Don’t you think that’s a little pretentious?”

“No idea where the name came from - everybody’s always called it that, though. Who knows. It’s an old house and probably came with the stupid name,” Quinne dismissed the anomaly with an easy shrug.

“Who’s this woman?” Qianna asked, pointing to a tall blonde in another picture.

“That’s Lindsey. She’s one of Gus’ moms.” Qianna swiped at the screen to bring up the next picture and before she could even ask, Quinne volunteered the next name. “And that’s Gus himself. Obviously trying to look older and cooler than he really is. Good picture though - probably taken by my Pops, who fancies himself a photographer on the side.”

“Damn, he’s cute!” Qianna gushed, practically drooling over the picture on her phone.

“Gus? No. He’s annoying, is what he is,” Quinne corrected, sounding like every younger sister describing her brother. “Besides . . . Ewww! . . . You’re not allowed to think my brother - who’s sorta your brother once removed - is hot. You’ll give me nightmares.”

Qianna had to laugh at that, but conceded it was a little icky, so she’d have to keep her drooling to a
minimum. Instead she just finished scrolling through the rest of the pics while Quinne went back to her own bed and starting looking through her own email messages. They spent the next five or ten minutes in a comfortable silence as each pursued their own thing and dealt with her own correspondence and social media posts.

The peace and quiet was only broken when Quinne sat up and started yelling at her tablet. “NO! No, no, no, no, no! That’ll mess up everything!”

“What’s wrong?” Qianna demanded, looking around like there was some physical danger she should be aware of.

“Hairy Alex is going to ruin all the wedding plans your dad and I have already set up!” Quinne complained while furiously typing away. “He’s being a total bitch. We already signed a contract with the venue we decided on and now Alex is demanding that your dad invite about fifty more people than we’d planned on. The venue can’t hold that many, so it means we’ll have to find somewhere else and it’ll probably at least double the price.” She kept typing away at the tablet, obviously communicating something with Justin. “No! You can’t just give in to him like that! Argh!” Quinne tossed the tablet aside with an expression of disgust. “I’m seriously pissed at your dad. He keeps letting Hairy Alex get away with stupid shit. I wish I could fly out there and kick that prissy little Bride-zilla’s ass.”

“Which one is the bride-zilla? My dad or Alex?” Qianna asked, trying to hold back her laughter.

“Both!” Quinne growled. “Well, mostly Hairy Alex. But your dad keeps allowing him to get away with it, so I’m kinda mad at him too. I don’t understand what that lumbersexual loser has going for him that your dad doesn’t just tell him to take a hike already. I really am tempted to go tell Alex what I think of him in person and save your father’s ass in the process. To hell with this stupid wedding.”

Qianna, who had been going through the pictures from Pittsburgh one more time while listening to her sister’s ranting, sat up and turned to face Quinne with a look of unadulterated inspiration on her face. “That’s a BRILLIANT idea, Q! You should do it! You should go to San Jose and I’ll go to Pittsburgh in your place! That way you can take care of Hairy Alex for me and dad and I’ll get to meet all your family.

At first Quinne was inclined to laugh off this suggestion, thinking it was just Qianna indulging in some wishful thinking. But looking over at her sister’s eager intenseness, it was clear Qianna was serious. She could tell how badly her sister longed to be a part of the big, sometimes chaotic, sometimes intrusive, but always supportive group that Quinne thought of as her family. At the same time, Quinne herself had become rather fond of Justin, and truly felt bad for him at the way he was seemingly being taken advantage of by his fiancé. If she were there in person, she felt sure
she'd have a better chance of corralling Alex’s incessant demands while still being a supportive assistant to Justin. So maybe it wasn't as crazy as it sounded.

“Okay. I’m game. I’m assuming you mean after camp is over, right? Cuz, I’m not sure I’m up for running away in the middle of the night just to show up on your dad’s doorstep at 2:00 am without an invite.”

“Well, duh,” Qianna laughed at the mental image of the two of them stealing away from the dorm in the middle of the night just to show up at each other’s homes.

“But won’t your dad want you home right after camp is over?” Quinne asked. “I mean, there’s only a couple weeks between camp and his wedding. I’m assuming there will be lots of shit you’ll need to do, like dress fittings and stuff. Not really a great time for a child swap, QiQi.”

“It’s the perfect time. I don’t want ANYTHING to do with that wedding, Q. I know my dad is going to regret this, probably as soon as it happens, and there’s no way I want to be complicit in helping him ruin his life. If you don’t go there and take care of Hairy Alex for me, I’m not sure I’ll ever want to go home at all,” Qianna asserted adamantly.

“Fine. But why would your dad even listen to me? I’m just some strange girl he knows nothing about. Wouldn’t you have more of a chance at stopping the wedding than me?”

“He’s been listening to you for the last two weeks, Q.”

“Yeah, but that’s only because he thought I was you,” Quinne pointed out.

“So, just keep being me,” Qianna suggested, looking at her sister with an impish glint in her eye and a wry smile.

“Uh, yeah, right,” Quinne scoffed with a shake of her head. “How is that supposed to work? I know we look a lot alike but you don’t think your dad will realize he has the wrong daughter?”

Qianna just shrugged. “I’m sure we could pull it off. It’s only when we’re standing side by side that you can really see the differences. Random strangers seem to think we’re identical. Remember that lifeguard at the Broadmoor a few weeks back?”
“That was a stranger, not one of our fathers,” Quinne maintained. “And even if our faces do look pretty similar, you don’t think your dad will notice that his daughter now has dark hair and grew about an inch taller?”

Qianna simply giggled. “He’ll probably compliment me on my new hair do and, even though he might secretly hate it, tell me how much he loves the color. And then he’ll exclaim about the huge growth spurt I had over the summer.”

Quinne had to concede that point. Based on what she’d learned about Justin so far, that sounded like him. She was now starting to seriously consider her sister’s outrageous plan and wondering if they really could pull it off. It might be fun, actually. She didn’t think they’d be able to get away with it forever, but maybe they could fool Justin at least long enough to get her to California. It might help that Justin seemed so entirely caught up in all his wedding plans that he wasn’t really paying attention to anything else. But, still, it was a stretch to think he just wouldn’t notice he had the wrong girl.

“Okay, but what will we tell MY Pops? He’s not going to just let me go off to California to stay with someone he hasn’t seen in more than a decade. Especially if whatever broke up our dads was as bad as we suspect. At a minimum he’s going to want to talk to your dad and confirm that everything’s okay, which would completely give us away.”

“So we don’t tell your father either,” Qianna suggested, making it sound like the easiest solution possible. “If you’re going to pretend to be me, I can just as easily pretend to be you.”

Quinne rolled her eyes, sure that this was going to be the sticking point of their plan. “My Pops isn’t usually easy to fool, QiQi. He also hates to be lied to more than anything else in the world - when we eventually get caught, he’ll go ballistic.” Then she thought of the one other glitch in the program. “And it’s one thing for me to convince your dad I grew over the summer, but how are you going to explain to my father that you shrunk an inch?”

“No problem,” Qianna answered with a stubborn insistence. “I’ll just let him buy me all the platform pumps he wants - the bigger the better - and get heel lifts to boot. He’ll be so happy to see you finally wearing the shoes he buys that he’ll forget about everything else.”

That declaration caused both girls to laugh, because it was so true. Brian’s biggest weakness was his love of expensive footwear - an obsession that his daughter had long fought him about - and he probably would be blinded to everything except her shoes. At least for a while. Maybe this crazy idea really could work?
“I know we can do this, Q,” Qianna urged. “Please. I really don’t want to go home to my father and Hairy Alex’s happy homo hookup ceremony. I want to go meet all these people.” She turned the phone screen around again and showed Quinne the photo of Brian and the family that she was now using as her lockscreen pic. “That way, even if you can’t stop my dad’s wedding, I won’t have to be a part of if AND I’ll get a few weeks of fun before I have to go back to sharing a home with my new Step-Yeti.”

Quinne, who was starting to warm a bit to the idea, responded, “well, it WOULD be kinda fun to see if we could get away with it. I have always loved a good prank. Even if we only make it as far as each other’s homes, and then get caught, it would be pretty hilarious. Can you imagine?”

“Totally! And, while you’re working to stop Hairy Alex, I can pump your dad and the rest of them for the skinny on what happened to break up our dads’ marriage and how the surrogate fits into things,” Qianna promised.

“That would be great. But if we really are going to try this, we’ll have to do more than just LOOK alike. You’re going to have to become me in every way, and vice versa. We’ll need to know EVERYTHING about each other’s lives. Otherwise they’ll catch on before we even get to the airport.”

“Piece of cake,” Qianna asserted. “We’ve still got almost a month to plan and prep. By the time we leave camp in August, nobody will be able to tell us apart. This is going to be EPIC! I can’t wait.”

Quinne sighed, still unconvinced they’d be able to pull it off, but intrigued enough by the challenge to at least give it a try. She knew they’d either be found out or have to confess so that they could eventually reclaim their proper lives. But perhaps they could help each other out and solve their own personal mystery before that happened. What did they have to lose?

“Okay. Let’s do this!” she capitulated, receiving a happy squeal of delight from her excited sister in return.

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From that point on, the sisters began an intensive study program that had nothing to do with the coding lessons they were getting that week in camp. Instead, they started studying each other’s lives. They’d already learned a lot, having been together almost 24/7 for over a month, but this was different.
Quinne set up a spreadsheet showing the five main areas of their respective lives which they’d need to have down pat to pull off their charade: Family, Homelife, Behaviors, Language, and Appearance.

The ‘Family’ category involved memorizing every single fact they could about the other’s family. This wasn’t going to be that difficult for Quinne, since she only had to learn about Justin, Justin’s mother Jennifer, and Hairy Alex. But for Qianna it was going to be the most difficult part of the entire endeavor since Quinne’s extended family was so extensive. Quinne listed them all in her spreadsheet, along with the most pertinent facts about each, and included pictures of all of them so there’d be no mistakes. Then they spent every spare minute they had telling each other stories about every one of their family and friends.

The ‘Homelife’ category was almost as voluminous. This involved both girls learning everything they could about the homelife of the other. Qianna created architectural diagrams of both family’s homes, friends homes and even their respective father’s workplaces, so that neither would seem out of place in what should be familiar environments. They also studied maps of the surrounding areas so they wouldn’t get lost going from one locale to the next. And, just to be on the safe side, they even spent time on Google Street View, guiding each other along usual routes and explaining anything important that they might need to know along the way.

The ‘Behaviors’ category was probably going to be the most difficult to master. This area included basically everything that encompassed each girl’s daily lives. What each’s daily routine was like, what each preferred to do with freetime, food likes and dislikes, mannerisms and quirks . . . It was so much that they feared this would be the one part of the plan that inevitably tripped them up. But, to the extent that they’d already been living together for a month, they at least had some idea of the other’s personality and how to mimic those aspects. Quinne started off listing these items in her spreadsheet, but when the section became too huge, they gave up. All they could do was hope for the best, try to prepare as best they could, and trust in luck and their individual acting skills to cover any potential faux pas.

In comparison, the ‘Language’ component would be relatively easy. There were lots of little things that characterized each girl’s mode of speaking that had the potential to give them away, but most were simple to correct. For instance, Quinne referred to most soft drinks as ‘Soda’ whereas Qianna referred to those drinks as ‘Pop’. They corrected each other constantly throughout the day but by the end of their first week had almost mastered this part of their transformation.

The ‘Appearance’ aspect of the plan needed to be, by necessity, as simple as possible. They wouldn’t be able to keep up any masquerade for long if they didn’t pull off the identical twins thing. They’d already figured out how to explain the major differences in their appearances, but to truly fool their families they needed to go even further. They’d have to make sure they copied the other’s makeup, hair, and clothing techniques. Every little trick they could think of to enhance the deception needed to be pursued and applied to make the switch more believable.
It was a lot to have to learn in just over a month’s time, especially since they were still kept pretty busy with the camp’s activities, but once they’d committed to their plan, both girls dug into the project with zeal.

“Remember, you have to refer to my father as ‘Pops’. I never call him ‘dad’,” Quinne reminded her sister as they were going over the plan again that first weekend.

They were sitting in the very back seats on the bus which was taking them to the Space Foundation Discovery Center for that week’s field trip and had decided to use the travel time for a short review session.

“Sorry. I keep screwing that up,” Qianna scrunched up her nose with self-disgust. “But don’t worry - I’ll be perfect by the time camp’s over. I promise.”

“I know you will,” Quinne replied with an encouraging smile. “Now, here’s a tough one - what’s his middle name?”

Qianna really has to stop and think for a minute before a neuron in the back of her brain fired up and supplied her with the needed information. “It’s ‘Aiden’ but everyone teases him that the ‘A’ really stands for . . .” Qianna looked around to make sure no one was listening in before finishing her statement in a hushed voice. “. . . Asshole .”

Quinne chuckled at her more demure twin. “You’re going to have to get comfortable with cursing, QiQi. Everybody in the family curses like a sailor, including my grandma, who’s actually worse than almost anyone except for maybe my Pops.” Qianna grimaced and pretended to be shocked, which only evinced a chuckle from Quinne. “Pops and I still laugh about the day he got called in by my kindergarten teacher and was given a lecture asking him to talk to me about appropriate language. It seems I’d told her I didn’t need her bullshit lessons because I already knew how to read.”

“Oh my God! I can’t believe you said that to your teacher!” Qianna exclaimed, tittering like a maniac.

“That’s another thing; nobody in our house ever refers to ‘God’. Pops is a raging atheist. He gives us shit if anyone even says that word in his presence. He always told me that any oath or exclamation you might want to use containing the word ‘God’ can always be replaced with the word ‘fuck’.”
“Sheesh. My dad would have a coronary if I cursed like that,” Qianna responded as she tried to wrap her mind around such an unconventional upbringing.

“Well, get used to it. If you’re going to be me, you’re gonna have to be able to curse when appropriate,” Quinne advised, waggling her eyebrows salaciously at the other girl. “And you’d better start practicing now if you want to be ready by the end of the summer. So, until further notice, I want you to greet me with a curse word every time you see me.”

“Jeeze, Q, I don’t know if I can . . .”

“Correction: Fuck that, Q. Go to hell, you bitch. I’ll do what I want and won’t take shit from anyone, so get off my ass,” Quinne coached, her revision causing Qianna to laugh out loud.

“I know I probably shouldn’t have been listening in,” Stella interrupted, looking back at the pair from the seat in front of them, “but why are you cursing at your sister, Q? Are you guys fighting again?”

The twins just laughed in tandem at their confused friend. “No, we’re fine. Q was just giving me some swearing lessons,” Qianna explained, before turning back to address her sister. “How’s this? When the hell are we getting to this fucking museum?”

“Ooooooookaaaaayyy . . .” Stella clearly thought they’d both gone nuts and turned back around, determined to mind her own business.

“Excellent!” Quinne approved.

And then she spent the next ten minutes giving Qianna tips on the finer points of bad language usage.
10/12/18 - So, I’ve finally got them to the point where they’ve hatched their plan to swap fathers. Was the reasoning logical enough? I didn’t want it to seem like they were just coming up with a stupid idea out of the blue... What else do you suggest the girls will have to practice for the swap? Come by the online doc and leave me a note or list any suggestions you have in a comment and I’ll happily credit you! TAG
“In case you’re not familiar with the term,” the Engineering grad student who was leading that week’s unit explained, “a Rube Goldberg Machine is a machine intentionally designed to perform a simple task in an indirect and over-complicated fashion. It’s named after an American cartoonist and inventor by the same name. Mr. Goldberg’s early 20th century cartoons, showing these complicated gadgets doing humorous things, caught the public’s attention and made him famous almost overnight.”

The instructor hit the remote control on the projector, displaying several of Goldberg’s fantastical Machine creations, raising laughter from all the assembled students.

“And, while his ‘Self-Operating Napkin’ or his ‘Patent Clothes Brush’, might be hilarious to look at, they are also intricate works of engineering that have inspired other inventors for years. So, this week, I’m challenging you to make your own Rube Goldberg devices. You’ll be divided up into groups and get the whole week to work on your creations. On Friday there will be a grand unveiling of all the machines and the head of Mines’ Engineering school will judge which group wins. Now, go have fun & do science!”

The camp kids were quickly sorted out into groups of five, each with their own college-aged advisor. Quinne and Qianna refused to be separated anymore, so they were put into a group with Stella, and their numbers rounded out by adding Chase and a buddy of his named Eric. Each group was given a bin full of equipment which they were allowed to supplement by using personal possessions. Then the groups were allowed to wander off to various nooks and crannies around campus where they would begin the process of designing their machines.

“This is going to be fucking awesome!” Qianna, who had been practicing her cussing assiduously
all weekend, declared. “We’re going to totally kick ass on this project!”

Quinn and Stella, who agreed about the degree of their own awesomeness, squealed and fist bumped each other, but the boys merely looked askance at this new, unfamiliar, boisterous, and cussing Qianna.

The first order of business was to decide what the final objective of their Machine would be. Since they hadn’t been given any limitations by the people in charge of this project, the possibilities were literally endless. So it took them quite a while to decide on this first important aspect of the process. In the end they decided to create a Smoothie Machine where the final action would be to dump out a fully blended fruit smoothie into a glass.

Next, they dug through the bin full of gear to get a basic idea of what they had to work with. There were various sorts of levers, wheels, balls and even a large metal thing with a spiral track down the middle of it that you could roll a metal ball bearing down. It was like a Pandora’s Box of fun for anyone with an inventor’s soul. Of course, this particular group wasn’t satisfied with the items they’d been given to start with and immediately started planning a much more elaborate creation.

The planning session lasted through lunch and well into the afternoon. They were all thankful they had Qianna there with her artistic skills - she was able to draw most of their ideas in a way that let them work out their design concepts on paper so they wouldn’t waste too much time on trial and error later. When it became clear that they just didn’t have nearly enough materials to do what they wanted, they began to research ways to expand their project. The guide that was assigned to their group advised that they were welcome to use the campus woodshop if they wanted to build structures with any of the scrap wood on hand. Chase and Eric seemed to like that idea, but the girls thought that was too mundane. As an alternative, Stella suggested building whatever structures they wanted using Lego blocks. That idea mushroomed into a theme in and of itself, and before they knew it, they were planning out Lego carts and towers and ramps and . . . They texted their adviser and got permission to access the robotics lab, which already contained bins and bins of legos, and which they could use in whatever way they chose. But, since they also wanted to make their creation personal in some way, they each agreed to contribute one personal item which would be used in the structure. The end result was going to be EPIC!

They ended up working like maniacs all week to bring their grandiose idea to fruition. It took a lot of revisions and adjustments to get a final working version, but the process itself was so much fun that nobody complained too much. The most time consuming aspect of all was building the large Lego platforms, towers and ramps that were going to support the whole thing. The end product though was both colorful and creative and by late Thursday night they were all satisfied with what they’d accomplished.

Despite their preoccupation with the week’s project, the girls didn’t let up on their personal plans. They continued to work at educating each other on the things they’d need to effectuate their Twin
Swap at the end of the summer. To get used to the idea of being someone else, they took to dressing in each other’s clothing and carrying each other’s bags. Qianna also began wearing shoes with heels almost all the time, trying to accustom herself to the height difference.

One afternoon, when they were browsing through the offerings in the campus bookstore, hoping to find more stuff that they could incorporate into their Smoothie Machine, they decided to purchase matching Mines’ beanie caps which would hide their biggest difference - their hair. They quickly found that, when they were seated, wearing their identical hats and the other girl’s clothing, they were frequently able to trick even their friends and acquaintances. When they finally explained their odd behavior to some of their closer companions, it all became a bit of a game for folks to try and guess which of the twins they were talking to. As the week progressed, they became more and more proficient at pretending to be each other, and were able to deceive even their closest friends. It was a good sign for their end goal.

“Okay, I give up,” Stella announced on Friday morning when she entered the auditorium where they were working to assemble the final product before that afternoon’s judging and saw two identical beanied girls sitting side by side on the floor. “I’m just going to call you BOTH ‘Q’ from now on and not bother trying to figure out who’s who.”

“Fucking excellent!” Qianna crowed, doing her best Cussing-Quinne imitation. “Now, if we can only manage to be as convincing when we see our fathers.”

But their fathers and everything else were soon forgotten as the team dove into the business of getting their machine ready. It was a scramble to finish on time, and they were still tweaking the setup right till the very last minute. But when the bell rang, indicating it was time to start, they knew they were as ready as they were going to get. The groups drew lots to see what order they’d be going in and then all they could do was wait while they watched the competition unfold.

The Q Team - as they called themselves - was the sixth group to demonstrate their Machine. They used Qianna’s phone as their starting mechanism. It was propped up on the very edge of an upturned and slightly tilted drinking glass and set to vibrate. When anyone called Qianna’s phone, it would start to shake atop the slippery surface, eventually falling into a netted hammock, and the added weight would pull a string, attached to a lever, that would set off the ensuing chain reaction for the rest of the creation. A series of wheels and levers and other actions eventually led to a ramp where a heavy bowling ball (borrowed from one of the unit advisors) rolled down a ramp into a lever that caused a wheel to turn. Attached the the wheel was a mannequin's leg (borrowed from the performing arts department) wearing one of Quinne’s soccer cleats. The cleat spun around, kicking into Chase’s soccer ball, which went flying into a net. The added weight of the net caused it to drop, pulling a string that lifted a block that was holding another ball in place. When that ball spun down the spiral cage holding it, it rolled over the switch on a power strip, turning on the power to Stella’s blow dryer, which blew into the sail attached to a small Lego car. The Lego car zoomed down a track into another net that operated a series of levers that eventually turned on the blender. When the net dropped far enough it also triggered a secondary chain of events that caused a Lego train to roll past the top of the blender, dumping out fruit and protein powder as it passed.
The train ended up by knocking against a wheel equipped with scoops that spun through a vat of milk, scooping it out and emptying into the blender. Eventually the blender lid, which was nailed to a 2x4 weighted down with sandbags, dropped on top of the blender to seal it closed. At the same time, one of the sandbags hit a lever that activated the switch to start the blender mixing. Simultaneously, a candle was lit by another mechanism, and the flame slowly burned through a string which was holding up a stick supporting a pile of books. The books propped up Eric’s skateboard, which was the surface the blender was sitting atop. When the string burned and broke, the stick fell and the skateboard rolled down a ramp, the lid still attached to the 2x4 was pulled off, and the whole thing ended up tipping over into a large plastic drinking glass, filling the glass with a delicious smoothie concoction. Qianna proudly picked up the cup at the end and handed it off to the judge for his enjoyment.

When the process had run its course, the entire auditorium full of people cheered. It was a complete success and clearly the hand’s down winner of the week’s competition. The girls’ group erupted into screeches and screams of triumph as they jumped up and down in a massive group hug. Several members of the staff, including the Dean of the engineering school, came up to congratulate them. Meanwhile all the other groups grumbled with disappointment at the realization they were destined to lose this week’s competition.

There was a huge pizza party to celebrate after the competition was concluded, with the winning group sitting in positions of state at the head table. All five of them were ecstatic over the praise they were getting. When it was all over, though, they still had the task of disassembling their creations and carting all the stuff back to where it belonged - a dubious ending to their otherwise stellar night.

Just as they were getting the last of the Legos put into the correct bins, Chase came up behind Qianna and tapped her shoulder. “Hey, QiQi,” he said shyly. “I was wondering if, maybe, you’d like to stop off and get something that ISN’T coffee with me on the way back to the dorms.”

Qianna looked up at the taller boy and smiled. She really did like Chase. He was smart and funny, not to mention quite handsome. But then she remembered how upset her sister had been when she’d suddenly gone off with him before; Quinne was more important to her than any boy. If only there were a way to have both?

Quinne herself approached right then, loading a full bin of equipment onto one of the dollys they were going to use to get all the stuff back to the dorm. “Hey, guys. Looks like we’re ready to go. Pick a stack of stuff and let’s head out.”

With a nod to her sister, Qianna turned back to answer Chase. “How about we help the others get this stuff back to the dorm first and then I’ll change real quick and meet you down in the lounge and we can go do something then?” she offered in compromise.
“Sweet,” Chase agreed, and then took up one end of the extra bin that didn’t fit on the dolly while Eric hoisted the other.

With everyone helping it didn’t take too long to get everything put away where it belonged and then they all headed up to their individual rooms. As soon as they had some privacy, Qianna broached the topic of her not-coffee date with Chase. She made sure to tell her sister that she wasn’t abandoning her and that if Quinne really objected she would cancel with Chase, but that she did, kinda, like him and would really, really, really like to go out with him for coffee and . . .

“Stop, QiQi,” Quinne ordered. “It’s okay if you’re into him. I’m over being jealous. Promise. But . . .”

“But what?” Qianna asked with trepidation.

“Well, if you want to really test out how well we’ll do at our Twin Swap Plan, we could start trying it out now with Chase.”

“Okaaaayyyyy . . .”

“Don’t sound so worried, Sis,” Quinne laughed at the way Qianna had scrunched her face up causing worry lines to mar her forehead. “I promise I won’t screw things up for you. I’ll be the perfect little QiQi. I won’t even curse at him once.”

“If he finds out, he’s going to be so pissed at me.”

“He won’t find out. And if he does, I’ll take all the blame. I’ll tell him it was all my idea and I forced you into it. I really don’t think he’ll catch us, though. We totally have this thing down.”

After another five minutes of ardent persuasion, Qianna reluctantly capitulated. Qianna helped Quinne get dressed, insisting that the tomboy put on a dress since that was more ‘QiQi-ish’. They scrambled to find something that would still work with the beanie hat that would hide Quinne’s hair but eventually came up with a denim skirt and dark-colored, layered shirt look that sort of pulled it off. When Quinne thought she was ready, Qianna made her stand still and did one last scan to make sure everything passed examination.
“Wait!” she exclaimed when she saw one item that didn’t fit. “Trade phones,” she ordered, offering up her phone in its sparkly gold case in exchange for the sturdy black otterbox-cased phone of her sister. “There. Now you’re perfect.”

“Thanks, Sis!” Quinne smiled - trying to make her grin as big as one of Qianna’s best smiles - and tucked a stray lock of auburn under the edge of the beanie so it wouldn’t give her away.

“Go. But please be nice to him,” Qianna pleaded. “I kinda DO like him a little bit.”

“I’ll be all sugar and spice nice, Sis. Trust me.” She leaned in and gave her sister a peck on the cheek before waltzing out the door on the way to meet Chase for Qianna’s date.

“Famous last words . . .” Qianna mumbled as soon as her sister was gone.

Then she flung herself down on the bed, nibbling with worry at her thumbnail as she thought about everything that might go wrong and wondering how much Chase would hate her if they did get caught. She hadn’t fallen too far into her cauldron of concern, though, before she was distracted by Quinne’s phone ringing. The caller ID showed a handsome picture of Brian, disclosing exactly who was trying to reach her sister. At first she wasn’t going to answer the call - she’d just let it go to voicemail and Quinne could return it later - but then she thought again. If Quinne was going to play her for the evening, she might as well do the same.

So, before she could chicken out, she pressed the ‘accept’ button and burbled a Quinne-like, “Hey, Pops. What’s up?”

“Hey, Spark! Just calling to check in. I haven’t heard from you all week. Wanted to make sure you hadn’t managed to work out the formula to transport yourself to an alternate dimension and got stuck over there or something,” Brian replied with a deep baritone chuckle at his own witty answer.

“Not yet, Pops. But if that cold fusion experiment we’ve got scheduled for next week goes astray you never know.” Qianna laughed as she played along with the joke. “Sorry I didn’t call, but you should see the Rube Goldberg Machine we created this week for the Engineering unit. We totally kicked ass. Hang on a sec and I’ll send you the video . . .” She tapped at Quinne’s phone till she found the video of their final, competition-winning run, and quickly texted it to Brian. “There. It was so fucking amazing. The Dean of the Engineering Department even came up to us afterwards and offered to write letters of recommendation for any of our team if we ever want to go to School of Mines.”
“Way to show the rest of them how it’s done, Spark!” Brian sounded impressed and she could tell that he was watching the video in the background. “Let me guess, the soccer kick was your idea?”

“Of course!” Qianna admitted. “Don’t you recognize the cleats?”

“Shit! That thing is pretty fucking elaborate. No wonder you were AWOL all week. Well done, Spark.”

“Thanks, Pops. It was a team effort though. We all busted our asses to get it done on time. Well, except for Eric. Eric is a total slacker and annoys the hell out of me. I think the only reason he’s here is to fulfill his parents’ overachievement-by-proxy fantasies. I won’t be teaming up with him on any future projects though,” Qianna explained. “Thankfully, there aren’t too many like Eric at this camp. Most of us are really enjoying ourselves and want to be here.”

“There’s always one. At least you know who it is and can avoid him now,” Brian summed up. “So, what’s left on your agenda? How many more months is this camp gonna last anyway?”

“We only have three and a half more weeks, Pops. One more week of Engineering, then Environmental Science, and a week of Individual Study, plus an end of summer wrap up and awards thingy,” Qianna explained to ‘her’ father. “You know, I’m really enjoying this summer and all, but can’t wait to see you! How’s everyone back home?”

“Same old, same old,” Brian answered with a tinge of disgust. “Mostly everyone’s been busy with their own summer plans. Except for Lindsey, who’s being a real pain lately - last week she changed her mind about Gus living on campus his first year at PIFA. She’s trying to insist that he live at home and commute. I tried to talk her down but she’s being all overprotective and bitchy about it. I don’t see what she’s worried about; She lived on campus the first two years we were at Pitts together and we survived despite all the shit we got up to.”

“Maybe that’s why she’s worried,” Qianna suggested. “She’s thinking Gus will be just as crazy as she was? Or worse, as wild as you?”

“I think you hit the nail on the head there, Spark,” Brian laughed. “Gus is way more level-headed than either of us were at that age, though. Oh well, if I can’t talk her down, I’ll just go over her head and sick Debbie on her. That should at least distract her long enough for Gus to make it to safety.” They both broke out laughing at the image that statement brought to mind. “Well, I should let you go so you can get back to your science shit. Fuck knows I wouldn’t want to interrupt your plans to invent the first flying car or anything.”
“Thanks, Pops. I’ll get right on that.”

“Miss you kiddo.”

“Same. See you in three and a half weeks, Pops. Love you.”

“Ditto, Kiddo. Later!”

Qianna tapped the icon to end the call and then let out a happy squeal! “I did it! I did it! He totally bought that I was Quinne. I can’t wait to get to The Pitts and see if it works on everyone else!”

And she was still beaming, full of self-satisfaction, when her roommate came waltzing in a half hour later.

“How’d it go?” Qianna demanded before Quinne had even shut the door behind her.

“Meh,” was the lukewarm response from Quinne. “I almost messed up right at the beginning when I forgot you don’t like coffee and actually ordered a latte. I had to think quick and make an excuse that I was trying to get used to the taste. I don’t think he realized I wasn’t you, but I had a tough time thinking of topics you’d want to talk about so we didn’t really say a lot. I think he was just as bored as I was by the end.”

“Oh . . . That sucks. He’ll probably never ask me out again.”

“Well, then, YOU should ask him. And, if he’s still reluctant, just kiss him and I’m sure he’ll be putty in your hands,” Quinne teased as she pulled off her beanie disguise and shimmied out of Qianna’s skirt before pulling on a pair of shorts in its place.

“I couldn’t,” Qianna insisted. “And I wouldn’t know how to ask a guy out anyway.”

“Well, if it helps we could double,” Quinne offered. “I’ve been thinking about asking out that girl who was on the Rocket Launch Machine team - Christa. I’ve caught her looking at me a couple of
times so I figure she might be interested. We’ve just been too busy so far to get around to me finding out for sure.”

“Wow! I mean, you didn’t tell me you were queer. Shouldn’t that be something important that you’d put on the spreadsheet?”

Quinne just shrugged. “I don’t know what I am yet. Pops said there’s no timeline so I don’t have to decide until I decide. I’m really not into labels anyway, so I’m just going to stay open and take whatever love comes my way for the time being. Besides, most of the guys here are totally immature geeks, so there’s no way I’d be interested in any of THEM. And Christa’s the hottest chick here - besides you and me, of course.”

“Of course,” Qianna laughed at her wild sister’s nonchalance. “Then we’ll do it. As long as I know you have my back, I think I could do anything.”

“Ditto, Sis.”

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World’s Largest Rube Goldberg Machine.

Chapter End Notes

10/15/18 - I made my first Rube Goldberg Machine when I was in sixth grade and, yes, I tried to create a ‘Milkshake Machine’. My effort was not as successful as the girls’ machine will be, of course. LOL! If you want to check out what a professionally designed Rube Goldberg Machine looks like, there’s a fun link for you at the end of the chapter. Thanks to Sid401k on AO3 for the suggestion about ‘Eric’ being a slacker. ;-) So, we only have a short three weeks of camp and then the girls will be putting their Twin Swap to the test. Cross your fingers. TAG
“It’s here! It’s here!” Quinne hollered as she came bursting through the doors of the cafeteria, almost toppling over a chair that got in her way as she rushed over to where her sister was sitting. She was carrying her ever-present tablet in her hand, waving it in the air in what Qianna thought was a rather dangerous fashion. Luckily she didn’t drop it as she sprinted the last few meters and slid into the chair next to her sister. But it all happened so fast that Qianna didn’t know what it was she was supposed to be looking at when Quinne shoved the tablet in her face.

“The DNA test results are back already. I just saw the email,” Quinne explained her exuberance. “Quick. Look at your email - I bet you got yours today as well. HURRY!”

It hadn’t yet been a full six weeks since they’d sent in their vials full of spit, so Qianna hadn’t expected to see any results until the following week at the earliest. As she opened up her email app on her phone, she was almost as excited as her sister to think that they might finally have their answers. And, yes, there it was - the email from the DNA analysis company they’d chosen. One click and they would each know for sure.

“I don’t know if I’m excited or scared to death,” Quinne stated, voicing the same sentiment they were both feeling. “I mean, I’m ninety-nine percent sure we’re related, but what if we did the test wrong before . . .”

“Well, you won’t know till you open the emails,” Stella, who was sitting across the table from them prodded. “Go on already, I’m dying to see what you guys find out.”

Both girls looked at each other, smiled, and then simultaneously clicked on the links provided in their respective emails. The links opened up to each girl’s account where they had to type in their personal passwords before the actual results were displayed. The output, even though it was nicely displayed and well laid out, was voluminous. They had to click through several different pages to get to what they really wanted to see. They only briefly scanned through all the info on their ethnicity make up - which they expected would vary since they had different fathers - and didn’t bother to even look at the section about some 5th Great Grandfather they had in common. What they wanted to delve into more than anything was the section that listed any and all DNA matches they might have.

When they opened up the ‘DNA Matches’ section there was a long list of matches and possible
matches listed. Of course the lists were limited to others who had already used the same ancestry service so they weren’t complete by any means. But there WERE some matches that came up, causing the girls to almost vibrate with anticipation as they read through the analyses.

The main match that came up at the very top of the chart was the link to each other, which reinforced what they knew from the tests they’d already done. The analysis said that there was ‘Extremely High’ confidence that they were related - which was as close to a sure thing as the service offered. But that was more than good enough for the twins. For all intents and purposes this was proof positive that they were, indeed, sisters.

As neither of their fathers had ever used the service, there were no matches listed to them, and unfortunately there wasn’t a listing to a potential mother either. However, there WERE several matches to people listed as ‘1st-2nd Cousins’. And when they clicked through the additional information provided on those matches, at least two of them seemed to be matches from their mother’s side of the equation.

“YES! I knew we’d find someone,” Stella bruited as she read over Quinne’s shoulder. “Now all you have to do is email one of these two and ask if they know your mom or how to contact her.”

“You are a genius, Stella. Thank you for coming up with this idea,” Qianna complimented their friend, adding a huge smile in thanks. “How about you contact that ‘Devon’ guy and I’ll email the woman here, ‘Malina’.”

“Okay,” Quinne agreed and then cautioned her sister before she could start typing. “Remember not to give away too much personal information - at least not at first. We don’t need to be telling strangers on the internet everything about us, especially that we’re still kids. I think I’m just going to explain in very vague terms that we’re trying to locate our mother and leave it at that. If we get responses from these guys, and they seem legit, we can give them more info.”

“Good idea,” Qianna echoed, and typed out a similarly ambiguous query email.

“Sent!” Quinne declared as she tapped at the screen of her tablet to send the missive on its way. “Now we just have to wait . . . Again.”

“It sucks, but we’re at least a little closer to finding an answer, which is all we can hope for at this point, right?” Qianna, ever the optimist, asserted, while she continued to scan through the rest of the results that had come up on her test. “Hey, look at this. It looks like my dad’s sister is on here - this match is listed as close family and she goes by the name ‘MollT’. Small world, huh?”

“You should contact her,” Stella suggested. “If she’s still a homophobic bitch you’ll know soon enough, but there’s always the chance she’s changed. You said your dad hasn’t talked to her since he was, like, in high school or something. Right? That’s a long time and maybe she’d be willing to renew contact. At least that way you’d have more family, which was part of why you were doing this, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know. If she really wanted to get in touch with dad or me, she could have done it ages ago through my Grandma Jen. Grandma still sees her and talks to her all the time. What if she’s mean or something?”

“Then you block her ass and move on,” Quinne advised. “But you don’t know that she’ll be mean. She might just be lazy or busy with her own life or not sure how to go about making up with Justin. I’m with Stella on this. Go ahead and contact her and see what happens.”

“Okay. Here goes nothing,” Qianna said as she fired off a quick email to the woman listed as
“Let’s hope I didn’t just open up a huge can of worms.”

They were just getting into looking at the additional matches on Quinne’s father’s side of the family when their research was interrupted by the arrival of Pooh Bear coming by to round up the campers and shuttle them off to the next event in Earth Sciences Week. “Let’s go, Ladies. Those portable desalination kits aren’t going to operate themselves,” she warned, prompting them to jump up and hurry off to the lab with the rest of the group.

“Hey, QiQi!” Stella startled her friend when she came up behind her without warning the following Saturday morning.

“Damn! How’d you know it was me?” Qianna asked, quickly reaching up to make sure no tell-tale blond hair had escaped from under the beanie hat she was wearing that day. “I thought Quinne and I were getting pretty good at the twin thing.”

“You are. You even managed to fool Pooh Bear yesterday. But I finally figured out the secret of how to tell you apart, so I’m immune to your twin powers,” Stella declared with a bit of smugness.

“There’s a secret?”

“What secret?” Quinne demanded as she arrived a moment later and slid into the bench of the picnic table next to her sister where Qianna had been enjoying a bit of sun before the August day got too hot to tolerate. “I love secrets.”

“You won’t love this one,” Qianna announced. “Stell says there’s a secret way to tell us apart even with our hair covered.”

“That’s not good. If she can tell us apart, our father’s will be able to do it too,” Quinne voiced the same fear her twin had worried over. “Okay, give, Stell. What’s giving us away?”

Stella stood there, hands on hips, smirking down at the two ALMOST identical girls, looking very proud of herself. “It’s your ears,” she explained succinctly.

“Our ears?” both Quinne and Qianna said at the exact same time. Both grabbed at their earlobes - the only parts visible beneath the knitted rims of their headwear - at the same time too. And then the answer dawned on the both of them simultaneously. “Shit! Our ears!” They said in tandem.

“Yep. Quinne’s ears are pierced and yours aren’t, QiQi,” Stella announced definitively.

“My dad said I had to wait till I was fourteen to get them pierced,” Qianna offered. “He didn’t want to deal with me having to take care of the piercings and losing earrings and stuff.”

“That’s stupid,” Quinne laughed. “It’s not like getting a puppy or anything. Once you get them pierced they don’t take any work. You clean ‘em with peroxide for the first two weeks and you’re good. Your dad is such a drama queen sometimes, QiQi.”

“Tell me about it. But it wasn’t worth fighting him over,” Qianna explained, shaking her head. “So what are we gonna do about it? It’d be a dead giveaway - you can always tell my dad you got yours pierced over the summer, but I can’t pretend to be you and claim that somehow, miraculously, the piercings closed up completely in just a couple months.”

“Simple. We’re just going to have to get yours pierced,” Quinne asserted.
“How? Don’t the piercing places require you to have a parent along if you’re underage?”

“I saw in a movie once where this boy pierced his by himself using a needle,” Stella suggested. “I’m sure it wouldn’t be that hard. It might hurt though.”

Qianna looked worried at the mention of potential pain.

“We don’t have to do this,” Quinne offered. “You can still change your mind. We could just come clean to our dads, demand that they fess up, and that they figure out a way for us to continue seeing each other.”

“But what if they refuse? What if they’re still so angry at each other because of whatever broke them up that they forbid us from having ANY contact at all. I’d never get to meet Gus or Auntie Em or any of the rest of them.”

“They can’t keep us apart forever, QiQi.”

“Yeah, only till we’re eighteen, which is, like, an eon from now, Q,” an overly dramatic Qianna moaned. “No! Fuck it! I won’t give up on everything we’ve planned just because of a little pain. My one chance to get to Pittsburgh is worth the sacrifice of my ears. Let’s do this.”

“Damn, Girl! You sure you want to be an Architect instead of an actress?” Quinne asked, channeling her inner Emmett. “Cuz you got the drama thing DOWN, Sweetie!”

And they all broke out giggling - even Qianna, despite her embarrassed blushes - while Stella went online and looked up what supplies they’d need to effectuate this last part of their physical transformation.

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“Is it getting any better yet?” Quinne asked sympathetically as she carefully settled on the couch next to her sister.

Qianna shrugged noncommittally. “Did it hurt this much when you got your ears pierced, Q?”

“I don’t remember. I was only eight at the time. All I recall was that my Auntie Em had promised me ice cream if I didn’t cry, and I was determined not to let anything get between me and that chocolate fudge,” Quinne explained, distracting the injured girl long enough to get a smile out of her. “For what it’s worth, I think those faux diamond studs we picked out are really pretty on you.”

“Thanks, but I think they just accentuate how red and bruised my earlobes look,” she whinged, making the saddest face Quinne had ever seen.

She didn’t have to think of something else to say to try and cheer Qianna up, though, because a welcome distraction arrived in the form of a phone call lighting up the screen of Qianna’s phone.

“It’s my dad,” Qianna said after a quick glance at the caller ID. “You take it, Q. I’m not in the mood.”

Quinne was happy to take the call, thus avoiding further discussion about her sister’s regrets over letting her friends pierce her ears. “Hey, Dad! How’s it going?” she answered the call.

“Not bad. Well, except that Alex wants to go with the surf and turf plate for the rehearsal dinner rather than the salmon, and the chef was a little ticked off at yet another change in the menu. I think I worked it out with him, though,” Justin explained with a deep sigh.
“Daaaadddd,” Quinne remonstrated, forgetting for a moment that she was supposed to be the quiescent Qianna. “This is getting ridiculous. Alex needs to be given a time out - he keeps saying he doesn’t want to be involved in the planning but then he objects to everything you and I decide. It’s really past time you put your foot down and tell him there won’t be any more changes and if he doesn’t like it he can pound sand. I don’t know about you, but I’m tired of him acting like a prissy bitch.”

“Qianna! Language, please!” Justin immediately corrected.

“Sorry, Dad. He just makes me so angry,” she apologized and then ventured into an attempt to address the real problem. “Are you really sure this whole marriage thing is a good idea? Alex doesn’t seem like he’s going to be the easiest person to live with if he can’t even be agreeable about the wedding.”

“Honey, don’t get in the middle of it, please,” Justin admonished gently. “My relationship with Alex is up to me and him. I’m not backing out of a commitment I made just because of a few hiccups in the wedding planning.”

“But he’s not making you happy, Dad. And it’s not just a few hiccups; he hasn’t liked ANYTHING we’ve planned from day one. He’s causing you a lot of headaches and costing you a lot of money. He never seems satisfied with anything, no matter how much you defer to his whims,” Quinne continued to protest. “Tell me, how is this supposed to work out in the long run? Huh?

Because if simply trying to plan a wedding together is this much of a problem, what’s it going to be like when real life hits? How is constantly catering to Alex at every turn going to work for YOU, Dad?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the phone line while Justin seemed to think - really think - about what Quinne had said. She waited as patiently as she could, hoping that maybe she’d finally got through to the man. But, in the end, all Justin did was sigh unhappily and clear his throat.

“It’ll be okay, Peanut. But I WILL talk to Alex and tell him that there can’t be any more last minute changes from here on out, okay?” Justin offered in compromise.

“I guess. I just want you to be happy and I’m worried about you, Dad.”

“Thank you, Honey, but you don’t need to worry about me. I’m the parent here and I’m the one who’s supposed to be doing all the worrying,” he insisted. “Although, from what I hear, it doesn’t seem like I need to worry about you. It sounds like you’re doing great.”

“I am,” Quinne agreed. “But who have you been talking to other than me?”

“Well, I’m really not supposed to say anything, but since I already gave it away, I guess . . . I got an email today from the folks at the camp. They wanted the parents of students who will be receiving special awards to make sure they attend the end of summer celebration. I’m so proud of you, Honey”

“Awards Ceremony? When is this ceremony supposed to happen?” Quinne asked with a sinking feeling.

“It's the last day of camp, of course. Which is great because, not only will I get to watch you and the others get your awards, but I'll get to see you a day earlier than planned. I've really missed you, Peanut, even if we have been chatting almost daily about the wedding plans. But now I only have
to wait another week and a half before I'll get to see you again.”

“You know, it's okay with me if you don't come to the awards thing. I'm sure it's not going to be that big a deal. It's not worth changing you plans over,” Quinne tried to dissuade Justin.

“Nonsense,” he immediately brushed off her attempt to deter his attendance. “I WANT to be there for you, Honey. I’ve already changed my flight and booked a hotel for the extra night. I just can't WAIT to see what amazing things you guys have been up to all summer. And this way I'll have a chance to meet some of your friends - maybe even that roommate you keep talking about - before we all have to jet off to our real lives again the next day.”

“Uh . . . Great . . . Um, Dad, I've got to go.”

“Okay, Sweetheart. I'll talk to you later. Love you, Hon.”

“Ditto, Dad. Bye!” Quinne rushed her own goodbyes and then turned towards her sister with a look of panic. “We've got a problem. A HUGE problem!”

“What?” Qianna looked up from the sketchpad she'd been doodling in, not having paid any attention to her sister’s conversation.

“Let me just check something real quick and then I’ll explain . . .”

Quinne logged into her own chat using Qianna’s phone and quickly typed out a message. She impatiently waited for about thirty seconds, her eyes never leaving the screen. When the display lit up with a return message, Quinne groaned aloud. Then she turned the phone around so Qianna could read the messages that had been exchanged.

Quinne: Hey, Pops! In case you got an email from the camp about some stupid Awards Ceremony thing, I just want you to know that it’s totally bogus and you don’t really need to be here for it. I’ll be happy to see you the next day when you pick me up to get the hell out of here.

Brian: Bullshit! We both know I love watching my daughter get awards. It’s almost as good as getting awards myself. I’ve already changed my flights to be there. Can’t wait to see all those other campers and their parents gushing over how smart you are. See you a week from Wednesday!

“Awards Ceremony?” Qianna asked, feeling like she was missing something.

“Yeah. And guess what, both your dad and my pops are planning to be here for it,” Quinne elaborated.

“Together?”

“Yep.”

“Shit!”

“Exactly!”

“What are we going to do? If they see each other here . . .”

“Or even just see the two of us together . . .”

“It’ll ruin all our plans!” Qianna moaned. “Damn it! Who’s stupid idea was this Awards thingy anyway?”
“I think we’re the victims of our own excellence - your dad said that it was only the parents of the kids winning awards that got the email telling them to come earlier,” Quinne explained. “Since both our father’s got the email, it seems we both did a little too good at our projects this summer.”

“Well that’s totally bullshit! See if I ever try to do a good job again,” Qianna threatened, only half teasing. “But I really wanted to go to Pittsburgh. I want to meet your Pops and Gus and Grandma Debbie and everyone else. And Emmett and I just finished planning our Saturday evening spa night and everything. I even went through with letting you and Stella mangle my earlobes - which my Dad is going to kill me for when he finds out - all for nothing? It’s just not fair. Why is the stupid camp ruining EVERYTHING?”

“To be honest, I was kinda looking forward to meeting your dad, too. He’s so sweet. He really needs someone there with him to stand up to The Hairy Yeti,” Quinne commiserated with her sister.

“Hey, Ladies, why so glum?” Stella asked a few minutes later as she sauntered up to where the twins were sitting looking totally dejected. “Your ears can’t be hurting that much, QiQi.”

“It’s not my ears; it’s my LIFE! Our whole plan has been totally torpedoed!” Quinne announced with a heavy sigh.


“Our dads are both coming a day early for some idiotic Awards Ceremony the camp is doing,” Qianna explained. “Apparently we’re BOTH getting awards. And, once our dads see us together - and see each other - there’s no way our plan to switch places will work. They’d be on alert for the wrong daughter and will probably whisk us away, back to our boring old lives a whole continent apart, as soon as the damn awards are handed out.”

“And that’s assuming they would even stay for the Awards Ceremony at all,” Quinne cautioned. “We still have no idea what broke them up or why they split us up, so there’s no saying how they’ll react when they see each other again. What if they’re still so angry that they just want to leave right then and there? What if they won’t even let us say goodbye? This could be a total disaster.”

“So much for us trying to figure out what happened with our mother or trying to plan a way to stay in contact,” Qianna’s crestfallen tone echoed her sister’s hopelessness.

At first Stella seemed almost as dispirited as the the girls, but the longer she listened to their recitation of all the supposed tragedies that were about to befall them, the more incensed and determined she got. Maybe it helped that she was a little more removed from the situation than the twins. Or maybe she was even more stubborn than her friends. But instead of falling victim to a sense of despair, Stella ended up even more determined.

“Come on, guys! We didn’t work this hard all summer turning you two into each other to give up now, did we? There’s got to be a way to still work this. Right?” Both Qianna and Quinne looked at Stella like she was insane, but that only made her more resolute. “You’re not going to just give up, are you? I know there’s got to be a way to salvage your plan. We can figure it out. After all, we’re all brilliant; we just need to approach this as another type of challenge. It’s like . . . It’s like an Engineering Project - ‘How to keep two objects in motion from coming into contact with each other for a specified period of time’. We just need to design a solution and then engineer it to function within the desired parameters. It’s, like, totally doable, guys!” Stella pulled her trusty laptop out of her backpack, cleared some space off the coffee table in front of the couch where the girls were sitting, and then plopped herself down on the carpet so she could start typing. “Okay. The variables here are your dads. We’ll call them Object B and Object J. And the stated goal is to keep
B and J from coming into contact. So, what materials do we have to work with? . . .”

Reluctantly Qianna and Quinne were drawn into Stella’s planning. This wasn’t going to be easy. There were a lot of unknowns. They were going to need to do some serious research if this new plan had any hope of working.

One thing was perfectly clear right from the start, though.

“We’re gonna need a LOT more help,” Quinne determined, to the nods of co-conspirators.

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Chapter End Notes

10/22/18 - This chapter ended up being mostly a bridge to what’s coming up next but the good news is that the summer’s almost over and the really fun stuff is almost here. I really love writing the girls, but I’m ready for some Brian and Justin too - how about you guys? Now, I’m going to try and channel some William Shakespeare and his Midsummer Night’s craziness to see if I can’t help the girls keep their dads apart long enough to get this plan to work. Wish me luck. TAG
“Okay Q Squad, the first of the fathers is due to arrive in T-Minus-Forty-Five minutes so let’s review the plan,” Quinne ordered.

She was standing at the front of the twenty-five or so students they’d assembled in the computer lab, which was the only semi-private room big enough to accommodate their secret society. By Quinne’s side was her sister and flanking the girls were their two deputies, Stella and Christa. The kids sitting in the chairs facing them were the selection of camp kids that the girls thought would be the most useful and - hopefully - most discreet. Now all they had to do was do one last review of their plan then deploy their troops and hope for the best.

“Those of you on this half of the room,” Quinne pointed to her left, “are on Team Brian. Christa is going to be your captain. If you have any questions at all, find Christa. You’ve also all been given access to the private TinyChat discussion room we’ve set up for this operation, so if you can’t physically find your Captain, you can communicate directly through that means. Captains have access to each other and to us, so there can be cross-communication as needed. Better make sure your phones are all fully charged now.”

“And those of you on my half of the room,” Qianna continued the briefing, “are on Team Justin. Stella is your Captain for today.”

Quinne, who thought Qianna was smiling too much to be a good leader, took over the briefing again at that point. “You’ve all been given your starting assignments, but keep in mind this is going to be a fluid situation so things might change fast. You have to be on your toes and work together. The main goal - the ONLY goal that matters - it to keep the fathers separated for the entire afternoon. That means no visual contact at all. You are authorized to do whatever it takes to accomplish that mission.”
“Well, within reason, of course,” Qianna spoke up to mitigate her sister’s too-harsh directives. “I’d like to think that actual assault or kidnapping or anything like that won’t be necessary.”

“Excuse me,” Chase, who was sitting on the Team Justin side of the room, raised his hand. “I’m still not completely clear on exactly WHY we have to keep your fathers separated here. I mean, you said that they didn’t get along, but I’m still confused. You two ARE twins, so how is it that your dads don’t know you’re here together?”

“That information is classified,” Stella stepped forward to intercept this question. “All you need to know is that the Qs have a really, really, REALLY good reason for what they’ve asked us to do. Anything else is ‘Need To Know’ only and YOU don’t need to know at this time, Chase.”

“As long as you’re not getting us involved in anything illegal, right?” Max commented from the Team Brian side of the room. When neither of the Qs nor their Captains immediately spoke up to reassure her, Max started to look a little worried. “It’s not, is it?”

“How would keeping two adults separate at a Camp Awards Ceremony be illegal?” Christa interrupted, shooting Max with a withering look. “It IS super important though, and just so you know, if you break your word to keep this project secret or if you fail in your assigned tasks, Quinne and I WILL hack into your social media accounts and post embarrassing pictures of you drooling while asleep or videos of you saying stupid shit. So don’t double cross us. You’ve been warned.”

Quinne leaned over and whispered in her sister’s ear, “have I mentioned how hot that girl is when she gets all butch like that?”

Qianna snorted a laugh against her will and then blushed to the roots of her hair when everyone looked at her. She quickly waved them off while Stella continued outlining the game plan for the day. The plan which seemed impossibly complicated.

“Team Justin, we’ll be up first,” Stella informed them then tapped at her phone to send a picture to the secret group chat. “I just sent you a picture of Qianna’s dad - make sure you know your target! He’s expected to arrive by no later than 11:30am, so be ready.” Stella turned to her team hacker. “Max, what’s the latest on the flight status?”

“The commuter flight down from Denver is still listed as being on time, which means he should be on the ground any minute now, and should soon be on his way to pick up the rental car. Since he’s
a preferred member the car should be waiting and he won’t need to check in or anything. Q2 says Justin never checks a bag if he can avoid it, meaning that there won’t be any additional delay for baggage claim. So, assuming he doesn’t get lost on the drive here from the airport he might actually be arriving a little early,” Max informed the waiting campers.

“You heard her, Team,” Stella recapped. “As soon as we’ve finished here, the vanguard team needs to take up their recon positions at the guest parking lot.” She nodded to Chase and Jonathan who mock-saluted to let their leader know they were ready. “After the target has been intercepted our Q will join him for a little tour around the dorms, which means we should have a pretty easy time of it for the next hour or so. We don’t need to be on high alert until we get word from Team Brian that their target has arrived as well. Then we’ll really need to go into action.”

“Team Brian will be on standby until approximately 12:30pm,” Christa took over the briefing at that point. “Oliver says that Brian’s connecting flight out of JFK was delayed a half hour, so he’ll be cutting it close to even make it to the Awards Ceremony on time.”

“If we could only BE so lucky,” Quinne mumbled, but then smiled an apology to her Captain for the interruption.

“Our Team’s Q will be waiting along with the Brian recon contingent, ready to meet him the minute he arrives,” Christa continued without missing a beat. “The rest of Team Brian will be waiting outside the auditorium prepared for Operation Human Shield. As soon as the recon team gives me notice of target acquisition, I’ll be notifying both teams, so everyone should be online and waiting for word from 12:30 on. Assuming the Brian Target arrives when we think he will, we’re just going to take him straight from the parking lot to the auditorium. Timing at that stage will be critical, so DON’T MESS UP!”

“Don’t forget,” Quinne warned, even though she knew they’d all been briefed on that part of the plan before, “Team Justin will be stationed on the North side of the auditorium bleachers - that’s on the right if you’re facing the bleachers with your back to the stage. Team Justin will already be seated when Team Brian ushers in their target. Team Brian needs to remain on the South side of the auditorium, or to the left side of the bleachers when facing away from the stage. Both teams need to be on full Human Shield Mode from that point on.”

“NO VISUAL CONTACT is the goal. Do whatever it takes,” Qianna repeated. “Quinne and I will do what we can to keep the targets distracted with chatter but we’ll need you guys to provide a more physical barrier just in case the targets’ attention wanders.”

Stella and Christa were both nodding along with the Q-Twins, backing their friends up with the weight of their most imposing glares.
“Max and Oliver already hacked Pooh Bear’s computer, so we’ve got a copy of her agenda and speech. Which means we’re pretty sure of the order of the ceremony. You should have already received copies of the agenda and hopefully memorized it,” Stella took over again. “Hopefully there won’t be any deviations from the written agenda, but if there are, just be ready with your distraction techniques. Team Justin will be up first, ready with their Blockade Action on the fourth Award Announcement, and Team Brian will follow with their Blockade Action on the sixth Award Announcement. This will be the MOST critical moment of the entire plan so anything you have to do to distract and block your target while the other Q gets her award is fair game. Scream, shout, fall down, hell, dump a bottle of water over the target’s head if needed, just make sure that your target doesn’t hear the other Team’s Award being announced or look up at that point. Got it?”

The entire room full of campers nodded and muttered in a synchrony of acknowledgement.

“Great!” Christa continued. “After the awards, the Qs are going to lead their targets in separate directions and hopefully all will be well for the rest of the night, but there should probably be at least a couple of us with each Q at all times - one to maintain a communication link with the other team and the other to remain on emergency lookout. We can spell each other, though, so nobody gets too overwhelmed. Your team will only be fully dismissed when that team’s target leaves campus for the night to head to his respective hotel. Then we can all crash and, hopefully, celebrate.”

“Thank you all, again, for helping us with this,” Qianna piped up as soon as everyone had their marching orders. “I know we haven’t completely explained things to all of you, but it’s hugely important to us both and we just couldn’t do today without each and every one of you. You have no idea how much this means to us.”

“Ditto what my sister just said,” Quinne seconded her twin. “Now, let’s do this thing!”

“Q SQUAD!” Stella and Max yelled together.

The entire room of helpers immediately echoed the cheer with a roof-raising “Q SQUAD!” in response, before breaking into laughter and chatter all around.

“Well, we’re as ready as we’ll ever be, I guess,” Qianna said, speaking for all of them as she looked around at the motley band of conspirators.

“If this actually works, it’ll be a fucking miracle,” Quinne whispered, as she clapped her sister on
Then the two girls pulled their matching School of Mines beanies down low enough to cover their hair, gave each other a final once over to ensure that they looked as identical as possible, and moved off. Quinne and Stella headed towards Team Justin and Qianna went with Christa towards Team Brian. Now it was just up to thorough planning and a little bit of luck to see if this scheme of theirs would have any chance to work.

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“Peanut? Is that you under there?” Justin asked as Quinne approached him, running down the sidewalk to greet him before he’d made it more than ten meters from the parking lot.

“Dad! It’s so good to see you finally!” Quinne stated, overcome despite herself at seeing Justin in person for the first time.

“I missed you too, Sweetheart!” Justin agreed, holding out his arms so his daughter could come in for a hug. “Why did I agree to let you out of my sight for a whole summer?”

“Because you love me and want to encourage my love of all things science?” Quinne offered, hugging him back as hard as she could, all the while winking over Justin’s shoulder to Chase and Jon, the recon team, to thank them for alerting her when Justin had arrived. “Dad, I want to introduce you to a couple of my friends.” She waved the boys over. “This is Chase and this is Jon. Chase is seriously looking at Stanford for college so I’ve been telling him all about the campus and California in general. He told me he’s going to be asking you lots of questions, so be prepared.”

“Nice to meet you both,” Justin nodded to the boys but almost immediately turned back to his ‘daughter’, not that easily distracted. “So, what is this . . . this look . . . you have going here, Honey? It’s ninety degrees out here, is that hat really necessary? And what . . . what did you do to your ears!”

“I had them pierced. Surprise?” Quinne announced. “Look, Dad, I know you said I had to wait till I was fourteen but I was, like, the ONLY girl here without pierced ears and I just didn’t think it was logical for me to have to wait any longer. Please don’t be too mad, okay?”

Justin huffed a deep, paternally judgmental breath, but seemed to capitulate as soon as he blew out
the lungful of air. “Well, if you’re going to cite logic against me, how can I argue?” They both chuckled a little. “I guess I was being a silly making you wait. But I’m still miffed that you didn’t run it by me first.”

“You know I would have talked you into it in the end anyway, so stop pretending to be all fatherly,” Quinne ordered, forgetting for a minute that Qianna wouldn’t have been quite so forceful with her father, but catching herself before he had a chance to comment. “Sorry. I just . . . You’re not actually mad are you?”

“No, Honey. I’m not,” Justin reassured her, then took a step back to give his daughter another look. “There’s something else different though . . . Hmmm . . . I can’t quite put my finger on it but . . .”

Quinne felt like a bug under the microscope of an Entomologist as Justin’s eyes ran all over over from head to toe. She couldn’t help fidgeting a little, wondering if their ruse was over already. She tried to think herself into Qianna’s body, if that were possible, while she waited for ‘her’ father’s final judgment. When he shook his head, brow furrowed in confusion, and a quizzical smile on his lips, she thought the jig was up.

“I think you’ve grown at least a half an inch this summer, Peanut,” he declared approvingly. “And here I thought you were doomed to be a shrimp like your old man, but I think you’re almost taller than me at this point! It looks good on you. Although it makes you seem way too skinny. Haven’t you been eating all summer?”

Quinne breathed a sigh of relief, smiling to herself that Qianna had anticipated her father’s reaction so perfectly. “Trust me, Dad, I haven’t been starving myself or anything. I’ve just been getting a lot of exercise and doing a lot of swimming this summer - it’s been great to have the rec center pool available to us all the time.”

“You finally discovered that a pool is good for something other than sunbathing?” Justin laughed at his daughter. “Sheesh, Peanut, in all the years we’ve lived in places with pools, you’ve never once swum a single lap. Now, THIS, I’ve got to see.”

Quinne nervously bit at her thumbnail, embarrassed at her slip up - of course Qianna wouldn’t have bragged about swimming all summer. The girl seemed almost allergic to exercise. She also wouldn’t have been excited to have such easy access to a pool, after growing up in California where it seemed like a pool was a necessary addition to every single living space - unlike Pittsburgh where swimming entailed a trip to the YMCA and an hour on the bus. Luckily, Quinne’s Q Squad team saw her discomfiture and immediately stepped up to cover for her.

“Hey, Q, didn’t you say you wanted to show your dad around the dorms before the Awards thing
“started?” Chase asked, diverting Justin’s attention right as he was beginning to wonder about ‘his’ daughter’s odd reaction. Chase gestured as if to lead the way down the sidewalk towards the dorm building, which could be seen just down the path. “And maybe, while we walk, I can pick your brain about Stanford, Sir?”

“Great idea, Chase. Thanks for reminding me,” Quinne eagerly took the out she was handed. “Come on, Dad. I want to show you around.”

Luckily, Justin let himself be towed around the dorms and some of the campus for the next hour or so, with Chase and Jon doing their best to keep his attention diverted by questions about California, thus giving Quinne some desperately needed breathing room.

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Meanwhile, Team Brian was getting antsy. 12:30 came and went without a sign of their intended target. Oliver had been checking his phone for updates on the flight every two minutes - the flight hadn’t actually arrived until 12:15 and Brian still had to wait for his bags and pick up his rental car, so it was questionable if he would even make it to the ceremony. Which meant Team Brian didn’t know what to do with themselves. They couldn’t stay in the parking lot waiting for him forever - the camp staff was already trying to herd them into the auditorium with the rest of the group - but then how were they going to know when Brian arrived so they could intercept him and keep him away from Team Justin?

Finally, at ten till, a sleek, dark grey Tesla came screaming around the bend and into the parking lot, gliding to a halt at an angle that took up two parking spaces, and the tall, elegant man unfolded himself from the vehicle. With a sigh of relief, Christa and the bulk of Team Brian scurried away, ready to take up their positions at the doors to the auditorium. Qianna, with her deputies, Max and Trevor, trotted over to welcome the tardy father.

“Shit, it’s about time, Pops,” Qianna welcomed the man with her best Quinne impression. “You almost missed the damn ceremony you insisted you HAD to be here for.”

“You know I prefer to make an entrance,” Brian countered, with his signature smirk, as he bent to hug ‘his’ daughter. “What good is showing up at an event if nobody notices you’re there. This way I get to walk in when everyone’s already seated and they can all get a better look at the magnificence that is ME.”

Qianna shook her head and chuckled. She had been looking forward to meeting this man in person
for a long time and he definitely didn’t disappoint. He was just as arrogant as she’d expected. But in an endearing way, of course. She hugged him back as hard as her arms could squeeze.

“Nice shoes, Spark,” Brian commented, noticing that she was wearing the Prada platform pumps he’d bought her despite her protests. “I’m glad you talked me into the black ones - especially if you’re going to wear them with that fucking awful hat on your head.”

“You’re just jealous because you’re not as hip as me, Pops,” Qianna replied, trying to be as snarky as she knew her sister would have been in the circumstances. “Too bad you refuse to wear hats for fear they’d mess up your precious hair. Luckily the rest of the world doesn’t have to worry about such things.”

“You’re not too old to spank, you know,” Brian teased her right back.

“You guys can argue later, Q,” Christa interjected, grabbing Qianna’s arm and tugging at her. “If we don’t get a move on, you’re gonna miss your award altogether.”

“Fine with me,” Qianna tried one last time. “You wanna just blow this popsicle stand and go get a cup of coffee, Pops?”

“Awards first. Coffee later,” Brian demanded and then turned to lead the way down the path from the parking lot towards the auditorium, with his ‘daughter’ and the camp kids scrambling to catch up to him.

As they neared the auditorium, Qianna was relieved to see her team milling around by the doorways, trying their best to delay the staff who were attempting to get the kids inside so the event could finally get underway. They were already almost five minutes late. As soon as Max, who’d stationed herself right in front of the doors, saw the trio surrounding Brian, she’d texted to Team Justin to be on the ready. Max then stepped up to greet Qianna, thus blocking Brian’s entrance for the few additional seconds it took for Trevor - the biggest kid at the camp, who was not only over six feet despite being only fourteen, but also nearing two hundred pounds - to get into position in front of Brian. Max then hit send on the text she’d already typed, signalling the rest of Q Squad that Operation Human Shield was a go!

Trevor, who was not only a good visual block but also one of the sweetest and smartest kids at the camp, positioned himself directly in front of Brian, walking as slowly as he could so that Qianna and ‘her’ Pops were forced to shorten their steps as they entered the auditorium. Brian found himself having to look down to make sure he wasn’t going to trip over the large boy’s shuffling feet, so he didn’t get much of a look at the auditorium as he entered. If he had been able to look up,
he would have noticed the ‘stage’ set up on the floor of the space to his right, complete with a podium surrounded by chairs for the camp staff and other notables to sit facing the audience, all of whom were assembled in the three sections of bleachers that had been rolled out for this fairly small assembly. There was even a large empty area waiting for Brian’s group in the center of the first group of bleachers, right up front, which Trevor and Christa led their group towards.

Almost everyone in the small assembly stopped what they were doing to watch the late arrival. Everyone, that was, except for the group on the farthest bleachers surrounding Team Justin. Justin was circled by a group of about ten students, most of whom took that moment to stand en masse, providing a human wall between their father and the arriving group. The chatter at that end of the bleachers also ramped up right then, creating a susurrous of noise that cocooned Justin and Quinne, preventing them from even noticing the disturbance of the group that noisily seated themselves at the opposite end of the bleachers. Once Brian and Qianna were seated, with their human shield in the form of Trevor taking perch to Brian’s left and providing a fleshy barrier between the two men, Team Justin again assumed their own seats. Chase and Jon, who were both fairly tall for their ages, if not quite as bulky as Trevor, served as the counterpart human screen by taking up seats on Justin’s right.

And so the scene was set, with the two men seated only a dozen meters apart but shielded almost completely from each other, and their respective Teams diligently monitoring the situation to make sure they remained oblivious.

As soon as the noise died down, Pooh Bear stepped up to the podium and started her speech. Stella monitored the agenda of the ceremony, making sure that everything was following the plan, so they would be ready. There were little speeches by some of the other staff and the professors running things, thanking the parents for attending and commending the kids for their collective brilliance. Then the awards themselves began. The camp was offering awards for the best students in each of the units that they’d covered that summer. The individual awards were presented by the professors or grad students that had run those units, each of whom offered a short explanation as to why they chose their awardee and giving praise to the students selected. There was a large video screen set up behind the podium where pictures of all the summer’s activities were displayed. That was a bit of a surprise to the Q Squad, and not a happy one either, as the girls figured prominently in a lot of the pictures.

“Distraction Mode!” Stella frantically texted to the entire Squad. “Try to keep the dads from looking at the pics too closely!”

Twenty-five phones simultaneously pinged and started to vibrate. Twenty-five students looked down at their phones. Then twenty-five campers started to chatter and goof off in a valiant attempt to distract their two targets from looking up at the lovely picture of the two Q’s proudly standing next to their winning robot from that first week at camp.
“So, Mr. Taylor, tell me about Stanford,” Chase asked, right as the video screen lit up. “I really want to go there but my parents are worried about it being so far away. I’ve heard it’s really a nice campus though . . .”

Justin tried to politely brush off the poorly timed question, and leaned over so he see around Jon’s tall shoulders. Max unhelpfully pushed Jon to the left so Justin’s view was still blocked. At the same time Quinne leaned across Justin’s body, pretending to pick up an imaginary something that had dropped at Chase’s feet, handing the pretend item off to Chase just as the picture of the twins was replaced by another of the second place team, whose leader was the recipient of that unit’s award.

Meanwhile, over on the Team Brian side, Christa quickly brought up the picture of her team’s robot on her phone and shoved the device in front of Brian’s face, complaining about how she’d though her team’s bot was better designed overall than the one that the award winner’s team had created. Qianna took the opportunity to debate the matter with Christa, providing enough of a distraction to keep Brian from looking up again until after the kid who was getting that award, Ling Tran, was already sauntering up to the podium to accept his lucite trophy.

And so it continued through the awards for the Geology Unit and the Genetics Unit. Every time the video screen would light up with pictures that might show either of the girls, Brian and Justin would be immediately engaged by one or more of the students surrounding them, usurping all their attention until the coast was again clear. Justin was trying to politely get the kids around him to settle down, admonishing them for keeping the rest of the students - not to mention himself - from being able to pay attention when their friends were getting awards. Brian, on the other hand, was neither as patient nor as politic and was getting noticeably annoyed by his Team’s distractions.

“What the hell is with your friends, Q?” Brian asked, not bothering to modulate his voice so that his comments would be kept between the two of them. “Did they feed you guys too much sugar at breakfast or something? Why can’t you all sit still and let me hear about all the crap I paid for you to learn about? I didn’t shell out hundreds of dollars of good money to listen to your friends complain about how THEIR robots didn’t work or shove their phones in my faces, Spark.”

Unfortunately, Brian’s last comment was growled loudly enough that it almost downed out the smattering of polite applause that accompanied the announcement of Tobin Jeffries winning the Genetics award. Justin’s head immediately popped up from amid his protective circle of campers as he looked around him, as if searching for the speaker. Even though he hadn’t heard that particular voice for more than a decade, it was still familiar enough that it caught his attention despite the cacophony of noise around him. In response, at least five of the students sitting to Justin’s right, stood up, creating a virtual wall with their bodies as they over-exuberantly clapped and cheered on Tobin, a boy who was pleasantly surprised to discover he was so admired by the others at the camp. When Justin didn’t seem to find whatever or whomever he was looking for though, he let ‘his’ daughter pull him aside so she could whisper some story about how she thought Tobin was a bit of a bossy cow who really didn’t deserve the award, especially since he’d copied most of his final Epigenetics presentation off Stella.
And then it was crunch time for the Q Squad, who was already on notice that the next award was for one of the Qs. As Pooh Bear started to announce the Coding Unit award, the video screen showed a picture of the smiling Quinne, sitting in the Computer Lab with at least five other laptops and tablets cabled together around her, her headphones on as she DJ’ed a set using the Music Library compilation she’d created via a Python Database she’d created. Brian smugly leaned over to bump shoulders with ‘his’ daughter, the computer genius. The camp staff actually broadcast a brief music sampling that their coding group had recorded for the presentation depicting what they’d accomplished, and Qianna played her sister's part well as she beamed self-confidently around herself. She even managed at bit of a ‘Kinney’ strut as she made her way to the podium to accept her award after her name was called.

At the same time, Team Justin was in all out Blockade Mode. Stella, who’d pretended to have just then discovered that Justin was a famous movie animator, loudly announced the fact to her buddy Chelsie, and the two of them squealed and gushed and fan-girled over the poor man so shamelessly that Justin was cringing. He was far too distracted trying to prevent the two girls from groping him while they all three posed for a selfie together, to pay any attention to whatever was going on up at the podium. After a set of three pics - a serious one they could show their parents, a goofy one they could post to social media, and one where the girls tried to cajole Justin into kissing them which they said they wanted so they could make their girlfriends at home jealous - they finally subsided. Justin looked like he wanted to crawl under a rock and hide. Quinne had a seriously hard time not laughing out loud at the way her ‘Dad’ scooted closer to her, as if seeking protection from his rabid fans. But, if nothing else, the ruse had worked and kept Justin oblivious to the proceedings as ‘Quinne’ received her award.

Both Teams got a rest for the duration of the Chemistry Unit award, which went to a timid and non-descript girl - she was so shy and had kept to herself so much throughout the camp that most of the other students didn’t even know her name - who’d supposedly done something miraculous with her experiment in the Chem Lab.

Next up, though, was the second Q award so, as soon as both teams had caught their breath, they were up again and ready to do their Blockade thing. This award was for the week where they’d been allowed to choose an Independent Study project of their own choosing. Most of the projects had been along the same lines as you’d see at any science fair, and while they were all somewhat interesting, only one had truly stood out. Hence, the award being given to Qianna, who’d created some truly original artwork depicting heroes and sheroes of the STEM world along with their contributions.

As her name was announced, the video screen behind the podium began to show the series of six different mixed media paintings that Qianna had produced, each of which was truly quite beautiful. Justin was rightfully ecstatic and proud of his daughter’s artistic talents, and stood up along with the rest of the group around him to applaud the girl. Quinne blushed - something not common for her - as she gratefully accepted her sister’s award, feeling a little guilty that her twin wasn’t accepting for herself since the work was so personal and so amazing. But the parent switch plan had always been more for Qianna than herself, so Quinne figured she was doing all of this for her
sister in the end. On top of everything else, Qianna’s outgoing and bubbly personality had made her a lot of friends that summer, so her personal fan club was huge. The crowd went wild, hooting and cheering at the tops of their lungs, as the girl they thought was Qianna began to walk back towards the bleachers.

It was almost loud enough to cover up the commotion that erupted at the south end of the bleachers, which resulted in a large part of the audience from that area also getting up to their feet. Only these folks weren’t cheering, they were trying to get out of the way. And the roar of noise was from the angry, and now dripping wet visitor, who lurched to his feet with a growl after the hapless Trevor had dumped his entire sports bottle of ice water over Brian’s head in an attempt to distract him from watching the presentation for Quinne. Brian, needless to say, was NOT amused. If looks could kill, the nasty glare he sent Trevor’s way would have castrated the boy with a rusty spoon and then fed him his own testicles to choke on until the poor kid died in an embarrassed heap of mortification. But, to the extent that it did, in fact, distract Brian, it was a complete success.

Luckily, by the time Quinne had made her way back to her seat in the bleachers next to Justin, and the crowd at that end of the auditorium had settled back down, Brian had already stomped out of the room, heading for the men’s room so he could try to dry himself off and fix his melted hair. Trevor was still shaking, worried that Brian was going to come back and murder him. And Qianna and Christa were trying, unsuccessfully, to stifle their giggling.

“You SAID, if all else failed, to dump a bottle of water over his head,” Trevor complained, a little miffed at the girls’ reaction.

“Yeah, but I was thinking about Justin when I said it. I never dreamed anyone would be brave enough to take on Brian Kinney like that,” Qianna replied amid more giggling. “OMG! Did you see his face? He was sooooo angry. You’re totally hard core, Trevor. Nobody else would have even dared something like that.” And then they all started laughing again. “Sheesh, it was like looking at a wet cat. If he could have gotten away with hissing at you, he would have. That was the most hilarious thing I’ve ever seen.”

They were laughing away so hard that they didn’t even hear the award presentation for the Earth Sciences Unit. But the following, and last, award of the presentation did get their attention. It was the award for the Engineering Unit and the students’ Rube Goldberg Machines, which had been saved for last since it was destined to be a real crowd pleaser. It was too bad, really, because the winning team happened to be the one the girls were on but since they couldn’t possibly be seen together by the fathers, Qianna opted to leave before the end of the video presentation showing the machine at work. She figured she probably should go find out what had happened to Brian, anyway, and Quinne could collect the award for the both of them. At least she knew Justin would be happy for her win. And if this crazy plan of theirs actually worked, it would be worth missing out on the award.
And at least it seemed they’d managed to get through the Award Ceremony without being found out.

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Chapter End Notes

10/29/18 - So, what do you think? Did you think I’d be able to write my way out of this one? Poor Brian and Brian’s hair, though. I suspect that Trevor will have to go into witness protection or something to escape Brian’s rightful wrath. Now, I just have to get the girls off to each other’s homes for the real fun to begin.... Wish me luck! TAG

So, NaNoWriMo 2018 begins this Thursday, and I WILL be writing another new story with Sally for the occasion - which we hope will eventually turn into our second book - but I’m not going to let this story get abandoned. I plan to try and keep writing both. This story is about 75% done and I have the rest of it pretty well outlined, so it should be doable. It might be a little longer between updates though because I’ll be juggling. Please send me your most productive vibes.
Chapter 14 - We’re Doing This!

After the Awards Ceremony the rest of the afternoon and evening went by much more smoothly, for which everyone was eminently thankful.

Quinne talked ‘her’ father into almost immediately heading off campus to go see some of the sights of downtown Colorado Springs. Stella went with them to serve as the communications liaison just in case. The remainder of Team Justin got to take a well deserved break and, for those whose families had begun to arrive as well, they took the time to hang out with their own people.

It took Brian a little bit longer to restore his wardrobe and hair to its usual level of stunning magnificence. When he finally emerged from the men’s room his anger had abated enough to grudgingly accept Trevor’s apologies. Qianna and Christa tried really hard not to show any inkling of amusement at the situation, but QiQi feared she might not have succeeded completely when she caught ‘her’ Pops glaring at her. Channelling her inner-Quinne, she smiled and shrugged as nonchalantly as possible. Brian merely shook his head at her and let it all slide. And then the group headed off to give Brian the tour of the dorms that Justin had already received earlier.

“So, where’s this amazing roommate of yours, Kiddo? The one you’ve been babbling about all summer? From the way you talked about her, I thought the two of you were practically joined at the hip,” Brian asked almost as soon as they walked through the door of the girls’ dorm room.

“She’s off with her dad. I think they were going to do some sightseeing and have dinner or something,” Qianna advised, while trying not to be nervous at the direction Brian’s questions had taken.
“That’s too bad. I would have been glad to meet her. And maybe even her dad - didn’t you say he was gay too? We could have all had dinner together,” Brian commented with a suggestive waggle of his brows.

“Yeah, I’m sure that would have gone well. I’m not going to sit around making polite conversation while you ogled your next conquest, Pops,” Qianna stated, trying to sound like her sister.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time for you, would it,” Brian chuckled as he sauntered around the small room, looking at all the various nick-knacks the two girls had accumulated to decorate their small living space over the summer.

He only stopped when he passed by Qianna’s messenger bag draped over the back of her chair. The bag was decorated with a brightly colored image of one of Justin’s most beloved and well known animation characters. And, while it wasn’t unusual to see merchandise bearing the character’s likeness, it wasn’t often that the item was personally autographed by the artist who’d designed and drawn the character. Justin’s sprawling and very distinct ‘JTaylor’ signature was clearly evident on this bag, though. Brian paused and reached out to trace the lines of the mark with his index finger, his face betraying a moment of some undecipherable emotion for that one brief instant, before he recollected himself, smiled and then moved on around the room. Qianna, who was watching Brian like a hawk, hadn’t missed the attention to Justin’s work or the strange expression, but she didn’t know what it meant.

“Well, I can’t say dorm rooms have changed much from the last time I lived in one, Spark,” Brian averred with a smirk. “At least you didn’t have to try and cram a year’s worth of personal possessions in here. Your brother’s been going through his shit all summer, planning what he’s taking to school, and seems to think he’s going to be able to get half the house into HIS dorm room come fall. Maybe you’ll be able to talk him down. He’s only going to be about ten miles away, for fuck’s sake - he doesn’t need to take everything he fucking owns.”

“I’ll beat some sense into him for you, Pops,” Qianna promised, internally squeeing at the very thought of finally getting to meet her ‘brother’.

“So, you want to get the hell out of here and go get something to eat? I couldn’t eat the slop they tried to pass off as food on the flight out here,” Brian announced. “You’d think that the price of a first class ticket would at least get you something edible. And why airlines can’t just serve you fresh salad without you having to pre-order, I’ll never understand.”

“Sure, Pops. Sounds great. I was too excited waiting for you to get here to get much lunch myself. Do you mind if we ask Christa to join us though? Her ‘rents aren’t due until tomorrow so I figured we could offer her dinner,” Qianna asked, trying to find a way to finagle her Team Captain and Logistics Expert an invite.
“This the same ‘Chrisla’ you told me you asked out for coffee a couple weeks ago?” Brian asked with an obvious wink.

Qianna paused, unsure how much her sister had shared with Brian about the budding attraction between her and Christa. “Maybe . . .” she hedged, with a blush that wasn’t at all Quinne-like but which the more demure Qianna couldn’t control even if she’d wanted to.

“Interesting. Never seen you blush over anyone before, Spark. Should I be worried?” Brian teased, shooting a knowing look at his ‘daughter’.

“Stop, Pops,” Qianna ordered. “If you need to be worried, I’ll tell you.”

“Fine. Just nice to see another of my children following in daddy’s footsteps, is all,” Brian joked.

“I said, ‘Stop’, already.”

Brian just chuckled and smirked with his tongue pointedly poking out his cheek. “Of course we should invite this Christa along for dinner, then. I’m looking forward to checking her out.”

Qianna grumbled under her breath about annoying fathers as she ushered him out the door and down the hall to pick up her supposed new love interest. If only there was some way to get out of what was bound to be an uncomfortable dinner. But she needed Christa with her in case there was a need to share info with the other team, so Qianna just held her tongue and hoped Brian would dial down his usual sexual-innuendo-laced conduct for the duration of dinner.

Not that that was at all likely.

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Quinne arrived back at the dorm room a little after seven that night to find her sister already there and waiting for her. She’d had a really pleasant afternoon with Justin. They’d found several eclectic little art galleries in the downtown area to tool around in, actually meeting several of the artists and talking to the owners, all of whom were thrilled to meet Justin Taylor in person. After wandering through the galleries for several hours, with Justin making a couple of small purchases along the
way, they’d gone out for a nice meal at a hole-in-the-wall Salvadoran restaurant that they stumbled across by accident. The food had been absolutely delicious and she was so stuffed by the time they left that she wasn’t sure she’d be able to walk.

Quinne found her sister in their room, lying across the bed with her feet propped up on a chair. Qianna looked exhausted. “He took you shopping, didn’t he?” she asked sympathetically.

“I know you tried to warn me, but I just didn’t understand . . .” Qianna replied, looking at her sister sheepishly.

“Do NOT let him get his head when he’s off on a shopping spree. That’s, like, a total rookie mistake, Sis. And if you do agree to shop with him, you need to be prepared. Stay hydrated. Bring snacks to keep your energy level up. Wear comfortable shoes. Oh, and I’d also suggest bringing a book or something to help entertain yourself for when he gets lost in the shoe department,” Quinne lectured as sympathetically as she could, moving Qianna’s feet so she could sit on the chair herself and rub at the poor girl’s tired toes.

“He said he just wanted to go get something to eat and the next thing I knew he’d found a Prada outlet. I didn’t even know they had one here,” Qianna sounded dazed.

“If there’s a designer label anywhere in ten miles, Pops will find it. I think he can smell the shoe leather or something,” Quinne joked - well, mostly joked, since there was at least some truth to her words. “You need to be firm with him, though. Sometimes you just have to put your foot down and tell him ‘NO Shopping!’ and stick to your guns.” Qianna sighed so deeply that Quinne almost started laughing at the pitiful sight. “Did he remember to feed you?”

“No. Which had Christa super annoyed, by the way - she actually bailed on us after only an hour and your dad had to pay for a Lyft to take her back to campus. But I’m too tired to eat now anyway,” Qianna moaned, cringing as she shifted her weight to try and sit up straighter. “How was your dinner with Dad?”

“Delicious! I wish I’d known about your afternoon - I’d have brought you a doggie bag from the Salvadoran place we found. The owner’s wife was the cook and she kept trying to shove more food at us till I thought I’d explode. Fuck it was good.” She rubbed at her still-full stomach. “I had no idea your dad could eat that much. Actually, I didn’t know ANYONE could eat that much. How does he do it and not weigh, like, a thousand pounds.”

“Dad’s got amazing metabolic powers. Just don’t get between him and his dinner plate unless you want to lose a finger or two,” Qianna kidded, feeling a little better now that she had company to
laugh with. “But even my dad can’t eat for five straight hours. What did you do with the rest of the
time?”

“We went through a bunch of really sweet art galleries downtown. Your dad is so cute when he
talks about art and stuff. He gets so excited. It’s adorable,” Quinne concluded. “He bought me
this.” She showed off the beautiful leather-bound notebook with the hand-painted cover that Justin
had purchased. “And all the gallery owners went practically gaga over him as soon as they found
out who he was. It was crazy.”

“Yeah, that happens a lot. Dad doesn’t mind so much when it’s other artists, but he hates dealing
with the public at large.”

“So, how’d it go with Pops when he first saw you? I caught a glimpse or two of you guys during
the awards thingy. It looked like he bought it was you. Any problems?” Quinne asked, eager to
gauge how well their scheming was going.

“Piece of cake. He didn’t say anything except to give me shit about the hat all afternoon long,”
Qianna advised, looking pleased with herself and her Quinne performance. “Of course, I think he
was a little too distracted by Trevor dumping a gallon of water on him and then by the shopping to
really notice me much.”

“Don’t let his shopping obsession fool you - Pops notices EVERYTHING, even when you don’t
think he’s noticing,” Quinne explained. “You can’t let your guard down. Not even when he’s
shopping. He’s tricky like that.”

“Got it. Thanks for the warning. How about you? Did Dad say anything about how tall you got
over the summer?”

Quinne grinned. “You totally nailed it. He was, like, ‘you grew’, and then he complained that I
looked too skinny before going off on the hat too.” The girls laughed together at their hat woes.
“But I think he bought it. The only thing that had me worried was when he started to brag on me to
the artists we met and asked me to show off some of my drawings. Which was when I realized I’d
goofed and had neglected to bring along one of your sketch pads. I covered by saying I was so
excited to see him that I forgot it back at the room. But what am I going to do when we get to
California and he asks me to draw him something? He’s definitely going to notice if his daughter
suddenly loses all interest in her art.”

“Damn. We didn’t think about that,” Qianna sat up straighter and began to nibble nervously on her
thumbnail. “You can’t just conveniently forget to bring a sketch pad along with you all the time -
knowing Dad he’d just run out and buy you another. Hmmm . . . Maybe you could say you’d hurt yourself or something? I mean, it won’t hold him off forever, but maybe it would give us a couple weeks or something?”

“That’s not a bad idea. I could say I hurt my wrist goofing off with friends after he dropped me off tonight.”

“Oooo - what if we pop over to that all-night pharmacy on the corner and see if they have one of those wrist support braces or something? That way it would make it seem more real. And you wouldn’t forget and all of a sudden pick up something with your ‘injured’ hand,” Qianna suggested wisely.

“Great idea, Sis. Come on,” Quinne got up and started to head for the door.

“Ugh!” Qianna groaned as she tried to stand to follow her twin. “I’m not sure I can walk that far. Carry me?”

“You’re pathetic; you know that?” Quinne laughed and threw a pillow off the bed at her sister. “You’re gonna have to toughen up if you want to be a Kinney. We Kinneys don’t crumple from a mere shopping excursion. We’re made of stronger stuff than that.”

“Well, we Taylors are delicate, fragile creatures, unfamiliar with the rigors of marathon shopping sprees, so don’t expect too much,” Qianna groaned as she limped after her sister.

“Poor baby - it’s your first shopping hangover,” Quinne sympathized. “Come on and I’ll buy you an energy drink to help get you past the worst of the symptoms.”

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The girls successfully got to the pharmacy and back, picking up a wrist brace for Quinne along with enough junk food to get them through the rest of the night. Since it was the last night of the camp, the students were holding a movie marathon night. It was a great way to enjoy one last fun activity with the friends they’d made that summer. Qianna flittered around from group to group, hugging all, and exchanging email addys with practically the whole group. Nobody really minded that there was too much chatter to actually hear the movies half the time. And, at the end of the night, Chase escorted Qianna up to her room to say goodbye, giving the girl her very first kiss in the process. Quinne showed up a couple minutes later, Christa holding her hand and looking well
kissed herself. The twins said their final goodbyes before heading into their own room a little after midnight.

The last thing that Quinne did before snuggling into bed - a habit she’d picked up from watching her Pops for years - was to quickly scan through any last minute social media notifications and her email accounts. This time she was very, very, glad she’d done it, too. There in her inbox was one email the twins had been waiting for with much anticipation.

“OMG! It’s here! QiQi, it’s here!” she screeched giddily.

Qianna, who’d already been in bed and halfway asleep sat up, staring around herself as if looking for whatever it was that had invaded their room. “What’s here?”

“The email from that Devon guy from the DNA service,” Quinne explained. “He finally wrote us back . . .” She took a minute to read through the message and then hollered, “YES!” loudly enough that it probably disturbed the sleep of their next door neighbors. “I think we found her!”

Qianna crawled into her sister’s bed so she could read over Quinne’s shoulder.

DevonDart2000@mymail.com: ‘Hi, Cousin! It was really a surprise to hear from you. It’s so sad that you and your sister have had such a hard time looking for your birth mother, but I’m glad that we seem to have finally connected in this roundabout way. I do indeed have an ‘Aunt Lizzy’ who sounds like she might be your mother. She’s my father’s youngest sister. She is now on her third marriage - which, happily, seems to be the one that might finally work out - and goes by ‘Lizette Forbes’ . Aunt Lizzy was a bit of wild child when she was younger and she basically disappeared for a number of years, so the family would have no information for you about whether or not she actually ever gave up two children for adoption. I spoke to my father about it and he was clueless but said it wouldn't surprise him. I’m afraid I’m not comfortable just giving you Aunt Lizzy’s contact information but, if you’re okay with it, I would be happy to relay your info to her and ask that she contact you directly. And in the meantime, if I can be of any other help, just let me know. I hope it’s true and we really have found new relatives we didn’t even know were out there. Welcome to the family!’

“We found her!” Qianna crowed happily when she’d finished reading. “We actually found her!”

“Yeah. Now, let’s hope she’ll actually write us back and answer some of our questions,” Quinne said as she quickly typed out a reply to Devon, giving him the go ahead to send her email on to ‘Aunt Lizzy’.
“We can also try to do some more research on our own while we’re waiting. Now that we have a name, it should be a little easier,” Qianna added.

“True.” Quinne hit the send icon and then laid aside her phone. “She can’t hide from us forever.”

“Let’s hope,” Qianna responded with a yawn before she gratefully fell into bed once more.

Only to be awakened far too early the next morning with the unpleasant prospect of packing to leave.

As Qianna folded the last of her clothing into her suitcase, she looked around the tiny room they’d shared for the past ten weeks and sighed. “Is it wrong that I’m so sad about leaving today? I mean, I’m excited to go to Pittsburgh and meet all of your crazy family, but I’m going to miss this. I’m going to miss US.”

“I know. Me too, Sis,” Quinne paused in her own efforts to sort through which of her own books she just couldn’t live without even though she was going to pretend to be Qianna for the next however-long, and looked up at her sister. “While we were here it was just us; we got to know each other and really be sisters. I don’t want that to end either.”

“What if this all comes crashing down around our ears?” Qianna worried, slumping down onto the floor next to Quinne. “Shit, when our dads finally figure out what we’re doing, they’re going to be so mad. Are we nuts to try this? What if it backfires and they get so angry they never let us see each other again?”

“That’s NOT going to happen,” Quinne insisted, reaching for her twin’s hand and squeezing hard. “We won’t let it. They can’t keep us apart. We’ll have phones and email and . . . we just won’t let it.”

“I’m going to miss you so bad, Q,” Qianna sobbed, leaning into her sister’s shoulder as the tears she’d been struggling to hold back just wouldn’t stop.

“Same.” Quinne felt a few tears escaping down her own cheeks as she hugged her sister hard. “But it doesn’t matter. Even if we’re a whole continent away, at least now I know you’re out there and that someday we’ll figure out a way to be together again.”
“That’ll be our next plan,” Qianna asserted, sitting up and swiping at the wetness dripping down her chin. “We’ll plan out how we’re going to live together - or at least close by each other - and have our own families and see each other all the time and never, ever, be apart for long again.”

“Sounds like a wonderful plan to me.”

“Me too,” Qianna echoed, finally getting herself back under control as she returned to her packing. “Okay, all my clothing and stuff is packed up for you. I only kept a couple of my favorite t-shirts and some books. Oh, and one small sketchpad that I figured I could hide in my room when I get to your house - I can’t go more than a few days without something to draw on, you know. But other than that, I think I’m ready to go into Quinne-Mode full time. How about you?”

“I’m feeling very Qianna-ish already,” Quinne agreed with a smile as she slipped the fake wrist brace on her right hand. “I can’t wait to see San Jose.”

“Make sure to give Winston a big hug for me and tell him I still love him.”

“Winston? You didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend, QiQi!” Quinne pretended to be shocked. “Does Chase know about this?”

“Winston is my cat, you dweeb. You know that!” Qianna finally cracked a smile.

“Fine. I’ll hug the fur beast for you.”

“And then you can kick the ass of the other fur beast - Alex - for me,” Qianne offered. “Or, at the very least, try to make sure my dad isn’t being totally taken advantage of by the creep.”

“Don’t worry. I’m on it.”

“Well, okay . . .” Qianna looked around the room one last time but didn’t see anything they’d forgotten. “Then you should probably get out of here so you’re not around when Brian gets here to take me home.”
“Yeah,” Quinne grabbed Qianna’s bags and hefted the carryon to her shoulder. “Damn, I wish I could at least hug Pops once before you go off with him. It felt so weird not even saying ‘hi’ to him yesterday. You promise to take good care of him and not give him too much shit about his shopping problem?”

“Of course. You make sure you give my Dad lots and lots of hugs from me too, okay?”

“Alright . . . *sigh* . . . So, we’re really doing this, huh?”

“Yep. We’re doing this,” Qianna nodded with a resigned smile.

“We’re fucking crazy to try this, you know?” Quinne stated bluntly.

“I know. But, what the fuck, right?” Qianna replied with her best Quinne cursing impression.

“Right.”

“Love you, Sis, and thanks for . . . well, for everything.”

“Ditto, Sis.” Quinne reached out her arms so Qianna could get one last hug in. When they finally let go of each other, a glance at the clock told them it was time to put the final step of their plan into action. “Okay. I’m off to go hide in the lounge until after you and Pops are gone. Text me when you’re in the car on the way to the airport. And again when you land in The Pitts.”

“You too. And good luck. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

And then Quinne pulled her beanie hat over her auburn mop of hair, grabbed the handle of her suitcase, and waved one last time before she left the room. Qianna slumped back onto the now bare bed. She hadn’t expected this to be so hard. She was already missing her sister and having second, third and maybe even fourth thoughts about the wisdom of this plan of theirs. But it was too late to back out now. She needed to just shake off all the misgivings and try to think like her sister. Quinne was always confident and bold. She wouldn’t let her fears hold her back. Yeah. Qianna
could do this. She could BE Quinne. At least she thought she could.

About fifteen minutes later there was a knock on the door and, when she called out a cheerful ‘Come In’, Brian’s face peeked through the opening. “You ready to blow this joint, Spark?”

“Definitely, Pops!” Qianna replied, jumping up to trot over and hug ‘her’ father hello. “I can’t wait to get to Pittsburgh and see everybody!”

“I don’t think anybody’s ever been that enthusiastic about Pittsburgh before,” Brian laughed as he hugged his daughter back. “Everyone will be glad to see you though. It’s been a quiet summer without you around. So let’s get this show on the road, hmm?”

“Let’s!” Qianna picked up her messenger bag and allowed Brian to take charge of the big rolling suitcase.

And then they were gone, with only one last look back at the room where so much had changed for two young lives in only one short summer.

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Chapter End Notes

10/30/18 - Sorry, had to do a lot of plot development in this chapter to get our girls off on the way to their respective father’s homes, so not a lot of fun or action. Now all the good stuff can start happening though. So excited to start writing the Brian and Justin parts - even though I love the girls I’ve created. I love smart, curious, challenging young women characters, don’t you? And we don’t have nearly enough of them in our fandom. So, read on and I’ll go furiously write to try and get as much out before NaNoWriMo as I can. Enjoy! TAG
“Okay, the coast is clear,” Quinne announced to her brunch companion as soon as she received the text from Qianna. “Q2 is on her way to The Pitts. So far the plan seems to have worked. Pops was oblivious to the fact that he has the wrong daughter. Let’s just hope the masquerade holds until at least after the plane takes off.”

“She’ll do fine. You guys have been practicing for this for weeks,” Stella reassured her friend. “Hell, you even had ME confused who I was talking to half the time.”

“I hope you’re right, Stell.”

“The only question I still have,” Stella interjected as she pushed away her tray full of empty plates, “is what are you going to do when you finally get caught? Cuz you know this can’t last forever, right? Eventually you’ll either get made or you’ll have to just confess what you did in order to get back to your correct families. So what happens then?”

“Well . . . We really didn’t figure things out that far ahead, I’m afraid,” Quinne admitted. “I mean, a lot depends on what we find out about our mother and if we can dig up more info on why the dads separated in the first place. If we find out it was all a big mistake, maybe they’ll be open to fixing things and agree to let QiQi and I have at least have some kind of ongoing relationship.”

“And if you find out they split you two up intentionally and don’t want you to have anything to do with each other?”
“Then we’re screwed, I guess. At least until we turn eighteen and can do something about it on our own,” Quinne replied unhappily. “But I really HOPE that isn’t the case. I just can’t see my father doing something like that, Stella. I just CAN’T. There has to be SOME other explanation . . .”

“Some other explanation for what, Peanut?” Justin asked, having come up from behind the girls without either noticing.

Quinn was so startled she almost fell right out of her seat. She used the time it took her to settle herself again to cover while she mentally scrambled to come up with some way to answer Justin. She’d never been much good at lying, especially not when she was on the spot like she was now. Growing up with Brian Kinney as your father - a man who was unapologetically and sometimes bluntly honest - lying wouldn’t have been tolerated, so she really didn’t have much practice at it. The only way she was ever able to successfully lie was when she’d had lots of time to prepare and plan what she would say, neither of which applied here. So she panicked and fell back on her natural snark.

“There has to be some other explanation for why you’re letting Hairy Alex walk all over you about the wedding stuff,” she answered with all the Kinney frankness she had in her. “I mean, he can’t be THAT fucking good in the sack, can he?”

For a full sixty seconds silence descended on the corner of the cafeteria where they’d been sitting. Justin stood there, his mouth agape, staring at Quinne in shock as a red rage-filled flush started to creep up his neck from under the collar of his shirt. Quinne knew she’d screwed up badly. Really, really badly.

“Qianna Lea Taylor!” Justin erupted when he finally found the words of outrage he’d been looking for. “That kind of language is unacceptable! And I do NOT appreciate your attitude either, young lady. My love life is none of your business, thank you very much.” Quinne hadn’t expected someone as generally easy-going and affable as Justin to be able to muster such an imposing glare, but there was obviously steel underneath that sunshiney exterior and his rebuke caused her to shrink down in her seat. Then he took a deep breath and seemed to regather his equilibrium. “But, since this probably isn’t the best place to have this conversation, and since we have a plane to catch, I won’t say anything more. How about we just go already? Where’s your stuff?”

“It’s all waiting in the lounge,” Quinne answered meekly.

“Alright. Let’s get going,” Justin replied, his tone thawing out a tiny bit.
“I’ll get your tray for you, Q,” Stella intervened, hoping to help divert the worst of the righteous fatherly anger. “That way you won’t hurt your wrist again.”

“Your wrist?” Justin asked, apparently noticing for the first time the sturdy, black nylon brace on Quinne’s right hand. “What did you do to your wrist?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Quinne answered, able to speak glibly because she’d rehearsed this lie. “I was goofing off last night with some of the other kids and I twisted it. Pooh Bear looked it over though and she thinks it’s only sprained. A few weeks in this brace and I should be good as new.”

“Goofing off? What the heck were you doing?” Justin demanded, a little of his pique still coming through as he gently lifted his daughter’s hand higher so he could look at it more closely.

“Handstands,” Quinne answered, feeling sheepish now.

“Unhhh,” Justin groaned histrionically. “Handstands? Seriously? Why the heck were you doing handstands? Were you drunk or something? Because I can assure you, handstands are pretty much NEVER a good idea, Qianna. Trust me, I know.”

“Of course I wasn’t drunk, Dad. I’m only in middle school, for fu . . . for crying out loud.” Luckily she’d caught herself at the last minute on that one.

“I don’t know, QiQi. I just don’t know about you right now . . . Right now I think I’d believe just about any trouble you got yourself into,” Justin replied, sounding disgusted with ‘his’ wayward daughter. “Let’s just go already before you get up to something even more stupid, okay?”

Quinne stood up, now feeling really anxious. Had she already blown things? She didn’t know what to do to make it better, though. Thankfully, Stella distracted her from her worries by coming around the table to give her a hug goodbye. Meanwhile, Justin left to go get the bags from where Quinne had stowed them in the other room.

“Bye, Q. Good luck,” Stella whispered in her ear.

“I think I’m going to need it at this rate,” Quinne whispered back.
“Just TRY and think like Qianna,” Stella chuckled softly as she let go of her friend. “And text me if you need anything. Or just to vent. I know this isn’t going to be easy, but we’re all pulling for you two.” Quinne shot her friend a thankful smile before squaring her shoulders to follow ‘her’ father towards the unknown.

“Thanks again for all your help, Stell. I’ll let you know how it all turns out, one way or the other.”

As she was walking out of the room, Quinne thought she heard her friend mumbling something about how ‘it would be a miracle if this thing worked’.

“Great start, Quinne, you idiot,” she whimpered under her breath.

Then she steeled her resolve and headed out, following Justin to the rental car for a long, silent, ride to the airport. Luckily, the rest of the trip to California went relatively smoothly. Things were a little cool between them, but that was better than Justin being outright angry at her. She spent most of her time playing games on Qianna’s phone and reading an ebook fanfic story she’d downloaded before the plane took off. By the time they’d transferred planes in Denver for the longer flight to San Jose, Justin had cooled off and begun to talk to her in a more normal way, asking about any plans she had to keep in touch with the friends she’d made over the summer, and about Chase in particular. Quinne was extra careful about staying in character and made sure all her responses would be Qianna Approved.

Things were looking up.

Until they landed at San Jose International Airport and Hairy Alex himself showed up to drive them home, that is.

Quinne could see right away why her sister hated the man. He was as pompous as a peacock, and strutted around like he owned the place. Now, while the daughter of Brian Kinney was accustomed to strutting men, at least her father could pull it off. Hairy Alex, on the other hand, was sorely lacking in whatever it was that men would strut about. He was a little taller than Justin but still under six foot. From what Quinne could see, he didn’t have much of a body either; he was thick through the middle and hips - although not fat or anything - and not particularly muscular. And the hair . . . Sheesh, the hair. On top of the bushy beard and long curled mustache, there was plenty of hair everywhere else too. There was hair sprouting up from the gap where he’d failed to button the top two buttons of his ugly plaid shirt. There was hair on the backs of his wrists peeking out from below his rolled up sleeves. And while the hair on his head and his beard was all trimmed and waxed slickly back, you could tell that the rest of him was not nearly as well groomed.
But far more unattractive than the hairiness, was the man’s personality. Alex sauntered over to greet them, looking at Justin like he was put out by the tediousness of the chore. Instead of a smile for his fiance, he rolled his eyes when Justin pulled him in for a hug and a quick kiss; maybe Justin hadn’t seen it but Quinne sure did and was immediately incensed. Alex didn’t even bother to look in Quinne’s direction, though, treating the girl like nothing more than a baggage handler, not even offering to take one of her heavy cases. Luckily, Justin handed his bag off to Alex so he could take Quinne’s case in hand himself, leaving her with only her carry on. And then they were all off to the parking garage where Alex had left Justin’s Prius.

Once in the car, Alex started in by complaining about some friend of his who had apparently sent an early wedding gift that hadn’t come from their gift registry. He just went on and on about how tacky the gift was - Quinne actually missed hearing exactly what they had got, she was so bored with the conversation from the first word - and how bad a friend this other guy was. Justin spent the whole ride home trying to placate his fiance. There was not one single word said asking about their trip or Quinne’s summer experiences or anything other than Alex, Alex, Alex. ‘What a fucking narcissistic piece of shit’, she thought to herself at least a half dozen times over the course of the twenty minute drive.

Quinne was so relieved when they finally did reach their destination that she almost bolted out of the car as soon as the vehicle came to a stop in the driveway of a nice, suburban, two-story house with faux-Southwest details and a tile roof. It looked like a fairly nice place, even though it wasn’t anywhere near as fancy as she’d expected for someone who worked in the movie industry. Of course, from what she’d heard, real estate prices in the area were outlandish, so this place was probably worth a lot more than you’d suspect from just looking at it. She hoped she remembered the floor plan layout that Qianna had drawn for her well enough that she didn’t get tripped up trying to find her way to ‘her’ room.

They’d barely made it through the door between the garage and the kitchen before a small, grey, furry body was winding its way affectionately around Justin’s ankles and meowing piteously.

Justin reached down to scratch at the cat’s head, “Hey, Winston. It looks like you missed me, buddy. I was only gone one night though.” Then he looked over at the cat bowl sitting on a little mat in the corner and noted it was empty. “Didn’t you feed the cat, Alex?”

“Sorry. I guess I forgot,” Alex replied laconically as he walked over to the fridge, opened the door, and pulled out a beer for himself without asking anyone else if they wanted something.

Justin gave his fiance a bemused smile before bustling over to the plastic storage box next to Winston’s bowl and scooping out some food for the poor starving beast. It had taken all of 10 seconds to feed the cat; proof that Alex was either the most forgetful man on the planet or the laziest. Quinne frowned in his direction before walking over to give her sister’s cat the hug she’d
promised Qianna.

Only, Winston was not amused by this stranger trying to hug him while he was eating. He turned around and hissed loudly at Quinne, holding up one clawed paw in a clear warning gesture. Quinne quickly backed away. Apparently, at least one member of the Taylor family saw through their switch right from the start.

“Winston! That’s not nice!” Justin admonished the cat, who’d already turned back to his food bowl. “Sorry, Honey. I guess you’ve just been away for so long that he’s forgotten you a bit. I’m sure he’ll warm up to you pretty quick once he’s filled his tummy a bit.”

“The damn cat probably just agrees with me how stupid that hat looks,” Alex criticized, smirking over the top of his beer bottle at Justin’s daughter.

“Yeah, well, at least my hat doesn’t make me look like a Yeti. I’m actually surprised you two don’t get along better - not every human can be as hairy all over as a cat, right Alex?” Quinne shot back.

“Qianna . . .” Justin warned, as he too went to the fridge and pulled out two bottles of water, one for himself and one for his daughter. “Be nice.”

“I will if he will.”

“Shit, what got your titties in a twist, girl?” Alex prodded as he started to walk past her to get out of the kitchen.

As Alex passed behind Quinne’s chair, though, he apparently couldn’t resist the impulse to reach out and slap the back of her head, ending by grabbing the top of her beanie hat and pulling it off as he went by. Which, of course, exposed her last secret. Quinne hadn’t been at all prepared for the juvenile trick so it was already too late when she reached up to grab at the hat - her unruly mop of auburn hair was already exposed for all to see.

“Shit, Qianna! What have you done to your hair?” Justin hollered, forgetting for a moment his own rules against cursing, as he reached over to tentatively touch a brunette strand.

“Surprise?” Quinne replied with what she hoped was a winning smile for her father. “I thought it
“But your hair . . .” was all Justin managed, clearly already in mourning for the loss of his beautiful blond daughter. Then he dropped into the chair next to Quinne, rubbing his hand over his face. “Damn, it finally happened.”

“What?”

“You turned into a fucking teenager,” he moaned despondently. “I never liked teenagers - not even when I was one myself. I don’t know how anyone puts up with them. And now it’s too late and you’ve turned into one too.”

“Well, to be precise, I’m still only twelve, so I’m not quite a teenager yet, Dad.”

“Close enough. You always were precocious and way ahead of your time,” Justin griped.

“Sheesh. It’s just a different color hair, Dad. It’s not like I went out and became a meth addict or something,” Quinne replied starting to get pissed off at the constant criticism.

“It’s not just the hair,” Justin replied sounding way too whiny for an adult. “It’s this whole new Qianna that just appeared out of the blue. It’s the hair and the earrings and the cursing and, most of all, the attitude. I don’t know what the hell got into you over the summer, but I’m not sure I like it much . . . I barely even recognize you, Qianna.” Justin shook his head sadly and then got to his feet, walking out of the room and leaving his daughter sitting there at the kitchen table wondering what the fuck she’d just done.

As soon as Justin was gone Alex, who was still looking on from the doorway, started laughing. It wasn’t a happy laughter though. It was nasty and spiteful and mean. “Looks like big-hearted Jus finally woke up to the fact that his sweet angelic little baby girl is really a big fucking brat like I always knew.”

“Fuck off, Hairy.” Quinne was done playing nice with this troll.

“It’s Alex, you moron.”
“Like I said, fuck off, Hairy,” Quinne repeated, getting up so she could leave the kitchen, intent on finding her room and hiding from the world for the rest of the night while she tried to readjust to the situation in which she now found herself.

“You know, you’re not going to keep getting away with this shit after the wedding. I’m not putting up with a fucking brat always taking my husband’s attention away from the two of us. And I don’t believe in such lax discipline,” Alex warned as she dragged her heavy suitcase past him. “Things are going to change around her, Missy.”

Quinne didn’t bother responding. It would only feed into the man’s narcissism. No wonder Qianna didn’t want to come back here after the summer was over. Quinne almost wished she hadn’t come either. What the fuck did a sweet man like Justin see in this horrible excuse for a human being? Something serious needed to be done to get rid of the man as soon as possible. No way was she going to let this wedding go through and leave her precious, sweet sister to come home to this creep. The only question was, what could she do to stop it?

She managed to find her way to Qianna’s bedroom without any trouble and was more than happy to shut herself away inside. She didn’t feel like putting away her clothing or, really, doing anything else. She already missed her sister and wished the other girl was there to help her fight against the Evil Yeti. Looking at the clock, though, it was clear that her twin was still somewhere at 10,000 feet over the midwest. But, on the off chance that she had wifi on the plane, Quinne sent out an SOS text using Qianna’s phone since her own was currently in her sister’s possession.

Qianna’s phone: I HATE (with all caps and several !!!) Hairy Alex. We HAVE to do something.

Quinne’s phone: Sounds like you had a great homecoming . . . NOT! Sorry. I tried to warn you about him.

Qianna’s phone: He basically threatened me that there will be ‘discipline’ after the wedding is through. And he also outed me about my hair. Your dad is definitely not happy with you right now. I may have cursed a little more than strictly needed. This is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

Quinne’s phone: Ouch. Don’t worry about Dad, though. He’ll get over it once he’s wrapped his head around all the changes. It’s Alex that scares me. I seriously wouldn’t put anything past him.

Qianna’s phone: After meeting him, me neither . . . So, how’s everything going with Pops? Any problems?
Quinne’s phone: Nope. Smooth sailing so far. He’s been busy doing something work-ish the whole flight so we haven’t really interacted much. I also think the new shoes he bought yesterday are a size too small and pinching his feet, cuz he took them off as soon as we got on the plane. I tried to tell him, but he insisted he HAD to have them even though they didn’t have that style in his real size. Poor guy.

Qianna’s phone: Well, at least one of us is amused and having a good time.

Quinne’s phone: I miss you already.

Qianna’s phone: Me too. Sooooooo much. I think you’re definitely getting the better end of this deal, Sis.

Quinne’s phone: Hang in there. I’ll call you tonight and you can vent to me all you want. And I love you tons and tons for doing this for me.

Qianna’s phone: You better! Okay, later.

Quinne’s phone: Later!

Quinne set the phone aside and stretched out on Qianna’s bed. She really hadn’t believed Qianna about how truly bad Alex was. Now she knew. He was definitely all wrong for Justin. And it was up to HER to fix things. So, how to stop a wedding that was scheduled to happen just a little more than two weeks away . . .

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“Another of your little friends from camp?” Brian broke into Qianna’s train of thought as she ended the text session with her twin. “You haven’t seen them for what - three hours - and you already can’t do without them? That must have been some bonding you guys did back there.”

“I do miss them. Especially my roommate,” Qianna admitted. “Apparently she and her dad’s fiance got into it pretty much the minute she got home. He’s a nasty piece of work, that one. I wish I was there to help her. We’re trying to figure out a way to stop the wedding.”
Instead of being angry or trying to dissuade his daughter, Brian just laughed at her pronouncement. “Knowing you, Spark, you’ll find a way. I wouldn’t try to stand in your way once you set that scary brain of yours to something. I almost feel bad for this troll. He has no idea what he’s up against.”

“Thanks, Pops. I think,” Qianna replied, joining in on the laughter.

“If you’re serious about stopping this guy’s wedding, though, you should enlist your Auntie Em,” Brian suggested helpfully. “He’s saved enough weddings from near disaster over the years that he’s probably got a good idea how to reverse the process.”

“Thanks, Pops! You’d make an excellent co-conspirator, you know?”

“Except for the fact that I don’t want to officially know whatever it is you’re doing,” Brian advised. “That way I have plausible deniability when I have to bail you out of jail or defend you in a civil suit or save you from whatever other mischief you get caught up in, Spark.”

“Got it! Good call, Pops. That way we’ll at least have an emergency back up plan if we get caught.”

“In the immortal words of Sergeant Schultz, ‘I know nuffink!’” Brian replied with the most atrocious German accent ever invented, causing them both to break out laughing all over again.

“You know, you’re not such a bad father when you’re not making me shop till my feet hurt,” Qianna volunteered when the laughter had finally bubbled down to the occasional, random chuckle. “In fact, you’re kinda hilarious.”

“I missed you too, Kiddo,” Brian offered, reaching across to playfully rub his daughter’s head, an affectionate gesture that was familiar from way back.

Only, this ‘daughter’ didn’t realize what he was intending. A startled Qianna leaned away from the raised hand. And because of the jerky counter motion, instead of just the light pat to her head that Brian had intended, something which wouldn’t have disturbed her hat much at all, his hand ended up dragging the beanie halfway off. She tried to grab for it, but several blonde locks had already escaped and slithered free across the breadth of her forehead. Of course Brian saw and immediately pulled the hat all the way off.
“Blonde? Seriously?” Brian asked with a dismissive twist of his lips. “Aren’t you too smart to pull off the ditzy blond airhead look, Spark?”

Qianna just shrugged without comment.

“I mean, I figured I’d eventually have to deal with blue or purple or rainbow with sparkles . . . but blonde? Isn’t that a little unimaginative? Or were you going for the bleached-out escapee from the FoxNews white-supremacist-anchor-woman-line-up look?”

“You’re not seriously giving me shit for NOT coming home with purple hair, are you? Cuz, if so, you are undoubtedly the weirdest father I’ve ever met,” Qianna opined with amusement.

“Hey, there’s a reason for the stereotyping that says blondes are just plain stupider than everyone else; I didn’t invent all of those dumb blonde jokes. Hell, I still remember when your Uncle Ted tried going blond back in his midlife crisis days. I swear to fuck his IQ dropped twenty-five points the second that bleach touched his scalp. If it weren’t for Blake finally saving him from himself, who knows what Ted would’ve tried next.” Brian chuckled quietly to himself for a moment, obviously lost in fun memories from the past for a couple seconds. “Honestly, I’ve only ever met one blond that was smart enough to break through the stereotype, and he was so smart he scared the fuck out of me. But everyone else . . . Well, I guess he was just the exception that proved the rule, as they say.”

“Then I guess you’ll just have to make a second exception for me, Pops, because the blond hair is staying for the time being,” Qianna declared stubbornly.

“Whatever,” Brian easily gave in with his typical live-and-let-live approach to life. “But, if I hear you’re quitting the STEM team and trying out for the cheerleading squad instead, I’m coming after you with a bottle of dye. Be warned.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you’ll have to be worrying about that anytime soon, Pops. And if anything like that does happen, you have my permission to take whatever steps are necessary to bring me back to sanity.”

“Good. Now, go do something smart or techy or mathy so I don’t worry so much.”

“I love you, Pops,” Qianna gushed as she leaned her head against the tall man’s shoulder.
“Ditto, Kiddo.”

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Chapter End Notes

10/31/18 - So far so good, right? Who would have thunk that Brian would be the easier father, though? I guess it’s only in my headspace that these things happen. Anyway, I estimate there’s still a good eight chapters or so before this story is finished, but it’s going to slow down a bit because I’m going to be working on my NaNo story at the same time. And it’s only 2.5 hours and counting till 12:01 am on 11/1/18 - the magical hour when I can officially write my first NaNo sentence, so I’m super psyched here. Happy NaNo, All! Now, go write something! TAG
They’d been in the car, en route from the airport, for more than fifteen minutes before Qianna realized something wasn’t right. From what her sister had told her, Britin was fairly close to the airport. The big old house Quinne and her father had lived in since she was a baby was located at the extreme edge of the city’s western suburbs, close to the West Virginia border. Since the airport had been built on the northwest edge of town, it was actually quicker to get from there to Britin than it was to drive all the way into the city. And when the wooded farmland they’d been driving through started to look more populated, Qianna knew something was up.

She pulled out her phone, tapped at the right places to bring up the maps app, and easily discovered her hunch had been correct. They were headed the opposite direction from the house she’d thought they’d be going to. Thank you, modern technology, for the heads up.

“Why are we heading into town, Pops?”

“Did you seriously think you were going to get away with being gone an entire summer without your Grandma Debbie throwing you a surprise welcome home party?” Brian replied, sounding completely disgusted by the prospect.

“She didn’t have to do all that,” Qianna spoke up, trying to politely demur even though she was secretly delighted by the prospect of a party in her honor.

“Yeah, YOU try telling her that,” Brian actually snorted a tiny huff of laughter at such a
preposterous idea. “Hell, it was all I could do to keep her from throwing a Get Well Soon party every time you stubbed your toe as a baby. There was no way I was holding her back from this one. And then, of course, Michael insisted it would be more fun if we surprised you. I do not understand how he got it into his head that surprise parties are a good idea, but you’d think he’d have learned by now after virtually every surprise party he’s ever tried to throw turned into an epic disaster. But, no, and everybody else seemed to think it was a brilliant idea too. And then, as if that wasn’t bad enough, Emmett decided to get involved. The next thing you knew he was clicking his heels together, saying ‘there’s no place like home’, and planning a Wizard of Oz themed extravaganza. I’m disgusted with the entire bunch of them . . . But, I’m also rather fond of my one remaining good ball, which Debbie threatened to personally remove from my body with her bare hands if I didn’t agree to get you there. So, surprise!”

“I’m sure we’ll suffer through somehow. After all, I wouldn’t want Grandma Debbie coming after the family jewels,” Qianna responded with a giggle she just couldn’t hold back; cursing was one thing, but discussing your purported father’s genitals was a little too much for her.

“See what I meant by the blonde thing? It’s happening already. My brown-haired Spark would never have giggled like that.”

Wisely, Qianna chose not to say anything further until they arrived about fifteen minutes later on Debbie Novotny’s doorstep.

“Surprised faces ready.” Brian ordered, then he twisted the door knob and pushed through the screen door, loudly proclaiming his cover story. “I know you’re tired and would rather just go straight home, Spark, but I don’t want to cook tonight and Debbie said she would have a lasagna ready for us, so…”

“SURPRISE!!!!”

The roar of greeting was followed almost immediately by a cacophony of voices, each trying to outdo the other in order to garner Qianna’s attention. Even though she had spent weeks memorizing photos and names for all these people, they came at her so fast she didn’t have a chance to distinguish one from the other. They all wanted to hug or kiss her. Or both. All Qianna could do was smile and nod vaguely at all of their well wishes.

“Out of the way. Out. Of. The. Way! Let me in to give my granddaughter a welcome home hug!” a boisterous contralto voice decreed as a red bewigged beldame shouldered her way through the crowd to get to Qianna. “Well, look at you! My little Einstein looks fucking gorgeous! Come here and give your grandma a hug. I missed you, Kiddo.”
The next thing Qianna knew, two strong arms were wrapped around her neck and constricting her breathing like an anaconda attacking its prey.

“Hugging her to death is really not the best way to welcome her home, Deb,” Brian advised as he helped to peel the arms away.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, Honey. But I just missed you something awful,” Debbie apologized and then reached up to roughly wipe the smudge of red lipstick off Qianna’s cheek.

“Girl, can I just say, I LOVE the hair, with a capital love!” a tall lanky man with a huge gap-toothed smile announced from where he was standing behind Debbie’s left shoulder. “You look so elegant. Like Marilyn, only cuter. And younger of course.”

“Don’t encourage her, Honeycutt,” Brian ordered with his best frown directed Emmett’s way.

“Oh, pshaw! Don’t listen to him, Sweetie. We ALL know our Big Bad loves blonds even though he pretends not to. And don’t call me ‘Honeycutt’ or I’ll tell the girl all the rest of your secrets, Kinney.”

Brian made a show of holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender and slowly backing away from the group standing around Qianna.

“Personally, I love blonds,” declared a towering hunk of muscle-bound man-meat who came up behind Emmett, wrapped his arms around the man’s middle and bent down to nibble affectionately at the long, slender neck. “Especially ones that taste like sugar cookies.”

“That would be Aunt Lula’s spice rum gingersnaps, to be precise. I don’t make just plain old sugar cookies, dear,” Em insisted as he angled his neck further to the right so that Drew could have better access for his nibbling.

“I think I have to agree with Brian on this one,” said a short, dark-haired man with abundant laugh wrinkles lining his big brown eyes. “I don’t think you have the coloring to pull off blonde, Quinne.”

However, from the dissenting murmurs of those standing around examining her ‘new’ look, it was readily apparent that most of the group disagreed with this negative conclusion.
“What are you talking about, Michael? She seems to pull it off just fine to me,” insisted a trim, silver fox of a man. “You know, if anything, I think she looks better with the blond hair. It gives her a whole new . . . Something. Hmmm. I can’t put my finger on it, but you just look different somehow, Quinne. Your cheeks look ruddier - fuller even - and with the way your eyes light up when you smile like that . . .” Ted paused, apparently stretching his memory before the answer dawned on him. “You know who she reminds me of with the blond hair and all? She looks a lot like Ju . . .”

“Uh, Teddy, Hon, can you come help me finish setting the table,” interrupted a slim, younger, dark-blond man, who actually tugged Ted’s arm hard enough to pull him off balance before he could fully voice whatever he’d been about to blurt out.

“Oh. Yeah. Good idea, Blake.” Ted smiled sheepishly before letting himself be led off by his husband, presumably to do something that didn’t involve sticking his foot in his mouth.

“Personally, I would’ve expected fuschia or blue or something,” commented an auburn-haired boy that looked so much like a younger carbon copy of Brian Kinney it was uncanny.

“Gus!” Qianna shouted, reaching out to hug the youth who was not only the one person she should have wanted to meet the most but also the easiest of all of them for her to recognize.

“That’s exactly what I said,” Brian added with a smile for his two hugging children. “Purple or blue or something I could’ve handled, but blonde? I did not see that coming.”

“Hey, Sparky,” Gus whispered in Qianna’s ear as she clung to him a little more desperately than was probably necessary. “I missed you too, Kiddo.” Then, in a louder voice, he asked, “so, how was college? Got any tips for me for when I move into the dorms at PIFA?”

“Yeah, make friends with all your neighbors right away, because the walls are super thin and if you don’t get along with them, they’ll make your life miserable,” Qianna advised with a grin. “Oh, and Pops said I was supposed to try and talk you out of taking too much shit with you, cuz those rooms are super tiny and it definitely won’t all fit. I could barely make it with only a suitcase of stuff, and I was only there a summer.”

“Well, you can tell Pops,” Gus shot a patented Kinney glare at his father, “that I’ve got it covered. I have plans and organizational storage tools. So you can both just butt out already, kay?”
Brian snorted dismissively and shook his head at his son. Gus rolled his eyes so hard they almost disappeared back into his skull. Qianna laughed, watching the two Kinney men trying to out-Kinney each other. Yep, these two were EVERYTHING her sister had told her they would be. She was in heaven here in the midst of this huge, happy, comfortable family. And she was even more jealous that she had never had anything like this for her own childhood.

“Okay, let’s move the reunion over to the table already,” Debbie stepped in and ordered them all towards the kitchen. “I didn’t slave away over a stove all day making Sparks’s favorite three-cheese lasagne just to have it go cold while you all stand around and flap your gums in the living room. Everybody get their asses to the table. Lindz, can you grab the salad over there? Carl, you’re in charge of the wine, Honey. Everyone else just get the fuck out of the way so we can work here!”

The entire houseful of people immediately followed their matriarch’s orders, shuffling over to squeeze their huge numbers around a table that looked far too small to accommodate them all. Somehow, though, they made it work. Qianna was seated next to Gus, of course, the two of them teasing and poking elbows into each other’s middles as they playfully jostled themselves into place. Brian was on Qianna’s other side, looking on at his silly offspring with an indulgent smile. Michael was on Brian’s other side and his husband Ben was in the chair next to him. Then came Drew, Emmett, Ted and Blake, like four peas in a pod. Lindsey, Jenny Rebecca and Melanie were squeezed in on the far side of the table. And then came the empty chair for Carl, who was still pouring wine and therefore couldn’t sit yet. The final spot - the chair closest to the stove, of course - was reserved for Debbie, who was too busy handing around food to bother sitting. Even for a regular sized dining room this would have been a lot of bodies to try and accommodate, but for the relatively modest little kitchen it felt like a crowd.

Qianna LOVED it.

“So, Sweetie, tell us everything you did this summer,” the brunette woman that Qianna recognized as Gus’ second mother asked. “Brian, as usual, only told us that you were being your usual brilliant self and then told us not to bother you. But from what Gus added, it sounds like you had a pretty great time.”

“I did. It was the BEST summer of my life,” Qianna raved in a very un-Quinne-like manner.

“Wow! The best summer ever? What did you do, discover the cure for cancer or something?” Gus teased her with yet another insistent elbow to her ribs.

“No. But we DID design the robot that won the robotics competition - for which I did all the coding, of course. AND, I learned Python and created this sweet database of all the music for our
entire team, which I used to DJ a dance party that week. AND our team made a totally lit Rube Goldberg Machine which the Dean of the Engineering school said was the best he’d ever seen. He even offered to write everyone on our team letters of recommendation if we decide we want to go to school at Mines. AND we also did cool genetics stuff and epigenetics and chemistry and earth sciences and archeology and . . .”

“Shit, slow down, Speedy Gonzalez,” Brian joked as he passed the platter full of garlic bread to his overly-enthusiastic daughter. “They get the idea already, Spark. It was a STEM-kid’s dream summer.”

They all laughed and Qianna realized she was being way too Qianna-ish and needed to dial it down. “Yeah, well, it WAS pretty dope.”

“It sounds like it was an amazing camp,” Lindsey summed up for the whole family. “I’m glad you got the chance to experience all that, Honey. Now you have a better idea of all the opportunities out there that await you and you can figure out what you really want to concentrate on in High School and College. Maybe we’ll see if there’s something similar for JR to go to next summer.”

“As if . . .” Jenny Rebecca scoffed as she picked at the salad on her plate. “The only place I’m going next summer - like I’ve done every summer before, if you’ll remember - is gymnastics camp. I leave the science stuff to the brainiac over there.” She pointed with her fork towards Qianna. “My coach says I might even be able to qualify for Nationals this year if I really buckle down. That’s the only thing that matters. I don’t have time for a lot of boring shit like calculus.”

“Language, Honey,” Lindsey corrected, getting only an eye roll from her daughter, who went back to her salad. “You know we’re proud of you and your athletic ability, JR, but you can’t neglect your academic side either. We just want you to grow up well-rounded and have something to fall back on if gymnastics doesn’t pan out.”

Qianna thought Lindsey had a point. She didn’t think there weren’t that many people that made an actual living doing gymnastics - not unless you were absolutely top of the top, and judging by Quinne’s comments, JR didn’t rate THAT high - and if you didn’t have a plan for what you’d do after a gymnastics career, you’d be selling used cars for the rest of your life. But, whatever. It wasn’t her place to be advising her step-sister about her career options.

Debbie, who’d finally taken up her seat, obviously still wanted to hear about the Science Camp though - they’d all heard about JR’s gymnastics shit more than enough times - and turned to her youngest grandchild. “Brian told us you’d won a special award or something, Honey. What did you get?”
“It’s no big deal - the camp just offered an award for the best student in each weekly unit. I got the one for the Coding Unit. Oh, and our team also won for the Engineering week, but that was a group thing.” Qianna answered humbly, more interested in the delicious lasagne at that moment than anything else. “Mmmm. This is SO good! I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything so wonderful . . .”

“It’s the same lasagne Ma makes every family dinner,” Michael laughed at his niece with confusion. “You’ve had it, like, a thousand times, Sparky.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t had real food like this all summer, so I’m just extra appreciative, I guess,” Qianna covered her little slip up as best she could.

“Then you eat up, Honey,” Debbie directed, spooning another heaping helping onto the girl’s plate. “I knew I should have sent a care package or two to that place.”

“How exactly did you plan on sending lasagne through the mail, Deb?” Ben teased his mother in law affably.

And then the conversation drifted off into the hundred and one other directions that family dinner conversations usually take. Qianna, who was still a little overwhelmed by this crew, was glad to have the spotlight taken off her. She listened avidly to all the talk going on around her, smiling and laughing along, but not saying much herself. She just wanted to sit and soak in the family-ness. She loved the warmth and companionship and love that seemed to envelope this whole house. It was so different than her past with her father. For most of her life it had just been the two of them. Or worse, the two of them and one of the string of loser boyfriends her father had tried out. Never had she experienced this level of family, though. Quinne better be careful or else Qianna wouldn’t ever agree to switch back.

When everyone had been thoroughly stuffed to the gills by Debbie, the family was finally allowed to retreat to the front room. Qianna ended up squished in the corner of the couch with Michael taking the spot next to her. He immediately picked up a ratty spiral notebook that was waiting on the coffee table and opened it to a page in the middle before turning to his niece.

“I’m glad you’re back, Sparky. I need you to go over my latest comic for me and do your editing thing. I want the new laser ice ray weapon I designed for IceTina to be realistic, you know? My readers are such sticklers for that crap. You wouldn’t believe the negative reviews I get if they think the gadgets wouldn’t work in the real world. So, can you please read it over and tell me if it’s, like, at least reasonably plausible?”
“Sure thing,” Qianna agreed and took up the notebook.

To be honest, she’d never really been a huge fan of comic books. The storylines were generally too simplistic and didn’t hold her attention. Unfortunately, this one was even worse than most. And the rudimentary drawings were terrible. Quinne hadn’t mentioned anything about her Uncle Michael’s comic book hobby, so she didn’t know if this was just a rough draft or if he thought he could publish this stuff. If he did, he’d need a much better artist than whoever was drawing for him now. The inner artist in her desperately wanted to take out a pencil and fix all the wonky angles and the incorrect perspectives. But she contented herself with merely reading through the script and only commenting on the technical stuff - at least to the best of her knowledge, seeing as she wasn’t exactly an expert on lasers or anything.

The ensuing discussion took far too long and Michael got way too into talking about the details of his plot for her liking, but Qianna didn’t know a polite way to get out of the conversation so she was trapped. Thank goodness that Gus came over just when she was about to die of boredom, bringing her a bowl of ice cream and telling Michael his mother wanted him to help out in the kitchen doing the dishes. As soon as the comic book author was gone, Gus took up his seat and gave his ‘sister’ a confused look.

“Did you suddenly develop an interest in Mikey’s superhero shit over the summer or something?” Gus asked.

“Hardly. I just didn’t know how to get him to stop talking,” Qianna answered honestly.

“Why didn’t you just get up and walk away? It’s what the rest of us always do,” Gus advised, still looking at her funny.

“I was about to, but then you showed up. Thanks for saving me, Bro.”

“Hmmmm,” was all Gus said as he looked into his ice cream bowl thoughtfully and fell silent again.

“You seem quieter than usual tonight, Sparky,” Grandpa Carl declared as he took a place in the recliner next to them with his own small bowl of dessert clutched in his arthritic hand. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Qianna answered, realizing that she was being a lot less talkative and outgoing than
Quinne usually was - it’s just that she was so overwhelmed by all these new people and didn’t really know WHAT to say most of the time. “I guess I’m a little tired. I stayed up really late last night with my friends. It was the last night we had together, you know, so we didn’t want it to end. And then my roommate and I got up extra early so we could pack.”

“I think that’s MY cue to say goodnight and get my budding genius here home to bed,” Brian declared, standing up and putting the empty beer bottle he’d been sipping at on the table. “You two ready to go?”

Both Qianna and Gus nodded. QiQi offered to take Gus’ dish to the kitchen for him. Then they had to be hugged goodbye by everyone and Qianna was told all over again how glad they all were to have her home. Debbie had already packed up a huge bag of leftovers for them to take home, which made Quinne extra happy but caused Brian to grumble about carbs and calories under his breath. Gus didn’t say much, just took the bag from his grandmother’s hands and waited by the door.

“So glad you’re home, Sweetie. We really did miss you,” Debbie said for about the hundredth time before finally letting her go.

“I missed all of you too,” Qianna stated with a huge, sunshiney smiled beamed around at the entire group. “It’s good to be here finally.”

“Thanks for helping out with my comic,” Michael repeated, stepping up to say his own goodbyes. “I really appreciate it. I’m going to submit it to a new publisher next week. Hopefully we can increase our readership and your comments always make it better.”

“Anytime, Uncle Michael,” Qianna replied as politely as she could without pointing out how much she’d hated it.

“Thanks, Quinne! If you really mean it, though, maybe I’ll take you up on that offer and come by later in the week. I can show you the other stuff I’ve been working on!” Michael seemed really enthusiastic about her offer to help - enthusiastic enough that he couldn’t help himself and pulled her in for a huge bear hug. “Hey, did you shrink or something this summer?” he asked when she finally managed to get him to let her go.

“Huh?” she asked, momentarily caught off guard by the question.
“Yeah. You used to be taller when I hugged you, didn’t you?”

“I thought you wanted to go, Spark?” Brian interceded, thankfully, before she had to answer Michael’s awkward question.

“I do. I’m ready, Pops. Let’s go home.”

“Later, Mikey,” Brian said, offering his best friend a kiss goodbye and then waving to the rest of the group. “It’s been a slice, folks.”

They finally escaped to a chorus of ‘Byes’ from everyone inside, making their way to Brian’s Mercedes Benz GLE waiting at the curb. Gus seemed distracted and didn’t even argue when Qianna called ‘shotgun’. And when they got into the car Brian, who seemed to have had enough socialization for the day, immediately turned up the music and zoned out for the rest of the drive home. That was fine with Qianna, who wanted to just rehash the memories of the evening in her own mind and revel in her first night of true family fun.

The drive out to the country didn’t take long at that time on a weeknight, and a half hour later they were rolling into the garage at Britin. Despite the fact that Quinne had tried to warn her, Qianna was awed by the size of the house. It was this huge, sprawling, half-timbered, tudor-style mansion with a huge front entrance hall and two equally large wings to each side. No wonder it had its own name - the place was probably almost large enough to have its own zip code, judging by what Qianna could see of it in the dark. She wondered how much money Brian must have to be able to afford a place like this, even in Pittsburgh with its relatively low cost of living.

Brian helped her out by carrying her suitcase inside, so Qianna only had her messenger bag. Gus was toting an overnight bag of his own. They all three made their way into the back of the house and through the kitchen to the big front staircase.

“I’m beat, Kiddos,” Brian confessed as he dropped his daughter’s case at the foot of the stairs. “I’m going to go get an hour in on the stairmaster to burn off the damn pasta and then crash. You two have fun.” Then he turned to Qianna with a smile and added, “it’s good to have you home finally, Spark.”

“Thanks, Pops. I’m glad to be here.”

“You okay, Sonnyboy?” Brian asked his son who still hadn’t said a word since they’d got in the car at Debbie’s.
“Yeah. Night, Pops.”

“Night, Kiddos.”

Qianna was feeling a little tired herself, even though what she really wanted to do was explore the house. She figured she’d have time to do that tomorrow, though, after Brian was gone to work. Which would be better, because then she could have the whole place to herself. So it was probably best to just head to bed now herself. Assuming, that is, she could remember how to get to Quinne’s bedroom.

“Nite, Gus,” she said around a yawn that threatened to choke off her words.

Then she picked up the forgotten suitcase along with her carry on bag and started up the stairs. She took a right at the top landing and carefully counted the doors along the hall till she was reasonably sure she’d made it to Quinne’s room. When she twisted open the handle and found a room decorated with a familiarly feminine flair, she sighed with relief, assured she’d found the right place. It was a huge room, with it’s own attached bathroom, and of course it was decorated with Quinne’s comfortable yet modern taste. Qianna loved it at first sight. She was really going to love it here.

But she’d barely set the suitcase on the bed in preparation for unpacking when the door to her room opened again and, without bothering to knock, Gus barged in. Qianna was alarmed by the angry dark look on the boy’s face as he strode up to her, stopping only centimeters away and leaning down to glare directly in her face. Whatever he was about to say was obviously not going to be good.

“Who the FUCK are you and where’s my sister?” he hissed at her, the vitriol in his tone making up for the lack of volume in conveying exactly how furious he was.

“I . . . I . . . I don’t know . . . W-w-what are you talking about, Gus?” she stuttered, unprepared for how to answer this attack.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” he insisted, poking a finger into her chest with each word he uttered. “You’re a fucking imposter. Now, where the FUCK is my sister? She better not be hurt or anything or I’m going to beat the crap out of you before I call the cops.”
“Shit! How did you know?” was the first thing that came out of Qianna’s mouth, which only further infuriated her accuser, causing him to grab hold of her arm as if to pull her out of the room. “Stop. Just . . . Just hang on a minute. Please, Gus.” He didn’t relent a bit, still tugging her along even though she was trying to dig in her feet. “Gus! Stop already! I can explain. I promise. Just STOP!”

“You better fucking talk fast, because you’ve got two minutes.”

“Shit. Fine. Hold on, okay,” Qianna pleaded looking him earnestly in the eye until Gus finally relented and let go of her.

Qianna immediately reached into her bag and pulled out her tablet. A couple of taps and she had her contacts list opened, allowing her to initiate a video call to ‘Q1’. Luckily the call went right through and was picked up on the third ring.

Before Quinne could say anything, Qianna was talking. “We’ve got a problem. Everyone bought it except for ONE person,” she explained.

“Did you slip up and call Pops ‘Dad’ again?” the voice on the other end of the call asked.

“No! It’s not your dad. He and I got on great. It’s your brother.”

Qianna turned the tablet around so that Gus could finally see the face that went along with the voice, although he’d already halfway guessed by that point.

“Quinne? Is that REALLY you?"

“Of course it is, you dweeb.”

“See? That’s why I knew she wasn’t you - you NEVER called me by my name. You’re always giving me shit and calling me dweeb or asshat or jerkwad or worse,” Gus explained how they’d been found out.

“Damn. You mean I got caught because I was being too nice? That’s sucks,” Qianna griped, falling
back onto Quinne’s bed in a snit.

“Well, yeah. MY sister would never politely sit and listen to uncle Mikey babbling on about superheroes for twenty-five minutes. Plus, you didn’t give any of the uncles shit for making kissy face the whole night long or complain about Grandma Debbie pinching your cheeks or tease Pops about eating carbs after seven or . . . Well, anything you’d normally do,” Gus elaborated before hesitantly sitting down on the bed next to the doppelgänger. “So where exactly are you, Quinne? And who the hell is this? You didn’t clone yourself while you were at that camp or something, did you?”

Both girls broke out laughing at that unlikely supposition, their nearly identical peals of amusement giving Gus yet another reason to look quizzical.

“No, we didn’t clone ourselves, but you’re getting closer.” Quinne started to explain. “Gus, I’d like you to meet Qianna - our other sister and my fraternal twin.”

Qianna waved at him with a huge smile on her face. “Hi! Surprise!”

“What the fuck!” Gus was understandably incredulous. “Are you fucking pulling my leg? How the hell did this happen?”

“That’s a really, really, REALLY good question,” Qianna admitted. “We wanna know how it happened too. Which is one of the reasons why I’m here and Quinne is at my house in California.”

“Wait. This is real? You two are, like, twins?”

“Yep. We’ve got the DNA tests to prove it,” Quinne assured her disbelieving brother. “As for how, we’re not exactly sure. The best we can tell, it’s what’s known as heteropaternal superfecundation - that’s when two separate ova are fertilized by different fathers in the same pregnancy.”

“Hetero-what? You know I don’t speak science, Sparky. What does that mean in plain English?”

“It means,” Qianna stepped in, “That we have the same mother and were born at the same time but we’ve got two different fathers. Quinne’s father is the same as yours; Brian Kinney.”
“And Qianna’s father is . . . Can I get a drumroll please, QiQi?’” Qianna obliged by rattling her index fingers against the headboard of the bed. “. . . Justin Taylor!”

“No SHIT! Your dad is Justin Taylor? THE Justin Taylor? The animator? Seriously? That’s so fucking sweet!” Gus began raving at the news that the daughter of his idol was apparently, somehow, his newest sister, while the girls giggled in the background. “So you must be the camp roommate, right? We talked that one time a few months back. I never did get my autograph, you know.”

“Sorry. It kinda slipped my mind, what with plotting to switch parents and all,” Qianna apologized.

“Yeah, so, what’s up with that, anyway?” Gus asked.

“Well, this is what we were hoping . . .”

And the girls proceeded to enlighten their brother on the plan to uncover the mystery of Brian and Justin and the secret twin separation.


Chapter End Notes

11/2/18 - Oops, I was supposed to be writing on my new NaNo story today, but . . . Surprise! This chapter was just demanding to be written instead. *Sigh* I’m sooooo bad at multitasking. Oh well, I’ve got the whole weekend to catch up on NaNo, right? Enjoy! TAG
“Okay. I think it’s somewhere in the back of his closet here,” Gus explained as he started to dig through the odds and ends stored in the depths of Brian’s enormous walk-in closet.

Qianna joined him, pushing aside luggage and peeking into one shoe box after another. “I get liking shoes - I really do - but why buy them if you’re never even going to take them out of the boxes?”

“I think it’s because Pops just doesn’t have enough real hobbies. He’s got nothing to keep him entertained these days other than shopping. It’s not really about the shoes or the clothes at all. It’s just something to fill the void, you know?” Gus explained as he rifled through an old banker’s box filled with paperwork and then moved on when it clearly didn’t contain whatever it was he was looking for.

“Wait. I think I found it,” Qianna exclaimed as she came across another box that was about the same size as the shoe boxes but much fancier, with silver corner brads and a nameplate on the end that read ‘Sunshine’. “I don’t know what Sunshine means, but you said it was a box full of mementoes, and that’s what this seems to be.”

Gus took the box out of Qianna’s hands and led the way out of Brian’s bedroom, down the hall, and into his own room, where they could have some privacy for their snooping. He placed the box in the middle of his bed. Qianna climbed up to sit on one side of it and Gus sat on the other. He then carefully took the lid off and set it aside so they could both see what they were looking at. At first glance the stuff in the box seemed unremarkable. There were some photos, scraps of paper, some small trinkets and such - pretty much par for the course in a box of keepsakes.
“Yeah, this is the box I remember. I found it once when I was just a kid and I was snooping around looking for my birthday presents,” Gus informed his quasi-sister as they rifled through the odds and ends in the box.

Qianna seized on a stack of photos and began thumbing through them. Most were just random pictures of Brian and the gang, albeit with all of them looking much younger. From the looks of it, Brian and his buddies got up to a lot of trouble when they were younger. He had been pretty good looking when he was in his twenties, Qianna thought - not that Brian wasn’t still great looking, just more mature - which reinforced some of the comments and stories she’d heard about his wild youthful ways.

“Hey, I found one with my dad in it. Ha! OMG! Look at this! Was this a Halloween party or something?” Qianna held the photo out for Gus to see so they could laugh together.

The photo in question showed Brian along with five others, all dressed in eye-opening costumes.

“Sheesh, Pops, could those pants have been any tighter?” Gus giggled at his father's ensemble, which consisted of the tightest white-leather pants imaginable and a shirt that was equally tight and practically see through. “He looks like a pimp or something in that get up.”

“Yeah, and my dad looks like a total twink. Damn he was young.” Qianna shook her head over the red mesh crop top her father was wearing in the photo, exposing practically everything down to his low waist khakis.

“The rest of them look just as bad. I mean, I get Em dressing up as Jackie - he LOVES to dress up just about any time he can find an excuse - but even Uncle Ted is wearing something crazy. I mean, I just can not see him as a leather daddy . . . And Grandma Debbie in those glasses?”

“Who’s the other man in the picture? The one in the crazy purple hat?”

“I think that’s Grandma Debbie’s brother, Vic. He died back when I was just a baby, but I’ve seen lots of pictures of him. None like THAT though,” Gus answered, setting aside the picture and delving back into the box.

“Aha!” Qianna announced as she pulled out another photo, one that was paperclipped to what
appeared to be two separate wedding announcements. “Here’s the original of that black and white picture that Quinne found. This is the same as the one we saw online when we were doing our research. And here’s the wedding announcement proving our dads were, in fact, married.”

“That looks familiar,” Gus said, as he looked over QiQi’s shoulder at the picture showing two men dressed in black suits smiling at each other. “I think my Mom has a copy of that in an album somewhere.

“Huh. Look at this, though,” Qianna handed over the two wedding announcements. “They show two different dates about six months apart? Did they have TWO weddings or something?”

Gus looked at the two neatly printed announcements, both with similar designs, but each inviting the recipients to commitment ceremonies on different days. “That IS strange. I wish I hadn’t been so little back then and that I remembered more.”

“You should,” Qianna teased the older boy, holding up another of the photos she’d discovered, this one showing a preschool aged Gus, dressed in a baby-sized tux, holding up a blue satin pillow with two rings tied to it with ribbons. “It looks like you were their ring bearer.”

“Damn. Okay, so my memory sucks. Sue me,” Gus responded, taking the picture out of Qianna’s hands so he could admire his younger self while the girl continued to go through the pictures she’d pulled out of the box.

“Wow! Look at this one.” She held up a cropped photo of the two men, Brian standing behind Justin, holding him close to his chest, his mouth just millimeters from the younger man’s ear, as if caught in the moment before he whispered something to his younger lover.

“Your dad was so young there. What an odd couple they must have made. And I just can’t imagine my Pops actually DATING anyone, let alone a twink like your dad. I mean, even though I remember them together, it’s still amazing to see actual proof like that,” Gus exclaimed as he smiled at the evidence that the two men had been so close.

“Yeah. But they do make a gorgeous couple, don’t you think? Dark and light. And they’re so comfortable with each other - I don’t think I’ve ever seen my dad letting someone get that close to him outside of our home. He’s usually so standoffish in public, you know. I guess it’s because he has a reputation to maintain now, but still . . . Look at them together in this picture; you can almost feel the way they just seem to fit. I don’t think I’ve ever seen my Dad so relaxed with another man
as he is here.”

Gus wasn’t really listening to Qianna anymore though. He’d found something else in the box that had usurped his total attention. It was an envelope filled with yellowed and brittle old newspaper clippings. But the odd thing wasn’t that Brian had kept the clippings, it was that this envelope had been wrapped up in a long piece of cloth - cloth that turned out to be an elegant, white silk, scarf. He’d unwrapped the scarf and found the envelope inside before he’d really looked at the wrapping, but when he looked again, Gus could see that there were some brownish stains blotting the pure white of the scarf, which seemed even more odd than wrapping a packet of clippings with it. There was also one photo in the envelope.

“Look at this,” Gus directed, as he handed the photo showing their fathers dancing together while wearing formal wear, the back-lighting of the scene creating a dramatic aura for the picture that seemed to show the two men caught up in their own little world.

“That’s not from the wedding, is it?” Qianna asked, looking again at the other picture they knew was from the wedding. “No. It can’t be. Dad’s hair is much longer in the wedding pictures. He also looks really, REALLY, young here. Where was this one taken?”

Gus, who’d started in on the clippings in the envelope where he’d found the picture, gasped when he found Qianna’s answer. “It was Justin’s Senior Prom... Shit!... Did you know about THIS?”

He handed an old page of newsprint over to his new sister for her review, waiting nervously for her reaction to what he’d just uncovered. Qianna took the paper from him - when unfolded it seemed to be the entire front page of one of the local newspapers from almost twenty years earlier - and felt like she’d been punched in the gut all over again. Even though she’d read about the bashing on the internet when they’d first started their research into the dads, it still hit her hard to read this headline again:

‘Local Teen Attacked At High School Prom’.

A quick reading of the subheaders and the first couple paragraphs told the rest of the story pretty succinctly, reminding Qianna of the horror of it all. ‘Justin Taylor, a senior at St. James Academy, a local college prep school, was attacked by a fellow classmate after his significantly older, MALE lover showed up at the school’s senior prom. Taylor was allegedly assaulted and struck in the head with a baseball bat before Brian Kinney, the boyfriend in question, was able to stop the attack. According to police sources, the alleged attacker was in police custody and Taylor was still in the hospital, his condition serious enough that there was speculation that he might not make it’.
By all accounts - and it looked like Brian had saved clippings from several different papers - it was one of the most gruesome and premeditated hate crimes the state had ever seen. And the fact that it had been HER father who had been the victim, almost caused Qianna to keel over herself. It didn’t matter that she’s heard about it before; it would probably never get easier to read about such a horror.

“Yeah. Quinne and I found some of this stuff online a couple months ago. But . . . Damn . . .” she scanned each of the subsequent clippings as Gus handed them over to her, noting how the media had tracked her father’s progress and the criminal case, detailing Justin’s release from the hospital and continuing through the pathetic, unsatisfying, ending of the attacker’s trial. “Did your Pops ever tell you about this?” she asked Gus, who merely shook his head, looking like he was still in shock. “My dad has NEVER said a word about any of this to me either. None of it. I mean, he’s occasionally joked about an ‘accident’ that he had when he was young and how it tanked his career as a world-famous painter, but I never took it seriously. He’s famous enough for his computer animation work, so I never thought he was serious. And, yeah, he sometimes complains that his hand is acting up, but he’s never really said why it hurts. I just thought he was overdoing it at work or something. You know, like, carpal tunnel syndrome or something. I had no idea about any of THIS . . .”

They both took several minutes to read through the entirety of the press clippings that Brian had saved until they felt they had the entire story. It was heartbreaking. Poor Justin seemed to have barely survived, his recovery taking months, and based on the testimony given to the court, it was clear he had sustained permanent brain damage as a result of his injuries. Even worse, that creep, Chris Hobbs - the monster who’d attacked Justin simply for daring to dance with another man - had gotten off with nothing more than community service. It was an outrage. And it was apparently an outrage that Brian hadn’t forgotten either, seeing as he’d carefully kept all these clippings as well as what they could now tell was the blood-soaked scarf he must have been wearing the night of the prom.

“Even after all that, they were still together. They still loved each other. They still got married,” Qianna summed it up for them both. “So what could have possibly broken them up after they survived all THAT? It would have had to be something huge, right? But what?”

“Yeah. It doesn’t make any sense. Especially if they’d gone so far as to hire a surrogate to have a baby together. Which, from what I’ve heard my moms say, was pretty much a shock to everyone in the family,” Gus explained.

However, despite spending another fifteen minutes going through the rest of the items in the ‘Sunshine’ box, the kids couldn’t find anything that explained the men’s subsequent breakup.

“Nothing!” Qianna complained as she shoved the last of the scraps of paper back into the box and pushed the worthless thing away from her. “This just doesn’t make any sense. It’s all just a bunch
of dead ends."

“Well, we did learn one thing,” Gus added as he put the top back on the box and went to pick it up so he could return it to it’s hiding place in Brian’s closet. “We know that, whatever broke them up, Pops at least still loves your dad.”

“Huh? How do you get that?” Qianna asked, feeling like she must have missed something. “They split up me and Quinne, my dad moved 3,000 miles away, and as far as we know they haven’t spoken in over a decade. That doesn’t say ‘love’ to me.”

Gus held up the box and rattled it in his pseudo-sister’s face. “This says love.” When Qianna still looked lost, Gus explained further. “My Pops doesn’t do sentimentality. He doesn’t keep anything old. He throws out clothing after one season, refuses to keep leftovers, even donates books after he’s read them once. Hell, last week we got into an argument over him insisting that I throw out my favorite old hoodie - he got pissed that it’s all frayed and has a stain on the sleeve - but it’s from my freshman year on the track team and I love it, so I told him to back off. He said something to the effect of, ‘old shit just keeps old memories alive and you’re better off living in the moment’. So, don’t you see? The mere fact that he’s kept all this crap about your dad for, like, fifteen years, means he’s not over him. Not even close.”

Qianna wasn’t so sure about Gus’ analysis of the situation, but he obviously knew Brian better than she did. She did wonder if the same was true for her father. Justin was about to marry Hairy Alex after all, which didn’t bode well for Brian’s supposed hopes, if he was holding on to any. Although she knew that Justin didn’t really love Alex - he hadn’t ever truly loved anyone, she didn’t think - so maybe there was still something there? Or maybe Justin had simply been so hurt by whatever happened with Brian that he would never be able to love that way again.

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Speaking of Qianna’s Soon-to-be Yeti-in-law, Quinne was more than ready to be rid of the man, whether or not Justin was. Quinne had only known Alex for a little over twelve hours and was already prepared to kill him if that’s what it took. The troll was simply insufferable. She could find no redeemable qualities in him at all. She had absolutely no idea what Justin could see in the poseur, unless Alex was absolutely fabulous in bed, which seemed doubtful based on his overall selfishness.

He’d started in on her first thing that morning, as soon as Justin had left for work, and it didn’t seem like he planned to let up anytime soon. Quinne had just kissed ‘her’ dad goodbye and was about to sit down with a cup of coffee to catch up on her emails when Alex came rambling in, dressed in nothing but a pair of ratty old sweats, grabbed Quinne’s coffee cup out of her hands, and stole the toast she’d been making right as it popped up out of the toaster. He laughed at her, crumbs
spraying out of his mouth, when she called him out on it and demanded that he at least start a new pot of coffee since that had been the last cup. Then he'd just stood there, looking at her with this contemptuous smirk, dribbling even more toast crumbs down his bare, hairy chest. And, yes, it WAS as hairy as she'd expected. Yuck. Not that she had anything against bears, per se, but weren’t they supposed to at least be cuddly and warm and jovial? This guy didn’t have any of those features. He just had the hair.

Instead of fighting with him over the damn coffee, though, Quinne opted to remove herself from the situation. She went up to her own room, starting the shower so she could get ready for the day. But, just as she was about to get in, she heard the sound of a toilet flushing in the master suite and the water in her shower got scalding hot. She cursed under her breath, jumped out of the reach of the boiling spray and waited as patiently as she could until the water came back to normal temperature again.

She’d only barely made it into the shower the second time, and had just started to soap up, when it happened again. This time she got the full brunt of the superheated water before she could escape and her scream of pain was loud enough to ring throughout the house. In response, she heard laughter coming from down the hallway in the direction of Justin’s bedroom. That fucker! He was playing with her. And he obviously didn’t care that she could have been seriously hurt. Well, fuck him! Quinne decided there and then that she was going to take this fucker out and she didn’t care what the collateral damage might be. Justin would have to find someone else to marry, damn it. Hairy Alex had no idea who he’d messed with.

Quinne quickly dried off, rinsing off the soap as best she could in the sink because she wasn’t willing to risk the shower again, and then headed for Qianna’s computer. A half hour later she was armed with all the knowledge she’d need to make Alex’s life a living hell. It took her about an hour or so more to get everything ready, but she figured it was time well spent. Luckily, she’d been able to find most of the ingredients she needed in the house itself, which had been a bonus, allowing her to get started on her preparations right away.

She started off by harvesting a couple of the old, dried roses she’d seen in the garden, using her lab skills to carefully dissect down to the cotton-like cythilicus at the center of the rosehips and then steaming them to activate the chemicals that would make the fibrous little particles extra irritating. While that was doing it’s thing, she took the box of laxatives she’d found in the medicine cabinet downstairs to the kitchen and whipped up a quick batch of brownies with a special ingredient added. Then, while the brownies were baking, she took a quick trip down the block to the market on the corner, coming home with some mousetraps and some little firework-type things called ‘Pop-its’ that she thought might come in handy. By the time she got back to the house, the brownies were ready to come out of the oven. She quickly cut them up into nice-sized squares, put them all on a plate, covered it with plastic wrap and taped a note to the top of the wrapping that said, ‘QiQi’s Brownies - Please ask before eating’. She left the platter on the counter before going to check on her rosehip experiment, confident that Alex would NOT ask before taking a laxative-laden brownie.
The cythilicus was coming along nicely but still needed to be dried before it would be ready, so she set that aside in a warm place and proceeded with her other preparations. A peek out the window revealed that Alex was currently relaxing in the backyard by the pool so the coast was clear. She snuck into the bathroom of the master suite where she left a couple of the Pop-its on the rim of the toilet bowl, just under the little support legs that held up the seat. That ought to give the Yeti a bit of a surprise when he sat down, she thought. Almost as much of a surprise as the Mousetraps she’d already set in his boots, which would go off the minute he stuck in his toes. She decided she’d also do the same to the guest bath toilet on the first floor, just to be thorough.

Next, Quinne turned her attention to something she was even better at than dirty tricks - computer hacking. It took her less than five minutes to find Alex’s social media accounts and, just as expected, he hadn’t been smart enough to set up two-factor authorization or any other type of security protocols, making it a piece of cake to hack his accounts. By the time the bathing beauty brought his freshly tanned ass in from the pool an hour or so later, Quinne had managed to not only post several photoshopped pictures showing him in compromising positions, but had also trash posted on his behalf on all of his friends’ accounts. Quinne figured that, by nightfall, Alex would be a complete social pariah. And, because she was feeling extra nasty, she made sure to tag Justin on a post she’d made of Alex joking about how unimpressive his fiancé was in the sack. Let him try and explain his way out of that one. Finally, as her coup de grace, before she logged out, Quinne also made sure to change the associated email address on all the accounts to a random gmail address she’d made up and then changed all the passwords to ‘fuckyouasshole247’.

While Alex hit the shower - after having stolen a couple brownies as he came in from the pool; evidenced by the fact that he hadn’t wrapped the remainders up properly afterwards - Quinne popped downstairs and finished up her chemistry preparations, putting on the rubber dishwashing gloves before she handled the dried cythilicus. When dried, the fine rosehip filaments were practically invisible, not to mention a well known and insidious skin irritant. She proceeded to carefully sprinkle her homemade cythilicus itching powder inside the collar of Alex’s jacket, which was hanging on its customary hook by the back door, as well as all over the hoodie he’d left draped over the back of a kitchen chair and, for good measure, into the already mouse-trapped boots. She figured she’d hold onto the remaining itching powder for future use, thinking that it might be fun to put some into the cretin’s swimming trunks once they’d dried sufficiently.

And then she just had to sit back, wait, and enjoy the fun.

Her phone pinged just as she was finishing up her work for the morning, and Quinne accepted the call before heading back up to her room. “Hey, Sis? Any luck on your research efforts?”

Qianna’s voice answered from the other end of the call. “Nope. Gus and I searched all over the house this morning but we didn’t find anything that would explain why the dads broke up or anything about our mother. Gus suggested that, if there IS anything, it’s probably locked in your
Pops’ safe, which means we’ll never find it. The only thing we did find was a box of mementos your dad kept of my dad; Gus said it proved your Pops is still hung up on his ex-husband but I’m not sure. Other than that, though, I’m batting zero. How was your morning?”

Quine started to laugh maniacally, which actually sorta scared her sister.

“Um . . . You okay, Q?”

“Go check out Hairy Alex’s Instagram feed,” Quinne advised, giving Qianna the correct handle for the account and waiting while her sister checked the postings.

“OMG! . . . Shit! . . . Oh snap! Quinne, you naughty, nasty, evil little girl. What did the Yeti do to you to deserve that?” she cackled with laughter as she scrolled through the doctored photos, all of which were either demeaning or incriminating or both.

“Oh, that’s nothing. That ape picked the wrong girl to chase out of the shower with his juvenile toilet flushing trick this morning. He has no fucking idea how stupid it was to get on my bad side. I don’t get angry very easily but once I do, I never forgive and I never forget. By this time tomorrow, Hairy Alex will be ruing the day he was born,” Quinne threatened.

“You’re kinda scary sometimes; you know that, right?” Qianna commented. “And I totally love you even more now.”

“Damn straight I’m scary. But I’m not about to let an asshat like that get his claws into my sister’s dad. I’m with you 100% on this, Sis. Poor Justin deserves better than Hairy Alex and I’m just the girl to make it happen.”

“My shero!” Qianna sighed. “I almost wish I could be there to see exactly how you’re going to humiliate Alex.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take video and send it to you,” Quinne promised with a chuckle. “Just wait till the itching powder and the laxative brownies kick in - that should be a riot. Oh, and I booby trapped the toilets too, so when the runs do hit, he’ll get an extra surprise. How much you wanna bet he shits himself when the toilet seat explodes. Hahahahaha!”

The girls dissolved in laughter after that, spending the next ten minutes giggling their heads off.
Just about the time they were ready to end the call, though, there was a noisy commotion coming from the bedroom down the hall, so Quinne stepped out into corridor to see what was up, taking her phone with her. They made it in time to hear a loud popping noise, followed by a rather girly yelp, and then a crash as a something large fell, first against the wall adjoining the hallway and then to the floor. The howl of anger that followed fanned the flames of the girls’ amusement anew. They were both literally crying with laughter when they finally ended the call five minutes later.

It seemed like at least part of their plan - the part that called for Alex to become only an unpleasant memory - was well underway.

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**Homemade Itching Powder**.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 17 End Notes - So, yeah, I spent the entire day researching mean pranks. You got a problem with that? LOL. Thanks to ‘The Sno’ for all the ideas in your review - if I missed any, let me know and I’ll work them in later. Also, in case you ever want to make your own itching powder - not that I’m endorsing this at all, you understand, and if you do it’s all on you... - I added a link to the recipe at the end of the chapter. Thanks for bearing with me on this story while I concentrated on my NaNoWriMo2018 challenge - you’ll be happy to know that Sally and I made the 50,000 word goal and are well on our way towards turning that story into our second novel. But, now that I don’t feel so pressured to work on that one to the exclusion of everything else, I’m going to try to trade off writing both this story and Stylite in turns. Wish me luck. TAG (the girl who hates to multitask).
Chapter 18 - You Know Your Father.

“Hey, Moms. Got a minute?”

“Always for you, Lambskin,” Lindsey replied via the speaker of the phone that Gus had set down on the middle of the coffee table.

“Mom! I’m about to turn eighteen in less than two weeks. Don’t you think it’s time to get rid of the ‘lambskin’ thing?” Gus complained.

“Never!” They could hear Lindsey laughing. “Even when you’re fifty and I’m eighty, you’ll still be my little lambskin.”

Qianna had to put a hand over her mouth to stifle the giggles that comment engendered. Gus actually blushed, which didn’t help with the hilarity level. Parents were so embarrassing sometimes.

“Whatever,” Gus rushed on to try and distract everyone. “Anyways, I didn’t call to talk about pet names. I wanted to ask . . . Um . . . So, did you know that Quinne’s summer camp roommate knows Justin Taylor?” There was a ‘huh’ from Gus’ phone indicating Lindsey had not known that fact, so he continued. “Yeah. And she’s going to get me an autograph or something, but she was surprised that I knew him. I told her how he and dad had dated back when I was younger . . . But that got me wondering about why they broke up. You never told me what happened.”

“I don’t think anyone really knows, Honey,” Lindsey responded. “One day everything was fine and
the next it was over. Of course, we were all still living in Toronto back then, so we missed most of
the drama. But from what I heard, the family didn’t even know Justin was gone till after he’d
already left town. Your dad took it pretty hard, fell off a cliff and disappeared for about two weeks,
and by the time he’d resurfaced after his bender, that was that - Justin was history and your father
ordered us not to ask about it, so we didn’t.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense,” Gus argued with Qianna nodding agreement at him in the
background. “Weren’t they married or something? I have vague memories of being a ring bearer
for their wedding, right? That means they must have been serious about each other. How did they
just break up, over nothing, and nobody ever ask what happened?”

“You know your father, Gus. He’s never been big on talking, especially about things that really
upset him. He’s also incredibly stubborn, so if he doesn’t want to discuss something, he simply
won’t. Whenever I’d try to press him, he’d just physically leave, and then I wouldn’t see or hear
from him at all for weeks. It was just easier not to push, I guess.”

“But didn’t anyone try to talk to Justin? From what little I remember about him, he seemed like he
was a lot more open than dad,” Gus insisted, pressing for whatever additional information he could
get.

“Like I said, Honey, we were up in Toronto so I didn’t know anything about what was happening
until weeks later. And I did try to contact Justin, but he ignored my emails. I admit, I was a little
hurt by that and maybe didn’t put all that much effort into following up with him. I’d thought we
were friends, but then he just seemed to cut all ties from everyone,” Lindsey explained further.
“Personally, I always thought it was the promise of a new job that lured Justin away. He’d worked
in California for a few months a couple of years earlier and even talked for a while about going to
New York to pursue his art career, so it wasn’t a big surprise to anyone that he might take a full-
time job doing animation work in California. And it wasn’t like your dad could just pick up and
leave, not with Kinnetik here and all. Justin, on the other hand, was so young and had his whole
career ahead of him back then. It made perfect sense for him to do whatever he had to do to
advance himself and his art. I can’t blame him - I would have probably done the same thing if I’d
had his talent - I only wish he hadn’t felt like it was necessary to cut us all out of his life to do it.”

“But wasn’t that about the time that Pops had Quinne? Doesn’t it strike you as odd that my dad -
the guy least likely to commit to anything - would decide to have a kid right after breaking up with
his husband? You don’t think that had anything to do with Justin leaving, do you?”

“Oh, no. That’s not Justin’s style at all. Justin loved kids. He used to practically beg us to babysit
you and J.R. He used to call it ‘getting in his baby fix’.” You could hear the fondness in Lindsey’s
voice when she recounted that particular memory. “In fact, I suspected at the time that having
Quinne was your dad’s last gasp attempt to get Justin back. But, apparently, it didn’t work, and the
lure of a Hollywood job was stronger than a baby and a life of domestication in The Pitts.”
Something about that explanation still didn’t ring true to either Gus or Qianna, but since it didn’t seem like they’d get anything more than speculation out of Lindsey, Gus let the matter drop and quickly ended the call with his mother.

“Well, so much for getting answers from her,” he groused and flopped back deeper into the couch cushions in defeat.

“I just don’t buy it,” Qianna agreed with her brother. “First of all, I don’t see your Pops being the kind who’d try to blackmail his partner into staying by having a kid. And secondly, my dad wouldn’t leave just to take another job. Not the way he did - cutting off all contact with EVERYONE back here at the same time. My dad isn’t spiteful like that. And, if what he’s doing for Alex with this stupid wedding is any gauge, he’d bend over backwards for any man he really loved, including rearranging his career plans for him.”

Gus nodded along with her conclusions. “Yeah, I agree. Plus, the Justin I remember wouldn’t have just abandoned all of us for a mere job. There had to be a lot more to whatever happened.”

Before they could discuss the matter further, though, Qianna’s phone pinged to alert them to an incoming message. She picked up the device, looked at the text, and immediately broke out laughing. When Gus demanded to know what was so funny, she read the message aloud to him.

Quinne: ‘I think the mousetraps might have been overkill.’

“Uh oh. Sounds like she got caught,” Gus worried, grabbing the girl’s phone and tapping at it until the phone rang through to his sister in California. “You got caught, didn’t you.”

“I’m afraid so,” Quinne responded, regretfully. “I probably would have gotten away with the laxative brownies - the idiot ate even more this afternoon, by the way, despite already having the runs - and even the fireworks on the toilet, because they basically disintegrate when they explode, leaving no evidence, but the mousetraps . . .”

“Dad is not amused, I take it?” Qianna asked.

“Definitely not,” Quinne answered, obviously a little worried but not at all repentant. “You dad came home from work, found the troll huddled on the toilet moaning, and got all uber-worried. I tried to intervene but he insisted on taking the loser to the emergency room. Unfortunately, that’s
when he discovered the mousetraps in his shoes.” Neither Gus nor Qianna could stop themselves from laughing a little at that image. “Naturally, there wasn’t any other explanation for those being in his shoes other than me putting them there, so I got THE LOOK and was told that Dad would deal with me when he got home. I’m not sure if they’ve twigged onto the cause of the diarrhea yet or not, but since Alex was wearing the jacket I spiked with my special, homemade itching powder when he left, they should be dealing with that by now too.” They all had to pause a moment to get their hilarity under control at that point. “So, how tough of a disciplinarian is your father, after all, QiQi?”

“Don’t worry. He’s a total marshmallow,” Qianna reassured her naughty sister. “He’ll just sit you down and lecture you for a while, making you feel like shit because of how much you disappointed him, but that’s pretty much it. Maybe some extra chores or something. Piece of cake.”

“Well, as long as he doesn’t make me clean up the bathroom that Hairy Alex stunk up all day, I’m good with that. Who’d have thunk that the combo of an exploding toilet seat AND laxative brownies could cause that much of a mess, huh?” she snickered nastily and the other two joined her again.

“What about all the social media posts? I bet they haven’t even seen that stuff yet,” Gus posited.

“Nope. Alex has been too busy communing with the porcelain god all day,” Quinne assured them.

“Alex deserves all he got and more,” Qianna assured them both.

“Agreed,” Quinne spoke up. “I’m just afraid that my little stunts might backfire. I think your dad feels so sorry for the moron that he’s probably going to overlook the part about how Alex started all this with the shower thing this morning. He’s just too nice of a guy, you know?”

“Exactly! Which is why we still can’t figure out why the dads broke up,” Gus added. “Qianna and I just got off the phone with my mom. Her explanation was that Justin simply left dad - knowing that there was at least one baby on the way - for a better job in Cali. I mean, come on. That’s not Justin. Or, at least, not how I remember Justin.”

“No way. This guy is so fucking sweet he practically gives you cavities,” Quinne echoed her brother’s opinion. “Justin wouldn’t have left when he did just for some job. Not when they were about to become dads. I don’t see it.”
“Unfortunately, that means we still don’t know the real reason they split up or the reason behind us being split up either,” Qianna summed up the situation. “And I really don’t know who else to ask. We might have to just give up and ask the dads straight out.”

“Still no word from that other cousin?” Quinne asked, referencing the one other hit they’d got off the DNA service.

“Nope. And I’m assuming you didn’t get a response from our mother either?”

“Afraid not. If that Devon guy really did forward our contact info to her, I suppose this means she’s not interested in talking to us. Which sucks,” Quinne complained.

“Well, I’ll try my contact again and see what happens and maybe you can try Devon back too?”

“Maybe. Assuming I’m still allowed access to my computer after your dad and Alex get back from the hospital and I get grounded. Although, even then I won’t regret it. That nasty little prick needs taken out and I won’t rest till he’s gone.”

They were all laughing at the righteous viciousness of Quinne’s tone when the door opened and Brian sauntered in, interrupting the call. “Well, what’s this? The ‘All My Children’ hour?” he asked with his usual smirk.

“Hey, Pops!” three voices said all at the same time - two in person and one via phone - and then the two present in the house also yelled a synchronized, “Jinx!”

“Ha ha! Got you!” Qianna crowed happily to ‘her’ brother. “Now you can’t talk till someone says your name.”

“Bullshit. I got YOU!” Gus countered.

“I wish you’d both shut up!” Quinne joked from her end of the call.

Brian looked askance at the phone until Qianna offered an explanation. “That’s my roommate from camp. We were just consoling her. She’s about to get grounded for playing a prank on her dad’s
evil finance.”

“Ah! The mysterious, QiQi, I presume?” Brian surmised. “Well, if you need help with pranks, you’ve come to the right place. These two are experts on that subject.”

“You still haven’t forgiven us for that time we filled the sugar bowl with salt, have you, Pops?” Gus teased. “You should have seen his face when he dumped half the bowl into his coffee and then took a huge gulp. Best April Fools Day ever!”

“You are not too old to still be grounded, either, young man,” Brian warned, although anyone could tell that he wasn’t serious. Then he turned his attention back to the supposed stranger on the phone and advised, “but I doubt a couple of pranks are going to be enough to get rid of this loser. That is the plan, right? You’re trying to tank this guy’s wedding?” The nods all around told Brian he was on the right track. “Well, like I told Quinne - you should talk to Emmett. If he doesn’t know how to ruin a wedding, nobody does.”

“Excellent idea!” Quinne enthused from her end of the phone, before she remembered that she wasn’t supposed to know who Emmett was. “I’ll take whatever help I can get. If this ‘Emmett’, or anyone else for that matter, knows how to get rid of Hairy Alex, I’ll be forever grateful. Thanks, Mr. Kinney.”

For about half a second, it looked like they might have goofed. Brian looked down at the phone, his head cocked to the side, as if confused. Gus and Qianna immediately worried that hearing Quinne’s voice - and her very Quinne-ish responses - might have given away their masquerade. It had been stupid of them to think that a father wouldn’t recognize his daughter’s voice. And that ‘Mr. Kinney’ seemed to have done it.

Before Brian could overthink it, though, Qianna decided to act. “Well, I was just about to go pack a bag to go over there for our usual pedicure and movie night, so I can ask Aunty Em for you, QiQi. I’ll call you back if he has any good ideas. Okay?”

“Sounds good. Later!” Quinne signed off and the phone screen faded to black.

“I better get going too,” Gus stood up at the same time as Qianna. “I’m meeting some friends at the movies tonight. Bryce and Glen are both leaving for college this weekend so it’s probably the last time I’ll see them for awhile. But I’m not sure what time I’ll get home, so I figured I’d crash in town with the moms and leave you to your wild ways for the night, Pops.”

“Ah, yes. My wild ways. A stud’s job is never done,” Brian responded with a vague half-smile.
Qianna worried about the somewhat unenthusiastic tone to Brian’s comment but was happy that it seemed Brian had been distracted from wondering about Quinne - at least for the moment - and decided to make good her own escape while she could.

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While Qianna was having a great time eating pizza and picking out toenail polish with Emmett, over on the left coast her sister was not having nearly as good of a time.

“You go on up to bed, Babe, and I’ll be there in a minute to make sure you’re comfortable,” Justin advised, ushering Alex into the house as soon as they returned from their trip to the ER.

Quinne had heard the car driving up, but refused to go hide from the consequences of her actions, so she stayed put in the kitchen awaiting whatever the fall out might be. Watching the solicitous way that Justin was fawning over Alex was more than enough punishment for her, she thought. The only thing worse was seeing the way Alex kissed up to Justin and milked him for every last drop of sympathy. Sheesh, you’d think that the guy had just recovered from the plague or something, not that he’d been a greedy fucker who scarfed down too many stolen brownies and had to spend a few hours on the toilet as a result.

“Thanks, Hon. You’re so good to me,” Alex cooed as Justin helped him remove his jacket. “But could you please bring me up something warm to drink too? Maybe some tea or something to make my tummy settle down?”

“Of course. How about some camomile?” Justin offered and Alex smiled at his fiance with this simpering look in his eyes that made Quinne want to barf.

“Thanks, Babe. Love you,” Alex chimed.

“Love you too,” Justin replied, leaning in to leave a quick kiss on Alex’s cheek.

Which is why Justin didn’t see that, over his shoulder, Alex smirked nastily at Quinne while he pretended to submissively accept the kiss. By the time Justin had stepped back again, the belligerent look had been wiped away and replaced with the annoyingly schmaltzy smile that the hypocrite always gave Justin. It was infuriating. She was relieved when Alex finally made his departure, pretending to drag himself up the stairs to the bedroom while Justin turned back to
“... manipulative, conniving, underhanded, little bitch...” she was still muttering under her breath as Alex disappeared around the upstairs landing.

“Enough, Qianna!” Justin rounded on her. “I don’t know WHAT has gotten into you, but I won’t put up with this any longer. You could have done some serious damage with that trick you pulled. And, yes, we know about the brownies and the fact that you poisoned them. No wonder poor Alex has been sick as a dog all day. How could you do something like that?”

“It’s not like I forced him to eat them, dad,” Quinne argued defiantly. “I put a note on the plate saying NOT to eat them without asking me first. See?” She pointed to the almost empty platter of brownies waiting on the counter where the sticky note was plainly visible. “If he’d asked me, instead of stealing them like the pig he is, I could have told him they shouldn’t be eaten. Not that he’d listen to me - he’d still take them just to spite me because he’s a total ass - but that’s not my fault.”

“Qianna...” Justin huffed an exaggerated sigh as he looked at his wayward daughter. “This has to stop. Seriously. You have to let go of this grudge against Alex, Honey. I’m going to be marrying him in just a couple weeks and I need you two to somehow figure out how to get along. Okay? Please?”

“I didn’t start it, Dad. He’s the one that chased me out of the shower this morning by intentionally flushing the toilet over and over until I was practically scalded. I was just returning the favor.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t intentional, Peanut.”

“Actually, it was. I heard him laughing as he flushed the second time,” she insisted adamantly. “And that’s not all. He’s never been nice to me. He’s always doing mean stuff, just not when you’re looking. Why can’t you see what a total jerkwad he is? He’s just ACTING like he loves you, Dad. He’s playing you. He’s... Well, he’s an asshole and a creep and that’s the best I can say about him.”

“What is with you, Qianna? When did you start cursing like a sailor? I know I taught you better,” Justin wrongfully focused on that one slip up rather than on the underlying problem with Alex and that only made Quinne more angry.
“That’s it? You’re going to just ignore what I told you about him attacking me first and lecture me on my language? Really?” an insolent Quinne replied, going on the offensive, because she truly had had enough and was getting pissed off. “Focus here, Justin! This man is using you and all you can see is that I’m cussing? He’s no good for you. He’s a gold-digger. And he’s AN ASS! You need to cut bait and get rid of him NOW before you regret it,” she ordered, too angry to realize that she was completely out of character by that point.

“Qianna Lea Taylor! That’s more than enough. You will NOT talk to me like that!” Justin finally betrayed some temper of his own. Pointing to the stairs he added, “go to your room, right now! I’ll deal with you after I’ve made sure that Alex is okay. And, just so you know, there will be consequences for this bad behavior, so don’t make any plans, because you’re going to be grounded.” When she still didn’t back down, he added, “till you’re eighteen.”

Quinne stared her ‘father’ in the eyes for half a minute more, challenging him silently, but soon realized that she wasn’t going to win this round and gave up. She stomped off, heading up the stairs to her room, still unrepentant. She was angry enough that she didn’t even say a word when she noticed Justin grabbing Alex’s hoodie from the back of the kitchen chair - the one she’d added the itching powder to - presumably to take it, along with the tea, up to his poor, ailing finance. Fuck them both. If Justin was happy letting himself be manipulated by an opportunist like Alex, then he deserved what was coming to him.

So much for her one job of trying to break up the wedding; it seemed like she’d only driven the two men closer.

Qianna was going to kill her.

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Chapter End Notes

12/4/18 - How much do we HATE Alex? Huh? Poor Justin who just doesn’t see what this loser is doing, right? Maybe Em will be able to help . . . TAG
Chapter Notes

Qianna gets to have a girl's night with Aunty Em but will she get the info and help she needs while there? Read on to see. Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 19 - Time To Spill.

“Okay, time to spill, Girlfriend. I want to know EVERYTHING about the boys at that summer camp of yours. Any hotties? Or were they all notties?” Em pried as they sipped at the virgin strawberry daiquiris that he’d whipped up for them while they waited for their toenails to dry.

Listening to Emmett’s way with words, Qianna thought she loved him even more than she’d suspected she would. She also loved the watermelon toenail polish job Aunty Em had given her. She took another sip of her fruity drink, looked down at her pretty toes and sighed with happiness. This was the life.

Of course, she felt a little guilty that, while she was in Pittsburgh having a good time and enjoying all the ‘family’ she’d never had growing up, her poor sister was trapped in California dealing with the likes of Hairy Alex. She didn’t want to go back there. Not with the prospect of having Alex as her new step dad. Not when she could be here, with Gus and Brian and all of these other fun, accepting, warm people. But it did make her even more determined to do something to fix things so that she and Quinne could be together. Maybe there was some way she could convince her dad to move back to The Pitts so she wouldn’t have to give up all her new friends?

“So? . . .” Em prodded, bringing her back to the there and then. “Spill, Girl!”

“Well, there was this one boy - Chase - he took me out for coffee a couple of times,” Qianna confided dreamily . . . and then remembered that she was supposed to be Quinne and added, “there was also this girl named Christa who was pretty hot. So, I don’t know, you know?”

“Ooooo! I like this whole ‘open to anything’ vibe you’ve got going there, Q! Way to be all bi-visibility and whatnot,” Em gushed approvingly. “Anything you’d like to confess about either
option? Hmmm? You know I love a good summer camp romance story, right?”

Qianna giggled at the campiness of the man as he waggled his eyebrows at her. “Oh yeah? Well, you first then. You tell me about your first summer camp romance and then maybe I’ll trust you with mine,” she teased.

“Oh, Honeychild, we were too poor for summer camp back when I was a kid,” Emmett waved her off as if his confession was nothing. “Unless you count that one summer when I was nine when my daddy lost his job and we had to live in a tent behind Uncle Ennis’ barn. That was sorta like camping, right?”

“That’s . . . terrible. I’m so sorry . . .” Qianna was taken aback by this tale of woe and her empathy level instantly shot through the roof.

“Oh, pish! Don’t worry your head over it, Sweetie. That’s water under the bridge. And, since I didn’t know better back then, it didn’t really bother me all that much. At least it was in the summer when the weather was nice, right?”

“Right . . .”

Just then Qianna’s phone vibrated to let her know she had a new text message which thankfully distracted her from Emmett’s childhood woes, reminding her that she had woes of her own.

Quinne: ‘Sorry, but your dad says you’re grounded till you’re eighteen and he’s still gonna marry the Yeti . . .’

“Damn!” she complained as she frowned at the text.

“What’s wrong, Sweetie?” Em asked.

“Oh, my friend in California got in trouble and is being grounded,” Qianna explained briefly but then smiled when she remembered what she’d been planning to talk to Emmett about. “Hey, maybe you can help us, Em. We need an Anti-Wedding Planner.”
“An Anti-Wedding Planner? I’m not sure that’s up my alley, Hun. I usually put the weddings together not ‘anti’ them.” Emmett looked confused. “What’s the problem?”

Qianna picked up the bowl of popcorn that had been waiting on the nearby coffee table and munched a couple of kernels while she formulated what she was going to say before speaking aloud. “So, my friend’s dad is engaged to be married to this total loser. He’s horrible, Em. And a total gamer who’s just after my . . . I mean, my friend’s . . . dad. She was dreading going back there all summer and now, she’s only been back there two days, and has already got into it with the Yeti . . .”

“The ‘Yeti’?” Em interrupted, chuckling at the name.

“That’s what we call him,” she explained, laughing a little herself, “because he’s extra hairy and kind of a monster and mean and gross and we totally HATE him, you know?” Emmett nodded sympathetically. “But, anyway, The Yeti tried to scald her in the shower this morning, so she retaliated by baking a batch of laxative-laced brownies - which he stole and scarfed down, of course - and then he got the runs so bad that her father took him to the hospital - which was totally unnecessary, right, but the prick had to ham it up - and now her father feels sorry for the twerp and is mad at HER and she just got grounded for, like, forever, and now it’s all hopeless.”

“Wow! You said all that without taking a breath - I’m impressed,” Emmett kidded her, trying to lighten the mood, which had turned dark almost as soon as Qianna had started talking about Alex. “So, let me get this straight. Your friend wants to try and ruin her father’s upcoming wedding? I don’t see how that’s going to help matters. Won’t she just get into even more trouble?”

“We don’t want to ruin the wedding. We want to STOP it altogether,” Qianna insisted, setting aside the popcorn so she could grab Em’s hands and implore him more strongly. “Alex is all wrong for him. He doesn’t love him. He just wants ‘stability’, whatever the hell that means. I . . . I mean my friend . . . just wants more for him than a lukewarm relationship that has no real substance. You know?”

“Gee. It sounds like you . . . I mean your friend . . . is really upset about his Honey,” Emmett replied, obviously catching Qianna’s slip ups but hopefully not understanding why she’d slipped up. “But don’t you think you’re getting a little too invested in this? Even if your friend doesn’t like her dad’s fiance, it’s not really about HER, is it? It’s definitely not up to you. It’s about what’s going to make her dad happy, right? And if he wants this Yeti guy - even if your friend doesn’t understand it - it’s not up to her to make that call.”

“But that’s the thing, Em - The Yeti DOESN’T make him happy. Not really. Not like he was . . .” She had almost goofed up and blurted out, ‘when he was with Brian’, but caught herself at the last second. “Not like he was in prior relationships he’s had. We think he’s just so lonely that he’s
willing to settle, you know, and it’s wrong. We have to find a way to stop the wedding. At least for a while. If he had a little more time to think about it, we could probably talk some sense into him. That’s what my friend thinks, at least.”

“Fine. But what do you expect ME to do about it? I don’t even know this guy or his Yeti.”

“The Yeti’s name is Alex Ramsey. He fancies himself to be some kind of tech guru, but I can code better than him and I’m only twelve,” Qianna explained, looking up at Emmett with desperation in her eyes. “And I don’t know if there’s anything you can do - Pops is the one who suggested I talk to you. He said you’d had enough experience trying to save weddings that you’d know what would stop one too.”

“I should have known Mr. ‘Marriage is just an Outdated Heteronormative Farce’ was behind this,” Em griped. “Leave it to Brian to get involved in a crazy plan to destroy someone else’s wedding . . .”

“Em!”

“Sorry, Honey. But we all know your dad’s position on marriage and it’s not nearly as life affirming as his other usual positions . . .” When Qianna continued to glare at him, the big queen relented. “Whatever. Okay, I’ll look into it for you. I’m not promising anything, mind you, but I’ll reach out to some contacts I have in the Golden State and see what they say. If this wedding was thrown together at the last minute, like you claim, perhaps everyone would benefit by a tiny delay and I can probably even get them a price break on the cancellation fees.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Aunty Em. You’re the best!”

“Yes, I am. But let’s wait and see what I can find out before you start declaring that fact to the world, huh?” The party planner smiled at his wayward and meddlesome niece. “I just hope you know what you’re doing, Q, because this could really backfire.” Qianna simply shrugged, clearly not willing to concede to Em’s wiser warnings. “Okay. So, where’s this shindig supposed to happen?”

“Unless he’s bitched his fiancé into changing the venue again, the wedding is supposed to happen at the Hayes Mansion in San Jose, two weeks from tomorrow,” Qianna answered readily enough.

“Fancy! And expensive,” Em opined and Qianna nodded knowingly. “Well, I’ll let you know what
I find out tomorrow, Sweetie. But for now, let’s forget about The Yeti and watch our movie, ‘kay?"

QiQi nodded and Em jumped up, running over to the bookcase next to the TV and pulling out two DVD cases, then spinning around to hold them up for his niece’s inspection.

“So you ready to get our Princess on? I’ve got Frozen or Mulan. What are you in the mood for?”

Qianna decided all over again that she REALLY loved Aunty Em.

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Because of the time difference, it was almost 1:00 am her time when Qianna got the next text from Quinne. Em had already fallen asleep and was snoring inelegantly next to her on the sofa, leaving the younger princess in peace to scroll through her social media feeds. She posted a pic of her perfect toenails to her Instagram and then waited to get the reactions from all of her followers - which were, of course, resoundingly in favor of watermelon toes. Natch.

Quinne: ‘The itching powder has kicked in. Hairy thinks its a reaction to the meds he was given at the ER for the diarrhea. Justin is taking him back to the ER. Bwahahahah!’

Qianna stifled her chuckle and immediately typed back: ‘You are soooooo bad! But this time, just play dumb if dad asks you about what happened. Don’t admit to anything. They have no proof.’

Quinne: ‘Good advice. Wouldn’t want to get us grounded for any longer than absolutely necessary.’

Qianna: ‘You DO realize that as soon as we’re found out for THIS... we’re going to be grounded for life, right?’

Quinne: ‘Well, that was always a given. So, I guess if we’re already going to be in trouble, we might as well have fun with it.’
Qianna: ‘Agreed.’

Quinne: ‘I miss you, BTW. Is that cray-cray? It’s only been two days.’

Qianna: ‘Same. But it feels like a week, right? Besides, I’d rather be having a sleepover with you than Em - he snores really loud...’

Quinne: ‘Yeah. Been there... Did he fall asleep in the middle of the movie again?’

Qianna: ‘Yep. Poor guy. It must suck to get old. And he was so excited to watch Frozen, too.’

Quinne: *multiple laughing face emojis* Don’t worry - he’s seen it about a hundred times. It’s his favorite. Uncle Drew had to put his foot down and forbid Em to watch it anymore so he only gets his Frozen Fix when he can talk me into watching it with him. Drew would never deny ME the chance to watch a movie - even a Disney Princess Movie - so I’m basically Em’s beard in the movie arena. Aunty Em gets to watch Disney movies and blame it on me and nobody’s the wiser. It’s our dirty little secret. Well, that and the toenail thing.’

Qianna: ‘Awww. That’s so cute. But, I gotta tell you, Sis, I’m falling hopelessly in love with your family. I’m not sure I want to trade back. Em is hilarious and so much fun to hang out with, your dad is even more adorable in person than online, and Gus is such a sweetheart... Thank you again for letting me have a taste of this. I’m so jelly of you.’

Quinne: ‘You totally owe me, girl. You DEFINITELY got the better end of this deal. I’m just coolin my heels in your bedroom waiting for your dad to come back and decide my punishment. It sucks.’

Qianna: ‘I’ll owe you for the rest of our lives. Whatever you want, it’s yours.’

Quinne: ‘I WANT us to be together again. This separation is for shit. How do we fix this? Seriously! We can’t do this two coasts thing. I want to be home but I want you there too.’

Qianna: ‘I was just thinking the same thing myself. And you know, going through all those pictures of our dads together got me thinking . . . Do you think there’s any possibility of getting them back together?’
Quinne: ‘That’s a pretty tall order. Whatever broke them up was enough to drive Justin to the other edge of the continent. What makes you think they’d be at all interested in resurrecting ancient history?’

Qianna: ‘I don’t know. Call it intuition. But if you’d seen those pics of them together . . . They were so HAPPY together, Q. I could see it in my dad’s eyes. And your Pops’ too. They looked so perfect. I just . . . I want something like that for my dad now, you know. I want him to be that happy and complete. I’m sick and tired of him going from useless boyfriend to useless boyfriend, always unsatisfied, always lonely no matter what . . . He NEEDS what he had with your dad again.’

Quinne: ‘You won’t hear any argument from me. My Pops has been playing the Super Stud for way too long anyway. I don’t even think he’s that into it anymore. If you ask me, it’s time for him to settle down. And if that means you and your dad get to move back to Pittsburgh so we can all be together, all the better. I just don’t know how we can work it. Hairy Alex has his claws pretty fucking deep into Justin’s hide at this point. Justin doesn’t even see how manipulative Alex is; he’s just so desperate to find love, you know?’

Qianna: ‘I know. That’s what has me so scared. I don’t think Alex will go quietly, either. But I DID talk to Em tonight about whether or not he can help us break up the wedding. At least that would give us some breathing room. Not sure he’s going to help or not though - he was pretty reluctant to get in the middle of it all.’

Quinne: ‘Cross your fingers. And, in the meantime, I’ll keep doing what I can here. I was thinking, while they’re gone, I might try sabotaging Hairy’s clothing...’

Qianna: ‘Did I already tell you that you’re my shero?’

Quinne: ‘Yes. But you’re welcome to say it again. LOL.’

Qianna: ‘You’re my shero! And I love you. And I miss you.’

Quinne: ‘Ditto, Sis.’

Qianna: ‘Talk to you in the morning.’
Quinne: ‘Nite.’

Qianna was just about to put her phone away and go to bed when she noticed the little red dot on the corner of her email app icon showing that she’d just received a new message. Stifling a yawn, she tapped at the proper spots to open the message and then, all of a sudden, she wasn’t that tired any more. The email was one she’d been expecting for more than a week; it was a reply from the second DNA match they’d sent an inquiry to.

When she read it, she let out a little squeal of glee that woke Aunty Em from his slumbers.

“Wha . . .?” Emmett mumbled as he startled awake. “Did you say something, Sweetie?”

“Sorry to wake you, Em.”

“Uh . . .” Em looked around with confusion, stretching and yawning. “Guess the movie’s over, huh?”

“Afraid so.”

“Damn . . . Oh, well. It’s definitely bedtime for this old queen. And for you too, young lady. We have to get our beauty sleep, don’tcha know?”

“You go ahead, Em. I’ll be right up. Just want to respond to one more email,” Qianna advised, already typing away on her phone.

“Okay,” he readily agreed through a yawn that almost split his face in half. “Just don’t stay up too late or we won’t have time to hit the Saturday Market before I have to scurry off to do the Schniders’ wedding tomorrow. Nite, Baby.”

“Nite, Em. See you in the morning.”

As soon as her pedicure buddy was gone, Qianna returned to her email. She immediately forwarded a copy to her sister with a curt, ‘Look what came!’ Then she fired off an eager reply to the mysterious ‘Malina’, thanking her for the information she’d forwarded.
‘Dear Malina; Thank you so much for getting back to me. I’m glad you found my email in your spam folder even though it took a while. You have no idea how happy I am to have another ‘cousin’ to add to my growing family. And thank you also for the contact email for Lizzy Forbes - let’s hope we have the right woman and that she’ll be willing to talk to my sister and I. I want to reassure you, again, that we don’t want to cause any trouble for her - we just want a few answers to some questions we have about the circumstances surrounding her surrogacy - so you don’t need to worry about letting us have her info. And, in the meantime, please keep in touch; maybe we can meet in person sometime in the future. Yours, Qianna Taylor.’

Since the Two Qs had already talked at length about what they’d put in any email to their mother, if they ever found her, it didn’t take Qianna long to draft that message as well. They’d decided to go with a fairly vague initial inquiry, just asking Lizette to contact them, out of fear of scaring her off with accusations or recriminations. Qianna just hoped this would work because so far they hadn’t come up with any other way to find out the information they’d been seeking and they weren’t yet ready to come clean to their fathers. She actually crossed her fingers on both hands before hitting the button that would send the email to Lizette, willing to resort to superstition just this once if it might help them get what they needed.

Afterwards, all they had to do was wait . . .

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Qianna, who shared her father’s dislike of earliness, was still asleep the next morning when she was rudely awakened around nine-thirty by a very loud and insistent knocking on the door of the guestroom where she was staying while at Em and Drew’s.

“Um . . . Come in,” she called out, rubbing at the sleep in her eyes so she could focus.

“What the hell is going on, Quinne?” Em growled at her, towering over the bed where she was lying, and looking down at her accusatorily. “Why are you trying to get me to stop Justin Taylor’s wedding? And, while we’re on the subject, why is there a picture of YOU on the couple’s wedding invitations?”

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Chapter End Notes
12/5/18 - Don’t you just love a good cliffhanger? Sometimes being an author is extra fun because I get to decide where to leave you and how high that cliff should be when I’m planning out my chapters. LOL. TAG
“Why are you trying to get me to stop Justin Taylor’s wedding? And, while we’re on the subject, why is there a picture of YOU on the couple’s wedding invitations?”

Qianna’s sleep-fuzzed brain was reeling as she tried to come up with some way to lie her way out of this. “Uh . . . I . . . um . . . I don’t . . . what . . . what are you talking about, Aunty Em?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, young lady,” Em growled. “I happen to know for a fact that you’re far too intelligent to get away with that. Now, sit up and tell me EXACTLY what is going on, right now!”

She obediently sat up and rubbed at her face, trying to buy time, but the sinking feeling in her gut told her that the jig was up and it was time to face the music. “I honestly don’t know what you mean about the invitations, Em, but you’re right that Justin Taylor IS the other groom for the wedding I want to break up.”

“Look!” Emmett insisted, offering her the tablet he had been holding, upon which was displayed a copy of the beautiful hand drawn wedding invitations that Justin had created for his wedding.

Qianna wasn’t lying about not having seen the invitations yet. She had intentionally left everything to do with the wedding to Quinne. She vaguely remembered hearing her sister talk about Justin deciding to make his own wedding invitations. Quinne had thought it was a brilliant idea - Justin’s artwork would make the invites much more personal than if the couple had simply gone with the traditional, plainly printed variety. But Qianna hadn’t bothered to look at whatever it was they came up with in the end, so she hadn’t realized that her father had included her picture along with
his and Alex’s in his drawing. Now that she looked at it, she had to agree that it was a wonderful idea; it made the invitations so much more personal and, as always, Justin’s artwork was phenomenal. Only, if she’d known about this, she would have probably thought twice about getting Emmett involved. Now she didn’t know what to do.

“I hadn’t seen the invitations,” she confessed to her accuser. “They’re nice.”

“They are nice, but then again, anything Justin does is always wonderful,” Emmett agreed, taking a seat on the edge of the mattress next to Qianna as he spoke. “I just didn’t expect to find YOU being one of his subjects or that you’d have anything to do with his upcoming wedding. So imagine my surprise when I called up the Events Coordinator at the Hayes Mansion - who, by the way, deserves a raise for getting into work on a Saturday at the crack of dawn, and I don’t care how busy the day is supposed to be for them, that girl is a mensch - and I start chatting her up about this Alex Ramsey only to find that the other groom is an old and very dear friend, Justin Taylor. Then Kelly begins to tell me all about the amazing wedding that Justin has planned and I start to notice quite a few of my own, personal, tricks of the trade thrown in there, so I’m already getting suspicious, you know? But it wasn’t until Kelly started to rave about the invitations and then offered to send me a pic in case any of my future clients wanted to use the idea, that I realized that my own niece must have been involved somehow, and not just in planning how to tank the wedding. What I can’t figure out, is how your picture got on the invites. So you better start talking right now, Girlfriend, cuz I’ve got a really bad feeling about all this.”

“I really didn’t know about the invitations . . . or any of the other stuff, actually,” Qianna confessed, primarily because she was out of cover stories. “I never wanted this wedding to happen in the first place. I refused to have anything to do with it. So it wasn’t me that gave away your wedding planning tips. It was . . . Quinne.”

Emmett stared at her with confusion written all over his face. It was comical, to be honest, how dumbfounded he seemed. She rather liked the shock value of her little revelations. But she was too nervous to actually laugh at that moment so she sped on with her confession, hoping that she wasn’t about to blow everything for both her and her sister.

“Hi, Emmett,” she held her hand out in a gesture of greeting. “I’m Qianna Taylor . . . Justin Taylor’s daughter.”

Emmett mutely let her shake his limp hand, still looking adorably lost as he sputtered, “but . . . What?”

And then Qianna just thought to herself, ‘what the hell?’ and launched into the whole story about how she and Quinne had met at camp and discovered they were twins. Emmett sat quietly, listening to every word, which in and of itself was a sure sign of just how gobsmacked he was,
because Emmett was never that quiescent for that long. When it was all over, Qianna fell silent too and waited patiently to discover what would come next.

When Emmett STILL hadn’t said anything after more than five minutes of just sitting there, Qianna started to get really worried. “Don’t be angry at me, Em. Please. I just couldn’t go back there and be a part of dad’s wedding to that total loser, Alex. And don’t be mad at Quinne, either - it was all my idea from the start, she just went along with it to humor me.”

“There were TWO babies?” Emmett mumbled, finally coming to life.

“Yep. There are definitely two of us.”

“But . . . how?”

Qianna sighed and then started into the explanation of heteropaternal superfecundation that was, by that point, becoming almost rote.

“Oh, no, no, no, no! No. I’m not going to get in the middle of another Kinney-Taylor love triangle. Nope. Been there, done that, learned my lesson . . .” Emmett insisted as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and started to dial. “This whole mess is happening because everyone was keeping secrets from everyone else, and I’m not going to be a part of that again. My Aunt Lula always used to say, ‘Sunlight is the best disinfectant’, and it’s time to clear up this whole rotten mess. Get ready for a whole lotta sunlight, Baby.”

Qianna groaned and slumped back into her pillows, defeated and hopeless. She’d always known
they couldn’t get away with their twin swap for long, but she’d hoped to manage for more than four days. Damn it. Why had she listened to Brian and tried to get Emmett involved? For all he pretended to be this clueless queen, the man was shrewd as a snake and way more perceptive than he was given credit for.

“Brian, we’ve got a MAJOR problem!” Emmett was already announcing into his phone.

“Is Quinne okay?” Qianna could hear the concerned voice coming loudly over the line even though it wasn’t on speaker.

“I assume so, but . . . Well, let’s just say, I hope you’re not too fucked out and hung over to think clearly this morning, because you’re gonna need all your higher faculties for this one.”

“Huh? You’re making less sense than usual here, Emmy Lou.”

“Just get your ass out of bed and get over here, Kinney. Right away.”

“My ass is already out of bed, Honeycutt. I’m already on my way to pick up Gus and take him to breakfast at the Diner. If my daughter isn’t in danger of imminent bodily harm, can’t this wait?”

“Don’t call me ‘Honeycutt’. And, no, this definitely can’t wait.”

“What the fuck? What’s going on over there?”

“If I tried to tell you while you were driving you’d probably crash,” Emmett warned, and rightfully so if Qianna was any judge. “Just get the fuck over here. Now, please!” And to emphasize the urgency of the situation, he hung up on Brian, which was sure to earn him a tongue lashing later, but would no doubt hurry the man along.

By the time the inevitable knock on the front door of Emmett’s house came about ten minutes later, Qianna was up, dressed, and sitting at the kitchen table, sipping at a glass of orange juice and nibbling on a cranberry scone. She really hoped that this wasn’t the last time she got to sample one of Em’s delicacies, because he was an amazing cook. Although, based on the way the chef was still glowering at her, she wasn’t sure he’d ever stop being angry enough to bake for her or Quinne ever again.
“So, what the fuck’s the huge emergency?” Brian demanded, as he came through the door and took up the chair across the table from ‘his’ daughter.

“Hey, Sis,” Gus cut in, giving Qianna a worried squeeze to her shoulder as he passed by and took his own seat next to her. “Everything okay?”

“No,” she replied, wincing at the warning look that Emmett gave her.

“‘No’ is right. Things are about as far from okay as they could be at this point,” Emmett declared before turning back to Brian. “And, just so you know, I had NOTHING to do with this.”

“Just what would THIS be?” Brian asked, looking confused back and forth between his friend and his daughter.

“Go on. Tell him,” Emmett prodded.

“Shit. You got caught already?” Gus groaned.

Qianna shrugged and looked sideways at her brother with a guilty expression. “How was I to know that dad hand drew his wedding invitations and included a picture of me on them, or that the idiot at the Hayes Mansion would share a copy of it with Emmett when I asked him to help us stop the wedding?” she tried to excuse her mistake.

“What wedding are you talking about? Last I knew, I wasn’t getting married anytime soon, so I haven’t got invitations for you to look at,” Brian interrupted, looking at the two kids expectantly.

“Wrong ‘dad’,” Gus offered, unhelpfully.

“Tell him! Or I will,” Emmett ordered more forcefully than Qianna would have expected from the usually friendly man.

“Okay . . . Um . . . So, just so you know, Quinne is perfectly fine. She’s . . . she’s in California
“with MY dad . . .” she began, haltingly, only to be immediately interrupted.

“What? What are you talking about? Emmett, did you let her get into your stash of LSD or something? I don’t understand . . .” Brian complained, looking genuinely worried for the first time.

“Pay attention here, Kinney. We’re trying to explain and you being intentionally obtuse isn’t helping. This,” Emmett pointed to the girl sitting at the table, “is NOT your daughter, Quinne. This is Qianna Taylor, your daughter’s sorta twin sister from . . .”

“. . . Justin?” Brian practically whispered the name, and then blew out a long deep huff of pent up air as his body seemed to collapse into his chair.

“Bingo!” Emmett crossed his arms, looking satisfied that the matter was finally being sorted out. “It seems the girls met at camp and started playing amateur detectives to figure out what happened and why they looked so similar. Then they hatched up this crazy plan to switch places so that Quinne could help tank Justin’s wedding - apparently he’s lost it and is planning to marry some total troll with serious personal grooming issues - while Qianna here carried on with their investigation into why you and Justin split them up as babies. So, care to shed some light on this mystery for everyone involved, Kinney?”

“You’re not Quinne?” Brian asked, still apparently too confused by the sketchily related story to understand the full import.

“Sorry. No. And I KNOW you’re probably going to be totally pissed, but I just really, really, REALLY wanted to meet you and Gus and everybody else here, so I talked Quinne into doing this twin swap thing, and I know it was probably a stupid idea - I mean, obviously, because we got caught already, right? - but nobody ever told us anything about you two being together in the past and we didn’t know why you would have separated us or if you would try and keep us apart after we told you and I couldn’t bear the thought of going back there and having to watch dad marry that stupid Yeti, so Quinne offered to take my place and see what she could do to get rid of the loser, and I came here so I could have at least a taste of what it would be like to have a real family, only now I don’t know if I want to go back, ever, because I don’t want to lose all of you, so please, don’t make me go back, not yet anyway, and please don’t get angry at us . . . please.”

“Wow,” Brian commented, looking at the girl sitting across from him with a penetrating frown that had Qianna trembling. “First of all, I can’t believe you said all that without taking a breath,” he began, betraying a hint of a smile, that relieved at least a tiny bit of her worry. “Secondly . . . let me get this straight . . . You and Quinne - and, I take it, Gus got in on this scheme at some point as well? - you guys cooked up this ridiculously complicated plan to switch places, stop Justin’s wedding to some troll, and pump me for information, with the aim of, what exactly?”
“Well . . . we didn’t really know how it would all end,” Qianna admitted. “I mean, we figured we’d get found out eventually but, in the interim, I’d at least get to meet all of you and I wouldn’t have to be part of the wedding from hell. Since I got here though . . .”

“What?” Brian demanded.

“I kinda hoped, maybe, that . . . well, that we could somehow convince my dad to move back here so Quinne and I could be together for real,” she confessed, finally revealing her deepest hopes. “I know my dad doesn’t really love The Yeti, but he’s just so lonely, you know, and from the pictures I’ve seen of the two of you together, he was tons happier when he was with you, so we thought that . . .” Everyone was looking at her, hanging on her every word, so Qianna felt she had no choice but to finish her sentiment. “We thought that maybe you and dad might get back together and then Quinne and I could be real sisters and everyone would be happy again.”

Then she stopped, fearing that the words sounded stupid and naive when said aloud. Brian would probably start yelling at her any moment, too, because what they’d done really was sorta stupid. It had all been just wishful thinking on her part. She should have known better than to try and manipulate her father into getting back together with his Ex. What the hell had she been thinking? How pathetic could she get? And now, not only were all their plans in ruins, but both Brian and Justin would probably be so angry at them that they’d be grounded for life and she’d never get to see Quinne again . . .

Right about the moment when Qianna had worked herself up into such a self-incriminating frenzy that she was about to start crying, however, the mood was broken by a peal of loud and unrestrained laughter. Brian, who’d been sitting back in his chair, hand covering his mouth as he seemed to contemplate how to retaliate against his scheming offspring and her newfound sister, had instead erupted into uncontrollable paroxysms of glee. He was rocking back and forth in his chair, laughing so hard there were tears coming from the corners of his eyes. This unexpected development had everyone else in the room confused for a good minute or two, but eventually the hilarity infected them as well, and before long the other three were laughing along with Brian, although none of them were exactly sure what the joke was.

“Oh, fuck!” Brian finally spoke up when the worst of the laughter had passed, leaving him gasping for air and wiping at the wetness that had leaked down his cheeks. “I can’t believe we fucked shit up THIS badly. Damn . . . Fuck, I’m sorry, Qianna. You have NO idea how sorry I am.”

“You’re not mad at us?” She couldn’t quite believe it.

“No. Not much, anyway,” Brian reached out to lay a hand on her arm to reassure her with his touch.
as well as his words. “Hell, I’m the one everyone should be angry at. You and Quinne . . . Fuck, I still can’t believe that there are two of you . . .”

“Believe it, Pops. I’ve seen them both and it’s fucking crazy,” Gus piped up once it looked like he wasn’t going to be in too much trouble.

“So, Quinne is with Justin? In California?”

“Yes. Speaking of which, I should probably call her and make sure she’s okay. When I talked to her last night she was waiting for Justin and Hairy Alex to get back from the hospital and was kinda freaking out over how much trouble she was going to get into for putting that homemade itching powder in all of the loser’s clothing,” Qianna explained, raising a new wave of laughter from Brian at the tale of his daughter’s pranks.

“Itching powder?”

“Oh yeah! And laxative brownies. And mousetraps in his shoes. And hacking his social media accounts - but I don’t think he’s found out about that part yet, so please don’t tell Justin, okay?” Qianna bragged on her sister’s behalf.

Brian rolled his eyes and shook his head with another chuckle. “Well, you better call her, then, so we can try and figure out what the fuck we’re going to do about this,” he ordered.

“You’re really not mad?” Qianna asked again, still unsure on that point.

“No. I’m not mad. I’m impressed, actually. I can’t believe you two did all this on your own, although I’d never put anything past my crazy-intelligent daughter and her, apparently, equally sneaky sister. I still don’t understand completely how this happened, but I’m not angry. And I promise you we will fix it. Somehow.”

Qianna followed orders, going to get her tablet and placing a facetime call to her sister as directed. Quinne must have been up already, even though it was still early on the west coast, because she answered on the second ring. She was also in a rather good mood, and before Qianna could warn her about what had developed in The Pitts, she launched into a breathless description of her current travails.
“Good news, Sis! They haven’t twigged to the itching powder yet. The doctors just sent Alex home with this stinky cream that he keeps slathering all over himself. But since he’s still wearing the hoodie I doctored, he just keeps itching like a dog with fleas. It’s hilarious, actually. How are things going with Aunty Em? Is he going to help us?”

At that point Brian leaned in over Qianna’s shoulder so that he was in the picture on that end of the call and answered, “I think you’re going to need more help than Emmett can provide, don’t you?”

“Pops?” Quinne’s tone immediately went flat. “Shit!”

“Yes. And that shit is about to hit the fan, big time, Spark,” Brian warned with a sickly sweetness that belied his ominous words.

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Chapter End Notes

12/6/18 - Who thought Brian would be angry? I don’t see him like that - in my eyes he’s the ultimate pragmatist who would never be angry at something he sees as inevitable. And when he screws up, he admits it and then deals with the fall out. Right? Not so sure about Justin though . . . Now, we should at least start getting some answers about what exactly happened to split the boys up and how the twins came to be separated. Watch me write! TAG

PS - For those waiting on ‘Stylite’, my apologies. Why do I always try and deceive myself that I can write on more than one story at a time? I’m a total slave to my creative whims. When something inspires me, I have to write it then and there. I literally have NO idea how other authors manage to write several stories at one time. All I can say is that I’ll try my best to get that next Stylite chapter out for you - it’s all planned out, I just have to find the time to write it. Stay tuned. :(

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“Hey, Pops . . . So, um . . . I guess you’re probably wondering what’s going on and why I’m in California right now . . .” Quinne started off lamely.

“Nope. I think your sister has adequately explained that part of this caper,” Brian replied with a smirk for his crafty daughter. “You’re there trying to sabotage her father’s wedding to some troll, right? That part I get.”

“Great. Then, since you seem to know what’s going on, how about you return the favor and explain exactly how it is that I even HAVE a sister I didn’t know about until three months ago,” Quinne immediately hit back, just as snarkily as any Kinney ever.

“I’ve got no clue on that part, Spark.”

“You’re seriously expecting us to buy that, Pops?” Quinne questioned harshly. “Come on. You’re the guy who’s always saying that there’s no such thing as a coincidence, right? So how it is that you and your HUSBAND - yeah, we know about that too - hire a surrogate so you can start a family and then, after you two break up, you both miraculously end up with a baby each without ever knowing about the other child? That’s a pretty big stretch, don’t you think?”

Brian chuckled again, apparently amused by his pushy daughter and her unerring logic. “I promise you, Spark, I had NO idea there was another one of you out there - which, by the way, is a really scary thought - and if I HAD known, I wouldn’t have kept you two apart. I swear. Cross my heart.” He facetiously made the juvenile gesture with his index finger x’ing over his chest to emphasize his words.
“Then how do you explain what happened?” Qianna interrupted. “We figured that you and my dad probably didn’t realize you were having twins when you separated, since it was so early in the pregnancy, but you had to have figured it out when we were born, right?”

“Except that I wasn’t there when you were born.” Brian huffed a big sigh and grimaced at whatever memories were assaulting him. “I hate using the phrase, ‘it’s complicated’, but that’s the only way to describe what happened, I guess.”

“Yeah, well, complicated or not, I think we have the right to know how this shitstorm came about,” Quinne asserted, then added, “and how you think this thing can be fixed. Because I can tell you one thing, Pops, Qianna and I aren’t going to be happy if there isn’t some way the two of us can be together.”

“Now that we’ve found each other, we won’t go back,” her sister echoed the sentiment.

“Judging by the lengths you two have already gone to in order to prove that, I think I believe you,” Brian smiled affectionately at the girl sitting in front of him. Then he stood up straight and announced, “Honeycutt, I’m going to need more fucking caffeine if I’m expected to unburden my soul here.”

“Me too, I think,” Em agreed as he bustled off to the kitchen for more coffee and breakfast fixin’s for all.

By the time he returned about ten minutes later - laden with a tray full of coffee for the adults, hot chocolate for the kids, and more scones for all - the facetime call had been transferred via screen mirroring to the big flat screen television on the wall of Drew’s study and the principles on the Pittsburgh end had taken up more comfortable seating where they could all see. On Quinne’s end, she’d also scrounged up some breakfast for herself and made a more comfortable nest of the pillows and quilts on Qianna’s bed. As soon as everyone was resupplied with refreshments, though, Quinne renewed her inquiry.

“Okay, enough stalling, Pops. Start explaining,” Quinne ordered.

“How the fuck did I end up with the pushy one?” Brian complained, with a smile sent Qianna’s way.
“You were just lucky, I guess,” Quinne beamed at them all from the huge screen overhead. “Don’t discount my QiQi, though. She may seem like the less assertive one, but she’s wicked sneaky and quietly conniving. You don’t want to get on her bad side either.”

“I can see that,” Brian conceded and then scrubbed at his face with both hands before finally launching into full disclosure mode. “So, Justin and I . . . Shit . . . I knew we screwed up but I didn’t think it would affect anyone else . . . I’m sorry about that, girls. Really. And you know I don’t apologize easily but, fuck it, you’re owed at least that much . . . Anyway, I really didn’t know there were two of you. And I don’t know for sure whether Justin was aware of the situation, but I seriously doubt he knew either. He would never have let you two grow up apart. But that’s not really an excuse is it? If we hadn’t fucked up so bad in the first place it wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“You can say that again,” Emmett mumbled, shooting Brian a withering look, which the big stud chose to ignore.

“Yeah, well, they say hindsight is 20/20, right?” Brian carried on. “I have no idea what we thought we were doing, to be honest. We’d only just worked out our shit enough to finally do the marriage thing and then we had Gus and JR for the holidays and I somehow got the idea that we could do the family thing too. That was back when you were off in the Great White North during the Munchers’ Toronto Retreat, Sonny Boy, and I have to admit that I was missing you more than I had thought I would. So, when Sunshine jumped on the chance to try for a family, I naively thought it would somehow all work out.” Another big sigh caused Brian to pause while he struggled to frame his confession. “It didn’t go well from the very beginning, though. We even disagreed on who to use as our surrogate - I wanted to go through a reputable agency but Justin insisted that we use his artschool friend who needed the money. I gave in, of course, but only because he talked me into it by claiming that, since Lizette looked sorta like him - she was blond and short and artistic - that we’d end up with a genetically similar baby. Which didn’t make any sense, really, when he later insisted that we mix our sperm so we could be ‘surprised’ by who the father was. Silly, sentimental, little twat . . .”

Brian drifted off at that point, lost in whatever visions he was seeing in his mind’s eye, a tender yet sad smile coming over his face.

“Well, that would explain the two different fathers, right?” Gus interjected? “What was that thing you two tried to explain to me? Hetero Dads Extra Fertile something or other?”

“Heteropaternal Superfecundation,” both girls corrected him, speaking at exactly the same time and in voices so similar it was like hearing in stereo, which caused everyone in the room to smile.

“We’ll send you a link to the video, Gus,” Qianna offered. “It’s animated so you’ll like it and, by
the end, you’ll actually be able to say the term.”

“Whatever,” Gus waved off the helpful offer. “But that’s what it is, right? Two different fathers from the same pregnancy? That’s how you can be twins and have two fathers - they mixed their sperm and the surrogate was super fertile and . . . voila, I get two sisters for the price of one.”

“Leave it to Sunshine to overperform even in the reproduction arena. He always was a showoff, so of course his kids would be the same,” Brian huffed a quiet laugh before continuing. “Anyway, we did the thing and Lizette got our mixed loads squirted up her hooahh.” There was a round of groans and an ‘ick’ from Gus at that particular description of the procedure, but Brian ignored them all. “And the next thing we knew, we had a positive pregnancy test. I mistakenly thought the hard part was over, but . . . we didn’t even make it to the end of the first trimester before the bitch backed out on us.”

“Lizette was the one who backed out?” Quinne seized on that point. “It wasn’t that you and Justin broke up? We thought that, maybe, it was you two splitting up that caused all the problems and then you just decided to take one baby each.”

“Hardly. It was that bitch pulling out of the contract that CAUSED us to argue in the first place. She’s what broke us up,” Brian insisted.

“Well, that, plus the fact that you’re a total ass and you abandoned him afterwards when Baby was at one of the lowest points of his life,” Emmett added, glaring Brian’s way.

“I never fucking abandoned him,” Brian shot back, now sounding more angry than sad. “We had a fight. We were both upset about the surrogate thing falling through and we both said shit we probably shouldn’t have. I decided to leave before things got even more out of control. I needed to cool off. And when I came back . . . HE was the one who’d left ME.”

“That’s not how I heard it from Baby,” Emmett contended, just as angry as Brian by that point. “Justin came to me, in tears, more upset than I’d ever seen him - worse even than after the bashing, mind you - and told me that you blamed him for the surrogate backing out and had ordered him to leave. He was so hurt, he cried all night long. And the worst part of it all was that he blamed himself just as much as you had. He agreed it was all his fault, moaning about how he forced you to pick Lizette, and now that everything had gone to shit it was no wonder you hated him. It was all Daphne and I could do to calm him down and get him to finally get some sleep. But he was gone again by the time we woke up the next morning. We didn’t hear from him again for almost two weeks and then all I got was a voicemail saying he needed to ‘make some serious changes in his life’. And that was that. The next thing I knew, Daphne told me he’d found that job in Cali and wasn’t planning on coming back.”
“And you didn’t call or tell ME any of this?” Brian snarled at Emmett. “Fuck you, Honeycutt! I never meant for him to leave - that was just something stupid I yelled when we were arguing and . . . I was gutted by the thought of losing the baby, okay? After we got the news, I spent the afternoon getting snot-puking drunk, and Justin got angry at me for how I was handling it. Then I said some shit about how, if he didn’t like it, he knew where the door was . . . But I didn’t MEAN it, okay? . . . Then I stormed out. And when came home the next morning, he was just gone. I had no idea what happened to him or where he’d run off to. I figured he was still pissed at me - which, let’s face it, wasn’t exactly unwarranted - but I assumed he’d eventually come home. Wasn’t that the whole point of the marriage thing? Commitment means you have to stay with each other, right? But, no, he just left. Again. Without a fucking word. So, yeah, I . . . I lost it.” Brian fell silent, looking so sad and hurt that they were all stunned by his unprecedented show of emotion, until he finally gathered his self-control and continued in a much more subdued tone. “A couple weeks later, when I finally climbed out of the bottle of scotch I’d fallen into, I had no idea where he’d gone or how to find him. I just assumed it was over and he’d had enough . . .”

“Oh, Pops,” Qianna slid closer to the big man and encircled him in her arms in a gesture of comfort. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Kiddo,” Brian absolved her with a return hug. “Anyway . . . Life goes on, right? I survived and everything went back to how it was before. Until, that is, almost a year later when I get this call from Lizette saying she’d changed her mind again and asking if I still wanted the baby or should she just put it up for adoption. What am I going to say, ‘No’? Of course I wasn’t going to let her give Sunshine’s baby to some stranger, so I ante’d up another wad of cash for her and she handed Quinne over. But I wasn’t around for the birth and she never mentioned a second baby - why would I even suspect that, right? - so I had no idea where he’d gone or how to find him. I just assumed it was over and he’d had enough . . .”

“. . . And Qianna and I wouldn’t have had to grow up alone, separated by 3,000 miles,” Quinne summed things up for everyone. “Shit, Pops, you two stubborn idiots completely fucked up everything. You realize that, right?”

“So it seems,” Brian replied, looking up at the screen where his daughter was glowering down at him. Then, heaving one last, huge, sigh, Brian stood up and smiled around at his audience with determination. “But we’re going to fix all of that right now!”
By 7:30 pm that evening, Brian, Gus and Qianna were at the airport waiting to board a flight from Pittsburgh to San Jose. Unfortunately, that was the first available flight, and they’d have to deal with a three hour layover in Denver, so they wouldn’t actually arrive in California till just before dawn the following day. However, it was the best that could be arranged at the last minute.

Strangely enough, the revelations of the morning had left them quiet and introspective so there hadn’t been much discussion afterwards beyond what was needed to make their travel arrangements. Which isn’t to say that they weren’t, all three, busy mulling things over in their minds. There was a lot of private speculation about what might have been, or should have been, not to mention trepidation about what was going to happen. But underlying all, at least for Qianna, was a frisson of excitement about getting to see her father again, even if coming clean to him was probably going to land her in a heap of trouble.

“You okay, Kiddo?” Brian asked as he took a seat next to Qianna in the Liberty Air VIP Departures Lounge.

“Yeah. Just . . . worried about seeing dad, I guess,” she admitted. “He’s going to be soooooo pissed off at me.”

“He’ll get over it,” Brian assured her. “Sunshine would forgive almost anything for those he loves.”

“How can you say that when it seems like he just walked out on you and your marriage like he did?”

“Yeah, well . . . It’s not like I ever made it easy for him to stay with me,” Brian confessed wistfully. “Your dad and I had, at best, a rocky relationship from the start. I . . . I don’t know how much Quinne or Gus told you about me, but I didn’t have very good role models in the relationship department when I was a kid so I was always a bad bet. Justin tried his hardest, the stubborn little shit, but I guess it wasn’t enough. I don’t blame him for finally giving up. I’m just glad that I got Quinne out of it. And now, hopefully, you too.”

Qianna leaned over to shoulder butt him reassuringly, although she wasn’t done with the conversation. “But how is this going to work? I mean, my dad’s still engaged to the fucking Yeti from Hell and we still live a nine hour plane ride away from each other. I can’t stand the idea of being that far away from all of you.”
Gus kicked her foot gently from where he was sitting across the aisle to let her know the feeling was mutual. Qianna offered him up a genuine smile with a little added nose scrunch to take the seriousness out of the gesture. It worked, causing Gus to chuckle and smile back.

“Shit. When you do that, you really DO look like Sunshine,” Brian commented.

“I meant to ask - why do you call my dad ‘Sunshine’?”

“It’s something Deb came up with.” Brian shrugged and then smiled with a nostalgic glint to his eye. “It suited him so well, it just sorta stuck. When he smiles at you, it’s like . . . shit . . . that smile just seems to light up the whole fucking world, you know?” The usually laconic man shook his head and laughed quietly to himself. “Don’t tell him I said this, but it was that fucking smile that roped me in from the very beginning. He smiled at me from across the street and I was toast. It was like a moth being drawn to a flame - I couldn’t look away. And, fuck, he was so damned beautiful. Right from the start, I couldn’t get enough of just looking at him. Touching him. All that perfect, unmarred, pale skin . . .” Brian stopped, cleared his throat, and fidgeted in his seat, which caused Qianna to blush as she realized exactly where those thoughts were going. Luckily he changed to a much less uncomfortable topic and added, “that’s why I call Quinne ‘Spark’, you know? She was all I had left of my Sunshine and she brought back at least a little spark of that brilliance to my life.”

“Sheesh, Pops, I had no idea you were such a big old softie,” Gus teased, probably in an effort to alleviate the somber mood his father’s words had created.

“I’ve told you before about using the word ‘soft’ around me, Sonny Boy,” Brian warned with a mock-serious glare that caused them all to laugh.

When the laughter had died down again, though, Qianna’s anxiety returned. “I doubt I’ll be seeing his sunshine smile for awhile though. By the time he gets done lecturing me for going off on a wild tangent all the way across the country without telling him, I’ll be grounded for life. Although, maybe that’s a good thing; maybe he’ll be so angry he won’t let me be part of the stupid wedding to the Yeti. Of course, I’ll still have to put up with the creep after the wedding, though, so . . .”

“I promise I won’t leave you to the tender mercies of The Yeti,” Brian chuckled at the poor little worrywort.

“You laugh, but he really is THAT horrible,” Qianna promised. “He tried to scald Quinne in the shower yesterday and he’s always saying mean stuff to me when my dad isn’t around. I can’t stand him. I mean, dad’s had some loser boyfriends before, but Hairy Alex is the WORST!”
“I don’t know . . . there was that one old guy a few years back - some producer or something, I think - the one that looked like he was about seventy. I thought he was pretty much the bottom of the barrel,” Brian ventured.

“How do you know about Matthew?” Qianna asked, remembering the older man whom her father had dated for about a year back when she was in the fifth grade.

“I’ve periodically kept tabs on your dad,” Brian admitted, trying to make it seem like a casual thing even though Qianna knew it would have taken serious effort for him to have found that information since her father wasn’t one to let his personal life be widely known. “I saw a picture of the two of them together at some movie premiere or something a while back. From what I could tell, it sounded serious, but I’m glad it didn’t work out. Sunshine would be wasted on a dried out old geezer like that.” Qianna gave him an appraising look causing him to shrug unapologetically. “Personally, my favorite was the bodybuilder guy he was seeing last year. But, then again, I’ve always had a bit of thing for gym bunnies myself.”

“Dean?” Qianna had to laugh at that assessment. “Dean WAS actually pretty sweet but he was as dumb as a sack of hammers. I seriously wondered some days how he managed to dress himself. I don’t think my dad was interested in him for his brains though.”

“No doubt,” Brian winked at her and chuckled. “Not that a brainless jock could keep Justin happy for long. I knew he’d get bored with that one pretty fast.”

“So . . . if you’ve been keeping track of all my dad’s boyfriends all this time, that must mean Gus was right; you’re not over him, are you?”

Brian didn’t immediately answer and Qianna thought she might even have detected a bit of a blush as he seemed to think about his answer.

“No, I don’t suppose I’ll ever be over him,” Brian finally admitted with a sad smile. “What Justin and I had was . . . It wasn’t something that comes along more than once in a lifetime. At least not for me. Like I said, I’m not exactly the relationship type, so I figure Sunshine was it for me. I had my shot and I blew it. Game over.”

“But . . .” Qianna was frustrated but Brian’s strangely defeatist attitude - it didn’t fit with the self-confident man she’d come to know. “If you still loved my dad enough to watch him from afar all these years, why didn’t you do something about it? Why didn’t you come get him. Try to explain
and win him back? Do something!”

Brian simply shrugged again - a habit of his that Qianna was becoming annoyed with - and answered. “Everytime I thought about it, he was hooked up with someone else. He seemed happy enough and I didn’t want to storm in and ruin whatever he had going. All I ever wanted was for him to be happy, so what good would me showing up on his doorstep and chasing away the boyfriend du jour do? I figured I’d just wait and see and, if I ever saw an opening, then I’d . . . I don’t know . . . swoop in and save the day?”

“You, Pops, are a romantic old fool,” Gus pointed out the obvious for all of them, to another round of laughter. “And all these years you’ve been giving ME shit whenever I’d fall in love with someone? If I’d known, I wouldn’t have let you give me such a hard time.”

“For your information, Dad HASN’T been happy all this time,” Qianna interrupted their joking. “I mean, didn’t the fact that he’s been going through boyfriends faster than most people go through socks tell you anything? He’s never been happy with any of them. Not for long. But at least none of the others were devious enough to try and trick Dad into marriage - a mistake that won’t be easy to correct when he finally wakes up and realizes just what a scheming, manipulative, conman, Alex really is. Then it WILL be too late. For Dad and for you,” she asserted conclusively.

Right then their flight was announced. Brian stood up and started to gather together his belongings. Qianna thought it odd that he was smiling the way he was when she felt so upset by the specter of what they were heading into.

“Well, then I guess I’ll just have to go break up a wedding and win back my man,” the big stud declared, with a goofy smile directed towards his two co-conspirators. “Who’s with me?”

“Me!” both kids shouted enthusiastically, jostling past Brian to get to the gate as quickly as they could.

And so the three accomplices set off, together, on their Mission to Rescue Sunshine.

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Chapter End Notes
12/8/18 - TaDaaaaa! The mystery of why Brian didn’t know about the girls being twins is (mostly) revealed. Spoiler: there’s more to the story but you’ll have to wait for that till we get Justin’s part of the tale. So, what do you think Justin’s reaction will be when they arrive? Was Brian too OOC here? It’s not easy to write him being romantic and still being Brian-ish . . . hope I didn’t disappoint. Off to write the Justin scene now - wish me luck! TAG
The first tinges of gold were just peeking over the eastern horizon when the three weary travellers drove their rental car up to Justin’s front door the next morning. They were all exhausted after the red eye flight. Qianna, though, was too nervous to let her fatigue get to her. She bounced out of the car and all the way up the walk to the door. Then she had to stand there and wait till her compatriots caught up with her.

Brian patted the girl on the shoulder and moved her bodily to the side so he could reach the doorbell. Gus put his arm around Qianna’s shoulders to try and ground her. Brian rang the bell once. Then again when there was no response. Then he rang it a third time and leaned on the buzzer so it would keep going off until somebody in the house was finally roused.

And even then it took a couple more minutes before they heard feet plodding down the stairs and a grumbling voice yelling out, “Alright, already. I’m coming! I’m COMING!”

But when the door finally did open and a sleepy, bed-headed, Justin Taylor stood there, wearing only a pair of rumpled sweatpants and a shocked stare, it seemed like he’d lost all of the surliness he’d had a moment before.

“Morning, Sunshine!” Brian says. “I think, maybe, you might have something of mine here. Wanna trade?”

“Isn’t dawn the traditional time for an exchange of prisoners?” Brian teased, reaching to his right and pulling Qianna over so she was standing in front of him. “But I’ll only give her back if you promise a full exchange of intelligence along with the return of MY spy.”

Justin’s mouth had fallen open at the first sight of Qianna standing there in front of Brian and he was still just standing there gaping, too confused to comment, a full minute later. Qianna lifted up one hand to wave limply at her father but was too anxious to actually say anything. Gus was snickering at the spectacle from behind his father’s shoulder. And they probably would all have still been standing there staring at each other if it hadn’t been for the advent of another participant, as Quinne came galloping down the stairs a few seconds later.

“Pops! Gus! Qianna! You’re here! Finally! I was about to die of anticipation waiting for you!” she hollered as she elbowed her way past Justin and launched herself into her father’s arms.

“Hey, Spark,” Brian squeezed his daughter tightly in his arms and gave her a kiss to the top of her head. “Good to see you in one piece. And, can I just add, that I’m really glad you DIDN’T actually bleach your hair. No offence, QiQi.”

“None, taken, Pops,” Qianna giggled. “As long as you don’t start telling blonde jokes, that is.”

“I promise,” Brian agreed, before turning back to Justin who remained standing there in the doorway looking completely lost. “Well, are you going to invite us all in, Sunshine, or just stand there looking like a large-mouthed sea bass?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t understand . . .”

“Obviously. How about you offer us some coffee and we’ll see if we can explain?” Brian suggested.

But when Justin continued to just stand there, Quinne got fed up. She grabbed Brian by the hand and pulled him into the house, physically pushing Justin further aside so they could enter, and towing Brian in the direction of the kitchen. They could all hear her bantering with her father as they disappeared around the corner.

Gus, who had been feeling a bit shy, stepped forward and held out his hand to greet his old friend. “Hi, Justin. Long time no see, huh?”
“Gus? Shit, is that you? You’re . . .” Justin accepted the hand offered him and started shaking it dazedly.

“All grown up, yeah. That happens after about thirteen years,” Gus smiled to take the sting out of his words. “It’s really good to see you, Justin.”

“Oh, Gus!” Justin finally seemed to have come to the conclusion that he wasn’t dreaming and this was all real. He pulled Gus into his arms and hugged the boy who was now a good half a head taller than him. “I missed you so much. I wanted to keep in contact with you but I wasn’t sure . . . After what happened with your dad I thought it was better if I just made a clean break, you know?”

“Yeah. I get that. But it doesn’t mean that I’m not still pissed at you,” Gus hugged the man back just as fiercely. “You promised I’d see you for March Break and told me you’d keep in touch and then I never saw you again.”

“I’m a total shit. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Gus,” Justin apologized profusely, and Qianna could see a tear escape from the corner of his eye.

“Enough of the welcome mat reunions,” she declared in order to save both her father and her brother. “Let’s go inside already, Dad. We’ve been on a plane all night and I’m starving. I need Breakfast and then I want a nap and then you guys can get all caught up, okay?”

“It’s really you, Qianna?” Justin asked, looking back over his shoulder in the direction where Brian and Quinne had disappeared. “So . . . who is THAT?”

“That’s my twin sister, Quinne Kinney,” Qianna answered. “And I promise to explain it all to you but not until you feed me. Come on.”

The girl grabbed her father by the hand and started to tug him further inside the house. Gus followed behind, pulling the door closed behind him. By the time they’d made it to the kitchen, they found that Brian and Quinne had already started a pot of coffee and were raiding the fridge for breakfast fixings. Qianna deposited her father on a barstool at the kitchen island and ran around to give her sister an official hug hello. Gus took up the second barstool and clapped Justin on the shoulder, trying to reassure the blond who was still looking around himself in disbelief.

“Let’s see . . . We can whip up a huge pan of scrambled eggs with cheese to start with. Since I
knew you were coming, I also made a coffee cake yesterday afternoon - it’s on the bottom shelf there, Pops - but there’s toast too if anyone prefers that.” Quinne directed as she took charge of the proceedings and began to organize the cooking. “QiQi, will you get the orange juice out? Bro, you want coffee or juice?”

“You didn’t add any special ingredients to this coffee cake, did you, Spark?” Brian asked as he set the baking dish with the delicious-smelling, brown sugar-topped cake on a trivet on the counter.

Quinne laughed. “No. The coffee cake is safe, Pops. Just avoid any brownies you might find laying around.”

“Uh . . . Excuse me!” Justin spoke up, seeming to have finally reached a point where he was capable of rational thought and speech. “Can I just ask, what the FUCK is going on here? What is Brian Fucking Kinney doing here in my kitchen? And, most importantly, which one of you is my REAL fucking daughter?”

Everyone except Justin broke out into a round of laughter.

Brian shook his head and pushed Gus off the barstool the boy was on so he could assume the spot next to his Ex-Husband. “You gotta keep up, here, Sunshine,” he advised, putting one arm around the younger man’s shoulders in a gesture that was reassuringly familiar. “As you can see,” he swept the other hand out towards the two almost identical girls, “it turns out we have two daughters - fraternal twins - and they’re obviously nearly identical. They met at summer camp and, because they’re both brilliant as well as sneaky as fuck, they hatched this plan to switch places so they could meet each other’s families. You temporarily got the daughter I’ve been raising, Quinne.” Quinne turned around from her frying pan full of scrambled eggs and took a facetious curtsy. “And I had Qianna with me.” QiQi did a shrug, holding her hands out in a ‘whatever’ gesture, and adding a goofy smile. “But - for reasons we’ll get into later, I’m sure - they got caught when Qianna tried to enlist Emmett to help them in their cunning plans. So, here we all are. Aren’t you excited to see us?”

“But . . . How?” Justin asked, still too confused to form complete sentences.

Brian was just about to answer that question when the happy breakfast party was interrupted by the arrival of an unwanted sixth guest.

“Justin, Hun, what’s going on down here? Who was at the door . . .” Alex asked as he rounded the corner and entered the kitchen proper.
“This him?” Brian asked and received nods from both girls. “Oh, Sunshine. I gotta say, you should have stuck with the gym bunny. This one isn’t nearly as pretty. And, when did you start going for bears, anyway? You always used to laugh at me when I suggested we bring home a hairy one. Don’t you remember? You complained about how the hair would get caught in your teeth when you bit them.”

“I’m not a bear,” Alex protested, his brow furrowed with a mixture of anger and confusion.

“If the pelt fits . . .” Brian rejoined, laughing in the younger man’s face without getting up from his stool or relinquishing his hold on Justin.

“Who the fuck IS this, Justin?” Alex complained. Then he finally looked around the room and noticed all the other guests including both copies of his fiance’s daughter. “Okay, what the hell is going on here?”

Brian got up from his stool and took the two steps necessary to approach Alex. The tall, svelte man towered over the smaller Alex by at least half a head. And, even rumpled after more than ten hours of travelling, he looked amazing - he was just as handsome as he’d been thirteen years earlier, maybe a tad thicker through the middle, but still strong and well-toned, with just the first hints of a little salt and pepper in his dark auburn hair and the addition of a few character lines around the corners of his eyes, giving him a more approachable look than he’d had when he was younger. Standing next to the hairy, out of shape, and ungroomed Alex, there was simply no comparison.

Brian held his hand out to Alex. “The name’s Brian Kinney,” he offered amicably. “I’m Justin’s husband.”

“EX-husband,” Justin finally spoke up. “And it was never official, anyway. Gay marriage wasn’t legal in Pennsylvania back then.”

“True. Which means, as far as I’m concerned, there’s no legal way for you to get rid of me either,” Brian averred. “In my mind, we’ll always be together, Sunshine.”

“Cut the crap Brian,” Justin warned, now glaring at his former partner.

“Whoever he is, what the fuck is he doing here, Justin?” Alex demanded, bristling as he pulled his hand free of the grip Brian had kept on his limb.
“I don’t really know yet, either,” Justin moved over so he was standing between Alex and Brian, as if to ward off any broiling confrontation between the two of them. “Brian and the girls were just starting to explain that when you came downstairs.”

“Quite,” Brian agreed readily. “Hairy, why don’t you take a seat here.” He pointed to the stool where he’d been sitting. “And Sunshine you join him.” Brian pointed to the stool Justin had been using before. “Then Gus and I can take over breakfast while our daughters explain themselves. How does that sound?”

Justin took the seat he’d been directed towards but not without a complaint. “Ha! You cooking? That I’d love to see. You can barely work the toaster, Brian.”

“Au contraire, mon mari!” Brian laughed as he took over the spatula from his daughter’s hands. “That was the old Brian Kinney. Twelve years as a single father teaches you a lot - I not only cook but I clean and help with homework and whatever else my children need. Right, guys?”

“He’s the best house-husband a man could ever want,” Gus chimed in with a laugh as he moved over to add more bread to the toaster. “But seriously, Jus, he has learned a few things over the years. And he only burns dinner maybe once a week these days.”

“Hey, Sonny Boy, no lip or I’ll make sure your eggs are the ones that are burned.”

“Stop, you two,” Quinne ordered when she realized that Justin was about at the end of his patience. “Sorry, Dad. They’re just impossible when they’re together sometimes.” Then she turned to her sister and exchanged a telepathic look that Qianna instantly understood meant that it was time for them to come clean. She nodded back and Quinne began their explanation. “So, like Pops was saying, QiQi and ended up being roommates at summer camp and it was pretty obvious from the first moment we met that something was up. You don’t just meet your exact duplicate every day, right?”

You could see Justin and Alex looking back and forth between the two girls who were now standing shoulder to shoulder in front of them. It was pretty amazing when you saw them together like that. Even with the different hair color, it was clear that they were related.

Qianna took up the narrative at that point. “So we did all the research and figured out what must have happened . . .”
“Heteropaternal Superfecundation,” Gus added, proud that he’d finally mastered how to say the term. “Careful or they’ll make you watch a video about it.”

Everyone laughed, even Justin, because that was so clearly a thing the science girls would do.

“Exactly,” Qianna continued. “We compared birth dates and stories and did tests using the chemistry lab at camp and came to the uncontroverted conclusion that we are maternally related, fraternal twins, but with two different fathers.” She gestured with one hand to each of the fathers in the room in demonstration. “And then we started to research you guys and we found that you’d been married and all the other stuff out there on you two. It was pretty clear that there was a lot you guys were hiding from us - including the very fact of each other’s families.”

“And QiQi really wanted to meet Pops and Gus and all the rest of the family back in The Pitts, but we didn’t know why you guys had separated us, so we were scared to ask you about it,” Quinne added as justification.

“Exactly,” Qianna agreed. “So, I talked Q into switching places with me.”

“QiQi went home with Pops, and got to meet the Pittsburgh clan, and I came home with you,” Quinne elaborated when it seemed like Justin was still confused.

“Okay, I get that,” Justin responded. “But - biological explanations aside - I just don’t understand how we have two daughters.” He looked up at Brian, who was just then serving up the eggs onto five separate plates. “Did you know about this? That there were two of them? How did you end up with Quinne?”

“Nope. I had no clue about any of this until yesterday morning, Sunshine,” Brian answered and handed his ex-husband a plate. “What we think happened, though, was that Lizette scammed us - in essence milking us both for money in exchange for one of the babies. At least that’s what I’m assuming is the correct explanation, since it doesn’t seem like YOU knew there were two of them either?”

“Nooooooo,” Justin insisted. “I thought Lizette had changed her mind completely. You remember what she told us - that her new boyfriend had talked her into keeping the baby because being gay was a sin and she was risking her immortal soul by offering us her baby - or some shit like that. Then Lizette called me, out of the blue, the following February, and gave me a sob story about how it was too hard and she didn’t really want to be a mother after all and blah, blah, blad. I was so
overjoyed to get our baby back that I didn’t really question her too much. Only, when she asked me to pay her the outstanding balance on the surrogacy contract, I told her I didn’t have the money since you and I had broken up, so I’d have to pay her over time. She didn’t like that much but, at the time, she didn’t have much choice if she wanted the money because I’d just started a new job and didn’t have much saved or anything. She called me back the next day and agreed to take the payments I’d offered and I flew out to Pittsburgh to pick up Qianna the next week. And that was the last I heard from her.”

“That’s about what I expected,” Brian concurred. “She must have decided the money was more important than her homophobic, fake-Christian, values. And I fell for it too. Only, she managed to get a cool $50,000 more out of me, on top of what you paid her. The bitch.”

“So, our mother split up her twin babies, basically selling us, one to each of you, in order to get double the pay out?” Quinne summed up the evidence. “Great surrogate you guys picked there.”

“And if it hadn’t been for us going to the same summer camp, we might never have met . . .” Qianna added, sounding shocked and more than a little hurt.

“I’m so sorry, Honey,” Justin rushed to apologize. “I should have listened to Brian. He wanted to use an agency, but Lizette was my friend and she really needed the money and I wanted to support another artist. I didn’t know that she’d hook up with some Evangelical nutjob a month into her pregnancy.”

“None of which matters now, Sunshine,” Brian spoke up. “It’s water under the bridge. We should be thankful to Lizette. Because of her we now have TWO amazing, intelligent, meddlesome, daughters. The question is what are we going to do about it?”

“What do you mean, ‘what are we going to do about it’?” Justin asked, testily. “There’s nothing TO do. I appreciate you bringing Qianna back, Brian, but I don’t see what else needs to be done. You’re welcome to stay for breakfast and all, but then I’d appreciate it if you’d leave. And you,” he turned to face ‘his’ daughter with a frown, “have a LOT more explaining to do, young lady. I do NOT appreciate finding out about this prank you played on all of us like this.” He rose to his feet and walked around the kitchen island to a spot where he could pace as he lectured on. “Don’t you understand how dangerous it was to go running off, clear across the damn country, without even telling me? What if your newfound camp friend’s parents were axe murderes or child sex traffickers or something? You had no way of knowing anything about Quinne’s family except what she was telling you and that could have all been a huge pile of lies. Did you think about THAT when you cooked up this moronic plan of yours? Did you? You’re just lucky that it was Brian and not some pedophile whose home you ended up in, Qianna. I thought you were smarter than that, young lady.”
“I’m sorry, Dad,” Qianna answered when Justin finally gave her a break in his ranting. “I didn’t do it as a prank, though. It’s just that Quinne and I didn’t know you guys were tricked by Lizette - we thought you two might have intentionally split us up and would try to keep us apart if we told you we’d found each other again. I was worried this was the only way I’d ever get to meet Gus and Brian.”

“Well, you’ve met them now. And, thankfully, your little stunt didn’t end up with you getting hurt. But there will be consequences and, considering the magnitude of what you’ve done, I doubt you’re going to like it much,” Justin warned with all due parental severity. “Now, why don’t you go wait for me in your room while I see our guests out and then I’ll come up and talk to you about your punishment.”

“What? You’re going to make them leave. Like, for good?” Qianna was no longer cringing from the discipline she expected; she was in a panic about the unexpected consequences of her actions. “No. No, you can’t. Please, Dad, you can’t do this. You can’t keep Quinne and I apart. Please!”

“Qianna, this is not up to you. You’re in enough trouble. Now, I told you to go to your room and I mean it. Go!” Justin pointed authoritatively towards the stairs.

“Hey, Justin, come on. You don’t need to be so tough on the kid. It’s not like she ran off to join the fucking circus or anything. She was with me the whole time,” Brian tried to intervene, coming around the island with both Quinne and Gus on his heels.

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, Brian, and I don’t appreciate you interfering in this. Regardless of whatever circumstances brought it about, Qianna is MY daughter, not yours, and I’ll deal with disciplinary actions the way I see fit,” Justin briefly turned his anger on his former partner. “You seem to think her running away isn’t that big a deal - that it’s all some hilarious joke - but I don’t agree. She’s only twelve, damn it! She shouldn’t be travelling clear across the country with some virtual stranger without telling me. It doesn’t matter that it turned out to be you. She didn’t know you from Adam. She could have been killed!”

“You’re right,” Quinne spoke up then too, so blinded by her righteous indignation that she seemed to forget she was talking to an adult who was twenty-some years older than her. “It was stupid for us to do this without telling anyone. But don’t take it all out on Qianna. We both agreed to do this together; you should be angry at me too. And, even if you’re mad at us, that doesn’t mean you have the right to tear us apart. Not if you’re only doing this to prove some stupid point about who’s in charge. She’s my sister, for fuck’s sake, and you have no right to keep us separated like this. It’s not right!”

Justin appeared to be on the verge of responding to Quinn’s diatribe, but he didn’t get a chance to say anything before Hairy Alex popped up off the stool where he’d been sitting, quietly taking it all.
in up to that point, and intervened in the argument.

“I think we’ve heard just about enough from you, Missy,” he growled at Quinne, getting in her face so his words spewed down on her from his hairy maw. “After all the shit you’ve been pulling the last few days, you should be glad I haven’t filed assault charges against you yet. So, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get your sneaky little ass out of here right now, and don’t bother coming back, bitch!”

And that was the exact moment that World War Three broke out in the small kitchen of a moderate suburban house in San Jose, California.

“Alex, that’s not appropriate. Let me handle this please,” Justin cautioned, frowning at the man’s unsuitable comments to the young girl, and moving over so he was standing next to his fiance.

“Oh yeah? Who’s going to make me?” Quinne rejoined at exactly the same moment, crossing her arms obstinately, ready to dig in her heels and refuse to let the likes of Hairy Alex order her out of her sister’s house.

“You can’t talk to my daughter like that, asswipe,” Brian snarled at precisely the same instance, trying to insinuate himself between the perceived threat of the belligerent man and his headstrong daughter.

Not to be left out of the fray, both Qianna and Gus moved around so they were flanking Quinne, one on each side of their sister, creating a wall of resistance to counter their Yeti foe.

“I’ll talk however the fuck I want to this stupid little cunt,” Alex contended, growling over the shoulders of the adults at the girl who’d become the primary focus of his anger. “She’s fucked with me for the last time and I want her insolent ass out of here right now.”

Even then the whole fracas might have eventually blown over if Alex hadn’t made a major miscalculation by reaching out to grab Quinne by the arm right at that moment. His intention had probably been nothing more than to get her moving in the right direction, namely towards the door. But that’s not how his actions were seen by the rest of the assembled group.

Quinne immediately began to struggle, trying to free herself from the man’s grip. The other two kids attempted to drag Quinne backwards, trying to save her from Alex’s perceived aggression. The three of them combined were enough to drag Alex off balance, forcing him to take a few tottering
steps forward when he refused to release his grip, and tipping him ever so slightly off balance. Justin, then, got into the mix, reaching one arm around Alex’s chest from behind and pulling him backward, away from the children. This only exacerbated Alex’s instability. But Alex apparently didn’t appreciate the restraint Justin was trying to exert. He growled at his fiance then threw off the arm which was, at that point in time, the only thing that was holding him upright. However, at the exact same instant that Alex freed himself from Justin, Brian finally got a grip on Alex’s right wrist, ordering the younger man to get his grubby hands off Quinne or he’d be pulling back a stub, and used his superior strength to twist the man’s arm in a painful outward arch. The Hairy Yeti lost his grip on the straining girl’s arm - his grip on whom had been the only thing holding him upright at that point - and started to flail his arms outward as he fell ass over tea kettle. The kids tumbled into a heap in one direction, Justin flew off to the left, landing on top of the two barstools with a cacophonous crash, and Alex’s right hand flew upward in a perfect parabola right into Brian’s face, smacking him resoundingly in the left eye, before Alex too landed on his ass, sprawled across the kitchen tiles.

The thirty seconds of peace that descended on the site of the melee while everyone fought to catch their breath served as a tiny oasis of calm. It was far too brief though. Brian was literally seeing red and was only about ten seconds away from taking out his Irish on the body of the hairy attacker lying at his feet. Luckily, Justin managed to untangle himself from the barstools sufficiently to allow him to crawl in between Brian and his intended victim.

“How dare you put your grubby little paws on my daughter!” Brian roared as he tried to vault over Justin’s body to get to his prey. “I’m going to break every fucking bone in your body!”

“Brian!” Justin screeched, vaulting to his feet and reaching up to put both hands on Brian’s heaving chest. “Brian, stop! I’m not going to let you kill anyone in my kitchen. Stop already!”

“That piece of shit just assaulted my daughter and punched me in the face, Justin!”

“I know, Brian. But I’ll handle it. Just back the fuck off,” Justin ordered with a tiny shove to the much larger man’s chest.

Brian glowered and huffed and hissed at the man he wanted to get his hands on, but Justin’s soothing touch was enough to restrain him. He sufficed himself with clenching his fists at his side, still ready to attack if needed, but taking a step back. This allowed Justin to turn his attentions to the man who’d started the whole brouhaha.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Alex?” he looked daggers down at the man who was still lying on the floor after having the wind knocked out of him. “You do NOT physically attack a twelve year old girl. I don’t care what she did to you. That’s just unacceptable and I won’t have it in my house!”
“After what that little bitch did to me? You’re taking HER side? She made me fucking shit all over myself all day yesterday, Justin,” Alex whinged.

“Yeah, after you tried to scald her by flushing the toilet when she was in the shower, you fucking creep,” Brian rounded on the man, unwilling to let him blame what had happened on his daughter. “From what I hear, you deserved what you got and more, you bully. And if I’d been here when you were talking shit to Qianna, or were playing your little games on Quinne, you’d have got a hell of a lot worse, I can promise you that!”

“What’s all this?” Justin asked, finally realizing there was more to this dispute than met the eye.

“It’s true, Dad. Alex is always being an ass to me behind your back. He makes fun of me and teases me and even threatened me that, after you guys were married, he’d have me sent off to boarding school so he could have you all to himself,” Qianna maintained, jumping to her sister’s defense. “He’s always doing something nasty and mean, as long as he knows you’re not looking, so the fact he was trying to hurt Quinne doesn’t surprise me. That’s one of the other reasons I didn’t want to come back here after camp was done - I couldn’t bear the thought of having to be around HIM. I’d rather be living with strangers than spend even one more day in the same house as this asshole!”

Gus stepped up and put his arms around Qianna, allowing the overwrought girl to turn into his strong chest where she broke into tears. Quinne joined her brother, hugging the crying girl from the other side. Brian finally gave up his pugilistic stance and walked over to where his kids were huddled together. He wrapped the whole lot of them in the protective circle of his arms, looking accusingly to where Justin was still standing in the middle of the kitchen floor.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” Justin asked the pathetic lump of hairiness still cowering on the kitchen floor.

“Are you going to believe those two brats over me? After that bitch tried to poison me?” Alex pointed up at Quinne, looking at her with such menace in his eyes, that it caused both girls to shiver.

Justin shook his head and grimaced at the man. “The fact that you continue to use such foul language, directed at a child, tells me everything I need to know, Alex. That’s not, in any way, acceptable. You should know better. You’re an adult and they’re only twelve years old, for crying out loud. I don’t care what Quinne or Qianna did to you, you’re not going to to curse at them, call them names, and physically attack them in my house!” He huffed a deep breath as he moved a few steps over so he was standing closer to the doorway and lifted his arm to point the way out of the
“I won’t tolerate that kind of behavior towards my daughter or any other child, Alex. I want you gone. Get the hell out of my house. Now!”

“Think again, Lover Boy,” Alex sneered as he shakily climbed to his feet. “This happens to be MY house now too. Remember, you added me to the title last week when we drew up all the papers for the wedding at your lawyer’s office? So I’m not going anywhere. In fact, if you and your brat and all your skanky friends don’t get the fuck out of MY house, I’m going to call the cops on you and file charges for assault against the trickster over there as well as her brute of a father. How do you like them apples?”

“And here I thought I was the one who was hopeless at relationships,” Brian drawled into the pregnant silence that followed Alex’s ultimatum. “You suck at this way more than me, though, Sunshine.”

12/9/18 - Yay! Everybody cheer for the demise of The Yeti! Justin’s finally got his number. And that was the scene I’d had virtually written in my head from the very beginning - so what did you think about it? Now for Brian to work his magic and win back his man... TAG
How It Could Still Be

Chapter Notes

The fall out after the fight with The Yeti . . . Enjoy! TAG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 23 - How It Could Still Be.

“Ouch!” Brian grunted in pain as Justin pressed on a particularly tender area while he was trying to clean the cut above Brian’s left eye.

“Well, if you’d sit still and stop squirming around long enough for me to get this bandage on, I wouldn’t be hurting you,” Justin ordered, taking the paper wrapping off the small Band-Aid and expertly applying it over the cut as he spoke.

Brian made a show of folding his hands in his lap, the picture of all innocence, looking up at the worried faces surrounding him with a beatific smile.

“There,” Justin stepped back to admire his handiwork. “Gus, can you check and see if those cold packs we put in the mini-fridge are ready?”

The boy obediently trotted over to the cupboard where a small refrigerator had been built into the console that also acted as a dresser, an entertainment center, and a desk. He tugged open the appropriate door and retrieved a square plastic pack filled with blue gel. The girls watched as he assessed its temperature, shrugged, and brought it over anyway.

“They’re not super cold yet, but you can use this one for the moment while the other keeps chilling,” Gus suggested, handing over the cold pack.

Justin took the proffered item and tenderly held it up to the side of Brian’s face, where the redness from where he’d been struck was just starting to darken into a substantial bruise.
“I’m afraid you’re going to end up with one hell of a shiner,” Justin surmised, stepping back to look at his handiwork.

“That fucker. I should sue him for assault.” Brian winced as he shifted the cold pack he was holding and it caused him another surge of pain. “Hey, that’s not a bad idea. And, if I win, we could get your house back for you as part of the damages,” he teased, winking with his good eye at the girls who were standing behind Justin.

“It’s not fucking funny, Brian,” Justin moaned, plopping down on the other hotel bed and looking utterly dejected. “The man I was supposed to be marrying in less than two weeks just broke off our engagement AND threw me out of my own house, so excuse me if I’m not laughing. I’m now homeless. I’ll also be broke as soon as I get done paying the cancellation fees for all the wedding shit. I’m so fucked.”

Brian let the cold pack fall to the bedspread and got up to go sit next to his Ex, wrapping his arm around the smaller man’s shoulders. “Hey, I was just kidding, Sunshine. It’ll be fine. I know a great lawyer who’ll sort this whole thing out for you. There’s no way that fucker will get away with this. And EmmyLou is already on the wedding stuff - he’ll get you out of most of the fees, he’s an old hand at this crap.”

“He’s already on what?”

Brian cleared his throat and looked up at the girls, who were trying not to look too guilty. “Yeah, well, that’s the other part of the story of the kid swap, Sunshine. See, while Qianna was responsible for pumping me and the rest of the family for more information on our history and the circumstances surrounding their birth, she was also trying to enlist help to stop your wedding to the Yeti.”

Justin looked at his daughter with renewed irritation but didn’t say anything.

“Relax, Sunshine, it’ll be fine. Now, my proposal is this,” Brian continued. “We all deserve a bit of a rest - I don’t know about the kids, but the days when I could stay up all night long, have a fist fight before breakfast, and then still function at my usual brilliant levels of perfection the rest of the day are, sadly, past - so, I say we hole up here in the hotel for the rest of today and then get a flight back home to Pittsburgh first thing tomorrow.”

“Excellent idea!” Qianna voiced her approval. “I desperately need a nap; I was so worried about
how Dad would take the news that I didn’t get any sleep on the plane last night.” She yawned and started to turn around to go through the connecting door of the hotel suite into the adjoining room.

“I think I’ll change into my suit and go for a swim,” Quinne stated. “Then I’m going to see what other damage I can do to Hairy Alex’s online footprint.” She laughed evilly at the enjoyable prospect ahead of her.

“Hey, Justin, is it okay if I tell a couple of my friends that you’re coming to town? I know QiQi says you hate talking with fans, but what about fellow artists. Or, at least, aspiring artists. We all love your work and they’d really get a kick out of meeting you,” Gus pleaded, looking at the famous animator with an almost reverent regard.

“What? Wait . . .” Justin looked around him, seeming perplexed and just a tad bit angry. “Who the hell said I was going to Pittsburgh? I’m not going anywhere.” He crossed his arms over his chest and sat there glowering at the lot of them in total defiance.

“Sunshine, be reasonable . . .” Brian started, only to be savagely cut off.

“DON’T CALL ME SUNSHINE! You have no right to call me some stupid pet name from a decade ago. And I’m not going back to Pittsburgh or anywhere else with you, Brian!”

“Fine . . . ‘Justin’ . . .” Brian shook his head indulgently at the other man, but that only caused Justin to growl at him under his breath. “Shit, could you just pull that stick you’ve got up there out of your ass and calm down a minute? Please? Fuck, if this is what happens when you go full-on top mode, I say you were better off as a bottom boy. At least back then you weren’t so up tight. Pun intended,” Brian teased, in a ill-conceived attempt to lighten the mood.

“Fuck you, Brian Kinney!” Justin shouted, standing up and turning around so he was towering over the other man, who remained seated on the hotel bed holding the cold pack to his mangled cheek. “You don’t get to just show up out of the blue and insinuate yourself back into my life as if nothing ever happened. You don’t get to order me around and take over control of my life. And you certainly don’t get to make fun of me, or my sex life, especially not in front of my daughter!”

Justin’s rant effectively shut everyone up, including Brian, for the moment. The girls, who’d been about to head off to do their own thing, now huddled together near the door and Gus backed up a step, away from the fuming blond man. Even Brian was quiet for about thirty seconds. Justin wasn’t the type to get easily angered, but when he finally did reach his boiling point, it wasn’t a pretty sight. The whole group seemed to think it best not to further aggravate the situation while Justin stood there, his face flushed with fury and his chest heaving, clenching his fists reflexively.
Finally, though, Brian took the initiative to try and calm the blond storm. “I get that you’ve had better mornings, Justin, but can we please deal with this rationally for a second,” Brian began, setting aside the cold pack in order to hold his hands up in a placating gesture. “Look, Sun. . . Justin . . . I didn’t mean to make light of your situation. I know the thing with the Yeti . . .”

“His name is ‘Alex’,” Justin insisted.

“Fine, ‘Alex’,” Brian conceded. “I know the thing with Alex has got to be tough, but I won’t apologize for not wanting someone like that around my children. He’s a complete ass. You are better off without him. And, while you’re dealing with the fallout from that - and, for the moment at least, the fact that you’re homeless - there’s no reason why you and Qianna can’t come to Pittsburgh for a couple of weeks. At least there you’ll have a place to stay and the girls can spend some more time together while we,” he gestured in a back and forth motion between their two bodies, “figure out how we’re going to handle the fact that our TWIN daughters want to maintain contact. That’s not so unreasonable, now is it?”

“But . . . I can’t just hop on a plane and leave,” Justin maintained, his voice now sounding frustrated rather than angry. “I’ve got to deal with cancelling the wedding and I’ve got work and . . .”

“But you’re already off work for the next three weeks, Dad,” Quinne threw in. “You weren’t scheduled to go back till after the honeymoon.”

“And school doesn’t start till after Labor Day, so there’s no reason I can’t spend more time with Quinne,” Qianna added imploringly.

“You can just as easily make calls about the wedding stuff from Pittsburgh as you can here from a hotel, not to mention that you’ll be able to enlist Emmett’s help if you’re back there,” Brian suggested.

Justin, though, still appeared reluctant to accept the idea of a trip to his former hometown. He looked from one girl to the next, then darted a suspicious glance Brian’s way, before dropping his eyes to the carpet as he chewed on his bottom lip in silence. Quinne and Qianna looked at each other worrily. Brian sat there mutely, simply waiting for his former partner to work through whatever it was he thinking. And for a minute or so it looked like it might all fall apart.

Which was when Gus finally spoke up. “I realize you’ve got a lot of issues you’re dealing with that
are a lot more important than me, Justin, but, well, if you did come back to Pittsburgh, you could also come to my birthday party next weekend. I mean, if my moms are to be believed, you were there when I was born eighteen years ago, so it seems kinda fitting that you’d be there to see me off into adulthood too.” Gus smiled shyly at the man he’d only just been reunited with.

That seemed to be all it took to completely melt poor Justin’s resolve. “Oh, Gus, I’d be honored to be there for your birthday,” he caved, reaching out to grip the boy’s arm and give it a reassuring little squeeze, before sighing deeply and looking around at the rest of his audience. “Okay. Fine. I can see that I won’t win this one. But I want to be on the record here that I am NOT happy at the way you four have all conspired to manipulate me into this. I told myself thirteen years ago that I would never set foot in Pittsburgh again, and I’m SERIOUSLY pissed at all of you for forcing me to break that promise to myself.”

Justin petulantly flopped down on the bed across from the one where Brian was still sitting, looking more like a pouting toddler than he probably wanted to know. Brian repositioned his cold pack again, using the motion to mask the fact that an ear-to-ear grin had bloomed across his face. The kids were less circumspect, sharing jubilant smiles all around, and both girls leaned over to deposit kisses on Justin’s cheeks.

“Thank you, Dad,” Qianna beamed.

“Yeah, thanks, Dad,” Quinne echoed.

“You do realize, now that there’s two of them, nobody’s ever going to be able to stop them,” Gus commented with a chuckle as he watched the two girls head off into the other room, arm in arm.

“Yeah, I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing, though,” Brian replied, joining his son with a chuckle or two of his own.

Justin didn’t join in with the laughter, continuing to just lie there on the bed, sprawled out like a helpless starfish washed up on the beach, looking up at the ceiling dejectedly and sighing. Brian’s amusement died pretty quickly when he noticed his Ex’s demeanor. He caught Gus’ eye and then jerked his head towards the door in a silent request that the boy leave the two adults alone. Gus nodded and silently backed away, pulling the door that connected the two rooms closed behind him.

Before he could actually shut the door all the way, though, his sisters were there, pulling him backwards and taking over. Qianna had her finger over her lips, warning Gus not to say anything. Quinne took charge of the door, pulling it almost all the way to, but leaving a gap large enough to
allow them to continue to eavesdrop on the conversation in the other room. Then the three of them gathered closer, leaning in so that they were all three only inches from the crack.

“If you’re really not okay with this idea, Justin, I’ll try and rein in the girls and we can make other plans,” Brian’s soothing baritone voice said.

There was a pause for several seconds before they could hear a loud sigh and Justin answered. “No. They’re right - we can’t keep them apart. It wouldn’t be right. They need to have as much of an opportunity to bond as we can give them. I just . . . I really never thought I’d have to go back there and I . . . I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“Still that pissed off at me?”

“No . . . I mean, yes, but . . .” the kids could hear yet another heavy sigh. “It’s more complicated than that, Brian, and you know it.”

There was nothing further for at least a minute and the snoops listening in from the other room thought maybe that was all they’d get, but then Brian began talking again, his voice dropping to a lower tone that was somehow more intimate and more sad at the same time. “Despite what many people seem to think, I have actually grown up a little over the past eighteen years, Justin. And I know that a lot of the blame for WHY things got so ‘complicated’ was on me. I’m fully aware of my propensity to be a total ass - usually when it’s least appropriate and most harmful - but I’d like to think the past few years of being a single dad have . . . let’s say ‘mellowed’ . . . me a little. So, here’s me proving that.”

The listeners could hear the sound of motion, fabric sliding against fabric, a little grunt of movement and two faint footsteps, before more fabric noises and then Brian’s voice came again, this time from closer - giving the impression that he’d moved over to sit on the other bed with Justin.

“When Lizette backed out of the surrogacy contract I was devastated,” Brian continued. “And that’s not to say that you weren’t too - I get that - but, well, I guess it sort of surprised me how hard it hit me. I never expected to feel that level of grief over something we never even really had. I know most of my friends doubt that I even have a fucking heart, but that day . . . I finally knew what being heartbroken felt like. So, I lost it. Completely.”

“We both did, Brian,” Justin’s quiet response came through the pregnant pause.
“Yeah, but I didn’t need to take those emotions out on you the way I did,” Brian answered, his voice raising with the strong feelings he was admitting. “I shouldn’t have blamed YOU for what Lizette did. I knew that, even as I was screaming at you about it; I just felt so gutted that I needed to lash out at someone and . . . you were there.” This time there were dueling sighs, both loud enough that the kids in the other room could hear them. “I hated myself for that for months afterwards. I kept reliving that argument on a fucking loop in my head and hearing myself telling you that if you didn’t like the way I was reacting you could just leave . . . Fuck. It still makes me cringe, even now . . . And the second the words were out of my mouth I knew I’d gone too far. So I left. I went back to the loft and stayed there all night, drinking myself into a fucking stupor.”

“I figured you’d gone out tricking,” Justin interjected wistfully.

“No. I was too fucked up to fuck around,” Brian explained, laughing mirthlessly at his own joke. “I didn’t even wake up till the middle of the next afternoon and then I spent the rest of that night puking my guts out. I hadn’t tied one on like THAT since . . . well, since before I’d met you, I guess . . . Anyway, when I finally did come crawling home two days later, you were gone. I thought I’d finally done it; I’d driven you away for good. And I knew I deserved it after the way I’d acted, so I just . . . started drinking all over again and didn’t really stop until Lizette showed up again, almost a year later. She handed Quinne to me and it scared me back to my senses.”

“Idiot. How your liver has held up this long, I have no idea,” Justin commented.

“It’s a mystery, all right.” Brian’s tone briefly lightened and then returned to a more somber level. “You know I suck at the whole apology thing, but if it helps, I really am sorry. I didn’t mean what I said and I certainly didn’t mean to drive you away from your home and your family.”

Justin’s response came a minute or two later, his voice sounding empty and lifeless. “I appreciate the apology, Brian, but it doesn’t really change anything.”

“Is there anything that would change things?” Brian asked.

“I don’t know . . . I . . . I don’t think so . . .”

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“We have to do something!” Qianna announced to her posse, getting a nod of agreement from her twin.
Gus reached over to grab another slice of pizza out of the delivery box that was sitting on the floor between the two beds in the ‘kids’ room’. “Don’t you think we should stay out of it? Pops and Justin ARE adults, after all. They should be able to work out their own shit, right?”

*Pffft!* Quinne scoffed at that idea and threw the crust of her last slice back in the box. “Yeah, right! If they could work out their own shit we wouldn’t be just meeting each other after twelve years apart. We also wouldn’t be sitting here in a hotel room after Justin’s love interest threw us all out of Justin’s house. And Pops is no better - running around still pretending he’s twenty and fucking his way through the male population of Western Pennsylvania because he can’t be with the one man he ever really loved. These two are hopeless if you ask me. If we don’t fix this, they’ll just muddle on with their heads stuck up their asses for ANOTHER twelve fucking years.”

“I’m with Q here,” Qianna agreed. “Our dads are useless when it comes to relationship stuff. We need to do something. I don’t want to live 3,000 miles away from you guys for the next six years.”

“Okay, but what?” Quinne asked the question they were all thinking.

“I think you two are underestimating the Kinney charm,” Gus speculated as he engulfed the last of his pizza and then chugged the remains of his soda to wash it down. “I say, we leave Pops to his wicked ways. I mean, if all those rumors we’ve heard over the years have any meat to them, he does just fine with the guys he chooses to go after. And it seems like he’s pretty much intent on going after Justin now, so shouldn’t we just let him do his thing? He won over your dad once, right?”

“Yeah, but you don’t know how STUBBORN my dad can be,” Qianna warned. “When he gets his back up, there’s nothing you can do about it. I don’t think even the legendary Brian Kinney could talk Justin Taylor out of something if he really dug in his heels.”

“Trust me, Pops won’t try and TALK him out of anything. That little speech earlier is probably the most he’s talked in years. If I know Brian Kinney, there will be a lot less talk and a lot more action,” Quinne commented, raising chuckles from her siblings.

“Listen, ladies, I may not remember much from when I was a kid, but I do remember those two when they were together,” Gus insisted, rolling over so he could sit up on the bed he was occupying. “I used to love staying with Pops and Justin. I remember how they used to touch pretty much all the time. I remember joking about how much they’d kiss. I remember how they used to laugh all the time - with each other and with me - and how happy they always seemed when I saw them. I refuse to believe that all of that somehow just evaporated. Didn’t you see when Justin was bandaging Pops’ head? The way he was so gentle and concerned? Nope. It’s not gone. Those
feelings they used to have are still there - they’re just suppressed. All we need to do is help them remember how it could still be.”

“Hmmmm. You might be right,” Quinne seemed to have been swayed by her brother’s logic. “Justin did seem really concerned about Pops’ injury. And he did agree to go to Pittsburgh in the end. If he was going to fight this, he’s not trying very hard.”

“If that’s the case, then we just need to help them remember what they used to be like,” Qianna summed up. “So, how do we do that?”

“Easy. We make sure they have to spend LOTS of time together, so they have plenty of time to reminisce. And we keep them talking about the past. We ask questions. We MAKE them think about all the good things they’ve been missing all these years,” Quinne directed, getting a familiar, mischievous glint in her eye that her co-conspirators found reassuring. “But we’ve only got two weeks to do it, so we have to work fast. Here’s what I suggest . . .”

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Chapter End Notes

12/16/18 - Well, I’ve got them together and Justin’s going back to Pittsburgh . . . I don’t think we have the whole story about what happened to send Justin running away though. Stay tuned. LOL. TAG
“Wow! I can’t believe you held on to this place all those years,” Justin stated as the group piled out of Brian’s Mercedes G-Class SUV after they pulled up to the front steps of the big old tudor-style mansion where Brian and Quinne had lived for so long.

Brian opened the back and pulled out two of the waiting suitcases before answering, adding a patented Kinney smirk. “Well I couldn’t sell it with you still on the title.”

“What are you talking about? I signed off on the quick claim deed when you returned the divorce papers to me,” Justin argued, wrestling his case out of Brian’s hands.

“I never recorded the deed,” Brian replied with a shrug.

Justin was still standing there, mouth hanging open in shock, as Brian hustled up the front walk to unlock the door and disappear inside.

“Cool! We own another house,” Qianna stated, seeming unfazed by the bombshell that seemed to have taken out her father. “I say we just let Hairy Alex keep the place in San Jose and move in here permanently.”

“We are not letting Alex keep the house, QiQi! And we are not moving here. We live in California, remember? Everything we have is back there, including my job,” Justin growled angrily at his daughter.
“You know, considering your reputation,” Gus intervened, grabbing his own case out of the back of the car, “you’d have no problem at all getting a job around here. You’d basically have your pick. In fact, if you were interested, Uncle Ben just happens to be workout buddies with the Dean of PIFA.”

“Sweet!” the twins sang out in tandem.

“Shut up you two!” Justin growled, but then softened the rebuke slightly by adding, “I’m still angry at you guys and continuing to spout more idiotic nonsense certainly isn’t going to help matters.” Then Justin addressed the boy with a much gentler tone. “Gus, Honey, you know I can’t just uproot my whole life on a whim like that, right? No matter how much I still care about you.”

“Wait a minute!” Qianna complained, hands on hips and a glare directed at her father. “How come I got a ‘shut up’ and called an idiot, and Gus gets a ‘Honey’ and ‘I care about you?’ I’m your actual daughter, in case you forgot!”

“Face it, QiQi, I’m now his favorite,” Gus chuckled as he beamed at his newest sibling. “Bout time too, after having to fight Quinne for Pops all those years.”

“Like you ever had a chance with Pops! I AM his baby girl after all,” Quinne bragged, offering up a simpering, pseudo-innocent look that got Gus laughing along with her.

“Fine, you can take Pops and I’ll have Justin,” Gus decided as he handed his sister’s bag to her.

“What about me? I wanna be someone’s favorite too,” Qianna whined, shouldering her carry on bag and starting to follow her sister inside.

“You can be MY favorite,” Quinne declared as she slipped her free arm around her clone’s shoulders and led her inside. “Now, let’s go pick out a room for you and decide how we’re going to decorate it.”

“It’s like nobody’s even listening to me!” Justin grumbled, watching the teens’ retreating backs with a sour look on his otherwise handsome face.
He pulled the last of the bags out of the back of the large vehicle and then slammed the hatch closed. Gus came up next to the grouching older man and shoulder bumped him before reaching out to take another of the bags out of Justin’s hands. Justin managed a small smile for the boy and began to follow Gus up the walk.

“You get used to it when you live with women long enough. You think it’s bad with just two of them? You should see what it’s like at home with two mothers and a bossy younger sister. This is nothing.”

When the girls finally came back down to the kitchen about twenty minutes later they were in high spirits. They’d managed to convince Gus to give up his room so that Qianna and Quinne could have adjoining rooms. He was actually quite happy to be moving further down the hall where he’d have more privacy and not have to share a bathroom with his sister any longer. He didn’t tell them that, though, and made the girls concede many, many favors in order to ‘get’ his room. Meanwhile, Quinne had the Wayfare app open on her tablet and had employed the virtual decorating tool to select all the new furniture Qianna would need. Now they just needed Brian’s approval - and his credit card - to finalize their rather hefty purchases.

“You DO realize we’re only staying for two weeks, right? By the time that stuff is delivered, we’ll probably be gone already,” Justin cautioned the two twittering girls.

“Maybe, but it’s not like we won’t be spending time together in the future, right? QiQi needs a place to stay whenever she comes to visit,” Quinne insisted.

When Justin failed to respond other than to glare in the girls’ direction some more, Qianna got worried. “You haven’t changed your mind, have you, Dad? You’re not going to try and keep us apart, are you? You promised, Dad . . .”

“I know what I promised, Qianna, and I won’t try and keep you two apart but that doesn’t mean we’re moving in!” Justin erupted furiously, slamming the coffee cup he’d been holding down on the counter before storming out of the room. They could hear him stomping up the stairs and then, a few seconds later, they heard an upstairs door slamming.

“Shit!” Quinne mumbled and sat down on the kitchen stool that Justin had vacated.

“Give Justin some time, girls. He’s had a lot of changes thrown at him in a very short period and just needs to vent a little. After he’s through queening out, I’ll go talk to him,” Brian promised with
a reassuring smile to the twins.

“I don’t think a little talk is going to do much,” Qianna replied, pouring herself a glass of orange juice and then joining her sister at the kitchen island. “Dad is pissed - I mean, majorly pissed - and he when he gets like this, he tends to stay mad for a long time.”

Brian chuckled under his breath. “Oh, trust me, I remember. He always was a little drama princess. But this is nothing. You wouldn’t believe some of the fights we got into back in the day.” Brian’s smile got even bigger and his eyes glinted as if he was actually enjoying the memories of their prior fights, a phenomenon that was explained by his follow up comment. “Of course, that just meant the make up sex afterwards was even better.”

“Ewww! Pops! Stop already,” Quinne demanded. “It’s bad enough I had to listen to all your sexual exploits growing up, but I can’t handle it when I actually know the other guy you’re talking about. I’m gonna be traumatized for life.”

“You think that’s bad?” Gus added as he poured himself a cup of coffee and joined his father in leaning back against the counter near the sink. “I once walked in on them back when I was about five . . . And no, Pops, even then I didn’t buy the explanation that you were just teaching Justin some fun new wrestling moves.”

The whole group exploded with laughter. Especially Brian, although he might have been blushing just a tiny bit at the same time - it was hard to tell with his darker coloring. As the laughter died down, though, the participants became serious again, each staring contemplatively into his or her drink.

Qianna was the one who finally broke the lingering silence. “I don’t know if that approach is going to work this time. Dad is . . . well, I can tell he’s not ready to forgive you for whatever happened between the two of you. To be honest, I’ve never seen him this angry at anyone before. Usually he gets over stuff like breakups pretty easily, but not this time. I’ve never seen him like this.”

“Yeah, I . . .” Brian began, and then shook his head, apparently at his own failure to say whatever it was he needed to say. “It’s not you kids’ fault that he and I screwed up so badly. I know I hurt him pretty spectacularly, but I promise that I’ll find some way to fix it. At least enough so you girls won’t have to suffer.”

“Well, whatever you need to do, you better do it fast,” Quinne advised, taking a sip of the cooling coffee that Justin had never tasted, “because you only have two weeks and I get the impression that, once they go back to California, QiQi and I aren’t going to see each other very often - maybe
once or twice a year, tops - which is completely unacceptable.”

“I hear ya,” Brian agreed, setting down his own coffee cup and cracking his neck from side to side as if about to set off into battle. “Personally, I would be thrilled if we could somehow convince Justin and Qianna to stick around permanently. Although, it’s gonna be tough to get everything sorted out in only two weeks.”

“Just tell us how we can help,” Gus offered, as incentivized as his sisters and father to find a way to work this thing.

“Leave it up to me - I’m the one that caused all this, so I’m the one that’s going to have to find a way to repair the damage,” Brian admitted.

Then he headed out of the room with a steady stride and a determined set to his shoulders. As soon as Brian was out of sight, Gus and Quinne jumped up and, each pulling on one of Qianna’s arms, they signalled that she should follow them without saying anything. The Kinney kids led the Taylor girl to the back stairs, heading down to the basement and thence to the laundry room at the rear of the building. Once there, they huddled together next to the laundry hamper in the corner. Qianna wasn’t sure what the hell they were doing in the damn laundry room, but since she trusted her friends, she didn’t say anything. And, as soon as they were all settled and not making any noise, the words of a distant conversation became discernable, trickling down to them via the heating vent above their heads.

“. . . Yeah, well, stop taking it out on our daughters, then,” the kids heard Brian speaking. “They just want to be together, which is understandable, and you’re freaking them out with this temper tantrum of yours.”

“I’m not taking it out on them,” Justin yelled, loudly enough that the eavesdroppers had no trouble at all hearing him. “And I’m not throwing a temper tantrum, damn it!”

“You’re sure doing a fucking great job of imitating a spoiled four year old, then,” Brian shouted back. Then his voice softened again, and the kids had to lean in closer to the wall to hear. “Come on, Sunshine. Stop making this so hard. What do you want me to say? I was a total ass. I freely admit it. But you’re not blameless either. I didn’t expect you to fucking leave me over a stupid argument. It’s not like we didn’t have a million other arguments in our day. But when I came home you were just gone. And then I didn’t hear another word from you for six months? It felt like . . . you just . . . you gave up on me. And now, what? You’re giving up on our children to?”

There was a long pause and then an interval of mumbling that the children couldn’t decipher.
“What?” Apparently Brian couldn’t understand Justin’s whispered explanation either.

A little louder, sounding almost desperate, Justin responded, “I DID give up . . . When you stormed out of the house that day I gave up on everything, Brian. And worse, I gave up on myself.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You said you were devastated when Lizzy backed out on the surrogacy contract?” Justin responded, a tinge of anger returning to his voice now too. “But, what? You didn’t think I’d be equally affected? I was just as devastated as you were, Brian. And, on top of that, I had to deal with my partner screaming at me and ordering me to leave my home. Not for the first time, I might add. So, effectively, in the space of just under an hour, I felt like I’d lost not only my child, but also my home and my lover. Talk about fucking devastated – I was crushed. Destroyed . . .”

“Fuck,” Brian commented quietly. “But . . . Why did you leave? We’d had that same fight before, Sunshine, but you never left for good. You always just tracked me down later and kicked my ass for being an idiot. I thought . . . I thought the whole marriage thing meant you . . . You weren’t supposed to leave, damn it!”

There was no response for long enough that the kids almost decided it was time to leave their hidey-hole, but then, finally, they heard Justin’s voice again. He sounded thoughtful but distant, as if he was discussing something from a clinical perspective. Strangely emotionless.

“I know you’ve always detested the idea of therapy, Brian, but it might have been useful for me to get some help after the bashing, you know.” They could hear a faint grunt of assent from Brian in the background. “I’ve learned a lot about PTSD since then. Like the fact that nobody really understands what triggers recurrences. You see, getting your brains smashed in isn’t something you ever really get over. You can go years without even thinking about it and then, one day, you see something or hear something - maybe something completely unrelated - and it just hits. Like a fucking Mack Truck. And before you know it you’re totally incapacitated and struggling to even breathe . . .”

While Justin’s voice remained calm and neutral as he spoke, the children listening in heard a muffled whimper at that point in the conversation and could only surmise it came from Brian. Which was troubling to the man’s children who’d never seen their father as anything other than strong and capable of handling anything. It seemed likely that they were about to find out something that none of them had suspected. They shared a glance amongst the three of them, their matching expressions communicating the doubt about whether they wanted to keep listening or not. But the conversation they’d been listening in on continued before they could make that
I don’t actually remember it very well. I guess I packed up my stuff - intending to leave as you’d directed - and I called Daphne to come pick me up. All I recall from that time was that I couldn’t seem to stop crying. Everything seemed to be crashing down around me and I couldn’t even see outside the blackness that covered everything around me. Everything seemed hopeless. All my thoughts became this circular morass of pain and self-loathing. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn't focus on anything. All I could do was cry. And I hated myself for being so weak. Even my anger at you turned inward and somehow morphed into self-recrimination. It was . . .” Justin laughed mirthlessly when he couldn’t seem to find the right words to describe what he’d gone through. “It wasn’t pretty.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Brian pleaded.

“I wasn’t exactly thinking rationally, Brian,” Justin replied, finally evidencing some emotion in his tone. “Eventually Daphne bundled me into her car and took me to the hospital. I spent fourteen days in the psych ward before they were confident that I wasn’t a danger to myself. And after that . . . Well, it took me a long time before I felt strong enough to deal with the outside world. I was so . . . embarrassed . . . I didn’t know how to explain what had happened to people. That would have required me admitting to everyone I’d become so unhinged that I was threatening to kill myself and I just couldn’t do that so . . . I don’t know . . . It just seemed easier to move three thousand miles away and cut off all ties to everyone I’d ever known.”

“Fuck, Sunshine . . . If I’d known . . .”

“Yeah, well, like I said, I wasn’t exactly rational at that point,” Justin admitted. “I was barely holding on as it was and talking to you or anyone else in the family seemed like an impossibility at that point. PTSD is a real bitch. And, knowing your pathological aversion to talking about shit, it’s not like telling you would have helped all that much, now would it?”

“I would have . . .”

“What? You would have what?” Justin’s voice betrayed a renewed hint of anger. “You would have come with me to therapy? You didn’t even manage to come see me when I was in the hospital after I was bashed, Brian. How exactly would you have helped?”

“That was before we were fucking married, Justin. I was your husband. I had a right to know . . .” Brian countered.
“Maybe . . .” Justin conceded quietly and then paused before he offered another disclosure. “That’s what Daphne said too, by the way. She was so pissed off at me, but I blackmailed her into not telling you - I said I’d go through with killing myself if she told you - so she couldn’t say anything. Of course, after I fled to California I cut her off too. So much for that unwavering friendship thing, huh? I haven’t talked to Daphne in ten years . . . Hell, I barely kept in touch with my mother.”

There was another long silence during which Quinne had to take her sister into her arms, pressing Qianna’s face into her shoulder to muffle the sounds of the girl’s quiet sobbing, in order to prevent the men they were covertly listening to from discovering they were being surveilled.

Eventually Brian’s voice broke through the silence. “I did come to see you, you know. After Hobbs. I came every night, but I . . . I still . . . I blamed myself for what happened. So I only came after everyone else left. When you were asleep. And I watched through the window of your room so I wouldn’t disturb you . . . But that was before. Before I manned up and fucking married you, you twat. You should have known I’d changed. You made me change, damn it . . . I would have been there for you this time, Justin. If I’d known, I would have been there.”

“How was I supposed to know that, Brian? How? When you’d just finished throwing me out of your life? When I was barely functioning for months afterwards?” Justin sounded so crushed and defeated, the kids’ hearts were breaking. “So you see why I’m not exactly thrilled to have been forced back here? All the memories this place brings up . . . It’s fucking painful.”

“What can I do to help, Sunshine?”

“How was I supposed to know that, Brian? How? When you’d just finished throwing me out of your life? When I was barely functioning for months afterwards?” Justin sounded so crushed and defeated, the kids’ hearts were breaking. “So you see why I’m not exactly thrilled to have been forced back here? All the memories this place brings up . . . It’s fucking painful.”

“What can I do to help, Sunshine?”

“Nothing. I have to work though this by myself,” Justin warned with an audible sigh so loud that even the kids could hear it. “And, as if that’s not bad enough, I have to call my Mom and explain to her why I’m back in Pittsburgh and why the wedding is off. That should be a fun conversation.”

“If it helps, you’re welcome to blame it all on me,” Brian suggested, earning himself a wistful chuckle from Justin that broke the somber mood.

“That’s probably not a great idea. My mom isn’t your biggest fan these days.”

“I’m not afraid of Mother Taylor . . . Well, not too afraid . . . Although, if she tells Debbie, and they team up against me, I’ll probably be toast. So much for preserving my one remaining ball intact. Good thing I’m not still the prime Stud on Liberty Avenue or there’d be issues.”
“What? You’re not still the reigning Stud around here? When did that happen?”

“The day I first held a squirming bundle of baby girl in my arms and decided I’d rather be a single dad than an aging club boy,” Brian answered. Justin must have evidenced some disbelief though, because Brian’s next comment was telling, “What? You think I’m still out tricking nightly or something? I’m forty-fucking-eight, Sunshine. How pathetic would I be if I was still out chasing chicken every night?” They both laughed. “Don’t get me wrong, I can still get my needs met when I choose to, but outside of an occasional fuck buddy or two I don’t really bother much anymore. These days, when I go to Babylon, it’s just to look over the books and talk to the manager about business. Nope. I’ve long since given up my Studly ways, Sunshine. I’d rather spend my weekends reading, watching movies and catching up on my sleep than chasing tail and suffering through hangovers.”

“Oh how the mighty have fallen,” Justin teased.

“I choose to think of it as ‘evolving’,,” Brian countered. “Now, if you’re done wigging out, come back downstairs with me, Sunshine, and let the kids see that you’re okay.”

“Fine,” Justin replied, his words followed by noises associated with the two men getting to their feet. “I’m going to need a drink before I call my mother, though. Maybe two.”

“My liquor cabinet is at your disposal, Sunshine,” Brian offered and then they heard a door opening.

The kids waited a minute or two till they could be sure that the men had left the guest room, listening to the steps echoing on the risers of the stairs as two sets of feet descended, before they relaxed.

Relaxed might have been the wrong word, though, especially for Qianna, who seemed completely wrecked by the disclosures they’d overheard. “Oh, Dad . . . I didn’t know. It’s terrible. But he’s never said a word to me . . . Maybe I should back off? I mean, if coming back here is so hard for him?”

“Bullshit,” Gus declared, reaching out to give his newest sister a consoling squeeze to her shoulder. “I’m not a psychologist or anything, but even I know that it’s probably a good thing that Justin is finally confronting all the crap he’s bottled up for more than a decade. Yeah, it’s not going to be easy, but it’s got to be healthier than hiding from the truth. Right?”
“I agree with Gus,” Quinne seconded. “It was about time your dad finally confronted Pops about all this. And Pops needed to hear it too - you heard how hurt he sounded and how he practically begged Justin to explain to him why he left? Pops doesn’t open up emotionally like that unless he’s really hurt. Now he knows what happened and hopefully he can start getting over it too. This will be good for them, QiQi. I know it will.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Come on, QiQi,” Gus interrupted. “You can hear how lonely they both are. Sheesh, Pops just admitted that, all these years when we thought he was out sowing his wild oats every weekend, he was basically just sitting around alone. That’s just . . . well, it’s just wrong.”

Quinne added her own take. “Look at it this way, QiQi; what’s better - Justin running back to Cali and hiding from the painful memories while he cycles through another half dozen useless boyfriends like Hairy Alex while Pops keeps guilting himself out over driving your dad away all those years ago, or the two of them working out their shit and figuring out that they’re better off together?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Qianna admitted, taking a deep breath and wiping away the residue of a tear that had escaped from the corner of her eye. “It seems like it’s gonna take a lot more than two weeks to get through all the issues our dads have, though.”

“I refuse to accept failure,” Quinne averred strongly, looking at her co-conspirators with determination. “We just stick to our plan. We keep the dads together as much as possible and let them get used to each other again - giving them whatever support they need to work through their shit in the process - and in the meantime, I’m going to send another email to that bitch Lizette. If she hadn’t screwed with the dads like she did, none of this mess would have happened. And I intend to give her a piece of my mind.”

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Chapter End Notes

1/6/19- Now that the holidays are over, hopefully, I’ll get back in my writing groove.
This chapter took a bit though because it was pretty emotionally draining. I tried to add enough humor to lighten it up, but . . . Well, hope you like it and that it answers some of your questions about what happened between the boys to split them up. Now, to figure out how to fix it all . . . TAG
“Damn! She wrote back!” Quinne exclaimed.

Qianna, who’d been sitting in the next lounge chair over from her sister while the two lazed on Britin’s back patio, immediately sat up and turned to face Quinne. “Who wrote back?”

“Lizette! She wrote back,” Quinne explained, as she scrolled through the email on her trusty tablet.

“Finally! What does she say?”

“Uh . . . Well . . . I know we discussed going slow with Lizette and not giving away too much at the start,” Quinne began to explain, looking a little guilty, “but I was just so upset last night after listening in to what Dad and Pops were talking about, so I sent her another email.”

“So, you basically busted her ass, huh?”

“ Basically.”

Qianna huffed a satisfied laugh. “Good. She deserves it. She ruined both our father’s lives with her shit AND kept the two of us from knowing about each other. So, what did the witch have to say?”
Quinne got up off her lounger and came over to sit next to her sister so they could read through the missive together. It seemed like Quinne’s attack email had hit a nerve. Lizette started off apologetic but the more the girls read through the woman’s supposed explanation the less sympathetic they felt towards their birth mother.

“. . . But I soon found out that parenthood - especially parenting twins - was just too much for me,” Quinne read aloud, adding a disbelieving snort. “Seriously? Listening to this drivel is painful,” she added for her sister’s benefit. “Aha, now we come to the blame-someone-else portion of the excuse . . . ’Don, my boyfriend at the time, wasn’t at all supportive. While he’d been vehemently against letting a gay couple raise you two, he wasn’t really a great father figure. So, after a while, it just got to be too much. When you were about six months old, I realized I couldn’t be the mother you deserved and I contacted Justin, telling him I’d changed my mind. However, when I asked if he would be willing to still pay me the balance of the surrogacy contract, he told me that he and Brian were no longer together. And when Don heard about that, he got greedy. He convinced me that we could get double the money by giving each of the guys one baby and getting each to pay us the same surrogacy fees. I know this was wrong but at the time we were broke and I was weak . . .’ What a load of bullshit!”

“She was ‘weak’? More like, she was a conniving liar. And blaming it all on her boyfriend? How lame.”

Qianna was equally disgusted. “Yeah. There’s more . . . ’I wish now that I hadn’t listened to him, but Don was very controlling. I should have known that, as soon as we got Justin and Brian to pay up, he would take off. He ran off, with all the money, leaving me practically destitute . . .’ Like we’re supposed to feel sorry for her after she fleeced our fathers because she didn’t get to enjoy the money? Is she for real?”

Quinne was so disgusted at that point that she just handed her tablet over to Qianna to finish reading and walked away from the whole thing, diving into the pool to literally and figuratively cool off. When Quinne finally finished her laps and climbed out of the pool, Qianna was waiting for her with a towel. The swimmer smiled her thanks and followed back to the lounge chairs before saying anything. She may have worked out the bulk of her feelings but that didn’t mean she was happy about the half-assed explanations Lizette had tried to offer up.

“Hey, at least we got some kind of explanation,” Qianna offered in an attempt to be conciliatory.

“Yeah, not that it’s worth much.”

“It could be worse,” Qianna offered. “She could have kept us and we’d have had to grow up with
that as our parenting example.”

Quinne nodded. “True. And, even though we didn’t grow up together, we each had great fathers so I guess it probably turned out for the best, right?”

“Exactly! And now that we’ve found each other, it’s going to be even better,” Qianna, the eternal optimist, ventured.

“All we have to do is somehow convince your dad to stay in Pittsburgh for good and it will be perfect.”

“Right. So, what else can we do to make that happen? I mean, besides just keeping the dads together as much as possible, which we’re already doing. There’s got to be something more we can do. Someone else we can get to help us.”

Quinne thought about it for a few moments and then seemed to come up with a new idea. “What about that friend of Justin’s he talked about? The one he said checked him into the hospital after he and Pops broke up. He said something about how he cut her out of his life too, and it sounded like that was something he regretted. What if we could find her and get her to help us?”

“Brilliant!” Qianna agreed immediately. “The more ties we can reestablish between Dad and Pittsburgh the more likely it’ll be that he wants to stay. But how do we find this person? We don’t even know her name.”

“I think he said it was ‘Daphne’...” Quinne replied, but didn’t get any further before the pair was interrupted by the arrival of a third party.

“What are you two scheming about now?” Brian asked, coming up behind the two bathing beauties without warning. “Haven’t you guys done enough already?”

“We’ll stop when Justin finally agrees to move back here,” Quinne boldly answered her father.

“You can’t force someone to do something against their will. Especially not Justin. Trust me, I know. If you push too hard he’ll start pushing back and probably end up going back to California early just to spite you,” Brian warned, pulling up his own lounge chair next to the girls’.
“We can’t just sit around doing nothing,” Qianna countered, smiling over at the tall, svelte man, who was busy arranging his towel on the lounger and making sure it was angled just right so he could get the most tanning exposure. “I’m not going back there if there’s anything at all I can do about it. I want to stay in Pittsburgh and that’s that.”

“I told you, I’m working on it, QiQi,” Brian tried to contain the girl’s determination.

“Yeah, and if that was all it took, Justin wouldn’t have left you in the first place,” Quinne shot back.

“Ouch,” was all Brian said.

“Sorry, Pops, but the truth sometimes hurts, and your track record sucks,” his daughter offered without really apologizing at all. “We don’t intend to let you fail again. So just consider our help inevitable.”

“Yeah? And what more do you think you can do?” he asked, sounding dismissive, and thus incurring both girls’ ire.

“Well, to start with, we were thinking about contacting that old friend of Dad’s. I think he said her name was ‘Daphne’. We were hoping that, if she’s still in Pittsburgh, she could help us convince Justin that running away, back to the West Coast, isn’t going to help,” Qianna ventured boldly.

“Daphne? Hmmm. That’s . . . not a bad idea,” Brian reluctantly admitted. “I have no idea where she ended up, though. I only saw her once after Justin and I split and she was more than a little hostile towards me. I don’t think she’s my biggest fan. I doubt she’d help me get him back.”

“Well, maybe not, but she’ll help US,” Quinne stated with confidence. “All we need is a way to contact her and QiQi and I will take it from there.”

Brian chuckled at his self-assured daughter but his smile revealed that he was proud of her all the same. “Like I said, I don’t know where Daphne is today, but her surname is ‘Chanders’ and last I heard she was heading off to med school. Assuming she stayed the course, I assume you might be able to find her through the local medical boards.”
“Great! Thanks, Pops. We’ll take it from here!” Quinne replied, already enthusiastically tapping away at her tablet to try and suss out Daphne’s contact deets.

“Take what from here?” Justin’s suspicious voice asked, surprising everyone as he appeared out of nowhere, coming up behind the conspirators with a tray of drinks for the girls. “Or do I not what to know?”

“Oooo, yay, iced tea. I was just about to get up and go get something to drink myself. Thanks, Dad,” Qianna spoke up, trying to divert her father’s attention. “Q, you want a snack to go with this? I could go get some fruit or something.”

“I’ll go with you, QiQi. I want to grab a yogurt too.” Quinne jumped on the out she was being offered and the two girls skipped away into the house without ever answering Justin’s question.

“Okay, out with it,” Justin asked Brian, his voice following the girls as they scampered off. “What are they up to now?”

“I don’t think I really want to know,” Brian replied without really answering either.

The second the two girls were inside the house and out of earshot of the men, Quinne shoved her tablet in Qianna’s face. “Look! I think I found her already. See, she is a doctor, and she’s working right here at UPMC. This should be easy.”

“Sheeeet!” Qianna responded and then the two of them quickly collaborated on an email to the young doctor that they hoped would get them the help they needed.

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“Hey, Sweetie!” Emmett greeted the niece who opened the door to him later that afternoon. “I was summoned by the Big Bad, so I’m here. Any clue what it is that he needs that’s such an emergency?”

“It’s not exactly an emergency, but we DO need your help,” Qianna responded, pulling the front door wide enough to reveal Quinne standing off to her side. “Surprise!”
“Wha... Okay, either I’m seeing double or I’m having a flashback to that LSD I did a few weeks back,” Em exclaimed, looking confusedly between the two nearly identical girls. “You’re BOTH here now? How did that happen?”

“You’re not seeing things, Auntie Em,” Quinne replied with a huge smile. “Hey!”

“Awww, Q, you’re back! Come here and give your Auntie Em a big hug, Sweetie!” The tall, lanky queen enveloped the unprotesting girl in a bear hug that threatened to squeeze the all the air out of her lungs. “Damn, girl, you have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

“Same here, Em,” Quinne replied when she finally managed to wiggle out of his embrace.

“So, if you’re back, and together, I take it the rescue mission worked?” Emmett asked, following the girls further inside.

“Yep. Like a dream. And the wedding is definitely off - thank you very much!” Qianna assured him. “Which is why you’ve been summoned. Dad needs help cancelling all the wedding plans.”

“So you got rid of the Yeti? Way to go girls!” Em congratulated them, offering up a double high five in celebration.

“Don’t encourage them,” Justin cautioned, stepping into the front hall where the discussion had been taking place up to that point. “They’re already in enough trouble.”

“Baby! Is that you? Ah, it’s so good to see you!” Emmett gushed, already reaching out to pull Justin into a hug before the man had even answered.

“It’s good to see you too, Em.” Justin hugged him back but quickly retreated from the overwhelming greeting. “I hope you don’t mind, but Brian and the girls said you’d be willing to help me clean up the mess my life has fallen into and, hopefully, mitigate the cancellation fees that I’ll owe for backing out of this wedding at the last minute?”

“Not a problem, Baby. I’m happy to help. And don’t you fear, I’ve dealt with a LOT bigger disasters over the years and everybody always survived,” Emmett reassured him, putting his long arm over Justin’s shoulder and leading the way towards Brian’s office. Then he added over his shoulder, “and you two girls - we’ll talk later - cuz I’m betting there’s a story or two I need to hear
from you ladies.”

“If you do get them to talk, then maybe you can explain it all to me too,” Justin suggested with a shake of his head. “I’m still not completely clear on the details.”

The girls giggled but didn’t offer any further help to their beleaguered father, preferring to return to their scheming without any further disclosures. However, before Quinne could shut the front door, another car pulled into the long front drive, speeding along so fast that it raised a cloud of dirt as it rattled across the gravel. Quinne sighed and sagged against the doorframe as she awaited their newest visitor.

“Good to see the gay grapevine is operating at peak efficiency,” was her only comment.

“Who is it?” Qianna asked, not recognizing the car.

“Grandma Debbie.”

“Oooohhhhh . . .”

“Yep. Hope your dad is prepared to be given the full Novotny Guilt Treatment.”

“Should I go warn him?” Qianna asked, looking worried.

“No,” Quinne advised. “It wouldn’t do any good. He doesn’t have enough time for a clean escape and you can’t hide from her - she’ll find you eventually. Better to just get it over with.” By that point the buxom older woman had made her way up the front walk and was almost upon them, so further strategizing was mute. “Hey, Grandma Debbie. How are you?”

“Quinne? Is that REALLY you?” Debbie asked, squinting at the girl as if she could see through her. Qianna stepped forward so she was no longer hidden in the shade of the door. “Well, fuck me with a tuna fish! Now I’ve seen everything. There really are two of you? I didn’t believe it when Michael told me, but I guess . . .” The twins shared a smile and waved in tandem. “Damn! How the hell am I ever going to tell you two apart?”

“Come on, Deb, you’re not much of a grandmother if you can’t even tell your grandkids apart,”
Quinne teased.

“Okay, got it; the smart-assed one is Quinne,” Deb concluded. “Now get over here and give me a hug already, young lady.” Quinne submitted meekly to her punishment, allowing Deb to give her the usual smothering bear hug. “And you too,” Deb indicated that the second girl should prepare to be hugged. “What’s your real name, Honey?”

“It’s Qianna. Qianna Taylor.”

“Welcome to the family, Qianna Taylor!” Deb nearly shouted, and took her second granddaughter into an equally crushing hug. When she was done, Deb looked around herself as if she was missing something. “Okay, where’s my Sunshine hiding? That boy’s got some serious explaining to do. Did he think he could get away with just up and disappearing on me for twelve fucking years and then not get his ass kicked when I did finally track him down?”

“Dad’s in Pops’ office with Em,” Qianna offered up her father without even a second thought. “Don’t be too hard on him, though, Grandma. We kinda tanked his wedding and he’s not in the best of moods.”

“Oh, pish! That’s no excuse!” Debbie dismissed the girls with a wave of her hand and bustled off towards the interior of the house, bellowing as she went, “Sunshine! Get your bubblebutt out here!”

“Poor Dad!” Qianna giggled. “By the way, did I mention I ADORE your Grandmother?”

“OUR Grandmother, Quinne corrected. “You heard her. She gave you the official welcome-to-the-family hug. There’s no escaping now.”

“Did I hear Grandma Debbie?” Gus asked, emerging from the back of the house carrying a well-loaded sandwich that was easily bigger than his mouth. “Let me guess . . . Em told uncle Ted . . .”

“. . . Who accidentally let something slip while eating breakfast with Uncle Michael . . .” Quinne added.

“Who promptly called his mother and blabbed everything to Grandma Debbie,” Gus concluded.
“Who immediately drove out here, hell-bent for leather, to greet the prodigal son upon his reluctant return,” Qianna finished. “That’s what we figured too.”

“Poor Justin. He’s gonna be hugged half to death and then given a twenty minute lecture,” Gus surmised. “Well, at least I’ll have time to finish my lunch.”

“Fine. While you’re stuffing your face, I’m going to go find Pops and tell him what’s going on. Maybe he can barge in with guns blazing and rescue Justin from Grandma Debbie’s clutches. Then Justin will realize just how much he still loves Pops and they’ll ride off into the sunset together,” Quinne joked as she headed off to locate her father.

Qianna followed on her sister’s heels. “You do know that's not gonna be nearly enough, right? You’ve met my Dad. He’s way more stubborn than that. It’s gonna take more than one foolish rescue attempt to win him over.”

“Maybe. But every little bit helps,” Quinne concluded wisely.

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It had taken more than an hour to get rid of Debbie. Justin endured the lecture he got with relatively good grace but even his repeated apologies didn’t seem to be enough to completely quell the woman. She was only placated when Justin agreed to come to dinner with the whole family the following night. The girls, meanwhile, simply looked on with amusement, rather enjoying seeing one of the adults being treated like a recalcitrant child for a change.

That wasn’t the end of their visitors for the day, though. Just as Britin’s denizens were beginning to discuss their dinner plans - the kids pushing for burgers on the grill outside, Brian complaining about how fattening burgers were, and Justin electing to remain neutral on the subject - the doorbell rang again. Brian quickly conceded defeat in the dinner debate and trotted off to answer the door while Justin took over directing the meal preparations. Justin had stepped outside to start the grill while Gus was deciding between two different chips options and the twins were up to their armpits in salad fixings when the latest guest burst into the kitchen with Brian trailing at her heels.

“. . . Cut the bullshit, Brian. I don’t want to hear it. I still haven’t forgiven either of you,” the petite, curly-headed, tornado growled. “Okay, where is he? He better not think he's going to get out of the tongue lashing I plan to give him.”
“Daphne, can I introduce you to our children?” Brian calmly responded, gesturing towards the girls. “Qianna and Quinne are, I believe, the ones responsible for your appearance here today. And the tall one over there is an all grown up Gus. Kids, say ‘hi’ to Daphne Chanders. Or should I say, Dr. Chanders.”

“Wow! That was fast. We just emailed you this morning!” Quinne declared, setting aside the bowl of spinach she’d been washing to come over and greet the new arrival with a friendly hug.

“Thank you for giving me the heads up about Justin,” Daphne smiled warmly at both girls. “I hope you don’t mind that I just came right over rather than replying to your email, though. I was worried that, if I gave him any kind of warning, Justin would up and disappear on me again. You wouldn’t believe the number of times I’ve tried to reach out to that idiot after he totally ghosted me. He’s not getting away from me again. Not till I give him a large and rather scathing piece of my mind.”

Right then the sliding glass door to the patio opened and the subject of their discussion came back inside. “Okay, the grill is ready. Who wants to be in charge of flipping burgers?” he asked without even really looking around at who was in the kitchen until he noticed the quiet that greeted his words.

“Get your ass over here so I can kick it already, Taylor!” Daphne ordered, causing Justin’s head to pivot in her direction so fast it was likely to give him whiplash.

“How DARE you try and just cut me out of your life like that!” Daphne shrilled, punching Justin in the arm to emphasize her point. “After everything we’ve been through! You do NOT get to just disappear on me, Mr. Taylor. And you don’t get to move to fucking California without telling me. And you certainly don’t get to have a kid without letting me know I was an Aunt!”

All through this harangue, Justin continued standing there, mouth hanging open, saying nothing. The twins were holding their breath, hoping that this ploy hadn’t backfired. Brian, on the other hand, was leaning casually against the end of the kitchen island, smiling down on the scene with the utmost amusement.

“Sorry . . .” Justin eventually offered, looking like a sad little puppy.

“You bet your ass you are!” Daphne angrily rejoined. But then her expression perceptibly softened
and she added, “Well? Are you just going to stand there, gapping like a fish, or are you going to get your ample ass over here and give me a fucking hug already?”

With his face finally cracking with the beginnings of a smile, Justin shuffled forward until his old friend could grapple him into a huge, lingering, hug.

“You jerk!” Daphne mumbled, then gave her friend one last, extra-tight squeeze before releasing him. “Now, invite me to dinner so I can get the full story on how you somehow managed to end up with twins without knowing it.”

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Daphne stole the beer Brian had just opened right out the man’s hand and then leaned back in her chair with an impish grin on her face. “So, then, how did you guys manage to come up with matching names for the girls when you hadn’t even talked in, like, a year?”

“You know Sunshine,” Brian answered for the two of them. “He’d read at least a dozen psychology articles about how to maximize your child’s future by selecting just the right name and had a list of names drawn up before we’d even decided on the surrogate.” Brian smiled indulgently across the table at his Ex, causing Justin to roll his eyes and shake his head dismissively. “If I remember correctly, the theory was that boys do better with common names but girls excel when they’re named something that lets them stand out. And somehow that led to him declaring that we had to select a ‘Q’ name for the baby if it was a girl. So, after Lizette showed up and dropped a pink bundle in my lap, I just selected one of the names on his list. I had no idea he’d stick to the same list, although it doesn’t surprise me.”

“At least we didn’t both pick the same name,” Justin smiled at his daughter.

“I’m sure you remembered that ‘Quinne’ was my favorite and you probably chose something else just to spite me,” Brian accused, but without any animus in his tone.

“I think that would have been cool,” Qianna put in her two cents. “Back at camp when we were practicing being twins, everyone just called both of us ‘Q’ since they couldn’t tell us apart when we were wearing our hats. It was fun being able to fool everyone.”

“Well, thankfully, you still have different colored hair, so you can’t pull that shit on us,” Gus stated as he grabbed the last slice of watermelon out of the bowl sitting in the middle of the patio table.
and began to scarf it down like the teen boy he was.

“Don't give them any more ideas, damn it!” Justin warned. “They’ve caused enough mischief this summer. And I haven’t even gotten around to telling them off for contacting Daphne without my permission,” he teased, leaning over to shoulder bump his friend so she knew he wasn’t really all that upset about the circumstances that had brought them back together. “Before I forget, though, are there any other surprise visitors I should be expecting, girls? You didn’t write to my fifth grade math teacher or anything, did you?”

“No,” Quinne answered him with a laugh. “Well, except for Lizette - who sent back this totally lame excuse for why she bailed on everyone - but I doubt she’ll be showing up any time soon. Oh, and, well, we also wrote to your sister, Molly, but we still haven’t heard back from her.”

“Molly? Why the hell would you contact her?” Justin asked, placing his empty beer bottle down on the table and sitting up straighter in a display of anxiety. “I haven’t talked to Molly since before I left Pittsburgh. I doubt she wants to hear from me. How’d you even find her, anyway?”

“When we were still trying to make sure we really were sisters, we did one of those DNA tests you send away for and Molly’s name came up on my list of possible matches,” Qianna explained. “I know you guys never really got along, but I just figured, what the hell. Maybe enough time had finally gone by and she’d got over whatever her problem with you being gay was? Or, at the very least, maybe she’d want to talk to her niece?” The young blonde seemed a little discouraged by the way her father was grimacing at her as she said this, so she added, “and I guess I was also a little jealous of Quinne and all the family she has here. I mean, I didn’t have anyone but you and Grandma Jenn, so I suppose I was just hoping that I could at least add an aunt to the mix, you know?”

“Fuck her,” Brian pronounced with his usual bluntness. “If she’s got a problem with her brother being gay, we don’t need her around. And you’ve got all of us now, QiQi, so you don’t need her.” He reached over to grab Qianna’s hand, giving it a meaningful squeeze before picking up another beer for himself. “You’ve got more than enough family now to keep you busy for years. Trust me, Grandma Debbie alone will have you feeling familied-out in no time.”

They all laughed and the adults offered up a toast in Debbie’s name. At the same time, Quinne, who was sitting on the far side of the her father, had been watching Justin closely throughout this particular interaction. She’d noticed the way Justin followed Brian’s actions and the way he’d smiled involuntarily at the gesture of affection between Qianna and his former husband. It looked like Justin was softening up a bit towards his Ex, which was a good sign for their plans.

But what would clinch the deal? What more could they do to force Justin to see just how good they’d all be together? How could they make this moment - this family - a permanent thing?
Because it was clear to everyone other than, maybe, Justin, that he still loved Brian and that this was where he belonged.

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Chapter End Notes

1/12/19 - There. I think I managed to clear up a whole bunch of loose ends and answer some of your questions with this chapter. Now, to work on Justin . . . *writing, writing, writing*. TAG
The Assembled Crew

Chapter Notes

We've got the whole gang together again . . . so what else would you expect to happen? LOL. Enjoy! TAG.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 26 - The Assembled Crew.

The younger members of the household were waiting in the living room for the adults to finally get their butts downstairs. They’d been waiting for well over a quarter of an hour. Finally, Brian had stomped off up the stairs to see what, exactly, was keeping Justin, so they could finally get going to Deb’s dinner. Another five minutes passed before the two men eventually made it down to the front room.

“Buck up there, Sunshine. It’s only dinner at Deb’s. The way you’re acting, you’d think it was dental surgery or something equally painful,” Brian was kidding him as they came into the room.

“I’d rather have the root canal, please,” Justin replied, not even breaking into a smile as he said it.

“Come on, Dad. How bad can it be?” the twin sitting nearest the door asked him, trying her best to be supportive.

“Have you met Debbie?” Justin argued, plopping down on the couch next to the other twin, looking utterly dejected and not at all prepared to leave despite the fact that they were now probably going to be late. “And it’s not just Deb. They will ALL be there and they will ALL be asking me why I left . . . Can’t we just go back to California and hide for another decade?” he asked the girl beside him.

“Well, you can go back to California, but I don’t think Pops would like it much if you took me with
“Sweet! We totally got him!” Qianna crowed from her own seat across the way, pulling off her hat too. “I wonder how many people we’ll get at the dinner?”

“Don’t tease the old people, Sis. It just makes them all crotchety,” Gus warned, getting up from his chair and starting for the door. “Okay, anyone riding with me, get your asses in gear.”

Both girls stood up and started to follow their brother towards the door leading off to the garage.

“Wait. I thought we were all going together,” Justin questioned, looking a little panicky at the thought of the kids leaving him behind.

“Sorry, Dad, but if the choice is riding with Gus, who’ll let us listen to real music, or being subjected to Pops’ ‘Greatest Hits of the 70s’ playlist, we’ll take Gus,” Qianna asserted with a smirk that was so Kinney-esque it was hard to believe there wasn’t any biological relationship there.

“Looks like I get you all to myself, Sunshine,” Brian stated, sounding pleased with the circumstances.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,” Justin yelled after the retreating kids, getting only a chorus of giggles in return. “And it’s not going to work.”

When Brian and Justin finally did show up to Deb’s, arriving at least fifteen minutes behind Gus and his crew, who’d been ten minutes late to start with, they got the expected round of complaints and teasing.

“It’s about time you two got here,” Deb nagged. “Don’t tell me, ‘something came up’, right? That’s the standard line with you boys, right? Well, it’s good to see that some things never change.”

Brian chuckled and shook his head but didn’t say anything to dissuade the crowd from what they were very obviously thinking. Justin grumpily backhanded Brian’s biceps, his face all screwed up in a disapproving scowl. He obediently let Deb hug him in greeting, though, and then moved further into the house where he was swarmed by welcomers.
“Hey, Boy Wonder. Long time no see,” Michael said, pushing his way to the front of the throng.

“How’s it going, Michael?”

“Not bad. Not bad. Comic book business is going as strong as ever - thanks in part to you California animation guys - so I can’t complain too much.”

“Good to hear. And Gus has been showing me some of the stuff you and he have been doing for your own graphic novel. It’s not bad. Glad to see that you’re still at it even after Rage died out,” Justin offered, smiling over Michael’s shoulder to where Gus was lounging in the living room area.

“Our old Rage stuff has become sort of a classic, you know,” Michael gushed. “I still get inquiries about it and the prices for copies being traded online has skyrocketed - I check it every so often, you know - so if you were ever inclined to do another volume or two . . .”

“Sorry, Michael, but I’m a little busy on other projects these days,” Justin turned him down as gently as he could.

“I figured. Just thought I’d throw the possibility out there.”

“Enough talk about comic books,” Emmett insisted, shouldering Michael aside so he could link his arm through Justin’s and lead the newcomer further inside. “I’m sure Baby doesn’t want to talk shop while he’s on vacation. Besides, I want to hear all about living in Cali and any movie stars you’ve met out there. QiQi has been telling me about these movie premieres you get to go to - so dish, Baby - who have you met? Anyone seriously fuck-worthy?”

“Em, I don’t think . . .” Justin began, seeming like he was going to shut down that topic of discussion before it got any further.

“Dad and I did get to meet Ryan Reynolds two years ago when he was doing the animation for this movie that Reynolds was the voice talent for,” Qianna interrupted. “He was super nice and even shook my hand. I was so blown away I forgot to ask for a selfie, though, and none of my friends in school would believe me later when I told them.”
“Ooooo! Ryan is sooooo dreamy,” Em whimpered at the very thought of meeting such a hottie.

“Yeah, and I love the whole bi-curious air you get from him. It’s a refreshing take from a Hollywood type,” Ted commented.

“Hey, Ted. Nice to see you. Where’s Blake?” Justin responded with a smile for the laconic older man. “Wait, you two are still together right? I didn’t just stick my foot in it, did I?”

“Good to see you too, Justin. And, yes, Blake and I are still together,” Ted hurried to reassure the man who’d been gone for so long. “He’s just on call tonight at the Counselling Center and had to take off to help with a crisis call. He said he’d pop in later if he could. He also said to tell you ‘welcome back’ and that if you needed a sympathetic ear to deal with the mess of all the rest of us, he’s available for coffee anytime.”

“Why would he need a sympathetic ear,” Lindsey spoke up from where she’d been waiting, with relative patience, to greet the new return. “It’s not like we’re going to pounce on him or anything. We’re family, after all.” The tall, elegant, blonde woman then turned to face Justin with a tight little smile. “Welcome home, Justin. We’re so glad to have you back.”

“Hey, Lindz,” Justin responded guardedly.

“Oh, enough with the polite shit. Get over here already and take your hugs like a man,” Mel urged, brushing past her wife to grapple Justin into a bear hug with such vigor that it caused the man to grunt. “We missed you, kiddo. Glad you’re back.”

“Thanks, Mel,” Justin replied when he’d finally got his breath back.

“Enough with the hellos already,” Debbie ordered. “Thanks to the Perpetually Tardy One,” she shot a glare in Brian’s direction, causing the big stud to wave unrepentantly at her, “my dinner’s already late, so everybody get their asses to the kitchen and start eating already before it’s ruined.”

The assembled crew immediately hopped into action, lining up at the kitchen table so that Deb could dish out lasagne to them. They then helped themselves to salad, garlic bread and a few other random side dishes before finding their way back to the living room to find seats. The extended Novotny Family had long since outgrown the modest little dining table and had to make do with whatever seat they could find, including several folding chairs that had been put out between the other furniture. The kids - including both twins, Gus, and Jenny Rebecca - rushed to the head of the
line and were already chowing down long before the adults were served. Brian managed to guide Justin into line just behind their offspring and then established his charge in the place of honor on the center seat of the couch so that everyone could see and talk with Justin as they ate. The rest of the group - Emmett, Drew, Ted, Michael, Ben, Hunter, Carl, and, bringing up the rear when all the others were fed, Debbie - eventually filtered in and found perches with their plates. And then the real conversation began.

“Since everyone else is acting like a pussy, I guess I’ll ask the question,” Hunter spoke up, raising his voice enough to be heard over the smattering of casual conversation that had sprung up. “So, where the fuck have you been for the last ten years, Blondie, and why’d you just up and disappear without a word?”

Justin looked up at his interlocutor, offering a weak smile for the boy who’d grown into quite an attractive young man in the decade he’d been gone. In the years since Justin had left Pittsburgh, Hunter had really come into his own. He’d pulled his life together, finished high school with better than average grades despite all the hardships he’d suffered before he’d met Ben and Michael, got accepted to the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Social Work, finished his Masters Degree, and was now the Deputy Director of a local non-profit that provided advocacy services for LGBTQ youth statewide. He’d never lost his blunt, in-your-face, approach to life, though, so it was probably not a surprise that he was the only one willing to voice the question that everyone else had been too afraid to ask.

Justin sighed and set his plate down on the coffee table. For a second or two, it looked like he wasn’t going to answer. Brian even seemed about to intervene, but then Justin reached out, patted his Ex on the arm to signal that Brian should relax, and started to talk.

“It’s complicated, Hunter,” Justin began and added another sigh. “I suppose you wouldn’t just accept me saying that I was upset after we thought our surrogate had backed out on us and that, on top of the other personal issues I was dealing with at the time, led me to think I needed to get some distance.”

Hunter shook his head with a scrunched up face, dismissing this simplistic explanation. “Sorry, Blondie. Not good enough. Try again.”

Justin grimaced and looked like he was about to offer a more fulsome explanation when Brian slammed his own plate down next to his Ex’s and glared menacingly around at the room. “Why don’t all of you just back the fuck off already,” Brian growled protectively. “Whatever caused Justin and I to break up, it’s nobody’s business but our own. Why do you all act like Justin owes each of you some personal apology? If anything, all of you owe HIM an apology. The phone lines do go two ways, you know, and it’s not like all of you didn’t know where he was.”
“Some of us did try to contact him, Brian,” Emmett spoke up. “I left a bunch of messages for you, Baby.”

“I know you did, Em. I’m sorry I didn’t call you back, but I just . . . I was in a really bad place when I first left and I didn’t have the strength to explain. And then, after enough time had passed, it seemed . . . too awkward . . . to call again out of the blue. So, I just . . .” His words tapered off leaving everyone hanging.

Before the silence had a chance to settle, though, another voice ripped through it. “I not only tried to call,” Lindsey insisted, “I also emailed. And when those came back saying that you’d closed your account, I even attempted to reach you through your agent. That’s when Elliott told me you’d fired him, completely out of the blue, and cancelled the outstanding commissions that he’d already taken payment for. I can assure you, Justin, he wasn’t the least bit amused. It’s a good thing you found work in the animation field, because I don’t think any agent on the East Coast would touch you after that.”

“Our publisher wasn’t exactly thrilled when I had to tell him you weren’t going to do Rage anymore, either,” Michael added. “He was so pissed at me that he refused to take on the comic Gus & I started. I ended up having to go through a different publisher, and they’re not really as good . . .”

Amid this repetition of all Justin’s failures, the man in question seemed to be slowly crumpling in on himself. Qianna and Quinne shared a worried look, but neither knew what they could do to help. It didn’t seem right to let all these supposed ‘friends’ harp on the man like that, but if they spoke up, they’d be revealing confidences that weren’t theirs to share. Hell, they weren’t even supposed to know the real reason behind why Justin had left.

“Shit! Enough already!” Brian exploded, standing up and moving in front of the spot where Justin was sitting as if to provide a physical shield for the target of the family’s attacks. “Do you hear yourselves? Why the fuck would he WANT to talk to you if all you’re gonna do is gripe? If you were really his friends, you’d accept whatever explanation he felt comfortable offering, welcome him back, and then just drop it. Instead you’re making it all about YOU. No wonder Sunshine didn’t want to come back to Pittsburgh. After seeing the way you guys are acting, I’m ready to leave too.” With that Brian tossed the paper napkin he’d been crumpling up in his fist while he spoke onto his plate and held out a hand to help Justin up. “You wanna get the fuck out of here, Sunshine?”

Justin accepted the offered assistance, getting to his feet without another word and allowing Brian to guide him out through the jumble of furniture and people towards the door. The rest of the people sitting in the living room were still stunned and silent - even Debbie, which was probably a minor miracle. Just before Brian reached for the door handle, he turned and looked back to where the kids were sitting.
“You coming with, girls?” He asked, prompting the twins to leap to their feet and trot after their fathers.

As soon as they were all back in Brian’s car, he gave them a tired smile and asked, “so, who’s up for pizza instead?”

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After a successful pizza feed, the two men and their two daughters loaded back into the car for the trek home to Britin. For the most part, the unpleasantness at the family dinner had been forgotten. Gus had texted Quinne to let her know that there’d been a big brouhaha after they’d stormed out, but the bottom line was that pretty much everyone admitted they’d been too hard on Justin and agreed to give him the time he needed to adjust to being back. That’s assuming he stayed, of course, but Gus hadn’t thought it necessary to mention that point. The boy promised to stay and spy for them until the group broke up for the night.

Meanwhile, for the four in the car, Justin had offered up his phone’s music list as a compromise between the parties and it was hooked into the car’s bluetooth system, belting out an eclectic mix of stuff that seemed to please everyone. But they hadn’t driven very far before the music was interrupted by an incoming phone call. Since the phone was already hooked to the car’s speaker system, the call came through on the speakers as well, meaning that everyone heard the woman’s voice echoing a cheery ‘hello’.

“Hey, Sweetie. Just got your messages. Sorry I didn’t call back sooner. I was away - Clint took me to Rehoboth Beach for a long weekend get-away - and I just now got home,” Jennifer explained. “So, your message said the wedding is off? I’m so sorry, Honey. What happened? Is there any way I can help?”

“Hey, Mom. Yeah, it looks like Alex is history. He ended up being a total jerk to Qianna, so I cut him loose,” Justin told his mother.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Honey,” Jennifer consoled her son. “But I can’t say I’m overly surprised. I didn’t want to say anything, because it’s your life and all, but I never really liked Alex all that much. He was rather rude to me the one time I met him - bad first impressions, you know. And I’m sure you’re better off seeing him for what he really is BEFORE you married him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking too. Not that I’m happy to have to cancel the wedding at such short
notice or anything. It’s basically a nightmare.” Justin sighed, mentally preparing himself to tell the rest of the tale. “There’s more to the story, though, Mom . . . Shit, I don’t even know where to start . . . Um . . . Remember the mess that happened with the surrogate for Qianna?” There was a small sound of assent from Jennifer. “Well . . . you see . . . Lizette wasn’t completely honest with me about the baby and . . .”

“Fuck, Sunshine, spit it out already,” Brian intervened in order to speed things along. “Brian here, Mother Taylor. What happened was that Lizette actually had twins but she deceived Justin and I, splitting up the babies so that we’d each have to pay her and she’d get double the surrogacy fees. We didn’t know we were raising twins - separately - until the girls met up by accident this summer when they were away at camp. And, to make a long story short, the girls brought us together to try and figure out what we’re going to do about this mix up. Your son and Qianna are staying with me and Quinne - your other granddaughter - out at Britin until we resolve matters.” Then he turned to a fuming Justin with a semi-apologetic shrug. “What? I was being helpful. You were making it way too complicated, Sunshine. At the rate you were going you still wouldn’t have finished explaining by the time we got home. Now it’s out there.”

Justin shot another disappearing glare at his Ex before taking over the conversation again. “That IS basically the jist of things, Mom.”

“I have another granddaughter?” was all that Jennifer seemed able to focus on.

“Hi, Grandma Jenn. I’m Quinne. Nice to officially meet you,” the girl piped up from where she was listening in on the conversation from the back seat.

“Hey, Grandma!” Qianna chimed in. “Isn’t it great? I’m not an only child anymore. You’re just gonna love Quinne too. I can’t wait for you to get to know her!”

“Why don’t you come out to the house tomorrow, Mother Taylor. We can explain everything to you in more detail and you can meet Quinne in person,” Brian offered genially.

“Brian! Do you think I could maybe talk for myself for a change? I don’t need you to plan my social calendar for me,” Justin grumbled.

“Just trying to be helpful, Sunshine” Brian replied with a saucy little smile, not at all apologetic. Then, without any regard at all for Justin’s criticism, he continued, “how about we say 11:00-ish, Jenn? The girls and I can throw together something for lunch while you and Justin are talking and then we’ll all have a nice visit?”
“I can do that,” Jenn responded promptly. “Wow! I can’t believe I have another granddaughter. Looking forward to seeing you, girls. Justin.”

Brian hit the button on the steering wheel to terminate the call and the music came blasting back on. Which was a good thing because it offered a distraction from the series of angry glares and the disgruntled grumbling coming from the blond sitting in the front passenger seat. Brian assiduously ignored the angry looks he was getting and pretended to concentrate on the road. The girls were too excited about visiting with Jennifer to give the grown ups any attention, even if they would have been inclined to humor an irritated Justin, which they weren’t. Of course, this annoyed Justin even more because he hated to be ignored, and the grumbling grew continuously louder until it was almost impossible to ignore.

“Hey, QiQi,” Quinne eventually interrupted her alternative-father’s mumblings by speaking up loudly enough that her words carried throughout the car. “Did I ever tell you about the evil torture Pops devised as a method of discipline for me and Gus when we were little?”

“No. Do tell,” Qianna played along.

“Well, see, when we were being annoying little shits, arguing about everything and throwing temper tantrums because we weren’t getting our way, Pops would sit us down and force us to watch reruns of that old kiddie show, ‘Barney’,” Quinne explained. “The number of episodes we’d have to watch was directly tied to how bad we’d been. But I can assure you, after being lectured by an annoyingly condescending purple dinosaur for an hour or so, and being subjected to repeated choruses of everybody singing ‘I love you, you love me, we’re a happy family . . .’, we definitely learned our lesson.”

Both Brian and Qianna were chuckling at the image of a young Quinne being tortured by Barney reruns.

“I’m pretty sure Pops still has those DVDs around somewhere,” Quinne continued, looking slyly up at the rear view mirror where she could see the reflection of Justin’s eyes watching her back, “in case you think your father might need to spend a couple of hours with Barney.”

Qianna guffawed loudly at the dis, adding, “well, it couldn’t hurt. Right, Dad?”

After that, Justin was silent for the rest of the ride back to Britin.
1/15/19 - Just a little filler chapter here. Setting things up for the HEA . . . BTW, the Barney torture was something I used to do with my own kids. It was suggested to me by another parent who swore by it. I kept it up till they were well beyond the age when they’d actually enjoy watching a show like Barney. And, when you’re a surly 5th grader who’s being forced to watch Barney against your will, it’s definitely torture. But for all the grumbling I’d get, the message of the show - sharing, being polite, inclusiveness - always worked to calm down a tantrum. So, I say, ‘Go, Barney!’ . And Justin definitely needs a bit of Barney time, don’t you think? LOL. TAG
Chapter 27 - Would Flowers Be Too Much?

Qianna had just come inside to make another pitcher of iced tea when she heard the doorbell ring. She started for the door but then stopped when she realized that her other father had already beat her to the front hall. She was far too curious about how Brian and her grandmother would react to each other, though, to not eavesdrop a little on their conversation. So she positioned herself around the corner from the entryway where she could listen in without being seen.

“Mother Taylor! You look as lovely as ever,” Brian greeted his one-time Mother in Law as he opened the door.

Qianna peeked around the corner, enough so that she could spy on the adults in the hallway via the large mirror on the wall next to the front door. She was surprised to see both Brian and Jennifer smiling genially at each other. She’d thought that Grandma Jenn would be more reserved with her son’s Ex. From all appearances, though, these two actually got along pretty well.

“It’s good to see you, Brian,” Jennifer returned the greeting with a genuinely pleased smile and teased him back, “but I think you’re the lovely one. How have you managed to stay so handsome after all these years? You hardly look like you’ve aged at all.”

“Good, healthy living, I guess,” Brian replied with a tongue-in-cheek grin that made him look even more boyish. Then he turned and gestured with a sweeping bow for his guest to come further into the house. “You’ve got two ridiculously eager girls - and one grumpy son - waiting for you out on the patio.”
“Jenn tittered quietly over Brian’s description of her waiting audience but then got serious again. “How’s Justin taking all this? I don’t imagine he was eager to come back here . . .”

“No. He wasn’t. But we’ve talked . . . a little . . . and I’m doing what I can to try and make it easier on him,” Brian offered with a sigh. Then his face resumed a more determined look and he continued, “I’m not going to let him just disappear on me this time, Jenn. I refuse to back off. He told me what caused him to leave the last time, and I won’t let that happen again. Ever. And it’s not just for the sake of our girls.”

Jennifer gave Brian a tight-lipped, sad, little smile and nodded. “For what it’s worth, Brian, I did try to talk him out of it. I could see how much he was hurting, and I was incredibly angry at you at the time, but I never thought running away from everything was the answer. It didn’t make Justin happy either. He just numbed the pain, he didn’t ever escape it.”

Brian reached out and gently grabbed Jennifer’s arm, giving her a sympathetic squeeze. Jennifer’s smile grew as she looked up at the tall man with the kind eyes. Then they both chuckled a little and moved apart with an awkwardness that Qianna was becoming used to in the man she was starting to love. Brian really didn’t like messy emotions - that much was clear - but she was buoyed by the fact that he was opening himself up to them for Justin’s sake. It gave her hope that her father might actually be won over in the end.

“We both were affected by what happened,” Brian admitted openly, “and it’s taken us both far too long to come to grips with everything that brought us to tha point. But I think that the girls might just be the final thing we needed in order to fully heal.”

“Well, I can’t wait to meet Quinne. It’s about time you boys got going and gave me another grandkid,” Jennifer joked before taking the initiative to head back towards the rear of the house with Brian following her.

Qianna barely had time to scamper back into the kitchen and pretend like she hadn’t been spying the whole time. She was just starting to refill the iced tea pitcher with water when Brian and Jennifer came through the door. Qianna quickly set the pitcher aside and ran to meet her grandmother with a happy squeal.

“Grandma Jenn! Grandma Jenn! You’re finally here!” she cheered as she gave the older woman a huge hug.
“I’ve always been here, Honey. I live in Pittsburgh, remember? But it’s good that YOU finally came to visit ME for a change.”

They laughed together for a moment, just so happy to see each other that they couldn’t contain it, before Qianna finally remembered that she now had to share her grandmother with someone. “Quinne is waiting for you outside. She’s so excited to meet you. I’ve told her all about you. You’re going to love her.”

“You two go ahead and I’ll bring out some drinks for everyone,” Brian directed, shooing them out of the kitchen and taking up the iced tea pitcher so as to add the requisite number of sun tea bags.

“Dad! Q! Look who I found!” Qianna shouted the second she was through the patio door, tugging Jennifer after her so fast Jenn almost tripped over her own Manolos.

“Mom!” Justin stood up to greet his mother, accepting the proffered kiss to his cheek.

“You look good, Sweetheart,” Jennifer commented, giving her son’s cheek a little pat of approval. “I figured, with the wedding being cancelled and all, you’d be more of a wreck. But I guess finding your other daughter and being back here was at least a good distraction?”

“A distraction, yes. Whether or not it was ‘good’ is still undecided,” the man countered with a shrug.

“I’m not a good distraction, Dad?” Quinne spoke up for herself. “I think I’m going to be offended.”

“Sorry, Quinne. You’re about the only good thing to come out of all of this, Honey,” Justin rushed to reassure his other daughter.

“Now I’M offended,” Brian interrupted, setting the full pitcher of tea in the middle of the table where it could brew in the sun and placing a tray of cut up veggies and dip next to it so the group would have some nibbles while they visited. “I thought seeing me again would have been the best part of this adventure, Sunshine.”

Everyone laughed except for Justin, who shot his former husband a look that could have burned with it’s annoyed iciness.
“You certainly haven’t changed, have you, Brian,” Jennifer commented with an indulgent smile. “That ego of yours is just as healthy as ever. Not that I object, mind you. I’ve always said that confidence is the sexiest thing about a person.” Jenn looked past Brian at that point, fixing her eyes on her son once more, as she added, “a sentiment that my son used to echo, I might add.”

You could see the muscles of Justin’s jaw flexing as he clenched his teeth in reaction to the very pointed comment but he didn’t take the bait.

“Yeah, Pops has never had a problem in that area,” Quinne stated the obvious conclusion for all of them before stepping around her preening father to get to Jennifer. “But enough about him; I’m the one you came her to meet, right?” She laughed at her own presumption and held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Quinne.”

“Like father, like daughter,” Brian bragged, beaming at his daughter approvingly.

For about the next hour or so, Jenn visited with her son and Qianna and got to know Quinne. Brian spent the time bustling around, serving drinks, even rustling up lunch for the whole crew - something that would have been very out of character for the old Brian Kinney, but which didn’t cause this new, fatherly, Brian any qualms at all - with Justin watching him the whole time as if he wasn’t quite sure who this strange man was. About the time lunch was wrapping up, the topic of conversation moved around to art, as it inevitably did whenever Qianna was involved, and Jennifer mentioned that there was a new exhibit of 18th Century Manga Art at the Japanese Gardens which she’d been meaning to check out.

“Oh, Gus mentioned that,” Quinne interjected. “He’s been babbling on and on about it for days. He loves anything about comic books, you know.”

“I have an idea,” Jennifer eagerly opined. “I haven’t seen Gus in ages – not since he was a baby – so how about this; we head back into town, pick Gus up along the way, and check out the exhibit this afternoon together.”

“Excellent!,” both girls chimed together.

“You’ll have to give me time to shower and change. I just got out of the pool right before you arrived, Mom,” Justin grumbled as he got to his feet.

“Oh, hey, Dad, not to be a total brat or anything, but we don’t need a chaperone or anything,”
Quinne asserted, moving around to intercept Justin before he could leave. “I’m sure Grandma Jenn’s got this. Plus, weren’t you just complaining about how much you still need to do on the wedding cancellation? You said you didn’t have time to socialize.”

“It’s no big deal. I can work on that later,” Justin argued.

“Quinne is right, Dad.” Qianna jumped in to back up her sister. “You should just stay here and do your thing. You know you’ll just stress over it the whole time we’re gone. We’ll be fine on our own and it’ll give us more time to hang with Grandma Jenn without you feeling all rushed to get back here.”

“Well, I guess . . .”

“Then it’s settled,” Jennifer declared, pushing back her chair and rising regally to join her granddaughters. “Let’s go grab whatever you need and get going. If we hurry, we’ll have time to see the exhibit, walk in the gardens and still make it to the afternoon tea ceremony.”

“Thank you for taking Gus and the girls, Jennifer,” Brian spoke up from where he’d been standing off to the side watching this scene play out. “I know my son has been dying to see that comic book display.”

“Oh, pish!” Jenn waved off Brian’s thanks. “It’s Grandmother’s Privilege to take her kids on outings like this, and I’ve rarely had the chance, what with Qianna living so far away all these years. Now that I know I’ll have at least one granddaughter living nearby, you better count on me getting in a lot more time with my kids. Besides, I’ve got a lot of Grandma Time to make up for with Quinne.”

“You’re welcome to them any time you like, Mother Taylor.”

Then the always elegant woman took a step towards her son, bent, and left a perfume-scented kiss on his cheek. “Don’t worry about anything, Honey. You just concentrate on finishing whatever you need to do to put Alex behind you for good. And, for what it’s worth, I think you made the right choice to get rid of that loser.” Both girls and Brian were smiling and nodding in agreement with this proclamation, making it clear that nobody had any regrets on The Yeti’s behalf. “Alright. Let’s get going girls!”

Quinne and Qianna kissed both their fathers goodbye and then headed inside with Grandma Jenn on
their heels. They could see, over their shoulders, that Justin was looking as concerned as ever while Brian was happily beaming at his Ex. Hopefully this little outing with Jennifer would work right into their plans by allowing the dads to spend more time together without any kids to provide a distraction.

“You think Pops can charm him over?” Qianna asked in a hushed voice as she and her sister started to climb the stairs up to their rooms.

“I hope so. Although Dad still doesn’t seem very open to the idea,” Quinne replied, sounding sceptical. “But all we can do at this point is make sure they have plenty of opportunities for Pops to do his thing. I know he wants to try and work things out.”

“Yeah, I know. And I know we can’t force Dad to forgive Pops but . . . I really don’t want to have to go back to California,” Qianna moaned.

Jennifer, who seemed to have rather excellent hearing despite the fact that she was still waiting for them at the foot of the stairs, took that opportunity to add her own suggestion. “Perhaps we should pack some overnight things for you two? You know, just in case you don’t want to come all the way back out here tonight? I’m sure your fathers can find SOME way to amuse themselves together without you, right?”

Both girls turned on the landing and smiled down at their crafty grandmother before running back down to give her matching hugs.

“Thank you, Grandma!” Qianna chortled appreciatively.

“You know, you make an excellent co-conspirator,” Quinne stated approvingly.

Jennifer laughed and winked at the girls. “Don’t say anything to Justin but, despite the rocky start Brian and I had when the boys first met, I’ve always liked that man. He may be a bit rough around the edges sometimes, but he has a good heart. And, even though I fought against the idea in the beginning, I’ve known he loved my son from the first day I met him. So, if the choice is between Alex Ramsey - that rude little shit - and Brian Kinney, consider me ‘Team Kinney’.” Both girls squealed with delight and offered another round of hugs to their newest accomplice. “Now, go get your stuff. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner Brian can start to work his magic. And, if you’re good, I’ll tell you two all about the day I showed up at Brian’s office with a duffle bag full of Justin’s socks and underwear and informed him he was now responsible for making sure my son did his homework. The look on his face was priceless. I still get a chuckle out of that . . .”
The girls waited until after they were done with the Manga exhibit to text their fathers with the news that they were going to stay with Jennifer for the night. Brian sent back a winking emoji face in response. Justin cautioned against taking advantage of Jennifer’s hospitality and basically begged them to come home. Qianna texted back, telling her father to stop being a baby, and to enjoy his kid-free night.

“Problems?” Jenn asked as the girls whispered over their phones.

“No. Just Dad being a wuss. He wants us to come home. I think he’s afraid Pops will ravish him or something,” Qianna joked, getting a round of laughter from her audience.

“Let’s hope so. From what I’ve seen, Justin could use a good ravishing,” Gus declared, voicing what all of them were thinking.

“Judging by the conversation we overheard the other night, I’d say Pops could use a little ravishing himself,” Quinne added, causing Qianna to snort out the tea she’d been sipping through her nose. “I still can’t believe that all this time, all those nights I spent with Em or Grandma Deb so that Dad could have some personal time, he wasn’t out sowing his wild oats at all. He was just sitting around in that dusty old loft, hiding, and watching TV. Meanwhile, we all thought he was still the biggest gay stud in town. I feel cheated or something.”

“Haven’t they both been hiding all these years?” Jennifer added, a little more seriously. “I know that Justin’s been through a couple dozen boyfriends over the past decade, but none of them even came close to making him as happy as he was with Brian. Oh, I admit they had it rough at times - and I wasn’t always Brian’s biggest fan - but if you could have seen Justin’s face the day they finally got married . . . His smile was literally incandescent that day. I just wish they had figured out how to talk to each other instead of always running away whenever there were problems. This whole mess could have been avoided,” Jennifer gestured between the two girls, “if they’d shared what was bothering them rather than trying to go all macho and swallowing their feelings.”

“Hey! Coming from those here that are further along the macho spectrum,” Gus interrupted, “I have to say it’s not always that easy. Guys don’t do emotions as easily as girls. Especially not when you’re dealing with PTSD or whatever it is that Pops and Justin are still dealing with after him getting bashed.” Jennifer gasped, looking at the kids with surprise and maybe even a little guilt. “Oh, yeah, we know about the Prom bashing and even about some of the other reasons behind why Justin left Pittsburgh all those years ago,” Gus confessed, smiling over at his sisters. “You can’t really keep anything hidden for long with the Junior-Detectives over here. They have mad
research skills, you know?”

“That’s fine. I just didn’t know that you kids knew . . .” Jennifer excused herself and her reaction. “Justin always said that he didn’t want to burden you with traumas that were already in the past, Qianna, although I figured he would have to tell you eventually. But you’re right, Gus, society makes it harder for men to admit to their feelings, and that makes healing from something like Justin’s attack even harder. Which, in turn, makes it even more important that we find a way to help the boys. If they can’t figure out on their own, that is.”

Just then Quinne’s phone chirped with the tone that indicated she had a new text. She looked down at the screen and chuckled. She turned the device around and held it up so that everyone could see what was written there. The entire group smiled; it seemed like their plans were working just fine after all. Maybe Brian truly did have this figured out?

Pops: Ask QiQi if Italian is still Justin’s favorite.

Quinne: She says ‘yes’. Are you going to take him out? That’s a great idea!

Pops: Actually, I thought I’d try and cook him a nice dinner here so it can be just the two of us.

Then, a minute later, before Quinne could overcome her shock and text back, Brian texted again.

Pops: Stop laughing! I’m perfectly capable of boiling some damn noodles!

Quinne: Fine. Just make sure you have the number for the Poison Control Hotline handy.

Pops: Ha ha! I’m insulted that you doubt my culinary prowess. Just sit back and watch me get my woo on!

Quinne: Good luck with that . . .

“I’m pretty sure that sending your date to the ER to get his stomach pumped is not the best way to win him over,” Gus commented with a grimace.
“Your dad’s not THAT bad of a cook, is he?” Qianna asked, starting to feel a little worried for her father.

“He’s been known to fuck up toast on occasion,” Quinne explained with Gus nodding in the background. “But that’s mostly because he just gets easily distracted when he tries to cook. He leaves whatever it is he’s making on the stove and goes off somewhere and forgets . . .” She looked over at Gus with a worried frown. “When was the last time we checked the batteries on the smoke detectors?”

“Perhaps the plan is to force Justin to come to Brian’s rescue when he sets the meal on fire?” Jennifer posited with a huff of laughter. “Nevermind. They’re big boys. I’m sure Brian can figure out something as simple as feeding the two of them for one night. Right?”

Quinne and Gus looked at each other, exchanging strained and half-hearted smiles. Qianna wasn’t reassured by their reaction. Before she could speak up though, Quinne’s phone chirped again.

Pops: Would flowers be too much?

Qianna shook her head. “Remind him about Dad’s allergies.”

Quinne followed directions.

Pops: Shit! Right. Forget the flowers . . .

The tea house group all sighed in relief and returned to their refreshments, only to be interrupted again thirty seconds later.

Pops: Do we have any unscented candles? All I can find are these ones that stink like Christmas cookies.

Quinne sighed and picked up her phone again, tapping away with the instructions for her father.

“He’s really not that good at this romance stuff, is he?” Qianna stated worriedly.
“Maybe Justin will give him credit for trying at least? Like, it’s the thought that counts and all,” Gus hoped. “Assuming, of course, Pops doesn’t burn the house down with his dinner and candles first . . .”

Chapter End Notes

1/22/19 - Thank you to everyone in the KD Facebook group for offering up your wonderful suggestions for how Brian could romance Justin. I’m never going to be able to use them all in this story, but please know how grateful I am for the ideas. Maybe I’ll save up the ones I can’t use here and play with them later! Now, enough dilly-dallying. It’s time for Brian to get serious if he wants to win back his Sunshine! TAG
The girls were happy to see that the house was still standing when they returned from their sleepover at Jennifer’s the next day. They waved goodbye to their grandmother, put their overnight stuff in their rooms and then jointly made their way downstairs to find their fathers. They discovered Brian out by the pool, sitting at the patio table as he scowled at his phone.

“Hey, Pops,” Quinne greeted her father, leaning over his shoulder to leave a kiss on a slightly stubbled cheek. “So, how did your dinner plans go last night?”

Brian growled, deep in his throat, but didn’t otherwise answer.

“That sounds ominous,” Qianna commented, taking up a seat next to the older man. “Didn’t Dad like your pasta?”

“Yes, I did,” Justin answered on Brian’s behalf, appearing as if from out of nowhere, a pile of freshly washed pool towels in his arms. “And the vanilla scented candles didn’t help at all. It took us all night to get the smell out of the house. We ended up eating frozen pizza out here on the patio because neither of us could bear the toxic fumes inside. But at least it was mostly cleared out by the time we went to bed.” Justin deposited the towels in the storage closet that housed all the other pool supplies and then returned to join the rest of them at the table. “It’s comforting to know that at least one thing hasn’t changed in the past decade - Brian STILL can’t cook without risking a visit from the fire department.”
The blond man was chuckling under his breath, blue eyes glittering with amusement as he looked sideways at his grumbling Ex. Brian smiled at him sarcastically, but looked a little ashamed nonetheless. The girls giggled quietly at the two of them. Even when they were pretending to be annoyed by each other, the two men were so obviously still attracted to one another. And QiQi, especially, noted how comfortable her father seemed around the other man. That teasing tone and the little snarky smile had been a rarity, in her experience, with Justin’s past relationships. But now, the way Justin was leaning back in his chair, legs stretched out and one arm draped casually over the back of the next chair while he beamed one of his best grins in Brian’s direction, evidenced just how at ease he felt here. Qianna hadn’t seen him laugh this easily or smile this much with any of his other, many, boyfriends. Justin seemed relaxed and at home here. It made her feel a little sad when she realized that’s what had been lacking in his life for all these years. And it made her even more determined to find a way to make this permanent so her father could live his best, fullest, life.

“It’s not my fault that Ted called in the middle of my preparations with a crisis on the Jenkins account,” Brian protested, looking uncharacteristically sheepish. “I was only gone from the kitchen for, like, ten minutes . . .”

“Make that at least twenty,” Justin corrected him, “judging by the fact that all the cream had boiled off by the time I found the source of the stench and turned the heat off. And, for future reference, Stud, I’d recommend never turning the burner up to ‘high’ when working with cream sauces. That’s just asking for a disaster.”

Brian gave a dismissive little half shrug ending with a full-blown smile aimed Justin’s way. “No biggie. It wasn’t my cooking that caused you to fall in love with me in the first place. I do much better work in the bedroom than in the kitchen, right, Sunshine?”

“I don’t know,” Justin teased him right back, that humor bubbling through and showing in his brilliant smile and the happy crinkles around his eyes. “From what I remember, you work just fine in the kitchen too. And the living room, the office, the hot tub . . .”

Brian broke into a full belly laugh while the girls both protested with a chorus of ‘Ewww’s. This, of course, only made the dads laugh harder. There was such camaraderie between them at that point. Quinne and Qianna shared a conspiratorial look. If only Justin could see himself, he’d know what everyone else already saw; this was where he belonged. If anything, the sight of the two men laughing together made the girls more determined than ever to find a way to keep their family together.

“So how was your night with your grandmother?” Justin asked, trying to get the conversation back on to a more ‘PG’ track.
“It was great!” Quinne enthusiastically replied. “I LOVE Jenn. She’s so sweet. We went to the Japanese Gardens and saw the Manga exhibit and then had tea at the formal tea house. Then we went back to her condo and she made the most delicious dinner. And, after dinner, she started teaching me how to knit. I’m going to make this really cool pashmina - we’re getting together on Wednesday to go to the knitting store so I can pick out the wool I want to use. It was really fun. She’s, like, a real grandma, you know? Like, how you see grandmothers on TV. I mean, I love Grandma Deb, and all, but she’s not exactly your typical grandmotherly type.”

“Not unless your grandmother is a foul-mouthed, LGBT activist, with a penchant for overly bright colors and an obsession with the Shopping Network,” Brian expanded on that thought. “Nope. Jenn is much more the Norman Rockwell type of granny.” They all chuckled at the truth in that statement. “Yeah, she’s a much more refined type. And it’ll probably do you good to hang out with her sometimes, Peanut. She’ll teach you which fork to use in polite company and all that other shit that the rest of us have no clue about.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had my fill of etiquette lessons,” Qianna volunteered her own point of view. “I’ll trade you for Grandma Debbie. She’s flippin’ hilarious! She cracks me up every damn time I see her.”

They all spent the next few minutes comparing grandmother stories, laughing at the disparity between the two women while also cherishing the similarities. In the middle of this discussion, Gus arrived and joined them, adding his own perspective from growing up in the crazy Liberty Avenue family full of colorful characters and detailing how it had formed his world view. Even Justin chimed in with some stories about what it had been like when he’d temporarily lived with Debbie back during his senior year of high school - stories that his daughter had never heard before. The more they spoke, though, the more Qianna felt how cheated she’d been, having been separated from this family. And there was absolutely no way in the world that she was going to give this up now that she’d found her way here.

Eventually the conversation turned towards the final preparations needed for Gus’ big birthday bash, which was planned for that Saturday night. It sounded like Emmett and Debbie had everything pretty much in hand, although there were a few last minute details still to take care of. The girls learned for the first time that the party was supposed to take place at Brian’s club, Babylon, and that they’d all be allowed to stay for at least a little time after the club opened for real. That got a huge round of excited approving squeals from the kids, even though Brian earned a critical glare from the other father.

In the midst of the party planning Qianna got a text which diverted her attention for a moment. “Awwww! Poor Winston. He looks miserable! Tell me again why we had to leave him with Mrs. Crieghton instead of bringing him with us?” Qianna held up her phone, displaying a picture of a very unhappy cat.
“Because it’s not worth dragging the poor cat all the way across the country for a mere two weeks,” Justin explained, shaking his head at the woebegone look his daughter was aiming his way. “I know you miss him - especially after being away from your cat for the whole summer - but you won’t have to wait long to be reunited, Honey. We’ll be home in less than a week. In fact, I was going to make our plane reservations later today.”

That statement pretty much killed the mood for everyone sitting around the patio table. They all fell silent, even Justin, who belatedly realized that he’d stuck his foot in it. But a minute later, he huffed a determined woof of air and got to his feet with a stubborn set to his shoulders.

“Well, I’m going to get dressed. I’ve got a conference call in an hour with my lawyer about evicting Alex out of the San Jose house. If you’ll excuse me,” Justin stated and then quietly walked away, back through the patio doors.

“Shit!” Qianna grumbled as she slumped back into her chair.

“Shit is right.” Quinne reached out a consoling hand to give her sister’s shoulder a squeeze. “We’re running out of time!”

“What am I going to do?” Qianna asked with a hopeless frown. “Do you think if I just locked myself in my room and refused to go, he’d eventually give in? Or maybe Em would hide me until Dad leaves? I don’t want to go back to California. I want to stay here with all of you. I’ve already missed out on twelve years of family and, now that I’ve found you, I refuse to give you all up.”

Quinne turned to Brian with a pleading look. “You have to DO something, Pops! Now! Before it’s too late!”

Brian sighed. “What do you want me to do? I’ve been trying. I fucking burned pasta for him last night, for whatever good that did, but he’s being his usual stubborn, bratty self, of course. At this point, about all I got left is maybe tying him up in the basement.”

“Do you think that would work?” Qianna asked, perking up enough to sit straighter in her chair again, apparently all in on forcibly detaining her father until the Stockholm Syndrome kicked in.

Everyone else laughed at the desperate girl, causing QiQi to blush.
“Sorry, kiddo, but bondage was never Justin’s kink,” Brian replied, tongue-in-cheek.

His son rolled his eyes and swatted his father with the back of one hand. “Get serious, Pops.” Brian pretended to rub at his arm as if Gus had truly injured him. “I’m with the girls here. We need to do something MAJOR and we need to do it now. We’ve got less than a week to convince Justin that he wants to stick around Pittsburgh. So what else have you got besides burning his meals?”

“I don’t know . . .” Brian looked lost.

“Well, you managed to talk him into marrying you once. How’d you do it back then? Maybe that would work again?” Quinne prompted.

“It’s not that easy. With Justin, it’s never that easy . . .” Brian rubbed at his forehead as if his thoughts were hurting him. “The first time I asked him, he turned me down, despite the fact that I’d just broken my lifelong vow to never admit I needed anyone AND had announced I loved him. It wasn’t until I bought him a mansion fit for a prince that I managed to convince him I was serious.” Brian waved his arm outward to indicate that the mansion he was referring to was Britin. “But even then he backed out before I got him down the fucking aisle. The stupid twat got a bug up his ass - put there by your interfering mother, I might add, Sonny Boy - that he needed to go to New York and become a famous painter. Thank fuck that plan only lasted a few weeks. Of course it helped that he hated New York as soon as he got there and realized he couldn’t afford even a closet - let alone studio space - on what he was making as a waiter while he waited for his ‘big break’. By the time I called and asked him to come back and give us another go, he’d already been softened up. It was still like pulling teeth though. When that boy has his mind set on something . . .”

“So, basically, you tried romance, bribing him, and eventually had to resort to begging before he agreed to marry you?” Quinne summarized Brian’s more neutrally-worded explanation.

“I wouldn’t say I begged. I just . . . I had to wear him down,” Brian argued, trying to put a more forceful spin on things.

“Well, we don’t have TIME to wait while you ‘wear him down,’” Quinne argued, using air quotes to denote that she still didn’t completely believe Brian’s version of events. “And your attempt at romance last night was a total bust. Which leaves only bribery. Got another house up your sleeve, Pops?”

“Sorry.” He shook his head with a sad smile. “I doubt that would work this time, though. Sunshine’s come a long way in the last ten years. His bank book could probably give mine a run for its money these days,” Brian confessed.
“For what it’s worth, I say you should go for the ‘shock and awe’ approach, Pops,” Gus spoke up, voicing his opinion. “Justin’s an artist. By definition, we artists are more driven by our emotions. So if you want to win Justin over, you have to do something to affect him emotionally,” the wise young man continued to elaborate. “You can’t approach this calmly and logically and hope to talk him into loving you again. You can’t just SAY you love him and want him to stay, because he’ll discount that. He’ll see that as empty words with no weight to them. I mean, you’ve always told us that actions speak louder than words, right, Pops? So follow your own advice here. I say, throw caution to the wind and sweep him off his feet. Don’t just romance him; romance the fuck out of him.”

Brian appeared to contemplate his son’s advice for a second or two before commenting. “Actually . . . that’s not a bad idea, Sonny Boy. You’re right that we don’t have time to fuck around. And the kid always was a total drama queen. So, the grand gesture . . . Hmmm . . . Yeah, that just might work.” Brian was nodding his head, his hazel eyes glinting with passionate green sparks of mischief as he leaned towards his eager minions. ‘Okay, if we’re going to go ‘full media blitz’, though, I’m going to need all of your help. And I might have to horn in a bit on your birthday party spotlight, if that’s okay?”

“Whatever it takes, Pops,” Gus readily agreed.

“Thanks, Sonny Boy. Now, if this is gonna work,” Brian looked at his watch and cringed a little, “we’ve only got a little over thirty-eight hours to get our shit together. You better grab your tablet, Q, and conference Emmy Lou in, cuz we’ll need his help too.” Quinne pulled her tablet out and started tapping frantically at the screen. “Gus, go close the patio doors; we don’t want the object of our machinations sneaking up on us and overhearing the plan.” Gus darted to follow directions, pulling the big glass sliders closed. “QiQi, have you still got Daphne’s number handy?” Qianna nodded. “Great! Text her and see if she’s willing to help on the Justin end of things - that girl was always up for some good trouble, so I bet she’ll be thrilled to get involved.” Qianna started typing away at her phone with a huge smile on her face. “Alright team, here’s what we’re going to do . . .”

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“You’re not going to wear THAT, are you?” Qianna looked at her Dad, dressed in some shapeless casual pullover and a pair of faded old jeans, with horror. “You look like you’re getting ready to clean the garage, not go to a party.”

Justin rolled his eyes and tutted at his daughter. “We’re going to a birthday party for Gus. It’s not like it’s a black tie affair, Sweetheart.”
“Yeah, but it’s his EIGHTEENTH birthday - that’s a big deal - and it’s at a nightclub, not out in Deb’s back yard. If you dress like that you’re going to feel underdressed and out of place all night long,” she insisted. “Here, let me help you find something more . . . well, just more.” She rifled through the clothes hanging in Justin’s closet, increasingly disdainful of the options she found there. “Didn’t you pack ANYTHING even remotely hot? Sheesh, Dad. Looking at this closet, you’d think you were seventy, not a hot, single, thirty-something. You’re never gonna find a replacement for The Yeti like this.”

“QiQi . . .” Justin started to correct his daughter but she wasn’t listening.

“Nevermind. Just wait here!” the girl ordered and then rushed out of the room, returning in less than two minutes, burdened by a shopping bag from a local menswear store. “There you go. I found this when we were out shopping with Grandma Jenn yesterday. I was going to give it to you as a Christmas present, but you need it now.” As she spoke, she crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping that her lie wouldn’t be held against her when her father eventually found out that Brian had been the one to purchase the outfit as part of his big plan.

Justin opened the neck of the bag and pulled out the item inside. It was a gorgeous, sapphire blue satin, button down shirt. The color was a nearly perfect match for the blue of Justin’s eyes and the slightly shiny fabric looked almost liquid as the light played over it. The man let himself admire the shirt for a moment, his fingers obviously enjoying the touch of the cool silk. But then he shook his head and tried to hand it back to his daughter.

“I can’t take this, Sweetie. It had to have cost a fortune. It’s Hugo Boss. How did you afford this anyway?”

“Well, I got a little help,” Qianna confessed without saying exactly who had ‘helped’ buy it. “But that doesn’t matter. You have to wear it. You’ll look beautiful in it. Go on. At least try it on and make sure it fits.”

“I really shouldn’t,” Justin protested again, although his complaint was decidedly weaker this time around.

“Here - it’ll go great with these dark blue dress slacks.” She pulled a pair of Justin’s pants out of the closet. “Put it on and I’ll be right back to see the final effect,” Qianna demanded, not giving her dad time to object again before she skipped out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

She was still hovering a few feet down the hall, hoping that this ploy had worked, when her sister
came out of Brian’s room to join her. “Did he buy it?” Quinne asked.

“Not sure yet. I think so. I could see how much he wanted to believe, though - the shirt IS gorgeous and I’m pretty sure he’ll cave,” Qianna responded.

“Let’s hope so. Pops is already dressed and he looks hot - and I say that as his daughter, so I’m biased, but he really does look amazing. If I were a gay man, I’d fall for him in a heartbeat. And the two of them will look so adorable together with Pops wearing the same shirt only in a darker color. You know, Emmett should hire me to help him with his wedding planning business - I’m really, really good at this stuff,” Quinne bragged.

“Well, Dad’s had enough time to work himself up to trying on your selection. Let’s go see if it worked,” Qianna suggested as she knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

The girls entered together, to find that, so far, their plans were going just as hoped. Justin was dressed in the beautiful shirt and the matching trousers and looked simply magnificent. The blue was indeed an almost exact match for his eyes and the gem-toned silk played off against his creamy-pale skin to perfection. The halo of his white blond hair topped it all off. And when he smiled at the girls’ look of admiration, he looked a decade younger,

“Damn, Justin! You look delicious! If you weren’t my sorta-dad, I’d want to eat you up!” Quinne declared with a dreamy gaze.

“I’ll second that!” Gus added, sticking his head in through the doorway to admire Justin’s finery. “Damn, Jus, are you trying to upstage me at my own birthday party?”

“Shit! You’re right, Gus. I should change,” Justin apologized, immediately beginning to unbutton the shirt.

“Stop, Justin! I was KIDDING!” Gus hurried to explain. “Don’t you dare change. You have to wear that. It’s perfect for you.”

“But you’re right, I don’t need to hog the limelight or anything.”
“Bullshit. Hog away. I’m not that insecure that I can’t share my night with my gorgeous step-dad,” Gus maintained. “Seriously, Justin, if you DON’T wear that outfit I’ll be genuinely annoyed at you, so just get over yourself already.” Then the birthday boy, who was dangerously handsome in his own right, looked at his sisters and tipped his head in the direction of the stairs at the end of the hallway. “You two ready to go? Emmett texted a minute ago and asked me to stop by and pick up something he forgot on the way, so we need to leave now.”

“Just let me grab my dress. We were going to change and do our hair at Em’s anyway, so we might as well get going,” Qianna announced already halfway out the door before Justin stopped her.

Hey, wait! I thought you were riding into town with me,” he questioned his daughter.

“Sorry, Dad, I promised to help Em with the final party prep. You’ll have to drive yourself. Oh, and don’t forget, you’re picking up Daphne too.”

She turned back long enough to give her father a peck on the cheek and then was gone again in a swirl of tween activity. Quinne copied her sister’s actions, leaving a kiss on Justin’s other cheek and then trotting off in Qianna’s wake. Justin was still just standing there, looking a little abandoned, as the two girls disappeared down the hall.

“Don’t be late, Jus,” Gus warned and then placidly followed after the giggling and whispering girls. “I hope this works,” the boy muttered to himself as he made his own way down the stairs.

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Chapter End Notes

2/9/19 - This chapter feels a little like filler - probably why it felt so hard for me to write - but it was necessary to set up the big ending, so please bear with me. So, any predictions as to how Brian’s going to ‘romance the FUCK’ out of his man? Hehehe! Here goes nothing! TAG
Chapter 29 - Passionately Happy Again.

“Yay! You’re finally here!” Qianna brayed as soon as her father stepped foot inside the club. “I was beginning to think you’d chickened out or something.”

“I had to stop him from changing clothes three times,” an exasperated Daphne complained as she handed her wrap off to the coat check boy.

“Did not,” Justin argued, only to be silenced by a look from Daphne. “It was only two times.”

“Whatever. At least we’re here and, for the moment at least, your Drama Princess tendencies are under control,” Daphne smiled at her friend to ease the sting of her words. Then, as they walked through the entrance arch into the main dance space of the club, she exclaimed, “wow! Look at this place! Does this bring back memories or what?”

“Yeah,” Justin agreed, looking around himself with a dreamy look. “Shit, I practically grew up here. If these walls could talk . . .”

“They’d tell stories that you DEFINITELY don’t want your daughter to hear,” Daphne cautioned, elbowing her friend and gesturing towards the girl listening in with avid interest.

“Don’t mind me. I’m always up for a good ‘Dad Gone Wild’ story. It gives me more leverage for when I hit my teens and want to start going out to places like this on my own,” Qianna suggested, giving her father a bratty grin that matched his so perfectly that Daphne started giggling.
“Right. Remind me to send you to a convent tomorrow,” Justin proposed, only half joking.

“Gee, how bad are these stories you don’t want me to hear?”

By that point Daphne was laughing so hard that tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. Justin swatted her with a back hand to the belly but that didn’t do anything other than elicit another spat of giggling. Justin rolled his eyes and pretended to ignore her, although the blush painting his cheeks gave away his own discomfort with the subject.

Before QiQi could ask more questions, however, they were joined by the owner of the club himself. “Well, what do you think of the latest iteration of our baby?” Brian swept his arm in an arc taking in the whole of the space in front of them. “I just did another remodel last year. Gotta keep the place up to date so the fags feel they’re getting their money’s worth.”

“It looks like you’ve really spiffed it up from the old days, Brian,” Daphne stated. “It’s much sleeker and less post-90’s disco chic. Although I kinda miss the black walls and stench of male sweat.”

“Never knew you had a kink for sweaty men, Daph. But, stick around till later tonight and you’ll see - not that much has changed,” Brian reassured her.

“Oh good, cuz there’s nothing I like more than a room full of hundreds of half-naked, sweaty, lust-crazed, gay men, all ignoring me while they try and hit on my best friend,” Daphne teased. “Yep, just like old times.”

“Well, that never seemed to stop you before. If I remember correctly, you were here almost as often as Justin back in the day,” Brian kidded her good-naturedly. But after they’d all finished laughing about that round of teasing, Brian turned to Qianna and added, “I think it’s time to get this party officially started, don’t you? Can you run and tell Gus it’s time for him to do his thing?”

“On it!” Qianna agreed and immediately started for the stage where she knew her siblings were waiting.

As she was walking away, though, Qianna overheard Brian add, in his sexiest drawl, “so, Sunshine, care to continue this reminiscing while I give you a private tour? I could show you around the new VIP lounge I put in last year. Or maybe just a quick trip to the backroom?”
“Brian!” Justin voiced his complaint, but Qianna thought she detected just a trace of amused interest and it gave her hope that maybe everything they’d been working towards wasn’t completely in vain.

Luckily, Quinne intercepted her sister before she’d even made it all the way to the stage. “Is Justin here yet? Gus and I have everything ready to go and I think all the other guests are here.”

“Dad just walked in and your father’s already got him in hand,” Qianna assured her. “Last I heard, he was trying to talk Dad into a tour of something called ‘the backroom’.”

“Shit! We better get going then. There’s no telling what trouble Pops will get himself into if we let him take Justin to the backroom.” Quinne started to tug at her sister’s sleeve, hollering as they ran, “Gus! You’re up. It’s showtime!”

Gus, who’d been standing to the left of the main stage area, nodded his head to indicate he’d understood and then moved towards a small podium set up with a microphone. With a signal towards Brian’s Entertainment Manager, who’d been waiting in the wings, the house lights began to dim. The crowd of guests - maybe thirty to forty in all - who’d been milling around the bar and buffet tables, started to coalesce in a group, taking seats in the chairs set up in front of the stage area. When his audience was mostly assembled, Gus turned on the mic and started speaking.

“Hi, everybody! Welcome! I’m Gus Peterson-Marcus-Kinney! And if you didn’t know that, you’re probably at the wrong party,” Gus started off, getting a round of laughter right off the top. “So, in case you’re unclear on the theme of the night, today is my eighteenth birthday.” There was a loud roar of applause. “Thank you! Thank you. I’m glad I made it to adulthood too!” More laughter.

“Now, when my parents asked how I wanted to celebrate my ’Big 1-8’, my first suggestion was that I get an all-expense-paid trip to Greece for the summer, but when my Dad insisted the only way that was happening was if he went along as a chaperone - and we all know that scenario would be just asking for trouble - I opted instead for this party.” Brian, who was standing next to Justin off to the side of the main group of guests waved and shot everyone with his best, sexy lothario smirk.

“To start things off, my attorney and orator mother, Mel, suggested that I give a little speech. Apparently, turning eighteen is a big deal or something? It’s a ‘Rite of Passage’ and demands that one examine one’s life, where you’ve been, and what the future holds, yadda, yadda, yadda . . . I know, right? But to make my mother happy, you’re all going to have to bear with me for a few minutes here. Please try not to fall asleep before the big ending, okay?”

While the crowd was laughing and clapping, Gus picked up a remote device, hitting the button and illuminating the electronic screens behind him on the stage. The screens showed a picture, apparently taken in a hospital room, with two smiling but exhausted looking women huddled together in a big bed, Brian in the foreground holding up something wrapped in blankets and
grinning at the camera, with Justin, Michael and a few others standing in the background. The assembled guests all oohed and ahhed at the picture.

“This is me eighteen years ago this very night. See that lump of blankets with the blue beanie cap in my father’s hands? Yep. That’s me!” There was some chattering and laughing from the audience as folks pointed to the much younger versions of themselves. “That was the day everything started,” Gus continued. “Now, I realize that, logically, the universe might have existed in some form prior to my birth but, since this is MY birthday, and it’s all about ME, do we really care? For all intents and purposes, the world began the night I was born, right?” More laughter. “And, for what it’s worth, my theory that I’m the center of the Universe, is born out by the fact that stories of many of my family also seemed to start that night. Take my moms, for instance: the night I was born was also the night they became real grown ups and had to learn about adulting and shit. Am I right?” Mel and Lindz both chuckled and nodded to let their son know that they agreed with him. “It was also the night that my father met my future, once-upon-a-time, step-dad, Justin; so, basically, before I was born, Justin didn’t even really exist - at least not as far as Liberty Avenue was concerned - which is all that matters.” Justin shook his head and smiled up at Gus from his seat. “Don’t even get me started on my father - before Justin and I came along he was just drifting through life, completely lost, wandering from one man to the next . . . Well, okay, he sometimes still does that, but you get the picture.” Everyone laughed at that comment, Michael more loudly than anyone. “But you get my point, right? Before I came along and gave the family a reason to exist, it was just chaos, so it really is all about me.”

“It was also the night that my father met my future, once-upon-a-time, step-dad, Justin; so, basically, before I was born, Justin didn’t even really exist - at least not as far as Liberty Avenue was concerned - which is all that matters.” Justin shook his head and smiled up at Gus from his seat. “Don’t even get me started on my father - before Justin and I came along he was just drifting through life, completely lost, wandering from one man to the next . . . Well, okay, he sometimes still does that, but you get the picture.” Everyone laughed at that comment, Michael more loudly than anyone. “But you get my point, right? Before I came along and gave the family a reason to exist, it was just chaos, so it really is all about me.”

“After being born, I sped through my childhood just like most other kids . . .” Gus carried on, advancing through a series of other pictures from his infancy and early years, eliciting more amusement over the sweet and funny pictures that were displayed on the huge video screens as he went.

It was a fun trip down memory lane for most of those assembled. There were pictures of most of the Liberty Avenue family from those years so everyone felt included. Quinne and Qianna, who had helped their brother prepare this slide show, smiled to each other, glad that their work was being appreciated even as it was setting the stage for what was to come. Most importantly, almost every photo included a shot of Justin amongst the others, subtly instilling the point that the youthful blond had been very much an integral part of the family back in those days.

“It was also the night that my father met my future, once-upon-a-time, step-dad, Justin; so, basically, before I was born, Justin didn’t even really exist - at least not as far as Liberty Avenue was concerned - which is all that matters.” Justin shook his head and smiled up at Gus from his seat. “Don’t even get me started on my father - before Justin and I came along he was just drifting through life, completely lost, wandering from one man to the next . . . Well, okay, he sometimes still does that, but you get the picture.” Everyone laughed at that comment, Michael more loudly than anyone. “But you get my point, right? Before I came along and gave the family a reason to exist, it was just chaos, so it really is all about me.”

“Which brings me to my fifth year on this planet, when an atrocious act of hate - the bombing of this very club - tore my whole world apart as well as my family.” There was a shot of some news coverage showing Babylon the night of the bombing, with emergency vehicles surrounding it and injured people being helped out of the smoldering ruins. “That was the night that a right-wing nut tried to take out their political agenda on our family. It tore up the community and my family as well. After the bombing, my moms decided it wasn’t safe here for us anymore and carted JR and I off to Canada for the next six years.” There were photos of the house in Toronto where the
Peterson-Marcus family had lived during that time. “And meanwhile, back here in the States, my father and Justin split up, got back together, got married, and then split up again, leaving a huge hole in all our lives when Justin left.” There was an adorable picture of Gus and Justin together when the boy had been about five, showing them smiling at each other and looking out through a large window in the airport at a scene showing an airplane taxiing away.

“Of course, I carried on,” Gus continued once the sad comments from the audience died down. “I did my best not to let the loss of one of my parents affect me as I did my thing in MY universe.” There were a few more pictures of elementary school-aged Gus. “But just as I was starting to adjust, along came another addition to our family when one day, out of the blue, my father showed up with a squawling, stinky bundle of annoyance named ‘Quinne’.”

A picture of Brian holding a screaming infant and looking totally freaked out was splashed across the screen, earning a huge roar of laughter from the guests as Quinne stood up from her chair, spun to face the crowd and gave a cheeky bow. There were several more pictures after that, each displaying more family scenes from Gus’ childhood as he matured through middle school and high school. Again, there were lots of pictures of everyone in the family, including Brian. The one noticeable contrast between this series of pictures and those that had been taken before the Babylon bombing, though, was that Brian was rarely smiling any longer. He seemed set apart from the rest of the group in most of the photos; off to the side, there but separate from the fun, with a wistful look to him that was unsettling.

“So here I am, thinking that I’ve made it all the way to adulthood,” Gus continued his narrative before clicking on the remote and bringing up a picture of the twins - one standing on each side of him - and the three of them grinning in unison for the camera, “and all of a sudden I’m confronted by the prospect of yet another sister popping up out of nowhere. I mean, what is with these pesky little sisters, huh? As if JR and Quinne weren’t enough a burden, now I’ve got another one? And Qianna is, like, Quinne squared, so it’s really, really bad.”

“Love you, Gussy!” the pest in question yelled from where she was seated next to her sister.

“Back at ya, QiQi!” Gus replied with an adoring smile. “Anyway . . . I figure she can stay, especially since she brought back our lost blond boy with her.” The screen above Gus’ head showed a new picture of Qianna and Justin together, sitting at a patio table near the pool at Britin. “So now I’m whole again. I’ve got all my parents back in one place, and all my annoying sisters to keep me amused, and I FINALLY turned eighteen, and I’m off to PIFA next week to start my career as a graphic artist, so I’m thinking my life is all sorted, right? Cuz remember, it’s ALL about ME.” More laughter, and murmurs of ‘he’s his father’s son’, before the star of the night continued. “But, no! All is not right! Because, just when I have everything sorted the way it should be, I’m confronted by the threat of my step-dad leaving again! Can you believe it? I know, right? My newly-restored, long-lost, prodigal step-father, the inestimable Justin Taylor, refuses to stay put! He’s going to disappear on me again, skulking back to the wilds of deepest, darkest, California, never to be heard from again and leaving me - remember this is all about ME, right? - leaving me with a huge hole in my life once more! Which is, frankly, unacceptable!”
There were sympathetic groans throughout the audience along with some outright derogatory comments aimed Justin’s way. The subject of this criticism cringed in his seat. But, when the commentary became too vocal, Justin stood up and responded directly to the accusations.

“I’m sorry you felt abandoned, Gus. That was never my intention. I had no idea you felt like there was a hole in your life,” Justin insisted. “But I promise I’m not going to just disappear on you again. Even though I’m going back to San Jose, I promise not to ghost you this time.”

Unnoticed by Justin or any of the rest of the audience, one of the guests had already surreptitiously made his way up to the edge of stage by this point and was ready to take over the narrative. With a wireless mic in hand, Brian emerged from the wings, a serious look on his face.

“Gus isn’t the only one who’s gonna miss you, Sunshine,” Brian stated bluntly.

“Brian, we’ve already discussed this,” Justin argued while crossing his arms over his chest. “I have obligations back in California. I can’t stay here.”

“No. You don’t WANT to stay here. Because you’re afraid,” Brian responded while slowly descending the steps leading from the stage down to the main floor of the club. “And I can’t blame you for that. You’ve been hurt too many times - I’ve hurt you too many times - and you’re right to be wary. But don’t you think you’ve been hiding for long enough? Maybe it’s time to take another chance. A chance at being happy again?”

Justin shook his head, his lips screwed up in an angry moue. “You’re still as arrogant as ever, aren’t you, Brian? How dare you assume that you’re the only thing in the world that will make me happy? I’ve been perfectly fine on my own, thank you very much.”

“Perfectly fine? . . . How perfectly boring . . . Wouldn’t you rather be passionately happy again? Because I don’t care how much you try to deny it in public, I KNOW you were happier - WE were happier - together.”

By this point Brian’s slow amble had brought him all the way down the stairs and right up to to where Justin had been standing. The defiant younger blond hadn’t moved an inch. Justin was still standing there looking more stubborn than an angry mule, but now that Brian was hovering over him he was forced to look up at the taller man, which naturally gave him a more submissive posture. Brian meanwhile was smiling down on his former husband with all the overwhelming charisma his presence afforded. To those looking on, there was an almost tangible connection
radiating back and forth between the two of them. It was an electric tension. Everyone seemed mesmerized by the tableau and there was complete silence throughout the club except for the two men talking to each other as if they’d forgotten they had an audience.

At the same time, the slide show happening on the large screens behind the stage had switched from pictures of Gus to a series of pictures of Brian and Justin. There were pictures of the two men going back almost two decades, beginning with pictures of them from the first years they’d known each other, with both looking so remarkably young, to a few taken just the past couple of weeks. And in every single photo of the two of them, you could see the seemingly palpable bond between the pair. They were always touching, or at least looking at each other, as if they were just naturally drawn to one another, almost against their will. There was always a glow around them - one that didn’t come from any filter or trick of the lighting - an outward manifestation of whatever innate affinity they had. It didn’t hurt that they were so inherently beautiful together; Justin’s lightness and innocence contrasting and enhancing Brian’s darker, smoldering handsomeness. When the slides ended on a shot of the two of them standing hand in hand on the day of their wedding, their eyes locked and radiant smiles adorning each man’s face, the crowd of onlookers audibly sighed en masse, causing the two men who’d been locked in a fruitless battle of wills to look up.

“Brian . . .” Justin sighed when he too saw the wedding photo, his body losing much of the tension it had held up to that point. “Why couldn’t you have tried half this hard back when we were still married, damn it?” The last sentence was spoken so softly that if it hadn’t been for the mic Brian was still holding nobody would have heard it.

“Because I was a fucking idiot, Sunshine,” Brian admitted with a soft smile meant for only one man. “And it may have taken me a dozen years to finally get my fucking act together, but now that I’ve got you back, I’m not going to let you get away again. I don’t care what it takes, Justin. Tell me what I have to do and I’ll do it. You want me to grovel? Beg? Because I’ll do it in a heartbeat. You want me to announce to everyone we know that I love you and I can’t live without you? No problem. I’ll fucking yell it from the top of the highest mountain I can find, if that will finally convince you I’m serious.”

Brian turned his body slightly so that he was facing the sea of guests who’d been following every word the two men were saying. “I fucking LOVE Justin Taylor!” Brian stated loudly, the mic he was holding amplifying the statement so that the words rang out through the whole club. “I adore him! I can’t fucking live without him any longer! I, Brian Kinney, LOVE Justin Taylor, and I want everyone in the entire fucking universe to know it!”

After a moment of stunned silence - because it was still hard for some of them to believe what they were hearing, seeing as it was completely out of character for Brian to be so demonstrative - the crowd of guests broke out into a chorus of cheers and applause. Brian looked around him and smiled his typical, snarky, tongue-in-cheek, neerdowell grin. Then he turned back to Justin, reaching out to grab the younger man’s hand in one of his own.
“How can I trust that what you’re saying is real? That this will last? How can I be sure?” Justin whispered, just loud enough that the mic picked up the words.

“You can’t. There are no promises in this world, Sunshine. Sometimes you just have to take a leap of faith. Grab for what you want and work as hard as you can to make it last,” Brian answered him with a bittersweet smile. “That’s what I’m doing right now.” He paused, took a deep breath, and brought Justin’s hand up to his lips so he could leave a kiss atop one pale knuckle. “So . . . Is it working?”

Justin closed his eyes, took a deep breath, tilted his head to the side and gave a half-shrug, bit his bottom lip and shook his head, all before he finally opened up those big blue orbs and gave a defeated huff. “You’re fucking impossible. You know that, right?”

“Maybe. But you always loved a challenge, Sunshine. Admit it; that’s one of the things about me you find irresistible.”

“This is never going to work.”

“We’ll make it work.”

“But . . .” Justin seemed determined to argue just on principle at that point.

Brian chuckled under his breath, reached out and grabbed hold of Justin’s shoulders, and pulled the shorter man closer. “Shut up and fucking kiss me already, Sunshine,” Brian purred as he bent to take possession of the lips he’d been longing to taste.

As they kissed, the image from the men’s wedding was replaced by a live action shot of the two of them kissing. The camera, operated by the stage manager at the direction of the twins, slowly zeroed in on the pair, ending in a close up that caught every last second as the two men lost themselves in a spit-swapping game of tonsil hockey that didn’t seem likely to stop any time soon. The image was then, suddenly, replicated onto every single video screen throughout the entire club, creating a legion of kissing Brians and Justins all around them. It wasn’t until Brian dropped the mic while trying to grasp Justin even closer to his body, resulting in a booming screech of feedback, that the two men remembered where they were and realized that they’d become the object of avid interest. Brian bent his head down, burying his face in Justin’s hair with a happy little laugh and then reluctantly pulled away with one last kiss to his lover’s temple.
Brian bent and picked up the mic again, then grabbed his man’s hand and began to tow the reluctant blond behind him up the stairs to the stage. “So, I’m going to interpret that as a ‘Yes, I’ll stay with you, Brian’,” he commented as they walked. Justin only laughed and shook his head again, as if even he didn’t believe what was happening. “Your enthusiasm is a little lacking, Sunshine, but no matter. Like I said, I’m not letting you get away from me this time no matter what I have to do.”

When they’d made it up the stairs and all the way to the center of the stage, Brian turned to face Justin and then abruptly sank down onto one knee. Justin looked startled. Gus and the girls had already moved around so as to flank the surprised man, though, perhaps to prevent him from escaping.

Then Brian looked up at him from below and, in the boldest, most confident voice possible, he asked, “Justin Taylor, would you please do me the honor of marrying me . . . Again . . . And this time I swear by all that is gay, I will try harder not to fuck everything up.”

“You’re serious?” Justin questioned, looking at the man kneeling in front of him as if Brian had a screw loose. “Brian . . . This is . . . It’s way too sudden. I can’t . . .”

“Yes, you can, Sunshine,” Brian assured him, not getting up from his kneeling position and not letting go of Justin’s hand either, mostly because it seemed like the blond would immediately bolt if given half a chance. “I told you I’d do ANYTHING to get you back. Well, this is me putting it all out there. This is me being ridiculously romantic and not caring who knows. This is what I’m willing to do to prove to the man I love, just how much I love him . . . So, are you just gonna leave me hanging here like this, in front of practically everyone we know, or what?”

Justin stared at Brian as if he was trying to see through him. Then he looked around at the rapt audience waiting for his response. And finally, he looked to his right and saw his daughter and her sister, and to his left where Gus was grinning at him like a loon, and groaned quietly.

“You never did play fair, Brian.”

“That’s because, as the Bard says, ‘All’s fair in Love and War’, and I’m going to take every tactical advantage I can get,” Brian declared. “So what’s your answer? Yes or no? Will. You. Marry. Me?”

But still Justin hesitated without speaking, his expression betraying how conflicted he felt. The tension in the room was nerve-racking. Before the silence could get too uncomfortable, however, a strident voice from the audience spoke up.
“Shit, Sunshine! If you don’t fucking say ‘yes’ already - after all that - I’m gonna have to come up there and kick your silly little twinkie ass,” Debbie promised, getting a laugh from everyone watching. “Sheesh! Stop overthinking shit and just go for it. None of us are getting any younger, you know.”

“But, no pressure, right, Deb?” Justin answered her snarkily before turning back to the man still waiting on his knees in front of him. “You’re actually serious about this, Brian? I mean, we haven’t seen each other or even spoken for more than a decade, and after only a week you want to marry me again? You don’t know me anymore. I may not be the same person I was back then. How can you be sure you even still want me?”

“Because I never stopped wanting you, Justin. Not for one single day,” Brian asserted with obvious conviction. “Hell, I knew the first time we fucking did this that you were the only man I’d ever do this shit for. And nothing’s changed for me even after all these years. So . . . Are you going to make me stay down here on my knees until all the circulation in my legs is cut off or are you going to fucking marry me again?”

Justin smiled finally. “Fine. I think you’re fucking insane. And I must be too if I’m letting myself get talked into this mess. But . . . whatever . . . Let’s just do this before I come to my senses.”

“Let’s just do this? Is that the best you can do, Sunshine?” Brian teased him, his lips rolled in to try and hide his smile. “Come on. Say it.”

Justin rolled his eyes - a gesture that the camera which was still following them caught in all it’s bratty glory - and huffed a small laugh. “Did I mention that you were impossible?” Brian only laughed. “Okay.” Justin took a deep breath and then nervously let it out. “Yes.”

“Yes . . . what?” Brian prodded.

“Yes, I WILL marry you, Brian.”

The entire club full of guests erupted with cheers and the applause was momentarily enough to drown out anything more the newly-engaged couple might have said. Qianna and Quinne were jumping up and down and squealing while Gus tried to hold them back from swarming their fathers. Jennifer, Debbie, and even Emmett, seemed to be crying with joy. And, basically, it was chaos for a minute or two.
In the meantime, Brian had climbed back up to his feet with a little help from his fiance. “That’s better,” he said approvingly as he turned to look at his kids. “So, then, let’s get this show on the road. Sonny Boy, Girls, you’re up!”

“What . . .?” Justin looked around himself with confusion.

“You said you’d marry me and I’m not going to give you time to rethink it or get cold feet, Sunshine,” Brian partially explained, even as the kids, along with a couple of the stage crew from the club began to roll a new set of decorations out from behind the curtained off wings.

“What the fuck?” Justin exclaimed as Brian towed him out the way so that the Q-Twins could position a rose-bedecked-yet-tasteful, wrought iron-framed trellis in place in the very center of the stage and a stagehand could roll out a red carpet runner that led from the trellis towards the front of the stage. “What the hell are you doing, Brian?”

Brian only shrugged and smiled in a playful way that caused Justin to groan. Luckily the transformation of the stage only took a couple minutes thanks to the efficiency of the crew, and before Justin could really get to complaining, it was a done deal. The sound system began to play an electrified version of the Wedding March complete with techno thumpa-thumpa beat and crooning backup singers. The girls and Gus reemerged from the back carrying bouquets of flowers and boutonnieres for the fathers, followed by Daphne and Michael, who had self-appointed themselves as attendants for the wedding party. Justin was still just standing there, gaping, while Gus pinned a flower below the collar of his shirt - a small rose which perfectly matched the red silk button down shirt that Brian was wearing - which, it must be noted, was the same type of shirt as the one Qianna had supposedly purchased for her father, just in a larger size and different color. Brian’s boutonniere, of course, coordinated with Justin’s shirt, because, you known, Brian Kinney and ‘style’. Together they looked like the perfect offset pair.

Then, the last of Brian’s surprises appeared.

Walking out of the wings came a young woman with strawberry blonde hair, a swathe of freckles across her upturned nose, and a smile that was almost a rival for Justin’s. Most of the people in the audience didn’t know her, but at least one of the guests - Jennifer Taylor - gasped when she recognized the woman who was dressed in a dark purple cassock with a rainbow-printed clerical stole around her shoulders and carrying a bible. Even Justin himself didn’t seem to recognize the minister at first. But when it finally hit him just who he was looking at, he seemed like he was about to faint.
“Molly? Is that you?”

“Hey, Jester. Surprise!” Molly replied with a wink.

“But . . . what . . . I mean, I didn’t think you approved of . . . well, any of this . . .” Justin’s confusion caused him to splutter.

“I didn’t used to, thanks to our dear old dad,” Molly explained with a smile. “But, then I started at the seminary and realized that Dad’s brand of religion was just another form of glorified hate. Most modern ministries these days welcome everyone, and so do I. I’ve been meaning to contact you and offer my apologies for whatever I might have said in the past - I was just waiting for a good opportunity, you know - but when my nieces contacted me and told me what they were planning for you two, I knew I wanted to be part of the surprise. So, surprise!” Molly leaned forward and gave her big brother a huge, healing, hug. “Now, how about we get you two married so this party can really get started?”

By this point Justin seemed so bowled over he was no longer capable of saying anything. Thankfully, Brian was happy to take charge. He led his fiance over so that they were standing on the red carpet directly in front of the trellis. Justin in his sapphire blue shirt and Brian in his ruby red shirt turned to face each other while Molly took up her position standing behind them under the peak of the trellis’ arch. Daphne moved around so she was standing off to Justin’s left with Qianna at her elbow. Michael took up his spot to Brian’s right with Gus and then Quinne beside him. And then, when all of the impromptu wedding guests were in place and the music had finally died down, Molly began to speak.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’d like to welcome you all here today to celebrate the marriage of Brian and Justin . . .” she intoned using the age-old formula for such things.

It was a short and simple ceremony. But that seemed appropriate seeing as how Brian had sprung this whole thing on Justin without warning. They’d already had one wedding with all the hoopla and fanfare and, to be honest, neither man really needed that a second time. Molly confidently led them through the traditional vows, which Brian repeated in a booming and enthusiastic voice, Justin following suit in a more subdued but still earnest tone, and then it was done. They were officially married. Again.

It wasn’t until his sister announced that it was time for the newlyweds to seal the deal with a kiss, that Justin blinked at the assembly standing around him and the guests watching from out in the audience and actually smiled one of his patented Sunshine smiles.
Qianna, echoing her father’s grin, shared a happy look with her co-conspirator, Quinne. Qianna was almost as incredulous as her gobsmacked father. She couldn’t believe they’d somehow accomplished this coup. All her hopes and dreams for a family had finally come true and she’d managed to guide her father to true happiness at the same time. In her heart she just knew that this was what they’d both needed for a long, long time. And, yes, it meant some HUGE changes, but that was exciting, as well as scary. She had her dad, she had Quinne, she had Gus, and now she also had a new father in Brian, and a new family here in Pittsburgh.

The cheering from the guests soon devolved into catcalls and hoots as the boys’ kiss rapidly turned into something a little more heated, with significant amounts of tongue, and a bit more groping than was probably advisable for the PG crowd of onlookers at this event.

“Shit! I think they’re going to consummate this thing right here and now! I wish I’d brought the video camera,” Debbie joked loudly enough to finally get through to Justin, as evidenced by the blossoming crimson blush that painted his cheeks as he pushed Brian away.

“Actually, that sounds like a superb idea,” Brian declared with a classically rakish Kinney grin. “How about that tour of the VIP lounge, Sunshine?”

“Brian!” Justin chided his new husband with an affectionate swat to his midsection.

“I’m just saying . . . It HAS been almost thirteen years, you know?” Brian’s eyes were sparkling with a sense of fun that nobody had seen there in more than a decade and he waggled his brows suggestively while trying to tug his husband towards the edge of the stage. “Besides, we’ve already imposed ourselves on Gus’ birthday celebration enough. I’m sure Mr, ‘It’s All About Me - I’m the Center of The Universe’, can take over at this point. Can’t you, Sonny Boy?”

“Sure thing, Pops. You two are excused,” Gus confirmed before turning back to his audience. “I think it’s time for all of you to give me gifts now, anyways. Am I right? So, who wants to be the first to shower the Birthday Boy and Best Son with presents?”

There was another round of laughter as the stage crew began to remove the wedding decorations and the music was switched back to something more party-like. And, as Gus descended from the stage heading towards the table that had been set up off to the side heaped with gaudily wrapped packages, Brian leaned in and deposited one more kiss to his new husband’s cheek. He determinedly grabbed Justin’s hand in his own and began to tow the younger man off towards the darker corners of the club, although Justin wasn’t putting up much of a fight.

Qianna stood there watching her fathers as they walked away arm in arm, greeting their well-
wishers as they went. She smiled to herself over a job well done. It had been surprisingly easy and she almost couldn’t believe it was true.

“I can’t believe this actually worked,” Quinne said, voicing QiQi’s own thoughts aloud, as she came to stand next to her sister.

“I know, right? I mean, Dad is NEVER this much of a pushover. I half expected him to throw a fit and storm off. Or at least threaten to ground me for life for being so manipulative,” Qianna agreed. “I really thought the surprise wedding thing was just your father being nuts. The best I was hoping for was for Dad to agree to stay and see how things would work out. I never thought he’d go through with it.”

“Well, Pops can be quite convincing when he puts his mind to it. He’s not the best AdMan on the East Coast for nothing,” Quinne bragged. “Plus, I think your dad secretly wanted this just as much as Pops did. He just needed a good reason to give in and Pops’ over the top, ‘romancing the fuck out of him’, antics gave Justin the excuse he needed. They BOTH wanted this for probably longer than they’ll ever be willing to admit. And now it’s on to the happily ever after.”

They both watched as the new couple dodged the last of the congratulatory family who’d been holding them back and continued on their way towards the rear of the club. From the way they were stopping every couple of feet to kiss and fondle each other, it was pretty clear what they were going to do once they found some privacy. In fact, judging by their progress so far, they’d be lucky to make it all the way to the VIP lounge with their clothes still on. Even as the girls watched, Brian was undoing Justin’s belt and shoving one hand down the back of the younger man’s pants.

“Ewww! You don’t think they’re actually going to . . . you know?” Qianna asked, as the happy pair separated from another kiss just long enough to stumble laughingly through a doorway. “Here? Now? With all of us waiting out here? Gross . . .”

Quinne only laughed at her naive sister. “Yeah, It’s probably a good thing that their bedroom is on the other side of the house.” Qianna nodded at her sister and shuddered.

“Dad sex . . . I mean, ewww!”

“Let’s not think about it, please,” Quinne urged. “It’s going to be bad enough having to be around them all the time for the next few months. If I know my Pops, it’ll probably be days before they even come up for air.” Quinne grabbed QiQi’s arm and started tugging her towards the refreshment table. “But in the meantime, we deserve to celebrate. We done good, Sis! So, come on and let’s party! And then tomorrow morning we’ll get started planning what it will take to get you
guys finally moved in for good. ”

Chapter End Notes

2/19/19 - How was that? I didn’t want the wedding to be too overly-gushy because this Brian wouldn’t want that, but I still wanted it to be romantic. I hope y’all approve. Also, I think I’m gonna have to change the rating on this story to YA - I’ve never written anything this tame before, but it just doesn’t feel right to include anything over the top here. Quinne and Qianna just wouldn’t approve of icky dad-sex, you know? Now, one last chapter to clear up all the loose ends and this one will be in the can too! Then I can devote all my focus to finishing Stylite! Yay! TAG
“How long is this going to take? Do you think they’ve lost him?” Qianna whined for about the tenth time.

Justin took a sip from the large cup of coffee that Brian handed him and smiled gratefully at his husband before answering his daughter. “QiQi, Honey, I’m sure Winston is fine. It just takes longer for the airline to unload the cargo hold than it takes for passengers and regular luggage. I’m sure you’ll have your cat soon. Just relax, please.”

By that point in time, Brian had moved around to stand behind the shorter blond, wrapping his arms around Justin’s waist and pulling him closer than was probably appropriate for a public venue like the luggage claim area of an airport.

“Maybe we should have flown out there and brought him back with us in person. What if he’s scared being down there in the cargo hold all alone?” Qianna continued to worry.

“No way. No flying clear across the country for you two. I’m not letting this one out of my sight for at least the next six months,” Brian interrupted his new daughter’s worrying, adding a kiss to the pale cheek of his captive to let Justin know he was mostly joking. “I’m sure your furball will be fine, QiQi.”

Justin rolled his eyes, but didn’t say anything, and then tilted his head a little further to the right so
as to let Brian have better access for nibbling happily at his neck. Qianna and Quinne shared an exasperated look. Justin didn’t seem all that interested in going to California anytime soon. The Lovebirds - as everyone in the family had taken to calling the newlyweds - had been virtually inseparable in the week since Brian’s surprise wedding. It was actually kind of a miracle that the girls had managed to drag them out of the house long enough to go pick up the cat at the airport. Hell, except for the occasional food raid on the kitchen, they’d barely been out of their bedroom all week. If it hadn’t been for Gus and the rest of the more responsible members of the extended family, the twins might have felt a little neglected. As it was, however, they’d been so busy with friends and family that they hadn’t missed their lovestruck dads too much. But, when QiQi finally put her foot down and insisted that they send for her cat without further delay, the fathers had been forced to get fully dressed and venture out of the house like real people.

Right about then the customer service rep who’d been supposedly tracking down the cat, came out from behind a pair of double swinging doors pushing a dolly laden with two largish cardboard boxes and a tenuously balanced pet carrier on top. Qianna squealed happily and rushed over to pull down the carrier before the guy had even stopped. Inside his plastic carrier, you could hear Winston growling in protest at the uncivilized way he was being lugged around. Quinne hoped the poor thing hadn’t been this upset for the entire flight; it would have made for a very long trip for the beast. The cries of her pet were totally freaking Qianna out, though, and she was already trying to get the cage opened.

“QiQi, don’t let him out yet,” Justin warned, trying to pull away from Brian long enough to tow his daughter back from the pet carrier. “If you do, we’ll never get him back in again and it’s a long trip out to Britin.”

“And what if he gets startled and bolts? You don’t want him to get lost here in the airport,” Quinne added logically.

“But he’s so upset . . .”

“Q is right. We do not need to be chasing all over the fucking airport after a squawling furbeast. You can let him out WHEN we get home,” Brian insisted, finally letting go of Justin all the way so he could lift the pet carrier up, out of Qianna’s reach, and take charge of the situation. “Quinne, text your brother; tell Gus to bring the car around and meet us at the curb outside. Justin, you sign whatever paperwork this guy needs so we can get the hell out of here. Then, you two girls grab those boxes and let’s get a move on. This is still technically my honeymoon and I wanna get home so I can get back in bed with my husband already.”

“You do know that you’re eventually going to have to let me out of bed long enough to go back to California, right?” Justin teased him as he handed back the signed shipping receipt to the waiting airline rep. “I still have to deal with the house and my work and . . .”
“You can deal with work from here, Sunshine. That’s what facetime was invented for,” Brian maintained, using his one free hand positioned in the middle of Justin’s back to herd his hubby after the girls and out the door. “And we’ll hire someone to deal with your house. I wasn’t joking about not letting you out of my sight, Justin. That ass is far too tempting and I don’t trust all those fucking actors and producers and art directors . . .”

Brian emphasized his point by goosing the ass in question, causing Justin to jump and spill his coffee all over his hand. Justin grumbled a little as he wiped his hand off on the leg of his jeans. That caused Brian to grumble too, complaining that Justin still didn’t know how to treat his clothing right. The girls, meanwhile, had dropped their boxes on the curb and proceeded to giggle over their ridiculous fathers.

“Remind me again how long you guys have been married?” Quinne spoke up with an amused grin on her elfish face. “It can’t have only been a few days - you two already have the old married couple thing down.”

“We aren’t bickering. That’s just the way Brian expresses affection,” Justin replied facetiously. “Besides, the more clothing I ‘ruin’ the happier he’ll be, since that’ll give him an excuse to go shopping and buy me more stuff. After all, somebody has to feed his compulsive shopping habit, right?” Both girls laughed while Brian started to look just a little chagrined.

“I don’t have a compulsive shopping habit,” Brian countered. “I just appreciate looking nice, is all. It’s not my fault none of you heathens understand the first thing about fashion.”

However, the argument over whether or not Brian’s shopping fetish rose to the level of an addiction was cut short by Gus when the boy pulled Brian’s car up to the curb at the arrivals level and hopped out in order to help load everything. Brian deposited Winston’s carrier in the rear passenger area and then went around to take up his place in the driver’s seat. Justin took the front passenger seat and the girls climbed in the back. Once the last box was loaded and the hatch pulled closed, Gus folded his tall, lanky body in, next to his sisters, and the crew was underway.

“Shit, how much stuff did you guys have shipped? Those boxes are heavy,” Gus complained as he examined the paper cut he’d just got off the edge of one of Justin’s cartons. “Damn! I’ve got a moving injury already. I hope you guys remember this when I ask you to help me move into my dorm. I’ve made the ultimate sacrifice - I’ve spilled my heart’s blood for you - and I expect you to reciprocate.”

“It’s two tiny boxes,” Qianna laughed at her drama princess brother. “And they weren’t THAT heavy, you wuss.”
Quinne immediately backed her sister up. “It could have been a lot worse. They only had the neighbor box up and send the minimal amount of extra clothes, toiletries, and personal stuff. I doubt the stuff in those boxes would keep you for more than a week Gussy.”

“Which is why I shouldn’t have had to carry anything today. I can’t afford to get injured right before my own big move. I’ve got plans, you know.”

“You do realize that all that crap you have in your room will not fit in a dorm that’s roughly the size of your closet, right?” Brian cautioned his son, smiling at him via the rearview mirror.

“Did you miss the part where I said I had a plan?” Gus argued, shooting his father a sassy smirk that was almost an exact copy of Brian’s own.

The discussion of Gus’ dorm plans might have continued the entire length of the trip home if not for the interruption afforded by the ringing of Justin’s phone. He tapped the icon to answer the call, but since his phone was still being used as the compromise music selection for the group, the call was picked up by the car’s speaker system. The voice that answered Justin’s ‘Hello’ sounded quite happy.

“Hey, Justin. Ric Loftgren here. And I’ve got great news for you.”

“Hey, Ric. Great news from a lawyer is a rarity, so I’m all ears. Hit me,” Justin responded.

“We got Alex Ramsey to voluntarily sign off on a Quit Claim Deed relinquishing all rights to the San Jose property,” Ric announced, receiving a roar of delight from all in the Taylor-Kinney car. “It was a smart idea you had, Brian - hiring a private investigator to look into his background and finances - our guy turned up a hell of a lot of shady stuff. If you really had gone through with marrying him, Justin, I suspect it would have been a huge mistake. You definitely do not want to get involved with someone like that. But, luckily for you, it’s also what gave us the leverage we needed to get him out of your life for good.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask what you found,” Justin stated.

“Like I said, this character is NOT a good guy,” Ric went on to explain. “It turns out that he’d used your financial information to apply for at least three credit cards listing you as a co-signer. We got copies of all three applications and it’s pretty clear that he forged your signature. After that it was
easy to get him to cave. All we had to do was promise not to turn him in to the police for the financial fraud and he was more than happy to do whatever we asked. We’ll be filing the Quit Claim Deed as soon as the County Recorder’s office opens tomorrow morning and Alex said he’d be out of the house by 5:00 pm tomorrow night.”

“Excellent news! We’ll call a locksmith and have them ready to change all the locks at 5:01 pm,” Brian promised. “And the fact that a poseur like The Yeti would try bank fraud doesn’t surprise me in the least. It’s too bad you had to agree to let him off the hook in order to get him out of the house, though.”

“Well, about that . . .” The occupants of the car could hear the lawyer chuckling in the background. “I agreed - on your behalf, Justin - that YOU wouldn’t report him to the police, but I don’t have any authority over what the credit card companies do. The minute we contacted them to get copies of the false credit applications, they started their own inquiries. Apparently Ramsey has done this sort of thing before and they aren’t inclined to let yet another case of fraud slide. So, I expect that Alex will be hearing from the police in the not too distant future regardless of whether or not you initiate any charges against him. And I’m assuming I have your authorization to provide the police with whatever documentation they request once they begin their investigation?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Justin readily agreed. “I can’t believe he’d have the balls to do shit like that, but I suppose I shouldn’t be so surprised. Apparently everyone else who’d ever met the guy saw right through him. Including my daughter. I only wish I hadn’t wasted so much time on him. But, yeah, do whatever you need to do, Ric.”

“Will do, Justin. And I’ll email you copies of everything including the full settlement agreement Alex signed. Just let us know if you need anything further,” Mr. Loftgren offered and then promptly signed off.

“Shit! Can you believe that motherfucker?” Justin muttered as soon as he’d ended the call.

“One thing I’ve notice about getting our fathers back together,” Qianna commented to her sister, “is that it’s been really bad for my Dad’s ability to speak without swearing. Sheesh! If you knew how many times he’s called me out for swearing in the past . . . and now look at him. What a potty mouth, Mr. Taylor!”

“That’s how you know you’re really part of the family, QiQi,” Gus added. “If you can’t swear like a sailor, you’ll never fit in.”

“Hey, lay off your dad, Qianna. Personally, I love his mouth just the way it is . . .” Brian reached
out with his right hand and pinched Justin’s side, causing the embarrassed blond to squirm in his seat and his blush to deepen. “And, now that The Yeti has been neutralized, there’s even less call for you to take that wondrous mouth away from me or go back to California.”

“Brian!”

“You know it gets me so hot when you call out my name like that, Sunshine . . . But, since the kids are here, you’re going to have to give me a rain check, at least till we get home again,” Brian teased his husband and laughed when the blushing hit an epic level of crimson on poor Justin’s cheeks. “In the meantime, we need to start making some calls. We need to get the movers scheduled so they can get started on boxing up all your shit. Then we need to get the place listed. The realtor said that you can leave the majority of your furniture in place - it actually helps sell the property if it’s not just vacant rooms - but it’s better to have your personal belongings out of there first. Since we really don’t need the furniture, you can either sell it ‘furnished’ or just have an estate agent come in and remove the furniture, then sell it for you after the property has sold.”

“Movers? Realtor? What the hell are you talking about, Brian? I haven’t had time to even start looking for movers yet, let alone hire a realtor,” Justin complained, looking sideways at his husband with evident confusion.

“I know. Which is why I handled it for you.”

“What? Brian, you can’t go around . . .”

“Keep your pants on, Sunshine . . . for the time being,” Brian cautioned as he grappled to grab hold of his husband’s hand. “I knew you were already a little overwhelmed with the whole situation, so I had Cynthia take care of it for us. She’s already done the research and found the movers with the best reputation in the area, along with a great realtor who’s willing to work with you remotely. It’s all taken care of. So you don’t have to worry about anything and can therefore spend more time with me.”

Justin shook his head and sighed, exasperated by his controlling lover. “And when did YOU find time do all this? I thought I’d been keeping you too busy to meddle in my life without permission.” When Brian didn’t answer except to shrug noncommitally, Justin apparently got suspicious. “Brian? Answer me. When did you arrange for all of this?”

“Uh . . . last week sometime . . .” Brian eventually answered.
“LAST week? As in, the week BEFORE I’d actually agreed to stay?”

“. . . I was being proactive,” Brian hedged.

“No. You were being pushy. You figured you could bowl your way over every objection I might come up with, just like you always do, Brian,” Justin accused, ripping his hand out of his husband’s and crossing his arms over his chest.

“I told you I wasn’t going to let you get away from me again, Justin, and that I’d do whatever it took,” Brian asserted, although he did sound just a bit embarrassed to have been caught out. “Besides, I didn’t actually give them the go ahead until Sunday morning. Before that I had only had Cynthia contact them and collect some quotes. I was just being a good boy scout - ‘Be Prepared’, right?”

“You were never a boy scout, Brian,” Justin replied and you could hear the softening in his tone.

“Maybe not, but I did fuck a few in my day. Doesn’t that count?”

“No.”

“But you love me anyways, right?”

“Maybe. But only if you promise to stop doing shit like this. Married or not, I get to run my own life,” Justin insisted with that totally determined air that everyone who knew him knew not to fight.

“I’ll try,” Brian conceded, grudgingly.

“Good boy,” Justin praised him.

“But, since I’ve already got people in place to handle everything, you have to admit there’s no reason for you to go anywhere. Right?” Brian pushed his point. “The realtor said that she and the movers could do a virtual walkthrough of the place so you can give them directions on what you want shipped, what you want sold, and what you just don’t give a damn about. It’ll be a piece of cake. And you can stay here with me, where you belong, while you do it.”
“Brian, you’re . . .”

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘adorable’. Am I right?”

“They’re like teenagers,” Gus commented to his sisters after listening to the banter going on in the front seat. The girls we cringing right along with Gus. “Seriously, I’ve seen middle school relationships that are more mature. How long does this ‘honeymoon phase’ last, anyway?”

Qianna swatted Gus in the arm. “Stop it! After all the work we went to in order to get them back together, I don’t need you jinxing it by complaining.”

“I’m with QiQi on this, Bro. I say, let them stay all honeymooney forever. Or at least until we get Qianna moved in all the way so it’ll be harder for Justin to take her away again,” Quinne agreed with a sideways hug to her sister’s shoulders.

“I promise, you don’t have anything to worry about on that front, kids. I’ve got it all under control,” Brian assured them, going on to elaborate on all the plans he’d already made with Justin’s movers, house cleaners, and realtor - none of which Justin had been a part of, but which he, in the end, conceded all made sense. “So you see, all YOU need to do, Sunshine, is to contact your job and arrange to work remotely until you finish whatever project you’re currently working on.”

“Oh, you’re going to actually let me do that much on my own?” Justin teased with a huff of laughter that the kids joined in on.

“Not if you’re going to be a twat about it,” Brian shot back.

And while the ‘grown ups’ continued to banter and tease and flirt with each other in the front seat, Gus turned to his phone so he could quietly complain to more sympathetic friends, and the girls started discussing what they had planned for the upcoming school year.

“. . . I’ve already got my schedule for the first term. Hopefully, Pops can talk the Principal into giving you the same schedule. Unless you WANT to take something different, of course . . .”

“No, no. I definitely prefer to take the same classes as you this term. It’s going to be hard enough to
change schools; I don’t want to do it alone. Besides, I’m sure I’ll like the same classes as you. Except, maybe, I’ll trade an art class for your gym period,” Qianna suggested.

Quinne shrugged, willing to concede that one point for her decidedly unathletic sister. “We also need to get you enrolled in both the Engineering and Chemistry clubs. This semester the Engineering Club is volunteering to help the local Girl Scout Council run their Girls’ Robotics program. You’ll love it. We help all these adorable little girls to build their first Lego Robotics’ bots. They’re always so excited; it’s a great feeling.”

“That sounds fantastic. I love the idea of helping more girls follow in our sciencey footsteps,” the world wise twelve-year-old exclaimed.

“I knew you’d be down for it, QiQi. In fact, if you want, I’m sure you could help out tomorrow - the Club is doing a recruiting drive with the Girl Scouts at Comic Con. We’re doing a demonstration using last year’s bots. You do want to come, right?” Quinne asked.

Qianna was just as enthusiastic as her sister about the plan. “Of course! I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Hey! You two didn’t forget that you’re helping me move into my dorm tomorrow, right?” Gus interjected, feeling slightly left out, and a little panicky when he thought about how much stuff he needed help moving.

“Don’t fret, Brother Dear!” Quinne rushed to reassure her sibling. “The Engineering Club thing is happening first thing in the morning. We should be done before noon. And you know you never get up before lunch if you can help it. We’ll be back in plenty of time to help you haul all your crap to PIFA.”

“And then to help the dads haul at least half of it back home again once you realize it will never fit,” Qianna added with a conspiratorial glance at her sister.

“You doubt me at your own risk, infidels. I told you, I have a PLAN! And it’s a good plan too,” Gus maintained unapologetically.

Both the girls laughed.

“Gus, Sweetie, trust us on this; it will NOT all fit. It’s a logistical impossibility,” Qianna tried,
“Sorry, Bro. It’s just a question of physics. I can recite the equations for you, if you like, but the bottom line is that the volume of your possessions exceeds the available space. It’s simple math. And all your artistic hopes and designs aren’t going to change the math, no matter what your plans are,” Quinne tried for the umpteenth time to explain the facts of life to her overly optimistic brother.

Gus grumbled and made a face and refused to believe anyone because they just didn’t understand that it wasn’t about math; it was about interior design and storage options. But they’d already had this argument way too many times so it wasn’t worth rehashing things again. He was still going to try his idea and they’d all just have to wait and see.

“Ugh! You guys just don’t get it,” Gus complained in a way he thought would hopefully cut off the twins’ discussion of his scientific deficiencies. The he turned to his parents in an attempt to rally some support for his side. “You know, if you two really had to go and have twins, you could have at least insisted that one of them was a boy. I mean, shit, how do you expect a guy to ever win an argument with nothing but girls around me all the time. Sisters are so fucking annoying and pushy and . . . Just promise me, if you guys have any other kids, you’ll give me at least one brother. Please! I’m begging you here!”

The girls and Justin all laughed at Gus’ little joke. Brian, though, didn’t laugh. He looked up at Gus via the rearview mirror with a contemplative look on his face. Then, after the laughter had died down, he shrugged to himself and looked sideways towards his new husband.

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” Brian admitted, surprising everyone in the car into immediate silence. “What do say, Sunshine? Wanna give Gus a brother?” His offer garnered zero response. “I mean, the whole point of the surrogate thing was so we could try out this parenting shit together, but then you up and disappeared on me. So we’ve never really done the parenting thing together the way we planned. It could be . . . interesting.”

“You’ve got to be kidding, Brian. Now? When the kids we do have are practically grown already? That’s insane,” Justin argued, looking at his husband as if Brian had lost his mind.

For his efforts, all he got was another shrug. “You always were good with kids, Sunshine. You’re a natural. And you heard him, Gus needs a brother. We can’t let the boy suffer through a lifetime of only sisters, can we?”

“But . . . You . . . I . . .” Justin stuttered through the start of several possible responses he might
offer, only to fall silent in the end, taken completely by surprise to the point that he was absolutely speechless.

“You realize this is only the second time in twenty years I’ve managed to shut you up?” Brian bragged with a proud smirk.

“Over the exact same topic, if I remember correctly.”

“Yep,” Brian affirmed. “So, what do you say, Sunshine? Wanna make ANOTHER baby with me?”

Justin sat there, stunned, in total shock, for a good five minutes before he responded. The kids in the backseat were waiting the whole time with baited breath, afraid to speak and break the mood. Brian was just smiling to himself and waiting more patiently than was characteristic for the usually decisive man. In the end, though, Justin worked his way to an answer that made him smile one of his best sunshine-bright smiles.

“F*** it!” Justin finally spoke, breaking the anticipatory silence. “What the hell. What’s one more crazy decision after a week like this? I’ve already agreed to marry you, move back to Pittsburgh, and uproot my entire life. We might as well top it off with a totally irrational plan to bring another baby into the mix. Why not?”

A cheer broke out from the children in the back seat.

“Good.” Brian nodded and reached one hand out to thread his fingers through Justin’s slim digits, giving a squeeze to communicate his support. “This time, though, I think maybe I should pick out the surrogate . . .”

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The Beginning of More Hyjinx . . .

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Chapter End Notes

2/27/19 - Tttttthhhhhhaaaaatttttt’s AIlllll Ffolks! Another story is done and, as always, it’s a bittersweet feeling. I really loved the Twins I invented for this story. They are an amalgamation of myself and my own daughter and I will miss writing about them. But they’re off to do their STEM thing while their dads do . . . whatever. I hope you enjoyed their journey as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you all for reading. Now, on to the next WIP... TAG

End Notes

9/20/18 - Yeah, I KNOW I already have three WIPs started but I don’t feel like writing any of them right now. I’ve been on this horrible emotional rollercoaster all summer and it’s messing with my creative flow. And I’m just not in the mood right now to write either sexy/porny or angsty. I need to write something, though, because I get a little nuts when I’m not writing, and the only other thing I had left in my repertoire was lighthearted family humor. I promise to return to my other WIPs later, as soon as my mood improves. In the meantime, I’m going to give a try at re-writing the QAF version of The Parent Trap. I know others have already done this one, but I always wanted to try this particular storyline myself. I’ve loved this movie since I was a kid and figured I could do it my way - maybe do it better - who knows? So, please indulge me while I dabble. Enjoy! TAG

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