**We'll Carry On**

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**We'll Carry On**

by shnuffeluv

**Summary**

Five boys. A teen who was kicked from his house because he’s transgender. A boy who doesn’t reveal much of anything about his past, provided he has one at all. Twins who ran away from home. And the smallest of them all, a (mostly) silent kid whose mom vanished.

From five to fifteen, all these boys have one thing in common: they share a father in the form of Emile Picani. When fate brings them together, Emile and his husband Remy will have to figure out how to help these kids who keep dropping at their doorstep.

Slowly, this unlikely group starts to form into a family. But will Emile and Remy let Logan transition? What exactly happened to Roman? Will Patton and Virgil be able to reach out beyond each other for help? And where exactly does Dee fit in?

Title taken from "Welcome to the Black Parade" - My Chemical Romance

**Notes**
Hi, all! I apologize in advance to anyone who's subscribed to me for the following spam of chapters that's going to happen over the course of today. This was my entry for the TS-Storytime Big Bang over on Tumblr, and as such, it needs to all be posted today!

I just want to say before we begin, that I love any and all comments, and you'll never spam me, even if you want to comment on every chapter. I'd be thrilled if that were the case! Individual chapters may have trigger warnings on them in case of small instances of a trigger that I didn't feel warranted a tag may appear. If I miss one, forgive me, this was a lot of chapters to sift through.

One final note, and then I'll let you read: a majority of this was written before Dealing With INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS came out, so you'll see that the writing reflects that at times. Hopefully, you won't hold it against me that Remus isn't a major player in this story. That's all I wanted to say, happy reading!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

We'll Carry On
November 1st, 2017

“This will be your new home, Roman,” the man from Child Services said with a too-bright smile. Roman looked around. The walls weren’t rotting away, and the ceiling wasn’t falling apart, but something felt off about the place, like he wasn’t welcome. “Any last questions before you get settled in?”

Roman mutely shook his head. He was eleven years old, he knew when he needed to shut up, and he definitely needed to right now.

The man clapped him on the back and left, and Roman turned to the man and woman who he only knew as Mister and Misses Wright. Misses Wright’s smile dropped the second the man left. She directed him to the kitchen and shoved a mop in his hand. “You start cleaning,” she directed. “You can get unpacked when you’re done with your chores.”

December 20th, 2018

Roman shivered in the cold rain that had settled in to stay for a while. For hours, he had been searching for someone who could give him directions to the home he was looking for, someone who wouldn’t call the cops on an unattended child. The last thing he wanted was for his biological father to be in trouble for not supervising a kid he didn’t even know he had.

The sky was gloomy as Roman looked up, staring at the numbers hanging above the awning in front of the house. He looked back at the paper in his hand. Yes, this was the place. But what was he supposed to say? “Excuse me, Mister, you don’t know me but I’m your son and I could use a place to stay”? He didn’t want to impose.

And yet, here he was. Desperate enough to ask a stranger for help. At the very least, it had to beat the storm drain he had been sleeping in last night. He was fairly certain if he had to do that again he’d get rabies from a raccoon, or maybe a fox. And who knew how many rats lived in those things?

He had been staring at the house for too long. He turned away quickly, fully intending to leave. It was unlikely someone was home, anyway. It was the middle of the day, and though Roman couldn’t remember what day of the week it was, he knew it was more likely to be a weekday than a weekend. As he was walking away, though, he heard a door open and a man call out, “Excuse me?”

Heart soaring with hope, Roman turned around to find a man wearing thick-rimmed black glasses and a sweater vest run out of the house and to the fence. “Young man, are you lost? I couldn’t help but notice you were wandering around earlier. I might be able to help you.”

Roman cleared his throat and walked back over to the man, standing at the edge of his small yard. The townhouse behind the man was small, but looked inviting enough. This wasn’t a bad place for his father to live, provided this man even was his father. “Are you Mister Picani?” he asked, his voice trembling, betraying his worry.

The man blinked and adjusted his glasses. “Uh...yes. Who are you?”

Now or never, Roman supposed. “Uh...my name is Roman Jackson. I don’t know how to say this, but...uh...I think you’re my father.”
Mister Picani stood there in shock for a second, before pushing his glasses up his nose and frowning. “Where is your mother, then?”

Roman looked down at the ground and scuffed his shoe, trying to form the words that refused to leave his throat. His eyes stung, and he couldn’t get the proper explanation to come forward, so he forced out the next best thing. “She, uh...she abandoned me, sir. Couldn’t take care of me any more.”

“Oh, dear,” the man muttered. “Well, no use standing out here in the wind and rain. Why don’t you come inside? We can talk more over a cup of hot chocolate.”

Roman felt his hammering heart settle just a fraction. “Thank you, sir.”

“No need to call me sir, Roman. You’re free to call me Mister Picani, or Emile,” Mister Picani said, walking back towards the house.

Roman followed after him, walking in and looking around. The house was small, but filled with warm light. The walls were littered with cartoon posters and photographs. One of them which was hanging in the doorway, was of two men, both in tuxes, standing in front of who Roman assumed was a Justice of the Peace. “You’re married?” he asked, pointing to the photo.

“Yes, that’s my husband Remy,” Mister Picani said with a fond smile. “He’s the entrepreneur of his own coffee shop in the middle of town. Have you heard of Sleep Easy?”

Roman shook his head. “No, sir.”

“It’s a play on the term speakeasy. The joke is that his coffee is so good, it should be illegal. Not to mention he’s big on irony.” Mister Picani shook his head. “I love that man, and I’m so proud that he followed his dream and started his own coffee shop.”

Roman nodded as Mister Picani looked over to him. Inside, though, he felt guilt eat at him. This man had a whole entire life without him interfering. He didn’t want to cause trouble, but it seemed like that was exactly what he was doing.

The two walked into the modest but inviting kitchen and Mister Picani gestured for Roman to sit at the island in the middle. He brought out milk for the hot chocolate and asked, “Do you mind if I microwave it? I want to warm you up faster, though if you want me to bring the milk to the right temperature in a saucepan I can do that too.”

Roman shrugged. “You can do whatever you want, Mister Picani, I’m not picky.”

Mister Picani smiled softly and said, “I know you may not want to inconvenience me, but I really don’t mind putting in the extra effort if you would prefer it that way.”

Roman fiddled with his hands, feeling his heart ache at the reminder of what his mother used to do for him, back when she was around to care for him. She would take extra steps to ensure that he got what he wanted, too. “The microwave works, Mister Picani.”

He nodded and put the milk in a mug, and then proceeded to microwave it. “We’ll see if Remy ever forgives me for this,” he laughed. “He’s very particular about making many different drinks, and hot chocolate is one of them.”

Roman shifted on his chair, saying nothing. He didn’t know what to say. His heart kept thudding, and he kept waiting to hear that Mister Picani was going to call the police, or Child Services, or otherwise cart him off to someone else, who would inevitably send him back...back there. The place he swore he would never go back to.
“So, tell me a little about yourself, Roman,” Mister Picani said, pouring in hot chocolate mix to the milk and stirring it with a spoon.

Roman took the hot chocolate gratefully and let his fingers warm up from the mug. “Well...I’m twelve years old,” he said hesitantly. “I...I went to school for a while, until the sixth grade. Then...then everything kinda fell apart.”

Mister Picani winced. “You’re about the age to be in seventh grade. Did your mother not enroll you?”

Roman swallowed. “No. She...she wasn’t around to. I had to spend all my time...I don’t like to think about it.”

“You had to spend it getting by?” Mister Picani asked. “Making sure you got food, water, shelter?”

Roman nodded. That was close enough to the truth. No one ever bothered to put him in school. After all, someone had to take care of the younger kids. Considering that the people who were specifically assigned to do that were either too drunk or too angry to do anything useful. “But...but I remember a lot of what I did learn before, and I’m hoping to get back into school again sometime soon. Uh...my favorite color is red, if that’s important at all, and I really love fairy tales. Princes and princesses and castles and dragons. I know I might be a little old for that, but...”

“No such thing as too old,” Mister Picani said with a smile. “All those cartoon posters and paraphernalia you saw are mine. I wasn’t even aware I have a child or children until today.”

Roman relaxed a little bit at that. Before he was always mocked for liking fairy tales, but at least Mister Picani didn’t judge. “Cool.”

“Indeed,” Mister Picani said, grabbing another mug. “I hope we have another hot chocolate packet around here...”

The front door opened and a booming voice called, “Emile! Honey, you are not going to believe what Miss Fleming said today...” he trailed off as he caught sight of Roman.

Mister Picani looked like a deer in headlights for a quick second before recovering. “Remy, this is Roman. He’s...uh...well, he’s my son.”

Remy stood there for a moment, and Roman felt like he was being sized up. Then, he broke out in a wide grin. “I told you so, Emile! I told you that you’d be a catch for any lady at the sperm bank! Small wonder someone used it!” He held out his hand for Roman to shake. “Remy Picani. Husband of the dork over there. You can call me Remy.”

“Roman Jackson,” Roman said, shaking Remy’s hand.

Remy turned to Mister Picani-or, they were both Mister Picani, so...Emile?-and laughed. “Emile, please tell me you were not microwaving milk for hot chocolate again!”

“Well...the kid looked cold, and I wanted to warm him up fast, so...” Emile shrugged.

“All right, all right. I’ll give you a pass just this once,” Remy said with a grin. “So, uh...where’s the kid’s mom? Bathroom, or something?”

Roman felt a sharp pang in his chest and his breath caught. “His mom’s no longer in the picture, Remy,” Emile said. “I’m honestly not quite sure what to do.”
Remy hummed. “Well, that is a predicament. How about you two get situated in the living room and talk for a bit, watch cartoons, whatever. Emile, I’ll make sure that you get your hot chocolate, and I’ll make some calls. I’m pretty sure Sarah McGee’s a social worker who could lend us a hand figuring out what to do.”

Roman felt an icicle of fear stab him right in the chest. He didn’t get away from there just to be sent back! “You’re...what are you going to do?” he asked, his voice once again taking on that soft, trembling tone.

“Kid, if you’re okay with it, and Emile’s okay with it, we’ll be taking you in, at least for a little while. Until we can figure out what exactly is going on,” Remy said. “Because I don’t care why your mother is no longer around. Everyone deserves a home.”

Roman’s eyes grew hot and he smiled. “You really mean that?”

“Remy doesn’t say anything he doesn’t mean,” Emile said simply. “Come on, let’s go to the living room. We can see if there’s anything on TV you might want to watch.”

Roman nodded and followed Emile into the living room, getting settled on the couch with his hot chocolate. He curled up on it and took a long sip of the liquid, letting it warm him to the core.

“You know, you’re very lucky the weather is somewhat warmer outside than usual,” Emile said. “So close to Christmas, usually it’s dipping somewhere into the twenties, not in the low forties.”

“Cold is cold is cold,” Roman said, taking another sip. “I appreciate the hot chocolate.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Emile said with a smile, turning on the TV. “I have a couple cartoons saved on the DVR. Do you mind cartoons?”

“No, cartoons are great,” Roman said, taking another long sip of his hot chocolate.

Emile nodded with a smile, and pulled up Avatar: The Last Airbender to play, from the first episode. Roman was soon caught up in the show, finishing his hot chocolate quickly. He barely noticed when Emile patted his knee and got up. When the first episode ended, he put on another, figuring that Emile wouldn’t mind. By the end of the third episode, however, his fatigue was catching up to him, and he began drifting to sleep to the sound of the ending credits.

He fell into a dreamless sleep, hoping against hope that when he woke up again, that this wasn’t just some crazy dream he had thought up somewhere along the way that he had escaped.
Chapter 2

August 8th, 2001

Emile took a deep breath. He knew he wanted to do this. He had wanted to help people who couldn’t have kids on their own for years, and now he had finally gotten the chance. Not in the exact way that he had expected, but here he was, at a sperm bank, trying to calm down enough to get things done.

A look around showed so many posters of happy families. He needed to focus on that. Not the magazines that offered a little “help,” not the movies and the TV that were there for the same purpose. He didn’t need that, he could do this on his own. Even his boyfriend Remy agreed that he should do this, because if he wanted to help families, he should do it.

He took a steadying breath and sat down. He could do this. He could do this. He was going to do it. Nodding once, he made sure the door was locked, and undid his belt buckle. Quick and easy. And he would never have to worry about this after the fact.

December 20th, 2018

Emile was doing research in the kitchen as Remy talked with Sarah, one of his regulars at Sleep Easy. They were both trying to figure out what they had to do to become foster parents for Roman. Emile had explained that he thought Roman was lying about whatever happened with his mother, and Remy had said that no matter what the case, they couldn’t let the kid sleep on the streets. But the process of becoming foster parents was highly daunting, not to mention that it would take time. Time that Roman clearly didn’t have.

“Do you think that he could really do that?” Remy asked. “I mean, yeah...he definitely is. The kid has his eyes and nose and really, looks a lot like him at that age minus the hair, but do you think that would work? Just a paternity test?”

Emile glanced up. What was Remy talking about?

“You’re a gem, Sarah! Thank you so much! Yeah, I’ll see if we can get the kid to see you, that might be able to help. Someone who can explain what’s going on,” Remy said. “Next three coffees are half-off, you hear me? I owe you big time!”

Remy hung up and Emile looked at him closely. “What’s going on?”

“I have a solution for our little predicament,” Remy said, holding up a finger when Emile started to speak. “But you’d better be ready to commit, Emile, because this is not a temporary fix, this is permanent.”

“What is it?” Emile asked.

“If you can prove that you’re Roman’s biological father in court, they’ll grant you guardianship without having to foster first. Of course, this means that Roman has to agree to live with us, and that we have to get this place suitable for a kid,” Remy explained. He grinned. “But it can be done.”

Emile rounded the island and gave Remy a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Have I ever said that
I love you? Because I love you.”

Remy chuckled and batted Emile away. “Go! Go make sure your son is all right. We can all talk together about this in a little bit. But you should be the one to talk to him about it first. After all, you’re the kid’s father.”

“If he accepts and we adopt him, you know you’ll be a dad too, right?” Emile teased.

“Well, duh, but I’ll be the cool dad,” Remy said with a dazzling grin. “Not a rule in sight.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Emile laughed, walking out of the room and heading back to the living room, where Roman was still asleep.

The boy was curled in on himself, and was frowning ever so slightly, like he was trying to figure out a difficult math problem. His chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm and Emile gently shook his shoulder, careful to not be too rough. Roman blinked awake, looking down in confusion, picking up the blanket that Emile had put on him between two fingers, feeling it. Then, his eyes snapped to Emile, and the boy nearly jumped like he had been shocked. “I’m so sorry I fell asleep on your couch, Mister Picani, it was an accident!”

“Hey, Roman, it’s okay,” Emile soothed. “Remy and I have been talking, and doing some research, and we know a way that you can stay with us. But you’d have to agree to it as well; we don’t want to force you into anything.”

Roman looked terrified, and Emile sat on the coffee table. “We looked into becoming foster parents for you, but that would take a lot of time that we don’t have, considering that you’re already here. However, one of Remy’s customers has informed us that if we can prove you’re my biological son, I can claim guardianship in court.”

The puzzle pieces were coming together behind Roman’s eyes, and they widened as he realized what that would mean. “But that means...”

“Remy and I would be adopting you, Roman, yes,” Emile said. “If you’re willing, then we would love to adopt you.”

“You...you don’t even know me,” Roman said, voice raspy.

“Do we have to? You’re my son, Roman. Just because I didn’t know your mother, doesn’t mean I can’t get to know you now. It would be an honor to take care of you,” Emile said sincerely.

Roman started to cry, smile wide. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you, so so much.”

Emile just smiled. “So...that’s a yes?”

“Yes,” Roman agreed. “It’s definitely a yes!”

Emile grinned. “Great! Now, you, Remy, and myself will have a lot to talk about, rules, chores, school, all of that. But we can take everything one step at a time. I think the first thing we should do is get you a place to sleep in the house.”

“Okay,” Roman said. “Do you have...a guest bedroom?”

“As a matter of fact, we do,” Emile said with a smile and a tweak of his glasses. “Let’s get you set up there. Do you have any other clothes? Personal effects?”
“Not really,” Roman said, smile falling just a fraction. “I have legal documents and stuff under my jacket.” He hadn’t had the forethought to pack a bag with spare clothes when he left. But there was nothing else back there that he could really call “personal effects.”

“No matter. It may be close to Christmas, but we can get you clothes really quick today, and once it’s Monday, we can get a paternity test to legally adopt you,” Emile explained. “I say we should take two days to set up the basics with no fuss, sound good?”

Roman nodded eagerly. “You’re so kind, thank you so much,” he said, eyes shining.

“Hey, it’s no problem,” Emile said. “I’m more than happy to help you, okay?”

“Okay,” Roman said.

Emile nodded and clapped his hands once. “Should I show you upstairs to your new room?”

Roman gratefully smiled. “That would be amazing, thank you.”

“No need to keep thanking me, but you’re welcome anyway,” Emile said. “Come on, it’s just up the stairs.”

Roman followed him up the stairs to the second floor of the townhouse. “So you see, there’s the master bedroom, where Remy and I sleep. Next to that is my personal office, and occasionally Remy’s office too, if it’s around the time of year for taxes. Across the hall, we have the bathroom, and two slightly smaller guest rooms. You can take your pick of the two.”

“Okay...” Roman said, looking between the two. Eventually, he walked into the one that was across the hall from the master bedroom. “I’ll take this one, if that’s all right,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Emile said. “Are you still tired? You can nap there if you need before we get clothes shopping.”

“No, I think I’m okay,” Roman said with a smile. “Thank you though.”

Emile nodded. “Right, then. We should probably grab Remy and then find some clothes for you to wear. Remy knows a fair amount of stuff about clothing, despite only wearing maybe three shirts, and the same pair of jeans and leather jacket every day.” Roman laughed and Emile smiled. “So he’ll be able to help both of us a lot.”

Roman nodded, left the folder containing what Emile assumed was his legal documents on the bed, and Emile let himself be led back down the stairs by Roman. Emile went to the kitchen and said, “Hey, Remy. Roman’s in need of some clothes. Care to help us find stuff?”

“Yeah!” Remy said, standing up and heading to the door. He shoved his fading purple hair out of his face with a grin. “This will be fun!”

Roman followed Remy out and Emile was the last one out the door, locking the house behind them. Roman was sitting in the back seat of the sedan and Remy was starting the car by the time Emile climbed into shotgun. “You never wait, do you?” Emile asked with a fond smile.

“Not particularly,” Remy said, pulling out of the driveway and getting on the road, turning on the radio.

Roman seemed to visibly relax in the backseat as the music began to play. “What kind of music do you listen to, Roman?” Emile asked.
“Oh, uh...mostly movie soundtracks and musicals,” Roman said with a blush.

“You’re probably gonna be a theatre kid come high school,” Emile said good-naturedly. “Theatre is a blast, though, I’m sure you’d love every second being on the stage.”

“That’d be really cool, yeah,” Roman said shyly.

“Do you have a favorite musical?” Remy asked.

Roman hummed in thought. “I mean, I haven’t given it much thought, but...probably Footloose. Just because I think it’s weird that dancing could ever be illegal. Dancing is lots of fun! Why would you ever want to ban it?”

Remy smiled. “I don’t know. Lots of people do strange things that don’t make sense, though. Like saying guys can’t like other guys, or that being proud and self-confident is bragging.”

Roman nodded, and Emile hummed. “Just know that we’re not like that, Roman. You can be whoever you want to be around us,” he said.

“And I don’t know about you, but I always want to be myself,” Remy said cheerfully.

“If only it were that easy,” Roman muttered to himself.

Emile and Remy shared a concerned look but continued talking like nothing had happened. The music continued to fill the car when silences lapsed too long, and Roman looked around outside the car. Emile suspected that he didn’t live in this city. If he had, he would have known where they were going. He would be bored, not looking around in wonder. And he probably would have heard of Sleep Easy, because virtually every adult within a ten mile radius of it had tried the shop at least once.

But he didn’t want to spook Roman, so they simply continued to drive, Emile idly chatting with Remy, and Roman occasionally throwing in his two cents, when he wasn’t busy looking outside.

Emile did worry, though. He thought that parents were screened before they had the procedure to inseminate, but had he been mistaken? And what were the odds of this kid finding him? He was beyond worried for Roman, and he was angry at Roman’s mother, whoever she was, for allowing this to happen.

Remy squeezed Emile’s hand and gave him a smile. “Breathe, babe. It’ll all be okay,” he said with confidence.

Emile took a breath and nodded, giving Remy a thin smile. He was still worried, and still angry, but he couldn’t show that in front of Roman. The kid was already scared to death of doing the wrong thing, he didn't want to think about what might happen if Emile got angry in front of him.

They pulled into the parking lot of the local mall and Roman looked out the window into the large parking lot. “This is pretty big,” he said, voice carefully neutral.

“It is,” Emile said. “But hopefully no one will need to hold hands to make sure we stick together, right?”

Remy laughed. “Yeah, that won’t be a problem.”

“I don’t know, I’ve lost you in the crowd before,” Emile teased. “Remember that time when we went to the museum? You practically shrieked false information about cartoons for me to come over and
correct you.”

Roman snickered from the backseat and Remy blushed. “Oh, hush. Let’s just get those clothes, shall we?”

They all got out of the car and began the trek through the parking lot into the mall. Roman was shivering and Emile noticed that the jacket Roman was wearing was pretty thin. “I think we should look at jackets first, don’t you, Rem?” Emile asked.


“That’s gonna be...a lot of money,” Roman said hesitantly.

“No more than buying stuff for back-to-school for younger kids,” Emile shrugged off.

“Okay, then,” Roman said, voice still soft, but smiling all the same.
Chapter 3

December 2nd, 2017

Roman stood at attention as the woman opened the door to his room. With her was a young boy, who couldn’t be more than six years old. “This will be your room,” she said dismissively. “The boy in here is Roman. I’m sure he’ll be willing to give you his bed.”

The boy looked around with a frown on his face after the woman left. Then he focused on Roman and scowled. “I don’t wanna share my room,” he said simply.

“I didn’t know that you would be coming, or else I might have seen if I could have made stuff for a second bed,” Roman said apologetically. “As it is, you can have mine until we figure out how to get an extra blanket in here...”

“I don’t wanna share my room,” the boy repeated. “Get out of my room.”

“I can’t, yet,” Roman said. “I need to finish my work, and I need somewhere to sleep...”

The boy shrieked and Roman stiffened. Someone was going to be in trouble for causing a ruckus, and as much as he didn’t want the boy to be in trouble, he didn’t want to be the recipient of the woman’s ire either.

“Roman?! What did you do now?!“

December 21st, 2018

Roman was shaken free from his thoughts by a knock at his new bedroom door. “Hey, Roman, whenever you’re up, Emile was hoping we could have a talk just the two of us,” Mister Remy’s voice said through the wood.

“All right,” Roman said. He walked to the door and opened it up. He was still in a pair of pajamas, but seeing as they weren’t going to meet with the school board until at least the second about getting Roman into classes, and they weren’t planning on going anywhere, Roman didn’t see much of a reason to change. “What do we need to talk about?”

“House rules,” Remy said, taking a step back. “Come to the kitchen, I’ll make us both some lunch.”

Roman nodded and followed Mister Remy out. He wasn’t sure why he didn’t see the talk about rules coming. After all, the places he had been before all had rules. He just hoped that these rules were actually reasonable.

Once they were seated in the kitchen, Mister Remy sighed. “Now, I don’t know how many rules there were where you came from, but I figure we can start with basic rules, like a curfew, when you should work on your homework, that sort of thing, and work our way inwards as needed. Sound good?”

Roman wasn’t quite sure he understood what “working inwards” was, but he figured Mister Remy would probably do some explaining as they talked more, so he simply nodded.
“All right. First things first: curfews,” Mister Remy said.

Roman, again, only nodded. He figured it would be something early, but hopefully not too early. He could only get so much done when he had to be in his room, asleep, by nine.

“Emile and I talked, and we figured that eleven o’clock should be the final cut-off. That’s when, unless you’re up sick with something, we want the light in your room off and you attempting to sleep. You can get ready for bed as soon as it’s eight thirty, but we don’t want you going to bed too early. Ideally, getting ready for bed around ten and being in bed by eleven should work, if you’re a night owl,” Mister Remy explained.

Roman blinked. That was not what he had expected. At all. “You’d let me stay up that late?”

“Well, Emile seemed to think it was fine,” Mister Remy said. “I probably would have made you go to bed at ten or ten-thirty rather than eleven, but he seems confident that giving you that flexibility means you won’t try and stay up later, because if you need to stay up for whatever reason, you can.”

Roman had to keep himself from gaping. “That...that works. Definitely. Yeah,” he agreed.

“Okay. Now, about homework,” Remy said. “When you go to school, homework will be your responsibility. We won’t insist you do it as soon as you get home, and you won’t have to do that before we give you food, or before you can relax, or watch TV. However, you have to have it done before the morning it’s due. And we won’t let you stay up later because you have homework. If any homework in any subject takes more than an hour for you, then come to us and we can work out a plan together for how to tackle it. If you have any difficulties with homework, you can come to us, whether it’s an issue with budgeting time or you don’t understand a concept. Emile and I will help to the best of our abilities.”

Roman got a pang of sadness in his chest when he remembered how his mom would help him with homework before...before he was alone. But he pushed it down and nodded to show Remy he was listening. “That will help a lot, thank you,” he said gratefully.

Mister Remy shrugged off his thanks. "It's really not a big deal, Roman. Both Emile and I know what it's like to struggle with different aspects of school. We don't want you to be left struggling for whatever reason simply because you're afraid of asking for help. There are much more serious reasons for struggling, and you shouldn't be held back just because you need a little support."

Roman grinned slightly, letting just a little bit of his happiness at this shine through. "Is there anything else?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah. Food and drink stuff, mostly," Mister Remy said. Roman's stomach sank, until Mister Remy spoke again. "You're welcome to eat whatever you want in the house, so long as you can prepare it safely. So if you know how to cook ramen, help yourself. If you're unfamiliar with skinning a potato, wait for someone to teach you. All we ask is that if we're running low on a certain food, you let us know, so we don't reach for something that isn't there."

Roman was unable to hide his shock at that. "Seriously?" he asked. "You don't mind if I need a snack in the afternoon?"

"You're twelve, Roman. You're still growing. If you need more food than whatever you get for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, we won't be offended if you ask for a snack. That's better than going hungry," Mister Remy said, leaning forward. "Didn't your guardians before tell you to not worry about food?"
Roman turned crimson and looked away. "Uh, not...not really," he managed. "Money was kind of tight...and we had to ration out what we would spend it on, so I couldn’t always just eat when I was hungry.”

Mister Remy looked concerned. Roman bit his tongue, trying to avoid the urge to spill his guts. What had happened to him since his mom. The foster homes he had been moved through. How the one he had run away from always seemed to have money for beer, but never for a second bed in any given room. How they took in small children, but relied on the older kids to watch the toddlers. How he couldn’t go to school because he was too busy making sure the house was pristine.

But he couldn’t say any of that. If Mister Emile and Mister Remy found out about that, they’d tell the foster system, and he might be sent back, or worse, those kids might be scattered to other homes. Other homes that might be abusive, not just neglectful. He couldn’t let that happen to any of them, not even the boy who hated Roman’s guts for sharing a room with him, or the girl who always pulled on Roman’s hair whenever he picked her up and moved her away from danger. No. That had to be a secret he carried to his grave.

“Well, rest assured, Roman, we have the money for food, okay?” Mister Remy said. “If you need to eat, you need to eat. We won’t stop you.”

Roman nodded and tried not to show how emotional he was getting at that small gesture. He knew that most people would consider that the right thing to do, and most kids wouldn’t be fazed by being able to eat whatever they wanted. But he was shaken to his core over this. This was something he never thought he’d be able to have again, and two strangers were just...giving him a home that he felt welcome in. It was a stroke of luck he honestly wasn’t expecting to find. Finding his dad in the first place seemed like a pipe dream. And yet. He was here.

“You okay, Roman?” Mister Remy asked.

Roman cleared his throat and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m okay,” he managed to say. “All of this is a little overwhelming.”

“Maybe we should save the rest of the rules for later, then,” Mister Remy said softly. “After all, any other rules we put in place would need your input.”

“You would...want my input?” Roman asked.

“Yeah,” Mister Remy said. “These rules affect you, after all. Those ones were just general guidelines. Anything else that we need to go over will be specifically for you and your needs.”

Roman tried to absorb that, but he was so used to being...used that he couldn’t figure out how someone wouldn’t want something from him in return.

“Yeah, I think we need a break from the rules talk,” Mister Remy said with a laugh. “Do you like football?”

“Uh...yeah, sometimes,” Roman said. “I’m not the best at playing, but I’m always willing to watch a game or two.”

“Cool. Emile doesn’t always enjoy watching a game with me, but I have a couple saved on the DVR, if you want to watch it for a bit?” Mister Remy offered.

“Sure,” Roman said easily, moving to the living room with Mister Remy.

They got settled on the couch and Mister Remy worked with the remote until the game was on the
screen. Roman burrowed into the couch and let his mind wander. Running away hadn’t been his first choice, but it was looking like the right one. He was getting adopted. By people who respected his needs and were more considerate than anyone else he had met for a long time.

What really blew him away, though, was the fact that the people taking him in had known him all of two days. Obviously, they trusted him for some reason, but he couldn’t figure out why. He was very fortunate, whatever that reason was, but the reason itself was just something that he couldn’t figure out.

Mister Remy looked over at him. “You good, Roman?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Roman said. “I’m just thinking, I guess.”

“What are you thinking about?” Mister Remy asked.

“Well...you and Mister Emile...you guys just took me in, for no other reason than I showed up with nothing to my name and asked for help,” Roman said with a shrug. “I don’t know, that just sort of...shocks me, I guess?”

“Yes, I suppose that could shock anyone who isn’t familiar with myself and Emile,” Mister Remy said with a chuckle. “But Emile has always been a kind soul at heart. He would never hurt anyone intentionally if he could help it. And I...well, I admire his spirit. I like the way he wants to help others, and I work to be as accepting and helpful as he is. He would have taken you in whether or not you’re his biological son, because you needed help. You needed to get out of a bad situation, and if he could help you with that, he wouldn’t understand why anyone in his position would refuse to help you.”

“Because they don’t know me?” Roman said. “I could just be someone trying to rob you blind, or someone here to try and trick you for whatever reason. Get free food, a place to stay, whatever.”

“But in any of those cases, you would need whatever you stole, or whatever you ate, or wherever you stayed,” Mister Remy countered. “Even if you stole something for the money, you would need that money for something. Most kids don’t rob people just because they’re bored. You understand what I’m getting at?”

“I guess,” Roman said skeptically. “But that still doesn’t explain why the both of you would take me in.”

Mister Remy smiled and shrugged. “Well, I guess it just might be one of life’s greatest mysteries,” he said, wiggling his fingers and making ghost noises.

Roman laughed. “You’re funny,” he said. “I may not understand why you and Mister Emile are so willing to help me, but I’m very happy that both of you are, regardless of your intentions behind it.”

“Thank you, I think,” Mister Remy said with a laugh. “Now, I assume you know how football works?”

“The basics,” Roman agreed. “I would sometimes see it when I was cleaning around the house and my foster parents would watch it.”

“You were in foster care?” Mister Remy asked.

Roman nodded. “For a bit, after my mom left,” he said carefully. “But they didn’t exactly...help me.”

Mister Remy frowned and Roman prayed that he wouldn't pry further. “All right,” Mister Remy
dismissed. “If you want, we can talk about this later.”

Roman knew that couldn’t ever happen, much as he wanted it to.
Chapter 4

September 13th, 2000

Remy looked around the campus he was on with a sigh. He really didn’t know why he was doing this. College just seemed like one of those things you did just because; it wasn’t like he was going to get a job just because he had a degree. But here he was, at his parents’ insistence.

He was sipping his coffee on a park bench, watching the leaves on the trees. He had some time before his next class, and it wasn’t like he had anything better to do. “Pretty, isn’t it?” a man asked from behind him.

Turning, Remy found a man with a curly mop of red hair and bright green eyes. “Yeah, I suppose,” he said, looking back at the leaves.

The man sat down next to him with a smile. “My name’s Emile,” he said.

Remy offered his hand. “Remy.”

“Nice to meet you, Remy,” Emile said. “Mind me asking why you look so down in the dumps?”

January 10th, 2019

It was Remy’s turn to stay home and look after Roman, which he figured was a fancy way of Emile telling him he couldn’t skip out on his clients again. Getting Roman into the local school system was proving to be difficult experience, and in the meantime Roman was staying home, just getting accustomed to his new house.

Emile and Remy had gotten the paternity test sent out, now they were waiting for the results. But just in case, they were also applying to be foster parents, because there were some “what if’s” that left Emile insisting that they couldn’t risk Roman being taken away and sent back to wherever he had been. Remy had agreed, much to Emile’s visible relief.

But now, he and Roman were sitting in the living room, Roman reading a book while Remy worked on his laptop, making sure all his t’s were crossed and i’s were dotted. All they needed was the home inspections and interviews and they would be allowed to foster, just in case Roman wasn’t actually Emile’s.

The home phone rang and Remy sighed, getting up to answer it. “Picani residence,” he sang into the receiver.

“Remy, it’s Sarah,” the woman on the other end of the line said. “Listen, are you still applying for being foster parents?”

“Uh, yeah,” Remy said, feeling Roman’s eyes on him. “Why?”

“I may have a child who needs to be placed, and she... he says that he isn’t his dad’s biological kid. I ran the sperm donor’s name past some people, and I just got the results back from official channel’s. The donor is Emile.”
Remy was stunned. “There’s another little Picani running around?”

“Technically his last name is Gaines, but yes,” Sarah said. “Listen, he’s a bit of a special case. His parents kicked him out for being transgender. We’re trying to get him placed soon so he doesn’t have to keep sleeping in his best friend’s house, but if you guys have room, and don’t mind...I could speed up the process of getting you guys accepted and get him in your home.”

“Yeah, I say do it,” Remy said. “I’ll have to talk to Emile, of course, but I doubt he’ll say no.”

“Thank you,” Sarah breathed. “We’ve been trying to place him for three and a half months. No one wants a transgender teen and he refuses to be put back in the closet just to have a home to rest in when he’s sleeping under the roof of people who respect him.”

“We’ll respect him here,” Remy said. “Without a doubt. I’ll let Emile know ASAP, and I’ll talk to Roman about it too, because this does concern him.”

“I swear, Remy, you and Emile are godsend,” Sarah laughed. “And I don’t just mean because you give me my coffee fix.”

Remy laughed. “It’s not a problem, Sarah. Is that everything for now?”

“Yup, that’s all I wanted to say,” Sarah confirmed. “Thank you again. See you in the shop.”

“You got it,” Remy said, hanging up.

“Who was that?” Roman asked.

“My friend Sarah, who’s helping us adopt you,” Remy said. “Apparently, there’s another kid out there who could use a roof over his head, and Sarah was asking if we could help out. As long as you’re okay with it, and Emile’s okay with it, you’ll be having a brother.”

“A brother?” Roman asked, disbelief in his tone. “I’ve never had a brother before.”

Remy shrugged. “Well, this could be your chance. And from the sound of it, he’s old enough that he won’t need much looking after, so Emile’s and my attention won’t be split between you and him as much.”

“You wouldn’t...have me take care of him, right?” Roman asked, posture becoming guarded. “If he was that young and needed taking care of?”

“Not unless you volunteered it,” Remy said easily. “I don’t believe in making older kids raise their younger siblings. If you wanted to help here and there, it’d be fine. But Emile and I would never force you to do that.”

“Good,” Roman said, relaxing and returning to his book.

Remy made a mental note of that reaction. Wherever Roman had come from, it was clear he had been forced to work for someone. If not with child-rearing, then other household chores that weren’t suited for a child his age. He didn’t like the thought of what that meant. He knew Emile didn’t want him pushing Roman about his past, but Remy was worried in his own way. “Any specific reason you were worried about that?”

Roman looked up again and briefly looked like a deer caught in headlights, before he flushed. “It’s just...uh...I read a lot about stuff like that in fairy tales. And I know that sometimes my friends would have to do stuff like that too, even if they didn’t want to. That’s just kinda...how I thought siblings
were, for the most part.”

Remy knew that was a lie, and no doubt Roman knew Remy’s thoughts on the matter. “Remember, Roman, Emile and I won’t be mad at you no matter if you did something wrong or not, if you tell the truth.”

Roman flinched minutely and nodded. “I know,” he said softly. “But this...this isn’t something I want to talk about, okay?”

Remy inwardly sighed. The kid had been through so much, he shouldn’t have to deal with this on his own. But, he supposed, they’d have to make sure that Roman knew he could ask for help processing whatever he needed to process, no matter how far along he was with it. “Okay. But if you ever do want, or need, to talk about it, Emile and I are here. Understand?”

Roman nodded. “Yes, sir. And...I can’t thank you enough for being here for me.”

“Believe me, Roman, when I say it’s our pleasure. Both mine and Emile’s,” Remy said with a smile.

Roman grinned briefly before switching the topic of conversation. “So this new kid. Do you know anything about him?”

“Not much,” Remy admitted. “Just that he’s transgender.”

Roman cocked his head to the side and Remy realized he had to do some explaining sooner rather than later, to avoid Roman traumatizing the new kid accidentally. “What’s transgender mean?” he asked.

“It means that someone isn’t the gender they were assigned at birth,” Remy said.

“You’re assigned a gender at birth?” Roman asked.

Remy sighed. “Well, yeah. The doctors look at your...privates, and based on that they’ll say ‘It’s a boy’ or ‘It’s a girl’ and put you in blue or pink respectively. That’s how they generally do it, anyway. But sometimes the gender you were assigned at birth isn’t the right one. And if that’s the case, then you’re considered transgender.”

Then came a question that made Remy cringe. “So...he was born a girl?”

“Not exactly,” Remy said. “He’s always been a boy, it’s just that for a while, everyone saw him as a girl. Maybe he didn’t know he was a boy. But that didn’t make him any less of a boy. Do you understand?”

Roman frowned in thought. “I...think so. Is there anything that I shouldn’t say to him?”

“Aside from the obvious of not calling him a girl, that differs from person to person,” Remy explained. “He might welcome questions about being transgender, or he might not want to talk about it. He might ask you to use different pronouns around different people, if he isn’t ‘out’ yet. You can ask what he’s comfortable with. But if he asks you to back off, you do, no questions asked, got it?”

“Got it,” Roman agreed with a nod. “Do you know when he’s coming over?”

“Not yet,” Remy said. “I still need to talk this over with Emile, and we need to officially register as foster parents, but it should be soon. And the two of you can have separate rooms. We won’t ask you to share if we don’t have to.”
Roman sagged with relief, and Remy filed that reaction away for later too. “In the meantime, I think we should prepare you for the placement test,” he said.

With a groan, Roman lolled his head back into the couch. “But I know almost everything in there!” he protested. “I might be in some remedial classes, but I know they’ll put me in the seventh grade!”

“That may be, but Emile said he wanted you to study, so you have to study. Just for an hour, okay? After that, you can keep reading fairy tales, or do whatever else you might want to do,” Remy replied.

“Fine,” Roman sighed. “But I don’t like it.”

“I don’t know many people who liked school at your age, Roman,” Remy laughed. “It’s not gonna be fun, but it’s necessary. At least until you’re sixteen.”

“Why sixteen?” Roman asked.

“That’s the legal age when you can drop out of school,” Remy explained. “If, by sixteen, you want to find a job and not do school anymore, you can try your hand at that. Although Emile and I would both encourage you to at least get a GED, which is the equivalent of a high school diploma. Those things open many doors.”

“Did you finish high school?” Roman asked, leaving the couch in favor of the kitchen, where the study materials were.

“That I did. However, I dropped out of college. I felt that they had taught me all they could teach me about business, so I went to a coffee shop, became a barista, and saved up the money I’d need to buy my own store. I was lucky in the sense that there weren’t any niche coffee shops by Main Street, yet. I was the first, and people who were looking for something new came flooding to me. And thanks to my experience as a barista, knowing what worked and what didn’t, they kept coming back for more,” Remy said. “Not a half-bad origin story, is what Emile tells me.”

Roman grinned and Remy smiled back. “You think you can study on your own or do I have to stay here and make sure you do the problems?”

“I’ll do it,” Roman said, looking at the books and sighing. “I’m not looking forward to it, though.”

Remy hummed. “Well, tell you what. If you finish all the problems in that book, and get them all right, I’ll advocate for you to Emile, and argue that you don’t need to study anymore. Of course, that means you have to continue studying if you get even one wrong.”

“I can do that!” Roman exclaimed, opening the book and immediately starting to read.

Remy smiled and left the room, grabbing his phone and sending a text to Emile: Sarah called about a possible foster kid, call me when you can

He didn’t expect an immediate reply, but he got a call just seconds later. “Emile? Don’t you have a patient?”

“This is my free hour of the day which I use to work on insurance claims. This is a welcome distraction. You said something about another kid?” Emile prompted.

“Yeah. Apparently you’re a transgender boy’s father, and the poor kid was kicked out of his home over being trans. Sarah was willing to speed up the fostering process if we take the kid in,” Remy explained.
“Well, that’s a no-brainer. We’ll take him in,” Emile said. “That is, if you and Roman are okay with it?”

“Yeah, Roman’s good with it as long as he’s not in charge of child-rearing, and I’ve never actively wanted kids, but they’re not horrible beasts who I hate. It’s nice to be able to help them,” Remy said. “And I explained what transgender means to Roman, so hopefully the new kid won’t run away screaming.”

“Let’s hope so,” Emile said. “I have to finish these insurance claims, but tell Sarah that I’m in. We’ll help this kid.”

Remy smiled as Roman came over and held the first section of his book out for inspection. “Sounds perfect,” he said.
September 16th, 2018

“Get out!” his father yelled.

Logan stared up at the man with wide eyes. “I...what?”

“Get out!” his father repeated, shoving a ratty backpack at Logan. “Start packing! If you’re not out of here by the time I’m back from grabbing dinner for my wife, I’ll call the cops!”

Logan stared at his father with wide eyes, uncomprehending. “You’re...kicking me out?!”

“You’re no longer welcome here,” his father bit. “Not until you can see that you are Jessica, not Logan.”

The bedroom door slammed shut and Logan scrambled to start packing. He didn’t bother with textbooks or anything for school, that was all packed in his backpack he took to school every day. He could hopefully take both with him and at least pretend that he had a house to go home to in the evening. He grabbed as many pairs of socks and underwear as he could, stuffed in a couple T-shirts and some jeans. He couldn’t stand any of his sweaters, so he shoved all the other clothes down so he could fit in two hoodies. He wore the third and final one he owned.

January 15th, 2019

Logan exited the car that Sarah was using to drive him to his new house. He was still in the same school district, so he’d be going to the same high school he’d been going to, and he’d get to see Jack Harkness, his best friend, five days out of the week. All in all, it wasn’t the worst situation he could be in.

As he walked around to the curb by the driveway, Sarah got out of the car and said, “Now, these two already are in the process of adopting another boy, so you may have to share space with him. I’m unfamiliar with his background, but I know that the Picanis are accepting and if Roman isn’t, they’ll keep him in line.”

Logan nodded at her just as the door to the house opened and a kid who couldn’t be older than twelve dashed out the door, jumping to a stop in front of Logan. He came up just above Logan’s chin, and he scrutinized Logan closely. When the boy opened his mouth, Logan braced himself for the inevitable comment about looking like a girl, but he just said, “You look like a nerd!”

“Uh...” Logan blinked. “I do care about my grades, I don’t know if it’s more or less than you do.”

The boy laughed. “Oh, you’re a nerd all right!”

Logan cracked a small smile. “You reek of prep, so I don’t imagine that grades are the first thing on your mind.”

“Ha!” The boy stuck his hand out. “Roman.”

Logan took it and gave it a firm shake. “Logan.”
Roman nodded. “Not a bad name,” he said.

“Thank you, I chose it myself,” Logan said with a smirk.

“Yeah, Mister Remy said you were transgender,” Roman said. “I’ll try to respect your pronouns, but uh...I might slip up at first. I’m just used to people with higher voices wanting to be called ‘Miss’ or ‘Ma’am’ rather than ‘Sir.’ It’s not because I don’t respect your identity! I just never knew someone who was transgender before. At least, someone who was pre-transition? Is that the right word?”

“Yeah, you got it right,” Logan said. “I’m impressed.”

“I asked Mister Emile lots of questions. He’s a therapist, so he has some experience with these sorts of things,” Roman said. “He knows a lot, although you probably know more, having to live it and all.”

Logan nodded absently. His attention had been drawn to the two men standing in the doorway of the house, looking him over. To size him up or to make sure he was okay, he wasn’t sure. “Is that them?” he asked.

Roman turned to look behind him. “Oh, yeah! The one with the sweastervest on is Mister Emile. The one with the shades always hanging off his shirt is Mister Remy. They’re both super nice.”

Logan scratched the back of his neck, suddenly nervous. He felt glued to the ground, and he knew he should do something, or wave at least, but all he could do was stare.

“Hey, uh...Logan?” Roman asked.

“Hm?” Logan asked absently.

“Do you...like your hair that long?” Roman asked, pointing to his ponytail.

Logan felt at the ponytail and winced, suitably distracted from this new situation via dysphoria. “No. But my parents never let me cut it shorter than this. Claimed that I might want to braid it someday to look prettier and refused to listen when I said I didn’t want that at all.”

Roman nodded. “Would you want to go to the barbershop whenever I go? Mister Emile was trying to set up an appointment for me. I like my hair the way it is for the most part, but it’s getting a little long.”

Logan frowned. “You’d...they’d...let...me?”

Roman nodded. “More than let you. If they know you hate your hair, they’ll do nothing short of insist that you get it cut to your liking.”

Logan felt himself start to smile. “That’s awfully considerate.”

“They say that my comfort is a top priority, so I don’t see why yours wouldn’t be as well,” Roman said with an easy shrug. “I dunno what happens when our comforts don’t line up, but...”

“Yeah,” Logan agreed. “This...that sounds good.”

Sarah came over with Logan’s backpacks and set them on the ground. “Well, I suppose I’ll leave you two boys to talking? I need to go over a few things with your foster parents.”

Roman waved her off and Logan merely nodded, feeling too choked up to speak. “You okay, Logan?” Roman asked.
Logan cleared his throat. “Yeah. I...uh...I’m just not used to people being so accepting.”

“Hm? Oh, yeah,” Roman said. “I honestly wasn’t expecting Mister Emile and Mister Remy to be as helpful as they have for me. I didn’t have anywhere to go, and they just...took me in, without a second thought.”

“I suppose the same can be said of me,” Logan said. “The man who used to be my father kicked me out. I’ve been living at my best friend’s house for three months.”

Roman wrinkled his nose. “I never had a dad. Well, obviously, I have Mister Remy and Mister Emile, but before I came here...I didn’t have anyone, really.”

Logan winced in sympathy. “I’ve been there,” he said.

The two boys stood there a moment, sizing each other up. Then, Roman jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Do you want to see your new room?” he asked.

Logan picked up his bags and nodded. “Sure.”

Roman led him inside and up the stairs to the second floor. There was one room with clothes everywhere, and another one which looked like a standard guest room next to it. “The empty one is yours,” Roman said, pointing. “I’m right next door, and the walls aren’t paper thin but they’re not super thick so try not to blast music, okay?”

“I don’t typically blast music, but I will attempt to be quiet at night,” Logan said, looking Roman over. They didn’t appear to have a lot in common physically, but he could in theory believe that they were brothers. “Thank you for giving me an excuse for being away from the adults for a moment.”

“It’s no problem!” Roman said brightly. “I’ve been needing an excuse away from them too. My first day of school is coming up and Mister Emile has been pushing me to study more to make sure I’m caught up with my class.”

“Well, not falling behind in classes is certainly important,” Logan said, frowning.

“I mean, sure, but I passed the placement exams with flying colors. They put me in advanced English and I don’t even need remedial math!” Roman scoffed. “Anything that I don’t understand I can ask my teacher about. Not a big deal.”

Logan tried to wrap his head around that concept. Back before he had gotten kicked out, he was always told he was too smart to ask for help from his parents, and that philosophy soon extended to his teachers. He hardly understood what “help” meant any more. “It’s not?” he asked.

Roman shrugged. “I mean, not to me. I don’t know about where you’ve been from, so it could be a big deal to you. But there’s no shame in asking for help. At least, you know, when it comes to school.”

“Are there other things that it’s not okay to ask help for?” Logan asked.

Roman shrugged and looked away. “Usually if an adult assigned me a task that wasn’t school-related, I couldn’t ask for help, because I was their help. It wasn’t huge, it was just...like...chores and stuff. It was a little tiring, but I don’t know anyone who enjoys chores.”

Logan nodded, squinting his eyes. Roman wasn’t telling the whole story there. He didn’t know how he knew it, but he did. The trick was going to be getting him to admit it, if necessary. Because Logan didn’t want to push anything just yet, he sniffed and looked away, effectively dismissing his
suspicion for the time being. “Well, I should probably unpack,” he said.

Roman nodded. “All right. I’ll be next door if you need help.”

Logan smiled and nodded, before walking into his room, closing the door, and letting out a shaky breath. There had been no time to be afraid after getting kicked out. He had his studies to worry about, to make sure that he had the scholarships to go to college. He had to help the Harknesses around the house to make sure he wasn’t kicked out. There were things to keep his mind occupied. He lived out of two backpacks and made sure that if he were kicked out again for whatever reason, he had money on hand and clothes already packed.

Now, though? He had to unpack, just enough to make these people convinced that he was planning on staying. He didn’t know if he had another part to play, or work to do outside school. He had time to worry, to let the impact of what happened finally sink in. He had felt little inklings of this terror when he had first been kicked out, but he had shoved them down. Now, he had no such luxury. His situation was rearing its ugly head, and the fact that he was now in foster care was hitting him full force. His parents weren’t going to call, say they made a mistake, and let him back in. He was well and truly on his own the second he turned eighteen.

He collapsed onto his bed and felt himself crying. He tried to steady his breathing, to just take one deep breath, but it wasn’t working. He was petrified, and hurt, and he had no idea how he was supposed to keep going when his plans for his future had been so rudely ripped from underneath him.

If asked how long he sat there just panicking later, Logan would say he had absolutely no idea. But eventually, when someone knocked on his door a couple times and didn’t get a response, one of the men from before came in, rushed to his side, and helped him through some breathing exercises. And after a while, it did work to calm him down. He still felt devastated, but he felt less like he was going to puke. The man, the one he had seen before with curly ginger hair, offered him a small smile. “Feel better, Logan?”

The fact that this man used his actual name nearly sent him crying again, but he just nodded and wiped at his eyes. “My apologies,” he muttered. “Everything just sort of...hit me at once.”

“Yeah, that’s understandable,” the man said. “But rest assured, we won’t be like your last family. We accept you for whoever you are.”


“Roman said you might want to get your hair cut whenever he goes?” the man asked. “If you don’t like your hair long, then you don’t have to keep it that way.”

“That sounds nice,” Logan said softly. “I’ve always wanted my hair shorter, for as long as I can remember.”

“Well, you can have it that way, hopefully by the weekend. Remy knows a guy at the barbershop who owes him one. He can probably squeeze you both in.”

Logan nodded. “Yeah. I’d like that a lot.”

The man smiled. “Well, then, it’s settled. We’ll head down to the barbershop this week and get your hair cut. It’ll be okay. Deep breaths, all right, Logan?”

Logan nodded again.
“Oh, and don’t feel the need to unpack yet if you don’t want to,” the man said. “If it makes you feel better to have some stuff packed up and ready to go, then by all means, keep it packed.”

“Thanks,” Logan said. “Uh, what should I call you?”

“You can call me whatever your comfortable with,” the man said. “Roman calls me Mister Emile, and he calls Remy Mister Remy. You can do that, you can call us both Mister Picani, because I took Remy’s last name when we married, although that could get confusing. But the point is that neither Remy nor I are picky.”

“All right. Thank you,” Logan said.

“No need to keep thanking me, I’m doing what I like to imagine any half-decent dad would do. If you want, you can come downstairs, Roman and Remy are watching some football game or another, but you’re free to do whatever you want,” Mister Emile said.

“Do you have any books?” Logan asked.

“Yeah, we have quite a few. Fiction or nonfiction?”


Mister Emile nodded. “Well, let’s go downstairs and see if you like anything, huh?”

“Sure,” Logan said with a small smile. Maybe this was going to be okay.
August 29th, 2011

Roman sat in the back of Mom's car, and asked, “Hey Mom, what's adopted mean?”

“It means someone who wasn't born into their family was brought in later,” Mom said. “So if something were to happen to me, and some other family took you in and decided that you were going to be a part of their family permanently, even when you were an adult, you would be adopted.”

“Oh,” Roman said, swinging his legs. “Susie in my class said she was adopted when we played Two Truths and a Lie, and that was one of her truths.”

“She's a very lucky girl,” Mom said. “Sometimes, kids don't get adopted. It's sad, but then it feels like they have no one to turn to when they become an adult.”

“I'm glad I don't have to worry about that,” Roman said.

His mom looked back and gave him a smile. “I would never leave you for anything, my little knight.”

January 18th, 2019

Roman was shaking just a little. His leg was bouncing impatiently on the bench in the courthouse, Mister Emile on one side of him, and Mister Remy on the other. He was nervous. He knew this meant that he wouldn't have to go back into foster care, but it didn't mean he wasn't nervous about what this meant for him. When he was younger, he was always scared thinking about adoption. In order for it to happen, something would have to happen to his mom. Now that his mom was gone, and he was actually being adopted...well, he didn't feel great.

That's not to say he didn't trust Mister Emile or Mister Remy; he trusted them with his life most days when he went to sleep, when he turned his back to them, when he let himself ask for help with whatever he was dealing with at the moment. It just meant that...his mom was never coming back. Legally, she was gone. She wouldn't be able to come back, and Roman knew that she was never able to come back before, but he guessed that a small part of him hoped all of this had just been a long, bad dream. He didn't feel good, at all. He felt queasy and sad and more than a little overwhelmed.

Mister Emile rested a hand on Roman's knee that wasn't bouncing like a jackrabbit on a sugar high. “You're fine, Roman,” he assured. “All we're doing is signing a piece of paper. It's not a big deal. After all, you've been living with us for a little while now, and that's not going to change when we sign this.”

“I know,” Roman said with a sigh. “I'm just...”

“Nervous?” Mister Remy offered.

“Realizing” Roman said. “Realizing that I'm going to have a family again. I miss my mom, yeah, but I'm also glad to have a new family, you know?”
“Yeah, I guess that would be a shock to anyone,” Mister Remy said. “Adoption is a life-changer, even if it doesn’t always seem like it. Sure you’ve been living with us, but now you’re gonna be officially part of our family.”

Roman swallowed. Yeah, that hit the nail on the head. He nodded, adding, “I didn’t realize I was hoping that my mom might come back. Because I know she won’t. But now that I’m being adopted...it’s just...reminding me of when she left...” and there was a reason he didn’t talk about that. A very good reason. He didn’t trust himself to even think about it, let alone tell anyone else.

When their name was called, Roman wiped his sweaty palms on his new dress slacks, standing up along with Mister Remy and Mister Emile. He knew that Mister Remy felt a little uncomfortable in his button-down, but he was willing to bet that he looked twice as uncomfortable as Mister Remy did.

They walked into the room across the hall and to the left, where a judge was talking to someone, who Roman assumed was his secretary. The judge turned to smile at them as the secretary walked out after giving Roman a smile. “Sorry for the delay, sometimes those hearings take longer than I’d like.”

A flash of brown curls rushed past Roman and he flinched on instinct, before realizing it was just Sarah McGee, the social worker. “Sorry I’m late,” she apologized. “I’ll leave earlier next time, traffic was heavy for it being early morning.”

“Next time?” the judge asked in amusement.

“They’re in the process of adopting another boy,” Sarah explained, panting. “Of course, he only moved in a week ago, so it will take time.”

The judge laughed. “Well, that’s certainly going to be an interesting process! Are you looking forward to having a brother?”

Roman shrugged. “I mean, I’m looking forward to it as much as I can, I guess,” he said. “I never expected to have a brother but I’m not objecting.”

The judge offered Roman a soft smile. “I’m a middle child, myself. It can be difficult to stand out to outsiders, but good parents will always make sure you feel heard.”

Roman nodded. He didn’t have older and younger siblings, not officially, but he knew the struggles of being a middle child from foster care. Being ignored in favor of the younger or older kids was a low blow, that took a while to recover from. Eventually, you grew numb to it, but that didn’t mean that it was any better, just that you learned to compartmentalize.

“Shall we get started, then?” the judge asked.

Roman started to zone out as Mister Remy and Mister Emile started asking questions, and Sarah and the judge answered them, and then asked some questions of their own. Eventually, the judge pulled out some paperwork from his desk, and then Mister Emile and Mister Remy signed it, as well as Sarah. The judge shook hands with both men in the room and Roman blinked. “That’s it?” he asked. “Just three signatures on the paper?”

“That’s it,” the judge confirmed with a smile. “All the hard stuff was already done, so the papers just needed to be signed off.”

“Huh,” Roman said. He didn’t realize adopting someone could be that easy, or that anticlimactic.
They left the room after a brief conversation, and it took them walking to the parking lot before the magnitude of what had just happened struck him. He was adopted, he had two dads. He never had to go back to foster care.

Without any warning, his legs buckled and his knees hit the asphalt, hard. He wasn’t sure if he was breathing or not. This had completely thrown him for a loop. Now he had to comprehend the consequences.

“Woah, Roman?! You okay?!” Mister Emile asked, rushing to his side and gently touching his shoulder.

Roman blinked a couple times, suddenly pulled out of his head. He was still kneeling in the middle of the parking lot, and his knees ached. “Yeah, I’m fine,” Roman said, voice thick with emotions that Roman couldn’t pin down. “It’s just...I’m actually...adopted.”

“Yeah, you are,” Mister Emile said with a nervous smile. “I hope that’s okay?”

Roman nodded, standing with help from Mister Emile. “Yeah, it’s okay. I just never thought I’d see the day where I was adopted.”

“You just always assumed you’d age out of the system?” Mister Emile asked, and Roman didn’t fail to notice Mister Emile kept a hand on Roman’s arm as they walked.

“I always assumed I would never be in the system period,” Roman said. “Once I was in it, I...I pretty much always knew I was going to leave it one way or another. And I did. It all worked out. I just never thought it would work out this well.”

Mister Emile smiled. “I’m glad you think ending up with me and Remy is a good thing.”

“Well, yeah,” Roman said like it was obvious. “You guys actually care about me. Maybe not more than my mom when I was really little, but you still care about me a lot, and that makes a world of difference.”

Mister Emile smiled and they got in the car, where Mister Remy was waiting with the heating already starting to warm the inside. “I agree,” Mister Emile said. “And every kid should have someone in their corner.”

“I think that’s something we all agree on,” Remy said, pulling out of their parking space and getting on the road. “Now we need to get you to school, Roman.”

Roman groaned.

“No complaints, young Mister Picani,” Mister Remy said. “You need school.”

Roman sighed but ducked his head to hide his grin at the “young Mister Picani” comment that made him feel all warm and fuzzy inside. He didn’t know why it felt right, but it did.

“I saw that grin,” Mister Remy teased.

Roman stuck his tongue out at him. “So what? I was just adopted, I’m allowed to be happy!”

Mister Remy offered him a grin of his own. “I know. But I wanted to hear you say it for myself. It’s a nice thing to hear.”

Roman rolled his eyes good-naturedly and smiled as they drove to the middle school. “I hope you
realize that you’re a bigger dork than Logan most of the time.”

Mister Remy gasped in mock offense and Roman couldn’t help the big grin that spread across his face at that. “I’ll have you know that I am the cool dad!” Mister Remy exclaimed.

“Yeah, no,” Mister Emile said. “You’ve never been the cool dad, Rem. Do you know exactly how many times I’ve had to veto your rules because it was something that Roman or Logan could do on their own and they really didn’t need supervision, or us making snap judgements for them?”

“No,” Mister Remy said.

“Neither do I, but I can definitively say it’s been a lot,” Mister Emile said with a laugh.

Mister Remy made an offended noise, and if Roman didn’t know any better, he would say Mister Remy was pouting when he responded with a, “If you don’t know the exact number how can you say that?”

Mister Emile turned, looked him dead in the eye and said, “Because I lost count after thirty seven.”

Roman guffawed and Mister Remy turned a dark red. “Oh, shut up,” he mumbled.

“Not a chance, Rem,” Mister Emile said, not unkindly. “If it’s not this thing, it’s something else. And we both know you’re not hurt over this; if anything you’re just a little confused. I know you always said you’d be the cool dad, but you worry too much and you have too much experience with too-strict rules to suddenly be lax about what your own kids do.”

“Are you trying to shrink me?” Mister Remy asked, tone turning offended again. “I thought we agreed you wouldn’t do that anymore!”

“You asked me not to, yeah, and I said I will do my best not to. But sometimes when you ask for an explanation that’s my automatic response. So...sorry, I guess? But you knew you were signing up for this when I told you I was going to grad school to become a therapist.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mister Remy said, and this time he was definitely sulking. “Doesn’t mean I like it when you accidentally shrink me.”

Mister Emile shrugged right as they pulled up outside the school. Roman looked out the window and sighed. He hated middle school with a fiery passion, and decided that high school and college had to be much better than this ever would be. “I can’t wait for high school,” Roman muttered.

“Only a few more months, and then you’re off for the summer and you’ll be in eighth grade. After that you’re a freshman in no time,” Mister Emile assured him. “You’ll do fine, Roman.”

Roman sighed. “I just really hate this place,” he grumbled, getting out of the car but not closing the door just yet. “Thanks for all this,” he said.

“Sure thing,” Mister Emile said. “Do you need me to come sign you in?”

“Yeah,” Roman said with a sigh. “Though in high school, you’ll only need to sign a note which I can turn in myself.”

Mister Emile nodded and got out of the car with a promise to Mister Remy that he’d be right back. Roman kicked a rock lying on the pavement into the grass and sighed. “Middle school sucks,” he said under his breath.
“I know,” Mister Emile said. “Though you might not want to tell Mister Remy that.”

“Why not?” Roman asked. “Did he like middle school?”

“Actually, he has no recollection of the eighth grade, and very little of the sixth or seventh. He was bullied a lot, from what he told me, and he suppressed all of those traumatic memories. So far, he’s had very little luck in the way of recovering them, but thanks to some talking with a therapist who isn’t me, he no longer has flashbacks,” Mister Emile said.

Roman turned silent. He didn’t know Mister Remy was bullied. “I had no idea,” he said. “He doesn’t show it.”

“Yes he does,” Mister Emile said with a sad smile. “He shows it everyday with the kindness he spreads, and the smiles we both know are a little too forced to be genuine. He doesn’t want anyone to be sad, so he makes sure that no one he knows has to be, or that no one knows he is.”

“But we both know when he is anyway,” Roman pointed out.

“That’s because he trusts us,” Mister Emile said, and they walked inside. “I hope you won’t abuse that.”

“I would never dream of it,” Roman assured.

“Good,” Mister Emile said. “Now let’s get you signed in.”
June 16th, 2017

“Mom, I’m not trying to start anything, I swear, I just want my hair short for the summer!” Logan pleaded.

But his mom just shook her head. “You look lovely with long hair, Jessica. If it gets too hot you can just put your hair up in a ponytail.”

“What about a bob?” Logan bargained. “I could put that in a ponytail by the end of summer, and it would stay off my neck most of the time! I just...I want it short.”

“You’d regret cutting your hair in an instant, young lady,” his mom said. “If you wanted your hair up again, or wanted to braid it, you wouldn’t be able to. We’re not cutting your hair.”

Logan did his best to not storm off in a huff after that declaration. Sure, he was still in the closet, but a bob would be better than this horrible ponytail he always had to wear.

January 20th, 2019

Logan was singing the song as he worked on his homework, his voice light and lilting in the afternoon sun. He heard a small gasp come from the doorway, and turned to see Roman standing there, jaw agape. “I didn’t know you could sing,” Roman said, voice raspy.

Reaching to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear that he realized was still in his ponytail, Logan tugged on his ear instead. “I don’t, usually. I don’t like how high my voice is. I guess I was just in a good mood.”

“What was the song?” Roman asked, his voice continuing to rasp a little.

“It’s called Welcome to the Black Parade ,” Logan said. “Some of the students I know from school listen to a band called My Chemical Romance. I checked out some of their songs, and not all of them are kid friendly, but I do like that one.”

Roman cleared his throat and walked over slowly. “Do you think...do you think you could teach me the song?”

Logan nodded slowly. “Do you mind my asking...why?” Roman glanced toward the doorway, and Logan was quick to reassure him. “I won’t tell Mister Picani. Either of them.”

Roman swallowed. “I...my mom. It reminded me of my mom.”

Logan nodded in understanding. “Oh. Yeah, when you lose someone important, sometimes music is a good release. I can let you listen to the song on my phone while I work?”

Roman nodded with a grateful smile. Logan passed him the phone, earbuds plugged in, and Roman set himself up on Logan’s bed, listening to the song with rapt attention. Logan pretended not to notice the tears that leaked through Roman’s façade as he continued to listen to the song.
They sat in silence a while, Logan working on his homework, and Roman listening to the song, mouthing the words to the lyrics. When Logan’s homework was done, he stood, and Roman pulled the earbuds out of his ears. “You can keep listening, if you want. I’m not going anywhere,” Logan said.

“It’s okay, I think I have most of it memorized anyway,” Roman said.

“You sure?” Logan asked.

Roman nodded. “I pick up songs pretty quick. And I don’t want to leave you without your phone. Worst comes to worst, I look it up on my own phone.”

Logan shrugged. “All right.” Roman headed towards the door, but Logan put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “Hey, Roman...”

Roman looked at him expectantly, eyes red and just a little puffy.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” he finished. That was neutral enough. Hopefully Roman wouldn’t get suspicious or try to shut Logan out after this.

Roman gave him a flicker of a smile and nodded. “Yeah. Me too.”

The boys stood there in silence a moment before Roman mumbled a, “I’ll be downstairs,” and the spell was broken. Logan picked up one of his for-pleasure books from the nightstand in the room and settled down to relax and let his mind wander for a half hour, before they left for the barber’s.

When he heard the muffled voice of Mister Remy calling, “Logan, it’s time to go!” he replaced his book mark and left the book itself on the bed, heading downstairs and out the door with a grin. This would be the first time he had his hair short in literal years.

When the three of them were in the car, Mister Emile waving them off from the doorway, Mister Remy drove off. Logan resisted the urge to excitedly squirm...for the most part. He couldn’t help the grin nearly splitting his face in two at the prospect of once again having short hair. It was such a small thing to be excited about, but he couldn’t help himself.

Roman was sending him odd looks from the back. “Hey, Logan, when’s the last time you had short hair?” he asked.

Logan thought back on it and shrugged. “I’m not sure, honestly. I think it might have been when I was in second grade.”

“And you’re in tenth now?” Roman confirmed.

“Yeah,” Logan said. “So this is a big moment.”

“Do you know what style you want to get?” Mister Remy asked. “Since you finally got a phone plan that allows you to use the Internet again?”

Logan shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know exactly what I want, and I might hate what I do with my hair for this, but...” he ducked his head, ears tinged pink. “I kinda want to try a pompadour.”

“Hey, I think it’d look good on you,” Mister Remy said with a smile. “Give it a go if you want. And if you wind up not liking it, you never have to get it again once it grows out.”

Logan nodded, ears still pink. “It just...feels really weird thinking about having short hair again. I
keep on second-guessing myself...but I always hated having long hair. And even if I don’t like this style, there has to be another men’s style that could work.”

Roman shot him a grin. “For what it’s worth, I think you’d look like a complete dork no matter what.”

“You’re just mad that I’m older than you,” Logan shot back with a smirk.

“As if! I’ll always be the more creative one, so I don’t need to be older than you!” Roman challenged.

“Yeah? Well, I’m planning on being an astronomer, maybe an astrophysicist. So I think I’ll always be the smarter one in terms of schooling. I don’t need to prove myself to you,” Logan replied easily.

“Boys, be careful that this doesn’t get out of hand,” Mister Remy warned. “We don’t want any hurt feelings.”

“Yeah, I know,” Logan said. “You cool, Roman?”

“Yeah. I don’t care about book smarts all that much,” Roman said. “I’ve seen some of the people at my school rehearse lines for the school play and I want to try out for it next year. It could be fun.”

“It’s hard to make a career out of acting,” Logan warned.

“Maybe, but right now, it’s not a career, it’s just a little fun,” Roman brushed off.

Logan made a noise in the back of his throat. “What’s the point in fun if you can’t get good at it and make something of yourself for it?”

Roman shrugged. “I dunno. I just want to have a good time, meet some new people, have a few friends. Fun doesn’t have to have a point. And you don’t have to be wildly successful to be happy.”

Logan frowned and chewed that thought. His parents had been wrong about a lot of things before. Could this have been another thing they had lied about?

“We’re here,” Mister Remy said, pulling into the parking lot of a small shopping outlet.

Logan was nervous as they walked into the barbershop. Everyone there was presenting as male or gender non-conforming, and it felt odd to be sporting a ponytail in here. A man walked over and said, “Remy!” in a booming voice, crushing the man in a hug. “When I heard your call, I could barely believe it.

You wound up with kids?!”

Remy shrugged. “Domestic life has its perks, apparently, Dominic,” he said easily. “This is Roman, and that’s Logan. Roman said he just wants a trim, but Logan...he’s gonna need some serious cuts. His old family was rather strict about his hair.”

Dominic scoffed. “Ridiculous! Hair is an expression of yourself! To restrict that is just cruel! Come on, young man, we’ll get you whatever cut you like.”

Logan was led to a chair in front of a mirror and he took his glasses off as Dominic draped a plastic covering over his shoulders. “Now then, Logan, what would you like today?”

“I’d like a pompadour, if that’s all right,” Logan said, voice trembling only slightly. “Preferably only a few inches long, at most.”

“Logan, in this shop the customer is always allowed to choose their own hair style,” Dominic said,
placing a hand on his shoulder. “If you want that, I can do it. First, we should chop off that ponytail, don’t you think?”

“Please,” Logan all but begged. “I’ve had it for seven years at least and I’ve hated every second it’s been there. Chop it off.”

Dominic nodded and grabbed a pair of scissors. Logan took out his ponytail and let his hair fall over the chair, down to his shoulder blades. Dominic used his scissors with exact precision, and soon Logan’s hair was falling to the ground, a broken halo he no longer needed. Once the hair was at about a short bob, Dominic brought out an electric razor, and started shearing off the hair on the sides and very back of Logan’s head. “Is that short enough?” he asked Logan.

Logan brought out his glasses and looked at the shaved hair in the mirror, feeling it. It couldn’t be more than a quarter of an inch long. “That’s perfect,” Logan said. “Can you show me how to style the top?”

“Certainly,” Dominic said, grabbing scissors as Logan took off his glasses again. “I’ll cut the last of it and then I’ll show you how to gel it and comb it back.”

And true to his word, when Logan was pleased with the length of his hair Dominic explained how much hair gel to use, and how to comb it into his hair, and consequently wash it out at the end of the day.

At the end of the haircut, Logan put on his glasses and grinned genuinely at what he saw. “I don’t believe it,” he said, reaching to look closer into the mirror and feel his hair. “I look like myself. For once in my life, I actually look like myself. Thank you so much!”

“Logan, it was my pleasure,” Dominic said. “Come back when you need a trim, all right?”

“Definitely,” Logan said, grinning and shaking Dominic’s hand.

He walked over to where Roman and Mister Remy were waiting. Roman only had a few inches taken off his already-long spikes, and he looked about how Logan expected he would. Mister Remy looked up and whistled. “Looking sharp, Logan!”

Unable to help himself, Logan laughed and brought a hand up to his mouth, covering his grin. “I look like myself, finally!” he exclaimed.

“You look like a dork,” Roman said. “So I agree.”

Logan simply laughed in response. “You wish you could look this good!” he said, striking a pose.

Mister Remy led them out after thanking Dominic, and they headed back to the car. “Are we gonna need to invest in hair gel, Logan?” Mister Remy asked.

“Maybe a little,” Logan said. “If you want me to keep this look.”

“If you want to keep it, we’ll grab some,” Mister Remy promised. “For now, let’s go home.”

Logan and Roman agreed and no sooner did they get back than Emile walked out of the house and nearly squealed in delight. “Love the hair, Logan!”

“Thanks,” Logan said, beaming with pride. “I really like it. I actually look like myself for once!”

“That’s amazing!” Emile said. “Should we watch some celebratory cartoons?”
“Maybe some *Steven Universe* is in order,” Logan said with a grin.

Emile cheered and Remy leaned over to Logan, stage-whispering. “You’re enabling him. Never a good idea.”

Logan just laughed as they all headed inside. He sat down next to Emile on the couch and they watched some *Steven Universe*, belting out the lyrics to the theme song because why not, nobody was going to judge them!

His conversation earlier with Roman floated to the forefront of his mind, and his expression turned thoughtful. Sometime, he’d have to ask Roman more about that. He didn’t want to pry too much so soon, but one day he’d have to figure out what was wrong. He could help, but he needed to know what was up first.

As one episode turned into the next, Logan put those thoughts out of his mind. Right now, he wanted to ride the high of his gender euphoria for as long as possible. If he could milk more seconds of joy out of this experience, he definitely wanted them.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning for vomiting

September 15th, 2012

Roman felt pretty out of it, in all honesty. He had woken up earlier, hot and cold all over in different places, and unable to get comfortable under a blanket. He could hear his mother singing under her breath, and she was hugging him lightly. “Mom?” he asked.

“Ssh, it’s all right my little knight,” his mother said softly. “Rest. You’ll feel better soon enough.”

Roman leaned into his mother and coughed miserably. “Don’t feel good, Mom,” he bemoaned.

“I know, my little knight,” she soothed. “When you’re feeling a little better I’ll help you to the living room and we can watch something on the TV. Until then, you should save your strength, and sleep.”

January 27th, 2019

Roman wondered why exactly he had woken up when only the first few peeks at an approaching dawn were just appearing, until a wave of nausea hit him and he sprinted to the bathroom, barely able to make it to the toilet in time to avoid making a mess of the floor using the last remnants of the previous night’s dinner that had remained in his stomach. He groaned into the toilet bowl. He felt too hot and too cold at the same time, and his stomach was pitching almost as much as the floor.

Footsteps approached the entrance to the bathroom. “Roman?” That was Logan’s voice.

Roman whimpered, shutting his eyes tight only to realize that made the nausea worse and he coughed up bile. Logan padded over softly and put a hand on Roman’s shoulder. His shirt was clinging to his back, soaked through with sweat, and he wondered what would possess Logan to touch him like this.

“You don’t look so good Roman. Do you need any help?” Logan asked softly.

Roman didn’t know. He just wanted to go back to bed, but he wasn’t even sure if he could stand up. It was a miracle he made it to the bathroom without tripping in the hallway the first time. He shrugged.

Logan helped Roman sit against the cabinet under the bathroom sink as he flushed the toilet and started rooting through the medicine cabinet. He pulled out a thermometer and washed it, before crouching down and helping Roman put it in his mouth. Logan looked like he was in a perpetual wince, looking Roman over. Roman wished that he knew how to speak without talking, so he could do something while he waited for the thermometer to register.

“Should I get Mister Emile or Mister Remy?” Logan asked.
Roman grunted in the negative and shook his head, nearly falling over. Logan steadied him and when the thermometer beeped, Logan took it out and hissed. “You sure? Roman, you’ve got a fever of almost one-oh-two.”

“Don’t wanna...wake them up...nothing...they can...do right now...anyway...” Roman panted.

Logan frowned. “We should probably get you back to bed, though. Should we take the trash can, in case you get sick again?”

“Probably...yeah.” Roman grunted as Logan helped Roman stand up before grabbing the trash can.

Together they walked out of the room and back to Roman’s bed, where Logan positioned the trash can right below Roman’s pillow. Roman laid back and tried to ignore the ever-present nausea that only seemed to get worse whenever he moved. “Do you need anything else?” Logan asked, worriedly hovering around Roman’s bed.

“No, I’ll be...fine,” Roman managed. “You go back...to bed...”

“You sure?” Logan asked.

Roman rolled his eyes. “Don’t wanna...get you sick...and I won’t...die yet,” he said.

“I’d feel better if I knew you were going to be okay,” Logan said, setting up a vigil near the foot of Roman’s bed using his desk chair. “So I’ll stay here for a bit, just until you’re asleep, sound good?”

“What’s float your...boat...nerd,” Roman said, with a weak smile.

“Just feel better soon, you prep-in-the-making,” Logan said lightly.

Roman closed his eyes, and in what felt like only five minutes there was a knock at his door.

“Boys?” Mister Emile asked in confusion.

Cracking his eyes open, Roman saw morning light streaming through the windows, and Logan groggily stretching in his desk chair. “I told you to go back to bed, nerd,” Roman said.

Logan shook his head. “I’d much rather make sure you were all right.”

“Did something happen last night?” Mister Emile asked.

“Roman got sick at the crack of dawn,” Logan said. “He had a mid-grade fever, close to one hundred and two, but not quite there. When I asked him if I should wake you, he said he’d be fine and there wasn’t anything either you or Mister Remy could do.”

“Boys, in the future, please let us know if either of you is sick, all right? There might not be anything we can do to make the cold go away, but I’d feel better knowing that’s what’s going on, all right?” Mister Emile asked.

“Sure,” Roman said as Logan nodded.

“Do you feel any better this morning, Roman?” Mister Emile asked.

“Not really,” Roman admitted.

Mister Emile came over and felt Roman’s forehead with his wrist. He winced. “Yeah, you feel like you’re burning up. Think you can stomach some toast for breakfast? It’s very hard to get rid of toast, and you could use something in your stomach.”
“I guess,” Roman said.

Logan walked over and helped Roman sit up. “Come on, I’ll help you downstairs to the couch. There’s no use sitting here staring at a wall all day.”

“I’ll be fine,” Roman protested, even as Logan hoisted Roman into a standing position.

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, prep, I’ll get you downstairs,” Logan grunted.

Despite Roman’s protests, Logan helped Roman down the stairs and got him situated on the couch, before promptly sitting down next to him to catch his breath. “I’ll grab you breakfast in a minute,” he said. “Just need to breathe normally first.”

Roman leaned back into the couch and lolled his head over to look at Logan. “Why are you being nice to me?” he asked.

Logan looked stricken at that question. “What?” he asked.

“Why are you being nice to me?” Roman repeated. “You don’t have to be. None of you have to be. But you are. Why?”

“Because...we care about you, Roman.” Logan’s expression morphed into concern. “Haven’t you had anyone care about you before?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Roman said. “Not for a while, though.”

Logan’s concern only appeared to deepen at that statement and Roman was eager to brush him off. “It’s not a big deal, Pocket Protector. I just didn’t always have people look after me when I didn’t feel well. Not everyone does.”

“Well, yeah, but that doesn’t mean that not having anyone to look after you when your sick is automatically okay,” Logan said. “Roman, you’re still a kid. People should be there for you if you need them.”

Roman shrugged. Logan rolled his eyes in response. “I’ll get you some toast, and we can watch your choice of TV.”

“We?” Roman asked. “Logan, I’m sick. I could get you sick.”

“We already share a house, Roman, there’s only so much damage you can prevent,” Logan said. “Besides, it’s not the end of the world if I miss a day or two of school.”

Roman frowned, but Logan just pat Roman’s knee twice before standing up to go get food. Roman grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and wrapped it around himself. He hadn’t had someone to look after him since his mom went away. Tears pricked his eyes and he buried his face in the blanket in embarrassment.

“Hey, Roman?” Logan’s voice asked softly.

Roman sniffled. “I miss my mom,” he whimpered. “I want her back, I want her here to help.”

Logan set something on the table and sat down next to Roman, draping an arm over his shoulders. “Sometimes I miss my parents too. I know your life can’t be exactly like mine was, but if I’m allowed to miss the people who kicked me out, you’re allowed to miss the woman who left you.”

Roman cried a little harder at that and Logan gave his shoulders a squeeze. Roman appreciated the
gesture, but he still felt miserable, and if he cried too hard he knew he was going to get sick again.

Logan helped him lean back against the couch and passed him a plate of toast. “Eat a little,” he instructed. “I know it’ll feel gross for a while but you’ll feel better in the end because of it.”

Roman obligingly took a bite of toast and Logan flipped through TV channels until Roman had him stop on Disney. “I swear you like cartoons almost as much as Mister Emile does.”

“So what if I do?” Roman challenged.

“Not a taunt, just an observation,” Logan said mildly. “I think it’s nice to have something that you’re passionate about.”

“Do you have that?” Roman asked.

Logan turned pink. “I’m rather fond of astronomy,” he mumbled. “I’m not sure if I could turn it into a career, but I plan on trying.”

“That’s cool,” Roman said, nodding. “My brother, the astronomer. I can see it.”

Logan’s eyes snapped over to him in surprise for a second, and Roman smiled. “Still getting used to me calling you my brother, I see.”

“I don’t understand why you do that all the time when I’m very obviously...not traditionally masculine,” Logan said. “You’ve barely tripped up at all. The only other people who almost never tripped up when I came out were Jack and his parents.”

Roman shrugged. “Well, it helps that I’ve never known you as anything else,” he said. “But anyone who truly cares about you will make the effort.”

Logan nodded. “Everyone says that,” he said. “But if that’s the case most of the people around me don’t care all that much.”

Roman winced. “I know the feeling,” he said softly.

Logan scooted a little closer to Roman on the couch as some show or another played on Disney. “We’re a couple of misfits, I suppose,” Logan said.

Roman hummed. “Not fitting in anywhere but here.”

“I don’t mind only having one space to fit in. One space is all I need,” Logan said.

Roman smiled a little. “I guess that’s true.”

Logan burrowed in the couch and murmured, “Promise me you’d never call me Jessica?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Roman said, leaning on Logan’s shoulder. “Promise that you won’t give up on me?”

“Of course,” Logan murmured back.

The two of them sat in silence for a while after that, watching the TV show that was on play out. Roman was caught up in his own head, when it wasn’t too foggy with being sick to do much of anything. He didn’t understand why Logan was so concerned about people caring for him or not. After all, it wasn’t like Roman had much of a say in the matter, and in a pinch he could take care of himself. It wasn’t that bad.
But then he considered how he felt knowing that people might deadname Logan, and use the wrong pronouns on purpose, and think he was a freak, and felt a streak of protectiveness run through him that he figured must run through Logan in a similar way when Roman got sick. It was weird to think that people might care about him again. These people were mostly related to him by DNA, true, but that didn’t mean much, if Roman thought about it. What really mattered was they might not have known him well but they took him in anyway.

Family by DNA, but also by choice. It was a weird combination, but Roman wasn’t going to complain, especially considering it meant he didn’t have to get up as much when he was sick. If he was sick in foster care, he mostly had to take care of himself as well as everyone else. He didn’t find it pleasant in the slightest.

But here, that wasn’t a problem. Here, he didn’t need to worry if he was sick and couldn’t do something. Here...he was allowed to be vulnerable. Something he rarely got to be. He burrowed into the couch and the blankets more, finishing off his breakfast. He felt slightly nauseous, but Logan was smiling at him because of it, so he certainly wasn’t going to complain.

When Mister Emile came in, Roman turned half-glazed over eyes to look at him, and was having issues focusing. “Feeling any better, Roman?” he asked.

Roman groaned and shook his head.

Mister Emile winced. “That’s no good. Let me or Mister Remy know if you need anything, all right? We don’t want you to go without something you need just because you can’t get it by yourself. That goes for you too, Logan.”

He left the room and Logan and Roman shared surprised expressions. “Wow,” Roman said. “That was...”

“...Something.” Logan finished. “That was certainly something.”

As Roman let that information sink in, he turned his attention back to the TV. He could thank Mister Emile and Mister Remy later. And maybe make up waking up Logan somehow, too. It would be nice to show the people that cared about him he cared about them as well.
Chapter 9

March 14th, 2015

Patton squealed and grabbed Virgil’s shoulders as they both stared at the breakfast table in shock. Their mother was standing there, smiling. “Happy birthday, boys. I figured that we all deserved a treat today, so I made pancakes. I hope that’s okay?”

Virgil looked at their mom in shock and ran over hugging her. “Thank you!” he exclaimed, and Patton soon joined him. They climbed up onto their chairs in front of the pancakes and ate happily. They looked at each other and smiled and laughed, poking fun at each other having syrup everywhere.

Their mother looked on with a fond smile, and Patton thought that there certainly had never been a happier time in his life. But he was four now, after all! There had to be greater things right around the corner!

February 5th, 2019

Virgil was shaking beneath him. Patton hated to do this, but it had become increasingly necessary for them to stay quiet, and Virgil, try as he might, was not good at staying quiet. Something shattered outside the closet they were hiding in, and Virgil let out a muffled shriek into Patton’s hands. Patton shushed him quietly, and he could feel his hand starting to grow slick with Virgil’s tears.

“What are you two brats?!” their stepfather, Charles, bellowed. “Come on, don’t be shy! I only want to talk to you!”

That was the biggest lie that Patton had ever heard. He kept one hand firmly over Virgil’s mouth and the other wrapped around Virgil’s waist, to keep him from jumping. He knew that Virgil hated this, that it made him feel more trapped than they already were, stuck in a closet, but there wasn’t much they could do.

Eventually, the lumbering footsteps around their room left, and the bedroom door slammed. Patton immediately let Virgil go and Virgil started to sob. “I hate him,” he choked out. “I hate him I hate him I hate him.”

“I know you do, Virge. We’ll find a way out of here, though, all right?” Patton soothed.

“How?” Virgil asked in a heated whisper. “Charles always falls asleep on the couch by the front door, we can’t exactly leave that way! And Mom will never kick him out, no matter how much we beg!”


Virgil shook and sobbed and Patton wished he could do something to help his older brother out. They may have been born five minutes apart, and Virgil may have always pulled the “I was born first” card, but Patton was by far the more stoic of the two, and often seen as the more mature one as well.

Patton chewed on his thumbnail when an idea struck him. He knew Virgil wouldn’t like it, though.
“Virgil, I have an idea.”

Virgil looked at him warily. “What?”

Patton gently opened the closet door and looked around, confirming that Charles was out of the room. “You know that guy that Mom would talk about, and how we were born?”

“Mister Picani?” Virgil sniffled.

“Yeah, him,” Patton said. “Why don’t we try and find him, see if we can live with him instead of here?”

“One problem with that, Patton, we don’t know where he lives!” Virgil whimpered. “We could be on the streets for months trying to find him!”

“Not necessarily,” Patton said. “You remember the phone books that Mom had? He should be listed in the...what did she call it? The white pages.”

“Only if he lives around here,” Virgil spat bitterly. “He could be halfway around the world!”

“It won’t hurt to check, right?” Patton pressed. “You don’t even have to come with me to look. You can stay in here while I do it.”

Virgil shook his head. “It’s too risky, Pat! I won’t let you get hurt over this!”

Patton tried not to feel put out by Virgil’s denial. After all, he was trying to think of Patton’s best interests first and foremost. “Well, why don’t we check to see if the library might have the book, then? Libraries have all sorts of books!”

Virgil shuffled on his feet. “But how would we get to the library? We both have cards, sure, but...we have to get there, somehow.”

“We’ll have to walk, ‘cause Mom won’t drive us there. Are you in or out?” Patton didn’t want to pressure Virgil, but he couldn’t have his brother change his mind halfway to the library.

Virgil shifted on his feet for a few seconds, staring at the ground. When he looked up, there was a fire in Virgil’s eyes Patton hadn’t seen in years. An anger that burned hotter than the sun. Patton knew it was directed at their stepfather, and to an extent their mother as well. “I’m in. But we’re gonna have to do some things first.”

“What kinds of things?” Patton asked.

Virgil strode out of their closet and grabbed his backpack, stacking his papers on his bed and stuffing the backpack with clothes. “We’re gonna have to make sure we’re ready if Charles doesn’t let us back in the house,” he said, shaking his head. “Choose what you want to take with you. We might have to leave the house sooner than we expect.”

Patton paled a bit and grabbed his own backpack, emptying it of his schoolwork and stuffing clothes in it. As an afterthought, he also grabbed his kitten stuffed animal and Virgil’s stormcloud blanket. He figured if they didn’t come back, they might want something to keep their spirits up.

When both of them had packed, Virgil held a finger to his lips. Patton nodded. Virgil rarely took charge, but when he did, it was important. He approached Virgil, who pulled out a swiss army knife he must have nicked from the kitchen when Charles put it down. He slid it into the putty that kept their bedroom windows shut. Slowly but surely, he carved his way through the putty to get them
both a way out of the house without passing Charles in the living room. Virgil unlocked the window and pushed it up, and both of them jumped at the loud creak that came from the window.

“Run!” Virgil hissed, shoving Patton out the window, and Patton had never been so glad to have a bedroom on the ground floor.

Virgil hopped out with him and the both of them sprinted away from the house, as they heard someone throw the window all the way open. “Hey, runts! Get back here!” Charles bellowed.

Patton and Virgil didn’t even spare a glance back. Patton’s lungs burned as they continued, and never ever had he wished that he had lost his baby fat more. Virgil held his hand and continued pulling them both forward, even when Patton started to wheeze.

They left the neighborhood and started walking along the main road, Virgil rubbing Patton’s back underneath the backpack, soothing him. “It’ll be okay, Pat. We can’t go back, but the whole point of us leaving was that we could get away from them. Now we don’t have to worry about getting hit or screamed at ever again.”

Patton nodded, even though he really wanted to cry. “We didn’t get to say goodbye to Mom,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

“Mom hasn’t cared about us in a long time,” Virgil spat. Patton was shocked by the sheer venom in his voice. “She might have liked us once upon a time, but Charles changed her mind.”

Patton wilted at that. He still wanted to believe that Mom loved them both. That was one of the reasons he had never suggested running away before. That and he had heard horror stories about kids who had ran away.

Big, fat slow flakes started to fall from the sky and Virgil cussed. Patton gasped. “Where did you learn that?”

“The fifth graders,” Virgil said with a smirk. “You know it, too.”

“Because Charles would scream it sometimes. I know that the words he screams are bad ones,” Patton said, crossing his arms. “They’re not supposed to be used.”

“It’s fine if there aren’t adults to get you in trouble,” Virgil said, looking up at the sky. “But we’d better hurry to the library, if we don’t want to get frostbite.”

Patton nodded and shivered in the cold air. “Virgil...” His brother looked over at him. “If we had to run away...I’m glad that you’re with me.”

Virgil smirked. “Same, Pat. There’s no one I’d rather run away with.”

The two shared a smile, and continued the trek to the library. It wasn’t too far, only a couple blocks away once they left the suburbs they grew up in. They stumbled into the warm building twenty minutes to half an hour later, and Patton rubbed his hands gratefully in the warmth. “This is good,” he said. “Did you grab your library card?”

Virgil pulled it out of his pocket. “Do you have yours?”

“In my backpack,” Patton confirmed. “That’s one good thing that Mom did, letting us get library cards.”

Virgil nodded. “You know, the libraries have computers. We can probably google Mister Picani.”
“That would be faster,” Patton agreed.

Together the two made it to the kids’ section and Virgil hopped on an open computer, inputting his library card number and his password, before googling “Mister Picani.”

That brought up thousands of results, and Virgil growled in frustration. “Hey, Patton, do you remember Mister Picani’s first name?”

“That’s a picture, scroll down!”

Virgil stared at the images. “There would be dozens if not hundreds of pictures and we can’t possibly go through them all. We don’t even know what he looks like.”

Patton looked at the links and his eyes widened. “Hey, this is our city’s newspaper!” he exclaimed, jabbing a finger at the monitor.

Virgil clicked on it and the two read the headline. “New Coffee Shop Sleep Easy Huge Hit? Why would this be in our search?”

Patton frowned. “There’s a picture, scroll down!”

Virgil did, and both of their eyes widened. There were two men kissing under the awning of a coffee shop, and one of them looked almost exactly like Patton. “That’s gotta be Mister Picani!” Patton exclaimed. “He looks just like me!”

“I think you mean you look like him,” Virgil pointed out. “He existed first.”

Patton stuck his tongue out at Virgil and Virgil grinned. “You know what this means?” he asked Patton.

“That we’re not in as big trouble as we thought?” Patton asked.

“Kinda. It also means that this guy either lives in town or close to it!” Virgil exclaimed. “We could find the coffeeshop and ask around, see if we can find Mister Picani.”

Patton’s eyes lit up. “Good idea! Look up the coffeeshop, maybe it has a website, and we can figure out when it’s open and where it is!”

Virgil nodded, and as he searched, Patton glanced around. A few kids were giving them looks, but none of the adults had seemed to notice...yet. “Hurry up, too. Some of the kids are staring.”

“All right, I’m going as fast as I can,” Virgil said softly. “...Here we go. Sleep Easy. It’s right off Main Street.”

Patton groaned. “Main Street is, like, an hour away on foot! Does it say where by Main Street?”

Virgil looked at the address and frowned. “Uh...by the railroad tracks. I didn’t realize those were still used.”

Patton frowned. The railroad tracks were almost on the opposite side of town. “I’m not sure we can make it there before they close,” Patton said softly.

Virgil looked over the site and hummed. “They close at ten. It’s six now. We can make it. I hope,” Virgil said.
Patton glanced out the windows of the library. It was snowing harder now. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to go out in this weather?” he asked hesitantly.

“No,” Virgil said. “It’s probably not a good idea. But we’ve gotta go out there if we want to have a chance. If the adults realize we’re here unsupervised they might call the police and send us back.”

Patton paled and nodded. “We’d better start walking, then.”

Virgil agreed and logged off the computer, and the two of them walked out of the library, at least one of the librarians watching them. Virgil looked around. “We need to convince the librarians we’re not on our own.”

Patton looked around. “I don’t see any families we can hide in,” he said.

Virgil huffed. “Well, I don’t want to keep running. Let’s walk towards the bus stop, maybe that will get the adults off our backs.”

They walked to the bus stop, and kept walking after that. Patton was very glad Virgil knew the roads of the city well. Between his memory and Patton’s sense of direction, they were headed towards Main Street in no time.
Virgil frowned slightly, looking up at the man his mom had introduced him and Patton to as “Charles.” The man was looking down at him with a small smile that made Virgil’s skin crawl. Patton was looking between Charles and their mom with wide eyes. Patton pointed to Charles. “Is he gonna be our dad?” Patton asked.

Charles’ smile disappeared and Virgil’s alarm bells starting ringing. “Not necessarily, Patton,” their mom said. “But he’s very important to me, so I want the two of you to be nice to him, okay?”

Virgil scratched the back of his neck. “Okay, Mom,” he said softly. He knew that Charles was no good, but he didn’t want to upset his mom, so he didn’t say anything. Not to mention, he thought that if Charles got mad, it wouldn’t end well for either him or Patton.

Virgil was worried. He didn’t want to let Patton know, because he knew Patton would worry ten times more if he knew Virgil didn’t like this, but he couldn’t deny he was worried.

It was snowing, and even if the snow wasn’t quite sticking yet, that meant it was freezing at best. You could get hypothermia or frostbite in these types of temperatures. Patton had some baby fat left on him, so he might be warmer longer, but Virgil himself was thin, and he knew he wouldn’t be okay in below-freezing weather without a jacket for long. He was already shivering.

Patton was always the one who took care of him at home. He appreciated Patton for that. When there was a set routine, or someone needed quiet, Patton would help Virgil keep quiet, either gently or by force depending on how much it was needed. If Virgil was hungry, Patton would make them both something to eat if Mom was busy with Charles.

When it came to situations they were unfamiliar with, though, Virgil usually found himself in charge. Virgil was the one who could put on a tough, angry exterior. The one who could make other people stay away. He was the one who could make sure the bullies hurt if they came after Patton.

They kept walking in the cold, and he didn’t fail to notice Patton’s shivering. “You feeling okay, Pat?” Virgil asked.

“Cold,” Patton said.

Virgil stopped, and put a hand on Patton’s chest to stop him. “Maybe we should put on extra layers of clothes. That could help.”
Patton nodded and they both put on an extra shirt, and Virgil tried to get on another pair of pants but couldn’t succeed. He stuffed the pants back in his backpack and grumbled, but continued to walk. He looked around, in the dimming light, and knew that soon it was going to feel even colder. “Do you want to play I Spy while we walk?” Virgil offered.

“No, I wanna pay attention to the street signs,” Patton insisted quietly.

“Okay,” Virgil said. That made practical sense, even if he wished that he could get Patton to smile a little bit.

Virgil stuffed his hands in his pants pockets. He was cold, and he knew it was only going to get worse. He shivered, and ran over the signs of hypothermia in his head. If he stopped shivering, that was bad. If he got confused, that was bad. If he was sleepy, that was bad. He had to stay awake, stay alert, and keep shivering as if his life depended on it. Because it did.

Eventually, they got to Main Street, and Patton whooped in victory, and Virgil smiled. They had been walking for an hour, and Virgil was feeling exhausted. He knew Patton’s heavy breathing meant he wasn’t much better off.

They headed in the direction of the railroad tracks, Patton chattering away, his mood significantly improved from what it had been before they reached Main Street. Virgil didn’t have the heart to tell him it might be several more hours before they reached the shop.

It couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes later that Virgil stumbled and fell to the pavement. He pushed himself up, back onto his feet, and brushed the snow off his shirt as best he could. It had started to stick sometime in the past half an hour, and Virgil was even more worried when he finally noticed it.

“You okay, Virge?” Patton asked.


“Don’t know how warm I can be,” Patton admitted.

“Yeah,” Virgil agreed. “But we’ve gotta try.”

Patton gave him a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes and nodded. Virgil lead them down the street and continued to breathe, focusing on that and not the dull cold surrounding him. He was still shivering, but it was slower and less frequent. They had to find somewhere warm soon.

He blinked, and he didn’t recognize where they were. He looked behind him and saw the shops they were approaching behind him. “Woah,” Virgil breathed. “I must have zoned out.”

“Yeah, you seemed out of it for ten minutes,” Patton said, worry coloring his voice. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“No,” Virgil admitted, knowing that this was a very bad sign. “But I’ll be better when we can get somewhere warm.”

Patton nodded, biting his lip. Virgil smiled at him, praying that it actually made it into his eyes. “I’ll be fine, baby bro. No need to worry.”

“If you say so...” Patton said.

“Yeah,” Virgil said, and they kept walking.
Virgil could feel his muscles getting stiff and he stumbled again, trying to force himself up into a standing position, but he didn’t quite have the strength for it. “Virgil?!” Patton asked, voice easily reaching a panicked shriek.

“I’ll...be...fine, Pat. Just...need a minute...” he mumbled.

“Virgil, we don’t have a minute. We have to keep moving, keep us warm,” Patton said frantically. He gripped Virgil’s shirt and Virgil could feel how cold Patton’s fingers were through the thin material. “Come on, Virge, get up!”

He knew, logically, Patton was right. But he wanted nothing more than to sleep right now. “Pat, just a minute...please.”

Patton sounded like he was crying. “Virgil, no! Stay awake, Virgil, please!”

Virgil couldn’t even get his mouth to move and request one more minute. He blinked slowly, and Patton was sobbing over him. “Help!” Patton screamed. “Someone help, please!”

There was no one around in the cold air. Just the snow greeting them as Virgil laid on the pavement. It wasn’t the comfiest place he had ever slept, but it beat home after Charles had been drinking, when the whole house smelled like stale beer. “Pat...shhhhh...” Virgil whimpered.

“Someone help! My brother’s in trouble!” Patton wailed. He stood and moved away, but Virgil couldn’t tell where to. He hoped somewhere warm. He might freeze out here, but that was no reason for Patton to, as well. “Sir, please, my brother...he...he...we’ve been walking for hours!”

“It’s gonna be okay, kid, just breathe for me, all right? Your brother’s name, what is it?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

“V-Virgil,” Patton stammered out.

Virgil forced his eyes open, though he couldn’t push his hair out of his face. He could just barely make out a man like the one in the news article they had seen kneeling over him. “Hey, Virgil? Can you hear me?”

All he could do was make a small mewling sound.

“He must have been cold for quite a while before this,” the man murmured. “Virgil? I’m going to lift you up and get you and your brother in my car, all right? We’re gonna get you warmed up, buddy, just hang on, all right?”

“Uh...huh...” Virgil managed. He didn’t even try nodding.

The man grunted and lifted Virgil up, and then everything was blissfully warm. Patton was still crying next to him, and Virgil wanted to reassure him that it was all right, he’d be okay, but that took so much effort.

“H-he’ll be okay, won’t he?” Patton asked through tears.

“I hope so,” the man said. “I’m taking you both to the hospital, you shouldn’t be out alone at night, especially not in this weather.”

“Th-thank you,” Patton blubbered. “Thank you so much.”

“Don’t worry about it, Patton. My husband would kill me if he knew I left two kids to fend on their
own in this weather."

“What’s your husband’s name?” Patton asked.

Virgil suddenly felt like he was moving without moving and he just barely made out the word, “Emile,” before everything went mercifully dark.
September 15th, 2000

Emile smiled at the man who he was sitting next to in the local coffee shop, who he was quickly becoming fast friends with. Remy was pouring over his business textbook with a sigh. “I mean, I know ninety percent of the stuff in this book! I don’t understand why I’m going to college!” Remy complained.

Shrugging, Emile said, “There has to be some reason, right? Something that you really want to learn?”

“Yes,” Remy sighed. “I don’t know why I’m wasting money when I’m not even gonna learn anything.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t go to college,” Emile said with a shrug.

Remy sat back in his chair and hummed. “You know, you may have a point...”

February 5th, 2019

Emile was worried. Remy was running late, and he hadn’t called to give a reason why. That meant that he wasn’t stuck in traffic, and that he wasn’t helping late at the coffee shop. Roman and Logan were both relaxing in the living room, Roman in pajamas and Logan in his day clothes still. Emile couldn’t let them know he was worried, not this early in the night, but he was really worried.

Emile’s cell rang, and as if he had been summoned, Remy’s image was waiting on the screen. He answered the phone and hissed, “Remy, where are you? I was getting worried!”

“Emile, I need you to stay calm with what I’m about to tell you, okay?” Remy asked. His voice was neutral in tone but sounded a bit strained, and a little hoarse. “I’m at the hospital. I saw two kids on the street, one of them had real bad hypothermia, and I couldn’t just leave them alone, so I drove them here. I won’t be home for a bit.”

“Are you okay?! Do I need to bring the boys over? Do I need to come over?” Emile asked, his free hand making sweeping gestures. “Just say the word and I’ll get Roman and Logan in the car.”

“Mister Emile, what’s going on?” Roman asked.

Emile held up one finger as Remy started to speak again. “You might want to come here, and maybe bring your paternity test stuff with you. The kid who isn’t unconscious was in pretty bad shape emotionally, but he was the spitting image of you as a kid, Emile. Curly red hair, freckles, and all.”
“You’re saying there might be more kids out there?” Emile asked skeptically. “I don’t know, Rem, two already seems like a huge coincidence.”

“Look, bring it or don’t, but I can’t stay up all night watching these kids, and you’re much better with emotional stuff than I am,” Remy said. “Can you just...get here?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right over,” Emile said, hanging up. Logan and Roman were looking at him curiously. “Both you kids finished your homework, right?” he asked.

He got twin nods of assent.

“Good, because we have to make a late-night trip to the hospital. I don’t know how long it’ll be, so bring a set of clothes for tomorrow morning, and your backpacks so that if necessary Remy or I can drive the two of you to school.” Emile clapped his hands. “Let’s get moving.”

The two got packed quickly, and the atmosphere was tense in the car ride to the hospital, even though Emile played music. They got to the hospital and once Emile explained that he was there to assist his husband, the nurses directed him, Logan, and Roman to the pediatric ward.

Remy was sitting in one of the plastic chairs on the side of a bed, while a small blonde boy was lying on the bed, and a curly-haired boy who did indeed look like Emile as a kid sat on the edge, wiping at his eyes. “Hello, hello!” Emile said, walking in the room. Logan and Roman followed, standing by the door awkwardly.

The relief on Remy’s face was obvious to Emile. “Emile, you’re here. It’s so good to see you.” He turned to the curly-haired boy. “Patton, this is Emile, my husband.”

Emile waved and Patton offered a small wave back. “My mom used to tell me and Virgil about you,” Patton said softly. “Said that you were her first choice when she decided she wanted kids.”

“Really?” Emile asked. “I never knew that.”

Patton nodded. “She used to do a lot of stuff, before she married Charles.” He wrinkled his nose. “Charles liked to hurt me and Virgil. Not, like, hitting. At least, not mostly. But he would scare Virgil and laugh, and shout at us whenever we were too loud. So we ran away.”

Emile frowned. “Where were you headed? Do you have any other family who would help you?”

Patton shrugged. “Granny might, but she lives really far away. We were headed to this coffee shop in town called Sleep Easy. ‘Cause Virgil and I, we were hoping that you might be able to help us, and you were in the picture in a news article about it. Thinking about it...it might have been a stretch...” Patton looked at Roman and Logan. “And it looks like you already have kids, so I know you might not want me and Virgil...”

“Hey,” Emile said softly. “Don’t sell yourself short, kid. At the very least, I can give you guys a place to stay while you see if your Granny can look after you.”

Patton sagged with relief as a few tears slipped down his face. “Thank you,” he said. “Uh, this is my brother Virgil, but uh...he was in the cold for a while.”

“According to Remy, you both were,” Emile said. “You two are lucky he drove home when he did.”

“I know,” Patton said. “I thought we were gonna...that we were gonna...gonna be popsicles.”

“Let’s be glad that didn’t happen,” Emile said. “Logan, Roman, you two don’t have to stand at the
door. We might be here a while, let’s see if we can at least get comfortable.”

Logan and Roman nodded, both of them getting situated on the other bed in the room. Remy rubbed Patton’s shoulder. “You’re gonna be okay, Patton. You and Virgil both.”

Patton nodded.

Emile moved towards Remy. “Why don’t you take a break, Rem? Maybe take the boys home, if you need to. I can stay here with these two.”

Roman’s head shot up. “No way! I want to make sure that my baby brothers are okay!”

“I agree with Roman, for once,” Logan said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Even if the nurses call me ‘sweetheart’ and ‘miss.’ I’ll rest easier knowing that both of them are okay.”

Emile sighed, knowing that Logan and Roman were already attached to these two and if they did wind up going to their grandmother’s, Logan and Roman would never stop at the very least writing to them to make sure they were okay. “All right. But my point stands, Rem, you look like you’ve been through the wringer.”

Remy nodded. “I’ll see if they can bring another chair in here,” he mumbled, walking out of the room.

Everyone got settled and Emile sat in the chair that Remy had been occupying earlier, taking one of Patton’s hands and smiling reassuringly. “It’ll all be okay,” he soothed.

Patton nodded and looked at Virgil. “I kinda want to sleep,” Patton admitted. “And I’m warm, so it’s not a bad thing. But I don’t want Virge to wake up without me right here.”

“Well, you can take this chair if you need,” Emile said.

Patton shook his head before Emile could stand. “I’ll stay here. I’m not even sure I could sleep right now, even though I want to.”

Emile nodded his understanding. Logan asked Patton a question about Patton’s glasses and Patton was suitably distracted from Virgil’s condition for the time being. Remy came back in with a second chair and took up vigil by the door. They all stayed in the room, even as the lights dimmed outside, and a nurse came in the door just enough to turn the lights in their room off.

Logan and Roman had both fallen asleep on the free bed, and Remy was dozing in his chair by the door. Only Patton and Emile were awake, Emile rubbing Patton’s hand with a thumb as Patton talked about what his and Virgil’s home life had been like with Charles moving in. Virgil groaned on the bed, and Patton’s gaze immediately snapped to him. “Virgil?” he asked.

“P’t...” Virgil’s voice was weak and his forehead creased. He opened his eyes halfway and looked at his brother. “You...oh...kay?”

Patton laughed even as tears were forming in his eyes. “I’m fine, I was just a little cold and fifteen minutes under a blanket warmed me up. You’ve been asleep for hours!”

Virgil blinked, looking around. “Where...how...?”

Emile stood and moved into Virgil’s line of sight. “Virgil, it’s good to see you awake. My husband found you and Patton on the street and brought you here to the hospital. How are you feeling?”
Virgil moved the blankets off his chest and coughed. “Like I’m being smothered,” he groused.

Patton giggled, effectively waking up Remy. “Huh? What’s...oh, Virgil. You’re awake.”

Virgil rubbed his head. “Your voice sounds familiar. I don’t remember you, though.”

“I’m the one who found you and your brother and brought you both here,” Remy said. “And right now, I’m the one who’s gonna grab a nurse and make sure that both of you are all right.”

Remy left the room quickly and Emile looked Virgil over. He looked tired, and maybe a little annoyed from the blankets, but his gaze was solely focused on Patton and filled with worry. “Virgil, Patton,” Emile said softly to get the boys’ attention on him. When he had it, he continued. “Remy and I are certified foster parents. If you need a place to go, at least until you can contact your grandmother, we would be more than happy to let you stay with us.”

Virgil looked to Patton and Patton looked back. Virgil furrowed his brows and Patton shrugged, adjusting his glasses with a grin. Virgil turned to look at Emile. “Okay,” he said softly. “Your place has to be better than the streets, at least.”

“That’s the spirit, sorta,” Emile said with a laugh. “No offense taken, I understand what you mean.”

Virgil nodded as Remy and a nurse hurried into the room. The nurse asked Virgil a bunch of questions and took his temperature, and smiled. “Well, Virgil, it seems like you’re perfectly healthy! You’re very fortunate to have so much of your family concerned about you!”

She turned to Remy and said, “We can discharge him first thing in the morning.”

“Great, thank you,” Remy said, and she left the room.

Virgil sighed. “I have to stay here all night?” he asked.

“Chin up, Virge!” Pat said. “We have some place to go now!”

Virgil turned red and muttered something along the lines of “But I miss...you know...”

“Oh!” Patton exclaimed. “I brought that with me! Along with Little Kitty!”

He grabbed a backpack off the floor and pulled out a baby blanket covered in storm clouds. Virgil blushed but took it with a small “thank you.” He leaned back on the bed, and Patton laid down next to him, and soon both of them were asleep again, leaving Emile and Remy to talk. “You know we have to take them in for the time being,” Emile said.

“Yes, I do,” Remy said. “You know what this means?”

Emile sighed and scratched the back of his neck. “Remy, I’m sorry, I never should have donated my sperm. I know I just wanted to help other families have kids but now we’re the ones with all these kids...”

Remy put a finger on Emile’s lips to shush him. “It looks like we should start searching for a bigger house.”

Emile laughed and Remy hugged him. Emile kissed his cheek, knowing in that moment that Remy was truly the one for him, if he could put up with all this.
Chapter 12

July 21st, 2018

Roman sang quietly to himself, so as not to disturb the other kids in the house, and prayed that no one would tattle on him for making noise. “Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear Roman, happy birthday to you...” He bit back the tears that threatened to escape as he sang. This was his first birthday without his mom right there to help him. He was twelve years old, stuck in a broken foster home, with no visible way out except in six years.

Something had to be done, though. He couldn’t stay here for six years, he just couldn’t. If everything became unbearable one day, he resolved to himself to just get up and leave. But he didn’t want to risk leaving just yet, because he had no idea where he would go. He needed to get his hands on his legal documents. Every kid had a mom and a dad, biologically speaking, right? If he could figure out who his dad was, maybe he could ask the man for help.

He had to hold out that hope for as long as possible.

February 6th, 2019

Roman came home from school that day, to find Mister Emile and Mister Remy arguing over how to build a bedframe from...Roman thought it looked like IKEA. He awkwardly cleared his throat. They both stopped and looked over at him. “Where’s Logan?” he asked.

“Uh, last I checked, he went to visit Jack,” Mister Emile said. “Which is just as well, because this is a really ugly situation.”

“Uh-huh,” Roman said, not really understanding.

Mister Remy shifted from his knees to sitting on the floor. “Roman, we hate to ask you to do this, but are you willing to share a room? With either Logan or one of the twins?”

Roman’s stomach sank. “So you talked to their grandmother?”

Mister Emile winced. “She’s not capable of raising two seven-year-olds right now; apparently she had a recent shoulder injury and can barely take care of herself. Meaning we’re fostering them until further notice.”

Roman nodded. He wasn’t thrilled, but he wouldn’t want to send the twins anywhere else if it wasn’t with someone who could take care of them. “I’d prefer sharing a room with Logan,” he said. “Because I don’t care if he has boobs, but sharing my room with a little kid is...not fun, in my experience.”
Mister Emile and Mister Remy shared a look, and Roman sighed. “You know that I know you both worry about me, right?” he asked. “Because I do. And I’m touched, really. But foster care sucked. That’s the long and short of it. The police found out that I didn’t have any parents, and they shipped me to foster care, and the people who were fostering me weren’t good people.”

A thick silence hung over all three of them until Mister Remy said, “I’m sorry, Roman. That sounds rough.”

Roman shrugged. “It is what it is,” he dismissed. “And it could be worse. I could still be there. But I’m not, and that’s the end of that. You don’t have to worry. I’m out of there.”

“You may be out of there, Roman, but that doesn’t mean you’re not hurt,” Mister Emile said softly. Roman flinched minutely. “Yeah, well, I’m not, as far as I know. I’m good, really.”

Mister Emile looked like he wanted to argue, but Mister Remy steered the conversation away from that topic. “So, are you sure you’re okay with sharing your room with Logan?” he asked.

Roman nodded. “I’d prefer it be him to either of the twins. I don’t mind them, but I’d like to use my room past eight thirty, you know?”

“Yeah, that’s not an issue,” Mister Remy said. “You can ask Logan if he’s okay with it once he’s back. Though truth be told, I don’t think the twins are going to want to separate anyway, and we can’t move the office down to the basement, because the basement is already being used for storage and it’s too small to be of much use anyway.”

Roman sighed. “So, I’ll be sharing with Logan for the foreseeable future. Got it.”

“Actually...” Mister Emile paused. “Do we tell them?”

“I mean, we should probably tell them all, since it involves them,” Mister Remy said, shifting back to his knees to work on the bed frame.

“Tell me what?” Roman asked.

“Well, since the twins’ grandmother can’t take care of them, and giving them back to their parents is not an option, we’ll need more space to take care of all of you. We want you to be able to have your own room, and same with Logan. Patton and Virgil made it clear when Remy found them that they’re inseparable, so they might be okay with sharing, but the fact remains that this is a three bedroom house that has six people living in it,” Emile explained. “So Remy and I are looking into buying a bigger house.”

“We’re...moving?” Roman asked.

“Potentially,” Mister Remy said. “And not before the end of the month, for sure, because we need time.”

“Okay,” Roman said. “That’s a little shocking, but not surprising. If we want space, we’ll have to move.”

“You’re surprisingly calm about this,” Mister Emile said.

“Well, I get to keep my stuff, right?” Roman asked.

“Yeah,” Mister Emile confirmed.
“And you two will still be taking care of me?” Roman added.

“Of course,” Mister Remy assured.

“Then it’s no worries,” Roman said. “Everything’s gonna be okay.”

“You’re putting a lot of faith in us,” Mister Remy said lightly.

Roman shrugged. “I mean, I’ve been through way worse, right? So long as you guys are there to help, sooner or later things will work out.”

The front door downstairs burst open and two high voices started stampeding through the house. Roman smiled and put his backpack in his room. “I’m gonna get to know my brothers a little more,” he said.

When he got downstairs, Virgil and Patton were happily chatting to each other. “No, look, those books were so cool! They might be for the older kids but I definitely want to try them at some point!” Virgil exclaimed.

Patton shook his head. “If they’re for the big kids how will you understand them?” he asked.

“Easy! I’ll find a dictionary to go with it!” Virgil exclaimed.

Roman laughed and the two looked over at him. “What books are you talking about?” he asked. “Animorphs,” Patton said. “The covers are creepy but Virgil really wants to read them anyway.”

Roman thought back to what he remembered from reading one or two of those books. “They’re definitely for older kids,” he told them. “Not necessarily because of the words, though. It has a lot of death and fighting and creepy-crawly stuff.”

“Oh,” Virgil said. “Maybe I won’t read them, then. There’s always those Goosebumps books to try. And those don’t usually wind up with people being dead.”

“Yeah, good call,” Roman said. “I read some of the Animorphs books and they’re good, but definitely not for the faint of heart.”

“I’ll stick to other books, then,” Virgil said. “Maybe I’ll read Animorphs when I’m older.”

“Maybe,” Roman said. “But until then, don’t worry about it too much. Though you’re right, the covers are pretty cool.”

Virgil grinned. “Right! That’s what I’m saying!”

“Those covers are creepy, plain and simple,” Patton said, shaking his head. “Did Mister Emile and Mister Remy talk to Granny?”

“They did,” Roman said, thankful for the change in topic. “Apparently she hurt her shoulder really bad and she wouldn’t be able to help you two right now. Sorry.”

Patton deflated a little. “Oh. So, where will we stay?”

“Here,” Roman said. “Mister Emile and Mister Remy are building two new beds for the bedrooms. Do you two want to share a room?”

“Yes!” Virgil said, eyes wide and his answer just a second too quick. “I mean, if that’s okay with
“Course it is,” Patton said with a grin, hugging Virgil. “I’d feel weird not sleeping in the same room as you, too.”

Roman nodded. “You should probably let Mister Emile and Mister Remy know. And I’ll ask Logan if he’s okay with sharing a room with me.”

“What?” a new voice asked from the doorway.

“Oh, Logan, you’re home,” Roman said. “Yeah, uh, the twins don’t have anywhere else to go, and they want to share a room. So...since we only have three bedrooms, we have to double up. I hope it won’t be...a problem...?”

“But...” Logan shook his head. “Roman, I’m...you know...a girl.”

“No you’re not!” Roman exclaimed. “Having breasts doesn’t make you a girl, Logan! If you’re not comfortable sharing a room with me, that’s fine. But if you’re only worried about me seeing you without a bra, or binder, or whatever, I really don’t care? We’re brothers; it would be really creepy if I did notice.”

“Wait, you’re a girl?!” Virgil asked, turning to look at Logan.

“No he’s not, dummy! Didn’t you just hear Roman? He’s got a girl body but a boy brain,” Patton said. “You’re not a dummy, actually, but you can’t ask those things!”

“Oh,” Virgil said, thoroughly chastised. “Sorry, Logan.”

Logan was just staring at the three of them in shock. “But...but...” Tears were coming to his eyes.

“But everyone said...for years...and I know I’m not, but...”

“Logan, you’re not a girl, and that’s all that matters,” Roman insisted. “It doesn’t matter what anyone else said. And Mister Emile and Mister Remy are okay with us two sharing a room. I’ll move all my stuff to your room, if you want, because I know you have a place for everything already and I don’t want to mess that up.”

Logan looked like he was about to cry. “I guess...it didn’t really sink in...that...”

“That you’re our brother, not our sister?” Roman asked with a grin. “Yeah, Lo, that’s kinda how being trans works.”

“Shut up,” Logan said through his tears. “I hate crying. You’re making me cry!”

“Happy tears or sad tears?” Roman asked.

Logan sniffled. “I don’t even know.”

Roman shook his head with a fond smile. “Well, if you want to use your room to cry, I’d suggest doing so now and kicking out Mister Emile and Mister Remy, because this might be the last time you get your own room for a little while.”

Logan sniffed and wiped at his eyes. “No, I’m fine. And we can share a room. Having the three of you share with me having one to myself just because of my government-assigned gender doesn’t seem fair.”

“Government-assigned gender?” Virgil asked.
“You know how they say whether you’re a boy or a girl when you’re born?” Patton asked him.

Virgil nodded.

“That’s what he means. Because everyone, including the government, I guess, calls him a girl.”

“Not us, though,” Virgil said, frowning.

“No, because we know he’s a boy,” Patton confirmed.

“That’s confusing,” Virgil whined.

“Imagine having to live through that, though,” Patton said.

Virgil blinked, once. Twice. He turned to Logan. “How do you do that?!” he asked.

Logan smiled bitterly. “Very carefully,” he said.

“I didn’t realize that most boys didn’t have those problems,” Virgil said. “Well, I guess I did, but I didn’t realize that you can’t just choose what gender you are and have everyone accept it automatically.”

“Yeah, it takes a while,” Logan sighed. “And even then, not everyone will accept it, because people are jerks.”

“That’s dumb,” Virgil said. “Obviously you’re a boy. You know you best.”

Logan laughed. “Tell that to my ex-parents.”

Patton gasped. “You had parents before, too? Like, you didn’t just have Mister Emile and Mister Remy?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Logan said, shifting on his feet. “I don’t like to talk about it, though.”

“Same,” Roman said.

The air hung thick over them with awkward silence. Virgil cleared his throat. “So...uh...Logan? Have you ever read the Animorphs books?”

“Yes?” Logan asked, furrowing his brows. “They’re really dark, looking back on them. Are you wanting to read them?”

“Yeah,” Virgil said. “Roman says to wait, though.”

“I’d recommend the same,” Logan said. “Maybe wait until you’re at least in the fourth grade. And if they freak you out then, don’t keep reading them.”

Virgil made an oh face and nodded. “You’re smart,” he said.

Logan preened a little under the praise. “Thank you,” he said. “I certainly try to be.”

Everyone moved to the living room and kept talking, and Roman grinned as everyone got to know each other and relaxed. It was peaceful, despite the count of kids doubling overnight—literally. As Patton and Virgil brought out their backpacks, asking Logan about their homework, Roman offered to bring out snacks and juice. Even Logan accepted, on the agreement that the juice wouldn’t be orange juice, because he was convinced that was for breakfast only.
Roman was pouring the juice when there was a loud pounding on the door. “Mister Picani?” an unfamiliar voice called.

Roman hid out of sight behind one of the walls in the kitchen but peaked around the corner to look as Mister Emile went and opened the door. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“Sir, we’re here to ask you a couple questions,” the man on the other side said, flashing a police badge. Roman’s stomach dropped. “May my partner and I come in?”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for police

January 12th, 2017

Virgil was absolutely terrified. He didn’t know what to do. One minute, he and Patton had been playfully arguing over a game of Operation, and the next, Charles was in the room, bellowing at them to be quiet. Virgil flinched at the loud tone of voice, and Charles got up in his face, breath reeking of stale beer. “What’s the matter, boy? Can’t take a little bit of noise?!” Charles sneered.

Tears were coming to Virgil’s eyes and he tried to keep his breathing even. He was five, about to be six. He was old enough to keep his emotions in check, especially when Charles was mad.

Patton was staring between the two of them with terror in his eyes. “Hey, Virgil, we can keep this going in our room, sound good?” he asked.

Virgil nodded and the two scurried out of the room, game in hand. Virgil took a deep breath. “Why did he yell? He’s never yelled like that before,” Virgil whispered.

Patton just shook his head. “I’m just glad he didn’t hit you.”

Virgil’s terror skyrocketed. What had Charles exactly threatened Patton with?

February 6th, 2019

Virgil swallowed in terror when he heard the man at the door say he wanted to come in. He wanted to scream, to tell Mister Emile to not let them in, because people he didn’t know could be bad, and if they were police, what if they took him and Patton back to Mom and Charles?

But he couldn’t say any of that. He was rooted to his spot on the couch, staring at the doorway with wide eyes. Patton kept a hand on his shoulder, like he always did when Charles would get angry, and Virgil only felt more scared because of it.

Mister Emile stepped back and a man and a woman walked in, neither of whom Virgil recognized. The woman had a badge on her hip and the man had a gun. Virgil squeaked and ducked behind the back of the couch, panicking. Patton hugged him, though Virgil could feel Patton’s tears starting to soak his hair.

The man peered over the couch at the two of them and pulled out a picture, frowning. He turned to Mister Emile. “Sir, where did you get these two children?”

“My husband found them freezing to death in the streets last night,” Mister Emile said. He wasn’t trying to stand tall and intimidate the police, but he wasn’t backing down from them either. “He took them to the hospital, and made sure they were all right. We called their grandmother this morning,
because the kids had her number. She was unable to take care of them for the time being, so my husband and I agreed to house them until we knew what was going to happen to them. We had called Sarah McGee at Child Protective Services."

The woman frowned. "Sir, these children were reported as having been kidnapped last night. Can you explain that?"

Mister Emile looked shocked. "I cannot," he said. "If these two were taken, they said nothing about it. They spoke of an alcoholic stepfather, and their mother being neglectful, however."

The police shared a look and Virgil blurted out, "Don’t send us back!” before he could stop himself.

They looked at him. He was shaking like a leaf, but he couldn’t help it. He was terrified. “Don’t send us back,” he pleaded. “I don’t wanna see Charles again. I don’t want him to yell and drink. I don’t...I don’t want him to hit me or Pat. And I don’t want our mom telling us that if we were just quieter he wouldn’t have to hurt us, because that’s not true! We’re always quiet there, and he gets mad and comes after us anyway!”

The woman walked over to him and Virgil flinched. "Honey, is what you’re saying true?"

“He’s not lying,” Patton assured her. "Charles...he likes to hit. He likes to hit me and Virgil where no one can see the bruises. And he drinks too much. Mom used to help us, but...but now she doesn’t. And she likes Charles too much to leave him or kick him out. So...so we ran away. And when we were cold in the middle of the street, and we were gonna be popsicles because it was snowing last night, you know, Mister Remy helped us get somewhere warm. Charles wouldn’t have done that for us. Mom might or might not, depending on how much she chose to listen to Charles. But Mister Remy and Mister Emile helped us. Mister Emile is our...” he turned to Virgil. "What was that word?"

“Biological?” Virgil asked.

“Yeah!” Patton exclaimed. He turned back to the woman. “He’s our biological dad. Mom told us about him all the time when we were little. Just what she knew from that bank place, because she never met him in person, but he’s super nice. He hasn’t hit me or Virgil once, and he and Mister Remy could have left us where we were to freeze, but they didn’t. They helped us. I don’t wanna go back to Charles, and I know Virgil doesn’t either. Even if we might miss Mom, she would never leave Charles, and that means we don’t want to be with her. Right?"

Virgil nodded. "Charles would hurt us for running away. I don’t wanna hurt."

Patton turned to the police. "You see? It’s not safe for us to go back! Doesn’t that mean we can’t go back?"

The police looked at each other. "We’ll need to make sure what you’re saying is true,” the policeman said.

Virgil summoned all his courage and stood on the couch, pulling up his shirt to show a boot-shaped bruise on his stomach. "Is this proof enough?" he asked. "It doesn’t hurt too much, because I’ve gotten used to it, but is this enough proof?"

Mister Emile paled when he saw the bruise. "When did you get that?!" he asked.

“The day we ran away, Charles was kicking things around. And I was one of those things,” Virgil said with a shrug. "Patton pulled me out of the room to hide in our closet. That’s when we decided to run away."
The policewoman looked extremely angry. “I told you I got a bad feeling when we went to the house,” she said.

“Did it smell like beer?” Patton asked. “Because that probably means Charles was in a bad mood and did something bad last night.”

The police shared a look, before turning to Mister Emile. “Sir, you wouldn’t happen to know any foster families in the area that these two would feel safe at?”

“Here!” Roman said, jumping through the hallway. “Mister Emile and Mister Remy are certified foster parents!”

Logan piped up from behind Patton and Virgil. “I’m currently one of their foster kids, and I can say with certainty that they would make accommodations for these two. They’re already trying to build beds for them in case they decide they want to stay here.”

The police shared another look, and Virgil was almost convinced they were telepathic at this point. “Where is your husband, sir?” the man asked.

“Upstairs,” Mister Emile said. “You’re free to talk to him.”

“Yeah, Curatola, you go,” the man said.

The woman nodded and went upstairs, and the man winced. “Listen. Even with what the boys are saying, their mom is pretty insistent on wanting them back,” he said. “You might have to fight for custody in court.”

Mister Emile closed his eyes and sighed. “Yeah. I don’t like it, but I do understand.”

The man nodded. “You said you contacted Sarah McGee? I’m familiar with her, she’s one of the good ones.”

“Definitely,” Mister Emile said. “Do you really think I’ll have to fight for custody?”

“Well, as of right now, you’ve known these boys all of two days. The court system is also stacked against fathers, usually, which is unfortunate. I’m not saying it’s impossible to keep the boys out of that house, but it’s unlikely. For now, they can stay here, until the investigation with their mother is finished, but I’d look into finding a good lawyer if I were you,” the man said.

Tears blurred Virgil’s vision and Patton was hugging him tightly. “I don’t wanna go back,” he mumbled. “I don’t, I don’t.”

“It’s okay, Virge,” Patton whispered into his ear. “Even if we get taken back, we can run away again.”

Virgil sniffled and shook his head. “Charles probably painted our windows shut by now,” he whimpered.

“So we leave through the front door, or tell a teacher on him so they have to take us away,” Patton reasoned. “I won’t let us be stuck with yucky Charles for the rest of our lives.”

“It won’t work,” Virgil said. “If we go back we’ll never leave. I don’t wanna be stuck with them forever.”

“We won’t be,” Patton insisted. “I won’t let that happen. Understand, Virge? We’re not going back
there. No matter what.”

“How can you say that, baby bro? There’s no guarantee that Mister Emile and Mister Remy will
even win a court case, let alone be approved to keep us,” Virgil hissed.

“We’ll find a way,” Patton assured him again, voice a little louder. “We won’t go back to Mom and
Charles.”

Virgil shook his head, a few tears starting to fall.

Patton bit his lip and turned to the policeman. “Mister Police Officer, sir?”

The man turned to him and Virgil watched the interaction with morbid fascination.

“What do you think the judge person will let me and my brother choose where we want to go?” he asked.

“Our friend Tommy got to choose if he went to his mom or dad when they got a divorce.”

The policeman thought it over and hummed. “It would depend on the judge, kid. And even if you
want to stay here, the judge could decide you’d be better with your mother.”

“But we wouldn’t be!” Patton exclaimed. “That’s the whole point of why we ran away!”

“Yeah, but sometimes people don’t make the right choice,” the policeman said. “My partner and I
will testify if needed, based on what we see here and at your original home, but even then there’s
only so much we can do.”

Patton set his jaw. “Well, you can tell the judge that even if Virgil and I have to go back to our mom,
we’ll just run away again. And next time, we won’t go here, we’ll go somewhere no one can find us.
Because I’m not letting me and my brother fear for our lives every day.”

The policeman blinked. “I’ll let the people at CPS know,” he said slowly. “That has to count for
something in their investigation.”

“Reagan!” the woman said, coming down the stairs. “We have to go, the chief wants to talk to us.”

“All right,” the man said. He turned to Mister Emile “You have any concerns, you can contact me or
my partner Detective Curatola, all right? You might be seeing us again soon, as well as CPS. This
looks like it’s about to get messy, so keep sharp.”

Mister Emile nodded and the two detectives left. Immediately, Mister Emile came over to Virgil.

“Are you both all right?” he asked, voice filled with genuine concern.

“I’m okay,” Patton said, but Virgil felt frozen in place.

He felt like he couldn’t breathe. His chest was too tight and he thought he might faint. He didn’t
want to go back. He knew that Charles would be furious at them for running away, for getting the
police involved, for everything. He wasn’t looking forward to that in the slightest. Coupled with the
fact that they might have to go to court of all places just to be sent back home, it was a small wonder
that he was only crying a little.

Patton was hugging him and Mister Emile was asking him questions, but they sounded garbled, and
Patton’s touch burned like fire. He whimpered and curled into a ball, burying his head in his knees.
He didn’t want to get in trouble for crying, or making noise, but it looked like he didn’t have much of
a choice at this point. He was sobbing, huge shuddering breaths going in and out as quietly as he
could manage. He was struggling, and he knew straightening up might help his breathing, but he
couldn’t stand up right now. That was too dangerous. He didn’t want to be at risk for getting hit.

Patton was still hugging him and Virgil forced himself to not flinch away. Patton was good, he was trying to help. He wouldn’t hurt Virgil. He would never hurt Virgil.

Eventually, his sobs started to die down and he took in a big gulp of air, then another. When he peeked out from behind his knees he saw everyone’s eyes on him. He turned scarlet. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“No need to be sorry, Virgil,” Mister Emile said. “Panic attacks are scary things. Do you feel better?”

“I guess,” Virgil said. “I can breathe again.”

“That’s good, at least,” Mister Emile said with a smile. “Don’t worry, Virgil, we’ll figure things out, all right? Everything’s going to be a-okay.”

Virgil really, really hoped so.
Chapter 14

April 16th, 2018

He tried his hardest to not cry, honest to goodness, he did. But Logan couldn’t help letting a few tears slip down his cheeks. It stung to have everyone sing Happy Birthday using Jessica, not Logan. It stung to have girly presents and dresses instead of wearing suits and ties. Jack knew what was going on, and he tried to keep Logan’s spirits up, but there was only so much even Jack could do.

So here Logan was, trying to muffle his crying. He was fifteen years old, dammit! He wasn’t supposed to cry over people using the wrong name when they didn’t even know any better.

As he finally, mercifully, fell asleep, he remembered with a happy smile how Jack had sung Happy Birthday using Logan, rather than Jessica, and his tears trailed off just enough for his breathing to even out as he finally slipped into the blissful nothing of unconsciousness.

February 15th, 2019

Logan thought he might pass out. He was sitting in the recently-acquired minivan that Mister Emile and Mister Remy had purchased since Patton and Virgil had turned up. They were heading to court, because today was the day that Mister Emile and Mister Remy were adopting him. There was no going back from this. If he did this now, his parents would never get him back...not that he wanted to be back there. Still, there was something inside him that made him feel weak at the knees because he thought about what would happen were his parents to change their minds. And this meant they couldn’t.

They pulled up to the courthouse and Logan held his breath. He was both elated and filled with dread because of this moment. He forced himself to keep moving, no matter what. If he stopped, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to move again.

Mister Emile and Mister Remy were talking quietly behind him, and Logan couldn’t focus on their conversation, too nervous about this new development. Well, maybe new development was the wrong term. He had known this was coming for a while, he had consented to it. But all of it seemed to become real today.

They went inside and walked down a series of corridors until they stopped outside a judge’s office. Logan was standing perfectly still, and Mister Remy put a hand on his shoulder as Mister Emile knocked on the door. On the other side, when the door was opened, were Sarah McGee the social worker, and a judge who was smiling kindly at the three of them. “Right on time,” the judge said. She laughed. “Are you three ready?”

Logan was nudged forward and Mister Remy and Mister Emile walked up to the desk with him. When Logan saw the documents, his eyes widened. “But that’s...” he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“We figured since we were changing your last name we may as well change your first one too while we were at it,” Mister Emile said softly. “Is that okay?”

Tears pricked Logan’s eyes and he nodded frantically. “Yes. Yes, please, yes.”

“Okay,” Mister Emile said with a smile. Sarah was beaming off to the side, and Mister Remy was
Logan nodded again and the judge, Mister Emile, and Mister Remy signed all the documents, Sarah signing as a witness. Logan watched everything with tears in his eyes. His sex was still female on the documents, but that was okay, that would allow him the possibility of insurance covering some of his transition for now. And besides, his name...his name wasn’t Jessica. As everything was signed, the judge smiled at him. “Congratulations, Logan.”

That was all it took for him to start breaking down and crying. Mister Emile and Mister Remy laughed as they asked if he was okay, and he nodded. He was far, far better than okay. No longer would he be known as Jessica Gaines. No, from this day forward he would be Logan Picani. That’s what it would say on his bank account. His passport. His license, when he got one. His deadname was well and truly dead. To the outside world, he could be Logan. And that was the best feeling in the world. He beamed, smile a little watery, but elated all the same.

“That didn’t take too long, did it?” Mister Emile asked, laughing. “Here I was worried it would take a while with the name change!”

Logan was still in shock, but he managed to choke out, “Did you plan that from the start?”

“Yeah,” Mister Remy said. “Emile suggested it. If we’re changing your last name, it’s easier to change your first name now rather than later. It was my idea to keep it as a surprise, though. As a little gift to you for joining our family.”

Logan cried some more, holding the back of his hand to his mouth as he smiled. “Thank you,” he choked out. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“The pleasure is all ours, Logan,” Mister Emile said with a smile. “Now all we have to do is send copies of your new birth certificate to the school, the bank you use, and maybe one or two other places, and you’ll be all set!”

Logan continued to smile and cry. “My report card. My report card is gonna have my actual name on it. I can’t believe it.”

Mister Remy laughed. “Of all the things for you to fixate on, that was not on my list of expected ones.”

Mister Emile nudged Mister Remy playfully. “Let the boy live a little, Rem,” Mister Emile said with a grin of his own.

“I never said it was a bad thing,” Mister Remy defended. “Just that it was unexpected.”

Logan laughed. “You’re good. Both of you. I’m not offended or any less happy.”

“Well, good,” Mister Emile said. “Are you ready to head into school a little later than usual?”

Logan nodded. He couldn't wait to tell Jack about this great news! He was adopted, and his legal name was Logan! This day couldn't get any better!

Well, yeah, it could. Because he could get a hug and a clap on the back from Jack, both of them beaming and laughing at the fact that transphobes were going to have to acknowledge his name now. That...that would be fun.

So he went to school, smiling all the way. It was lunchtime when he arrived, and he nearly ran headfirst into Jack as he walked in the front door. “Logan! Man, where were you?! You haven’t been in
school all morning, and you never miss a day of school!”

Logan just laughed, grinning so hard his face hurt. “I was in court,” he said.

Jack frowned. “Why would you be in court?”

“I’m adopted!” Logan exclaimed, throwing his hands up. “And my name changed! You’re not looking at Jessica Jordan Gaines, but Logan Avery Picani!”

Jack stared at him a moment, before he whispered, “Seriously?!”

“Seriously!” Logan exclaimed. “They changed my name, Jack! As a surprise gift for being adopted!”

Jack whooped and wrapped Logan in a crushing hug, which Logan eagerly returned. As predicted, when they broke apart Jack clapped him on the back, saying, “Congrats, man! I knew you’d get to have this day eventually!”

Logan grinned and sniffled a little, saying, “I wasn’t so sure,” his voice thick with emotion.

Jack rolled his eyes playfully and turned to the students eating lunch in the hallways. “Hey everyone, listen up!” Jack shouted.

“Jack!” Logan hissed, a startled laugh flying from his mouth.

“You’re looking at one Mister Logan Picani, everyone! If anyone calls him Jessica, they can answer not only to me, but Logan’s legal documents!”

“Jack, no,” Logan laughed, as a few students clapped and cheered, while others scrunched up their faces or sneered their way. Most of the students just looked very confused.

“Jack yes!” Jack retorted with a laugh. “Suck it up, Buttercup, you’re stuck with me!”

“Why are you still calling me Buttercup? I haven’t watched Powerpuff Girls in years!” Logan exclaimed.

“Because we both headcanon Buttercup as trans, and anyway, Buttercup rhymes with suck it up, so it works,” Jack explained smugly as they started to walk to their normal group of friends.

Logan shook his head. “That really shouldn’t be how you logic things out, Jack, but okay.”

“You logic one way, and I logic another,” Jack shrugged.

“But...but logic is universal! You can’t just ‘logic one way’ and then change how you do the same thing the next day! That’s...that’s illogical!”

Jack laughed and Logan frowned. “I love when you get passionate about stuff,” Jack said with a small grin. “Even if you’re trying to prove me wrong.”

“You are wrong,” Logan said.

“That’s the spirit!” Jack laughed.

Logan rolled his eyes but he couldn’t resist the small smile breaking on his face.

Their friends were sitting in front of the auditorium, as always, and one of the theater nerds in their group named Preston asked, “Jack, was that you yelling?”
“Yep!” Jack said proudly. “Did you hear what I said or just the shouting?”

“Just the shouting,” one of the girls, Leslie, piped up. “What’s going on?”

Jack grinned. “Logan got adopted, and they changed his name, legally, to Logan. His deadname isn’t connected to him anymore, at all!”

Logan turned red as all of his friends congratulated him and cheered and were generally excited about everything this entailed. When Jack and Logan sat down and started eating, Preston and Leslie started arguing over whether *Dear Evan Hansen* or *Heathers* was better, and Tristen, their person of ambiguous gender, suggested that *Hamilton* trumped them both, sparking a heated and yet playful debate over the merits of all three musicals.

Jack nudged Logan lightly. “Don’t you just love our friends?” he asked with a wide grin.

“Yeah,” Logan said softly, musing as he took a bite of his sandwich. “They never had to be as supportive as they have been, and yet here we are.”

“Some people are just decent human beings, man. Not everyone is looking for something in return for their kindness,” Jack replied.

Logan let out a shuddery breath. “That’s a scary thought, honestly,” he whispered. “Because that means my parents were wrong about so many different things they taught me.”

Jack wrapped an arm around Logan’s shoulders in a sideways hug. “We can tackle that another day, sound good?”

“Yeah,” Logan agreed. “Sounds good.”

And it did. He didn’t want to have to focus on the fact that his parents were wrong right now. He just wanted to be happy about his legal name, and his friends supporting him. He grinned as Tristen made a particularly good point about *Hamilton* and the story surrounding it, and Logan pointed out a few factual tidbits that most people didn’t know about the musical, and immediately he was getting interrogated about what else he knew about the musicals they were talking about.

Eventually, lunch ended, Logan went to his afternoon classes, and then he was getting a ride from Mister Emile back home. His leg bounced nervously as he sat in the passenger seat and stared out the window. He blew out a breath. “So much is going on recently,” he said softly. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Mister Emile sent him a glance. “It is,” he agreed. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Fine,” Logan agreed. “I’m just...nervous, I guess.”

“What about?” Mister Emile asked.

“Everything just became...real. That seems to be happening a lot lately. Abstract concepts like abandonment, and adulthood, and growing up are all becoming terrifyingly real, and I don’t know how to handle it.”

Mister Emile put a hand on Logan’s shoulder and Logan turned to look at him. “You have a point, Logan. Those things can be terrifying. But just know that you don’t have to do it alone, all right? Mister Remy, myself, your friends, even your brothers are all ready and willing to help you with whatever you need.”

Jack’s words from earlier came back to him: *Not everyone is looking for something in return for their*
kindness. He supposed that applied to his new family. Which was terrifying, in a comforting way. He smiled and looked back out the window. “Yeah, I know. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Mister Emile said. “Let’s go tell your brothers the good news.”

When they got to the middle school and picked Roman up, he hopped in the back and grinned at Logan. “How’d the adoption go?” he asked.

“It went well,” Logan said with a smile. “Mister Emile and Mister Remy were kind enough to let me change my name.”

“What, to Picani? Yeah, that’s how adoption works,” Roman said.

Logan shook his head with a grin. “No, not to Picani. Well, yeah, they changed my last name, but they changed my first one, too. And my middle one, for that matter.”

Roman stared at him in shock before he laughed. “Hey, congrats, Lo! That’s gotta be a great feeling!”

“It is,” Logan agreed.

“Do the twins know yet?” Roman asked.

“Not yet,” Mister Emile said. “It was a surprise gift. So Logan gets to tell them the good news.”

“They’ll be ecstatic,” Roman said. “Be prepared for a lot of shrieking and yelling.”

Logan just laughed.
Chapter 15

June 31st, 2017

Patton was stunned. This was the first time he had come outside his room to get a glass of water himself after bedtime and his mom was watching a show with lots of yelling, and blood.

He made sure he was as quiet as a mouse as he got his water, but he couldn’t help but watch in morbid fascination at the scenes playing out on the TV screen. There was a man in a funny dress, who was being called a judge. There were lots of people in suits, and lots of gruesome pictures.

Was that what the world was like when bad things happened? Lots of blood and men in funny robes and horrible people being chased after by police officers? He scurried back to his room, drinking his water but not feeling very good all of a sudden. He looked over to Virgil, sleeping in the bed on the adjacent wall, and shivered. He hoped that Virgil never saw what he just did. And he hoped that both of them never had to go to that “court” place the pictures were being shown.

February 20th, 2019

Patton was nervous. He and Virgil were dressed in twin polo shirts; Patton’s a light blue and Virgil’s a deep purple. They had to be somewhat dressed up today, because they were going to be in court. Patton had never been in a real courtroom before, and the judge sitting at the huge chair didn’t look super super nice. But he put on a brave face. Virgil was already close to having another panic attack, so he had to be the brave one for both of them.

Their mother and Charles sat across the way from them, a table set up for them and the fanciest lawyer they could buy. Mister Emile and Mister Remy had also gotten a lawyer, but they couldn’t afford one with the track record that their mom’s apparently had.

The judge was droning on, asking questions to the adults, and reading over reports. And then, Patton heard his name. “Patton Sanders?” the man asked.

Patton sat up straighter and resisted the urge to gulp. “Yes, sir?” he asked.

The judge motioned for Patton to step up closer to him. “Would you please come up here? I’d like to ask you a question or two personally. As well as your brother.”

“Yes...could we come up together, sir?” Patton asked timidly. “I don’t like being away from Virgil, and he doesn’t look so good even with me next to him.”

The judge nodded. “Both of you may come up at the same time,” he allowed.

Patton stood and nudged Virgil up to a standing position, and the two made their way up to the judge. The man standing by the judge told them where to stop and Patton shuffled on his feet as the judge hmm’ed and looked over reports. “It says here that you told Detective Reagan you would run away if you were sent back to your mother, is that right?”

Patton tried to ignore the offended gasp his mother gave behind him. “Yes, sir. I love my mom, but...but I can’t live with Charles...uh...I mean, Mister Baker.”
“Why not?” the judge asked.

Patton opened his mouth, but no words came out. Virgil stepped in. “He drinks, sir. A lot. And when he drinks he breaks things and yells at us and sometimes hurts us. No one ever sees the bruises because they’re all hidden by clothes, but I think the nurse at school took a few photos once when my ribs were bruised, and that one time Patton got hit with a soccer ball in PE right over where Charles kicked him two nights before.” Virgil sent a dirty look to Charles as he said, “I hate that man and never want to live with him again. But either we go or Charles goes, and Mom won’t leave Charles.”

The judge looked at both of them. “I do see some pictures of bruises in these reports,” he muttered. “And you both feel comfortable with the Picani’s?”

“Yes, sir!” Patton and Virgil chorused. “They haven’t even raised their voices once at us,” Patton continued.

“And they make sure that we have enough food and they don’t drink the way Charles does. I’m not sure they even drink at all, actually,” Virgil added on. “They haven’t where I’ve seen them, at the very least.”

The judge nodded, and noted something down. “Very well, boys. I assume you would rather stay with the Picani’s, then?”

Patton nodded as Virgil replied, “Yes, sir.”

The judge nodded. “You both may take a seat.”

Patton and Virgil walked back to Mister Emile and Mister Remy. Patton sat between Virgil and their mom and Charles, so his brother didn’t get the brunt of their nasty glares. He resisted the urge to squirm as the judge continued to look over the papers. “Very well,” he eventually said. “After considering all the evidence, I will be granting custody of Patton and Virgil Sanders to...”

There was a brief pause as the judge looked over everything one last time, and Patton felt like he couldn’t breathe. Virgil’s eyes were wide and terrified, and Patton knew he probably wasn’t much better. It seemed like even the ticking of the clock had stopped.

“...The Picani’s,” the judge finally said. “Court dismissed.”

He banged the gavel and Virgil and Patton whooped, hugging each other and crying in sheer relief. The man standing by the judge led their mom and Charles out, their mother yelling all the way, but Patton and Virgil paid her no mind.

Patton was still crying as Mister Emile and Mister Remy-their new dads-got packed up and were talking with their lawyer. Eventually, Mister Emile and Mister Remy led him and Virgil outside to the minivan, and it suddenly hit Patton. He never had to see his mom or Charles again. No longer would he be blamed for not being nice to Charles, no more would he and Virgil have to hide in their closet from an alcoholic stepfather. They were free.

Virgil looked about ready to pass out; it seemed like the realization hit him as well. “Pat, we never have to go back there!” he exclaimed. “We’re safe!”

Patton gave him a huge grin. “I know! No more Charles! No more yelling! I can barely believe it!”

“Believe it, baby!” Virgil yelled. “We’re officially adopted!”
Patton giggled and Mister Emile and Mister Remy were looking at them fondly. “You boys ready to go home?” Mister Remy asked. “School’s out for the day, and Logan and Roman should be back.”

Virgil and Patton looked at each other before looking up and nodding, various affirmations leaving their mouths. Now not only did they both have one brother, they had three! Three brothers! Patton couldn’t believe how excited he was! He could be Patton Picani, once the paperwork came through!

He scrambled into the back of the van, where the booster seats were, happy squirming all the way. Virgil sat across from him, beaming. “We’re adopted!” Virgil exclaimed.

“We’re adopted!” Patton parrotted.

“Adopted!”

“Adopted!”

“Adopted!” Virgil threw his hands in the air and whooped. Patton victoriously banged his feet into the empty seat in front of him, laughing all the while.

As they started to wind down off the high of knowing they were safe from Charles, Patton started to cry again and Virgil looked like he might pass out at any moment. “Man, I’m beat,” Virgil mumbled.

“You and me both,” Patton agreed, wiping at his tears. “That was really scary.”

“Yeah. Had you ever seen a courtroom before?” Virgil asked.

“I saw them on one of mom’s shows once. There was a lot of blood in it,” Patton admitted. “I was scared they were gonna do something like that with us, too.”

Virgil shuddered. “I’m glad they didn’t. When did you see one of mom’s shows?”

“I was getting water one night and she didn’t hear me, I guess,” Patton said with a shrug. “I never told her. I was too scared.”

Virgil nodded knowingly. They both knew how their mom would react. Telling Patton he shouldn’t have gotten out of bed, that she wasn’t responsible for what they saw once they decided to disobey her rules. Ever since she had gotten with Charles, the blame game never stopped. And usually it landed on Virgil or Patton’s shoulders.

As they got back home-and that was a weird thought, they were finally home-Logan and Roman came out the front door. Patton could hear them the second Mister Emile opened the door. “Are they here? Did you win? Do they get to stay with us?”

Patton and Virgil got out of their seats and flung the side door open. “Why don’t you ask us yourself?” Virgil exclaimed as he jumped into the open.

As he landed on the ground, Patton laughed and jumped out too. “We’re staying!” he exclaimed, whooping in victory.

Roman cheered and came over, high-fiving both of them and hugging Patton tight. Logan stood there, beaming like he hadn’t since his own adoption was finalized. Patton grinned back and as they all went inside, they chattered about what they would do now that they were staying, and the move, and anything that came to their heads, really. They were just so happy that they got to stay together.

Patton yawned and stretched, and Virgil poked his side. “You know that if you’re tired you can
“sleep, baby bro? No one will wake you up for at least half an hour.”


“You might want to rest soon, though,” Logan said. “After all, tonight’s a school night.”

“Well, yeah, but I don’t take naps right after school!” Patton shot back. “I wanna do things!”

“Well, you could always help us pack up stuff we won’t need immediately until after we move,” Roman proposed. “Neither Logan nor myself have touched your room because we didn’t know if you’d be staying or not. Now that we know, we can start packing.”

Patton hadn’t even thought of that! “Oh, yeah!” he exclaimed. “And because Virgil and I don’t have today’s homework, there’s nothing stopping us from doing that!”

Virgil shook his head. “Packing up is gonna be boring, though!”

“Maybe, but at least we get to pack, right?” Patton asked. “If we didn’t, we would be back at Mom’s.”

Virgil considered this new information and frowned at Patton, who read his expression loud and clear: I guess you have a point.

Patton grinned and shrugged easily. Well, duh!

Virgil rolled his eyes and muttered a half-hearted, “Shut up,” before running up the stairs.

Patton clambored after him and they got to their room, the one across from the master bedroom. They walked into their room, looking around. There was little to pack, because Patton and Virgil had been living out of a suitcase in case they had to be sent home. Now that they got to keep everything, though, they had to pack all of that extra stuff up. Patton went for the sentimental things, first: the books Roman had shared with them, and the drawings and writings Logan would occasionally indulge in and pass over to him and Virgil. Roman and Logan would occasionally draw together, but usually wound up teasing each other on their subject matter, so most of the time they did it alone to avoid distraction.

Virgil, he noticed, was going for their clothes, and his blanket and Patton’s kitty. The things they needed more than wanted. “You know, Virge, you can get some of the stuff you want to keep, too.”

“Maybe,” Virgil said, “But I want to make sure we have everything we need first. What if we run out of room?”

“Well, we can ask for another box,” Patton said, like it was obvious.

Virgil shook his head. “Maybe we’ll get one, but what if we don’t? We have to be ready, Pat. We won’t be running away again, I don’t think, but that doesn’t mean we can get whatever we want.”

Patton felt a little deflated at Virgil’s explanation. “Maybe if we run out of space we can pack some of our stuff in Logan and Roman’s boxes?”

“Maybe,” Virgil said. “But I don’t want to take that chance, you know?”

Patton sighed. “Yeah, I don’t either. That’s why I’m taking this stuff, though. It’s important to me.”

Virgil nodded in understanding. “Yeah, I know,” he said. “And we’ll be okay. We just have to remember that we might not always have people there for us except each other.”
Patton sighed and nodded. Much as he hated it, Virgil did have a point. “Yeah. I wish we could, you know, know that people would be there, though. And I do think that Mister Remy and Mister Emile will be there for us when possible, but...”

“It’s not always possible,” Virgil said, nodding as he finished Patton’s sentence. “I know.”

Patton scratched his arm and continued to pack. “Do you think of Mister Emile and Mister Remy as our dads?” he asked Virgil.

Virgil considered. “Maybe a little,” he said. “But I don’t know if I want to tell them that just yet. I don’t want them flipping out or getting mad, like Charles did.”

Patton nodded and agreed softly. Sure, Mister Emile and Mister Remy weren’t Charles, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t freak out if they heard. Maybe he and Virgil could save that for later.
June 26th, 2016

Dee stared in shock at the snake in front of him, fingers pressed up against the glass as the snake’s tongue flicked out. “Mama, look! Lookit!” he exclaimed.

Mama crouched down next to him and took a good look at the snake. “It’s a very pretty snake, isn’t it?” she asked.

Dee nodded in no small amount of awe. Something that had no arms, and no legs struck fear into so many people’s hearts. It had to be super, super powerful! He waved at the snake with a huge grin. “Mama, it has scales! Kinda like me!”

Mama chuckled. “Your eczema is a little different than a snake’s scales, honey.”

Dee didn’t care. The snake was super, super cool and he was so preoccupied with it that he didn’t feel pressured or anxious enough to sign instead of speak.

Mama tapped on his shoulder. Dee turned to find her holding a camera at the two of them. “Smile, honey!” she exclaimed.

Dee grinned the biggest grin he had ever given. They were getting a picture in front of a real live snake! This was the best day ever!

February 28th, 2019

Dee knew it hadn’t always been like this. He knew that at some point, Mama had loved him like he was her whole world. He knew that at one point, she didn’t take pills like they were the only thing that got her through the day. At one point, she would do something other than stare blankly at a wall for half the day. But he needed to do something because that’s all Mama did anymore.

He was pretty sure most kids his age were at least in school at this point. While he might not want to go to school, he didn’t want to just sit around the house and be quiet in hopes that Mama would pay attention to him before she took more pills.

There wasn’t anything that Dee wanted that he couldn’t carry on him. He had no backpack for a second pair of clothes, but he had his favorite gloves, and the coat that made him feel like a super evil villain that made him run around doing his evil laugh.

He was putting on his shoes when Mama walked into the room. “Oh, good, you’re getting ready.”

“How?!” he signed.

“We have to get the prescription for your eczema,” Mama said. “Make sure you have everything.”

“I have my coat and gloves and shoes. Do I need anything else?” Dee signed.

Mama shrugged. “I don’t know. Is there anything else you would want to take if you never came back?”
Dee went to the dresser and pulled down the picture of him and Mama at the zoo, both of them smiling and happy. It was the last time he remembered Mama doing anything without taking pills first. He put the tiny picture frame in his coat pocket and signed, “Ready.”

Mama smiled sadly at him and he followed her out of the house to the car. He got strapped in and Mama drove off. He was wondering why Mama was so sad, before he noticed they passed the store where they usually got his eczema cream. “Mama?” he asked, for once saying the words, because he knew Mama wouldn’t be able to see him sign.

“Please don’t make this hard, honey,” Mama said.

Dee was immediately terrified into silence. He played with the gloves on his hands and did his stereotypical villain pose. He could play the villain. The guy who was scared of no one and terrified everyone else if he simply glared.

They drove for a long time, Dee sitting in the back while Mama cried up front. Eventually, they pulled into a neighborhood that Dee had never seen before. “Somewhere here there’s a man called Mister Picani,” Mama said. “He’s your dad, and we decided it would be a fun game if you could try and find him without any help.”

Dee frowned. Mama was so upset over a game? It didn’t make sense!

They got out of the car and Mama hugged him. “I love you,” she whispered, squeezing tight.

“I love you too, Mama,” Dee said. He didn’t know why he said it rather than signing it, but it seemed important.

Mama was crying again as she said, “I’ve gotta go grab that eczema cream, but I’ll get it to you when you find your father, okay?”

Dee nodded and Mama got in the car, driving off. He watched her go, before looking around. He didn’t recognize the neighborhood at all, and anyone here could be his father. Why would Mama think this was a good idea?

Maybe she had taken pills before they left. She sometimes did things that didn’t make sense when she took the pills.

He wandered the neighborhood, just looking around. Eventually, movement caught his eye and he saw a bunch of kids and two men moving boxes into a huge truck. Maybe they might know something? Have a clue that Mama gave him about the game?

As he walked over, an older kid who looked like a girl but dressed like a guy noticed him, and he? She? Walked over to him. “Hello, are you lost?” they asked.

Dee shook his head. “I’m playing a game,” he signed.

The kid arched their eyebrows. “What kind of game?” they asked, switching to sign language when Dee signed.

“Mama said I have to find my Dad. Except I’ve never seen him before. I think she wants me to meet him so he can help her sometimes,” Dee signed.

The kid frowned. One of the men walked over. “Logan, what’s up?” he asked.

“This kid says his mom dropped him off in the neighborhood and sent him looking for his dad,”
Logan said with a worried frown. “It sounds kinda suspicious...You don’t think she might have...?”

The man looked worried himself now. “Possibly. I hate to admit it, but possibly.”

Dee looked between them, confused. “She was acting weird,” he signed. “She asked me if there was anything I needed to take before we left, if I never went back home.”

Logan and the man looked even more concerned. “Mister Emile, I think she might have A-B-A-N-D-O-N-D him.”

Dee frowned. He hated when adults spelled things to keep him out of the loop. He decided that he would ask a question to try and get the conversation to a place he could follow. “Are you a boy or a girl?” he asked Logan.

“I’m a boy,” Logan signed. “I’m what’s called transgender.”

Dee didn’t recognize the last sign. “Transgender?” he asked.

“Transgender,” Logan spoke. “I was born in the body of a girl when I’m really a boy.”

“That happens?” Dee asked.

Logan nodded. “Yes. Some days it hurts, but mostly it’s just annoying.”

Dee hummed. “I guess you don’t know who my dad is or where Mama went?”

With a grimace, Logan started signing again. “No. What’s your name?”

“I hate my name,” Dee signed, pulling a face. “I go by Dee.”

“Dee, okay,” Logan signed. “Listen, Dee, I hate to say this, but...your mom might have left you.”

“Of course she left me,” Dee signed. “She left to get my eczema cream and she’s coming back to pick me up when I find my dad.”

“No. I mean...” Logan paused. “I mean she’s not coming back. I think she left you for good.”

Dee blinked. “Oh, sure,” he said, voice dripping sarcasm. “Because my mother doesn’t want to take care of me anymore and she’d rather leave me to some strangers. Sure.”

Logan grimaced. “Dee...” he said. “I’m serious.”

Dee’s eyes stung. “No! No, you’re lying!” he signed, gestures becoming more erratic the more he signed. “You’re lying!”

Logan looked about as distressed as Dee felt. He heaved in a big breath and screamed, “Mama!” at the top of his lungs.

That captured everybody’s attention and the other kids started staring at him. Logan tried to shush him, but it wasn’t going to work. He wasn’t Mama, he couldn’t get him to be quiet! “Mama! Mama! Come back! Mama!”

Logan backed up and the man from before crouched down to his level. “Dee, it’s gonna be okay,” he signed.

Dee shook his head vehemently. “I want Mama,” he sobbed.
“I know. And we can help you find her,” the man signed. “Do you have a picture of her? What does she look like?”

Dee reached into his pocket and pulled out the picture frame, holding it out for the man to see. “Don’t...don’t...don’t tou...tou...touch,” he stammered out. He wasn’t used to being honest when speaking. He had to lie to so many police officers and neighbors that if he said anything, it was only drenched in sarcasm or told so deadpan people couldn’t tell if he was lying or not.

“She’s very pretty,” the man said.

Dee nodded. She was very pretty. His tears were stinging on his eczema and he rubbed at the skin through his gloves. He knew he shouldn’t, but it was hard not to, even when Mama told him it was bad.

“Dee, if you want, you can stay with us until we find your mom. Okay? We can call the police and see if they can find her,” the man said.

“Police are bad,” Dee signed. “They wanted to take me away from Mama.”

The man looked concerned. “Why?”

Dee said nothing, signed nothing.

“Okay, you don’t want to talk about that, that’s fine. But I can’t just leave you here,” the man said.

“Emile,” the other man said. “We need to finish packing up.”

“Yeah,” the first man said. “Let me help Dee here and I’ll be with you as soon as I can be.”

The other man nodded and rallied the other kids to help move the boxes again. Emile sat down in front of Dee and signed slowly. “Dee, like it or not, your Mama’s not here. And she’s not coming back. I think you know that, somewhere in your brain. And it hurts, I know. But we can help you find a new family. We can be your new family, if you want.”

Dee looked at the kids. Logan, and the rowdy boy belting Disney songs, and the two younger kids. It was a ragtag group, for sure, but Dee recognized pieces of how he looked in the others. He had the rowdy boy’s hair, the chubby boy’s and Emile’s nose. This guy could very well be his actual father. He shrugged. “I guess,” he signed. “But will you help me find my Mama?”

“I can see if a friend of mine will find her, but you have to be ready to know that she might not want you back,” Emile said matter-of-factly.

Dee felt his eyes sting more at that. “She said she loves me,” he signed.

“She might have been trying to get you a better life than the one she could offer you, but whatever her reasons, she still left you. And I wouldn’t trust her not to leave you again just by her word,” Emile said.

Dee nodded. He didn’t like it, but he knew that Emile had a point. Were anyone but his Mama to do that, he wouldn’t trust them either.

“So,” Emile said. “Are you willing to join our family, at least for a little while? While we let the state know about you and see where that takes us, and you?”

Dee sighed and nodded. He didn’t exactly have a better idea, and at least these people didn’t look
like they took pills and stared at the wall all day instead of doing anything else.

Emile smiled. “Well, then. I won’t ask you to help move the boxes, but if you want, you can get situated in the back of our minivan?”

Dee nodded and Emile led him to the van. Dee sat in the back row, between two booster seats. “We’ll have to get another booster seat, it seems,” Emile mused. “Oh, well. When we get to the new house, we can work that out.”

With that, Emile closed the door to the van and Dee was left in the back. He fiddled with his hands, noticing that he was still wearing the gloves Mama had gotten him last winter. His breath hitched and he cried for her loss. If any of the others noticed when they clambered into the van after moving all the boxes, well, no one said anything.

Maybe this family wouldn’t be so bad.
August 14th, 2016

“Mama?” Dee asked uncertainly, tapping her cheek. He didn’t want to wake her up if she was sleeping, but he didn’t think she was. Her eyes were open and moving, though she was staring at a wall that had nothing on it. “Mama, I’m hungry.”

But Mama didn’t do anything, she just continued to sit there. Dee’s stomach snarled and he felt tears prick his eyes. Mama didn’t used to be like this. Usually she would just take those stupid pills once a week, and then something changed. But ever since she was taking them more often, he’d been getting less food, less attention, less everything.

Dee crawled into her lap and imagined himself just sitting down while she was in that old rocking chair he loved to sit in, and that they were rocking back and forth, back and forth, and he would get food as soon as his favorite show ended. Instead of sitting on the uncomfortable floor, with no idea when he’d be able to get food again, he pretended he was cared for, and safe.

March 1st, 2019

When Dee first woke up, it was on a couch with a different texture than the one he normally fell asleep on waiting for Mama. He opened his eyes and looked around, finding a light-filled, open-air space that was nothing like his home, and he nearly shouted in his alarm, before he remembered. Mama sent him away.

Tears pricked his eyes and he wiped at them furiously before anyone could see. Or at least, he hoped no one saw them. “Hey,” a man said from behind him, and he whirled around. “It’s okay, Dee. My name is Remy. Do you remember where you are?”

Slowly, Dee nodded.

Remy smiled encouragingly. “It looks like we’re the first ones up for the day. I don’t know a lot of American Sign Language, but I know enough to understand yes and no, and some basic signs for food, water, the bathroom, that sort of stuff. Emile is gonna teach me more so I can eventually talk to you like he and Logan can. And I think he plans on teaching the others, too.”

Dee didn’t understand. Mama had taught him sign since he was just a baby, because she already knew it and wanted to talk to him. But people learning a new language? For him? Was he...even worth that trouble?

Remy watched him patiently for a few moments. “Is there anything that you’d like right now? A drink?” he offered.

Dee nodded. “Water?” he signed.

“Yeah, of course, let’s get you water,” Remy said, holding out his hand for Dee to take if he wanted.

Dee gently took it in one of his still-gloved hands, and followed Remy to a spacious kitchen with an island surrounded by chairs. Remy helped him onto one of the chairs and poured water into a glass filled with ice, passing it to Dee. Dee took extra care to not spill it.
Remy sat down next to Dee with his own glass of water. “So, Dee...do you want to tell me about yourself? You don’t have to, but I’m a little curious. How old are you?”

“I’m five,” Dee signed.

“Five, huh? Are you in school?” Remy asked.

Dee shook his head. “Mama didn’t take me,” he signed.

“Past...go...oh, she never took you to enroll?” Remy filled in.

Dee nodded.

Remy frowned. “Well, that’s no good. It’s a little late to enroll you in this school year, it would be hard for you to catch up. I’ll have to talk to Emile about summer school.”

Dee frowned. “Why?”

“Well, you have to go to school, Dee. It’s the law,” Remy said. “Do you know why your mom never took you?”

Dee nodded, looking away.

“I doubt I’d know enough sign for you to explain, and I won’t force you to say anything about it if you don’t want to,” Remy said. Dee was surprised, but didn’t get a chance to comment, because Remy pointed to his gloves. “I like your gloves, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Dee signed.

“Any particular reason you like them?” Remy asked.

Dee blushed and looked down. He was always embarrassed explaining the reason he liked them to strangers. But...this man, though a stranger, was married to his possible dad. A dad who had shown more care for him in one day than Mama had shown him for a month. Maybe...maybe he could explain? “It makes me feel like a villain,” Dee whispered. “Villains don’t get hurt. The hero may beat them, but they always come back. So I pretend to be a villain, to try and hurt less.”

Remy frowned, and Dee prepared himself to get laughed at, or lectured, or told he shouldn’t look up to villains. But all Remy said was, “That makes sense.”

Dee looked at Remy with a frown.

“It’s sad that you have to pretend you can’t get hurt, but I understand why you do it,” Remy said. “And I don’t blame you at all. Seriously. My parents...well, they never left me but they didn’t always provide the help I needed. So I pretended to be my favorite characters from my favorite books, who could do everything by themselves.”

Dee winced. That sounded like what he did, almost to a T...whatever that expression meant.

“Glad I’m not the only one with parents who sucked,” Logan said as he walked past the two of them to the refrigerator.

Dee jumped but Remy just chuckled. “Yeah, no, my parents weren’t one-hundred percent with it. It wasn’t fun.”

Logan sat down at the table with a glass of milk. “So today’s Friday...do I still have to go to school?”
“Yeah. We only called you in absent yesterday because we needed to move ASAP. I’ll be driving you and Roman to school today, while Emile will take Patton and Virgil later in the morning,” Remy said.

“Convenient, how the drive to my school takes just enough time that you can drop Roman off at his on the way back,” Logan said, arching an eyebrow.

Remy laughed and agreed, and Dee stared into his glass of water. He didn’t like talking. Too many people accused him of lying or being sarcastic, and he didn’t know why everyone always assumed that about him. With sign, it was easy to show sarcasm and no one misinterpreted you. So he mostly stuck to that. The only upside about talking here was that he could communicate with Remy.

Talking took a lot of effort and thought, though, too. That’s why sign was so much easier, so much better. But...even if the other kids in the house learned a little sign, would it be enough for Dee to communicate with them? Would he have to resort to talking most of the time? He didn’t want to, but he was the new kid. The new kids were the ones who listened to the rules already there, they didn’t bend the rules to fit their needs.

Logan was waving his hand gently in Dee’s direction and Dee looked up, making a questioning noise in the back of his throat.

“Why are you so sad?” Logan signed.

Dee shrugged. “I’m not,” he lied.

“I don’t believe you,” Logan shot back.

Dee huffed. “Only two people in this house know sign. I don’t want to have to talk.”

“You won’t have to talk,” Logan spoke aloud, probably for Remy’s benefit. “Nobody will make you. Mister Emile can help you during the day while Mister Remy’s at work, and whenever he’s not around, I can be your translator.”

“What about school?” Dee asked, pulling a face at the final word.

“I don’t know about school,” Logan said thoughtfully. “But I assume that they have classes for nonverbal kids, or they have interpreters that can help you.”

Dee sighed. “I don’t like talking. It’s like there’s a block from my brain to my mouth and every word has to get around it somehow. It’s not easy.”

Logan frowned. “That can happen when you’re learning a second language,” Logan signed. “But if you know both and learned both at the same time, I can’t explain that.”

Dee shrugged, eyes sliding away from Logan back to his glass. He had yet to look anyone here in the eye, but he knew he was getting close with Logan and Remy. Close was about as far as he ever got with anyone, though. The one exception to that rule was Mama, and he didn’t do it often with her, either.

There was a knock on the wall from behind them and Dee nearly jumped out of his skin again. He turned to find Emile standing there. Was everyone in this house that quiet?! “Sorry, Dee, I didn’t want to startle you,” he apologized.

Dee just shrugged. He wasn’t in a position to complain.
“But, the reason I came in. I noticed your discussion, and your description of speaking, Dee, reminds me of language disorders.” Emile leaned against the wall and worried his lip. “Now, I can’t know which one, because I’m not a speech therapist, but coupled with some of your other behaviors...well, if you’re okay with it, I’d like to take you to someone who might be able to evaluate you, just to make sure that there’s not anything we’re missing.”

Dee nodded. That was okay, he supposed. It was good to cover your bases, wasn’t it?

Emile smiled at him before glancing to Remy, tilting his head away from the kitchen. “Mind having a private conversation really quick?” he asked Remy.

Remy nodded and left the room with Emile, leaving Dee and Logan alone. Logan tilted his head to the side slightly and hummed. “Hey, Dee?” he asked.

Dee nodded, not glancing from his water but signing, “What?” all the same.

“Do you know how to read?” Logan asked.

Dee looked up at that, turning pink. He knew that was one of the things you had to learn in school, but he’d never been. And now that he knew he was supposed to have started going, well...he doubted the others would call him stupid to his face, but what about behind his back? He shook his head slightly.

“I thought not,” Logan said. “That’s quite all right, though. If you want, when I have finished my personal studies after school, I could help teach you how to read.”

There were loud footsteps approaching behind them, and the boy Dee recognized as the one who was singing Disney songs scoffed. “Personal studies? Logan? Really? Just say you have homework like the rest of us and be done with it!”

“Homework is personal studies, Roman. As opposed to shared learning in a classroom,” Logan said without so much as a shrug.

Roman opened the door to the refrigerator and rolled his eyes. “Look, it’s nice that you want to help the new kid, Logan, but I doubt you have any books he’d be interested in.”

“We don’t have to use books. We can also use captions on cartoons when he learns more basic words,” Logan said. “And if you would allow it, we could always use some of your books. The fairy tales you have as a paperback for example. We would use that, rather than the collectible you got as a late Christmas present, of course.”

Roman paused and thought. “Yeah, you could use the old paperbacks if you want. Just ask first, because I might want to read them that day.”

Logan nodded. “Naturally.”

Dee was a little shocked at this conversation. He waved his hand to get Logan’s attention again and once he had it, signed, “Why would you help me?”

Logan looked taken aback at that question. “Well...I always appreciate helping people who want to learn. But other than that...whether or not you’re related to us, you’re part of our family for now. And we don’t let our family hang out to dry. We make sure that they’re taken care of.”

Roman piped up. “I always enjoy sharing my fairy tales with anyone who’ll listen. Most people say I’m too old for fairy tales but I just say that they haven’t read the right ones if they think people just
“Both excellent points, boys, but you’re going to have to move fast to get to school at this rate,” Emile said from the entrance to the room.

Logan and Roman finished their drinks quickly, both of them grabbing something or another from the pantry, presumably as a quick breakfast. Emile approached Dee and Dee tried to swallow his apprehension. He was still essentially in a house full of strangers, after all.

Emile sat down next to him and looked him over. “How are you holding up, kid?” he asked.

“I’m okay,” Dee signed simply.

Emile smiled at that and again, Dee was surprised. “That’s good, Dee. Now, once all the others are at school, we’re going to have to go to a friend of mine and Remy’s to get help with giving you a legal place to stay. We’re registered foster parents, so we can keep you here, but we need a couple things first.”

Dee nodded and rubbed at his cheek, grimacing. He was itching again. He needed his eczema cream.

“Oh, and we should probably get you some cream for your eczema,” Emile said, wincing. “If you come with me, can you point out what you might have used when you were with your mama?”

Dee nodded. That was easy, he could definitely do that.

There was a loud bang upstairs and the sound of two kids yelling and laughing, and Emile sighed. “I’m afraid Patton and Virgil might be a little...rowdier than Logan and Roman are,” he said apologetically. “But they’ll only be here for another hour, maybe, and then we can take them to school and get you settled in here.”

Dee nodded again. He wasn’t sure what settling in entailed, but he hoped it would be nice.
Chapter 18

December 16th, 2000

“It’s official!” Remy exclaimed, walking up to Emile and hugging him. “I dropped out of college!” Emile laughed and hugged Remy back. “Now that you’re not going to school, what will you be doing?” Emile asked.

“I’m working at a second coffee shop now,” Remy explained, “It’s something I’m good at and if I’m good enough I could get promoted to manager.”

“That’s great, Rem,” Emile said. “I’m happy for you.”

“Yeah, I just feel...freer, you know? Like I could do anything! I knew all the stuff they were teaching me in business school, so maybe if I get good enough at making coffee I can start my own shop. That’d be cool, don’t you think?” Emile smiled. “That sounds exactly up your alley,” he agreed.

March 11th, 2019

Emile was working his jaw with his head bowed and Remy put a steadying arm on his bicep. Hopefully Emile wouldn’t start shouting, but at this point Remy wasn’t sure what might happen.

“Are you sure about this, Sarah?” Remy asked.

“As sure as I can be,” Sarah confirmed. “The fingerprints are obviously a little bigger than the ones they took at birth, but it’s undeniable. His name is Deagan Russell. His mom has been suspected of drug abuse and child neglect for years, but the police could never get anything to stick. Apparently, she would have Dee lie to anyone who came over after receiving a call. And you said she just dropped him off in the middle of the neighborhood?”

“The day we were moving,” Emile said darkly. “If she had waited one more day, we wouldn’t have found him.”

“Breathe, Emile,” Remy said. “I’m angry too, but going into a blind rage isn’t going to help anyone.”

Emile took a deep breath. “Every last kid. Every last kid I helped conceive went to a broken home in one way or another. I never should have donated my sperm.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Remy said. “Besides, isn’t it better that they’re yours? If they had been anyone else’s kids, who knows whether or not they’d be in a better home now?”

Emile bowed his head again and Sarah looked at the two of them sympathetically, before glancing behind her to a play area where Dee was preoccupied with a couple toy trucks. “Look. You can claim child negligence, and bring charges against her if you so choose, once you’ve adopted him. Provided, you know, that’s what you want to do.”

“What else can we do?” Emile asked. “We can’t just cart him away to some foster home and hope for the best! Roman had enough issues, and he claims he wasn’t there that long!”
Remy strengthened his grip on Emile’s bicep. “Honey, you have to breathe. I know this is hard.”

Emile glared at him. “It’s not you who helped bring this boy into a broken home.”

“No,” Remy agreed. “But he is a son to both of us. I’m just as angry, if not angrier, than you about this. But we’ll be no use to anyone if we walk into this mess angry.”

Emile took a breath, then another. “You’re right,” he sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Remy dismissed. “Worry more about what we’re going to do about Dee.”

Sarah sighed. “I’m going to need to talk to him, and we’re going to have to figure out if we’re going to charge his mother.”

“I’m definitely willing to press charges,” Emile said. “She doesn’t deserve to get away with this.”

Sarah nodded and turned toward the play area. “Deagan,” she called, voice soft.

Dee froze like a deer in headlights, before putting the trucks down and walking over. “Yeah?” he asked softly.

“What can you tell us about your mother?” Sarah asked.

“Mama was fine,” Dee said, his voice robotic and rehearsed, but Remy could see the fear in his eyes as he lied. “Why?”

“Dee, we know she would almost get in trouble a couple times when you were with her. We’re just worried about what might have happened to you,” Emile said.

“Mama was fine,” Dee insisted, eyes growing glassy. “She loved me and made sure I had food.”

Remy took a deep breath and looked down at Dee. “Dee, we don’t want to force you into this, but we have to talk about it.”

“Mama was fine,” he insisted again. “Fine, fine, fine! She was fine!”

Remy let Dee get frustrated and flail his arms and heave in deep breaths for a few moments before he gently asked, “Did she ever take pills she shouldn’t have?”

Dee looked up at Remy with so much hurt in his eyes that Remy almost wished he could take the question back. But he needed to know the answer. “Did she?” he pressed.

Eyes dropping to the ground, Dee mumbled, “Not at first. But Mama’s back got hurt at work and she had to go to the doctor at the hospital. They gave her some pills that helped her, but after a while she would just...stare at nothing after she took them. And...and if she took them she wouldn’t make me food or help me get anything to drink. The only thing she really remembered most of the time was...was my eczema cream.”

Emile’s nostrils flared and Remy turned to him. “Emile, why don’t you take a walk for a minute, okay? Sarah and I can do the rest with Dee.”

Remy stared down Emile’s mutinous glare. Eventually, Emile huffed and stood, walking away. Dee looked after him, confused. Remy said, “Emile is going to take a little walk for a bit, Dee. He’s angry and needs to cool off before talking with us again.”

“Why?” Dee asked.
Remy braced himself for impact as he said, “He doesn’t like that your mom took pills instead of helping you.”

Dee made a soft “oh” sound and climbed into the chair that Emile had vacated. “How much trouble is she in?”

“A lot,” Remy said. “She neglected you, Dee, that can’t go unpunished.”

Dee took a breath and nodded, promptly shutting up.

Remy sighed. He didn’t want to alienate Dee, but he didn’t want to lie either. Parenting was a lot harder than it looked at first glance, and it already looked difficult. “Your mom wasn’t a good person, Dee. I’m sorry, but she just wasn’t. That doesn’t mean she didn’t have her good days, but when it comes down to it she didn’t help you as much as she should have. And that means she’s in trouble. We’re not going to love you any less, and if you still want to live with us, you can, but you can’t go back to your mom’s. No matter if you stay with us or anyone else. It just can’t be her.”

Dee looked at the floor, nodding. His eyes were glassy. “I...I love her...but...but I kinda...feel...relieved...?”

Remy put a hand on Dee’s shoulder. “You’ll be with someone who takes care of you from now on, Dee, that’s a good thing. Of course you can miss your mother, and love her, but it’s safer if you’re not with her.”

Dee nodded, a few tears falling. Remy’s heart was breaking, and he murmured, “It’s okay to ask for a hug if you need one.”

No sooner did he say that than Dee flung himself into Remy’s chest, quietly sobbing. Remy rubbed his back in small circles, looking frantically at Sarah to know if he was doing this right. She gave him an amused smile and a thumbs-up.

Emile walked back in and sat down, giving Remy a questioning look. “We were just explaining to Dee what’s going to happen now that we know who his mom is.”

“Ah.” A beat of silence. “And I take it he’s a bit upset?”

“He feels more relieved, and guilty about that, actually,” Remy said as if he were talking about the weather, trying not to make a big deal out of this. “But we’re pretty much set for adopting him, provided that’s what he wants.”

Emile nodded. “I take it you’re waiting out the crying to ask that,” he said.

Remy shrugged. “Yeah. The kid’s been through a lot, he deserves a good cry.”

“Oh, one other thing,” Sarah said. “His birthday was the second. He’s officially six years old.”

“You should have told us, Dee,” Emile spoke softly. “We could have celebrated.”

Dee’s crying tapered off somewhat and he turned to look at Emile. His hands were shaking as he signed something Remy didn’t recognize.

“You wouldn’t have bothered us,” Emile said, forehead creasing into his frown. “If you want to be a part of this family, you’ll never be a bother to us. Ever.”

Dee looked confused beyond belief at that sentiment, and Remy rubbed Dee’s back a little more,
providing comfort the only way he really knew Dee liked at the moment. “Why?” Dee signed.

“Because you’re important, Dee. You have to understand that everyone is important, including you. And you can’t bother people who want you around. We definitely want you around, and we know you’re important, and if you like, you can stay with us.”

Dee looked at Emile in somewhat of a shock. Then he turned to Remy. Remy smiled at him and said, “Yeah, I agree with your dad here. We’d love to have you, if you want that.”

There was a beat of silence where no one did anything. Then, Dee’s face crumpled a little and he nodded. “Yes, please,” he signed. “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“All right, then. Consider yourself a part of our family, Dee,” Remy said.

Sarah smiled. “I’ll get the adoption papers started. Hopefully this is the last time, right?”

“If it is it is, if it isn’t it isn’t. We’ll take in whoever needs help that we can accommodate,” Emile said.

Sarah gave a little laugh. “Spoken like a true parent,” she said, standing up and moving further into the office.

Dee was crying a little bit still and Remy lightly hugged him. “It’ll be okay, Dee,” he promised. “I know you miss your mom, but we’ll take care of you.”

Emile sat next to them, and Remy could tell he was still a little agitated by the news of Dee’s mother. But right now, Remy didn’t want to poke that bear. Later that night, he’d let Emile rant all he wanted. Right now, though, Dee had to be their first priority. “Hey, Dee,” Remy said softly.

Dee looked up at him and signed, “What?”

“In honor of your birthday, what do you say to visiting a toy shop on the way home? Just to get you a little something special,” Remy said. “As a belated birthday present.”

Dee grinned through his tears and Remy fixed Dee’s hair as Sarah came back with the papers. “Get these back to the court within the next two weeks, you two know the drill by now,” she teased.

Emile took the papers and the three of them got to their feet. “Thanks, Sarah,” he said sincerely.

“Yeah, seriously, thank you,” Remy added.

Sarah waved them off. “Just be good dads, all right? If there aren’t any more issues with the adoption process hopefully I won’t be knocking on your door for any inspections.”

“Of course,” Emile and Remy spoke at the same time. Dee snickered.

They went inside and Dee was overwhelmed within ten seconds of entering. He hugged Remy’s leg as they moved through, until they got to a section with stuffed animals. Dee’s eyes were flitting everywhere until they stopped, completely fixated, and he ran halfway down the aisle to pick up a
stuffed snake.

Remy walked over and ran a hand over the snake. “You like snakes, Dee?”

Dee nodded. “Scales,” he said, tapping his cheek where there was a small patch of eczema still. Then, he said, “Scales,” again, pointing to the snake.

“This snake might not have scales, but I see your point,” Remy said with a smile. “Is this what you want?”

Dee hugged the snake and nodded eagerly. Remy smiled. “Well then, we’ll get them. Is it a boy or a girl, do you think?”

All he got in return for that was a shrug. “Okay, fair enough,” Remy said. “Do they have a name already, or do you wanna think about it?”

Dee made a sign that went across his teeth and Remy frowned. “Teeth...? Oh! Do you mean fangs?”

An enthusiastic nod. Remy laughed. “Fangs, cool name. Let’s get Fangs.”

Dee grinned and they walked up to the front, Dee only parting from the snake for as long as it took to scan the animal’s tag. A tap on his shoulder had Remy turning to see Emile behind them. “So, I see Dee found something he liked,” he said.

“Yeah,” Remy said. “The snake’s name is Fangs, just so you know. You find stuff for the twins?”

“I found a Lego set for Patton,” Emile said. “And from a small selection of books I found some Goosebumps stuff. I figure Virgil would want to at least give those a go, and if he winds up not liking the one I chose it’s no big deal.”

“Yeah,” Remy said. “Put the stuff on the counter, let’s ring it up.”

They bought everything and Remy smiled as Dee climbed into the back of the minivan, snuggling his new snake. As they drove home, so Emile could look after Dee while Remy went to check on Sleep Easy, Remy discreetly observed Dee in the back. He looked entirely preoccupied with his snake, and while Remy knew Dee was sad about his mom, he was infinitely glad that Dee had decided to be with their family.
September 14th, 2008

Jessica was hanging close to the wall outside at recess. All the kids were running around and being loud and wanting to play in groups, but all she wanted was to sit and talk with someone. She didn’t have any friends here to talk to, though.

“Hey,” a boy said, walking up to her and leaning against the wall to her right. “Don’t wanna play?” he asked.

Jessica shrugged. “I like talking better than running,” she said. “I’ll play if it’s something I like, though.”

The boy thought over this. “Do you like hopscotch?” he asked.

Jessica nodded. “I like it a little,” she said.

He grinned and led her over to one of the hopscotch paintings on the blacktop. He grabbed a pebble off the ground and tossed it in the air a few times. “My name’s Jack,” he said with a grin. “What’s your name?”

“Jessica,” she said. “But I don’t like my name. I prefer to go by Jess.”


“Just call me Jess, Jack,” Jessica said. “And let’s play.”

March 16th, 2019

Logan was nervously bouncing his leg as he sat on the couch and texted Jack. Are you sure you wanna meet @ my house? My brothers are loud he wrote.

It’ll be cool to meet your bros, man Jack replied almost instantly. Besides, I wanna see your new house. I never got to see the other one you moved into

Logan shook his head. That’s the only reason I’m allowing this he replied.

Jack sent back a laughing emoji and Logan rolled his eyes. He knew Jack was likely poking fun at him muttering under his breath as he drove over. He was infinitely jealous of Jack; he had his license. With everything that had happened with him and his brothers over the past few months, Mister Remy and Mister Emile had promised they’d teach him soon, no later than April, but he still had to wait.

When he heard the tell-tale signs of a car parking outside, Logan sprinted to the front door, flung it open, and ran out just as Jack rounded his car, and Jack just laughed and opened his arms, allowing Logan to hug him tightly.

“You’re feeling huggy today, that’s a rare thing,” Jack teased lightly even as he squeezed Logan gently.

“I’m just really happy to see you, is that a crime?” Logan asked defensively. “Also, this is a big day.
You get to meet my dads, and possibly my brothers, if they don’t mind their own business.”

“Oh, yeah, I really want to see your dads outside the times they drop you off at school and drive away,” Jack said. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a while.”

“You flatter them,” Logan said. “Mister Emile is a giant dork, and Mister Remy isn’t much better. But they’re good dads, legally speaking.”

“Personally speaking?” Jack asked.

Logan shrugged. “I’m a little unsure on whether or not to call them my dads to their faces, especially because I don’t know how I’d differentiate them, but I do enjoy them on a personal level too.”

“Only you could make that sound so clinical,” Jack teased.

Roman dashed out the front door and Logan only got to see a brief flash of red shirt as he stepped back from Jack before he was roughly shoved a few feet away. Roman scrutinized Jack closely, looking him up and down. Jack glanced over at Logan. “One of your brothers, I take it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Logan huffed. “Roman! Don’t do that!”

“Do what?” Roman asked innocently. “I just want to get a look at your boyfriend!”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” Logan said with a scowl. “He’s a boy, yes, and he’s my friend, but not my boyfriend. He’s my best friend, and there’s nothing ‘just’ about that.”

Jack laughed. “Wow, Lo, you’re awfully defensive about our friendship.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Ever since I started referencing you when talking about school, Roman has been referring to you as my ‘mystery boyfriend’ and I’m sick of it.”

Jack just smirked. “You know, if you like me that way, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know. I don’t care if I’m gay or you’re gay or whatever anyone else is,” Logan said. “I just don’t like Roman trying to poke fun at me.”

“Fair enough,” Jack conceded. “I probably wouldn’t like that either if I had to deal with it all the time.”

“Hey, I’m still here, you know,” Roman huffed.

“Yeah, and have you ever considered you might not be wanted when I’m hugging my best friend?” Logan asked.

“Don’t be such a—” Roman stopped himself, clapping a hand over his mouth. “Sorry. I’ve been spending too much time around the jerks at lunch who never leave me alone. I shouldn’t have even started that sentence.”

Jack hummed. “Hey, you caught yourself, and you apologized. That’s okay in my book. You actually mean the apology, too. Not something you see often from a greasy middle-schooler.”

“I’m not greasy!” Roman protested in shock.

Logan snickered. “Jack, you’ve been listening to far too many musicals,” he declared.

“Maybe so,” Jack allowed. “But at least I didn’t call him a greasy little nobody.”
“He’s not a nobody, so of course you wouldn’t say that,” Logan said.

Roman pulled out his phone and said, “Hey, Logan, can I get a picture with you and Jack? Just to prove to the others that he’s real?”

“You’re ridiculous,” Logan scoffed with a laugh. “Sure.”

Roman held out his phone and Jack started to laugh. Logan pulled a face and made a peace sign, while Roman jerked a thumb in Jack’s direction and let his jaw hang open. He took the picture and grinned. “I’ll leave you two alone...for now,” he said, making spooky noises. He ran back into the house and yelled, “Patton! Virgil! You’re not gonna believe this!”

Logan sighed. “So that was Roman. Yes, he’s always like that.”

Jack shook his head. “I can’t even imagine what that must be like.”


When they walked in, Logan led Jack to the kitchen, asking, “Do you want anything to eat or drink?”

Jack shrugged. “Do you have...I dunno...that weird fruity lemonade stuff you were obsessed with when we were twelve?”

Logan laughed. “You mean raspberry lemonade? It’s not weird, it’s good, and even if we don’t have it, we should have regular lemonade.”

“Something can be weird and good. I mean, have you looked in the mirror lately?” Jack asked.

Logan turned and narrowed his eyes at Jack. “I can kick you out and you can continue to wonder what my family’s like for the rest of time, you know.”

“Aw, but that’s not nice, or fun!” Jack protested.

Logan rolled his eyes and grabbed lemonade from the refrigerator. “Not raspberry, but still lemonade. That fine?”

“Yeah,” Jack dismissed with a wave.

Logan poured two glasses of lemonade and passed one to Jack, while they took a seat at the island. “So this is a sweet pad,” Jack said.

“Do you have to say it like that?” Logan asked with a sigh.


“Yeah, it’s a nice place,” Logan said. “Much bigger than the townhouse we were all squeezed into before.”

Jack winced. “That’s rough. You told me you had to share a room with Roman.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t great,” Logan said with an eye-roll. “When he wanted to annoy me he’d sing Disney songs, and when he didn’t he’d sing Broadway, or show tunes in general. He never shuts up.”

“As opposed to you, who never says anything unless we’re alone,” Jack teased.
Logan stuck his tongue out at Jack before taking a sip of his lemonade. “Do you want to meet Mister Emile or Mister Remy first?”

“Either,” Jack said with a shrug.

Logan nodded and gestured for Jack to follow him, heading to the basement, where he knew Mister Remy would be working on taxes and the like. He knocked on the door to the office, and not getting a response, opened the door. He yipped and turned beet red when he saw Mister Emile and Mister Remy both kissing passionately, Mister Remy on the desk and Mister Emile standing way too close to just be friendly. He slammed the door shut again as Jack cackled. “Logan, buddy, that was the funniest noise I’ve ever heard you make!”

“Shut up!” Logan hissed. “You didn’t just see your parents making out in the basement!”

Jack laughed harder and the door behind Logan opened, and Logan was still red as he turned and saw Mister Emile standing there, about as red as Logan was. “Sorry about that, Logan, we didn’t realize you were looking for us.”

“It’s okay, though I’m never unseeing that,” Logan said with a shudder. “Um. This is Jack.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jack said, shaking Mister Emile’s hand. “Logan and I have been friends since kindergarten. It’s nice to see he’s with a family who cares about him.”

“Yeah,” Mister Emile agreed. “We’re happy to have him.”

Mister Remy walked out and cleared his throat. “Next time, we’ll remember to break away and yell to give us a minute, Logan. That’s our fault.”

“Let’s just...not talk about this and pretend it never happened, okay?” Logan asked.

“I can do that,” Mister Remy said. “So you finally invited Jack over, that’s nice. It’s nice to see him in person rather than behind a couple inches of glass and metal as I’m driving away from the school.”

“It’s nice to see you, too,” Jack said, laughing. “But I gotta admit, that was the funniest thing I’ve seen in awhile.”

Mister Remy didn’t blush, but he refused to look Jack in the eye after that statement. “Um. Logan, why don’t you take Jack upstairs or outside? Emile and I actually need to do taxes for our businesses, before we get distracted again.”

“Yeah, okay,” Logan said, ushering Jack away.

Logan’s cheeks were still on fire and they only worsened when Jack said, “Your dads seem to enjoy each other’s company very much.”

“Jack, I will pay you to shut up,” he hissed.

“Never,” Jack crowed. “You are never getting me to shut up about this, man, not happening!”

“If you tell any of our friends no one will find your body,” Logan threatened.

Jack held his hands up in surrender. “Chill, man, I’m not that cruel.”

“I know,” Logan sighed. “Doesn’t mean that I’m not going to worry for a while.”

Jack shrugged easily. “That’s fair, but know I wouldn’t purposefully hurt you, okay?”
“I know,” Logan said.

As soon as they got upstairs, the younger gremlins of the Picani family were swarming Logan and Jack. Patton was staring up at Jack with awe and Virgil was giving him a glare. “So you’re Jack?” Patton asked.

“Yes,” Jack said.

“If you hurt Logan, I’ll make sure you’ll live to regret it,” Virgil said, cutting right to the chase.

Jack laughed. “Noted.”

Logan facepalmed. “Guys, he’s not my boyfriend, chill out. You don’t have to give him a shovel talk.”

“We don’t have to, but we want to,” Dee signed.

Logan groaned. Jack laughed and signed back, “I won’t hurt your brother,” after putting down his drink.

“You know sign?” Dee asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Jack signed. “Logan and I take ASL in the same class in high school. It’s cool and it’s really useful.”

“Agreed,” Dee signed, before running off to do whatever it was he wanted to do at that point.

Patton and Virgil hung around for another couple seconds, before Logan cleared his throat. “You two done interrogating Jack or should I grab a chair?” he asked.

“We’ll go,” Patton said. “I wanted to play a game or two in the basement.”

Logan snapped to attention. “Uh, probably best to wait for a bit, Pat,” he warned, turning red. “Mister Emile and Mister Remy are down there right now, and they want some privacy.”

“Oh, okay,” Patton said.

“Why?” Virgil asked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

Logan stared him down. “If you’re looking for trouble, you know that whatever it was got a rise out of me already. Don’t push your luck and stay out of the basement for a bit,” Logan advised.

He and Jack went out the back, and Jack whistled. “Nice yard,” he said.

“Thanks,” Logan said. “It was one of the big appeals about this place that Mister Emile and Mister Remy liked enough to put on their list. Lots of space for the gremlins to run around in.”

“And lots of space on a deck to hang out,” Jack said, grabbing a chair.

“True,” Logan agreed. He sat down next to Jack and sipped his lemonade. “Do you feel better having met my new family?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “I definitely didn’t want you to be stuck with people like your folks or worse, but they’re better than I could have hoped for you.”

Logan smiled and nodded. “Yeah, they’re amazing,” he agreed.
Jack grinned at him and they sat in silence for a minute. Then, Jack ruined it by asking, “So did everyone think I was your boyfriend?”

Logan groaned. Jack laughed at his response.
Chapter 20

April 3rd, 2017

“Come on, Dee, you can do it,” Mama coaxed. “Ma-ma. Please? You haven’t said anything in two weeks, and I want to hear your beautiful voice.”

Dee sat on the couch, looking everywhere but Mama’s eyes. He didn’t want to disappoint her, but he was also incredibly nervous. He didn’t like talking to many people, if any. If the policemen came to talk to Mama, they’d try to get him to talk too, and that was about the only time he could speak, and it had to be covered in sarcasm or spoken so deadpan no one knew if he was serious or not, and he hated it.

Still, Mama wanted him to talk, and he would do whatever she wanted if only she asked. He wiggled on the couch before staring at her forehead and saying so softly even he could barely hear it, “Mama.”

Mama grinned and hugged him at just the right amount of tight and he smiled. If he could make Mama happy just by talking, maybe he should try it around her more often.

April 1st, 2019

Dee was playing with some of the blocks and trucks in the corner of the room, but he was listening intently to the conversation going on over his head. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Emile,” the therapist said. “You saw the signs, you brought him here, you must know.”

“He’s my kid, Clarence,” Emile said. “You know we can’t diagnose our own family or friends for this exact reason. I don’t want you to sugarcoat it. I want you to tell me whether or not he is.”

Dee had been talking to the therapist for an hour or something close. Well, maybe not talking, per se, more signing. It was useful that the therapist knew sign and was willing to talk and just watch Dee sign his responses, when he wasn’t busy drawing or playing. Then, when the “session,” as the therapist called it, was over, he brought in Emile to talk.

The therapist sighed and Dee looked up just in time to see him run a hand down his face. “He is. He definitely is autistic. His social skills are weak. He knows his surroundings, but he doesn’t understand the people inside them, nor the proper cues that they give him. If I had to place my bets on what most teachers would label him as, it would be ‘twice exceptional.’ He’s incredibly intelligent, picking up on things that I haven’t noticed being in this office for two years. But it’s clear he wouldn’t fit in with the other kids on the playground, if you know what I’m saying.”

Emile nodded. “That’s not a bad thing, it just means we have a little more work ahead of us. Does he experience echolalia, from what you’ve observed?”

“No from what I’ve seen,” the therapist said. “But obviously you see him more than I ever have. He does hiss like a snake when he gets angry.”

Emile laughed. “Oh, yeah, Virgil found that out for all of us the hard way and he nearly shrieked the first time it happened.”
The therapist blinked. "You’re being surprisingly calm about this," he noted.

“Well, yeah,” Emile said. “Like you said, I already suspected. It might make life a little harder for Dee, but now that we know, we can work on helping him.”

The therapist shook his head. “Most parents try and deny that their child is autistic and force them to mask for years if they have any ability to act like a neurotypical child.”

“I’m not most parents,” Emile said, getting up and walking over to Dee. “Hey, you ready to go?”

Dee nodded and stood, leaving the toys in the corner. “Thanks for letting me play,” he signed to the therapist.

The therapist smiled and said, “It’s no problem, Dee.” He turned to Emile. “Are you going to enroll him in behavioral therapy?” he asked.

“I don’t know. That will depend on what Dee thinks about it, I guess,” Emile said. “And of course, what Remy and I think of whoever we go to. I know you don’t do behavioral therapy so much as diagnoses and referrals.”

The therapist nodded. “I’m more a psychiatrist than a therapist now, after getting my certification,” he said. “Take good care of your kid, Emile, he’s going to need some help, but he’s brilliant, and I’d love to see what he’s capable of.”

Emile smiled, nodded, and said his goodbyes, holding Dee’s hand as they walked out the door. Once they were out of the office’s waiting area, Emile let go of Dee’s hand and Dee immediately started signing. “What does autistic mean?” he asked.

“Autistic means that you have a developmental disorder, Dee,” Emile said. “It makes it hard for you to hear tone, or recognize what people want from you without them saying outright what they want.”

Dee frowned. “Not everyone does that?”

“No, they don’t,” Emile confirmed. “Not everyone prefers signing to speaking, either. And most people can change their tone of voice on their own, instead of guessing and hoping you got the point across.”

Dee blinked. “Really?” he asked.

“Really,” Emile confirmed. “But because you have autism, your brain’s wired a bit differently, and you can’t do everything that allistic people do.”

Dee frowned. “Allistic?” he asked out loud, because he had no idea how to spell that, or sign it for that matter.

“Non-autistic,” Emile said, signing a word Dee assumed must be ‘allistic.’ “Some people might say it’s a dirty word, it’s not. It just means you don’t have autism. I’m allistic, Roman’s allistic, Remy’s allistic.”

“Logan?” Dee signed.

Emile turned thoughtful. “I don’t know,” he said. “He’s never been tested, but it’s possible he’s autistic. Though he seems to function all right on his own—he might be denied a diagnosis because he can do that. And he might not want to be tested because of being denied a diagnosis.”
Dee frowned again. “Why would the doctors say no just because he lives all right on his own?”

Emile sighed. “Because doctors like putting things in nice little boxes. And one of the boxes they put disorders in means that they need to affect how you work, and act, and feel in order to count as a disorder. If it doesn’t do much to you, or heaven forbid, helps you in some areas, suddenly it’s not a disorder and you’re just ‘quirky’ or ‘the weird kid.’ I’ve had so many patients say that over the years, and every time, I get mad. People need to be considerate of others, and doctors are people, as are their patients. But a lot of the time, it doesn’t feel that way.”

Dee and Emile walked through the parking lot to the minivan and Dee climbed into the back while Emile started the car. “You want to check on Remy at Sleep Easy?” he asked.

“Yes!” Dee signed, eyes wide and enthusiastic.

Emile laughed and they drove through town until they got to Main Street, and parked in the last space available in the coffee shop’s parking lot. They walked through the door and Emile called over the bustle, “Mio amore!”

“Mio amore!” Remy responded almost immediately, heading from one of the tables over to the doorway, where Remy and Emile hugged and kissed.

“Gross!” Dee squealed, laughing.

Remy smiled and ruffled his hair good naturedly. “Hey, Dee. How are things?” he asked.

“Good!” Dee signed. “Can I have a cookie?”

Remy laughed and turned to Emile. “What do you say, can the kid have a cookie?”

“Why not, he was a good sport at Clarence’s,” Emile said with a grin.

The three of them walked over to the counter and Remy grabbed a cookie for Dee. “So, how did the meeting go? Were your suspicions right?” he asked.

“Yeah, Dee is on the spectrum,” Emile confirmed. “The therapist said he might be considered ‘twice exceptional.’ He’s incredibly smart.”

“I know,” Remy said with a grin. “I only have to tell him once or twice what certain words are, and then he can read them wherever he sees them, not just at that place in the book we’re reading.”

“Really?” Emile asked, turning to Dee. “You’ve never pointed that out to me.”

Dee held the cookie in his mouth as he signed back, “You never asked.”

Emile blinked before laughing. “I suppose I didn’t,” he said. “In the future, I’d love for you to point out words you recognize.”

Dee grinned and nodded.

The three of them sat down at a back table and Remy asked, “Are we going to put him in Special Ed? Is the school going to?”

“I don’t know,” Emile said. “We’re gonna have to ask when we sign him up for summer school. I assume that no matter where he ends up, he’ll need a translator for communication.”

Remy grimaced and nodded. “The school won’t be happy with that, but they don’t have much of a
choice. It’s ADA regulation.”

Emile hummed his agreement. “And if they refuse, we can threaten to go to the paper with it. Or you
could deny them their coffee, because we both know the principal of Patton and Virgil’s school
drinks your lattes at least thrice daily.”

Remy chuckled and shook his head. “I suppose it’s worth a shot,” he said. “And I think if we play
our cards right, Dee could get some extra time on tests without having to be placed in Special Ed. If
he’s as smart as he is, he shouldn’t be stuck in remedial classes. And we all know that Special Ed
around here practically never goes farther than the basics.”

“Yeah,” Emile sighed. “What he needs most is some time to think, and no one to bug him when he’s
working. He doesn’t need speech therapy, or practice with eye contact, or anything else most schools
would try and get him to do. He’s fine the way he is.”

They both looked to Dee, who was finishing the last of his cookie. “What?” he signed.

“Usually you add something when we’re talking about you,” Remy said. “You’ve been quiet.”

“You know more than I do about school,” Dee signed simply, movements crisp and precise.
“Though if school is only gonna teach me the same thing over and over, I don’t want to go.”

“No putting up with the Special Ed classes that don’t teach anything, got it,” Emile said. “Some of
them do teach stuff, but we’ll try to avoid keeping you away from your peers in general. If you can
handle the regular classroom throughout the summer, then we’ll fight for you to be in a regular
classroom in the fall, too. If you can’t, then it’s no big deal, we’ll find a way for you to learn at your
own pace.”

Dee grinned. He had never met anyone as considerate as Emile or Remy before. Not even Mama
had been this kind to him, he could barely believe it. He signed a grateful thanks with his smile a
little watery. He couldn’t believe his stroke of luck.

“It’s not a problem, Dee, we want to make sure you’re comfortable and happy,” Emile said. “And
we hope that as long as you’re with us, you don’t feel forced into doing anything you don’t want to
do. And that includes talking, making eye contact, or doing anything else that makes you
uncomfortable.”

Dee offered a shy grin and signed, “I know. Thank you.”

Remy shrugged off the thanks with an, “Of course.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence for a few moments as the coffee shop bustled around them.
Then, Remy stretched and stood. “All right, back to work for me. I’ll talk to you both when I get
home.”

“Yeah, we’ll see you soon,” Emile said, standing up as well.

Dee got to his feet only when Remy and Emile hugged and Emile motioned for Dee to follow him.
“Just so you know, Dee. Your diagnosis? Doesn’t change how we feel about you. We love you just
as much as before, ” Emile assured.

“I know,” Dee signed. But that comment did get him thinking. Were he still with Mama, would it
have changed how she acted? Would she have stopped forcing him to talk sometimes? Or would she
have forced him to talk more? Would she have been kind and understanding, or would she have tried
to get him to “mask” as the therapist called it? He didn’t know. And he knew he didn’t have to worry
about that, but it was still interesting to think about. Though it did make him a little sad. He latched onto Emile’s pant leg and resolved to not think about it too hard. A thought occurred to him. “What time is it?” he asked.

Emile checked his phone. “Time to pick Logan up from school, almost,” he said. “If we leave now we should be only a few minutes early. Do you mind waiting?”

“Nope,” Dee signed.

“Then let’s go,” Emile said.

They got in the minivan and as Dee watched the scenery fly by, he counted himself very lucky that he had such understanding dads.
December 16th, 2017

It was a simple slip-up. A small slip of the tongue that really shouldn’t have had such catastrophic events as it did. But Patton had him wrapped in a hug in their closet, a hand clamped over Virgil’s mouth in an attempt to keep him quiet as Charles absolutely trashed their room, looking for them. All because Virgil had accidentally called him, “Dad” in a sarcastic tone when Charles was ordering him around.

Virgil squeezed his eyes shut tight and a few tears slipped out without his permission. He tried to focus on his breathing, on the feeling of Pat’s hugs, but all he could truly focus on was Charles screaming and throwing things to the floor with a crash.

When Charles finally lumbered away, Patton and Virgil left the closet, cleaning up what they could of their room. Virgil vowed never to slip up like that again. He didn’t want anyone getting hurt over a simple word.

April 16th, 2019

It was a simple-slip up. A small slip of the tongue that had Virgil paling when he realized what he had said. He tried not to hyperventilate as he realized he had just did what he had told himself years ago that he would never do again.

Logan’s birthday was today, and as such they had gone to a restaurant of Logan’s choosing for dinner. It was such an innocent question, he hadn’t even thought about it much. But he had said it. “Dad, can you pass me a fork?”

Everyone had frozen and looked at him. Virgil was trying to figure out how he could get out of this situation without getting hurt. Mister Emile was sitting next to the forks, so it was clear who he was talking to. He didn’t see a way out of this.

Mister Emile jerked to life again with a blink and passed Virgil a fork. “Here you go, Virge.”

“So wait,” Mister Remy said. “If he’s Dad, then who am I?”

Tears were forming in Virgil’s eyes and he couldn’t look at anyone at the table. “I’m sorry!” he blurted. “That’s not what I meant to say!”

Everyone was staring at him still and he buried his face in his hands as Patton hugged him. “It’s okay, Virge. You’re not gonna be in trouble,” he murmured.

“Why would he be in trouble for calling our dad ‘Dad’?” Logan asked. “That is, technically speaking, who he is.”

“Last time he called anyone Dad was to Charles,” Patton said. “And uh...Charles didn’t take that well.”

“Oh,” Logan said softly.
“Hey, Virgil, can you look at me?” Mister Emile asked.

Virgil peeked out from behind his hands and was surprised to see that Mister Emile wasn’t angry, or even upset. He was grinning, and there were the beginnings of tears in his eyes. “It’s okay if you want to call me Dad, all right? Is that who you think of me as?”

Blushing scarlet, Virgil nodded.

“Well, then, I can be Dad,” Mister Emile said. “No need to kick up a fuss about it.”

Virgil sniffled and nodded, offering him a watery and thankful smile.

“I repeat my question,” Mister Remy teased. “If he’s Dad, then who am I?”

Dee perked up and immediately made a sign close to his face that Virgil recognized but couldn’t place. Logan laughed. “Amiable? Bit of a mouthful, Dee,” he said with a good-natured smile.

Mister Remy just looked thoughtful. “Amiable. I could work with that. It is a little long, though. Why not just call me Ami? If you boys want to, of course.”

Virgil croaked out a, “Sure,” as everyone else offered varying noises of agreement. “I’m confused,” Virgil said, mulling over his words. “Why are you all so okay with what I said?”

“I already saw Dad as...well, Dad,” Roman said. “But I was a little scared to be the first one to say anything.”

Logan hummed his agreement. “I’ve seen both of them as better fathers than I could have ever hoped for, but I was at a bit of a loss as to what to call them,” he mumbled the last bit, turning red.

“Your pragmatism would get in the way of affection, nerd,” Roman teased.

Logan stuck his tongue out at Roman and Dee giggled, making Patton smile in turn, and a knot loosened in Virgil’s gut. Nobody was mad at him. Everyone else agreed with him that Mister Emile and Mister Remy were Dad and Ami. This didn’t have to be as terrifying as it was.

Everyone continued dinner soon after as if nothing happened. Virgil knew that Mister Emile... Dad was occasionally sending him glances filled with affection and proud smiles, and so was...Ami. This would take some getting used to, but Virgil didn’t regret it.

...He didn’t regret it, but it did make him nervous. He wished he could get rid of that feeling, but he had a sneaking suspicion that would never go away. He would always be nervous about something or another.

“So Virgil,” Dad said, grabbing his attention. “How was school today?”

“Oh! Uh, not bad,” Virgil said, shrugging. “Patton and I played with some of the other kids in our class at recess until we found a little caterpillar and that sorta...took all the rest of our time outside.”

Patton lit up. “It was really cool! It was bright green and had at least a dozen legs and I’m not sure what kind of caterpillar it was, but I know it’s gonna make a beautiful butterfly!” he exclaimed.

“There are many kinds of caterpillars that are green,” Logan said, humming. “But considering the region, that does narrow down our options some. Not by much, but a little bit.” He pulled out his phone and searched up something that Virgil couldn’t see, but then Logan showed them the screen. “These are just a few options the caterpillar could be.”
Virgil was enraptured by the pictures of butterflies and moths that Logan had pulled up. “That’s so cool!” he exclaimed. “They’re all so cool-looking!”

“And pretty!” Patton added. “They’re super pretty!”

Virgil looked at Patton with a grin. “You always did like the pretty things, Pat.”

“Yup!” Patton exclaimed with pride in his voice. “Because who wouldn’t want to be pretty?”

“I, personally, would prefer to be handsome,” Logan offered up. “But if you choose to want to be pretty, then that is, after all, your choice.”

Patton grinned at him. Virgil nudged his twin playfully. “Patton’s a little weird sometimes. I don’t understand why he would want to be pretty, but I won’t judge him.”

“Some time, I wanna try on a skirt,” Patton said. “One with all the bright colors and pretty flowers that some of the girls at school wear! They always look so pretty, and the skirts swish around, and it looks so perfect...” He sighed happily. “Yeah. I want to try a skirt.”

“We can go to the store and see if you find one you like,” Dad offered. “Not tonight, but maybe this weekend?”

Patton gasped. “Really?!”

Roman laughed. “I’ve found that Dad and Ami never offer anything that they don’t intend on finishing. If you want to try a skirt, they’ll let you.”

“Yes!” Patton cheered.

Logan laughed, right up until the wait staff came over with an ice cream sundae with a candle stuck in the whipped cream, and started singing “Happy Birthday” to him. Virgil sang along with their whole family and the workers. He was a little worried when Logan started crying as they sang, “Happy birthday dear Logan,” but Logan was still smiling, so Virgil assumed the tears were happy ones.

When Logan let every last one of his brothers get a taste of the ice cream, he wiped his tears and said, “That’s the first time people have sung my actual name in the Happy Birthday song in a group,” he managed to choke out. “Jack did it last year, and this year he did it again at lunch, but this is the first time anyone’s done it in a group.”

“Happy tears?” Virgil asked.

Logan laughed and nodded. “I like it when people use my real name.”

Patton nodded sagely. “Yeah. I don’t understand why anyone would think you’re anything but my brother. And you’re a great brother, too.”

Logan grinned as he took back the sundae and took his own bites. “Thanks, Pat. That means a lot.”

Virgil shook his head. “Pat’s always ridiculously nice like that. Honestly, I worry about him when it comes to bullies, because he always gives everyone the benefit of the doubt.”

Patton shrugged. “Everyone deserves a chance to prove themselves, no matter what rumors about them are. And I really don’t care too much if they try and hurt me. So long as you’re okay, I’m okay.”
Virgil smiled shyly and ducked his head. “You flatter me, Pat. But you also shouldn’t base your happiness on mine, because that could wind up hurting you.”

Patton shrugged. “Okay. As long as you’re not hurt, I usually don’t have reason to be upset. Better?”

“Still kinda focusing on me, but it’s a little better,” Virgil conceded.

Patton grinned in victory. Virgil rolled his eyes and gave Patton his Don’t think you’ve won look. 

Oh, but I have! Patton said with his smug grin.

Virgil stuck his tongue out at Patton. “Play nice,” Ami said. “Don’t want any hurt feelings.”

Dee waved his hands and signed, “I think they’re playing.”

“Yeah, they’re playing, but sometimes people can stop playing and wind up hurting others if they’re not careful,” Ami explained. “So I’m reminding them to play nicely.”

Virgil swung his legs as Logan finished the last of the ice cream. “You know, we do know to play nice,” Virgil pointed out. “I wouldn’t ever hurt Pat intentionally. I count on him too often to push him away.”

“Same here,” Patton piped up. “Sometimes all you have is family.”

Roman got a distant, sad look in his eyes. “Sometimes, you don’t even have that,” he said softly.

Virgil frowned. Roman worried him, sometimes, when he said things like that. He hoped that Roman was okay. He couldn’t imagine what life would be like if Patton weren’t in it. But no one knew about where Roman had come from, not even Dad and Ami. So Virgil could only wonder.

Logan finished his ice cream and everyone stood up, Dad pulling out the money for the meal and leaving it on the table. When they all left the restaurant, the clouds were hanging heavy overhead. “It might rain soon,” Virgil noted.

“Yeah,” Patton agreed. “But that means we can be all cozy inside tonight.”

“Speaking of tonight, I was thinking we could either do a game night or a movie night?” Ami proposed. “If Logan is up for it, that is. And he’d get first game and or movie choice.”

Logan perked up and Virgil smiled. He liked it when Logan got excited about things. It usually meant he’d start sharing his trivia knowledge, or he’d become more expressive, which Virgil didn’t get to see often. “If I get first choice on movies, I totally want to see Black Panther,” he declared. “It’s great, and I need to introduce my brothers to Marvel.”

“That is a bit more of a...grown-up movie,” Dad pointed out.

Logan frowned. “Oh, yeah...I forgot that Shuri is sometimes...not PG-friendly. Uh...how about Into the Spider-verse then? Still Marvel, but a little more kid-friendly.”

“Sure,” Dad agreed. “And if anyone gets scared, they’re free to leave the room at any time, no judgement.”

“Maybe a little disappointment,” Logan said. “But not at you, more in the fact that I picked a bad movie if it scared you.”

“Oh, you know what else is PG?” Roman asked. “Shrek is!”
Logan rolled his eyes and Virgil cackled as Logan snapped, “We’re not watching Shrek on my birthday!” He huffed and tweaked his glasses. “Everyone knows that Shrek 2 was better anyway.”

“But they’re human most of the movie! That’s no fun!” Roman exclaimed.

“Maybe, but I Need a Hero was a show-stopper song,” Logan rebutted.

Roman crossed his arms and huffed. “I guess!” he exclaimed, throwing up his hands into the sky.

Virgil laughed as Logan gave a smug grin not unlike the one Patton made earlier. “Into the Spider-verse first. Then we can talk about the possibility of Shrek 2.”

“Fine,” Roman whined.

Virgil bounced in excitement. “I really want to see Into the Spider-verse,” he offered. “That and maybe Detective Pikachu when it comes out.”

“That won’t be on-demand for a while,” Logan warned. “You’d have to see it in the actual movie theater.”

Virgil shrugged. “Worth it. I like Pokémon a lot.”

“Noted,” Logan said. “Maybe we could talk about it sometime. I enjoyed breeding Eevees to complete the evolutionary chain, and observe their different stats.”

“Definitely!” Virgil exclaimed. “I want to learn more about the stats, for sure!”

Logan smiled, but looked pleasantly surprised. “You might be the first person to actually say that to me,” he said. “I won’t complain, though.”

“Consider it your birthday present from me,” Virgil said with a laugh. “A free pass to ramble.”

Logan laughed in response to that, and Virgil’s heart warmed.
August 13th, 2013

Patton didn’t know why his mom was so upset. All he had done was pointed at a girl and said, “Her skirt is really pretty!” Virgil had agreed softly before making a beeline for the slide at the park, and Patton was going to join him, before he was stopped.

“Patton, honey, you can’t say that sort of thing, all right?” his mom asked.

Patton frowned. “Why not?” he asked. He really liked the girl’s skirt! It had butterflies on it and it swished when she spun in circles and it all-in-all looked pretty cool.

“Because if you say that to the wrong person, they might get angry,” she said. Then, in a whisper, “They might call you gay.”

Patton frowned. “What’s gay? Is it bad?”

His mother shushed him and Patton clamped his mouth shut. “Gay isn’t good, Patton. It’s not bad, but it’s not good. And if people think you’re gay, they might hurt you.”

Patton paled and promised not to comment on dresses or skirts again, and she let him go play with Virgil. But now he was scared. Did wanting to wear the skirt the girl was wearing... make him gay, like his mom worried about?

April 20th, 2019

Patton was jumping up and down, clapping his hands together, practically skipping across the parking lot to the store. Dad and Ami were behind him, as were Virgil and Dee. But he couldn’t settle for even a fast walk at the moment, he was just too happy. Because today... today, he finally, finally got to pick out a skirt to wear.

Last night, he had admitted to Virgil he was a little scared about finally getting to wear a skirt. He said he vaguely remembered Mom not liking whenever he looked at skirts and dresses, even in passing, and how she’d whisper the word “gay” like it was bad and horrible, and that Patton didn’t want to be bad and horrible. But what if he was for wanting to wear a skirt?

Virgil had looked at him in surprise, then said, “You won’t be bad just for wanting to wear a skirt, dummy. You won’t even be bad for being gay.”

“How do you know?” Patton asked him.

“Don’t you know what gay means?” Virgil pressed.

Patton shook his head. “I was too scared to ask Mom, especially if it was something bad.”

“Pat, being gay means liking other guys when you’re a guy, or liking other girls when you’re a girl. That’s what Dad and Ami are. Dad and Ami are gay,” Virgil explained.

“What?” Patton asked, blinking. “That’s it? That’s all being gay is?”
“Yeah,” Virgil said. “What did you think it was, tax evasion? Something you could go to jail for?”

“Well...yeah, kinda,” Patton had admitted, looking down at the ground.

“I mean, people can get in trouble for being gay, but not where we live,” Virgil asserted. “Being gay isn’t bad. Dad and Ami wouldn’t love you any less if you were or weren’t. And besides...actually, nevermind. That’s not important to this. What is important is that you’re not bad for wanting to wear a skirt, okay?”

“Okay,” Patton had said, and that was that.

Now, they were walking through the parking lot, Patton no longer worried about wearing a skirt, and the second they were inside the store, he ran to the girl’s section to look at all the sundresses and skirts they had to offer. Dad came up behind him, and said, “Ami is taking Virgil and Dee to look at some clothes for them in the summer in the boy’s section, so right now it’s just you and me here.”

Patton nodded. “But you’d let Dee and Virgil pick stuff out over here if they wanted, right?”

“Of course,” Dad said. “Right now, though, you’re the only one who’s said anything.”

Patton nodded. “Virgil wouldn’t want to wear skirts, I think. I don’t know about Dee, though.”

“Yeah, Dee’s a little unpredictable, isn’t he?” Dad asked. “One minute he’s so quiet you forget he’s there and the next he’s acting like a normal kid, and then the one after he’s climbing on top of the refrigerator and giving Ami a heart attack.”

Patton laughed at that mental image. Dee would totally climb the refrigerator just to see Ami’s face as he did it. When he focused on the skirts, though, he found he had a conundrum; they were all very pretty, and came in pretty colors, and had cute things on them like cats and puppies and flowers and butterflies, but Patton had no idea how to choose! “They all look so pretty,” Patton said, frowning. “How do I pick?”

Dad hummed and crouched down next to Patton, looking the skirts over. “They all do look very cool,” he agreed. “But we can probably narrow down the choices some.”

“How?” Patton asked.

“Well, do you prefer yellow or blue?” Dad asked.

“Blue,” Patton replied without missing a beat.

“Okay, so let’s look at the blue skirts and not worry about the yellow ones,” Dad said, steering Patton in the direction of the blue skirts. “Do you prefer pictures or patterns?”

“Patterns,” Patton said.

“Okay, so we can stop looking at some of the skirts with just one picture on them. That leaves us with a few options. Manageable?” Dad asked.

Patton nodded. His eyes flitted around the different skirts, until he saw one that made him gasp. It was a deep blue, and covered in stars and planets. “That one! I want that one!” he exclaimed, pointing at it. “Logan said he likes space and stuff, and he’s been teaching me about it, and it’s really cool! I wanna wear a space skirt!”

“Okay,” Dad said, laughing and picking a skirt off the rack, holding it up to Patton’s waist. “That
should fit you, yeah. The band is elastic, too. Do you want any others?"

Patton’s eyes widened. “I get to pick more than one?!!”

“If you want,” Dad encouraged.

Patton turned back to the skirts with a new sense of wonder. “I never got to wear a skirt before, and now I can have two? This is the best day ever!” he breathed.

Dad just smiled and let Patton hum and poke the skirts, taking a closer look at what each of them had to offer. When his eyes lit up as he found a light blue one, covered in polka dots shaped like puppy and kitty heads, he knew he had found the perfect skirt. “This one! I want this one!” he said definitively, pulling it off the rack.

“Okay,” Dad agreed. “Are there any others you really want, or should we look for shirts and pants?”

Patton thought about it. “I just want these,” he said. “But I kinda wanna look at dresses sometime too, you know? Dresses are pretty, and I like being pretty.”

Dad nodded, standing up. “Do you think you just like being pretty, or do you think you like being what people often think girls are?” he asked. “It’s okay if you don’t know the answer, I’m just curious.”

Patton thought. “I don’t think I’m trans,” he said. “At least, I’m not trans in the way Logan is. I wouldn’t wanna change my body to fit what people see girls as. And I don’t think I’d wanna be a girl if I got the choice to choose. But...I dunno. I probably wouldn’t choose to be a boy, either. Why couldn’t I just be Patton? Why would I have to be a boy or a girl?”

Dad shrugged. “You could be nonbinary.”

“Non-what?” Patton asked.

“It’s something some of my clients have said they identify as. So there’s boys and girls, and that’s what’s called the ‘gender binary.’ But some people don’t identify as either, or just choose to not identify at all. And usually those people are somewhere under the ‘nonbinary umbrella,’ which is a fancy way of saying that all these different labels people use are not part of the binary,” Dad explained.

“So...I don’t have to identify as something if I don’t want to?” Patton asked for clarification.

“Nope,” Dad said.

“Then I’m not gonna pick,” Patton said. “Because I just wanna be me. I can say I’m a boy to people, but that’s just...my ‘government assigned gender.’”

Dad smiled at him. “You should talk to Logan about that. He probably knows more about it than I do.”

Patton nodded as they moved to the boys section and nearly crashed into Virgil, Dee, and Ami. “Hey, guys,” Ami said. “Virgil helped pick out some stuff you might like, Patton, so we were about to find you and see if we got the right sizes.”

“Oh, cool!” Patton said. “Did you know that you don’t have to be a boy or a girl if you don’t want to?”
“Yeah, it’s pretty cool, right?” Ami asked. “Emile told me about it a while ago and it took me ages to understand, but it’s pretty neat!”

“It is!” Patton exclaimed. “So like, I might tell people I’m a boy because it’s easy, but really, I don’t feel like a guy or a girl, and that’s okay!”

“Wait, really?” Virgil asked. “You don’t just...automatically feel like you’re a guy?”

“Nope!” Patton said. “I assumed I was a boy because everyone said I was, but I never felt like one or the other! I was a little confused about Logan at first because of that, actually! Because I knew he felt like he was a boy and not a girl, but I thought he was an exception to not feeling gender, not the rule!”

“Oh!” Virgil exclaimed. “That’s really cool, Pat!”

Patton nodded. “So I’m a boy, I guess, but if I didn’t want to call myself a boy I wouldn’t have to!”

Virgil gave him a grin. “That’s really cool. Is it okay to still call you my brother and use he and him?”

“Sure,” Patton agreed with a shrug. “I’m not picky.”

Virgil nodded. “If you ever change your mind let me know.”

Dee waved his hands and signed, “Me too.”

“Thanks, guys, but I don’t think I’m changing what I want to be called yet,” Patton said with a smile.

They went to the dressing rooms for Patton to try on some of the shirts Virgil had picked out, and the skirts he had chosen as well. All of them were just a little big, but that was okay, because Patton knew he’d grow into them over the course of summer.

When they got back home, Patton immediately changed into his space skirt and went to Logan’s room, knocking on the door. Logan opened it about an inch and quirked an eyebrow.

“I wanna learn more about space,” Patton said simply. “And about being nonbinary.”

Logan’s eyebrows arched. “Since when did you know that word?”

“Since the store when I told Dad I wasn’t picky about being a guy or a girl, and if I had the option to change my gender I would just say I wanna be Patton,” Patton said.

“Huh,” Logan said, opening his door wide. “So you could be agender, or cassgender. Those are the two more obvious choices.”

Patton climbed onto Logan’s bed as he walked over and sat down a foot away. “What are those?” Patton asked.

“Agender is where you don’t have a gender, and cassgender is where you feel like your gender is unimportant, or you don’t care what it is.”

Patton mulled that over for a bit. “It’s not that I don’t have a gender, I don’t think,” he said, looking at Logan. “Because I guess it’s there. I just never felt strongly about what it was. I assumed I was a boy because that’s what everyone said I was. So I nodded along and said I was a boy when asked. But I just...don’t care. I’m me, and that’s all I really care about. So...I guess I’d use cassgender, if I wanted to have a label. Which...I dunno. The whole point is that I don’t care.”
Logan laughed. “Yeah. That’s kinda fitting. Do you want to see the pride flag for cassgender?”

“Sure,” Patton agreed.

Logan pulled it up on his phone and Patton grinned. “I like the blue,” he said.

“Yeah, it does look similar to your favorite shade of blue,” Logan agreed. “I like your skirt.”

“Thanks! I thought of you when I saw it and knew I had to have it!” Patton said with a bright smile.

Logan looked a bit choked up at that and swallowed. “That’s sweet,” he said. “Do you want to learn more about space, now?”

“Yeah!” Patton exclaimed. “We were doing constellations last time, can we do constellations again? Pretty pretty please?”

Logan laughed. “Yeah, sure, we can do constellations. Northern or Southern hemisphere?” he asked.

Patton blinked. “That makes a difference?!” he asked.

Logan nodded. “It also makes a difference depending on what season it is,” he informed Patton. “Do you know why?”

Patton shook his head, eyes wide in wonder as he asked, “Why?”

“Well, you see, the way the Earth is set up is that it spins around the sun, right? And one full spin around the sun is a year. But because there are so many stars in so many different places in the Milky Way alone...”
September 23rd, 2017

He thought he might get sick. He was looking at the mangled wreck in front of him. She had been there one moment, and the next...a brief flash of light, the frantic spin of tail lights as the car tried to correct itself, and it just...kept going into the night. The driver who must have known that he had hit a person getting out of a car just disappeared into the night.

She was just supposed to be changing their flat tire, why did this have to happen? Why did the car swerve, hit both her and their car, and drive away? Why was he still alive when she wasn’t? He thought he might get sick. He couldn’t tear his eyes from her body, from the blood on the metal, from the flashing blue and red lights of the police cars as strangers asked him questions.

He squeezed his eyes shut tight and sobbed. He just wanted his mother, but she was dead.

May 5th, 2019

Roman woke up with an aborted scream for his mother, shaking like a leaf. He kept a hand clamped over his mouth as he started to sob. He hoped he hadn’t been too loud, he didn’t want to wake the others up, they all needed their sleep--and then there was the knock at his door and light from the bathroom across the hall streamed into his room. Dad was there, but he couldn’t fix this. No one could fix this. “Roman? Are you okay?”

He couldn’t bring himself to look at Dad’s concerned face for more than a second. He shook his head as he looked away, hand still clamped over his mouth as he cried.

Dad slowly came over and sat on the edge of Roman’s bed. “It’s okay to cry, Roman. You need to let the emotions out. It’s okay if other people hear you, no one will blame you for needing to cry.”

Roman coughed and tried his hardest not to puke. Dad worried his lip and walked back to the doorway. “Rem? Could you get a trash can?” he softly called.

Instantly, there were two sets of footsteps in the hallway. The steady gait of Ami, and Dee’s frantic footsteps attempting to keep up. There were two shadows moving through the light, before Ami came over with a trash can and passed it to Dad, who put it by Roman’s feet on the bed. “Do you need anything, Roman?”

Roman shook his head as more tears fell. All he wanted was his mom, but he couldn’t have her.

Dee was standing in the doorway, holding onto Ami’s hand with a vice grip. When Roman looked over, he let go of Ami’s hand and disappeared into his room, before coming back with his giant snake stuffed animal. He walked into the room slowly, and keeping his eyes fixed on Roman, he reverently put the stuffed animal in Roman’s lap. Roman nearly choked on his laughter at such a small but meaningful gesture. He took the snake in his hands and rubbed his fingers over the short “fur” the animal had been given.

Dad started rubbing Roman’s back and Roman’s tears burned his cheeks as they fell. Roman took a deep breath, then another, then turned to Dad. “Sorry for waking you up.”
“It’s not a problem, Roman. Are you all right?” Dad asked.

Roman sniffled and rubbed his nose. “Yeah, I’m okay now. It was just a bad dream,” he whispered.

“About?” Dad pressed gently. “Roman, you know Ami and I don’t want to pry, but you showed up here one day, saying you were abandoned. You were surprised when we offered you food when you were hungry, and about the amount of chores you would do, and that we would help you with your homework. Logan, Patton, and Virgil all worry that you were abused. Did your mom...?”

“No!” Roman exclaimed. “Never. She would never hurt me. Not...not like that. She...she just left. When I needed her. And I got put into foster care when the police found out, and that’s where I had to do a lot of work, and didn’t get a lot to eat. And the horrible woman and her husband would make me take care of the younger kids, and the man would drink a lot, spending most of their money on beer. But my mother never, ever hurt me!”

“How did she leave?” Logan asked from the doorway.

Roman turned pink as he noticed Patton and Virgil standing there too, watching him like he was a ticking time bomb. He shrugged. “Does it matter? No matter why she left, or how, she’s gone now.”

Logan gently moved into the room, ushering Dee away from the side of the bed. “But how did she leave? Why? Don’t you ever wonder? Clearly, it still left an impact on you somehow. Did she leave in the middle of the night? Did she leave you behind in search of something else in life? Did you ever think you were holding her back?”

“Logan,” Dad warned, as Roman’s face turned red.

“Go to hell, Logan!” Roman exclaimed, and Patton pulled Virgil closer to him as Virgil gasped. “My mother loved me! She loved me like I was her entire world!”

“Then why would she leave you?” Logan asked.

“Because she died!” Roman exclaimed, jumping out of his bed and getting in Logan’s face. “We were coming home from shopping, and we got a flat tire! She was getting out to fix it when a drunk driver came by and hit her and the car on its way down the road! So no, I don’t question whether she loved me, you asshole, I just question why it had to be her, and not me who died that night!”

Logan stared at him coolly, face showing no emotion. Then, slowly, his eyes dropped to the floor. “I didn’t realize...”

“You didn’t realize what, huh?” Roman asked. “That the abuse came from someone other than my mother? That I could say she abandoned me without her having a say in the matter? What didn’t you realize?”

“Had I known that she had died, Roman...I would have...”

“Been gentler about it?” Roman scoffed, “You’re never gentle about things when you want to satisfy your own curiosity. And my mom dying shouldn’t be the only reason that you didn’t ask that! That would cross a line for anyone, Logan, not just someone whose mother died because of a drunk driver! You shouldn’t...you can’t make those assumptions. You can’t ask those questions. You never know who you’ll push away because of it.”

Logan opened his mouth to say something, but Roman just glared at him and Logan closed his mouth with a click. “I don’t want to talk to you,” Roman dismissed. “Go ahead and sleep in your own room. We both know you actually consider people’s emotions better when you’ve gotten a full
night’s rest, anyway.”

With a stiff nod, Logan left the room, slamming the door to his room next door. In an instant, Roman’s legs buckled, and Dad rushed forward to catch him just before he hit the floor. Roman could feel tears falling down again, but he was detached from it. Was he sure it was him that was crying? “Roman? Roman, I need you to look at me,” Dad requested.

Roman forced himself to look over towards Dad, even though he kinda wanted to curl up in a ball on the floor and never move again. “Okay, that’s not good. Roman? You’re dissociating. Do you understand what that means?”

Well, he knew what dissociation meant, more or less, but he didn’t understand why anyone would think he was dissociating right now. He tried to stand up, but the body he was using wasn’t working. He giggled manically and muttered, “I think this body needs a tune-up, can I get a trade-in?”

Dad gently pulled him to a standing position and led him over to his bed. “Okay, I think you just need some more sleep for now, Roman. If you’re feeling bad in the morning we’ll see if anything needs to be done, sound good?”

Roman hummed his understanding and got back in bed. Dee came over and gently moved the snake closer to Roman’s chest. “You can have them for the night,” Dee signed.

“Thanks,” Roman signed back. His eyelids felt like lead and soon enough, he couldn’t be bothered to keep them open.

When Roman returned to consciousness again, he sat up, rubbing his eyes blearily and yawning. He saw Dee’s stuffed snake in his lap and briefly wondered what had happened last night to prompt the stuffed animal being here instead of with its rightful owner. He picked it up and went to Dee’s room to return it, but Dee wasn’t there.

That was a little weird, because Dee never got up early. He checked the time on Dee’s clock, and his eyes bugged out when he saw it was ten in the morning. Even Logan would be awake by now!

Forgetting about returning the snake plush, he headed downstairs immediately, asking, “Guys, why didn’t anyone wake me up this morning?! It’s already ten!”

Everyone turned to look at him from wherever they were in the house. Patton and Virgil were watching cartoons, but quickly turned back to the show. Dee looked up from the book he was staring at, before averting his gaze when Roman looked at him. Logan was staring at his breakfast, resolutely not looking at him after first glance. Only Dad and Ami were bold enough to meet his gaze. “What happened? I didn’t contract the plague, did I?” Roman huffed.

“Roman, do you remember what happened early this morning?” Dad asked.

Roman frowned. “Uh...no? Why?”

“Well, you dissociated pretty badly, so I’m not really surprised about that,” Dad said. “But...”

“But?” Roman prompted.

Ami cleared his throat. “Roman, we know. About your mother.”

The forgotten snake fell to the ground. Roman’s eyes widened, and his blood roared through his ears. He took an involuntary step back. It all came crashing around him. The smells, the sound, the
flashing lights and the sight of blood and his tears burning his face like fire, crying, so much crying and he could only barely remember what the car looked like because in a flash it was gone, and he couldn’t help his mother. Shouldn’t someone try and help his mother?

Dad had his hands on Roman’s shoulders and the world snapped back into place. He wrenched himself free. “Don’t touch me!” he exclaimed.

Not only had his flashbacks crashed around him, but this new home he had started to build for himself was crumbling as well. They knew. They knew what had happened, he had too much baggage, he couldn’t keep up the mask well enough. And they’d send him away, back to that terrible place where he couldn’t go to school, couldn’t have friends, where he was only good for cleaning and the occasional meal.

He was crying, and his cheeks flared red in his embarrassment. They were definitely going to send him away now. He couldn’t even pretend like everything was okay.

“Roman,” Dad said slowly. “We’re not mad at you, okay? We’re not going to send you away, we’re not upset with you. This was something you didn’t want to share with us, and we’re not upset that you didn’t tell us sooner. Do you understand?”

Breathing was incredibly difficult, and understanding what Dad was saying more so. But he tried, because he knew that he should at least make an attempt. Slowly, he nodded.

“Okay,” Dad said, in the soft voice he usually used on Patton, or Virgil, or Dee when one of them got worked up. “Roman, we want to make sure you’re not going to dissociate again. Would you be okay if I gave you a weighted toy to hold?”

Again, Roman nodded. Dad moved away and almost immediately came back with a small sparkly crab that was surprisingly heavy for its size. He held it in his hands, trying to keep his hands up so the crab didn’t fall to the floor. “Okay, Roman, let’s go through some grounding exercises,” Dad said. “Can you name five things you can see?”

Roman frowned, trying to focus. “Uh...the crab, you, the floor, the couch, and the twins.”

“Four things you can feel?” Dad prompted.

“The crab,” Roman said, feeling his breathing start to slow at having a task to complete. “The cold of the floor, my shirt, and my tears.”

Dad smiled despite the situation and said, “You’re doing great, Roman. Three things you can hear?”

“The TV, your voice, my breathing,” Roman said.

Dad gave him another encouraging smile. “You’re almost done, just two more questions. What are two things you can smell?”

Roman sniffled. “Uh...whatever remains of breakfast...eggs, maybe? And...I guess how the house normally smells.”

Dad nodded. “That one’s hard. Is there anything you can taste? It’s okay if you can’t.”

“I taste salt,” Roman said softly. His cheeks were on fire from embarrassment, but he at least felt like he was real. “Can I have something to eat?” he asked, voice almost too soft to hear.

Dad nodded. “Yeah, we’ll get you some eggs and you can watch cartoons in the living room while
you eat, if you want.”
July 8th, 2008

Jessica may have only been five years old, but that didn’t mean that she wasn’t terrified. Her breathing felt like it was one of those cartoon pumps the characters on the TV would use too fast until it burst, or like it wasn’t happening at all. Her heart was hammering in her chest, as her father glared down at her. “Have you nothing to say for yourself, Jess?” he growled.

Flinching, Jessica tried to explain. “I just...I just wanted to see if I could read like the big kids. And...and the book was too heavy, and I dropped it.”

Her father scoffed. “You can’t read yet, you haven’t even been to kindergarten!”

Jessica wisely didn’t mention she could understand some of the title on the spine. She couldn’t read fluently, but she could read a bit. And she wanted to know what all the books said. But now she had caused a mess, and her dad was mad. So she was going to go back to her room and see if there were any picture books up there with actual words. Maybe she could see if she could read those.

May 5th, 2019

Logan felt incredibly guilty. He couldn’t look Roman in the eye. He hadn’t felt this chastised and this terrified since he had been really little, convinced he was a girl and just wanting to see if he could act like a big kid, only to find out that being a big kid would get him in trouble with his father.

To make matters worse, when Dad came into the room to get food for Roman, he didn’t glare at Logan, or make him feel like he was the scum of the earth in any way. Even Ami, who was the designated Logan-watcher this morning, wasn’t giving him anything more than the occasional neutral glance. He deserved worse. He forced Roman to admit his mom had died. He had forced him to say that in front of the entire family. And now Roman was on the edge of dissociating, listing sideways over the edge of reality into the unknown flashbacks Logan couldn’t even pretend to understand.

Logan thought he might get sick. He finished the last bites of cereal he had been working on, and then promptly stood up, heading to his bedroom. He didn’t look back, forcing himself to not check on Roman and make the situation worse. He just walked up to his room, closed the door behind him and locking it.

He sat down on his bed, grabbing his phone, which had been charging overnight. He thought he might get sick when he saw the lockscreen of him and Roman posing around Jack, who was laughing in the background. That had been taken the first time Logan had introduced each of them to the other.

Some older brother he had turned out to be. He was expected to be responsible, a role model. Now he’d be lucky if other people said, “Don’t do what your oldest brother does, he only screws things up when he wants to know something.”

Tears stung at his eyes and he focused on evening his breathing. He had problems managing his emotions on a good day. In the heat of the moment? Either his emotions shut off entirely or they
overwhelmed him to the point of drowning.

A patient knock started up outside the door. Logan closed his eyes and took off his glasses, forcing his breathing to stay regular as he called out, “Not now, Dad.”

“Logan, we have to talk,” Dad said, his voice muffled but holding no room for argument.

“When we’re both calm,” Logan said, throwing Dad’s words back in his face. “I’m not, right now.”

“At least unlock the door?” Dad asked.

Logan swiped at his cheeks and took a deep breath. “Do you promise to not come in without my permission?”

“Of course,” Dad said.

Logan walked over to the door and unlocked it, and cracked it open a couple inches. He knew he looked absolutely miserable. “Give me fifteen?” he asked. “I just need...just need fifteen.”

“Logan...” Dad stopped. Nodded. “Yeah, okay. We’ll talk in fifteen minutes.”

Logan closed the door and collapsed back on his bed, unsure as to what he should do to try and calm down. Tumblr probably wasn’t a good option. And he didn’t want to read today. And he had finished all his homework already. He curled in on himself on the bed, and closed his eyes.

He only realized he fell asleep when he woke up to the doorknob turning. He rubbed his eyes and sat up, seeing Roman standing in the doorway. “Hey,” Roman said softly. “Didn’t mean to wake you. Dad said you fell asleep.”

“Just as well,” Logan said. “I can’t sleep all day every day.” He checked his phone. “And it’s been half an hour.”

Roman shifted on his feet. “Can I come in?” he asked.

Logan nodded, and Roman came in, closed the door, and climbed onto Logan’s bed with him. “Dad and Ami told me what happened last night once they were sure I wasn’t going to dissociate again. Dad thinks I might have PTSD.”

“You saw your mom die, I would be surprised if you didn’t,” Logan said softly. “I’m sorry, Roman.”

Roman sighed, leaning his head on Logan’s shoulder. “I know you are. And I wanted to be mad with you. That was something I wanted to keep to myself. But I’m not.”

Logan looked down at him. “You’re not?”

“Well, I’m a little annoyed,” Roman allowed. “But you wanted to know what was going on. You wanted to make sure I was okay. Because I know once you knew you would be researching techniques to help me cope. That’s just who you are. You operate mostly on logic, rather than emotions. So while emotions might have told you to bide your time, and wait until I was willing to share, your logic was telling you that earlier treatment meant earlier recovery.”

Logan sighed. “You’re too nice, too forgiving. I traumatized you.”

“You made me dissociate a little bit, and let the adults know that I wasn’t okay. I’m not gonna hate you for that, Logan.”
“Why not?” Logan asked. “Roman, I actively pushed you, knowing that the subject wasn’t something you might want to talk about.”

“Logan, you need to shut up sometimes and just think about what other people are saying to you,” Roman said. “I don’t hate you. I’m not mad at you. You made a mistake. It’s not the end of the world.”

The words refused to sink in. “But why?” Logan asked. “Why isn’t it the end of the world?”

Roman pulled back and looked at him, nose scrunched up. “Because everyone in this house is a decent person?” he said, voice rising like a question at the end. “Do you honestly think Dad and Ami would punish you by...say...denying you access to Hormone Replacement Therapy just because you made a stupid mistake?”

Logan paled. Roman rolled his eyes. “Lo, they’re not gonna do that! They know that getting testosterone is a big deal for you, and they’re gonna help you get it at the start of summer! My point is that they won’t kick you out, or deny you something you need, just because you screw up! You can’t hold basic needs or assistance for health issues hostage just because your kid did something you didn’t like. That’s not how any of this works.”

“That’s how it used to be,” Logan said softly. “Finish my homework in order to get dinner, only getting positive attention if I got all A’s in school. I’m fortunate that I always enjoyed learning and it came naturally to me. Otherwise I might have lost my mind.”

Roman stared at him a long time, before he quietly said, “That’s messed up, Logan.”

Logan shrugged off Roman’s concern. “You saw your mom die and you were abused in your foster home. Patton and Virgil’s step-father was an alcoholic. No one knows how bad Dee’s home situation might have been except Dad and Ami, and they refuse to share. My home life wasn’t the greatest, but I’m in no position to complain.”

“That’s not how that...you know what? No. I’m not gonna try and logic you through this,” Roman said. He grabbed Logan’s cheeks, and brought their foreheads together. “If your parents were bad people, you can absolutely complain about them. No matter anyone else’s hardships. Your parents kicked you out because you wanted to go by Logan. They sucked. You’re allowed to complain, you’re allowed to be traumatized. Your parents held basic human needs for ransom. They were not good parents. Full stop.”

Logan blinked once. Twice. Opened his mouth and said, “My mother wasn’t that bad. It was mostly my father’s idea to do that stuff.”

“Your mother is complicit in the whole thing!” Roman exclaimed, leaning back and throwing his hands up in the air. “Logan, no one likes to admit their parents hurt them. But your parents hurt you. Considering the way you freaked out after you screwed up, there’s no question.”

“Wow, thanks,” Logan said, before turning and sighing, pinching his nose. “I’m really sorry, Roman.”

“I know you are, Logan,” Roman said. “No need to get hung up on it, all right? I forgive you. We can still work together with the gremlins to save for a dog. And I’m not going to stop talking to you. And Dad and Ami won’t deny you anything that you can’t live without, even if they decide to ground you. Which I doubt they will. Hearing them talk earlier, they know you’re beating yourself up enough.”
“I did traumatize you,” Logan pointed out.

Roman rolled his eyes. “You didn’t traumatize me. At best, you re-traumatized me. And that’s a stretch. You found one of my triggers. I didn’t even know I had it, so in a way you helped me.”

Logan frowned. “How could I help you?”

“Well, there are lots of topics they go over in Health class, one of those being family, and from what I hear, there’s an abuse unit. Knowing that I can’t handle talk of abandonment might help, because instead of dissociating in the middle of class, I can be excused,” Roman explained. “Not to mention, you know, now everybody knows not to talk about my mom around me unless I’m properly prepared beforehand.”

“But the downsides—”

“—Do not outweigh the upsides,” Roman said firmly. “Don’t beat yourself up over this, all right? You made a mistake. You learn from it. You move on. It’s not always simple, but it’s always possible.”

Logan nodded but felt his cheeks heat up anyway. He knew he wasn’t going to forgive himself for this for a while.

Roman seemed to sense that too, because he asked, “Do you really want to make me happy, Logan?” he asked.

“Of course,” Logan said.

“Just...promise me that if you go to a party, you don’t drive home drunk, all right? You can be drunk, I’ll just avoid you for the most part until you’re sober or I’m comfortable around you again. But...but don’t drive drunk, okay? Have a designated driver, or be the designated driver. I know you can’t trust everyone to not drive home drunk, but make the effort to avoid doing it yourself? The guy who hit my mom’s car and...and hurt her? He was maybe twenty years old. I don’t want you risking throwing away your life because of manslaughter charges, and DUI charges. And I don’t want anyone to get hurt on the road like that again if I can help make a difference.” Roman worked his hands. “I know you and Jack have talked about going to parties next year, when you’re both juniors, and I just...don’t want you to take that risk. Promise me you won’t drive drunk.”

“Yeah, I promise, Roman,” Logan said softly. “I would never drive drunk.”

“Then we’re good,” Roman said. “You don’t need to beat yourself up over it, you can just work on feeling better the same as I am. We both have our own issues to work through. Maybe we can help each other with some of them. Maybe not. But no matter what, I’m never going to hate you, or resent you, or want you gone so long as you try, all right? All I’m asking is that you try.”

“I can try,” Logan confirmed. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get better, even if I can never be at one-hundred percent. The last thing I want to do is let you or myself down.”

“And probably avoid letting down Ami and Dad as well,” Roman pointed out.

Logan laughed. “Yeah, good point.”

Dad knocked at the door and both boys looked up. “Are you two better?” Dad asked.

“Not one hundred percent, maybe, but we’re getting there,” Roman said.
Logan murmured his agreement. “I might need a little while to forgive myself, but I’m not going to actively destroy myself over this, not anymore.”

“Good,” Dad said with a slight smile. “The younger ones were thinking about playing some games in the backyard, if you want to join them?”

“Yeah!” Roman exclaimed, jumping up and dashing out of the room.

Logan and Dad followed at a slower pace. “Am I still in trouble?” he asked.

“It sounds like you and Roman are working things out between the two of you, and you were punishing yourself enough, so no, you’re not in trouble, unless you consider extra care and a little bit of a closer watch in trouble.”

Logan shrugged. “The watch might make me uneasy, but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Good,” Dad said. “And Logan...if you ever want to talk about your mother and your ex-father...we’re here for you.”

Logan smiled softly. “Thank you.”
Chapter 25

September 30th, 2017

It was all Virgil could hear his mother whispering about anymore. He’s gay, they’re gay, she’s sinning, Patton is going to wind up just like them and then she wouldn’t be able to protect him. Charles would offer to whip Patton into shape, which his mother always refused. Charles would scoff and say, “Don’t say I didn’t try to stop him from being a queer.”

Virgil never said anything if his mother brought it up. Sometimes Patton would ask him why he got quiet, and Virgil never had the heart to tell him it was because he had overhead Mom and Charles. He didn’t want Patton worrying about people talking about him, especially if what they were saying had no proof.

Though Virgil knew one thing for certain. He could never admit to his mother that he had gotten a crush on the new boy at school.

May 22nd, 2019

Virgil was nursing a black eye and trying his hardest not to cry in the principal’s office, failing miserably. He was snivelling as the principal called Dad and Ami. He would have sat outside the principal’s office, by the secretary, but when he had sat there, the other kid he was sitting by, Rick, had split his lip wide open. Of course, he had pinned it on Virgil, so now instead of being in trouble once, he was in trouble two times over. Both for things he didn’t do.

The principal looked at him with apathy. “Stop crying, Mister Picani. Crocodile tears won’t work with me.”

Virgil hiccuped, continuing to hold the ice pack to his eye and blotting his lip with a tissue. “I didn’t do it, sir. I really didn’t.”

The principal shook his head. “We’ll figure out who did what when Rick’s parents and yours come in.”

Virgil cried harder. He was terrified. Not because his secret was out, no, but because if he was blamed for what he didn’t do and Dad and Ami believed the principal, he’d be in such big trouble he doubted he’d be able to sit for a month. Dad and Ami had never spanked him before, but he was pretty sure being accused of kissing another student without consent would do the trick.

The time in between when the principal called Dad and Ami and when they showed up felt like an eternity and the blink of an eye at once. Virgil wondered if this was what dissociating was like, and resolved to give Roman a huge hug if it was, because he would never wish this on anyone.

When Dad and Ami walked in, Virgil almost sobbed. Ami immediately came over to his side and asked, “Virgil, are you all right?! What happened?!?”

The principal cleared his throat. “Mister Picani,” he said neutrally.

Ami stood and glared at the principal. “Mister Gardener. Have you managed to find accommodations for our youngest yet in between meetings?”
The principal leveled Ami with a stare. “No, he has not yet gotten a translator for summer school. He can speak, he doesn’t need one. And that is not why I have called you in here today.”

“Yeah, I can see Virgil here,” Ami growled. “Who gave him the black eye and split lip and what are you going to do about it?”

A woman strolled in with Rick clinging to her hand and crying, pointing at Virgil. “He did it, Mom! He’s the one!”

“Of course he is,” the woman spat. “Remy. Emile.”

“Brenda,” Ami said, voice as cold as liquid nitrogen. “What brings you here?”

“Your delinquent son kissed my poor Rick.”

Ami blinked and said nothing. Dad just looked shocked. The principal cleared his throat. “Misses Jackson, Misters Picani, please, have a seat.”

“I demand an apology be made! Rick was traumatized!” Brenda’s shrill voice accused.

Virgil cried harder as Rick glared at him. “I didn’t do it!” Virgil said. He felt like his heart had shattered into a million pieces, and Ami and Dad hadn’t even given him the disappointed look at him yet.

“He did!” Rick exclaimed. “He’s lying, he kissed me!”

“No I didn’t!” Virgil exclaimed.

“Virgil, deep breaths,” Dad reminded him. “Can you explain what happened?”

Virgil took a couple deep breaths but shuddered out a, “I’m not sure what happened.” At Brenda’s laugh, he exclaimed. “I’m not! One minute I’m talking to Rick and the next he punched me in the eye and called me names!”

The principal looked nonplussed. “Well, what did you say to him?”

“It was personal,” Virgil said, looking at the floor, and feeling his cheeks flaming red.

“If you won’t admit what you did, Virgil, then I’m afraid you will have to be suspended,” the principal said.

“Hey, now, hang on a minute!” Dad exclaimed. “You haven’t even heard his side of the story! I’m sure you listened to Rick’s in great detail! Did you not listen to Virgil’s because Remy and I are fighting against you to get Dee accommodations? Are you just bitter at us? Or is there something more sinister at play here? Do you just not care for your students?!”

“Of course I care about the students!” the principal exclaimed.

“Then let Virgil share his side of the story!” Dad bellowed. “And don’t suspend him until you’ve gotten all the facts!”

Virgil was shaking and crying more and Dad turned to him, apologetic. “I’m sorry, Virgil. I shouldn’t have raised my voice. I know you may not want to share, but what did you say to Rick before he hit you and called you names?”

With shaking hands removing the ice pack from his black eye, Virgil said, “I said I had a crush on
him, okay?” He scuffed his shoes on the floor. “I figured it was almost summer, so if he didn’t like me back it was no big deal, and by fall he would forget. But he started yelling at me, saying I was gross and going to hell and...and he punched me in the eye before saying...”

“Saying what?” Ami asked, turning his icy glare onto Rick.

“Before saying I was a filthy queer,” Virgil whispered, starting to cry again, softer. “That’s when a teacher came over and Rick claimed I kissed him and he was trying to get me away, and he sent us both here.”

“That doesn’t explain your split lip,” Ami said.

Virgil shifted. “When the secretary left for a minute to talk to the nurse about what happened, Rick punched me again, and when I yelled, he claimed I hit him in the stomach first.”

“My angel would do nothing of the sort!” Brenda screeched. “You’re a liar, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself!”

Virgil cried, “I’m telling the truth! I just had a crush on him! I didn’t want to kiss him, I didn’t kiss him! I just wanted to tell him, because I thought he was cool!”

Rick scrunched his face up and Virgil was really starting to wish he had punched Rick, because there was no way he could do it now but he really wanted to. “You’re gross!” Rick exclaimed. “I don’t want you near me ever again!”

Dad looked angry, and Ami looked completely calm, which is how Virgil knew someone wasn’t making it through the day alive and well. “Mister Gardener, how many times has Rick been called into the office for violence against another student?” Ami asked.

“I hardly see how that’s re—”


Mister Gardener stared down Ami and lost as his eyes drifted away and he muttered, “A handful.”

“Now. How many times has Virgil been called into this office, for any sort of infraction?” Ami continued.

“Never before today,” Mister Gardener said. “But he has been called down here for—”

“For abuse perpetuated by his mother and stepfather before my husband and I gained custody, I know,” Ami dismissed. “That’s irrelevant to this.”

Mister Gardener sputtered in indignation, but shut up as soon as Ami leveled him with a glare that would make Charles cry.

“Now, let’s see. A boy with a history of violence against other kids, as well as, I’m sure, insulting others, belittling them, and behaving much like your average schoolyard bully, tells you that the quiet kid who never comes out of his shell and never gets in trouble beyond occasionally talking to his brother for too long hits him because he was allegedly kissed, and you believe him? Over said quiet kid who not only hasn’t gotten in trouble, but also has a story behind what happened? Beyond ‘he came up to me and kissed me’? Are you really that stupid? Every kid has a reason for doing what they do. Not to mention that Rick doesn’t have a scratch on him and Virgil has some bruises that aren’t going away for at least a couple days. Do you want to allow violence in your school?”
“Mister Jackson will be punished as well for retaliating—”

“No,” Ami said, voice deadly, dripping with venom. “There is no ‘as well’ in this situation. Virgil is telling the truth. Ask the other kids on the playground, I’m sure they’ll tell you exactly what Virgil told us. Virgil doesn’t go up to random kids to kiss them. Especially not boys he likes. He has anxiety which makes it hard for him to raise his hand in class, let alone telling his crush he likes him. Kissing his crush is completely out of the question. You are trying to punish my son for simply liking another boy, and I will not have it!”

Virgil watched in awe as Mister Gardener actually got nervous. He fiddled with the cuffs on his shirt and swallowed a couple times before saying, “I can’t just let him get off scot-free.”

“He did nothing wrong!” Ami exclaimed. “He told a boy he liked him! And then that boy hit him, twice, and called him slurs! Don’t you think that is ‘punishment’ enough? Now, you either get the full story from the other students and see how you were wrong, or I’ll be taking this to your superiors, who I’m sure won’t be as forgiving as I am!”

Mister Gardener paled. “I will talk to the other students, but until the full story is uncovered, both boys will not be allowed to return to class.”

“If you’re suspending Virgil, we’ll be sure to give him some time off at home, let him watch his favorite cartoons, and make sure he knows he’s not in trouble. Because he did nothing wrong,” Dad threatened. “And if by next year you are still trying to get our boys in trouble for something they didn’t do, well, I’m afraid you’ll be dealing with us a lot more than you’d like.”

Dad and Ami led Virgil out, and he could see Dee waiting outside the office on a bench. The four of them went home and Virgil sat listlessly on the couch for two hours, until he heard the door slam shut and Logan, Roman, and Patton walk in.

He looked up as they approached him. Logan and Roman were looking at him with concern, but Patton just looked hurt. “Why didn’t you tell me you were gay, Virge?” Patton asked.

Virgil shrugged. “I was embarrassed, I guess. It’s hard to tell your twin brother you’re gay when he thinks it’s a bad thing, and even after that, I just...thought crushing on Rick was embarrassing. And clearly he didn’t feel the same way,” he weakly laughed at the end.

Patton climbed on the couch and hugged Virgil tight. “I don’t care that you’re gay, Virge,” he said. “I just wish you would have told me. I could have helped you.”

Virgil hugged him back, and sniffled. “He called me names the second I told him...” he admitted. “My heart hurts, and the principal didn’t believe me when I told him I didn’t kiss Rick, and definitely didn’t kiss him without him saying yes.”

Patton just hugged him tighter. “It’s gonna be okay,” he murmured. “You’re gonna be okay.”

Virgil wrenched out a sob and started to cry into Patton’s shoulder. Logan and Roman offered their comforts as well and Virgil realized something. Even if his crush didn’t like him back, his family would always love him. No matter if he liked guys, girls, or no one. No matter if he cried during movies, or laughed too loud at a good joke. His family would be here for him. No matter what.

Patton held Virgil close as Logan talked about his experiences with crushes and Roman laughed at the escapades Logan got into. Virgil smiled despite himself. His family would be there for him through this, through all of it. He didn’t even get a disappointed look. His family was there for him through this.
He was the luckiest kid alive.
Chapter 26

October 5th, 2009

“I saw a dog at school today,” Jessica said idly as her parents drove her home.

“Oh?” her mom asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “It was huge! Like, at least two and a half feet tall. Suzie said that her family breeds dogs for money. I thought that was kinda cool.”

Her dad grumbled. “We’re not getting a dog,” he muttered.

Jessica blinked. “I didn’t say that I wanted one. I don’t want a dog. I just thought it was cool that you can get money for raising dogs.”

Her dad glanced back at her. “Don’t come to me saying that you want one of those mutts. All they do is make noise and trouble,” he declared.

Jessica nodded, although she wondered why her dad was so against the thought of dogs.

June 13th, 2019

Logan kept the money in his wallet, and resisted the urge to fidget and adjust his sports bra. He looked enough like a guy to pass to strangers on the street, and he wasn’t even nervous about being called “Miss” for once. No, he was nervous because he, Roman, Patton, Virgil, and Dee had pooled their allowances together and saved for months to get a dog. And today was the day they were walking through the parking lot to the shelter.

“You have the fifty dollars for the adoption fee?” Roman asked for the umpteenth time.

“Yes,” Logan said.

“And the money for the food when we go to the pet store after?” Patton pestered.

“Yes,” Logan repeated.

“And the extra money for a bed and treats?” Virgil pressed.

“Yes! Brothers, I have the money. It’s not like it could have gone anywhere from my wallet on the way from home to here,” Logan said, thoroughly exasperated.

Dee tugged on the bottom of Logan’s shirt, and Logan looked down, quirking an eyebrow.

“Do you know what kind of dog you want?” Dee asked, signs somewhat timid.

“Hey, this dog is for you guys. I’m pitching in the money for the food because you needed it,” Logan said softly. “I’m not picky about what kind of dog we get so long as it can’t knock me down when I’m coming home from school.”

Dee nodded. “But what kind of dog do you want?” he asked, grinning.
Logan rolled his eyes at Dee’s antics and said, “I read up on good emotional support dog breeds. Pitbulls were on the list, as well as labradors, golden retrievers, and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. Though why they need such a long name is beyond me.”

They walked into the shelter and Logan was assaulted with the sounds of dogs barking, the smell of wet animal fur, and he saw more than a few kids running around with small animals on leashes. He walked with the rest of their rag-tag group up to the counter, where a young woman who couldn’t be any more than five years older than Logan himself was sitting. “Can I help you?” she asked cheerfully.

Remy and Emile looked to the boys, and every last one of them looked to Logan. He rolled his eyes. “We’re here because we’d like to adopt a dog,” he informed her.

“Certainly!” the woman said. “Follow me, I’ll show you the dogs up for adoption.”

Roman, Patton, and Virgil eagerly followed the woman, while Logan and Dee hung back a little bit but stuck with the group. They were led to a back room where dozens of dogs were all barking and approaching the gates keeping them inside. Dee immediately looked overwhelmed, and Virgil shuffled closer to Patton at the sudden onslaught of noise. “Do you know what kind of dog you’re looking for?” the woman asked over the barking.

“No, we didn’t have a specific breed in mind.” Logan shouted back. “But we were hoping for an adult dog, preferably already house trained.”

The woman nodded. “All the puppies are at the front, so you’ll want to head farther back.”

Logan nodded and moved further in, looking at all the dogs. Dee held his hand and Logan rubbed his thumb over Dee’s knuckles. “See any you like?” he asked his youngest brother.

Dee looked around, clearly nervous. Not that Logan blamed him, some of these dogs were almost as tall as Dee was.

“Should we look further back for a smaller dog?” Roman offered.

Patton and Virgil readily agreed, and they all moved further into the hall. Back here, the dogs were barking less. Dee felt a little more comfortable and moved further away from Logan, to look at the dogs closer. There were a few bigger ones, but none of his brothers seemed interested in a dog that could bowl them over. Even Roman, tall as he was, could be flattened by an over-excited retriever. And no one wanted that.

Patton and Virgil started talking when Virgil paused in looking, and they immediately headed over to one of the kennels with a small dog with large brown ears. Roman followed and actually cooed at the dog he saw. “Logan, Dee, get over here! This dog is adorable!”

Logan followed their footsteps and saw the dog that enchanted them so much. It was clearly a spaniel mix, sitting at the door to the kennel, patiently wagging its tail. Dee cautiously stepped toward the kennel door and held his hand out, and the dog took an experimental sniff before it licked Dee’s hand. Dee’s eyes widened comically wide. Logan knew that every last one of his brothers were smitten with this one. Not that he didn’t understand why.

The dog had a brown fur all over its face, save for a white stripe going down from the forehead to around the muzzle. It had a mottled mix of brown and white fur all over its body, and it had yet once to bark. Logan crouched down next to Dee, reading the small sign on the cage. The dog was a spaniel mix, and her name was Vanellope. “Hello, Vanellope,” Logan said to her.
Vanellope barked back, once.

“Vanellope? Like the Disney character?” Roman asked.

“I would assume so,” Logan said with a shrug. “Although I can’t say for certain, as I wasn’t the one to name her.” He pointed at the sign.

Roman took a closer look at it and made a *huh* noise. “Cool. One girl in an all-guy house, though, that’ll be something for her.”

“I think she’ll live,” Logan said drily. He waved the woman over and asked, “Do you guys want to see any of the others, or are we getting Vanellope?”

Roman said, “No, I’m good,” as Patton and Virgil cried out that they couldn’t leave Vanellope here.

Everyone looked at Dee and he cleared his throat a couple times, before his voice came out in a trembling, “I want Vanellope.”

Logan nodded and turned to the young woman. “I think we’ve made our decision,” he said, flashing her a grin. “My brothers can be very...particular, and they’ve made their choice.”

“They made a good choice,” she said, pulling out a key and unlocking Vanellope’s kennel. “Vanellope is a very calm dog. She’s just over two years, so she’s got a good seven years left minimum, provided you take good care of her.”

Vanellope walked out of the cage and started licking Dee’s hand, and he looked so overwhelmed with love that there were tears in his eyes. “You okay, Dee?” Logan asked.

Hesitantly, with shaking hands, Dee signed, “I love her.”

“Yeah?” Logan asked with a laugh. “I’d say she loves you, too.”

Dee sniffled and nodded. Dad and Ami were looking on with equal mixes of amusement and fondness. “Can we buy leashes and other supplies here as well?” he asked.

“You can get basic supplies, yes,” the woman said. “If you need dog food, though, you’ll have better luck at the pet store.”

“That’s our next stop,” Logan said. “But we didn’t know what kind of dog we’d get, so we’ll need at least a leash.”

The woman nodded. “A leash and a collar will cost about fifteen dollars for the cheapest ones we have. They should last a couple months, though, provided she doesn’t chew through the leash.”

“What about the more durable ones?” Logan asked, pulling out his wallet and counting their money. “We can afford up to thirty dollars for a stronger leash and collar. Everything else is the adoption fee, a bed, and food and toys.”

“You’re very put together,” the woman complimented.

Logan smiled at the praise. “I’m the oldest of five. I have to be.”

The woman laughed. “If your brothers want to continue playing with her, I can help you with the papers while they get acquainted?”

Logan nodded and she led him to a back room, where he chose a light green leash and collar, both of
them easily adjustable in length and sat down with the woman, signing all the papers where he could. When he needed a guardian’s signature, being a minor, Dad came in and finished what needed to be signed. He shooed Logan away, back to his brothers. “You’re going to want to make sure she’s on the leash before they leave with her,” he teased.

“Right,” Logan said, walking back out, where the others were still playing with Vanellope.

“Vanellope,” Logan said, walking over and putting the collar around her neck, “Welcome to the Picani family.”

As if she understood what was going on, Vanellope started wiggling happily, tail wagging at close to lightspeed. Logan made sure the leash was secure and played with her ears. “You’re gonna love it with us,” he said definitively.

Dee was crying again and Roman had an arm wrapped around him. Patton was crying a little too, and Virgil was beaming. Logan begrudgingly smiled as Vanellope walked into his lap. “You’re annoyingly cute,” he informed her.

She barked once, continuing to wiggle.

Roman looked at Logan. “Is she ours?” he asked.

Logan nodded once. “She’s ours as soon as Dad signs the last of the papers.”

“She’s yours,” Dad said, walking out of the back office.

Roman threw his hands up in victory, and Patton hugged Vanellope, who was still wagging her tail. Dee just bounced happily from where he sat, and Virgil had one of those rare, genuinely happy, anxiety-free smiles on. Logan grabbed Vanellope’s leash and said, “Let’s go to the pet store, get her a bed and some food and toys, sound good?”

All the boys nodded and stood. Logan didn’t miss the proud looks Dad and Ami were sharing, but he didn’t let the other boys know about it. This was something all of them were proud of. If they wanted to be proud of their sons for taking it on themselves to get what they wanted, well, who was Logan to stop them? This was something they deserved to be proud of.

As they left the shelter, Vanellope seemed to get even more excited, bouncing and looking around, sniffing everything within the range of her leash. When everyone got in the minivan, Vanellope sat on Logan’s lap on the way to the pet store. And while he internally lamented that he would probably need to invest in a lint roller to deal with dog fur, he couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face as Vanellope saw fit to start licking his face. She was truly annoyingly cute.

They got to the pet store and made quick work of finding the food, a bed, and a crate. They spent more time on the toys, and looked into the different treats Vanellope might want. She was well behaved, rarely barking at anything, and Logan was impressed with her previous owner. Clearly, she had either taken obedience classes or the owner was very good at training dogs themselves.

Dee was constantly crouching down to Vanellope and petting her, mumbling “Good dog,” under his breath over and over. Vanellope seemed to like it.

Roman whispered to Logan, “Is that the echolalia thing or is it Dee just getting really attached really fast?”

Logan glanced at Dee, still wearing his “villain gloves” and playing with their new companion. “Something tells me it’s both,” he told Roman.
Roman nodded. “Hey, Dee?” he asked.

Dee looked up.

“Is ‘good dog’ a good repeat phrase?” Roman asked.

Dee nodded, and Roman grinned. “Is it okay if I say it with you?”

Again, Dee nodded, smiling a little himself. “Good dog,” he said softly.

Roman laughed and said, “Good dog!” right back.

The two continued saying it over and over until Logan was cracking a smile and Patton and Virgil were giggling themselves. They continued through the buying of supplies, and on the car ride back home, and once they were back at their place, Roman helped take Vanellope off her leash, saying, “Welcome home, Vanellope. You’re a good dog.”
January 3rd, 2017

Jessica couldn’t believe it. She... *he* just couldn’t believe it. There was a word for feeling like a boy when everyone said you were a girl. *He* was transgender.

The health teacher droned on about the LGBT community and its spectrum of identities, but Jessica was shell-shocked. This was a thing other people felt. He was a boy. Jack nudged him from the next desk over. “You okay, Jess?”

He swallowed and nodded. “I just...never realized, there was a word for it...”

Jack made a soft *huh* noise. “So...are you gay then? Or bi?”

“Transgender,” he said with a smile on his face. “There’s a name for it. I’m transgender.”

“Congrats, yo,” Jack said with a laugh. “Or should I say congrats, *man*?”

His heart soared and tears pricked his eyes. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand and said, “Jack, I could kiss you right now.”

June 14th, 2019

Logan held his breath as they walked into the endocrinologist’s place. Dad and Ami were both there with him, as Roman had agreed to look after the younger boys during this appointment. Logan was sweating, and shaking, and Ami held his hand as Dad went up to the receptionist to let them know they were here for an appointment.

“You’re gonna be fine,” Ami reassured him. “Don’t worry too much, they’re just gonna ask you some questions.”

“I know, I did the research with you and Dad, so I know what’s coming, I know what to ask for, I’m just...nervous, I guess,” Logan said.

“It’s a big day for you, I know,” Ami said. “Just take deep breaths, your dad and I will be there for the whole appointment, and by the time we’re leaving, you should be all set with a prescription for testosterone.”

Logan grinned despite his nerves. He and Ami sat down in the waiting room, and Dad came over to sit on Logan’s other side. “You excited?” he asked.


Dad smiled at him. “Have you texted Jack yet?”

Logan nodded. “He wants to come over after the appointment, if that’s okay.”

“That’s fine,” Dad said. “I’d recommend it, actually, considering he’s your closest friend and you’re going to want to keep him in the loop.”
Logan nodded and felt for his phone in his pocket. Then a nurse called his name, his preferred name, and they were heading back to one of the exam rooms. Logan sat on the table, and Dad and Ami took watch by the door. Soon enough a doctor walked in smiling, and Logan could feel his nerves spike and then settle. “Hello, Logan, my name is Doctor Reign. How are you doing today?”

“I’m a little nervous,” Logan admitted.

Doctor Reign looked at the laptop in his hand and nodded. “Yes, I see you’re here to start Hormone Replacement Therapy. It’s a very big decision.”

Logan nodded. “It is, sir, but it’s one I’m absolutely certain of.”

“That’s the spirit,” Doctor Reign smiled and continued, “Now, these two are your fathers?”

“Yes, sir,” Logan said, shifting on the exam table. “They’re in full support of my decision, and they’re willing to sign the papers and waivers on my behalf.”

“You are very lucky to have such supportive parents,” Doctor Reign said. “I’ve heard horror stories from my adult patients sometimes.”

“Yeah, well, second time’s the charm, right?” Logan asked with a bitter half-smile.

The doctor looked briefly surprised, but hid it well in seconds. “I suppose so,” he allowed. “Let’s get your height and weight, and then your parents can help with the forms, and we’ll get you a prescription.”

Logan felt tears in his eyes and he nodded with a grateful smile. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“Of course, young man,” Doctor Reign said with a smile. “Stand on the scale, will you please?”

Logan followed the instructions and let the doctor get his height and weight, and the doctor murmured to himself, typing on his computer. “We got the bloodwork from your general practitioner,” Doctor Reign said. “Everything’s within perfectly normal ranges, and given your height and weight I believe we can get you on a small dose of testosterone today.”

“Could I request it be in a gel or a patch?” Logan asked. “I’ve read that the shots are meant to last two weeks, but they also have more fluctuating levels than daily doses.”

“Of course,” Doctor Reign said. “I’ll send in the prescription for one pump of testosterone in gel form. Apply one pump from the container once every day, all right?”

Logan nodded, feeling a little faint from sheer excitement. “Yes. Thank you. Thank you, sir, really.”

“It’s not a problem, Logan,” Doctor Reign said. “Where should I send the prescription?”

Dad chimed in with the pharmacy closest to the house, and Doctor Reign nodded, sent it off, and sent them on their way. Logan made it to the car before he started positively bawling at the thought that he got to start testosterone. Dad laughed and Ami put a supportive hand in the back on Logan’s knee. They swung by the pharmacy to pick up the prescription and then they were heading home, Logan texting Jack to come over.

When Logan got out of the car, Roman, Virgil, Patton, and Dee all swarmed him. “Did you get it?! Did you get it?!” Patton asked.

Logan held the bag with the gel pump inside up. “I got it!” he exclaimed.
All his brothers cheered and ushered him inside the house, where Vanellope was waiting at the door for them to return. Logan put the pump with the medicine in his room and walked back downstairs, in a good enough mood to play with Vanellope until there was a knock at the door.

Logan jumped up and bounded over to the door, flinging it open and crushing Jack in a hug, already crying again. “I got it, Jack! I get to go on testosterone!”

Jack laughed and hugged Logan back. “I knew you could get it, bro! Congrats!”

Logan wiped at his tears and let Jack in the house. “Do you want to meet Vanellope?”

“Of course!” Jack exclaimed.

Logan brought Jack to the living room, where Roman was currently still playing with Vanellope. “Yo, Jack!” Roman exclaimed, waving.

“What’s up, Roman?” Jack asked, giving Roman a high five.

All three of them were soon on the floor, Vanellope sniffing Jack’s shoe. “So what’s the doctor say about your T?” Jack asked.

“I need to take it once a day, one pump of the container,” Logan said. “The changes should start at the latest in a month.”

Jack pumped his fist in the air. “All right! That’s more like it! You get to look like one of the bros, too! So no one can pull that crap of ‘you’re not like other girls’ anymore!”

Roman wrinkled his nose. “Ew. People do that to him?”

“Only the real jerks,” Jack informed Roman. “And I make them put a sock in it if they don’t shut up.”

“If I don’t stop you, you mean,” Logan said. “Because it’s not that big of a deal. I come home to people who respect me and my pronouns.”

“It’s a big deal to me, man!” Jack exclaimed. “Sometimes it seems like you never stand up for yourself!”

“I stand up when it counts,” Logan said simply. “If some kid who doesn’t even look at me aside from throwing insults my way says a slur, what’s it to me? They don’t care about me, they just want a reaction. I won’t give it to them.”

Jack crossed his arms. “I still don’t want you to have to deal with that, man.”

Logan smiled softly. “I know. And I appreciate that. But you worry too much.”

Jack huffed and returned his attention to Vanellope. “So, how’d she do her first night here?”

“She curled up on Dee’s bed and absolutely refused to leave until he got up in the morning,” Logan said with a slight smile. “So I think she might already be developing a favorite.”

“Cute,” Jack said with a laugh. He gave Logan a sideways glance with a smile, and Logan’s stomach involuntarily flipped. That was his favorite smile of Jack’s, the one that said he was genuinely enjoying the company around him.

Roman cleared his throat and Jack turned his attention back to Roman. “Get up to anything
interesting lately, Jack?” he asked.

Jack shrugged. “A little of this, a little of that. Nothing much, definitely not like you guys. A dog, testosterone, the works? You guys have a setup for an awesome summer already.”

Roman offered a grin and shrugged. “It helped that we had five people’s allowances chipping in for the dog. The testosterone was a given, with Dad and Ami. And by the beginning of next school year, I’m pretty sure that no one will be able to recognize Logan when he walks through the door.”

Logan laughed. “Yeah, well. Testosterone is certainly going to help. Even if my first parents ever wanted me back before, I’m pretty sure this would stop them.”

Jack winced. “That’s kinda messed up, man.”

Logan’s smile faded and he sighed. “Yeah, I know. But I try to find the humor in it anyway, because that makes me feel a little better.”

Jack put his hand on Logan’s shoulder, and Logan gave Jack a small half-smile. “You don’t have to find humor in it if you don’t want to, man,” Jack said. “You’re allowed to cry if you need to.”

Logan sighed and nodded, lying back on the floor. “I know that. But what if I don’t want to cry?”

“It’s more about needing than wanting, man,” Jack said, looking down at him. “I’m not sure anybody ever wants to cry unless they’re miserable and want to feel better somehow.”

“I just...I don’t...” Logan took a deep breath. “I never enjoy crying. I’d rather find humor in a situation. And today’s a good day. I don’t want to remember sobbing my eyes out on the first day I get T.”

Jack laid down on the floor next to him and took Logan’s hand. “Man, if you need to cry, don’t beat yourself up over it. Your parents weren’t great people but you’re allowed to mourn their loss.”

Logan took off his glasses and took a deep breath, looking over at Jack. “Could we...do you mind if we just hang out in my room for a little while?”

“That’s fine,” Jack said, helping Logan stand. He turned to Roman. “Roman, my man, it’s good to see you. Do you mind asking the others to give us some time alone?”

Roman nodded. “It’s no problem. I’ll let Dad and Ami know, and they can talk to the others if any of them want to talk to either of you.”

Jack nodded his thanks and led Logan upstairs to his room. Once there, what remained of Logan’s calm broke down the second Jack closed the door. His breath hitched, his eyes stung, and he managed to choke out, “They don’t want me...” before completely breaking down into sobs.

“I know,” Jack said softly, coming over and hugging Logan tightly. “I know, and it sucks. It really, really sucks.”

Logan gripped Jack’s shirt tight and buried his head in his best friend’s shoulder. “Why would they hate me that much?” he asked, tears slipping out faster the more he cried. “Why would they try and kill their son just to keep their daughter?”

“I don’t know,” Jack said, rubbing Logan’s back. “I don’t think the answer would make you feel any better, though.”
Logan just continued to cry, because Jack was right. Whatever answer his parents might give him wasn’t going to make him feel any better. It wouldn’t be an answer at all. It would be some lame excuse that wouldn’t make him feel wanted, or give him closure. All it would do, at best, is make him blame himself for not being enough. He sniffled and could feel his tears start to slow. “They never liked me...” he whimpered.

“I know,” Jack said softly. “But I do. And Roman does. And so do your other brothers, and your dads. You have a better family and better friends now. And we wouldn’t trade you for the world.”

Logan pulled away with a laugh. “I don’t deserve you,” he said.

“You deserve everything I tell you and more,” Jack said, poking Logan’s side. “You deserve to know that people love you no matter what.”

Logan wiped at his eyes and put his glasses back on. “I just realized something,” he said with a laugh.

“What?” Jack asked.

“On T, my voice will start cracking, like yours did when you were fourteen,” Logan laughed. “And you will be able to exact your revenge.”

Jack perked up. “Oh, I hadn’t even thought of that!” he exclaimed.

Logan laughed again. His family was topsy-turvy, but he loved them anyway.
February 26th, 2019

Dee didn’t know how he was going to do this, but he knew that he had to. Mama had been lying around staring at nothing for far too long. He needed to find help for her that wouldn’t involve him getting taken away. She needed to stop taking pills.

He resolved that if she didn’t stop for the next two days, he’d strike out and find someone who could help. He tried to stop scratching his cheek. He needed more eczema cream, that’s what started this whole thing in the first place. It was starting to hurt, the itching. He needed a break. He needed someone looking after him.

He needed his Mama back.

June 17th, 2019

Dee looked up at the big building nervously and grabbed the hem of Ami’s shirt tightly. He didn’t want to go in, but he knew he had to. Today was the first full week after school had ended for everyone else, and he had to be enrolled in summer school to catch up with all the other six-year-olds he was going to meet in the first grade. He didn’t like the prospect at all, though. Hours upon hours away from Dad and Ami, he didn’t like the thought. His brothers, he could live without for a few hours, because that’s just how school worked for them.

But here? Here he couldn’t have his parents. He would have maybe one person who knew sign language, and that was the translator for his teacher. Provided they finally got the translator. The faculty seemed insistent that because Dee could speak, that meant he had to. He held onto Ami’s shirt tighter as they entered the huge school.

They walked through near-empty hallways all the way to a classroom at the very end of the school, which was filled with bright colors and kids who were already fighting over crayons. He looked up at Ami with desperate, wide eyes. “Please don’t make me go in,” he whispered in Ami’s ear when Ami bent down.

“You know I have to, Dee. You can read a little but the state will need more than a little to keep you out of remedial classes. There’s nothing bad with those if you need them, but the point of this is to not need them, right?” Ami said, squeezing his shoulder.

Dee felt like he might cry. It was too hot to wear his villain gloves, and besides, he didn’t really want to lose them or worse, have them stolen. But that meant he was without his biggest comfort. And if he couldn’t have even his villain gloves, he definitely couldn’t have Fangs.

Ami led him into the class room and immediately one of the kids pointed at him and yelled, “Gross! What’s wrong with his face?!?”

Dee looked up at Ami in dismay. Ami’s face was cold as he leveled the other boy with a glare. “He has eczema. And no, it’s not contagious, so I don’t want you avoiding him just because you’re worried about ‘catching’ it.”

The boy looked between Ami and Dee and Dee forced himself to stay still under the glare he was

Dee shuffled closer to Ami as Ami said, “Actually, he takes more after his other dad than me,” in a cheerful tone. “Dee, you’re going to be fine, all right?”

“What kind of name is Dee?” the boy laughed.

“James, that’s quite enough,” a woman, who Dee assumed was the teacher, said to the bully. She turned to Dee. “You must be Deagan. Your translator is running a little late, but should be here before class starts.”

Ami put a hand on Dee’s shoulder and said, “He prefers to be called Dee. I’m glad they finally got a translator.”

The teacher nodded. “The district tries to save money wherever they can, so they push hard against accommodations like extra staff, but I was working to make sure you got one too, because I am far from fluent in American Sign Language.”

Dee offered her a hesitant smile. She, at least, seemed nice enough.

The teacher smiled back at him and gestured to the tables. “I haven’t assigned anyone seats yet, so you can sit wherever you like.”

Dee took a look at the tables, and then glanced at Ami. He still really didn’t want Ami to leave. What if he never came back? But Ami was leaning down to hug him, so Dee hugged him back, signed “I love you,” and went to sit at the front of the class.

When Dee sat down, a girl sitting next to him with blonde hair in two pigtails looked at him. “You have two dads?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Cool! I have two moms!” she chirped. “And one of them is Deaf. I didn’t realize that I might know someone else who knows ASL just by coming to school!”

Dee shrugged and nodded. He didn't really know what to say, he wasn't expecting anyone would understand him if he signed.

“My name's Lucy,” she said, sticking her hand out.

Dee signed his name and shook her hand solemnly.

“I like you, Dee,” she said.

The teacher walked up to the front of the class and said, “All right, listen up, kids! My name is Misses Jones, and I'll be your teacher for the summer. I'm hoping that all of you will be ready for first grade by the time we finish class at the end of the summer.”

Dee could hear James and another boy shoving each other behind them but he tried to ignore them. He sensed that if he looked at them, they would only make fun of him more, and that’s the last thing that he wanted. Misses Jones seemed to be ignoring them, so he would too.

As the class started, Dee and Lucy got to know each other a little better when Misses Jones let everyone introduce themselves. Lucy was the only one who knew sign language, and the translator was running a bit behind. When he finally dashed into the room, apologizing profusely, Misses Jones
grabbed everyone’s attention again and began to go over the basics of the alphabet. Dee realized she must have been stalling for the translator, and he was oddly touched by the gesture.

Summer school was only three hours of the day, instead of six, so he got to go home to have lunch. He was worried as he walked out of the school with the rest of the class and stuck close to Lucy. What if Ami didn’t come back? What if the others decided to leave him like Mama did? There were too many variables, and he didn’t like any of them.

But not only was Ami there outside the school building, but Dad was too, as well as Logan. He tugged Lucy’s shirt sleeve and signed, “That’s my family over there! Do you want to say hi?”

She grinned wide. “Sure! My moms are right next to them, too!”

Dee looked at the two woman standing next to Ami. One of them had a full face of makeup and a leather jacket, while the other wore a flowery dress and combat boots. It was an interesting combination, but Dee wasn’t complaining. He led Lucy to Logan and signed, “I made a friend at school, her name is Lucy.”

Logan smiled. “See? School isn’t that bad! It’s nice to meet you Lucy.”

“Nice to meet you!” she chirped. “Your brother’s really nice! He and I got to sign to each other a lot today!”

Logan’s eyebrows shot up. “You know sign?” he asked, hands moving in a flurry to get the words out.

She nodded, beaming. “My mom is Deaf,” she signed back.

Logan offered her a smile. “It’s nice to know Dee has someone to talk to in class besides the translator,” he signed.

Lucy nodded again, turning to Dee. “Do you want to meet my moms?”

Dee nodded and Lucy led him over to the two woman just a few feet away. She started signing animatedly immediately. “Mom! I met a boy who knows ASL in class today! His name is Dee, he’s super nice!”

The woman with makeup smiled and signed directly to Dee. “It’s nice to meet you, Dee.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dee signed back.

“Are you Deaf?” she signed.

“No, but I don’t like speaking. My dad says I’m selectively mute,” Dee explained.

The woman nodded. “Have you used ASL most of your life, then?”

“For as long as I can remember,” Dee confirmed with a nod.

The other woman waved her arm and signed, “It’s very nice to meet you, Dee, but we have to get Lucy home. Her aunt and uncle are coming over to visit.”

Lucy’s eyes lit up. “I forgot about that!” she signed.

The woman laughed, her voice light like tinkling bells. “I figured you would. Don’t worry, you can see Dee tomorrow at school, okay?” she signed.
Lucy nodded and turned to Dee. “Is it okay if I hug you?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Dee signed with a shrug.

Lucy hugged him tight and he hugged her back. They both grinned when they took a step back. “See you tomorrow, Dee!”

“See you tomorrow,” Dee signed happily.

As they walked away and Dee waved goodbye, it occurred to him that his family might not know what he had learned! He ran over to Logan, signing his name over and over. “Logan! Logan! Logan!”

Logan looked vaguely amused as he asked, “Yeah, Dee?”

“Did you know that the alphabet has a specific order?!” Dee asked. “Like, there’s a specific order, not just random fingerspelling!”

Logan’s eyes widened comically and Dee giggled as Logan asked, “Really?!”

Dee nodded. “Yeah! It’s super weird, but really cool!” Dee could barely keep his hands from flying everywhere in his excitement.

“Wow! And here I thought the alphabet was just a bunch of letters!” Logan exclaimed.

“No! They have an order! I don’t have the order memorized, not yet, but there’s an order!” Dee explained.

Logan grinned. “Do you want to share your knowledge with the others?”

Dee’s eyes lit up and he nodded. “Yeah! I wanna tell them! Are they at home?”

“Yeah. Waiting for you!” Logan signed.

Dee jumped up and down in a little circle and flapped his hands while a grin split his face. He was so happy right now, he could barely contain it!

Logan led him to the car with a smile, and Dad drove them all home. Dee flapped his hands the entire way home. He was so ecstatic right now, he could practically fly! He burst out of the car when he got home to see Patton and Virgil playing in the yard. He waved his hands to get their attention and ran up to them. “Guys! The alphabet has a specific order!”

“Oh, yeah!” Patton exclaimed. “I remember learning that! Did you know that all the letters make specific sounds, too?”

Dee’s eyes widened. “What?!” he asked.

“Yeah!” Virgil chimed in. “Once you learn the alphabet you get to learn what each letter sounds like! And those sounds put together form words!”

Dee blinked in amazement. “Speaking is weird,” he signed. “But that sounds so cool!”

“It is cool!” Virgil said back. “That’s how most people learn to read! They sound out the words until it’s something they remember saying.”

“I learned to read some words because you guys told me what the words were,” Dee signed,
frowning.

“Yeah, but you know what learning to read means, Dee?” Patton asked. “You get to learn words all on your own!”

Dee stood there, well and truly shell-shocked. “I can learn to read new words by myself?!” he asked.

“With a little practice, yeah!” Patton encouraged. “If you want, we can help teach you the sounds of the alphabet! ‘Cause your teacher might not teach that to you quite yet.”

“Yes, please!” Dee signed, grinning wide.

Virgil picked up the soccer ball he and Patton had been kicking around. “Let’s go inside then and pick out some books! We can go over letter sounds when there are words you don’t know!”

The three ran inside, past Roman and Vanellope and up to Patton and Virgil’s room. Dee looked through their books at their encouragement. He didn’t look too long at the Goosebumps books that Virgil read lots, because the covers were creepy. He looked at the books Patton had, and eventually picked out the one he loved to have Patton read to him, the folk tales and fables book.

Together, they got situated on Patton’s bed, and Dee pointed at words he didn’t know. Patton and Virgil would explain what each letter in the word sounded like, and how they all came together to form one word. The vowels were a little confusing, but Dee was excited to get to learn how to read. In a few months, he might even be able to pick out books on his own from the library!
November 22nd, 2018

Logan sat at the Harkness’ table, offering a shy smile to Jack’s relatives. Jack was sitting right next to him, and talking about he and Logan had talked pretty much every day since he could remember being in kindergarten. He knew they were wondering why he was at their Thanksgiving, because no one had told them why he was here yet.

Jack continued talking, making a point to use Logan’s name and correct pronouns, and not one person at the table looked uncomfortable, much to Logan’s relief. He would have hated to have to deal with more transphobes at Thanksgiving.

“All of this is great, Jack,” one of Jack’s uncles cut in. “But where in this does that mean Logan is over here with us, and not with his family?”

Jack paused and looked at Logan helplessly. Logan swallowed and awkwardly squeaked out, “My parents...uh...kicked me out.”

“What?!” erupted around the table, along with a bunch of follow-up questions. Jack’s mother clapped her hands to gather everyone’s attention. “This is a very sensitive topic for Logan, everyone. I’d appreciate you not interrogating him about something he is very clearly uncomfortable with.”

Logan was incredibly thankful for Jack’s mom.

July 4th, 2019

Logan was scratching at his cheek. He was feeling more confident since he had been on testosterone, but he felt a little disappointed that he was unlikely to grow a beard. No sign of facial hair almost a month in wasn’t the end of the world for him, true. And usually facial hair took two months to see significant growth. But he knew most guys in his family did not have beards, and he wished that he would have been the exception to that rule.

Roman was chatting next to him, looking at the different kinds of hot dogs they had at the store, since Dad and Ami were hosting a neighborhood cookout for Independence Day. Logan didn’t register the voice at first, but when he did he froze, blood running cold. He heard the voice of his mother.

“What?!” Roman asked, turning to him as Logan turned towards the end of the aisle he heard the voice coming from.

His mother’s eyes landed on him and she blinked. “Jessica?” she asked.

Logan’s voice cracked a little as he corrected her. “Logan.”

“Jessica, what have you been doing to your body?!” his mother asked, walking over and grabbing his cheeks. “You never used to have this much acne, and your voice is deeper!”

Roman shoved Logan’s mother away as Logan’s breathing picked up. “I’m on Hormone Replacement Therapy, Mom. This is what’s supposed to happen when you take Testosterone.”
“Testosterone,” his mother said, disbelief in her tone. “You’re taking Testosterone. You look like a boy, Jess!”

“I am a boy, Mom,” Logan said. “You can’t change my mind about who I am.”

Another familiar voice drifted down the same aisle and Logan’s mother paled. “Jess, go, right now! Your father can’t see you like this!”

“My name is Logan!” Logan insisted. “And that man is not my father!”

“Diane, where did you go?!” his ex-father snapped, rounding the corner. When he saw Logan, his entire face turned red and he started stalking over.

Logan paled and turned in the general direction he knew the others had been and yelled at the top of his lungs, “Dad! Ami!”

Roman took a step forward, blocking Logan’s ex-father from getting any closer. “Stop right there! You’re not gonna hurt my older brother!”

His ex-father sneered. “Kid, ‘he’ is a chick. And my daughter. Though clearly, she doesn’t understand that yet.”

Logan was shaking. From rage or fear, he couldn’t tell. “I’m not your daughter, moron!” Logan snapped. “I’ve known you weren’t my sperm donor for a while now! And I’ve been adopted by people who actually love me, and call me by my real name, and my real pronouns, and they’re letting me transition so I can be who I’m meant to be! Logan! Not Jessica!”

His ex-father’s nostrils flared, and he shoved Roman out of the way into the refrigerator housing the hot dogs. He raised a hand and Logan flinched, bracing for an impact that never came. He cracked one eye open, and found Ami holding his ex-father’s arm in a vice grip. Logan hadn’t heard him approach over the blood roaring in his ears.

Ami had three inches easily on his ex-father, and Dad, who was stalking over slowly, had about five. His ex-father seemed to be realizing that he had miscalculated. “Henry, let’s just go,” his mom said.

His ex-father tried to wrench his hand free but Ami wasn’t letting go just yet. “Don’t you dare lay a hand on my son,” Ami spat. “You’re lucky that I don’t let my husband teach you a lesson.”

When his ex-father turned disgusted, Logan actually started fearing for the man’s life. Not necessarily actively, and not enough to do anything about it, but he did wonder how everyone would get out of this situation alive. “Jessica, you cannot be staying with queers.”

Logan crossed his arms and stared his ex-father in the eye. “Why do you even care, though? I thought you disowned me, kicked me out of the house, left me for dead? You wanted nothing to do with me, so why do you all of a sudden care what I’m doing with my life?

“I’m getting Hormone Replacement Therapy, so I actually look like the guy I am. I’m still going to school, and doing better than I ever did when I was stuck with you and Mom. I’m thriving. But because I wanted to go by he and him, you decided that I wasn’t worth your time, and you wanted nothing to do with me. And it took me a while, but I want nothing to do with you either, anymore.

“Don’t ever approach me again. Either of you. If you can’t respect me enough to call me Logan instead of Jessica and your son instead of your daughter, I’m not interested in knowing you. I have two dads who actually care about me, instead of caring about the concept that you built around me and said I had to be. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make sure my brother is all right, seeing as
“How you threw him into the refrigerator.”

Dad growled. “He did what!?”

Logan sighed. “I wish I could say this was a shock. He always throws tantrums when he doesn’t get his way.” He turned to Roman, who had slid down to the floor and was staring into the distance, seeing nothing. “You all right, Prep?”

“Fine,” Roman murmured, still not moving his eyes.

“I’d like the truthful answer, but I’ll take what I can get for now,” Logan said, helping Roman to stand. “What hot dogs were you thinking we should get for the party?”

Roman looked back to the refrigerator and leaned in, grabbing a box of beef hot dogs. “Kosher,” Roman mumbled. “Thought we should get the Kosher ones, just in case.”

“Good idea,” Logan said. He grabbed a couple boxes and put them in the hand cart that was tipped over on the floor, after Roman had been shoved. Inspecting the items that felt out, everything seemed to be fine, so he collected it all in the cart, and, with an arm around Roman’s shoulders, he told Dad, “I think I’ll take the boys elsewhere right now, Dad. They don’t need to be around horrible people. They don’t deserve to be around horrible people.”

Dad looked over at him. “Why don’t you take them to look at the cookies? Even if it’s a bit of a potluck, there’s no reason we can’t buy some cookies for the visitors. Ami and I will be right behind you.”

Logan nodded once, and ushered his brothers away from the scene. Logan could hear murmuring once they were across a quarter of the store. Which was marginally better than yelling, but the ice he could hear in the tone still sent a shiver up Logan’s spine. He never wanted to be on Dad or Ami’s bad side. They protected their own, no matter what it took. Which could be helpful, true, but it also meant that Logan went out of his way to make it clear to his brothers and himself that he wasn’t being threatening, to anyone.

Then there was the shout of, “How dare you say that I don’t know how to raise my own daughter!?” from his ex-father and Logan felt dysphoria wash over him. He could think of a very apt three-letter word to describe his ex-father right now, but he just tightened his grip on the basket until he was white-knuckled and continued forward.

Dee tugged on the hem of Logan’s shirt and Logan looked down. “You’re not a girl, you’re a boy,” Dee signed definitively.

“I know,” Logan said softly. “It just hurts that... they don’t.”

Virgil wrung his hands before saying, “I know it’s easier to say ‘who cares what they think’ than to believe it, but you shouldn’t care what they think about you if all it’s going to do is hurt you.”

Logan sighed and shook his head, feeling tears prickle his eyes. “I know,” he said, voice growing thick. “It’s just...so...hard.”

Roman hugged Logan fiercely. “Yeah, it is,” Roman agreed. “But we’ll be here to help you through it, understand?”

“Yeah,” Logan said, patting Roman’s hands in an effort to get him to let go. “I appreciate it.”

When Roman let go, Logan took a deep breath and looked around. They were almost at the bakery.
“What kind of cookies do you guys want?”

Patton, Virgil, and Dee immediately started listing the cookies they liked, and Roman, though sending Logan a look that said he knew what Logan was doing, threw in his two cents as well. Logan nodded at all their answers and continued walking until they got to the bakery, at which point he stopped and kept an eye on the others as they looked around and debated what were the best cookies for a cookout.

When Dad walked up and stood next to him, Logan winced. “How bad was it?” he asked.

“Well, I can understand why you were traumatized by the both of them,” Dad said. “They don’t immediately set off red flags, but I’m a therapist, so I know how to read between the lines, and this is definitely one couple who needs some serious help. Though not from me.”

Ami walked up on the other side of Logan and took the hand cart out of his hands. “Found the shopping cart, thankfully nothing was taken,” he said. “And don’t worry Logan, I’m pretty sure your former parents will be giving you a wide berth from now on.”

Logan nodded. “Good, that’s good.”

The three of them lapsed into silence as Roman whooped victoriously, holding a box of snickerdoodles in the air as Patton and Virgil tried to jump and grab them. Eventually, Logan sighed. “I thought I had gotten over them tossing me out to the street, but I guess I was wrong.”

“I’m not sure that’s something one ever truly recovers from,” Dad mused. “But you’ve made remarkable progress; don’t downplay what you’ve done so far. And don’t tell yourself that you’ll never get better than this.”

“Yeah,” Logan said softly, looking down. He knew he could get better, but it seemed like such a foreign concept, something that seemed too far away to consider real.

“Let’s bench that for now,” Dad offered. “Are there any cookies you’d want to bring to the cookout?”

Logan shook his head. “Not really. I prefer cake, personally.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” Dad said.

Logan shrugged. “Sometimes I forget I have to tell you these things. It feels like I grew up in your house, it doesn’t occur to me that I didn’t and therefore have to explain...or, not explain...enlighten you to my preferences.”

Ami grinned. “You’re learning to out therapist-speak Emile.”

Logan laughed. “I’m just learning that word choice is important.”

“Like I said. Therapist-speak,” Ami teased.

“Ami, you can be really annoying when you want to be,” Logan said with a huff.

“Thank you!” Ami said brightly. “I do try.”

Logan chuckled despite himself and they moved closer towards where the boys were focusing on a specific display of cookies. Logan leaned in close to Roman, and spoke practically in his ear, “See something you like?”
Roman yipped and whirled around, punching Logan in the arm, possibly a little harder than strictly necessary, but Logan didn’t really mind. “My question still stands,” Logan informed him.

“We found a variety box,” Roman said with a half-hearted glare. “But we’re trying to decide if we want the ones with snickerdoodles or sugar cookies.”

Logan hummed in thought. “I would say snickerdoodles, but that’s just me.”

“Ha! I told you!” Roman exclaimed, whirling around to talk to Patton. “Logan is definitely a snickerdoodle man!”

“Actually, I prefer cake to cookies,” Logan said with a shrug. “I just appreciate snickerdoodles marginally more than sugar cookies.”

That sparked a debate rather quickly. “Cake is good and all, but cookies are way better!” Virgil asserted.

“No way! Cake is so much better!” Logan said with a grin.

“What about a cookie cake? Huh? Those are amazing!” Patton exclaimed, jumping in the air and waving his arms around to prove his point.

Logan shook his head as the debate soon devolved into excited rambling about each other's favorite desserts. He loved this family. It made him feel like he had a home again.
August 25th, 2000

Emile gave both his parents one last hug. “Thanks Mom, Dad. I promise I’ll call soon,” he said.

His mom and dad just smiled as they packed the last of his things in his car together. “You’ll do fine, Emile. Don’t feel pressured to call us if you can’t do it every week,” his mom advised. “Of course, I won’t object to you calling every week, but...”

Emile laughed. His dad gave him a hug. “I’m so proud of you, son. Go out and get that degree, so you can be the world’s best therapist, like you’ve been wanting to do since you were twelve.”

“I will,” Emile promised. “And I’ll call when I can, and write when I can’t, and I love you both.”

The three of them hugged, before Emile drove all the way to his college, teary-eyed. This was it. He was on his own, figuring out what he wanted to do with his life. It was nerve-wracking, but also incredibly freeing.

He already knew he was going to miss his parents, though.

July 13th, 2019

Logan was fiddling with his hair in his room, pulling faces in the mirror he was holding up to mess with it. “You doing okay, Logan?” Emile asked.

“Fine,” Logan said, voice only cracking a little. “Just want to look presentable to your parents.”

Emile shook his head fondly and walked over, fixing Logan’s cowlicks with a little hair gel. “You’ll do fine, Logan. You look your best when you’re relaxed. Don’t stress so much. My parents are going to love you and your brothers.”

“I hope so,” Logan said softly.

“I know so,” Emile asserted. “They fell in love with Remy the second they met him, and immediately asked me when I planned to pop the question. In front of him. They’re just like me, in that sense. So just treat them with the same respect you give me, and you’ll do fine.”

Logan nodded. “Would a tie be too much, then?”

Emile smiled. “I would say no, but only because I know you love wearing ties anyway. There’s no need for your Sunday best around my parents. They’ve seen some silly pictures of you anyway, from your brothers’ escapades and your reactions. They’re not going to expect you to be poised all the time, or even want that from you.”

“I’m not used to grandparents being understanding,” Logan muttered.

“I know,” Emile said, helping Logan with his tie. “But you’re going to do great, understand me?”

Logan nodded as a car door closed outside. “That must be them,” Emile said with a smile. “Let’s go greet them, shall we?”
Vanellope was waiting at the door, tail wagging as she watched Emile’s parents through the screen door. She squirmed excitedly as Logan put her leash on and walked out of the house with her to greet Emile’s parents. Emile followed Logan out, keeping a steady hand on Logan’s shoulder. “Hey Mom, Dad! It’s been a little while!” he laughed.

“I know it has, you missed Christmas!” his mother scolded, but she was smiling. “You never missed Christmas with us before!”

“We didn’t want to shock Roman quite that soon,” Emile said, walking over and giving his mom a hug. “Dad, how are you?”

“Still stunned that I get to meet five grandchildren. I wasn’t even expecting one, let alone five!” his dad exclaimed.

Emile laughed and he hugged his dad, as he heard the front door open more behind him, and he could hear Roman chatting with Virgil and Patton. The three of them grew quiet as Emile stepped back, and they looked decidedly uncertain. “Mom, Dad, you can see Logan, holding Vanellope; he’s sixteen. Roman is the second oldest and second tallest; he’s twelve for one more week. The twins are Patton and Virgil, Patton is the one who looks like me, and Virgil is the blond; they’re both eight. And...where’s Dee?”

“Inside,” Roman said. “He’s attached himself to Ami’s leg and refused to let go.”

Emile laughed. “Well, then, you’ll see Dee when you go inside and Remy finds a way to walk around without hurting him. He’s six.”

His dad shook his head. “How do you accidentally adopt five kids, Emile?”

“Well, I told you I was a sperm donor in college, right?” Emile asked.

His dad stared at him blankly for one, two, three seconds. Then, he started to laugh. “Wait a second...all these kids...are yours? Biologically?!”

“Uh...yeah,” Emile said, scratching the back of his neck. “Whoops?”

His dad only laughed harder. His mother shook her head fondly. “Well, I always knew you were destined for chaos, Emile, but this isn’t quite what I was expecting.”

“Yeah,” Emile said. “Shall we go inside, though? I can grab your bags.”

“Nonsense, we can carry our own bags, Emile,” his dad said. “You get that lovely husband of yours and our youngest grandson.”

“Will do,” Emile said with a laugh. He walked back inside and could hear faint murmuring as he entered the house, no doubt Logan introducing himself. “Hey, Rem, Mom and Dad are here!”

He could hear quiet murmuring from the kitchen and he followed the noise to find Remy hugging Dee, who was shaking like a leaf. “Rem?” he asked.

“Dee’s worried about the new people,” Remy said softly. “Apparently new people usually weren’t good in the past.”

“Aw, don’t worry, Dee, Mom and Dad will love you,” Emile said. “They’re your grandparents, how could they not like you?”
Dee looked at Emile uncertainly and signed, “What if they want me to talk?”

“They know that you prefer signing to speaking, Dee, and they’ve been trying to re-learn sign to talk to you in your preferred language,” Emile explained. “My parents want to accommodate you as much as possible. I got it from somewhere, I didn’t just spring out from the ground wanting to help everyone I saw.”

Dee still looked uncertain.

“Look, you can stay with Ami if you want, or you can come with me, both of us are going to wind up in the living room with your grandma and granddad. And if you get overwhelmed, you’re always free to leave,” Emile said softly.

Dee nodded and signed, “I’ll stay with Ami.”

“Okay. If you want, you can help him with drinks, but don’t cling to his leg so that he can’t move, okay? He likes seeing my parents too,” Emile said.

Dee nodded and Emile moved back through the house to the living room, where Logan was sitting with Vanellope in his lap on the floor, and Roman, Patton, and Virgil were playing together on one of the couches, while his parents were on the other. “Dee and Remy should be in shortly,” he informed them.

“That’s good,” his mom said. “Logan was just telling us about his transition, and how much you and Remy have helped him.”

Logan turned a bit pink. “I mean, I wouldn’t have started my transition at all without Dad and Ami by my side,” he said. “It’s only fair to thank them, and give them the recognition they deserve.”

Emile smiled. “I’m happy that you feel more comfortable in your skin, Logan. Everyone deserves to feel like themselves.”

“Seconded!” Roman exclaimed.

“Thirded!” Patton and Virgil said at the same time. “Same hat!” they said, pointing at each other.

Logan laughed.

Remy walked in, and Dee wasn’t quite clinging to Remy’s legs, but he was hiding behind them. Emile’s parents were the picture perfect definition of surprised. “Oh, I think I see one more grandchild!” his dad exclaimed. “Is this Dee?”

Dee poked his head out from behind Remy and offered a wave.

“Hi, Dee,” Emile’s mother signed. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Dee offered a shy smile in return as he signed back, “Likewise.”

Both of Emile’s parents smiled as Remy gave them both glasses of water. “Here you guys go. I know you must be tired after the long drive.”

“Thank you, Remy,” Emile’s mother said, standing up and kissing Remy on the cheek.

Dee looked shocked, as did Patton and Virgil. “What, have you guys never seen positive familial affection before?” Roman asked.
“My mother would sometimes do that to me,” Logan offered. “Even if she wasn’t the greatest person in the world.”

Dee just shook his head. “Mama didn’t do that for me in ages,” he signed.

Emile just sighed. “I really wish she would have,” he said, “Because you deserve it.”

Dee came over and hugged Emile and Emile hugged him back. “I know, it’s still hard,” he murmured.

“It’s always hard,” Dee signed as he pulled back.

“I know,” Emile said softly. “But you’ll get through it. You’re one tough cookie.”

“I was overbaked?” Dee asked.

Emile laughed. “You know what I mean,” he said.

Yeah,” Dee agreed. “But taking things literally is what I do.”

“I know it is,” Emile said. “That’s one of the symptoms of being autistic, actually.”

Dee furrowed his eyebrows. “Really?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Emile said. “It’s really interesting, actually. There’s many different symptoms, and people rarely have all of them, because it’s such a varied spectrum! But that’s a fairly common one!”

Dee made an interested noise in the back of his throat and grinned, his tongue pushing against his bottom teeth, making one of them shake. He jumped and felt at it in surprise.

“Ohhhh,” Patton said. “Dee, you’re starting to lose your baby teeth!”

“What?!” Dee asked in clear alarm.

“No, it’s okay, that’s normal!” Patton exclaimed, jumping off the couch and baring his teeth. “You see how some of my teeth are way bigger and some of them have gaps?”

Dee nodded.

“That’s because I lost a few of my teeth, and my adult teeth have started to grow in! It’s normal! Don’t worry, it just means you’re growing up!”

Dee’s face was shocked. He felt at his tooth. “It’s not very loose,” he signed.

“Pull it out?” Dee asked.

“Well, yeah,” Virgil chimed in. “That’s how you make room for the adult teeth. But it’s okay! Because the Tooth Fairy comes at night and gives you money when you lose a tooth if you leave it for her!”

Dee’s eyes got really wide. “Really?! he asked.

“Yeah!” Virgil said. “It’s been a while since I’ve lost a tooth, actually. Some of mine have to be
Emile watched the exchange fondly. His father cleared his throat. “So,” he paused for a minute, before he grinned. “Have you kids ever played a good game of badminton?”

“Dad!” Emile exclaimed with a laugh. “Are you seriously trying to convert them to sports already?!”

“Badminton can be fun,” Logan said. “It was one of the games I played to get my gym credit fulfilled in school, and I found it to be entertaining, and easy on the body.”

Emile’s dad pointed at Logan. “You. I like your style,” he said with a grin. “I brought a badminton net that we could set up in the backyard. Does that sound good? We could play a round or two.”

“Sure!” Logan agreed. “I’d have to change out of my binder, but I’d be game.”

Patton squealed and Logan cringed. “Pun not intended!” he exclaimed, pointing at Patton.

“Patton figured out what puns were in a joke book the other day, and he’s been trying to come up with them ever since,” Remy explained to Emile’s very confused parents.

“Puns are fun!” Patton exclaimed. “They’re like the kinds of jokes my friends dads would say when we’d go over to their houses to play!”

“Well, they are often called ‘Dad jokes,’” Roman said.

Patton stared at Roman in shock. “Really?!” he asked excitedly.

“Really,” Roman said with a laugh.

They all slowly moved outside, and the second Logan came out in a tank top and sports bra, Emile knew that Logan was not intent on losing against his grandfather in the game. “Logan, sunscreen!” Emile advised before Logan could get off the deck.

Logan looked at him in exasperation but obligingly sprayed sunscreen on his arms and legs, and smeared some on his face and neck. He pulled a face as he rubbed the excess sunscreen off on a napkin. “That stuff feels disgusting,” he said.

“I know, but it will help,” Emile said. “Now go on and play the one sport you find enjoyable.”

Logan gave him a smile and ran into the yard to help put up the net and grab a racket. Roman grabbed one as well, and Emile’s father did too. Remy laughed and called, “I’ll join for doubles!” taking off his jacket and donning his sunglasses, grabbing the fourth and final racket they had.

Emile’s dad teamed up with Roman and as he hit the birdie over the net, the game began. There was running and shouting and a lot of laughter, and Emile watched them with a smile on his face from the safety of the deck. Dee was playing with Vanellope, and Patton and Virgil were refereeing, which left Emile and his mom with some much needed time to catch up.
Chapter 31

February 1st, 2019

Patton wished, not for the first time, that he could just escape this house and never return. He loved his mom, honestly, he did. But Charles made loving her feel hard. Because she always sided with him and that meant he and Virgil were always the troublemakers, even when Charles provoked them.

Granny was calling their mom over and over, asking for help or something, and Mom didn’t want to help. Charles kept telling her to ignore Granny and she’d go away, but he knew Mom felt guilty about it. And as such, she was much quicker to get angry, to get upset, to point fingers.

Patton knew that Granny needed help, and he didn’t understand why Mom wouldn’t help her. After all, didn’t family help each other when they were in trouble?

July 14th, 2019

Patton was absolutely delighted that Dad’s parents, his grandma and granddad, were staying for the weekend. It had been ages since he had seen Granny, even though she wrote them when she could, it was hard with their mom pester her for Patton and Virgil’s location. And to have two grandparents from one parent, well! That was really cool!

They talked a lot, mostly asking questions to him and his brothers to get to know them. But sometimes they’d talk beyond small stuff, and let Patton talk about Legos, or Virgil about the Goosebumps books that he loved. And when Logan talked about Jack and his other friends, he’d get this spark in his eye that made him look truly alive. Even Dee got to talk about snakes. The only one who didn’t speak much was Roman. He sat in a corner of the living room, looking like he would rather be anywhere else. “What about you, Roman?” Granddad asked. “Is there anything you really like?”

Roman ducked his head. “I like fairy tales, and theatre,” he muttered.

Logan’s head snapped up from his phone. “Wait, you’re going into eighth grade! You’re going to my high school after this school year!”

Roman looked confused. “Yes?” he said, phrasing it like a question.

“Our after-school drama club is unbelievable!” Logan said. “I’ve worked tech on stuff when the sound booth has issues, and watching those kids act? It’s amazing. You should try out for the fall play, you’d love it!”

Roman looked vaguely interested, but uncertain. “You sure? I probably wouldn’t get that good a part...even if I do well in the middle school play this year...”

“No, that’s the best part of this whole thing!” Logan exclaimed. “There’s two sets of actors! The actual people, and then their understudies. And if nothing happens to the main actors, the understudies still get to have a part, because the school rotates who plays what show on what days! So you might not get to do the Friday night show, but you could always do the Saturday matineé!”
Roman’s lips twitched into a smile. “That sounds nice,” he admitted.

“It’s super fun,” Logan said. “All my friends try to get me to perform, though I prefer helping the techs. Too much attention on me makes me stressed.”

“I can understand that,” Roman said.

“Most people don’t,” Logan replied, “So I thank you for trying to empathize.”

Patton shot his hand up and asked, “Do you know what play they’re doing?”

“Not yet,” Logan said. “Usually they don’t announce that until the beginning of the school year.”

“Oh,” Patton deflated a little. “I was hoping that I could figure out what the play was so I could help somehow.”

“Well, we could always make our own play,” Logan said with a shrug.

Patton blinked, trying to make sense of that sentence. “We can?”

Logan nodded. “I know how to write screenplays, it can be done.”

Patton grinned. That sounded amazing! “Can we do it today?”

“I don’t see why not, provided Grandma and Granddad are okay with it,” Logan said, looking to their grandparents.

“I have one condition for you five working on a play,” Grandma said with a smile. “I want you to work on it here, so your grandfather and I can see your creativity at work.”

“I have another condition,” Granddad said. “I want to see the play when it’s done, even if it’s just a silly videotape that your dad sends us.”

Patton jumped up and down and looked to Logan hopefully. “Can we work on it now?”

Logan looked a little exasperated but chuckled all the same. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll grab the laptop.”

The laptop was a recent gift from Dad and Ami to Roman and Logan, informing them that they could only afford one laptop at the moment, but if the boys shared well enough there could be a second one in the near future. If Patton was lucky, and Logan and Roman had finished whatever work they were doing, he’d sometimes get to play games with Virgil on it.

Logan left the room quickly and Patton bounced where he stood. Writing a play would be so cool! He couldn’t wait to see what happened!

When Logan returned everyone started talking. “We need a concept for the plot,” Logan said.

“We need to figure out who everyone will be in the characters!” Roman said.

“I think we should figure out a setting first,” Virgil volunteered.

Patton watched as the three of them talked over each other, until Dee jumped on the table and waved his hands like crazy. Everyone turned to look at him and he signed, “One thing at a time.”

“Dee’s right,” Patton said. “What should we start with?”
Logan, Roman, and Virgil each said what they were saying before, at the exact same time. Patton frowned and looked at Dee. He had no idea how to solve the problem of everyone wanting their way to be the right way. Suddenly, it struck him. “Why not figure out a theme?” Patton asked. “If we can figure out a theme, then we can figure out the other three things faster!”

The three stared at him, until Logan laughed and tweaked his glasses. “You’re pretty smart, Patton. Okay. What should our theme be?”

“I vote family!” Roman exclaimed. “We could make a play about our stories!”

“Or we could do something where a family fights dragons or aliens!” Virgil said.

“Why not both?” Patton asked. “Brothers who were separated because they’d be too powerful together, and they find out about each other and save the world!”

“That sounds so cool!” Virgil exclaimed.

Dee clapped his hands and grinned.

Roman clapped Patton’s back. “That’s not a half-bad idea, kid!”

Logan thought about it, and nodded. “Okay, I can work with that.”

They all sat down on the floor and suggested ideas, which Logan would dutifully write down on the computer. Patton noticed their grandparents whispering to each other, but they were smiling, so he didn’t think too much of it.

It had to have been hours that they worked, deciding to go with Patton’s idea and then starting to write a story. Roman came up with the biggest ideas, which Virgil would point out might be a bit too complex for them to pull off, and Logan would scale them down to manageable size. Dee would occasionally add his two cents to what they were doing, but was mostly happy if he could play an antihero, to use Logan’s words.

When they finally stopped, it was because Dad and Ami came into the room asking where everyone was, because they had called that dinner was ready and none of them had heard it. Roman promptly answered, “We were fighting aliens in the play we’re writing,” and left it at that, as if that explained everything.

“Right...” Dad said, glancing at Ami. “Regardless, dinner is ready. We should eat it before it gets cold.”

They all went into the dining room and slowly started eating. “So, can we get context for this play?” Dad asked.

“We were talking to our grandsons about what they liked to do, and Roman brought up the fact that he enjoyed theatre. Logan said that he liked the theatre group at their high school, and when Patton asked if he knew what the play would be this upcoming year, Logan said no, but they could make their own,” Grandma summarized. “And these boys are amazing, Emile! They were all so creative, figuring out what to write and how to scale it down to something they could do with five actors! You never told us that they were so smart!”

Patton blushed a little and all his brothers were also in varying stages of embarrassment. “It’s not such a big deal,” Roman protested weakly. “I create crazy stories all the time.”

“And I’m usually the one who drags him back down to Earth,” Logan said.
“I was just trying to be realistic with what we could do,” Virgil said.

Patton shrugged. “I think it’s kinda a big deal, if only because usually the five of us don’t all work together like that.”

“But the fact that you don’t see it as a big deal means that you are talented,” Granddad said. “I would go so far as to say extremely gifted.”

“No way,” Roman said, scratching the back of his neck, as Logan tried to not choke on the water he was drinking. Virgil looked like he had just swallowed a frog.

“The boys still aren’t used to high praise,” Ami said, looking extremely amused. “No matter how many times we compliment them, they try to play it off. I don’t think you’re gonna be successful in getting them to accept your words, Dad. Much as you try.”

“Think I’ll have better luck?” Grandma asked.

“No,” Patton said. “I don’t think the others will be convinced that what they’re doing is a big deal, at least not for a long time.”

“But you disagree?” Grandma asked.

Patton shrugged. “I don’t think it’s as big a deal as you’re making it, but it’s not nothing, either.”

Grandma grinned. “You’re the mediator of the group, aren’t you?”

“Sometimes,” Patton said. “Usually I just say something ridiculous enough to get Logan and Roman to stop arguing, but sometimes I actually add my opinions.”

Everyone continued to playfully argue about whether or not the play was a big deal, long after dinner. When Dee started yawning, Dad took him upstairs to get ready for bed. When he came back downstairs, Granddad haltingly signed, “Can I hug you?”

Dee looked surprised briefly before he nodded.

Granddad smiled and hugged Dee gently, and Grandma kissed his forehead when Granddad retreated to the couch. Dee walked up the stairs to his room, looking dazed and shell-shocked.

Patton glanced at Virgil, who was reading a *Goosebumps* book. “Do you think they’re gonna do that to everyone?” he asked.

“Everyone who accepts it,” Virgil said. “They’re leaving early tomorrow morning, so they’re saying goodbye now.”

“Oh,” Patton said. “You know, Granny would hug us goodnight, but Mom didn’t do that for a while before we ran away.”

“I know,” Virgil said. “I was there too. It’s nice to have people who care, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Patton said softly. “It’s weird, but it’s nice.”

Virgil looked over at Patton from his book, and Patton was surprised to see the amused smirk on Virgil’s face. Virgil almost never was this expressive with Mom, and it still shocked him to see Virgil come out of his shell. “You say that a lot. Things are always weird but nice to you.”

Patton shrugged. “Maybe one day it’ll stop feeling weird, but today’s not that day.”
Virgil shook his head and sighed. “Yeah, I get that feeling a lot, too.”

They shared a smile before Virgil went back to reading and Patton continued to listen to Dad and Ami talking to Grandma and Granddad about everything that had happened over the past few months.

Patton stretched and yawned, and hopped off the couch, gathering the attention of all the adults. “I’m gonna get ready for bed,” he announced. “I’m kinda tired.”

“Can I get a hug before you go upstairs?” Granddad asked.

Patton nodded and walked over, hugging Granddad tight. He smelled like wood shavings, and Patton wondered if he did any woodworking in his spare time.

When Granddad let him go, Grandma kissed him on the forehead too, and Patton giggled. “I like you both a lot,” he said.

“We’re honored to hear that, Patton,” Grandma said. “Go ahead and get ready for bed, we’ll see you soon.”

Patton smiled and nodded, and headed upstairs. He was grinning the second he was out of sight. Grandma and Granddad were super nice, and he hoped that he’d get to see them again soon. When he was around them, he felt truly loved, which meant he could add two more people to the list of people he had as good people in his head. He couldn’t wait until that list was too long to remember.
Chapter 32

July 30th, 2010

Roman looked at the scene in front of him with awe. The sun was beating down, but there were people with colorful umbrellas and blankets everywhere. Sand as far as the eye could see to his left and right, and directly in front of him, was a giant ocean. “This is cool!” he exclaimed.

“This is the beach,” his mom said. “Let’s figure out a place to go sit down and then you can play in the waves or collect shells, or build sandcastles to your heart’s content.”

Roman’s jaw dropped open. “And we get to be here all day?!” he asked with pure excitement in his voice.

“If that’s what you want, my little knight,” his mom said, smiling.

Roman nodded. He couldn’t believe it. The beach looked so magical!

August 4th, 2019

Roman was having the time of his life. Their whole family had gone to the beach for a vacation, and he was currently swimming at the edges of the ocean with Logan, who was floating on a cheap boogie board. “You really like riding the waves, huh?” he teased Logan.

Logan rolled his eyes. “It’s nice to float rather than tread water, and if I get to ride a wave to the shore, it’s just that much more fun.”

Roman turned to look at the shore. Virgil and Patton were building sandcastles, and Dee was drawing letters in the sand. They had taken the weekend off, and while it had only been two days, this had been some of the most fun Roman had the whole summer. Vanellope was being pet-sat by one of Logan’s friends in the neighborhood, so they really had nothing to worry about for these two days except what they wanted to do next.

A huge wave took Roman by surprise, and he and Logan were both tossed toward the shore. Roman rolled unceremoniously right up to Patton and Virgil, laughing his head off. Logan gently stood up with a smirk. “Not gonna diss my boogie board now, are you?” Logan asked. “It kept me from eating saltwater.”

Roman spat out what saltwater had made it to his mouth and he stood up, jabbing a finger in Logan’s chest, just above his sports bra. Roman was quickly proving that he grew faster than Logan, and would probably be the taller of the both of them. Already, Roman was only an inch shorter than his older brother. “I will always diss your boogie board. It’s a boogie board.”

“That doesn’t even explain what you have against it!” Logan exclaimed.

“It’s made for kids, Logan,” Roman said.

“So are cartoons, are you going to make fun of Dad for watching them?” Logan challenged.

Roman huffed. “No. But you still look like a dork.”
“He always looks like a dork!” Dee exclaimed, just a little too loud to be a normal voice.

Everyone turned to Dee in shock. He frowned. “What?” he asked, still using his voice over his hands.

“You’re speaking,” Logan said.

“Without being sarcastic!” Roman added.

Dee frowned and shrugged. “I can do it. It’s just harder than signing, so I usually don’t. But you guys weren’t paying attention to me waving, so I decided to talk.”

“Your voice sounds kinda flat,” Virgil said.

“I know,” Dee said, rolling his eyes. “One of the reasons I don’t like talking. Because I can’t use tone right. I can barely hear it unless you’re being sarcastic. That’s the only tone I can use and recognize.”

“But...but you can talk and it’s in full sentences! That’s...that’s like, really cool!” Patton exclaimed.

Dee frowned. “You guys did it when you were my age.”

“We didn’t sign almost exclusively until we were six and a half,” Roman pointed out.

“I’m still gonna sign most of the time,” Dee said. “Specially at school, ‘cause if I talk there the principal will take away my translator. But yeah. I can talk.”

Logan nodded and gave Dee a thumbs-up. “I resent you calling me a dork,” he said.

“I resent you implying that you’re anything but a dork,” Dee said, voice deadpan and without missing a beat.

Logan’s jaw dropped and Roman howled with laughter. Dee had a huge grin on his face, and fist-bumped Virgil when Virgil offered his fist out. Patton was giggling and Logan just stood there, shell-shocked. When he finally returned to himself, he said, “Well played, Dee. Well played.”

Dee signed, “Thank you,” and promptly went back to writing letters in the sand, and Roman recognized some very basic words, like “the” and “and” and a few nouns like “dog” and “cat” and one even went so far as to say “cookie.” Roman rolled his eyes at that. No doubt Patton had taught Dee that one.

Roman walked back to the edge of the water, wading in until he was about chest deep, and just let the water wash around him. Logan came up next to him and sighed. “Do you ever feel lonely?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” Roman glanced at Logan.

“I mean, Patton, Virgil, and Dee are about the same ages. Patton and Virgil are twins, and Dee is only two years younger. They could have been born into the same family. But between you and Patton and Virgil, there’s a five-year gap. And there’s an eight-year gap between me and the twins. I’m a whole decade older than Dee. Sometimes it just feels lonely, being the only one who’s close to where I am mentally, you know, developmentally. You’re the one who’s closest, and you’re just hitting puberty.” Logan shook his head and sighed again. “I don’t have anyone in this family who’s my age, who understands what I’ve been through. I’m the trail-blazer of our generation of the family. And it just feels...”
“Lonely,” Roman filled in, nodding. “I understand a little. You’ve already been thirteen, so you can help a little with some of what I’m dealing with, and we’re going through the male parts of puberty almost at the same time. But there is something about that three-year difference that feels like an invisible wall is put up. And with the twins and Dee, it’s almost like a physical wall. I definitely can tell it’s always there, though.”

“Yeah,” Logan sighed. “It’s less with you, but I still feel a certain degree of separation.”

“Yeah,” Roman agreed. “I don’t like it.”

Logan looked over and nudged him. “Eh. It’s not the end of the world, and we both feel the loneliness, so at least we can be alone together.”

Roman blinked. “That’s a song reference, isn’t it?”


“You’re such a dork,” Roman laughed, shaking his head and turning to face the waves. As one crested and Roman jumped while Logan floated with his infuriating boogie board, he sobered a little. “But in all seriousness, I’m glad to have you as my brother.”

“Same here, Roman,” Logan said. “Same here.”

When they were done with the beach itself, they wandered the boardwalk. There were plenty of arcades to look through, and quite a few restaurants to try. Roman went for the infamous fries of the area, while Logan elected to try a piece of huge pizza. Patton got chocolate ice cream, Virgil got orange sherbert, and Dee tried his very first corn dog, and proceeded to eat the entire thing in the span of ten minutes.

There was a small amusement park area full of rides, and the younger boys were immediately looking around at it in wonder the second Dad and Ami said they could spend some time inside. Roman and Logan hung together, less interested in the carousel and the bumper cars than the others. “A haunted house,” Roman pointed out.

“Not open until five,” Logan replied, pointing at the sign hanging above the entrance to the line.

“Those swing things,” Roman offered, pointing at the giant swing that acted like a carousel.

Logan shrugged. “Those can be entertaining, but we both just ate.”

“I guess that means the Tilt-a-Whirl is out of the question,” Roman said with a grin.

“Completely,” Logan said.

“The Viking boat?” Roman asked, pointing at the swing in question.

Logan paled. “Those have a fifty-fifty chance of sending you completely upside-down, and I’d rather not find out that I’d be doing loop-de-loops by sitting in the ride.”

The swing picked up speed and Roman and Logan watched as the swing reached its peak height, before flipping completely upside-down. “Okay, maybe not,” Roman said, voice strained.

“Definitely not,” Logan agreed.

Roman looked around. “There’s not a lot of rides designed for older kids and adults,” he observed.
“Amusement parks rarely pander to adults, which is a shame, if you ask me,” Logan said, pulling at the drawstrings on his board shorts. “The bigger ones have rides that adults can enjoy, but smaller ones, especially at beaches like this, pander more towards children.”

Roman made an unamused sound in the back of his throat. Patton and Virgil started yelling and headed towards a small ferris wheel. Roman and Logan trailed behind Dad and Ami. “I just want to ride something that’s made more for adults,” he sighed.

Logan looked around and pointed to something a little to the left of the ferris wheel. “Would that be something you like?”

Roman looked at the ride. It looked like a Ferris wheel, except the seats weren’t enclosed, and there was a safety bar holding you in your seat, but that was it. The whole thing was tilted at an angle, also unlike the Ferris wheel. And it moved fast, both forwards and backwards, Roman realized, as it slowed down before spinning in reverse. “Could be fun,” he allowed.

Logan offered him a smile and dragged him over to the ride, calling to Dad and Ami that they were going to check it out.

The line was almost nonexistent, and they got to sit down almost immediately after the ride let the other people off. One by one, people got in the cars, and one by one, the ride moved them further and further up, until they were heading down the other side of the ride. Once every car was taken, as more people started forming a line once they saw the ride open, they started it up with a jerk and Roman laughed nervously.

Quickly, they picked up speed and went in circles, going forwards and then backwards as they got halfway around the wheel. Roman laughed as the wind swept at his face and the people waiting got bigger and smaller at near ridiculous speeds. Logan was laughing next to him, right until they stopped at the top of the wheel, and then started swinging in the reverse direction at the same fast speed.

The ride took maybe two minutes, but it left Roman and Logan breathless as they laughed and jumped out of the car when they were at the bottom and the technician undid the safety bar.

As they walked out of the ride and to the Ferris wheel, Dad waved. “Have fun?” he asked.

“Yeah!” Roman exclaimed.

“We could hear you guys laughing from here,” Ami chuckled. “It must have been a good ride.”

“It was fun,” Logan said. “The wind rushing through our hair and the quick change in scenery was amusing.”

Roman rolled his eyes. “You talk like a college student’s essay sometimes, you know that?” he asked.

Logan shrugged noncommittally. “Whatever,” he said.

They turned to look at the Ferris wheel just in time to see Virgil, Patton, and Dee wave at them. Roman waved back and Logan just laughed. They watched the Ferris wheel go around twice more before Patton, Virgil, and Dee were let out of the car and they bounded over. “We saw you guys on the really fast one over there!” Patton exclaimed, pointing. “Was it fun?”

“Yeah,” Logan said. “But probably not a good idea for you guys yet.”
“Yeah, no, we were just wondering if you liked it,” Virgil said. “We didn’t want to get on it ourselves.”

Dee signed, “Speak for yourself.”

“You were scared when they got on and you know it!” Patton exclaimed. “You’re the one who asked if they’d be okay!”

“Boys, play nice,” Ami reminded them. “Do you want to play in the arcade for a while?”

“Sure,” they all said.

Roman and Logan immediately gravitated towards the skee-ball games while Patton and Virgil played more with the lower-stakes games that still gave out toys and tickets. Dee played the crane games and quickly figured out he was surprisingly adept at it. He won all of the others small stuffed toys, and got one for himself as well.

Logan and Roman pooled their tickets together to get some of the larger prizes, a lava lamp for Roman and a teddy bear for Logan, which caused him to blush when questioned and mumble that he had won a bear exactly like this one at another arcade when he was younger, but his ex-father had made him get rid of it when he turned twelve.

Patton and Virgil got smaller toys, little wind-up animals and finger traps and a few other things that amused them to no end. When they got back to their hotel room, and packed everything up for the ride back home, Roman was already yawning. The second they were in the sun-warmed van on their way home, he was fast asleep, a small smile still on his face at the memory of the whole day.
June 26th, 2003

Emile was standing in front of Remy’s new coffee shop with an extreme sense of pride. They had barely been open a month and business was booming enough that they had gotten an article in the local paper. The reporter was taking pictures and asking Remy questions, which he readily answered. But Emile’s heart was hammering in his chest. “Hey, Rem, I have a question for you,” he said.

“Babe, you know all of this already, I talked it over with you,” Remy said.

“Not that kind of question,” Emile said. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a ring box, and got down on one knee. “Do I have to say the words? Because I realized I could never make a romantic speech for you, so I decided to cut to the chase.”

Remy’s face broke out into a grin as Emile opened the ring box. “Of course I’ll marry you, Emile!” he laughed. He reached into his own pocket and pulled out a ring box of his own. “Great minds, huh?”

Emile laughed, stood, and kissed Remy deeply, which the reporter happily took pictures of, congratulating them on the engagement as well as the success of the store.

September 2nd, 2019

Emile watched as the kids all clambored around the dinner table, talking animatedly about how their first days of school had gone. He placed the last plate on the table and clapped his hands. “Ami and I would love to hear your stories, just one at a time, please.”

When everyone looked at each other, Logan cleared his throat. “I suppose I can go first,” he said. “I met all my teachers today. My ASL teacher is the same, but otherwise I’d only seen my other teachers in the halls or occasionally in clubs I would visit with my other friends. Jack was happy to see me, as were my other friends.”

“And did you see any of your friends, Roman?” Emile asked.

“I mean, I wouldn’t call the people I hung out in seventh grade with friends. They were the only people who would talk to me, and they weren’t very nice about it,” Roman explained, scratching his neck. “But there’s a few cool kids in my English class. One of them is writing novel-length stories in her free time. She said there was this thing in November...NaNo something, which she was gonna try. She would be writing fifty thousand words in a month! I couldn’t believe it!

“And then there was this guy in math class who saw me, sat down right next to me, and introduced himself as ‘Chad from High School Musical.’ He was funny and said that he’d like to be my friend just because he’d never had anyone laugh at his jokes like I had.”

Logan nodded approvingly. “Sounds like you’re making new friends already.”

“Yeah! It’s not as hard in the beginning of the year!” Roman exclaimed. “In the middle it’s difficult, but when you’re meeting a bunch of new people in your grade anyway, it’s easier to make friends.”
Remy cleared his throat and said, “So, Patton and Virgil, how was your first day in the third grade?”

“It was good!” Patton said. “Virgil and I got put in the same class again, which was nice! And our teacher seems really cool! He drew a giant wave on the white board just because he could and because he didn’t want summer to be over.”

Virgil nodded. “He also saw that I read Goosebumps and recommended a few books that he has on the shelves around the room that I might like. He’s pretty cool. Although I think the best part of the class was when Rick wound up being in our same class and when he tried to yell at me and call me names, Mister Prince shut him up by simply saying that if he had a problem with gay people, then he had a problem with Mister Prince himself, and he was more than welcome to throw those insults his way instead of mine.”

Patton’s eyes lit up. “You should have seen him, Dad! He didn’t raise his voice, and he didn’t glare, he just calmly stood there and told Rick that he was insulting every gay person when he insulted Virgil, and that included Mister Prince! It was amazing!”

Emile smiled. “I’m glad you have a teacher who stands up for his students,” he said. “Dee, what about you?”

Dee cleared his throat a couple times and fiddled with his new bat pendant that Emile and Remy had given him this morning. “Good,” he mumbled. “Lucy was in my class, and the translator they assigned me was okay, too. She talked to both Lucy and I a lot when we had free time.”

“And you weren’t lost when the teacher started to talk about different things like reading and math?” Remy asked.

Dee shook his head. “It was almost too easy,” he signed. “Once I figured out how to read I could learn stuff on my own, and I learned a lot of what the teacher talked about.”

Emile and Remy shared a look. Emile felt a little shocked, but Remy’s face was filled with pride and a look that vaguely said, I told you so!

“That’s great, Dee,” Emile said. “You might get put in some of the advanced groups.”

“I like learning,” Dee signed. “Most of the other kids don’t, but I found it interesting, and so does Lucy.”

“Something tells me you and Lucy are going to be really good friends this year,” Remy said, smiling. “And that’s good. You work better when you have friends to help you.”

Logan murmured his agreement. “I don’t know what I would have done in middle school without Jack. Suddenly we were taking seven different classes every day and we had to figure out where every last one of them was with little to no help. Jack willingly wandered the halls with me trying to figure out where everything was,” he said.

Roman laughed. “I can almost picture it! A baby Logan wandering the halls, cheeks bright red from embarrassment at not being able to read the school map correctly, and Jack right next to you, holding your wrist in a vice as he guides you through the crowd to the right classroom. How close am I?”

Logan glared and Roman laughed harder. “Pretty close, then?” he teased.

“Whatever,” Logan said, voice cracking. “It’s not like you’ve never gotten lost before.”

“Maybe so, but at least I can read the maps people give me,” Roman laughed. “I had no problems
finding my classes today once they gave me a map of the hallways.”

Logan stuck his tongue out before going back to his food. Roman just continued to laugh under his breath. Patton tilted his head to the side and he asked, “What’s high school like?”

Roman shook his head. “No clue. Probably better than middle school, though.”

“Definitely better than middle school for me,” Remy said. “Your mileage may very, but I doubt you’ll miss middle school.”

“I certainly don’t,” Logan said. “High school is pretty nice. Sure, you have to go to all your classes every day and you get a lot of homework, but you also get new friends, and a bunch of different clubs to try and enjoy. It can get a bit boring, though. The Honors classes are challenging for most people, but I found that I got bored pretty quickly.”

“Which would be why we enrolled you in AP classes,” Emile said. “And you never complained about your summer homework for them being boring.”

“We read Ender’s Game, which was a pretty interesting book,” Logan said with a shrug. “And we had to write an essay on thought-provoking topics I had never really considered before, and use sources to back up our opinions, which isn’t new, but the way they handled it made it more of a challenge. And AP Calculus? That’s a real challenge, but in a good way.”

“You’ll never be bored,” Remy said with a grin.

“Oh, no, I imagine I’ll get bored doing twenty variations of the same questions that we went over how to solve in class. But I’ll be bored because it’s monotonous, not because it isn’t intellectually stimulating,” Logan said. “I can be bored doing the same thing over and over, even if I have to focus to solve the problem. It just means it’s harder to focus and solve that problem, and it takes longer to finish the homework.”

“We’ll have to figure out how to entertain you while you do the monotonous work, then,” Remy said. “Provided, of course, you get bored. Because I find that when you focus, you rarely complain about being bored, because your mind has less time to wander.”

Logan shrugged. “I get bored in the same amount of time. But because I’m focusing on the problem, I don’t have the wherewithal to complain that I’m bored in the hopes that I get out of work.”

Roman shook his head. “That makes no sense. But I support you, I guess. Honors courses are sometimes fun, but mostly just a lot more work for no good reason.”

“Blech,” Patton said. “I don’t want more work! Why would you get more work dumped on you just for being smart? Why not just make the work harder instead of longer?”

“They do make the work harder,” Logan said.

“Well that’s even worse!” Patton exclaimed. “Because you get harder work and more work, which makes the extra time you have to work doubly long!”

“I...that’s not...how...that...works...doubly long isn’t a valid form of measurement...?” Logan stammered.

Roman laughed. “You short-circuited him! For what it’s worth, I agree that the honors kids shouldn’t have more work and harder work. Make it one or the other.”
Patton nodded solemnly. “It just seems unfair otherwise.”

Dee waved his hands and signed, “What are Honors courses, really?”

“Torture in its purest form,” Roman said with a smirk.

“Roman, no informing the others that something you don’t like is torture,” Remy said. “We don’t want them dreading school just yet.”

“So, save it for winter break is what I’m hearing,” Roman said.

Remy sighed. “If that’s what gets you to stop talking about it now, then sure.”

“But what are they?” Dee signed, insistent.

Virgil turned to look at Dee. “You know how in school they have different groups for the different kids, one for the kids who need extra help, one for the kids who are super smart, and then one for those in between?”

Dee nodded.

“Honors courses are the groups of super smart kids all in one class, so they don’t have to take turns with the teacher,” Virgil said.

“They can also be boring, and lots of work,” Logan added. “But Virgil’s summary is correct.”

“So you’re the smartest of the super smart kids?” Dee asked, hands moving in a blur. “If you’re in classes that are above the honors ones?”

Logan shrugged. “I don’t know about the smartest,” he said. “But there are fewer people in AP classes because they are more challenging than honors. If I’m the smartest out of my classmates I’d be shocked. Some of them are exceptionally bright.”

“So are you,” Emile pointed out. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

Logan shrugged noncommittally, and Emile wanted to argue the point further, but Remy put his free hand on Emile’s, a silent message to drop the conversation, at least for a little bit. “So I’m taking it that the first day of school was a success,” Remy said. “Logan, Roman, do you have any plans for clubs?”

Logan offered a small smile. “They’re doing emergency elections for the Gay-Straight Alliance at school, since the people who were president and vice president last year either graduated or transferred. I’m running for vice, Jack’s running for president. So we’re planning our campaign and seeing if we can get some educational flyers up around the school about gender and sexuality if we win.”

“There’s talk of the middle school doing a play or a musical this year, but everyone thinks it’s more likely to be a play,” Roman said with a shrug. “I want to try out, see if I like being on the stage as much as I like watching people up there. You know, before high school comes around and the auditions are super early in the year.”

“Why can’t we have fun clubs like that?” Patton asked with a whine.

Vanellope walked into the room, apparently looking for a little extra food after her own dinner. As Remy got up to give her something to keep her occupied and away from Dee, who was most likely
to give her food, Emile said, “You can in middle school. In elementary school, it's hard, especially since most of the kids are young enough that they need to be looked after most of the time, and a lot of the staff have enough on their plates.”

“Middle school is forever away, though,” Virgil sighed.

Emile chuckled and shook his head. “It may feel like that, Virge, but I guarantee that it’ll fly by and you’ll be looking for clubs you like in no time.”

“Yeah. You’ll find somewhere you belong,” Remy said, walking back into the room. “I’m sure of it.”
Chapter 34

March 15th, 2017

Logan was having problems. Not with his new name, although it was frustrating him that he couldn’t figure out a good middle name that he liked after finding his first name was a snap. No, he was having problems because he realized he still liked guys.

He wasn’t pretending to like them when he thought he was a girl, but now that he knew he was a guy, that attraction was still there and he wasn’t feeling any attraction to any of the girls at his school. He wasn’t sure how his parents felt about transgender people, but he knew they definitely didn’t like gay people.

It was hard, hiding that he was trans and gay. He just hoped one day he’d be around people who didn’t mind either of those things. And, if he was feeling bold, he hoped there was someone out there who would be romantically interested in him despite being trans.

September 23rd, 2019

Logan walked into Jack’s house with a grin. “Thank you for letting me in, Mister President.”

“It’s my pleasure, Mister Vice President,” Jack said with a laugh, closing the door. The two practically ran up to Jack’s room to hang out and get homework out of the way so they could talk about whatever they wanted. “You know my parents don’t mind us talking about more ‘mature’ things around them, right? We don’t have to hide in my room to hang out and talk about things.”

“Neither do mine, now,” Logan said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m comfortable doing it.”

“All right, fair point,” Jack conceded, walking into his room and sitting on the lower bunk of his bed, while Logan took Jack’s desk chair as they both pulled out homework.

They worked through Calculus, and History, and Logan finished his English while Jack struggled with his Physics homework. When Logan finished the required reading of the night and Jack was still struggling, Logan came over and sat next to him on the bed, ignoring the flutter in his stomach as he did so. “Here, let me help,” Logan said. “You said yourself that you need to visualize the circuit if you ever want to finish this fast, so I can sketch out the circuit for you here and you can do it on the others.”

Jack wordlessly passed over his homework and pencil and Logan made a small drawing of the circuit in the margins. “There you go,” Logan said, passing it back.

“Thanks, man,” Jack said with a grin.

“It’s not a problem,” Logan shrugged off.

“No, really, Lo. Thank you,” Jack insisted.

Logan smiled even as his heart hammered in his chest. He scratched the back of his neck. “Anytime, Jack.”
Jack finished his physics homework quickly after that and the two clambered into the top bunk of Jack’s bed. When Logan was staying with Jack, he always took the bottom bunk to sleep in. But when they were just hanging out, they’d both regularly squeeze themselves into the top bunk. It was a tight fit, but neither of them minded.

Some time passed, and Jack and Logan were still lying in Jack’s bed, laughing at nothing in particular. Jack was scrolling Tumblr, and Logan was staring up at Jack’s ceiling. His stomach fluttered uncomfortably when he looked at Jack and he didn’t fully understand why. Jack was his best friend, and even if Logan developed feelings for Jack, he didn’t want to mess up what they had.

When Jack touched Logan’s wrist lightly, it felt like electricity shot through Logan’s veins. He looked over at Jack, and Jack offered him a grin. “You’ve been stuck in your head all afternoon,” he teased lightly. “And I know you’re not stressing about homework because we finished it all.”

Logan shrugged and said, “You know how it is. Tests coming up, peers being...well, however they choose to be that day, and with the new school year...it’s all a lot to take in.” Jack chuckled and Logan felt his ears get hot. “Something funny?” he asked, voice cracking in the middle of the question.

“Sometimes...you can be so oblivious,” Jack said. “Not in a bad way, but just...you see, but do not observe.”

Logan propped himself up on one arm, tilting his body towards Jack’s. “What don’t I observe, Sherlock?”

Jack’s hand reached out to touch Logan’s free wrist, and it lingered on his pulse point. “My romantic advances,” Jack said softly.

“Wait. You...you like...boys?” Logan asked, brain stuttering to a halt.


Logan’s eyes flickered over Jack. His tousled brown hair, the way his muscles were growing from doing lacrosse at school, the cocky grin he wore, the lips he had been dreaming about kissing for months. He moved forward in an instant, lips colliding with Jack’s until not only sparks, but an entire forest fire grew between them. Logan didn’t have much experience kissing anyone, let alone his best friend, but Jack. Jack knew how to kiss.

His movements were sure, mouth moving in time with Logan’s. Jack had one hand at the nape of Logan’s neck and Logan had a hand on Jack’s hip. Logan could feel the beginning of stubble on Jack’s upper lip, and he felt a small thrill go through him. This was real, this was happening. Jack liked him. He couldn’t believe it.

When they pulled apart, Logan was panting a little and Jack laughed. “Did you forget to breathe?!” he asked.

“For the first ten seconds, maybe,” Logan said. “Um. Does this mean we’re boyfriends?”

“Do you... want to be boyfriends?” Jack asked, running his hand down Logan’s side.

“Yes,” Logan breathed. “Yes, I would love to be your boyfriend.”

Jack grinned. “Then we’re boyfriends,” he said calmly. Firmly. No room for argument. “But seriously. How did you not know I was into men? I’m the president of the GSA, Lo! You’re my vice!”
“I assumed that you were...not an ally, but maybe bisexual, with more of an interest in girls,” Logan said with a shrug. “After all, a lot of the girls at school fawn over you, especially when you’re practicing lacrosse. And you seem to enjoy their attention.”

“Sure, I like attention, and yeah, girls are cute sometimes, but I prefer guys, Logan,” Jack said. “Why do you think I joined lacrosse? I get to have hot guys surround me every day for an hour after school!”

Logan barked out a laugh. “Fair enough, I suppose. So are you bi? Or pan?”

Jack considered. “Pansexual, I guess,” he said. “Though saying I’m bi is easier to understand for most people, so I generally use that.”

“Cool,” Logan said. “I’m gay, I think, but nonbinary people are cool, too. Occasionally feminine-aligned nonbinary people might catch my eye, but for the most part it’s guys and more...not feminine enbies.”

Jack shrugged. “You could be bi, too. Or you could just say you’re gay. And of course, the label queer is always open for you to use.”

“I’ll probably use queer, honestly,” Logan said with a shrug. “It’s easier for me and everyone else.”

A comfortable silence fell over them. Jack looked at Logan and kissed his nose. “Do your dads know you’re queer?”

Logan paused. “If they didn’t, they’re gonna find out when I get back home and tell Roman that he was right, apparently.”

“About me being your boyfriend?” Jack asked with a grin.

“He knew I liked you before I knew I liked you,” Logan said. “He’s probably going to ask when the wedding is.”

“Tell him it’s after we graduate college, provided we’re still together then,” Jack said.

Logan glanced at him. “You serious?”

“Yeah, man. If we can date for six years and not want to break up by the end of it I’d love to marry you,” Jack said with a shrug. “I mean, I assume I would. That’s how that sort of thing generally works, from what I’m told.”

“As a concept, though, marrying someone feels kinda...hazy,” Logan said.

“Yeah, exactly,” Jack said. “Right now, I’m just happy to have you as my boyfriend.”

Logan could feel his cheeks start burning like a wildfire, and Jack grinned, kissing him on the lips, briefly. “Should we get something to drink and tell my parents the good news?”

As they got down off the top bunk, insecurity flared up in the back of Logan’s mind. “Are you sure they’ll approve?”

“They already see you as a son, Lo,” Jack reassured. “They might make jokes about you becoming a son-in-law, but that’s the worst they’ll do. They’ll love to hear that I decided to do something about my pining.”

Logan laughed a little and let himself be led downstairs into the kitchen. When they got there, Misses
Harkness was already pouring two glasses of lemonade. One look at the both of them and she grinned. “Logan, honey, your hair’s a little mussed up, and you have a little bit of stuff on your lower lip. If you don’t want the world to know you made out with my son a few minutes ago, you might want to fix that.”

Logan turned deep red and fixed his hair the best he could without a mirror and wiped the bottom of his lip with his thumb. Jack groaned. “Mom,” he said. “You’re gonna make him regret agreeing to be my boyfriend!”

“Jack, if I can stand you, with all your flirting at everyone, your dorky references to shows that I’ve never seen, and your passion for theatre without any desire to actually do something about it, such as trying out for the play or becoming the head sound tech, then I’m pretty sure I can stand your mom teasing me a little,” Logan informed him quickly.

“Well, if I can stand you, with all your obliviousness to anything romantic being shoved your way, your Doctor Who jokes which never ever stop, and your overall emotional threshold being similar to that of a small child before you get overwhelmed and can’t regulate your responses, then I’m pretty sure I can stand anything you and your family will try to throw at me,” Jack responded smugly.

Logan’s jaw dropped open. “Are you seriously trying to outdo me right now?”

Jack shrugged with a grin, accepting lemonade from his mom. “Maybe so,” he said.

Logan huffed and took his offered lemonade, taking a sip before he responded. “This is a battle you’ll lose, Jack Matthew Harkness, don’t test me.”

“Oh, you used my full name, I’m quaking in my boots!” Jack exclaimed, making an exaggerated terrified face.

Logan rolled his eyes and sipped at his lemonade. “You’re still being an a-hole, Jack, and I stand by that sentiment.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s one of the reasons why you like me,” Jack said with a grin.

“If you two are going to continue to flirt, please do it outside the kitchen, I actually need to start making dinner soon,” Misses Harkness said, shooing them away.

“Come to think of it, your folks are probably gonna pick you up soon,” Jack said, sounding a little disappointed.

“Well, I can grab my things and we can sit on your porch drinking lemonade until it’s time for me to go,” Logan offered.

Jack pointed at him with a grin. “You see, this is why I like you, Lo. You’re always trying to make the best out of any situation.”

Logan turned pink and scurried upstairs to get his things before coming back down and letting Jack lead them both out to the porch. They sat on the top step and took sips of their lemonade, just enjoying the silence between them. “So, I’m assuming we’re exclusive,” Logan said.

“Yeah, we’re both monogamous, so we’d be exclusive,” Jack agreed. “I don’t want to share you.”

“Nor I, you,” Logan said, sipping at his lemonade. “Although, if you’re worried about being out at school, and you want to continue letting girls flirt with you, I understand—”
“Hey, Lo, no,” Jack said, draping an arm around Logan’s shoulders. “I don’t care what other people think of me. You go to school every day risking someone getting mad at you, just because you take testosterone and use he and him. Compared to you, I don’t have nearly as big a chance of people insulting me. And if they get offended that I’m dating you, well, it’s their problem. I don’t want us to be a secret if it doesn’t have to be. I want people to know that I love you, and if they have a problem they can come to me and I’ll show them what bigots get when they try to insult either of us.”

Logan smiled softly. “A knuckle sandwich?”

“A knuckle sandwich,” Jack confirmed. “And maybe more, depending on how much they insult you.”

“You don’t have to fight on my account, Jack,” Logan said.

“Maybe not, but I want to,” Jack said. “I want people to know that if they mess with you they’re messing with me.”

Logan smiled and kissed Jack softly, which Jack returned with a little laugh into Logan’s mouth. A moment later they were interrupted by a loud cheer and an, “I knew it!” coming from the driveway.

They jumped apart and Logan turned toward the offender with a glare. “Shut up, Roman! We only started dating today!”

“I knew it! I knew you two would start dating eventually!” Roman crowed. “Come on, Ami’s back home making dinner and I’m sure Dad will want to hear all about your new boyfriend!”

Logan sighed and turned to Jack. “Looks like I have to go.”

“I gathered,” Jack said, giving him a quick peck on the lips and taking his lemonade. “Go on, I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”

“See you tomorrow,” Logan said with a smile on his face.

When he got in the car along with Roman, Dad was sitting there, smiling at him. “What?” Logan asked.

“I just figured...it’s about time that you and Jack got together. Everyone knew you two were pining except for the two of you,” Dad said.

Logan leaned back in his chair and groaned. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“Okay,” Dad said. “Do I need to tell you and Roman about safe sex practices?”

“No!” Logan and Roman exclaimed at once.

Dad laughed the whole way home.
Chapter 35

December 24th, 2011

Roman was running around the house happily, helping his mother put up decorations for Christmas. Just because they didn’t have any family other than themselves, didn’t mean they couldn’t get into the festive spirit! And besides, Mom was going to invite over some of the neighbors who also didn’t have family to travel to.

He was singing the songs he had heard on the radio about Christmas, because he loved to sing and these were special songs that he could only sing for two more days before he’d have to wait eleven months to sing again. “You have a really nice voice, Roman,” his mom said. “I love to hear you sing.”

Roman grinned up at her. “When I grow up, I wanna be a singer!” he declared. “It would be super fun to just sing all day for a job!”

His mother laughed. “I think that with that attitude, you could do just about whatever you wanted.”

October 1st, 2019

Roman was biting his bottom lip as he waited outside the classroom where they were having auditions for the play. He had read through the lines he needed, and he knew how to say them for maximum effect, but he was still nervous about doing this, especially since he was trying out for one of the main parts.

“Dude, you’ll do fine,” Chad said next to him, looking over Roman’s shoulder at the papers he was holding. “It’s not a big deal. You just go in, do a thirty-second performance, and you’re done.”

Chad had already auditioned, and Roman appreciated that he was sticking around for moral support and not just going outside to wait for the late buses. But hearing Chad try to reassure him just made him more nervous. “But they only give you thirty seconds! That’s no time to see the dedication people put into this!”

“Dude, no one is taking this more seriously than you are,” Chad said, putting a hand on Roman’s shoulder. “Trust me, Roman. Your dedication is going to show through no matter how nervous you are.”

“I hope you’re right,” Roman said, worrying his lip.

“I know I’m right,” Chad said. “The other people who were there when I got called in the room weren’t taking this remotely seriously. They just saw it as a little fun to pass the time. You could easily get the lead character with the kind of dedication you’re giving this.”

“You think so?” Roman asked nervously. “I’m the new kid on the block when it comes to theatre, they’d be taking a chance on me...”

“Which would be the best decision they could make,” Chad asserted. “Don’t sell yourself short, Roman.”
Roman took a breath and nodded, smiling a little at Chad. “Thanks, man.”

Chad shrugged. “I’m just telling you what I think.”

The teacher in charge of the play called, “Roman Picani, Jessie Raye, Frank Baker, and Lila Gardener, you’re up next.”

Panic struck Roman like a lightning bolt but Chad just squeezed his shoulder. “You’ll do fine. Once you’re done, we can go outside and talk about how you and I did, sound good?”

Roman nodded and went into the classroom, where the three other kids were getting situated. He sat down in the last desk available in the room, across from the theatre teacher and his assistant in charge, the woman who was in charge of the techs. “Jessie, why don’t you go first?” the teacher asked.

The girl with fiery red hair nodded and stood, going to the center of the room and starting the monologue for the lead actress in the play. Her hands made sweeping gestures, and her voice rose and fell along with the tension in the words that she spoke. Roman was enraptured by her performance, and was disappointed when she was done and returned to her seat, closing in on herself and not looking anyone in the eye.

“Roman? How about you go next?” the teacher asked.

Roman cleared his throat and nodded, mumbling, “Okay,” as he walked to the center of the room. His heart was thudding hard in his chest and blood was roaring in his ears. He took a deep breath, then another, his hands shaking at his sides. Then, he took one final deep breath, and started talking, the monologue response to the piece that Jessie had just performed.

“You say that you are nothing to look at my lady, but I am afraid I would have to respectfully disagree. Anyone who convinced you that you are worth anything less than the most valuable diamonds in the world is a scoundrel, who is not to be trusted.” There was snickering from behind Roman, but he forced himself to ignore it. “I believe that you are the fairest maiden in the land, and I’m sure that many a man would agree with me. For there is no one with such vivid a conviction, with such sharp a mind, that makes your beauty pale in comparison to the person you are.”

His voice rose as he gained confidence, and he puffed out his chest like he imagined the character would as he said, “If you desire to defeat the nation to the north, then I will assist you in any way I can. But make no mistake. If you join the army you will be the one leading, the one to strategize the perfect plan to defeat our enemies. My lady, not only are you the fairest in the land, but you are also the smartest, the bravest, and the kindest woman I know. If anyone were to lead our nation to victory, it would be you, my dearest. And I would be honored to fight by your side.”

The snickering turned to laughter as Roman let his shoulders relax and he let out a shaky breath as the adrenaline left his body in a rush. He turned to see Frank clutching his sides. “What?” Roman asked.

“You...you know this isn’t Broadway? This is just a stupid school play! You took it way too seriously!” Frank laughed.

Roman turned scarlet and returned to his seat, too embarrassed to even think up a good comeback. Jessie tapped his shoulder and he turned to see her smiling at him. “For what it’s worth, Roman, I think you did an amazing job.”

“Thank you,” he murmured, as the teacher reprimanded Frank’s behavior.
Frank did his monologue next, but it was clear he wasn’t trying very hard. At the end he turned to smirk at Roman. “I guarantee I’ll still get a part,” he informed Roman. “No need to be so extra.”

“Shut up, Frank,” Jessie snapped. “I’d rather work with Roman than with you, because at least he tries and actually cares.”

Frank sneered and sat down as Lila went up for her turn. She did a good job on her monologue, taking a different approach than Jessie, but still fun to watch. She paced the floor, making wide gestures and looking for all the world like an anxious princess trying to win an inner battle against her demons. Honestly Roman would love to work with her or Jessie, provided he got the part.

When Lila was done, they were all sent out of the room, and Roman started to head outside, his backpack slung over one shoulder. “Hey, Roman, wait up!”

Roman turned to find Jessie and Lila walking over. “Do you mind if we hang out with you for a bit? Both of us really liked your performance back there. Did you memorize the monologue?”

“Uh, yeah,” Roman said, turning pink. “I guess it seems a little ridiculous...”

“I think it was amazing,” Lila said. “Jessie and I memorized pieces, but we still needed the script. You had the whole thing down.”

Jessie said, “I don’t like how Frank treated you. You obviously enjoy theatre a lot, you should be allowed to be yourself...or...you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Roman said. “Thanks for backing me up. I really enjoyed both of your monologues.” He got twin “Thank you”s from both of them.

“Jessie, you seemed to really come to life when you did yours. Do you like theatre a lot too?” he asked.

Jessie nodded. “I have since I was a little kid. Theatre is super fun to watch, and even more fun to actually do.”

Roman nodded. “I bet. This is my first. Audition, I mean.”

Jessie gawked. “Really? I never would have guessed, you had so much confidence once you started!”

Roman laughed as they got outside. “Yeah, well, I guess I’m just a good actor.”

Lila snorted and Jessie grinned. Chad ran over from the bench he was sitting on. “Roman! How’d it go?”

“Really well, I think,” Roman said. “Jessie and Lila seem to think so, anyway.”

“Yeah, I see you three seem to get along well,” Chad said. “But I take it Frank...wasn’t as receptive?”

“He said I was being too ‘extra’ for a middle school play,” Roman said, rolling his eyes. “It’s whatever, I guess. I enjoyed the performance, it was really fun.”

“He really knocked it out of the park, too, you should have seen him!” Lila gushed.

Roman blushed. “Oh come on, I wasn’t that impressive.”
“Yes you were,” Lila said. “You pulled out all your punches. If you don’t get the part, I’m gonna riot!”

“I might join in,” Jessie said with a grin.

“I told you that you had nothing to worry about, dude!” Chad exclaimed. “Even with you trying to play down what you did, I can see the excitement in your eyes at being able to do this. You, sir, are going to nail this part and be the star of the show!”

Roman laughed and shook his head. “You guys are super nice, really, but I’m gonna hold out on hoping until I actually see what part I get.”

“Well, we find out at the end of the week,” Lila said. “And if I could bet, I would be betting on you.”

There was a honk from the driveway up to the school and Roman jumped. “That’s my ride, I bet,” he said. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, you guys. I’ll see you at rehearsal either way!”

He ran up to the minivan pulling up and climbed into the back seat, noting Patton, Virgil, and Dee were already in their seats. “We had to come straight from the elementary school to pick you up,” Ami said by way of explanation. “How was the audition?”

“Well, Chad and the two girls I went in with seem confident I’ll get the part. The other guy in the room wasn’t nearly as confident, claiming I was ‘too extra.’ Whatever that means,” Roman said.

“Well, it sounds like that guy won’t be getting a very good part,” Ami said. “But knowing you, and seeing you practice your lines, I would be surprised if you didn’t get your pick of the parts.”

“Same!” Patton chirped.

“Yeah, you actually care, and that goes a long way,” Virgil pointed out.

“I guess,” Roman said. “I just kinda resent the fact that anyone could consider pouring your heart and soul into a performance ‘too extra,’ you know?”

“Yeah, he’s trying to make you feel small for doing something you enjoy. That’s not cool,” Ami pointed out.

“Why would anyone do that?” Roman asked.

“I wish I knew,” Ami said with a sigh. “I knew a lot of people like that guy you’re talking about when I was in middle school. They’d do anything just to feel more powerful, and it’s despicable.”

Roman grew quiet, remembering the talk he and Dad had just after he had gotten adopted. Ami had been bullied really badly, and if he couldn’t remember most of middle school because of it, maybe he should keep Ami from dwelling on it. “I’m not going to let him get me down, though,” Roman resolved. “It was a little embarrassing at first, but if he doesn’t understand why I love theatre, that’s his problem, not mine. And I don’t have to make it my problem if I don’t want to.”

Ami smiled at him in the rearview mirror and Roman felt his nerves ease just a little with the knowledge that Ami was proud of him. “That’s definitely the attitude to have, Roman, I’m impressed.”

Roman smiled. “It won’t be easy, but I’m gonna try that. Not confront him if he doesn’t confront me, you know?”
“Yeah,” Ami agreed. “Don’t let him get you down, and just enjoy what you want to enjoy.”

Roman nodded. As silence filled the car, Roman looked down and quietly admitted, “I wish my mother were here to see this. That I’m actually following my dreams, even if it’s ‘only’ a school play.”

“She’d be proud of you without a doubt, Roman,” Ami said. “Just as proud as we are that you’re doing what you love.”

Roman nodded with a smile, and if a few tears fell from his eyes, well, no one mentioned it.
October 31st, 2015

“Come on, Jess, your parents really aren’t letting you trick-or-treat this year?” Jack asked on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, sorry, Jack,” Jessica said, feeling completely and utterly dejected but trying to not sound too disappointed lest her father find out. “My dad says I’m too old to go trick-or-treating.”

“That sucks. We’re only twelve, we’re not ‘too old’ to have fun tonight!” Jack protested.

“I know, but he doesn’t,” Jessica said, pursing her lips.

Jack sighed, causing static on the line. “I’ll smuggle you some candy next time I see you.”

Jessica smiled. “You’re the MVP, Jack.”

“Of course,” Jack said. “Try not to get too down on yourself tonight. You can have fun in other ways too.”

“Yeah,” Jessica said, nodding. “Talk soon.”

October 31st, 2019

Logan adjusted his wig in the mirror, feeling completely ridiculous but at the same time a little giddy. Dad and Ami were letting him go trick-or-treating with Roman and the others, and he was allowed to be the chaperone for them, while Dad and Ami stayed home to pass out candy to the other neighbors. Jack was going to one of the parties that the seniors were throwing, but Logan was just happy to go door-to-door with his younger brothers, collecting candy.

He grabbed his pillowcase and headed downstairs, looking at their group full of eclectic costumes. Logan was a mad scientist, complete with a wig that had hair sticking up in every direction. Roman was in full princely attire, right down to the gold frills on the front and the red sash. Dee looked straight out of a fifties cartoon, with a little cape and long yellow gloves that matched the old ones he had but he was outgrowing. He noticed that Dee had gotten Ami to put scales over half of his face, too, and Logan knew Dee would be demanding pictures once all this was over so he could remember being “a slimey boi” as Roman had put it. Patton had cat ears and a cowboy outfit on, and he was saying, “Meowdy, pawtner!” to whoever would listen. Virgil was a vampire, complete with a pair of fangs over his actual teeth. Virgil looked over as Logan came down the stairs and asked, “We ready?”

“We’re ready,” Logan confirmed. “Let’s go get some candy!”
The younger three cheered and bolted out the door, while Roman and Logan went at a slower pace. “You know Dad or Ami could have come with us to chaperone, you didn’t have to give up going to the Halloween party,” Roman said.

“I know,” Logan said. “But I haven’t been trick-or-treating since I was eleven. I missed it.” Then, when Dee was starting to become more of a shadow in the dim light than his actual costume, Logan called, “Slow down, Dee! Stay within my sight!”

Roman glanced at him. “Yeah, I haven’t gone trick-or-treating since I was eleven, too. Only I only missed one year. You missed...four?”

“Four, yeah,” Logan nodded. “Which, I might not have gone out every year, but I wanted to at least go when I was twelve, I had a really cool costume planned and everything.”

Roman nodded. “But now you get to do it again.”

“Yeah, now I get to do it again,” Logan agreed. “And maybe next year I’ll go to the Halloween party.”

They got to the first house at the edge of the neighborhood and they stopped talking, instead letting the younger ones yell, “Trick or treat!” when they rang the doorbell and a woman opened it.

All of them got candy, including Logan, and he felt inexplicably happy that he was able to get some candy again. They went to the next door, repeating the routine, and Dee got complimented on his costume, which he beamed at, and Logan thanked the teen on the other side of the door. “He’s very particular about his costume,” Logan said.

“Yeah, I could see,” the guy said. “Take a lollipop?”

“Thanks,” Logan said, grabbing one.

“No problem, Logan,” the guy said.

Logan frowned. “...Do we know each other?”

“Not well,” the guy said. “But we did hang out occasionally at the community pool.”

“Right!” Logan said, snapping his fingers. “Maybe I’ll see you around then, Casey?”

“You know it,” Casey said with a grin. “Catch up to your brothers, or else they might go on to the next door without you!”

Logan thanked Casey again and dashed after the others, catching up just before they rung the doorbell on the next house. Roman smiled but didn’t make a comment, and they went from house to house, going around the whole neighborhood in the span of two hours.

When the sun had completely set long ago and the boys had hit every door, they went back home and were greeted by a very excited Vanellope sporting tiny bat wings. All the boys save Logan went to the kitchen to compare what they had gotten and trade candy, but Logan’s phone started ringing, so he took his candy up to his room and answered it. “Yeah?” Logan asked.

“Logan,” Jack said on the other end of the phone, slurring slightly. “I think I need a lil help.”

Logan was instantly on alert. “I’ll come right over. Are you still at the party?”

“Mhm,” Jack hummed. “But everyone I came with is really drunk, an’ I don’t wanna be in a car
when the driver’s really drunk. But I can’t drive ‘cause I’m drunk. D’you think you can pick me up?"

“Yeah, of course,” Logan said, already leaving his room and rushing down the stairs, signing to Ami that he needed the car keys.

“Something wrong?” Ami asked.

“Jack’s at the party but his designated driver didn’t stay sober,” Logan whispered. “He wants a ride back home with someone sober.”

“I’ll come with you,” Ami said.

Logan started to protest, “I don’t want to be an inconvenience—”

“No. Logan, that’s not a request. I’m coming with you,” Ami said.

“Okay,” Logan said as Ami passed him the car keys and the two of them got into the minivan. “Jack, I’m coming over, but I have to hang up now, all right? Stay safe, and don’t get into any cars.”

“Mmm, I won’, promise, Lo,” Jack slurred, hanging up.

Logan hung up and backed out of the driveway, glancing at Ami, who was glaring out the front window. “Ami? Am I in trouble?”

Ami glanced over and shook his head. “No, Logan, you’re not in trouble.”

“...Is Jack?” Logan asked.

“That’ll depend on his parents, I assume,” Ami said. “Did you know there was going to be alcohol at the party?”

“I didn’t know for certain, but I assumed someone might try and sneak in some beer,” Logan admitted. “Most people did. That’s why Jack went with a group, and they had a designated driver.”

Ami nodded stiffly. “Are most of the parties you and Jack get invited to like that?”

Logan squirmed in his seat a little, stopping at a red light. “Yes,” he admitted. “Which is one of the reasons I generally don’t go. I don’t want the temptation. And if I do go, I’m the designated driver. I don’t want to get in a car with someone when the driver is drunk.”

Ami was silent for a long while. “If you were at college, and you didn’t have to drive back to wherever you were sleeping, would you drink, even if you were under twenty-one?”

Logan swallowed. “I...guess it would depend on the situation. If I trusted the people around me, or not.”

Ami took a breath. “Thank you for being honest, at least.”

“You don’t like the thought of me drinking underage,” Logan said.

“I don’t like the thought of you drinking, period,” Ami said. “That can quickly become self-medication, especially if you deal with a lot of the stuff you go through, Logan.”

“I’m responsible about it,” Logan said. “The one time I ever actually...” he trailed off, realizing that might not be the right thing to say.
Ami’s eyes flickered dangerously. “Finish the sentence,” he said.

Logan swallowed. “The one time I ever actually drank, I kept an eye on my beer at all times, it was only one beer the whole night, and Jack was the designated driver. And he never touched a drop.”

Ami took a couple deep breaths, and Logan started to shake. “Ami...please don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad at you,” Ami said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m mad at me, and Emile. We should have educated you better about the dangers of underage drinking. We should have made it clear that if you’re at a party, we don’t want you drinking, or worse. We didn’t set clear boundaries, and as a result, you could have put yourself in danger.”

Logan swallowed as they pulled up to the house, cars lining the street on both sides and in both directions. Music was blasting through the walls and Logan could see plenty of people inside the house dancing, and drinking. Jack was sitting on the porch steps, looking like he might pass out.

“Jack,” Logan called softly, walking over.

“Mm...Lo?” Jack asked. “Th’nks for comin’ to get me...”

Logan helped Jack stand up and Jack swayed. “How much did you have to drink?” Logan asked.

“Two beers,” Jack said, rubbing his head. “I left the second one at my waist, though, and I didn’t look at it for a sec, then after I sipped it, everything got hazy, and I called you.”

Logan stopped short. “Jack...did someone spike your drink?!?”

“Mm...dunno,” Jack mumbled. “Possibly. No one tried anything, though. Slipped outside ‘fore anyone saw me.”

Logan paled. “Jack, we’re going back to your house, right now. We’re telling your parents, and we’re going to see if you need to be in the hospital.”

“Lo, ’s not that bad...” Jack said, lazily waving his free hand around.

Logan led Jack back to the van. “Jack, someone spiked your drink, you are going home and we are telling your parents.”

“Lo, c’mon,” Jack begged. “They’re gonna kill me if they find out I drank.”

“Well, you can’t crash at my place,” Logan said. “Ami’s gonna insist you go home.”

“I’m debating taking him straight to the hospital,” Ami said simply.

Jack looked up at the new voice and squinted. “Mister Picani?” he asked.

Ami walked over and helped Jack get into a back seat. “You did the right thing, calling Logan,” he told Jack. “But if you’re in danger, we’re telling your parents.”

Even as Jack protested, Ami turned to Logan. “You’re sitting in the back and making sure he doesn’t tuck and roll out of the car.”

Logan felt his eyes getting hot, absolutely petrified, as he silently passed the car keys over and climbed in the back next to Jack. Jack fell asleep, head resting on Logan’s shoulder as they drove to Jack’s house in silence.

Ami got out of the car and signaled for Logan to stay inside with Jack. Logan did so, but opened the
van door to listen to the conversation Ami was having with Mister and Misses Harkness. It was mostly too quiet to hear, until Misses Harkness gasped and exclaimed, “He did what?!”

“He had a designated driver,” Ami said. “But the driver didn’t keep their word, so he called Logan. I made sure to come with him and make sure Jack was okay. But it’s possible his drink was spiked. You need to figure out if he needs to be taken to the hospital.”

Jack stirred and gagged, and Logan quickly unbuckled him, helping him out of the car right before he emptied what little was in his stomach. “Don’t feel good, Lo,” Jack mumbled.

Logan didn’t doubt it. Jack was sweating all over, and shaking. “I know you don’t. We’re at your home, and your mom and dad are gonna figure out if you need to see the doctors.”

Jack looked at Logan with betrayal. “Why would you tell my parents?!” he slurred.

“Because he cares about you, Jack,” Mister Harkness said, coming over. “And you are going to the hospital. And once you’re sober, we will be having a serious talk.”

Logan swallowed as Mister Harkness took most of Jack’s weight. “I’m sorry,” Logan whispered.

Mister Harkness softened as he looked at Logan. “You helped Jack, Logan. Regardless of what either of you have done in the past, you helped him tonight. You might have saved his life. Thank you.”

Logan started to cry, shaking as he nodded. Ami came over and helped Logan back into the van, driving home in tense silence, only broken by Logan’s hiccups. When they got home, Ami hugged him and said, “Go upstairs and go to bed. We can talk about this in the morning when everyone’s calm and we know that Jack is safe.”

When Logan nodded, Ami let him go upstairs, and Logan silently crawled into bed, crying himself to sleep out of worry.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for hospitals, and assault mention

September 28th, 2019

“Come on, Logan! Just take a sip! You said Jack should be the designated driver just so you could try it!” one of the girls at the party, Chelsea, said.

Logan gave her a sideways glance and grabbed a beer that wasn’t opened yet, and took an experimental sip. It tasted awful, like there was a fire going down his throat, but he had to admit that it wasn’t as bad as he thought it was going to be. He’d just space out how long he took to drink it.

Chelsea laughed and hugged him, moving away to someone else who was hesitant to take a drink. Logan grimaced. It was the first party of the year, and he resolved that he didn’t want to have no excuse to drink beer ever throughout the rest of high school. He’d just be the designated driver every time, then. Maybe he’d get pressured into drinking less.

November 1st, 2019

When Logan woke up the next morning, he still had a pit of dread in his stomach. He checked his phone immediately to see if he had a text from Jack, but he had no such luck. He headed downstairs to find that only Dad and Ami were in the house, and his brothers and Vanellope were out in the backyard. Logan swallowed. “Did...did you hear from Jack’s parents? Is he okay?”

Dad and Ami shared a look. “Jack is still in the hospital,” Ami said. “They took his blood and found out that he was drugged with Rohypnol. Not by choice, judging by the levels they found.”

Logan felt all the air leave his lungs in a rush. If he had gone to the party with Jack, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Maybe Logan could have gotten to him earlier, maybe he would have noticed who spiked Jack’s drink...

“Don’t blame yourself, Logan,” Dad said. “You’re the one who got in the van and drove over there to make sure he was okay. You saved his life.”

Logan still shook. It was hitting him that Jack could have died last night. Even if he had made it home safe somehow with the driver drunk, if he had been drugged and he didn’t tell his parents...he wouldn’t be okay.

“Ami and I are pretty sure what happened last night is a good lesson in why underage drinking is not okay, and why you shouldn’t do it,” Dad said. “But we still need to talk about it, so we’re clear on what to do if you find yourself in a situation like that again.”

“I definitely won’t drink until I’m twenty-one,” Logan promised.
“Good, but that’s not what we’re talking about,” Ami said. “Sit down, we’ll talk.”

Logan swallowed and sat down at the kitchen island across from Dad and Ami.

“If you find yourself in a situation where there’s alcohol and you’re not twenty-one, or there’s any sort of illicit drugs involved, Dad and I want you to leave. Make your excuses and get out,” Ami said. “Even if you don’t drink any alcohol, others getting drunk means that if you get drugged, someone could just claim you drank too much and others wouldn’t give you a second glance. And if there’s drugs being used openly, it’s the same story.”

“Logan, you’re smart. You know that Jack was in someone’s sights last night, and they saw fit to assault him. He was lucky to get out of there before he got caught. We don’t want that to happen again, to either of you. I know you guys want to socialize, but there’s ways to do that which don’t involve anything illegal. And on that point, what happens if the police get called? You can’t just run all the way home without getting some strange looks, at best, and get caught resisting arrest at worst. And if you’re arrested, you know what’s going to happen? Ami and I are going to get a call from the police, and we will not be pleased,” Dad said.

Logan swallowed again, nodding. This was easily the most terrifying lecture he had ever been given, mostly because it wasn’t filled with empty threats, but actual scenarios that could happen.

“You don’t have to call anyone’s parents or the police if you see someone bring out alcohol, all right? That’s not what we’re asking. We’re just asking that if you see someone bring it out, you leave. We don’t want you getting in trouble. And we won’t even ask you why you’re home early if you don’t want to talk about it,” Dad continued. “We’re concerned about your safety, first and foremost. So no alcohol for you or around you until your twenty-one, and no drugs period, all right?”

Logan nodded. He didn’t want to be in trouble with anyone, least of all Dad and Ami. He spoke, voice trembling and small as he asked, “Can we go visit Jack later, please? I want to see for myself that he’s all right.”

“We’ll call his parents and see if he’s up for it,” Dad said, grabbing Logan’s hand and squeezing it, silent reassurance. “He’s a little rattled since the doctors told him what he’d been given and what happened last night.”

“I bet that he wouldn’t want to see me anyway,” Logan sighed. “Because I’m the one who got him in trouble with his parents.”

“Logan, you saved his life,” Ami said. “If he’s angry with you for telling his parents he was drugged because he got drunk, that’s his problem. He wouldn’t be okay if it weren’t for you. I don’t understand why he wouldn’t want to see you, or why he’d be mad at you.”

“Between us, Logan, Jack’s parents were asking when you’d be able to come over because they wanted to personally thank you for helping him, and apparently Jack had been asking about you. He doesn’t hate you,” Dad said.

Logan could feel tears pricking at his eyes again. He hated crying this much, especially considering he was on testosterone and that made it much harder to cry, so he was doubly miserable. “Can...can we go see him soon?” he sniffled. “Please? I want to know my boyfriend’s going to be okay.”

“I’ll call Jack’s parents and see if they can find out when visiting hours are, and we can see him today,” Dad said. “Does that sound okay?”

Logan sniffled and nodded. Dad tutted and came over to hug him. Logan clung to him like a liferaft
until he finally felt like he could breathe again. He was still crying, but he could at least talk. He turned to Ami. “Ami...I’m really sorry I didn’t tell you that I drank at parties before...I just...didn’t want you to be...disappointed in me...or mad...”

Ami sighed and shook his head, hugging Logan as well. “Logan, I’m not mad at you. I never was mad at you. And now that we have clear boundaries about what happens at parties, I can rest easy knowing that you’ll be responsible. You’re not in trouble.”

Logan nodded.

“I’ll call Jack’s parents,” Dad offered. “You guys can go outside with the others or let them know they can come in if they want.”

Logan took a shaky breath and let it out slowly. He was going to be okay. Jack was going to be okay. Everything had worked out last night.

The wait to see what Jack’s parents would say felt like an age to Logan, and the fact that visiting hours weren’t until three in the afternoon to start with made the waiting for that feel like an eon. But eventually, Ami drove Logan to the hospital where Jack was staying, and they got directed to Jack’s room, where Jack appeared to be resting.

Mister Harkness say them first and came over to Logan. “Logan, you’re here,” he said softly, hugging Logan tight. “Thank you for saving my boy. You have no idea how thankful we are.”

Logan hugged Mister Harkness back. “And he’s going to be okay?”

“They’re monitoring him until they’re sure he’s through with his withdrawal, which shouldn’t take later than tomorrow, and after that he can go home. He’s been asking about you.”

“Is he asleep?” Logan asked, pulling away from the hug and looking at Jack.

“No, he’s just dozing,” Mister Harkness said. “Not much for him to do at the moment, so he’s been sleeping off most of the effects. But he was alert less than fifteen minutes ago, so he shouldn’t be too grumpy, even if he is woken up.”

Logan nodded and Mister Harkness ushered him into the room. Logan stood at the foot of the bed, looking Jack over. He wasn’t hooked up to any machines, which was promising, and they didn’t even have an IV drip, only some half-drunk water by his bedside. He was jolted out of his thoughts when Jack murmured, “You know it’s creepy to watch people sleep, right?”

“I always thought it was romantic,” Logan said with a relieved laugh as Jack opened his eyes and grinned. “Hi, honey.”

“You look like crap,” Jack said.

“Hey, I’m not the one in a hospital bed,” Logan pointed out. “I’ve just been crying a lot. You nearly died, I’m allowed to be worried.”

Jack grew quiet. “Yeah, I know. They told me I had a bad reaction to the combination of alcohol and drugs, and that if I hadn’t been brought in, I would probably be much sicker, if I were here at all.”

Logan swallowed and moved to the side of Jack’s bed, grabbing one of his hands. “Let’s be glad that didn’t happen,” Logan said. “How was the hangover?”

“Ugh, it was massive,” Jack laughed. “I’m telling you, hangovers get ten times worse with
withdrawals added into the mix.” He sobered as he asked, “Did your parents chew into you?”

“No really,” Logan said. “They explained why I shouldn’t have had beer before and why I
shouldn’t do it again, and what they expected of me if I ever go to these parties again, but that was
about it. You?”

“I got a talking-to once it was clear I’d be alive for a while yet,” Jack chuckled. “I’ve never been so
happy to be in trouble.”

Logan laughed and shook his head. “I love you, Jack. I love you so much.”

“If I weren’t stuck in this bed for a while yet I would kiss you,” Jack said with a dopey grin. “As is, I
can barely push myself into a sitting position.”

Logan kissed Jack’s forehead and leaned against the side of the bed. “Better?” he asked.

“Little bit,” Jack said. “I might need more kisses to be one-hundred percent, though.”

Logan laughed. “You’re terrible!”

“Yeah,” Jack said with a grin. “But you love me anyway!”

“Yeah,” Logan sighed.

“Don’t sound so put out about it!” Jack exclaimed, laughing.

Logan pretended to consider Jack’s demand. “Nah,” he said. “This is funnier.”

Jack lightly whacked him with the back of his hand. “Seriously, I love you.”

“I love you too,” Logan said, smiling. “As we just discussed.”

Jack rolled his eyes before grimacing. “Ow. Rolling my eyes is not a good idea. My head just span
like crazy.”

“You okay?” Logan asked, immediately concerned.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Jack groaned. “Just...need a minute.”

“Should I count for sixty seconds, or am I to take that figuratively?” Logan asked.

Jack pulled a face without opening his eyes. “You must be feeling better, if you’re being like this.”

“Yeah, well, knowing my boyfriend is alive and recovering well does wonders for my soul,” Logan
said, laughing.

Jack opened his eyes, but only into a squint. “You know...I’m not feeling great, still. I might need to
rest more.”

“Should I go and come back tomorrow? Or go to your house whenever you’re released?” Logan
asked.

“No, I don’t want you to go yet, but if you could just...sit quietly without snarking too much, that’d
be great,” Jack said.

“I can do that,” Logan said, grabbing one of the chairs in the room and pulling it over to Jack’s
bedside, sitting down and holding Jack’s hand.

They sat there in companionable silence as their parents talked just outside the door. Logan could hear snatches of their conversation, of what Jack and Logan were both told and what they expected the consequences of their actions to be, if there were to be any at all. But most of all, he could hear the relief in Mister and Misses Harkness’ voices, and Ami’s reassuring tone. Everyone was just glad that Jack was alive. Logan couldn’t say he blamed them. He didn’t know what he would do if he didn’t have Jack by his side in some way, shape, or form.

...That was weird to think about, though. Because the way Logan was thinking about Jack was more than just infatuation, and more than just the honeymoon phase. He thought about Jack like he truly, deeply loved him.
Virgil was happy. He and Patton were making hand turkeys in honor of Thanksgiving, and putting them up all over their bedroom with tape that Mom gave them. He was swinging his feet and humming. Even if their Thanksgiving was small, with just Granny coming over to visit, he was still happy that he got the day off school. And he had an excuse to eat as much as he wanted!

Patton showed Virgil his latest turkey and Virgil laughed. It had bright pink and purple feathers, and was outlined in bright blue. It was absolutely something Patton would do. “Nice one, Pat!” Virgil exclaimed.

“Thanks!” Patton said, walking over to Virgil. “I like yours, too!”

Virgil grinned. Together, they worked on more turkeys, pretending it was just them in the entire world, and that anything that might be happening outside their bedroom didn’t exist. It was just a peaceful activity, not an excuse to hide in their room from Charles.

When the doorbell rang that Thanksgiving afternoon, Patton squealed and immediately scrambled to the door, while Virgil scooped up Vanellope and followed. Patton opened the door and excitedly exclaimed, “Granny!” in a voice just a few decibels too loud.

“Pat, c’mon, don’t yell that loud,” Virgil said, laughing as he approached the door with a grin. “Hi, Granny!”

Their grandmother stood on the other side of the door, smiling. She had to be sneaky about coming to visit them at Thanksgiving without their mom and Charles finding out, but she had promised she’d come over. “Pat, Virge, you two have grown so much! And you look so much happier!”

“We feel a lot happier,” Virgil said. “Dad and Ami take really good care of us and the others.”

“Oh! Yes, you wrote about some of your brothers’ antics! I’d love to meet them!” Granny said with a smile as she walked in.

Ami came into the foyer and smiled. “Misses Sanders, nice to finally meet you,” he said.

“Nice to meet you too. And you’re...the one they call Ami, right?” Granny asked.

“Yep!” Ami said cheerfully. “Their dad’s currently helping the youngest of the bunch upstairs.”

There was a crash and Dee came downstairs giggling, Fangs wrapped around his shoulders as he hid in Ami’s legs. “Or, he was helping the youngest,” Ami said with a little laugh. Then, he called up the stairs, “You okay, mio amore?!?”

“Fine!” Dad’s voice floated down the stairs, a little strained but none the worse for wear.

Dee was still giggling madly until he turned and saw Granny standing just inside the door. He
frowned. “Who’s she?” he asked, signs timid.

“Dee, this is Granny. She’s Patton’s and my grandma on our mom’s side,” Virgil explained.

Dee scrutinized her carefully, before signing, “She looks nice.”

Patton laughed. “She’s super nice, Dee! And she has tons of stories from travelling all around the world!”

Dee’s jaw dropped and he turned to her. “You’ve been around the world?!” he asked.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t know sign language. Boys, could you translate?” Granny asked.

“Oh! Of course! He was asking if what Patton said is true, that you’ve really been all around the world,” Virgil supplied.

“Yes, I have,” she said, looking at Dee. “I haven’t been to every continent, but I’ve been close. I’m still waiting for that invitation to Antarctica for that final continent to check off my list.” She winked at the end.

Dee giggled a little and buried his smile in Fangs’ fur. Dad came halfway down the stairs, flushed and panting. “Dee, you’re the one who said you wanted help dressing up a little for Thanksgiving, why are you so against it now?”

“The jacket’s scratchy,” Dee signed, pulling a face.

“You could have told me,” Dad insisted. “I can cut off the tags for the future, but I guess you’re not wearing it tonight?”

“No,” Dee confirmed.

Dad sighed. “Well, if you’re all ready, no use hiding behind Fangs, is there? Why don’t you show the boys your new outfit?”

Virgil frowned. Slowly, Dee unwrapped Fangs from his stomach to his shoulders, revealing a bright yellow button-up shirt. But what really made Virgil have to bite back a snicker at the thought that Dee really had a strange sense of fashion, was the black clip-on bow tie he was sporting around his neck. Virgil doubted he would ever understand what made Dee tick, let alone why he wanted to dress up sometimes and do it in the oddest of ways (to Virgil, at least), but he wasn’t going to judge, and he wasn’t going to laugh in Dee’s face, either. “Looking sharp, Dee,” he said, giving Dee a big thumbs-up.

Dee grinned, big and wide, and Virgil let Vanellope down, and she promptly bounded over to Dee, full-body wiggling as she ran around him in circles. He laughed and knelt down to pet her.

“Well, that accounts for one of your brothers,” Granny said. “Where are the other two?”


“Yeah, probably,” Virgil agreed. “Come on, Granny, we’ll show you!”

Granny smiled and let herself be guided through the house by a very excited Patton, who was pointing everything out and explaining what each thing he pointed out was and why it was important. Virgil just shared a look with Granny, knowing that this was important for Patton, but that they both knew he’d tire himself out in ten minutes.
When they got outside, Patton immediately rushed over to Roman and Logan, who were playing badminton with the portable net Dad had gotten them, yelling, “Logan! Roman! Granny’s here!”

Logan and Roman agreed to end the game, shook hands, and then came up onto the deck, with Patton bouncing excitedly all the way. Roman easily shook hands with Granny, with a, “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

However, Logan looked considerably more nervous. Virgil didn’t fail to realize that Logan was only wearing a sports bra, rather than a binder, because he had been exercising. And though his voice was deeper, and he had been having a couple patches of facial hair sprouting, he had shaved it because it wasn’t enough for a full beard or a mustache. He looked enough like a guy randomly passing people on the street, but this wasn’t that. Here, people could see him closer. And Virgil knew that Logan hated that.

But Granny just smiled and said, “You must be Logan, then. The oldest of five brothers, I don’t know how you’d do it.”

Logan offered a small grin and tweaked his glasses as he shook Granny’s hand. “It wasn’t easy at first, ma’am, but you get used to the chaos sooner or later.”

“I’ll bet you have to,” Granny said. “And my grandsons are behaving?”

“As much as you can expect eight-year-olds to behave, yeah,” Logan agreed. “Sometimes things happen, but no one’s feelings get hurt.”

“Good,” Granny said, nodding.

Virgil turned towards the house just in time to see the back door open and Grandma and Granddad walk through, amused. “Wow, looks like a party! Are we invited?” Granddad asked.

Patton jumped at the voices and hugged Grandma and Granddad before turning to Granny. “Granny, this is Grandma and Granddad! They’re also super nice!”

All the adults laughed and introduced each other, and Virgil used that as an excuse to slip inside, grab his latest Goosebumps book and come back outside, getting situated on one of the deck chairs to read.

Logan sat down in a chair next to him, but brought his phone out and didn’t say anything. They sat there in silence for a while until Dad came out to the back, saying, “It’s time to carve the turkey!”

Everyone went inside and Virgil’s eyes widened. He knew they had a lot of family to feed tonight, but this still seemed like a lot of food for ten people. The turkey was pretty big, and then there was mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, asparagus, miscellaneous other vegetables, salad, and Virgil could spy some pies hidden at the back of the kitchen. How were ten people supposed to eat all of that?! Even with leftovers, it just wasn’t realistic.

But they went to the table, making use of the extensions to fit everyone. And as Granddad and Ami worked on carving the turkey, everyone took some of the food that they wanted. Virgil noticed that the adults were putting more food on their plates than usual, so Virgil took some of the food that they wanted. Virgil noticed that the adults were putting more food on their plates than usual, so Virgil took a little more food than usual too. He remembered that Thanksgiving usually meant most people ate more than they usually should, at least to the other kids in class. Back with Mom, it generally meant turkey sandwiches and hiding in their room while Mom and Charles pretended that Patton and Virgil weren’t around.

But things were very obviously different around this house. When Dad had come into the room after feeding Vanellope, Granddad and Ami started passing out turkey. And then Grandma said grace,
“So boys,” Grandma said. “How has school been treating you?”

“Well enough,” Logan said. “Roman has been stressing out about having the lead in his school’s play, though.”

“Hey, it’s a lot of lines to memorize!” Roman defended.

Dee waved his hands and signed, “I don’t think he was making fun of you.”

“Well, why wouldn’t he be making fun of me?” Roman asked. “He said that school was easy, but I was stressing anyway.”

“That’s...that’s not what I meant,” Logan said, with a pained expression. “Words are difficult. I meant that while studies are relatively easy, the play was causing you stress.”

“Oh,” Roman said. “That’s okay, then. I have been stressing over the lines, because there’s a lot of them.”

“Indeed,” Logan agreed. “I would not be able to memorize that many lines and give as compelling a performance as your practicing.”

“Yeah, Roman, you already know great ways to give your lines,” Virgil agreed. “Who was the girl who got the other lead role?”

“Jessie,” Roman said. “Lila got the third-most talkative role, of the Evil Queen. She seemed very pleased.”

“Are we going to meet these friends of yours off the stage? Ever?” Logan asked. “Because you seem very fond of them, but I haven’t seen you go to their houses, and they certainly haven’t come here.”

Roman shrugged. “We’re pretty busy with practice after school, and then we have to do homework. Honestly, a lot of us just want to go home and sleep when we’re done for the day.”

“Spoken like all my theatre friends, and you’re only in the eighth grade,” Logan laughed.

Roman shrugged. “I guess I’m just a quick study.”

Everyone laughed and Granny turned to Patton. “Patton, you wrote to me about your teacher? Is he still as nice as he was?”

“Oh, yeah!” Patton exclaimed. “He’s been recommending me books about all sorts of different animals! It’s really cool! I was hoping that maybe one day I could be a dog trainer, or a vet! And he’s helped me find a bunch of different books so I can learn about that sort of stuff and see if I like learning about it!”

“Mister Prince is an amazing teacher,” Virgil agreed. “He’s been telling me about books similar to Goosebumps that I might want to try. I was hoping to go to the school library and find them after Thanksgiving break.”

“I should write him a thank-you note,” Granny mused. “You two were never this excited about reading before.”

“It’s all about finding what they like to read,” Ami said wisely. “And Virgil certainly goes through a lot of books. We’ve had to cap him off at getting five whenever we go to the public library.”
“You read almost as much as I did when I was your age,” Logan noted.

Virgil felt a bit of a shock rush through him at that. “Really?” he asked. He read almost as much as the arguably smartest person in the house?

“Really,” Logan said. “The only difference is I would read in class when I wasn’t supposed to, and that’s probably why I read more than you.”

“Breaking the rules?” Patton asked. “Breaking the rules meant you read more books?”

Logan paused in eating. “I don’t condone breaking the rules,” he said. “But yes. I read many more books by sneaking chapters in the middle of classes when I was bored.”

Virgil didn’t know how to respond to that, but apparently Dee did, because he signed, “Does that mean that Virgil is the Smart One now?”

“No,” Virgil quickly said. “No, I’m not the Smart One. I’m perfectly happy not being the Smart One. Too much pressure. Besides, Logan thinks things through more, I react on instinct. Thinking things through is smarter than just reacting.”

“You’re still a Smart One,” Patton said sagely. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you took those AP courses in high school like Logan does.”

Virgil shrugged. “Maybe,” he allowed. He let himself feel proud of the fact that everyone thought he was smart. Not enough to let it go to his head, but it did feel good.

Everyone continued to talk, about school and games and hobbies and whatever else came to mind. Really, they were just enjoying each other’s company, and wanted it to last as long as it could. After dessert-pie with ice cream-Virgil felt thoroughly stuffed and as everyone went to the den to watch the football games, Virgil curled up in one of the armchairs down there and quickly fell asleep. He loved his family. They were exhausting, but he wouldn’t have them any other way.
August 4th, 2019

Dee was terrified, and he couldn’t say a thing. He had gotten out of bed to ask Dad or Ami if he could have a glass of water, because he couldn’t sleep, but when he got to the master bedroom’s door, he heard hissed arguments.

He shouldn’t have stayed to listen. It was impolite to eavesdrop. But Dee was curious, so he stood to the side of the door and strained his ears to catch the words.

“I don’t care what she says, Remy, I’m not letting her see Dee again!”

“Emile, I know you’re mad, but we finally found her, and even if we press charges, shouldn’t Dee have a proper goodbye?”

“No! She had that opportunity and she abused it! I’m not letting Dee see his mother one last time before she gets arrested!”

Dee’s eyes widened and he nearly dropped Fangs. He scurried back to his room, curling up on his bed. What...? Dad and Ami had found Mama? And they didn’t tell him? Did they not trust him to not run back to her? Or were they just worried about what she might say to him?

...If they didn’t tell him this, what else didn’t they tell him?

December 10th, 2019

Dee signed to Lucy, who was watching him from the monkey bars. She laughed and dropped to the ground when she lost her grip from laughing too hard at one of Dee’s jokes. He grinned, and she walked over to him, pouting. “Come on, Dee, I was about to get all the way across!”

Shrugging, he continued to grin. “It was a funny joke! I didn’t want to forget it!” he signed in his defense.

Lucy shook her head with a grin. “Whatever, I can always try again,” she said.

As she made her way back to the ladder that lead up to the monkey bars, James shoved her. “Outta my way!” he snapped. He ran up to Dee and jumped to a stop in front of him, causing Dee to flinch. “I know you can hear, freak, so why don’t you talk?”

Dee crossed his arms and glared at James. He had been picking on Dee at recess whenever he could since the beginning of the year. But Dee didn’t intend on even giving him the time of day. James was a jerk, and Dee hated jerks. Instead, he walked around James and over to Lucy, signing, “Are you okay?”

She brushed woodchips off her hands and jeans and nodded. “I’m fine, just a little startled.”

Dee nodded. James stalked over and shoved him. “Hey, freak, I asked you a question!”

“He’s not a freak!” Lucy exclaimed. “He’s selectively mute!”
“What would you know?” James sneered.

“What more than you!” Lucy growled. “Dee’s my best friend! Of course I know more about him than you!”

“Whatever,” James sneered. “I don’t wanna talk to anyone who’s friends with the freak!”

Dee glared and signed, “I don’t wanna talk to you either.”

James frowned, and Dee grinned. James didn’t know sign language, he couldn’t understand what Dee was saying. “What did he say?”

Lucy smiled sweetly. “I thought you didn’t want to talk to me or Dee?”

“Tell me what he said!” James demanded.

“No!” Lucy said, crossing her arms.

James balled his hands into fists and brought one back behind his head. Dee’s eyes widened and he pushed Lucy out of the way before she could get hit, and he got punched instead. His lip throbbed, and he spat out one of his teeth into the palm of his hand. “I’ve been waiting for that one to go for a while,” he muttered. “Lucy, look!”

Lucy stared at him in shock. “Dee, he knocked your teeth out!”

Dee shrugged, sticking the tooth in his coat pocket and zipping the pocket up. “Yeah, but it was loose anyway,” he signed.

Lucy stood up, staring at him, which Dee was sure must have been a sight, blood dribbling down his chin and one of his front teeth missing. Then, she turned, cheeks bright red, to James. She cussed him out, before taking a swing herself. Dee’s eyes widened and he wrapped his arms around her waist, trying to pull her away from James. Unfortunately, some of James’ friends saw the commotion, and came over. It was three against two, and Dee was looking around for a teacher, but all he saw were kids rushing over, chanting “Fight! Fight! Fight!” like a war cry.

Dee tried to hold Lucy back, but she broke free and lunged at James again, only to have one of his friends kick her and shove her to the ground. Dee turned red and screeched his displeasure, rushing over and taking a swing at the boy. He kept his thumb over his bottom knuckles like Logan taught him, and the boy’s head snapped to the side upon impact. He toppled to the ground. Dee turned to James’ other friend, who quickly backed away into the crowd of kids.

When he turned to James, he was kicked in the shins. Dee hissed like a snake, baring his teeth, and James backed up in surprise. “Break it up!” one of the teachers yelled, running over. She grabbed Dee by the shoulder and put a hand on James’ chest. “That’s enough! All four of you, to the principal’s office! Now!”

Dee huffed, helping Lucy to her feet and letting the teacher lead him to the principal’s office, head held high. James glared at him from the other side of the teacher, and his friend tried to lunge for Dee in revenge, only to have the teacher grab him and say, “Really, Troy?”

“He hit me first!” James exclaimed.

“No I didn’t!” Dee signed. “He tried to hit Lucy!”

“I don’t care who hit who first,” the teacher growled. “All of you will be talking to the principal.”
“James knocked one of Dee’s teeth out!” Lucy exclaimed. “Are you gonna let him get away with that?!”

The teacher sighed and wrangled all four of them into the office, before knocking on the principal’s door. James used the distraction to suckerpunch Dee in the stomach. The air left his mouth in a whoosh and he couldn’t get it back. He gaped like a fish out of water, gasping for breath.

“James!” the teacher admonished, offering Dee a hand as she also pushed James away from Dee. “That’s enough!”

Dee climbed to his feet by himself and tried to breathe again, forcing air through his nose and out his mouth. He felt like retching, but he wouldn’t give James the satisfaction. When the principal opened the door and took a look at all of them, he sighed. “Of course,” he said, like they got called into the office all the time. “Come in, you four. Thank you, Misses Smith.”

The teacher left and the four kids walked into the principal’s office. “Your brother was in here near the end of last year in a similar situation, Deagan,” Mister Gardener said. “I suppose you’re going to say that the fight which clearly occurred wasn’t your fault?”

“It wasn’t his fault!” Lucy exclaimed. “James called him a freak! James took the first swing! Dee did nothing wrong!”

“Miss Blye, let Deagan speak for himself,” Mister Gardener said.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Dee insisted. “And don’t call me Deagan, please.”

“Deagan, use your words, not your hands,” the principal said, with that infuriatingly patronizing voice setting Dee’s teeth on edge.

“He hit me first!” James exclaimed. “Lucy’s lying, and Deagan has problems with his anger all the time!”

Dee rolled his eyes and scoffed. “I’m not an idiot,” he signed at James. “Not like you, at any rate.”

“James, that’s enough. Deagan, use your words. We all want to know what you have to say.”

Dee gave him a withering glare and crossed his arms, but Mister Gardener would not be moved. “I’m autistic, not a moron,” he informed Mister Gardener, trying to put venom in his voice. “James doesn’t agree with me. He calls me a freak and makes fun of me for signing. I was signing to Lucy, and to him, and Lucy refused to translate for him, because he was being mean to both of us. So he tried to hit her. I pushed her out of the way, he knocked out one of my teeth,” Dee pulled down his lower lip to point at the gap between his teeth, “And I punched him back. Sure, I shouldn’t have done that, but he started it by calling me a freak.”

Mister Gardener pinched the bridge of his nose. “And Troy?”

“Kicked Lucy in the stomach. So I slugged him,” Dee said with a shrug and a shameless grin. “You seem surprised, Mister Gardener. I don’t know why you are. You’re the one who tried to insist I go to the school for the ‘emotionally disturbed’ kids because there I could get ‘accommodations’ and you wouldn’t have to deal with me.”

Lucy blinked. “You speak really well, Dee.”

“I really don’t,” Dee said, turning to her. “I don’t know tone, and I can’t use it right. My vocabulary’s good, but nothing else is.”
Lucy shrugged. “I hope they don’t take away your translator,” she said simply. “Sorry for dragging you into this.”

Dee shrugged. “I’m just glad you didn’t get hit as much,” he signed sincerely.

“I will be informing your parents of your behavior, of course,” Mister Gardener said, picking up the phone. “I don’t doubt what you said is true, because Deagan is certainly not able to lie that well,” oh, if only he knew the irony of that statement, “But you’re all in trouble for fighting, instead of using your words.”

Lucy held her head high and James and Troy protested, but Dee’s blood ran cold. What were Dad and Ami going to think of him now? Would they think he was a bad person? After all, he didn’t hit back in self-defence, he hit because he was angry. Would they want to get rid of him, like Mama did? Would they send him back to Mama? He didn’t know. And that terrified him.

Slowly, everyone’s parents came to pick their kids up, and everyone was given two days suspension for their actions. Dee’s translator came in once recess would have been over, and she talked with Lucy’s parents to help Mister Gardener. But Dad and Ami didn’t show up for a while.

When Troy had just been picked up, Dee was waiting with his stuff in the office and Dad rushed in. “Dee?! I’m so sorry, I was with a patient and I couldn’t leave, and Ami got tied up at the coffee shop. Are you okay?”

Dee nodded, pulling his tooth out of his pocket. “I lost a tooth,” he said.

Dad frowned, confused. “Okay? Why did the principal call?”

“Probably because James is the one who punched me hard enough to knock it out,” Dee said with a shrug. “I’m suspended for two days for hitting him and Troy back.”

Dad shook his head. “You hit back?” he asked.

“James was aiming for Lucy. I got in the way,” Dee said. “Do you think the tooth fairy will still take a tooth if it’s bloody?”

“I don’t think she’ll be picky,” Dad said with a laugh. “Do I need to talk to the principal?”

Dee nodded. “And then can we go home?”

“Yeah.” Dad squeezed Dee’s shoulder. “I’m proud of you for sticking up for your best friend.”

Dee let Dad go into the principal’s office, and when he came back out, he led Dee to the van. Dee played with the zipper on his jacket. “Dad, you’re not gonna send me away, right?” he signed.

“Of course not. Why would you ask?” Dad responded without missing a beat.

“I was a bad person,” Dee signed. “I know that you found Mama. I know you didn’t let me see her because you thought she was a bad person. I thought you just...didn’t want bad people in your life.”

Dad stared at him, before crouching down to his level. “Dee, I didn’t let you see your mom when we found her because I was worried she would hurt you more. Not because she was a bad person. I didn’t want you to see her once, and then never again, and be retraumatized. You’re not a bad person for defending your friend, either. You were trying to make sure that the bullies didn’t come after you again. I’m proud of you for that.”
Dee took a breath. “The principal forced me to talk,” he signed. “I hated it.”

Dad winced. “I’m really sorry, Dee. You know we’d never do that to you, though, right? We’d never force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with, and we wouldn’t kick you out over anything.”

Dee stared. “Why?” he asked.

“Because you’re family, Dee,” Emile said. “No matter whether or not you ‘fit in,’ you’re part of our family, and we take care of our own, no matter what.”

Dee blinked. He knew that Dad and Ami loved him, on some abstract level, but he didn’t realize that he was part of the family, no matter if he fit in with the others or not. He saw the family as Dad, Ami, his brothers, and then him, like an afterthought. But he wasn’t an afterthought. Not to Dad, not to Ami. He smiled. He was family. And that meant he fit in well enough, just being himself.

Dad smiled back. “Ready to go home?”

Dee nodded. Home. With family. He didn’t realize how much he wanted that until he realized that he had it all along.
January 1st, 2016

Patton didn’t understand what was going on. His mom was clutching her head frequently and muttering about everything being too bright, too loud, too much of anything. He didn’t want to bug her, but he and Virgil were hungry, and something needed to be done.

Gently, he walked across the floor as softly as he could and tugged on Mom’s sleeve. She cracked an eye open but immediately winced. “What’s wrong, Patton?”

“Virgil and I are hungry,” he said. “Can we have lunch?”

“Sure, go ahead and make yourself lunch,” she waved off, closing her eyes again.

“No, I mea—” Patton cut himself off. Clearly, his mom wasn’t up for making them lunch. Even if he didn’t know how to make stuff other than possibly sandwiches, it would have to do. Why was what was supposed to be a happy time of the year leaving him miserable?

December 25th, 2019

Patton didn’t know what to do. Ami was sitting alone, in the master bedroom, head in his hands. He didn’t think that Ami was hungover, or drunk, because he hadn’t seen Ami touch a drop of alcohol. He’d never seen alcohol in the house. But he didn’t know why Ami would be alone in his bedroom with no one there to help him if something big weren’t going on.

At the same time, he didn’t want to bug Ami if some time alone was all that was needed. After all, if Ami had a migraine, or just a headache in general, Patton wouldn’t want to make it worse. So he decided that he was going to go to the second best source of Ami-info, Dad. He went downstairs, going past Dee who was fiddling with Tinker Toys in the den, past Virgil, who was reading the first *Harry Potter* book to see if he’d like the series, and past Roman and Logan in the basement who were playing together on some video game, using the new laptop and the old one to do co-op mode.

He went to the office, and knocked on the door before opening it and finding Dad on the other side. “Dad,” Patton asked softly. “Is something wrong with Ami?”

Dad turned from where he had been working at the desk, running a hand down his face. “There’s not something wrong with him, no. He’s just a little upset today.”

“Well?” Patton asked.

Dad sighed. “I’m not comfortable telling you without his permission.”

“But...he’s okay? He’s not hurt or sick or hungover?” Patton asked.

“He’s okay,” Dad said. “Or as okay as he ever is on Christmas.”

Patton fiddled with his glasses, taking them off before putting them back on and pushing them up his nose. “Would it be okay for me to talk to him?” he asked.
Dad bit his lip. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt, but leave him alone if he asks to be left alone, all right?”

Patton nodded. He dashed away, up the basement steps and up the second flight of stairs that took him to the top of the house. He walked to the master bedroom, knocking on the door lightly. Ami looked up from whatever he had been looking at on his phone, and sniffled. “Patton,” he said softly. “Everything okay?”

“I don’t think so,” Patton said, walking over to Ami and looking up at him. “You’re upset, and that means not everything’s okay.”

Ami shook his head and put on an unconvincing smile. “Don’t worry about me, Pat. I’ll be okay.”

“Why are you sad?” Patton asked.

Ami looked away. “I don’t want to use you as my therapist,” he said.

“You don’t have to. I just wanna know why you’re sad. You don’t even have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Patton said.

Ami sighed and fiddled with his phone, pulling up a photo. He held the phone up to Patton’s face. “You see those two older people behind the young guy in the picture?”

Patton nodded. The young guy kinda looked like Ami, but he had no idea who the older people were.

“These two are my parents,” Ami said, shaking his head. “They haven’t been in contact with me much ever since I dropped out of college and moved in with Emile. I guess I was the black sheep of the family. My older sister and brother were their golden children, and I’m the college dropout who they see as a glorified barista. What little they’ve told me since we stopped talking is mostly that they want me to have ‘a better life’ than the one I have right now.” He laughed, but it was bitter. “And despite how they treated me and my siblings growing up, ignoring us, or at least ignoring me to the point of neglect, I regret not keeping in contact with them sometimes.”

“And this is one of those times?” Patton asked.

Ami nodded. “I want you kids to meet your other grandparents, even if they aren’t grandparents by blood. But I know that the second they’d come over, if I told them where we lived, they’d nitpick everything. They’d use the wrong pronouns for Logan. They’d throw in snide remarks about me being gay and how I went against every plan they had for me.” He sighed. “They’re...really unhealthy. Toxic, almost. And Emile is the one who holds me back from contacting them. But there’s a small part of me, that always hopes...despite what they did, that they could turn around...be better...be proud of the fact that Emile and I have you guys, and what you’ve done every day.”

Patton didn’t know what to say to that. “That’s hard,” Patton said. “It’s kinda like how I sometimes miss Mom, even if she listened to Charles too much and blamed me and Virgil for stuff.”

Ami laughed, choking back tears. “Sorry for unloading all that on you, Patton. I shouldn’t have.”

“I asked you to tell me why you’re sad. You did. It’s okay,” Patton said. He climbed on the bed and hugged Ami tight. “If you wanted to go into detail about that, I think Dad would be better, but you just told me why you were sad.”

Ami closed his eyes and hugged Patton back. “Thanks, Pat. You don’t have to keep this a secret from your brothers, okay? If they ask, you’re allowed to say I’m having problems with my parents.”
Patton nodded. “You know, I’m pretty sure even if your biological parents aren’t proud of you, Grandma and Granddad are. And Dad is. And I know that Dee looks up to you like you’re a superhero. And I trust you with my deep, dark secrets, even if it’s just that I like wearing skirts in the summer. Virgil and Roman and Logan all love you, too. The family you were born in may not have been great, but the family you found now loves you almost too much to understand. Or at least, too much for me to understand. I don’t know about you.”

Ami laughed, even as he cried. “I know. I know you guys love me. Sometimes, it just hurts. And when it does, I let myself be sad for a bit, and then I come back to you guys and know that you all love me.”

“Are you ready to come back now?” Patton asked.

“Not yet, Pat,” Ami said. “Though your hugs do help. I just need a little more time to think. Maybe I’ll call my brother, or text my sister. They’re not always the most accepting but I’m always going to be their baby brother, and they don’t let me being gay stop them from loving me.”

“Do you think that we could meet them sometime?” Patton asked. “Our aunt and uncle?”

“I don’t know, honestly,” Ami said. “It depends on how they treat me, and react when I tell them that I have kids now. Especially if I tell them that Logan is transitioning.”

Patton nodded. Logan mostly passed, but he still sometimes couldn’t wear his binder, and that meant some jerks would misgender him. So sometimes it was necessary to say he was transitioning. And if Ami’s siblings used she and her when they heard about Logan, well, Patton doubted they would be invited over, ever. “Do you want to call them now?” Patton asked.

Ami considered the question, eventually nodding. “Yeah, I’ll give my brother Toby a call. Do you mind giving me some privacy?”

“No at all,” Patton said, hugging Ami one last time. “I hope they make you feel better.”

Ami smiled. “Thanks, Pat. Now, I think you and Dee have some Legos and Tinker Toys to mess around with. Go on and have fun.”

Patton nodded and left the room, mostly closing the door, and letting Ami have his phone call in private. When Patton returned downstairs, Dee was working hard on building...what resembled a skyscraper. Dee looked up and signed, “Is Ami okay?”

“He’s a little sad, but he’s working on feeling better,” Patton told him.

“What is he sad about?” Virgil asked, looking over at Patton. “It’s Christmas. It’s hard to be sad around Christmas.”

Patton shrugged. “He’s sad that he can’t introduce us to his parents. Because his parents weren’t good people, and he doesn’t want us to get hurt.”

“Oh,” Virgil said softly. Dee looked stricken as well. “Do you think we should make him a card or something? Maybe that could make him feel better?”

“It’s worth a shot,” Patton agreed.

Dee jumped to his feet, signing, “I’ll grab the paper and markers!”

Virgil and Patton looked at each other and shrugged. “What do you think we should say on the
“card?” Virgil asked.

“Why are you asking me?” Patton asked.

“Because you’re the one who talked to him. You know why he’s sad better than we do.”

Patton thought about it, and shrugged. “Maybe we could just put... ‘You’re fam... ILY’? because Logan taught me that ILY is short for I Love You, and that would be a fun pun to make,” Patton said with a shrug.

Virgil thought about it, and nodded. “Sounds good. A little cheesy, maybe, but Ami likes that kind of stuff anyway. It’s good.”

Patton grinned and Dee came back in the room with paper and markers, as promised. “What are we writing?” he asked.

“You’re fam... ILY,” Virgil said. “Patton came up with it. It's a pun, and it shows that we love Ami lots.”

Dee nodded and put everything down on the table, looking at each of the twins in turn. “Who has the neatest handwriting?” he asked.

Patton and Virgil looked at each other. “I think... I do?” Patton asked. “But both of us have really bad cases of chicken scratch.”

Dee thought for a moment, before shrugging. “We could always check by writing it small on another piece of paper before we write the big one?” he offered.

“That could work,” Virgil said. “Dibs on the purple marker.”

They each wrote down the words to the card and they were all surprised to figure out that Dee had the neatest handwriting out of all of them. So Dee took a piece of paper that Virgil had carefully folded in two, and wrote, “You’re fam...” on the front of the card, and then on the inside put, “ILY!” on the left side of the paper.

Adding bits of this and lots of that and putting the other thing all over the paper, they created a drawing of the whole family for Ami.

About halfway through an argument over who should sign the card where, Roman, Logan, and Dad all came into the room. “Um... boys? Care to enlighten us on why you’ve been so quiet? I would have expected at least one exclamation by this point if you’ve been working together,” Dad said.

“We’re making a card for Ami,” Virgil said. “Because he was feeling bad. We’re just debating where to sign it.”

“Oh, I want to sign it too,” Logan said.

“All three,” Roman said.

“Would I be allowed to, as well?” Dad asked.

“Yeah!” Patton exclaimed. “The whole point of this card is to show Ami that we all care about him!”

They all signed the card, right before Ami came down the stairs. It was clear that he had been crying, and if his red-rimmed eyes weren’t enough proof, he was still sniffling a little. “Sorry, guys, I ran out of tissues, I’ll go back to my room in a sec so you don’t have to deal with me...”
“Wait! Before you do, we have something for you!” Patton exclaimed.

Dee approached a very confused Ami with the card behind his back. He presented it to Ami, who frowned as he took it from Dee’s hands. He read what was on the front of the card...and then he opened it, and promptly began crying again.

“Oh, no. Rem, you okay?” Dad asked.

“Th-this is...this is...the nicest thing that...th-that anyone has ever done for me...” he held the card close to his chest. “I will cherish this forever. Thank you.”

“Of course!” Patton chirped. “After all, you’re fam!”

“And we definitely love you,” Virgil added.
December 18th, 2018

Roman shivered in the cold, but he kept running, running, running. He had slipped out the back door of the house but he didn’t know if one of the younger kids saw him, or if they would tell on him if they did. His lungs burned and he just kept going, his personal documents hidden as safe as they could be pressed against his chest in his zipped up jacket.

He looked up at the sky. It was getting dark, but it would be a while yet before he felt safe enough to find shelter for the night. He growled. He couldn’t stay at that horrible house anymore, he just couldn’t. If he stayed one more day, he knew he would have done something drastic, other than running away.

Biting his lip, he hoped he was moving in the right direction of where this Mister Picani’s city was. He would hate to have come all this way only to have gone in the wrong direction.

January 1st, 2020

Roman jumped when Dad gasped like he had just gotten scalding water poured over his leg. He was revelling in the last day before he had to go back to school, and he didn’t like it when Dad got panicked. “Something up?” he asked Dad.

“We missed it. We missed your anniversary!” Dad exclaimed.

“My...what?” Roman asked.

“The anniversary of when you showed up at our door! We missed it! How could we miss it?!” Dad asked, jumping to his feet and pacing.

Ami walked in the room and frowned, turning to Roman. “What happened this time?”

Apparently, we missed the anniversary of when I dropped onto your doorstep,” Roman said drily.

“Oh,” Ami said with a little laugh. “I wouldn’t worry about that too much. Either of you.”

“Why not?!” Dad asked. “It’s an important day, Remy!”

“True,” Ami allowed. “But not as important as the day we adopted Roman.”

Dad froze in place. “That’s true,” he said, pointing at Ami. “We can have a mini-celebration on the day he was adopted.”

Roman frowned. “It’s not really that big of a deal, you know. No need to celebrate it on my account. I won’t be hurt.”

Dad stared at him like he was crazy. “That’s an important day, Roman!”

“I mean, I guess,” Roman said. Vanellope ran into the room and jumped onto his lap, and he scratched at her ears. “But I already feel like a part of the family. Adopted or not, I feel almost like I was raised here. Sometimes I still miss...” he swallowed. “Sometimes I still miss Mom. But I feel like
I have a new family here. When I joined it doesn’t matter as much to me as the fact that I’m simply a part of it now.”

“We’re still celebrating,” Dad said definitively. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. We’ll celebrate it with your brothers, too.”

Roman thought about it. “When did you adopt Dee? I don’t remember.”

“Mid-March,” Ami said. “Emile, do you remember the exact date?”

“March eighteenth,” Dad said. “I remember because I was shocked the process took less than a week that time.”

“Well, we were already certified foster parents, and we didn’t have a custody battle to win,” Ami pointed out.


Ami stared at Dad. “You have all of their adoption dates memorized? I couldn’t do that if I tried every day for weeks.”

“Priorities,” Dad said, tapping his temple. “It’s important to me, so I remember.”

“I mean, it’s important to me too, but I don’t have it memorized, my love,” Ami said.

“Well, you have other things memorized that I don’t,” Dad pointed out. “You know Dee’s texture issues in and out like the back of your hand. You know exactly how much time it takes Logan on average to finish his homework, and you check on him half an hour later if he isn’t done. I couldn’t possibly do either of those things. Dee because there’s so many little things to keep track of, and Logan because...well...Logan holes up in his room whenever he’s done with homework, but he’ll also do his homework in his room. I can’t tell the difference.”

Ami laughed. “It’s not too hard, but I’ll let you figure that stuff out on your own, unless we’re in a rush and Dee needs good textures on clothes and something to stim with,” he said.

Roman leaned back into the couch. “You know, when I first got here, I was worried that you both wouldn’t be ready to be dads, or that you’d just ship me off to another foster home after a month or so. But you’re better dads than I could have ever imagined.”

Dad grinned and Ami smiled softly, ducking his head. “Thank you, Roman, that means a lot,” Dad said. “Is there anything you’d like when we celebrate your adoption anniversary?”

Roman shrugged. “I don’t really need much fanfare. It would be nice if I could pick out dinner, like we do for birthdays, but it’s not necessary.”

“If that’s what you want, that’s what you shall have,” Dad said. “It’s not a big deal to you, but it is to us, so we’re going to try and make it special.”

“Okay,” Roman said, feeling somewhat skeptical. “Why is it a big deal for you, though?”

Dad and Ami looked at each other. “Is this a you playing down yourself thing or a genuinely curious thing?” Ami asked.

“Genuinely curious,” Roman said, shifting on the couch as Vanellope jumped off him and ran out of
the room. “I mean, I understand that anniversaries of things can be celebrated, but why this specific anniversary? Why our adoptions?”

“Well,” Ami said, sitting down on the couch next to Roman. “You changed our lives. You and all your brothers did. Neither of us ever really intended to have kids, but we were never against the thought. You showing up showed us...what we were missing out on. It showed us a look into a slightly crazier life, but one that was also incredibly rewarding. It was turning over a new leaf. It was offering us a chance to make a difference. It was...it was something amazing. And amazing things deserve to be celebrated.”

Roman supposed that made sense. Only through the lens of an adult, though, and he wasn’t an adult yet. So really, he supposed he was just taking his dads’ word for it, trusting that he might understand one day.

Logan poked his head into the room. “Hey, who’s turn is it to walk Vanellope? She’s getting antsy.”

“It’s the twins,” Roman said, standing up. “I can walk with them.”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Logan said. “What’s going on, by the way? Family meeting?”

“No, talk about celebrating the anniversary of my adoption,” Roman said with a shrug. “Apparently, it’s a bit of a big deal. They’re planning on celebrating yours, too.”

Logan blinked in surprise. “What?”

“You heard me, Pocket Protector,” Roman said, walking out of the room. “I’ll grab the twins and then head out with Vanellope.”

“Hey, Roman, I’m going to need an explanation on that!” Logan called after him, but Roman pretended he didn’t hear it.

He ran up to the twins’ room, where Patton and Virgil were both reading, and said, “It’s time to walk Vanellope, guys, and it’s your turn.”

Patton got up without complaint, but Virgil sighed. “I really like Vanellope, and most times I like walking her, but I wish she didn’t get too hyper right as I was getting to the good part in the book.”

Roman chuckled and led both the boys downstairs, before calling, “Vanellope, do you want to go on a walk?”

There was an excited yelp and the fast clicking of Vanellope’s nails as she ran full-tilt toward the door. She sat patiently for as long as it took Virgil to clip the leash on her, before she started pawing at the door and whining. Patton opened the door and all three of them were outside within seconds, letting Vanellope dash out into the yard and enjoy rolling around in the grass for a few moments.

As Patton, Virgil, and Roman started to walk down the sidewalk, though, Vanellope quickly dashed back over to them, walking a few feet ahead of them and sniffing everything, despite being familiar with the walk they took every day. She must have been really antsy for a walk. Something to do. Roman could relate to that. “So, what do you two think of our little family?” Roman asked.

“Why?” Virgil asked, sending Roman a sideways glance.

“Well, Dad and Ami are planning on celebrating my adoption anniversary soon, and it has me thinking. It has everyone thinking, I guess, but I’m wondering what you two think of our family,” Roman explained.
“I wouldn’t trade it for the world,” Patton said, letting Vanellope tug a little on the leash but making sure she didn’t go too far in front of them. “I mean, yeah, sometimes I miss Mom, but she didn’t really love me and Virgil for a while before we left, I think. At the very least, she didn’t love us the same way. And it’s a little sad, but instead of having Mom who didn’t love us as much and Charles who hated us, we have Dad and Ami, and you and Logan and Dee, who all love us. And you guys help us when we need it. Without fail. That’s...new, but nice.”

Virgil nodded. “I never thought I’d say this, but we can rely on you guys when we need help. It’s strange, for sure. But it’s also comforting. There’s so many ways the world can go wrong, it’s nice to know that there are people to be there with us through it all.”

“Huh,” Roman said, considering. “I’d never thought of it like that. For me, it was just...I saw this as a better alternative to foster care at first. Dad and Ami cared about me and they made sure I went to school and didn’t make me clean the entire house and look after other people if I didn’t want to. I didn’t think anything could be better than living with my mother, before she...died.” Roman swallowed and let himself feel the grief for a moment, before continuing. “But if this isn’t better, it’s at least as good. I don’t know if I could really compare this to that. It’s two entirely different experiences. But...I’m...happy, again. I never thought I’d be happy after that car wreck. Yet here I am.”


“You should tell Dad and Ami that,” Patton said.

“They worry about you a lot, including whether or not you’re happy and if you’re just pretending to be fine so they worry less. If you tell them that you’re genuinely happy with them, I think they’d relax a little, and also be over the moon,” Virgil added.

“Well, you should tell Dad and Ami that you trust them,” Roman retorted. “Don’t think they haven’t noticed that you go to each other more than anyone else when you’re in trouble.”

Vanellope dashed between them and the end of her leash, tail wagging as fast as it could. They rounded the end of the neighborhood and started walking back to their house. “How about we agree that all of us will tell Dad and Ami how we feel about the family?” Patton proposed. “Because I bet that they’d really enjoy knowing, and maybe if we do it together it’ll be less embarrassing.”

“Sure, we can try it,” Roman agreed. He laughed. “This is definitely nothing like a fairy tale family. Which is a good thing. It’s the best thing to happen to me in a while, realizing that I’m happy with you guys.”

“Same,” Virgil said. “I don’t think anything could make me happier than this new family.”

“Not even crushes?” Patton teased.

“Nah, crushes don’t last forever. Family is with you through all the tough times, while a crush might shy away from that. Family is definitely better,” Virgil responded definitely.

As they got back to the house, Vanellope whined, and she had to be dragged more than walked back inside. Roman carried her through the house and out to the fenced in backyard, and grabbed a few of her toys to wrestle with her. Logan came out to watch Roman, and he noted, “Patton and Virgil say that you and them are going to talk about our family to Dad and Ami later.”

“They’re right,” Roman said. “We’re gonna tell them how this family helped us. Because we weren’t exactly clear about that before.”
Logan hummed. “Can I join you? Dee makes it known that he loves this family almost every day in his own ways, but I haven’t told Dad and Ami how much they’ve helped me in a while. And I mean beyond transitioning.”

Roman threw one of Vanellope’s toys across the yard and she bounded after it. “I don’t see why not. It’s showing appreciation to them. We’re not going to ban you from that.”

Logan smiled. “Thanks. Do you have a plan on how you’re going to tell them?”

“Not yet. Any ideas?” Roman asked.

Logan shrugged. “Maybe a few...”
Chapter 42

July 21st, 2012

Roman hugged his mom tight as she laughed. “Roman, it’s not a big deal,” she said. “It’s a book of fairy tales. It’s a small birthday gift.”

That may have been true, but that didn’t mean that Roman didn’t love it any less. It was, by far, the highlight of his birthday. “Thank you!” he exclaimed. “Thank you so much!”

His mother laughed and pet his hair as she responded, “You’re welcome, my little knight. I’m glad you like it.”

Roman loved it. Especially with the dedication on the first page. To Roman - With your determination, my little knight, you can do anything.

January 10th, 2020

Roman sat in the den after dinner, which was from that new barbeque place on the edge of town that he had tried once and immediately loved. Everyone was just hanging out, the TV on in the background, playing Finding Nemo. Everyone came back to the moment, though, when Dad muted the TV. “Roman, Ami and I have a little something to give to you.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to!” Roman exclaimed.

“Yeah, but Ami saw this and he couldn’t resist,” Dad said, passing over a present wrapped in bright red holographic wrapping paper. “As you know, he occasionally goes to thrift shops looking for little treasures to bring home. Usually it’s a shirt or occasionally a decoration, but this time he found something among the books. He was in Scottsdale this time.”

“Okay...?” Roman said. He knew he had grown up around the Scottsdale area, which was maybe an hour away from home by car, but he hardly saw what that had to do with this.

“You’ll understand why that’s important when you open it,” Dad said. Ami grinned wide as Dad gestured for Roman to open it. “Go ahead.”

Roman gave them a confused look, before sliding his finger under the seam of the paper. He unwrapped it quickly and his eyes widened. “My mom got me this book when I was six,” he breathed. “It’s the same edition.”

“It’s more than the same edition,” Ami said, leaning back with his hands laced behind his head. “Open the first page.”

There was no way. Roman had lost the book as he was bounced from foster home to foster home until he found himself in the permanent one he had run away from. But there was just no way...he opened the cover, and he gasped at the familiar handwriting. “It’s...” his voice gave out, his mouth opened but no words could form. He hugged the book to his chest, starting to cry. “It’s my book! My mom...my mom wrote that dedication...! How did you find it?!?”

“I noticed the fairy tale book and thought you might be interested in it, and I flipped it open, saw
your name, and connected the dots. How many Romans could have grown up in Scottsdale with an
affinity for fairy tales, and were called ‘my little knight’ affectionately?” Ami grinned. “I couldn’t
believe it either when I first found it. I couldn’t buy it fast enough.”

Roman sobbed. He didn’t have anything to remind him of his mom when he was at the old foster
home. He had lost the book and he grew out of the clothes she picked out with him quickly. But
now...now he had something from her with him again. Through sheer dumb luck and Ami liking to
go to out-of-the-way thrift stores. He had a piece of his mom with him again. “How long...how long
have you had this lying in wait?” he asked with a laugh.

“Since December thirty-first. Emile let me go to that thrift shop as a birthday present to me, I saw it,
and just knew.”

Roman wiped at his eyes and stared at the book adoringly. “I don’t believe it,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome,” Ami said. “Be careful with that book, okay? Because if you lose it again I
can’t guarantee that I’ll find it afterwards.”

Roman nodded seriously. “I’ll keep a close eye on it,” he promised. “I definitely don’t want to lose it
again.”

“Yeah, I imagine you wouldn’t,” Ami said with a kind smile. “Don’t worry, we won’t touch it
without your permission, either. Not even if we’re cleaning your room. Okay?”

“Okay,” Roman said, staring at the book in wonder. He still couldn’t believe it. He had his book
back. He thought it was lost forever—he had cried for days when he thought he had lost it for good.
He hugged it close and took a deep breath. “I feel like I’m gonna cry more. I don’t want to, though. I
just got back from dinner, I don’t want to be a weepy mess.”

“If you need to cry, Roman, you can cry,” Dad pointed out. “Crying is healthy, especially if it’s
happy tears.”

Roman shrugged. “I guess,” he said. “Honestly, I’m just in shock. I never thought that...that...I
would ever get anything back that reminded me of Mom. It was just the two of us, and I wasn’t
allowed a lot of time in our house to grab my things after CPS stepped in. This was the one thing that
I took that would always remind me of her, and I lost it in one of my foster homes, before I wound
up in the one I told you guys about. And now that I have it back...I genuinely don’t know how to
feel. It hurts, but it also makes me unbelievably happy.”

“Conflicting emotions are natural when reminiscing about a loved one who has since passed,” Logan
pointed out. “It can make you sad, but the memories will always have that touch of nostalgia and
happiness.”

Dee looked at the cover of the book curiously. “Is that a knight?” he asked, before pointing to the
man on the front of the book.

“Yeah,” Roman said. “My mom always called me ‘her little knight.’ I would always argue back that
I was a prince, because I wanted to be noble and in charge but still go on adventures. Mom said that
the knights were the ones who fought for honor and often went on the best adventures, though.” He
smiled softly, staring at the cover. “She saw the book of fairy tales with the knight on the cover and
she instantly thought of me. It was a little pricey, she told me. It was the only birthday present I got
that year. But it was completely worth it. And it’s pretty sturdy. The cover still seems to be in good
shape, and I know I read it front to back about a thousand times. The spine might be a little broken
in, but...” he opened it and smelled the pages, smiling. “It still smells the same, even after being in
that thrift shop for who-knows-how-long.”

Dee looked at it with interest. “Do you think you could read it sometime to me?” he signed. “Just because I don’t trust myself but I want to know the stories.”

“Oh! Sure,” Roman agreed. “But I’ll warn you these aren’t like Disney fairy tales. There’s not always a happily ever after. Plus, some of these stories are fairly obscure. I don’t know if that makes a difference to you or not.”

Dee shook his head. “No, I still want to know why you love them.”

“Oh,” Roman agreed. “I’d love to read these to you sometime.”

“We too, maybe?” Patton asked. “I mean, I’m more into folk tales and fables and stuff with a moral bottom line, but fairy tales are still pretty cool.”


Logan scoffed. “I don’t need to be read to,” he said. “However, if you tell me the title of the story I’m sure I could find it online and read it without risking harm to the book.”

Virgil shrugged. “Honestly I’m just scared of damaging it.”

Roman rolled his eyes. “Guys, this isn’t like a museum piece, all right? It’s part of my past, and an important part of my past, but you better believe I’ll be using it. You can’t convince me otherwise. I’ll let you borrow it if you want. It’s not strictly a collectable. It’s biggest price point was how many stories it had rather than how fancy its design was.”

“You will, of course, have to ask for permission before taking it out of Roman’s room, though,” Dad said to everyone. “If for no one else’s peace of mind than mine. I don’t want to worry about Roman losing this again.”

Ami nodded. “That goes for any of your possessions that you boys have that you might not want touched. We try to ask your permission before cleaning your rooms, anyway, and we only do that if guests are coming over and we want the bedrooms to be presentable. And you boys do good jobs of regularly cleaning your rooms anyway. We don’t usually do much more than vacuum and maybe clean the windows.”

“I hate the smell of window cleaner,” Dee signed, wrinkling his nose.

“I know,” Ami sighed. “Unfortunately, it’s a necessary evil once every two months or so. Otherwise, the creepy-crawlies and germs get too cozy on it and might make you sick. We don’t want you getting sick from something in the house that could have been prevented.”

Dee pouted but nodded. “I know,” he signed. “Doesn’t mean I like it. At all.”

Ami rolled his eyes. “You’re so dramatic. You don’t complain this much when we actually clean it, and we crack the window open to get rid of the smell.”

“But being dramatic is fun!” Dee signed, hands slightly exaggerating the signs before he struck a pose. “I like being dramatic.”

“You’re definitely going to be a drama gay,” Roman said with a laugh. “Provided, you know, you’re gay. I forget sometimes that straight people exist.”
“I think I’m gay?” Dee signed. “I don’t know. I never had a crush on a girl. But I don’t think I’ve had a crush, period.”

“You’re six, Dee, give it time,” Roman laughed. “Crushes don’t always happen to people, either. Sometimes you just think, ‘Oh, I’d date them,’ without months of endless pining.”

“Yeah, crushes are nasty beasts, anyway,” Virgil said, wrinkling his nose. “Why would you want to pine after people for months? It’s not fun.”

Dee shrugged. “It might make me feel normal?” he signed, eyebrows raising at the end like a question.

“Normal is overrated,” Logan said, before promptly flipping how he was sitting on the couch so his head was closest to the floor. “Take it from your local transgender man. Normal isn’t always what you should want to be. And if you’re not normal, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Yeah!” Patton exclaimed. “Like, I like skirts and I don’t feel like a boy, but that doesn’t get me down! I’m not ‘normal’ but I don’t want to be!”

“Is there even such a thing as ‘normal’?” Virgil contemplated.

“Okay, if we’re getting philosophical we’re stopping this conversation,” Dad said, raising his hands in surrender. “We don’t need any existential crises keeping you boys up half the night. You need a full night’s sleep, no matter what plans you have the next day.”

“I read that having a regular sleep schedule is key to feeling well rested,” Logan said, raising his arm and pointing to the ceiling. “That doesn’t mean sleeping at night and staying awake all day, it means more...going to bed at the same time every day and sleeping for the same amount of hours. And it takes a while to set up that schedule, but only a couple days to fff...fudge it up.”

Roman laughed. “Oh, you nearly got yourself in huge trouble, Logan.”

“Why?” Dee signed. “What was he gonna say?”

“He was going to say an adult word, I think,” Patton said.

Virgil had a mischievous glint in his eyes as he said, “I know which one!”

“What’s an adult word?” Dee asked.

“Oh...uh...words that adults use a lot?” Logan said, “Taxes, politics, financials. That sort of thing?”

“That’s not true,” Virgil sang. “Well, adults may use it a lot, but you would not get in trouble for saying ‘financials.’”

Roman was making a cut motion across his neck, but Virgil ignored him.

“What was he going to say, then?” Dee asked.

“Virgil, if you tell Dee what Logan was about to say, you will be having a very long talk with myself and Dad,” Ami warned.

Virgil considered that information, and Roman was surprised that Virgil would visibly show he might ignore that warning and say the word anyway. “Maybe I’ll tell you later, Dee,” Virgil said. “It’s something that shouldn’t be repeated. At least, not around adults.”
“Not at all,” Ami warned again. “You don’t want to wind up with a talk, do you?”

Virgil shrugged. “I don’t really give a—”

“Woah, goodnight everybody!” Emile exclaimed. “Virgil, you’re having that talk now anyway. Everybody else, get ready for bed, please.”

Roman was chuckling a little as he went upstairs. “Kid’s got guts,” he whispered to Logan.

“More than I do,” Logan said. “Would you have done that?”

“Not with my mom, for sure,” Roman said. “Here? I wouldn’t be punished, but I don’t like discipline either, so I’m not going to.”

Logan agreed. “Times may change, but some things never do. And that includes the rule about not swearing around kids or parents.”

“Yeah,” Roman said. He looked at the book in his hands. “I’m probably gonna read until light’s out, so night, Logan.”

“Night, Roman,” Logan said. “Congrats on one year of being in the family.”

Roman smiled. “Thanks.”
Chapter 43

February 16th, 2019

Logan woke up slowly, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. It was a Saturday, so he didn’t have to worry about his alarm going off. Something was different, though, and he couldn’t put his finger on it. He stared at the ceiling for a minute. His hair had been cut, but he had gotten used to that, mostly. He was in the Picani’s place, not the Harkness’ place, which he was also used to.

Roman walked in their shared bedroom, grinning. “Hey, sleepyhead. Your legal dads are waiting for you downstairs with a celebratory breakfast.”

Logan blinked, frowning, trying to absorb that information. It hit him over the head like a sack of bricks: he was adopted yesterday! That’s what was different! He was legally part of a family again! He grinned, sitting up. “All right, all right, I’m up,” he said, grabbing a sports bra and getting dressed. Today was going to be a good day.

February 15th, 2020

Logan sat up in bed with a stretch and a sigh. It was February fifteenth, according to his phone, which had a little reminder about “Dad and Ami go crazy today.” He tried to puzzle that out for a minute before he remembered: the anniversary of his adoption. Dad and Ami had done a celebration for Roman about a month before, and they had asked Logan what he wanted in terms of his. He said he didn’t want a lot of fanfare, just maybe picking out lunch or dinner and his family there to support him.

The odds of that actually happening were slim to none, but hey, he tried. He climbed out of bed, got dressed, and stumbled down the stairs, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. “Ugh,” he grumbled as he walked into the kitchen.

“Morning, Lo,” Dad said with a smile. “Sleep well?”

“Debatable,” Logan responded, voice creaking in protest of being used.

“Have some juice to help your voice,” Dad said, gesturing to the fridge. “Then you can help yourself to breakfast, because I know you wanted to experiment with cooking.”

“Mm,” Logan hummed his thanks and went to the fridge, bringing out apple juice and pouring it into a glass Dad passed him. He took a grateful sip, letting the sugar coat his throat. He put the apple juice back and pulled out an egg. “Show me how to make one sunny-side up?” he requested.

“Sure,” Dad agreed.

Roman came down and grabbed breakfast as Dad was teaching Logan to cook the egg, and Dee, Virgil, and Pat soon ran to the den and turned on the TV for Saturday morning cartoons. Logan took his breakfast, successfully cooked, into the dining room to eat and think. Roman came over to him with a Pop Tart and spoke as he ate. “Any idea where we’re going for lunch or dinner?”

Logan pulled a face. “Roman, don’t talk with your mouth full. I don’t need you spraying crumbs all over my breakfast.”
“Mm. Shorry,” Roman mumbled. He swallowed. “Still, any idea?”

Logan shrugged. “Not really. I don’t really want to go anywhere super fancy. Maybe...like, Panera. Their sandwiches are good, even if it makes me sound like a ‘basic white girl.’”

“You are not basic, nor are you a girl,” Roman pointed out.

“True,” Logan allowed. “But people will say I sound like one anyway, even if I pass as a guy.”

“Why?” Roman asked.

“Well, if I pass as a guy, they aren’t using it to misgender me, they’re just insulting my taste,” Logan said with a shrug. “As far as I’ve gathered, at any rate. People are...not my strong suit.”

“Yeah, I’ve gathered that before,” Roman said with a grin and a bite from his Pop Tart. “But seriously, why do people compare guys to girls as an insult?”

Logan shrugged. “Because effeminate men are not supposed to exist, I suppose.”

Roman nodded, before frowning. “Logan...”

“Hm?”

“If you were...I don’t know...able to get surgery at one point, if that’s what you wanted. And your breasts were gone. So people very clearly saw you as a guy. Would you ever wear dresses or skirts or makeup?”

Logan considered. “I’m...not sure. I suppose I would give it a try, but...I don’t think I would go out of my way to do it often. I’m more androgynous-to-masculine in my style.”

Roman nodded. “That’s fair. I was just wondering if you didn’t like feminine things because you didn’t pass, or if you just didn’t like feminine things.”

“No, I’m just more masculine in style,” Logan said. “However, I do like pastels. I don’t wear them often because they make me look more ‘soft’ according to people at school, but they are fun to wear, provided I don’t get misgendered wearing them.”

“So when you’re an adult and have had all the surgeries you want, you’ll wear pastels and be the man of your dreams?” Roman asked. “Oh, wait, my mistake, Jack is the man of your dreams,” he teased.

“Roman, I will kill you,” Logan warned.

Roman just laughed, finished his breakfast, and left the room. Logan sighed and finished his breakfast before retreating to his room to read for a few hours. He considered writing, especially because he had seen a fascinating Sherlock Holmes theory recently, but he didn’t have the energy to write too much today.

So he read, curled up on his bed, until there was a knock at the door and Dad poked his head in. “Hey, did you want to go out for lunch as a celebration?” he asked. “Or should I come back around dinner?”

“Lunch is fine,” Logan said, putting down his book and standing. “I was just thinking we could go to Panera. Somewhere simple. Everyone likes something there, and we don’t go very often. Besides, I like their sandwiches.”
Dad smiled. “Sounds perfect. Shall we go?”

Logan nodded and followed Dad downstairs and out the door as Ami wrangled the boys into the van. Logan just sat in his usual spot, scrolling his phone. To him, it felt more or less just like another Saturday. The exception being that they were going out to lunch at a place of his choosing.

When they finally managed to get everyone inside the restaurant and figured out their orders, Ami suggested, “Why don’t you find a table, Logan? I need to grab something from the car, but the boys can stay with Dad, or they can help you if you want.”

Logan squinted. It wasn’t like Ami to forget something in the car. This was probably what his surprise was going to be, like Roman’s surprise was the book from his mom. Still, he didn’t want to ruin the surprise for the others, and Dad and Ami were clearly desperate for him to play along.

“Okay. Dee, do you want to help me find a spot that’s quiet enough for you?”

Dee nodded and the two walked away from the rest of the group. Logan sighed. Dee looked up at him. “Dad and Ami are trying to surprise you,” he signed.

“Yeah, I figured,” Logan said with a tired smile. “I didn’t want a lot of fanfare, though. It’s an important day, true, but I don’t like all the attention on me. Some is fine, but all? That makes me uncomfortable.”

Dee nodded in understanding. “Same,” he signed.

They found a table in the front, by the windows that no one was using. Most of the people around here were quiet, too, so Logan and Dee took a seat. Logan stared out the front window and sighed again. “I know this is supposed to be a happy day, and it is, but I feel...I don’t know,” he muttered.

“Bittersweet?” Dee asked.

“Monachopsis, maybe. I just always, always feel like I’m slightly out of place. Even in this family, where everyone belongs, I feel like I...don’t. And usually it doesn’t bug me, but today, I guess I thought I could relax and fit in with the rest of the family, but I still feel...off,” Logan said.

Dee shrugged. “I felt that way for a while,” he admitted. “I thought the second I did something bad Dad and Ami would send me away. Because they’re good people and I’m me. But I screwed up, and they forgave me, and we moved on, and I’m still here. You do fit in, even if you don’t feel it. And it’s okay if you don’t feel it.”

Logan signed a quick “Thank you,” to Dee as Patton and Virgil ran over, giggling, and Roman and Dad were carrying trays with lunch behind them.

“That should be everyone’s lunch,” Dad said. “Now we just have to wait for Ami.”

Patton and Virgil giggled more and Roman grinned. Dee looked about as lost as Logan felt. “Did I miss something?” Logan asked.

“Dad told us what he and Ami got you for your adoption anniversary,” Roman said. “And we all agree you’re going to love it.”

“I heard it! I heard it!” Dee asked frantically. Virgil whispered in his ear, so quietly that Logan couldn’t hear it. But Dee gasped loudly and held his hands over his mouth as he exclaimed, out loud, “Really?!”

Patton nodded. “Yeah! They decided they should kickstart it now, to help later on!”
Dee turned to Logan. “You’re gonna love it,” he signed, practically bouncing in his seat.

Logan felt a little stunned at the sheer energy at the table. This wasn’t fanfare, but it was attention, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about it. Ami came over, with an envelope about the size to fit a greeting card. “Sorry for the wait, everybody!” Ami said. “There was no way I could just give the game away the second we came inside and I was holding this!” He passed it to Logan. “But you’re free to open it now.”

“Oh...?”, Logan said, sliding his finger under the seal of the envelope.

Opening it, he saw it was indeed a greeting card. It said “Bye bye ta tas” on the front. He opened the card and his eyes widened in surprise. There were five twenty dollar bills residing in it, and when he took them out, the inside of the card said, “Hoping all goes well with your top surgery!”

“Maybe the card was a little preemptive, because obviously you’re not getting top surgery yet...” Ami said.

“...But we figured we could kickstart the fund to help you get there, since you’ve told us that’s the route you want to go,” Dad finished. “We told your grandparents our plan and they immediately contributed fifty dollars to the cause.”

“I...I don’t...” Logan swallowed. “I don’t know what to say. ‘Thank you’ doesn’t begin to cover it.”

“Say you accept, and maybe let us tell you there’s a jar at home with your name on it,” Ami said with a grin. “We want to support you in whatever way we can, Logan. And if we can help fund your top surgery, we’ll do it.”

“I...okay,” Logan said, still staring in shock at the card.

“Also, Logan, you might want to eat before your food gets cold,” Dad gently prompted.

Logan jolted upright like he had been shocked and nodded, putting the money back in the card with the envelope and the card on his lap. “Right. Good point. Thanks.”

Everyone started to eat, excitedly chatting. “That’s such a cool anniversary gift!” Patton exclaimed. “Helping to get top surgery! How much does that cost, anyway?”

“Like, a couple thousand dollars,” Roman said, pulling a face. “And that’s not counting what you have to pay the hospital, and the doctors beyond the surgeon, and the consultations. So a hundred bucks won’t get the entire thing done, but it’s a decent start.”

“Yeah,” Logan agreed softly. “It’s a long process, but I’ll get there.”

“I know you will,” Patton said, with all the certainty that he would use saying gravity existed. “Because you don’t let other people tell you what to do. You do what you want when it comes to your body. That’s super cool, and super brave.”

Logan tried not to feel choked up at that, and failed. He felt a few tears slip through his façade, but he let them fall. This was his family, they wouldn’t judge him for crying. Dee pat Logan’s leg softly and Logan laughed, giving Dee a quick, one-armed hug before going back to eating.

“Wait,” Virgil said. “Why do you need a surgeon to do that job?”

“Because breasts aren’t just fat,” Roman said. “They have veins and stuff and you could get hurt if you didn’t know what you’re doing. So you need a surgeon.”

Logan sighed. “Yeah. But one day it’ll be worth it,” he nodded before continuing, “I’ll look like the man I was meant to be, and no one is going to take that away from me.”
March 20th, 2019

“Anxiety?” Virgil asked, tilting his head to the side. “What does that mean, anxiety?”

“You know how sometimes you get really afraid and you start shaking and having panic attacks?” Mister Emile asked.

Virgil frowned but nodded.

“Well, that’s a symptom of several anxiety disorders. Basically, even if there’s no danger around you, your body still thinks there is and it starts your fight-or-flight instincts,” Mister Emile explained. “It’s not a bad thing, but I wanted to see if we could get you diagnosed, and maybe figure out if you need therapy to help with it.”

“Oh,” Virgil said. “That’s...a thing people get?”

“Yeah. You’re not weird, Virgil. Anxiety disorders are really common,” Mister Emile said. “You’ll be fine, and I’m always here if you need any help.”

February 20th, 2020

Virgil was enjoying himself, for once. It wasn’t unheard of for him to enjoy himself, but he didn’t feel any anxiety attached to his enjoyment whatsoever, so it was noteworthy. He and Patton were currently playing on one of the laptops in the house, Virgil handling the arrow keys and Patton working the “wasd” keys, so together they could steer a rebel ship to shoot the Death Star. It was entertaining.

Once they had shot the Death Star, they cheered and high-fived, before putting the laptop away. Patton and Virgil hadn’t wanted to go out to celebrate their adoption anniversary, so instead they were going to have a movie marathon in the den. Patton and Virgil had agreed to hide in the basement for half an hour while the others got everything set up, and it had to be at least forty minutes that they had been cooped up in the basement. They walked up the stairs, Patton calling in the general direction of the den, “Is it safe to come in?”

“You’re good!” Roman called back. “We just finished!”

Patton and Virgil walked in, and Virgil gawked. There was a stack of DVDs next to the TV, and huge bowls of popcorn and candy ready to be eaten. He wasn’t sure he would be able to watch all of the movies in the stack, but he knew they were certainly going to try.

Virgil got on the couch, grabbing a bag full of M&Ms and settling down. “Do you guys have the movies picked out already?” he asked.

“Yes, we have the first one in the player already,” Dad said. “But we figured you both would like to see this one first, so hopefully we weren’t too far off in that assumption.”

Ami turned on the TV and set it to the DVD player, revealing *Bolt* on the screen. Patton cheered and Virgil grinned. It was no secret to anyone in the family that they both loved that movie to death. As
everyone got situated on the couches, Dad pressed play and they started up the movie (with captions, both because Dee liked using them to learn how to read and because Logan focused better with them).

Patton leaned into Virgil and Virgil looked over to him. “Enjoying yourself?” Virgil signed.

He got a content sigh and a nod in return. “You?” Patton asked.

Virgil considered. “Yeah,” he signed. “I’m enjoying myself.”

“No anxiety?” Patton asked, brows furrowing.

“Not...no anxiety, but very little anxiety,” Virgil explained.

“That’s good!” Patton signed, returning his attention to the movie.

Virgil idly nodded, and wrapped an arm around Patton’s shoulders, leaning back into the couch as they watched the movie unfold. Both of them knew what would happen like the back of their hands, but the ending still got to them. Patton cried a little and Virgil wasn’t far off.

After the first movie ended, Ami got up and turned the lights in the den on, before approaching Virgil and Patton with two presents. “You two know the drill,” he said with a smile. “These might not be as big as Logan’s or as lucky as Roman’s, but we hope you’ll still like them.”

Virgil and Patton looked at each other. “You go first,” he told Patton.

Patton nodded and opened the paper, gasping in surprise. “Oh, that’s so cool!” he said, running his hand over the cover of the book. It was an encyclopedia about animals, no doubt designed for elementary school kids, so Patton would probably need bigger books if he became a vet, but Virgil knew this still meant a lot to him. “Thank you!” Patton exclaimed.

Virgil knew this was a big deal to Patton. He had never had someone really rooting for him when it came to his passions, until they had come here. Virgil tried, but Patton always said he wanted an adult who believed in him. Now, he had two, who were encouraging him to study what he wanted.

Virgil opened his slowly. His box was a little bigger than Patton’s, but he figured that Dad and Ami made sure that the gifts were mostly even. He opened the box underneath the paper and found...“A cat?” he asked.

“I’d recommend smelling them,” Dad said.

Virgil did so, and could make out...lavender. “Oh!” he exclaimed. “This is the smell that the therapist said made me calmer when we tried grounding!”

“Yeah, she told me that you seemed to really enjoy the scent. Now, obviously, you might not want to carry a stuffed animal everywhere you go to help with grounding, but because we know your thoughts start to race when you try to sleep...well, we thought you might like it,” Dad said.

Virgil picked the cat out of the box. “And it’s weighted?” he asked.

“Just a little,” Ami confirmed. “We figured that could also help with the grounding when you start to panic.”

“Wow,” Virgil said, swallowing. “I...thank you. This...yeah. This will help.”

“I mean, I guess I’m a little overwhelmed,” Virgil said with a little laugh. “But you know, it’s more with the fact that you guys are so considerate than with panic.”

“Oh, that’s okay, then,” Logan said with a grin.

Virgil laughed in shock. “Okay, listen, buddy—”

“Ooh, Logan’s in trouble~” Roman sang.

Logan glared at Roman and chucked a pillow at his face. Roman ducked and laughed. Virgil giggled and hugged the cat close to his chest, nuzzling the toy close. “Will the lavender scent fade?” he asked.

“Over time, yeah,” Ami said. “But don’t worry, Dad and I put a little velcro on its belly so whenever the lavender scent fades, we can replace it with whatever scent you like.”

“Cool,” Virgil said with a grin. Roman chucked a pillow at Logan but Logan swatted it away...directly into Virgil’s face. “Logan! Roman!” he yelled, pushing down the pillow so he could glare at them.

Logan looked somewhat chastised but Roman was unapologetic. “Not my fault Logan dodged,” he said with a shrug.

“This means war,” Virgil said solemnly, putting his new friend on the table, before running with a scream over to Roman, whacking him mercilessly with the pillow until Dad and Ami ripped it from his hands. “Not tonight, please,” Dad all but begged. “We need to preserve the pillows for at least another month.”

Roman groaned and Virgil grumbled, but both boys got settled back where they were before, and Patton and Virgil got to choose which movie they watched next. After a quick murmured discussion, they decided on *Spy Kids* and the new movie started up. Virgil snuggled his new cat and Patton snuggled Virgil.

As time continued on, Virgil could feel sleep starting to stake a claim on him. Much as he loved *Spy Kids*, sleep sounded really good, too. They had dinner earlier, and now the sugar rush from the M&Ms was wearing off, and Virgil wanted nothing more than to sleep. Anywhere, really. He wasn’t going to be picky.

His head rested on Patton’s and he let his eyes close, just for a minute. When he next opened them, the ending credits were rolling and Patton was gently nudging him. “C’mon, Virge, I need to get up.”

“Hmm?” Virgil hummed.

“You fell asleep,” Patton said. “And I’ll let you sleep more if you need, but I gotta pee first.” And with that, he dashed out of the room.

Virgil groaned and rubbed his eyes. “Wha’ time is it?” he mumbled.

Logan pulled out his phone. “Just about ten. And it is a school night, so I imagine Dad and Ami are going to send us all to get ready to bed as soon as they realize the movie is over.”

Virgil blinked and looked around to find a suspicious lack of the two men in question. “Where did they go?” he asked.
“If I had to hazard a guess, the office in the basement,” Logan said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “But I wouldn’t interrupt them.”

“Wait...” Roman said, staring at Logan in horror. “Last year, when you did that...you never said what you found them doing...”

Logan turned crimson and looked away. “Yes, well, it wasn’t as compromising as I’m sure you’re thinking of, but it was not...pleasant by any means. For any party.”

Roman laughed. “You caught them making out, didn’t you?!”

“No comment,” Logan hissed. “And unless you want to explain to Virgil and Dee what ‘making out’ is, I suggest you shut up, quickly.”

“Oh,” Roman said, glancing at Virgil and Dee, before clamming up.

Dee looked at Virgil, confused. “What is making out?” he signed.

“Uh?” Virgil shrugged. “I think it’s like...kissing? I’m not sure, though.”

“But Dad and Ami kiss all the time!” Dee signed. “Why would Logan be embarrassed?”

“Because making out is kissing for a long time,” Patton said, walking into the room. “Like. Kissing for more than five seconds.”

“Five seconds is a long time to kiss,” Dee signed.

“Which is why it’s got its own name,” Patton said. He turned to Logan, smiling smugly. “You’re welcome.”

Logan stared at Patton. “Where did you learn that?”

Patton shrugged. “I got to talk to some middle schoolers sometimes when waiting for Roman after theatre practice, and they said that, and I asked what it meant.”

“And they explained?!” Roman asked.

“Yeah?” Patton said, shrugging. “They said it wasn’t the worst thing I could have asked, so they explained.”

Roman choked on air and Virgil watched the exchange with confusion. Dee waved his hands and when everyone was looking at him, he signed, “Do you only make out with people you love, like, romantically?”

“Yeah, usually,” Logan said.

“So does that mean you’ve made out with Jack?” Dee asked him.

Logan turned beet red and Roman burst out laughing. “That’s private,” Logan stammered out. “Please don’t ask me or Dad and Ami that.”

“Don’t ask us what?” Ami said, walking in the room.

“We were talking about making out,” Patton chirped.

Ami blinked. “I...who brought it up?”
Roman pointed at Logan. Logan sputtered. “Excuse you, you’re the one who suggested that’s what they were doing! I just said that Dad and Ami wanted privacy!”

“And did you actually explain what it was?” Ami asked.

“Oh! I explained!” Patton said, raising his hand. “The middle schoolers explained it to me, so I explained to them!”

“Explained what?” Dad asked, appearing in the doorway.

“Making out, apparently,” Ami told him.

Dad choked on air and Roman laughed while Logan just turned a darker shade of red. Virgil just felt more confusion wash over him. “This isn’t fair,” he complained. “I know all the swear words, but nobody is teaching me this stuff!”

“Well, it’s generally stuff they don’t teach you until you’re at least ten,” Dad managed to choke out. “So that could be why.”

“You learn about making out in school?” Dee asked.

“You learn about stuff that happens when you hit puberty, and as you get to middle school, you start to learn more and more things, including making out,” Roman said.

“Among other things that definitely shouldn’t be discussed around six to eight year olds,” Logan said, still not looking anyone in the eyes.

“Logan makes a good point,” Dad said. “And it’s ten o’clock, so I think you kids need to get ready for bed.”

Virgil groaned, but Patton just laughed at him. “You seemed to enjoy sleeping just five minutes ago,” he teased.

“But then we started talking,” Virgil said. “I like getting to talk like this.”

“When it’s not ten, you’re more than welcome to,” Dad said. “Until then, bed.”

Virgil groaned but complied. As everyone made their way to bed, or to the bathroom to shower, Virgil and Patton held their gifts close and looked at each other. “I’m really happy we joined this family,” Virgil said.

Patton gave him a shy grin that, in their silent twins-only language, roughly translated to Me, too.
March 14th, 2019

Patton was having so much fun. It was his and Virgil’s birthday, and they hadn’t celebrated like this since before Charles was around. Everyone was laughing and eating dinner at the place Virgil and Patton agreed on. Virgil looked over at him and grinned, such a pure expression that Patton hadn’t seen on his brother’s face in a long time.

If this was what happened when he had a birthday with his new family, then he definitely wanted to stay with this family for years and years. He loved everyone looking as happy and excited as he felt. It just...worked. It felt right. And he could always be happy with things feeling right.

March 14th, 2020

Patton was eating breakfast quickly, swinging his legs as he ate. He was in a good mood, all things considered. Today was his and Virgil’s birthday, and while no one had said anything about it yet, the day was still early.

It was a pretty day, too. He was eating breakfast out on the deck while Virgil played with Vanellope in the yard. There was barely a cloud in the sky and a crisp spring breeze blew across it. He was having a good day, and it had barely started.

Logan came out onto the deck with a book and said, “Happy Pi day, Patton.”

“Pi day?” Patton asked, turning to look at him.

“Three-point-one-four, March fourteenth,” Logan said. “The first three digits of pi line up today.”

“Oh, that’s kinda cool,” Patton said. “It’s also my birthday. And Virgil’s.”

“Yeah, I know,” Logan said with a smile. “But I figured we could also take a moment to acknowledge Pi day.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence until there was a crash inside the house and Ami screeched, “Emile Thomas Picani, you get back here!”

Dad dashed out of the house, laughing, clutching Ami’s jacket close to his chest. “You’ll never take me alive!” he crowed. “You’re not wearing your jacket today! It needs to be washed!”


“Dad’s middle name is Thomas?” Patton whispered to Logan.

“It’s his maiden name,” Ami growled. “He took it as his middle name when we married, and I will continue to use it until I get my jacket back!”

Dad laughed and shrugged on the jacket, crossing his arms. “Rem, it’ll take all of ten minutes to wash and twenty to air dry! Half an hour, and you can wear your jacket again! But this?” He pointed
to an obvious stain on the left elbow. “Needs to go.”

“It’s not that bad!” Ami exclaimed indignantly.

Dad shook his head. “You’re worse than Linus with his blanket! But this is getting washed, and you can’t stop me!”

Ami seethed as Dad sauntered back up the deck and walked back inside the house, tossing a, “Thirty minutes!” over his shoulder.

Logan blinked a few times, and Patton empathized with his confusion at this sudden turn of events. Virgil had come up to the deck with Vanellope, and Ami let go of a deep breath, before opening his eyes. “Good morning, boys. Happy birthday Patton, Virgil.”

“Thanks,” Patton said. “Um. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you yell before.”

Ami took another deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, sorry about that. I shouldn’t have shouted. But every time Emile insists on washing that jacket, I worry that it’ll get destroyed.”

“I mean, he doesn’t put it in the washing machine, he spot cleans, right?” Logan asked.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean he knows what he’s doing,” Ami said. “And I don’t want to lose that jacket. I love that jacket! I’ve had it for five years!”

“I’m sure Dad will be careful with it,” Virgil said. “He’s always careful with my blanket, and with Patton’s cat. He knows what he’s doing for the most part, and this can’t be the first time he’s spot cleaned something off that particular jacket, right?”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not worried,” Ami sighed.

“That’s valid, but you don’t have to worry,” Logan said. “And you don’t have to chase Dad around the house, trying to get it back.”

Ami groaned. “How likely is it that Dee and Roman are going to recreate that to whoever asks about it?”

“About as likely as the sunset tonight is going to be,” Logan replied with a small grin. “Because those two are dramatic enough to pull it off.”

“Okay, that’ll be a problem,” Ami groaned, staring regretfully at the back door. “I just hope they don’t hurt themselves, because I’m pretty sure I can’t stop them.”

“I could try,” Logan offered. “Sometimes those two will push back at authority figures purely because they see authority figures as people who don’t understand that they’re just having fun. But if a peer explains to them why they could get hurt, and why it might disrupt other people, they might listen more.”

“You shouldn’t have to parent your own brothers, Logan,” Ami sighed. “But you have a good point there. If I had simply said that they might be bothering you guys, they’d do the same thing, but quieter. If I explained they could get hurt, they might actually listen.”

Logan shrugged. “Sometimes the quickest solution isn’t the best one. Sometimes you need to think before coming to a solution that works well. And...we all know that thinking is somewhat of a specialty of mine.”
Virgil laughed. “I know. You have a ‘processing’ face sometimes if someone interrupts you or says something you haven’t prepared yourself for them to say.”

“It’s not a bad thing!” Patton rushed to add. “I think Dee has one too. Although his happens pretty much every time someone says something to him.”

“Well, he probably doesn’t think through as many options as I do when I think of people’s responses,” Logan said.

“You use scripts?” Ami asked.

“I...Um...Yes?” Logan asked, blinking repeatedly and frowning. “Assuming that means practicing what I’m going to say in my head, and planning out possible responses.”

Ami made a *huh* noise. “I should probably tell Dad about that. He might be able to help you script if you want. He knows more about it than I do.”

“Why? What is it?” Logan asked.

“It’s a neurodivergent...thing,” Ami said, waving his hands around. “Look, Dad can explain it better than I can, and I have to tell Roman and Dee not to tear up the house, so we need to table this conversation, just for five minutes.”

Logan leaned back in his chair as Ami left and he groaned. Vanellope came over and gently tugged on his pant leg. He grumbled as he picked her up and began to pet her. “I don’t like tabelling discussions,” he sighed.

Virgil took a seat at the table and asked, “Why?”

“Means I have more time to script bad situations,” Logan said.

“You know...I remember Dee telling me that Dad told him he thought you could be autistic,” Patton said.

Logan shrugged. “I’ve done some research on it in the past, and I have some of the symptoms, but how many is enough? How much of that is just me being neurotic? And it doesn’t impede my life much outside social situations. I do fine in school. So why would I look for a diagnosis that would discriminate against me?”

Patton considered. Because, yeah, comparing what Dee did and what Logan did, they had some really similar responses, and preferences, and behaviors. But Logan had a point. If he would only be hurt by an official diagnosis, why would he want one? It made no sense. “I just know you sometimes act a lot like Dee does, only in slightly different ways, or smaller amounts,” Patton said. “And he’s only seven. You’ve had nearly ten more years than him to blend in to other people.”

Logan sighed. “Yeah. You have a point. I just...don’t know. And I’m okay not knowing if it doesn’t hurt me in the long run.”

“That’s fair,” Virgil said. “If you can do the stuff that Dee does to help and not get an actual diagnosis, and doing what Dee does helps you in any way at all, then why even go to the doctor? It’s not like they have some medicine that would make this go away.”

“I wouldn’t want it to go away, provided there even is an ‘it,’” Logan muttered. “But enough about me. You two should have all the attention today. It is, after all, your birthday.”
Virgil offered them both a small grin. “I’m excited,” he admitted. “Like, really really excited. I don’t know why. There’s something about being nine that feels really exciting.”

“You’re one year closer to hitting double digits,” Logan offered. “I, meanwhile, will be screaming in existential terror on my birthday, because that will be my final year before I have to sign all my own paperwork.”

Patton giggled. The thought of Logan screaming at anything in terror was hilarious. He finished the last of his juice that went with his breakfast and asked, “What do you think we’re gonna get as a birthday present?” he asked.

“I know what you’re getting, Patton, but I will never tell,” Logan said with a smug grin. “I helped Dad and Ami pick it out.”

“Oh, did you help with mine?” Virgil asked.

“A little bit,” Logan said. “Only in the sense of Dad and Ami asked about your potential gift, because I knew more than they did about it.”

Virgil pouted. “That doesn’t narrow it down at all!”

Logan shrugged, grinning. “That’s the point, Virgil! It’s a surprise!”

Virgil scowled until Dad came out on the deck, this time jacket-free. “Hey, boys,” he said. “What has you talking so seriously?”

“Birthday presents,” Patton answered solemnly. “Logan knows both of ours but he’s not telling!”

“Well, good, because that was the agreement we made when he helped us,” Dad said with a grin. “But if you want to see those presents, we could go inside now and open them, if you want?”

“Oh, please?!” Patton asked. Virgil agreed quietly.

Dad nodded and ushered the three of them inside. There were two balloons being held down by two presents each. One of the balloons was baby blue, and the other deep purple. Patton and Virgil immediately went to their favorite colors and grabbed the balloons, then looked at the presents. Ami came in the room with Roman and Dee trailing behind. “Oh, the time has come already, huh?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Dad said with a laugh. “Now, we’re going to spoil the fun just a little by saying that both of you each got a set of books we thought you might enjoy, and then something else we know you two would want. One experiment and one thing for certain, sound good?”

They nodded. Patton looked to Virgil and Virgil looked to Patton. “I opened mine first last time, you go!” Patton encouraged.

Virgil took the top present off the counter and felt it in his hands. “I bet this is the books,” he said. “It’s heavy enough to be.”

A quick rip and the paper was falling off and floating to the floor as Virgil stared at the books in shock. It was a series of four, the first four in the entire series of Animorphs. “No way!” Virgil exclaimed. “That’s so cool!”

Logan was stifling laughter. “I mean, you’re close enough to being a fourth grader that you can probably handle most of the stuff in the books. And if not, well, now you know, and you get those
cool covers to stare at.”

Virgil grinned. “I’m gonna have fun reading these!” he said. “Even if it gets intense, that’s half the fun!”

Patton opened the top present on his side and he laughed when he saw the books enclosed. “The Magic Treehouse! I love these, even if they’re a bit of an easy read. Sometimes it’s nice to relax with a book that you know is gonna end well.”

“See, that’s where our tastes are super different,” Virgil pointed out. “I like stuff with lots of suspense, you like things that are relaxing most of the time.”

“Don’t you worry that what you read is going to make you more anxious?” Patton asked.

Virgil shrugged. “Not really. I know it’s not real and it can’t hurt me. The only way I’d get a panic attack from reading is if it went over something I was already scared of. Like Charles.”

“Oh. Okay then,” Patton said. “Should I go or you go?”

“You go,” Virgil said.

Patton nodded and opened his other gift, and laughed. “Oh, cool! A new Lego set! This one...it looks like it makes a couple little buildings! Cool! I need somewhere for my creations to go around, and this could help me set up a little town!”

Virgil laughed. “You’re gonna have fun with that. What’s...mine...” Virgil trailed off as he opened the present, before squealing in surprised delight. “It’s Avatar! I don’t believe it! It’s the whole Avatar series!”

Patton grinned. “Oh, that’s neat! You can watch it whenever you want, now!”

“I know!” Virgil exclaimed, positively beaming. “This is fantastic!” he ran over to Dad and Ami and hugged them both. “Thanks so much!” he exclaimed.

Patton joined in on the hugs, and then the two ran off to their room, where Patton’s Legos and Virgil’s reading nook were, leaving behind two very stunned dads and three laughing brothers.
March 18th, 2019

Dee looked at everyone in the room in the courthouse with confusion. They were smiling and laughing and chatting like they had done this a million times before. They hadn’t done it a million times, but they had done it three, so maybe they were just that familiar with each other.

Whatever the reason, he was uncomfortable being slightly dressed up and just standing around in court doing nothing. He clung to Remy’s leg like his life depended on it, and when they finally started talking about signing papers, Dee felt relief flood through him. Even if this meant he couldn’t go back to Mama, he wouldn’t be stuck in this courthouse forever.

And anyway, if Mama left him, didn’t that mean that this new family taking him in was a good thing?

March 18th, 2020

Dee was happy enough that he was jumping up and down and flapping his hands like mad. He was wearing his adult villain gloves, because he had outgrown his old ones but Dad got him these so that he didn’t have to go without villain gloves at all. These he just had to grow into.

They were at his favorite pizza place, the one that knew his particular preferences for pizza and didn’t give him or his family weird looks when they ordered a white pizza with extra cheese and sausage. It was the anniversary of his adoption, and while he had gotten a mini-party two weeks before with his family for his seventh birthday, Lucy wasn’t able to come and have dinner with them like he had hoped. But today, Dad and Ami had talked with Lucy’s moms, and they all had agreed that they would meet here, as a belated birthday celebration in addition to his adoption anniversary.

As soon as they walked through the door, Lucy exclaimed, “Dee!” and ran over to hug him.

He hugged back, tight, before taking off his gloves and shoving them in his coat pockets so he could sign. “I’m so glad you came!”

“Well, of course!” Lucy signed back. “I was super sad I couldn’t do it on your birthday, but this is almost as good!”

Dee grinned and flapped his hands before signing, “It’s better! Because this is the reason why I know you in the first place!”

Lucy frowned. “What do you mean?” she signed.

“Well, if I hadn’t been adopted by Dad and Ami, I wouldn’t be going to school with you!” Dee explained.

“Oh!” Lucy said out loud. “Yeah, I’m really glad you got to be adopted, then!”

Dee nodded. He was really glad too, and he didn’t want to think about where he would be if he weren’t with Dad and Ami. It definitely was not a pleasant thought. Would Mama have stopped taking pills? Would he have had to talk to way more police people? Would he have been taken away
anyway, only this time he wouldn’t have been with Dad and Ami? He didn’t know, and that really scared him. Hence why he didn’t think about it often, if at all.

Lucy tapped his arm and Dee looked up at her from where he found himself staring at the floor. “You okay?” she signed.

Dee smiled softly. “Yeah. Just started thinking about not nice things.”

“Oh,” Lucy said, nodding her understanding. “Yeah, that’s no fun,” she agreed. “Do you want to find a table with my moms and your family?”

“Yeah,” Dee agreed, and the two immediately looked for a table that could house the ten of them.

When they found a likely candidate, everyone sat down and, because the customers were allowed to seat themselves, a waitress came right over with a bright smile. “Hello there! How can I help you tonight?”

“Hi, we’re going to be ordering...” Ami trailed off, before signing at Lucy’s moms. At their response he said, “We’ll be ordering three pizzas. Two large ones, regular sauce, pepperoni on one half and veggie lover’s on the other, the second one plain cheese on one half and green peppers and black olives on the other, and then a small, white sauce, extra cheese and sausage.”

The waitress laughed. “Oh, you must be the Picani’s! The manager talks about you a lot. Usually to say why you should never judge someone for their pizza order, because you come here often and tip well because no one else takes the order seriously.”

“That’s us,” Ami said cheerfully. “We’re here with a school friend of the youngest. He’s very excited about it.”

Dee noticed that one of Lucy’s moms was translating what Ami was saying for the other. When the waitress left, the conversation moved solely into the sign language territory. Mostly introductions, explaining who was who to one another. Lucy’s mom who was Deaf, who was wearing a denim jacket tonight, smiled and signed, “Your ASL is amazing for only knowing it one year.”

Logan signed back, “Well, Dad and I have had more practice than one year, but my teacher has said that my signing improved greatly since Dee joined the family. Full-immersion does wonders in learning a new language. And since Dee only would speak when he knew we wouldn’t know the sign and no one was around to translate, it really was like full-immersion.”

Lucy signed, “That’s really cool! I didn’t realize most of you didn’t know sign before! You’re naturals!”

“Not really,” Roman signed with a laugh. “My sign was terrible for the longest time. I constantly had to ask Dee to slow down, and I still do when he fingerspells. But I’ve been getting better.”

Ami lightly waved his hand and signed, “Before the food comes, we have a gift for Dee to celebrate his adoption.”

Dee was surprised, thought he didn’t know why. He had gotten presents on his birthday, both from the family and from Lucy. But he forgot that he might get a gift on his adoption.

Dad passed over a small bag to Dee and Dee took it gingerly. He sifted through the paper and found a pair of earbuds, which he played with for a few seconds before sifting through the paper more at Ami’s encouragement. He pulled out a small-ish rectangular device that sort of reminded him of a phone, except it had a circle where the keys would be, and the screen was small. “What is it?” he
Ami and Dad both laughed, and Lucy’s moms were cracking a smile. “I never thought I would see the day,” Ami signed. “It’s called an iPod. It stores music and podcasts and stuff so you can play it whenever you like.”

Dee blinked a few times, before putting the earbuds into the iPod and then his own ears. “What do I do to start the music?” he asked.

“You see the symbols of the sideways triangle and the two little lines? Press that,” Dad signed.

Dee did so and his eyes widened as he recognized one of the songs that Logan liked to listen to, one of the few that he was allowed to play without headphones around Dee, and the one that was Dee’s absolute favorite of Logan’s songs. He took out one of the earbuds, surprised that he couldn’t hear the music in that ear anymore, before putting it back in. He grinned. “Cool!” he signed.

“Ami and I found that in the basement in one of the moving boxes, and we cleared out what little music was still on it before downloading songs we knew you liked,” Dad signed. “We figured it could help some in crowds. It’s not the same as noise-cancelling headphones, but it still will give you something to focus on.”

Dee grinned wide and signed “Thank you” over and over again. Then, “Can I keep them in while we eat?”

“Well, yeah, if you want,” Ami signed. “We’re all going to be signing anyway, so you won’t be missing out on any of the conversation.”

Dee flapped his hands excitedly and slid the iPod into his pocket. Lucy was grinning at him. “That looks like it was a really good gift!” she signed.

“That’s great!” Lucy signed. “I’m really happy for you!”

Dee nodded. “They also help Logan when he has similar problems.”

“What?” Logan signed. “I don’t have those sorts of problems, do I?”

“You don’t buy certain shirts or pants because they ‘feel wrong,’ you can’t stand certain music because ‘the lyrics don’t sound right,’ you can’t touch chalkboards with any part of exposed skin, nevermind fingernails, without squeezing your hands repeatedly until you can run your fingers under water or on something that ‘feels better,’” Dad supplied. “You do all of this without realizing it, but yeah, Logan, you have sensory issues.”

Logan looked momentarily stunned. “Oh,” he said, out loud. “I didn’t realize...” he started to sign, but his hands drifted down as his thought process trailed off. “I don’t know.”

The pizza came while Logan was still brooding over this fact, and the conversation moved to lighter topics. Lucy and Dee talked a lot about school when they weren’t eating their slices of pizza, Roman talked about how the school play was coming up in April and how he had most of his lines down but the blocking kept tripping him up, and Patton and Virgil talked a lot about the books they were reading. Virgil adored *Animorphs* and Patton was still enjoying *The Magic Tree House* whenever he could.
Eventually, Logan joined in on the conversation again, when Lucy’s moms asked Logan and Dad where they had learned to sign. They signed an hour-long conversation, and when all of the pizza was eaten and their drinks gone, Dee was starting to yawn as one of Virgil’s slow songs came on the iPod, acting like a lullaby. “We should probably head out,” Dad signed. “I think Dee’s a little too tired for dessert.”

“I’m not tired,” Dee protested, before yawning again.

“You’d fall asleep face-first into whatever dessert you had,” Roman signed with a grin.

Dee whined in protest but didn’t do anything else outside rub his eyes. He was tired, and it had to be getting close to eight, but that didn’t mean he wanted to go home and get ready for bed.

“We should be going, too,” Lucy’s other mom, the one who was wearing bright pink lipstick, signed. “Lucy will need to go to bed soon. It is a school night, after all.”

Lucy tilted her head back and groaned, before hugging Dee. When she pulled apart, she signed, “I had fun tonight.”

“Same,” Dee signed.

“Oh, and do you like the book Mom found for you? There aren’t a lot of kid’s books out there with characters who are mute, so I hope just finding one who was autistic is okay...”

Dee smiled. “I love it a lot, Lucy. It’s nice to read, especially when the bullies give me a hard time.”

“Good, I’m glad,” Lucy signed.

Everyone stood, and after Dad and Ami left two twenties on the table, they all walked outside and went their separate ways in the parking lot. Dee was a little sad, even though he knew that he would see Lucy tomorrow. He had sorta hoped that tonight would never end.

“Chin up, Dee,” Virgil said as they all got in the van. “You get to listen to your music a little while longer before you have to go to bed.”

“And you get to see your best friend tomorrow!” Patton chirped.

“Not to mention that just because tonight is over, doesn’t mean we’re not going to be here tomorrow,” Roman added.

“And while it might seem unfair to cut the night short, we really should get back home. If you want, we could read the book Lucy got you again before bed,” Logan offered.

Dee yawned again and nodded. That sounded really nice. Ami drove out of the parking lot and started the trip home, and as one song bled into the next in Dee’s ears, he leaned back and tried to let himself relax, just a little, just enough that maybe he could have an easier time sleeping tonight. After all, his family was here, and they would keep him safe and love him ‘til the end of time. He had been here a year and they hadn’t disappointed him yet.

Virgil gently grabbed Dee’s hand and gave it a squeeze. Dee looked over in confusion. “Just...you know that we’re not gonna leave you for anything, right?” Virgil asked. “The only thing that would make me not be able to talk to you anymore is if one of us died. And that’s not gonna happen for years and years.”

“I love you,” Virgil murmured. “I want to make sure you know that, because I don’t say it often.”

“I know,” Dee signed again. “I love you too.”

After Virgil nodded and Dee started to relax again, he was asleep before they even hit the next red light.
Chapter 47

March 19th, 2020

As some of the techs clapped after Roman’s practice monologue, Roman turned bright crimson and took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself. He felt really embarrassed, even if all the attention he was getting was positive. Misses Reynolds, the head of the techs, came over to him and said, “That was an amazing performance, Roman. I’m impressed.”

“Oh...it...it wasn’t a big deal...” Roman trailed off, unsure of how to respond.

“If it wasn’t your best performance, I can only imagine what you’ll be like opening night,” Misses Reynolds laughed. “You’re doing amazing, Roman. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

April 17th, 2020

Roman was backstage, his nerves gnawing away at his resolve. He could do this, he could do this. He had done it last night, without a hitch. But tonight it was different. Tonight, he didn’t just have someone drop him off and maybe observe from the back. Tonight, his whole family was here. Dad, Ami, Logan, Patton, Virgil, Dee. Grandma and Granddad. He felt like if there was a heaven, even his mom was watching him from above.

“You’ll do fine, Remus, I saw you last night, remember?” Chad said from beside him.

Roman wrinkled his nose and gave Chad a playful shove. He fiddled with the fake mustache on his lips. “This still feels weird,” he grumbled.

Chad just laughed, wearing his peasant outfit. Roman was admittedly a little jealous. He was dressed in black and green, ruffles everywhere, and it all seemed a little extra, even for him. He was supposed to be from the neighboring kingdom, a rebel who wanted to overthrow the evil queen. But he still grimaced at his costume, especially the mustache that looked like it belonged in a joke shop.

Oh, yeah, and his character’s name was Remus, which Chad, being a nerd surrounding Greek and Roman mythology, found hilarious from day one, and he hadn’t stopped calling Roman that stupid name since. Whenever he had to put on the costume, Chad would exclaim, “It’s Remus! Roman’s evil twin! Everyone, make sure your belts are on, or he might just pants you!”

Roman was still trying to find a way to get back at Chad for that, but so far he hadn’t been lucky. Just as the lights were about to dim and the show was going to start, Roman was struck with an idea, and he quickly whispered, “Juicy buttholes!” in Chad’s ear before heading onto the stage, curtain still drawn, ready to start the play.

Chad was glaring at him from the side of the stage, and Roman just gave him two very enthusiastic thumbs-up as he tried not to laugh so hard he’d break character. Then the curtains rose and Roman slipped into his element, the play started, and he wasn’t Roman, the kid with jumpy nerves and a tendency to sing a little too loud on the way home from school. He was Remus, the conniving rebel who had a plan for everything, including getting the kingdom next to his to do all his dirty work, and accidentally fall in love as he worked with the princess.

As the play progressed, Roman continued to have fun with his character, making all kinds of snide
remarks and sarcastic quips as the lines called for it, and then he did the heartfelt monologue he had for his audition, where Remus showed that he could have a heart, if only he really wanted to try. Though if you asked anyone later, they would claim that Remus didn’t have a heart.

Then, after Remus went down on one knee, proposing to Theresa, the princess of the kingdom he had helped, she said yes, and the curtain closed. The ending music started playing and everyone came out to the curtain call. Roman was red in the face, but he adored the attention, and if he wasn’t mistaken, he could have sworn he saw his family giving him a standing ovation.

When the music ended, everyone disappeared backstage to walk down the stairs to the audience. Roman was promptly punched in the arm by Chad as soon as they found each other. “I hope you’re happy, I had to have your voice saying ‘juicy buttholes’ repeating in my head the entire time you were talking.”

Roman laughed, near hysterics as he walked out to find his family waiting for him. “Well done, Roman,” Logan said, and he was beaming. “You’ll love the high school theatre, I’m sure of it now.”

“Thanks,” Roman said, and then he turned his attention to Dad and Ami. “Oh! Guys, Chad and I have come to the conclusion that I have a twin brother named Remus who looks exactly like me except he wears this mustache at all times.”

“Not to mention that he often pantses people and gives you the worst mental images that require serious brain bleach,” Chad added. Roman pointed silently to Chad. “Roman’s a beast on the stage, but he never believes it when anyone tells him.”

“Oh, no, he’s definitely amazing,” Virgil said. “I almost forgot that you were my brother!”

Roman turned bright red under his stage makeup. His grandparents came over and were smiling at him. “Well done, Roman,” Granddad said. “I believe you’ve found your true passion.”

“Yeah,” Roman agreed, nodding. “I definitely want to do this again.”

“Maybe leave your twin brother Remus behind at this school, though,” Chad advised. “You don’t have to be this extra to get attention. All you have to do is have confidence, and people will notice you.”

“Whether I want them to or not,” Roman said with a little laugh and a grin. “I’m so ready to be out of this costume, honestly. It’s too extra, even for me.”

“Yeah, I preferred the white option for the costumes, but they insisted that if you were going to be a double-crosser, that you needed to look the part,” Chad lamented.

“I know,” Roman groaned. “But yeah. Let’s get rid of Remus. I’m happy to just be Roman.”

The two headed back to the locker rooms to change out of their costumes. Roman felt significantly better in his plain jeans and T-shirt, and his sneakers. He was perfectly fine looking like a thirteen-year-old for the rest of the night.

As he walked back to the auditorium with his costume in his arms, he got several compliments from families of other kids in the play and a few people he didn’t recognize. All of them related to his “stellar performance” in the play. Roman was red in the face again in no time and Chad laughed. “Hey, it’s better than Frank, right? He got all of two lines in the play because they needed to fill the spot, but he barely took those seriously.”

“True,” Roman said. “I’d rather be told I did a good job than a bad one. But it’s weird to have
“Remus!” a little kid yelled. “Remus! Wait!”

Roman turned to find one of the techs’ younger brothers running over. “I don’t know your real name, so I had to call you Remus,” he panted. “Can you sign my paper thing? You’re gonna be famous one day and I definitely want your autograph.”

Laughing, Roman nodded. “Sure,” he said good-naturedly. “Do you have a pen?”

The boy passed him one, along with the playbill, and Roman signed it on one of the lockers, before passing both objects back to the boy. “My name’s Roman, just so you know,” he told the kid. “Roman Picani. And I don’t know about being famous, but I think I’ll do theatre as long as I can.”

As the boy walked away, Chad shook his head. “You need to have more faith in yourself, dude. You could totally be famous if you tried.”

“Fame is in large part luck, Chad,” Roman said. “I’m not saying I won’t try, but if I don’t have that luck, well, it’s no big deal.”

Chad shrugged. “I will be your agent if necessary, dude. I will make sure people know that you’re great.”

Roman laughed. “Come on, Chad. At least wait until we’re, like, out of high school. Then you can push me into as many parts as you think I can handle.”

“Cool. You know I’m actually going to do that, right?” Chad asked.

“Yeah,” Roman sighed. “Yeah, much as I hate it.”

They put their costumes in the back and then came out to find their parents talking as Logan scrolled something on his phone and Patton, Virgil, and Dee were playing tag around the mostly-emptied auditorium. “…So that was fun,” Chad’s dad said. “I look forward to seeing what they can do next year in high school.”

“Agreed,” Dad said. “You should have seen Roman trying to memorize his lines every day after school. He’s an absolute maniac.”

“And occasionally a potty mouth,” Logan muttered under his breath.

“What?” Ami asked him as Roman made a cutting motion over his throat.

“Sometimes he couldn’t remember his lines, and he’d get frustrated, that’s all I’m saying,” Logan said, not even looking up from his phone.

“You’re walking a dangerous line,” Roman warned. “Between Dad and Ami or me killing you.”

Logan shrugged. “Hence why I’m not saying any more.”

Roman winced as Dad and Ami looked at him. Ami opened his mouth to speak, but Dad beat him to the punch. “Did you swear around your younger brothers?”

“No! Of course not!” Roman said, holding a hand to his chest in offence. “What do you take me for?!”

Logan snorted. “Yeah, he only did it when I helped him with his lines. Behind closed doors.”
“Please try not to swear,” Dad said. “But as long as you didn’t do it around your younger brothers, I’m not gonna get you in trouble. And I’ll keep Ami off your back.”

Ami sputtered until Dad whispered something in his ear. Ami stared at Dad in shock before fuming in silence. Though Roman thought it was more at being blackmailed than Roman swearing.

“Well, I think that this deserves a celebration, don’t you?” Dad asked. “A successful part played, a job well done. Anywhere or anything you’d like to go or eat, Roman?”

Roman shrugged. “I mean, I don’t know. I’m honestly craving a little bit of pasta for some reason,” he said.

“Then let’s go get some pasta with your grandparents,” Dad said. “Boys! We’re leaving!”

Patton, Virgil, and Dee all ran over and after Roman said goodbye to Chad and his family, they made their way outside, where Roman’s grandparents were apparently gushing...to the heads of drama and tech. “Grandma! Granddad! Come on!” Roman groaned. “Why is everyone insistent on embarrassing me tonight?!”

“You embarrassed yourself!” Frank exclaimed into Roman’s ear.

Roman yipped and whirled around. Frank was smirking at him. “You brought this on yourself, Broadway Boy.”

“Whatsoever, Frank,” Roman shrugged off. “At least I cared about the performance! Just because I put my all in my performance doesn’t mean everyone has to tell me I’m destined for fame! I’m just...ready to sleep, honestly.”

Frank pulled a face at him. “Oh, you’re destined for Broadway, all right...although I think you might be more of a janitor than an actor.”

Logan adjusted his glasses and stared Frank down. “Who is this, Roman? The same Frank who was at your audition?”

“Yeah,” Roman said, stepping back to allow Logan to swoop in.

“Allow me to explain something to you, Frank,” Logan said, voice dripping venom. “Come high school, there are going to be a lot of people who enjoy things like theatre, or knitting, or even anime. Things you won’t be into. But they’ll be bigger and stronger than you. And if you mock them, you risk them fighting back. And despite your behavior, you seem somewhat smart. Smart enough to know that if you mess with the wrong person, you could get hurt. Do you want to get hurt, Frank?”

Frank gulped, and Roman was shocked at how Logan seemed to bring the biggest protective streak of all of his family into play. “No, I don’t...” Frank trailed off.

“Then I suggest this: get a hobby. Find something that you’re passionate about that isn’t mocking others. Maybe other people will like it, maybe not. But no matter what, you don’t make fun of others. Because trust me, high schoolers? Are not nearly as forgiving to obnoxious freshmen than middle school teachers are to eighth graders.”

Frank scurried away and Roman gave Logan a high-five. “Thanks, Lo.”

“Anytime, Roman. You of all people deserve to be respected. Especially after such a respectable performance at that,” Logan said. Roman turned a light pink, and Logan just shrugged. “It’s true.”
And, despite how much he protested to the contrary, Roman was inclined to genuinely believe him.
August 14th, 2004

Remy was standing at the altar, staring at the man who he fully intended to spend the rest of his life with. Emile had gone for the traditional black tuxedo, while Remy had decided to do the inverse, with white tux and black shirt. They were both grinning like mad, and Remy thought there would never be a day that he was happier. He could barely register the words of the priest, if he were being completely honest. All he could focus on was Emile, staring at him with all the love that his fiance-husband, he reminded himself-could muster...love for him. And he knew he was getting weepy.

As they said their vows, Remy’s voice started to get choked up, and by the end of them, when the priest declared them husbands, he was outright sobbing. Emile laughed, kindly, and pulled him in for a tender kiss. Remy couldn’t think of a better day he could possibly have.

May 5th, 2020

That morning, Emile got up early. Remy knew that he had to, but he wished he didn’t. “Mm. Honey?” he murmured, cracking his eyes open in the dim morning light.

“Just have to go to the doctor’s, remember?” Emile asked, leaning down for a kiss.

“I know,” Remy said, reaching up to meet Emile halfway. “I was asking about the morning kiss.”

Emile chuckled. “I could never forget our morning kiss, love. I’m getting dressed, then using the car to head to the doctor’s, all right? And I’ll be home by tonight, and the bump-whatever it is-will be gone.”

Remy nodded, sitting up and stretching. Emile got dressed and was out the door quickly, and Remy felt worry pang in his chest. Two weeks ago, Emile had noticed that he had some sort of bump over his right nipple. This was the quickest date the doctors could give him to get it removed and examined. Remy hoped it was nothing. He had promised to be there for Emile in sickness and in health, ‘til death do they part, but he had sincerely hoped the sickness wouldn’t happen like this, and that death was not an option this early.

As Remy got dressed and went downstairs, he could hear Logan’s alarm and some grumbling as he struggled to turn it off. Remy made a quick breakfast, enough for all the boys, and then headed back upstairs to wake up Patton, Virgil, and Dee. “Hey, boys, I know it’s early, but we’re gonna have to all carpool at once today,” Remy murmured to Patton and Virgil.

Once they were up, Remy went to Dee’s room. He only had to touch Dee’s shoulder lightly and the boy shot up in bed, blinking owlishly at the clock on his nightstand, then at Remy accusingly. “I
know, Dee, it’s early. But we have to all leave early today. I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Dee asked with a scowl.

“Because Dad can’t drive you to school today, it’s just me,” Remy said. “Now please just go downstairs for breakfast? Make this easy for me?”

The scowl melted into confusion. “Why can’t Dad drive?”

“It’s a long story, Dee, come on, let’s get breakfast,” Remy coaxed.

But Remy clearly underestimated Dee’s curiosity even when groggy and grumpy, because he signed, “I wanna hear the story.”

“Look, I can tell all of you after breakfast, all right?” Remy bargained. “But you need to eat soon.”

Dee huffed and got out of bed, and Remy followed him downstairs to find some very confused sons conversing with each other on why Patton and Virgil had to be up. When Remy entered the room, he was immediately bombarded with questions.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Why did you wake up Patton and Virgil early?”

“Why do we all have to go to school together?”

“Why can’t Dad drive us?”

“Why are you so worried?”

“Is Dad okay?”

“Where is Dad?”

“He’s not hurt, right?”

Remy held up a hand and forced a smile on his face, despite his worry. “Dad’s fine. He had to leave early today to talk to a doctor before he went to his clients, so he can’t drive you to school later like usual.”

Logan narrowed his eyes and Remy knew Logan had seen right through the ruse. “What kind of doctor? Is this someone’s GP? Or a psychiatrist? Or something else?”

“It’s...uh...” Remy wracked his brain for an excuse.

But it was no use. The second he hesitated, Roman jumped on him next. “Why did you hesitate? It’s an easy question! And Dad tells you everything!”

“Boys, please, I...” Remy trailed off. His eyes were stinging with salt from tears. “Please, just finish breakfast, I can explain in a minute.”

“Dad’s not seeing a doctor, is he?” Virgil asked.

“He is, he is seeing a doctor,” Remy insisted.

“Then why aren’t you saying where he is? Why couldn’t it wait?” Patton asked.
Remy felt some kind of anger inside him flare up and he exclaimed, “It has waited! He’s waited two weeks for this appointment which should have been made the day he needed it! He—”

“He what?” Logan asked. “Why is this an appointment?”

Remy tried to keep his breathing even, but he was having a really hard time with it. He couldn’t yell, he couldn’t yell, yelling would make the kids scared. But if he cried, that would just make matters worse. He had to stay calm, stay calm, stay calm, calm calm calm calm... “Because it’s not consulting over a patient. He’s the patient. He gets sick sometimes, it happens.”

“But if he’s sick, why did he have to wait two weeks? Most doctors will get you in within a day or two,” Patton said.

Remy’s breathing was strained. He leaned against the wall and covered his eyes with his free arm. “Boys, please...” he all but begged. “Please, we can explain later. When Dad’s back.”

“You said you’d explain after breakfast,” Dee accused softly.

“Is Dad okay?” Roman pressed.

Remy felt like his heart was breaking and he let his arm drop as he shouted, “I don’t know!”

Dee yipped and scurried around the table to Logan, Vanellope growled to show her displeasure at the loud noise, Patton and Virgil were eyeing him warily, and Roman sat there in shock. Only Logan was brave enough to speak, and he did so with a glare. “Don’t yell,” he said. “Too many of us have bad experience with yelling.”

Remy felt his temper flare up more and he growled. “I need five,” he ground out, stalking to his room and forcefully shutting the door. He punched the mattress, he kicked the bed frame, he screamed into two pillows at once in an attempt to muffle the sound. This wasn’t fair! Emile was a good person, he didn’t deserve to get sick like this! If he was, Remy wasn’t sure what he would do. He couldn’t raise these boys on his own, but he couldn’t send them away, either. And no one could replace Emile. In his heart or the boys’.

When he had replaced the pillows and his breath was heaving in his chest, and his tears were falling freely, Logan knocked on the door and called, “Ami, we have to leave for school. Everyone has everything ready.”

Remy took a deep breath and strode over to the door, opening it, and walked past Logan without saying anything. He shrugged on his jacket, grabbed his sunglasses, and silently herded everyone out to the car.

When they were halfway to Logan’s highschool, Logan stared out the passenger side window and asked, “What kind of doctor?”

Remy’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “Surgeon. And oncologist.”

Logan looked over and paled. He might have muttered a curse under his breath in another language, Remy wasn’t sure. “You’re...you’re serious?”

Remy nodded. “They’re doing a biopsy today. He wanted to save his clients’ time, so he took the earliest appointment they had open today, which was the first free day they had in two weeks.”

“What’s an oncologist?” Patton asked timidly from the backseat.
“It’s…” Roman swallowed. “A cancer doctor. They see if someone has cancer or not.”

“Dad has cancer?!” Virgil asked.

“We don’t know,” Remy said.

“That’s not helpful!” Virgil snapped.

“Don’t you think I know that?!” Remy exclaimed. “Why do you think I’m so upset! I don’t want this either!”

“Stop yelling,” Logan said. “Both of you. It gets nothing done.”

As they pulled up to Logan’s high school, Logan hugged Remy and whispered in his ear. “I’m sorry. Text me if you find out the news before school’s out?”

“Yeah,” Remy agreed. “And I apologize for yelling.”

“You’re stressed, it happens,” Logan said. “Just try not to do it again.”

Remy nodded and the trip to drop off the rest of the boys was done in silence, after an apology for shouting. Remy went to Sleep Easy, not because he had to pick up anyone’s shift, but because he couldn’t sit around the house trying to do finances knowing that his husband was with the doctors, trying to figure out what was going on.

At around noon, he got a text and his heart leaped into his chest when he saw it was from Emile. They don’t know yet. They’re fast-tracking the tests to make up for the wait for the appointment. Should know tonight or tomorrow.

Remy slipped his phone back into his pocket, trying to ignore the shaking in his hands. This left him with an incredibly bad feeling. Doctors didn’t fast-track tests for nothing.

The sign that he wasn’t holding it together as much as he thought was when his own employees insisted that he go home. They weren’t taking no for an answer, either. He reluctantly went home, to find Emile already there, car parked at the curb in its usual spot. He pulled the van into the driveway and got out of it as Emile came outside the house. “Logan texted me,” Emile said by way of greeting.

“Of course he did,” Remy sighed. “Emile—”

Emile crushed him in a hug and he said, “Sweetheart, please, in the future, let me know when you’re worried about me? He said you were worrying yourself sick this morning.”

Remy was surprised. “He said that?”

“Well, he said that you lost your temper a little, and you and I both know that only happens when you’re already overwhelmed. My tests being today led me to the conclusion that you were worried about me,” Emile said. “He also told me that you only lost your temper in front of them twice, and you were making the effort to remain calm, so I’m not mad at you. I will ask that you, obviously, work to avoid that in the future, but…” Remy was crying into Emile’s shoulder, and he was pretty sure that Emile could feel the tears soaking through his shirt, because he hugged Remy tighter and said, “C’mon, Rem. Inside. We can talk.”

And talk they did. A little about Remy’s behavior that morning, but mostly about how he was worried sick, about how this wasn’t fair, about how he didn’t know what he would do with the boys if Emile were sick.
“Hon, you’re acting like I’ve already gotten the diagnosis,” Emile said. “We don’t even know that, yet. All right? Deep breaths. One thing at a time.”

Remy nodded. Though admittedly the rest of the day passed in a blur. Emile picked the boys up, because he had taken the whole day off from his therapy practice once he realized he didn’t know how long the appointment might go. As the boys came in, Remy gave a personal apology to each of them. Logan nodded at his, Roman said he was already forgiven, Patton and Virgil said they had never gotten an apology before for this, so of course he was forgiven, and Dee silently hugged him tight, crying as hard as Remy had earlier.

The whole house froze when Emile’s cell phone rang. He picked it up calmly in the middle of making dinner, saying, “Hello?”

Remy dimly recognized the TV being turned down from the den, and one of the boys opening the door to the basement to listen. “You’re sure?” Emile asked, and Remy’s heart leapt into his throat. “Okay. Okay, thank you. Is there anything I need to do?...Okay, thank you.”

He hung up and looked around, noticing everyone looking at him for the first time. “Boys,” he said with a laugh. “It was a cyst. Benign. I’m not dying! Remain calm!”

Roman whooped and ran back into the basement and Patton and Virgil cheered. Remy crushed Emile in a hug which Emile gently returned. “Like I said, one thing at a time, honey. You didn’t have to worry about anything you were thinking through today.”

Remy choked on a laugh and held Emile close. “I love you,” he said. “I don’t say that often enough.”

Emile kissed him lightly. “I love you too. Now, let’s finish dinner.”
Chapter 49

February 16th, 2004

Emile felt Remy shoot upright in bed with a gasp, again, for the third time this week. He was shaking the mattress, and Emile reached over, putting a reassuring hand on Remy’s arm. “R’my,” he mumbled into the pillows. “I’m getting you a therapist.”

“I don’t need—”

“Not a question, Rem,” Emile said. “This is the third time this week you’ve had a nightmare. All about your parents being invited to our wedding. I’m getting you a therapist. Because I can’t do it all the time.”

Remy sighed and fell back onto the bed, looking at Emile. “I’m sorry for waking you up,” he mumbled.

“No big deal, hon,” Emile said. “Just try to rest well.”

May 12th, 2020

Emile could see that Remy was approaching the end of his rope. It had been a week since Emile had gone to the doctors, a week since Remy had snapped at the kids. And the kids clearly still felt uncomfortable around him as a result. But it killed Remy to know that the boys were upset around him because of something he did, and he could have controlled. Emile could see it in his every move and every attempt at a smile; his husband was spiralling, and Emile would have to act fast to keep Remy from self-destructing.

So when they had finished dinner that night, only Emile looking Remy in the eye long enough to give him a smile, he cleared his throat before Logan, always the first to leave, could gather up his plate and retreat to his room. “We need to have a family meeting tonight,” he said, voice measured and calm. “You can take your plate to the kitchen, but please come back once you have.”

Logan gave him a nervous look but complied. Roman did the same soon after, and none of the other kids even took their plates to the kitchen, just pushed them away and looked at Emile.

Emile sighed. “I’d like to talk about what happened while I was gone last Tuesday. Understand that I am not mad at any of you, okay? I just want to clear the air a little.”

The boys all looked at each other but slowly agreed. Emile ran a hand through his hair. “I know that Remy lost his temper with you boys that morning. I know that he also apologized to all of you, and you said he was forgiven. But I also know that you boys have been nervous around him since.”

Anxious glances were exchanged. “I’m not mad, remember? I’m just saying what I’ve noticed,” Emile reminded. “You have every right to be nervous around Remy. Considering what some of you have been through, I’m surprised that’s all that’s happened. But if that’s what is happening, I’d like you to say outright that you need a little time. Because if you just grow quiet whenever Remy enters a room, or if he tried to initiate physical touch only for you to shy away instead of just saying, ‘I’m not comfortable with that right now’ hurts him too.”
The room was silent for a minute. Remy was the first to speak, and Emile didn’t realize that Remy could still sound so timid. “It’s really not a big deal, Emile,” he mumbled into his hands. “I made my bed. Now I have to lie in it.”

“Remy,” Emile said sternly. “That’s your parents’ rhetoric. And it’s unhealthy. You accepting something that is only going to hurt you in the long run shouldn’t be your first course of action.”

“You said yourself the boys have every right to be scared of me,” Remy said.

“Yeah, and you have every right to feel hurt and express that hurt in a healthy manner!” Emile said. “I won’t have you undoing years of progress after moving out of your parents’ place over a slip up that could have happened to anyone!”

Remy flinched, and Emile sighed. “I know emotions are still running high from the situation, but that’s why we have to talk about it now,” he said, forcing his voice to stay calm. “Would anyone like to go first in saying how they feel?”

Silence filled the room. They could hear the ticking of a clock somewhere in the house as well as Vanellope’s nails clicking across the kitchen floor. “No volunteers? Fine, I’ll go first,” Emile said. “That day? I was absolutely terrified. I didn’t know what the doctors were going to say, if they were going to need more tests, if I was going to need intensive treatment that meant I couldn’t help with you boys as much as I’d like. I knew that I didn’t have great odds. And it terrified me. I was so scared that I almost left the house before any of you, including Remy, were up. I didn’t want you guys to see how scared I was. Because as much as I try to take things one step at a time, sometimes anxiety does get the better of you.”

When he was done saying his piece, Logan flinched. “My natural response to fear is anger,” he said. “When Ami said that...that we didn’t know if you were okay or not, I instantly knew that the odds weren’t high and I covered up the fear of what that meant with the anger that we were getting yelled at. It was easier for me to focus on something I could fight.”

“I heard the word oncologist and...I don’t know.” Roman shrugged. “It was like the entire world just...stopped. I worked hard to get this far into this life, and I’ve grown to enjoy it more than I ever thought I would. The possibility that it could have been taken away...wasn’t pleasant. I was never mad at Ami for yelling. But now all I can hear whenever I look at either of you is that stupid word, on repeat, reminding me how easy it would be to have this life ripped away from me too.”

“When Ami shouted...it reminded me of Charles,” Patton admitted softly. “And yeah, Charles never apologized for shouting, but he’d do it again and again, even if someone told him not to. I’m still expecting the other shoe to drop. I’m still waiting to be yelled at.”

Virgil muttered his reluctant agreement.

Dee sat at the table, staring at his hands. Eventually, he looked at Remy, and signed, “I don’t mean to be scared of you. I just don’t like loud noises. And that was the first time I heard you make a loud noise. It scared me. I didn’t realize that I was trying to avoid you.”

Remy buried his head in his hands. “This was supposed to make me feel better?” he asked. “Because I’m feeling worse, now.”

Emile sighed. “We’re explaining how we felt that day, Rem. You’re allowed to explain yourself, too. You apologized, that’s as much as you can do for yelling. Why don’t you explain why you did that? Not as a justification, but in an attempt for others to understand what happened?”
“I...I don’t know what happened,” Remy said. He removed his head from his hands but he stared at the table. “I make a point for me to not lose my temper. I leave a situation as soon as I can if I’m angry purely so I don’t lose my temper in front of others who I can hurt. I don’t...I don’t know what happened. I was just...I don’t know! I was confused, and hurt, and scared, and I felt trapped because I had to take all of you to school, so I couldn’t cool off somewhere else first! But I don’t lose my temper! Not unless something is so unspeakably bad that I can’t even...face the issue. I...I don’t lose my temper if I can help it. I don’t...I don’t want to be my parents. I don’t want to yell at you guys in order to keep you in line, or to hurt you when you step out of line. You weren’t even out of line when you asked questions, you just wanted to make sure Dad was okay...and I went and screwed the pooch. Again. Just like old times.”

The house was silent after that. No one could hear Vanellope moving, even the ticking of the clock seemed to fade away into nothing. “You didn’t screw the pooch,” Emile said. “You said yourself that you were hurt. You lashed out because you were afraid of being hurt more. It’s not a good response, but it is one you apologized for. You can’t beat yourself up over it anymore, Rem. The boys can’t help being worried any more than you can change the past. But you’re not your parents. Did your parents ever apologize for yelling?”

Remy looked away. “According to you, they guilt-tripped, never apologized.”

“So, no. Did your parents make an effort to avoid yelling after they realized it scared you?” Emile continued.

“No,” Remy said.

“Did they even show a shred of remorse for their actions?” Emile asked. “At any point in your life? Ever?”

“No,” Remy muttered.

“And yet, all the things you said your parents didn’t do, you’ve done in the past week since you lost your temper. You’re not your parents, Rem. And the boys aren’t scared of you. They’re anxious, yes, but not because of anything you can help. They know that you’re sorry. Sometimes it just takes a while for knowing and feeling to match up.”

“And you can’t force feelings, no matter how hard you try,” Remy muttered, sulking.

“Exactly,” Emile said. “Now, I know this might not make everyone feel better immediately, but now we know everyone’s thoughts about that day. We know that each of us was only responding due to stress. The pathways of discussion have opened, somewhat. And that’s a start. It’s a good start. You all can go do whatever you need to before bed, now, all right? Just remember to be mindful of others, and make sure that you aren’t hurting them.”

The boys left the table quickly, but Emile and Remy stayed. Emile mover over to Remy and kissed his cheek from behind, murmuring, “Do you want to talk in private a little more?”

Remy hummed his agreement, and Emile walked with Remy upstairs, and they got situated on their bed. Remy put his head in Emile’s lap the second Emile sat down, and Emile played with his hair. Silence stretched between the two of them. “What if I’m a bad person?” Remy whispered.

“You’re not,” Emile said.

“But what if I am?” Remy insisted.

Emile looked down at Remy and didn’t fail to notice the unshed tears in his eyes. “Would I have
fallen in love with you if you were a bad person?”

Remy thought about it. “I don’t think so...but people change,” he said.

“True. You have changed. But it’s for the better,” Emile said. “When we first met, if you had done what you did last week, you would have tried to justify your actions or said that the other person was being too sensitive. The longer you’ve been away from your parents, the better you’ve gotten.

You’re still flawed, because humans are all flawed no matter how perfect they try to be. It took me a couple months of knowing you to actually develop feelings for you, Rem. Because you came off as so abrasive at first.

“You shoved everyone away whenever possible, and snarled at the thought of having friends other than me. You snarled at the thought of being friends with me, actually, for a good few weeks. You didn’t want to be attached to anyone, too afraid of what your parents might say. But the more distance you put between yourself and them, the kinder you became.”

Remy turned red. “Was I really that bad?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Emile said, not bothering to sugarcoat what he knew would be a blow to Remy’s ego either way. “But that’s not my point. My point is how you’ve changed from that, into the person I know today. By yourself, without your parents’ influence, you’re a little snarky, but you also look out for others, and you’re mindful of their feelings. You don’t play off hurt feelings as a joke anymore. You don’t try to justify your actions when they wound up being the wrong decision. But you also can’t beat yourself up over a mistake. One mistake doesn’t make you your parents, Rem.”

“How can you know?” Remy asked.

“Because your parents did what they did to you deliberately. Whether or not they thought they were helping you, they knew what they were doing and they made the conscious choice to repeat it, even after you expressed your displeasure. You reacted, they simply acted. You made a knee-jerk response. They made a conscious decision. And, yeah, their decision is why you have that fight response. But just because your instinct is to fight, doesn’t mean that you’re a bad person.”

“Seeing that Remy still wasn’t convinced, Emile wracked his brain for something to say. “You know, there’s sayings out there that your first thought is what you’ve been taught to think, and your second thought shows who you are. Your first thought was to yell, and shout down the problem. Your second thought was to apologize, and attempt to make amends. Would your parents have done that, Rem? To you?”

“Remy’s gaze drifted away from Emile. “No. Even when I could actually tell them they were hurting me, they acted like I didn’t know what I was talking about, that I was ungrateful for their ‘help,’ that I was too sensitive to ‘a little discipline.’ That wasn’t discipline, it was punishment. But they didn’t care about that. They only cared that I was quiet and followed their rules.”

“Then you’re not your parents, hon. And more importantly, you’re not a bad person,” Emile insisted.

Remy sighed, covering his eyes with an arm. “I screwed up, didn’t I?”

“Only a little,” Emile assured. “And we’re working to fix it. It’s just a bump in the road, Rem. We’ll be okay.”

“I hope so,” Remy murmured.

“I know so,” Emile insisted, kissing the crown of Remy’s forehead.

There was the squeal of, “Gross!” from the doorway, and Emile and Remy laughed. “Something we
can help you with, Dee?” Emile asked.

Dee came over and looked at Remy, before turning Remy's head toward the card that the boys had made at Christmas. “Remember our card,” Dee said. “Our cards don’t go to bad people.” And without another word, he left.

“How did he know exactly what to say?” Remy asked, looking up at Emile.

Emile shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he picked it up from you.”
Chapter 50

July 13th, 2018

Roman didn’t understand. There was a woman walking down the street, and people were laughing and jeering at her. She had a bit of a five o’clock shadow, and her jaw was a little more square than most women, but she was wearing a dress and she had breasts, so she had to be a woman, right?

He didn’t say anything as she passed him, but he smiled kindly at her and mouthed, “You’re beautiful.”

She lit up like he had just hung the moon and signed something, that Roman thought was a “Thank you.”

“Roman!” the horrible woman shouted. “Don’t socialize with those types! You will not be that in my house!”

Roman cringed, but he stood by his words. He thought the woman was truly beautiful.

June 16th, 2020

Roman was excited. Some might say a little too excited, but no one could really blame him. He was going through his freshman orientation at the local high school, and had signed up for all his classes, making sure to pick Drama as one of his class choices. As his backup, he had put Drawing and Pottery, because both of those could be pretty cool, too, but he really hoped he got to have Drama as his art course.

The high school was a big place, but right now, he was just eating lunch with Chad and a few of the kids they had gotten to go on a tour of the buildings with. All of them were talking about what classes they wanted to take and clubs they wanted to join with wide eyes. Roman knew he had a bit of the excitement bug too, but his was curbed somewhat. “Trust me, guys, it seems cool now but there’s gonna come a day where you can’t wait for summer break,” Roman said. “Logan insists that he’s ready for winter break by October.”

“Your older brother is hardly a paragon of knowledge,” one of the girls, Ellie, snorted.

“True, but he’s going to be a senior next year, so I think he knows what he’s talking about,” Roman said. “Anecdotally speaking.”

“Mm, I agree with Roman,” one of the boys, Rocky, said. “My older sister can’t stand going to high school by November.”

“Wait, is your brother Logan Picani?” a third kid, a girl by the name of Maria, asked.

“Yes? Do you know him?” Roman asked. Suddenly he felt like he needed to be on guard and he didn’t know why.

“My older brother knows her. She’s the transsexual that was in his calc class,” Maria said. She wrinkled her nose. “Personally, I don’t understand why anyone would make that sort of life choice.”
Roman blinked once. Twice. Saw red for a couple seconds. Took a deep breath. Laughed with ice and venom blending together in his voice. “Okay, first of all, he is transgender, not transsexual. Transsexual is an outdated term that many people in the community find offensive, from what I’ve been told. Second of all, being transgender is not a choice. He wanted to be true to himself and because his parents disagreed, he was kicked out. So my dads adopted him. Being transgender isn’t easy. It brings all sorts of unwanted attention, and Logan has told me that if he had the chance to be cis, with either gender on the binary, he would take it.

“He gets all sorts of rude comments, from people who are close-minded bigots like your brother. And if you point me in the direction of your brother, I’d love to knock some common sense and LGBT terminology into his head. Especially considering that I’m bi and would like to be respected that way. So, let’s see: my dads are a gay couple, my older brother’s trans and queer, I’m bi, one of my younger siblings is nonbinary. Is there anything else I can say about my family that would disgust you into leaving this group and never calling my brother a transsexual again?”

Maria stared at him, shock and disgust warring for control on her face. “How could you possibly encourage that sort of thing?! Don’t you know you can go to Hell for that?”

“Provided that even is true, which I severely doubt, Hell will be fabulous and I will happily live with my brothers, my sibling, and my two dads there for all eternity. But if you can go to Hell for being gay, why would a higher power even make gay people? Huh? Riddle me that!”

“It’s obviously a test,” Maria snapped back. “Proving that you’re strong in your faith, and you won’t give in to the temptation of sexual desires!”

Roman blinked. “Wow. I...just...wow. I feel really sorry for you, Maria. Your parents must be real pieces of work for you to believe that.”

Maria huffed and crossed her arms. “Whatever. I don’t approve of your choices, but we can still be friends. Love the sinner and hate the sin.”

“Uh, no, we can’t be friends, because the ‘sin’ you’re hating is literally a piece of me. Frankly, if you believe all that BS that you just spouted, I wouldn’t want to be friends with you anyway. That’s just wrong on so many levels.”

Maria growled, grabbed her lunch, and stood. “Well, then. I hope you enjoy Hell, because that’s where you’re going!”

“God is dead, and the gays killed Him!” Chad hollered after her back, laughing.

“Oof, I’m glad we avoided that one early,” Ellie said.

“Yeah,” Roman agreed. “Honestly, I don’t think that Hell...is a place? Exactly? And you certainly don’t go there for loving someone who’s the same gender as you.”

Murmured agreement came from the whole group. “What does nonbinary mean?” Rocky asked.

“Oh, it just means you don’t feel like you’re a boy or a girl,” Roman said, returning to his lunch.

There was a beat of silence before Rocky asked, “There’s a word for that?!”

“Yes...?” Roman asked. “Do you feel like that fits you?”

“Yeah, a little!” Rocky agreed. “I always felt like...kind of a boy, kind of not? It’s confusing. But I don’t have to be a boy, I can be nonbinary!”
“Yeah! Look up nonbinary stuff online, you’ll learn a bunch, and you might find a more specific label that you like,” Roman encouraged.

Rocky pulled out his phone with a grin and Chad laughed. “Well, today is a day full of discoveries, huh?” he asked. “I think I see my parents pulling up, though, so I’ll have to say goodbye for now. I’ll see you guys around this summer, and at school in September!”

“Yeah, see you!” Roman said, as everyone else bid Chad goodbye, too.

Soon after, Roman saw Logan pull up in the school parking lot, and get out of the car. Unfortunately, Maria was walking over to a car two spaces down, and a guy who looked like he could be a linebacker for the football team was waiting for her. Roman said his goodbye’s quickly and jogged over to Logan. “Hey, man, let’s get out of here,” Roman hissed. “That girl with the freckles? Massive transphobe, and her brother—”

“I’m well aware of who her brother is,” Logan said coolly. “Jeremy has seen fit to torment me ever since I legally got my name changed. Insists on using it only because it’s what’s on my papers, but claims that because I’m still ‘Female’ on my birth certificate—which he doesn’t even know for sure—that he can use ‘she’ and ‘her’ for me. He’s a brat.”

Roman pulled a face. “Gross.”

“Indeed,” Logan said.

Maria caught a glimpse of them and stalked over, her brother following behind. “He’s the one! He’s the one who said that I’m wrong!”

“Well, yeah, you are wrong,” Roman said. “I’m not going to Hell. Even if I were, I would be happy to go.”

“Should have known he was the brother of the tranny, here,” Jeremy sneered.

Roman scowled and balled his hands into fists, sucker-punching Jeremy hard right below the ribcage. Jeremy crumpled inward, gasping for air. “Don’t call my brother that word ever again!”

Roman bellowed. “C’mon, Lo. Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

“No complaints from me,” Logan said. They both got in the car and drove away. Once they were on the road, Logan said, “You realize Dad and Ami are probably going to get a very angry call from either that idiot’s mother or someone from the school?”

“Eh,” Roman said with a shrug. “Worth it.”

“I certainly hope so,” Logan sighed, “Because you just put a giant target on your back.”

Roman shrugged again. “I’m not going to stand by while you get insulted, Logan.”


Roman gave Logan a grin. “That’s a high compliment you know. Sounding like your boyfriend.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Logan said, shaking his head and smirking.

“Oh, so I guess I should tell your boyfriend your highly-esteemed opinion of him?” Roman asked, snatching Logan’s phone from the cupholder it had been residing in.
“Roman!” Logan shrieked indignantly, using one hand to blindly grab for his phone even as he kept his eyes on the road. “Give me that!”

Roman gleefully held it out of Logan’s reach as he dictated what he was typing. “Hey Jack...Roman here. Your boyfriend thinks that comparing someone to you...isn’t...a...compliment! Ha!”

“Give it back!” Logan exclaimed, lunging for the phone and yanking it free of Roman’s grasp, at the price of nearly swerving off the road.

“Too late, it’s already sent!” Roman exclaimed.

Logan locked his phone and dropped it back in the cupholder. “I hate you.”

Roman laughed unapologetically. “This is Jack, Lo. I doubt he’d break up with you over that. If anything, he’ll probably just respond with a ‘mood’ and be done with it.”

“I’m not worried about me, I’m worried about you,” Logan said.

As if on cue, Roman got three text alert messages in a row, and he could see they were all from Jack. More kept coming, and he arched his eyebrows. “How many texts is Jack going to send?”

“ Probably around fifty,” Logan said casually. “Most of them about stealing my phone to send text messages, a couple calling you a snitch, some memes, at least one asking if I’m driving and that’s how you got to send the text, and the final two will probably be a ‘thank you for telling me’ and ‘but mood.’”

Roman watched his text count go up and his blood pressure with it. “This is ridiculous,” he muttered.

“This is Jack,” Logan said with a laugh. “It’s how he is always.”

“Doesn’t that get exhausting?” Roman asked.

“Well, he’s always tired, but I doubt that’s the reason,” Logan said. “If that’s the only life you ever know, and the only attitude you’ve ever had, I doubt it would be as exhausting as it is to you now.”

Roman made a huh noise. “Don’t you ever get overstimulated talking to him?”

Logan glanced at Roman. “I mean, sometimes, I guess. But not usually. I’ve gotten used to his energy, as it’s grown as both of us grew. To me, he has the same energy levels as he did when we were in kindergarten and he asked if he could call me ‘Jessie.’”

“Did you slug him for that?” Roman asked.

“Well I didn’t know I was trans yet,” Logan said. “So I wouldn’t have punched him over that. I just really hated the nickname. Though I don’t think I punched him for it. Because he asked once and then never again. Apparently I looked completely disgusted at the thought of being called that.”

Roman got quiet, all of his current questions answered. A thought occurred to him, along with a new question. “Do you think of yourself as...you know...your deadname, when you think back into the past?”

Logan hummed. “You know, I try not to, but when I think back to before I realized I was trans, I almost always think of myself as either ‘Jessica’ or ‘pre-Logan.’ I know most trans people eventually adjust and they say, ‘When I was a little boy,’ or ‘This is a picture of a tiny whatever-their-name-is.’ I haven’t made that adjustment. I’m not sure I’m ever going to, at this point.”
“That’s fair,” Roman said. “I don’t ever think of you as...as that, but—”

“Roman, you can say it. You can say Jessica, it’s not a dirty word,” Logan said. “So long as you don’t call me by that as if it were still my name, you can use it around me. It took me a while to distance myself from it, but now I can hear the name without flinching. You don’t ever think of me as Jessica. Just the sentiment behind that means I trust you to use that name, just never on me.”

“Yeah. I don’t ever think of you as Jessica, but it’s weird seeing traditionally feminine clothing on you. Jack showed me some old yearbooks, and I nearly got whiplash,” Roman said. “And I’ll always use Logan when referring to you, even as a little kid. Because the whole, ‘back when he was a she’ or ‘when current name was deadname’ thing is just scummy, especially if you don’t have permission to out that person.”

Logan smiled. “You’re one of the good ones, Roman. Thank you. Would you be willing to go to the GSA next year?”

“Definitely,” Roman said, nodding. “Especially because you’re Vice President.”
Chapter 51

September 13th, 2017

Dee looked out the window of their house with awe. “Mama! Look!” he signed as Mama walked into the room.

“What’s up, Dee?” Mama asked.

“The leaves! They’re changing colors!” Dee signed animatedly, pointing.

“Yeah, I told you they do that,” Mama said, amused.

“But it’s really pretty!” Dee signed. “You never said it was so pretty!”

Mama laughed and gave him a hug. “The leaves fall off the trees too,” she said. “And you can collect them off the ground and keep the ones with really pretty colors.”

Dee gasped. “Really?!” he signed.

“Really,” Mama said, smiling. “Do you want to go out now and look?”

“Yeah!” Dee bounced in place. “I wanna go out and collect leaves!”

Mama let out a small laugh. “Okay, let’s go outside, then.”

June 20th, 2020

It took all the self-control Dee had to not sprint through the parking lot of the library. He had seen the flyer the last time that Patton and Virgil had gone book-hunting there; apparently a reptile exhibit was happening today. They were bringing in lizards, and turtles, and chameleons, but most importantly: they were bringing in snakes. Real life snakes! That Dee could actually hold!

He was scurrying into the library already, even as Dad just barely got onto the sidewalk. “Dee! Wait up!”

Dee turned in dismay, but nevertheless waited for Dad to catch up to him before walking inside and heading straight for the kid’s section, where the reptiles were going to be displayed all day. He ran through the halls, which were pretty empty for a Saturday morning, and zeroed in on the space in the center of the library where the tanks were set up.

He talked a little with the nice man who was feeding the reptiles, and by talking he meant Dee was signing and Dad was translating for him. When the man got used to only asking Dee yes or no questions, Dad gently nudged Dee and said, “I’ll be looking for the books Patton and Virgil wanted, okay?”

Dee nodded and let Dad leave. He was having fun looking at all the reptiles, and the man was teaching him how to hold snakes. He was handed a corn snake and his eyes lit up like he had never seen something so amazing. He wasn’t sure what exactly he was going to say to the snake, but he wanted to tell the snake how amazing and cool it was.
“Dee?” a familiar voice asked.

Dee turned from where he was holding the corn snake to see someone observing him with shock. Dee swallowed thickly. He couldn’t believe it. He just...couldn’t believe it. “Mama?” he hesitantly signed, careful not to jostle the snake wrapping itself around his arm.

“It is you!” she exclaimed, walking over from where she was helping with one of the tanks. “You’ve grown so much!”

Dee stared. “Mama...what are you doing here?”

“This is part of my sentence,” Mama said, a bitter note in her voice. “They gave me five years of prison time, and I volunteered to help with this for community service. They’re keeping a close eye on me so I can’t leave but...” She shook her head. “I can’t believe I get to see you again!”

“Dee, I found the books Virgil was looking for, are you still enjoying the...snakes...” Dad trailed off as he got closer. His eyes were as cold as ice as he stared at Mama. “What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here?! I'm doing community service! What are you doing here?!” Mama spat.

“Dee's only seven, he can't run around unsupervised,” Dad growled.

Dee looked between the both of them with surprise. They definitely recognized each other, but where would Dad have seen Mama other than Dee's picture?

_The court case_, his mind supplied. _After Mama got arrested._

Well, that wasn't good, especially if Dad got Mama to go to prison on purpose. He really didn't want to think about what that might mean. But of course, he had to think about it, because it was unfolding right before his very eyes.

“—Telling me how to parent _my own child?!_” Mama asked indignantly. “The only reason you even know about him is sheer dumb luck! You said so yourself!”

“And that fact is the reason why you don't get a say in Dee's life anymore! You abandoned him on the street! That's child neglect, which is a _crime_!” Dad roared.

Dee backed up a little against the tanks, focusing on the weight of the snake he was holding. But as things looked like they might escalate into a screaming match, Dee hastily let the head of the group have the snake back and stood in between Mama and Dad. He knew he was crying, but he couldn't let the fight continue.

Dad reeled backwards with a jerk, suddenly going extremely quiet. Mama was...Dee swallowed. Mama was now glaring at him. “Dee, get out of the way.”

Dee swallowed, but shook his head.

“Dee, that wasn't a request. Move, _now._”

Dee just stood there, shaking like a leaf.

“Deagan Timothy Russel, you move right now or—”

“It's Picani,” Dee said softly.

“What?” Mama asked.
Dee cleared his throat. “Deagan Timothy Picani, not Russel. They changed it when I got adopted.”

That, apparently, was not the right thing to say. Mama went red and shoved Dee aside, nearly sending him careening into the tanks and the carts holding them. She was all set to go on a tirade, but Dad’s eyes flashed dangerously and he beat her to the punch. “You...you shoved Dee?!”

Mama growled. “He refused to move. He’s not hurt!”

Dee couldn’t say that for sure. His feelings were definitely damaged. For a year and a half now, he said to himself that Mama might have made mistakes, but she wasn’t as bad as Patton and Virgil’s mom, or Charles. But she’d thrown him aside the second he had gotten in her way. More tears welled up in his eyes. Did he really mean that little to her? Did she only act nice to him when he behaved by her rules?

“Are you seriously saying he’s not hurt when he’s standing right there, crying?!” Dad asked incredulously. “I backed down when he tried to get us to stop! You’re escalating the situation and making everything worse!”

“Escalating?! I’m escalating?! You’re the one who started yelling first!” Mama snapped.

A man in a police uniform was walking over, hands outstretched in an attempt to placate. “Miss Russel...”

“I’m sober! I’ve gotten better! But you still deny visitation rights! You’re the one who makes sure I can’t write Dee, I can’t call him, I don’t get the chance to tell him how much I love him!” Mama exclaimed.

Dee covered his ears with his hands in an attempt to block out the shouting, but it all just became jumbled and distorted instead. He closed his eyes shut tight, but his tears just kept falling. All he wanted was to see the snakes, how had this gone so wrong?!

Mama was screaming now, no words, just noise, and Dee opened his eyes to see the man wrestling with her to keep her off Dad. Dee watched with wide eyes as she clawed free and slapped Dad, nails digging into his cheek and drawing blood. “Stop!” he exclaimed. “You’re hurting him!”

Mama just continued to stride forward, attacking Dad every chance she got. “Mama, stop!” Dee exclaimed again. “Mama, stop hurting Dad! Please!”

When she turned to him, Dee couldn’t see any love in her eyes, only bitter anger and hatred. “He’s convinced you that I’m the bad guy, Dee, but he’s the one who’s hurting you! We can be better, I got the treatment I needed, and once I’m out of jail, I can be with you again!”

Dee shook his head. “Dad d-didn’t con-con-convince...convince me that you were a bad guy, Mama. You...you did th-that on your own.”

Mama stared at him in shock. “Where did the sweet little boy I knew go?” she asked.

Dee’s eyes hardened, even as he felt tears continuing to fall. “He died the day you abandoned me,” he signed. “I’m all that’s left.”

The man managed to get handcuffs on Mama, and Dad came over to Dee. “Dee, are you all right?”

“Fine, Dad,” Dee mumbled. He glanced at Mama. “Why’s she staring at me?”

“Well, you are rocking pretty hard, buddy. You’re really upset,” Dad said.
Dee nodded. “Understatement,” he signed. “I don’t wanna talk anymore.”

“That’s okay, Dee, we won’t make you talk,” Dad said. “Do you want to go back to the snakes? I’ll deal with your mom and the guard, okay?”

Dee nodded again. “I know now why you didn’t want me to see her,” he signed, hiccuping.

Dad smiled sadly. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, hugging Dee, and Dee hugged back desperately.

Then he was gone and Dee turned back to the man who was handling the reptiles, who was staring at the scene in shock. He shook himself, before turning to Dee. “Do you want to hold a python?” he offered.

Dee nodded eagerly, willing himself to forget about that encounter, and letting himself focus on the awesomeness of being able to hold a ball python. It was a little heavy, but the man helped him hold the snake, whose name was Susie, upright. Whenever she slithered towards Dee’s neck, the man would redirect Susie onto one of his arms before letting her curl back up around Dee’s hands.

Soon enough, Dad was back, and he was smiling, however pained that smile looked. “Hey, Dee,” he said. “Do you want to play with the snakes some more or do you want to find some books and check out?”

“Mama?” Dee asked, hands shaking.

“Not going to bother you, Dee, I promise,” Dad said. “She’s being taken back to the detention center they put her in.”

That was kinda good, Dee supposed, but he was still sad. “I wanna go home,” he signed.

Dad nodded, thanked the man who took Susie back, and they went to the nonfiction section so Dee could pick out a few books on snakes. Then they checked out and were on their way home.

When they got back, Dee felt listless, and he knew all his brothers were worried when they asked him about the snakes but he just signed, “Not right now,” and face-planted into the couch.

Everyone tried to get Dee to talk to them, but he wasn’t really in the mood. He just laid there on the couch with no way to handle what he was thinking about, the fight playing over and over and over in its mind, and he couldn’t block it out no matter how much he tried.

After a while, he could hear more footsteps approaching him and he internally sighed. He still didn’t want to talk to anyone. There was a soft, but firm hand placed on Dee’s right shoulder blade, and he grimaced. If there was anyone he didn’t want to talk to at all right now, it was Dad and Ami. “Dee, Dad told me about what happened at the library. Are you okay?”

Dee propped his head up with one arm and shook it while looking at Ami’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect you to be. Do you want to explain what happened?” Ami asked.

Dee sat up and sighed, looking at Ami. “Mama and Dad fought, and it was really scary,” he signed.

“I’ll bet,” Ami said. “Dad’s really scary if he yells. Did he yell?”

“Yeah,” Dee signed. “And Mama pushed me, and I thought she loved me but I think she only loved me when I was being good. And she stared at me when I rocked.”

Ami winced. “That sounds tough,” he said softly. “I’m really sorry you had to deal with that. Did
“Yeah, I did,” Dee signed, smiling softly. “They were really smooth, and not slimy at all. So Patton calling snakes slimy boys was wrong. That was funny.”

“I think he picked that up from Roman. Did you like anything else about them?” Ami asked.

Dee nodded. “They were really nice! They just wrapped themselves around my hands and my arms and chilled there! I loved them so so so much, and I wish I got to tell them that in a way that they’d understand.”

“I’m sure they know anyway,” Ami assured. “If you were gentle with them, they definitely know that you love them, and they probably think you’re pretty cool to boot.”

Dee’s eyes widened. “Really?” he signed hopefully.

“Really,” Ami said, smiling. “Is there anything else you know about the snakes that you want to tell me?”

Dee delved into a very lengthy discussion about everything he knew about all snakes, ever, and he was starting to feel a little better because of it. When he was done, he felt better enough to actually wave to Dad when he came in to apologize. Seeing Mama had shaken him, but he knew for certain now that he definitely belonged in the Picani family, and staying with Mama would have hurt him. And while that information made him a little sad, he was also really happy that he was loved here.
March 4th, 2019

“What’s the use? I’m never going to pick this up!” Roman groaned.

Emile sat across from him at the table and sighed. “You need to know what Dee is saying, in case no one is around to translate, Roman. It’s important to know even the basics; if you can’t get the grammar right away, no big deal, but you need to know certain signs.”

Roman leaned back in his chair and scrubbed his face with his hands. “Okay. Okay, I’ll try, if only so the new kid can tell me when he needs the bathroom.”

Emile sighed. “Okay. So this is ‘I love you,’” he said, making the sign.

Roman blinked. “When would I ever need that?!” he asked

Emile shrugged. “You never know. ‘I love you.’ Can you make the sign?”

Roman rolled his eyes but complied.

“All right. Next sign is for pain...”

July 15th, 2020

Roman sat across from Dee on Dee’s bed, staring intently at Dee’s hands. Dee was doing the same to him. Roman’s palms were facing towards the ceiling, held out in a casual position. Dee held the same position, but under Roman’s hands. In a blur of movement, Dee brought his hands up but Roman moved his away before Dee could smack his palms. Dee groaned and flopped backwards on his bed, while Roman laughed. “Face it, Dee, I will always, always be faster than you at this. Or at least I’ll always be faster while I get practice at school and with friends.”

Dee pouted. “You’re no fun,” he signed, sitting up again with a grunt.

“I’m plenty of fun,” Roman said, placing a hand on his chest. “You just want to win.”

“Well, yeah,” Dee signed, making a face that quite clearly said *duh.*

Roman sighed. “Well, we’ve still got some time to do whatever while Patton and Virgil are gone. Anything else you want to do?”

Dee shrugged. “I dunno. How’s Logan?”

“Logan’s sleeping, last I checked,” Roman said. Logan had been feeling under the weather for a couple days, and caught a fever in the early morning, after which Dad and Ami promptly sent him back to bed with instructions to rest. “He should feel better in the next couple days, but while he has the flu, he just has to rest.”

“I want him to feel better,” Dee signed.

“You and me both,” Roman muttered. “He helped me when I was sick when he first got here. I can’t
even return the favor, though.”

“But you are, kinda,” Dee signed. “You’re looking after me while everyone else is gone so that Logan doesn’t have to.”

Roman hadn’t considered that. “I guess so,” he allowed. “Do you want to play with tinker toys?” Dee nodded. “Can we figure out how to make a catapult this time?” he asked.

“We can certainly try,” Roman agreed.

They spent a majority of the morning in Dee’s room, playing with the various tinker toys, trying to figure out if any of them could be bent in the way the catapult needed, while still being stiff enough for the job. Short that, they were looking for a basket to hold whatever the catapult would be holding.

“You have to have something that could work as a basket?” Roman asked.

Dee looked around his room from where he was standing, and waved his hands around in meaningless gestures that Roman took to mean, *I’ve searched my room half a dozen times.*

Roman sighed. “Okay, no dice. We can do this anyway.”

“How?” Dee signed. “We need a basket for the catapult!”

“If we want to build a traditional trebuchet and have it work with weight, yeah, but we don’t have to build a trebuchet if we don’t want to. There are other kinds of catapults,” Roman said. “The ballista threw arrows and bolts and spears and stuff. It’s like a giant crossbow.”

Dee shrugged. “I don’t really want to build one of those,” he signed.

“Okay. Maybe we can work on the catapult another day, then,” Roman said. “Is there anything else you might want to do?”

“No really,” Dee signed, shoulders rising and falling in a silent sigh.

Roman frowned. He didn’t like when Dee was sad like this. He wondered...he walked over to Logan’s room. He checked, and just like he thought, his older brother was still asleep. He went back to Dee’s room, where Dee was watching from the doorway. Roman closed the door, plugged Dee’s iPod into the speaker that Dad and Ami had gotten him for when he wanted to listen to music without earbuds, and searched for a song.

When he found one he thought Dee might like, Roman gathered up the tinker toys and put them in a corner, so they’d have space to dance. Then he hit play, and the unmistakable sound of the Mulan soundtrack greeted the silence in the room. Roman grinned and put on his biggest theatre voice as he started to sing along with the song. “Let’s get down to business!” Roman sang. “To defeat! The Huns!”

Dee’s eyes lit up and he laughed, as Roman continued to act out the song and sing along with it. He attempted to sing every line, even when they started to overlap with each other. Dee joined in on the dancing halfway through, and by the end of the song they were both giggling panting messes.

The next song came on and Roman turned in surprise to the stereo. He wasn’t aware that Dee had this song on his iPod. But he was so distracted by that, he failed to notice Dee jumping onto his bed and taking a deep breath before belting out the first lines of the lyrics. “I’m gonna be a mighty king,
so enemies beware!”

Roman jumped in just in time for the next line, “Well, I’ve never seen a king of beasts with quite so little hair!”

“I’m gonna be the main event, like no king was before! I’m brushing up on looking down, I’m working on my roar!” Dee continued.

“Thus far, a rather uninspiring thing,” Roman said, crossing his arms.

“Oh I just can’t wait...to be king!” Dee belted.

They went through the entire song, Dee dancing on his bed the whole time, and when the song ended and Dee let himself fall into sitting on his bed, Roman was breathless and laughing. “Wow, you can really sing, Dee! We should probably keep quiet after this one, though, because we don’t want to wake up Logan.”

“Too late,” a croaky voice said from the doorway.

Roman cringed and turned around to find Logan standing there, blanket wrapped around him, holding a glass of water, but he was smiling.

“I never knew you could sing like that either, Dee,” Logan said. “Although I take it that most people don’t.”

Dee shook his head. “Sometimes I’ll sing in music,” he signed. “But I’m always quiet about it. I don’t want people staring at me.”

“But you really enjoy The Lion King, so you have a hard time not singing, is that right?” Logan asked.

Dee nodded. “I love it. They don’t have any snakes as bad guys,” he signed.

“That’s always a plus,” Logan laughed, before dissolving into coughs. “I’m going back to bed. But I don’t mind hearing you guys sing, for the record.”

“Good to know,” Roman said, with an awkward thumbs-up.

Logan looked around the room and spotted the tinker toys in the corner. “You know, if you two need something to function as a basket or a sling for that catapult you’ve been trying to build for the past week or two off and on, let me know when I’m less sick, and I’ll look through my room for something.”

“Thank you!” Dee signed with a big grin.

Logan nodded, and walked back to his room, quite clearly dazed. Roman turned to Dee and both of them laughed a little as one of Logan’s more emo songs came on the iPod. “That was fun,” Roman said with a little grin. “What time is it?”

“It’s about noon,” Dee signed. “And I’m getting hungry.”

“Well, I was about to ask you if you wanted lunch, so that works,” Roman said. “Let’s go downstairs and pick out something to eat, sound good?”

Dee nodded and they walked downstairs, Roman letting Dee look through the pantry for anything they might want to eat, and Dee pulled out the peanut butter and jelly almost immediately. Roman
rolled his eyes. “You do realize that you can’t eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the rest of your life?”

“I can try,” Dee signed with a grin after Roman took the offered containers.

Roman shook his head, opened up the Crofter’s and muttered, “Logan is gonna kill me if I use the last of this on sandwiches.”

“Make one for him?” Dee proposed. “Maybe then he’ll be less mad?”

“I mean, I don’t think he’s ever really mad if I use the last of the jelly,” Roman said. “He’s more...irritated. Unamused. I don’t know. Point is, he won’t actually kill me. But if I made three sandwiches, each of us would get less jelly.”

“Oh. Nevermind, then,” Dee said. “I want jelly on my sandwich.”

“I know,” Roman said, rolling his eyes. “That’s why I told you about this.”

Dee watched Roman closely as Roman made the sandwiches, and Roman sighed. “Dee, I know how to make your sandwich, you don’t have to watch me that closely.”

Roman didn’t get any response except Dee swiping one of the sandwiches and hopping up on the island to eat it. Roman rolled his eyes and sat next to Dee, eating his own sandwich. Vanellope came over, whining, and Dee shook his head, signing no at Vanellope.

“I think the only time you refuse to feed Vanellope any of what you’re eating is with your PB & J’s,” Roman observed. “You’ve accidentally almost fed her things that would hurt her, so really, I’m kinda shocked you don’t cave when it comes to your sandwiches.”

“They’re my sandwiches,” Dee signed, as if that explained everything. “They’re special.”

“Good to know, I guess,” Roman said, eyebrows furrowing, but he offered Dee a smile regardless.

Dee ate more of his sandwich, but when he was done, Dee didn't hop off the stool to play something, like Roman expected him to. Instead, Dee wiggled his fingers, apparently trying to figure out what to sign. “I like playing with you, Roman,” he signed eventually.

“Well, yeah, I like playing with you too,” Roman said, frowning.

“No, I mean...I like playing with you. Dancing and singing and being silly,” Dee signed. “I can build anything with Patton, and I can read with Virgil, and I can infodump with Logan. But...I play with you. It’s special.”

Roman blinked. That hadn't occurred to him. Sure, Dee might dance with the others, and read around Roman, and he might build stuff with Virgil if Virgil wanted to join, but Roman didn't realize he associated those things that he enjoyed doing with certain brothers. And the fact that Dee thought singing and dancing was special...was something else. “Well, we’ll just have to do that a little more often, then, won’t we?”

Dee grinned and Roman grinned back. He was starting to learn more about Dee. Just when he thought he knew everything, he discovered he had so much to learn in terms of how Dee showed love. And that was super exciting.

The front door opened and Vanellope ran towards it, Dee hot on her heels. Roman followed after. “How was the pool party?” he asked.
“It was so much fun!” Patton exclaimed, his hair still plastered to his head.

“Yeah, Lilly’s party was pretty cool,” Virgil said. He looked around. “Dad’s not back?”

“Not yet,” Roman said. “It’s just been me and Dee for a while. We just had lunch.”

“I’ll leave you two out of lunch plans, then, got it,” Ami said.

“Oh, we’re almost out of Crofter’s,” Roman said.

“And there goes my lunch plans,” Ami replied brightly. “All right, boys, anything you want other than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches?”

“We had cake at Lilly’s, isn’t that enough?” Patton asked.

“No,” Ami said simply. “That is not enough, and you need something solid to eat.”


“Soup I can do,” Ami said.

As Ami walked to the kitchen and Dee signed animatedly to the twins, Roman followed Ami into the kitchen. “Did you know Dee has different ways of spending time with all of us?” he asked Ami. “Like, he dances and sometimes sings with me, but he’ll read with Virgil, or build with Patton. It’s really cool, and I’m honestly kinda touched.”

Ami smiled. “Yeah, I noticed he’ll watch cartoons more with Dad and laugh at comics with me, but I guess I never realized that was his specific idea of quality time with us. That’s sweet of him.”

“Right?” Roman asked. “Every time I think I’ve finally got this family figured out, I find another level of our relationships to explore. It’s crazy. In a good way!”

Ami laughed. “Yeah, I guess that would be a little crazy,” he agreed. “I’ve stopped trying to ‘figure out’ the family, and just sorta...ride the wave. If I didn’t, I would go absolutely crazy.”

Roman nodded. “I still love us, though.”

“Oh, absolutely. I wouldn’t trade this family for the world,” Ami agreed.
Chapter 53

April 12th, 2019

It hurt Virgil to know that Granny wasn’t able to come visit them. Not just because she wasn’t feeling well, but because Mom was giving her trouble, trying to figure out where Virgil and Pat lived now. It hurt to know that Granny had to change her routine, had to change where she got her mail, had to change almost everything in order to make sure that Virgil and Patton were safe. He appreciated the effort, but he still felt bad.

She said it was no problem, but he wasn’t so sure. It couldn’t be easy to handle everything. Supporting her grandkids without letting her own daughter know. He winced. He knew that he wasn’t going to feel good about that for a long while. He just hoped that his mother would stay gone.

August 4th, 2020

Virgil had just about had it with Roman. He was being so positive, so cheerful, so... peppy and it was driving him up the wall. Virgil was trying to keep his problems to himself, honestly, but it just...wasn’t working. When Roman starting singing a song for the third time in twenty minutes, Virgil snapped, “What is your problem?! Can’t you stay quiet for five minutes?!”

Everyone in the general vicinity stared at him and he turned red, running to his and Patton’s room and slamming the door, sitting against it. He buried his head in his knees and let himself cry, just a little bit. He knew crying was ultimately good for him, but he was still hurting, and he didn’t quite want to acknowledge the why just yet.

There was a gentle knock on the door. “Virgil?” Roman called. “Can I come in?”

“No,” Virgil said, cursing his voice for cracking.

A gentle thud followed, no doubt Roman resting his head on the door. “I want to help, Virgil. What did I do wrong?”

Virgil didn’t respond. He was too choked up, and he hated to admit that Roman hadn’t done anything wrong. Virgil was just being too sensitive, a crybaby, an anxious mess, all sorts of things Charles used to call him and some new terms thrown in the mix as well.

After some indeterminable time, there was another knock, closer to the ground but not quite at his level. That had to be Patton. He cracked open the door and Patton said, “I know you wanna be alone, but I kinda need some stuff in here. Can I come in?”

Virgil backed up and opened the door, letting Patton come in and look around the room for what he needed. Virgil sat in a ball on his formerly neat bed, and watched as Patton got what he needed and left the room, with the door open. Virgil buried his head in his knees. He wasn’t trying to be like Charles, honestly, but this just sort of...happened.

Then, another knock at the door, and Virgil inwardly sighed. Roman just...didn’t give up! “Go away,” he growled.

“Can we at least talk first?” Roman asked.
“What is there to talk about?!” Virgil demanded. “No, really, Disney Prince, what is there to talk about?! You’re loud, and obnoxious, and really irritating when you want to be! You never shut up, you never stop annoying me, and you’re never not happy!”

Virgil’s breath was heaving in his chest and Roman just...stood there, taking the hit. “You know, if you’re going to call me names, we could shorten ‘Disney Prince’ to just ‘Princey’ in a pinch.”

“Case in point!” Virgil yelled, jumping off his bed. “You never stop doing that! Why can’t you understand that I’m just the bad guy?! Because everyone else loves when you do those stupid things that drive me well and truly up the wall!”

Roman continued to stand in the doorway, saying nothing. Then, “What brought this on?”

Virgil scowled.

“Virgil, you never say you’re the bad guy unless you’re trying to protect yourself from something or someone. Everyone in the house knows this. And we’ll find out what happened sooner or later,” Roman reasoned.

Eyes flitted towards Virgil’s desk and back, but clearly Roman had caught the movement. “Something on your desk? Or inside it?”

Virgil sighed and walked over to his desk, opening the top drawer and bringing out a letter. He passed it silently to Roman. Roman read the first part of it aloud. “Dear Patton and Virgil...Congratulations, you got your wish. You never have to live with me or your stepfather again. But too bad you can’t have your cake and eat it too, because I now know where you live. You two decided to be little pieces of...’ Oh, geez! That’s horrible! Your mother wrote this?!”

Virgil nodded. “And she refuses to give up later on in the letter. She says to ‘expect more.’ I’m lucky that I got the mail that day instead of Patton. I came up here, read it, hid it. No one else should have to worry.”

Roman read the entire thing in the span of a minute and he paled considerably the more and more he read. “Did you tell Dad or Ami?”

“It’s not like they can do anything about it,” Virgil said with a shrug.

“Actually, they can,” Roman said. “But we need to tell them about it sooner rather than later. Are you in?”

Virgil hesitated. He really didn’t like where this was going. If Dad and Ami found out about this, they’d be mad he hid it from them, wouldn’t they? Wouldn’t he get in trouble?

“Are you in?” Roman repeated.

With a sigh, Virgil nodded. “Yeah, Princey, I’m in.”

Roman nodded and offered a hand to Virgil, which Virgil gently took. Roman then led him down the stairs, through the door leading to the basement, and down another flight of stairs, where Dad and Ami were arguing quietly. Roman cleared his throat. “I got our resident ‘bad guy’ here out of his room all on my own,” he said. “And I know why he’s been so out of sorts recently.”

Virgil turned to Roman in surprise. “Recently?” he asked.

“You really think we wouldn’t notice?” Roman asked, sounding genuinely offended. “You’re
family, Virge. Of course we noticed!”

Virgil took back his hand and crossed his arms, staring at the ground. Roman sighed. “So do you want to tell them? Or should I? Fair warning, I will not be kind to you-know-who about her actions.”

When Virgil didn’t respond right away, Roman waved the letter around and said, “This bi—” before getting cut off.

“Language!” Dad and Ami said at roughly the same time.

“Don’t call her that!” Virgil cried indignantly.

Roman rolled his eyes. “Virgil and Patton’s mom figured out our new address and decided to write them. And she was not kind.”

Ami took the letter and read it over, before muttering, “Son of a...” and passing it to Dad.

Dad’s eyebrows rose the more he read, and at the end of it he said with absolute certainty, “I’m going. To kill her.”

“Mm, not recommended,” Ami said. “However, I would suggest a restraining order.”

“Yeah,” Dad agreed. “I’ll make a call or two and get that set up. Because this,” he waved the letter around, “Is not okay.”

Virgil gripped his own arms in a vice and tried to not feel bad. But it wasn’t working. “Sorry for not saying anything,” he mumbled. “I just wanted to see what she had to say, and then when I realized what it was, I wanted to keep Patton safe, so I never brought it up when he was around, but...he’s always around...”

“Keeping this a secret could not have been easy,” Dad said with a wince. “No wonder you were all out of sorts.”

“Yeah...” Virgil said. “People acting like everything’s okay, when everything is definitely not okay...it hurts.”

Ami nodded. “That doesn’t mean your outburst wasn’t uncalled for, but I really don’t think much would be effective as discipline, because you know that you don’t yell at people and you had just reached the end of your rope.”

“For what it’s worth, I don’t blame you at all, Virgil,” Roman said. “And if you want, we can do something together to take your mind off this problem with your mom.”

“None of the distractions I’ve tried have worked,” Virgil said with a sigh.

“Well, a few more tries can’t hurt, huh?” Roman asked, nudging Virgil lightly. “Come on, we can go to my room and figure out what to do.”

Virgil wanted to go to Roman’s room, but he was also a little hesitant. He didn’t want to wind up snapping at Roman again, because what if Roman didn’t want to talk to him after that? What was he supposed to do then?

When Roman offered Virgil his hand again Virgil tried to shake the thoughts loose. “C’mon, Virgil. Live a little,” Roman said with a smile. “No harm in trying. And it beats moping the rest of the day.”

Virgil took Roman’s hand and Roman dragged him back up two flights of stairs into Roman’s room,
and Virgil flopped down on the bed. Musical posters were literally everywhere; Virgil hadn’t realized exactly how many posters Roman had until now. Roman was rooting through his closet, looking for something that would presumably keep them both occupied. “Look, Princey, you don’t have to do this,” Virgil started.

“I know I don’t have to, I want to,” Roman said. “Indoors or outdoors, do you think?”

“Out...doors...?” Virgil asked.

Roman nodded. “Then I think a game of badminton is in order.”

“What—? Ah!” Virgil just barely caught the racquet that Roman tossed him. “Roman!” he exclaimed indignantly.

“Honestly, I kinda prefer Princey at this point,” Roman laughed. “But what?”

“Don’t throw things around my head!” Virgil snapped.

Roman shrugged. “Sorry, I wasn’t aiming there. I should look before I throw next time.”

Virgil rolled his eyes. “Let’s just go out back.”

They went to the deck and then into the grass, and Roman set up the badminton net while Virgil grabbed the birdies. Then, when everything was set up, they started to play. “Why do you like badminton so much?” Virgil asked Roman.

“Well, Granddad showing me how to play was nice,” Roman said. “But it also helps to keep me from dissociating when I feel a panic attack coming on.”


“Because I’m aware of running around to hit the birdie,” Roman said, “And I can feel the air in my lungs, and the adrenaline in my veins, and it gives me something here and now to focus on.”

“Huh,” Virgil said. “Do you think that could help with other anxiety?”

“Maybe,” Roman allowed. “Provided you’re not distracting yourself to shove the anxiety down and bottle it up.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Roman asked.

“Okay,” Virgil agreed. “I might try that if I get anxious.”

“Grounding? You’re gonna try grounding when you get anxious?” Roman asked.

“That’s grounding?” Virgil asked.

Roman nodded.

“My therapist says I should practice that, but never offered any ways to do it that helped me,” Virgil said.

“Oh. Well, now you know one more that you can try?” Roman offered.
Virgil nodded, and they lapsed into silence as the game continued. Virgil focused on the feeling of his sneakers pounding into the ground, on the air moving in and out of his lungs, on the fact that he was feeling anxious, but he was moving. He wasn’t trapped, he wasn’t in actual danger, he was just playing badminton with his brother. And it was weird to think that thought...but it was helping.

Roman lobbed the birdie high into the air and Virgil slammed it back over the net and into the ground. He laughed at scoring a point against Roman and Roman huffed, but he was smiling. “Nice shot,” he begrudgingly admitted.

“Thank you, I try,” Virgil said.

They both laughed a little and continued to play. Virgil was panting from Roman shooting all around his side of the net, causing Virgil to sprint across the yard with every hit. “Roman?” he asked.

“Yeah?”

“Is there anything else you do to ground that works for you?” Virgil questioned.

“Why?” Roman asked. “Is this not helping?”

“No, it is helping,” Virgil said. “But obviously I can’t go on a run in school if I remember that letter.”

“Oh. Yeah, I can help you figure out what exactly helps for you,” Roman said. “So feeling stuff helps you?”

“I guess,” Virgil said. “I felt anxious but I focused more on physical feelings than emotional ones. Like, yeah, of course I’m anxious, my mom figured out where we lived. But I wasn’t in actual danger, I was just playing badminton with you.”

Roman hummed in thought. “Okay, yeah I can figure out a couple other techniques that I’ve been taught, whether or not they help me, because they might help you. It’s just a matter of applying them right most of the time, at the right time.”

Virgil stared at Roman. “Okay, I think I know what you said...but it’s still kinda confusing.”

“Just knowing what technique to do at which stage of your anxiety can help you,” Roman said. “Okay?”

“Okay then,” Virgil agreed. “Now, what are some things that help you?”
November 1st, 2019

Logan was thinking. About everything that had happened last night, and earlier today. He was in his bed, staring at the ceiling, because he had no idea how to process his feelings for Jack. Surely, it had to be a stress response, he thought. But what stress response resonated that strongly with two boys who had only been dating for two months? It didn’t make any sense!

Logan resolved to keep the revelation that he loved Jack under wraps for now. Two months was much too soon to be super serious about each other. But still, whenever he thought about Jack, his stomach warmed and his heart rate slowed, rather than skipping a beat. He was completely content to be around Jack, and while it should have terrified him, he was more terrified of Jack finding out and not reciprocating than anything else he had ever been terrified of before.

September 9th, 2020

It was a stupid little game that had started it all. Logan’s senior year had just started, Roman and his buddies sat across the way by the theatre entrance, and Logan and Roman were occasionally lobbing witty comebacks at each other. Eventually, Jack had gotten tired of it, asking the rest of their friends if they were okay expanding their lunch circle. Everyone had said yes, and Roman and his new friends joined Logan’s group. Roman and Logan sat next to each other, still occasionally arguing, especially when Roman would dramatically drape himself over Logan’s shoulder.

“You definitely have freshman energy,” Tristan said with a good-natured laugh. “You’ll grow out of it, but it’ll take time. You might cringe afterward.”

Roman shrugged. “Eh, it’s just something that will be part of me, you know? I cringe at things I said when I was younger now, it’s not gonna be a new feeling.”

“Yeah, everyone looks back at their past every once in a while and cringes,” Chad piped up. “Like, high school relationships, by and large, will be something most of us will cringe at in the future.”

“I disagree,” Logan said, bristling. “Relationships may have messy feelings attached to them, but I don’t think they’re something to cringe at, because at the time you were with that person, you had genuine affections for them.”

“Aw, I’m flattered, Logan,” Jack said, smirking. “You have affections for me, how cute.”

Something sat wrong in Logan’s stomach. His brows furrowed and he frowned. “I don’t...think it’s cute?” Logan said. “It’s not like a schoolyard crush in elementary school. It’s important to me. Is it not...important to you?”

“Of course it’s important to me,” Jack said, frowning. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, you just called me saying ‘I love you’ cute,” Logan said.

Jack blinked. “You said...you love me?”

Logan frowned deeper. “That’s what affections means?”
“Wait...” Jack said, holding up a hand. “You’ve said ‘I love you’ in the infatuation sense and the honeymoon stage before. Are you saying this...as part of that? Or...is it something else?”

Logan blinked several times, and his ears grew hot. “I’m...I’m not certain what you mean?”

“Do you love me back, Lo?” Jack asked.

“...” Logan was speechless. He had entertained the idea of a life with Jack before, but it never fully hit him that he would love Jack like that, and that deeply, before today.

Jack watched him as Logan processed this, but Logan couldn’t get words to leave his mouth even after he realized this, and Jack slowly deflated, and his hurt grew. Logan felt tears coming to his own eyes, because he didn’t want Jack to be hurt, just because Logan had lost his ability to speak in full sentences. He looked at his hands, and he was having a hard time even allowing his hands to move to say what he wanted. He had never been this nonverbal before.

But Jack was leaning away, his mouth opening to no doubt say something along the lines of, “Just forget about it,” and Logan didn’t know what to do. He leaned forward, grabbing Jack’s hand desperately trying to keep him here, in the circle. Everyone was staring between the two of them, like the situation might explode at any moment.

Jack glanced at Logan, the hurt evident in his eyes. Logan could feel his tears starting to fall, “Jack...” he croaked out. “Please...I don’t...I don’t know how to say it.”

“If you don’t love me, Logan, it’s okay,” Jack said, freeing his hand. “But I’d like to know now, rather than have you string me along for months on end.”

Logan moved forward before he could think, and he had his arms wrapped around Jack in a hug, his chest heaving as much as it could with his chest binder on. “Please,” he murmured. “Please don’t leave.”

Jack slowly extricated himself from Logan’s death grip and fixed his clothes. “Lo, it’s okay. Just say it.”

Logan was sobbing at this point. “Jack, please. I don’t know how!”

Jack shook his head. “It’s easy, Lo. ‘I don’t love you that way.’”

Logan’s hands shook as he backed up to where he had been sitting before, making sure everyone could see him. With his hands still shaking, his sign language might come across a little more difficult to read, but he hoped that he could still get the point across. “I love you more than I love being called, ‘sir,’” he started. “I love you more than all the stars in the sky. I love you to the moon and back. I’ve loved you since the beginning. I’ve loved you since you almost died. I’ve loved you enough to think about a life together. And it makes me giddy enough to do that rocking thing you’ve pointed out to me. I love you more than words can say. I love you, I love you so much and I don’t know how to say it. It’s not the tacked-on thought at the end of a phone call. It’s not the honeymoon phase’s infatuation. It’s not a small thing. I love you, Jack. I just don’t know how to say it.”

Jack was staring at Logan with wide eyes, searching him for any shred of deception. Logan knew that was just what Jack did, and he didn’t feel any offense for not being believed at first, especially because Logan had such a hard time saying it and Jack had an overwhelming fear of rejection. But in an instant, Jack was moving forward, cupping Logan’s cheek as he brought Logan forward slightly for a tender kiss. It barely lasted a second, and Jack rested his forehead against Logan’s when it was over. “I’m sorry, Lo,” he breathed. “I should have remembered you sometimes have problems with
Logan grabbed Jack’s hands with his own. “It’s...” he cleared his throat. “It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I...I should have thought through what I was going to say more, instead of just dropping that bombshell on you.”

“I have one more bombshell for you, Sherlock,” Jack said, pulling back.

“Oh?” Logan asked.

“I said ‘back’ in my question,” Jack pointed out.

Logan made a choked noise as his thought process short-circuited.

“I know that doesn’t make the admission any easier,” Jack said with a laugh. “But you really need to improve your active listening.”

“Shut up!” Logan laughed. “My active listening is fine!”

“I don’t know...” Jack teased. “You seem to short-circuit whenever a certain cute boy talks to you.”

“Okay, first of all: you are a man. Big difference. I would go so far as to say a gentleman. Second of all: I’m queer! What do you expect from me??” Logan exclaimed.

Everyone in the circle laughed, and just like that, all the tension previously in the circle eased. Logan and Jack wound up positioned in such a way that Logan was leaning back into Jack’s chest, both of them sitting more or less on top of each other. Logan was eating the last of his cookies, and Jack was scrolling through his phone when the bell rang for class. Everyone started to get up, say their goodbyes until after school when all of them would return to the theatre for the play auditions.

Logan was about to leave when Jack caught his hand. Logan turned and Jack kissed him softly.

“Hey, I love you,” Jack murmured.

“I love you too,” Logan said, feeling his heart melt a little. “No hard feelings.”

“No hard feelings,” Jack parroted with a relieved smile. “I’ll see you in ASL?”

“Yup,” Logan confirmed.

When they walked away, Roman jogged to catch up with Logan. “My next class is this way,” he said at Logan’s look. “And for what it’s worth...I think you and Jack will be one of the few who stay together after high school. I don’t know how long it’ll last, and I don’t want to jinx anything...but I feel like you two could wind up being that stereotype of ‘high school sweethearts.’”

Logan smiled softly. “Yeah...” he murmured. “Provided he wants to stay with me, I want to stay with him.”

Roman offered Logan a grin. “Then it’s no worries!” he said. “Because Jack definitely loves you. Maybe more than to the moon and back.”

“Shut up,” Logan muttered half-heartedly.

“Nah,” Roman said. “I like flustering you more than I value my continued existence.”

“What?” Logan asked, alarmed.
“It’s a joke, Logan. Mostly. I will occasionally push boundaries for a joke, but I wouldn’t want you to kill me over one. And here’s my class. I’ll see you after school!” Roman exclaimed, dashing through the doorway.

Logan shook his head and continued on to his classes. He and Jack hung out in ASL a lot more, both of them almost holding a fluent conversation, save for a few misinterpreted signs from Jack. They continued to joke around the rest of the class, and walked to the theatre together. “I’m so glad I convinced you to become a tech sophomore year,” Jack said. “Because this is so much more fun with you around.”

“I’m glad you convinced me to join then too,” Logan said. “Because I have a lot more friends now, thanks to you.”

Jack grinned and the two made their way into the wings of the stage, Logan messing with the lights to make sure all of them were functional, and Jack heading to the sound booth so that everyone could hear when the kids came up to audition for the play. They occasionally caught glances at each other and would share smiles. Nothing about it was super special, but maybe that’s what made it stand out for Logan. They were still their normal selves, even after a confession of love.

As the kids started to audition, Logan spied Roman looking nervously at his lines. Logan walked over and leaned against the wall behind Roman, saying, “You’ll do fine, prep. No one is expected to memorize their lines in the span of two days. That’s why they give you pieces of the script.”

Roman bit his lip. “Are you sure? All the other kids are really good and—”

“So are you,” Logan said firmly. “No question about it. Most of the freshman know about your Remus performance last year at the middle school. A couple of older kids know about it too. Even if you don’t get the lead for the main show, you could get a significant part in the second cast. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Roman smiled thankfully at Logan, right before the head of the drama club called his name. “I guess that’s my cue,” he said, smile slipping away.

“Knock ‘em dead, prep, you’ll do fine,” Logan assured.

Roman nodded at him and Logan went over to the sound booth, since he didn’t need to adjust the lights for a while. Jack was leaning in a chair back there, suitably impressed. “Your baby bro has some serious talent,” he said.

“I know. He also has one of the worst cases of stage fright I’ve ever seen,” Logan said.

“Ouch,” Jack said, grimacing. “Real shame. If he decides this isn’t for him? We could lose having him as the lead his senior year.”

“No one wants that,” Logan muttered. “Dad and Ami would probably encourage him to keep going, if he starts to get too doubtful. But he has some time to think about that anyway. Right now, he just has to audition.”

“True,” Jack said. “Also, for the record, I’m really touched that you love me.”

Logan turned red around the ears again as he muttered, “I admittedly have fallen deeper than I expected to. But it’s a wonderful accident.”

Jack laughed and kissed Logan, and Logan kissed back.
“Excellent audition, Mister Picani. And if the other Mister Picani and Mister Harkness could stop snogging in the sound booth that would be great!” the drama instructor called.

Logan jumped away, completely as red as a tomato. Jack wasn’t much better. Roman was still on stage, cackling away from the mic but still audible all the same. Jack and Logan shared a look and a giggle between them. “Go help with the lights,” Jack suggested. “I’ll be here afterward.”

“I look forward to it,” Logan said with a little wink.

“Of course you do!” Jack called.

Logan turned and stuck his tongue out at Jack as he walked away.
October 27th, 2019

“Hey, Jack,” Logan said, catching his boyfriend’s attention.

“What’s up, baby?” Jack asked.

Logan ignored the way his heart flew into his throat at the pet name. “What do you think we’ll do if we wind up being together for a whole year?”

Jack paused in scrolling his phone and hummed. “Well, I imagine that there’s gonna be a lot of kissing, but outside that I don’t really know. And I don’t really care, either. As long as I get to be with you and celebrate, it’s all good to me.”

Logan turned crimson. “Jack, stop it!”

“Never,” Jack vowed.

September 23rd, 2020

Logan fiddled with the bow tie he was wearing at Dee’s suggestion. He felt a little ridiculous, but he had to admit that a regular tie would have been too formal for his and Jack’s date. He slicked his hair back with a little hair gel, and gave himself a nervous smile. It didn’t seem like it had been a year that he and Jack had been together. It felt like forever and yet no time at all. It felt...right.

The doorbell ringing brought Logan out of his musings, and he hollered through the house, “I’ve got it!” He dashed down the stairs and opened the front door, to find Jack standing there with a small bouquet of duct tape flowers. “Duct tape?” Logan asked.

“They double as pens,” Jack explained, pulling one out of the small container they were in, revealing a pen cap on the bottom.

“I love it,” Logan laughed. “Thank you.”

Jack offered Logan a shy grin as Logan put the flower pens on the small table by the door. “I will tend to those after our date,” he said with a little laugh. His voice had stopped cracking by now for the most part, and his voice wasn’t super deep, but it definitely wasn’t what it used to be. He felt like a guy, and honestly, the fact that he was with Jack just made the experience that much better. Because Jack never ruined the illusion. He didn’t treat it as an illusion at all. “Where are we going, anyway? You never specified. Just that it was dress-casual.”

With a smirk, Jack gestured to the car. “You shall find out when you get in the car, Mister Picani.”

“I hate you sometimes, I hope you realize that,” Logan said with a laugh as he got into Jack’s new-to-him car. “In a joking way, of course.”

“Course,” Jack said, getting in the driver’s seat and setting off down the road. “Your clue is in the glove box.”
Logan sent Jack a glance when Jack grinned like he had made a particularly good pun. He opened the glove box and found two tickets for the local theatre’s production of “Clue: On Stage.” Logan was speechless for a good minute. “I...wow. That was a terrible pun, Jack.”

“I know,” Jack said with a grin. “But worth it.”

“If you say so,” Logan replied with an eye roll.

“I do say so!” Jack laughed, grabbing Logan’s hand with his free one. “I love you, I hope you know that. And I know you love me, because you put up with my puns.”

Logan shook his head. “That’s it? That’s all you see that says ‘I love you’?”

“Is there anything else?” Jack asked, glancing at him.

“Well, I always figured that you knew I was saying ‘I love you’ when I sent you pretty pictures of space that I found, or when I found a song that reminded me of you,” Logan said with a shrug. “And then there’s when we send each other selfies, or you’re upset and I send you a meme or three about the situation. Or when we hang out after school in drama club, laughing at all the younger techs who are trying so hard to be cool but have no idea what they’re doing.”

Jack smiled softly. “That’s you saying you love me?”

“Well, yeah,” Logan said. “I’m not much one for words, so I try to do smaller gestures that show you that you matter to me. I thought your love languages might be quality time and gifts? So I sent you stuff and I hang out with you whenever I can.”

“What are your love languages?” Jack asked. “So I can know what I can do to help you?”

“I generally receive love in acts of service or words of affirmation,” Logan said. “But quality time is also important to me, so I’m not sure how to rank them.”

“That’s okay, Lo, you don’t have to, I was just curious,” Jack said. “I guess neither of us are big on physical touch, huh?”

“It can get overwhelming,” Logan said. “And I know you just like to respect people’s space.”

Jack grinned at Logan as they pulled into the parking lot of the theatre. “Here’s some words of affirmation: I love you, and there’s nothing I would rather do than spend the night watching this play with you.”

Logan turned beet red and buried his head in his hands. “Jack, no,” he murmured.

“Jack yes!” Jack said with a laugh, getting out of the car and helping Logan out as well.

The two walked into the building and Jack held Logan’s hand as they showed their tickets and got to their seats. They leaned back and relaxed as the show started. Logan kept his hand intertwined with Jack’s as the characters showed up, one by one.

Slowly, as all the suspects were investigating each other, Logan let his grip on Jack’s hand grow lax, as he was completely sucked into the story. He only came back to himself when Jack stretched and wrapped his arm around Logan’s shoulder. Logan looked at Jack and rolled his eyes, sticking his tongue out. Jack grinned, held a finger to his lips, and pointed to the stage.

When the play ended, with Colonel Mustard using the lead pipe in the observatory to kill Mister
Boddy, Logan and Jack clapped along with the rest of the audience as the curtain call came. Logan whistled at the end when they all took a bow, and Jack laughed, nose wrinkling up and all his teeth showing in his pure joy at Logan’s enthusiasm.

They headed out of the theatre as slowly the lights came back on. “That was so much fun!” Logan exclaimed to Jack, once they were outside again. “This was a great night!”

“It’s gonna get greater,” Jack said with a grin. “Because we still have dinner to go to.”

“Oh! Right!” Logan had forgotten about that. He was supposed to come up with a place where they could have dinner. “I know it’s not five-star cuisine, but we can head back to my house for some chicken alfredo? I made sure that Dad and Ami got all the ingredients we’d need.”

“Sounds perfect,” Jack said, kissing Logan’s nose and getting into his car.

Logan squawked indignantly and fell into Jack’s car, going on a rant about how he was a very serious man, and as a very serious man he did not get kissed on the nose.

“You do by me, so suck it up, Buttercup!” Jack said with a grin.

Logan scoffed and crossed his arms with a huff. “I’m a very serious man,” he grumbled.

“Of course you are, baby,” Jack laughed. “But I have to let you know I love and trust you somehow. What better way than that? Doing something that I wouldn’t be caught dead doing otherwise because germs and trust issues and I don’t want to get slugged.”

Logan glanced out the window. “You could just use words of affirmation and acts of service.”

“Kissing your nose isn’t an act of service?” Jack teased.

“Well...no,” Logan said, frowning.

“Really? Because that nose of yours is practically begging to be kissed,” Jack said. “I’m doing a service for every man loving man out there by kissing it.”

Logan groaned. “Stop,” he whined.

“Never,” Jack declared as they pulled up to Logan’s house.

They got inside and Logan promptly picked up the flowers and moved with them into the kitchen. Logan checked the fridge, pulling out chicken breast, before pulling pasta from the pantry, ignoring Jack’s confusion all the while. When he had retrieved all of the ingredients, he said, “Now we’ve entered the cooking part of the challenge.”

“Logan, no,” Jack laughed.

“Logan yes,” Logan retorted. “We’ve gotta figure out how to be domestic with each other eventually, hopefully before we have to worry about moving in together. And after such a fun play, don’t you think it would be fun to cook dinner, and share it, just the two of us, somewhere in this house?”

“I guess...” Jack said hesitantly. “I’m a little worried about your brothers running in on us, though.”

“We’ll be eating chicken, Jack. Not...you know?”

Jack turned cherry red in embarrassment. “Logan! Don’t talk like that!”
Logan winked at Jack before pulling out a pot and filling it with water. “A little innuendo now and again won’t hurt anyone, Jack. We’re seventeen. My dads will understand.”

“It’s not them I’m worried about,” Jack hissed, walking over to Logan and watching him fill the pot with water.

Logan rolled his eyes and put the water on to boil. “Pretty sure my brothers wouldn’t get it, Jack. Only Roman might, and he wouldn’t tell the others.”

Jack glanced around nervously, and Logan rolled his eyes, murmuring, “C’mer, you,” and kissing him softly.

In an instant, Jack was kissing him back, and Logan had to lean against the counter because Jack was making him weak at the knees. He wrapped an arm around Jack’s back to try and help himself stand again, but Jack grabbed Logan by the hips and hoisted him onto the counter. Logan shrieked softly before dissolving into a fit of giggles, Jack kissing all over Logan’s face as the water started to boil. “Okay, so, noodles?” Jack asked.

“Yup,” Logan said, watching as Jack put noodles in the pot with a pinch of salt. “We need a pan for the chicken.”

Jack reached between Logan’s legs to get to the pan...right as Dad and Ami walked in. Logan stiffened as Ami choked and Dad grew red. “This is not what it looks like!” Logan assured.

Hurriedly, Jack pulled out the pan to show to the stunned parents, and began greasing it up. “Just...just needed a pan to cook, nothing untoward was happening, or will happen tonight!”

“I should hope not, considering Logan’s room isn’t soundproof,” Ami deadpanned.

“Logan, off the counter, please,” Dad choked out.

Logan complied and scratched the back of his neck. “...Sorry.”

“Just...don’t let it happen again,” Dad said. “Especially when your brothers are in the house.”

Logan hurried to assure them that wasn’t going to be a problem, and the two adults left quickly. “...That was terrible,” Jack said.

“Agreed,” Logan replied.

They stood in silence for a bit as Jack stirred the noodles and Logan watched the chicken. Then, Jack turned to Logan and kissed his cheek with a chuckle. “This is kinda fun,” he admitted.

“Thank you,” Logan said softly. “I thought you might like it once you actually bothered to try it.”

“Cooking?” Jack asked.

“Domesticity,” Logan said.

“I resent that,” Jack grumbled.

Logan laughed and kissed Jack’s cheek in return. They plated the food once it was done and Logan looked around. “I guess...we can use the dining room? High chance of brothers, though.”

Jack shrugged. “With this kind of messy food, I wouldn’t want to eat anywhere that there’s a risk of making a mess.”
“Fair enough,” Logan conceded, and the two sat down at the table in the next room over to eat.

They ate in semi-silence for a minute, before Logan said, “I think we did a good job.”

“Agreed,” Jack said. “I’d do it again.”

“You mean that?” Logan asked, voice soft and hopeful.

Jack looked at him fondly and nodded. “Of course I mean it. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

Logan smiled. “That’s what I like about you. You know to get to the point with me, even if the point is banter.”

Jack laughed. “And that’s what I like about you. Always looking for a silver lining in the clouds.”

“What can I say?” Logan shrugged. “When I lived under so many clouds all my life, the best part of my day would be finding a silver lining. At this point, it’s just a habit I don’t really feel inclined to kick.”

“I don’t want you to kick it,” Jack said, grabbing Logan’s free hand. “You’re amazing just the way you are, Lo. You don’t have to change anything about yourself if you don’t want to. Not here. Not with me.”

Logan smiled softly. “I know.”
Chapter 56

September 30th, 2020

“Hey, Pat? Can I talk to you?” Virgil asked before either of them could leave the room for the morning.

“Uh...sure, Virge. What’s up?” Patton asked.

Virgil shuffled his feet. “I don’t think therapy is helping me as much as it used to. Or at least, my anxiety is getting worse, not better.”

Patton’s eyes widened. That was a thing that could happen? “Have you told Dad and Ami? They could probably help you.”

Virgil shrugged. “I don’t know...I can always ask, I guess. But I wanted to tell you first. You’re my brother who I’ve known since forever. I kinda want you to know before they do, just because I trust you a little more than them still. Does that make sense?”

Patton nodded. He understood, although he wished that Virgil would go to Dad and Ami right away about this predicament.

October 14th, 2020

Patton was roused from his light and fitful sleep in the middle of the night, feeling like his chest was being crushed. He managed, with great difficulty, to open his eyes, and if he could have screamed, he would have. There was an old woman sitting, hunched over, on his chest. Her hair was silvery and almost matted. She was staring right at him, and he thought in that instant, he was a dead kid. Her clothes were ratty and all in black, and she had a weathered witch’s hat on as well. She sat on him, not moving, not blinking, and he screwed his eyes shut tight and whimpered. Maybe if he kept his eyes closed she would have mercy on him and not kill him in the dead of night.

He kept his eyes shut even as he heard Virgil move around the bedroom and leave. Just as well. If Virgil wasn’t in here maybe this woman wouldn’t kill him. Patton kept his eyes shut tight until he felt a hand touch his arm, and he shrieked, eyes flying open as he flung himself up against the wall away from the hand.

Ami backed up in surprise and Virgil had covered his ears from the sudden noise. Patton looked around. Was the woman gone? Where did she go? For that matter, how did she get in their room in the first place? His breathing was shallower than it had been when he had first woken up and seen the woman on his chest, and he was feeling light-headed.

Virgil had come over and started talking slowly to him, but Patton couldn’t make out the words for the blood roaring in his ears. Apparently, Virgil knew this, because he took Patton’s hand and placed it on his own chest as he took a deep breath. Oh. Yeah, deep breathing made sense, he supposed.

He tried to suck in air, but it kept being shoved out of his lungs half way through. He managed to get a small amount of air in, and held it until Virgil exhaled, his chest falling back down. Virgil took another deep breath, and again, Patton did his best to imitate the action. He wasn’t entirely certain it was doing anything, but Virgil was smiling, so Patton would keep trying.
After some time, Patton felt like he could finally breathe normally, and he looked around the room curiously, holding his bedsheet to his face, as if it could protect him if the hag came back. “Is she gone?” he whispered.

“Is who gone?” Virgil asked.

“Her,” Patton said. “She was sitting on my chest and I couldn’t move, and she was gonna kill me.”

“Oh,” Ami said. “Patton, she wasn’t real.”

Patton looked at Ami uncertainly. “I saw her. I felt her. I couldn’t move...how isn’t she real?”

“It was a hallucination,” Ami said softly. “It’s a pretty common one when it comes to sleep paralysis. This is one of the things I remember researching when I was in college, because I just found it so interesting. But the long and short of it is, your brain woke up before your body did, so you couldn’t move. Your brain tried to explain that sensation of not being able to move by having something sitting on your chest. But it wasn’t real, Patton. It was a dream.”

Patton took a deep breath and lowered his bedsheets. “You promise?” he asked.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Ami vowed. “I can’t promise it won’t happen again, but she wasn’t real. I’ve had that happen to me once or twice in my life, and it’s not fun. It is interesting, though, that you had something like this happen to you this early in your life. Usually sleep paralysis doesn’t start until your teen years.”

Patton felt like he could breathe a little easier just as Ami explained everything. He reminded Patton of Logan, because when both of them got excited about something they had learned, their eyes lit up and they became more animated. Not to the extent Dad did, though Patton wasn’t sure anyone could get as excited as Dad did over anything, not just cartoons. And Logan was able to keep all the boogeymen away, no matter how real they seemed. He didn’t realize Ami might have the same effect.

Virgil slowly crawled onto Patton’s bed and gave Patton a hug. “You haven’t been sleeping well lately,” he murmured. “I figured the least I could do is help you if you were having a nightmare.”

Patton tentatively hugged Virgil back. Then, Virgil was moving away, back to his bed. Ami nudged Patton and murmured, “C’mon, we can talk more where your brother isn’t trying to sleep.”

Well, that was a little scary, but Patton was pretty sure Ami wasn’t mad at him, so he followed Ami down the hall to his and Dad’s room. Dad was propped up on one arm and blinking blearily at Ami. “Pat okay?” he asked.

“Sleep paralysis,” Ami said. “A little shaken, but he’ll be okay. I’m letting him sleep in our bed tonight if he wants to, though.”

“Would you like that, Pat?” Dad mumbled.

“Yeah,” Patton said softly.

Ami ushered him onto the bed, next to Dad, and then Ami climbed in and pulled the blankets over all of them. Patton felt a bit like a sandwich, but not in a bad way. Dad was snoring within a couple seconds of letting himself collapse back on his pillow. Patton squirmed on the bed, and Ami murmured, “Still a little scared?”

“A lot scared,” Patton admitted. “It went away for a bit, but I don’t wanna wake up and see her
Ami ran his hand up and down Patton’s arm, and Patton felt himself growing sleepier, which he wasn’t entirely sure was a good thing. “I can’t promise you won’t,” he murmured. “Because I don’t know whether or not you’ll get it again, and that’s not fair. But I can promise you that I’ll be here if it does happen.”

Patton felt a few tears escape. “She’s not the only thing I’m scared of,” he admitted.

Ami sighed. “Yeah, I figured. What’s going on?”

Patton just shrugged. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I keep getting really vivid bad dreams and it’s not fun. Sometimes I don’t remember them, but when I do it’s the worst of the worst of the dreams. Sometimes it involves you guys dying, or getting hurt until I can’t recognize you.”

Ami continued rubbing Patton’s arm and Patton felt tears well up in his eyes. “The worst ones are with Virgil. He’ll...he’ll be eaten up by bugs, or Mom and Charles come back and hurt him and make me watch, unable to do anything, or he’ll be hurt any sort of way and he’ll yell that it’s my fault. I don’t want him to think that I’m trying to hurt him, because I don’t want to! That’s the last thing I want to do! But here he is, constantly getting hurt because of me!” he sobbed.

“Hey, shh, it’s okay, Patton,” Ami soothed.

“It’s not!” Patton cried. “He keeps getting hurt and I can’t help him!”

“Patton, it’s a dream,” Ami said. “You’re right, it’s a really bad dream, but a dream is all it is. You can be scared, you can be worried, but when it comes down to it, if it’s affecting your sleep you need to figure out how to calm yourself down, or ask for help to calm down. Preferably not Virgil, though, because he needs his sleep too. But you saw him tonight, right? You know that he’s okay. He’s alive, he’s not hurt.”

Patton nodded. He knew that Virgil was okay every morning, and he didn’t get hurt, and he certainly didn’t blame Patton for it, but Patton couldn’t stop the dreams, meaning he was up at all hours of the night.

Ami hummed. “Patton, what do you know about Virgil’s anxiety?”

“He told me it was getting worse. That therapy was helpful, but it wasn’t doing enough, not anymore,” Patton said softly. “Did you and Dad know?”

Ami nodded. “He said you told him to tell us because we might be able to help, and we’re looking into child psychiatrists. If Virgil has an anxiety disorder, they can give him a small amount of non-addictive medication to help with the anxiety attacks.”

“How long is it gonna take?” Patton asked.

“We have a few people, and Virgil was looking at the different options, and the ones he likes, we’re going to call and see what their openings are,” Ami said. “Point is, he’s going to get help. You don’t have to stress about it. Furthermore, he took your advice to tell us. He’s going to be okay. The only way he would get more hurt is if he refused help, and he’s not doing that. He’s actively looking for help. It’s no worries, Patton, okay? No need for you to get stressed.”

Patton let out a breath and nodded. He didn’t know that Virgil had went to Dad and Ami already. Usually it took him a while to build up the courage to admit something like this to them.
“Also, Patton?” Ami asked, gathering his attention again. “Virgil is not your responsibility, okay? Whether or not he decides to get help is not on you. If he told you his anxiety was getting worse, but to not tell us because he didn’t want us to worry? Whether or not you followed that instruction, Virgil’s reaction would not be on you. In that situation he would have liked it to be kept quiet, but he couldn’t blame you for not telling anyone because he told you not to, and he couldn’t blame you for getting worse because you’re not his therapist. You’re not the one who gives him tips to manage his anxiety and to ask him to look at it from a different perspective.”

“But...but he told me,” Patton said. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

“Yes, it does. It counts for you being a confidante, and someone he trusts. But, and this is a big but, it still doesn’t make you responsible. You can’t set up appointments for him, you can’t buy his medication if he needs it, you aren’t responsible for anything he does,” Ami said. “The only one responsible for Virgil’s actions is Virgil. The only one who can control his emotions and thoughts? Also Virgil. And yeah, you can’t necessarily control what thoughts and emotions come into your head, but as Virgil has been learning, you can control which ones you listen to and act on. None of this falls on you. It can’t be your fault because you can’t control him. Understand?”

Patton bit his lip but nodded. “It doesn’t mean I’m not scared.”

“Well of course you’re scared, he’s your brother and he’s hurting,” Ami said softly. “You’re allowed to be scared. But you can’t hold the weight of Virgil’s world on your shoulders. It’s just not fair. To him or to you.”

Patton sighed and nodded. He knew Ami was right. It didn’t mean he wasn’t still worried, but he knew he didn’t have to be. Ami kept rubbing his arm and Patton could feel himself getting pulled into sleep. He was, admittedly, still a little scared about having another nightmare, or waking up before his body did again. But Ami and Dad were both here to help him if he needed it. So he burrowed into the blankets and let himself fall asleep.

The next morning, Virgil tapped Patton’s arm at breakfast. Virgil opened his mouth, then paused. “You still good?” he asked.

Patton smiled softly and nodded. “Yeah. Better than I was last night, actually. Ami and I talked, and I feel loads better.”

“Good, that’s good...” Virgil said, biting his lip and looking away.

“Hey, don’t worry, Virge,” Patton said. “I still trust you with the world. I just trust Dad and Ami now, too. Less weight for each of us to carry that way.”

“I guess you’re right,” Virgil said with a sigh. “I’m glad you feel better.”

Patton smiled. “I hope you feel better soon, too.”
Chapter 57

July 16th, 2020

Dee laid on his back with Logan, in the backyard, watching the sky eagerly for meteor showers. He was intermittently flapping his hands in excitement, and he could feel Logan happy-squirming on the blanket they had brought out. Logan murmured, “If you unfocus your eyes, you can see more of them. Don’t look at one specific spot, just look up in general.”

When Dee took the advice, he could see so many more stars in the sky, for one, and then, when the first meteor hit the atmosphere, he gasped in delight. It really looked like a star flying across the sky!

“I’m glad I can do this with you, Dee,” Logan said, voice still not raising enough to be heard inside. “You show your excitement in ways that I can easily understand. It’s nice.”

“I’m totally not excited,” Dee said sarcastically. “You’re the last person I would want to do this with, of course.”

Logan laughed. “I love you too, Dee.”

November 27th, 2020

Dee looked around at all the crowds of people with more than a little trepidation. He didn’t know what had possessed him to agree to go shopping with the others on Black Friday, but already he was starting to regret it. He grabbed Logan’s hand in one of his own. Logan looked down, but gave him a half-reassuring smile. They were both wearing noise-cancelling headphones, because neither of them would be able to stand the noise or hear anyone for the throngs of people surrounding them. If Dee needed to say anything, he could just have them stop so he could sign, but he was not losing Logan in the crowd, especially considering that Roman, Patton, and Virgil had all disappeared into the crowd already. Granted, Dad and Ami had said they could look at the video games, so it was a small wonder they had melted into the rest of the faceless people.

Logan walked with confidence, but with small enough steps that Dee could keep up. He wasn’t entirely sure where they were headed until they were actually there—there being the art supplies section of the store. “It’s not the highest quality of art supplies, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to look around, you know?” Logan signed.

Dee nodded. There were still people milling around, but they were significantly lesser. Looking around, Dee saw markers, and crayons, and colored pencils, all in huge packs with dozens of colors. He was a little in awe. Logically, he knew these supplies weren’t “artist-grade,” but his heart told him he could create amazing pictures with that kind of variety in the colors he could choose.

“See anything you like?” Logan asked with a smile.

Dee pointed at the markers with a grin. “There’s a lot of colors!” he signed.

“Yeah, there are,” Logan replied with a smile. “But I wanted to show you something else.”

Dee frowned and followed Logan down the aisle until he grabbed glitter glue off the shelf. “Glitter glue?” Dee asked.
“Have you ever seen a glitter jar?” Logan asked.

Dee’s eyes lit up. “We could make glitter jars?!” he signed.

“With some glitter glue and the right jars, yeah,” Logan signed back. “We’d also need Dad and Ami’s permission, but I doubt they’d say no.”

Dee flapped his hands in excitement. “I’d love having a glitter jar!” he may as well have been shouting with how exaggerated his signs were.

“I know,” Logan signed back, and Dee could see that he was laughing by the shaking in his shoulders. “Pick a color you like, and I’ll hold onto it until the scheduled meet-up with Dad and Ami.”

Dee looked at all the colors, a deep frown etched on his face. This was a very important decision to make! They didn’t have any yellow glitter glue, which Dee thought was a shame-yellow had quickly become his favorite color—but they did have a very deep green that he thought would look pretty in a glitter jar. He grabbed it and passed it to Logan. Logan nodded and looked around, grabbing an abandoned, empty basket and putting the glue in there. “Do you want to stay here or look around?” Logan signed.

“I don’t care,” Dee said. “We can do whatever.”

Logan’s eyes flicked from Dee’s forehead to something or someone behind Dee. He glanced over his shoulder and found...some man staring at them for an uncomfortably long period of time. Dee turned back to Logan and signed, “What is he staring at?”

“Nothing good,” Logan signed, worrying his lip. “Come on, let’s find somewhere else to talk.”

Dee grabbed the hem of Logan’s shirt as he was ushered forward out of the aisle. He felt a little nauseous and his alarm bells were ringing, even if he didn’t know why. He let go of Logan’s shirt after some time, so that they could move away faster. Logan shoved him into an aisle full of storage supplies, and signed, “Stay here,” with a stern face.

“What’s going on?” Dee asked.

“I don’t know, but I don’t want you involved.” Logan glanced around before repeating, “Stay here. If anyone tries to take you somewhere you don’t recognize, and it’s not Dad, Ami, or one of our brothers, you scream your head off, okay?”

Dee nodded, and Logan rounded the corner of the aisle. And Dee knew that he shouldn’t have done it, but he inched closer to the edge in the hopes that he would be able to hear the conversation.

In an instant, he wished he hadn’t. “Hey, darling, where’d your little charge go?” an unrecognizable voice, probably the man from before, said.

Dee could hear Logan bristling as he said, “Don’t call me darling. I’m a guy, thank you very much.”

“If it has boobs, it’s a girl,” the man said. “And I can tell you’ve got a good pair under that compression bra you’re wearing.”

Logan heaved a sigh. “Well, you’re already dropping from human person to human scum in my eyes, so what has you staring at me and my brother?”

“How old are you?” the man asked.
“Way too young for you, I can tell you that much right now,” Logan snapped.

Dee strained to hear more, but he couldn’t make out anything else. He felt someone try to grab his wrist and he wrenched it back into himself, turning to stare at a woman who was frowning at him. “You shouldn’t be running around all on your own, sweetheart. Where’s your mommy?”

“My brother is over there,” Dee signed. “My mom’s in prison.”

The woman frowned at him and Dee rolled his eyes, turning back to try and listen to more of the conversation. The woman grabbed him around the waist and said, “Come on, I’ll lead you to the help desk, so they can call your mom.”

Dee was stunned into silence for one, two, three seconds. Then he heaved in a deep breath and screamed at the top of his lungs. The woman’s hold loosened around him in shock and he squirmed away. But when he turned the corner where Logan was, the man from before held him tight by the wrist. Logan turned to Dee and yelled, “Dee, run! Run, now!”

There were many times that Dee couldn’t recognize the seriousness of a situation, but he definitely knew this didn’t look good. He turned and sprinted down the building in the opposite direction, tears clouding his vision as he completely panicked. Not even his villain gloves were helping anymore. He ran and ran around aisle after aisle until he knew that neither of those people were following him. He slowed to a stop, only to realize that now he didn’t recognize where he was, either.

A fresh string of panic ran through him. He shrunk into the nearest shelf as best as he could and tried to breathe, failing terribly. His lips felt like they were going numb as he near-silently sobbed. He kept himself pressed against the shelf for he-didn’t-know-how-long, but knowing that it was too long, and Logan was probably in huge trouble by now.

He kept crying until he heard voices approaching, knowing that they’d probably try and take him away again. But the harder he tried to stay quiet, the worse his hiccups and sobs became. He looked around desperately, trying to find a place to hide, before the voices came around the corner. He sobbed in relief, though, when he saw that it was Dad and Ami, looking through the homegoods section, if their cart was anything to go by. In an instant, both of them had rushed over, checking to make sure he was okay. “I’m fine,” he hesitantly signed. “Just scared.”

“You’re sure?” Dad asked, as Ami demanded, “Where’s your brother in all of this?!”

“Logan’s in trouble!” Dee signed. “There was this man who was watching us, and he was talking to Logan and then this woman tried to take me away from where Logan left me, so I ran to Logan, but he was being pulled around by the man and he told me to run, so I ran! Don’t blame him!”

Dad and Ami shared a look and an argument in the span of three seconds. Before they could do anything, someone frantically shouted, “Dee?! Where are you?!”

Dad stood, while Ami stayed with Dee. “Logan! Over here!” Dad called back.

In an instant, Logan was coming over, tears falling down his face hard enough and fast enough that Dee instantly knew whatever happened after he had ran wasn’t good. Logan stopped in front of Dad and Ami, and his hands were shaking...no, he was flapping them, clearly distressed. And Dee didn’t know which fact was more shocking: Logan crying, or Logan openly stimming. “I’m sorry,” he gasped. “I’m so so sorry, I didn’t want to leave him, but I couldn’t have him with me while that creep was talking to me, and then he started screaming and I knew he was in trouble, but when I went to help him the guy grabbed me by the wrists and I couldn’t leave, so I told him to run and I know I should have stayed with him but it wasn’t safe and—” He broke down sobbing again, his hands still
flapping loosely at the wrists, not at all like the tight, happy, pent-up energy that Dee usually felt when he was flapping his hands.

Dad opened his arms and Logan flung himself into Dad’s embrace, sobbing all the while. “It’s okay,” Dad murmured. “We’re not mad with you, and you’re both safe. It’s okay now, Logan.”

When Logan had calmed down, somewhat, Dad let him go and Logan went back to flapping his hands. Only when he accidentally whacked himself in the chin did he look down and notice. “Oh. How long have I been doing...uh...that?”

“Since we saw you run up,” Ami calmly informed him.

Logan shook his head. “Okay, not important, not right now. Uh...oh shoot, I left the basket back there! Dee and I were hoping to get some glitter glue to make glitter jars.”

“It’s okay, Logan, we can get glitter glue another day. You don’t have to go back there,” Ami said. “Provided both of you are okay with waiting?”

Dee and Logan both silently nodded. Logan’s headphones, Dee noticed, were slightly askew, and Dee signed, “Logan, your headphones.”

“Hm? Oh,” Logan said, repositioning them properly. “Thanks, Dee,” he signed.

“No problem,” Dee signed back.

It was quieter back here, with virtually only the four of them in this part of the store, but Dee knew he’d have to go back out into the throngs of the crowd eventually. He wasn't looking forward to it. Especially considering that more people meant it was more likely to see people like the two he and Logan had just dealt with.

Logan was still flapping his hands occasionally, too, so Dee knew that Logan wasn’t quite ready for the crowds either. Dad and Ami were sharing another silent discussion, and judging by the glances at both himself and Logan, Dee figured it was likely they were figuring out how to handle the situation. When Dad nodded, Ami turned to the two of them. “Do you boys want to leave the store? Dad and I got everything we wanted to for a deal, and Roman, Virgil, and Patton should be at the meeting point in a matter of ten minutes anyway. We can head outside if you want.”

Logan said something so softly that Dee couldn’t make it out even in this part of the store. He assumed it was, “Yeah,” but he couldn’t be sure.

“Dee? You want to leave now or hang out with Dad?” Ami asked.

“I’d like to leave,” Dee signed.

Ami nodded. “I’ll take you boys out. Do we need to hold hands, or are you two gonna be okay?”

Dee immediately grabbed one of Ami’s hands, but Logan brought his close to his chest. “I...I can do it on my own,” he signed.

“Allow me to rephrase,” Ami said. “Do you want to hold hands?”

Logan slowly turned pink but hesitantly took Ami’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you, Logan,” Ami said. “Whenever we get home, you and I could bake cookies, if you want?”
Logan got a spark of excitement behind the distress in his eyes. “You promise?” he asked.

Ami nodded. “And of course the others can help if they want to, but I think you need something to focus on that isn’t in your head.”

Logan blew out a breath and nodded. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“I’ll see you guys outside,” Dad said. “Let me retrieve the other boys and buy the things we picked out, and we’ll be out of here.”

Dee stuck with Ami and Logan on the way out. He didn’t know what possessed him to agree to go out on Black Friday, but at least they were heading home soon enough.
August 8th, 2015

Roman was panting. He and his mom had decided it might be a fun idea to go on a hike, but now it was super hot and they were out of water. Even though they were heading back to the car, Roman certainly wasn’t feeling better with that knowledge. “Mom, I don’t feel good...” he said, voice high-pitched but too weak to be whining.

“We’re almost at the car, Roman, just fifteen minutes,” his mom said. “It’ll be okay, my little knight. Can you make it fifteen minutes?”

Roman wasn’t sure. He shrugged and continued walking. Soon, he was barely doing that, and his mom had him propped up against her as she continued to walk. By the time they got back to the car, Roman was only seeing the world in smudges of color and the edge of his vision was going black. His mom immediately cracked open a water bottle they had left in the car and helped him drink some of it. “We need to be more careful, Roman,” she said. “You can’t push yourself until you almost pass out. For any reason.”

December 12th, 2020

“Well, it all comes down to this,” Logan said playfully. “The Saturday matinée. You know, you really didn’t have to stay after school with me yesterday just because I’m a tech. You weren’t scheduled for that night.”

Roman put a hand to his chest and made an affronted noise. “How dare you!” he exclaimed. “Of course I’m going to stay after school with you, it’s the very end of Hell Week, and there’s no reason you should suffer with the lights on your own!”

“Jack was doing the sound, I would have been fine,” Logan said, looking Roman up and down. “Your costume...I still don’t get why they made it like this.”

“This” being covered in tan glitter, with a few stuck-on starfish and shells for show. “I’m the sand guardian, guardian of the sand!” Roman exclaimed. “Seriously, though, if I’m supposed to pop up from behind where I was hiding in a sand dune while the mystery unfolds, then I have to look the part!”

“I still say you should have gotten a bigger role,” Logan grumbled.

“Hey, I got the lead for the second mystery, and I don’t want to have to memorize that many lines. After dealing with the Remus character, I may be able to memorize anything, but that doesn’t mean I can or should try,” Roman said. “Besides, Nick says that he doesn’t give out the lead roles easily. I’m honored that I even got one lead in the three-act mysteries.”

“True, Nick can be pretty picky,” Logan allowed.

Roman preened under the subtle praise. “You see? There’s no need to get upset on my behalf! I got a lead role for the play my freshman year, albeit the second cast. It’s still not something to gawk at!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Logan said, waving a hand. “Just be prepared for a lightning-quick costume
change and try not to trip on stage, all right?”

Roman gave Logan a look with his eyes darting back and forth as he worried his lip. “Uh, yeah, about that...”

“What did you do?” Logan asked, his voice sounding more like a warning than a question.

“I didn’t do anything!” Roman defended. “But some of the other freshmen got their hands on kinetic sand for props, and they sorta...spilled some on the stage. Not enough to stain or make a mess, and they got most of it up! But the stuff they used to clean it means that the stage is still a little...slippery...”

Logan pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. “And you didn’t tell Nick this, because?”

“Because I thought it would have dried by now, it was like, ten this morning when it happened!” Roman defended.

Roman watched Logan’s face flit through several emotions, which mirrored the five stages of grief pretty well: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and when Logan sighed, his face showed resigned acceptance. “Well we can’t do anything about it now except pray it dries before tonight’s show. If you actually break a leg from that, I will kill the freshmen who did that.”

“You’re the best, Logan,” Roman said with a small thumbs-up.

“The only reason I’m not telling Nick is because I’m not the head of the props department and we can’t do anything, because we don’t have any towels to lay down that aren’t paper towels, and that wouldn’t end well,” Logan groaned. “Just know that Jack will kill you if you break your mic, and I’ll kill you if you break your neck.”

Roman laughed out, “Noted,” before Logan headed into the wings for one last lights check.

“Places, everyone!” Nick called in a stage whisper.

Roman dashed over to where he was supposed to be hiding, and grimaced as he realized he essentially had to lie down in the remains of the water and whatever-else the others had used to clean up the sand. Roman was probably going to dismember John before the day was up for messing around with the props. He should know better; he was a tech, after all!

The floor felt really gross, and Roman was pretty sure he never wanted to lie down for a solid half an hour on hardwood that smelled faintly of cleaning products again. The smell wasn’t too bad at first, but as time wore on it was starting to give Roman a bit of a headache. By the time he had to jump up over the fake pile of sand, he was feeling a little dizzy, but he still put his all into his performance, trying to avoid running on autopilot for as long as possible.

As the first act ended, Roman dashed offstage to get ready for his next part. The intermission was all the time he had to get out of his beach costume and change into a somewhat understated suit. He was sweating from the heat of the spotlights and he looked around desperately for a bottle of water that he could get a sip from, but he had no such luck. The curtain was about to go up and Roman had to get out on stage.

At this point, Roman was struggling to stay off autopilot harder than ever before. The spotlights were beating down and he was sweating underneath his suit coat. He made it all the way to the end of the act, focusing on the blocking and the lines, and not how miserable he felt. He walked off the stage, seeing Logan waiting in the wings. His mouth was moving, but Roman’s ears were ringing and he couldn’t make out the words. Logan reached out to Roman’s arm, but Roman kept walking. He
needed to change for the third act, didn’t he? Sure, he was an extra, but he didn’t wear the full suit in the final act.

He paused in his way to the green room, suddenly feeling like his legs couldn’t move. He was panting, and Logan dashed over to him, grabbing him by the arms and shaking him slightly, his mouth moving over and over again in the same pattern, but Roman still couldn’t hear him.

Without warning, his knees buckled and his vision went dark and he collapsed to the ground as Logan’s grip on him slipped. Roman’s head throbbed, and he lost all sense of what was happening around him.

When he finally felt like his thoughts were coherent again and he could crack his eyes open, Logan, Nick, and Jack were all hovering over him. Nick was fanning him with a playbill, Logan was shaking and crying, and Jack was hugging Logan tightly. Roman blinked, trying to get his eyes to focus more than just blurry smears of color he could only recognize from past experience nearly passing-out and his vision going funny.

“Roman!” Logan exclaimed, entirely too loudly for Roman’s ears. “Roman, are you okay?! What happened!?”

A groan was all that could come out of Roman’s mouth. Jack bent down and instructed, “Logan, prop him up a bit. Just his head, if you can’t hold him all up.”

Logan propped up Roman’s shoulders and there was the crack of a water bottle cap opening, and Roman could have sighed in relief as Jack poured water into his mouth, which he eagerly swallowed. When Jack pulled the water bottle away, Roman whispered, “Thank you.”

“Roman?” Nick asked. “How are you feeling?”


“It might have been a combination of the chemicals and the lights that made you pass out,” Jack noted.

“What chemicals?” Nick asked.

“Oh...uh...” Jack squirmed. “Earlier today some of the freshmen techs spilled some kinetic sand on the stage and they had to clean it up, but the floor was staining and it took small amounts of floor cleaner to get it looking good as new again. I wasn’t told about this until after it had happened, right before the show was about to start.”

“Well, that’d do it,” Nick sighed. “Roman, your dads are being led back here, you were only out of it for two minutes. But you’re in no condition to get back out there. Rest up, and if you feel better tomorrow, you can be a part of the Sunday show. No pressure if you can’t, though; that’s what the understudies are here for.”

Roman nodded, which he instantly regretted doing, but Jack helped him drink some more water and Dad and Ami were ushered backstage. “Roman?! What happened?!?” Dad asked.

“He passed out,” Jack said simply. “He should be okay, just needs some water and rest.”

“Okay,” Dad breathed. Ami looked visibly relieved as well.

Logan squeezed Roman’s shoulder. “Can you sit up?” he asked. “We can help you get out of here, but you need to be able to sit in the wheelchair they have.”
“Yeah, I think I can...” Roman mumbled, and pushed himself into a sitting position with some help from Logan and Jack.

As one of the techs dashed up to Roman with a wheelchair, Roman was helped to stand just enough to get in the chair thanks to Logan and Jack. He was then rather unceremoniously wheeled offstage. Logan went back to the lights, and Jack went back to the sound, but Nick, Dad, and Ami all stayed with him in the green room as he took sips of water. He needed to change out of the costume before he could even think about going home, and he just hoped that some color was returning to his face.

When he felt considerably better, Nick let himself out of the room at Roman’s insistence. He shook as he tried to push himself out of the wheelchair and groaned. “I can’t stand yet,” he mumbled. “I feel better, but not enough to change into my own clothes.”

Dad checked the time. “Well, everyone is going to be just about done with the play, soon. We should get you out of your costume before your classmates are flooding the place.”

Roman sighed. “I know,” he groaned. “But I can’t do anything about it.”

“I could help?” Dad offered.

“What?” Roman asked.

“The underwear you’re wearing isn’t part of the costume, right?” Dad asked. “And I know what you came in wearing. I can help you with the pants issues and you can handle the shirt yourself.”

“I...okay?” Roman said, voice rising at the end. It wasn’t like he had much of an option here.

“Rem, do you mind going back to the kids to make sure they’re not driving their grandparents nuts?” Dad asked.

“Sure thing,” Ami said, squeezing Dad’s shoulder. “Hopefully we won’t have to carry you to the car, Roman. If we do, though, it’s okay. We just want you to be safe.”

Roman nodded as Ami left. Dad wheeled Roman into the men’s dressing room. Roman was able to fumble with the buttons on the suit coat and slide that off somewhat easily, but his fingers kept slipping on the smaller buttons on the shirt. He growled in frustration as he continued to struggle with the buttons as Dad searched the room for Roman’s regular clothes.

When Dad had returned with the right clothes and Roman was still struggling with the first button, Dad gently pried his hands away and murmured, “It’s okay, let me do it.”

Roman sighed as Dad gently undid the buttons on his shirt. When he was halfway down the row, Roman sighed and muttered, “Sorry.”

“No apologies, Roman, this isn’t your fault,” Dad said. “It was a series of unfortunate events that led you to pass out, and obviously you’re going to be shaky afterward. Even if that weren’t the problem, I wouldn’t mind helping you. It gives me...”

“What?” Roman asked softly.

“It gives me a glimpse into what life would have been like if I had been there for you from the start,” Dad admitted. “Little kids are a lot of work, because they’re so dependent, but every once in a while there are intimate moments that it’s harder to get with older kids or teenagers.”

“It takes those rare moments where they become dependent after that to experience them?” Roman
asked.

“Typically,” Dad agreed. He slid the shirt off Roman’s shoulders. “Let’s get your shirt on, and then we can deal with the awkwardness of pants.”

Roman laughed. “...Hey, Dad?”

Dad looked at him curiously as Roman put on his shirt with minimal difficulty.

“Part of my early childhood or not, I’m still glad that you and Ami are here for me now,” Roman said.

“Roman, there’s nowhere we’d rather be,” Dad assured.
May 15th, 2015

Patton was worried about him, that much was obvious. He felt bad about it, because he couldn’t exactly do anything to reassure his brother that he was okay. Virgil was too busy hyperventilating.

His breath was coming in and out funny, and his lips felt tingly, and all this happened because someone slammed a door nearby. He didn’t know why he was so freaked out, he just knew he was. Patton was awkwardly rubbing Virgil’s back, and Virgil appreciated the gesture even if the touch felt a little bit like fire.

When his breathing finally steadied, Patton was looking at him warily. “What just happened, Virge?”

Virgil looked at Patton helplessly. “Sorry, Pat…but…I don’t know.”

January 15th, 2021

Virgil was shaking, just a bit. Just enough for Patton to notice. And Virgil knew that even if Misses Pastor didn’t recognize when he was stressed, not all the time, she recognized when Patton sent Virgil glances. He took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. It was just a test that he was doing. It wasn’t life and death, it wouldn’t even determine anything super important in the long run beyond what math help he may or may not receive. Misses Pastor came over and murmured to Virgil, “Are you all right, Virgil?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Virgil said. It was a half-truth. He wasn’t in a full panic attack, not yet, but he was anxious.

“All right. You know that if you ever need to leave the class for a minute, all you have to do is ask,” Misses Pastor said.

Virgil nodded. Misses Pastor was definitely one of the good teachers. She taught the advanced math block in the morning, which he and Patton were both a part of, even though they had unfortunately been separated in their homeroom classes. They both wound up being in advanced classes with Logan and Roman’s tutoring and without worrying about whether or not they’d have the time to do homework. And Virgil had never been more grateful to have extra work, because it meant that he had Misses Pastor.

Turning back to his test, Virgil took another deep breath. This wasn’t life or death. He was scared, and that was okay. It wasn’t a bad thing, it was simply...there. A fact. He took another deep breath and looked at the math problem. They had gone over this, they had to find the area of a circle. He knew that he had to multiply the diameter by pi. And he had pi memorized. This was a problem he knew how to solve.

He did the math quickly and circled the correct answer. There. That wasn’t so bad! And he had plenty of time to finish the last two questions of the text. He continued measuring out his breathing when his anxiety started creeping up, but he was...managing it. On his own. Granted, he was taking some anti-anxiety medications, but he still sometimes got worked up with those medications in place. This was the first time he could ever recall being able to calm himself down from a panic attack.
before it started.

...Huh. Maybe all that therapy was useful after all. It was just a matter of finding the right person who explained everything the right way.

He worked through the rest of the test and handed it in, heading back to his desk and pulling out scrap paper to doodle on. He really enjoyed getting to draw. He doubted he could make a huge thing out of it, but it was a fun way to pass the time.

When the test was over, it was time for lunch, so Virgil and Patton went to their respective homerooms, grabbed their lunches, and headed to the cafeteria. Fortunately, they didn’t have to sit sorted by class for lunch, since they would be heading to recess afterwards. No one could get confused with which class they had to follow back. Virgil and Patton sat next to each other, just like every day. Patton pulled out a PB&J, and Virgil pulled out a turkey and swiss sandwich, just like every day. But unlike every day, Virgil was fairly relaxed, and wasn’t even shaking from everyone around them being so loud.

“You okay, Virge?” Patton asked.

Virgil nodded. “Yeah, I’m feeling a lot better than I have in a long time. Why do you ask?”

“I noticed you were getting anxious about the test earlier, and I wanted to make sure that you weren’t bottling up your anxiety over it,” Patton said.

Virgil shrugged. “I mean, it’s one test, Pat. Sure, it’ll be a part of my final grade, but we’re only in the fourth grade. It’s not like I’m not going to get into college from missing one or two questions on a fourth grade math test.”

Patton blinked in surprise behind his glasses, and Virgil frowned. “You seem surprised,” he said.

“I am surprised!” Patton exclaimed. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you calmly explain why what caused you anxiety wasn’t a big deal.”

“Really?” Virgil asked.

Patton nodded.

“Oh.” Virgil took a bite of his sandwich and frowned, chewing food and thought alike. “Well, I’ve been trying to put stuff like that in context for weeks, if not months, you know? Miss Karen is a good therapist, and she’s been helping me go through these exercises that go through situations like that where I explain what would most likely happen, and what the most rational worst-case scenario would be, so even if it’s bad, I’m not...uh...catastrophizing? Yeah, catastrophizing.”

“And it worked?” Patton asked.

Virgil nodded. “It worked really well! I just did deep breaths and went over what I usually say in therapy, and just like that, I was calm again. Like, my anxiety would try and creep back up on me, but I was able to beat it back again and again when I needed to.”

“That’s great!” Patton said, but his voice sounded a little too cheery to be genuine.

Virgil frowned. “I thought you’d be happy for me?”

“I am happy for you!” Patton rushed to assure him. “It’s just...I’m a little worried and I can’t really explain why. I guess I just worry that...if you get better then you won’t need me as much anymore.
And I like being there for you, and I like it when you’re there for me. I don’t want that to go away.”

“It won’t go away, Pat,” Virgil said, putting a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “It just means I won’t have to lean on you as much and as frequently as I did before. I still need my baby brother, you’re my partner in crime, the yin to my yang, we’re a package deal! I won’t stop coming to you with stuff, because stuff will come up. But hopefully it will be less anxiety about tests and worrying that people are talking about me behind my back, and more...normal kid problems, like my favorite character in my favorite book being treated badly or being killed off, y’know?”

“Oh,” Patton said, seeming to mull this over. “That’s good, then? We’re still the dynamic-est dynamic duo that has ever duo-ed? You’ll just worry a little less about ‘little things’?”

“Exactly!” Virgil exclaimed. “That’s it! Less anxiety, same me!”

Patton grinned. “That’s amazing, then!”

“I know!” Virgil said, practically bouncing in his seat. “I can’t believe that it actually worked!”

“If anyone could make it work, it’s you, Virge!” Patton exclaimed, taking a victorious bite of his sandwich. “You have the determination to keep at it until it actually works for you! You don’t try something once and give up, you keep at it! And that’s a super good thing!”

Virgil blushed a little and ducked his head. “Pat, you’re playing me up again!” he griped.

“Well, yeah, because you should be played up! You’re the best!” Patton exclaimed.

Virgil huffed and took a bite of his sandwich, but he was smiling regardless. They chatted through the rest of lunch, and headed out to recess eagerly, ready to run around and burn off a little steam.

The best part about recess, though, had to be the fact that they shared recess with the second graders. Which meant that somewhere in the sea of gremlins, there was... “Dee! Lucy!” Patton shouted, waving at two kids by the monkey bars.

Patton and Virgil dashed over, Dee and Lucy were waiting for them with grins on their faces. “Hey!” Dee signed. “We’re learning to read clocks! The ones with the hands!”

“Oh, cool!” Patton exclaimed. “Virgil learned a really neat trick today, too!”

“Really?” Lucy asked. “What is it?”

“I learned to stop my panic attacks before they start, at least a little bit!” Virgil exclaimed. “I think the medication helps take the edge off, but I managed to handle the remaining stress by myself!”

Dee started jumping up and down and made the sign equivalent of applause over and over, before hugging Virgil tightly. Virgil was a little surprised when Dee stepped back, revealing tears in his eyes. “I’m so proud of you!” Dee signed. “That’s amazing!”

Virgil gave an awkward but happy smile. “Yeah, it’s really great. It’s going to come in handy a lot, I can already tell.”

Dee nodded enough to make him look like a bobblehead. “That’s amazing!” he repeated.

Virgil coughed. “Well, enough about me, you guys. What do you want to play today?”

“Ooh! Let’s play pirates!” Lucy exclaimed. “I want to sail the seven seas and destroy my enemies!”
Patton laughed. “I hope we’re not your enemies?” he asked.

“No! You’re my crew!” Lucy exclaimed. “And Dee is my first mate, if you want to be?”

“Yeah!” Dee signed, grinning wide. “That will be fun!”

They climbed onto the tallest structure on the playground, yelling and laughing as they fired pretend canons and did sword-fighting with imaginary swords. Patton was laughing his head off, and Virgil was grinning wide. Playing with the little kids shouldn’t be this fun, or at least, the others in his class didn’t think so. But the younger kids were the ones with the best imaginations, they came up with the best stories to act out! They were fighting a giant kraken today, and tomorrow they might be playing spies, trying to steal the crown jewels or save the world from aliens! It was the absolute best!

They played together until the second graders were called inside, and then Patton and Virgil hung out at the monkey bars, taking turns making their way across. “Are you going to tell Dad and Ami about the anxiety thing?”

“Yeah,” Virgil said without missing a beat. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, you’re sometimes hesitant to share mental health stuff with them,” Patton pointed out.

“This is different, this is positive news. I don’t want to share negative news with them all the time because I don’t want to come across as a bother or something, you know?” Virgil said, holding one arm with his other one.

Patton was so shocked at that statement that he dropped off the monkey bars and slammed into the ground hard. “What do you mean, being a bother?!” Patton asked. “You could never be a bother! You need to tell them to make sure that you’re taking care of yourself! If there’s a lot of bad news, that just means that you need more help! That’s not something to be ashamed of, and it doesn’t make you a bother!”

Virgil shrugged. “I mean, I guess,” he said. “I’m starting to realize that, but—”

Patton walked over to Virgil and gripped his shoulders tight. “No, Virgil, there’s no but’s about this,” he said, his eyes filled with pain and worry. “You’re completely worth it! You need to take care of yourself! You matter, so so much! And there’s nothing to be ashamed of for needing help to take care of yourself. That just means that you’re making doubly sure that you’re okay, and that’s a good thing. That’s a great thing. Don’t downplay it, or yourself, okay?”

Virgil stared at Patton in surprise. He had never seen this kind of intensity in Patton’s eyes before. He only saw glimpses when he...he swallowed. When he put himself down. And Patton was looking like Virgil might break at any moment. Patton was scared that Virgil would end up hurt, or worse, because of his anxiety. Oh. That would definitely explain why Patton had been so worried about him in the past. He was worried about losing Virgil. To better health or to...to worse health.

“Patton, I’m going to be okay,” Virgil assured. “You’re not going to lose me. We’re inseparable, no matter what. And no matter what, I won’t let that change. I can’t promise I won’t hurt, but I won’t let it get the better of me. Okay? Don’t worry about me. We’ll be okay.”

Patton swallowed and gave Virgil a nod. “Yeah, I know, Virge. Doesn’t mean I don’t worry.”

“Yeah, I know,” Virgil said, hugging Patton. “But maybe some of the stuff I’m learning could help you too.”

Patton laughed a little, and he relaxed. “Yeah, maybe. Teach me about it when we get home?”
“Of course,” Virgil said. “Anything for you.”
May 10th, 2020

Patton swung on the swing with a giant laugh, leaping from the seat and sticking the landing in the park, taking a bow. Roman laughed and Logan clapped, and Patton happily twirled in his new skirt that he had gotten for the upcoming summer. “I’m so excited!” Patton exclaimed. “I get to do all sorts of things in a skirt because of extra legroom!”

Logan chuckled. “I was never one for skirts, myself, but you make it work, Patton.”

Patton stuck a pose and exclaimed, “Duh!” before Virgil and Dee called his name from the top of the slide. “Gotta go, sounds like my other brothers need me!”

He ran up the playset, admiring his skirt swish all the way. This summer was gonna be great!

February 7th, 2021

It was a lazy Sunday morning, and Logan and Patton were crammed together on Logan’s bed, Logan explaining everything he knew about astronomy to Patton. Patton had heard some of it before, but a lot of it was new, and he loved getting to see Logan so excited about something as simple as the stars in the sky.

...Well, no. The stars and galaxies and stuff were all very complicated, and that was what Logan was explaining to Patton. But the fact remained that Patton loved seeing Logan come alive.

After some time, Logan pulled Patton closer to him. “We don’t do this often enough,” he told Patton.

“Yeah, we need to do it more often,” Patton agreed. “I love getting to hear you talk about anything when you’re excited.”

“Thanks, I think?” Logan said with a laugh.

“It’s a good thing,” Patton said. “You come to life and it’s super super cool!”

“As opposed to me being, what, lifeless the rest of the time?” Logan asked, tilting his head toward Patton with a frown.

“No, like...you’re always a little alive, but you get really excited and animated when you talk about space. It’s super cool to see you get really happy, because I don’t always see you get to be super happy,” Patton explained. “Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Logan said. “It still seems weird, but I guess you can’t see in my head, so you can’t always see when I feel emotions but can’t express them properly.”

“Yeah,” Patton agreed. “I’m not a mind reader, no matter how much Virgil insists I am. Just because I can notice when he’s anxious doesn’t make me a mind reader.”

“No, it just means that you can read his body language,” Logan agreed. “He’s not super obvious when he’s anxious, but I can pick up on a couple ticks of his, too.”
Patton hummed. “Do you think we could talk more about gender stuff?”

“Sure, if you want,” Logan said. “Is there anything you want to know in particular?”

“Yeah,” Patton said, playing with his hands as he sat up and put them in his lap. “I was hoping we could look up stuff on being cassgender?”

Logan blinked. “Sure. You haven’t brought that up in a while, though. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Patton said, shrugging. “I don’t mind being called a brother or you guys using he/him for me, but...being called a boy feels...off, when I know I’m not really a boy.”

Logan nodded. “I know the feeling,” he said. “Do you think your label might be changing?”

“I don’t know,” Patton said helplessly. “I just...I don’t want to be he all the time, you know? Being Pat is fine, and so’s Patton, too, I guess, and I think it would be funny if you guys called me Patricia sometimes just to mess with people. I don’t think I’m...uh...whatever that gender is where you switch around. I just think that being called a boy is getting on my nerves.”

“You’re feeling dysphoric,” Logan filled in. “And the gender you were talking about is genderfluid.”

“Oh. Okay,” Patton said. He knew what dysphoric meant, because Logan had explained it before, but something about it confused him. “How can I be dysphoric if I don’t care about my gender?”

“Well, your gender might not be that of a boy,” Logan offered with a shrug. “You could be nonbinary, or even a girl, and just not care but ‘he’ feels wrong. Or ‘he’ could just feel wrong because that’s all that’s ever used on you and you want to experiment with other pronouns or ways of expression that aren’t traditionally masculine.”

Patton hummed. That made sense. He didn’t care about his gender, and never really had. That’s why being called a boy had been so jarring. He didn’t know why it decided to be jarring recently, but he supposed he might have just gotten sick of playing pretend being a boy at school. “Do you think you could call me ‘she’ for a while?” Patton requested. “I’m just so tired of hearing ‘he’ and ‘him’ and ‘his’ all week. I think I need a break from it.”

“Sure, Pat,” Logan said. “Should I call you Patricia, or Pat, or does Patton still work?”

Patton shrugged. “I dunno. I don’t really care about that as much.”

Logan laughed. “Okay, that’s fair. But of course I’ll use ‘she’ pronouns if you want me to, even if it’s only for a day.”

Patton beamed wide and she tackled Logan in a hug. “Thank you!” she exclaimed, words muffled by the material of Logan’s shirt.

Logan laughed and hugged her back. “It’s no problem, Pat. Do you want to tell the others about this?”

“Not just yet,” Patton said, leaning back. “I wanna keep hanging out with you.”

“Me?” Logan asked, ears turning pink. “Why?”

“Well, you’re super cool, Logan!” she exclaimed, hands making wide, sweeping motions to emphasize her point. “It’s really nice to get to talk to just you, and we almost never ever do it!”

Logan still looked shocked, but also a little pleased. “Well thank you, Patton. That’s very kind of you
Patton grinned. “Hey, do you think Dad and Ami would let me try makeup?” she asked. “That could be super fun to play around with!”

“Well, you’re almost ten, you could always ask about getting some lipstick or something for your birthday,” Logan said with a shrug. “No guarantee that you’d get actual makeup, but at the very least I know they’d let you get lip gloss rather than a chapstick or two.”

Patton’s eyes lit up and she bounced where she sat. “Really?! That’s so cool!”

Logan nodded, smiling a little. “I will admit, I never had much of an interest in makeup, but I’m sure Roman could help you. He knows about stage makeup, at the very least, so it might not look natural at first, but with a little practice I’m sure the two of you would do a lovely job.”

Patton squirmed happily. “I wanna go put on a skirt now,” she said.

“Hey, go ahead, no one’s stopping you,” Logan said, waving her off. “You can come back as soon as you’re done if you want to keep hanging out with me.”

Patton squealed and dashed to her room, going to her dresser and immediately rummaging through it until she found her favorite skirt, the pastel blue one with suspender straps. Oh, she adored this one! She put it on and dashed back to Logan’s room, jumping onto his bed and laughing. “Very cute,” Logan complimented. “Come spring, you’ll be the belle of the ball, if you want to be, of course.”

Logan put her hands in her lap and laughed. “I’d love to be the belle of the ball! That’d be so cool!”

Logan grinned and opened his phone. “If you want, I’m sure I could look through people’s makeup pictures and see if we can figure out a style that you like?”

“Blue! I want it to be blue! Or at least pretty pastels!” Patton exclaimed.

“Wow, I never would have seen that coming,” Logan laughed. “Come on, let’s take a look anyway. You might find that your style changes as you look at different pictures.”

No sooner had Logan started the search for makeup than Patton saw something that made her heart skip a beat. She pointed at it and said, “That one! I like that one!”

Logan clicked on it and snorted. “Pastel goth. Of course. It’s you and Virgil combined.”

Patton stuck her tongue out playfully at Logan. “Whatever. I think it’s cool, and you can’t change my mind!”

“I don’t want to change your mind, I was just pointing out that pastel goth is you and Virgil combined. You being the pastel, and him being the goth,” Logan said with a shrug.

“I’m not goth!” a new voice cried indignantly from the doorway.

Patton and Logan turned to find Virgil standing there, arms crossed and his frown etched deep in his face. “I’m not goth. I’m emo. There’s a difference,” he informed Logan.

Logan put a hand to his mouth, and Patton could see he was trying to stifle giggles. “Yeah, okay, whatever, Virgil. My mistake. The two types of people who despair over the world, wear all black, and wallow in their own misery are completely different.”

“Goths are over-the-top and extra, like Roman,” Virgil said. “Emos don’t really try that hard. That’s
“Why I’m emo.”

“That…actually makes sense,” Patton said.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Virgil scoffed, before jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “Dad and Ami were wanting to talk to the two of you. Their spidey-senses were tingling.”

“Oh,” Patton said, feeling dread bloom in her gut. Either something was really wrong, or they knew that she wanted to change her pronouns somehow. And no one in this house was a mindreader, so she doubted it was the pronouns.

“We’ll be right down,” Logan said. “I want a word with Patton, first. She looks a little nervous.”

Virgil blinked once, staring at Patton, who was bright red and hoping that Virgil wouldn’t comment. “Okay, I’ll let them know. Should I, uh…use ‘she’ pronouns?”

“Patton?” Logan asked, turning to her.

She squirmed. “I mean, I don’t mind being the one to tell them, but you can tell them too. It’s just for the day, to see how it feels.”

“Oh, okay,” Virgil said. “For a second I was wondering if you thought you were a girl and trying to figure out how to come out. Which wouldn’t be a bad thing! But it would make stuff hard on you at school whenever you came out, and you know how my anxiety works. I will freak out over things months in the future.”

“You’ve been good at not catastrophizing recently, Virgil, cut yourself a little slack,” Logan said with a smile. “Go ahead and tell Dad and Ami we’ll be right there.”

Virgil nodded and left and Patton started to shake. Logan gave Patton a hug. “Hey, we’ll be okay, Pat. Odds are they just wanted to ask us something about whatever they overheard this time. No big deal, right?”

Patton nodded. “That isn’t,” he said softly. “But what if someone got hurt? Granny could have fallen again, or Grandma and Granddad could be in trouble, or…or…there’s too many options!”

“All of them ‘what if’s, Patton,” Logan said softly, kissing Patton’s hair. “You’ll be okay. Even if what they want to talk to us about stuff which hurts, we’ll be okay in the end.”

Patton took a breath and nodded slowly. Together, they walked out of the room and downstairs, to the living room, where Dad and Ami were talking. “…But she? I didn’t really see that coming,” Ami said.

Dad was quick to respond, as Patton’s ears turned pink, “It’s just what she feels comfortable with, Rem. You knew this day might come, right? We talked about it.”

“I know. I just worry about… her,” Ami said, turning and doing a double-take looking at Logan and Patton in the doorway. “Speak of the devil, and he shall appear! Hi, kids.”

Dad turned with a smile. “Hey, we were just talking about you.”

“I heard,” Patton mumbled, scuffing the floor with his toes.

“Not in a bad way!” Dad exclaimed. “We were calling you both down here to talk about gender stuff even before Virgil revealed the pronoun experiment.”
“Okay...?” Logan asked.

“Well, you two are the ones in the house who identify as transgender to some degree,” Ami said. “So we thought we could use your advice on something.”

“Okay...but...on what?” Patton asked.

“Well, there’s someone we know who has had feelings of femininity and being a woman for years, but he was convinced he was just somewhat feminine until recently when someone mentioned being genderfluid in passing. Usually the feeling might last for about a week, he says, but sometimes he feels like a woman, sometimes a man, and other times just a person or a mix of...something,” Dad explained. “What do you two think about that?”

Logan cleared his throat. “Well, obviously, it is up to the individual in question, but that sounds like a classic case of genderfluidity.”

“Sounds pretty cool!” Patton exclaimed. “I sometimes feel feminine, but I don’t feel like a girl. There’s a difference. Girls can be masculine, you know? So I guess they’d have to feel like a girl in their soul, not just their style? If that makes sense?”

Dad gave Ami a smug smile. “I told you so, honey.”

Ami rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “All right, all right, you’ve made your point, Emile. I’ll go out and buy the white flowy dress! I’ll be your wife some days! You’re bisexual, it works out!”

“Pronouns?” Logan asked after the initial silent shock.

“Will change, probably,” Ami said. “But I’ll let you kids know when they do. For now, uh...I guess she and her?”

“Pronoun buddies!” Patton exclaimed excitedly, holding up a hand for Ami to high-five. Hesitantly, she did so. “This is gonna be so cool! And you’re gonna be the prettiest, Ami, I can already tell!”

Ami’s smile at that declaration made Patton’s whole day just that much better.
Chapter 61

December 14th, 2020

Roman turned his head to look at the guy behind him in his math class. It looked like Ryan was wearing nail polish, but he couldn’t be...could he? Was wearing nail polish something Ryan liked to do? Was Ryan secretly in the closet and he hadn’t told anyone he was actually a woman, or nonbinary? Was this his way of coming out?

After class that day, Roman quietly asked Ryan about the nail polish. “Oh, yeah!” Ryan said, glancing at his nails. “I almost forgot I had it on. I went to a punk rock concert last night, and to get into it I painted my nails black. I think it’s pretty cool!”

“Aren’t you worried people will think you’re, you know, a girl?” Roman asked.

“Nah,” Ryan shrugged off. “Guys can wear nail polish too. It’s just a little less common. See you later!”

And as Ryan walked off to his next class, Roman was left stunned and scratching his head.

March 27th, 2021

Roman was mentally and physically exhausted as Dee wrapped up his game that he had been playing, with Roman acting out the part of the evil Dragon Witch. Honestly, Roman loved Dee, but he could be exhausting if Roman wasn’t careful and didn’t watch what he was doing. And he certainly didn’t watch what he was doing today.

Dee thanked Roman for playing, before running off to do whatever he wanted to do next, and Roman flopped face-first into the couch in the basement. He groaned when he heard slightly hesitant footsteps approach not thirty seconds later. That meant it was either Virgil, or... “Roman?” Patton asked.

Roman just groaned in response. He really was not up for this today, not that he had much of a choice. Patton would probably want to play something equally as draining, and Roman had difficulties ever saying no to Patton. He turned his head to look at them. “You good, Pat?” Roman asked.

“I should be asking you that,” Patton retorted. “You’re the one who played with Dee for forty five minutes straight.”

“Yeah,” Roman sighed, sitting up and running a hand through his hair. “That was probably a mistake, but seeing him happy was worth it.”


“Do you want something? Or are you just trying to genuinely compliment me instead of buttering me up?” Roman asked with a sigh. “I’m just...really tired right now, Pat. I’m not up for much.”

“Oh,” Patton said. “I was wondering if you’d want to help me with makeup at all. You know that
Dad and Ami got me a little makeup bag with some stuff inside it for my birthday, and I was wondering if you’d be willing to help me try some of it. I know how to use lipstick, but I have no idea what the other stuff should do.”

Roman sighed. That sounded like fun, and he didn’t want to say no to Patton, but he was genuinely exhausted. “I don’t know if I’m up for that right now, Pat. Though, if you want, maybe we could do each others’ nails?”

Patton’s whole face lit up. “Do you mean that?” they asked.

“Yeah,” Roman said. “So long as you use the bright red nail polish, I’m great with it.”

“Cool!” Patton exclaimed. That was another gift they got on their birthday—a few small bottles of nail polish. “Can we do it now, or do you want to nap for a little bit?”

“Eh, naps are kinda unhealthy after a certain time, and I’d be waking up at three in the afternoon if I fell asleep now. But I’d be so groggy I’d probably go right back to sleep,” Roman said, standing up and stretching.

Patton cocked their head to the side. “Isn’t it one in the afternoon?”

“Yup,” Roman agreed.

They went upstairs together, and nearly got run over by Vanellope and Dee rushing down the hall. “Dee, slow down!” Roman called.

“Never!” Dee called back. He had been talking bit by bit at home, claiming that so long as no one took any accidental tone as what he meant to say, that he’d feel comfortable using his voice. And he had used it more often when someone asked him for something but they couldn’t see him signing.

Roman shook his head and walked with Patton up another flight of stairs to their room, and Patton immediately went to their dresser, grabbing the red and the yellow bottles of nail polish. “Ooh, feeling cheery, are we?” Roman asked.

“I want to try the yellow out,” Patton said with a shrug. “Besides, it’s nice and bright and Dee might like it.”

Roman shook his head playfully. “One day, Patton, you’re going to paint your nails full rainbow, aren’t you?”

“Probably,” Patton agreed, getting on their bed. “Do you want me to do your hands or your toes?”

“Hands, please,” Roman requested, also sitting on the bed.

They sat in silence for a minute, not really needing to say anything, or having anything they wanted to say. Then, Patton idly said, “I’m not sure if I’ve ever had a crush.”

“Never?” Roman asked. “Not once?”

Patton shook their head. “Nope. I’m not really sure I want one, either. Romance is weird, and like, it’s okay if other people want to do it, but I’ve never found someone who I really want to do romantic stuff with. Is there a word for that?”

“Aromantic,” Roman said, letting Patton wave their hand a little bit over Roman’s fingers. “You could always be aromantic.”
“Huh,” Patton said. “What if I thought that I could maybe date someone, but like, only if I knew them really well? Like, I wouldn’t wanna date anyone I just saw on the street, that seems kinda weird. But I could see myself dating a friend, if they were okay with it.”

“That would be demiromantic, then,” Roman informed Patton.

“Oh!” Patton looked briefly surprised. “Okay. I didn’t know there was a word for that.”

Roman waited for Patton to say something else, but he didn’t. “That’s it?” Roman asked.

“That’s it,” Patton said, glancing up at Roman in their nail painting. “I’m demiromantic, until proven otherwise, I guess. Not a big deal, is it?”

“I mean, no, not if you don’t want to make it one,” Roman said. “I just thought you might...want to make it one.”

“Nah,” Patton said. “I don’t care too much about my gender, why should I care about who I love when I don’t have someone to love at the moment?”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Roman said, frowning. “I’m just...surprised.”

Patton grinned. “What, that the metaphorical heart of the family can’t be the heart when it comes to love?”

“Not what I meant!” Roman exclaimed. “I don’t want to push you into that specific category if you don’t want to be there. And there’s more to love than romance, you of all people should know that.”

“Yeah, I do,” they said with a cheeky grin. “I was just trying to tease.”

Roman narrowed his eyes and said, “As soon as my nails are dry, I will tickle you relentlessly.”

Patton laughed. “Good luck with that!”

“You know I can outrun you,” Roman warned.

“Yeah, but if I tickle you back, you stop your tickling and collapse into a useless heap,” Patton pointed out. “And I know all your weak spots.”

Roman’s jaw dropped. “Is that a challenge, my dear sibling?”

Patton’s grin grew mischievous. “And if it is?” they asked.

“Well, I would say that you’re in for a rude awakening!” Roman laughed.

Patton giggled and shook their head, continuing to paint Roman’s nails. When they had finished the last pinkie, they put the bottle of red nail polish on their nightstand, and offered the yellow one to Roman. “Can you do mine now?” they asked. “While your nails dry?”

“Sure,” Roman agreed, twisting the cap off and beginning to paint Patton’s nails. He was wracking his brain for something to say. “So, what’s it like being nonbinary?”


“I’m just curious,” Roman said. “Because there’s rejecting societal norms and gender conformity, and then there’s actually living outside the binary. Logan has told me a little about what it’s like swapping places on the binary, but I was wondering what it’s like outside it.”
“It’s...definitely interesting,” Patton said. “There’s not really one way to show that you’re nonbinary, you know? There’s no one size, or no one presentation, that will make people look at you and go, ‘Oh, they’re clearly nonbinary.’ A lot of people haven’t even heard of the term before. And you can dress vaguely masculine but have androgynous features and people may wonder, ‘Are they a boy or a girl?’ but they never ask if the person is nonbinary. Besides, not all nonbinary people want to present as vaguely masculine.”

“And if you dress at all feminine people assume you’re a trans girl or in drag, is that true?” Roman asked.

“I dunno about drag, because I’m only ten. There aren’t really drag queens my age, you know?” Patton laughed. “But yeah, people have asked me if I’m a boy or a girl, and the mean ones have asked it with a sneer or used the word ‘transgender’ like it’s a slur. It’s...it’s frustrating sometimes, but more often than not it’s just tiring. Why can’t I be allowed to just be myself, and not put a label on it? Sure, nonbinary is a good label, but if there could be no labels at all, it would be nice. I know some people feel better with labels, but I...don’t, usually. It’s nice when there’s a word for something like demiromantic, so I know I’m not alone, but if I have to use the label to explain why I’m not interested in someone, it’s just...yucky, you know?”

“Yeah, you don’t want to be forced into a box, you want to be in that box because you choose to be,” Roman agreed, finishing one of Patton’s hands. “I completely understand that.”

Patton hummed their agreement. “I’m super glad you understand,” they said softly. “Because sometimes it feels like others don’t. They don’t like being pushed into boxes because they’re the wrong boxes. Ami’s genderfluid. Logan’s a guy. I just...don’t like being put in any boxes. All the boxes are wrong.”

Roman nodded. That sounded really difficult, and he wished that Patton didn’t have to deal with that. His little sibling deserved better than those who insisted everyone be placed in a box. “Anything in particular you want to do after our nails have dried?” he asked.

“Nah,” Patton said. “Maybe we could just relax on your bed for a bit, or read downstairs, but I don’t want to do anything super high-energy today.”

“Oh, good, because I don’t want to either,” Roman sighed. “I’m exhausted.”

“I could tell,” Patton said, their grin just a little too big for Roman’s liking. “You never pace yourself when it comes to doing stuff with me, Virgil, or Dee. You’re a big softie when it comes to us.”

“Am not!” Roman protested. “I treat all of the family equally!”

“Then why don’t you do the same to Logan?” Patton challenged.

“Because he can be a jerk and we argue more than we get along,” Roman said.

“When anyone else is around,” Patton said. “Logan has told me that the two of you get along better without supervision. You act like mature adults who can handle problems on their own. But not if anyone else is around. You like putting up a front, but the two of you love each other.”

“Don’t tell anyone!” Roman hissed. “I have a reputation to protect, come on, Pat!”

Patton giggled and shook their head. “Come on, everyone knows that you two love each other, it’s not some government secret or anything.”

“Well, yeah, but it doesn’t need to be pulled into the open for inspection either!” Roman protested.
“Seriously, Pat. It’s something that Logan and I share when we have time alone. If everyone knows that we’re civil alone, then someone will say they expect us to be civil all the time, and that will lead to actual arguments, not just arguing over who used the last of the eggs to make breakfast, or who stole who’s sweatshirt.”

“Okay, okay, okay, I won’t tell,” Patton promised. “I don’t see the big deal about having to be civil, though. Virgil and I get along almost all the time, whether other people are around or not.”

“Well, that’s different,” Roman said. “Because you don’t have the reputation of being a ‘Type A’ personality. People expect us to clash. If we don’t, they’ll get suspicious, and if people are scared of us getting along, they might spread rumors that would make us fight for real, and not want to talk anymore.”

“People would do that?” Patton asked, wrinkling their nose.

“Yup,” Roman said, finishing Patton’s second hand of nail polish. He put the bottle on the nightstand and sighed. “People are dumb sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Patton agreed. “Good thing we’re not just ‘people’ to each other, then, right?”

“I guess so,” Roman said with a smile.
April 1st, 2019

“Haven’t you heard of April Fool’s, Dee?” Logan asked.

Dee shook his head, brows knitting together in confusion. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a day where people commonly play harmless pranks on each other, like short-sheeting someone’s bed, or swapping sugar for salt by the coffee. I never really got to play a lot of pranks, because my old parents...were not the biggest fans of that sort of thing, but it’s generally pretty fun, so long as no one gets hurt when you play those pranks,” Logan explained.

Dee nodded to show he was listening, but he wasn’t sure he understood. Patton and Virgil swapping clothes and pretending to be each other was kind of weird, especially considering that they weren’t identical twins. But he supposed it was whatever. Maybe he’d better understand next year, and could play a few pranks of his own.

April 1st, 2021

Dee dashed around the house, snickering like mad. It was April Fool’s day, and he had woken up before dawn and was unable to go back to sleep, so he decided to play some pranks on the rest of the family. Nothing mean-spirited, of course, and nothing that would get them hurt. Just little things like hiding Dad’s toothbrush in the medicine cabinet, or swapping Ami’s white shirt with a pink one on the same hanger that he always got the white one from. He found it hilarious, but he was trying to be quiet so no one else would wake up in the middle of his plans.

Thankfully, everyone seemed to be tired enough that no one heard his laughter. He was downstairs, making himself breakfast in the form of grabbing a pair of Pop-Tarts and sat on the kitchen stool, swinging his legs a little and humming the song he had been learning in Music for the past couple weeks. Occupied by this, he only barely registered Ami behind him when he was three feet away. Ami didn’t stop behind him, though, just went to the refrigerator. “You’re up early, Dee.”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Dee signed when Ami turned to look at him.

“Bad dreams?” Ami asked. “Because you can always come to me and Dad, no matter how old you are.”

Dee shook his head. “No bad dreams. I just woke up and couldn’t sleep again.”

“You could still come to me and Dad,” Ami said.

Oh. Dee hadn’t realized that. Still, he wasn’t sure there was much they could have done, so he just shrugged in response.

“Oh, and by the way, I know my white shirt didn’t get thrown into the wash with any red socks, so the pink shirt you put on my hangers? Is definitely not mine,” Ami said.

“It was in your dresser,” Dee signed.
Ami frowned, fingers darting side to side as he thought. “Huh. Well what do you know? I do own a single pink shirt.”

“Are you gonna wear it today?” Dee asked.

Ami leaned against the counter and hummed. “You know what? Why not? It could be a fun prank on my employees. I’m pretty sure they’re convinced I only own one pair of clothes.”

Dee snickered more and glanced at the clock in the kitchen. Any minute now, Logan’s alarm was bound to go off...

“Dee, what else did you do for pranks?” Ami asked.

Dee just blinked, putting on his best innocent face. “I don’t know what you mean,” he signed.

“Oh, come on, Dee, you get a huge kick out of April Fool’s videos on YouTube. What else did you do?” Ami pressed.

Dee sat on the kitchen stool, munching on his Pop-Tart innocently while Ami stared him down. Upstairs, there was the sound of an alarm, and hurried footsteps, before a very loud thud reverberated through the house, followed by a very annoyed, "Deagan Timothy Picani!"

It was impossible not to crack up as Logan stormed down the stairs, only to trip at the threshold of the kitchen because of the shrink wrap still stuck to his feet. Logan glared at Dee, who only continued to giggle as Logan wrestled with the shrink wrap on his feet. “Not funny,” he ground out. “I could have broken my wrists!”

“In my defense, I didn’t think you would try to run out of your room,” Dee signed, laughter finally dying down.

“He generally isn’t up this early, Logan, you know he’s telling the truth,” Ami said. “He doesn’t know your morning routine.”

Logan rolled his eyes and sighed. “I’m still annoyed,” he snapped. “And you probably woke up the whole house by causing me to trip that hard.”

“You’re the one who yelled,” Dee retorted.

“Because of your poor excuse of a prank,” Logan growled.

“Hey, boys, play nice,” Ami warned. “Dee, Logan’s right. You could have seriously hurt him. In the future, you can’t set it up for him to trip that hard?”

Dee sighed but nodded. He didn’t like it, but he knew that Ami had a point.

“Logan, there’s no need to snarl at Dee. He’s seven, do you honestly expect him to know everything about everyone’s morning routines to ensure that his pranks are safe? He made an attempt to be safe, he just assumed that you would walk rather than run out of your room,” Ami said. “And while he was incorrect in that assumption, he didn’t hurt anyone in a serious manner.”

Logan grumbled but went to the refrigerator to grab the things he needed for breakfast. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m not quite in a place where I feel like apologizing.”

“That’s fine,” Ami said. “So long as you and Dee can come to an understanding in the future.”

Hurried footsteps entered the kitchen behind Dee and he turned to find Roman looking around
frantically. “Where’s Vanellope? She was with me last night when we all went to sleep and now she’s not there!”

There was a bark from the den and Vanellope bounded over to Roman, wagging her tail. “Oh,” Roman sighed. “I was worried someone might have taken her away as an April Fool’s joke.”

Logan looked Roman over. “I think there’s a quite different April Fool’s joke at play, here,” he said, fighting back a grin.

“What? What is it?” Roman asked.

Dee was giggling again, as the morning light filtered in and made Roman’s hair sparkle. Roman scratched at his head, only to have some glitter fall on his fingers. He stared at them in shock, rubbing his fingers together. Then he sighed. “Dee, we’ve been over this! Glitter is a prank for bad people!”

“Glitter is a prank for people you want to annoy for weeks,” Dee corrected. “And I wanted to remind you that I can and will annoy you for weeks if I want.”

Roman sighed and turned to Ami. “Now do you believe me when I say we have to lock up the messy stuff so the young ones don’t get their hands on it without supervision?”

“I think you may have a point, yes,” Ami said. “While the prank is relatively harmless, it’s certainly not ideal to be covered in glitter for two weeks.”

“Understatement,” Roman complained, “I’ll have to go to school like this! I don’t have time to shower!”

Logan actually laughed at that. “That should not be as funny as it is,” he said.

Roman huffed. “Okay, sure, go ahead, pick on the fourteen year old, see if I care!”

“Dee doesn’t discriminate with pranks,” Logan said. “I just appreciate what he did to you more than what he did to me.”

“You would,” Roman grumbled.

Dee finished his Pop-Tarts and got off the kitchen stool, throwing the package away. “Do I get to try and sleep again, or should I stay up longer?” he asked Ami.

“Stay up a little longer to observe the fruits of your labor,” Ami said. “Plus, it’ll be easier to talk with you about what pranks you pull if you’re actually alert when we have the conversation.”

Dee groaned at that. “But I didn’t hurt anyone!” he protested.

“You could have,” Ami said. “And the potential for being severely hurt outweighs the fact that you got lucky this time. Because you might not get lucky next time.”

Dad walked into the kitchen, scratching his head. “Who moved around virtually everything that I use in my morning routine? I spent a good five minutes trying to find my toothbrush, and it was in the medicine cabinet?”

Everyone pointed at Dee. He waved.
Dad waved back with a sigh. “Well, I can’t really say that I’m not surprised. I do wish that it had waited until I was more functional, instead of first thing in the morning.”

“At least your only got your stuff moved,” Logan said. “I tripped over shrink wrap at the bottom of my door.”

“And I’m doomed to look like a Twilight vampire for the next couple days at least,” Roman griped.

Dad looked around, seeming to assess the damage before sighing. “Clearly, we need to specify what April Fool’s pranks are okay and which ones aren’t,” he said. “Because simply ‘not hurting anyone’ is a bit of a subjective rule.”

“Yeah,” Ami said. “No one’s hurt, but everyone’s a little crabby, now.”

Dad shook his head. “Dee, how long have you been awake?”

“Since, like...three thirty?” Dee signed back. “I haven’t been able to sleep for a while.”

“Okay. Impaired judgement might also have played a part in it,” Dad said. “Dee, you should really try to get some sleep instead of pranking everyone, April Fool’s or not.”

“I did try! I tried for a whole hour!” Dee signed, scowling. “My stupid brain wouldn’t stop thinking long enough for me to fall asleep!”

Dad sighed. “Okay, okay. Probably a poor word choice. Rem, are you okay putting off the prank talk while I try and get Dee to fall asleep?”

“Sure,” Ami sighed. “I was suggesting he should watch to see the consequences of his actions, but he does look a little dead inside already.”

“Yeah, I think he should take some time to sleep if he can. He’s definitely not going to be able to function by the afternoon at school. Do we call him in as sick?” Dad asked.

“Probably a good idea. We all know what happens when he pushes himself too hard,” Ami agreed.

Dad waved for Dee to come over. “Come on, Dee, we’ll see if we can get you some more sleep before three this afternoon.”

Dee frowned, but followed Dad out of the kitchen. “I can get off school because I can’t sleep?” he asked softly, using his voice over his hands.

“Not always, but if you’ve been up for three hours and it isn’t seven in the morning, yet, I qualify that as reason enough to stay home,” Dad said. “Do we need to have a conversation about pranks and how they can hurt people?”

Dee shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. “I think I get it for the most part. I just need to dial it back a little more, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Dad agreed. “And you’ll be helping me get the glitter out of Roman’s bed when he manages to get it mostly out of his hair, so you can understand why glitter isn’t a good prank, ever. Even if someone is annoying, it just makes a deeper grudge.”

Dee sighed. “I screwed up, didn’t I?” he asked.

“Hey, it’s only your second April Fool’s, I expected you to cross a line you weren’t aware of. No big deal, so long as you learn from your mistakes,” Dad reassured.
“Thanks for being understanding,” Dee mumbled. “I still don’t know if I can sleep, though.”

Dad shrugged. “Well, we can find out,” he hummed.

Dee went into his bedroom and crawled under his sheets, pulling both them and his weighted blanket up to his chin. Dad passed him Fangs and said, “Now, I don’t know if this will help or not, but I can always lead you through a guided meditation and see if that relaxes you enough to fall asleep.”

“Sure,” Dee said. It wasn’t like he had anything to lose from it.

“Okay,” Dad said with an encouraging smile. “I’m going to need you to close your eyes, and let your breathing even out. In for four seconds, hold for seven, and out for eight. Can you do that?”

Dee nodded, closing his eyes and following the breathing pattern. Dad barely had to get through half of the scene he was setting before Dee couldn’t even open his eyes if he wanted to. He nuzzled into Fangs’ fur, feeling content enough to actually sleep for another hour or two at least. Sure, he might be in a bit of trouble when he got up, but he wouldn’t have to worry about a punishment. Dad and Ami would be fair, they would never hurt him or ask him to do the impossible.

Dad ruffled Dee’s hair and murmured that he would see Dee in a few hours when he woke up, and Dee was left alone to rest for as long as he needed.
April 23rd, 2021

“Yeah, Toby, life’s going great,” Remy said, picking imaginary lint off his pants with his free hand. “I never thought I’d be suited for domesticity, but it honestly just feels right.”

Toby laughed on the other end of the phone call. “Only you could accidentally pick up five kids and a husband, Remy,” he said. “The husband I saw coming ever since you told me your first crush was George in your Geography class, but the kids? No way, that completely blind-sided me.”

“Yeah,” Remy laughed. “You haven’t told our parents about it, right? I don’t want them barging into my life and trying to take it over, you know?”

“Don’t worry, Remy, I won’t tell a soul,” Toby assured. “They’d have to torture it out of me, and even then they wouldn’t get very far.”

Remy laughed. “I love you, Tobes. Talk soon?”

“You know it,” Toby said. “I’m really glad we started these regular phone calls again.”

“Me too,” Remy agreed. “Me too.”

May 16th, 2021

It was Remy’s worst fear coming to life. It was a Sunday morning, and she had elected to wear one of her white sundresses to go with her ever-present leather jacket. There had been a ring of the doorbell, and seeing as how Remy had been expecting Toby and Vanessa to visit at some point, just to say hi, she readily opened the door, a warm greeting on her tongue that died when she saw the two people who were actually on her doorstep. She swallowed. “Mom...Dad...what are you doing here?”

Her dad was looking her up and down while her mother sniffed, “Is that any way to greet your own parents, Remington?”

“It’s not that I’m not glad to see you, but...I didn’t know that you were coming over,” Remy said, stepping around the door and closing it behind her so that hopefully the boys wouldn’t get the brunt of her parents’ attacks.

“Remy...why are you wearing a dress?” her dad asked.

Remy flinched. “I...uh...I lost a bet,” she said, unable to tell her parents the truth about her being genderfluid.

“Toby called us the other day,” her mother said conversationally. “It took some pestering, but he told us that you and your... husband adopted.”

“Yeah,” Remy said. “We did.”

A silence stretched on between the three of them, one that made Remy more and more uneasy the
“Well?” her mother asked.

“Well, what?” Remy replied.

“Well, can we see our grandchildren?” her mother pressed. “They may be...illegitimate but I’m sure they must have some redeeming quality or you wouldn’t have taken them in.”

Remy bristled. “Considering you just called my sons bastards, I’m not so sure I want you to see them.”

Her mother gasped and Remy flinched. Even after all this time, she was expecting to be used by saying yes, and abused for saying no. “How dare you?!” her mother shrieked. “I said nothing of the sort, and you shouldn’t use that type of language, Remington!”

_Oh, grow up, Mother, I did without your help, why can’t you do it without mine?!_ Remy thought to herself. But she didn’t verbalize this, knowing it would only get her in more trouble.

When the silence stretched on further, Remy didn’t know what to do. She certainly wasn’t going to apologize, because that was what her mother had said. But her mother wouldn’t continue the conversation without an apology.

As soon as the silence, came, it was gone as the front door opened and Emile said, “Rem? What’s going...oh.”

“Yeah,” Remy said, turning to him. “They want to see our boys.”

“Oh, right, because that’s definitely happening,” Emile said, glowering at Remy’s parents. “After they hurt you bad enough that you needed literal years of therapy to train yourself out of their sort of behavior.”

She shifted on her feet as her mother’s glare intensified at Emile. She was hoping, praying that none of the boys would come to investigate...

And her prayers were denied. Roman came to the door and asked, “Dad, Ami, what’s going...on...” he gawked at Remy’s parents. “Who are they?”

“My parents,” Remy said.

“Oh.” A beat. Then, “Are we inviting them in, or...?”

Remy’s mother turned to her expectantly. “At least one man in this house has manners,” she sneered. Cringing, Remy said, “Fine. You want to come in, go ahead. But I reserve the right to kick you out if you hurt any of my boys. And that includes Emile.”

Her mother glared at her and promptly walked past her into the house. Her dad gave her a look that she recognized as the, _why can’t you keep your mouth shut?_ look. She turned and followed them in as they looked around. “It’s bigger than that old hovel you called your house last time, at least,” her mother scoffed.

“Yeah, well, with four brothers, we all kinda needed more space,” Roman offered. “But the townhouse was hardly a ‘hovel’ as you put it.”

“Four—?! Remington, did you seriously adopt five kids?!” her mother sputtered at her.

“Please stop calling me that,” Remy said. “It’s Remy. Has been for years. Using my full name is
just...so unnecessary.”

“Five children?” her dad asked her, arching an eyebrow.

“They’re Emile’s. Biologically, I mean. He’s their biological father. We both adopted them, but...yeah. He’s the reason they’re around,” Remy said, scratching the back of her neck.

“And you stayed with him?!” her mother scoffed. “You stayed with an adulterer?”

“He didn’t cheat on me!” Remy exclaimed. “He donated to a sperm bank! All these kids were from there!”

Her mother scoffed, and Remy felt heat grow in her cheeks. Whether it was from anger or embarrassment, she had no idea. She was pretty sure she was going to have a very long talk with Toby after this, however. “However they came about, it was still out of wedlock. And therefore wrong.”

Roman turned to Remy, eyebrows arched in surprise. “Is she always like this?” he signed.

“Unfortunately yes,” Remy signed back.

Patton and Virgil were observing from the top of the stairs, and as of yet Remy’s mother hadn’t noticed them, but she knew that wouldn’t last long. And she knew she had to keep them from going out back, because Logan and Dee were roughhousing out there with Vanellope, and Logan was wearing gym shorts and a sports bra due to the exercise. And dignity aside, she was not going to allow her mother to misgender Logan.

“I see three children, where are the other two?” her dad asked.

Emile and Remy shared a look. Emile was clearly saying, We can’t let them see Logan and Dee.

Remy felt tears come to her eyes as she silently asked, Do we even have a choice?

We always have a choice, Emile reminded her with a downward tilt of his chin.

“Well?” her mother asked. “Your father asked you a question.”

Patton slowly crept down the stairs and timidly asked, “Weren’t they in the backyard?”

Remy facepalmed and Emile paled.

“I thought they were in the basement, Pat,” Virgil said, trying to distract Remy’s parents from the obvious.

Patton seemed to realize his mistake the second Remy’s mother turned to her. “Basement or backyard?” she snapped.

“I don’t have eyes on them every second of every day,” Remy weakly said. “The backyard is fenced in and the basement is free of dangerous objects. Either way, they’re safe and I don’t need to supervise them.”

Her mother scoffed. “You’re a terrible father, and so is your husband! If you think you can trust children not to hurt themselves one way or another if you leave them alone, you’re clearly delusional!”

Vanellope barked in the backyard and Dee squealed. Remy’s mother gave her a victorious grin,
despite not doing anything to get the information of where Logan and Dee were. She strode to the backyard, Remy hot on her heels trying to distract her mother without physically dragging her away from the door. But it was no use. She walked out to the deck, surveying it with arms crossed.

Remy dashed out after her and pulled up short right behind her. “Remington, I thought you said you were hosting five boys,” she said stiffly.

Logan bared his teeth and Remy knew that the situation was going to go nuclear in half a second. “Ma’am, I don’t know who you are or why you’re at our house, but I can assure you, I am a man,” he snarled.

Remy’s mother scoffed. “Not with that chest you’re not! Do you even have any idea how deep in Hell you’ll end up?”

“Mother!” Remy exclaimed. “That is enough!”

Her mother turned on her and Remy took an involuntary step back. “That is no way to speak to your mother, Remington!”

Remy could feel the eyes of everyone on her. Her husband, her sons, her father, and her mother was glaring at her. And something inside of her just snapped. “No, maybe it’s not,” she said. “But considering they way you’ve treated me my entire life, I don’t consider you a mother.

“All my life, you’ve set this impossible standard for me to reach. And when I failed to reach it, you would ignore me or belittle me. You expect me to live up to Vanessa and Toby, well, news flash! I’m not them! They can be your perfect little children, doing whatever you want them to do when you tell them to do it, but I won’t! I will love whoever I want to love, I will raise the family I choose to raise, even if it was unexpected. It was the best thing to happen to me in my entire life, and I can see clearly now all the damage you did to me, because it reflects in what my kids have had to go through!”

Her breath was heaving in her chest as she continued. “Every time they flinch at a loud noise, or they mess up and expect myself and my husband to be mad at them, I realize that I did the same thing! And do you know why most of them left their mothers? Because their mothers were abusive! Can you believe that? The very same things you did to me that traumatized me are considered abuse!

“I made my own family without you in it. And yeah, I might not be related to them by blood, but I don’t have to be! All these kids came here because they were related to Emile by blood, but they stayed because we made sure they felt welcomed, that they felt safe coming to myself and Emile were something to go wrong! I made my own family, and I’m proud to say that they’re mine! It doesn’t matter that two of them are transgender, it doesn’t matter that I have a husband instead of a wife! I’ve found out that I, myself, am transgender, so you don’t get to tell me that my son is not my son just because he was born into a body that didn’t match his brain! I know for a fact that your body does not dictate your gender!

“You’re racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and so many more things that I don’t care to surround myself with! It took me years to unlearn everything you had convinced me was right. Even when I decided to go my own way and run my own coffee shop one day, I was still struggling because I knew that wasn’t your plan for me. But your plan for me doesn’t matter! It shouldn’t even exist! Because I’m the only one in control of my life, and I’m the only one who gets to decide what my plan is!”

Her mother was staring at her in shock, too stunned to come up with any sort of reply.
“I don’t know if you can read a room well enough to see this, but you’re no longer welcome here,” Remy snarled. “Leave.”

Her father jumped to life. “You can’t do that, Remy, we’re your family.”

“No, you’re not,” Emile said. “That’s what my wife just told you. Leave, or we’ll be calling the police to escort you off our property.”

“You won’t be missed,” Dee signed, grinning.

“What? What did he say?” Remy’s mother cried, voice shrill and angry.

“He said you won’t be missed, and I’m inclined to agree,” Remy said evenly. “Goodbye. Leave and don’t come back, ever. Don’t bug Vanessa or Toby about me, either. I still consider them my family, because they treated me with basic human decency. But you? You’re both dead to me.”

Her mother and father left as Emile pushed them through the house and out the front door, locking it behind him. As soon as they were gone, Remy started to shake. She got halfway through the house before her legs gave out and she collapsed to the ground, breath heaving in her chest and tears stinging her eyes. Her entire family surrounded her, right down to Vanellope, who was trying to lick away her tears. “It’s going to be okay, Rem,” Emile soothed. “I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself.”

Remy launched herself at Emile and crushed him in her hug. Emile hugged her back gently. “Is Ami going to be okay?” Patton asked, worry clear in his voice.

“She’ll be fine. She just needs a couple moments,” Emile reassured him.

Remy sniffled and continued to hug Emile. She was completely exhausted, and scared out of her wits. But she knew that at least her family would be with her until she felt better.
February 14th, 2021

Logan and Jack were laughing and throwing popcorn at each others’ mouths, trying to catch it and eat it, and only being successful half the time. “Man, senioritis hit hard this year,” Jack said. “I could hear even the most laid-back teachers complaining.”

“I know,” Logan said. “It’s hard to believe that we’re going to be going to college in the fall.”

“At least we’re going to the same one,” Jack pointed out. “No long-distance relationship necessary.”

“Yeah,” Logan agreed. “That’s definitely the biggest perk of going there.”

A comfortable silence lapsed between them. Then, “Logan, I’m really glad I get to have you as my boyfriend.”

“Why’s that?” Logan asked.

Jack looked over at him. “Because you don’t make a big deal out of Valentine’s Day, or any huge romance days, really. You match my energy for it. We’re completely in sync. It’s nice to be together with someone you know that well.”

Logan had never looked at it that way before, but now that he had... “I totally agree,” he said. “And you make a really nice boyfriend, too.”

June 11th, 2021

Logan let out a shaky breath, fiddling with his cap and gown as he talked to Jack. “I really wish we could sit wherever we wanted to,” he muttered. “I’d sit next to you in a heartbeat.”

“I know, but they want us to sit in alphabetical order to make it easier to grab your diploma,” Jack sighed. “I’d love to sit next to you too, but we’ll be okay. And it’s not as if you have to give any of the speeches.”

“True,” Logan allowed. “I would have hated having to give the valedictorian speech. That’s just...no. I’m book smart, not people smart. Why would anyone think me giving a speech would be a good idea?”

Jack laughed as he fixed Logan’s gown sleeves. “I don’t know, you could probably make a pretty mean toast at someone’s wedding.”

“That’s different, that’s essentially bragging about a friend and making everyone else acknowledge that friend is great,” Logan said.

“Oh, so I can trust you to be my best man at my wedding?” Jack teased. “You love telling people how great I am.”

“Well, I suppose I could be your best man, but I sort of always assumed that I would be your husband,” Logan said simply.
Jack short-circuited, staring at Logan slack-jawed. Logan stifled a laugh and made his way to his seat as everyone started moving into the auditorium. He sat down in his seat and played on his phone to ignore Jack, who had walked out to the auditorium and was staring at him pointedly from the seat right in front of him. “Logan, we need to talk about that,” Jack hissed.

“I mean, sure,” Logan whispered. “We can talk once the ceremony is over.”

“Logan—!”

But Jack didn’t get to finish, as the principal walked on stage. Logan put his phone away but checked out for most of the speech. It was all about how everyone was destined for greatness, how high school was an integral part of their lives, and one they would look back on fondly, which Logan knew would not be the case. At least, not all of those for everyone.

He was more preoccupied with what he had said with Jack, anyway. After all, he had said it as a one-off line, it had slipped out like an old habit, or something that a couple might say after going out for several months and it was an inside joke. The catch being, that they had never talked about this before. Logan and Jack had never seriously discussed marriage like it was an option that would be available for them. They said they might marry if they were still together at the end of college, but he had somewhat assumed that they had both been joking. Jack had told him as much a few times recently. But Logan had been completely serious when he said it. He had been completely serious when he said he assumed he would be Jack’s husband at Jack’s wedding. Was that presumptuous? Did Jack not feel the same way about him? They were both only eighteen, why were they even talking about marriage in the first place?

He was starting to psych himself out. He didn’t want to make assumptions, he really didn’t want to start thinking that Jack didn’t want to stay with him that long if that wasn’t the case. And yet...if that was the case, shouldn’t he prepare himself for the worst? After all, he had just brought up marriage in a serious setting. If Jack didn’t feel the same way, he would want to disentangle himself from Logan as quickly as he could. And Logan would have to wait until after graduation for them to talk.

As the speaker moved from the principal to the valedictorian, Logan could feel his palms begin to sweat. He had gone and ruined the best thing to ever happen to him in his entire life. Jack would probably be too scared to even be friends with him after this, and he would be alone on a college campus that Jack would be sharing with him, and they would have to dance around each other for four years.

Jack kept sending him glances, but Logan couldn’t decipher their meanings. He was freaking out. Was Jack trying to tell him something? Was he figuring out how to break things off? Logan tried to focus on his breathing, using the same exercises he had learned to help Virgil. They made some of the hyperventilation ebb away, but he was still stuck in a world of panic.

Slowly, after the valedictorian and the class speaker, the students got called up to grab their diplomas and shake hands with the principal, and stood on the open floor in front of the stage. Jack’s name was called, and Jack sent him one last look before turning around, going up to grab his diploma and not looking back. Logan was officially panicking.

As more and more students got called up, Logan bunched the fabric of his gown in his hands before slowly releasing them. He didn’t want to look outwardly rattled, that wouldn’t do for the pictures. He smoothed the gown out and took a deep breath as his name was called. His whole family cheered as he took the diploma and shook hands with the principal. He walked off the other side of the stage and stood among the other students. Here, there seemed to be no order to where people were, as friends were setting up in bunches. Jack moved through the throng to come over to Logan and he murmured quietly, “Can we talk now?”
Logan felt his eyes widen and the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. “Jack, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. It crossed a line that we had never even discussed before…”

Jack waited a second to see if Logan would continue, but the words were getting caught in Logan’s throat. “Honey, no,” he said softly. “That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m not breaking up with you, not at all. That’s the last thing that I want to do.”

Logan looked at Jack curiously. He had figured that Jack would want nothing to do with him after this declaration. After all, he had talked about marriage, which was often seen as a permanent, forever sort of thing. “‘Til death do us part” and all that. Logan wouldn’t have blamed Jack at all for being freaked out by that and wanting to take a step back from it all, just to make sure that he wasn’t swept up and away by Logan’s feelings, leaving no room for Jack’s own.

“You forget, honey, that when you prepare for the worst of your situations you often start to assume that’s the case,” Jack said softly, grabbing Logan’s free hand with his. “But that’s not always, if ever, true.”

Logan’s chest felt tight. Did that mean that…Jack genuinely…loved him back? “So the marriage thing didn’t freak you out?” Logan asked softly.

“Freak me out? No. It certainly surprised me, but I put a little thought into it, and that seems to be the logical conclusion to our relationship,” Jack said. “We’d either break up and remain best friends, or we’d get married, and remain best friends. Just with romance thrown in the deal.”

Logan couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing. “So...what you’re saying...is that you’d marry me?”

“Theoretically, yes,” Jack said. Before Logan’s heart could sink much, Jack added, “Now, I say theoretically because I don’t think either of us are quite ready for that sort of commitment, you know? But whenever we are ready, somewhere down the line…I would love to be your husband. Have all those little domestic scenes that we’ve had, except every day. Have a little fun every night watching movies, or making dinner, or playing games. Stuff like that is good for the soul, when it’s with someone you love. And I certainly love you.”

Logan’s eyes stung with tears of an entirely different sort. He blinked, and a few fell, causing Jack to laugh. “Honey, you really need to think things through to their logical conclusions, not just the worst case scenarios, you know?”

“That’s gay,” Tristen whispered behind them with a snicker.

“We’re gay, what did you expect?” Jack teased.

Logan had to bite back a very loud groan. “Come on, guys, a little sympathy for me would go a long way.”

“You know we love you,” Tristen said. “In very different ways, but we still love you. I’ll steal your kneecaps if you don’t keep in touch with our friend group as we all go off to college. We’ve still got that group chat to talk in.”

Jack kissed Logan’s cheek and said, “Honey, just to be clear; I would love to marry you. Not yet, because neither of us is ready for that and I think it would stress us both out. But if, in a year, we need better FAFSA applications, I’ll totally get hitched with you a little ahead of schedule.”

Logan clapped a hand over his mouth as he snorted. “Jack!” he hissed. “That is not helpful!”
Jack just grinned at him. All the other little groups were conversing quietly as well, as cameras flashed and people clapped and the last of the High School Class of twenty-twenty one were called up to grab their diplomas. As the principal gave one last short, mini-speech that lasted about five minutes, Logan and Jack held hands and gave each other shy smiles. When the time came to throw off their caps, Logan and Jack did so with gusto, before Jack jumped on Logan and kissed him with a passion. Logan made a muffled noise of surprise before beginning to laugh. He tried to stay standing, but when it was clear he was about to fall, Jack put his feet on the ground and held Logan’s waist to keep him from collapsing to the floor.

When both their families approached, Dad good-naturedly asked, “When’s the wedding?”

Logan and Jack looked at each other. “Well, we don’t have an exact date, yet, but sometime in four years, probably,” Logan said, squeezing Jack’s hand. Jack grinned at him and kissed him again. Logan laughed and pulled away. “Come on, Jack, we have to be somewhat presentable for pictures!”

Dad was sputtering in surprise, while Ami just looked like a cross between proud and amused. Grandma and Granddad were congratulating the both of them, not only on their graduation but on their admission that they planned to marry each other.

Logan was thrilled beyond belief. The graduation was over, meaning that all of them got the chance to go out and have lunch together. He had a family who loved and supported him, and his diploma had his real name on it, not his deadname. Jack was still with him and said that he would be willing to stay for a long time, so long as nothing drastic happened. Dee was chattering away, too caught up in the excitement to worry about his volume and his tone. Patton and Virgil were asking Jack and Logan a bunch of questions about their future wedding, and Roman was laughing every time the word “wedding” was used.

As they all left the auditorium and Jack and Logan went to change out of their gowns, Jack grinned at Logan. “You know, I hadn’t given much thought to actually marrying you before you said you anticipated being my husband. But after you said it, I realized that there was no one else, in that moment, I’d rather have by my side. So thank you, for helping me to realize that.”

“Hey, it was your joke that lead to my response. I didn’t realize I wanted that either until I had said it,” Logan responded. “But we’re the best power couple out there, and it’s made doubly-great by us being gay.”

“The best gay power couple!” Jack agreed with a laugh.

And as they reunited with their families outside to take pictures, Logan beamed the widest smile he had ever given. Because not only had a family found him that loved him and supported him in ways he had previously never thought possible, but now they were encouraging him to make that family his in the sense that he could add on to it and make his own place in everyone’s hearts, not just the place they had assigned him.

His family had found him, and now, he was continuing the tradition, building his own family that included both its previous members, and its future ones as well.
August 25th, 2021

Dee didn’t know what he was forgetting, but he knew he was forgetting something. He was in his room, playing with a couple dozen parts of tinker toys when he heard the sound of a car trunk slamming and his mind just went: Logan.

“Logan!” he yelled, leaping off his bed and sprinting down the stairs. “Logan Logan Logan! Logan! Logan!”

As he burst through the front door, Logan was standing there, amused, as his boyfriend-turned-fiancé Jack was trying to stuff the last of the suitcases they had in the backseat of the sedan. “Yeah, Dee?” he asked.

Dee zipped over and hugged Logan as tight as he could. At just above four feet, he came close to Logan’s chest, but he wasn’t quite there yet. It made him sad to realize that Logan wouldn’t be around to see him grow taller until around Thanksgiving or Christmas, and it was still August! “I’m gonna miss you,” Dee mumbled into Logan’s chest.

Logan laughed, a deep, rumbling sound that made Dee smile despite the moment. “I’ll miss you too, Dee, but remember, we can call every Saturday evening, right? And if one of us misses Saturday, we can do it Sunday. Remember?”

“I know,” Dee said, taking a step back to allow Roman and Virgil and Patton to hug Logan too. “But I’m still gonna miss you.”

Logan smiled softly. “I’m only two hours away, Dee. That’s not too far, considering some people go to college halfway around the world.”

“You’re not allowed to do that!” Dee exclaimed. “You can’t go halfway around the world without me!”

“I wasn’t planning on it, Dee,” Logan said, crouching to his height. “Jack and I will both call regularly, promise. You’ve got this, you don’t need me.”

“But...but I want you,” Dee said.

“And that’s what the video calls will be for,” Logan said good-naturedly. “Look, Dee, I have to go. Jack and I are due for orientation in four hours, and we have to get our dorm keys and IDs and everything that comes with that. But I’ll call you tonight to let you know I’m settling in, okay? I love you.”

Dee felt like he was going to cry and his words were getting caught in his throat, so he signed “I love you” back and let Logan hug him one last time, before his brother climbed in the passenger side of Jack’s sedan, and they drove off. Dee sighed, turning back to look at the rest of the family. Everyone was a little misty-eyed. Patton and Virgil were hugging each other, and Roman held onto Vanellope, who whined as Logan left. Dad and Ami were smiling, though they cried a little too. “They grow up so fast,” Ami said, and Dad agreed with a nod. “Hey, guys, what do you say to a little trip to get some ice cream, in honor of the last days before school starts?”

“Sure,” Patton said, and Virgil murmured his agreement. Roman nodded.
Everyone looked to Dee and he nodded too. Internally, he let himself relax. Even though some of his family was moving forward, they weren’t moving on from who was left behind. And he knew, somehow, someway, no matter what, that they would all eventually be together again.

End Notes

I fully intend at this point in time to make this story the first in a series, one which hopefully won't all be posted on one day for all the other works, but we shall see. If that's something that would interest you, feel free to let me know! I love to see if my ideas excite anyone other than myself! Thank you for reading!

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