When You Were Mine

by Daisy_Rivers

Summary

Francis "Frankie" Kinloch has broken up with his longtime boyfriend, John Laurens, in a spectacularly public manner. With his father's deep disapproval and other people's judgments, John already has enough to deal with. While his friends rally around to support him, one of those friends would like a more-than-friends relationship. Then, suddenly, enter Alexander Hamilton, motor-mouth transfer student from New York City who wants to be John's new best friend. How will that work out?
Eliza found him sitting under the oak tree in the dirt, picking up acorns and breaking them into tiny pieces. She stooped down in front of him.

“I just heard. I’m so sorry, John. How could he do this?”

John shrugged and gave her a twisted smile. “Oh, you know Frankie. He looks out for Frankie first.”

“He’s a son of a bitch.”

“Yeah.”

“And her, of all people. I didn’t think they even liked each other.”

John snorted. “I don’t think they do.”

“Then why?”


“Is it true that Patsy gets control of her trust fund as soon as she gets married?”

John pulverized another acorn. “That’s what I heard.”

“So, today?”

“I guess.”

“Did you hear anything else?”

He finally looked up and made eye contact. “I heard she was a useless fuck.”

“John!”

He shrugged again. “Maybe he wasn’t that good a judge.” His eyes glittered with unshed tears.

She took his hand. “You knew, then?”

“I knew he was seeing her, but he told me it was all a sham to keep his parents happy. The things he said about her – God, Eliza, how could I ever have thought I loved a person who would treat somebody like that? I even feel sorry for her.”

“Did she know about you?”

“I don’t know how she couldn’t, but I have no idea what to believe about anything today.”

She put her hand on his. “Will you be all right?”

“Probably not today, but maybe sometime.” He shook his head. “I was going to ask him to marry
“Oh, John!” Her eyes filled with sympathetic tears. “He’s so not worth it.”

“I know. That’s part of the shock. It’s not just that he dumped me and married the rich Rutledge girl. It’s finding out he was a lying bastard. Do you think he was using me too?”

She looked away uncomfortably. “I don’t know.”

Eliza was the world’s worst liar. John narrowed his eyes. “Wait, what have you heard?”

“It’s just gossip.”

“Today?”

She sighed and nodded.

“What?”

“Somebody said that Governor Rutledge has more money than Henry Laurens.”

“That’s not true, actually,” John responded, bitter amusement in his voice. “It’s just that the likelihood of my inheriting any of Henry Laurens’s money is nonexistent.” He thought for a minute. “I wonder if Frankie verified that.”

Eliza’s eyes widened. “How would he have done that?”

“His father knows people who know my father. He might have found something out. It doesn’t matter, really.” He pulled the cap off another acorn and crushed it to sawdust. “I should be glad, shouldn’t I? Glad I found out, I mean.”

“I suppose.”

“I wish I were. I just keep thinking what a fool I’ve been. It makes me doubt my judgment. How could I be that wrong about a person?”

“We’ve all done it. We’ve all trusted people we shouldn’t have.”

“For two years? It’s nice of you to say that, but I think I may hold the record in obliviousness.”

She was still holding on to his hand. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get some lunch. You’ll freeze to death sitting on the ground out here.”

“Would that be so bad?” There wasn’t a trace of amusement in his voice.

“John!” She stood up and pulled him along with her.

“Don’t worry, Eliza,” he said. “I’m not going to kill myself.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

* * * * *

The transfer student was grateful that one of the guys in his Systems of Representative Government class had invited him to sit at his table for lunch. It wasn’t junior high, but it had still feel weird to
sit alone in the university food court for the first few weeks of the semester. Sam seemed nice, a little overly friendly, but that was probably just the difference between New York and South Carolina. Everybody was so nice here it made him nervous.

“So,” Sam was saying, “this is Chip Lee. He plays football, so he’s a business major, and he’s on the same dorm floor as me.”

The transfer student held out his hand. “Alexander Hamilton,” he said. “Call me Alex.”

“Hey,” Chip responded. “Any friend of Sam’s and all that.”

“Actually, I only met Sam a couple of weeks ago,” Alex began, and then realized that sounded rude. “I just transferred from Columbia, so I don’t know many people down here.’

“Well, welcome to the University of South Carolina. If you need anything, I’m right here.”

“Yeah, thanks, I think I’m good.”

Chip pulled out his phone. “Why don’t you give me your number, so if you call, I won’t ignore it.”

That was a little weird. It certainly wasn’t the first time a guy had asked for his number, but the context was different. Still, no real reason not to, so he took the phone and entered his contact information.

“Thanks,” Chip said, still smiling. “I’ll probably give you a call in a couple of days, let you know about some of the great activities we’ve got here.”

“Sure,” Alex agreed, not interested, but trying to be polite.

Some more friends of Sam’s turned up, a guy named Jimmy and his girlfriend Maria, so Sam performed introductions again. Neither of them had too much to say, as they appeared to be completely wrapped up in each other. Alex was still surveying the food court, trying to work out what social groups were where. The section near the back with all the big guys and perky blond girls undoubtedly represented the jocks and their girlfriends. In the center of the room there were several tables with a colorful assortment of students, a few emo types, a girl with bright pink hair, and some guys who definitely set off his usually-accurate gaydar. Drama majors, he decided. He looked around again, but no other groups were easily identifiable. His attention was attracted, though, by a couple who came in together, a very cute guy with curly hair and a slim, pretty girl. Another girl waved at them and they went to sit with her on the far side of the room. They all looked very serious.

“Who are those three over there?” Alex asked Sam.

“Them? That’s two of the Schuyler girls, Angelica and Eliza, and Johnny Laurens.”

“Mm,” Alex acknowledged, hoping for more information. “What’s up? They look like their dog just died.”

Maria tore herself away from Jimmy to join the conversation. “Didn’t you hear?” she asked in the tone of someone about to impart a significant piece of news. “Johnny’s boyfriend dumped him for Patsy Rutledge.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Alex’s mouth said, while his brain commented, Oh, he’s single? Great!

“They’re all better off,” Chip Lee put in. “I’m glad Frankie has done the right thing.”
Maybe that only sounded homophobic. Maybe Chip knows these people personally and has good reasons for what he said.

Sam nodded. “I’m sure Pastor Henry is grateful. I know he’s had this in prayer for a long time.”

Uh-oh.

“Two years,” Jimmy said. “Pastor’s been praying for his wayward son for two years. There’s no way to know if Johnny has changed, but at least Frankie has come to his senses and can lead a normal life.”

“You’re saying it’s not normal to be gay?” Alex inquired.

Jimmy stared at him. “Well, it’s not. The Bible says, ‘He created them male and female and blessed them.’ It doesn’t say anything about God blessing same-sex couples.”

“Right, well, of course it makes more sense to believe a collection of three-millennia-old writings that have been copied and translated thousands of times than to believe factual, peer-reviewed data,” Alex responded with heavy sarcasm.

Everyone at the table was regarding him with shock. It was Sam who found his voice first. “Is that the way you really feel? Are you … are you gay?”

“Why do you want to know?” Alex asked sweetly, batting his eyelashes. “Are you asking me out?”

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John had tried not to feel self-conscious when he walked into the food court with Eliza, but he was aware of some sidelong looks and whispers. Fuck them. He wasn’t going to give anybody a show. They headed for Angelica’s table.

“You okay?” she asked when they joined her.

John raised an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“Right, sorry, incredibly stupid question. I’ll buy you lunch.”

“Fair enough.”

Angelica smiled. John was the strongest person she knew. “What do you want?” she asked.

“If you’re buying, everything on the menu.”

“Seriously.”

“Okay, what’s the soup today?”

She looked at the chalkboard. “Tomato basil.”

“Yeah, that, and a grilled cheese.”

“Me too,” Eliza added.

“Come with me,” Angelica said to her sister. “I can’t carry three lunches.”

Eliza stood up and looked around. She didn’t want to leave John on his own, even for a few
minutes. She gave a brief sigh of relief when she saw Gil come in, his arm around a girl as usual. She didn’t know this one’s name yet. She caught his eye, and they immediately crossed the room to join her.

“I’ll get lunch,” the girl said, and Gil sat down with John.

John looked up after a minute. “Just don’t ask me if I’m okay,” he said.

“I wouldn’t think of it.”

“Good.”

There was a long silence. “So, how are you, really?” Gil asked.

“I told you not …”

Gil held up his hand. “Different question. I was careful about the wording.”

John rolled his eyes. “I’ve had better days.”

“What are you going to do?”

“About what?”

Gil tried to find a tactful way to inquire if John still had a place to live. “Erm … the apartment?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, Frankie must have cleared everything out yesterday afternoon when I was in class. He didn’t come home last night, but that … well, it’s happened before, so I wasn’t actually worried.” He looked up, and Gil saw how pale he was, freckles standing out like sepia ink against ashen skin. “Then this morning I got the text.”

“You got a text? He sent you a fucking text? Are you fucking kidding me?”

John took out his phone and opened the screen. He handed it to Gil without a word.

_Patsy and I were married last night in private ceremony. I hope you’ll understand and wish us well._

Gil’s jaw literally dropped. “He hopes you’ll _understand_?”

“Yeah. I probably won’t.”

“Jesus, John! What a bastard.”

“I keep thinking I should have seen it coming.”

Gil looked at him speculatively. “Nothing?”

John shook his head. He didn’t want to talk about the night before last, when he and Frankie had made love for the last time. Of course, he hadn’t known it would be the last time, but there was nothing, _nothing_, in any of Frankie’s words or actions that might have hinted that he didn’t love John as deeply and passionately as John loved him. Nothing at all. And that was terrifying.

The girls came back with the lunch trays, and John tried to concentrate on his soup. He was colder than he had realized, and he was grateful to Eliza for finding him in the far corner of the quad and bringing him inside. Gil introduced his latest girl as Adrienne. She seemed nice, if a little
uncomfortable at finding herself in the middle of a group of friends who were dealing with some sort of crisis.

One of the TVs on the food court wall was set to a local station that was showing the noon news. When the anchor said the word *elopement*, they all looked up apprehensively. The smiling blond went on to relate the whole story. “Governor Rutledge’s daughter Martha, who’s known as Patsy to her friends, married Francis Kinloch, Jr., son of Anne Cleland Kinloch and Francis Kinloch, Sr. in a private ceremony last night. While the engagement had not been announced, the ceremony was performed by the Governor’s close friend Judge Thomas Heyward, and the Governor’s office has issued a statement that he and Mrs. Rutledge are delighted to welcome their new son-in-law into the family.”

“Well, shit,” Angelica muttered.

There were apparently still some students at the university who hadn’t heard that the popular couple who had been known affectionately as Frankie and Johnny were no longer together. A gasp went through the room. A girl’s clear voice was heard to say, “But isn’t he gay?” before she was shushed by a friend.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Angelica snapped.

John stared at his grilled cheese. Gil put his arm casually across the back of John’s chair, sending a silent message that John was not to be approached.

“I should probably go home,” John said. “I don’t …”

“Not by yourself,” Angelica interrupted. She grabbed her phone and sent a quick text.

John sighed. They were all used to being managed by Angelica, but he didn’t really want company. On the other hand, the idea of being alone in the apartment he had shared with Frankie for two years was bleak. “Who?” he asked.

“Herc,” Angelica replied. Her phone chimed and she looked at the screen. “He’s in class, but he’ll be here as soon as he’s done.”

“Okay.” Herc would be all right. He wouldn’t ask a lot of questions. “I guess I might as well stay here till he comes.”

“We’ll stay with you,” Eliza assured him.

“Don’t miss class on my account,” John said.

Eliza raised an eyebrow. “Just shut up.”

John nodded and took a bite of his sandwich. It tasted like cardboard.

He sensed Gil stiffening in the seat next to him and looked up as Angelica muttered, “Shit, shit, shit, shit, fuck!” through clenched teeth.

“What …” he began, then saw the person they were reacting to. He put his hand to his forehead and implored, “Can somebody make him go away?”

Gil stood up and gave it his best shot. “Go away, Tom,” he said.

Tom Jefferson gave him an excruciatingly patient stare. “You know you don’t mean that,” he said.
Jefferson took a few steps farther and stood silently next to John’s seat. John concentrated on his lunch, keeping his eyes down. Jefferson spoke in a deeply sincere voice. “John, I know you may feel distressed right now, but you will find …”

“Fuck off,” John said.

Jefferson didn’t miss a syllable “… that as time goes on you will be grateful for what may at this moment appear to be …”

Gil got his hand on Jefferson’s shoulder just a second too late to stop John, who stood up, five-ten to Jefferson’s six-one, and punched him as hard as he could in the face. Jefferson went down, bleeding copiously from the nose, and turmoil swept the food court. John sat back down, rubbing his bruised knuckles, while a few dozen students began filming Jefferson’s awkward stumble to his feet, his light blue shirt stained with crimson splotches of blood. Some of his friends gathered with handfuls of napkins and glasses of water. Angelica, ignoring the impromptu first aid squad, was telling him off in heavily profane prose. Gil placed himself between Jefferson and John, and Eliza and Adrienne tried to get people to go away.

It didn’t help that another faction of the crowd despised Jefferson and began cheering, “Johnny, Johnny!” It really didn’t help that some fool called 911 and reported an assault with “possible serious injuries.” Within minutes, police entered the food court with their hands on their holsters, closely followed by EMTs with stretchers and oxygen. They found, as their lieutenant later expressed it, “One whiny guy with a bloody nose.”

The upside was that John and his friends were able to make an inconspicuous exit while the police were asking Jefferson and his minions questions. By the time they got outside, they were laughing, even John. Angelica texted Herc a change of plans to meet them at Gil’s apartment because none of them were going to afternoon classes.

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Alex watched the drama from the far side of the room. He had no context to put it in, but he was observant, and he didn’t like the swaggering behavior of the tall guy in the light blue shirt.

Sam and Chip had left the table hastily after Alex’s flirtatious remark, suddenly remembering they had some place to be, but Jimmy and Maria were still there.

“Who’s that?” he asked Maria just as the cute guy with the curly hair decked Blue-Shirt.

“Which one?” she asked.

“The one on the floor.”

“Oh, that’s Tom Jefferson. The one who hit him is Johnny Laurens.”

Alex nodded. That name he’d remember. About half the people in the food court were chanting “Johnny, Johnny!” Another fourth or so ran to help Jefferson, who was being yelled at by a tall, very sexy brunette.

“She’s one of the Schuylers, right?” he asked
Maria wrinkled her nose. “Angelica. She’s the oldest.”

“You don’t like her?”

She shrugged. She was distracted from answering by the noisy entrance of the police and EMTs, but Alex gave them only a glance and kept his eyes on Hot Brunette and Cute Curls. They and three other people exited the food court quickly and discreetly by a side door. He smiled.

The group that Alex had deduced were drama majors broke into the old ballad “Frankie and Johnny Were Sweethearts” at top volume and in perfect harmony. One of the police officers tried to quiet them down, with little success.

He went back to the subject that actually interested him. “So why are they singing ‘Frankie and Johnny’?”

Maria stared at him as if he was stupid. “Johnny Laurens and Frankie Kinloch? They were dating for like two years. People used to sing that song when they were around.”

“So they were pretty popular?”

Maria shrugged. “I guess you could say that. They had a lot of friends, especially Johnny. The Schuylers and Gil Motier and those people.”

Those people didn’t give Alex any information. “What’s the other Schuyler sister’s name? The one who came in with Johnny.”

“That’s Eliza,” Maria told him.

“There’s another one, too,” Jimmy put in, “but I can’t remember her name. She’s a freshman.”

“Peggy,” Maria supplied.

“So three Schuyler sisters?” Alex wanted to be sure he had all available information. “And you said Gil somebody? Was he the tall guy with the hair?”

“You’d think somebody with his money could afford a decent haircut, wouldn’t you?” Jimmy asked sarcastically.

“I thought it looked cool,” Alex said. He’d already pissed off their friends, and he wasn’t dying to become better acquainted with Maria and Jimmy.

“It’s Gil Motier,” Maria told him. “He’s from France.” She made it sound like France was another planet.

“And the other girl?” Alex inquired, still seeking information.

Jimmy glanced at Maria, who shook her head. “Who knows?” he said to Alex. “He’s got a new girlfriend every week.”

Alex couldn’t help himself. “Well, at least he’s not dating a guy.”

Jimmy grabbed Maria by the arm and they left the table. They were halfway across the room when Maria looked back and gave Alex an apologetic little smile.

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Gil got out a few bottles of wine.

“How come you never have any beer?” Herc asked.

“Because I am French,” Gil told him with an exaggerated, phony accent.

“Whatever.” Herc didn’t turn the wine down.

John was curled up in a corner of the couch with ice on his hand because Eliza had insisted. “I didn’t even hit him that hard,” he said with a shrug.

“He’s been asking for it for ages,” Angelica pointed out. “I don’t know how it hasn’t happened before.”

Adrienne tossed her long braids. “He’s an ass.”

“He was two sentences away from quoting Henry Laurens’s latest sermon,” John said. “I really couldn’t deal with that today.”

“He goes to your dad’s church, right?” Eliza asked.

“So he tells me. I haven’t been there myself so I couldn’t swear to it.” he closed his eyes. “Gil, you have any Advil or anything? I have a headache, and now my hand hurts.” He managed a crooked smile.

Gil got him the painkillers and a glass of water and suggested he go lie down in the bedroom. John nodded and got up to go, Eliza following him.

“Are you going to be okay in here by yourself?” she asked as he sat down on the side of the bed and took off his shoes.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s not going to be any worse in here – or any better.”

“I’ll stay if you want.”

He smiled faintly and held out his unbruised left hand. “Friend cuddle?”

She took his hand. “Sure.” They’d done it a hundred times since they were freshmen, when one or the other of them was feeling upset or lonely or stressed. They’d been best friends almost since the day they met, without there ever being any romantic involvement. She kicked off her shoes, and they crawled under the covers together.

“You be the little spoon today,” Eliza whispered, and John snuggled against her gratefully, her arms around his waist. “Love you,” she told him.

“Love you too,” he said, and was quiet for a few minutes. Then, “Eliza?”

“Hm?”

“Thank you for everything. I’d never get through this without you.”

“I’ll be here whenever you need me,” she promised and pressed her face into his curls. *Maybe this can be enough, no matter what Angelica says. Maybe it doesn’t matter exactly how he loves me as long as he loves me.*

In the living room, Angelica poured herself some more wine. “Do we know for sure whose name
the apartment lease is in?” she asked, looking around.

“It’s got to be in John’s name,” Gil said. “Would Frankie have been able to pass a credit check two years ago?”

“I don’t think so, but we don’t know what might have happened between then and now.”

“I don’t understand,” Adrienne interrupted. “I mean, I’ve heard John’s father is rich, but if he disowned John, how is it that John has money?”

Angelica explained. “His grandfather on his mother’s side had a ton of money, and as each grandchild was born, he set up an iron-clad trust that they would get control of when they turned eighteen. John told me that his father wanted to change it to twenty-one, but his grandfather refused. Apparently there was a huge fight about it one Thanksgiving when John was eleven or twelve. He remembers his grandfather yelling at his father, ‘What’s the matter, Henry, don’t you trust your own son?’ He said it meant a lot to him to know that his grandfather trusted him.”

“Didn’t his grandfather die not long after that?” Herc asked.

Angelica nodded. “Yeah, and then John was stuck living with his father until he was eighteen. He got all the paperwork in place, and he literally moved out on his eighteenth birthday. He was still in high school.”

“Really?” Adrienne was wide-eyed. “It was that bad?”

“It was really, really bad,” Herc said somberly. “His dad sent him to gay-conversion camp when he was sixteen.”

“Oh, no! What did he do?”

“He ran away,” Herc responded. “Then his dad found him and sent him back, and he ran away again. And again and again until camp was over.”

“Where did he run away to, if his grandfather was dead and he couldn’t go home?”

Herc’s mouth twitched with a small smile. “You’ll have to get John to tell you sometime. He got to the nearest main road and hitched a ride to wherever the one who picked him up was going, slept in bus stations, shoplifted clean underwear, and probably a lot more things. The camp was in Texas, so he got to see a lot of the Lone Star State that summer.”

“Wow. His father didn’t send him back the next year?”

Herc chuckled. “I think even Henry Laurens realized that wasn’t a good idea.”

“I also think that John was in contact with some activists about the practices in the camp,” Gil added. “There might have been some negotiation – John got to live at home without being harassed, and Henry’s gay-conversion friends didn’t get their story in the newspaper.”

“His father sound horrible.”

“Yeah, Henry Laurens is a son of a bitch,” Angelica said. “Yet thousands of people think he’s some kind of saint, and they send him money all the time. It’s sick.” She was about to continue when her phone chimed. She looked at the screen and smiled. “Hello, Peggy … What? When? Of course I will. We’re at Gil’s if you want to come over.” She looked at Gil who just shrugged. It was nothing new for Angelica to invite people to his apartment. “Yeah, we’ll probably order pizza
or something.” She hung up. “Peggy’s coming over. She’s furious that she was in class and missed the whole show in the food court, but she says there are about a dozen versions on YouTube.”

“Oh, great,” Gil commented drily. “I can call my family in France and tell them to watch me not prevent John from punching Jefferson.”

“Jefferson so deserved it,” Adrienne said.

About twenty minutes later, the doorbell rang twice, followed by loud knocking. “Shit!” Angelica exclaimed, jumping up. “I forgot to tell Peggy not to ring the bell because John was sleeping.”

“Probably not now,” Herc said.

He was right. Peggy was hardly in the room before John came out of the bedroom rubbing his eyes. “Somebody trying to break in?” he asked. Eliza followed him, twisting a scrunchy around her hair.

“No, sorry, it was just me,” Peggy told him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Are you okay?”

John shook his head and headed in the direction of the kitchen. “Eliza’s making tea,” he announced.

“I’ll have some,” Peggy said. “Are there any cookies?”

Gil looked at Herc. “I still live here, don’t I?”

“I think so,” he responded, “but are there any cookies?”

“There are, actually,” Angelica said. “I bought a bunch of Girl Scout cookies and put them in the cupboard because Gil never buys cookies.”

“Ooh, Thin Mints,” Peggy smiled and followed Eliza and John into the kitchen.

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Alex watched Jimmy and Maria go, then turned around as he heard someone sit down at the table. It was a slim, petite girl with dark curly hair and bright red lipstick.

“Don’t mind Jimmy,” she said. “He’s a jerk.”

Alex snorted. “I noticed.”

“Maria’s okay, though,” the girl went on. “I don’t know why she doesn’t dump him. Oh, I’m Kate Livingston, by the way.”

“Hi, Kate. I’m Alex Hamilton, and I just transferred from Columbia.”

“I overheard. I’m an eavesdropper by nature, can’t seem to help it. I also heard you asking questions about the scandal du jour.”

“Yeah, I feel like I’m the only person on campus who doesn’t know all about Frankie and Johnny.”

“Well,” Kate said, “why don’t you go get us some coffee, and I’ll fill you in. What time is your next class?”

“Not till two,” Alex told her.
“Okay, good, maybe I can get through the whole story.”

Alex asked how she liked her coffee and got a cup for each of them. He looked at her expectantly. “So, dish. I like to be informed.”

Kate gave him a mischievous grin. “I’m a pretty good source. Frankie Kinloch and Johnny Laurens both come from very, very conservative families. Johnny’s father is the Reverend Henry Laurens, pastor of The Church of the New Redemption. I’ve been told that Johnny tried to come out to his family when he was in high school, but his father freaked and sent him to one of those places where they, you know, pray the gay away.”

“Didn’t work, did it?”

“Nope.” Kate took a sip of her coffee. “Anyway, even though their families both kind of moved in the same social circle, Frankie and Johnny barely knew each other before college. When they got to campus, though, they ended up in a lot of the same classes and then, suddenly, they were best friends.” She put air quotes around the last two words. “They got an apartment together, and, well, it was pretty obvious that they were something other than friends.”

“So their parents finally accepted it?”

“Oh, hell, no. First of all, Frankie kept dating his high school girlfriend, Patsy Rutledge. She goes to Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania, so they didn’t see each other a lot, and maybe his parents actually believed that Johnny was only a friend.” She shrugged. “My parents know the Kinlochs, but they never asked me about it, and I sure wasn’t going to tell them anything. So, you know, time went on, and Frankie and Johnny were, like, everybody’s favorite gay couple – they’re both really cute and smart and funny.”

Alex had seen that sort of thing before. “People can claim they’re not homophobic because they have a gay friend, you mean?”

Kate looked uncomfortable. “I don’t know. Maybe. But I think almost everybody genuinely likes them.”

“How about that tall guy in the blue shirt? He didn’t seem to like Johnny Laurens very much.”

“Oh, him,” Kate said, scrunching up her face as if she smelled something unpleasant. “That’s Tom Jefferson, self-appointed saint. He’s super-involved in The Church of the New Redemption, and he thinks it’s his job to tell us all exactly what sins we’re committing. Today wasn’t the first time he’s tried to tell Johnny that he’s going to burn in hell for being gay, but I don’t think this was a good time to pick.”

“Why?”

“Because Frankie Kinloch married Patsy Rutledge last night.”

“Oh, shit.”

“It was on the local news because her father’s the Governor. You didn’t see it?”

“If I did, I wasn’t paying attention, because I didn’t know the names until now. When did they break up?”

Kate looked confused. “Who?”
“Frankie and Johnny.”

“Oh, right, you just got here. That’s why it’s such a big deal. They didn’t.”

“What?”

“Yeah, as of yesterday, they were sitting right over there holding hands and being cute as fuck with each other, then Frankie got married.”

“Wow. Just wow.”

“I heard – I don’t know if it’s true, but I heard Johnny didn’t find out till this morning. In a text.”

“Son of a bitch!”

“I know, right? Of course Frankie’s not around today. I’m kind of surprised Johnny was here, actually, but I think one of the Schuyler girls dragged him in.”

“Maria mentioned them. Do you know them?”

“Angelica, Eliza, and Peggy Schuyler. Angelica is a senior, Eliza is a junior, and Peggy is a freshman. They’re all good friends with Johnny. I think Eliza might be into him, but I don’t see how it could go anywhere.”

“Yeah.” The story was wandering off into speculation. “Angelica is the one who was yelling at Jefferson, right?”

“Right. Angelica can’t stand Jefferson, and she’s not afraid of anybody.”

“Good person to know, then,” Alex said thoughtfully.

“Maybe,” Kate conceded, “but she’s kind of intimidating.”

“I’m not easy to intimidate,” Alex smiled.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Okay, then, good luck.”

Chapter End Notes

Francis Kinloch really did marry Governor Rutledge's daughter Martha. Patsy was a common nickname for Martha in the 18th century. Thomas Heyward was a judge in South Carolina at the time, but I doubt if he performed the wedding ceremony. Henry Laurens was certainly not a clergyman, but I despise him, so he is the very worst sort of clergyman in this story. The old ballad “Frankie and Johnny” (I recommend Johnny Cash's version) involves a female Frankie, and it's Johnny who's the cheater, so it's not really relevant, but I couldn't resist using the title and the first couple of lines. As for the rest, I'm making it up as usual, but my eternal thanks to Lin for doing all the hard work of character development for me. I'm just getting started on this one, so let me know where you'd like it to go. I'm
grateful always for kudos and comments.
The next day at lunchtime, Alex entered the food court with a plan. As he’d told Kate, he wasn’t easy to intimidate, and he’d been searching for a friend group since he’d transferred from Columbia. In three weeks, the only person who’d really reached out to him was Sam Seabury, and after yesterday, it seemed unlikely that they would still be on good terms. The Schuyler girls and their friends were the first people he’d seen who really interested him, and he wasn’t going to waste time waiting for an introduction.

“Hi,” he said to Angelica, holding out his hand. “I’m Alexander Hamilton, call me Alex, just transferred from Columbia, and most of the other students I’ve met here are boring, but you and your friends look like the kind of people I want to hang around with, so I’m hoping you’ll give me a chance. Okay if I sit here?” Without waiting for a response, he sat down next to John and kept talking. “You’re Johnny Laurens, right?”

“John.”

“What?”

“My friends call me John, not Johnny.”

“Okay if I call you John, then, because I’d like to be your friend …” By now they were all staring at him. “I have to tell you, I loved seeing you deck that asshole yesterday, what’s his name, Jefferson? He looks like such a jerk …”

“He is,” John agreed, and then held up his hand, palm out. “Stop.”

“Stop what?” Alex asked, wide-eyed.

“Just …sh.”

“Okay.” With great difficulty, Alex stayed silent, chewing on his lip.

“Who are you again?”

“Alex. Alex Hamilton. Transfer student from Columbia in New York.”

“And why are you here?”

“Here, like University of South Carolina or here like at your table?”

“Both.”

“Ran out of money in New York, and South Carolina offered me a scholarship in Poli Sci, and I
was impressed with the way you and your friends handled yourselves yesterday, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

John cast a bewildered look at Angelica, who shrugged. “He might just be crazy,” she said.

John nodded. “Thought crossed my mind.”

“I’m not crazy,” Alex sputtered.

“Maybe he’s an undercover journalist,” Peggy suggested. She had lunch with her sisters on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Angelica frowned. “Could be.”

“I’m not, I swear,” Alex protested. “I am just a guy trying to do my best. It’s been lonely the last few weeks, and then yesterday I had lunch with Sam Seabury and some of his friends. I don’t think they like me now.”

John snorted. “Seabury? Who else?”

“Um, Chip somebody …”

“Lee?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah, that was it, and a couple, her name was Maria.”

“Jimmy Reynolds and Maria Lewis,” Peggy supplied.

Alex nodded. “Yeah. I mean, they were okay, but …” he realized too late that explaining why Sam and Chip had been upset with him would mean admitting they’d been talking about John and Frankie’s breakup. He moved on quickly. “Oh, and Kate Livingston. She seems nice.”

“Yeah, she is,” Eliza said. “What was she doing with Sam Seabury and that crowd?”

“No, I met her later,” Alex explained.

Eliza leaned forward to say something, but she was interrupted by the arrival of Herc, Gil, and Adrienne. Gil folded his arms across his chest and stared at Alex. “Who is this kid?” he asked.

John threw his hands in the air. “He says his name is Alex Hamilton, and I think he’s here to audition for the role of our friend, but I haven’t quite figured it out yet.”

Gil narrowed his eyes at Alex. “You want to be our friend?”

Alex nodded. “Yeah, I do. I transferred from Columbia, and I’ve been here for three weeks, and I don’t really have any friends yet.”

“He had lunch with Seabury’s crowd yesterday,” John said.

Herc rolled his eyes. “They’re idiots.”

“Yeah, I know that now, and honestly, part of the reason I wanted to meet you guys is that they didn’t seem to approve of you.”

“Approve of us?” Gil inquired, his eyebrows rising. “What right do they have to approve or disapprove of us?”
Alex waved his hands around. “No, I meant … I didn’t … oh, shit.” He smacked the table with his right hand. “I was trying to be all tactful and diplomatic.”

John snorted again, as if he really wanted to laugh but wouldn’t let it out. “I can see that it’s hard for you.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed, then thought about it. “Wait, I mean …”

John laughed out loud, and Alex really liked the sound of it.

Angelica stood up. “All right, let’s get lunch, and then we can continue interviewing Alex for the position of friend. Each of you gets one question.”

* * * * * *

One of the reasons Alex always had that underfed look was that eating meant he had to stop talking. Angelica had declared that they couldn’t question Alex until they’d all finished lunch, and Alex was having a hard time with that.

“Does she always tell you guys what to do?” he asked, his untouched sandwich still on his plate.

“Yes,” John replied. “Eat your sandwich.”

Alex huffed, but took a bite and swallowed it quickly. “So are you all from South Carolina?”

Peggy fell for it. “We’re from Albany, New York, but our family used to spend summers at the beach here, and we really liked it. Mom and Dad sold the house in Albany and moved to the beach house two years ago.”

“Oh, cool,” Alex said. “It’s way too cold in New York. I used to live near the beach in Martinique, but …”

Angelica interrupted him. “Before you give us your life history, could you finish your lunch? Some of us have classes we have to get to this afternoon.”

“Oh, sure, right, right.” Alex took another bite of his sandwich, then looked up as if he were about to say something else. He saw Angelica glaring at him and went back to the sandwich. It wasn’t like he hadn’t been warned that she was intimidating. He’d let it go for now, but once she got to know him better, she’d be more willing to give him equal time, he was sure.

“Oh, okay,” Angelica said a few minutes later, “we’re all going to interview this lunatic transfer student to see if we want to have him around.”

Alex raised his hand immediately. “Your Honor, I object to the characterization of myself as lunatic.”

Angelica tried not to laugh, but didn’t quite manage it. “I’m sure you do, but I’m basing it on my observation, so overruled.” She looked around. “Remember, one question each, because I have a feeling the answers will be long. Gil, you go first.”

“You mentioned that you had lived in Martinique. Tu parles français?”

Alex’s face lit up. “Mais oui, bien sûr! J’ai passé sept ans en Martinique après avoir vecu en Porto Rico où je suis né, alors je parle aussi espagnol, naturellement, et anglais, ça se voit, et …”

Angelica held her hand up. “Stop. Gil, translation?”
“He speaks French,” Gil responded helpfully.

“No shit,” Herc muttered.

“He also speaks Spanish and English and he’s from Puerto Rico,” Gil added.

“Actually,” Alex started, and Angelica glared at him again. He shut up, his bottom lip between his teeth.

“Adrienne, your turn,” Angelica said.

Adrienne looked like she’d rather not ask anything, but she gave it a try. “Do you live on campus?”

“Yes, I do, I’m in Wren, on the second floor, room 212. I don’t have a roommate at the moment because my transfer came in late, but I’ll probably be getting one, so …” he slowed down, looking around. “Was that too much information?”

“It’s fine,” Adrienne told him.

Alex smiled. “I think it’s interesting that all the dorms are named for birds native to South Carolina,” he continued. “I mean, Wren is nice, but it would be weird if they named a dorm White-Breasted Nuthatch, wouldn’t it, even though that’s also a bird that is native to this area, but it doesn’t work so well as a dorm name …”

“Now that is too much information,” Angelica broke in, rolling her eyes. “Did you honestly look up all the birds native to South Carolina so you could predict future dorm names?”

“Yes, of course.” Alex seemed surprised for a few seconds, and then he grinned. “Did you just waste your question on that?” he asked.

Angelica blinked. First, that grin was remarkably charming; second, she realized that she had underestimated him. “No,” she told him. “I made up the rules, so I can change them if I want.”

Eliza and Peggy exchanged knowing looks. “Where have we heard that before?” Peggy inquired sarcastically. “Angelica has always made up the rules.”

Angelica waved her hand dismissively. “Oldest child privilege. Okay, Herc, you’re next.”

Herc went for the personal information. “How do you identify?”

Alex actually paused before responding. “You know, I’ve always said I was bi, but honestly, I’m attracted to lots of different people, so maybe I’m pan. I’m still working that out, though.”

Herc nodded. “Fair enough.”

Alex looked at Angelica. “Am I allowed to ask questions?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I’ve got a two o’clock class. Eliza, what’s your question?”

Eliza tilted her head to the side a little and looked serious. “What did Sam Seabury and his friends say yesterday that made you decide you didn’t want to hang around with them?”

Alex felt his face grow warm and glanced sideways at John who unfortunately appeared to be interested in this question. “Well,” he began, trying to stall while his brain planned the sentences he was going to say, “you know, yesterday, um, there were some things that happened here …”
“Here?” Eliza asked.

“Well, actually,” Alex mumbled, “like literally here. I mean there.” He pointed to the floor. “When John knocked that guy down.”

“Jefferson,” Herc supplied helpfully.

“Yeah, Jefferson. John knocked him down, and he was bleeding, so I wanted to know, like, who they were. I mean you were. Who you guys and also him … he … were. I didn’t know what was going on, so I asked Sam, and then Chip and Jimmy got all Evangelical about it.”

“Don’t tell me,” John sighed, “they said I was going to hell.”

“Well, not in so many words,” Alex said, turning even redder and shifting uncomfortably in his seat, “but sort of. One of them called you wayward.”

“Oh, my dad’s favorite word for me.”

Alex cringed. “I’m sorry.” He turned to Eliza. “Is it okay if I don’t really give you any more of an answer?”

She was already regretting asking him. She knew she had set him up, and now that she saw how embarrassed he was, she wished she’d gone with something like his favorite color. They all already knew that everyone had been talking about John and Frankie’s breakup. She didn’t have to rub anybody’s face in it. “I’m sorry. I know they’re jerks, and that’s reason enough.”

Alex nodded, and then looked at her with a glint of mischief in his eyes. “I did sort of ask Sam if he wanted to date me.”

Eliza laughed out loud. “Oh, my God, did you? He must have nearly died.”

“He left very quickly.”

“Probably felt so dirty he had to go home and take a shower,” John snickered.

“Maybe a cold shower,” Alex said. “Maybe he got … you know … feelings.”

They all laughed at that, and Alex went on, making ridiculous jokes about Sam Seabury’s possible fantasies, and they laughed harder, until Angelica realized that Alex had become the center of attention. *Fuck me,* she thought, *he’s done it. We all like him, even if he is a little crazy. I wonder how much of that crazy is a façade just to keep us all on our toes. I’m interested in finding out more.*

“I’m pretty sure he dreamed about me last night,” Alex finished, pushing his hair back in an elaborately flirtatious way.

“Stop,” Peggy begged. “My face hurts.”

“We’re moving on,” Angelica declared. “John, go ahead.”

John turned in his seat and regarded Alex thoughtfully. “There are a lot of people on campus. What makes you think we’re the ones you want to hang around with?”

“Well, first, I now know you laugh at my jokes, and that alone is enough reason. But what I saw yesterday, after you punched Jefferson, it was like this group of people closed ranks around you and got you out of here safely. I thought …” he stopped. Everybody was very quiet, listening to
him. He took a breath. “I just thought, I wish I had friends like that, friends who would stay with me when things weren’t going well. We moved around a lot when I was a kid, so I kept changing schools, and sometimes my mom home-schooled me, and it was hard for me to make friends. Then when I was at Columbia, most of the other students had money, and I had to work evenings, and I didn’t really fit in. Now I’m here, and I saw that you guys look out for each other. It’s just … well, I never had a group of friends before, but you’re the kind of friends I’d like to have.”

Eliza sniffed and took a pack of tissues out of her purse. Without a word, she handed some to Peggy, who blew her nose.

John smiled. “Good answer,” he said softly.

Angelica didn’t need any tissues. She almost never cried, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t moved by what Alex had said. She turned to Peggy. “Your turn.”

“Dammit,” Peggy said, wiping her eyes. “Now I can’t even think of anything. Okay, fine, what’s your favorite food?”

“Cookies,” Ales responded instantly. “No question. I love all kinds of cookies.”

Peggy giggled. “That sounds like you’re five years old, but whatever. Oh, and Eliza makes the best chocolate chip cookies ever.”

Alex’s eyes widened. “Really? The slice and bake kind or homemade?”

“Definitely homemade,” Eliza said. “Come over this Saturday and we’ll make some.”

“Really?” Alex asked, bouncing in his seat. “Really?”

Eliza nodded. “Sure. Listen up, everybody, cookie-baking party at our house on Saturday.” She looked at Peggy and Angelica. “What time?”

“Four?” Angelica suggested. “We can bake the cookies and then order pizza. Does that work for everybody?”

There was agreement around the table, and Alex was practically vibrating with excitement. “So … I mean, it sounds like … wait, Angelica, you didn’t ask me anything.”

“You know what, I’m going to put my question on hold because I have to get to class. You can have an answer ready for me, though. I want to know why you decided to major in Political Science.”

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” Alex began. “I think our Constitution is one of the greatest documents ever written, and as our government …”

“Not now,” Angelica told him. “Save it for Saturday.”

Alex nodded, biting his lip again. Saturday. He’d talk about it on Saturday, because he was going to see all these people then. On Saturday, he was going to be with his friends.

Chapter End Notes
Can anybody shut Alex up?

Thanks for reading, and thanks for kudos and comments. I love hearing from you.
Be Careful With That One

Chapter Summary

The cookie baking is successful. Alex asks John too many questions, but John answers them anyway. Angelica is observant, but her conclusions may not be correct.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alex was so excited he was bouncing up and down. Eliza had told him to get two cups of chocolate chips, and he was treating the task like he was measuring rocket fuel for a moon shot.

“All the way full to the top?” he asked, holding out the plastic measuring cup.

“Yes,” Eliza told him patiently, mixing the dough with a wooden spoon.

“Level with the top,” Peggy added helpfully.

A few minutes later, John found Alex in a corner of the kitchen trying to arrange the chocolate chips so that none of them stuck up over the rim of the cup. “If I put in the first layer right-side-up, and the next layer upside-down, that seems to work, as long as I end with an upside-down layer, because they’re flat on the bottom,” he explained earnestly.

“You really are crazy,” John said, trying not to laugh.

“Peggy said they should be level with the top, but if they’re right-side-up, then there’s no way to make them level because they’re pointy.”

“I don’t think that’s what she meant.”

Alex frowned. “Really? I’ve never baked before, and I want to get it right.”

He looked so anxious that John almost hugged him, and then the warning signals he had set up for himself went off like sirens, and he took a step back. “It’ll be fine,” he said. “Are you supposed to put them in this bowl?”

Alex nodded. He had a bag of chocolate chips, the measuring cup, and the bowl lined up on the counter. He was only on the third layer of neatly arranged chips in the cup. John sighed, picked up the bag, and poured chocolate chips into the cup until it was full, dumped them in the bowl and repeated the actions. He handed the bowl to Alex who stood staring at it, looking worried. “Are you sure that’s the right way to measure them?” he asked.

“Yes, don’t worry. I’ve made chocolate chip cookies a million times. That’s how you do it.”

Alex still didn’t relax. “I thought it would be more complicated.”

“Hey, Alex, I need the chocolate chips now,” Eliza called from the other side of the kitchen.

“Watch this,” John directed, and Alex followed him across the kitchen. “Here you go,” he said to
Eliza and dumped the chocolate chips into the dough.

“Thank you,” she smiled and began to stir the chips into the dough.

“That’s it?” Alex asked.

John did his best not to laugh. “Yep. Have you really never baked cookies before?”

“Never. My mom always worked a lot, so she didn’t have time to bake, and then after she died …”

They left the kitchen and went into the living room where Gil and Adrienne were making out on the couch. John jerked his head in the direction of the patio, and they went outside. It was cool, but not cold, and there were chairs and a table.

“Your mom died?” John asked as they sat down. His green-gold eyes were filled with sympathy.

Alex nodded. “Yeah, it’s been a while. I was twelve. Then I was in foster care for a few years, which totally sucked, and then I went to live with my cousin Pete in New York. That’s why I applied to Columbia, but then … well, Pete had some problems, and he died of an overdose during my freshman year, so I had to figure out how to pay for the dorm or an apartment.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I started looking for a school that would give me enough financial aid, and now here I am, baking cookies with my friends.”

“That’s a lot to have to deal with, though,” John said.

Alex looked at him directly. “Yeah, but I’m not the only person who’s had to deal with hard things.”

John flushed. “Did you get all the details from Sam and Chip or just some of them?”

“I’m sure they couldn’t give me all the details because nobody but you could possibly know everything, but they gave me enough that I know it’s rough for you right now.”

“I’ll be fine.”

The corner of Alex’s mouth turned up a little. “That’s what people in denial always say.”

John couldn’t help but smile. “No, people in denial say, ‘I’m fine,’ present tense. I know I’m not fine right now, but I’ll be fine. I mean, at least I don’t have to live with Patsy Rutledge.”

Alex grinned. “How bad is she?”

John held up his hand. “No, I’m not going to start, because it will just sound like I’m jealous.”

Alex’s face was suddenly very serious. “Are you?”

John’s jaw tightened, and he looked away. “Fuck, yeah.”

“Listen, John, I’ve only known you a few days, but I know already that you don’t deserve to be treated the way he treated you. I hope that Patsy Rutledge makes his life miserable every single day for the next fifty years.”

John choked on something between a laugh and a sob. “Thanks. I appreciate the solidarity.”

“You ever want to talk or anything … I mean, really, anything … I’m here.”

John looked up, his eyes speculative, wondering if he was hearing something in Alex’s words that
wasn’t really there. If he was … well, no, he wasn’t even going to think about that. “You’re a lot less crazy one-on-one,” he said.

“Yeah, I know. When there are a lot of people around, I get overexcited and talk too much. It’s an anxiety thing. I have medication if I need it, but generally, I’d rather people knew what they were dealing with. Then I know it’s okay to be myself around them.”

“That’s brave,” John said softly.

“Not really. It’s more like trial and error. At least I find out fast whether people are going to want me around or not.”

“I still think it takes a lot of courage to walk up to a lunch table and say something like, ‘Hi, I want to be your friend.’”

Alex shrugged. “It worked. You guys were willing to give me a chance.”

“I’m glad we did.” He paused, as if he were thinking about something, then asked in a different tone, “Hey, you want some coffee? I don’t really feel like hanging out in the kitchen, and Gil and Adrienne have claimed the living room.”

“Yeah, I’d love some. Cream and four sugars.”

“Four?”

“Well, six, really, but I didn’t want to shock you.”

John laughed and went to get the coffee. Alex surveyed the patio and the small back yard. The house wasn’t big, but it was nice, much nicer than the rentals most college students lived in. He hadn’t seen the upstairs, but it probably had at least three bedrooms, maybe four. He wasn’t even sure who lived in it, except the Schuyler sisters, but unless the Schuylers were rich, there had to be a couple of other people sharing the expenses. He was distracted from thoughts of the house when John came back with not only coffee, but some fresh-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip cookies.

“Oh, my God, these are so good,” Alex mumbled through a mouthful of cookie. “They’re the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

John laughed and ate just one so Alex could have the other three. He sat there drinking his coffee and watching Alex devour the cookies, his eyes blissfully closed. His heart wanted to go get more because he’d never seen anybody so happy over cookies, but his head reminded him that falling for Alex’s charm would be a very big mistake. Alex was just so damned cute.

He licked the crumbs off his fingers and smiled at John. “Now I can die happy.”

“Not any time soon, I hope.”

“No, but it’s good to know what homemade cookies really taste like.” He waved at the house and yard. “Who all lives here?”


“Just them? Are they, like, millionaires?”

John shook his head. “No, but their parents are pretty well off, I think. Anyway, once Angelica and Eliza were both here, the Schuylers realized that a monthly mortgage payment would be less than
room and board for both of them at school, so they bought this house. They’ll sell it after Peggy graduates, and they’ll probably make a profit on it, so it’s a smart plan, really.”

“Assuming you have the money for a down payment, yeah,” Alex agreed. “So not millionaires, actually, but definitely several levels above where I live.”

John waved his hand. “Don’t worry about it. They’re really nice people.”

“You know them?”

“Sure. I’ve been friends with Angelica and Eliza since I was a freshman. Their parents come to visit a few times a year.”

“It must be nice to have parents like that,” Alex said without a trace of sarcasm.

“Yeah.”

Alex looked up. “What about your mom?” he asked.

John shrugged. “She just goes along with whatever my dad says. Always has.”

“Do you see them at all?”

John didn’t answer for a minute, and Alex wished he hadn’t asked. He knew it wasn’t any of his business, but he wanted to know everything about John. Finally John tucked a stray curl behind his ear and said, “I saw my mom and my sister about a year ago. I met them at a highway rest stop twenty miles from here.”

“Met them on purpose or just ran into them, do you mean?”

John’s jaw tightened. “My mom made an appointment. My dad didn’t know.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess. I mean, she wanted to see you.”

“No, she wanted to see the son she thinks I should be. The straight, church-going, conservative son that never existed except in her imagination. For some reason, she still thinks that she can talk me into being an entirely different person.”

Alex reached across the table and put his hand on John’s. “I’m sorry. That sounds awful.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“What about your sister? How old is she?”

“Marcy’s sixteen. She just cried the whole time my mom was lecturing me. She gave me a hug, though, when they left, and she said she loved me.”

“That’s good. I’m glad she did that.” John’s hand was warm under his, and he wondered if he could wrap his fingers around it, actually hold John’s hand. He also knew it was way too soon to make even the slightest gesture of affection because John would have every right to be angry. Boundaries, he reminded himself. Boundaries. He moved his hand just a little and stroked John’s fingers very lightly.

John looked up, looked directly at him, his eyes clear green with gold flecks. For a long moment, he just held eye contact, and then he smiled faintly and pulled his hand back, but gently, not angrily. “Better not,” he whispered.
“What kind of pizza do you want?” Peggy yelled.

“Plain,” John told her.

“Everything but anchovies,” Alex said.

Peggy rolled her eyes. “That’s not an option, Alex. The choices are plain, pepperoni, or sausage and mushroom.”

“Sorry,” Alex apologized, “I didn’t know the rules. Sausage and mushroom.”

Peggy gave him a thumbs-up, and said, “You guys should come in. It’s getting chilly.”

“Is the living room available?” John asked. “It was kind of occupied.”

“Yeah, I sent them upstairs,” Peggy told him with another eye roll. “You’d think Gil would know better.”

John grinned. “He’s French.”

They followed Peggy in and found Angelica and Eliza both in the living room, along with Herc, who was sitting on the floor. Alex went right to Eliza. “Those cookies were literally the best thing I’ve ever eaten. Thank you so much for making them.”

Elia was a little embarrassed. “You’re welcome. I like to bake, so I make cookies pretty often. You can come by any time.”

“Really? Will you let me know next time you’re baking? Do you make other things like cakes or pies?”

She nodded, laughing. “Yeah, and brownies. It’s not that big a deal.”

“It is for me. I never had homemade baked goods before.”

“Are you serious?”

“Totally.”

Eliza couldn’t even imagine a life that had never included a homemade cake or batch of brownies. Her soft heart was touched by Alex’s excitement. “Okay, I’ll text you every time I bake, and you can come over and help. In a couple of months, you’ll be able to make cookies on your own.”

“You really think so?”

“Of course.”

Angelica listened to the conversation, wondering if Alex was being completely truthful. She had no reason to doubt him, but if he wanted to find a way to spend more time with Eliza, this was a good plan. Well, maybe that would work out well. She knew her sister had been pining over John Laurens for the last two years, but even though John had dated girls in high school, he identified as gay now, so there wasn’t much hope of a happy ending for Eliza. Maybe Alex would be the distraction she needed. He was cute and funny and smart. Maybe teaching him to bake would lead to a different kind of relationship so Eliza could forget her hopeless crush on a guy who would never be interested in her except as a friend.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the kudos and comments. I love to hear from readers!
Homilies and Hymns

Chapter Summary

Alex fumbles his way through baking, asking John too many questions, theological
discussion, and knowledge of football. Fortunately, he only falls down once.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Pumpkin bread,” Eliza repeated patiently. “It’s more like cake, really, but we call it bread because
it’s baked in a loaf pan.”

Alex nodded seriously, paying attention. “What’s a loaf pan?”

Eliza held one up. “See? It’s what you bake a loaf of bread in.”

Alex’s eyes widened. “Is that why bread is shaped like bread?”

“Um, yeah, I guess.” She laughed. “Do you remember how to grease and flour the pan?” That had
been Alex’s lesson a couple of weeks earlier.

“Absolutely.” He got to work on it right away.

Eliza looked across the room at John, who was sitting at the table with his sketchbook, drawing
them. “It’s homework,” he explained.

“Oh, okay. You don’t want to help bake?”

“Not now, I need to work on this.”

They were the only ones there at the moment. Everybody else either had class or was busy. Eliza
was trying to schedule at least one baking lesson a week with Alex. He was a quick learner, but he
spent so much time admiring the results of his efforts that they hadn’t made a lot of progress.

“The pan is ready,” he announced now, as if he were initiating a surgical procedure.

Eliza showed him how to mix the ingredients in the correct order, poured the batter into the
prepared pan, and put it in the oven. “How long do I set the timer for, Alex?” she asked.

He checked the recipe. “Forty-five minutes.”

There had been a previous incident when the timer had not been set at all, and no one had realized
it until the smoke alarm went off. Alex was not only painfully embarrassed about his lapse, he had
mourned the ruined brownies for a week.

“Hey, that’s just about enough time to finish that episode of Sherlock, right? Come on, John,” Alex
said.

“Okay, I’m done for now.” John closed his sketchbook and the three of them went into the living
room. They’d begun watching Sherlock a few weeks ago, and they were halfway through “The
They settled on the couch with John in the middle, Eliza curled up on his left and Alex on his right. By mutual consent, John was in charge of the remote.

“So what do you think?” Alex asked after about ten minutes. “About Sherlock and John, I mean?”

John paused the TV because Alex’s discussions could go anywhere. “They always say they’re not a couple, if that’s what you mean,” he said.

Alex sniffed. “Lots of people say that about their relationships.”

Eliza leaned forward, frowning. “Who? Who would try to hide a relationship these days?”

“Well, Frankie Kinloch, for one,” John murmured, looking at the ceiling.

There was sudden silence. “Oh, John, I am so sorry,” Eliza said, her voice shaking. “I can’t believe I didn’t even think. It’s not like I don’t know …”

John put his arm around her and pulled her close to him. “Hey, don’t beat yourself up. It’s okay. I’m okay, see? No tears, no yelling, no punching random people.”

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated.

“Sh, sh, babygirl.” He kissed the top of her head, and stroked her hair.

Alex watched with interested curiosity, and then stepped in with what he thought might be helpful refocus. “Well, assuming John and Sherlock don’t have hyper-conservative parents, there’d be no reason for them to hide anything, right?”

“Right,” John nodded, “but would they get the ratings they’re getting if the show was about a couple of gay detectives?”

“Probably not. Sadly, there are still members of the public who would object.”

“Can I put it back on now?”

The episode ended just as the oven timer went off, and Eliza went into the kitchen to take the pumpkin bread out.

“Did you and Eliza ever date?” Alex asked while she was out of the room.

“What? No, of course not. We’ve been best friends since our freshman year, but nothing else. You know I’m gay. Why would you even ask?”

Alex shrugged. “Just curious.”

“You’re too damned curious about things that are none of your business,” John snapped.

“Mm-hm, you’re right. People tell me that a lot.”

John snorted. “I’m not surprised.”

Alex put his hand on John’s arm, and John went still. “I think she’s in love with you,” Alex said softly.

John looked up, startled, and his eyes met Alex’s. “No. I mean, she couldn’t be. She knows me. She knows who I am.”
“Yeah, but that wouldn’t really matter.”

John shook his head. “No.”

“Okay. You know what else, though?”

“What?”

“I think you might be in love with her too.”

John sighed and stood up. “Just shut the fuck up, Alex. All you’re going to do is piss me off.”

“Sorry. Really, I’m sorry. It’s that ‘no filters’ thing again, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m working on it, I swear.”

John smiled. “I know.” He smacked Alex lightly on the side of the head. “Just don’t be an idiot.”

There was no reason at all for him to still be awake at two in the morning, reviewing over and over what Alex had said. Even less reason why he should keep thinking about how soft Eliza’s hair was.

* * * * *

Alex was only mildly surprised to get a call from Chip Lee. “Hey,” Chip said, “I know we may not agree on some things, but I didn’t want you to think I was never going to speak to you again. I told you I’d call about some of the activities on and off campus.”

“Yeah, sure,” Alex responded, his mind more on his notes from the most recent lecture in his Political Systems in Nineteenth Century Europe class.

“So, listen, a bunch of us get together on Wednesday nights, usually get pizza or something, just hang out. Why don’t you come tomorrow night?”

“Um, sorry, what?”

Chip repeated what he’d said.

“Where?” Alex asked.

“It varies, depends on what we’re doing, but tomorrow night we’ll be at a coffee shop in town, Beanie’s. You know where it is?”

“No, but I can find it.”

“Around seven o’clock, if that works for you.”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, why not?”

Alex hung up without having really thought about what he’d just agreed to, but it didn’t take him long to realize that maybe he should have asked more questions. On the other hand, how bad could it be to spend one evening at a coffee shop? Maybe he’d even meet some interesting people. After all, the Laurens/Schuyler crowd couldn’t be the only group on campus he might be friends with.

* Which only goes to show, he thought at around eight o’clock on Wednesday night, that sometimes I
am one hundred percent wrong.

It was a rainy night, and the coffee shop was pleasantly warm and dry and smelled like cinnamon. He hadn’t been surprised to find Sam Seabury, Jimmy Reynolds, and Maria Lewis there. He’d also been introduced to George Eacker, Janet Cumming, and Eleanor Lestor. Only Jimmy and Maria were a couple, but Sam seemed to admire Janet, and she did that head-tilting thing when she talked to him, so Alex suspected the attraction was mutual. All of them were very friendly, and he was on his second cup of coffee before Sam started talking to him in a deeply sincere tone that immediately set his teeth on edge.

“I shouldn’t have just walked out of the food court that day,” Sam said. “I’m sorry I was so rude to you.”

“No problem,” Alex responded. He didn’t elaborate, just took a sip of coffee, watching Sam over the rim of his cup.

“I hope you weren’t offended,” Sam continued.

“Nope.”

“I guess you understood that I was unhappy when you called the Bible … um …”

“A collection of three-millennia-old writings that have been copied and translated thousands of times?” Alex supplied helpfully. He had an excellent memory and no objection to quoting himself.

Sam shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Is that really what you think the Bible is?”

“It’s not about what I think, Sam, I mean, that’s actually what the Bible is – well, some parts are only two millennia old, but the Bible is a collection of writings. What do you think it is?”

“Well, it’s not just writings.”

“Yeah, it is. No illustrations.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Sam looked over his shoulder to see who was paying attention to their conversation. Janet had clearly been listening, and she had a concerned look on her face. Sam signaled her to join them, and she sat down next to him. “I know the Bible is written,” Sam continued, addressing Alex, “but it’s not just a written document like other written works.”

“Oh,” Alex responded, shrugging and drinking some more coffee.

“What do you mean, okay?”

Alex sighed. “I mean, you believe whatever you want about the Bible or anything else. Why would you think I wanted to argue with you about it? I don’t care if you believe the Bible was written three thousand years ago by God’s personal scribes or three weeks ago by the Keebler Elves. I’m not interested in discussing it with you.”

Janet leaned forward. She was very pretty, with long, wavy light-brown hair and green eyes. “Do you believe in God?” she asked softly.

Alex shrugged again. “Not really.”

Janet smiled at him as if he were three years old. “You don’t mean that.”

“Yeah, I do.” Alex had had enough. He turned in his chair and looked through the front window of
the coffee shop. It was raining harder. Great. Janet put her hand on his wrist, and he jumped, pulling away from her.

She was still smiling. “From what Sam tells me, I think you might be denying God because of your lifestyle.” The smile faded. “You won’t ever be happy, you know.”

Jesus, this is getting creepy. “Actually, I’m fine,” Alex said. “Also, you have no idea whatsoever what my so-called lifestyle is. Neither does Sam. I haven’t discussed my personal life with either of you. Furthermore…” Alex stood up “…I’m not the least bit interested in hearing your versions of sociology or theology. Please don’t tell me what I should believe. In fact, I think you’d both be a lot happier if you would just go home and fuck, because it’s pretty obvious that’s what you want to do.” He ignored the loud gasps and walked straight out the door of the coffee shop into the now-pouring rain. He put his hand up and his head down to keep the rain out of his eyes and started walking as fast as he could in the direction of campus. He’d gone about twenty feet when he walked smack into somebody. The person he collided with was considerably taller and broader than he was, and he was thrown off balance. His feet went out from under him, and he sat down hard on the concrete pavement. “Fuck,” he muttered.

The guy he’d walked into was bending down, hand extended. “You okay? I’m really sorry.”

“I’m fine,” Alex told him, squinting up at him through the rain. He looked huge, and Alex realized there was another guy of about the same size with him. He took the offered hand and was pulled to his feet as if he weighed nothing.

“We were on our way to my car,” the guy said. “Can I drop you somewhere? I’m Rick, by the way. Do you live on campus?”

“Yeah,” Alex nodded, rain dripping off his nose. “That would be great. I’m Alex. I live in Wren.”

“No problem. We’re in Crow.” Rick started walking in the direction he’d been going before Alex ran into him. “Oh, this is Tench, my roommate.”

“Hey,” Tench said, and Alex sketched a wave.

“You sure you’re okay?” Rick asked.

“Yeah, I was … sort of escaping from a bad situation, and I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going. I’m just kind of embarrassed.”

Rick waved him off. “Don’t even think about it. But, escaping? That sounds interesting.”

“It’s one of those things that will make a hilarious story eventually, but right now I’m just glad to be out of it.”

They’d reached the parking lot where Rick’s car was. “Right here,” he said, unlocking a new-looking Chevy Malibu. Alex tried to wring the water out of his hair before he got into the car, and Rick laughed. “Don’t worry about it.”

Halfway back to the campus, he handed his phone over the seat to Alex. “Hey, put your number in. I really have to hear the full escape story sometime.”

* * * * * *

By lunchtime the next day, the story was starting to be funny.
“You actually told Sam Seabury and Janet Cumming to go home and fuck?” Angelica asked, laughing so hard she could barely speak.

Alex grinned. “It seemed obvious to me that’s what they really wanted to do.”

John threw his arm over Alex’s shoulder. “You know that boundaries thing we talked about? You were so far over any boundary there.”

“Oh, I know. It didn’t matter because they’re idiots, and I don’t care what they think of me. I have to say the look on Janet’s face was pretty funny.”

“Janet’s a virgin,” Peggy announced, and took a bite of her cookie.

“Really?” Eliza asked. “How do you know?”

“I have a class with her. She tells everybody. All the time.” She rolled her eyes. “She’s saving herself for marriage with the man God has chosen for her. It makes me want to gag.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a virgin,” Eliza said, trying to be fair.

“I know,” Peggy agreed. “I’m one too, but I don’t stop strangers on the street to brag about it.” She stopped, realizing they were all looking at her. “What? You’re shocked? I happen to be very picky.”

Eliza threw her arms around her little sister. “I love you!”

“Yeah, I love you too, but let’s not make a big deal out of this. I don’t want to act like Janet.” She extricated herself from the hug so she could reach her cookie.

“See, that’s the thing,” Alex said. “Personally, I don’t care if Peggy’s a virgin or if she’s had sex with the entire football team …” Peggy threw her balled-up napkin at him, and he reached across the table and stole her second cookie. “… because it’s none of my business. Just like my personal life, or John’s personal life, or anybody else’s is none of their business.” He took a bite of the cookie.

“Absolutely right,” John agreed. “So what happened after you left the coffee shop?”

“I ran into a couple of guys. Literally. Well, I only ran into one literally, but he helped me up …”

“Helped you up?” Gil asked.

“I kind of fell down.” He did his best to ignore the laughter. “And then he gave me a ride home. I think he felt sorry for me.”

“So he’s a student, too?”

“Yeah, he and his roommate live in Crow. They were both like twice my size. Nice guys, though, I think.”

John frowned. “Did you get their names?”

“Rick and Tench.”

John and Angelica were looking at each other. “Rick Meade and Tench Tilghman?” Angelica asked.
Alex shrugged. “No idea. We didn’t get that far. Tench is a pretty odd name, though, so maybe. Do you know them?”

“Not well,” Angelica said, “but they’re best defensive linesmen on the football team.”

“Huh. We have a football team?”

John took Alex’s face in his hands. “Oh, my poor innocent baby. This is the American South, and we are at a state university. Of course we have a football team. And now it seems you have friends on the football team, which will, I have to tell you, raise your social cred by several points.”

Alex shrugged. “Okay. I don’t have to watch the games, though, do I?” He took another bite of the cookie.

Chapter End Notes

Janet Cumming was a resident of Charleston, South Carolina who worked as a midwife in the time leading up to the Revolutionary War. She maintained Loyalty to the British King and moved to England in 1777. I've cast her as an annoying college student.

Richard Meade and Tench Tilghman were, like Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, aides de camp of George Washington. In a letter to John (September 12, 1780), Alex expresses his frustration with pretty much everything and says, "I hate Congress—I hate the army—I hate the world—I hate myself. The whole is a mass of fools and knaves; I could almost except you and Meade."

For Hamilton to have paired Meade with John as "the only people I almost don't hate even though I hate everybody else, including myself" indicates to me that he was a close friend. Meade and Tilghman are going to be playing football here. Alex isn't sure yet where his affections lie or what might be the implications of expressing them. He's not patient enough to wait much longer, though.

Thanks to those of you who've left kudos and comments. Let me know what you think. I always like to hear from readers.
The Place to Be

Chapter Summary

Peggy has a plan to help John. Everybody gets sorted into a Hogwarts house and finds their Patronus. Alex and Eliza stay after everyone else leaves.

Chapter Notes

A basic knowledge of Harry Potter lore will be helpful, but Peggy probably gives enough explanation that you'll figure it all out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After a couple of weeks of drifting between Gil’s couch and the futon at the Schuyler girls’ house, John had decided to face reality and start sleeping at his own apartment again. When Eliza mentioned that she was worried about the effect it might have on him, Peggy had a stroke of genius.

“We’re having an exorcism party,” she announced at lunch, handing out colorful invitations.

“A what?” John asked.

“An exorcism party.”

He stared at the invitation and frowned, “Wait, this is my address.”

Peggy nodded. “Right. We’re having the party at your apartment. We’re going to exorcise the evil spirit of Frankie Kinloch from it.”

John looked around the table. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” Angelica told him. “It was Peggy’s idea, but I think it’s great. It’s always hard to deal with a break-up, and you and Frankie lived there for two years. You don’t want to have to look for a different apartment, so we’re going to clear out whatever you don’t want to keep and rearrange the furniture. Oh, and Eliza talked to your landlord, and we’re allowed to paint the walls.”

“What color?” John asked cautiously.

“You pick.”

“Okay. Hey, Alex, you want to go to the paint store with me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Eliza started reading from her phone. “We’re starting at nine on Saturday, and we’ll keep going until it’s all done.”
“Did you say we’re going to move furniture?” Alex asked. “I could ask Rick and Tench to help if you want.”

“That would be great,” Eliza said. “Do you guys know how much paint to get?”

Alex shook his head. “No.”

“There’s a formula,” Herc told him. “It’s on the Sherwin-Williams website.”

Alex got out his phone and started doing calculations.

“We’re bringing donuts,” Adrienne said.

“And coffee,” Gil added. “Lots of coffee.”

Peggy smiled. “I knew this was a great idea.”

* * * * *

Gil didn’t just bring coffee, he brought a fancy coffee maker with dozens of little single-serving cups so they could all have whatever they wanted. Adrienne had brought three dozen donuts and hoped it would be enough. As they were eating, Eliza managed to get John aside and asked him gently, “Have you slept in that room since Frankie left?”

John looked away and then shook his head.

“It’s okay,” she told him, her hand on his arm. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and grabbed a big black trash bag from the box on the counter. She went into the bedroom and stripped the bed, running song lyrics in her mind so that she wouldn’t think about anything else. She stuffed the sheets and the blanket into the trash bag, then added the bathroom towels. “I need quarters,” she yelled to everyone in general and took all that they offered, then disappeared to the laundry room.

“Who’s painted walls before?” Rick asked. Only Tench and Herc raised their hands. “Okay, then,” he continued, “I’m in charge of telling you how to paint. Have we got drop cloths?”

John had bought whatever the clerk at Sherwin-Williams had told him he’d need, so the drop cloths, rollers, pans, and brushes were all ready. Rick decided they would start in the bedroom so that John could sleep there that night, and he directed them to move all the furniture to the middle of the room. That uncovered a fair amount of dust that had been hidden, and Angelica wielded the vacuum cleaner until the floor was clean. Then Rick and Tench covered everything with the drop cloths, and Rick began explaining the process of cutting in. It turned out that Alex was good at that because he was detail-oriented, and John was good at it because he was an artist with excellent hand-eye coordination, so they got started with the angled brushes to do all the edges.

“I really like this color,” Alex said as he brushed the pale ivory over the dull beige that was currently on the walls.

“Yeah, me too,” John agreed. “It’s going to look good.” He paused. “And different.”

“That’s a good thing, though, right?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

With two of them doing the edges and three more painting the walls, they got the first coat on in under an hour. Then they moved to the living room and kitchen, going through the same process.
By lunchtime, the whole apartment was done. Gil called for pizza and around the time the pizza arrived, Eliza reappeared with piles of neatly folded laundry.

“Peggy, Adrienne, and I are redecorating your bathroom,” she told John as they ate.

John looked a little wary. “Okay. What are you doing to it?”

“Paint, new shower curtain, all that sort of thing?”

“You’re painting?”

Eliza raised her eyebrow. “Really, John, there are three of us, and your bathroom is tiny. I think we can manage.”

“Do we have enough paint?” Alex asked.

“We got the paint on our own,” Peggy responded, smiling. “It’s a different color.”

John sat up straight. “What color?”

“Magenta,” Adrienne said helpfully.

“Magenta?”

“She’s kidding,” Peggy reassured him. “It’s a surprise.”

“Do I get any say in this?”

Peggy shook her head. “No. Oh, and everybody, John’s across-the-hall neighbor says we can use his bathroom while we’re working on this one. He’s working, so he gave me the key.”

“How do you even know Steve?” John asked.

Peggy smiled. “I’m friendly. I know lots of people.”

After lunch, they got the second coat of paint on the walls quickly, and then Angelica began to direct the arrangement of the furniture. Eliza made up the bed with clean white sheets.

“Those aren’t my sheets,” John said, staring at them. “I don’t have any plain white ones.”

“You do now,” Eliza told him. “Fresh sheets, fresh start.”

He pulled her in for a hug. “You’re the best.”

Alex watched from across the room as John kissed her gently on the cheek, his face a little flushed. He’d have to talk with John about that later.

As Tench and Rick moved the last few pieces of furniture into place, Peggy opened the bathroom door. “Ta-da!” she yelled. “Come see your new bathroom!”

John was relieved to see that the walls were a pale sage green, not magenta. The shower curtain was ivory with a design of sage-green leaves, and the towels were a coordinating cream color. John stood in the doorway speechless for a minute, then said, “Y’all … this is so fancy.”

“I love when John talks Southern,” Peggy murmured, batting her eyelashes. Tench snorted at that, so she turned around and batted her eyelashes at him.
“Really,” John continued, “this is too much. You guys went way above and beyond.”

“We had fun doing it,” Adrienne said. “Anyway, you deserve it.”

“Well …” John’s voice was a little shaky. “Thank you. Thank y’all so much for…”

“Wait, wait!” Peggy interrupted, waving. She was holding a big tote bag that was obviously full. “We’re not done. We have to have the ceremony!”

Angelica and Eliza looked at each other. “The ceremony?” Angelica asked.

“Yes,” Peggy nodded, “the ceremony to get rid of all the negative energy. Like, the exorcism.”

“How do you do that?” Herc asked.

“Actually, I looked it up,” Peggy said, “but the real thing requires a priest, which I think would just be a bad idea, and there are prayers, and then you throw holy water on everything, but it all just sounded like a complete downer, you know? The opposite of what we want?”

“Right,” John agreed, nodding. “No priest, thank you very much.”

“Exactly. So I turned to my own spiritual guide, which has never failed me.”

“What’s that?” Gil asked suspiciously.

Peggy reached into her tote bag. “Harry Potter!” She waved the copy of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* in the air. Everybody stared for a minute, and then Adrienne started laughing.

“Dementors?”

“Yes! I brought chocolate! Help me give it out.”

“Chocolate’s the antidote,” Alex explained to the two or three of them who weren’t Harry Potter fans.

“What’s a dementor?” Tench asked.

“Just eat the chocolate,” Peggy directed.

“So the chocolate protects us from the whatsis? The dementos?”

“Dementors,” Alex corrected, because Peggy was giggling too much to talk.

“No,” she said when she recovered, “the chocolate makes you feel better if you’ve been affected by a dementor, but what do we need to protect us from dementors in the first place?”

“A Patronus!” responded her sisters and most of her friends.

“Did you brings wands?” Eliza asked.

“Don’t be silly,” Peggy removed a pack of white tissue paper from her bag. “Since we’re only Muggles, we can’t cast spells, but we can make Patronus cutouts from tissue paper. I already made mine.” She held up a roughly squirrel-shaped piece of tissue paper.

“Your Patronus is a squirrel?” Adrienne asked.

“Yeah, what’s yours?”
“A raven.”

“Oh, very cool.”

“What’s a Muggle?” Tench asked. “What’s a Patronus? Why are we making paper cutouts?”

“It’s like, your magical protector,” Peggy explained, “but it always takes the form of an animal. Do you want me to find out what yours is?”

“I can’t just pick a random animal?”

Peggy looked shocked. “No.” She and Adrienne handed out the tissue paper, pencils, and some dollar-store scissors, then she went online to find Tench’s Patronus. She helped him with the quiz questions because he had no idea what any of them meant. “How have you never read Harry Potter?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “Just never got around to it.”

She shook her head. “Okay, well, it says your Patronus is a horse.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s the same as Ginny Weasley.”

“Who?”

“Harry’s girlfriend.”

“Okay.”

Peggy took pity on him and began sketching a horse on the tissue paper. By then John had cut out his turtle Patronus and was walking around looking at what everybody else was doing.

“A turtle?” Alex asked. “Really?”

“Turtles are amazing animals,” John told him. “What’s yours?”

“A lion.”

“Wow, I never heard of anybody having a lion Patronus before.”

Alex smiled proudly. “Cool, huh? What house are you?”

“Gryffindor.”

“Me too.”

John smiled. “I figured. Eliza and Peggy are Hufflepuffs.”

“That’s pretty obvious.”

“Gil’s a Slytherin.”

“Really? Huh. Is Angelica Ravenclaw?”

“Of course.”
“Herc?”

“I don’t know. Hey, Herc, what house are you?”

Herc looked embarrassed. “Hufflepuff.”

Peggy heard him. “Aw, really? We’re the nicest. Adrienne, how about you?”

“Ravenclaw.”

“Oh, smarty-pants!”

“What are you all talking about?” Rick asked. “I feel like I did when my family went to Greece on vacation, and I didn’t understand a word anybody said.”

Peggy took it on herself to explain the Hogwarts houses, and then made sure Rick and Tench took the online quiz. “Okay, looks like we’ve got another Hufflepuff here, Rick, and, wow, Tench is a Gryffindor. Cool. Has everybody got a Patronus?”

They waved their paper cutouts at her.

“She’s going to be a hell of a kindergarten teacher,” John remarked to Alex.

Alex snickered. “Is that what she’s planning to do?”

“Yeah. I feel like we’re her practice class.”

“Now we’re going to have the procession. We’re going to walk around the apartment holding up our Patronuses, and think happy thoughts. Remember, to summon a Patronus, you should think about the happiest time in your life, so that’s what we’ll do to get all the negative energy out of here and make sure no dementor will come anywhere near it again.”

They all cooperated because Peggy was having so much fun, and anyway, it was harmless. Alex found himself searching his mind for his happiest memory, and what he found was the past few weeks here with this group of friends. He thought of baking with Eliza and having coffee with John, and eating lunch with everybody. He’d never known people that he liked as much as he liked them. Especially John. Especially Eliza.

Peggy’s ceremony was over, and John insisted on treating everyone to dinner, calling Dusty’s Barbecue for delivery of their Super Dinner Party Combo, so everyone could have what they wanted. Gil and Adrienne left right after dinner, and then, to no one’s surprise, Tench offered Peggy a ride home. Eventually, only Eliza and Alex were left in the apartment with John. Eliza wiped down the kitchen counter for the last time and came back to the living room to join John and Alex on the couch.

John looked around the room. “It’s completely different,” he said.

Eliza smiled. “That was the point. This is your home, not yours and Frankie’s.” She flushed. “I hope that didn’t sound mean.”

“No, you’re absolutely right, and you know what? I feel comfortable here now, when I didn’t even yesterday. There was still some of Frankie’s stuff here – I’d put it in a box.”

“Yeah, Angelica found it,” Alex told him.

“What did she …”
“Dumpster.”

John took a breath. He didn’t feel bad at all about a couple of Frankie’s shirts and phone cases going into the dumpster. In fact, he felt relief. He put one arm around Eliza and the other around Alex and pulled them both close. “Thank you.” Eliza put her head down on his shoulder and he started playing with her hair. “I’m lucky to have friends like you.”

He wasn’t really surprised when Alex slid his left arm around his waist and snuggled close to him. It felt good to have Eliza on one side and Alex on the other. Was that strange? He kissed the top of Eliza’s head, and she made a little humming noise.

Alex kissed his neck just below his ear, very softly, his lips barely touching John’s skin. “Okay?” he whispered.

John felt his body responding, but he still had his hand in Eliza’s hair, running his fingers through it, his thumb skimming the back of her neck. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s good.”

Alex reached across John to run his fingertips down Eliza’s arm. She turned to look at him, wide-eyed, but she didn’t pull away.

“Is that okay?” Alex asked her.

She looked up at John, and he smiled at her, but the choice was hers. She held out her hand to Alex. “Yes,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

John’s bedroom and living room are painted in the Sherwin-Williams color Chamomile. The bathroom is Topiary Tint. I’ve been doing some painting myself around here, so I picked out colors for John while I was choosing my own. You can look them up on the S-W website if you want.

Anybody want to guess who John’s across-the-hall neighbor might be?

Can we ship Peggy and Tench? We can if I say we can.

And ... what’s going to happen next with John, Eliza, and Alex?

Thanks to you lovely people who have left kudos and comments. Tell me what you think.
Chapter Summary

Alex and Eliza stay at John's after the party. Eliza gets something she's wanted for a long time. John assesses his identity. Alex is very bossy and very talkative.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John sighed, and the thing that had made it impossible for him to be comfortable with himself for so long melted away. Eliza and Alex were holding hands across his chest, and he looked down at their clasped hands, watching Alex run his thumb over her knuckles. He turned toward Eliza on his left, his hand still in her hair. He’d kissed her on the cheek or forehead a thousand times, but now he slid his hand to the back of her head to hold her in place and kissed her mouth. He heard her quick intake of breath before she began to kiss him back. I think you might be in love with her, Alex had said, and he had denied it, but maybe Alex was right.

Then again, as he turned to kiss Eliza, Alex let go of her hand and slid his hand up inside John’s shirt, and that felt very, very good. Eliza’s lips parted, and Alex moved out of the circle of John’s arm and got up on his knees next to him. His hand was still on John’s chest, flat and warm against his skin as he stroked up and down over John’s abs to his collarbone. He leaned in and began to kiss the back of John’s neck, and – Jesus!

John shuddered, and Alex, close to his ear, whispered, “Yeah?” Then Eliza slid her hand under his shirt to join Alex’s. John turned a little more toward her, both arms around her now, as Alex pressed himself against his back. He put his hand over Eliza’s inside John’s shirt, laced his fingers with hers, and pulled her hand up with his. He stroked John’s nipple with his thumb, then moved her hand so she could do it, and John whimpered against her mouth. Then John broke away, breathing hard, and asked, “What are we doing?” His voice was ragged.

Alex kissed the back of his neck again. “Making out,” he said. “Do you like it?”

“Hm?” She sounded drowsy.

“You okay?”

She kissed his jaw softly, her hand and Alex’s still caressing him. “I’ve wanted to kiss you for two years, so … yeah.”

“Really? Really? The whole time I was with Frankie?”

“Angelica wanted me to give up,” Eliza told him in that same half-sleepy voice.

“Why?”

“’Cause you’re gay.”
Right. He had to think about that, but Alex’s mouth was on his neck. “Come on, John,” he murmured. “I haven’t kissed you yet.”

“Have you ever done this before?” John asked him.

“Made out?” Alex sounded genuinely puzzled. “Yeah, sure.”

“With more than one person?”


“Are we going to take turns?” Eliza asked.

John felt like he’d fallen through the looking glass into some soft, warm, dimly lighted place where all he had to do was relax and let go and everything would be all right. The part of his brain that had kept him guarded for most of his life was sending out alarms, but they were faint and far away. He turned toward Alex, and met his mouth. He was astonished that Alex – brash, awkward, pushy Alex – was slow and gentle, twisting his left hand in John’s curls, his right still holding Eliza’s hand under John’s shirt. As Alex’s tongue flicked teasingly against John’s lips, Eliza pressed against his back, rubbing her breasts against him and making little humming noises. John opened his mouth for Alex and fell deeper. Alex explored his mouth, sucked on his bottom lip and scraped his teeth across it until John pulled away, feeling like he might go up in flames.

Alex was smiling over his shoulder at Eliza. “I want to kiss you,” he said to her.

Her eyes were dark, her lips parted. She nodded.

“Watch, John,” Alex directed, and John watched. They were gorgeous. He was still between them, and they were both pressed against him, Alex actually lying across his chest. He watched Alex kiss Eliza in the same slow, thorough way he had kissed him, and he needed to get his mouth back on him. On one of them. He bent his head forward, took Alex’s earlobe between his teeth, and sucked it. Alex moaned into Eliza’s mouth, then pushed himself up to get his knee between John’s thighs. John could feel his heart pounding in his chest, could feel Alex’s heart beating against him. His mouth was already on Alex’s ear.

“Maybe we should think about this,” he said.

Alex took his mouth off Eliza’s long enough to say, “Oh, let’s not. It’s going so well.”

Eliza hesitated, though. “What’s the matter, John?”

“Dammit!” Alex muttered, pushing his hair off his face.

“I don’t know,” John said. “I mean, nothing’s the matter, just … I’m not from New York, okay? This is … different.”

Alex sighed. “What do you think, Eliza?”

“It’s … it’s good, I think.”

John turned to look at her. Sweet, trusting Eliza seemed like the last person who would be interested in this sort of unconventional relationship – or was it even a relationship?

Alex nuzzled John’s neck. “Eliza likes it. I like it. Come on, don’t try to tell me you didn’t like it.”

“No, that’s not it. Of course I like it.”
Alex leaned across John and began to kiss Eliza again, and John, watching, felt his body responding as it had before. His left hand was on Eliza’s back, and he slid it under her shirt, his hand on her soft, warm skin. She pulled away from Alex and brought her mouth to John’s.

_But I’m gay, he thought. Then why do I like this? Why does Eliza feel so good? Why do I want to touch her?_ His hand slid up and he felt for the clasp of her bra. _Shit, I’m going to do this._ He unhooked it without fumbling much, and she made a noise against his mouth, pulled away long enough to say, “Yes.”

Alex’s mouth was close to his ear. “John, beautiful John, what worries you?”

“I’m gay.”

“Are you, though? Because you’ve got your hand up Eliza’s shirt, and I know you like the way she feels.”

“Yeah.”

Eliza had turned so that he could get his hand on her breast, and he was stroking it, his thumb brushing her nipple.

“That’s why I hate labels,” Alex said. He pulled Eliza toward him so that she was sitting on John’s lap, and he got his hand under her shirt and on her other breast. Eliza threw back her head and sighed.

Alex looked at John and smiled. “You like to make her feel good, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“And you feel good too, don’t you, touching her, kissing her, kissing me? You like it all?”

“Yes, that’s what …”

Alex cut him off. “Then maybe you’re not gay, or maybe you’re mostly gay, or gay but flexible, or maybe you’re gay except for Eliza Schuyler? Or maybe you’re John Laurens, and you are who you are, and fuck anybody who wants to put you in some box. No labels, John, just be you. You’re perfect.”

John took in a long breath. He’d spent the first sixteen years of his life hiding who he was, and the last four years trying to prove that he knew exactly who he was. Maybe he didn’t really have to prove anything to anybody. Maybe he could … just let go. Alex began to kiss him again, and he leaned back, his mouth open to Alex, his hand caressing Eliza’s soft, full breast, his body filled with electricity. He wanted both of them.

Well, why not?

He broke the kiss. “We should … we should go into the bedroom,” he said.

Alex smiled. “Yeah?”

“Please,” John said, his eyes bright gold under his lashes.

“Eliza?” Alex asked.

“Hm?”
“Do you want to go into the bedroom?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know.”

*Please, please, please,* John begged silently.

“You can just watch if you want,” Alex told her. “No pressure.”

“Watch?” she asked tentatively.

Alex glanced at John and then kissed Eliza softly. “I don’t know exactly what you guys have in mind, but my plan is to suck John’s cock until he’s screaming.”

*Ah, fuuuck.*

Eliza’s eyes were on Alex’s mouth. “Yes,” she said, her voice suddenly strong. “Yes, I want to watch that.”

“We should move now, then,” John said, “before it’s too late.”

Once they were in the bedroom, Alex looked at John. “Take your clothes off, babe.” He pulled his own shirt over his head and unzipped his jeans, then reached out his hand to Eliza, who was staring at John. “You could take your clothes off too,” he said to her.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “I think I’m just going to watch.”

Alex nodded. “Come sit on the bed with us?”

“Okay.”

She sat cross-legged near the foot of the bed, and Alex kicked his jeans off. He wasn’t wearing underwear. John was lying down, but he still had his boxers on. Alex stretched out next to him.

“Tease,” he said.

“What?”

“You want me to take your underwear off?”

John smiled. “Yeah.”

Alex got up on his knees and yanked the boxers off in one quick move. Eliza gasped. Alex put his knee between John’s legs and leaned down to kiss him, taking his time, rubbing against him. John let out a whimper. “*Jesus,* Alex.”

“Look how pretty,” Alex said softly, and began stroking him. “Eliza, look how beautiful he is.”

Eliza’s eyes were so dark that the iris had almost vanished. She leaned forward, watching Alex’s hand move. John was panting, pushing his hips up. “You want to help?” Alex asked.

Eliza reached out and ran her fingers, feather light, along John’s length. John moaned. “Please,” he whispered, his eyelashes fluttering. He felt like he was floating.

Alex took Eliza’s hand, pulled her closer. “Right here,” he told her, wrapping her fingers around the base. Then he bent down and took John all the way into his mouth until his lips met Eliza’s fingers, and John threw his head back and let out a noise that made Eliza jump, her fingers
reflexively tightening. Alex licked her fingers, licked his way back up to John’s tip, while she moved her hand on him, watching his face. His eyes were closed, his lips swollen and red, and he was beautiful. Alex was licking and sucking him, and then he paused and looked at Eliza, tilting his head, his eyes glittering. “Want a taste?”

“Yes.” She didn’t even realize she’d said it aloud, but at that moment, there was nothing she wanted more. She gave him a long, slow lick from base to tip, and then pulled back. “Go ahead,” she said to Alex, and pulled her shirt over her head. Without taking her eyes from Alex and John, she yanked off her bra and threw it on the floor, then took off her jeans. Her underpants were soaking wet, and she put her hand inside them, rubbing herself. Then she gave up any pretense of hesitation and pulled the underpants off too. She moved so that there was room for her to lie on her stomach and get her mouth on John, and then she and Alex shared him, their lips and tongues on John and on each other. Eliza had never done anything remotely like this before. The intensity of her feelings had taken her by surprise, but when she’d seen Alex put his mouth on John, she was more aroused than she’d ever been. She rubbed herself against the mattress, trying to get some friction. Alex moved away for a minute, grabbed John’s hand that was twisted in the sheet, and pulled it to Eliza. “Come closer,” he said, and she did. He slid John’s hand between her legs, and she instinctively pushed down onto his fingers.

“Oh, Jesus fuck,” John gasped, pressing his fingers deep into her, so that she started to move on him.

Alex took him all the way in and got serious about rhythm and pressure, and John gave himself up to it completely. His fingers were hot and wet inside Eliza, circling and pressing outward. At the same time, Alex’s mouth was pulling him closer and closer to the edge, and that warm soft place he had fallen into had become hot and slippery and bottomless, and Alex had been right, because he really did scream, his back arching, his hips jerking again and again in spasms until he was completely spent and fell back on the bed. He lay limp, panting, feeling like his body had been entirely emptied out. Alex kissed his way up softly to his mouth. “You’re gorgeous,” he said.

“Fuck,” John gasped. “Oh, my fucking God, Alex.” He realized his hand was still on Eliza, his fingers wet and slick. He turned to see her face, all huge dark eyes and shimmering pale skin.

“I watched,” she told him.

“Yeah?” He had no idea what it might have been like for her to watch. “Did you … was it … are you okay with it?”

There was an expression on her face he’d never seen before, something eager, avid … hungry? She moved closer to kiss him, rubbing herself against him, then leaned across him to kiss Alex. “It was amazing,” she said. “It was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Alex sat up, reached across John to brush Eliza’s hair off her face. “It was hot to know you were watching,” he said. He twisted his hand in her hair and pulled her in for a long kiss. When it was over, he turned to John. “Do you want to watch?” he asked. “Or do you want to help?”

John’s breathing had returned to normal. He sat up, still in that through-the-looking-glass place. “Help?”

Alex’s eyes were glittering again. They were on Eliza, not John, but he spoke to John. “I’m going to fuck her, but you can help.”

Eliza gasped, looking from John to Alex and back again. “What do you want, babygirl?” John asked.
“Everything, yes, both of you, anything you want to do.”

John pulled her onto his lap. “Oh, Eliza, why didn’t I know?”

She nuzzled his neck. “You had a boyfriend.”

John snorted. “We exorcised him today, didn’t we?”

“We really, really did. Is this part of the exorcism?”

“What do you mean?”

She looked at Alex. “Did you plan this as part of it? Clearing the negativity out of the apartment?”

He shook his head, smiling. “No, but I wish I’d thought of it. I just stayed late to see if I could seduce John.”

“Just John?”

“I didn’t know you were staying, but I’m glad you did. It’s been really good so far, I’m looking forward to more.”

“Me too.”

Alex gave her and John an assessing look. “John, move back a little bit, and then, Eliza, turn to face me.”

She did as he said, finding herself between John’s legs. Without any instruction from Alex, John pulled her tight against him and then back, so that she was lying on top of him, her shoulders at his waist and her head resting on his chest. He began stroking her, his hands moving from her throat over her breasts to her belly. She took a long breath and he felt her shiver against him.

Alex smiled approvingly. “You’re both beautiful. You’re perfect. John, where are your condoms?”

“Nightstand drawer,” John told him, jerking his head toward it. He had his hands on Eliza’s breasts now, playing with her nipples. She was squirming against him, and it felt wonderful. How long had it been since he’d been with a girl? Five years, probably, and he’d never been with a girl like this, a girl he loved, a girl who liked watching him have sex with a guy. Everything was new and shining.

Alex had dealt with the condom and was watching Eliza’s face. Her eyes were closed, her lips parted. She loved the way John’s hands felt on her. “You’re so beautiful, babygirl,” Alex said. “Tell me if I do anything you don’t like, okay?”

“I will.”

He would never, ever do anything to hurt Eliza, but she was so trusting – too trusting maybe. He wanted her to be safe. He knelt between her legs and opened her with his thumbs. A long shuddering sigh went through her, and he bent down and slid his tongue into her, probing and tasting. She was wet and slippery, soft, soft, soft, with the slightest taste of salt. He licked up to her clit, and when he found it, she gasped, and her hips moved involuntarily. It wouldn’t take much to make her come. She’d been so aroused by watching him and John that he could probably bring her to climax in a couple of minutes, but he wanted to go slowly, let her feel everything. She deserved the best. His thumbs moved inside her as he circled her clit very lightly with his tongue.

“Yes,” she said, “do that. Please, Alex, do that.”
He did, holding back, though, not giving her enough pressure. She whimpered, half pleasure, half frustration. He lifted his head to look at John, whose rapt eyes were fixed on him. John knew exactly what he was doing. He nodded and rolled Eliza’s nipples between his fingers. Alex smiled and went back to teasing her.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please, more.”

Alex pushed her legs farther apart and got closer, brought his tongue back to her. She was pressing her hips up toward him. He lifted his head and pushed her legs back toward her shoulders, rolling her hips up. “John?”

John understood. He gripped her legs at her knees and pulled them back and apart, opening her wide for Alex. She was past whimpering now, making a high, keening noise, interspersed with gasps. Alex put his thumb on her clit. “Now, babygirl,” he said, and began to push into her. As soon as she felt him, she tried to move toward him, but John was holding her in place, and Alex had complete control. He went as slowly as he could, letting her feel the stretch all the way in, until he was pressed tight against her. “Ah, fuck, you feel so good,” he murmured. “You’re so soft, Eliza, you’re so soft and warm inside.” He began moving as he leaned forward, still talking to her, his thumb massaging her clit. “God, you’re gorgeous, look at you. I wish I could fuck you all night, just like this, but you’re so hot, I’ll never last. I want to be all the way inside you, as far as I can go. You feel so good around me, babygirl, so warm and tight. You’re so beautiful, so soft. God, you feel so good, so wet, so hot. Yeah, yeah, that’s good, just like that, ah, fuck, Eliza, you’re perfect. Yeah, like that, oh, fuck, yes, yes, yes …” She was quivering, and he pushed harder and deeper as she came, clenching tight around him and then shaking as spasm after spasm went through her. He finished with a shout, and she fell back onto John.

* * * * *

Eliza woke up from what she was positive had been the most erotic dream of her life to find herself curled against John, whose arm was around her. She was facing Alex who was sleeping on his back with his arm thrown over his head. All three of them were naked.

Not a dream.

She reached down to pull the sheet up over her and remembered putting these clean sheets on the bed the day before. Fresh sheets, fresh start, she had told John. She had never imagined this. She moved as she covered her shoulder with the sheet, and John stirred, his arm tightening on her possessively. She took a deep breath and relaxed against him as she put her hand on Alex.

Everything was different.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here we are. Things happened faster than I expected them to, and I did try to slow them down, but Alex is so pushy. Still, all three of them seem to be okay with it.

Let me know what you think. I live for comments.
Changes the Game

Chapter Summary

Everybody is wearing John's clothes. Alex, John, and Eliza have the awkward "morning after" discussion. Some decisions are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alex was the first one up, and he went out for coffee and donuts. When he got back, John was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, and Eliza was in the shower.

“Hey,” Alex said, dropping a kiss on John’s head as he put the carrier down and took a seat.

“Hey yourself.” John took a sip of his tea and then stirred it some more, looking intently at his cup.

“Everything okay?” Alex asked after a while.

“I think so.”

Alex grinned at him. “Donut?”

John helped himself to a donut. “Are you wearing my shirt?”

“Yeah, mine was dirty. I just took the one that was on top in the drawer.”

“Okay.” John took a careful bite of the donut.

They heard the shower go off and then a few minutes later, Eliza called, “John? Is it okay if I wear your clothes?”

“Sure,” John called back, then added, half to himself, “Why not? Everybody else is.” He still felt like he was in some alternate universe. He and Alex continued to sit in silence.

Eliza entered the kitchen with her hair damp, wearing a black tee shirt and a pair of John’s jeans, the legs rolled up and the waist cinched in with a belt.

“Good morning, beautiful girl,” Alex said, smiling.

“Good morning,” she responded, not meeting his eyes. “Oh, coffee, thank God.” She sat down and added cream and sugar to her coffee.

“We’re not going to have one of those awkward ‘morning after’ conversations, are we?” Alex asked.

John took a breath. “Yeah, we probably are.”

Eliza nodded. “I think we should.”

“But everything is so amazing,” Alex protested. He reached across the table and took both of their
hands. “We are really, really good together. You can’t tell me that wasn’t the best sex you’ve had in – oh, I don’t know, but a really long time.”

Eliza turned red and put her hands to her face. “We need to talk.”

Alex held her hand and raised it to his cheek, then kissed her palm. “You don’t want to go away, do you?” he asked softly.

She pulled her hand back. “We need to talk, Alex,” she repeated. “Without touching.”

“You don’t want me to touch you?” He sounded incredibly hurt.

Eliza turned to John. “John, please help out.”

“She’s right, Alex,” John said. “We need to have a conversation. Maybe we should have had one last night, but … well, we didn’t.”

Alex’s grip tightened on John’s hand. “Are you sorry?”

John’s eyes met his, bright green-gold. “No,” he said, and he broke into a smile that lit up the room. “Not even a little bit.”

Alex let out a breath. “Thank God. I was worried.” He looked at Eliza.

Her face softened, and she shook her head. “I’m not sorry either, Alex, but it’s all new. It’s overwhelming. I don’t know about what you did in New York, but I’ve only ever had one boyfriend at a time.”

John turned to her. “Are we your boyfriends?”

She flushed again, her eyes fixed on her coffee cup. “Maybe that’s one of the things we need to talk about.”

John continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “… because I’d really like to be your boyfriend.”

She looked up. “Really? Really?”

“Yeah.” John turned to Alex. “How about you?”

“Do I want to be Eliza’s boyfriend? Fuck, yeah!”

“Do you want to be my boyfriend too?”

“Of course. Eliza? Are you okay with that? With all of us, I mean?”

She nodded, and the tears spilled over. They both went to her, one on each side. John kissed her tears away, and Alex said, “Please don’t cry, babygirl. Everything’s okay. We’re fine.”

“I’m not sad,” Eliza told him. “It’s just not anything I ever thought about. I can’t take it all in.”

“Can I kiss you, or are we still doing that no-touching thing?”

She didn’t answer him, just leaned in for the kiss, and it was as good as it had been the night before. Then Alex kissed John, and John kissed Eliza, and finally John smacked the table and said, “Okay, we have to stop. If not, you know what’s going to happen.”
“I certainly hope so,” Alex responded, grinning.

John sat back down in his chair. “We need to talk about a few things,” he insisted. Alex took hold of his hand again and started kissing his fingertips. John didn’t pull his hand away – he liked it – but he gave Alex a look. “We still have other things to do, you know.”

“Not today,” Alex reminded him. “It’s Sunday. No classes. We can spend the whole day in bed.”

Eliza gasped, and John started laughing. “Remember that first day when you came to our lunch table, and Angelica and I thought you might be crazy?”

“Mm-hm.” Alex was still kissing his fingers.

“Well, you’re crazy.”

Alex licked John’s pinkie delicately, then looked up at him through his lashes. “You’re not the first one to say that.”

John reached for Eliza’s hand. “Do you agree with me that he’s crazy?” he asked.

She nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, but I don’t think he’s dangerous.”

“Of course I’m not dangerous,” Alex said, insulted. “And I’m not really crazy, either, just a little … hyperactive.”

John smiled, “Is that what you call it?”

“That’s what a highly-qualified therapist called it.” He was still holding John’s hand, and he kissed the back of it.

“You know what you remind me of?” John asked.

“What?”

“The color settings on a phone.”

Eliza laughed and said, “That’s perfect.”

Alex looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

John let go of Eliza’s hand to pull up a picture he had taken of Peggy holding her tissue-paper Patronus the day before. He showed it to Alex. “This is the normal setting, but if I slide it on this, all the colors become more saturated.” He slid the picture all the way over, so that Peggy’s golden-brown skin became ocher, her light green shirt emerald, and the wall behind her yellow instead of ivory.

“Yeah, okay,” Alex said, frowning, “but how am I like that?”

Eliza answered before John had a chance. “Because everything about you is so intense. You don’t just like a thing – like, I don’t know, cookies. You love them, they’re your favorite food. If you’re interested in something, you research it like crazy, and you can’t stop talking about it.”

Alex took a bite of his donut and considered what she’d said. “Okay, I guess that’s fair. Does it bother you? Is that what you mean?”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not what I mean, but it can be overwhelming, and maybe you need
to slow down sometimes?"

Alex frowned and looked from her to John and back. “Are you saying I went too fast last night? Did you feel pressured?”

“You did go fast,” John admitted, “but not too fast, at least not for me. It’s not like I hadn’t thought about it.”

Alex really wanted to explore that avenue, but he spoke to Eliza first. “How about you, babygirl?”

“You asked for my consent through it all,” she reminded him, “so, no, but I can imagine that it could happen.” She smiled. “I like it when you call me babygirl.”

Alex grinned. “Yeah?”

“So, anyway,” John said, trying to stay focused, “maybe we can at least decide if we want to tell our friends we’re dating or something?”

Alex was still grinning. “I’d like to shout it from the rooftops, actually. I’m dating the most beautiful girl and the hottest guy on the planet.”

“Dating,” Eliza said, as if the word were unfamiliar to her. She turned to John. “Am I really dating John Laurens? I didn’t think that would ever happen.”

“I did,” Alex put in proudly. “I told him he was in love with you.”

Eliza looked at him, surprised. “Did you?”

“Yes.”

“I told him I wasn’t,” John said, “but then I stayed awake most of the night thinking about you.”

“Did you really?” Alex asked, interested. “You didn’t tell me.”

“It didn’t seem like a good idea.”

“But you were thinking about Eliza that way.”

“Yeah, and trying to talk myself out of it.”

Alex played with his fingers some more. “You said a few minutes ago that you had thought about you and me being together.”

John’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Yeah.”

“Was that because you were trying to talk yourself out of being interested in Eliza?”

John’s smile changed abruptly to a frown. “What? No, that’s not what I meant … I was thinking about both of you.”

Alex caught Eliza’s eye across the table. “Together?” he asked John, keeping his eyes on Eliza and watching her blush.

“I hadn’t actually gotten that far. I … uh … I never did that before.”

“You’re okay with it, though?”
John’s smile lit up his face. “Yeah, I am very okay with it. I think we’re going to run into some things that may need working out, but I don’t even know what they might be.”

“Well, for one thing,” Eliza said, looking a little worried, “I don’t think my parents are going to be thrilled.”

Alex was an orphan, and John didn’t have a relationship with either of his parents, so that hadn’t occurred to them. Alex pulled his chair closer to Eliza’s and put his arm around her. “Oh, babygirl, I’m sorry I didn’t think about that. Are they going to be upset with you?”

She shook her head. “No, it won’t be like that. They won’t be mad, just … worried, maybe.”

“Your parents like me,” John reminded her.

“Yes, they do, they like you a lot, and if I told them I was dating you, they’d probably be fine with it.”

“Only probably?” John asked, looking a little hurt.

“Because they knew you were with Frankie. My mom would talk to me about rebound relationships and about being sure of your orientation, that sort of thing, but once we’d talked about it, she’d be happy about it.”

“What about me?” Alex asked like a little kid who was afraid of being left out of a game.

“Well, as far as my parents are concerned, Alex, you’re an unknown quantity, so at some point, my dad will probably ask you a lot of questions.”

“I can answer questions,” Alex said, his chin up.

She smiled at him. “I’m sure you can, and I’m sure they’ll like you, but then there’s the whole two boyfriends at the same time thing.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s a little unconventional.”

Eliza choked back a laugh. “A little. Anyway, I was thinking I should talk to Angelica and Peggy first, so that when I do tell Mom and Dad, I’ll have allies.”

“You sure they’ll be allies?”

She nodded. “Positive. Peggy will be totally supportive as soon as I tell her. Angelica might take a little longer, but she’ll be on our side.”

“So,” John said, “I guess this means Eliza tells Peggy and Angelica first, and then after they know, we just tell everybody else.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Alex agreed. He grinned mischievously. “You know who I want to tell? Sam Seabury and Janet Cumming. I want to tell them what they’re missing out on.”

Eliza giggled, and John dropped his head into his hand. “That is such a bad idea.”

“No, it’s not,” Alex argued. “Oh, and I can tell them that when they finally get around to fucking, they should invite Chip Lee or George Eacker or – oh, wait, Jefferson!”

“No,” John told him, trying not to laugh. “No, no, no …”
“You’re right, you’re right. None of them would be any fun at all. I mean, seriously, you couldn’t pay me to date anybody in that crowd. It would be like dating a department store mannequin.”

They were all laughing, and John realized that they had gotten through the awkward “morning after” discussion without any damage. He got up to make more tea and stood waiting for the kettle to boil, leaning against the counter. Alex hadn’t moved his chair and he was still right next to Eliza, relaxed now, holding her hand. Eliza smiled up at him, and John thought about how beautiful she was, and how much he liked Alex’s smile, and then he wondered why he didn’t feel jealous. It was the opposite. It made him happy to see them together.

The kettle whistled, and he poured the boiling water, and then he asked Alex and Eliza the question that was on his mind. “Why doesn’t it bother me to see the two of you together? I really like both of you, so shouldn’t I be worried that if you like each other, you won’t need me?”

“That’s conventional thinking,” Alex said.

Eliza smiled up at John. “I sense a speech coming,”

“I think you’re right.”

Alex stood up. “You don’t have a coffee maker?”

“No, I usually drink tea.”

“Huh. Okay, can you pour me some?”

John obliged, and Alex added four heaping spoonfuls of sugar, then sat back down. “So here’s the thing,” he said. “In our society, it’s generally accepted that a romantic unit is two people. It used to be that it had to be a man and a woman, but now, thankfully, most people can accept two men or two women. Think about how long it took to get to this point, though. How many people lived closeted or worse because of some stupid arbitrary rule that same-sex couples didn’t count, or that they were defective in some way? And even now – sorry, John, but you know what I’m going to say – there are plenty of people who are telling same-sex couples that they’re wrong or unworthy or whatever other shit they make up. It’s ridiculous.”

John nodded. “Okay, yeah, I agree, but how does that relate …”

“Sh,” Alex told him, holding up his hand, “I’m giving a speech.”

“Sorry, Your Honor,” John muttered, and Eliza giggled.

“A little respect, please,” Alex reminded them, but he was smiling. “I’m saying that not only is the insistence on male-female couples arbitrary and pointless, but so is the idea of couples at all. Why does a romantic unit have to be two and only two people? Why not three or four? What law says you can only love one partner at a time? If a mother can love three kids, then why can’t she love three romantic partners?”

“It’s funny,” Eliza said thoughtfully. “We just accept certain things without even thinking about them, just because that’s the way it’s always been.”

“Exactly,” Alex responded, beaming. “We don’t have to follow any of these conventions unless we want to. I mean, there are millions of couples who are perfectly happy, and that’s great, but if I’m happier with both of you, then that’s what I want.”

John drank some of his tea, thinking. “So you’re saying that’s why I’m not upset seeing you and
Eliza together – like, last night …”

Alex sighed, “Oh, last night …” He looked up at John through his thick lashes. “Last night was spectacular.”

“Right,” John agreed, dragging his mind away from the feelings Alex’s words had evoked. “What you said before in a conventional family with more than two people, we accept that everyone loves everyone else.”

“Exactly,” Eliza put in. “I love Peggy and Angelica, and they love me and they love each other. It would be ridiculous if I got mad because my sisters went to a movie without me or something. Sometimes all three of us do something together, or sometimes two of us, and it’s fine. I don’t even think about it.”

“The potential for jealousy is there, though,” John said. “I’ve seen that happen in some families.”

“But that’s true even in the standard het couple romantic pair,” Alex pointed out. “In fact, it might be worse because there’s such a taboo about going outside of that relationship.”

Eliza looked concerned. “But I don’t want to date anyone else right now, and I think I’d be upset if one of you started dating somebody else.”

“Yeah, me too,” Alex said. “Having a poly relationship isn’t about no commitment or no fidelity.” He stopped and bit his lip. “Look, I know we’re just getting started, and I don’t want to be pushy, but are both of you willing to be in this relationship, just the three of us? Is it too soon to ask that?”

John put his tea down on the counter and took a few steps to stand behind Alex’s chair. He leaned down, his arms around Alex and his lips against his neck. “Not too soon,” he whispered. He held out his hand to Eliza, and when she took it, he lifted it to his mouth.

She couldn’t reach both of them from her chair, so she stood up. John still had her hand, and he was kissing her fingers. Alex reached for her other hand and pulled her onto his lap and she nuzzled his neck and kissed him softly right below his ear. “I’m in,” she said. “This is what I want.”

Chapter End Notes

Not too much new in this chapter, just getting the relationship established. Thanks always for kudos and comments. I love hearing from you.
More Than Anything in This Life

Chapter Summary

Eliza talks to her sisters and gets their reactions. John and Alex talk about their relationship and about Eliza. John demonstrates his artistic skills, and Alex just never shuts up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This won’t take long, will it?” Peggy asked. “Tench is coming over at two because not only has he never read Harry Potter, he’s never watched Good Omens.”

Eliza smiled. “Are you going to try to educate him?”

“Probably,” Peggy said. “I think he’s worth salvaging.”

“He seems like a good guy.”

“I know, right?” Peggy took a bite of her sandwich. “So, go ahead,” she added through a mouthful of turkey on whole wheat.

“In a minute,” Eliza told her. “I’m waiting for Angelica.”

Angelica was at the stove, making herself a grilled cheese. “Done,” she said, flipping it onto a plate. She took a seat at the table. “So what’s this thing you have to talk about?”

Eliza took a deep breath. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I didn’t sleep here last night.”

Peggy swallowed her bite of sandwich and tilted her head thoughtfully. “I didn’t notice, actually, but Tench and I went to Banjo’s when we left John’s, so I didn’t get home until late.”

Banjo’s was a club that was popular with university students.

Angelica frowned. “Margarita Schuyler, do you have a fake ID?”

Peggy looked at her oldest sister, wide-eyed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Just don’t do anything stupid,” Angelica told her.

“Of course not. Really, you could have a little faith in me.”

“Fine.” Angelica cut her grilled cheese into neat triangles, just as their mother always had. It made Eliza smile. “So,” she said, “can we assume you slept at John’s?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve slept at John’s before, though,” Angelica continued, “even slept in the same bed with him, and it was always just – what did you call it? ‘Friend cuddles’?”
“Yeah.” There was a long pause. “That’s not what it was last night.”

Angelica’s eyebrows went up. “Really? Are you saying maybe John Laurens isn’t quite as gay as we all thought he was?”

“That’s part of it.”

“Go, Eliza!” Peggy said with a grin. “John’s hot!”

Angelica glared at her.

“What?” Peggy retorted. “John’s always been hot.”

“Okay, fine, I won’t argue. John’s hot.” Angelica was looking at Eliza. “So you had sex with John?”

Eliza realized with a shock that she hadn’t technically had sex with John. In the moment, it had certainly seemed as if she was having sex with both John and Alex, but that wasn’t what had happened. She was suddenly overcome with the anticipation of John and Alex reversing their roles from last night, and she felt the heat of the deep blush that swept over her.

Angelica stared. “Eliza, what’s going on? You just turned bright red, and you’re practically shaking. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She took a drink of water.

“It must have been quite a memorable experience,” Peggy commented.

“Shut up,” Angelica told her. “Come on, Eliza, you said you wanted to talk to us, and there’s got to be more to this than that you and John had sex. I mean, you’ve been making heart eyes at him for two years, so that wouldn’t be a big surprise, except that he’s always said he was gay, but he dated girls in high school, so maybe he’s bi or whatever. But there’s something else, right?”

“Yeah.” Eliza nodded and drank some more water. “I didn’t exactly have sex with John.”

“Okay, now I’m really confused,” Peggy said, looking at her plate. She picked up her sandwich and took another bite.

“What do you mean by didn’t exactly?” Angelica asked.

I’m just going to have to say it. “I watched Alex and John have sex, and I … sort of participated, and then I had sex with Alex, and John was … with us.”

Angelica was speechless. Peggy was not. “Oh, holy shit,” she gasped. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Shut up!” Angelica snapped. She stared at Eliza. “So you, John, and Alex had a three-way?”

Eliza met her big sister’s eyes without flinching. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

“John Laurens and Alex Hamilton? I’m just … why would you do that?”

“Because I wanted to, Ange. Because I really, really like both of them. Why else would I have sex?”

“Well, you could have been drunk.”
“I wasn’t. I didn’t have anything stronger than Sprite yesterday.”

“Okay, okay, I’m not judging.”

“Really?”

“No, I’m not. Whatever you want to do is fine, as long as everybody involved is overage and gives consent, so – great. I’m not sure why you wanted to tell us about it, though, because that’s a little weird.”

“Because it wasn’t just sex,” Eliza said, trying not to sound defensive. “We’re dating.”

“Who’s dating?”

“John and Alex and I.”

“You’re dating two guys?”

“Yes.”

“And they’re dating each other and you?”

“Yes.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Peggy broke in. “So you’re dating John and Alex, and John’s dating you and Alex, and Alex is dating you and John? And you’re all having sex with each other?”

Eliza put her hands over her face. “Peggy!”

“I’m just trying to understand.”

“Peggy, for the love of God, shut the fuck up!” Angelica yelled.

Eliza kept her hands over her face, feeling the tears gather. She had felt so happy at John’s, and she had come home thinking that she’d just tell her sisters and they’d be happy for her too. Only now it seemed like they thought she was some sort of freak. She felt Angelica’s hand on her shoulder and turned to look at her, brushing her tears away with her fingers.

“Eliza, I’m not as loud as Peggy, but I’m trying to understand too,” Angelica said softly. “I just want to be sure of one thing, that nobody talked you into this, that this is really what you want.”

Eliza choked, caught between a laugh and a sob. “Yes, Ange, it’s what I want. Nobody pressured me – and you might be surprised to know that Alex asks for consent for every single thing.”

Angelica smiled. “That does surprise me, but I’m glad to know it.” She took a deep breath. “Okay, then. You know I love you, and I’ll always support you. If you’re happy, then I’m happy for you.”

Eliza held out her arms and Angelica pulled her in for a hug.

“Hey, me too!” Peggy said, jumping out of her chair and hugging Eliza from the other side. “I love you too, you know, even if it’s unfair that you take up more than your share of guys – kidding! Really!”

Eliza got up to find a tissue and blew her nose. “I’m so glad you’re my sisters. At some point, I’m going to have to tell Mom and Dad, and it’s going to mean a lot that you have my back.”
“You’re not going to call them now or anything, are you?” Angelica asked.

“No, I’m going to wait a while. I need some time to figure out exactly what I’m going to say. And I think I need to give myself some time and see how we’re going to do this.”

“Are you saying you’re not sure it’s going to work?”

“No, not at all, just that it’s new, and well, there are always things to work out in a new relationship. I mean, look at Peggy trying to explain Harry Potter to Tench.”

Peggy sniffed. “Oh, right, that’s a perfect analogy.” She looked at the clock on the wall. “Tench will be here in about fifteen minutes. Is it okay to mention it to him, or are you going to keep it quiet?”

“It’s fine, Peg. We’re not going to hide anything.”

“Good. Live your truth, right?” She waved her hand airily.

“Yeah.” Eliza smiled. “That’s what we’re going to do.”

* * * * *

John was lying on the couch with his head on Alex’s lap, turned on his side a little so he could watch what seemed to be the fiftieth episode of Dr. Who that Alex had insisted on. He had only a vague understanding of what Dr. Who was all about, but Alex loved it, so he was willing to learn more. Alex was playing with his curls, winding them around his fingers and then letting go so he could watch them spring back. He found it endlessly fascinating.

“You’re so pretty,” Alex said now, releasing another curl.

“Thank you.”

“This is nice.”

“Yeah, it is.” It had been a long time since John had felt this relaxed. Maybe he never had. Until he was eighteen, he’d lived in fear of his father and of hell, until he finally left that environment and began to consider that hell might not be waiting for him after all. Then he’d spent the next few years proving to everyone that he really was gay and perfectly happy about it. That led him into his long term relationship with Frankie Kinloch, and … well, that hadn’t ended well.

Now, though … now he had nothing to prove to anybody. Sure he was gay, or as Alex suggested, mostly gay, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t love Eliza. No labels, Alex had said, no categories, just be who you are. It was going to take some getting used to, this being himself and being loved for who he was, but Alex’s words had stirred something in him, something that he knew was the truth. He didn’t have to fit anybody’s definition. He could just be John Laurens, and that would be enough.

He smiled up at Alex. “I think I’m in love with you.”

Alex didn’t even look surprised. “Yeah? Good, because I love you.”

John snuggled closer, loving Alex’s warmth. “And Eliza. I’m in love with her too.”

“Yeah, so am I.”

“Works out well.”
Alex bent to kiss his cheek. “We need to take care of Eliza.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you noticed that she’s the one who takes care of everybody else?”

“Oh.” It should have been obvious. “I never thought about it, but you’re right.”

“Nobody thinks about it,” Alex said, “so we have to. Just ordinary things, you know, make her tea, clean up after ourselves, maybe get her gift cards for stuff like pedicures…”

John thought for a minute. “You know, we could give her a pedicure.”

Alex considered the idea. “Do you know how?”

“Well, I’m an art major, so I can do the nail polish really well.”

“What about the rest of it?”

John grinned and sat up. “YouTube.”

“Oh,” Alex said, thinking about it. “Oh, this will be fun.”

* * * * *

Eliza had promised to come back for dinner. John was making a shrimp risotto with asparagus, and Alex was hanging over his shoulder.

“It smells really good.”

“I know. Could you move? You’re in my way.”

“I’m just watching.”

John prodded him with his elbow. “There are some chocolate chip cookies in the freezer, the container with the blue lid. Can you get them out?”

“Shrimp risotto and cookies? This is the best meal ever.”

“Great – and close that container. The cookies are for dessert.”

Alex was distracted from the cookies, at least temporarily, by Eliza’s arrival. “John’s making us a fabulous gourmet dinner,” he told her.

“Really?” She looked at the risotto that John was dishing up. “Oh, I love shrimp.”

“It’s not that fancy,” John said.

“It’s way better than frozen pizza,” Alex responded, “and besides, we’re having our first dinner together, so that makes it better than most meals.”

It was true. Dinner was good – John was an excellent cook – but even better was the feeling of being together.

“How did it go with your sisters?” John asked Eliza about halfway through the meal.

“Well, they didn’t exactly jump for joy,” she said, “but they’ll support us. I think they need to get
used to the idea.”

John smiled at her. “So do I.”

She smiled back. “We’ll find our way.”

Alex managed to contain himself until they were clearing the table, and then he told Eliza, “John and I have a surprise for you?”

“Really?” She looked from him to John. “What?”

“It’s a surprise,” Alex repeated. “We’re not going to tell you, we’re going to show you.”

“Oh.” Eliza didn’t know what the surprise might be, but the combination of Alex’s tone and the idea of the two of them showing her something took her thoughts in only one direction. Her heart started beating faster.

John turned the dishwasher on and held out his hand. “Come on,” he said.

She was surprised that he led her to the bathroom, not the bedroom. “What are we doing?” she asked.

“Alex and I were talking this afternoon about how you take care of everybody.” She started to protest, and he held up his hand. “No, don’t argue. You do, and maybe you don’t mind, but we want to take care of you tonight.”

She felt the warmth sweeping through her. “What do you mean?”

It was Alex who spoke. “We hope you’ll enjoy a spa evening that we planned.”

It was the last thing she would have guessed, but she loved the idea and loved that they had come up with it. “Oh, that’s so sweet. What are we going to do?”

“You’ll see. I hope you like lavender, by the way.”

“I love lavender.”

John gestured to an array of products arranged on the counter top. “The lady at the salon recommended these.”

“So you bought the whole line?”

John shrugged. “Maybe. But if we have the whole line, you can have all the treatments.”

“Treatments?”

“Mm-hm.” He kissed her lightly. “We’re going to start with a pedicure.”

“A pedicure? Really?” She looked a little wary. “You know how to do that?”

“Of course,” Alex assured her.

*If I go home with bloody bandages on my feet, Angelica will never get over it,* she thought, but, “Okay,” she said.

“You should choose your polish color first,” Alex told her.
She looked at the counter. They had actually bought five different colors of nail polish, which was so adorable that she felt her throat tighten, and she made a point of considering them carefully. “I like this one.”

It was a deep rose pink. John smiled. “Told you,” he said to Alex.

“They’re all pretty, really,” Eliza assured them.

“Alex liked the purple better.”

Eliza gave Alex a sideways glance. “That’s because Alex is more dramatic.”

Alex leaned in for a kiss. “So you’ll wear that one when you’re in a more dramatic mood.”

“Mm-hm.”

“I knew this was going to be fun.”

“Unfortunately,” John said, “we don’t have room in here for a real salon chair, so if you don’t mind, you’ll have to sit on the side of the bathtub.”

“That will be fine – and, honestly, it would be pretty weird if you had salon equipment in your apartment.”

Alex ran warm water into the tub and threw in some lavender-scented bath salts. He held out his hand formally. “Let me help you – oh, and I’m afraid you’ll have to take your jeans off so they don’t get wet.”

“Right, of course.” She unzipped her jeans and stepped out of them. She was wearing pale blue bikini panties trimmed with a wide band of white lace.

“Oh, those are very nice,” Alex said, his eyes lighting up.

“Thank you.” She was glad he’d noticed. After all, that was the whole point of pretty underwear, wasn’t it? She took his hand and sat down on the side of the tub, letting the warm, fragrant water flow over her feet.

John stood behind her. “While your feet are soaking, I’m going to massage your neck and shoulders to help you relax,” he told her. “I think we’ll need to remove your shirt.”

“I understand.” She pulled her shirt up and John helped to take it off. Her bra matched her panties.

John caught his breath and bent down to kiss her neck. “Did you dress up for us, sweetheart?”

“Mm-hm.”

“So pretty.” He poured some lotion into his hand and began applying it to her shoulders, working his thumbs into the muscles. He frowned. “Do you want to tell us about your conversation with Angelica and Peggy?”

“No, it’s okay. It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah? You know your shoulder muscles are all in knots, darlin’?”

“Really?”
Alex sat down next to her on the edge of the tub, facing the other way, and took her hand. “You can tell us anything.”

“I know.”

He made little circles on her hand with his fingertip. “Do you worry that if you talk about things that are stressing you, it will cause us stress too?”

She tried to shrug, but John was holding her shoulders in place. “Maybe. But really, everything’s all right. Angelica and Peggy just need a little time.”

Alex lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Okay. You can talk to us about anything, though. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I do.” Then, as John’s fingers worked their way along her trapezius, she winced.

“Does that hurt?” John asked.

“A little, but don’t stop. It feels good.”

“Can you lean forward a little?”

“I’ll help,” Alex volunteered. He pulled her in for a kiss, then kept going as she put her arms around his neck. Alex’s hands were on the small of her back, and John’s movements were pressing her tighter against Alex. John found the pressure points just under her shoulder blades and he brought his mouth to the back of her neck. She whimpered into Alex’s mouth.

“Yeah, like that,” John said, his teeth on her ear.

Alex finally pulled back. “I think it’s time to move into the bedroom.”

“I’m going to do your nail polish now,” John told her once she was lying down comfortably on the bed. He had dried her feet with a fluffy towel, and he gave the bottle of polish a shake. “You’re going to have to lie still.”

“I know.”

“You know it takes half an hour for nail polish to dry, right?”

“I think it’s a little less than that.”

“No, Alex and I researched this very carefully. It’s half an hour.”

“Okay.”

“Do you think you can lie still for half an hour?”

“I’m sure I can.”

John’s eyes met Alex’s, and they both smiled.

“Are you comfortable?” John asked.

“Mm-hm.”

John began to apply the polish to her toenails in meticulous strokes, and Alex stretched out beside
her, lying on his side, his head propped up on his hand. “You are so beautiful,” he said softly. He brushed a strand of hair off her face and kissed her, then ran his fingers lightly over the lacy top edge of her bra. She shivered.

“Hold still,” John reminded her.

*Oh, is this what they’re doing? All right, I can play the game too.* “I don’t think I can if Alex keeps touching me.”

“Do you want me to stop?” Alex asked.

“No.”

“I’d hate to ruin your pedicure,” Alex murmured and sucked on her earlobe. His hand went back to the edge of her bra, and he slid one finger under the lace. “Your skin is so soft here.”

She pulled in a breath, willing herself not to move, because she wasn’t going to let them win, at least not easily.

“I just want a taste,” Alex said, and licked along the line his finger had just traced.

Eliza felt a warm wave building inside her, but she didn’t move.

“I finished the first coat,” John told them.

“We don’t have to wait half an hour for the first coat to dry, do we?” Eliza asked.

“No, only about ten minutes.” John lay down on her other side, and now she was between them, both of them warm and tight against her. “Alex, show me what you were doing.”

Alex demonstrated, and Eliza tried not to react. Then John did the same thing, his tongue flicking along the tops of her breasts, and she arched up involuntarily.

“She can’t do it,” Alex announced with a degree of satisfaction.

“You’re not playing fair,” Eliza told them. “We should all have to follow the same rules.”

John laughed. “Were we that obvious?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want your nail polish to smear, though.”

“I’m not moving my feet.”

“Point taken. You win.”

“Actually …” Alex began, but John interrupted him.

“Don’t argue, Alex.”

Alex stopped talking and slid his hand under Eliza to unfasten her bra. “This is so pretty, I almost hate to take it off,” he murmured as he removed it.

“This is prettier,” John said, and put his mouth on Eliza’s breast. She drew in a breath with a sharp hiss, and then Alex took the other side, both of them sucking and tonguing her nipples.
“Oh, God,” she moaned. It felt so impossibly good. Hardly aware of what she was doing, she put her hand between her legs.

“I can help with that,” Alex told her, and her cheeks turned red.

“Are you two going to be okay while I finish the pedicure?” John asked.

“I’m sure we can manage,” Alex responded, sliding his fingers in the front of Eliza’s panties.

“Don’t get ahead of me,” John told him as he went back to painting Eliza’s nails.

“Don’t worry.”

Alex kept his mouth on her breast and his hand in her panties, palming her, but not giving her as much pressure as she wanted. John put the polish bottle on the dresser when he finished and then stood looking down at them, watching Alex’s hand move inside Eliza’s panties as she squirmed against it, wanting more than he was giving her. “What do you want, babygirl?” he was asking. “Do you want my fingers inside you?”

“Yes,” she gasped.

“Not yet,” he said. “We’re going to wait for John. Then you’ll feel his fingers and mine inside you at the same time. I can’t wait to feel you, babygirl, feel how warm and wet you are …”

Eliza was making a sort of humming noise, breaking it occasionally with, “Please,” but Alex just kept going.

“I want to get my tongue inside you too, taste you, lick you. Do you like that?”

“I think we should take her panties off,” John said, and did it without further discussion, so that Eliza lay naked in front of him. He took his own clothes off without self-consciousness and got back up on the bed and knelt between Eliza’s legs. Alex grinned at him and got out of the way.

“Nah, don’t go. I like what you said. You should get rid of your clothes first, though.”

Alex complied, and then John grabbed his hand and brought it with his own back to where it had been. He folded back three of Alex’s fingers, and then they each pushed one finger inside her, each one pulling a little so that she could feel the stretch.

“Oh, God,” she wailed.

“She likes that, I think,” John said to Alex.

“Yeah, she does. Do you think she’d like more?”

“Yes,” Eliza gasped, “yes, yes, yes.”

Two fingers each, then, and her hips were bucking up, chasing more. John slid his thumb lightly across her clit, and she moaned, “Oh, please.”

Then Alex withdrew his hand with a knowing look at John and began to stroke her from hip to breast. “Isn’t she beautiful, John?”

“She’s gorgeous.” John’s fingers were still inside her, circling and scissoring.

Alex bent down, his mouth close to her ear. “Do you want John to fuck you now?”
“Yes,” she whimpered. “Yes, please.”

“You want him inside you, don’t you? It feels good, doesn’t it, babygirl, when he pushes into you, fills you up? Do you want him to do that?”

“Yes.” It was almost a sob.

“Do it, John,” Alex said. “I can’t wait to see it.” He pulled himself up so he could watch, his eyes glittering as John pushed into her, and she let out a long, keening moan. “Oh, God, yes, that’s beautiful. You’re both so beautiful. Yes, John, just like that, all the way in. You’re amazing. Jesus. Please babygirl, can I touch you while John fucks you?”

Eliza didn’t even try to answer him with words, but as John moved faster, Alex put his hand on one breast and his mouth on the other, and within only a few minutes, she came apart under them, wailing and shaking while they kept going and worked her through it, and then the three of them lay tangled together on the bed.

Much later, when they thought to check, they were pleased to see that Eliza’s nail polish remained perfect.

Chapter End Notes

Is the rest of the Schuyler family going to be okay with Eliza’s new relationship? How will their friends react? And where do they go from here?

What about Peggy and Tench? Will she get him to read all the Harry Potter books?

Thanks to everyone who’s reading this, and especially to everyone who’s left kudos and comments. Love you guys!
Lead You Astray

Chapter Summary

John has to go somewhere, but nobody knows where, and he doesn't get there anyway. He thinks it's about money, but he may be wrong. Alex and Eliza worry, but John said he'd be back by Wednesday ...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eliza spent the night again, but John’s apartment really wasn’t big enough for three people, and even Alex had to go back to his dorm for clean clothes. They both had classes on Monday mornings, so John was alone when his phone rang. He didn’t recognize the number, so he ignored it, but the caller left a voice mail. He was about to delete it, but then thought he’d better not. Scammers don’t usually leave voice mails.

He clicked on play and listened. It wasn’t a scammer. He sat staring at the phone, wondering whether to call back. He got up, made himself a cup of tea and drank it, thinking. He knew what it was like to feel abandoned and isolated, to be shut out. How much responsibility did he have in that situation? After a while, he threw a change of clothes and a few other things in a backpack, and sent Alex and Eliza a text: Something has come up. Don’t think it’s a big deal, but need to take care of it. Can’t tell you any more rn, but will as soon as I can. Prob be back tomorrow, Wed at latest. I’ll text or call tonight. I love you.

On the way out of town, he stopped at an ATM and took out a lot of cash.

Alex was at Home Depot when he got John’s text. Home Depot was not a place he was even slightly familiar with, but John had given him the spare key to the apartment – the one Frankie had so politely left in the nightstand drawer next to the condoms – and asked him to make another copy for Eliza. Alex had stopped at Home Depot before class and was delighted to find a machine that would copy keys. He was now standing transfixed in front of the machine surveying the variety of designs and colors available. Blue was Eliza’s favorite color, so that was an option, but so was the one with roses on it, and the panda was really cute. They weren’t even expensive, so he decided to get a new one for himself too, because, really, anything that had been Frankie Kinloch’s probably had negative energy attached to it. He finally decided on a rainbow design for himself and the bouquet of roses for Eliza. It only took a few minutes to insert his debit card, have the keys cut, and get them out of the slot, like getting a soda out of a vending machine. He had just put them in his pocket when his phone chimed, signaling a text.

What the hell?

Why was John going away without telling them where? He texted back immediately: What’s up? Where you going?

When there was no response after a few minutes, he texted Eliza: Do you know what’s going on w John?

Eliza responded: No, am in class now, meet me food court 10:30
Alex dragged himself to class, but kept checking his phone every few minutes to see if John had answered him. There was nothing. When he got to the food court, he grabbed two cups of coffee and sat down with Eliza.

“You’ve known him way longer than I have, babygirl,” he said. “What do you think is going on?”

She stirred cream and sugar into her coffee thoughtfully. “I don’t know, but I think I’ve narrowed it down to a couple of things. I think it’s obvious that somebody got in touch with him after we left this morning.”

Alex nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense, but who could get him to drop everything and take off like this?”

Eliza bit her lip. “Maybe his mom? She got in touch with him last year, and he went to see her.”

“Yeah, he told me about that. It didn’t sound like it went well, though.”

“I know, that’s why I don’t really think it would be her.”

“Who else, though?”

She looked up at him, and her eyes were filled with tears. “I hope I’m wrong, but the only other person I could think of was …” She sniffed and grabbed a napkin to wipe her eyes.

“Well, who, dammit?”

“Frankie Kinloch.”

*          *          *          *          *

Well, Dad was right about one thing, John though grimly. I do make one bad decision after another.

The motel room was as nondescript as it could be. Someone had removed all of the items that had the hotel chain logo on them – the information booklet, the notepad and pen, the TV schedule – so that he had no idea if he was in a Holiday Inn or a Best Western. The room phone was also missing. The curtains were closed. He could have opened them to see what was outside if it hadn’t been for the armed man standing in front of the window, looking exactly like his counterpart who was standing in front of the door.

That and the fact that he was lying on the bed handcuffed.

There was no clock in the room, but he thought it was still daytime since he was hungry, but not starving, and he didn’t feel at all sleepy. Of course, that could be the adrenaline.

Meet me in the parking lot of the Camellia Café on West DeKalb Street in Camden. I’ll be in a blue Camry parked behind the building.

It had seemed simple enough, and well, he couldn’t in good conscience say no. He never got to see if anybody was really in the Camry, though, because as soon as he stepped out of his car, somebody grabbed him from behind, cuffed him, threw a bag over his head and tossed him in the back of a van. There were other people in the van, but he didn’t know how many. They’d barely pulled out of the parking lot when at least two of them held him down while somebody stuck a needle in his arm. He’d screamed, but that had been laughably useless.
He hadn’t been fully unconscious, more like extremely groggy or extremely drunk. He heard people talking but he couldn’t seem to grasp any of the words. He thought somebody was crying, but maybe he dreamed it. He didn’t know how long the ride had lasted, but later, the van had come to a stop, and the two guys with guns hustled him into this place through a back door, into an elevator, and up to this room. He had tried to ask them questions, but neither of them had spoken a word. In his mind, he was referring to the tall one with the big nose as Bert and the shorter one as Ernie. Right now, Bert was at the door, and Ernie was by the window. Their guns were in shoulder holsters and easily accessible. They were dressed identically in gray sweats and black watch caps pulled low over their foreheads. Despite the fact that they were indoors, both of them wore mirror sunglasses, and they had evidently not shaved for a couple of weeks because they had thick stubble on their faces; in both cases, it was a nondescript brown. Dressed differently and clean-shaven, they would look nothing like they did now, and he would never be able to identify them.

John had come to the conclusion that someone who knew about his father’s money had arranged to have him kidnapped for ransom. The joke was going to be on them, though, because he was pretty sure Henry Laurens wouldn’t pay a nickel to get his son back. He just hoped that when Henry refused to pay, they’d let him go. He’d seen enough *Law and Order* episodes to know that kidnappings didn’t usually end well for the victim.

Why the hell hadn’t he told Alex and Eliza what he was doing? Sure, he’d been told not to, but he shouldn’t have let that stop him. Like his father would have said, another bad decision. He looked from Bert to Ernie and decided that Ernie looked slightly less menacing.

“Can I have a drink of water?” he asked.

Ernie and Bert exchanged glances, then Ernie got one of the paper cups that was on the dresser and filled it with water from the bathroom faucet, while Bert stood close to the bed, his hand on his gun. Ernie brought back the water and tried to hold the paper cup so that John could drink, but he couldn’t seem to get it right, and the water spilled down the front of John’s shirt.

“Look,” John said, trying to keep his voice patient, “I need to use the bathroom anyway, so could you uncuff me? Maybe I could get a dry shirt out of my bag?”

Ernie and Bert exchanged glances again, and then Bert jerked his head toward the corner of the room farthest from John. The two of them went there and had a whispered conversation, still keeping their eyes on John.

Jesus, did they think he was going to try to jump them or something, like in a James Bond movie? They both looked like they could play for the NFL, and they were armed. He didn’t have any delusions about his own abilities, and he wasn’t suicidal. Unless things changed, he was prepared to wait until they got word from Henry Laurens that he didn’t want his son back at any price, and maybe then they could all go home.

After a few minutes of conversation, Bert pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked the handcuffs. John brought his arms forward, pain shooting through his shoulders, opened and closed his hands to get the circulation going. *God, that hurt like a mother fucker.* He tried not to let it show. No point in looking any weaker than he had to.

“I’ll take you to the bathroom,” Bert said in a sort of hoarse whisper, as if somebody had told him to disguise his voice.

“Fuck,” John muttered. This guy was really going to watch him take a piss? There wasn’t much he could do about it, though, so he walked across the room to the bathroom, Bert following a few feet behind him, and kept his eyes straight ahead. He used the toilet and turned to the sink to wash his
hands. The tiny bar of soap hadn’t been opened, and apparently no one had noticed the decorative capital R on the paper wrapper.

**Well, well, well. He was at a Ramada Inn.**

He returned to the other room feeling unreasonably triumphant that he now had that small bit of information. “Can I sit in the chair instead of on the bed?” he asked, gesturing to the upholstered armchair near the desk.

Bert looked at Ernie, who shrugged. “Go ahead,” Bert said.

John decided to push his luck a little. “Do you guys have my phone?”

Bert shook his head.

“Can we have the TV on? I mean, it’s kind of boring in here.”

Bert and Ernie stared at him for a full minute. Then Bert said, “No.” He opened a drawer in the nightstand and pulled out the Gideon Bible. “Here, you can read this.”

John took it with a twisted smile. “I’ve read it.”

“The whole thing?” Ernie asked skeptically.

“Oh, yeah. With special attention to the book of Leviticus.” He flipped through the pages. “My father was especially fond of the verses in Leviticus that say I should be put to death.” He looked up and shrugged. “There’s some good stuff in here, too, though. I always liked the story of David and Jonathan.”

Bert and Ernie remained silent, and John put the Bible aside. “Is there anything to eat?”

Ernie nodded. He opened the small in-room refrigerator and took out a wrapped sandwich, a pack of cookies, and a can of generic cola, and handed them to John.

He was hungry, but even so, the meal looked unappetizing. The sandwich was bland white bread with a couple of slices of baloney and cheese. The cookies were the cheap tasteless kind, and the generic soda was – well, generic. Apparently the food budget was limited. “I don’t suppose I could get a glass of milk, could I?” John asked, quite sure what the answer would be.

“Be grateful for what you’ve got,” Ernie snapped.

Oh. That was interesting. Maybe he needed to reconsider his theory about what was going on.

* * * * *

Angelica, Herc, Gil and Adrienne were there at lunch time, as usual, and Angelica was trying to talk Alex and Eliza down. “It’s noon on Monday,” she said patiently. “He said he might be gone until Wednesday. Can we wait until then before we go into total panic mode?”

“It’s not panic,” Eliza told her. “It’s just not like him to go off like this without saying where. What kind of out-of-town emergency could John have? He’s not in contact with his family, and all his friends are right here.”

“He saw his mom last year, thought,” Herc reminded them.

Eliza nodded. “Yeah, but it didn’t go well. I don’t think he’d do it again.”
“What about more distant family?” Gil asked. “Doesn’t everybody have a favorite cousin or uncle?”

“If he does, he’s never mentioned them,” Eliza responded, “and I’ve seen John almost every day for nearly three years. I probably know him better than anybody else.” She glanced at Alex, who was staring at his phone. “What?”

“John took a thousand dollars out of the ATM this morning,” Alex said.

“What? How do you know?”

“I have his password.” Alex looked up to see that they were all staring at him suspiciously. He waved his hands. “No, no, it’s not like that. We were talking about cyber security one day, and I told him I could guess his bank password in three tries, just, you know, to point out how easy it is to hack into things.”

“And you guessed it?” Gil asked.

“Yeah. I told him it was too easy to figure out, and he agreed and said I should make up a new one for him, one that would be harder to hack. I mean, you guys know that John has some serious money, right?”

Angelica nodded. “The trust fund from his grandfather.”

“So he needs to be super careful about his online security,” Alex continued. “I made up a new, practically unhackable password for him, so that’s how I know it.”

“And now you see that he withdrew a thousand dollars today?” Gil asked, getting back to the point.

“Yeah, at around ten o’clock.”

“John always carries a lot of cash,” Eliza said. “I’ve never known him to have less than five hundred dollars in his wallet.”

“So we can assume he now has at least fifteen hundred dollars on him,” Gil concluded.

“Yeah.” Alex shoved his hair off his face impatiently. “But for what?”

“Is there anybody who would call John and ask to borrow money?” Angelica asked.

“Probably,” Eliza responded. “You all know that any time a friend needs anything, John will step in and take care of it. Still, though, a thousand dollars is a lot, and, look, John is generous, but he’s not stupid. If someone he didn’t know well asked for that much, he wouldn’t just hand it over. He’d check it out.”

“Maybe that’s what he’s doing,” Adrienne suggested. “Maybe somebody called and said they need the money to buy medicine for their mom or something. Would John go somewhere to verify if the mom is really in the hospital or whatever? Is that too crazy?”

Alex nodded thoughtfully. “No, it’s not. If he had to drive to, say, Atlanta, to check it out, that wouldn’t be unreasonable.”

“Who, though?” Eliza asked fretfully.

Alex shrugged. “No idea. Maybe one of those cousins nobody’s ever heard of. It makes more sense than anything else, at least for now. He did say he’d call or text tonight.”
Angelica drank the last of her coffee. “All right, then, the panic is called off for now. When he gets in touch, can you just pass it on, so we know everything’s all right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Alex agreed a little absently.

As they left the food court, Eliza took Alex’s hand. “You should come over tonight,” she said. “We’ll both worry less if we’re together.”

He turned to smile at her and kissed her lightly. “You’re right.”

“Come for dinner.”

“I will.”

“You should probably bring a toothbrush.”

* * * * * *

As far as he could judge – and that wasn’t very far, because time always passed slowly when he was bored – John had been in the room for about four hours when there was a knock at the door. He sat up straight, hoping that Bert and Ernie were going to be told to let him go. No such luck. It was just a shift change, with two other guys in gray sweats relieving Bert and Ernie. John looked them over and dubbed the one with the beaky nose Phineas and the other Ferb. He slumped back down in the chair, his fingers itching for a pencil.

He gave them about half an hour before he asked, “Do you know where my bag is? It’s a navy blue backpack. It was on the seat next to me when I was … uh … picked up. It’s got my clean clothes in it, and my sketchbook.”

“What’s that?” Ferb asked suspiciously.

“It’s just a notebook for drawing in. I’m an art major, and I like to draw. It would give me something to do.”

Ferb turned to Phineas. “You know anything about it?”

Phineas shook his head. “Nope.”

Ferb pointed to a closed door next to the bathroom and asked John, “Did you look in the closet?”

“No. I didn’t look anywhere because the other guys told me if I got out of this chair, they’d handcuff me again.”

“Okay, you stay there. I’ll check.”

John kept his face as expressionless as possible. “Thanks.”

Ferb opened the closet door and held up the dark blue backpack. “This it?”

“Yeah.”

Ferb tossed it on the bed and began going through it efficiently. It took him about twenty seconds to find John’s phone. Shit.

“We’re not going to give you this right now, but we’re not stealing it,” he said defensively, shoving the phone into his pocket.
“Whatever you say,” John responded sarcastically.

“We’re not thieves,” Ferb declared. “We’re …”

“Shut up,” Phineas broke in.

What John could see of Ferb’s face was looking flushed. “I don’t want him to think we’d take his stuff …” he protested.

“Not our job. Just shut up.”

“Fine,” Ferb snapped. John was encouraged. Maybe he could start a fight between them. He wasn’t exactly frightened, at least not much. Nobody had shown any desire to hurt him. He was just frustrated and baffled and bored out of his mind. Having something to do would help. Ferb pulled the sketchbook and pencil box out of the backpack, and closed it back up. He’d apparently been so distracted by the conversation that he had completely missed the concealed Velcro-closed pocket with a thousand dollars in it. He opened the pencil box and ascertained that it did, in fact, contain pencils before handing it and the sketchbook to John.

John took out a couple of pencils, flipped the sketchbook open, and propped it up on his knees. He could make the lines and angles of the room into a cubist study, but the room wasn’t interesting enough, and he really preferred to draw faces. He closed his eyes, focusing on an image of Eliza curled up against Alex in bed, both of them facing him, Alex’s arm resting on her shoulder, his hand in her hair. He blocked out the figures on the paper in a few lines and curves, working to get the position of Alex’s hand right. It was good to have something to do, something to distract him from waiting for whatever they were waiting for. He’d been working for about an hour when there was a knock at the door again.

“Is that dinner?” he asked hopefully. It had been a while since his meager lunch.

Phineas shook his head, checked through the peephole and opened the door.

*Well, fuck, John thought, this just got a lot worse.*

Henry Laurens had just walked into the room. Tom Jefferson and Frankie Kinloch were with him.

Chapter End Notes

What is John going to have to go through now?

Thanks for reading, and thanks always for kudos and comments.
Don’t Call Me Son

Chapter Summary

This chapter may not be to everyone's liking because we get into the American Evangelical position on homosexuality, and it will be clear that I am 100% opposed to their position. You probably already know that if you've read any of my stuff, but fair warning if you are a conservative Christian. There's also some very frank language about sex in various contexts. Finally, there is a LOT of swearing because John is very angry through much of this chapter. My regular readers are probably shrugging, "Yeah, that sounds like Daisy," but this information is mainly for new people. All of that being said, things are kind of a mess for everybody right now, although Alex and Eliza do get some private time in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John hadn’t texted yet, but it was still early, just after nine. Angelica and Peggy had smirked knowingly when Eliza had said she and Alex were going upstairs, but she had smirked right back at them. It wasn’t like she was trying to keep a secret from her sisters.

“You’re perfect,” Alex said now, his lips against her skin, kissing a path from her mouth to her jaw to her throat. “You’re beautiful, and you’re sweet, and you’re perfect.”

“I’m not perfect,” she told him, half laughing. Alex was so dramatic.

“Sh, you are if I say you are.” He came back to her mouth and slid his tongue between her lips, tasting her. He caught her bottom lip in his teeth, not biting, just holding. She pressed herself against him, ground her hips on his. “Jesus, babygirl.”

She loved knowing that she did that to him.

He had his hand between her legs and he was talking again. “Right there,” he said, stroking her with one finger. “I want to put my tongue right there, then here, and here …” he was moving his finger as he spoke “and then in here. I want to lick you and taste you, and I want to suck …” He moved his mouth to her breast to demonstrate.

One thing she had learned in the last couple of weeks was that Alex talked nonstop unless he had something else to do with his mouth. She didn’t mind the talking at all; it was exciting, but sometimes when Alex went silent, things got even better. He seemed to know exactly where and how to touch her to get the most intense response possible. She hadn’t yet had to say, “No, not there, there,” or, worse yet, “Stop, that hurts.” Right now, he had two fingers inside her, thumb on her clit, mouth on her breast, his tongue flicking her nipple, and there was nothing for her to do but feel and respond to him. She ran her nails down his back, and he gasped, then pressed his fingers into a spot that made her hips jerk up involuntarily. God, that was good.

“You like that?” he asked and licked her nipple once more. He kissed his way down, taking a minute or two to play with her navel, and then his tongue replaced his thumb on her clit until she
was right on the edge. Then he stopped, and she gave a frustrated little whimper. “Please …”

He pulled himself back up to kiss her and whisper, “Tell me what you want. Do you want to come on my tongue or on my cock?” His words alone were almost enough; no guy had ever offered her the choice before.

“I want you inside me,” she managed to say, and he kissed her again. She was so close that she almost came as he entered her, but he went slowly, giving her time, and talking her through it.

“God, you’re so perfect, babygirl. You feel so good, so warm inside. I love how soft you are …”

*          *          *          *          *

John made eye contact with his father for about five seconds, then flipped over a new page in his sketchbook and went back to drawing. Henry Laurens motioned Tom Jefferson and Frankie Kinloch into the room, and then he said, “Hello, Jacky.”

John didn’t respond, just glanced briefly at his father’s face and continued with his sketch. Henry Laurens might be the world’s worst father, but he had an interesting angular face, and John was availing himself of the opportunity to draw it from life.

“All right, then, John,” Henry snapped in exasperation.

“Hi, Dad,” John said without looking up. “You know I haven’t answered to Jacky since I was sixteen.”

“That was what I always called you.”

“Yeah.” John sighed and took another look at Henry’s face, then continued with his sketch. “You know, if you didn’t want me to be gay, you shouldn’t have given me such a girly nickname.”

Tom Jefferson pulled up the desk chair and sat down a few feet away from John. “Your dad wants to talk to you, John,” he said softly. “You should give him a chance.”

“No, I really shouldn’t. I already gave him about a thousand chances. He thinks being gay is a personal defect, but that I could fix it if I really wanted to.”

Frankie decided to enter the conversation. “You could change if you tried, John. If you pray about it, God will help you. I did, and I feel so much better about myself now that I know I’m following God’s plan for my life.”

“Fuck off, Frankie,” John said, his eyes on his drawing. Frankie had no idea how many hours twelve-year-old John had spent on his knees, begging God to change him. Those prayers had been met with divine indifference, and John never talked about that time now.

“Come on, John, don’t be like that. What we did was wrong, but you still mean a lot to me. I still care about you.”

John finally looked up and smiled sweetly at Frankie. “You mean you miss me?”

Frankie turned bright red. “Not … I mean … I may miss you as a friend, but not … not in any other way.”

John gave an understanding nod. “Patsy got herself a strap-on, then? Good for her.”

Henry Laurens crossed the room in fury and backhanded John across the face as hard as he could.
It knocked him off the chair, and when he stood up, there was a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. John swiped at it with his fingers and wiped them on his jeans. He turned to the two guards who were standing stock still by the window, looking from him to his father as if wondering what they should do. “Don’t worry,” John told them. “This is normal Laurens family interaction.” He picked up his sketchbook and pencil and sat back down in the chair.

Henry lunged for him again, but Jefferson caught his arm. “Pastor,” he said, “you know he’s trying to get a reaction from you.”

Henry swallowed hard, shrugged, and stepped back. He remembered that he wasn’t alone with John. People were watching and listening. “I want to help you, son.”

“No, thanks,” John responded politely. “I have no idea why we’re going through this big dramatic production, but I don’t need whatever you might call help.”

“There’s medical care available, son,” Henry continued.

“Two things, Dad: first, stop calling me son, and second, I don’t have any medical problems. I’m perfectly healthy, really.”

Henry took a breath and spoke calmly. “I have every right to call you son, and I also have every right to be concerned that you’re in denial about your own mental illness. That’s not unusual, from what I understand, and it doesn’t mean you don’t need help.”

“My mental illness? Really? I’m in my third year of college, carrying a full course load, and I have a 3.7 average. I have lots of friends. I don’t do drugs, and I’ve never been arrested. I think that shows that I’m pretty stable. But that’s not what you mean, is it?”

“Not all mental illness manifests itself in hearing voices. If you don’t get help soon, you will suffer.”

“And by get help, you mean do what Frankie did? Find some girl who won’t ask too many questions, marry her, and produce the requisite nuclear family for the picture in the church directory? Do you recommend that I lie to her outright, or should I look for a girl who will do it for a nice share of the Laurens money? Isn’t that what you suggested last time this came up?” John looked from his father to Jefferson and then to Frankie. “Do you guys really think this is about what’s in the Bible? If Henry Laurens was a Christian, he’d be hammering nails for Habitat or serving meals at the homeless shelter instead of living in his gated mansion and accumulating more money. No, this is about his public image. I was always an embarrassment to him. I have no idea why he thinks that could change now.”

There was a knock at the door, and Henry nodded to one of the guards to answer it. John took a good look at the man who entered the room. The brown of his hair wasn’t natural, he’d had some work done on his face, and his teeth had been bleached to a frighteningly bright white. Henry introduced him. “This is Dr. Thomson. He’s going to help you.”

* * * * *

By Tuesday night, Alex was convinced they should call the police. Even Angelica was beginning to feel some real concern. Eliza was right: this was totally unlike John. He might conceivably leave town for some reason, but if he said he was going to text, he’d text. He’d know that they would be worried, and John was considerate of his friends. Furthermore, Alex had checked, and there’d been no activity on his debit or credit cards. He hadn’t charged a meal or put gas in his car.
“Could he be paying for everything with cash?” Tench asked. “You said he had a lot of cash with him.”

“Possibly,” Alex conceded, pacing back and forth in the Schuyler girls’ living room, “but he usually keeps his cash for unexpected things. I mean, I saw him leave a hundred dollar bill as a tip at a diner. He uses his debit card to pay for most things.”

Eliza corroborated what Alex said. “You know how sometimes there are people at intersections with cardboard signs about needing help? John always gives those people money, at least fifty dollars, lots of times a hundred. That’s what his cash is for. It’s not normal that he’s not using his debit or credit cards.”

“I think Alex is right,” Gil said. “I think somebody should report him missing tomorrow morning. It will have been forty-eight hours, and I think that’s how long before an adult is considered missing.”

“What if there was an accident?” Eliza asked, her voice shaky. “What if he was mugged and robbed and he’s unconscious in a hospital somewhere? If somebody stole his wallet and his phone, the hospital wouldn’t know who to contact.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Rick advised. “He’s probably fine. I mean, a lot has been going on in his life, and maybe he just needed a break.”

“What are you talking about?” Alex asked, stopping mid-pace to look at him. “You mean his break-up with Frankie and his rebound relationships, is that what you’re referring to? Because a person would have to be insane to literally flee because of being in a new relationship, which is actually, let me say …” Alex’s voice was rising, and Peggy stepped between him and Rick.

“Come on, Alex,” she said, “Rick wasn’t trying to psychoanalyze anybody, really. I’m going to make tea, come help me.”

“John’s as stable as anybody I’ve ever known,” Alex insisted, glaring at Rick, but he let Peggy lead him into the kitchen.

“I’m sorry,” Rick said to Eliza. “I didn’t mean …”

“I know. It’s just hard not to know where he is. It’s not like John, and so I can’t help but think that something awful has happened.”

She started to cry, and Angelica came and sat next to her and put her arm around her. Tench went into the kitchen to see if Peggy needed help either with the tea or with Alex, and Angelica looked across the room at Gil. “Alex and Eliza will both want to go to the police station tomorrow. I’ll drive them. Will you come with us?”

Gil nodded. “Of course.”

* * * * *

John came back to consciousness like coming to the surface from deep water. He felt as if he couldn’t breathe, and then he started coughing and blinked at the light. He was back on the bed in the hotel, and there were other people in the room. The room seemed to tilt as he struggled to sit up. Things finally came into focus and he saw his father. “What the fuck did you do to me?” he asked.

“We didn’t want you to hurt yourself,” Henry Laurens said.
John looked around. Frankie and Jefferson were still there, as was the guy who had been introduced to him as Dr. Thomson. The guards had changed again, and Bert and Ernie were back. “What time is it?” he asked.

“Why?”

John took a deep breath and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He was pretty sure he could walk. “I need to use the bathroom, and I’m hungry.” He stood up. So far, so good. He took a few steps. He wasn’t as steady on his feet as he would have liked to be, but he was okay. He tried to recall what had happened, but parts of his memory seemed to be missing. He turned to his father. “There’s no window in the bathroom for me to escape out of, so I’d appreciate not having company.”

He used the toilet and stood in front of the sink washing his hands, thinking. His father had evidently fallen for some quack doctor who claimed he could “cure” homosexuality. He’d met similar types when he’d been sent to conversion therapy, but he’d been a kid then, under his parents’ guardianship. Now he was an adult, so this had to be illegal. Illegal or not, though, it didn’t matter if they didn’t get caught. He stared at his reflection in the mirror. I look like shit. I need a shower and my mouth tastes like a sewer. He splashed some cold water on his face. I need to get out of here. Alex and Eliza must be worried sick. I need to go home.

He went back into the room and asked, “Is there anything to eat?”

Somebody had gotten bagels, and Jefferson handed him one, not quite meeting his eyes. If he could get through to any of them, it would be Tom. They’d been friends once, all through middle school into high school. Tom was an asshole most of the time, but he wasn’t stupid.

John sat down in the armchair again, and took a bite of the bagel. He chewed thoughtfully, still not sure his brain was clear. Bagels. Breakfast?

“What time is it? Fuck, what day is it?”

For a long couple of minutes nobody spoke, and then Jefferson said, “It’s about nine o’clock Wednesday morning.”

“Wednesday? What the fuck happened to Tuesday?”

“Please stop using that offensive word,” Henry Laurens told him.

“Not a fucking chance. Your pet doctor drugged me, didn’t he?” The doctor – if in fact he was a doctor – had the same smug expression he’d worn when he got there. Henry Laurens too was unchanged; there was little indication of his tightly controlled rage on his face, but John could see it. He’d always seen it. As for his “friends,” Frankie was looking a little pale. He wondered what Frankie might have had to watch, and then he wondered why Frankie was even here. Did anybody really think that Frankie could persuade him to anything? He looked at Jefferson. Tom was tired. There were shadows under his eyes, but there was something else that he hadn’t seen before. He was right about Tom not being stupid. Whatever had happened in the hours John had lost, Tom Jefferson had seen something that had sown seeds of doubt in his mind.

* * * * *

Angelica drove to the police station on Wednesday morning, Gil in the front with her, Alex and Eliza in the back, holding hands tightly. Peggy had wanted to go too, but Angelica had said that it was going to be bad enough with four of them there all trying to give information, so she had
reluctantly gone to class after Angelica promised to text her as soon as they were done. Alex had gone to John’s apartment early in the morning, just on the remote chance that John would have come home, but it was clear that nobody had been there since John left on Monday.

“Listen,” Angelica said as they pulled onto the main road, “Eliza is John’s girlfriend and Alex is his best friend for the purposes of this report.”

“But …” Alex started to protest.

“Look, I get it, Alex, there’s no reason to hide anything, I know, but we’re going to have a hard time convincing the police that John didn’t just take off on his own. Let’s not give them anything they can latch onto as a reason. You got pissed at Rick when he even suggested it, but you know that’s how some people think. You can march for acceptance of nonheteronormative relationships some other time.”

Alex had to smile at that, even as worried as he was. “Yeah, you’re right. All the attention needs to be on finding John.”

As it turned out, the police were both courteous and receptive to their concern. A young officer whose name tag read Perry wrote it all down. “Has he ever taken off like this before?” he asked.

“Never,” Eliza told him. “I’ve known John for three years, and this is completely out of character.”

“And has anything unusual happened, anything that might have been particularly upsetting or traumatic?”

That was a bit tricky. Angelica took that one. “There was a break-up a couple of months ago, but John was over it, and he and Eliza are together now.”

Officer Perry nodded, and she hoped he wouldn’t ask for more details.

“John is a very conscientious student,” Gil said before Perry could follow up on the break-up issue. “He would never miss three days of classes like this. I checked with a couple of his teachers, and they haven’t heard from him.”

Alex glanced sideways at Gil. He wondered if Gil really had spoken to John’s instructors. He should have thought of that himself.

“What about when this break-up occurred? Did he miss class then?”

“Just a day,” Eliza responded, “and he got the notes from the teachers’ websites and made up all the work. John doesn’t skip classes. He may miss one here or there if he’s sick, but really, I think most of us cut more classes than he does.”

The others voiced agreement, and Officer Perry wrote it down. “Have you contacted his parents or other family?” he asked.

“He’s estranged from his parents,” Alex responded. “He has been for a long time.” He was going to have to explain at least some of it. “You’ve probably heard of his father, the Reverend Henry Laurens?”

Officer Perry looked up alertly. “The Evangelical pastor with the TV show? That guy?”

“Yeah, they … he and John have really different views on most issues.”
Perry gave a mirthless chuckle. “Well, that’s a point in your friend’s favor, as far as I’m concerned. My Aunt Sue got hooked on his show, sent him all her money. We didn’t realize she was developing dementia until my cousin Jake found that her savings were gone. He contacted a lawyer, got all the medical verification, and tried to get at least some of the money back. Henry Laurens had way better lawyers, and Jake had to give up, sell his mom’s house and everything in it to pay bills that had piled up. Aunt Sue needed to go into a nursing home, but she had to go on Medicaid, and, well, maybe it wasn’t the best nursing home around. They did what they could, but if she’d had the money she and Uncle Joe had saved, she could have had a much more comfortable life for her last few years. Jake is still bitter about it.”

“I don’t blame him,” Eliza said. “That’s terrible.”

Officer Perry shrugged. “I probably shouldn’t talk about it, but it’s a sad story, and I’m sure Aunt Sue isn’t the only old lady who’s been convinced to donate everything to Henry Laurens. My family’s always been Quaker, so when I see pictures of Henry Laurens’s mansion and the gigantic church that looks more like a stadium, yeah, it upsets me.”

“So you understand why John isn’t in contact with his father,” Alex said.

“Yeah, I do. Listen, though, I have to tell you, when this report goes out, some reporter is going to see it and put two and two together.”

“Oh, shit,” Alex muttered, “I never thought of that. Reporters? Really?”

“Yeah, they get copies of all the routine police reports – freedom of the press, right? Somebody’s going to be running a headline tomorrow that says, ‘Son of Evangelist Henry Laurens reported missing.’ I can’t hold the report. The first thing I’ll do is put out a BOLO on his license plate, and it will take five minutes for a journalist to make the connection.”

“Sorry,” Gil interrupted, “what’s a BOLO?”

“It means Be on the lookout for John’s vehicle. Very often finding the vehicle will lead us to a missing person. It will at least let us know where he’s been.”

Alex looked at Eliza. He was well aware of what information was accessible on the internet, and he knew Officer Perry was right. “John will hate it, but we still have to do it,” he said decidedly. “If John could contact us, he would have by now, and we can’t just sit on our hands.”

“Maybe the publicity won’t be a bad thing,” Gil added thoughtfully. “The more people who are looking, the more likely that John will be found.”

Angelica nodded. “Gil’s right. It might help, and embarrassment will be a small price to pay.”

* * * * * * *

John was back to sketching silently, this time working on Tom Jefferson’s face in profile. He had considered doing another portrait of Frankie Kinloch, but he’d done dozens of him, and now, his vision unclouded by emotion, he viewed Frankie’s face with detachment and concluded it wasn’t so interesting after all. Oh, it was pretty, no doubt about that, but that was all. Frankie would be a great model for one of those romance novel covers, breathtakingly handsome, but with nothing to distinguish him from all the other cover models. Frankie was probably better-looking than Alex from a cover model perspective, but Alex’s face had character and real intelligence. I hope he’s using some of that intelligence to figure out where I am, John thought now. I wish I knew myself. He tried to think of all the Ramada Inns located in the area, but honestly, he had no idea how long
he’d been sedated after they grabbed him in the parking lot. They could have driven for hours. He could easily be as far as Raleigh or Savannah, or maybe in some small town along the Blue Ridge. Anger and frustration welled up in him, and now for the first time, there was real fear as well. He didn’t think he’d suffered any damage from whatever drugs Dr. Thomson had administered, but if Henry Laurens wasn’t satisfied with the results of his treatment, something stronger would be prescribed.

He remembered some of the “therapy” he’d been given in the conversion camp, the hours of intensive group prayer where he was supposed to confess his “sin” and express a desire to repent, the nausea-inducing drugs that made him vomit while he was shown pictures of naked men. He had escaped after only a few days, and he’d often wondered about those who had had to stay.

His father was on the far side of the room now, talking to someone on his phone. He couldn’t hear the conversation, but he sounded angry. Of course, Henry Laurens often sounded angry if he wasn’t in the pulpit or in front of the TV cameras. Why now? John wondered. It had been three years since he’d seen his father. What had triggered this effort to bring John around to his way of thinking? Surely he knew it would fail. He thought of something.

“Hey, Dad,” he said as soon as Henry get off the phone. “Where’s Mom? Why isn’t she here to support your little kidnapping venture?”

There was a long silence, while both Frankie and Tom looked uncomfortable, and John kept his eyes on his father. So he was right. Something had happened.

Finally Henry Laurens cleared his throat and said, “Your mother and I are living apart temporarily.”

“Really?” John’s voice was skeptical. “How un-Christian of you. What about all that till-death-do-us-part shit?”

“That’s enough!” Henry snapped, striding across the room to stand in front of John’s chair. “How dare you mock Christian marriage when there is no possibility of your ever participating in it? There’s no question of your mother and I ending our marriage. We are both just taking some time for individual prayer and contemplation.”

“Why?” John asked. “What caused it? Does it have something to do with Marcy? Was that really her on the phone? It sounded like her, but there’s a good chance I wouldn’t recognize her voice.”

“Of course it was Marcy! And if you had a normal relationship with your sister, you’d know that.”

“Kind of hard to have a normal relationship when you tell her I’m a pervert and forbid her to have anything to do with me.”

“You could change that,” Henry insisted. “That’s in your hands.”

“Bullshit,” John muttered.

“Shut your filthy mouth!” Henry screamed and leaped forward, his hands outstretched. He got them on John’s neck before Dr. Thomson and Tom Jefferson dragged him off, the two of them struggling to hold him. Thomson yelled for help, and the two guards held Henry still while the doctor opened his medical kit.

“I’m just going to give you a little something,” he said soothingly, “just something to help you feel better.”
Henry was ranting something about punishing children out of love, but his voice subsided quickly to a low mumble as the injection Dr. Thomson gave him quickly took effect. John sat stone-still watching everything, cold sweat dripping down his back. His father had always had a temper, had hit him often, but this was much worse. He seemed unhinged.

Tom Jefferson stood uncomfortably as the two guards lifted Henry onto the bed. With everybody’s attention elsewhere, he stepped closer to John’s chair and sat on the arm of it, looking at John’s sketch of him.

“That’s not bad,” he said casually.

John looked up at him. “What are you doing in this, Tom? Even at your most obnoxious, I thought you still had some decency.”

“Is that why you punched me?”

John shrugged. “You caught me on a bad day.”

Tom’s mouth twisted into a half smile. “My timing was probably off.” He took a breath. “Listen, John, I don’t agree with the way your father is going about this, but I do agree with his purpose. He wants to bring you back to God.”

“Damn, for a minute there, I almost liked you.”

“Don’t be flippant.”

“Don’t be flippant? I’ve been kidnapped, hit, and drugged, and I can’t even guess what might have happened to me while I was drugged, and you’re worried that I’m being flippant?”

Tom shook his head. “I’m worried about your place in eternity, John, really.”

“We’re not … this isn’t something we can discuss calmly, Tom, so let’s not try.”

Jefferson stood up and looked away, his face expressionless. After a minute he turned back to face John. “I’m going to tell you something to help you understand your father’s state of mind. Maybe then you can extend a little grace toward him.”

John raised a skeptical eyebrow. “I doubt it, but go ahead.”

“Your mother moved out about a month ago. She’s renting an apartment, and Marcy stays with her most of the time.”

“Okay. Was it my mom or my dad who got Marcy to call me saying she needed to see me?”

“Your dad told her …” He stopped and looked away again.

“What?”

“That you were thinking of killing yourself.”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” John jumped to his feet.

Tom put a hand on his arm quickly. “Shut up!” He looked around the room. The guards were back in place by the door and the window, Dr. Thomson was on his phone, and Frankie was sitting on the floor looking miserable. “Sit down and let me finish. First, the rate of suicide being what it is in what you call the LGBTQ community, it’s not such a farfetched idea.”
“Jesus, Tom, you should …”

“Will you please stop taking the Lord’s name in vain?”

John took a deep breath. “Okay, whatever, but why? How could anything justify the pain that my father inflicted on my sister by telling her that?”

“He had to make sure she called you because he knew that would get you to come meet her.”

“And why was it so important that I come meet her?”

“Pastor Henry wants more than anything for his family to be reunited. He prayed about it, and he believes that if he could get you to agree to therapy, and can show your mother how strongly he wants you all together again, she’ll come back home.”

John shook his head in disbelief. “Tom, you have to see that’s completely irrational. There’s no way I’m rejoining the narrow-minded, bigoted family that I left years ago. I have a good life. I’m doing great in school. I’m in a very happy relationship.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really, more on that later. Anyway, you know it’s not possible that we’re all going to be the sort of happy Christian family that my father thinks he wants. And there’s something important you haven’t told me.”

“What?”

“Why did my mom leave? She’s put up with everything for twenty-five years, why now?”

“There was … let me say right here that I don’t believe a word of it, because it just couldn’t be true, but there were accusations made against your father of … inappropriate behavior.”

“With men, by any chance?”

Jefferson looked shocked. “No, no, of course not. It was … not that I think it ever happened … the accusation was made by a teenage girl.”

The picture finally came into focus. John felt a wave of nausea rise in his throat, and he forced it back with an effort. “My sister?” he asked.

Jefferson flushed and nodded. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I freely admit that the first scene in this chapter may have been inspired by repeated viewings of the video for Anthony Ramos’s newest song, "Mind Over Matter." My phone practically caught fire when I watched it.

Dr. Samuel Thomson was an 18th century alternative-medicine guy who sold herbal "remedies" and accumulated a lot of followers and a lot of money.

When Officer Perry makes a reference to his family being Quaker, the Quakers are the Society of Friends, a religious denomination that has long practiced pacifism, equality, and simplicity.
I feel like James Madison asking, "Can you get us out of the mess we're in?"
Will Jefferson's better judgment prevail? Will the police find John? What horrible plans does Henry Laurens really have?
I’m Still Alive

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We’ll see if we can ping his phone,” Officer Perry said, “but if it’s turned off, we probably won’t be able to locate it.”

“If he had his phone, he would have called one of us,” Alex said.

“We can probably get the last known location,” Perry told him. “It might help.”

Alex nodded. “Thanks,” he said. “We were a little afraid that the police would just blow us off.”

Perry leaned back in his chair and spread his hands. “Look, I’m not saying that could never happen, but you’re all telling me the same thing, that John Laurens is stable and responsible, and he’s got no history of erratic behavior. And I have to say, you’re all excellent witnesses. We get people who come in here drunk or stoned and want us to find a friend who may have disappeared or maybe was spending the weekend at his Grandma’s house, but they’re not sure. We’ll listen, but after you’ve been on the job for a few years, you begin to know which reports get priority. I’ve already run all your names, and only one of you turned up in the system.”

Angelica gasped. “What?”

Perry looked at his computer screen. “Alexander Hamilton, New York, New York, about a year and a half ago. Illegal trespass.”

They all turned to stare at Alex. “Wait, let me explain …”

Perry held up his hand. “He was at a rally protesting cuts in health care, and he didn’t disperse from the Congressman’s office when ordered to do so. Charges were later dropped.”

Eliza gave a sigh of relief. “Oh, okay. Alex, why didn’t you ever tell us?”

Alex’s face was flushed. “It never came up.”

“If it helps,” Perry broke in, “that doesn’t exactly place him on our ‘armed and dangerous’ list. I’m free to ignore that totally non-criminal activity.”

“Thanks,” Alex said with a grateful glance.

“One more thing,” Perry continued. “Can you give me a good recent picture of John Laurens?”

Alex pulled out his phone and began to scroll through it, but it was Eliza who had the best photo. She had taken it on the day they had redecorated John’s apartment, and he was standing in the
living room smiling. She cropped it down to his head and shoulders and sent it to the number Officer Perry gave her.

“Is that it, then?” Angelica asked.

Perry nodded. “Yeah, unless something comes up. I’ve got your contact numbers.” He stopped and hesitated for a minute. “There’s just one thing. I know you think it’s unlikely, but there is the possibility that John has left for his own reasons and doesn’t want to communicate. If that’s the case, we won’t be able to tell you where he is.”

Alex felt the anxiety twist his stomach into knots. “Would you be able to at least tell us that he’s all right if that happens? I mean, I know that’s not what’s going on, but more than anything I want to know that John’s safe.”

Eliza took Alex’s hand and held on. “That won’t happen,” she said firmly. “We know John, and we know he wouldn’t leave us.”

* * * * *

“You have to help me get out of here,” John said to Jefferson. “I’m serious, Tom, enough of this bullshit. I’ve got to find my sister and talk to her, let her know that I’m okay. My father’s plan seems to be drugging me into unconsciousness and letting his crazy doctor friend take me away somewhere and torture me. You can’t really think that’s a good idea.”

Dr. Thomson had left, saying he’d be back later. Bert and Ernie were once again at the window and the door. Frankie was still sitting on the floor, reading something on his phone. Jefferson stood in front of John’s chair. He looked over his shoulder at Henry Laurens, still sedated, lying on the bed, then turned back to John. “Your father doesn’t want to hurt you or your sister. He wants what’s best for you, and that’s a life that’s pleasing to God.”

John tried silently counting to ten. Of the people in the room, Jefferson was the one most likely to listen to reason. Antagonizing him would be a huge mistake. Right now, however much he might feel like punching him again, he kept his hands by his sides. “Look, Tom, there are all kinds of ways to live a good life, and for me, living my life as the person I actually am is the best one. I don’t know if I can make you understand that some things can’t be changed. It’s like – what if somebody told you to be shorter? What if there was some sort of acceptable height and you had exceeded it? What if you were, about six two?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what if the only normal height was between five ten and six feet? You need to be shorter.”

“John, that’s a ridiculous analogy.”

John folded his arms across his chest. “Why?”

“Because you know perfectly well that height is not in a person’s control. You can’t just decide to be taller or shorter.”

“Really? Have geneticists isolated a height gene?”

“No, it’s a combination of genes, and it can be affected by things like nutrition, but it can’t be
controlled by your will.”

“Right. So it’s a perfect analogy for sexual orientation.”

“Stop it. That’s nonsense.”

“It’s not, Tom. I am who I am, and if you believe in God, then you have to believe that this is how God made me.” He shrugged. “Even if you don’t believe me, you have to believe that I shouldn’t be kept prisoner by armed guards.” He nodded his head toward Bert and Ernie.

Jefferson looked at the guards uncomfortably. “I didn’t know they would be here,” he admitted.

“What did my father tell you before he brought you here?”

“He said he’d persuaded you to meet with him and us.”

“How could you believe that could be true?”

Jefferson smiled faintly. “I believe that prayers are answered.”

John refrained from rolling his eyes. “Do you think those guys will shoot me if I try to walk out?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why do they have guns?”

“Well … I think they’re supposed to … make you take this seriously.”

“Yeah, guns are pretty serious. What if we all try to leave together – you, me, and Frankie?”

Jefferson shook his head. “I’m not going against Pastor Henry’s wishes.”

“For God’s sake, Tom, can’t you see that my father isn’t being rational? He’s not well.”

It was evident that Tom Jefferson was uneasy. None of this was what he had been led to expect, but he had complete faith in the Reverend Henry Laurens, and he wasn’t going to turn against him. “He’ll be okay, John. He needs rest.”

John sat back down in the chair, frustrated. He thought for a minute, then, “Hey, Frankie,” he said. “Come talk to me.”

Frankie looked wary, but he got to his feet. “What do you want?”

John put his hands up in an I surrender gesture. “I just want to talk.”

Except for the brief, acrimonious exchange a few hours ago, they hadn’t talked since Frankie had left him. It was going to be awkward. Frankie shuffled the short distance to where John was sitting. Tom Jefferson was leaning on the desk, so Frankie pulled out the desk chair and sat down, keeping his eyes on John. “Okay, talk,” he said.

“What are you scared of?” John asked curiously.

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Come on, Frankie, I know you. You’re not one to sit quietly in a corner while everything is happening around you, but that’s exactly what you’ve been doing here. Why?”
Frankie shrugged and looked away.

Jefferson pulled himself up to sit on the desk so he could see Frankie’s face. “What did Pastor Henry tell you we were going to do here?” he asked.

“He just said he wanted me to talk to John,” Frankie mumbled, “tell him I was happily married and all that.”

“So, go ahead,” John told him.

“What?”

“Go ahead and tell me that you’re happily married.”

“Well, yeah, sure I am.”

John looked at Jefferson. “You think he’s telling the truth?”

“Of course,” Jefferson responded, but he didn’t sound confident. “Why would he lie to you?”

“Oh, I can think of a few reasons.” John turned back to Frankie. “Did my father offer you money?”

Frankie’s shoulder twitched in a sort of half-shrug. “It wasn’t like that.”

Frankie finally looked directly at John, and John, who knew him so well, saw the pain in his eyes. For just a moment, he felt so sorry for him that he almost put his arms around him the way he would have a few months ago. Not now, though. Now he just met his gaze with sorrow. “Tell me what it was like.”

“He just wants what’s right for you,” Frankie responded, but there was no conviction in his voice.

“The way I’m living is right for me,” John told him. “You know that better than anybody.”

Frankie looked away again. “I’m happy with Patsy,” he said.

“Okay.”

“He wanted me to tell you that.”

“Was that supposed to make me decide to be straight?”

“I don’t know.” Frankie’s voice was shaky.

Tom Jefferson broke in. “What aren’t you saying, Frankie?”

“There was … I was …” Frankie put his hand up to his face and started to cry.

Tom looked at John and shook his head. “Before you ask, I don’t know.”


Frankie wiped his face with the back of his hand. “Your father has pictures.” He choked on a sob and looked around for tissues. Jefferson went and got him a handful out of the bathroom.

John gave him a minute, then asked, “Pictures of you with somebody?”
“Yeah.”

“With a guy?”

Frankie nodded. “Yeah.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. He said his name was Liam.”

“But that wasn’t his real name?”

“I don’t know. I met him at a conference. We got talking, and … you know … we had dinner together and … it was a three-day conference. We ended up in his room.”

“Which was conveniently fitted with cameras.” John shook his head in pity. “Oh, Frankie, how could you be so gullible?”

“When I got back from the conference, Pastor called me to his office, and he showed me the pictures.” Frankie started to sob again.

“Of course he did.” He let Frankie cry for a minute and looked at Jefferson. “You see how Henry Laurens works? He set Frankie up so he could blackmail him.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Tom. My father had the pictures before Frankie got home from the conference. Whoever Liam might have been, his assignment was to seduce Frankie Kinloch to get evidence that he was still gay, Patsy or no Patsy.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because that’s what he does, Tom. Because he wants to control everyone, and he’ll do it any way he can.” John told him. He looked away for a minute and sighed. “Besides, he did it to me.”

“What?”

“I was seventeen, and the guy was supposedly a new student in school, took the same classes as I did, joined the same clubs. We really bonded through the ecology club. I went to his house after school a couple of times, and then one day his parents weren’t home …”

“But, John, that doesn’t mean your father had anything to do with it.”

“My father had the pictures within twenty-four hours, and Peter disappeared off the face of the earth. The house where he had lived with his parents – if they even were his parents – was empty.”

“Your father had pictures?” Jefferson asked as if he couldn’t believe his own ears.

“Oh, yeah.”

“What did … what did he do with them?”

“He said he would show them to my mother and to all my friends.”

“And did he?”
John smiled a little bitterly. “I don’t know. See, my father never knew me. He thought I’d be ashamed of being gay. He thought it was something he could hang over my head to control me, and it wasn’t. I wasn’t ashamed of it; it’s just part of who I am. So I told him to go ahead and show the pictures to whoever he wanted. He was furious.”

“What did he do?” Jefferson asked the question, but Frankie was paying attention now too.

“He beat the shit out of me.”

Frankie put his hand on John’s arm, and John let him keep it there. “It wasn’t the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last. That’s what he does. That’s who he is.”

Jefferson turned and walked away to stand near the door, his face expressionless.

“He’s going to show the pictures of me to Patsy and her parents,” Frankie sobbed. “Unless I convince you to go to counseling with Dr. Thomson.”

John put his hand on Frankie’s for a moment, then gently removed it from his arm. “You know I’m not going to do that, don’t you?”

Frankie nodded miserably.

“You might have to start over, Frankie,” John said.

“I don’t … I can’t …”

“Yeah, you can if you have to. I just want you to know, it can’t be with me.”

Frankie nodded again. “I know.”

Jefferson came back to stand close to them. “We need to figure out how we’re going to get out of here,” he said.

* * * * *

Alex got a call from Officer Perry on Wednesday afternoon. “We’ve been able to ascertain that the last call John got on his phone was on Monday morning, less than half an hour before he texted you. It came from a burner phone. The last location was in Camden about an hour and a half after that call, then the phone was turned off.”

“Camden?” Alex questioned. “Do you know where in Camden?”

“Pretty much in the center of town, near the intersection of West DeKalb Street and Broad Street. There are shops and restaurants all along there. He could have stopped for coffee and turned his phone off then.”

“Yeah, I understand,” Alex said. “Nothing on his car?”

“Not yet. Sorry I don’t have more information for you.”

“Okay. Thanks for letting us know.”

Alex looked up at Eliza, who was next to him on the couch. “John got a call from a burner phone right before he texted us, and then he went to Camden. That’s all we know.”

“A burner phone? Who even uses them?”
“Drug dealers?” Peggy suggested helpfully.

“John is not involved in drugs,” Alex snapped.

“All right, let’s not take it out on each other,” Angelica said, standing up. “I’m making tea. Somebody come help me.”

Peggy and Tench followed her into the kitchen, and Eliza looked around at the rest of their friends in the room. “Why would he go to Camden?”

Alex shrugged. “We don’t know what his destination was. We just know he got as far as Camden before he turned off his phone.”

“That’s not very far,” Adrienne said, “and Camden’s just an ordinary town. There’s nothing special there.”

“I think we have to wait,” Gil said. “At least give the police a few days.”

“I’m going to stay at his apartment,” Alex told them. “That way, if he comes home, I can let everybody know right away.”

“Good idea,” Herc agreed. “Anything else?”

“It wouldn’t hurt to pray,” Adrienne suggested.

Alex nodded thoughtfully. “What about all those people that were trying to convert me? Sam Seabury and Chip Lee and that crowd. Don’t they go to John’s father’s church?”

“I think so,” Eliza said. “I know Tom Jefferson does.”

“So, did John know them before he started college? Were they all in Bible study group or something together?”

Eliza shook her head and looked around. “I don’t know. Even if they were, what difference would it make?”

“It might not make any difference, but maybe somebody who’s known John since first grade would know of an old friend or a distant cousin we could contact. I know I’m grasping at straws here, but I’ll try anything.”

Rick pulled out his phone. “I’m going to text Kate Livingston,” he said. “She knows everything about everybody.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Alex approved.

Rick had barely started texting when Eliza’s phone rang. She looked at it and shrugged. “It’s a random number.”

“Answer it,” Alex directed.

She put it on speaker and said, “Hello.”

“Is this Eliza? Eliza Schuyler?” an unknown voice asked hesitantly.

“Yes, I’m Eliza.”
“This is Marcy. Marcy Laurens, John’s sister.”

Chapter End Notes

Liam and Peter are stand-ins for William North and Pierre-Étienne du Ponceau, two actual gay lovers of that famously gay Revolutionary War general, the Baron von Steuben. Of course neither of them would have been involved in dastardly blackmail schemes.

Here’s hoping John can escape without being beaten up by his father or shot by the guards. I think Jefferson has come around to his side now, so maybe he’ll help.
Chapter Summary

Brace yourself for angst in this chapter. Two people need to get out of two different places. One of them is successful.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I think we should get out before Dr. Thomson comes back, preferably while your father is unconscious,” Jefferson said.

John nodded almost absently. “Maybe. These guards, though.”

“They’re not going to shoot us.”

“They won’t shoot you or Frankie,” John said, “but they might shoot me.”

Frankie looked nervously over his shoulder at Bert, who was near the door.

Jefferson huffed dismissively. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, come on, Tom, how do you not get it? They won’t kill me, but they’d have no problem shooting me in the knee. Then my dad – or worse, his doctor friend – takes me to the emergency room and explains that I was shot by some criminal gang that I’d gotten involved with. I’m the wayward son, remember? And my father is the rich and famous Pastor Henry Laurens. Who are they going to believe? Then Thomson keeps me drugged, they take me to wherever his treatment facility is, and they fry my brain with more drugs until I agree with whatever they say. They park me in the pew every Sunday and we get our family pictures taken for the PR stuff. By then, of course, I won’t be able to use whatever brain cells are left.”

“John, he wouldn’t. Your father wouldn’t do that to you.”

“What have you seen over the last couple of days? You’ve seen my father hit me, allow me to be injected with God only knows what, and try to strangle me. Hasn’t your idealized rosy picture of Henry Laurens faded a little?”

Jefferson nodded, his face somber. “Yeah, it has. He’s not the man I thought he was, but he’s still your father. He loves you.”

John blew out an impatient breath. “No. he doesn’t love me. He never has. I don’t think he’s ever loved my mom or Marcy either, or anybody but himself. All his family has ever been are props for the Henry Laurens he wanted the world to believe existed. Just please get rid of the idea that my being his son means that he cares about me as a person.”

Jefferson pushed his curly hair off his forehead. “It’s just hard for me to believe a father would deliberately hurt his own child. I saw him lash out in anger, but that’s different. You’re saying you think he has a plan to destroy you.”
John looked down at the pencil he was holding in his hand. “Did you know,” he began in a detached voice, “that Joseph Kennedy, Sr., the father of President Kennedy, had a lobotomy performed on his daughter Rosemary without the knowledge of anyone else in the family, including his own wife?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Rosemary was developmentally delayed in some way and had seizures. She functioned pretty well, and was able to read and write on around a fourth-grade level. Mr. Kennedy didn’t want people to know that he had a ‘retarded’ daughter, though. She might do something to embarrass him, might damage the family’s image, you know what I’m saying?” John raised his eyes and looked Jefferson in the face. “You know what a lobotomy is, Tom?”

Jefferson shook his head, his eyes on John’s. “No.”

“They drill a hole in your skull, stick a steel rod in, and chop up your brain.”

Jefferson looked like he might throw up. “That can’t be true.”

John shrugged. “You don’t have to believe me. The information’s easily available. Rosemary was twenty-three when her father had that done to her, Tom. Older than I am now. She couldn’t speak or walk after that, had to wear diapers. Her family had even more money than mine, so they sent her to the best institution they could find. I hope the people there were kind to her.”

Jefferson had his phone out, googling frantically. “That can’t …” He found what he was looking for, and his face turned a sickly shade of gray.

“Hey, put that phone away,” Ernie yelled from across the room, and Jefferson shoved it into his pocket.

John put his hand on Jefferson’s arm. “Just because he’s my father doesn’t mean he won’t kill me,” he said.

* * * * *

The room fell silent. Adrienne got up quickly and went into the kitchen to get Angelica, Peggy, and Tench.

“Marcy? Do you know where John is?” Eliza asked, looking frantically at Alex.

“No,” Marcy responded, her voice catching on a sob. “John gave me your number a long time ago, and he told me I could call you …”

“You can, of course you can. I’m so glad you did. Do you know John is missing?”

“Yeah.” Marcy’s voice was barely audible. “It’s my fault. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Eliza told her. “Whatever happened, I doubt if it’s your fault.”

“My dad made me …”

Alex broke in. “Marcy, this is Alex. You don’t know me, but I care a lot about John. Do you think you could help us find him?”

“I don’t know. I’m scared, though.”
“Why are you scared?” Alex asked, gripping Eliza’s hand.

“I’m scared of my dad.”

Angelica crossed the room in a few determined strides. “Marcy, this is Angelica, Eliza’s sister. Where are you?”

“I’m at my dad’s house. Nobody else is here now. I don’t know where my dad is.”

“Can you give me the address? We’ll come get you.”

“I’m not supposed to tell …”

“It’s okay,” Angelica said. “We just need it to get to you, and we’ll bring you back to our house. You’ll be safe, I promise.” She looked around the room, and everyone was nodding in agreement.

“I don’t have the gate code,” Marcy told her.

“What does that mean exactly?”

“I can’t open the gate, and the wall’s too high for me to get over.”

Alex was furious. “You mean you’re locked in the house alone with no way to get out?”

“Yeah. I can get out of the house, but just into the yard.”

“Hang on for a minute,” Alex instructed, and took the phone off speaker. “Anybody here want to climb a wall with me and rescue John’s little sister?”

“Oh, hell, yeah,” Tench said immediately. “Let’s spring the kid.”

“There’s a ladder in the shed,” Peggy told them.

Alex went back to the phone. “Marcy, give us the address, and some of us will come get you. We’ll be able to get you over the wall, I promise.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can Eliza come?” Marcy asked. “John said she was his best friend.”

“I’ll be there, Marcy,” Eliza promised. “If you can, pack what you need, but don’t worry about it. I have two sisters, and we have plenty of clothes and stuff here.”

“Okay,” Marcy agreed, her voice breaking again. She gave Eliza the address, and asked, “When will you be here?”

Alex didn’t know the town that well. He looked at Rick. “Twenty minutes, half hour,” Rick said.

Eliza checked the time. “We’ll be there by four-thirty. I’ll text you and tell you what to do then, okay?”

“Promise?”

“I promise. You’ll be having dinner with us in a couple of hours.”
“Okay.”

“We’ll see you soon, Marcy.”

* * * * *

“I need to get out,” John said. “I really want to get out before my father wakes up.”

“We could try just walking out the door,” Frankie suggested.

John nodded. “I’ve thought about it.”

Jefferson looked back and forth from Bert to Ernie. “We outnumber them.”

“They have guns, Tom,” John reminded him. “I think that ups the odds in their favor.”

“Are we sure the guns are loaded?” Frankie asked.

John gave him an incredulous look. “You want to find out? Or maybe you can ask politely, because I’m sure they’d tell you the truth.”

“Okay, maybe, but I can’t believe Pastor Henry would bring in guards with loaded guns.”

Jefferson turned to Frankie in disgust. “Look, when we got here, I would have said the same thing, but look at everything that’s happened. I have to admit I don’t trust Pastor Henry any more. That’s really hard for me, and maybe it will change, maybe he’s really ill or something, but right here and now, I think we have to assume that he would hurt John.”

Frankie looked back and forth between Henry Laurens on the bed and Tom Jefferson. “I guess you’re right.”

“He set you up, Frankie,” John said. “He’s blackmailing you. Your life is about to suck because of him.”

“Yeah, I know. I just don’t want to make things worse.”

Jefferson snorted. “How much worse could it be?”

“Don’t ask that,” John told him sharply. “We’re all still alive and relatively uninjured, so it could be a lot worse.”

Jefferson was silent, taking in what John had said. He wondered how many times in the past twenty years John had had to remind himself that he was still alive, so things could be worse. He turned to John now. “What if Frankie and I create a distraction, and you can get out the door?”

John nodded. “I’ve thought of that, but first, we don’t know if there’s another guard in the hall. Also, I don’t want to leave you guys to deal with all the shit.”

Henry stirred on the bed and mumbled something. They watched him warily, but he quieted down, and Jefferson said, “I don’t think Frankie and I are in any real danger. We’ve both got families that would create all kinds of an uproar if we were hurt. We came here out of a sincere wish to help you. I honestly had no idea you weren’t coming of your own free will.”

John shook his head. “You should know me better than that.”

“Yeah, I should. When all this is done … let’s get together.”
John gave him a twisted smile. “One condition.”

“What?”

“We don’t talk about religion.”

Jefferson smiled and nodded. “Fair enough.”

“In the meantime …” John began, but Henry was moving and making noises again. The shot Thomson had given him must be wearing off.

There was a knock at the door, and they all jumped. Bert checked through the peephole and opened the door to admit Phineas and Ferb. The guards exchanged a few words, and then Bert and Ernie left.

“Oh, good,” John whispered. “Hang on, guys, I think I’ve got a plan.”

* * * * *

Peggy and Adrienne stayed at the house to prepare what Peggy swore would be a celebration-worthy dinner, and the rest of them took two cars to go rescue John’s little sister. Rick drove his Chevy with Tench in the front next to him and Gil and Herc in the back. “If all else fails,” Tench said through his teeth, “the four of us can take that fucking wall down brick-by-brick.” Rick was pretty sure he wasn’t joking. The ladder that Peggy had mentioned was in the trunk of the Chevy, but it was only a small folding stepladder. It might help, but they wouldn’t be able to scale a wall with it.

Angelica was at the wheel of the Camry she shared with her sisters. Eliza sat in the front, her phone out, and Alex was in the back. They had mapped out the route to the address Marcy had given them and had agreed to drive past it first to take a look and then meet up in an elementary school parking lot a couple of blocks away. The house was on the edge of town in what had once been an area of farm fields and huge old oak trees. Some of the farms had been sold to developers, so there were several new houses around, but the Laurens mansion, as it was known, sat by itself on a large lot. There was an eight-foot-high brick wall surrounding the entire lot. The gate wasn’t a barred gate like most; it was two gigantic solid steel doors, and the wall was in plain view from the street. “Shit,” Angelica muttered as they drove past.

“Wait,” Alex said. “Where’s the back of the lot? Can you go around the block?”

Angelica took the next right, but the road made a loop to the left, and she couldn’t figure out how to get behind the house. Alex texted Tench to come back and try accessing the back of the house from the other side, then they continued to the school parking lot.

“It’s the kind of neighborhood where people will call the police if they see a strange car driving past more than once,” Alex explained, “and I’m pretty sure nobody around here drives a Camry.”

Rick had some good news for them when they met up. “There’s a park behind the house,” he said, “with a lot of trees. If there’s nothing but the wall between the park and the house, we’re good.”

“Somebody should take a casual stroll through the park and reconnoiter,” Alex suggested.

Rick nodded. “Yeah, good idea. How about if you and Eliza do that? Nice young couple out for a stroll in the park won’t raise any suspicions.”

“You okay with that?” Alex asked Eliza.
“Absolutely. We need to get that poor kid out of there.”

“There’s a small parking lot near the playground,” Gil said. “We should take the cars there and wait for you. There was nobody at the playground when we went past.”

“It’s almost dusk,” Alex pointed out. “Families are eating dinner. It’s a good time to do this.”

They drove the short distance and parked the cars. The roof of the Laurens mansion was just visible above the trees. Alex and Eliza got out of the car, and Alex took Eliza’s hand. “Here we go,” he said.

“Be careful,” Angelica whispered.

Eliza smiled. “We will be.”

The trees weren’t thickly planted enough to be called a forest, and there were picnic tables scattered here and there among them, but they were a useful shield from passers-by. “Nice little park,” Alex remarked.

“Yeah, but let’s not waste time admiring it. We need to take a look at that damn wall.”

As it turned out, the wall at the back of the property looked exactly like the wall at the front, very solidly built. Alex stared at it for a few minutes, then turned to Eliza. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. We send either Rick or Tench over the wall because they’re the biggest. They boost Marcy up, we catch her on this side, then we all go home. Easy peasy.”

Eliza stared at him. “You’re crazy.”

“No, trust me, it’ll work.”

They walked back to the parking lot, and much to Eliza’s surprise, all the guys agreed with Alex. She and Angelica exchanged doubtful looks, but when Alex told her to text Marcy, she did. *We’re in the park behind your house. One of the guys will come over the wall to help you. How soon can you be there?*

Marcy texted back immediately: *5 minutes.* Eliza showed them the screen.

“Eliza, you come with us,” Rick said. “You’re the one she’s been talking to, so you should be there to meet her. Angelica, you wait here. We shouldn’t be more than half an hour, but if there’s a delay, one of us will text you.”

Angelica nodded, doing her best to ignore the hollow feeling in her stomach.

“Alex, you should stay here too,” Rick continued.

Alex interrupted him, outraged. “*What? Why?*”

Rick looked down at him from his six-foot-four. “Alex, you’re brilliant and all that, but what we need now is physical strength and coordination. All you’d do is stand there and try to direct us, but we know how to get over a wall. Stay here, keep Angelica company. We won’t be long.”

Alex opened his mouth to yell some more, but Eliza grabbed his hand. “Rick is right,” she said gently. “Let them do what they’re good at.”

Alex looked down, his face flushed. “*Fuck,*” he muttered. “I hate not being good at things.”
Eliza kissed his cheek. “It’s not a personal failure to be five-eight,” she told him.

“Five-nine,” Alex snapped.

“Okay. We’ll be back soon.”

Alex, still angry, got into the car with Angelica, and Eliza followed the other guys into the trees. When they got to the wall, she texted Marcy again: We’re here.

Marcy texted back: I’m right by the wall, near the middle.

“Who’s going over?” Eliza asked.

Tench raised his hand. “Me.”

“Okay, she’s ready.”

Tench used the small ladder to give himself a boost, and swung himself up to sit on the wall. “Hey, are you Marcy?” they heard him say, then he jumped down and disappeared from sight.

Rick did exactly what Tench had done but remained on top of the wall. Within a couple of minutes, he dropped a small suitcase down to Herc, who handed it to Eliza. Then he said, “Gil, hang onto me. Tench is going to lift her up, but I’ll have to hang part way over the wall to reach her.’

Gil grabbed Rick’s ankles, and Eliza bit her lip watching them. Rick lay on his stomach on top of the wall, his shoulders and arms on the other side. She heard him say, “Don’t be scared, I’ve got you.” With a tremendous effort, he pulled Marcy to the top of the wall and held onto her as she swung her legs over the side. She looked down at them, tears running down her face. “Eliza?” she asked.

“I’m right here,” Eliza said, her own eyes filling with tears.

Rick lifted Marcy and handed her down to Herc as easily as he had the suitcase. Herc set her feet on the ground, and she ran straight to Eliza, who pulled her into a hug. The guys pretended they weren’t emotionally affected by that at all, and Rick leaned over the wall again to help Tench up. Within a few minutes, they were headed to the parking lot. Eliza kept her arm around Marcy, who looked up at her with eyes like John’s. “Did you find John yet?” she asked.

“No yet,” Eliza replied, wishing she had a different answer.

“I might have some ideas,” Marcy said.

Chapter End Notes

The story of Rosemary Kennedy, sister of JFK is true, but John only gives a bare summary. The reality was much worse. Lobotomy was performed fairly commonly in the 1940’s and 1950’s to treat mental illness, which, as far as I can find, Rosemary did not have. It was "successful" in that it often made patients more docile, but it was a horrific procedure and truly the stuff of nightmares. Rosemary’s story will break your heart, but everybody should know about her.

But back to our story. Marcy has been rescued -- or possibly kidnapped, depending on your point of view -- but now what? Can John's friends keep her safe? And what about
John? Is he finally going to escape? What might his plan be?
Thanks so much for kudos and comments and your interest in the story.. I love you guys!
Chapter Summary

John puts his plan into operation, with at least some help from Jefferson and Frankie. Marcy tells her story.

Chapter Notes

Parts of Marcy's story tell about her father's abuse. The descriptions aren't graphic, but the elements of the abuse are made clear.

“Okay,” John said, “these two guards, the short one with the pointy nose is Phineas, and the tall one is Ferb.”

“How do you …” Frankie began.

Jefferson, understanding immediately, cut him off. “Shut up, Frankie. John, go ahead.”

“Yesterday – at least I think it was yesterday, but who the hell knows? – Ferb took my backpack out of the closet and got my sketchbook for me. My phone was in there too, so he took the phone, but he didn’t feel right about it. He kept telling me that they weren’t going to keep it, and Phineas kept trying to shut him up. I think Ferb’s our weak link.”

Jefferson nodded. “Makes sense. Do you think he still has your phone?”

“I have no idea. I was unconscious for a while, so I couldn’t watch him. Even if he doesn’t have it, though, he knows where it is, and he was already feeling guilty.”

“You think you can convince him to give it to you?”

John was quiet for a minute. “He won’t hand it over if Phineas is watching, but he might if I can get him alone. Even if he won’t give it to me, if I can get him to turn it on, it would help a lot.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a hundred percent sure that Alex and Eliza have reported me missing to the police. They’ll be checking for my phone location. I don’t know exactly when my phone was turned off, but I had it on when I got to Camden.”


“What?”

“We’re at the Ramada in Camden.”
“Jesus! All this time, I’ve only been an hour from home? Fuck!”

Henry Laurens thrashed around on the bed and moaned, then pulled himself into a sitting position. John nudged Frankie and Jefferson closer to the desk, as far away as they could get from the bed.

Henry coughed and rubbed his hand over his face. Phineas stepped up to talk to him. “How are you feeling, sir?” he asked.

Henry mumbled something unintelligible. “Call Dr. Thomson,” Phineas said over his shoulder to Ferb, and Ferb pulled out a phone. John took a quick look. Not his phone.

Henry was still trying to communicate and getting agitated, as Phineas strained to understand him. “Thirsty? Did you say you’re thirsty?”

Henry nodded emphatically and muttered, “Fool!” clearly enough to be understood. Phineas went to the room fridge and got a bottle of water. He opened it and handed it to Henry, who spilled half of it on himself, but got some into his mouth.

Ferb said, “Dr. Thomson is coming right over. He’ll be here in about ten minutes.”

Ten minutes before the odds went higher and were increased by easily injectable drugs. John made a quick decision. He leaned in toward Jefferson. “Listen, Tom,” he whispered, “this is what I want you to do.”

* * * * *

Peggy and Adrienne had prepared a build-your-own-tacos feast. “I thought it would be fun,” Peggy said to Angelica. “She probably needs some fun.”

Angelica squeezed her sister’s hand and nodded, but didn’t trust herself to speak. Marcy had cried all the way home, and right now she was upstairs with Eliza, supposedly being shown the guest room, but that wouldn’t take more than five minutes. The guest room was really more of a storage room, but it had a futon in it, and friends were always welcome. Not so long ago, John had slept there for a while when he didn’t want to go back to the apartment that he and Frankie had shared. They’d do what they could to make Marcy comfortable, but the poor kid seemed terrified.

Eliza was putting a clean pillowcase on the pillow.

“John slept here?” Marcy asked, her voice shaky.

“He did,” Eliza responded, trying to keep everything as matter-of-fact as possible. She fluffed the pillow and put it on the futon. “He was here off and on for a month or so. Sometimes he slept on Gil’s couch.”

“Is Gil the one with all the curly hair?”

Eliza smiled and reached back into the linen closet for a blanket. “Yes. Rick and Tench are the big guys. Rick has dark hair, and Tench’s is more of a dirty blond, and Herc is the other one, not quite as tall, but still pretty big. And then you met Alex and Angelica on the ride back, and you’ll see my other sister Peggy and Gil’s girlfriend Adrienne in a few minutes.”

Marcy bit her lip. “You have a lot of friends.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky. And John’s our friend, too, don’t forget.” Eliza had refrained from asking Marcy what she knew about John’s disappearance because it was obvious that the girl was struggling with
her emotions. She’d wait – well, she’d try to wait. Maybe after dinner. She spread the blanket on the futon and took Marcy’s hand. “Come on, let’s go get some dinner.”

John said she was sixteen, Alex thought. She seems so much younger. She’s so scared. I wonder if she’s overwhelmed. There are a lot of us …

He gave her a friendly smile as Marcy entered the dining room with Eliza. “I hope you like tacos,” he said.

She nodded, “Yeah, I do.”

“Just grab whatever you want,” Peggy said. “We got everything, so you can build any kind of taco you like.” She waved her hand over the table. “Chicken, beef, refried beans, three kinds of cheese, lettuce, tomato, green onions, black olives, jalapeños, sour cream, three kinds of taco sauce from mild to set-your-esophagus-on-fire, corn tortillas, flour tortillas … um, what else, Adrienne?”

“Chopped fresh cilantro, guacamole, pico de gallo, rice …”

“You don’t put rice on tacos,” Rick said. “Rice is a side dish.”

“I’ll put rice on my taco if I want,” Tench told him.

“No shrimp?” Here asked.

“No, and I’m going to slap you, Hercules,” Peggy told him. “You’ve already eaten what, three tacos? You’re not starving.”

Marcy silently put a spoonful of ground beef and a little cheese on a tortilla and rolled it up, her eyes on her plate. Eliza leaned over and whispered, “You can take as much as you want. We have plenty.”

Marcy glanced up at her nervously. “I’m okay.”

She was definitely not okay. Eliza kept her voice low enough for only Marcy to hear. “When’s the last time you ate?”

Marcy shrugged. “I’m not sure. Maybe a couple of days. I had some juice, though.”

Eliza’s hands were clenched into tight fists under the table where Marcy couldn’t see them. “Your father left you locked in the house with no food?”

“Okay,” Eliza said, as calmly as if she heard this kind of thing every day. “You’ll feel better if you eat a good meal.”

“I don’t want to be greedy.”

Eliza had never in her life hated anyone the way she hated Henry Laurens in that moment. She relaxed her hand with an effort, and put her arm around Marcy’s shoulders. “You’re not greedy. You need to eat something. If the tacos are too spicy, I’ll scramble you some eggs.”

To Eliza’s distress, Marcy began crying again, wiping her tears with her napkin. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Eliza told her firmly. “Let’s go into the living room for a few
minutes.” She led Marcy out of the dining room, signaling Do not disturb over her shoulder to the others, and sat down with her on the couch. “Can you tell me why you’re crying?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I don’t know if I can put it into words.”

“Go ahead and try. Maybe we can figure it out.”

“It’s just … I don’t know how to just take food for myself. My parents always fix our plates.”

Eliza thought of dinners at the Schuyler home, everybody helping themselves, taking seconds if they wanted, fighting with Peggy over the last chocolate chip cookie – normal family life, at least to her. Henry Laurens was a millionaire, and he rationed his kids’ food?

“What if you’re still hungry?”

Marcy shrugged. “They give me enough.” Eliza was no medical expert, but Marcy looked at least ten or fifteen pounds underweight to her. “John used to sneak food sometimes,” Marcy continued in a tiny whisper. “He’d share it with me, but then he got in trouble for stealing.”

Stealing. Taking food for himself and his little sister was stealing. What kind of monster was Henry Laurens?

“All right, I want you to listen to me,” Eliza said now. “My parents own this house, and my sisters and I live here, and all our friends are welcome any time. There’s always plenty of food, more than enough, really, because I love to bake, and Peggy is dating Tench, who’s a football player, so he eats more than three normal people.” As she had hoped, that got a squeak of a giggle from Marcy. She went on, “But it’s our house, so we play by Schuyler family rules, and that means you are welcome here for as long as you want to stay, and you can have as much to eat as you like, whenever you like. If you want to make yourself a meal at three in the morning, you go right ahead, just clean up after yourself. That’s another rule. If you need anything, anything at all, just ask. We have clothes, shampoo, toothbrushes, whatever, and if we don’t have it, somebody will get it for you. That’s the way we live, and it has worked pretty well for at least twenty years.”

Marcy was finally looking up at her with wide green eyes. “I can just have whatever I want?”

“Yes, and we’re not going to let anybody bother you.” She was aware that Marcy was a minor, but surely what she’d suffered was child abuse. Eliza decided she would call her father in the morning. Philip Schuyler was a lawyer, and while his area of specialization was civil rights, he knew lots of other lawyers. He’d help. “Come on, now,” she said. “Let’s get some tacos.”

They went back into the dining room. Everyone else had taken their time, and Peggy and Adrienne popped the meat and rice into the microwave to heat it up, and Marcy began to make her first taco with a little coaching from Eliza. She ate it, obviously enjoying it, then had some rice. She finished the rice, took a deep breath, and said bravely, “I think I’d like another taco.”

* * * * *

Tom Jefferson could be a real pain in the ass, but he was smart, John had to admit. John had explained what he wanted to do once, and Jefferson caught it all perfectly, while Frankie was still asking questions. Frankie had a role to play too, and John hoped everything went the way he wanted it to.

Jefferson made his way to Henry Laurens’s side, his face filled with concern. “How are you feeling, Pastor?” he asked.
Henry coughed again, and then said, “All right, I suppose. Where’s Dr. Thomson?”

“I think he’s on his way,” Jefferson replied, then turned to Phineas. “When is Dr. Thomson coming?”

“Ten minutes,” Phineas said, and Henry nodded.

Frankie stepped up closer. “Do you need anything, sir?” he inquired, getting the words right even if his voice was shaky.

Henry looked around the room and fixed his eyes on John. “I need my wayward son to agree to get the medical care he needs.”

“I’m fine, dad,” John said. He had his sketchbook and pencil in his hands again. He leaned against the wall, looking at the group gathered around Henry, blocking out the figures. Ferb was still near the door. John moved toward him casually, as if he was looking at the others from a different angle. Just as casually, he held the sketch up for Ferb to see. “What do you think?” he asked.

Ferb glanced at it, and appeared to study it carefully. He looked at John. “It’s good,” he said.

“You think so?”

Ferb nodded. “Yeah, definitely.”

John’s smile was faint, but his eyes met Ferb’s. “Thanks.”

Henry Laurens stood up angrily. “Let me see that,” he demanded.

“Sure,” John agreed, “I’m just finishing a bit of shading here.” His pencil scratched over some cross-hatching. “Here.” He handed it to his father. He knew, of course, what Henry’s opinion would be because he knew what it had always been.

Henry grabbed the sketchbook from John’s outstretched hand and started flipping through it. When he saw the drawing John had done of Jefferson, he grunted and looked up at Tom suspiciously. A few pages farther back, he found the sketch of Alex and Eliza. John’s focus had been on their faces and Alex’s hand on Eliza’s shoulder. While it was evident that they were lying in bed, there was nothing graphic about the picture. Eliza’s shoulder was bare, and there was a suggestion of a crumpled sheet, but the emotion that the image evoked was love and tenderness. At least that was how John had drawn it, and even Jefferson had been touched by the drawing, but Henry Laurens had a totally different reaction.

“This is disgusting!” he yelled. He tore the page out of the sketchbook and ripped it to pieces. “Is that what you’re spending your grandfather’s money on?” he demanded. “You’re learning how to produce pornography?”

John took a cautious step back from his father, but his voice was calm. “No, it’s not pornography, it’s a portrait. I know it’s easy to get the words mixed up because they start with the same letters, but there’s really a difference. I would have been able to explain the elements that made it a portrait if you hadn’t ripped it up.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Tom Jefferson. How far is John going to push him?

Henry reached for the front of John’s shirt, but his coordination was still off from the effects of the sedative he’d been given, and John was able to side-step him and move away toward the desk. He sat down in the desk chair without saying anything, watching his father. Jefferson followed and
boosted himself up onto the desk, and Frankie sat on the floor. There were a couple of minutes of tense silence in the room, and then there was a knock on the door.

“That will be Dr. Thomson,” Henry Laurens said confidently.

*          *          *          *          *

It was evident that Marcy was tired, and Eliza felt guilty about asking her questions. Marcy brushed off her apologies, though. “No, I want to talk,” she insisted. “I don’t know if I can help, but I want to try.”

Alex was the only one who had stayed after dinner. He had offered to go, but Eliza wanted him there, and Marcy was okay with it. Peggy had gone upstairs, so Marcy was in the living room with Eliza, Alex, and Angelica. Angelica spoke first. “Can you just tell us what you know about the last few days? That way we won’t bombard you with random questions.”

Marcy nodded. “All right. I have to go back further than a few days, though.” She bit her lip. “Some of it is kind of hard to talk about.”

“Take your time,” Eliza told her. “Tell us as much or as little as you want to, and if you need to stop, just say so.”

Marcy stared at her. “You’re so nice. You’re all so nice to me, and you don’t even know me.”

“You’re John’s sister,” Eliza said, “and we love John, so we love you because you’re his sister. There’s nothing unusual about that.”

“There is,” Marcy responded, her lip trembling. “Most people aren’t like that. And anyway, maybe when you hear about some of the things I did, you won’t like me very much.”

What in the world could this scared kid have done? Alex wondered. Her own father left her locked up with no food, and yet she thinks she might have done something bad. He patted her hand gently, and she tried to smile. Her eyes are so much like John’s. “You’re John’s sister,” he said, echoing Eliza. “You’re family. You’re probably stuck with us now.”

Marcy took a deep breath. “All right. I’m going to go back about four months. Things weren’t good at home. I mean, my parents have never been easy to get along with, but I’ve tried to be respectful and obedient. It’s hard, though, because sometimes I can’t see something coming.”

“What do you mean?” Eliza asked.

“There was a boy … I knew him from church. We’re … we were in youth group together. He’s nice. His name’s David.” She stopped for a moment and swallowed hard. “I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

“Did somebody say he was a bad person?” Angelica asked.

Marcy didn’t answer the question directly. “He just asked me to go to the movies with him. For an afternoon showing at the mall, and it was a PG movie. He said his mom would drive us there and back so we wouldn’t be alone in the car, so I thought it would be okay.”

Eliza and Angelica exchanged glances. “You’re sixteen, right?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah.”
“But you haven’t dated anyone?” And no wonder, if her parents have all these crazy rules.

“No, but my parents have known David forever, since his family goes to our church, and he’s never been in trouble. And he was really nice about understanding how my parents want to protect me and not arguing about it.”

Alex bit his tongue to keep the angry words in his mind from spilling out of his mouth. Protect her? Is that what they said they were doing? More like prevent her from having a normal life.

“Your parents wouldn’t let you go out with him, then?” Eliza asked.

Marcy shook her head. “No. I guess that didn’t really surprise me, but then my dad just … I don’t know … lost his mind. He started yelling about what he thought David really wanted from me, and it was horrible. I mean, it was nothing like that. We just wanted to go to a movie together, not have sex. My dad was screaming at me, calling me names …” She stopped, biting her lip again. “Can I have some water?”

Alex jumped up, went to the kitchen, and came back with a glass of ice water. Marcy gulped some of it down gratefully and sat up straight, determined to continue.

Eliza looked worried. “You sure you’re okay to keep going?”

“Yeah, I want to tell you. It doesn’t make sense to me, so I felt like I was crazy, but maybe it’s not me.”

“I’m very sure it’s not you,” Angelica told her.

“So my dad said a lot of horrible things. Mostly it was about how he didn’t raise me to be a … to be a slut, and how could I abandon my faith and disappoint my family. It … it was like he was talking about something completely different from what I was talking about, and that’s what I kept saying. I said something like, ‘We just want to go to a movie,’ and he really lost it. He hit me a couple of times …”

“He hit you?” Alex broke in furiously.

Marcy nodded, her face half-scared, half-ashamed. “My dad hit us sometimes, John more than me, but yeah. There’s something in the Bible that says you should hit your kids when they do something wrong.”

“Whoever spares the rod hates their children?” Alex asked bitterly. He’d gone to Catholic schools as a child and had sat through many religion classes.

“Yes, that’s it. And my dad never used a belt or anything, just his hands.”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Alex muttered, and Marcy’s eyes widened in shock.

Eliza took Alex’s hand. “Maybe you should go upstairs.”

Alex closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, then looked up. “I won’t … I’m sorry, Marcy. I know you’re probably not used to that kind of language.”

To his surprise, Marcy smiled, even if it was a little shakily. “Not since John left. You sounded just like him.”

Alex smiled back, his throat feeling tight. “That’s a compliment, you know.”
“I know.” She hesitated again. “This next part is the hardest, so I just want to get through it, okay?”

“Whatever you want,” Angelica told her.

“I’m going to say it really fast,” Marcy said. “At least I’m going to try.”

*What in the world?* “Go ahead.”

“The next day, the day after we had that big screaming fight, I came home from school, and my dad was there. He was usually at the church until late, and my mom wasn’t home, so that was kind of strange. He said he needed to talk to me, and we went into his office. I thought maybe he was sorry for losing his temper, and he didn’t seem mad anymore, so I wasn’t really scared.”

Eliza thought of her father, the kind, loving father who adored his girls, and tried to get her head around the idea of a father whose children were afraid of him.

“He sat down on the couch with me, and he said he wanted me to know about the kinds of things boys might try to do, so I would be prepared for it. I didn’t understand what he meant at first, and then he started touching me …”

Alex stood up, strode across the room and walked out the door to the patio.

Marcy took a breath and kept going. “I knew it wasn’t right, and I told him to stop, but he said he needed me to know. I started crying, and then I yelled at him, and tried to push him away. I got away from him, and I just started throwing things, anything I could get my hands on, books, a paperweight, a stapler, and I was screaming my head off. And then my mom came in.”

She clutched at Eliza’s hand. “Mom knew right away what had happened. I’ve thought about it since then, and she must have known something, because when she walked in, there was my dad yelling at me to calm down, and I was hysterical, and my clothes were all messed up, and there were things that I’d thrown all over the place. But she knew. She got in front of me, and she told me to go to my room, so I did. I went right to my room. We moved out the next day.”

“Thank God,” Eliza said.

“Yeah, it was … it was better, but still … I think my dad still has a lot of control over my mom. I don’t know why. He wanted to see me sometimes, and she let him.”

“Did he ever …” Eliza began.

Marcy shook her head. “No. It never happened again. But I still had to see my dad every other weekend. I didn’t want to see him at all, but at least I was never alone with him. She’d worked something out. Then this past weekend …” She stopped and looked up. “Alex should come back in. We can’t let her go back.”

Angelica got Alex from the patio. He knelt down on the floor in front of Marcy. “I don’t know how we’re going to do it, but we’re going to keep you safe, okay?” he promised. He looked up at Eliza. “We can’t let her go back.”

Eliza nodded. “Angelica and I agree. We’re going to call Dad first thing in the morning.”

“Good.” He went back to his chair.

“What happened this past weekend?” Eliza asked.
“That’s when my dad told me that John had tried to kill himself.”

Chapter End Notes

Who has figured out John's plan? Will it work? Will Philip Schuyler be able to protect Marcy from her parents?
I don't know about you, but I am SO ready for John to come home.

I live for kudos and comments, so a fafillion thanks to anyone who leaves them!<3 <3 <3
Marcy tells Eliza, Alex, and Angelica what she knows. Jefferson carries out John's plan, but goes a little farther.

“He told you that John tried to kill himself?” Alex repeated, struggling to keep the rage out of his voice.

Marcy nodded. “Yes …”

“John would never,” Eliza said. “When Frankie left him to marry Patsy, I was worried about him, and he told me not to worry about that, that he wouldn’t do it. And now – well, anyway, even when things have been bad, John doesn’t … he doesn’t despair. He gets sad like anybody would, but he sees the good in life.”

“I know,” Marcy responded, tears welling up in her eyes and spilling over. “I didn’t really think it was true even when my dad said it, and now, after meeting all of you, I know it wouldn’t happen, but my dad kept talking about the high rate of suicide for LGBT people, and he made me worry about it.”

“Someday when we have time, I’ll explain how skewed that data is,” Alex told her, “but right now, tell us exactly what your father said.”

“He said that John tried to kill himself by taking an overdose of drugs. He said that John used drugs, but I didn’t think that was true because John lived in our house until he was eighteen, and I know he never used drugs. We used to talk about it. He always said he needed his brain to be clear.”

“He still says that,” Angelica put in. “John doesn’t even smoke weed. He barely drinks. He told me once that if he has too much to drink, he can’t focus well enough to draw, and he feels like he needs to be able to draw all the time. He said, ‘You never know what you might see.’”

Marcy smiled. “That sounds like John. So, like I said, I didn’t really think it was true, but my dad kept telling me it was. I know my dad is wrong about a lot of things, but somehow when I’m with him, he makes me believe he’s telling the truth. Then when I’m away from him, like now, I see how crazy it is.”

Eliza gave her a quick hug. “Your dad has been manipulating you for your whole life. It’s no surprise that it’s hard not to believe him.”

“I’m glad you can see that,” Marcy responded gratefully. “I don’t want you think I wanted to trick John.”

“Trick him how?” Alex asked.
“My dad told me to call him and tell him I needed him, that I was in some kind of trouble. I was supposed to tell him to meet me in a parking lot in Camden.”

“That’s why he went to Camden.”

“Yeah. He didn’t pick up when I called, so I left a message, and he came to meet me.” Her eyes filled with tears again.

“Did you see him?”

She nodded, biting her lip. “Just for a few seconds. Two of my dad’s guys grabbed him and threw him in the back of the van …”

“Wait.” Alex held up his hand. “Your dad’s guys? What does that mean?”

“Just guys who work for my dad. I think they mostly do security.”

“Okay, and what van?”

“My dad has a lot of cars. The blue Camry is his, and so is the van. Fred drove me in the Camry to meet John, and Keith drove the van. I didn’t know that then, though.”

“So John got to the parking lot, saw the Camry, and got out of his car?” Alex was asking all the questions now.

“Yes. As soon as Keith shoved John into the van, Fred grabbed me and made me get in it too. There was somebody else in the van too, in the back with John, but I don’t know who he was. I think he gave John a shot or something, because he sort of passed out.”

“Where did they take him?”

“I don’t know.” Marcy took a minute to get her voice under control. “I was really upset and I was crying because I felt like it was my fault. They dropped me off at my dad’s, and that’s all I know.”

“Was your father home when you got there?”

“Yes, and I’m not supposed to be alone with him. My mom got some kind of court order. But it didn’t really matter because he left a couple of hours later, and he didn’t come back, so after a couple of days, I called Eliza.”

Alex looked from Marcy to Eliza and back again. “Why did you call Eliza instead of your mom?”

Marcy flushed. “Well, first, because my dad said that things would be very bad for me and John if I told Mom any of it … and then, second, Mom’s not as bad as Dad, but I don’t know if it would matter much to her if something happened to John.” She started to cry again. “I wanted to talk to somebody who loved John, somebody who would care about him.”

“You did the right thing,” Alex told her.

“I know that now.”

“Listen,” Angelica broke in, more to Eliza and Alex than to Marcy, “I don’t think we should wait until morning to call Dad.”

Eliza looked up and met her sister’s eyes. “You’re right. Call him now.”
Angelica went into the kitchen to make the call, and Marcy said, “I don’t want to go back to either my dad or my mom.”

“I can’t promise anything,” Eliza told her, “but my dad’s a lawyer, and he’ll do everything he can to help.”

“Thank you. I don’t think I even said that. Thank you so much.”

Angelica came back into the room, phone in hand. “Marcy, is there anyone you know, any adults, that you might want to stay with? An aunt or uncle, maybe?”

Marcy thought for a minute and then smiled. “My godparents. I haven’t seen them for a while, but they’re great, and I think they’d be okay with my staying there, at least for now. I call them Uncle George and Aunt Martha, but George is actually my mom’s third cousin or something like that.”

“Do you have their number?” Angelica asked.

Marcy gave it to her, and she went back to the kitchen to continue the conversation with Philip Schuyler.

“Is there anything else that you remember that might help us find John?” Eliza asked.

Marcy shook her head. “I don’t think so. I don’t know where they took him.”

“Okay, but you’ve really helped,” Alex said. “I’m going to call the police now and update them.”

“Will I be in trouble now?” Marcy asked anxiously.

“Of course not. They might send somebody over to get an official statement, but you won’t be in trouble.”

Officer Perry had given Alex his card, so he called the number on it and caught Perry just as he was about to go off duty. “I’ll swing by on my way home and go over what she told you,” Perry said. “I know it’s late, but …”

“No problem,” Alex assured him. “The sooner you get the information, the better.”

While they waited for the police officer, Angelica was able to give Marcy some positive news. “My dad called your godparents, and they’re more than happy to have you stay with them. Then he called a judge who’s a friend of his and got an emergency custody order so that you can go right to them. It’s okay for you to stay here tonight, and then Martha will pick you up in the morning. After forty-eight hours, your parents will have the right to petition for custody, but Dad said your father has no chance of getting it, and with George and Martha also applying, your mother would have to be able to make a really strong case, and she probably can’t.”

“She won’t bother,” Marcy said. “I think she’d rather just go somewhere by herself and make a new start.”

Eliza’s heart ached to hear those words, to see Marcy trying to be so brave, but it would be so much better for her if she could have a happy home with her godparents.

“It turns out Mom and Dad know George and Martha,” Angelica said.

“Really?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah, you’ve heard Dad talk about working with Washington, Knox, and Greene, right?”
“The law firm? Yeah, sure.”

“Well, Marcy’s godfather is George Washington, the head of the firm. Dad has nothing but good stuff to say about him.”

“That’s great!” Eliza turned to Marcy. “Our dad is a very good judge of character. I’m glad your godfather gets his stamp of approval.”

The doorbell rang, and Alex went to let Officer Perry in. He took a brief statement from Marcy, getting as much information as she could give him about the van and the two security guys, Fred and Keith. “I’m sorry I don’t know the license number or anything,” she said, sounding distressed.

“Hey, don’t apologize,” Perry told her. “You’ve given us a lot of useful information, and we now know that a crime was committed. There’s going to be a lot more movement on this now.” He said good night, and Alex walked him to the door.

“Keep your phone on,” Perry said. “I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.”

Alex put out his hand. “Thank you.”

“Let’s hope it’s soon.”

* * * * *

“Pastor Henry,” Jefferson said, “Frankie and I would like to leave now.”

Henry Laurens looked up, focusing intently on Tom Jefferson’s face. “Why?”

“Sir, we’ve been here quite a while, and, honestly, I don’t think we’ve been terribly useful. With all due respect, we’re not going to be able to persuade John to cooperate.” He shot John a sideways glance.

“What are you going to do if you leave?” Henry asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Who are you going to talk to? You agreed that we would keep this meeting confidential.”

Jefferson looked both shocked and hurt. “Pastor, you can’t think that I would betray your confidence … John has been my friend since first grade. You know I want the best for him.”

Henry held up his hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you’d break your word. I do wish you would stay, though.”

“Well, Dr. Thomson is back now, so I don’t really think you need me. I’ve already missed three days of classes. If I leave now, I can get some sleep and go to all my classes tomorrow.”

Henry looked from Jefferson to the doctor to John, who was sitting in the desk chair, sketchbook and pencil in his hand. The sketchbook was closed, but John wasn’t making eye contact with anyone. Henry muttered something under his breath and turned to Frankie. “What about you? Do you want to leave too?”

Frankie was twisting his fingers together nervously, but he replied, “Yes, I do, Pastor. I want to go home.”

“To your wife?”
“Of course.”

“Don’t forget what we talked about,” Henry reminded him.

Frankie flushed. “I won’t.”

Henry shook his head sadly. “I thought I could count on you boys. I’m surprised at your lack of commitment to the Lord’s work …”

Jefferson squared his shoulders. “It’s not lack of commitment, Pastor, but there are many ways to do the Lord’s work.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that John is not going to be forced into anything, no matter what your method is.”

John glanced up. This wasn’t in the script.

Henry turned red. “Are you telling me how to deal with my own son?”

“John may be your son, but he’s my friend. I know him well enough to know that you can drug him or beat him into unconsciousness, but not into changing his mind.” Jefferson’s face was set, his eyes looking directly into Henry’s. “You could kill him trying to do that, and then what?”

Henry flung his arm up. “Shut your mouth. You don’t know anything about being a father.”

“I don’t have to. I know about being a decent human being and about being a Christian, and I can’t see anything Christian about the way you’re treating John. And I might as well tell you now that I won’t be worshiping at New Redemption anymore.”

“You’re mad at me, so you’re abandoning God? That just proves how immature you are.”

“There are other churches,” Jefferson said coolly.

Henry’s face was dark, and he practically snarled as he yelled, “Then I curse you! I curse you, and I call down the curse of the Lord on you. The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done in forsaking him! All these curses will come on you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed!”

John had seen and heard his father like this many times, but it wasn’t Henry’s usual public face. He sighed, wishing Tom hadn’t felt the need to be honest. He stood up and crossed the room to stand between his father and Tom. “Just go, Tom,” he began, but Henry grabbed him from behind, his arm around John’s neck.

Jefferson was no longer reluctant to interfere. “Let him go!” he shouted, pulling Henry off John. He was younger, bigger, and stronger, and he twisted Henry’s arm behind his back. Henry was still yelling curses, now calling them down on everybody. Dr. Thomson was in a corner of the room, looking anxiously at his phone, Frankie was edging closer to the door, and even the two armed guards had had enough.

“Put the handcuffs back on him!” Henry ordered, struggling to get away from Jefferson.

Ferb stood up to him. “No, sir. You asked us to do a security job, but that’s not what this is. I’m done with …”
Phineas came up behind Henry Laurens and snapped handcuffs on him. Henry reared back, yelling, and kicked at John as hard as he could. He missed, overbalanced, and fell heavily backward. Phineas held his legs down while Ferb neatly secured his legs with zip-ties. They both stood up and looked from Jefferson, who was still breathing hard, to John. “What do we do now?” Ferb asked.

Chapter End Notes

Somebody answer Ferb's question!
Just FYI, the curses that Henry Laurens yells are taken right from the Book of Deuteronomy. It's a pretty grim book.
Mary Ball was George Washington's mother, and Eleanor Ball was John Laurens's mother. I don't have any information about their being related, but the coincidence of their names was good enough for me to make them distant cousins and provide Marcy with kind, sane guardians.
I'm pretty sure John will be home soon.
Thanks to all for reading and leaving kudos and comments. I love hearing from you.
John stood silently, trying to work it out. He could get Phineas and Ferb to take his father home, could probably just dismiss Dr. Thomson, and then maybe ask Tom for a ride, but …

His train of thought was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. He jerked his head at Frankie, who was closest. “Open it.”

Frankie unhooked the security chain and opened the door a crack.

“Excuse me,” came a firm voice from the hall. “We’ve had several complaints …”

John looked at Jefferson and started to laugh. “Now somebody complains?”

He crossed the room and opened the door all the way. “Come on in,” he said cordially. “I’m John Laurens, but I don’t think the room is in my name.”

The earnest-looking young man who confronted him was wearing a Ramada polo shirt with the name Austin neatly embroidered over the pocket. He stepped into the room and looked around. His eyes widened as he saw Phineas and Ferb in their security gear, their guns visible. “Oh, shit,” he muttered. He scanned the room and went pale at the sight of Henry Laurens yelling and thrashing on the floor as much as he could with his hands and feet secured. He took a couple more steps into the room to get a better view and evidently recognized Henry. “Fuck!” he said. “Isn’t that the TV pastor?”

“Yeah,” John replied laconically. No need to air any more dirty laundry than necessary.

Austin pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Lucy,” he said into it. “Call 911.”

John let out a long breath. “Thank God.” He turned to look at Tom Jefferson, who was pushing his curly hair off his forehead.

Jefferson looked him in the eye and started to laugh. “We’re gonna be here all night, aren’t we?”

John nodded. “Oh, yeah. We may even get arrested.”

“Isn’t this why I stopped hanging out with you?”

John shook his head. “Absolutely not. I swear to you I have never been in a situation like this before.” That made them both laugh harder. Austin was staring at them nervously, but he stayed where he was.

“Then why did we stop being friends?” Jefferson asked John, his tone different.
John gave a half-hearted shrug. “I wasn’t good enough.”

“Who said that? I’ll fight them.”

“You gonna punch yourself in the face?”

“I might have to.” Tom held out his hand. “I was wrong about a lot of things.”

John took his hand and pulled him in for a hug. “Bro hug,” he said, “not gay.”

“Definitely not gay,” Tom agreed, and they both started laughing again.

“Excuse me!” Dr. Thomson snapped. He’d apparently been trying to get their attention. “I’d like to leave. I have patients to see.”

“Nope,” John told him. He looked at Austin. “The police are on their way, right?”

Austin nodded. “Yes.”

As if to confirm this, the sound of sirens became audible. Dr. Thomson looked anxious and became insistent. “I have patients to see.”

“It’s night, you idiot. You don’t have appointments now,” John said, getting between him and the door. He turned his attention to the guards. “Yo, guys, sorry, I don’t know your names, you should probably disarm before the cops get here.”

Phineas and Ferb seemed a bit startled, but John was right. If the police came in and saw two armed men, they might not wait to ask questions. They unbuckled their holsters and handed them over to Tom, who cautiously put them on the desk.

“Can I go?” Frankie asked plaintively. “I don’t want to be mixed up in this.”

“Too late,” John told him. “Everybody needs to make a statement. My story is so ridiculous that even I wouldn’t believe it, so I need everybody to tell the police exactly what happened.” The noise from the sirens was getting louder, and they heard the squeal of tires as several police cars pulled into the parking lot. John turned to Tom. “I’m going to meet the police in the hall. Will you guys be okay in here?”

“Sure,” Tom said. He looked at John and laughed, shaking his head. “This is like being in the worst spy movie ever made.”

John grinned. “Pretty much.” He walked past the resolute Austin with a polite “Excuse me” and stepped into the hall to meet the police.

* * * * *

Marcy had finally gone to bed, exhausted but happy that her godparents were going to come get her in the morning. Angelica had gone upstairs at the same time, but Alex and Eliza were still up. Eliza was sitting on the couch with her feet tucked up under her as Alex paced.

“Somebody had to drive John’s car away,” Alex was saying. “I wonder where it is.”

“I think John has a car locator thing on his phone,” Eliza told him, “but I guess that’s no help if we don’t have his phone.”

“Well, they’ll catch up with Henry Laurens now,” Alex said with grim satisfaction.
“I hope so. He’s a horrible person. Marcy’s terrified of him.”

Alex stopped pacing for a minute and looked down at her. “You know, I’ve always thought my father was a bad guy because he left us when I was a baby. I realize now it could have been a lot worse.”

“Yeah.” Eliza smiled faintly. “Your mom did a pretty good job with you.”

Alex finally sat down and took her hand. “I wish my mom could have met you and John.”

“Me too. I’m glad we’ve got my parents. They already like John, and I know they’ll like you.”

“Yeah, but will they like us? As in, the three of us?”

“I think they will. They love me, and they want me to be happy, so they’ll be okay with it, even if they’re surprised at first.”

Alex put his arm around her and she put her head down on his shoulder. “That means John and I will have to make sure you’re happy, doesn’t it?”

“Mm-hm.”

Alex closed his eyes and thought about it, thought about a future for the three of them, all of them taking care of each other. “We need John back,” he said.

“I know, babe. I think the police are going to prioritize it now that they have the information from Marcy. Maybe we’ll know something by tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I hope so.”

“We should try to get some sleep,” she said, knowing that Alex hadn’t slept more than a few hours a night since John left. “Come on, let’s go upstairs.”

She curled up next to him in bed, holding onto him and rubbing circles on his back to try to keep him calm, but she fell asleep before he did. Alex lay awake in the dark, wondering what kind of drugs Henry Laurens’s henchmen had injected into John, wondering if they’d hurt him in any other ways. It was nearly one o’clock in the morning when his phone rang.

* * * *

Three police officers got out of the elevator and came down the hall, not quite running, but moving very fast and looking very serious.

John got in front of them. “I’m John Laurens,” he said. “I’ve been held here against my will for the last … wait, what’s today?”

“Are you the one who called?” the officer in charge asked. His sleeve chevrons marked him as a sergeant, and his name tag read Boyce.

“No, sorry, that was somebody in the office, I think.”

“Is the incident in this room?” Boyce continued, pretty much ignoring what John was saying.

John decided it was better to let the police follow their routine. “Yeah, maybe you should talk to Austin.”
Boyce went past him into the hotel room. The other two officers followed him, but one of them, a young woman, stopped and asked John, “Did you say you’d been held against your will?”

“Yeah, but I’m sure we’ll get to that.”

She gave him an uncertain look, but continued into the room. John followed them, wondering how long it was going to take.

“Who restrained this man?” Boyce asked sternly. Henry was still yelling.

Ferb stepped up. “I did, sir.”

“We both did,” Jefferson said.

“One at a time,” Boyce told them. He nodded at Ferb. “You first. What’s your name?”

“Fred Skinner.”

“Address and occupation?”

Fred gave them his address and added, “I work as a security guard for Pastor Henry Laurens.”

Boyce’s eyebrows went up. “The TV preacher?”


Boyce blinked, looked at Henry, and looked back at Fred. “That’s your boss?”

“Yeah. Yes, sir, I mean.”

“And you restrained him with handcuffs and zip ties?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Could you tell me why?”

“He was trying to hurt his son.”

“His son?” Boyce looked around the room. “Is his son here?”

John raised his hand. “That would be me.”

“Henry Laurens is your father?”

“Yes.”

“And he … what, attacked you?”

“Yes.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“Yes, quite a few times.”

Boyce paused, as if realizing that things were way more complicated than what he had expected. He turned to the female officer. “Penney, call in for assistance. We need more officers to take statements, and we may need medical assistance.”
“I’m a doctor,” Dr. Thomson said loudly as Officer Penney made the call.

John was not going to let Thomson take the role of good guy in this drama. “I don’t know if he’s a doctor or not, but he injected me with drugs that made me lose consciousness.”

“Against your will?” Boyce asked.

“Fuck, yeah,” John snapped, losing patience.

Boyce put up a hand. “Okay, just had to ask. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“So no question of guardianship …”

“No. I left home when I was eighteen. Could I make a call, please?”

“Give me a few minutes,” Boyce responded. “I need everybody’s attention right now.”

John nodded. _I should have called earlier. I could have used Tom’s phone. Not much longer now. I want to go home._

Sergeant Boyce turned back to Fred. “So you restrained Mr. Laurens to keep him from injuring his son.”

“Yes, sir. He’d already hit him once.”

Boyce glanced back at John and saw the recent cut at the corner of his mouth and the bruise on his neck. “Did your father hit you in the face? Is that how you got that cut?”

“Yes.”

Boyce took a couple of steps closer to Henry. “Mr. Laurens,” he said, “I’m going to release you, but you need to give me your word that there won’t be any trouble, and that you’ll do as I say.”

“Of course there won’t be any trouble,” Henry retorted angrily. “And I’ve never raised a hand to my son. He’s a liar.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Boyce told him. He nodded to the third officer, a young guy whose name tag identified him as Allen. Allen got the key from Fred, cut the zip ties on Henry’s ankles, and unlocked the handcuffs.

“You’re fired!” Henry snapped at Fred.

Fred shrugged. “I figured.”

Henry glared at him and looked like he was about to launch into another tirade, but Boyce stepped in. “Mr. Laurens, please remain silent. You can sit on the bed for now.” He turned briefly to Austin. “Can we get some more chairs? Or maybe a conference room to take statements?”

“Um, yeah, sure … can I go take care of that?”

“Go ahead, just come back right away.”

Austin left in a hurry, just as three more police officers arrived. They all seemed to know one another. The oldest of the new arrivals, another sergeant, gave Boyce a casual salute. “Back-up
“present, Sergeant Boyce.”

“Acknowledged, Sergeant McDade,” Boyce responded.

“I have some information that might be helpful,” McDade said. He showed Boyce his phone screen.

Boyce read it and raised an eyebrow. “Oh, really? Well, that confirms something.” He sighed. “We have a lot to work through, though. I’m thinking we should tape this room off as a crime scene and get everybody into a conference room to give statements. There’s not enough space in here.”

“That makes sense,” the older sergeant agreed.

“You can have Conference Room B,” Austin told them, returning just in time to hear what Boyce had said.

Boyce looked around. “Okay, Allen, you’ll accompany Pastor Laurens, Penney, you’re on the guy who says he’s a doctor. Sergeant McDade, You can handle the two security guards, I’ll take the three civilians. Hunt and Darby, you secure the weapons and get the room taped off. Come on, everybody, we’re going downstairs.”

* * * * * *

Alex had just started to fall asleep when the phone rang, and he was instantly at full alert. “Hello?” he answered.

“Alex Hamilton?” asked a voice that might have been familiar.

“Yes.”

“Listen, you didn’t hear this from me, but we pinged the location of John Laurens’s phone.”

“What? Where?” Alex sat straight up and put his hand on Eliza’s shoulder to wake her.

“I can’t tell you, but I hear the Camden Ramada Inn is a nice place to stay.”

“Officer Perry?”

“No, sorry, I think I dialed a wrong number.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

Perry had already hung up.

Alex turned to Eliza, who was sitting up next to him wide-eyed.

“They got a signal from John’s phone. Get dressed.”

“Should I get Marcy?”

Alex shook his head. “Not until we’re sure he’s okay. Wake Angelica up and tell her, though, so she’ll know where we are.” He was throwing random clothes on.

“Where will that be, Alex?”

“Oh, shit, sorry, the Camden Ramada Inn.”
“Who called?”

“I’m pretty sure it was Officer Perry, but we have to pretend not to know, okay?”

“Okay.” Eliza hesitated at the door. “Alex …”

“What?”

“I’m scared.”

* * * * *

Conference Room B had about half a dozen tables in it, and Sergeants Boyce and McDade started by telling everyone where to sit and to produce identification.

“I don’t have any,” John said.

Boyce frowned. “Why not?”

John gave him the shortest version he could of how he came to be in the hotel room. “My backpack is in the room closet, though,” he added. “My wallet was in my pocket when they grabbed me, but they may have put it in there.”

“Let’s hope,” Boyce sighed. He ordered Officer Penney to go back to the room and get John’s belongings out of the closet. In the meantime, he supplied Frankie and Jefferson with a stack of paper and some pens and told them to write out statements of what had happened in the last four days. That ought to keep them busy for a few hours, he thought. Serves them right.

When Penney returned with the bag, Boyce put it on the table and opened it carefully. “Clean clothes, toothbrush and deodorant, wallet.” He handed John the wallet and opened a zippered compartment. “Quite a lot of cash,” he commented, pulling out a stack of bills.

“My sister said she was in trouble,” John told him. “I wasn’t sure how much I might need.”

Boyce nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. Would you mind if we checked your bank records on that?”

“Not at all. I could show you on my phone, but …”

“You don’t know where your phone is?”

“One of the guards had it. Ferb … sorry, Fred.”

“Hold on a minute,” Boyce said. He crossed the room to where Sergeant McDade was interviewing Phineas and Ferb, or, as they now had revealed, Kevin and Fred. John couldn’t hear the conversation, but a wave of relief went over him as Ferb pulled the phone out of his pocket and handed it to Boyce.

Boyce brought John the phone. “Was it turned off earlier?” he asked curiously.

John frowned. It was an odd question. “Yeah, why do you ask?”

“Columbia PD has been trying to locate it, but they just got the signal a couple of hours ago. You were reported at first as a missing person, but that was upgraded to kidnap victim earlier today.”

John dropped his head into his hands. Alex and Eliza didn’t think he’d left them. And they must have talked to Marcy. Where was she? He looked up and brushed the tears away. “Could I have
some water?”

“Sure.” Boyce gestured to Darby and sent him out to get bottles of water for everybody. “Did you get enough food while you were here?” he asked John.

“Not really, but I’ll be okay. Can I make a call?”

Boyce gave him a faint smile. “I don’t think you need to.”

“What?”

“Sergeant McDade was contacted by Columbia PD right before he left the station. They’d gotten your phone signal and wanted us to investigate. He told them that we already had been called to the location and that you were here. They’re on their way now.”

“Who’s on their way?”

“Columbia PD.”

John’s face fell in disappointment, and Boyce took pity on him. “In a case like this, when we know the missing person has been located and is safe, we may informally notify whoever made the missing person report, just to reassure them. We may even – again, informally – mention the location.”

John felt shaky. “Alex and Eliza?”

“They’re on their way too.”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter after this to get everyone reunited and all the loose ends tied up. If you have any questions, ask now! Thanks for reading and as always for kudos and comments. <3 <3 <3
Peggy and Adrienne had made a celebration breakfast and invited everyone, so that by the time Alex and Eliza returned from Camden with John – and, surprisingly, Tom Jefferson – the house was already full of friends. Jefferson got a few suspicious looks, especially from Angelica, but John wanted him there, so nobody objected. A couple of phone calls had ensured that the Washingtons would be able to stay long enough to enjoy the meal and say hello to John, who had gratefully dug into a huge stack of blueberry pancakes as soon as he’d taken a shower. He gulped some coffee to wash them down so he could continue his story.

“And then,” he said, “I showed Ferb the picture in my sketch book. I had written Turn on my phone on it. He saw it and let me know that he understood, and then I covered the writing with crosshatching before my father got his hands on the sketchbook.” He looked around the table and grinned. “Ferb turned on the phone, and Alex and Eliza came to pick me up.”

“You are a genius, babe,” Alex told him.

“I’m a tired and hungry genius right now,” John said, “but you can tell me more about how smart I am after I’ve had about ten more pancakes and a nap.” He helped himself to more pancakes and a couple of sausage links.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Eliza asked anxiously. “Maybe you should get checked out by a doctor.”

John leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I’m fine, sweetheart. I’m sure that whatever drugs they gave me are out of my system, but I’ll go get some blood work done this week just to be sure, promise. I was worried about what might have happened while I was knocked out, but Tom told me all they did was play those subliminal tapes like they use for quitting smoking, only these were for quitting being gay. Waste of time, obviously. Oh, and my dad’s doctor friend is wanted for fraud in three states and malpractice in a couple more, so the police took him away somewhere.” For a minute the smile faded from his face. “They took my father away too.” He leaned across Eliza to take Marcy’s hand. “We don’t have to see him again, ever.”

Marcy nodded, fighting tears, and Eliza pushed her chair back to get out of the way of their hug. She was glad that the Washingtons lived nearby so that John and Marcy could spend some normal sister-and-brother time together.

“I’m going to make some more coffee,” Angelica announced. “Alex, come help me.”

“Why…” Alex began, frowning, but John kicked him under the table. “Oh, yeah, sure,” he agreed and followed Angelica into the kitchen.
She shoved him into the corner that was the farthest from the dining room and whispered, “Will you please tell why in the name of all that’s holy you brought Jefferson here?”

Alex threw up his hands. “John insisted. He said he wouldn’t have gotten out safely without him, but I don’t know the whole story yet. I couldn’t say no …”

“No, of course you couldn’t.” She filled the coffeemaker, a thoughtful look on her face. “I have to say, I’ve never seen Tom Jefferson this quiet.”

It was true. Tom had barely spoken a word beyond his polite thanks at being included. Peggy entered the kitchen just then, Adrienne right behind her, and put an end to the conversation. “Tench wants more pancakes,” she said. “I think I’ll make chocolate chip. And Adrienne’s going to do another pound of bacon.”

Alex went back to the dining room just in time to hear John ask, “Does anybody know where my car is, by the way?”

“It might be in dad’s garage,” Marcy suggested timidly.

John nodded. “I hadn’t thought of that, but you’re probably right if one of dad’s security guards drove it away.”

“Do you need us to break in again?” Tench asked hopefully.

George raised an eyebrow. “Break in?”

“Nobody actually broke in,” Gil explained hastily. “We just helped Marcy over the wall.”

“Oh, okay,” George said with a smile. “I know about that. I’m glad Marcy is going to stay with us. We’ve always wanted to see more of her.”

“I’m going to go to public school,” Marcy announced with a smile. “I’m a little nervous about it, but I’m kind of excited too. I might be behind in some subjects, though.”

“Hey, if you need help in anything, we’ve probably got somebody here who can help you, right?” John told her. “Let’s see, Gil’s pre-med, so he’s got science covered, oh, and he also speaks French, if you take French …”

“So do I,” Alex put in.

John laughed. “Yes, but I was going to recommend you for civics and US history. Alex is a poli-sci major, so he knows everything about government. Herc’s in engineering, so he can do anything with math. You already know Eliza is studying journalism, and Angelica is pre-law, so … what else will you be taking?”

Marcy laughed. “Phys ed?”

“Oh, hey,” Rick said. “Tench and I are on that. We can set you up with a workout routine, and …”

“Stop,” Peggy told him, putting a plate of freshly made chocolate-chip pancakes on the table. “You’ll scare the poor girl to death.” She turned to Marcy. “You don’t need a workout routine, but Rick and Tench are really helpful with moving heavy objects.”

“So that’s why you keep me around?” Tench asked.

“Absolutely,” Peggy told him, but she gave him a quick kiss as she sat down next to him. “But
you’re cute too.”

Tench helped himself to another pancake.

A few minutes later, the Washingtons announced that they had to leave. Marcy wasn’t ready to go
back to either her father’s or her mother’s house to get her things, so they were taking her shopping
for a new wardrobe and whatever other essentials she needed.

“Martha says I can have regular clothes,” she told Eliza, “even things like tank tops.”

Eliza hugged her. “You deserve every good thing. I’ll call you in a few days, and we can get
together.”

Marcy’s eyes filled with tears. “Thank you for everything, Eliza. Thank you so much.”

John held his little sister tight for a few minutes and then kissed the top of her head. “We’re gonna
see a lot of each other now.”

Marcy nodded, trying not to cry. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” John told her, then turned her around. “Go have fun shopping.” He watched her
walk down the sidewalk with the Washingtons.

Eliza leaned her head against his shoulder. “She’ll be okay. It may take some time, but she’ll be
okay.”

“Yeah.” John took a deep breath. “God, it’s good to be back. I want to go home, though, to my
apartment, but I want you and Alex with me. Is that okay?”

“You need some peace and quiet?”

He nodded, and she was struck again by how exhausted he looked when he wasn’t smiling. “We’ll
take you home,” she said.

Nobody raised a word of objection, and Peggy and Adrienne insisted that Gil and Tench would
help with the cleanup.

“Could I help?” Jefferson asked tentatively. “I can wash dishes, or dry them, or whatever you need …” His voice faded as he looked at Angelica.

Angelica didn’t know yet why things were going to be different with Tom Jefferson, and maybe
she never would, but his habitual arrogance seemed to be gone. “Sure,” she responded. “I’ll show
you where the dish towels are.”

Alex drove to John’s apartment, the three of them mostly silent on the way. Once they were inside,
John grabbed both of them, one in each arm, and held on as he buried his face in Alex’s neck and
cried. “I was so scared,” he sobbed.

“Of course you were,” Alex murmured, his mouth against John’s curls. “You knew better than
anyone there what your father was capable of.”
John lifted his head and wiped his eyes with his fingers. “How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That it wasn’t being kidnapped or drugged or handcuffed that was the worst, it was being near my father.”

“Because I know he doesn’t love you. That’s horrible, and unfair, and makes no sense, because how can anyone not love you, but it’s still true, and being at the mercy of someone who doesn’t love you is terrifying.”

John started crying again, and Eliza leaned against his chest, holding him tight and listening to his heartbeat. “I love you so much,” she told him. “We love you. We’ll always love you. Maybe that could be enough.”

“It is,” John whispered. “You – you two – you’re everything I’ve ever needed.” He took a deep breath. “I’m so tired. Come to bed with me. I need you with me.”

None of them had slept much over the last four days, stressed as they were by fear and anxiety. They curled up together in John’s bed, Alex and Eliza holding John between them, too tired to even talk now, but lying as close to one another as they could. Alex pulled the covers up over them, and they finally slept.

It was nearly dark when they woke up, Alex first, as usual, opening his eyes in the dim room and remembering with relief that John was safe with them now, and then starting to worry about what the aftermath might be. He’d make sure John went to a doctor for a check-up because they couldn’t know for sure what drugs he’d been given. Then at some point, he would have to testify against his father. That was going to be rough, but they’d be with him, and, strangely, it seemed that Tom Jefferson was going to back up everything John said. He shifted to his side so that he could put his arm around John; he wasn’t trying to wake him up, but John moved and then reached up and pulled Alex’s head down so he could kiss him. “I’m home,” he whispered.

Eliza was still asleep, curled up on her side, spooned against him, so John nuzzled her neck to wake her up. She turned toward him, smiled, and kissed him. “I love you,” she said.

John sat up. “I need to say something, but can we get some dinner first?”

“Sure,” Alex responded, resisting with difficulty the urge to ask questions. “What do you want? I can go out and pick something up, or we can get delivery.”

“Let’s get delivery,” John said. “I don’t want either of you out of my sight for a while.”

Alex called Quick Chick and ordered the dinner-for-four special, and a short time later they were sitting at John’s kitchen table enjoying roast chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans. “There’s apple pie for dessert,” Alex announced happily.

John raised an eyebrow at him. “I’m just glad there’s food.”

Alex turned red with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry, babe. Here I am talking about pie, and you barely had anything to eat for days.”

“I don’t understand how your father thought that starving you would help,” Eliza said. “In fact, I don’t see how he thought any of the things he did would influence you at all. How does he not know you better than that?”
“Well, that’s the thing, sweetheart,” John responded. “He doesn’t know me at all. He never has, because he never made any attempt to get to know me. I was just supposed to be an extension of him and do whatever he told me to. Same with Marcy, and I guess even my mom. We were never real people to him.”

Alex put his hand over John’s. “I’m so sorry you had to grow up like that. How did you turn out to be the completely awesome person that you are?”

John shrugged. “Who knows how any of us figure out who we are? I just always knew I wasn’t who my father wanted me to be.”

“Thank God,” Eliza murmured.

“I know, right? My only regret for the last few years was that Marcy still had to live there, but now she’s out too. She’ll be so much better off with George and Martha.”

“She’s really sweet,” Eliza said. “It will take some time, but she’ll be fine. I want to try to get together with her at least a few times a month.”

John gave her a grateful look. “That would be good for her. She doesn’t have much confidence in herself because she’s never been allowed to make her own decisions, so you’ll be a good role model.”

Eliza smiled. “You think I make good decisions?”

“Well, you decided to be in this relationship with Alex and me, so I hope you think that was a good decision. I know it’s good for me.”

“Definitely good for me.”

“Me too,” Alex added, standing up to clear the table. “We all want pie, right?”

John laughed. “If it were the end of the world, Alex would still want dessert.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Alex defended himself. “Pie is delicious. So are cookies. And cake.” He handed out the plates of pie.

“Okay,” John said, picking up his fork, “I need to say something, so I might as well say it over pie.” He stopped and looked up, his eyes going from Eliza to Alex and back. “I’ll never keep anything from either of you again. It doesn’t matter that I thought Marcy was in trouble, I should have known that you’d be as willing to help her as I would. I should have told you who called, and exactly where I was going. I probably should have taken you with me, because anything that concerns me concerns you too. It’s something I thought a lot about in that hotel room.”

“You can trust us, John,” Alex said softly.

“I know I can. I’ve just been so used to handling things on my own that I wasn’t thinking that way. It’s funny, because for two years I was supposedly in a relationship, but I still dealt with my emotional issues alone. There was a lot I never even mentioned to Frankie. After two years with me, he knew way less about my relationship with my father than you know now. I’m not going to have secrets from you two, ever.”

Eliza took his hand and nodded. “Me either. If we’re going to do this, then we have to promise to be open with each other – even if it’s hard.”
“Especially if it’s hard,” Alex said. “We can’t keep things from one another.”

“It’s hard for me,” John admitted. “It’s been hard talking about what happened, but I promised myself I’d do it because I want us to stay together. I could have avoided being kidnapped and drugged if I hadn’t told myself that I could handle something without anybody’s help. But it’s not just about me, it’s about us. I need to know that you love the real me, not just the me that I show the rest of the world.”

“Have we seen the real you since we’ve been together?” Eliza asked.

“Yeah, you have, except for that one fairly significant exception.”

She smiled. “I really love the person I’ve seen over the past few months. I love him even more than the guy I loved for two years while he was dating somebody else.”

“John,” Alex said, “I can only say that when you vanished, when we didn’t know where you were, I really understood what you meant to me. I would like to show you, rather than just tell you, how much I love you.”

John reached out for him. “I would like that.” He was still holding Eliza’s hand on the other side, and he stood up, pulling them both with him toward the bedroom.

Alex didn’t even wait to finish his pie.

Chapter End Notes

Alex’s last speech is a paraphrase of part of his well-known letter to John (April, 1779). The original reads, “I wish, my Dear Laurens, it might be in my power, by action rather than words, (to) convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that ’till you bade us Adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you.” If you want a link to the whole letter, find me on Tumblr @daisy-rivers and message me.

Every story leaves more stories untold and loose threads that can’t be tied up. What happens to Peggy and Tench? Was there or was there not a spark between Angelica and Jefferson (hint: there was)? How will things work out for Marcy? Maybe somebody will write these stories ...

A million thanks to all of you who read this and who read the things I write. Thank you even more than a million for leaving kudos and comments because they are the best motivators ever. I hope our paths cross again.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!