Summer Menage III

by AnniKay

Summary

Commune's first summer as KAMA
The collegiate New Directions summer before their Freshman & Sophomore years.

Notes

*****PLEASE NOTE: If I am using an actor or musician as a face claim, they do not exist as their famous persona in this universe. IE: Darcy Lewis is a person so Kat Dennings doesn't exist. Or Hiram Berry is a person so Jeff Goldblum is not.*****

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
This Chapter Dedicated to Mykroft & love-orthelack-thereof, two very encouraging Learning French Series reviewers.
I appreciate all of you.
Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 Welcome to the LF Beta Team!!!!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Dear Diary (Pink) & Love Never Felt So Good (Michael Jackson)

Dear Diary (Pink)
Mercedes PoV

The time between the MTV Movie awards and the end of the school year flew by in a fit stop kind of hurry up then wait haze. Immediately after we got back to campus, we were in advisement meetings to set our schedule for fall term. I don’t know about Sam’s or Noah’s advisers, but both of mine seemed to be more than a little shocked that I was actually coming back the next year. But I was definitely finishing my degree. Platinum tracks or not…my family would have been so disappointed in me if I didn’t get my degree. The day after we had to submit our registration for fall term was Puck’s birthday. We did whatever he wanted that day. Thankfully I didn’t have to sing a lick for a while…because skipping classes to make love over and over and over again all day was certainly not conducive to hitting sustained high notes.

We had a nice dinner with the entire crew and they gave him some really nice gifts. Santana got him a set of shot glasses with the mug shots of famous gangsters on them. Brittany gave him a great painting that was cool and looked deep, but none of us got it. Artie’s gift was cool…but rather unnecessary. He gave Puck a collection of the top ten porn videos of the twenty-thirteen. Blaine went for the safe thing, a gift certificate to Game Stop. The tenants bought the dinner and that was their gift, which just told us that we had the very best tenants any landlord and ever had, ever. Kurt had gone last because his gift heralded mine and Sam’s. When Puck opened the ‘Pirate Bandit on a Bandit’ helmet, he looked confused as hell. “Fairy?”

“You’ll understand in a minute,” was all Kurt would say.

And he did. Sam and I had gotten him a red and black Harley Davidson Street Seven-fifty. It was brand new and we’d customized it for him with special black and red wheels. It was awesome. We dragged him to his new space in the garage. “Holy, fucking, hell. This is the most boss thing ever.” Suffice it to say that he showed his gratitude for his birthday gift with more, extended lovemaking that left both me and Sam almost unable to move the next morning.

The following Monday, we met with Haja, Brantley and Hudson to see what we needed to do to help them be successful at making us successful. That meeting went well into the evening and it was more invigorating than doing that dumbass Polar Bear thing…we decided to buy an office space for all our ‘administrative or management type employees, and Uncle Ethan who decided to move to New York and concentrate fully on entertainment and contract law with us as his primary clients. I was happy as hell about that. His kids were adorable. The next day was Sam, Puck and my anniversary. We went back to Amore La Vie for dinner, then we joined our New York friends at Webster Hall.

We said that we weren’t going to get each other gifts, but not one of us kept to our agreement. I knew that Puck needed motorcycle leathers. So I had, in the back of my mind, known that I was going to get him those for our anniversary before we ever said we’d be good and not buy each other anything. My mother had convinced me that since we weren’t using our real estate purchases to build our credit ratings, I should probably get a personal credit card. The ones we had for our big purchases were actually held jointly, so they helped our personal credit scores but mainly it helped our corporation’s. After considering my options, I’d decided to go for a Neiman Marcus card. Since they had given me one with an almost ridiculously high limit, I made it a point to get anything I didn’t want the guys to be able to see on the site where we could monitor and pay our main credit card account with my Neiman card. I was able to get Puck a Helmut Lang black leather aviator
jacket that looked like it was designed just for him, I added a pair of black leather Ralph Lauren ‘defender’ moto-cargo jeans. I finished it all off with a pair of Jimmy Choo Stanford calf leather moto boots in black.

As I was checking out, the sales clerk seemed to have a problem with the fact that I was making such a large purchase on a store card. Or should I say he seemed to have a problem with me doing so while not being white. It got so bad, I asked to see a manager. I may also have let Darcy know what was going on. Social media wasn’t just a time suck, it could be a great weapon and a defense when necessary. Apparently the manager was not just smarter than the sales associate. He was also a fan. When he came over he was a whole different story. “Ms. Jones. What a pleasure it is to have you in our lovely store this afternoon.” He said graciously. “My wife and I saw you and your husbands perform at the Warner Halloween Concert Ball. Your song ‘Color Blind’ was so beautiful it made her cry.”

“Thank you so much.” I smiled and signed an autograph for his wife.

“Now, what seems to be the problem today?” he said helpfully.

I smiled warmly. “Your sales associate seems to have a problem with how I choose to pay for the gifts I’m getting Puck for our anniversary.” I stated simply.

The associate behind the counter looked defiant. “She is making a purchase of over five thousand dollars on a store card. I simply asked her for verification of her identity.”

“You asked for two forms of photo ID.” I said reasonably. “Then when I gave you my driver’s license and student ID, you were, first, extremely rude then you claimed that you couldn’t accept either.”

“It is an out of state license.” He said smugly.

“I’m an Ohio native living in Harlem, primarily, because I attend school at Columbia.” I said reasonably. “That has no bearing on the matter at hand. First of all, this city is known around the world as one of the biggest tourist destinations in the entire country. I’m sure that you wouldn’t treat a German or British tourist like this. Second of all, I could have had a New York license with an address in Morningside Heights and it would have been far more transient because it would have been a campus apartment. My reason for demanding that your manager join the conversation was because you very clearly muttered that I couldn’t really have a platinum level store card. Which meant that you either thought I was committing credit card fraud with absolutely no justification… unless you had a reason?” My tone of voice left no doubt as to what I was referring,

He damned himself with his next words, “It is store policy that we must make sure that we protect our shoppers from identity theft and our stores from the inventory loss associated there with.”

I rolled my eyes. “And you chose to use apply that policy to me because?” I drew out the last word of the question giving him time to answer. When he didn’t or couldn’t, I continued. “It was because, and I quote…you really should learn to keep your thoughts to yourself, by the way…no way does this jumped up little nigga bitch have this kind of credit.”

He was fired and I walked out of that store with a gift card with enough money on it that I would be able to get Uncle Ethan and Amanda a great house warming gift, and a personal apology from the Manager as well as his promise that all his store personnel would be trained better. I was feeling far too pissed off to look for Sam’s gift that day, so I headed home to wrap and hide Puck’s gift. But that feeling changed the second I saw an advertisement for an art supply store. Gabby had told me that when he was young Sam had wanted to be an artist. He wanted to draw his own comic books. I
switched trains and made my way to the East Village location of Jerry’s Palette Shop. That store had to be artist Mecca. With the help of a store clerk, I found Sam a beautiful wooden chest that contained forty-six different colors of oil paint, painting knives, brushes, palette cups and everything else an artist might need. I got him a really boss easel and canvases and rolls of canvas and frames because apparently real artists like to wrap, or stretch or something, their own. I stopped myself from over spending…Puck’s stuff had come to a shade over five thousand, so I made sure that Sam’s stuff was the same. Thankfully Jerry’s was more than happy to deliver everything, because there was no way in hell I was going to manage to get all that stuff from the East Village up to Harlem.

We woke up early the morning of our anniversary and exchanged our gifts after making love. Noah had gotten me and Sam our own helmets for if or when we rode with him, Sam’s was made to look like a stormtrooper’s helm, only as black as Darth Vader. The one he had gotten me was silver with purple EL wire making a cool design. He also gave me a pair of Paloma Picasso olive leaf hoop earrings from Tiffany’s that were really gorgeous. He gave Sam a Diesel Black Gold shearling lined leather biker jacket, a pair of Belstaff quilted leather moto pants and the exact same boots I’d gotten for him. When he realized how similar his gift to Sam was to my gift for him he laughed and merely said, “Great minds really do think alike.”

Sam laughed, “Oh you have no idea.” He passed me a small wrapped box. When I unwrapped it, it was to find Tiffany blue. Inside was a Paloma Picasso olive leaf vine pendant that went perfectly with the earrings Puck had gotten for me. Then he passed me a box that obviously contained apparel. He had also gotten me an Escada Embroidered Leather Moto Jacket that was feminine enough to wear over a dress, but sturdy enough to wear if I ever got on the back of Puck’s bike. “Kurt helped me get something that you would love and with the size a little bit.”

“I do love it. I love you.” We kissed until breathing became an issue. Then Noah and I kissed until our lungs demanded oxygen too. They loved my gifts to them as much as I’d loved theirs to me and when we went out that night I wore my earrings and my necklace.

We made it through the rest of the semester without too much in class drama though as I understood it Santana couldn’t say the same. We fought our way through finals at least one of our teachers decided that they preferred long ass papers or big ass projects to actual final exams so it was a hard fought battle. We were actually fairly confident that we had done well enough to maintain all our merit scholarships and to be invited back for the following year. Before we left campus for the summer, the three of us spent two hours at the financial assistance office setting up a new scholarship for the school that would go to deserving students with economic backgrounds similar to what had happened to the Evans. Before we knew it, it was time to head out for the first part of our festival tour.

I had to state that riding in a caravan of big ass RVs was definitely one way to see the good old US of A. Now first of all let me say I was not complaining and that Gwen Abrams was an amazing business manager. She had arranged the RVs with a company she and Artie’s dad knew from way back in the day. The three RVs she rented us for the summer were forty-two footers that slept eight each. They also had the ability to tow things and we bought a six foot by ten foot cargo trailer that hauled all our instruments, amps, performance gear and that kind of stuff so that we’d only need to have people and their day to day luggage in the RVs. Of course, everyone had an acoustic version of their instruments, or a smaller keyboard in my case and in Justin’s, which they brought with them in the RVs to practice or work on new songs with. The way we broke things down, Santana, Artie and Brittany were in with Hudson, Sam, Noah and I. Deborah had hired us three CDL drivers, Brock, Van and Jacob. Van had our vehicle. Brock had the one that most often held Damien and Adam, Xena, Rainbow, Bianca and Elena. And Jacob drove the one Erica, Cassidy, Justin, Dave, Jackson, and Simeon rode in. The drivers were all big and brawny men that doubled as security and they were huge teddy bears. Brock and Van were only about eight to ten years older than us while Jacob was
about thirty-two. They were great about explaining to us how and why they did things. Like the reason we pulled out from New York at eleven at night. They preferred to drive at night because there was usually less traffic and if they got their sleep during the day, then we could practice while the RVs were stationary.

For our first stop, we were heading to the Riverfest Music festival in Little Rock Arkansas. While we all slept, Brock, Tan and Jacob drove through the night and we woke up at an RV park in Davy Crockett Birthplace State Park. The three of them slept in a rented cabin while we all took advantage of the park’s ‘stage’ area to get in some open air practice…treating the park’s visitors to an impromptu concert. After six hours, only two of which was spent practicing, the rest of the time we made use of the entertainment center in the RVs. Rather than splitting back up we all crowded together in one and watched TV. Thankfully Hudson had made sure that there was food in each of the RVs. She hadn’t gotten anything to make major meals, though there was certainly enough cookware and stuff to do so, but things to make sandwiches and quick breakfast foods like cereal and pop tarts and plenty of water and drinks. So we were able to have breakfast and then lunch. Brock, Jacob and Van were back in their seats by half past two and we got back underway, after a short stop at a Sprawl-Mart supercenter so Hudson could restock the groceries in the RV we’d cleaned out earlier. I think everyone went in, and we lost an extra hour and a half of travel time, but it was hella fun. Apparently in Tennessee, Puck and I could walk around a Sprawl-Mart separately without getting mobbed, but when we were together, people recognized us. That resulted in the later thirty minutes of the delay. But by the time Jacob and Brock managed to get us out, Hudson, Elena and Cassidy had gotten all the groceries put away.

We pulled into Little Rock around one in the morning. We checked into the Courtyard Marriott near the amphitheater where the festival was held and quickly got settled in our rooms. Since we’d been sleeping in the queen sized bed in the RV when we got to the hotel, we were actually pretty awake by the time we got checked in and got all of our clothing up to the room. Of course, we’d made slow and carefully quiet love in the RV, but in the privacy of the hotel room we could really enjoy ourselves. As soon as we grabbed some ice we locked up for the night and it was like someone had flipped a switched in my men. “Baby.” I shivered, it had been too long since I had heard Sam call me that in tone of voice. “I want you to strip naked. Noah, I want you to go turn down the bed.” He moved over and unzipped a very familiar bag.

Following his directive with absolute joy, I took off my comfy cute, teal and cream, ‘I Need My Booty Sleep’ pajama pants, my purple KAMA hoodie, my teal tank top and my sleeping around other people soft bra. Standing in the middle of our large one bedroom suite with its rather nice living room and the pretty king size bed that was calling our names in a very naughty tone of voice, I knew that I was right where I wanted and needed to be. Sam walked forward with my purple and black brocade corset and in a thrice he had me tied into it. He fastened my collar/choker around my neck then and I couldn’t hold back the moan of pure want that slid from my throat. My body was yearning for their attention. No…not just their attention, but I needed them to lose all control. I needed them to take me and remind me that my body was theirs at least in those dark hours. Puck came towards me. “We need you, Babygirl. We need you too. If we get too rough, what do I want you to say?”

“Gum.” I recited. We very rarely played deep enough to need a safe word. A word that I could say if Puck and Sam managed to find my absolute zero.

Sam looked up, “and yours, Noah?”

Puck looked over at our lover. “Rat.” We had decided that one syllable words made the most sense for us. We tended to get monosyllabic in the heat of the moment.

Sam nodded. “Tonight, Baby, Noah’s word won’t be needed…but yours might.” He said calmly.
Crossing the distance between us, he removed the shirt he’d tossed on to come into the hotel. Soon both he and Noah were standing on either side of me, crowding into my personal space. “Tonight, we’re going to take you hard and fast. We’re going to make you want to scream, but you know that you can’t. Even with everything Shelby taught us, if you scream as much as we’re going to make you want to, you won’t be able to perform and a lot of people have paid their hard earned money to come and see you. So you’re going to be a good girl aren’t you? You’re going to be good and not scream too much no matter what we do to that delectable little body of yours, right?”

God, the things that he could do to me with just his voice. They hadn’t touched me at all yet and I was already so wet I could feel the dew of me starting to leak out onto my thighs. “Oui Monsieur.” I answered quietly.

“Good, Babygirl.” Noah whispered. “Now, go over to the bed. Kneel on the bed facing the window.” His instructions were always so clear and concise.

I followed them because I knew that I would be rewarded. I loved it when they rewarded me. I was not to be disappointed. Sam came around in front of me while Puck moved around to my wantonly displayed pussy and ass. His calloused hands rub over my ass, hips and thighs inflaming my senses and making me even wetter. Sam’s hands were busy too, one grabbed my chin and tilted my head up for his kisses, the other slipped over the taunt ribbons of the corset, teasing the skin bare between them. So drugged by Sam’s kiss I almost missed the feel of Puck’s hands spreading the cheeks of my ass. There was no missing the intense sensation of himfasting his lips to my puckered ass hole and licking and Frenching it until I was whining in the back of my throat. Sam smirked against my lips. “You love the feel of Noah sucking and licking at your ass, don’t you? You love it because it feels amazing and because you know that when he moves that tongue, he’s gonna replace it with that big, thick cock of his…ain’t that right Baby.”

I could barely get out a small “Oui” in response. I was teetering close to the knife sharp edge of heaven and hell.

The fact that I got it out at all was a miracle. I was concentrating very hard on not falling over the edge until the command left Sam’s lips. Puck must have known that too. “That’s a perfect Babygirl. So fucking hot.” He murmured before he resumed driving me out of my mind.

Sam was not one to be idle. Having teased the ladder of skin exposed by the wealth of ribbons down my back, he decided that each window of visible flesh should bear his mark. So mark me he did. Soon I was a whining, writhing mass between them only then did Sam give Puck the signal. I felt him move back for a hot minute and when he came back, the very next thing I felt was with his condom and lube covered cock replacing his mouth, just as Sam had taunted earlier. “Oh ho oh God.” I gasped quietly. My fingers were clawing at the sheets in pleasure and my back was arched at the slight twinge of pain. I needed to cum so badly, but we had been playing the game for long enough that I knew better. I knew that there was no way that I could cum without permission and not face retribution. I wanted the loss of control. I didn’t want the ruthless control that came with them having to focus on doling out a punishment.

“Baby, I’m going to fuck your pretty little mouth. I want you to make me cum. When you taste my cum on your tongue. Then, and only then, can you cum.” He said imperiously. I felt even more fluid slip out of my pussy. I loved it when they took on these roles. But I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t do more than relax my lips and take Sam’s cock deeply into the hot, wet cavern of my mouth. Had I said a word, I’d have screamed for sure. “That’s good Baby. You are doing such a good job taking care of your throat.” He praised.

As I pulled my head up his shaft, I kept my tongue stiff against the ridge on the underside of his
cock. The moan that came from Sam at my action spurred me on. I licked and sucked as Puck stroked in and out of my ass. “Come on Babygirl. Work for that Sammy-Boy cream.” He taunted next to my ear as his fingers gripped my hips tightly. He worked his hips so his balls were slapping my clit on every stroke. It was a delicious feeling that was not helping me to maintain control.

My suction increased as I mentally begged Sam to cum, “Oh God, Baby. I want…fuck yeah…suck me hard. Shit. I wanted to tease you more…but fuck your mouth feels so fucking good.” He growled…as he flooded my mouth, I almost choked as my own orgasm took over me. Puck joined us in ecstasy and our cries of pleasure flooded the room. The next few hours were spent between the bathroom and the bed as we made love over and over. Finally, as the sun was coming through the curtains, Sam returned my collar to the ‘toy case’ and we fell into an exhausted sleep.

We had the whole of Wednesday to ourselves, well, once we woke up. So we elected to get out and see the city. Hudson was awesome. Assuming that we wouldn’t want to be trapped in the hotel, she had made arrangements for us to have a large passenger van waiting when we got to the Arkansas capital city. After we’d toured the town, we all agreed that we needed to have food, real food that none of us had touched other than to eat. We were walking distance from a nice steak restaurant, so once everyone was refreshed after our tour of the city, Hudson made some last minute arrangements and the whole crew walked over to have a nice late lunch or early dinner at Sonny Williams Steakhouse. We ran into Josh Todd and Keith Nelson in the lobby and ended up with five more people joining us for dinner, but Hudson did a thing and suddenly it wasn’t a problem at all.

The food was amazing. After spending way too much time trying to decide on my appetizer, I finally went with the chilled shrimp cocktail and then I made my own entrée paring the jumbo lump crabcakes with the ten ounce filet and adding steamed broccoli and sautéed spinach. That way I got both of the appetizers I’d wanted and was a full and happy woman after dinner. Over dinner there was so much laughter and joy. Sam paused eating his Cowboy ribeye and made the offer to Josh that we would pull ‘Rescue Me’ from our set list, but the Buckcherry front man pointed out that the cover was dissimilar enough from the original that we could easily play them back to back on the same stage and there were people who still wouldn’t realize that it was the same song. After dinner there was sound check at the stage in the amphitheater. After not sleeping until after day break and still getting out and about fairly early, we made sure to call it an early night.

The next morning, I got up a little early. I felt like treating Sam and Noah a little bit, so I called room service and had them bring us up breakfast. By the time the guys got up breakfast was waiting. I had ordered a morning scramble of eggs, crisp bacon, sausage and bistro potatoes, and a side of cheese grits for Sam, thick cut French toast with fresh strawberries and country syrup and two orders of bacon for Puck, a healthy starter sandwich for me comprised of egg whites, roast turkey, spinach, Havarti cheese all served on an English muffin. The bistro even offered Starbucks, so I ordered myself a white chocolate mocha, for Puck I had them bring up a caramel macchiato with extra espresso and extra caramel, and for Sam, I ordered his guilty pleasure treat of a caramel cafe latte again with extra espresso and extra caramel. We had a nice leisurely breakfast and then we showered and got dressed for our day.

That summer, I quickly decided that the best thing about the music festival performances was that we didn’t have to dress up as much…at all really. I had picked outfits that would look good, but wouldn’t have me passing out in the late May southern heat. For that first day, I had found a cute little American Rag Printed Asymmetrical-Hem Dress on sale at Macys. It had teal, blue, brown, yellow, cream and pink and I had found a great pair of Native American inspired brown flat suede boots with three layers of fringe. I had lucked out completely because I even found a pair of teal shorts that matched the teal in the dress perfectly. I wore a great, supportive black contour bra from Fredericks and the matching black lace panties. I shimmied on the tight, high waisted, teal shorts that would protect my modesty and keep me from jiggling too much. Then I pulled on a teal and brown
sports bra, again to stop me from jiggling too much before I finally pulled on the dress. Socks and the boots completed my look. I knew that the heat was going to be outrageous so I went for a Cheerio ponytail and no makeup other than my deep berry lipstain and lighter berry gloss.

Hudson text us all with a fifteen minute warning that we needed to head over to the amphitheater. I looked over at Sam and Noah. Each of them were wearing cargo shorts, Puck’s were desert camo and Sam’s were just plain khaki. Puck hadn’t even bothered with a real shirt. He was just wearing a plain white, ribbed tank tee. Sam couldn’t resist the grey and black Vader baseball tee. Each of them were wearing low profile sneakers, black Converse All-Stars for Sam and the KAMA Vans for Puck. When we got down to the lobby, we found that all our girls were wearing white tank tops with the KAMA logo across their breasts and short shorts in either purple or gray. Cassidy, Erica, Santana and Xena were rocking sandals while the dancers wore tennis shoes. The guys were wearing masculine versions of the tank top, so rather than white their background color was heather gray. Their shorts were all black cargo shorts and they were all rocking sneakers. We looked damn good. We looked like a band. And for three days we rocked Little Rock like the boss ass band we were.

From Little Rock, we actually flew up to Chicago early on Memorial Day for the last day of the EDC Festival. We stayed in a hotel there too, even though we had the condo, it was still completely empty. We hadn’t had any time at all to even buy any furniture or bedding or anything. There was no time those two days we were in Chicago that trip either. We flew back down to Arkansas and drove the nine hours to Kingston Downs, Georgia. That festival was another three-day festival. It was totally awesome and an entirely different feel to the event. It ended on Sunday and we spent Monday and Tuesday in Atlanta because our awesome booking agent had gotten us a last minute, surprise concert at the historic Fox Theatre in downtown Atlanta. Despite the last minute nature of the booking, the house was completely packed. We spent an hour afterwards signing autographs and we sold out of all the swag we had brought with us.

Thankfully we had to fly home to our house in Harlem on Wednesday because that weekend we were at the Governor’s Ball Music Festival. We restocked everything, used the three extra days we were in New York to handle some business, do our laundry and refresh our wardrobes, and meet with both our team and our Warner team to pick the songs for our ChristmaKah album that we were scheduled to record over the summer whenever we could make time. That Wednesday, just before we were slated to head to the airport to fly back out to meet Brock, Van and Jacob in Atlanta for the three-hour drive to Manchester, Tennessee where we spent four days performing at the Bonnaroo Music Festival, our grades were released. Sam had finished our first year of college with a three point five seven GPA which was a really high B. Puck’s A plus came out to a three point eight five. I was so proud of my three point seven five that if my head had gotten any more swollen, I wouldn’t have been able to get out of the RV. We were floating on cloud nine for the entire Bonnaroo festival. It was a great time. We were hot as hell, but we had a blast. We followed that up with a concert at the Schermerhorn Symphony Center in Nashville. Another Brantley booking and another huge success. Sam showed us a few of his “old stomping grounds”. He ran into one of his old teachers and took great pleasure in showing her his grades from both semesters. She looked shocked, but at least she seemed very happy for him and pretty proud. When we left Nashville, we had four days off…sort of. We actually drove the entire caravan to Lima and were immediately enveloped into Kevon and Patrice’s wedding plans.

They got married on the third Saturday of June, on the summer solstice. I was one of seven bridesmaids as were both Tessa and Tonya. The other four were Patrice and Tonya’s sorors. Kevon had Devon and both of my hubbies in his line of groomsmen. The rest of his lineup was composed of his frat brothers. There were four junior bridesmaids but only two junior groomsmen. Beth was their flower girl and one of Patrice’s cousins’ kids was the ring bearer. Our dresses were long, strapless, pale pink and floor length satin. As the shortest and curviest of the bridesmaids, I kind of hated that dress. Patrice did try to help by pairing the dresses with five-inch, black platform dress
sandals, but nothing could help the corset I had to strap myself into to keep the girls from weighing down the neckline. Sam and Noah, and the guys were in traditional black tuxes with pale pink ties and cummerbunds. The entire wedding was very traditional and perfectly showcased Patrice looking amazingly, perfectly beautiful in her gorgeous Eve of Milady ballerina inspired embellished ballgown with its thin beaded shoulder straps, embroidered and beaded sweetheart cut bodice, and super low cut back. As Tonya as the destination wedding had been the summer before, that was just how Patrice that hometown wedding was on that June evening.

We gave Patrice and Kevon their gift from us the night before. “Alright, so remember us telling you not to do any planning for the honeymoon but to make sure that you didn’t have to be anywhere from next Monday until the one after it?” Sam started off.

They both agreed with nods of their heads. So Puck continued. “That’s because we’ve known since December what we were going to give you for your wedding gift was your honeymoon. We just had to find the one that screamed Kev and Tricie.”

“It took us quite a bit of research before we found the perfect place for you two to go.” Together we handed them the folder containing all their travel information. “Monday morning, you will fly to Barbados and spend a week in one of the love nest suites at Sandals resort. It is all inclusive, but you will probably want to take some money with you just in case you decide to go off the property for something. Oh and we got you a couple’s massage at the spa. You’ll just need to call and schedule it. You fly home on Sunday the twenty-ninth.”

There was a lot of love given. No, seriously, I thought that I was gonna have to club Tricie over the head to get her to stop hugging us. Since the parents all knew what we were giving them, they gave them things that they would need to have on their honeymoon. They received new luggage, summer and beach apparel, a new digital camera and even simpler things like a basket of sunscreen and some spending money just in case. Their other family and friends’ gifts were all more about their house and stuff like that. After Tricie and Kev headed back to get rested…they had to separate for twenty-four hours, Tricie was traditional like that…we cornered Devon and Tonya and gave them their packet. We had gotten them a week at a Beaches resort in Turks and Caicos for their anniversary and to thank them for their support and love and acceptance and otherwise just being awesome elder siblings.

While Kevon and Devon took their brides off to celebrate their love and marriages, we met Brock, Van, Jacob and all the RVs down in New Orleans where we met up with the Warped Tour. That was an extremely awesome experience. We traveled with the Warped Tour for six stops, then we had four days off before we hit the Pacific Northwest leg of the Warped Tour and celebrated Independence Day in Portland. I opened the night for the concert by singing the Star-Spangled Banner…it went over very well. Artie taped it and Darcy put the video up on our website as a free download with purchase of any Merch over twenty-five bucks, in two weeks it was downloaded over a hundred thousand times.

Our final stop in that leg of the tour was Sturgis…I was surprised by how many bikers really did like us. They loved Puck, but they really did like the rest of us too. One huge, burly biker guy told me if I ever wanted to get away from it all, the back of his bike was always waiting on me. After Sturgis there was another little break before we had more southern dates, including another stop in Atlanta. We did another surprise concert at the Peace Concert Hall in Greenville, South Carolina…we got to meet Jamie’s whole family. They were all very different and yet completely awesome. It was easy to see that she had the support of her whole family. The theatre seated twenty-one hundred people, about twenty of those tickets were comped to Jamie, and another thirty tickets were given away at the local radio stations, but they sold two thousand and fifty tickets in three days through radio advertising, and Darcy’s spreading the word online. That was supremely exhilarating. When we
found out that the cheap seats had gone for forty-five bucks and the front row had been almost two hundred, Sam literally swooned.

The Warped Tour went through the Carolinas finishing that part of the tour at Duke University’s Wallace Wade Stadium. Once we left Raleigh Durham, we were off for two weeks for Becah and George’s wedding. Since so many of their relatives were still in New York, they had elected to have their wedding in the city they had grown up in together. Being in New York for three days before the wedding, we were able to meet with Darcy, congratulate her and Brantley on the awesome work they had done for us by that point in the summer and we stopped in to see the progress being made on the office space. The timing was perfect Hudson’s lease was up on August first so the entire band plus Darcy, Haja and Brantley came together and we got Hudson moved into the apartment that Darcy had moved into as soon as it was completed and ready for them. The quad their apartment was part of just four houses up from ours, so it was convenient to both of them and us, plus they were really close to the subway line and a fabulous little Greek restaurant that Darcy had discovered.

The wedding itself was held in the Mayzer family stomping grounds in Flushing Queens on the third Saturday of July. The Forever Together venue was a beautiful ballroom. It was a truly lovely Jewish ceremony. Until that week I don’t know if I realized that George had converted, I knew that he and Tessa really only went to Temple any more, but I didn’t realize that they had gone Jewish all the way. The running joke among my men was ‘boy do I hope George was circumcised as a baby, you know that would hurt like a son of a bitch as a grown up’. But either way, the ceremony was full on Jewish though Bubbie Ruth explained that it was only semi-traditional. They married under a chuppah, but it was an indoor ceremony. They did have a ketubah, but they chose not to share it with everyone. The ceremony was done all in English, and Puck escorted his mother down the aisle in the beautiful, pale gold silk, David Fielden dress he had arranged for her to find. The camera crew from Say Yes to the Dress was there filming for another later episode. She had Sarah and Tessa as her maids of honor and Mom and Gabby were her bridesmaids. She let them wear fancy evening wedges and short blue strapless satin dresses that looked like they were wearing waterfalls. The night before we’d given them a six night honeymoon stay at the Ritz Carlton in Maui, which they kind of tried to object to since Puck had given her the dress, but given an hour of talking straight up out our asses, after thirty minutes of speaking from our hearts, we were able to guilt them out of guilt for spending money on them.

Their flight didn’t leave until after ten, so we were all able to watch MTV VMA nominations all together. The whole big ass cluster of us watched it on the new feed screens in JFK before they headed through security. As we watched the announcements, we must have looked like LOONS… completely crazy. But that was not our fault. We were really just all that happy. We have been nominated for all three of the videos we’d released so far. ‘Rescue Me’ had gotten nominated in the video with a message category. ‘ColorBlind’ was up for Best Choreography and Best Direction and ‘The Fighter’ was up in four categories, Best Cinematography, Best Direction, Artist to Watch and Video of the Year. It was such an amazing end to an awesome weekend. There was quite a bit of press to be done in the five days between the nominations but thankfully we didn’t have to rejoin the Warped Tour in Florida until Saturday. Sammy Boy had had a hormonal episode Monday afternoon that lasted well into the evening, but thankfully everything Shelby had taught us more than a year before, and the undeniable grace of God, meant that my voice was its usual strong and melodic self when we were in the studio the rest of the week. I loved it all. It was all really amazing. It was the best summer of my entire life.

Love Never Felt So Good (Michael Jackson)
Puck PoV
By the end of July, we were tired as hell. I mean, we’d been all over the US map and we still had six
more weeks and another wedding to go. All that being said it was still the best summer ever, and the most amazing part had nothing to do with living our dream or even being with Cede and Sam as God intended when He created the two of them just for me. The best, absolutely hands down best part of the summer was getting to escort my mother down the aisle and putting her hand in the hand of a man who was truly worthy of her love. Don't get it twisted I loved the fact that we had added like ten more states to our ‘Yeah, we've boned there’ list. Though Sexy Mama wouldn't let us count any that we got down while passing through. She set down the rule that we had to have stopped there for at least an hour or else that state didn’t count. If we could have counted the drive through states, the number would have been a hell of a lot higher. Still we'd even added seven to the ‘busted a nut in our woman's amazing ass list’...so all the traveling might have been tiring but it was definitely enjoyed. But there was just nothing that could top seeing my mother happy after everything that my rat bastard of a sperm donor had put her through.

The day after George and my mom headed on their Hawaii honeymoon, and we found out that we were nominated for like all the VMAs, yea we did that shit, we were actually back in the studio. Since the family wasn't rushing immediately back to Ohio, we dragged our siblings with us on both Tuesday and Wednesday. We had picked out nine Christmas songs and ten Chanukah songs and in a moment of inspiration that I took full credit for, I dragged Sarah into the booth with me for ‘The Dreidel Song’ and ‘Hanukkah, Oh Hanukkah’. Which then inspired Sam to have Stacey join him on ‘Christmas Shoes’...which was pretty risky because in the meetings everyone had either loved or completely hated that song, but Sam loved it...so he fought for it. Stacey's part was heavy though and her little voice was just so fucking pure...made me wanna cry or some shit. Of course, then we had to make arrangements for him to do one with Stevie...wouldn't have been fair otherwise. It took them for freaking ever to agree on 'Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer'. Thankfully that one was public domain, so we could just do it without the drama of getting the permission to cover it like some of the others. It also brought us up to an even number of songs for each denomination.

Having the middle Evans siblings take part meant that there was no way Devon and Kevon were about to be left out and neither was Tessa, so I shared ‘Jingle Bell Rock’ with her, and Mercedes and her original brothers did ‘Mary Did You Know’. Kevon and Devon shocked us with how good their voices were. I don’t think me and Sam had ever heard them sing anything at all. We were in the studio for six of the seven days we were home. It was the first time we were recording tracks with our band and it was really awesome. Santana, the Dam Brothers and Xena were able to know just from knowing us so well when we wanted them stronger or quieter without us having to say a word. Justin, Erica and Dave were able to pitch in or stay out when they felt the song needed their instrument and we let them try it that way.

Most of the time it worked great. In fact it worked out really well until Justin tried to 'deconstruct' ‘Joy to the World'. I don't know who was less happy with that suggestion, Sexy Mama, Stacey or Brittany, but there was no way in hell that we were going to mess with it after their reactions. By the end of that week, we’d gotten all the tracks laid down except for the one we were doing for charity. That one we didn't get in the can until we were back in Ohio. We had a three day gig at the state fair and we used the day before it started to lay the final track. We'd been doing go-to-meeting online practices with the whole crew, there were too many of us for skype. We got every person who had been a New Direction under either Schue or Shelby, even St. Jackass...except Berry. We took the high road and invited her. It was for charity after all and we had asked everyone, hell we even flew in Rutherford...but she refused when she realized that it was going to fully choral and fully acapella. We also got all Blaine's buddies from Dalton...there were thirty of them, seventeen old school NDs, and twenty four in the most recent NHSSCA national championship New Directions, and plus Aidan, the Dam bros and Xena

We had this big ass gospel choir recording studio we rented in Columbus and we practiced it in person a few dozen times before we recorded it. We did three takes, before everyone was perfectly
on beat and no one, not even St. James or Sebastian was trying to over sing anyone else. We’d amassed at the studio around eight that Monday morning and practiced until noon. We laid the first attempt at the tracks before twelve thirty. ‘Carol of the Bells’, with all the Warblers vocal music was a four and a half minute track. By the time we decided that it was perfect, and Xavi agreed, it was one thirty. We were all hungry as a mug, so we decided to take everyone to lunch.

That meant deciding where to go and seeing if there was any way that the place we wanted to go would take like eighty people with no notice. Suddenly Finn shouted out. "Dude. I know exactly where we need to go."

He, Vince, who couldn’t sing…he may have been worse that Hudson, but he had come for moral support…and to hang out and Lauren all exchanged a look and in unison started telling us about a hole in the wall barbeque joint called Ray-Ray's Hog Pit that was awesome and really quiet during the summer and probably empty or close to it. Hudson Friedman never left anything to chance. She had the guy on the phone in a heartbeat and a half. "Yes. I am calling to hope that you can help me. My bosses, the music group KAMA, yes sir that is the one with the curvy little black girl and the two white boys, well they just finished recording with their friends and some of them go to OSU…yes sir Finn and Lauren and Vince. Yes sir, we are all very happy that they are doing better and that man got what he deserved. Oh well thank you, but I would feel horrible if I didn't tell you that there are a total of seventy-six of us. Really, sure it is no problem…we will eat whatever you bring us. No sir, we don't all eat like Finn…there are a lot of guys his age though. Thank you so much. We'll be there…is two thirty okay? Great, my name is Hudson and we will see you at two thirty."

"I don't think I have heard you sound that shy and quiet since your interview." I teased her with a grin. Hudson was really only shy until she got comfortable with people. Crowds gave her the heebie-jeebies and she really hated meeting new people face to face first, but she wasn’t as retiring as we’d originally feared.

Her smile was sweet but after spending so much time with us on the road, she finally felt comfortable enough to flip me off even as her smile got sweeter. "He was a very nice older gentleman. Of course, I was nice and respectful. Besides, ‘you get more flies with honey’ isn't a cliché because it is false. You’d know that if you ever tried to be sweet."

That parking lot was alive with laughter. Guess they all thought it was a true statement. Maybe it was. I was only sweet to my fam…the rest of the world could kiss my ass…after they bought our albums. I chuckled to myself at the thought. There was a quick run through to make sure that everyone knew where we were heading and that if they didn't have a clue how to get there, they could plug it into their GPS to find it. We got there a couple of minutes before we were supposed to, because Hudson is freaky evil about punctuality. The guy who let us in was as old as Ruby Dee pretended to be in The Stand. But he was completely unbowed. I would have bet money on him having been a drill sergeant or something. We signed autographs and we took a picture for his wall. Then we all took our seats, filling the restaurant completely. I looked up there and there were some pretty famous people. "Hey James, look, there is your Cousin Tommy." I pointed out.

We killed the time until our food was ready. I didn't care that I hadn't seen a menu. I didn't care that the interior of the restaurant looked like it hadn't been remodeled since that crotchety, with everyone not named Hudson, old man had retired from the military before our parents were even born. All I cared about was the fact that that food smelled AMAZING. Then when old dude brought it out, it looked even better than it smelled. They turned the front counter into a big ass buffet, but rather than bothering with chafing pans and such, it was all hot and fresh out the kitchen. There was brisket that looked like it had been smoked for days rather than just hours. Next to that there was a big ass mound of what looked like fresh made yeast rolls. Then there was pulled pork…but it looked like they had cooked that shit in a crockpot then smoked it. The last meat option was a big ass thing of
chicken thighs, I think, but they were boneless, skinless and smoked so it was a little hard to tell. Then there were the sides; green beans with chunks of ham, baked beans, cheesy potatoes and homemade, baked in an oven, macaroni and cheese…oh and potato salad, but not like Angel Mom makes, this one was hot.

Most of us tried a little bit of everything. Every one of us loved everything. "Oh my God." I heard Santana breathe out at one point. "Artie I love you, but you're going to have to marry Brits and just be my man on the side because I need to marry this pulled pork and have its little bacon babies."

Brittany smiled serenely and added some more sweet house and roasted habanero sauces to her brisket sandwich. "We can have a six way marriage, just like we have a three way relationship. Artie can marry the chicken, you the pork and I'll marry the brisket and we'll all get fat and happy eating each other's spouses all the time."

That seemed reasonable to everyone present. Adams took it a step further. "Forget marriage, I just need enough of these beans to bathe in e'eryday."

"You ain't said nothing but a thing." One of the Warblers agreed. "Dude, never tell anyone I said this, but this hot German potato salad is better than my grandmother's, toats for real."

Suddenly the old guy stuck his head out of the kitchen. "None of y'all are allergic to blackberries are ya?"

"No sir," chorused through the restaurant, almost as in unison as we'd been laying the track earlier that day.

"Good…then save some room for dessert." He barked and disappeared back into the kitchen.

We listened…probably because we sure as hell wanted some of whatever amazing thing was coming out of that kitchen next. Even with leaving room for dessert, we still left not a single crumb of food behind. No, seriously, that buffet set up looked like it had been attacked by locusts. There was nothing left. Santana, Finn and Lauren had taken the few left over yeast rolls and sopped up and then wiped clean the pulled pork chaffer. Vince, Sebastian and a couple of the Warbler guys had handled the brisket one. I would have helped them…but Sexy Mama said I was just being greedy. St. James, the Dam-Bros, Xena and Mike made quick work of the chicken chaffer too.

The next time the kitchen door swings open there are more chaffers. The old man looked and the damn near licked clean ones that had held the meats and laughs his head off. "I don't think I have ever seen a bunch of rich white folk…"

"Hey." The grand total of fifteen people of various other ethnic orientations in the room objected.

That old man just rolled his eyes and continued, "Lick the chaffing dishes before. Either y'all really do all eat like Finn over there, or y'all were really hungry…'cause we prepped enough for a hundred." He smiled. As he had been talking, the other men had taken away the actual food pans and brought out four big ass pans of blackberry cobbler with thick golden brown strips of crust making a lattice work of the top. Then damn if they didn't bring out tubs of vanilla ice cream. I looked over at Hudson, "Whatever they charge us, double it. They have earned the best tip in the history of tips."

When Sam tasted the cobbler, he looked at her and agreed by simply saying, "Double time and a half."

There was very little in the way of conversation until the cobbler pans were empty…all you could
see was stainless steel with hints that there had been something in them at some point since the last
time they were washed…empty. We were all wondering if we could even manage to roll out of the
restaurant when Hudson, returning from having handled the check and the tip, whistled to get out
attention. "Can all of you meet in Chicago or Cleveland sometime during the third week of August?"

We were all confused but it was David that voiced the question in all our minds. "Why?"

"Mr. Cohen just emailed Haja. Xavi sent him a copy of the rough cut…he and the team at Warner
absolutely LOVED the song. He wants you all to come together and make a music video for the
song. It will still be on the CD…but it will also be sold in stores as a single rather than just being
available online. All the proceeds will still go to charity, but the pre-Christmas in store sales will go
to Toys-for-Tots with the online sales through New Year's Eve still going to the Trevor Project.
So…are you guys comfortable getting together to make a video?"

"Hell yeah." Echoed off the walls everyone was so loud.

"Good. As soon as the Warner team gets back to me with who they are going to get to direct…we
will make the arrangements and get back with you all as to which city and what dates. Try to keep
three days that week clear."

From there the rest of the afternoon was passed in a blaze of fun and laughter. After we left Ray-
Ray's, having left him a two hundred percent tip on top of the bill, we all headed to the fair and
clowned and had a blast. We separated near midnight and the next day when we preformed there
were a hell of a lot of familiar faces in the crowd. We left Columbus on Friday morning and on
Saturday evening we were on stage at Lollapalooza in Chicago. The summer was really cool, but I
couldn't wait to get back to school. I needed a break from the road in the worst way. I never thought
that I would rather go to a class than…well anything…but man I was looking forward to classes
being back in so I could sleep in my own damn bed. Still, I wouldn't trade our life for anything in the
world. But I knew one thing. next summer, we were buying and tricking out our own 'tour buses'
because whoever had picked the bed for the ones we rented really needed to go back and look up
'comfort' in the dictionary.

We didn't head back to New York until Monday night since we had some shit to take care of in
Chicago that day. But thankfully it was a straight twelve hour drive and we were able to get there
before lunch Tuesday. However, Mills was a whole different type of bride than Tricie, Tonya or
even Mom. She was so Laid Back…it wasn't even funny. Nothing bothered her. The florist flubbed
the bouquets she had originally picked for the bridesmaids…she was unfazed. "I didn't really need
the roses anyway. Why don't they just carry one Japanese Camellia? Have the florist wrap the stem
with the gray ribbon and we'll go with that." The caterer wasn't able to get the kale she wanted for
the warm salads, "It's not a big deal, just substitute collards and bok choy." There was nothing that
got her upset.

Uncle Saul, however, was an entirely different story. Everything that went wrong almost made his
head explode. It was hilarious. Finally, Thursday afternoon…when Saul was even managing to get
on Mills last nerve, Sander came up with a way to calm his. "Saul, since we're all here, why don't we
all sit down with the kids and see if we can't get Sam a little more comfortable with, well,
everything."

So we went into Saul's home office, got Gwen Abrams on the 'phone' and we talked about money
issues and what we were making, what our investment portfolio looked like, what our tax burden
was, how Gwen handled it quarterly, paying it within days of our royalties coming in. We learned
about things like how the updates we'd made to the duplex that Tina and Mike were renting half of
with their roommates had raised the value of the house from what we'd paid the owner…and we'd
gotten a mint of a deal because it was in a state of preliminary foreclosure, the previous owner had been able to give the bank what he owed, and keep a bit or a profit but most importantly he hadn't taken the credit hit that a foreclosure would have caused…anyway, when it was appraised after the renovations were fully completed to both sides they determined that it was worth over a million. Sam's smirk was hot as hell. I had to give him credit, he might not be sure about the music business money, but he was on point when it came to real estate. It wasn't just that one property either. The condo in Chicago, George had gone over it with a fine tooth comb and we'd done the things he recommended as far as ripping out the bathrooms and the kitchen area and replacing the floors and walls with better materials we'd done that not long after the purchase was complete. We'd put in twenty-seven thousand and had increased the value by over a hundred large. And that was without any fixtures or cabinets or anything at all in place.

"Basically the increase in equity in your rental properties has paid for every single property you've purchased…including the house you are building in Lima." Gwen explained with a smile. "I'd like to speak with you about a property in the metro Atlanta area…it would be a significant investment…but the return could be outstanding. It is a two hundred-thirty unit apartment complex in one of the northern suburbs. The layouts currently offer one, two and three bedroom apartments. It's being sold for under four million but according to the papers it hasn’t been updated since the early nineties. It currently has only about fifteen percent occupancy, so according to Saul we could probably talk them down to under three. If we renovate the buildings, update the grounds, turn the place into a luxury family complex… you could rent the larger units for up to sixteen hundred a month and the one bedrooms for just under a thousand. That would bring you almost two million in the first year, just for the hundred three bedroom units. Another eight hundred thousand on the one bedrooms and about seven hundred and fifty thousand a year on the two bedrooms."

"That would mean that we'd earn back the purchase price in the first year. The renovation costs within the second and the rest after that would be gravy." I said thoughtfully.

"Yeah but three million plus a couple of million extra for the renovations…that would have to be broken down…at least twelve payments…fifteen would be better." Sam reasoned.

Saul looked thoughtful. "There would be no problem finding financing for something like that. I know that my bank has a commercial financing branch here in town. You have already established your corporation, it is already making money on two smaller properties and that is on top of your, for lack of a better term, day jobs…you are a good risk as far as any bank would be concerned."

Sexy Mama, Sammy Boy and I talked it through, got some input from the 'rents and decided to move forward. "Try a low offer, maybe two point five, to give us negotiation room…but we're absolutely not willing to go above three five." We told Gwen after we had everything figured out. The rest of the meeting we talked about things like staffing and the fact that there was room to build another building worth of units and offer that as an incentive for staff so that we, hopefully, wouldn't have much turnaround. By the time we left that room. Sam was cool on the whole money thing and Saul didn't have another 'groomzilla' moment that entire week.

Ultimately the wedding went off without a hitch. Mills had not converted to Judaism and Uncle Saul did not convert to African Methodist Episcopal so they were not having the wedding in either of their houses of worship. Instead they were getting married on an evening cruise kind of deal. Friday flew by and before we could blink, we were all getting ready for the wedding. Mills colors were steel and hot pink, but mostly steel. They had gone all out. While Mom and George had kept things pretty simple and low key…Saul and Mills planned one hell of an event. Mills had Francesca as her maid of honor, then she had Sexy Mama, Tessa and Shelby plus her other best friends as her bridesmaids with Sarah and Stacey as junior bridesmaids. Since she didn't have any little boys and she wasn't huge on flowers, Mills had decided that Beth would be a ring bearer instead of a flower girl that time.
I was Uncle Saul's best man, Sam, Neil, Kev, Dev and Saul's poker buddy and friend Rick Castle…
I'm still shocked that he knew a world famous author that threw me for a loop…and Stevie were his
groomsmen. Stevie refused to be called a junior groomsman after the last wedding. The ladies were
in steel gray, floor length, satin sheath dresses with one shoulders and diagonal seams that made the
simple dresses look incredible…at least on Sexy Mama's gorgeous lush curves. Okay, I guess I can
admit that they were all smoking hot…except Tessa, but she really did look nice. Sarah and Stacey
were in cute little party dresses that had one shoulder, but it was the opposite one from the grown
women. Rather than being a curve hugging dress, theirs were A-Line dresses that made them look age
appropriately pretty. Beth's dress was really adorable. It was the same gray as the ladies on the
outside, but the inside lining was the hot pink as was the ribbon flower at her waist and the regular
ribbons that came down from the flower.

The ladies all wore pink shoes. Beth and Stacey were in hot pink Mary Janes, Stacey's had a small
heel and Beth's were flat but they were both patent leather and the same shade. Sarah's shoes were
two and a half inch hot pink satin peep toes that looked like they bridged the gap between the little
girl shoes and the four and half inch peep to suede pumps that adult women were wearing. Every
one of Mills girls were wearing their hair in curls and flowing down their back. Their makeup was
nice and light even though the wedding and reception was evening and formal. The jewelry was
simple, engagement rings, for Cede and Francesca and silver earrings.

We headed to the harbor to board the Hornblower Infinity, the yacht where the wedding and
reception were taking place. The wedding itself took place in the boat's 'Infinity Lounge'. There was
just enough seating for all the family and friends that had been invited. Mills looked beautiful
walking down the aisle in a bright white satin gown with a strapless neckline and corset back that
simultaneously showcased her petite hourglass figure and highlighted the stunning bodice, which
flowed into an asymmetrically draped side godet accented with beaded embroidery and Swarovski
crystals, then finished with a dramatic bubble hem…I had no clue what half of those things were, but
Cede and her Fairy had described it over and over and over again so at least I knew what to say.
Mills wasn't the veil type, instead she wore a little feathery, barely big enough to brush her cheek,
white net thingy, which drew the eye to her beautiful face rather than obscuring it. Uncle Saul looked
at her, not like she was the only woman in the world, but like she was the woman who made every
other woman in the world superfluous and unnecessary. Which, for him, she was.

The ceremony was not performed by a clergy member since they were already married and
everything it wasn't a big deal. Just one of the few friends of the deceased Millses who actually cared
enough to keep track of the daughter they had left behind, who had gotten 'ordained' in an online
thing several years before. It was quick and dirty, but deep and meaningful at the same time. The
only readings were what they read to each other. Mills read 'Loves Philosophy' by Percy Shelley,
which sounded pretty, but I didn't really get why he was talking about mountains kissing heaven.
The one Saul read, I understood better. ‘The Married Lover’ by Coventry Patmore was about not a
man taking his bride for granted just because she was now his wife. I liked it a lot. Mercedes did an
amazing version of ‘At Last’ after Mills poem. After Saul's poem, Sam and I did Michael Buble's
‘Everything’ from my uncle to my favorite aunt. Once the officiant said that they could kiss, Saul
dipped Mills low and laid one on her.

Then we moved into the reception hall, which was the ship's Grand Ballroom. The space was
fucking awesome. There were huge windows out one side there was a beautiful view of the lights of
Manhattan and out the other was an ocean view that was just as spectacular. We'd spent about thirty
minutes of the five hour wedding package on the vow renewal...so the rest of the time was spent
partying. They had a short, cocktail reception that gave the wedding party a chance to freshen up and
the guests to move from one part of the yacht to another. The food the whole night was completely
awesome. The passed hor d’oeurves were so good that I remembered all five of them. They had
mushrooms stuffed with spinach and asiago cheese, tomato basil bruschetta, spanakopita with tzatzki,
fresh vegetable crudités and marinated steak skewers. Then when we got to our tables there were smoked salmon canapés on little beds of pumpernickel and drizzled with spicy mustard.

The salad course was a mozzarella and tomato Napoleon with basil salt, basil oil and a balsamic glaze. It was cool, really light. With the invites, Mills had given every one a choice between the filet mignon served with a port wine demi-glaze and which came with truffle mashed potatoes and the warm greens mix that had made Saul freak out while Mills had handled that shit. The other choice was a pan seared Atlantic salmon with an almost weird-but good- curried chutney sauce with basmati rice and sautéed bok choy. Sexy Mama and Sam had gotten the salmon while I got the filet…but of course we each had some of both. After the entrée, there was a fruit and cheese course, after which there was dancing.

And oh was there dancing. Cassidy was on point. The music was fucking epic. I think we danced the entire time she was spinning. Most people did. Because once she got you on the floor, she had you trapped. You'd dance for a while and then think, okay, let me catch my breath…then she would play something that was so goddamn boss, you just had to stay on the floor. Finally, after a couple of hours, Cassidy laughed into the mike and said "Alright, ladies and gentlemen, it's time to cut the cake…before a few of you couples and triads decide to get down right there on the dance floor."

Admittedly we were probably the closest to forgetting ourselves. Sammy hadn’t had a hormonal event since the night after the VMA nominations. Something told me that we were due for another one soon…and all that dancing up on each other had only increased the likely hood. The cake was great too, but it was cake…Cede loved it though. We got back to dry land and gave Saul and Millsy their wedding gift from us, not that it was a shock by that point. We got them a week at the Hotel de Paris Monte-Carlo in France along with their flight and a spa day. Bubbie Ruth gave them a bunch of Monte Carlo appropriate clothing, and everyone else gave them money so they could gamble. It was the perfect honeymoon for the couple who got married on a bet. I cannot believe that they thought the rest of us hadn't figured it out.

The day after the wedding, we were back on the road. The drive from Harlem to Des Moines was seventeen hours so we stopped over in Toledo to give Jacob, Brock and Van a six hour break. While we were a city I only knew of as being the town the cross dresser on MASH came from, even if it was in the same state I grew up in, we decided to catch a movie and figure out what else we wanted to do afterwards. That was the plan until we realized that the theater closest to the hotel our drivers were sleeping in was home to an enterprising individual who had the brilliant idea to have a double feature of Captain America: The Winter Solider and Guardians of the Galaxy with a short intermission between the two. The second the helpful desk clerk mentioned that, Cede and I knew what we were doing that afternoon. When we found out that the theater was a multiplex with sixteen screens, everyone else decided to spend the hot afternoon in the cool movie theater too. We spent a boatload on snacks, but I had to admit those were the best movie theater nachos I'd ever had. We ended up signing some autographs, but it was cool. We made it back to the hotel five and a half hours after we left and Sam was so hype from the two, admittedly awesome, comic movies that while everyone else decided to go and have dinner before we got on the road, Sam, Cede and I just returned to our RV and fucked so long and so good, we didn't come up for air until we were out of Ohio all together.

The clowning that we took for our two hour marathon boning was so totally worth it. Sam had totally invented his own 'thing he does with his tongue, and I was one fucking happy and satisfied muthafucker. I was so happy and satisfied when we were on stage that Cede banned me from performing ‘Pillow Talk’ within a twenty-four hour period of Sam using his new trick ever again…at least in the heartland or the bible belt. Oh yeah, I may have been fucking exhausted three days out of every five, but that was still the best fucking summer ever.
Beat This Summer (Brad Paisley) & Just Fine (Mary J. Blige)

Chapter Summary

Commune's first summer as KAMA continues

Chapter Notes

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review or leave Kudos! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
This Chapter Dedicated to all of my very encouraging Learning French Series reviewers.
I appreciate all of you.

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 Welcome to the LF Beta Team!!!!

French Lesson Series Timeline
April 2012---Junior Prom (Learning French)
May 2012---First Nationals Title (Learning French)
June – August 2012 Summer after Junior year(Summer Menagé)
August 2012-May 2013 Senior Year (Grandissions Together)
June –August 2013 Summer before College (Summer Menagé II)
September 2013---May 2014 Freshman Year of College (Les Ames Soeurs, Si Cela Est Noel)
May-September 2014 Summer before Sophomore year (Summer Menagé III)

Beat This Summer (Brad Paisley)
Sam PoV

The summer flew by. We had some time in New York, but between working, weddings, and financial planning, we were all over the map. After Lollapalooza, we stayed in Chicago for an extra day to interview interior designers because we had a fucking epic three bedroom two bathroom condo on the South Loop that we were paying the damn HOA fees for every month, but because it was still completely unfurnished and unfinished, we were still staying in hotel rooms whenever we were in Chicago. We were all way too cheap to let that continue indefinitely.

While we didn’t get to start interviewing until August, the process started not long after Memorial Day when we were in the city for the EDC festival. We took the fifteen most award winning designers in the Chicago area and started going through their online portfolios. From those we interviewed six different firms, just the three of us and Hudson, we knocked one out damn near immediately she talked down to us like we couldn't possibly have good taste because we were so young. Another was honest and preferred more in person interaction than we would be able to provide. The third one we had to get rid of would be perfect for someone other than us. His and
Sexy Mama's styles just didn't mesh well at all. To be honest both Puck and I had suspected that but we hadn't been sure until we met in person. That left us with Kendra Mann, Dianna Mondi and Thomas Kaufman and his partner Dave Segal.

Hudson had scheduled time with each of the six for us to walk through the space and determine if they were the right fit for us. They all knew that the morning interviews would determine if they actually did the walk through. The condo itself was just a little over sixteen hundred square feet and it had a 'separated floor plan' meaning that the master bedroom was separated from the other two bedrooms by the living room dining area and kitchen. The master bedroom was nice and large with its own private balcony. Its adjacent bathroom was spacious and had originally held a soaker tub, a standalone shower and dual sinks. There was only one closet in the master, but the room we were planning to use as an office/music room, had a walk in closet that would work for me and Puck. The third bedroom would act as a guest room. Nice and simple…nothing outrageous, but we did want the place to be fully reflective of the three of us. Our first walk through was with Kaufman and Segal. They were very much in line with what Kurt would have wanted to do with the place, but we really found them to be kind of bland and fuddy duddy leaning in their design ideas. So Mercy started trying to lead them more in our direction, "I found this great stormy, purplish, light gray that I would love to build the master bedroom around." She said very succinctly after her subtle attempts to get the duo away from a super neutral color palette.

"A bedroom should be a sanctuary, a respite from the world. I'm sure that we can find a color much more conducive to your refuge." Dave said airily. That was way the wrong thing to say. Because first of all who the hell was he to tell us what color we considered a refuge. Puck, Mercedes and me had all picked that color out because we liked it and thought it would be great to have around us on a lazy Sunday morning. Second of all, we were the clients, not him. He had to please us…not the other way around.

Then when he went into the kitchen, Thomas was just so sure that we were never going to be bothered with actually using it for the intended purpose. "Now then, since you are young and busy, we can have a very aesthetically pleasing kitchen without having to worry about functionality."

Mercy and I probably would have just let them finish the walk through and go, but Puck was done. "Look, we could passive aggressively let you finish and then just not call you because our ideas for what we want don't mesh with yours, and your style doesn't mesh with ours. So why don't we just say goodbye now rather than wasting your time and ours."

They looked a little offended and seemed ready to argue their case, Mercy chimed in. "In the future, I hope that you will take the time to get to know your clients wants and hopes for their space. All three of us prefer to eat at home as much as possible. We'd need a functional kitchen."

"And that stormy, evening sky gray that you couldn't even be bothered to look at, it took us five hours of looking to find a color that we all agreed was perfect for us. Thank you anyway, but Puck is right. I don't think that you are going to be a good fit for us." I finished.

After getting rid of those two, we had half an hour to just kind of walk around the space ourselves and get a better sense of what we wanted and didn't want. We decided that we wanted some sort of privacy screen on the bedroom balcony but not something that would block light, just something that would allow us to see out without others seeing in. We wanted the living room to be cozy and comfortable, not formal or stuffy. That kind of thing. When Kendra Mann arrived we were a lot better able to handle the walk through. Kendra Mann was kind of our preferred person mainly because she traveled anywhere to do her designs. She had done places in New York, LA, Miami and all over Illinois. We liked some of her ideas a lot, but she proved not to be right for what we wanted in that condo. We wanted a place to relax and decompress. Ultimately, it would be utilized when we
were performing in the area or needed to escape for a while. She wanted to make it into a showplace. We talked with her about doing something like that in LA where we might conceivably have to host some industry people and she was very excited about that opportunity. It seemed like that was going to be a perfect fit and best of all, it meant we didn't have to go through all of this kind of rigmarole again out there.

Dianna Mondi, walked into the space and the first thing she said was "Tell me what you want to create in this condo that you aren't doing in your other homes?"

We all smiled. "This is going to be our refuge. Our place to come and maybe write, definitely make love, and just forget for a little while that we're not regular young adults." I told her honestly.

"Yes. The place needs to be comfortable, but at the same time fun and funky and chic." Mercy continued.

"But we should still be able to bone in every single room of the place, ya know?" Puck nodded. "I mean, we're building a place in Lima, but any of our parents or siblings could pop up there at any moment. In Harlem, we have roommates and in LA who knows what kinds of special lenses the paps have. So I guess I'm trying to say that this is gonna be our little love shack."

We all shared a laugh, but he wasn't lying. "Oh…and we need a real kitchen…one that is cool and looks great but is functional because we might go out if no one feels like cooking, but we don't want to have to go out because the kitchen is a pain to cook in."

She nodded as we were walking through, she pointed out a few things. "Would you be amenable to glassing in your small balcony with glass treated to let you see in and get in good light, but make sure that no one can see in. My partner and I have that on our balcony and it is a nice way to spend an evening."

"We were actually just talking about that before you got here." Mercy told her.

When we moved into the master bathroom she raised another good point, one we hadn't thought about. "I think that you three should all have your own sinks, and we could do a water closet for the toilet…and rather than bother with a tub at all in this bathroom we'd just have a huge steam shower. It would fit all three of you, but at the same time, I'd like to create a bench along the back wall."

"Is there any way to make that a heated bench?" Mercedes asked curiously. "Like make it tile or whatever, but use the heated padding like they do under bathroom floors?"

"Actually we can do the shower floor, the bathroom floor, the bench and the shower walls if you want." Dianna explained. "The added cost at the outset isn't insignificant, but it isn't too bad, but it will increase your energy bills overall somewhat."

"We can make that work." Puck said thoughtfully. We talked about storage solutions for the bathroom and then we moved back into the main living space. "I want a big ass TV with a good sound system, in fact, a whole tricked out entertainment system or something and a big, deep comfortable couch. So we can snuggle in and watch movies and shit."

She liked the color we wanted for the bedroom and wanted to look at bringing the some variation of the color into the living room too. "Maybe have the evening storm in your bedroom and a bluer, morning storm color in the living, dining and kitchen walls. And then in the office, perhaps a custom lavender cream blend." We talked some more and then called Hudson in with the paperwork. We had us an interior designer.
Then we were back in New York for Mills and Saul's wedding. I had to admit that I was a little bit jealous of them being able to have their wedding. I knew that we would need to be more settled and that we needed to wait a few more years, but that didn't mean I didn't want to get ourselves committed as we could in the eyes of man as soon as we could. We had a long meeting with Saul and Ms. Gwen and Dad and found out that we were making a lot more money than I had realized. The amounts we'd made just off the festival tour was enough for me to feel comfortable for a year. Once you added in the money from the rentals, some of which was still projected, but the projections were more than enough for me…plus the money from our residuals and songwriting money…I could finally let go of a lot of the tension I didn't realize I was still carrying around.

The wedding was beautiful. I'd never been to one on a yacht before. I'd never been on a yacht before at all. The food was great and we enjoyed Cassidy's mixing and danced, like, the whole time. As soon as we got home, we made love all night like it had been our wedding. Then we were back on the road heading to Iowa. We stopped and had a great time watching a couple of awesome movies while Van, Brock and Jacob got some rest. Then we made love until we got to Iowa. At the state fair we got Mercedes to perform in a sexy ass pair of brown and teal cowboy boots, and a sundress. The crowd seemed to love her even more. We managed to scope out a place that we could make love to our woman in between sets just like we had at every other venue. Santana jokingly asked if we would ever get to the point where we wouldn't have to get inside her every time we came off a stage. Puck and I exchanged looks and shrugged. "Probably not." He said giving her a wink.

"Besides, don't act like it's just them." Mercy laughed. "I give every bit as good as I get."

The crew ‘bout died laughing and it was a great way to end the evening. Bradley had set us up with a concert in Chicago as soon as everything had been set up for the ‘Carol of the Bells' video shoot. Just like our other surprise shows, the word went out on social media thanks to Darcy and on radio thanks to Bradley and Haja and Deborah's connections. The fifteen hundred available seats sold out in under an hour. We gave them the best show we could. I even made Puck break out the Zilla by doing my new tongue trick right before the show. He broke out the D'Angelo for the encore, so I hit them with some Luther and Mercedes went all luscious with some Janet Jackson. If half the ladies there ended up having kids nine months later, they would be totally justified in blaming us.

The next morning we checked in with Dianna to see her plans for the condo. She had it all worked out and we helped her pick things like flooring and fixtures for the bathroom and lighting and everything like that. Then we had to go shopping. Sarah's birthday party was the following Saturday, we had to get her something boss. I mean, yeah we were putting some good money into her college fund, but we each wanted to give her a great gift too. On top of all that, there was the fact that we were eleven days out from the VMAs and, while we had everything in place for the performance, we hadn't found a single thing to wear for the red carpet. Mercedes dragged us into more than five shops. Stores that just sold dresses, stores that just sold suits, stores that just sold shoes, stores that just sold lingerie.

After six hours of shopping, we'd found Mercy some really sexy lingerie, and Sarah a great platinum and diamond Star of David from Tiffany's that was going to come from her official big brother. I got her a pearl necklace and bracelet set that had silver scroll looking hearts in both. I'd found it in Tiffany's as well. I'd been hella proud of picking it out all by myself, until Mercy showed me up. Our girl got Sarah a platinum charm bracelet and then she got her several different charms including a diamond studded crown, a lock, a cameo of a little girl against a pink background and a cupcake with Tiffany blue enamel. But despite having done all that shopping we'd only accomplished one goal. Then she finally headed to Neiman Marcus, which was where she should have just gone in the first place.

In Neiman, Mercedes found two amazing…her words not mine…dresses. She literally couldn't
decide between the two of them. The dress with the dude name was, according to the tag, a red ball gown in silk faille that boasted a strapless cat-ear bodice and had angled seaming to highlight the waist, dramatic pleating to form a voluminous skirt and a high-low hem that was shaped into a train at the back. When she came out of the dressing room in that dress, I almost fell to my knees to worship her. Fuck she looked amazing. The cat-ears of the neckline framed her titties more than they contained them and damn they looked so good, but made me want to bury my face in between them and never come out. Then she tried on the dress named after the woman. That one was completely different… well they were both strapless but that was the only way that they were similar. The Herrera dress was a formal gown too but it was sleeker and less fun. The black silk skirt had a rose silk jacquard on it and there was vibrant pink at the neckline and then a slim band of yellow at the waist. If the Zac dress was sexy, the Carolina dress was beautiful.

Having seen her in both, neither me nor Noah could decide which one was the better of the two either. They were equally gorgeous on her… so after a few minutes of thought, Puck came up with a solution. "Get them both. There are more awards shows that we're going to have to go to."

Our beautiful wife looked at him like he had grown a second head. "The Zac Posen gown is ten grand by itself. That is not counting the accessories, shoes and everything. Then you add in the eleven thousand for the Carolina Herrera… Seriously. You still think I should get both?"

Puck smirked. "It is an event and you are a performer who is attending the event as part of your job. There is a tax loophole for that." He said sounding like the app commercial.

"Okay Mr. Smarty Arty… how do I make the decision as to which one to wear for the VMAs?" she said with her hand on her hip. Damn she was so freakin' beautiful like that.

Puck shrugged. "We get them both. Then you decide by finding shoes and accessories… which ever one you can put the complete look together for, including the suits for your arm candy," he gestured at me and himself, "that is the one you wear for the VMA's and you give yourself some time to find everything to go with the other."

So that was what we did. The first strike against the lady dress was that Mercy couldn't find any shoes she liked to go with it. However, it took no time at all before she found a pair of red bottomed, cagey, meshy, platform, high as hell heels that she decided were perfect for the dude guy dress. She found some cool earrings and a couple of bracelets for both dresses, but then when we went to the men's section to try and find Puck and my suits or whatever for ‘the two looks’. We found nothing at all that would work. I mean we found some cool suits, but trying to find a particular shade of black to match the lady dress, did not work in any shape, form or fashion… But then we found a pair of suits in two slightly different shades of blue. Puck and I looked at each other and smiled. We'd walk the carpet in red white and blue… make a silent statement that we are the new America.

Checking out was an adventure. No seriously, it made me a little nauseous. The two dresses were twenty two grand, our suits were basically ten, the five pairs of earrings were another three, and the four bracelets were five. The shoes, Mercy made us get new ones too, that was five more grand. Then there were the new dress shirts and new tie for Puck, it was my turn not to spend the whole day getting strangled. When we finally got back and we sent Gwen copies of the receipts, I realized that we'd spent, including Sarah’s birthday gifts, like fifty thousand dollars. It baffled my mind that we had that much to spend. Then I found myself starting to think about all the other things we could have spent it on. "Am I the only one who feels weird that we just spent fifty thousand dollars on clothes and stuff in eight hours?" I asked them quietly as we headed back to the hotel to meet everyone else for dinner.

Noah shrugged. "If you mean does it feel weird to us that we have the kind of money we have right
now and we can spend that much money in that amount of time…then yes. I agree that it feels weird. If you mean do I feel guilty or whatever for spending it. Nope. Not even a little bit. We worked our asses off getting that album written, practiced and recorded. We worked even harder doing it while we were still going to classes and shit. I know that it isn’t a job like what you probably thought you would have; where you work nine to five, but Sam…you have worked for this money. It is okay to spend it.”

We arrived at the Langham Hotel where we, Haja, Hudson and our band were staying for the duration of our time in Chicago and stopped by the concierge to have the jewelry locked in the hotel safe before we took the rest of our purchases up to the Classic Suite we’d rented for the week. We had enough time to refresh ourselves and we were very glad that we had the powder room in addition to the master bath, because we all needed to go when we got back. Once we’d refreshed ourselves and hung up what needed to be hung up, we took a quick shower before getting dressed and heading down to meet up with our band and any of the New Directions who had gotten into town already before walking the short hop to Shaw’s Crab House. We must have looked crazy. There were thirty eight New Directions from the Twenty-Twelve school year to the school year that had just ended who were participating in the ‘choir’. There were thirty Warblers and then twelve others who didn’t fit in either other category, meaning our band, Aidan, Vince and James. We were helping our classmates and Tessa and Jake…which therefore meant we were helping Aidan, James, Marley, Unique and Ryder with theirs too…with their trip by paying for their hotel rooms in our hotel….which helped us get a reduced rate, so we weren't really complaining at all. We were buying everyone one meal, usually dinner, but the Warblers were on their own for everything else. The Baby NDs, other than the fam ones, were in the Courtyard Chicago Downtown, just a block away. We were handling their rooms and had hired van that took everyone back and forth between the lot and the hotel and the hotel and whatever restaurant we were coordinating at for dinner.

Shaw’s Crab House was a cool clubby place. Because we had a bunch of underage people in our party, we were there pretty early and eating all together in a private dining room. When we got there, several of the Warblers, including Sebastian, David and Wes were already there. We shot the shit with them for a while as more and more people started to arrive.

All of my New Directions, meaning the ones who I performed with for at least one year, were there as were Marley, Ryder, St. James and Rutherford. Marley, Ryder, Unique and Jake had car pooled and driven themselves since Ryder had a car. They had also decided that the four of them would be sharing a room. It wasn't a big deal to me, but Mercy had asked Haja very nicely to make sure their room was stocked with every type of contraceptive measure known to man. Poor Haja, the first time he got to go out on the road with us and he was being assigned to condom procurement…but then again, he started talking about contraceptives that I knew I had never heard of, so maybe he was the right person for the job. And most of the younger set wouldn't be there until quite a bit later. He and Hudson were going to take care of getting them all checked in and taken care of for us.

Dinner was so good. Shaw's was notably a seafood place, but they had sushi and sashimi and even some chicken and steak dishes for those who didn't or couldn't eat shellfish or whatever. Puck and Hudson had taken care of ordering appetizers for everyone to share. They had gotten several of the ‘Grand Hot and Grand Cold Shellfish Platters’ each of which supposedly served four to five people. Each cold platter offered an abundant selection of Maine lobster tails, oysters, shrimp cocktail, blue crab fingers, Alaskan red king crab bites, while the hot allowed you to choose from calamari, mini crab cakes, fried oysters, oysters Rockefeller, golden king crab legs, steamed lobster tails. I tried at least a little bit of everything. I found that while I loved fried oysters and even oysters Rockefeller, I couldn't stand cold, raw oysters. Mercy felt the same way, she hadn't touched them. Puck, on the other hand, loved them. Probably because of their rumored aphrodisiac properties. After our appetizer, the three waiters who'd been assigned to the room took our salad and entrée orders.
The restaurant offered four salads, a Caesar, a house or green, a double iceberg wedge, and an heirloom spinach and kale. Puck went for the Caesar, Mercy went with the heirloom and I chose the green salad with balsamic vinaigrette. We traded bites back and forth as always, which made Damien look around at our older friends, "so they have always been that?"

Mike looked up and nodded. "Oh yeah. Pretty much since they started dating after junior prom. They do it in restaurants all the time…they have pretty much infected the rest of us too. When it is only a few of us, we'll all get something different so everyone can try as many different things as possible."

Hearing him answer Dam, made me realize that I hadn't asked him about the duplex. "Mike…how are you and Tina liking your love nest?"

The smile that crossed his and Tina's faces was priceless. "Man, it is awesome. Did you guys see the finished product?" I made the universal kinda sort of hand gesture.

"Hold up, what are you talking about?" Finn asked confused.

Tina chuckled. "Cedes, Puck and Sam are our land lords." She explained. "And you guys should see the house. Each side of the duplex has three bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms. There is a formal living room…though we have our living room set up as a study with four desks and thing so that we have a dedicated space for the four of us to do our homework. We share our apartment with our freshman year roommates, or we will when they get back after the summer. Anyway, once you go through the formal living and dining rooms, there is a kitchen with a center island breakfast bar thing that is also part of the family room. Then upstairs there are three bedrooms. Mike and I have the one with the attached bathroom and DJ and Nevel each have one of the jack and jill bedrooms. It is really great. It's in a nice area, only twenty minutes to each of our campuses and the rent is perfect. Our neighbors are cool too. They are a youngish couple that has been married for three years, and the husband, Mark, just got transferred out there for his job. They are renting until they learn enough about the area to decide where they want to buy a house."

"Well they have a year to get it all decided upon and everything." Puck said with a grin. "But Tee…how do you two like that shower in your bathroom? I told them to make sure it was nice and roomy." He teased.

"You're an asshole Puck, even the last few years with Cedes hasn't made you any less of an asshole…but, yeah, you did a good job on the whole shower thing." She shot back sassily.

Before my husband could open his mouth to retort, the waiters came to take away our salad bowls and we returned to kidding around until they brought out our entrees. Mercy had gone with the one and a half pound steamed whole Maine lobster served with drawn butter. She'd paired it with sautéed spinach and garlic. Puck went with the fourteen ounce New York strip served with bearnaise sauce and potatoes au gratin. It took me a minute to decide that I needed all the things. So I went with the Club Room Combination which was made up of a six ounce filet mignon, sea scallop, and garlic shrimp. I also got the lobster macaroni and cheese which gave me enough shellfish to kill someone who was allergic. By the time we finished the meal, I was stuffed, and so were the rest of the table…even Finn. The walk back to the Langham was definitely a good thing. I felt less glutinous and bloated. Before we separated, Hudson got all our attention. "I've already arranged for all our rooms to have a five AM wakeup call. We're all due at the lot by six. Hair and makeup at six thirty. We're to start filming by eight."

One thing we had all quickly realized was that Hudson Friedman did not play. So we all headed up to bed and actually went to sleep. Probably only because we were all too full to make love. The next morning, when the wakeup call came in, I was buried inside my wife while our husband filled her mouth and used his on us where we were joined. Mercy had to wrench her head up and answer the
phone since Hudson had apparently made sure that they would continue call until they spoke to a person. I guess Mercy's screaming out ‘Oh fuck, I'm fucking up….mmming." counted for them.

We showered quickly and threw on some lounging clothes since we'd be changing once we got to the studio. The shuttle took us to the same lot where Mercedes had filmed the Chicago scenes of ‘SongBird'. We were on a different sound stage. The one we were taken into that day was cold as hell. They had made it a winter day inside all the way down to snow. An hour and a half later, we were all fed, watered, primped and dressed in kind of similar outfits. The guys were all in sweaters and cargo pants. Most of the guys were in grey cashmere Henley like sweaters and thick black cargo jeans, but Kurt was in a heavy cable knit number with slim cut cargo pants almost the same shade of gray. The girls were in gray, knit sweater dresses with shallow V-necks that stopped right under their knees and brushed the tops of their shiny black knee high boots with modest two inch heels. Unique's dress was the same color, but rather than being a form fitting sheath, hers was fitted across her torso and waist but flared into a pleated skirt at her hips. Her boots were different too, they weren't shiny and they had a different look to their decorative ankle straps.

That was for all of them, the three of us were dressed different though the main difference was the color of our sweaters. Mercy's sweater dress was a sheath dress too, it had a rounded neckline and stopped a couple of inches higher than her knees. The cobalt blue made her chocolate skin glow and her beautiful brown eyes flash. She too was wearing boots, but hers were higher and grey and suede and had a cool woven looking pattern to them. She loved them. Before she had put them on, she'd kept petting them saying they were Italian. All of the girls had simple, natural looking makeup with pale pink lipstick on the white girls and the black and Hispanic girls were all in a deeper earthy pink. Noah and I were both wearing the same dark gray cargo pants, but while our sweaters were the same shade of blue as Mercy's dress, Puck's had grayish blue trim at the neck, wrists and hem.

We did the song standing in choir formation in the fake snow with Noah and me bracketing Mercedes at the center of the front line. Then we did the song with 'Warbler-like' choreography. Then we did the song again letting Britts and Mike and all the rest of the dancers have their fun. Who knew that you could waltz to ‘Carol of the Bells'? We must have given them eight or nine different takes of the video, including one where we were all booed up and singing in groups and clusters that showed pretty much the whole range of human sexual relationships. It was pretty cool. When we headed back to the hotel we were tired but exhilarated. The family got together to watch movies in the living room of our suite. It was great having some time together. The summer had been awesome and cool and epic, but tiring as hell…and we still had two weeks to go.

Just Fine (Mary J. Blige)
Mercedes PoV

We decided to rent a car and make the drive from Chicago to Lima the Friday before Sarah’s birthday. There was just so much stuff we had with us and to be honest I missed driving, being behind the wheel anyway. It was pretty rare for me to take my Tahoe anywhere in Manhattan, and usually when we did take it out, it was on a date night and one of the guys always drove. So when Hudson looked at the results of our shopping excursion and asked if we thought about renting a car, I jumped all over the chance. We made the four hour drive as part of a caravan of the NDs and Warblers who were returning to Ohio before heading back to their schools. Jake's crew was in the car ahead of us and Aidan's was in the car behind. Hudson had called shotgun so Puck and Sam had both been relegated to the back seat. Thankfully the Dodge Durango we'd rented had plenty of space in the back seat.

I looked over at Hudson and smiled. "Hudson, I really want to thank you. You've proven totally
"Thank you. It has been a great experience. I'm not sure how other celebrities treat their PAs, but you three have been great. You don't exactly treat me like an employee…you treat me like one of your friends." Her words made me very happy.

I nodded. "We were glad to find you. We did our interviews the way we did so that we would find someone who could and did fit in with us…not just as an employee, but as someone who could get along with all of us…someone who could join our crazy ass family and become one of us."

"One of Us." Sam started to drone.

Noah took up the chorus. "One of us."

"Shut it Laurel and Hardy." I tossed over my shoulder. Hudson just laughed.

"I appreciate it, and I do feel like you guys are slowly making me as crazy as the rest of you." Her grin was infectious. "But as much as I am loving the mutual admiration society, we have some work to do. I need the three of you to think of names that we can use for hotels on the road."

I didn't get it. "Why? We haven't have any trouble at any of our hotels."

Hudson shook her head. "You didn't, but I reserved the block of rooms at the Courtyard in Puck's name…which is far more distinctive than M. Jones or Sam Evans. According to the desk clerk there were several attempts made to get up to the floor that we had the rooms on. He suggested that you all start using pseudonyms when booking your flights and hotels. The flights will be a lot more difficult, I'll have to research if that is even possible. But we can come up with a list of names for each of you. I did some research and you probably want at least five to seven."

Sam's grin was wicked and his laugh was almost chilling. "Okay…one of mine is Joe Kerr…get it…Joker…Joe Kerr." My poor silly Sammy just about died laughing.

Puck reached over and shoved him teasingly. "Man, it wasn't that damn funny." But his smile was almost as big as Sam's. "I want John Hendrix…after John Holmes and Jimmy Hendrix."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm half surprised that you didn't work Gene Simmons in there."

"What about you, Sexy Mama…what is one of your names gonna be?"

I thought for a long moment. "Wilhelmina Brockhurst." I could feel three sets of eyes boring into me. "What…who would ever think that someone would pick that for a pseudonym."

"True, and no one would ever look for a hot, sexy, curvy little black woman with a name like that either." Sam teased. "I should go for something completely out the box…what about Tyrone Davis?"

"Sure you're gonna set yourself up to get racially profiled over a fake name." I pointed out.

Puck smirked. "Yeah, but then when you get mad at me…you can always tell me that I'd 'betta call Tyrone'." He crooned.

We died laughing. It was hilarious. After that I think Hudson just started picking the halfway normal first names and matching them with somewhat decent last names until she was satisfied that we had enough. "Okay so Sam you can keep Joe Kerr…but no way are you getting Bane anything nor are you getting Steve Rogers. But you can have Clinton Stark and Steven Parker. Puck…John Hendrix is a go as is Gene Mitchell…but Richard Long…just no."
"But it's true." He defended.

"You can't say that to Hudson... you're gonna get hit with a sexual harassment lawsuit." Sam chided.

Hudson just laughed. "Puck is a sexual harassment lawsuit. I know he doesn't mean anything by it. He sees me the same way he sees Tessa and Sarah and Stacey... no, more like the way he sees the girls from the band. I might be nice to look at and fun to tease. That's all."

"Then maybe Puck should be Tony Stark... or something with one of those two names." Sam returned.

A part of me was soothed. I knew that Puck loved me, but sometimes, the knowledge that the women he flirted with knew it was harmless and not an attempt to lead to something more was comforting. "So... what does our schedule look like between now and the VMAs?" I asked almost dreading the answer.

Hudson must have heard the tension in my voice. "It's pretty packed. You guys are in Lima for the next three days. Tonight is the family dinner for Sarah's birthday, tomorrow is her party at Westgate Lanes. You told the parents that you three, Tessa, Aidan, Jake, and Marley would handle that party." I internally groaned. Fifteen kids and tweens, pizza, junk food, pop and more sugar than it is probably wise to give them loose in a bowling alley and arcade. What on earth made me think it was a good idea to agree to chaperone that hot mess. "Don't worry... Finn, Lauren and Vince said they would come by before they headed back to OSU." Reinforcements would definitely be appreciated. "That is over at four... Sarah, Stacey and three of their friends are then Mrs. Altman's responsibility for a sleep over at her house and you guys are released from servitude. But you are expected at both temple Saturday and church Sunday. You fly out of Dayton on Monday morning. I have you three booked in an Executive Suite at the Ritz Carlton Marina Del Ray for the week. The band members, Haja, Brantley, Darcy and I are in deluxe guest rooms. There is some doubling up this time. Damien and Adam think it is nice that you get them separate rooms, but it is completely unnecessary. BaeBe and Jax want to room together and Darcy swears that if she doesn't room with me she will probably steal everything that isn't nailed down since it is all guaranteed to be swanky. I wasn't able to get us all on the same floor this time. But the band is together, the management team is all together and you three are just a few floors up. Monday afternoon, you are scheduled to meet with the set designers to create the stage for your VMA performance."

"We need a stage created? I thought we were a pre-show performance." Puck asked her quickly.

"You were... until Iggy Azalea had to rush back to Australia because of a family emergency and her performance had to be replaced. Lyor managed to talk them into shifting Rita Ora to the preshow since she doesn't have any new music out right now... and you three into that slot. Now you'll perform right before the Artist to Watch category winner is announced."

"Should we rethink doing 'Rescue Me', maybe we should do 'ColorBlind' instead?" I said thoughtfully. "The stage could be kept very simple for that."

"Yeah, but the reason we decided not to do it for the awards shows is still valid. It won't communicate as well on camera with them zooming in on us as it does live with the audience able to see the dancers and everything." Sam pointed out.

"Besides, we've already bought all the costumes and everything for the performance." Puck pointed out reasonably. "We've practiced our asses off. Rainbow came up with all new choreography and me and Sam actually learned it... we're doing 'Rescue Me'."

"Yeah, you are right." I whispered. "Just had a nervous moment, right there. Sorry. Hudson please
"Umm. I emailed Mrs. Mayzer and Kurt…she said that they will handle making the alterations for your dress this weekend. She said she is bringing the appropriate underpinnings with her…I told her that as far as I knew, you hadn't gotten anything that I knew of that would work with the Zac Posen." Oops, I'd forgotten. "We already scheduled Mr. Westwood again for your event makeup. He has agreed to also be back stage to get you ready for the performance. He said that the makeup look will need to be vastly different to go with the period dress. In fact Tuesday, after you finish your tour of your LA house…Ms. Mann is scheduled to meet you there…you have a makeup rehearsal with Mr. Westwood in his salon."

"Think we can talk Kurt into going out there with us?" Sam suddenly asked. "He is great as last minute fixes and stuff and I know that I went out without underwear at the Movie Awards because the pants showed the lines. He so would have known how to fix things so I didn't have to go out there free ballin'."

Hudson shot off a quick email. Not two seconds later my cell rang. "Tell me that you are not kidding?" Kurt's voice rang through the speaker. His excitement was actually palpable.

"Not kidding at all. Apparently there was an undisclosed wardrobe malfunction at the Movie Awards and Sam is pretty sure that you could have saved his ass had you been there." I told him with a grin.

"I did wonder why he was sans underwear during the performance." Kurt whispered. "Puck wouldn't have surprised me, but Sam…not so much."

"Oh my god…you could tell?!?" Sam freaked out.

Kurt laughed. "Sam…you are rather well endowed and it is a well known secret among those of us you consider friends what performing does to both you and Noah. The bulge was quite pronounced…of course we could tell."

"My mom was watching!" he moaned. "Oh my GOD!!! My MeMaw was watching."

"Considering that all your Puckett relatives were watching, I'm surprised that none of them said anything." I teased.

Puck laughed. "I'm surprised there hasn't been an Insider expose or twitter-pation over it."

Hudson raised a hand. "Ummm…they probably didn't have enough information. That was your first televised live performance of that scale. Not to mention that when you did the other television appearances you were either seated or you were in more forgiving slacks."

"Oh great…so now I need to make sure that we keep me in 'forgiving slacks' so people don't start commenting on my junk." Sam grumbled.

"I have no sympathy…or did you forget about that dude who posted my naked ass on the web." Puck shot back. "Aisha Tyler asked me about my junk to my face on national television. Now granted, I have nothing to be ashamed about…but still no sympathy at all from me.

I shook my head. "Me neither, or were you not paying attention to the twitter-pation that started about whether I had butt implants."

He and Noah exchanged a long look. "Sorry Babygirl, that was just funny. I mean, your ass is clearly real…and it is spectacular." Puck finally said setting off another round of laughter.
Hudson brought us back to the point. "Kurt, please check with Blaine and see if he is going to accompany you. Get back with me as soon as you can so I can make the necessary arrangements."

We said quick goodbyes. Then she pulled out the ‘business phone’ and put that on speaker. "Go Haja."

"Hey guys, I just got off with Deborah…she was approached by one of the artists on one of Warner's subsidiary labels, Parlophone…"

"That's Iron Maiden's label." Puck chimed in. "I don't think I knew that was a Warner label too."

Haja laughed. Of course Noah would know which label a heavy metal band was on. "Yes, and it is Idris Elba’s label too…he raps under the name Driis…he wants to get together and do a verse on a remix of ‘Rescue Me’. His manager said that he saw the video and he loves cover and even more he loves the message of the video and has been looking for a good vehicle to break onto the US music scene."

"Wait…the black James Bond wants to come and do music with us?" Sam squeaked. "That is fucking awesome."

Noah wasn't as cool with the idea. "Hold up Sam. You want us to say sure; come on in to the one dude Cede has said she would literally fuck right in front of us?"

I rolled my eyes. "Dude, I didn't say a single word last night when you drooled over Iggy Azalea and Charli XCX for fifteen minutes after we saw the ‘Fancy' music video, but you've got the nerve to be acting all jealous now?" I said caustically.

"What?" he shot back. "I didn't say anything when you said that you would and I'm quoting here ‘have to break him off a little something-something if you ever got to meet him'. I just didn't think you'd ever meet him. It's not like I'm ever gonna meet Iggy Azalea or Charli XCX. Not to mention… neither of them is as sexy as you are."

"There are a hell of a lot of people who would disagree with you." I shot back. "In fact every damn day I get to hear from those people telling me that I'm not as hot as those two. Plus, you'll probably be meeting at least one of them next Sunday."

At least that made him understand my point a little bit. Or so I thought, "And you don't think Sam and I hear from all the dudes out there who do agree with us and who think that you would be better off with a black guy."

"Man, Noah…you're on your own this time. I know that there is no one, not Idris Elba, not Terrance Howard, not anyone that she would actually fuck in front of us…that she wants instead of us." Sam said calmly. "She was joking with her girls and we happened to be in the room. So we can't hold that against her."

"Maybe Noah is having trouble trusting that I was joking because he knows what his ass would do if he got time alone with Charlie XCX or Iggy." I shot back.

"What? Hell no. You're my girl…our girl. You know I'm not gonna fuck up what we have by fucking somebody else…not anybody else."

I sighed. "Then why the hell would you think that I would."

"Ah shit." He breathed. "Damn…Cede…I don't think you would. Fuck. I didn't mean…damn it. I just…I guess some times I still get fucking insecure."
"You think I don't." I growled. "You two don't pay any attention to the shit people say about me on social media...most of the time neither do I but when I do...it's not oh she's so beautiful. Oh she's so talented. Oh Sam and Puck are so lucky to have her. No. I get to hear 'they are both so fine, what the hell are they doing with her? 'They are too hot to be with a fatty like that.' I get to hear what a million skinny bitches would do to you if they get the chance. But you know what...I trust that you two wouldn't hurt me by following behind one of them."

"You're right. We see what they say too. But I didn't think that you cared or that it bothered you." Noah said gently.

"Of course it bothers me. I'm human. I'm a woman. But if I let them change me, if I let them harm us, then they get what they want and I'm the one shit out of luck." I told him allowing my eyes to meet his in the rearview mirror for a moment. "Now, if you are gonna let an offhand comment I made while shooting the shit with Tana and the girls that I meant so much I didn't even remember it until you just brought it up make you not trust in me...a comment made in jest about a guy who is literally old enough to be my father...then I have to ask myself if you ever trusted me to begin with."

Noah's sigh was long and loud. "Cede...Mercedes...I trust you, I do. But your insecurities are from what other people say. That shit is easier to get over. I've never felt worthy of you. You're a truly good person. Beautiful, inside and out. I'm a fuck up from a broken home who spent more time on his back than a two dollar hooker. I'm sorry that you think I don't have faith in you, but the truth is that when this shit creeps into my head, it's not you I doubt...its me."

I sighed. We'd worked through Sam and my own issues...but we'd always believed Noah when he'd thrown us his Puck arrogance. "Noah, is there anything else you are hiding behind Puck?" I asked knowing that he and Sam would both understand what I meant.

"Just the fact that sometimes I wake up and watch you sleeping so I can, like stockpile, the image for when you realize that you can do better." He said quietly.

"Hudson, can you book us a room for the weekend. We need to show Noah that he is ours and nothing and nobody is going to change that...not even him." Sam said authoritatively.

She did some quick work on her iPad and looked back up. "It is done and I emailed Mrs. Dr. Jones to let her know of the change of plans."

Haja alerted us to his continued presence on the phone. "You guys do realize that you just had a fight...at least I think that was a fight. It was the most civil fight I have ever heard before...still you fought, you talked through the true feelings behind the fight and you resolved the issue...or at least made arrangements to resolve them...all in twenty-seven minutes." His voice was fill of shock and awe.

I could feel my face flush. "That wasn't exactly a fight. But I am sorry that you and Hudson had to hear all of that."

"It's cool. I mean there are hiccups in every relationship. If you guys keep handling yours intelligently and honestly like that you should be cool." Our manager assured us. "So final verdict, should I let Mr. Elba's people know that we can move forward?"

Sam and I both deferred to Noah. "Yeah, Cede is right. I trust her completely so working with a dreamboat won't make any difference. Besides... that will probably be pretty epic for our sales."

"Alright. I'll set something up. Don't worry, I will make sure that they understand your scheduling constraints." Haja assured us.
"How is the office coming?" I asked him once we wrapped up that subject. "Are they still on schedule?"

"Yes, we should be able to have the furniture delivered on schedule the Thursday after Labor Day. The floor was large enough that we were able to create a real division between your administrative and management staff and the legal department. We're gonna have some empty offices that will give you room to grow and there is a semicircular area that is dedicated to reception and will be staffed by Brantley and my administrative assistant, as soon as we find one, until we need a more dedicated receptionist. After the furniture is all in place, Darcy will handle the technological purchases...I do not envy you that bill." He joked. "We are holding off on posting any job listings until we have the office space all set up."

"We can get someone in there on the days you are interviewing to pretend to be the receptionist." Sam laughed. "That way the prospective hires won't get the wrong idea. They have hard wood throughout, right...I know that most offices are like stone or tile or carpet...but I don't like the idea of any of those."

"Yes. We actually found a great medium tone, high gloss hardwood from Armstrong." Haja explained. "It is everywhere but the bathrooms and the break room. We did go with tile in those, a nice slate in a tone called Brazilian Green Slate from Menards for the men's room and an Indian multicolor one with hints of sunset, gray and copper in it for the ladies room."

"What did you and Kurt finally decide on for the breakroom, and is it bigger than six by ten?" I chuckled. Kurt had been livid about Haja's adamant claims that that was a big as the breakroom really needed to be.

I could almost hear Haja roll his eyes. "It's huge and yes, he got the banquette and table rather than the bar height tables and stools. As for the flooring, that we agreed on immediately. We found a Dalian grey riven slate tile that is just gorgeous."

We all laughed. Hudson owed me twenty bucks, we'd tried to explain to her that Kurt Hummel had reinvented the meaning of the word stubborn. But she hadn't believed us. We talked for a little while longer and made sure that everything was in place for him and Darcy to join us in LA. Our Social Marketing and Media guru was coming to make sure that our fans felt like they had the skinny on all the back stage and background happenings. Everything was a go and they were both ready. As we were finishing up the call, Brantley called so we said goodbye to Haja and flipped over to Brantley.

"I just got off the phone with a cat I know in LA. He is in need of a musical group to do a song or two for the soundtrack of and a concert scene in the next Johnny Depp movie. He wanted to know if KAMA wanted the job. Apparently after TMZ asked Mr. Depp about you guys a few months ago, you've been on his radar and he likes what he sees."

Holy shit that was an epic thought. But... "When would they need the song and when is filming? We're a week out from going back to classes." I asked worriedly.

"No worries. They are still in casting. No way will they move into filming on this one before Christmas. It's a future period piece so they wanted someone fresh on the scene with a new sound. That sounds like KAMA to me."

"We'd love the chance," Sam said with a big grin. "But before we write a song for the movie, can we get a script summary. I mean, we don't want the song to be completely off topic." He pointed out. "It has been known to mess up the audience's enjoyment of the movie and mess up the career of the artists." His tone conveyed that he was thinking of a very particular movie...none of us were brave or crazy enough to start the rant that he would throw if we asked what he meant.
"I'll get up with Patrick and make it happen. I should definitely have it in hand when we get to LA if not before," Brantley told us.

We were pulling into Lima when we ended the call. Out of curiosity, we drove by what would be our Lima home and were shocked to see how much progress had already been made. The foundation and basement had both been cured and the rough framing, plumbing and electrical had had been completed. It was still really early in the day and the crew was onsite. Puck spotted George among them, so of course we had to stop. The way those two hugged, it was easy to forget that we'd just seen them like two weeks earlier. Then again, I know that Puck was a little worried about how George was going to react when he found out that we had kind of paid off the debt he'd incurred to move his business from Manhattan to Lima. It wasn't much, but men were proud creatures.

"Wow, George, this is amazing. It is so much further along than we thought it would be." I said as I gave him a hug of my own.

He smiled. "Well, there are these three mothers...you may know them...they are very interested in your house being finished by the time you three get out for Christmas."

I chuckled, but Sam was looking confused. "It's...it's big." He finally said quietly. I thought we went with a simple four bedroom, four bath house design...it was only like forty six hundred square feet."

George smirked. "Well, since your dad and I suddenly had no more debt..." we gave him sheepish smiles. Maybe we should have asked before we did that...but they had done so much for us and supported us so well, how could we not especially since neither of them would let us buy them houses or anything. "Sander, he decided that all things considered, he'd come up with some new floor plans. It's a little over eight thousand square feet. Six bedrooms, six full baths, a couple of half baths and a fully finished attic and basement. There is space for a pool, pool house and a guest house if you want them later."

"Wow." I breathed. "What are we gonna do with all that house?"

George checked around as if looking for someone. "Don't tell them I told you, but your mothers are hoping that you will host Christmas in your house and maybe let the out of town relatives stay with you. Gabby said that between the four houses, no one should have to get a hotel room this year."

"I love it...the moms are pimping out our house and it isn't even finished yet." Puck roared with laughter. "Hell yeah, we'll do it. We're like really, real grown-ups all committed and married and hosting our first Christmas. It is going to be so fucking awesome."

Puck has never been one to be excited all by his self. Within minutes he had Sam and me completely on board with how epically cool it was destined to be. I was working with Hudson to try and figure out how many people could sit at the typical formal dinner table and if we'd need to get something custom made. We started talking about how to manage to fit all of our multitude of family members into the four houses. George sent us on our way and we were still planning everything. But we had to shut that talk down when we pulled into the drive at my parent's house. Despite it being a work day, Mom, Becah and Bubbie Ruth were there waiting for us with Shelby and Beth.

There were more hugs...lots of checking us over to see if we were too thin or had somehow lost a limb in the last couple of weeks. Then next thing I knew, Bubbie was issuing orders. "My boychicks, I want the two of you to carry all of the things you bought for the VMAs up to Mercedes' room. I've taken it over for my stay. We have six hours before we need to get dressed for dinner. That is more than enough time for me to get everything pinned and tucked....while we work on Cede, you two can go get checked in."
"Our stuff too?" Sam asked.

Bubbie nodded. "Have you never seen Fashion Police…they will crucify you if your suits aren't tailored, much as they would Mercedes for not wearing a ridiculously expensive, designer dress." She advised. "I want to see everything so that we can make sure that you get all the best press. Oh and get my little protégé over here. I swear he hurts my heart with all that NYADA stuff. He is going to be the single best stylist and designer the world has ever seen."

I got out my phone and texted Kurt. He and Ruth Mayzer had been arguing about his true calling for months. My boys and I along with Blaine stayed far out of it. Santana liked instigating battles in the war. Then I helped Sam and Puck take things up to my old room. This was a great chance to have the moms help me decide on which of the different jewelry pieces to wear. "Alright, we'll be back in I guess an hour." Puck said after kissing everyone and asking Shelby if he could take Beth with them. She went down to help them move the extra car seat to the rental car.

After they were gone, Bubbie pulled out the underpinnings she'd gotten me, based solely off Hudson's description of the dress and her own gifts at fashion. "I started to go with a corset, but I was worried that you wouldn't be able to dance in it for your performance and I didn't want you to have to strip down to your skin to change, so instead I went with a Spanx, strapless body suit." She handed me a Neiman Marcus bag and inside was the black shape wear and something else. "If you wear that black strapless Wacoal bra with it, your ladies should sit up perfectly behind that dress."

I went into the bathroom and noticed that Mom had changed out the shower curtain, liner and the towels. I quickly changed from the cute little sundress I'd worn in the car, and put on the bra and spanx before returning to the bedroom. With Bubbie's help, I put on the red dress and then I pulled on the Louboutins that would give me added height and looked awesome with the dress. Or so I thought.

"Why did you go with those?" Mom suddenly asked looking at the Christian Louboutin Altarakna peep-toe, mesh-caged, red sole booties I'd fallen in love with. She must have seen the look on my face. "Sorry…they are definitely cute, but why didn't you go with a pair of evening pumps… something more formal?"

"I love them." Becah smiled. "They are adorable and unexpected. I mean, they are formal and yet and still they are playful."

"So are those cute laser cut ones that just hit stores in the spring." Bubbie mentioned. She quickly added. "I actually like them and they look good with the dress, but I love those new laser cut, peep toe, sandals with the criss cross straps over the vamp."

"Those are cute. But they didn't have those in my size. Plus, I love these. They make me feel sexy and confident." I told them honestly.

"Well then, that is all that matters." Mom said reasonably. "But, Hudson, if you will give me the name of the hotel, I'll have a pair of the sandals she likes there by Wednesday or Thursday."

I laughed. Mom must really not like my shoes. Hudson realized the same thing. She gave Mom the requested information and smiled. "Mercedes, would you like me to lay out the accessories so that your moms can help you decide between them?"

"That's a great idea." I said happy for the subject change. Letting them choose between things I hadn't had such a visceral reaction to was definitely the lesser of two evils. Hudson laid out the Dannijo Carrie crystal drop earrings, the pointed end, elliptical silver and garnet earrings, the eighteen carat white gold detachable garnet and diamond chandelier earrings, and the luxury garnet
stone earrings chandelier dangle earrings which were also eighteen carat white gold on the mirrored dresser in the room. As she was doing so, my regular cell phone rang. Hudson answered it and put it on speaker. "Mercedes, are the guys there?" Gwen Abrams calm voice rang out.

"No, they went to get us checked into the Wyndham." I told her with a chuckle, "but you can go ahead and tell me whatever it is…they should be back soon."

"We got the property in Georgia, the apartment complex for under three million. And we can get the renovations started in forty-five days." Her voice was very clearly smiling.

"What is the plan for the current occupants?" I asked cautiously.

"We are giving them the option to relocate and we are giving them fifteen hundred dollars per household to facilitate that relocation. Most of them wouldn't be able to afford the new rates that the new apartments will draw. Most of them would have moved long ago if they had the ability." Artie's mother answered. "The old management company had been raising rents without really maintaining their units. They welcome the change."

I nodded. "Okay, I just don't want to displace them from their homes and not make sure that they have somewhere to go."

"They won't be." Gwen assured me. "Also we over paid first quarter, so do you want me to pay the usual amount and you get a refund next year, or do you want me to lower the payment for this quarter and allow the adjustment to even out."

"Let's over pay and get a refund." Sam suggested as he entered the room. "That way if we're wrong about the over payment or something, we'll still be okay."

Mrs. Abrams agreed and we moved on to the next subject. "I have already hired Brasfield and Gorrie, LLC to handle the construction. As usual, they don't know your names beyond the name of your corporation, nor does the company that used to own the apartment complex."

"Okay, great." Puck began, "the last thing we need is people talking about how KAMA kicked people out of their homes."

We silently agreed. Gwen said that she would bring over the purchase documents that needed our signatures in the next hour. By the time she had arrived, Bubbie had finished with me, I'd changed back into real clothes and Ruth and Kurt had completed pinning in Sam and were working on Puck. There were a butt load of places that needed our signatures but by the time we finally finished the signing, we were the proud new owners of more real estate. And Mom, Becah, Shelby and Gabby, once she got home from work, had finally reached an agreement on which earrings I should wear. Though the question of my shoes was apparently back on the table.

Sam Puck, Hudson and I escaped the madness and retreated to our hotel rooms. We, unfortunately, barely had time for a quickie in the shower before we had to get dressed, gather Sarah's birthday gifts and make our way to the Old Prime Steakhouse. It was a lot more than what one would expect the typical thirteen year old to ask to have their birthday party, but she got to pick the place and that was where she picked. I kind of wished that we'd been able to do more for her Bat Mitzvah the year before, but we weren't balling at that point, not for real, and we'd barely been able to make it the first place. We had just moved to New York for school and barely had time to breathe. We flown in a few hours before the party and flown back not long after it ended. Besides, Sarah hadn't wanted a huge to do…or that was what she claimed. So instead we were doing her thirteenth birthday up huge.
We rented the 'Upper Lounge' for the night. The dinner was just for family...mostly. Each of Triple S had been allowed to invite one friend. Steven had brought Ethan, which was perfect since Aidan came with Tessa. Stacey had brought the little redhead girl, Tiffany, and Sarah had brought a girl she'd been friends with for most of her life, but they had mainly been 'at school' friends until middle school when they both got cell phones and were better able to keep contact after school and on weekends. Mia Hinkle was a cutie with long chestnut brown hair and wide, innocent brown eyes. She made me smile every time someone mentioned math at all...the faces she made were hilarious. Other than those four, and Marley, everyone present was a member of our big crazy family. Saul and Mills had come in, as had Neil and Francesca. I'd met Neil's mother at Becah and George's wedding. She had been so grateful that Neil was actually living his life and settling down with a 'nice Jewish girl' she was pretty much hugging everyone that had anything at all to do with the change. Francesca was sporting a large heart shaped diamond in a diamond and platinum band. She was so very happy...she'd put on fifteen pounds and looked absolutely incredible. The little bit of extra weight softened her body and made her boobs look almost real. Probably she would never let herself get any bigger, but she looked healthy.

Both Grandma Mae and MeMaw had come in for the weekend. They had adopted all the rest of 'the babies' as surely as Ruth had. Gabby was hoping that she could possibly talk her mom into moving up to Lima too, but she loved her home, the one she had shared with her husband and in which she had raised her kids. Couldn't blame her, those feelings were called roots for a reason. Kevon, Trice, Tonya and Devon had all made the drive too. After a great dinner, Sarah opened her gifts. She got tons of clothes, the jewelry from us, some tech and a car. Okay so the car was a picture of the sixty-nine Chevy Nova that she and George were going to rebuild in their spare time in the hopes that they would be finished with it by the time she was ready to get her license. All in all it was a damn good haul.

Once she had all her gifts opened and, in many cases, on, the cake was brought out. Becah had gotten her a pretty fuchsia cake with silver and black scrolls over it and it was made to look like a present itself. After cake and ice cream Puck and Sam helped George, Sander and Benton take Sarah's haul to the car and then we headed back to the hotel room.

Once we were locked away for the night, I looked over at Noah. "It has been a crazy day, and an even crazier week, but don't think that Sam or I have forgotten about the conversation in the car." I told him gently as I carefully started to separate him from his clothes. My hands made short work of his clothing, and I let my lips and kisses try to heal the emotional wounds that he'd kept hidden from us for so long. Sam joined us and we spent the next seven hours making sure that he understood that he was worthy...that he was worth everything.

The next morning we awoke to a knock at the door. Thankfully it was just room service, but it gave us time get up and get dressed for the day before Grandma Mae and MeMaw all stopped by. They dragged us to the mall. They said that it was to get us presents for our good grades, which was a tradition in my family, but I think they really did it just to watch us get swarmed by fans and then point and laugh at us before they finally helped security manage the crowd and get us the hell out of there. Thankfully we still made it to George's in time to grab Triple S and Tessa and make it to Westgate Lanes in time for the party. Fifteen middle schoolers and a few fourth and fifth graders were just as loud and borderline obnoxious as I'd anticipated. At least we had Tessa, Aidan, Jake and Marley for help...plus Finn, Lauren and Vince stopped by for a while and not too long after they left Unique and Riley showed up too.

There was another cake, this one from a grocery store rather than a real bakery, but it was still cake so it was still good. I was going to have to work out so much before the VMAs. The bulk of the parents showed up and took the wildebeests they called tween home, after everybody and their grandmothers asked us for autographs...which was epically weird by the way. Around the time we
were saying good bye to the last of them, Becah and George arrived to get the girls they were taking for the slumber party and Aidan and Tessa took Stevie and Ethan with them. We had just enough time to make love again before we had to get dressed for Temple. It was nice to see Hiram and Antwan. They introduced us to their surrogate…she seemed like a really nice lady and she was showing a lot considering that she was only twenty-five weeks along. I sent Hudson a text to have her start keeping an eye out for registries for the two dads and they tried to apologize again for the bad behavior of their eldest child. She wasn't present. Despite the fact that they had asked her if she wanted to visit for at least part of the summer, she had staunchly remained in New York. The prevailing theory was that while Rachel had been able to handle the concept of a single sibling but then when they told her that they were having multiples, she hadn't taken it very well.

That night we had a quiet dinner together with our friends almost all of whom were either going back to their schools the next morning or we heading to LA with us the morning after that. When we made it back to our hotel room, we were asleep before the condoms cooled in the trashcan. The next morning dawned bright and early and saw us getting all dolled up to go to my home church. Since we'd been gone so long, I took the time to say hello to as many people as I could. When the pastor asked me if I would honor them with a song, the three of us, I wasn't about to get up there without Sam and Puck, gave them ‘Oh Happy Day' before I fulfilled the original request by singing Yolanda Adams' famous ‘Order My Steps'. We had a ball after church, so many people were trying to get our autographs without looking like they were begging for our autograph.

The rest of our stay in Lima was spent mostly with the family. We were all on our flight at nine the next morning and got checked in to our rooms the Ritz Carlton, all twenty-five of us. The summer had been a wild and crazy roller coaster and it wasn't even over yet.

****************************************************************************************************************************************************

Alright, now I put some serious work into this Chapter and so did my Betas. We could use a little love and I could use a lotta inspiration. Chapter 4 came so easy that Chapter 5 is trying to make me her B*tch.

Let me know what you loved...what you hated. What you want to see more of and what you never want to see again.

TTFN,
Anni
****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
This Chapter Dedicated to MyKroft & love-orthelack-thereof, two very encouraging Learning French Series reviewers.
I appreciate all of you.
Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Prom Night by Kaybee80
Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 Welcome to the LF Beta Team!!!!

French Lesson Series Timeline
April 2012---Junior Prom (Learning French)
May 2012---First Nationals Title (Learning French)
June - August 2012 Summer after Junior year(Summer Menagé)
August 2012-May 2013 Senior Year (Grandissions Together)
June -August 2013 Summer before College (Summer Menagé II)
September 2013---May 2014 Freshman Year of College (Les Ames Soeurs, Si Cela Est Noel)
May-September 2014 Summer before Sophomore year (Summer Menagé III)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She Works Hard For the Money (Donna Summers)
Hudson PoV

I will admit that when I answered the rather vague ad for the personal assistant position, I hadn't expected much. When one job hunts, they reach a level of ennui that can mess with their minds. I was no different. By that point, it had been three months since I'd been out of any semblance of work. I was just a few months away from the end of my lease in an apartment that was actually student housing. In all reality, I was sending curricula vitae to any add that seemed like it was an actual job and completely legal. If I wasn't compelled to keep a log of all the ads I answered, it may have escaped me when I was called in for an interview a little more than a week after I'd found the posting.

"Ms. Friedman, this is Deborah Jergens with Warner Music Group. I would like to schedule you to meet with your prospective employer on Monday, March twenty-fourth." I immediately accepted. In the moment, I didn't even remember which position she was referring to. But beggars couldn't be choosy and if I got too choosy about a job at that point I would end up a beggar. Unlike my classmates, I had no parents to fall back on in the event that all my college degrees proved unmarketable. My mother had died of cancer when I was four and my father had followed her by the time I was eight. I spent the next nine and half years in the overtaxed foster care system of the state of New York. Fortunately I'd never had a truly bad placement. Unfortunately, each less than good placement had only made me more shy and more reclusive. I fell into books and after managing to earn a full scholarship to Binghamton University I escaped my final foster home right before I turned
eighteen. In my five years there, I managed to earn four bachelor degrees and an associates.

After graduation, I had exhausted the scholarship and was determined not to take on any more debt than absolutely necessary, I found a job in a small bookstore. However, bookstores, especially the small, boutique ones die quick deaths in poor economies. So I applied for a master's program and the scholarships I would need to secure the masters in computer science from CUNY that I had completed while working at the campus library. Once I graduated from the master's program, I was left jobless and with a short amount of time before I would be homeless. Had I realized exactly what would happen, I'd have stretched my thesis out a little and graduated in May rather than December. So it was with a very glad heart that I accepted the invitation to interview with the unnamed Warner Music Group artist as a personal assistant. I spent the time between the phone call and the actual interview reading articles that talked about what personal assistants did on a day to day basis and how that differed from what was usually asked of a celebrity personal assistant.

After meeting with KAMA for lunch, I was shocked to realize that while they were very young, they weren't immature. They knew what they wanted and I found that I desperately wanted to take the journey with them. After we finished having lunch and answering a plethora of the psychological based interview questions, they didn't ask any of the usual and expected skill set based queries, we were all told that they would let us know by Friday afternoon who they had selected and asked that we keep Friday evening dinner open. If we were the candidate selected we'd need to be available for a dinner meeting that same night. I was more than happy to do so. It had been weeks since I'd had more than bag salads for dinner and scrambled eggs for breakfast. The interview lunch was the first time I'd had lunch since my money situation had gotten uncomfortably tight.

I was exceedingly happy when I got the call early Friday afternoon inviting me to dinner at the Warner Music Group's Midtown offices. I was told to dress professionally, but to remain comfortable since the meeting could take quite a while. That was even better because they had already seen the best of my interview outfits. I was able to pull together the pretty blue wrap dress I'd worn for my master's graduation and a pair of nude pumps. Naturally, my hair was very reminiscent of Merida's from Disney's Brave so I took the rest of the afternoon to wash, blow dry and straighten the mass. I arrived at Warner's offices a scant fifteen minutes early. An intern showed me up to a well-appointed conference room where Deborah Jergens was waiting along with several others and a teleconference all ready to go.

Once KAMA got there, Ms. Jergens took the time to introduce everyone to each other. "We've met each of you, however, tonight is the first time that the four of you who will comprise the management and administrative team of KAMA have met. Haja Johnston," a tall, well-built black man with shoulder length blond locs smiled and waved as Ms. Jergens gave us his background, "is being offered the position of talent manager. Brantley Clayton," he was younger than Mr. Johnston, and had lighter skin though they were both African Americans. He was being offered the job of the new group's agent. He would see to all their booking and tours. "Now, after interviewing for a personal assistant, Mercedes, Sam and Noah were faced with a conundrum. They had two candidates who seemed to be a perfect fit for the position. The only differences between the two was that one is related to one of their close personal friends and the other speaks a multitude of languages. Our triad was very concerned with nepotism keeping them from hiring the linguist, and yet they were also worried that in trying not to appear as if they were only hiring the girl who was related to their friend, they would miss out on an incredible candidate as well. They were arguing the point for almost an hour when I pointed out that one candidate was supremely qualified to take a position that we would eventually need to fill but hadn't looked to fill for a few more months. Darcy, you are being offered the position of social media marketing manager. Hudson, Mercedes, Sam and Noah would like to offer you the personal assistant position."

Then Mr. Zizes spoke up from the display on the wall. "Before we moved forward, I need each of
you to verbally accept your positions.” He said firmly.

"Hell yeah, I accept Uncle Ben…” Darcy laughed. "I'm being offered the chance to be paid for one of my favorite parts of life. You know that I am all over this job."

"So am I sir." Brantley agreed. "This is exactly what I've wanted to do with my life for the last six years, and the chance to do it for people who seem to value the loyalty that I give. That gives me life."

Haja smiled. "I have considered this job mine since the interview.” He returned simply.

All eyes, those physically present and those digitally there turned to look at me. "I am happy to accept this opportunity."

Deborah's intern passed us each our offer letters and nondisclosure agreements. I read mine over and got totally held up by the salary. "This is…” I caught myself. I'd read more than enough articles during my job search to know that employers tend not to like it when you discuss your salary around other people in the firm.

Darcy had no such compunction. "Is this serious? You're gonna pay us sixty-five grand a year…and give us a rent free apartment."

"Yes. Combined that brings you two up to almost the same base salary as all our other employees.” Sam said carefully.

Puck continued for him. "There will be bonuses for the management and probably gifts for the administrative staff."

"Wait, gifts?" I asked quietly.

Mercedes took that one. "As I understand it, you will probably end up attending events with us. I'm not going to ask you to buy clothes that you wouldn't have to purchase if not for the fact that you work for us on your own."

"I can help you with getting the girls outfitted." Haja piped in. Something told me that he would really enjoy taking us shopping. I wouldn't mind. I wasn't very good at the whole shopping thing.

From there the meeting progressed quickly. They had us covered with full group medical, dental, short and long term disability and even vision. We got everything handled paperwork wise. My start date was the first of April and I got a signing bonus and everything. I also got my first assignment. I was to set up the flights and lodging for KAMA's trip to the MTV Movie Awards and their summer festival tour. By the end of April I felt like I had really cemented my place in my new position. I had created a database to manage my knowledge of their likes and dislikes. I worked with Kurt to create a database that will allow us to keep track of what they wore to which events…that would make it easier once the offers for her to wear specific designers or whatever started to come in as they gained more fame and notoriety. I also created a database of their likes and dislikes when it came to things like their favorite brands of toilet paper and toothpaste and any of the other kinds of things that I might eventually need to know to stock their home when they began to live on their own.

I tried to fill my down time with things that would ultimately help me perform my duties better. I found and linked to all the important music industry sites, Billboard being the very first of those. I also took time to email and Skype with Darcy so that she and I could revamp KAMA's online presence, including their website and their online store. Noah Puckerman had done a really good job picking their original offerings, but Darcy and I worked with the group to expand them. We found
better vendors who would be able to handle the shipping as well without undercutting the bottom line. We also expanded the selection to include things that sold well without costing much, like widening the selection of bumper stickers and car magnets, BPA free water bottles, fit bit bracelets, and even KAMA cellphone, tablet and iPad covers. I'd never realized how big the markup on those kinds of things were. The water bottles cost like fifty cents each to make, less than a dollar to ship and yet we charged almost twenty bucks plus pretty arbitrarily set ‘shipping and handling’ fees…and people bought them in droves. The online store broke such a large profit that first full month, Sam and Noah insisted that Mercedes make time to take Darcy and me shopping as a bonus. Once he saw the swag, Haja immediately made arrangements to have vendors making sales of the lower end, fifty dollars and less, items at each festival stop. We wouldn't make quite as much profit from the boots on the ground sales as we did the internet sales, but it was a great way to get more people interested in the group and overall both the online swag sales and the record sales went up quickly.

Every month there was a meeting, via skype of Gwen Adams, Antwan Berry and Saul Mayzer to discuss any pertinent details about Sam, Puck and Mercedes' financials. That was immediately followed by another meeting of Antwan Berry, Ethan Harris, Haja, Brantley and myself about career and legal details. In addition to those meetings, Haja, Brantley and I, along with Darcy via Skype, met with Ms. Jergens, Ms. Rawlins and Mr. Hamilton once a week for several weeks. Those meetings were just to bring us fully on board and teach us what we needed to know about the band to do our jobs. After each of the meetings, I'd bring the notes and go over everything with the trio. It was fairly intensive, but it helped me to get a deeper understanding of the three of them. Ultimately, the trip to LA for the Movie Awards was definitely an eye opener and I learned even more. Mercedes, Sam and Noah were very serious about treating their band and me very well. I was to always book everyone on the same flights and in the same hotel. They didn't want to make anyone double up. They wouldn't ask anyone to do anything they weren't comfortable doing. By the time we returned to New York, I had enough knowledge to make booking for the festival tour a breeze. The rest of the school year and summer was a flurry of activity. I learned more about my bosses and my job. I found myself fully integrated into their lives, as much as I needed to be anyway.

By the time we were nearing the end of the tour and working on recording their Christmas/Hanukah album, there was nothing they could throw at me that I couldn't handle. I was comfortable with their personalities and comfortable enough to start peaking my head out of my own shell. It was nice. I didn't have very many friends, but Darcy had almost immediately adopted me and Haja and Brantley seemed determined to make me feel as comfortable with them as I did with Darcy and Mercedes. By the time we all met up in LA for the VMAs, the four of us were as thick as thieves and we were going to do everything in our power to ensure that KAMA reached the highest of heights.

Haja, Brantley and Darcy were waiting on us near baggage claim when we arrived at LAX. They helped us gather all of the bags. Everyone had garment bags that held their performance and/or red carpet wear. Ruth Mayzer had done an incredible job tailoring Mercedes' red carpet dress and she and Kurt had Puck and Sam's suits looking custom made rather than off the rack. The fact that they had gotten it all done over the course of one activity packed weekend just showed how good both of them were with their needles. We were checked into the Ritz Carlton in a fairly quick process. We had rented a total of ten single ‘deluxe guest rooms', which were booked under the name Gene Stark, four double ‘marina terrace guest rooms', booked under the name Joe Kerr, an ACA accessible ‘club level guest room' for Brittany, Santana and Artie and the executive suite for KAMA both reserved under the pseudonym Michelle Franks. We got the keys all handed out and the amazing concierge and Ritz staff got every single bag taken to the correct rooms.

Mercedes, Sam, Puck, and Rainbow were due to meet with set designers by two. I had them changed, assembled and at the designers' studio near the venue by one thirty-seven. Brantley and Haja accompanied us. Primarily because the tour the following summer would be larger and call for stage sets and such. The meeting was not quick, but it was efficient. The designers, Florian Wielder
and Richard Finkelstein and their lighting designer LeRoy Bennett came into the meeting with more questions than ideas as first. But as we answered things like 'stage costumes', still the twenties, speak easy looks. 'How many dancers and band?' six dancers, four background singers and five band members...I included Artie since Sam and Noah wouldn't be playing for this performance. "Our lead guitarist for the evening is disabled. Please keep the band on stage level."

"Easily done." Mr. Wielder said with a nod. He had started sketching a moment ago, his hands almost a blur of movement.

Mr. Finkelstein leaned over, "open up the front there and the five piece band can play under there." He looked up from the sketch. "None of you are afraid of heights, right?" thankfully they weren't. He pointed to something and smirked. "We can make those retractable. I already have a set that we can alter to make this work."

"Scarlet Pimpernel?" Mr. Bennett asked him. When Finkelstein nodded, Mr. Bennett looked down at the colors I'd given him that everyone was wearing. "Ivory or palest pink, lavender and blue gels for the spots…and silver gels to create moonlight for the main lighting theme." The three of them barely seemed to realize that we were there as they disintegrated into industry specific speech that went over our head.

Suddenly they turned their sketch around. "Now, given the nature of the song, I'm going to put you in contact with the conductor of the orchestra that will be available to the other artists and will be doing the live music for the night. I didn't think to ask...were you using live music or canned. Since you will have your band on stage, I assumed."

"We don't lip sync. I know it can cause problems for the producers, but I can't do it." Mercedes told him honestly. He probably thought she meant that it was a low road she refused to travel. But I had been to enough of her live performances to know that Mercedes often let the music take her. She never knew exactly what would come out of her mouth on the chorus and harmony parts. Puck and Sam seemed completely used to letting her have her head as she improvised to her hearts content.

"Great...your band backed up by the swell of the orchestra during the second chorus through the end of the song. It will sound amazing." Mr. Wielder said with a smile. "Richard, can we have this ready for them to have rehearsals..."

"It's altering an existing set, I can have it ready for you guys to get in here with your band by Wednesday evening...Thursday morning at the latest." Richard Finkelstein assured us.

I quickly rearranged the schedule blocking out chunks of Wednesday evening, Thursday and Friday for their rehearsals and sound checks. The changes wouldn't affect their time to get ready on Sunday. The performers were scheduled for their spa visits on Saturday, and hair and makeup would begin at ten Sunday morning. Once I had the whole calendar rearranged and reset, I sent everyone the needed updates and catalogued the replies to make sure that they would all know exactly what was going on and when.

We spent another hour learning what the set designers had planned, and I had to say it was going to be spectacular. As per the usual arrangement, KAMA fed us one meal a day and we were on our own for the others...though we could get room service for breakfast and, in Puck's words... "We're going to, you might as well do it". I had made arrangements for the entire entourage to have dinner at a fun waterfront 'sport's bar' and dockside grill called Tony P's. There was a car service to transport everyone over. The place seemed very nice, but very Cali meets Middle America. They were very professional and ready for us when we arrived. I had rented the Dockside Private Room for the evening. Since the space sat thirty-six to fifty, I believed that we would be well and truly fine. Sam, Mercedes, and Puck had called and invited their LA real estate agent and she was bringing a
date…a chef that was in town from New York who was out visiting her. The couple had been introduced by Mrs. Mayzer. She was exceedingly happy when I let her know that her match making had been successful. Ms. Mann was also invited to join us, but she had other plans. That still only brought us up to twenty seven, so we were golden.

The restaurant had assigned us four waiters, three men and one lady. The lady kept geeking out, but she wasn't obnoxious about it. She had my quarter of the table, and she gave us recommendations as to her favorites and outlined the specials. Ultimately, Darcy and I decided to take a note from our bosses' hand book and share two appetizers. She ordered the calamari and I went with the crab and shrimp stuffed mushrooms. Both where quite enjoyable. I noticed that Blaine, sitting across from us, was noticing and working up his nerve to ask about it. I smiled. "No, we aren't dating. I think Darcy has officially adopted me. I'm not really one for dating…either gender."

"Oh, I read an article online about people who identify as asexual and aromantic." Kurt piped in. "Science has really only scratched the surface of gender and sexuality in the last ten years. Before that they really only looked at gender from a hetero-normative standpoint. Now, they are finally starting to look into the science of gender from the standpoint of the entire human experience. The current prevailing theory is that asexual people actually make up about one percent of the world's population."

I nodded. I had done some research…and by some I meant I had read everything I could get my hands on to try to understand why I'd never felt even the beginnings of sexual attraction. As I read more and more, I came to so many conclusions. I had no problem with the thought of sex. I didn't frown on others who enjoyed the pursuit of sexual relationships. I didn't fear sexual interaction, I just didn't want to interact with others that way. I wasn't gay, I wasn't straight, I wasn't bisexual. I wasn't pansexual. I wasn't sexual at all. In the earlier determinations of people like me, our lack of desire was considered a disorder. They assumed because we didn't experience sexual desire there must have been something physiologically wrong. While the desire for sex was never present, the desire to categorize myself, to understand myself was. So I had allowed a younger, tenured professor with a reputation for liking coeds 'seduce' me…up to a certain point. My body parts responded correctly to the physical stimulation. My nipples hardened in response to thumbs and tongues. My vaginal canal moistened appropriately to manual stimulation, but I never got any emotional or psychological stimulation. Mr. Professor Man hadn't liked that and it had made it easier for me to pull back and discontinue the association. But it definitely answered a whole host of questions I'd had at that point.

Since then, just knowing what I felt, or didn't feel, as the case may have been…knowing that it had a name, that there were others like me…it made it easier to live my life. I determined that I was both asexual and aromantic…though I had no romantic experience so that one was still a little bit up in the air. Though, since becoming a part of KAMA's team, I had discovered that while I had no interest in sex, I did like hugs. They were a very huggy bunch. Mercedes, Sam and Darcy were the worst, though Brittany did deserve an honorable mention. I had also become completely comfortable with my self diagnosis. I was around some of the most objectively beautiful people I'd ever encountered in real life and there was absolutely no sexual desire for any of them. I looked up at Kurt and Blaine and smiled. "Yes, I am asexual…and Sam, Puck, Santana and Brittany are pansexual…though Santana and Brittany may simply be bisexual. I am not sure on them."

"Pansexuality…that's when gender is not the point right? Where the person is more important than the plumbing?" Darcy asked in her own irreverent way.

"Yes." I told her with a grin.

Kurt smiled as well. "That would definitely seem to categorize Sam…Sam's father likes to say that Sam never saw Noah coming, that he hit him like a bolt out of the blue."
"Bet he sees Noah cumming all the time now." Darcy chortled.

Thankfully before anyone had to think of a response to that horrifically bad joke that she absolutely loved, our waitress arrived with the entrees. I had ordered the Seafood Pasta which had fresh fish, shrimp, calamari, Prince Edward Island mussels, clams, garlic, fresh basil, marinara cream sauce, over a big bed of linguini pasta. Darcy had gone for another region's food altogether. Her Stir Fry Teriyaki Bowl was entirely too large to call it a ‘bowl'. It was resplendent with shrimp big enough to be called prawns, ten different vegetables, peanuts, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, the restaurant's signature stir fry sauce and brown rice. I looked around and saw that Kurt had gotten the healthiest thing on the menu a healthy char-broiled ten ounce chicken breast, but had substituted the rice dish for extra sautéed fresh vegetables. Blaine, however, decided to enjoy the garlic shrimp pasta, which was a dozen large shrimp, spinach, mushrooms, garlic, marinara cream sauce served with al dente spaghettini.

I glanced up the table. I wanted to know what a chef would order in another person's restaurant… from another chef's kitchen. Roman Manoso had ordered the restaurant's specialty. Sweet Italian sausage, cappacola, meatballs, mushrooms, spinach, ricotta, mozzarella & Parmesan cheeses, marinara, over a bed of rigatoni that they called ‘Tony's Special Pasta'. He seemed to approve of the meal, finishing the rather large portion. The room was quiet for several long minutes as everyone dug in. Darcy was pretty quick to return us to our original conversation. "So we have gay." She gestured at Kurt and Blaine. "Pan," she gestured at the male two thirds of our bosses. "Asexual…" she gestured at me. "Bi..." her head nodded towards Brittany and Santana. "Jeez, I feel kind of boring just loving dick. Maybe I should expand my horizons. Nah...I tried the whole lezzie experience in college. Chicks be crazy man. Plus, considering what I was bringing to the table I don't think it was unreasonable to want any girl I dated to be at least a C-cup. The Lesbos on campus all got really offended when I said that."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "My Ga-ga...you are certainly related to our Lauren." He chuckled. "I'm not sure that Harlem is ready for you and Puck to reside so close together."

Darcy gave a Kanye shrug and returned to devouring her meal. The food was delicious and when our waitress asked if we wanted anything for dessert, I was tempted. But when I considered that I wouldn't have to buy lunch the next day, simply because I had about half of the meal left, I decided that I really didn't need that lovely looking All-American hot fudge brownie sundae after all. Puck handled the payment. Sam made sure to leave a hundred dollar bill within each of the wait-staff zones. So we left full and happy. By the time I'd returned to the room I was sharing with Darcy, the local news had picked up the slightly ridiculous tip amounts. "And in lighter news, with all the bad behavior often associated with young Hollywood and the under twenty one set of the music industry it is always nice to be able to say something good about a famous young person. The music group KAMA is in town with their band, background singers and entourage for the VMAs. Tonight they had dinner at a local area restaurant and rather than the usual reports of out of control behavior or even the occasional dine and dash, the staff at Tony P's Dockside Grill posted this to their social media. 'KAMA and their crew are the most mature and kind group of celebrities we've had eat in our restaurant for a long time. Not only was the room completely neat and clean with the dishes stacked neatly ready for our busboys to take away. They paid their bill which exceeded our minimum for the room and left a forty percent gratuity, doubling the required tip. Then at each different zone for the waiters, they left a crisp, new hundred dollar bill. This is the first under twenty-one celebrity clique I can truly say is welcome back anytime.'" The picture attached to the Facebook post shows the four waiters we'd had serving us each holding up one of the hundreds. The news anchor came back on the screen. "The post has already been viewed over a million times and it joins several other posts from restaurants around the country. I have to say…it is quite lovely not to have to tell another story about Beiber peeing in a bucket."
"Given that Sam Evans worked for a time as a pizza delivery guy, I guess he understands the importance of tips. Well, as a former waitress myself, I have to say Kudos to KAMA. No matter how a person may feel about their private lives, they are living their professional ones with grace and maturity." The late evening news co-anchor said with a bright toothed smile.

Darcy immediately whipped her Mac Book pro from her ever present messenger bag and followed the restaurant, dropping them a very quick KAMA thank you note and arranging to have them sent a signed photo of the group. As she went to work, I took a moment to look around the room. Despite having come up earlier, I hadn't really taken an opportunity to check the room out. The room was really beautiful with a personal balcony that allowed one to really appreciate the views of the marina and city. The two double beds were draped in handcrafted Egyptian and Italian bedding and the bathroom was full on marble bathrooms with a combo bathtub and shower and a signature terry cloth robes for each guest.

I wanted to take a long bath. It had been so long since I had had the luxury. The dorm bathtubs hadn't been worth sanitizing. None of the off campus apartments I'd lived in had a tub, just stand up showers. My bathroom in our apartment in Harlem did have a nice soaker tub, but I'd barely been there since we moved me in. Further investigation showed that the bubble bath they provided was a very sweet scent, not anything that I could see myself using, so I made a note to get myself some bubble bath when the group went shopping. I felt Darcy come up behind me. "Ohhh look at that tub. I so call dibs on some serious bath time this week." She chuckled wickedly.

"I was just thinking something similar…but it will have to wait until I get some different bubble bath. I couldn't walk around smelling like honeysuckle all day." I told her honestly.

"We should go half on some of the really good shit." Darcy postulated. "I mean, they are dragging us to the mall…we can definitely find something there that appeals to both of us and cost more than we'd spend individually. I actually thought that it was a sound premise, so we agreed to it. However that would be another day. I took a long hot shower and knew that I would just have to wear my hair curly for the week. The southern California humidity played havoc with my self straightened hair. Darcy's hair was looking very curly as well…but she was the epitome of 'just go with it' so I doubted that she was concerned.

After my shower and my Hummel and Jones approved moisturizing routine was complete I donned my blue floral scroll pajamas I'd gotten especially for on the road travel and shoved my feet into the matching slippers. I laid out my clothes for the next day as my hair went from wet to damp in the confines of the thick, plush hotel towel. When I was fairly sure that I wouldn't soak the bed with water from my head, I grabbed my brush, settled down and brushed every discernible tangle from my abundant curls. Once that chore was done…and I had finished the episode of Bones that was playing…I braided it down in two French braids. I checked Mercedes, Sam and Puck's KAMA emails and forwarded anything that needed their attention to their personal emails. I was quite happy that we'd culled out some time the day before to hold our monthly meeting with Mrs. Abrams, Mr. Mayzer and Attorney Berry, and Attorney Harris mostly in person; the only one who had needed to Skype in was Mr. Harris. So I wouldn't need to wake up early to deal with that.

I called down to the front desk and arranged wakeup calls for myself, Haja, Kurt and of course KAMA. Then I made myself comfortable in the opulent covers and immediately went to sleep. When my phone rang at six thirty, I'd been up for a few minutes just luxuriating in the bed. I answered on the very first ring so that Darcy would be undisturbed. I would realize later that Darcy Lewis could sleep through any matter of loud and/or obnoxious sounds. I changed into some workout clothes, found the fitness center and did thirty minutes on the elliptical machine. It was with a grin that I noticed that Puck, Sam and Mercedes were there when I walked in and they were just starting their cooldown when I got ready to leave. Better them than me, I was not one for exercise,

preferring to spend my time in more intellectual pursuits. But I had eaten a lot of food over the weekend and the night before. The Jones, Evans, Altman-Puckermans and Mayzers all seemed to share a decided need to feed people as much as they could eat...and then try and cajole them into eating even more. After a quick shower, I dressed in very comfortable business casual clothes. A pair of khaki colored high waisted, wide leg slacks, a jewel tone green collared shirt with long tabs at the waist that tied just for detail or to act as a belt. The flat sandals I wore matched the shirt. I shoved my necessities, iPad, my smart phone, KAMA's iPhone, and my wallet into an ivory and black striped tote bag. Grabbed my ivory and black striped sweater...Puck and Sam insisted on AC for every single drive...and headed to the elevator. On the way to the lobby, I emailed the contractor for the office and asked for a status report, texted Darcy all the things I needed her to check on or information I needed her to pull for me for the day reminded her about the makeup rehearsal that afternoon, and confirmed with Ms. Mann that we were on schedule to meet at the house located in nearby Mar Vista.

Sam and Mercedes were helping Puck to a seat in the restaurant area so I joined them as we waited on Haja and Kurt. I noted that Mercedes was dressed in a pretty purple plaid scoop neck, wide strap sundress and open toe wedges. Sam looked very Abercrombie and Finch, wearing khaki colored board shorts and a Superman graphic tee, while Puck looked more like a rebel in a pair of desert camo shorts and tight tank. All six of us had a simple bagel and cream cheese or fruit and coffee...lots of coffee...breakfast before the car service arrived. I gave them the address and we were under way. It was only about a twenty minute drive with traffic from the hotel to the lovely French Country style house. As we exited the car, Puck looked at the house, then over at Sam and Mercedes. "I thought we'd gotten a condo."

Sam shrugged looking just as confused, but it was Mercedes who put the answer into words. "The condo fell through. They wanted to do everything through the banks and they didn't want to cover closing costs which we wouldn't have had to incur the same way with the system we've been using to pay for our personal real estate purchases. When Madeline had this one fall into her lap in the same price range as the condo and tons closer to the beach...she called me and I told her to move on it."

"Wow...so we got a house? For the same as the condo...cool." Sam chuckled.

Puck leered at Mercedes. "At least we won't have to worry about the neighbors getting mad at us for your scream of fertility knocking them up every few months."

"Shut it, Noah." she said poking him in the solar plex. She crossed to Kendra Mann, who was looking pretty Chicago in a black, half sleeved, hemp, twist dress and low heeled sandals. "Ms. Mann. Thank you so much for agreeing to take on this project."

"It's Kendra, please and I am excited. The home is a little older, but it has incredible bones. According to the appraisal, we should be able to complete your remodel in just a couple of months." She said quickly. Kendra Mann reminded me very much of the woman with the eight kids who had the reality TV show...but with a more genuine smile. "This is my LA contractor Bill Becks." He was a tall, wiry man who moved a lot like Mr. Altman did.

There was room for all eight of us on the covered porch as Mercedes let us in with the key Madeline had given her the night before. I made a note to have a copy made for Ms. Mann and another to have the locks changed when the renovations were completed. We entered and the foyer was a nice size but had truly magnificent high ceilings. The big brass chandelier would have to go. I made a note. There was a large courtyard to our right and Kendra made a note that it would need the attention of a landscaper. An arched entry way lead into an even more magnificent entry. The entry way had a clear sight line through to the family room and out to the back yard. "There is a pool...how were we
able to afford a pool?" Sam asked.

Kendra answered his question. "It is an older house. Built in the later seventies, and only updated in the late nineties or very early two thousands. We are going to need to modernize a lot of the finishings on the first floor, I can tell that already...though I see that they scraped the popcorn from the ceilings and this entry way and staircase were done in a classic marble. We won't touch that...even the wrought iron banisters are a classical look that is basically timeless."

We saw the large study and gorgeous master suite. There was another bedroom on the first floor along with a large kitchen, breakfast room, formal dining room, laundry and butler's pantry, a second bathroom, a powder room and the entrance to the four bay garage. All the rooms had nice, high ceilings and plenty of space. The Master Bedroom was a gut job, but the master bathroom had been upgraded with timeless materials like the front entry. As long as they could live with the room's layout, they would be fine just replacing the dated brass fixtures and adding a third sink. "The current trend is to do away with Jacuzzi tubs and have expanded steam showers." But Mercedes nipped that in the bud. She was fine with upgrading the tub and the shower, but she wanted a big enough to fit all three of them soaker tub, if not just a new Jacuzzi. The room had two adjacent walk in closets, one had been updated as a full on dressing room the other had a great organizer system, but it was significantly smaller. While there were plenty of avenues to work with the current setup in the first floor powder and bath rooms, Mercedes took one look at the kitchen and immediately declared it a gut job. I could see her point. The cabinets were very dated and everything was shiny white...except for the carefully stenciled ivy that had been painted along the wall above the low back splash and around the windows.

However, if we thought the kitchen was bad...it was nothing compared to the state of things upstairs. There was ugly dusty rose carpet everywhere...even in the fripping bathrooms...two toned, bold damask wallpaper, the game room was further abused with big, hopefully fake, rustic beams that made no sense with the rest of the design and finished off with a hunter green 'faux finish' accent wall. The two upstairs bedrooms hadn't suffered the same fate. But they were not happy rooms despite the good bones. "The home appraiser was shocked to find that the house actually met all the current earthquake zone building codes. The foundation doesn't have a single crack or separation between it and the house well other than the crawl space. The concrete support posts are actually reinforcing steel girders, not simply concrete, which is the current codes. They used the perfect placement of steel reinforcement and connections. That is of prime importance to provide sufficient ductility in concrete structures." Bill went on and on about the changes that wouldn't need to be made.

Then Kendra went in on discussing everything from purpose to color palettes. The walk through was more intensive, or at least it lasted longer than the one in Chicago with their final pick for their designer. But I quickly realized that was because the condo in Chicago was less than half the size of this house that would act as the KAMA showcase home. It was also because the LA house would be the showcase house. Haja and Kurt were going in hard with Mercedes working with Kendra to make sure that everything would be perfect. I took notes on everything they said, each decision made as well as the second choices just in case. The work would start on the second floor, gutting it to the studs and building out from there. The layout of one of the bathrooms would be completely re worked so that the unfinished storage space could become a fifth bedroom which shared the redesigned bathroom. The bathrooms would all be done in the same materials as the ones downstairs, or as close as could be found.

We had arrived at 12333 Culver Blvd at eight thirty, and left there having locked up behind us at one. It took us almost an hour to get to Albert Westwood's salon. We didn't manage to get lunch, but we made the two o'clock appointment time. The rest of the girls had made it too and Artie and Darcy were already taking pictures for the site. Darcy was doing a whole side page with bios of all the
singers and dancers and band members. She was going to start with time elapsed video of their transformations that were made that day. She did the same for Mercedes once she arrived. Albert had staff there and he introduced Catherine Briggs. She had worked on filming a twenties period piece and Albert had brought her and her team in to do the women's hair. Most of the men were either wearing hats, or they didn't have hair long enough to worry with. There were four makeup and four hair stations. The first thing that Albert and Mercedes did was decide on her evening arrival makeup look. Then he cleaned her face completely and Ms. Briggs worked Mercedes twenties performance hair look. The hair stylist then handed her off to Albert where he turned her face into the epitome of a nineteen twenties speak easy goddess. Catherine had created a vintage pin curl look, which started as finger waves. I was shocked by how quickly she had turned the almost waist length wealth of hair into the twenties look. "We'll go with long, looser finger waves…sleek and shiny, for your arrival look…that way we won't have so much trouble with the transformation.“ Ms. Briggs said with a smile. The rest of the crew would be backstage the whole night for this event, so they didn't have to worry with transitioning between looks. I made notes on everything that I could, from the names and pictures of the hairstyles to the colors of their lipsticks so that we'd be able to have them the day of the VMAs if needed.

We spent three hours there and I sent the payment for the afternoons work and the deposit for Sunday to their accounts once I had the needed information. We headed to our dinner date at Musso and Frank's Grill. We had a similar set up as the night before, a rented room for our entire party. Ms. Briggs and Mr. Westwood were kind enough to join us. So we had a lovely evening. The drive back to the hotel was long and meandering as we kind of sas a little tour of LA. It was nice.

The next morning we were up early for a meeting with the set designers. Everything wasn't finished. But they were well on track to be finished that night. After that we got the whole crew together and drove the thirty minutes to the Santa Monica Place Mall. It had taken quite a bit of research to figure out which of the five malls we were in a five mile radius of and found one that had a Barneys, a Bloomingdales, a Nordstroms and a plethora of designer stores like Michael Kors and Emporio Armani. We were supposed to be getting things that were needed for the performance…but, while everyone made sure they had what they needed, it was very easy to see that everyone was pretty much just enjoying shopping with friends. It was a rather weird feeling for me. I'd never experienced it before.

Darcy, Haja and I had a blast. Darcy and I found a great bubble bath and split the almost forty dollar cost of the Antica Farmacista 'orange blossom, lilac & jasmine’ bubble bath. For myself, when we get home, I got the Antica Farmacista 'bergamot & ocean aria’ bubble bath. I smirked when I noticed that Darcy had gotten herself a bottle of the Damascena rose, orris & oud' bubble bath from the same company. While we were all tramping through the mall I confirmed the spa services for all the guys and dolls I was in charge of as well as Kurt and Blaine. We stayed at the mall so long we had to go directly to our dinner at 'Killer Shrimp' a restaurant near our hotel. I had made arrangements for us to have the Marilyn Lounge to ourselves so that Sam, Mercedes and Puck could have their dinner in peace. They'd signed autographs whenever asked at the mall…eventually having to separate so they could actually get some shopping done. Even separated the guys still got asked for autographs, which they gave without a problem…and they had to field the ‘Where is Mercedes' questions. Haja had been kind enough to go with Sam and Blaine and several other of the group…Brantley and Darcy hung out with Puck and crew and I stayed with Mercedes. Kurt and I were both rather annoyed by the fact that Mercedes by herself didn't get recognized as often…even though she had broken through the ‘fame' barrier first.

As I placed my order for my Killer shrimp shelled appetizer, I made a note to start speaking with Team KAMA about finding the group a PR manager. I don't think anyone had considered it a necessity yet, but the train was certainly fast approaching that station. During dinner I had a lovely conversation with Xena and Simeon. I learned more about the singer and dancer as people. I found
out how much they were loving working with KAMA and that the band and Brantley had made bets as to how many awards would be won by our bosses. When the waitress brought out my Killer Paella, which was a delicious amalgamation of saffron rice, andouille sausage, chicken, clams, mussels, calamari, and, of course, shrimp. As I was trying to decide if I had left enough room to try the New York cheesecake, Mercedes, Sam and Noah got a notification from the scene designers that they had set up the scene for them to practice at a soundstage on their lot and that it was ready for them to begin practicing on it the next morning. I texted them back to let them know that we would be there by eight to begin rehearsal. By the time we headed back to the hotel, we were all full and sleepy. For the band, dancers, KAMA and I the next morning started with a six o'clock. I made arrangements to have lunch delivered to the soundstage, we all had breakfast and got to the studio by a quarter of eight.

Thursday and Friday were both spent in practice. Much time was spent reworking the choreography to fit and make the most of the new set. Once the dance routine was completely reworked, then they all strapped on the shoes they would be wearing on Sunday evening and I couldn't help but notice that Mercedes' peep toe black satin ankle strap sexy d'orsay pumps were a couple of inches higher than the dancer's more modest, and time period correct, two inch heels. But it didn't seem to matter. Even when she had to quickly climb the stairs to the upper platform, she did it in four inch stilettos, like she was walking across a level floor. Sam and Noah were doing very well. Rainbow only had to spend an hour teaching them the new moves. They started practicing and dancing after lunch once they had everything sorted with what they were doing. They practiced until eight that evening. Over the course of the day, I had pushed back our original dinner reservations and gotten several other things accomplished as I sat available to KAMA, but checking in with the contractors in Manhattan, the decorator in Chicago, Mr. Altman in Lima and the construction company in Atlanta. I made a quick trip to a hardware store I found online and then took the extra key to Kendra, but other than that I was available for everything Sam, Mercedes and Puck could possibly need. After all that was my job and I was more than determined to excel at it.

Semi Charmed Life (Third Eye Blind)
Darcy PoV

I had to admit as much as I freaking loved my job. I never thought that I would be working for anyone in the music industry…let alone actual recording artist and freaking celebrities. It needed to be said that I was not that girl. I just wasn’t usually that lucky. My life had been a series of unfortunate events until I was seven. My mother was the poster child for a good kid gone bad. Both Amelia and her younger sister Laura, had grown up in a good middle class, military, family. Both had excelled in school. At least until Mom was in high school and Aunt Laura was in middle and the family moved to a military base in the south. There dear old Mom had ‘fallen in love’ with a douchebag, borderline pedo, situational druggie asshole. Dear old dad had been twenty five and Mom was sixteen…in most states that was a felony…unfortunately PopPop had been stationed at a base in Georgia at the time.

They dated in secret for almost a year before he finally took her virginity. He'd done a bang-up job convincing her that the decade worth of age difference was okay because they were 'in love'. Dude was good at what he did. He even had Mom convinced that she had all the power in their relationship that he would do whatever she asked because he loved her just so much. Oh, and he did a great job getting her addicted to half of everything. According to the DA's file which I managed to get my hands on shortly after my sixteenth birthday…Ask me no questions and I will tell you no lies…they had only been together sexually for about three or four months before Grandma caught on and PopPop went hunting for them and caught them with their pants down. He'd called the cops. But my sperm donor hadn't been a fool. He’d culled Mom from the herd and started getting her dependent, on him and drugs, at fifteen, but he had waited until she was over the age of consent for the state before he had taken the final step. Before the DA could decide if there was enough evidence
to press actual rape charges; Mom was pretty much high as a kite every time they had sex, after all; the sperm donor had dipped to the left. From the file I learned his name was Rich...well Richard, Richard Deal. He probably would have beaten the wrap; Dude guy's family was loaded. By the time they moved to Ohio, Mom had been forced through an intensive six week rehab...and I was a known entity.

Mom managed to stay clean until I was born. She even managed to graduate high school. But when she took me and moved into off campus housing while she attended the University of Georgia, she fell off the wagon so hard she fucking bounced. By the time I was three I could make a mean sandwich and use the microwave like a pro. If it wasn't for me, Mom probably would have died an early death of a massive overdose. I managed to keep her fed and alive. She even managed not to flunk out of school...not sure how she managed that, but she did. When the Grandparents would come and visit, she would straighten up and we'd fake it for the weekend or week...but then she went right back into the pill bottles or the alcohol bottles. Unfortunately PopPop's last duty station before he finally got out for good was Okinawa. They only made it to see us once a year. With all the drugs and drinking and partying, it took her five years to earn an English bachelor's degree...but she managed. However, that time, even with Grandma, PopPop and Aunt Laura in town for her graduation, she still went partying. Suffice it to say they sure as hell weren't leaving me there with her once they knew that she was unfit. It took them less than a week to get guardianship of me. When Mom was finally found, two weeks later, she was busted in a meth den not too far from campus; they stuck her into the most restrictive rehab they could find. When I was old enough, I had to know what had set her off...why she had wrecked everything. So I may or may not have hacked a few dozen files to find out the whole story. Apparently she'd seen Dear Old Dad's engagement picture in the Atlanta Journal Constitution. His thirty three year old ass was engaged to the reigning Miss Georgia who wasn't even old enough to drink.

She had always believed that he was looking for her, waiting for her. That when he found us we'd be a family. Seeing that he'd moved on to the next big breastied young chickie he could find...this one a lot more in line with his family's level of influence...had broken her. I lived with PopPop and Grandma for two years before the courts and doctors decided that I could be returned to my mother's care. Problem with that was Mom was better...but I had pretty much grown to hate her face. I'd taken care of her for my whole childhood because she was so weak that she was pining after a man who didn't want her. I vowed never to be that weak and stupid. Granted, I didn't want kids in the first place. I mean, not to be funny, but after raising my mother...I didn't need kids. The only thing that kept me there was the fact that my mother's second attempt at picking a dude actually turned out to be pretty fucking fabulous.

Dennis Lewis was a mechanical engineer and a tech head. Even though I was a ten year old with a chip on my shoulder the size of the state of Rhode Island, he never made me feel unwanted or like he only dealt with me to be with Mom. He got me counseling for everything that I'd been through... though when I first started going I swore up and down that I was totally fine...he got me the help that he saw I needed. We even did counseling as a family. I started to love my Mom again, even if I still found it hard to like her very much. The day Dennis asked Mom to marry him, he gave her a ring and me an iPod filled with the best examples of nineties alterna-rock known to man. Dennis gave me his last name, he taught me everything he knew about computers and computer aided drafting. He even taught me how to find information online, which got me into hacking...but he never needed to know that. He helped me find my niche, he made me feel that I could still be a kid even though I thought Mom had stolen my childhood. PopPop and Grandma loved him too. Aunt Laura and Uncle Ben were cooler with him than they were my mom by that point too.

The rest of growing up was pretty awesome. Don't get me wrong I developed early and the chicks at school hated me because they weren't me, but the truth was that at home life was boss. My mom had been off the stuff for the better part of ten years. She and Dennis had been married for eight. I was in
all AP classes and I spent two weeks every summer with Aunt Laura, Uncle Ben and Lauren. PopPop had been sick when he and Grandma made the decision to return me to my mother’s custody. Probably it was the only reason they had made that choice. He did get to see Mom and Dennis get married and the three of us become a real family before he passed away, so that was something. Grandma had lasted a while without him, but once she was sure that her girls were going to be okay, she joined PopPop in the next great adventure. There were days when I wondered what would have happened to me if Mom had overdosed and I'd ended up in foster care…sometimes those kids got lost in the system even when they had relatives who would have wanted them.

It was because of PopPop, Uncle Ben and Dennis that I had any faith at all in men. Because the bio-pater and the dudes I'd dated in high school and college really should have killed it completely. It was also because of Uncle Ben and Dennis, well their connections anyway, that I was able to go to MIT. I got in on my own merit, but we were not bailing out of control enough for me to go, and I'd only gotten enough scholarships to cover about two thirds of the tuition and fees. It was Uncle Ben and Dennis that trolled every single connection they had in the STEM community to find me other scholarships that would cover the cost of books and the balance of my tuition. With their help I managed to graduate from a seriously expensive college with two bachelor's and an associates and only eighteen grand and some change in debt to my name and none to Mom's or Dennis'.

It was a few weeks before Spring Break that my little cousin, and pseudo-little sister, Lauren called me to tell me that her friends, the music group that had hit and hit hard around the world shortly after they all graduated together. Hell, I had met them when Mom, Dennis and I had traveled to Lauren's high school graduation, and now she was telling me that their record company wanted them to find a PA for the group, though eventually they would probably need one for each individual member. I wasn't sure that I wanted to waste my degrees working as a wrangler for three rock stars. But then Uncle Ben called me and told me that if I gave them my resume, he didn't think I would regret it. Besides…how many people ever got to even submit a resume to a group of globally known musicians. I took the train down to the city and met them for a second time. I loved the questions they asked. When they asked me who my hero was… I accidentally spilled my emotions all over them. I wanted to say something flippant, but not so flip that it irritated them. Instead I opened my mouth and out came all the feels about Dennis.

I was so shocked when they asked me to join them for dinner that night. I knew from what they said that getting that invite meant I was in. It was later that I realized that they had created a position that was tailored to my skill set and they had done so partially because they thought I was just that damn good and partially because Puck understood more than most people ever could. Within weeks of me starting for them, Puck was like the little brother I never had. We got along like gas and oil. Everyone else seemed kind of worried that we would end up burning down something so that seemed like a good simile. I got along with Mercedes the best of the other two. Sam was cool, but he was just so inherently earnest and genuine…I think that my inherent snark and sarcasm had an allergic reaction to him.

Once I graduated, I spent a week with the family figuring out what to take with me to my rent free abode. Then there was the time spent forcing Uncle Ben, Dennis and Lauren's adopted bro Vince and her boytoy Finn to help me load that frigging UHaul. I made the drive to NYC all by myself. And Haja and Brantley and one of the guys who rented the unit under KAMA's primary domicile, Jon, who was only still in town because he was taking summer classes. He was hot like fire and we had a great time breaking in my new bed after it came. Jon Scully was so well endowed it was hard to believe that he was like eighty percent Irish. He was cool with the just being friends after the fact. I wasn't looking for anything more than that until I got my debt paid off and could afford an apartment like the big ass ones upstairs from where I had so recently moved in.

My first few weeks I worked from said apartment, on my brand new Mac Book Pro that I had gotten
as my graduation gift from my brand new bosses. I tweaked the KAMA site and created their online store, after sourcing the swag with Hudson. I took over their professional social media presence, they still had their locked up tight, only for their family and friends, accounts, that they handled, but the ones their fans and miscellaneous other humans could access were my kingdom and I prided myself on my dominion over them. I'd written a new algorithm and some new code that allowed me to better approximate when the flow would be heaviest…what twitterpations they would each want to chime in on…and their appropriate side on the issues. I used that to help me build their follower count. Between my algorithm and their festival tour, KAMA's group account and individual public pages had over a million followers by the end of July. I was hella-proud of that.

When the nominations came down, Mercedes and the crew decided that we'd all be going out to LA. Okay, so maybe it was my idea. I had a great idea to post some serious KAMA behind the VMAs videos to the site. We got to LA on Monday before the awards show and for the first few days there wasn't much for me to do, I had to corral some, thankfully positive press online. But I began to realize that even though they were still really young and lived their lives in the digital world, they were still getting constant attention in the real world and that wasn't my purview at all. They needed a real PR person too. I mentioned it to Hudson, so that she could tell the crew and get the ball rolling on that search. But I did what I could and rolled on through. During the first dinner, I'd sat with Hudson, mainly because I knew how she was about new people. She and I hadn't spent much physical time together since she travels with our bosses and I stick close to home for the most part…but we had bonded over a billion minutes of phone time, a million texts and thousands of emails since that first meeting at the contract signing. She was one of my people…I took care of my people.

Tuesday, I decided that I was going to go to the makeup practice thingy and start getting tons of shots for the behinds the scenes videos and the band bio pages. Wednesday we were all at the mall for way too much time. But I ended up having fun, and finding some boss bubble bath so I could take advantage of the seriously sexy soaker tub in my bathroom. Plus I found some great gadgets, both Art-man and I had. That was another bonded mine now kid. Him and his girl Brittany…I hadn't managed to bond with Santana at that point though sometimes I wondered when I had bonded with Brittany. I think she just decided that I was one of her people, and I was just along for the ride. I had found a cool new digital camera, which pleased me greatly since it was on sale and everything. Unfortunately, I didn't escape Mercedes and Kurt's need to make people over. They dragged Hudson and I around the mall for an hour getting us outfitted. "You are both representing the KAMA brand that we are all working so hard to build. You've gotta look tight, even if you are stuck in darker colors and everything." Mercedes told us the fifth time I asked why we had to get dressed up too. Actually it didn't take us long at all to have Hudson taken care of. LA shopping was meant for her tiny, skinny self. Kurt and Mercedes found her a cute but fashionable black MICHAEL by Michael Kors petite gold stud-trim side-slit dress. Getting her to agree that Mercedes was covering the bill was a harder sell than getting her to agree to wear the dress. They found her some cool shoes too. The pair of MICHAEL by Michael Kors Carla dress sandals that I joked had been expressly designed to be worn with her dress.

I had to admit that I had a streak of good luck though. Mercedes had big boobs…even bigger than mine. She knew what I could and couldn't wear comfortably. It was awesome. She rejected stuff for me before Kurt could gay-Jedi mind trick me into just letting him see me in it. We ended up in Nordstroms when they started agreeing on what I could try on. In the end, I only ended up trying on like four dresses and getting the second one I'd tried on. The Adrianna Papell pleated jersey blouson dress hugged my curves, but didn't even give a peak at the girls so I was pretty comfortable in it. It was formal enough for what I needed it to be, but not shiny, look at me level formal. I found my own shoes. A pair of burgundy leather 'Dylan’ cutout, low heeled, pointy toe booties by Bella Vita, I loved them and they kept me from being all monochromatic like Hudson was and honestly preferred. I also found a cool pair of Nadri curved bar drop earrings that had dark pink hematite stones to finish
me off and a pair of pave stud earrings by the same designer in gold and black for Hudson. Both pairs of earrings and the booties were on sale. It didn't matter that I wasn't the one paying, I was way proud of my sale finds… I fucking rocked the Kasbah.

When Thursday rolled around, I let the bosses and the band practice unmolested, while I stayed in the hotel and broke in my new shoes, but I got tons of great footage for the site with my bomb ass new camera on Friday. Then the next morning, I went with them to their sound check and got to get a great picture of my three bosses meeting Macklemore. They told him the story about them doing his song 'Same Love' for an exhibition piece at the show choir nationals' competition the year before. Macklemore and Ryan Lewis were cool. They tweeted about having just met them and how cool KAMA was. So, of course, I had to have Mercedes and the guys talk Macklemore and Ryan Lewis up big too. It was pretty awesome. But then they got to work. The set had been brought over from the other studio so they used the hour they had for their sound check to get in some practice time on the stage they would be performing on for real on Sunday. After sound check and practice, KAMA met up with Brantley and Haja and went to meet Brantley’s friend Patrick Hayes to find out more information on a movie they might be doing a soundtrack song for. I headed back to the hotel and uploaded the video to my Mac then sent it all to Artie and Lauren. They were going to work together and get all the footage and stills edited into a cohesive video.

Friday night, we met up with the missing members of our big ass entourage and had dinner a cool fusion place in Marina Del Ray called Yard House. After dinner, we were all told that we needed to get up early the next morning. Every single one of us were due at the spa the next day at half past eight. They would provide breakfast and lunch, because we were going to be there all day. The next morning Hudson forced me away an extra hour early and dragged me down to the gym. We only did half an hour, even though our bosses were there way more time than we were, they still managed to beat us down to lobby. Mercedes looked really cute in a honeydew colored, hemp twist, Henley tank maxi-dress that would have made anyone with lighter skin looked totally jaundiced and an incredible pair of leather lace-up espadrille sandal wedges with an ivory upper part and 'green tea' stripes down the actual wedge. Puck and Sam had thrown on shorts and tee shirts with man flip flops. I knew in an instant that Sam had gotten Puck his shirt…because if Puck had brought it himself, the best part of the story I created in my head was lost. The shirt read 'I Shaved My Balls for This'. My head canon read that Sam had found it and gotten it despite the crass nature of the shirt, just for the play on the old Deana Carter song.

Hudson looked the most ‘dressed’…and Mercedes noticed that too. "You made the arrangements for the services that I wanted for everyone that I stipulated, right?" Hudson looked resigned but nodded. "Including yourself…right?" again a slightly sullen nod from Hudson. "Okay…I'm just checking because you really look like you are about to spend all day making calls rather than getting Pampered."

Hudson kind of rolled her eyes but smiled none the less. "Nope…all ready for the pampering. In fact you will notice that I have a paper printout of the services requested, our confirmation and receipt of prepayment all printed out so that I didn't even have to bring my phone. Darcy, Haja, Brantley and I are scheduled for the O2 Reboot facial, we can then pick between the vortex fusion extraction or the brow shaping wax. Then we have the Zents mani-pedi with gel polish in the color of our choice for each of us." Brantley threw her a concerned look. "Just get clear or black, you'll be fine." She turned back to Mercedes and continued. "Then we can each have either the scrub bar or the detox marine algae wrap body treatment with the scalp quench…sorry Brantley, but the other three of us have hair…and we'll finish off the day with the Zentsory Massage with revitalized feet. I am actually looking forward to the foot treatment, though I will admit I find myself uncomfortable with the level of disrobing Noah is fine with." She finished cheekily.

Mercedes threw back her head and her boisterous laughter filled the lobby. "Everyone but Puck is
uncomfortable with total nudity under their robes…And if they aren't that falls under too much information and I don't think I need to know about it." She assured her PA.

I was looking forward to everything. I had never been to a spa, and despite Lauren's Brazilian waxing horror story, I was anticipating the experience for serious. I'd thrown on a comfy summer weight tunic top, some leggings and flip flops so that I wouldn't have too much to remove. Looking around it looked like most of the others had done the same. In fact, in the time I spent working with him and Haja to get the design for my office down and cemented, I had never seen Kurt Hummel in less than two hundred bucks worth of apparel, my estimate…probably not very reliable…but the boi could dress, that day he was dressed down in Target couture. Blaine was wearing a tank top and shorts…he looked like he was heading to the beach. I bit back a laugh at how different those two seemed from the outside looking in…it amused me.

We headed to the Spa del Ray and checked in. We were each given fluffy, terry cloth robes…that I kind of wanted to steal…a pair of matching terry cloth flip flops that again, I kind of wanted to reappropriate but didn’t because the markup on those types of thing were cray-cray…and directed to the locker rooms to change into them. We were advised that we could disrobe as much as we were comfortable with, so I stripped down to my bra and panties…because the girls hated being allowed to roam free…and headed to the meet with the others in the room we were having breakfast in. Breakfast was what you'd expect in a spa, lots of fruits and good quality protein…I kind of wanted to marry that bacon…and a decent selections of ridiculously priced bottled water and trendy juices. Once everyone had filled their plates and decided among all the non-caffeinated beverage choices, the prettiest of all bosses ever stood up and gathered our attention. "Alright ladies and gentlemen, once again you will be broken down into groups so that all twenty five of us don't have to try and fit into a treatment room at one time." Mercedes said with authority. "Please pay attention to our wonderful Hudson…she has your group assignments and treatment schedules."

We all turned our attention to Hudson, who looked like a little girl playing dress up in even the smallest of the robe sizes. "Okay, the first group is gonna be Brittany, Baebe, Cassidy, Elena, Erica and Rainbow. Your group's attendant is Charis," a small Filipino woman stepped forward and waved. "She will escort you to your treatment rooms and back here for your lunch, then on to the afternoon treatment. You six will have your body treatments first. Each of you will choose between either the scrub bar or the detox marine algae wrap body treatment either of which will come with the scalp quench hair and scalp treatment. Then you go for the clarifying facials followed by the athlete's choice massage with hot stone focus. Your massage will be followed by the waxing treatment of your choice and your last treatment will be the athlete's choice pedicure…I didn't add the gel polish, because I know that dancer's feet are more important than polish lasting extra time." Rainbow just nodded with a smile. The jury was still out on the use of the gel polishes on toe nails, so for the dancers it was definitely better safe than sorry. "Now, if you prefer to not bother with the pedicure at all speak with Charis, you can change the athlete's choice pedicure and have the Spa del Ray signature manicure with gel polish instead. Erica and Cassidy, I assumed you wouldn't want a manicure since your hands are you lively hood." They both looked like they agreed. It made sense since their calluses were important to them…a sign of their long hours of hard work.

Hudson continued. "Next group…Artie, Dave, Jacks, Justin, and Simeon…Malinda is your attendant." A short, buxom black woman stepped forward and waved a flirty wave. "She'll take care of you all. You five start with the citrus drench body treatment with a scalp quench. Then you have a choice between the Athlete's choice or zentsory massage with hot stone focus…Artie, they have assured me that you can have either and they will concentrate where you want their attention. After your massage you are scheduled for the gentlemen's facial, followed by the athlete's choice pedicure or the zents manicure as per your choice. You guys will end the day with the waxing treatment of your choice. Dave, Ms. Rawlins asks that if you insist on playing sans shirt…you should please get the chest and back wax, and she will pay for it herself, if needs be, to make sure that it is
maintained." Dave was a furry bear…and he did follow the tradition of most drummers and play in as little as he could get away with.

She turned to the background singers next. "The four of you are together and Stephan will attend to your needs." I wonder if she realizes how dirty her last couple of attendant introductions have sounded. Stephan looked like a surfer dude...he easily could have stepped out of an old episode of Baywatch. His smile was as dirty as Hudson's introduction. "You four start with the Spa del Ray custom massage with either the scalp quench treatment or the revitalized hands and feet…I'm assuming that Santana and Xena will go for the hair and scalp treatment and Dam-Dam you two would rather have the hands and feet treatment."

Adam shook his head as if moving a wealth of hair to challenge Xena's or mine. "What ever are you talking about? You don't think my long, luxurious millimeters of hair deserve to be pampered?" he teased.

It took us all forever to quiet our laughter. "Okay…well go for which ever you want. It will be followed by the Ultimate Zen body treatment and then the O2 Reboot or gentleman's facial, you pick which you prefer. Your last two treatments are your hands and feet, the citrus splash pedicure with either the gel polish or the callus cure and finishing off with the Zents manicure with or without gel polish." Hudson was finally able to get out. "The last two groups are the smallest. Sam, Puck and Blaine, you three are together. Your attendant is Jesus," he was just as Latin as his name implied and even shorter than Blaine his smile was big and bright though. "You three will start with the Spa del Ray custom massage with both the hot stone focus and the aroma body balm. Then you'll move on to the Ultimate Zen body treatment. After that you'll get the gentleman's facial with the scalp quench…Blaine thank you for not coming down with product in your hair. I know it was hard but I really appreciate it. Your day will end with the Athlete's choice pedicure with the callus cure treatment."

"Last but never least. Mercedes and Kurt…you two will have Brenda." Whoa, their attendant looked just like Janet Jackson from Poetic Justice. "You will start with the detox marine algae wrap, followed by the Bright and tight body treatment for your thighs Ms. Jones and your upper arms, Mr. Hummel." She teased. "That is followed by the bright and tight facial the diamond manicure and pedicure; both with the gel polish color of your choice…or Kurt's choice as the case may be. Then you will finish the day off with the Spa del Ray custom massage again with both the hot stone focus and the aroma body balm. We are all scheduled to begin our first treatments by nine fifteen. The last treatment should be completed five. We have reservations here at the Cast and Plow restaurant for dinner at seven. Ms. Briggs and Mr. Westwood's teams will be here at ten in the morning and we will all need to be ready when they arrive."

I was so happy to get started on the pampering that I rushed through eating before I turned myself over to, I shit you not, Sven, our attendant to be directed to our treatment rooms. The facial was totally awesome. The brow shaping hurt like a son of a bitch, but made my eyes look incredible. I loved the mani-pedi experience, and went with a sexy and I knew it bright ass, red gel polish for both to match my signature lipstick. We had lunch after the manicures; during the pedicures…I never would have ever thought I would find a salad a full and complete lunch, but that chopped salad al tonno was one bomb ass salad. Since my dress was very fitted around my hips ass and thighs, I decided on the detox marine algae wrap over the scrub bar. The scalp quench was billed as a warm vitamin E and jojoba enriched oil is drizzled onto the hair, followed by an invigorating scalp massage for super soft, shiny tresses. It was even better than it sounded and I swear to whatever deity is out there, it tamed the monster the humidity had turned my hair into. By the end of the zentsory massage and revitalizing foot rub, I was putty…just a pool of flesh.

When I went up to the room, I was definitely not ready to look slubbish again. I was feeling all feminine and sexy and wanted to run with it, so I poured the girls into a black satin and silver lace
bra with nice wide straps and pulled up the matching panties. I threw on the Free People asymmetrical lace slip dress I'd brought with me to wear to the event, before Mercedes and Kurt decided that I would need to have something fancier. I topped the dress off with a long ass, double layer, fringe pendant gold necklace and some simple gold hoop earrings. No matter how sexy I felt no way was I wearing heels two night in a row, so instead I wore a pair of scallop edge pointed toe flats. My skin was so glowy, I was not covering it with makeup, except my lipstick…never left home without that. I sat on the bed and watched some TV while Hudson finished getting dressed. There was a piece on ‘the Insider’ about all that the stars went through to prepare for awards show red carpets. None of that sounded like what I'd been seeing Mercedes, and the guys eating all week. I felt bad for those other stars. It sounded like hell to be so deprived.

Finally Hudson was ready. Her marigold yellow dress was lovely against her pale skin and flaming hair. The stretch crepe sheath dress had a thin black patent leather belt that nipped in her tiny waist. Her classic and classy patent leather, low heeled pumps and tiny black stud earrings finished her look. Her face was bare too, though all she had put on was some nude gloss. She really didn't like drawing attention to herself. When the group assembled in the lobby for the second time that day, it was easy to see that everyone had felt like Hudson and I. Boss Lady was looking quite fetch in a curve hugging, faux wrap, purple midi dress, and black, peep toe, glittery, red bottoms with cute criss-cross straps over her feet. Her purple lips looked hot like fire and I made sure to grab a quick pic of her making a sarcastic kissy face at Sam for their Instagram. The other ladies were just as well dressed, though our Boss Lady was the only one in red bottoms.

The restaurant staff was very professional and we were all seated quickly. Within minutes the waiters and waitresses serving us had not only taken our drink orders but returned with the drinks and large platters of the five tasters; herb brioche slathered with organic butter and sprinkled with truffle salt, kale chips seasoned with sumac and Monterey bay sea salt, frites, which were different from regular fries because they were dusted with provençal herbs and drizzled with duck fat hollandaise, a selection of cheeses served with purple haze, salted date bread crisps, market condiments, and brussels sprouts toasted with marcona almonds and served alongside romesco sauce. As a serious farm to table restaurant, their menu was a lot more limited than other types of restaurants. They offered a total of seven entrees, and the sides were predetermined by the nature of the dish. With twenty-five of us, every one of those seven was represented. Somehow I'd ended up across from the three bosses with Haja on one side of me and Brantley on the other. So I noticed what each of them had picked. Mercedes had ordered the Baja scallops with parsnip purée, Brussels sprouts and sea urchin cream. Haja had gotten the organic salmon alongside the beluga lentils, quail egg, mission fig chutney, and ham hock broth. Puck had surprised me by ordering the local halibut with caramelized cauliflower, romanesco, hazelnut butter. Brantley had long ago said that whenever he went to a super fancy place, he went with the chicken. He figured they couldn't frou-frou it too much. He had stuck to his usual MO and gotten the Petaluma chicken breast that came to the table alongside white bean stew, pickled radish and fennel. Sam, too, had stuck to type getting the thirty-two days aged smoked ribeye that was served with asiago cheese potato purée and herb salsa verde. As for me…I went with the Cast & Plow burger which was so good I felt like I was kind of wrong for wishing that the all-natural prime beef, provolone cheese, grilled onion, ciabatta bun, and arugula pesto was accompanied by some of the bacon from breakfast. The mizuna salad was pretty okay too…for a salad. It took looking around the table to find the person who had gotten the last menu offering. There were twenty-five of us. Statistically someone had to be a vegetarian. Finally, I found it in front of Rainbow. The Duley's thyme tagliatelle…pasta tossed with spinach, preserved Meyer lemon and parmesan cream.

The vibe at dinner was pretty nifty. We were all seriously pumped and excited. The portions were such that most of the dudes had room for dessert. As they were eating their desserts, Haja stood up.

"Alright everyone. Tomorrow is D-Day…or at least VMA day. You'll need to get a lot of rest
tonight, because in the morning, you will need to be up, have done everything you need to do, be showered and meet us down in the Director's Room for hair and makeup no later than eleven thirty. Band, dancers and background singers need to be out the door with your costumes and everything you need by two thirty. Brantley and Blaine will be going over with you to make sure that you have people who can get you whatever you need. Darcy will be going with you too because if she isn't in place by three she'll be too far back to get the shots and everything that she wants. Hudson, Kurt and I will ride over with KAMA. We're going to be the newest kids on the block, so we're going to let them underestimate us…but we're going to show them how it can be done when you have the perfect blend of artists, support and management. And guys, I'm not blowing smoke up your asses when I say that Mercedes, Puck and Sam have brought together the best team this industry has ever seen. Tomorrow…we're going to prove that to the world.” Fancy-schmancy restaurant or not…that was one epic pep talk…we may have cheered.

It was hard as hell getting to sleep that night, but I managed. The next morning when Hudson dragged my sleepy ass to the fitness center, it was full of all of us. Come to find out everyone else had been working out every day. Who knew? By the time we showered, shampooed our hair, threw on some button front shirt over our lingerie for the event and got down to the Director's Room…one of the hotel's meeting rooms, Ms. Briggs and Mr. Westwood had gotten everything set up and were ready to go. I wasn't worried about my own look. So I just told Ms. Briggs to have fun. In the end she gave me pompadour bangs, two asymmetrical victory rolls, and then allowed the rest of my hair to wave down my back. Then she turned me over to Hector, one of Mr. Westwood's protégés for makeup. He matched my hair by going glam rockabilly on the makeup. My skin was pale ivory and looked flawless. My eyes were big and looked almost liquid they were so blue. My lips ended up a shade of red that almost made me pause for a second. Hell, I had to force myself away from the mirror so that I wouldn't keep staring at myself.

Once I got up to the room I was even more grateful that I had shoved myself into my lingerie and shaper slip before I went down. I was not ruining this look by sweating it off forcing my curves into submission. I got into my sexy, but not ostentatious dress and heels and made it to the lobby to see that our band and backup singers were all looking awesome. It was time and we were freaking awesome.

Chapter End Notes

Here it is...your update...A whole day early in honor of Friday the 13th.
So come on my lovely readers...Celebrate by giving me 13 reviews.
Pretty PLEASE! With naked Puck on top. (LOL)
Please & Thank You.
TTFN,
AnniKay
****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

***WARNING***
Social Commentary found in this chapter!

Je Suis Paris
Je Suis Charlie
To all my fellow Americans who say we shouldn't admit Syrian Refugees I have 3 things to say,
1) Stop painting them with white paint. Just because the Puritan refugees from England came and killed everyone who stood in their way doesn’t mean that the Syrian refugees will
2) Mary, Mother of God, and her husband Joseph were refugees the night an innkeeper let them bed down in a manger and she brought the Christ child into the world
3) Matthew 25:40 & 41
40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.
41 Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Prom Night by Kaybee80

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need! Princess 976 Welcome to the LF Beta Team!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Here for You (Neil Young)
Danica Jones PoV

Trying to explain to anyone who hasn’t been on the ride we’ve been taking the last year to two was impossible. I went from planning my daughter’s ‘prom on a budget’ pity date…as much as she would let me plan it anyway, to planning a VMA watch party because my little girl was up for several of those bad boys. The kids first year of college had blown past so fast it wasn’t funny. Amara and Amaea had grown so fast. My two youngest daughters were the perfect blend of their father and me. They were taller than MeDe had been at each of their doctor appointments, well within the ninetieth percentile for the ages. But they were also, almost borderline underweight… though they ate like champs. The two of them were already speaking…a lot. They also had a language that seemed to be understood only by the two of them and Noah’s daughter Beth, and Sam’s little brother Sloane, though he could have been just reacting to their beloved voices. They can
toddle along and we’ve had to gate all the stairways in the house, unlike any of her four siblings, Amaea was a climber.

As the summer progressed, Sam and Noah made more and more money. They reinvested a great deal of it, but I swear every time we turned around we found something else they had done to benefit their families and our community. With their first check, Sam had donated a hundred thousand dollars for a family shelter in Lima that could benefit families like the Evans had been not so long ago. I’m not sure if they realize that we know that he has done the same every time they get a royalty check. The county bought four abandoned condemned residences in the area of town Santana calls LHA and tore the houses. They had begun the construction of what would be almost an apartment complex that would be the Lima County Family Homeless Shelter. It would have four floors and provide accommodations for at least seventy five families and two on site rooms for overnight staff. Sander and Gabby were both so very proud of Sam. I was just as proud of Mercedes. Our church has been raising funds for a new roof for the fellowship hall for three years. Suddenly they received an anonymous gift that gave them the money to replace the entire church roof, not just the part of the greatest immediate need.

Puck’s synagogue didn’t have the same need, instead he had established a scholarship that would get any kid who had the grades and drive and desire a way out of Lima. No one would ever have to give up on school, just because they felt they were destined to be ‘Lima Losers’. Not if Noah Puckerman had something to say about it. The three of them had done great things for their family too. Sam has set up a trust account that Sander and Gabby will be able to use to buy a house whenever I finally let them move. Amara, Amaea, Beth, Jake, Sarah, Sloane, Stacey, Stevie and Tessa will be able to go to any college they want to go to without worrying about cost. They will never have to incur any debt to get their degrees. The small amount of debt that Devon, Kevon, Patrice and Tonya had has disappeared. The mortgage on the quadplex in Harlem that we took out just a year before has a balance that reflects almost five years of payments. George had taken out a loan to set up his business in Lima, it had disappeared. Sander and Gabby’s bankruptcy had been discharged as paid in full. The car I’d needed to upgrade to in order to have room for the babies and Triple S was completely paid for. The small balance Ruth had carried on her brand new quad-plex had already been paid off as were all of her credit cards and she swore that her bank account kept getting extra infusions of untraceable cash.

We wanted to get angry, but Gwen pointed out that our babies were on track to make almost two hundred million dollars after taxes just off their first album. I almost passed the hell out when she said that the total didn’t even reflect the money they were making off the rental properties they were setting up around the country. Six grand of income from the house in California…eventually there would be thirty-two thousand a month of income from their quadplex in Harlem, and another almost two hundred and eighty thousand a month from the complex they were renovating in Georgia. I didn’t even understand how to process that. Then she told us about the amounts of income they would be able to gain from the portfolio that the kids and Saul had set up…not just for the three of them, but trust funds for all their siblings, in addition to the college funds for the younger ones.

There were no words for how proud I was of my children, all of them…from Devon all the way down to Sloane. But those three the world knew as KAMA were just amazing. They didn’t get to come home for the summer. They were working…touring the country performing at music festivals all over the country and yet they made it to every single family event we had, The Jones Gathering, the Harris Family Reunion, all three of the weddings, giving each of the newlyweds honeymoon packages that were not only wonderful, but thoughtful gifts. They had come into town to celebrate Sarah’s thirteenth birthday and not just showed their faces, they took care of everything so that she and her friends could have an ‘adult’ free party and yet have good supervision. And Becah told me that the deposit had been refunded to her credit card and the full cost of the four hour party was paid for by the kids.
Since we no longer seemed to have to work for anything but our day to day bills, Benton and I decided to have fun. We were looking at selling the building that housed our dental office and buying a medical plaza that was for sale nearby. That move would allow us to get into the real estate game ourselves and it would allow us to expand our business. It was something we were starting to talk with Gwen about. In the mean time, Benton had upgraded the TV in the game room to a sixty-five inch whopper. So that was where we decided to hold the viewing party. It took my minds off my nerves. And since I switched back and forth between being nervous that they would lose and be massively disappointed or that they would win and their lives would change even further even faster…I tried not to dwell on them at all. But we weren’t the only ones. Devon, Tonya, Pattie and Kevon were gathering their friends to watch it at a pub near their apartments, Ethan and Amanda had planned their house warming as a VMAs watch party and had even invited the kids from the two basement apartments under the kids. Saul, Mills, Ruth, Neil and Francesca were going to watch from their apartment too.

Whenever I would find myself sinking down that rabbit hole, I would hit pinterest or cooking channel for recipes that would make the evening the most talked about event in Lima. I invited people we liked, not people who loved us now that the kids were all famous and such. The Hummels, the Lopezes, the Zizes, the Adams, basically every family associated with my kids’ glee classmates. I invited Coaches Sylvester and Biste, plus Don and Sugar Motta and Marc Fisher. Shelby, David and Beth, Becah, George, Jake and Tessa were expected, but not invited. You don’t invite family…you just tell them what time to be there and what, if anything, to bring. Jake was bringing Marley, Ryder and Unique…if Ryder would pull his head out of his ass he would realize that he doesn’t care that Unique is still physically Wade…he is totally ass over teakettle for the transgender girl. It was adorable, if a little painful to watch. I had invited Unique’s aunt. Wynifred Adams was good people. The fact that she had gone against her own sister to champion her niece made her a rock star in my mind. If only I had fought a little harder for Hannah. But my niece had ultimately turned our just fine. Tonya’s and Patrice families were going to join us too. I invited Ms. Pillsbury…who I found a lot more likeable since she had gotten up off Schuester’s jock. All the current New Directions that I knew were invited with their parents. I had personally extended an invitation to the Harts after hearing them defending my baby at the farmers market. They might have been a little too ‘Duggar’ seeming to some, but they weren’t so bad once you got to know them.

I may have invited a few too many people for the game room to hold. So since it was a nice summer evening, Benton rented a big ass projection system that would make it possible to watch everything in the back yard. We also set the game room up for people who didn’t want to be outside all night. I set up a big spread in both, though the messier food was outside rather than being down stairs. Everyone was told to dress comfortably, since we all knew that the kids would be locked into suits, ties, shapewear and binding shoes. Since the preshow started at eight, I had set the party start time for seven thirty, most of the family showed up at seven…and even though I told them I had it all under control, Shelby still brought a couple bottles of wine. George still brought a couple of cases of beer. Jake still brought a couple of cases of pop. Nichole and LoQuita came early, both of them bringing their signature party dishes, a huge crockpot full of buffalo chicken dip and pita chips from Quita and an even bigger homemade sheet cake from Nichole. Sander had disappeared once all the tables and seating were set up in the back yard and reappeared with extra paper plates and cups and such. Our big ass, crazy family rocked.

Not a single soul was late. The preshow watching break out seemed to fall along gender lines. All the women congregated in the game room where we could dissect the outfits in peace without the men making cat sounds. Since I knew my people, I had set up a huge white board in the basement and we created our own fashion police lists…but we had three categories; Best Dressed, Worst Dressed and ‘Dear Lord Who Let Them Out of the House Dressed Like That’. The first name that hit the last list was Amber Rose. She knew she was wrong for showing up mostly naked. We were
damn near shocked when we put both Nicki Minaj and Miley Cyrus on the Best Dressed list. But they looked both looked really nice trendy and yet not trashy. I noticed that there was a lot of red on that red carpet, but not really anything that looked like MeDe’s dress. As we drank wine…we even got sweet little Mary Hart to have some after all Jesus turned water to wine at the wedding in Cana, he would be just fine with her having a glass or two…we broke them down into ‘teams’ for comparison too. Like Team Destiny’s Child…which wasn’t perfect because we put Solange in there so were weren’t just comparing Beyoncé to Kelly. Then there was Team Kardashian and Team Pop Princess. Hannah was live tweeting her reactions to the outfits and so were Bubbie and Jamie in New York, so it seemed almost as if we were all watching it together. Bubbie had just tweeted a comment about Jessie J’s vintage Halston dress when suddenly there they were.

My baby looked beautiful. Her hair was long and loose, but rippling in tightly controlled waves until it curled under. Her brows were perfectly arched and her eye makeup was flawlessly glamorous, flash lashes that almost fooled me…so perfectly tapered that when she blinked they created a perfect fan against her cheek. Both lids were lined in a rich, thick kohl line that followed the lash line before arching up towards her brow tip…but then it looked like they pulled a half line of the liner along the crease to the exterior line and formed a very dark delta at the outer corner of her eye. Her inner lid was a softer deep, warm brownish pink that darkened until it blended into the dark delta. There was some shimmer over the whole lower lid and blended up into the brow ridge. Her foundation was definitely airbrushed or something else that left no trace of blending or lines…just a youthful, beautiful complexion. Her lips…oh my goodness. I immediately wanted to know what color that was…it was gorgeous. The color was multifaceted, a warm, rich, red that was bordering on burgundy with metallic gold undertones. Part of me smiled because her lips looked huge…she hated when I said that, but they reminded me even more of her father’s mouth when her lips were at their plumpest.

Her earrings were the long, big garnet dangles that started in the pave scrolls and extended almost six inches from the stud to the drop shaped garnets inset in pave white gold drops. Her dress fit like a dream. Ruth’s bra and shaper together were strong enough to contain her bosom, and give her a regal and classily sexy décolletage. The grenadine silk faille followed her generous curves in a neat and subtly sexy way instead of the blatant sex appeal the other red dresses had showcased. Bubbie had raised the hem all the way around so that the high low skirt would fall perfectly despite her being at least half a foot shorter than the body the original design had been made for, yet the pleats still looked as they should. The high front showed off her expensive designer shoes. She had gone with the mesh caged booties, le sigh. MeDe laughed at something the interviewer said but answered with a grin. “The dress is Zac Posen. The shoes are Louboutin and the jewelry…well the earrings are Staurino Fratelli and the bracelets are Alexis Bitter and Crivelli. Sam and Noah designed my engagement ring themselves. They absolutely refuse to tell me anything more than that.” She gave the boys loving smiles while showing the ring off proudly.

“You don’t need to know either.” Sam and Noah both smirked. They look great too. Noah’s suit was slightly darker than Sam’s and he was wearing a white shirt with it and an oxblood colored tie. Sam had done away with the tie all together and had a very light blue shirt under his suit. Both boys were wearing Tom Ford…suits, shirts, tie and shoes. Sam’s hair was well cut and brushed to the side to give him a boyishly handsome look, while Noah, with his low cut almost Caesar looked dangerously attractive. Both of them looked at my little girl like she was the most precious thing in their world.

In the background I could see Haja, Kurt and Hudson subtly moving them forward. They encountered the interviewer from the ‘#askhermore’ movement. They asked her about her studies, she looked them dead in the eye and pointed out that that was still a fairly superficial question. “Instead let me say that I believe that you have a good platform and maybe even a good point, but just as we are not all shaped alike, we don’t all think alike. I just wish that you would acknowledge that there is a place for both the ‘what are you wearing’ questions…after all the fashion industry
employees millions of people around the world…and the more meaningful queries that showcase the intelligence of the stars out here. So while #askhermore is a good start…maybe we should ask everyone more.”

The interviewer was speechless. But we sure as hell weren’t, we cheered so loud and proud; I think we gave poor little Emma and Mary heart attacks. Mercedes had a great point and used her moment to preach for equality. The next interviewer asked Puck about their next project, “We have a Christmas album coming out this winter. The single from it will showcase the benefit of arts education in schools by featuring two of the best show choirs we know.” He smirked leaving no doubt in anyone’s minds that he was speaking of the New Directions. “But if not for the benevolence of April Rhodes, our choir would have been shut down for lack of funding before it every really got off the ground. All the proceeds from the single will go to the Trevor Project and to Toys for Tots.”

It took a couple more questions before Sam got asked a question. Apparently it had hit big on twitter that the guys designed the ring themselves. “So are you two going to go into jewelry design?” he was asked.

Sam chuckled, “uh no. Sorry…just because we know our woman well enough to design something that she loves doesn’t mean we could do that again for any other woman. Heck, we had some help from all of the men in our big crazy family…just like both of her brothers got her to help them make sure that they picked something that Tonya and Patrice will love forever. So I think we’re just gonna stick with the singing/songwriting thing.”

They proceeded to an open air area where they were separated for some pictures and then brought back together for others. Some intrepid photographer got them to pose with their left hands all out showing off the three rings they had given each other. Once they were gone and the carpet moved on, we changed from E! to MTV just in time for Fifth Harmony’s performance. Charlie XCX went on a little bit later. We used that time to make bathroom or snacks runs and, in many cases to check on the younger kids who were all bunking in the twins nursery with Triple S watching over them and watching the show on a smaller TV. When we came back together, it was in two much less gender separated crowds.

The show started with Jessie J, Cat Valentine and Nicki Minaj doing a performance. Cat sang her hit song ‘Break Free’, poor thing had voice but she wasn’t much of a dancer. She was disappeared then the cameras found Nicki Minaj in a tunnel in some barely there green shorts and bra. She did her song ‘Anaconda’…when her song ended then Jessie J came out in a cute little black and white mini dress for ‘Bang Bang’. When Cat’s part came in she showed up having changed into black bodysuit with white details and black boots from her pink sparkly solo performance getup. Nicki’s quick change had apparently gone horribly, horribly wrong. When she came out, her dress was split all down the front and she was holding it together…but she did her part so that was very professional of her.

Once the song was over, the camera swung to Gwen Stefani and Snoop Dogg. They presented the Best Female Video award to Katy Perry who won for her song with Juicy J. Jay Pharoah came out and performed a short stand-up routine and spoke about Artist to Watch voting procedures. We’d all voted early…and often. Joneses and Harrises around the world had campaigned via social media and word of actual mouths too. Columbia students, NYU students basically all the students on any campus associated with a former New Direction kid…all had been vocally calling for KAMA to win that award. I was fairly confident that we were good at least on that category. After he finished his stick, Lorde introduced Taylor Swift who performed ‘Shake It Off’.

Chelsea Handler, oooh, if I could have reached through the screen and snatched her bald I would have. I heard all the shit she has been talking about my baby just because Mercedes values herself
and Chelsea Handler never has… she presented Best Male Video award to Ed Sheeran and Pharrell Williams for ‘Sing’, which was wicked because I loved that catchy little song. Then it was the return of Jay Pharoah playing like he was Jay Z that time. He performed another short stand-up routine and spoke about Artist to Watch voting procedures. I was sensing a theme. After him, Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels, aka Dumb and Dumber, presented Best Pop Video to Cat Valentine for her song with Iggy Azalea ‘Problem’. Next up was Kim Kardashian West, who had sent Sam a very nice thank you card for speaking out against the way media spoke of her pregnancy, she introduced Sam Smith.

I had to admit, even if only to myself…if my babies weren’t doing what they do…Sam Smith would have been my favorite artist of the night. He got up there and did his thing on ‘Stay With Me’. I loved me that song. When he was finished, Common spoke out about the situation in Ferguson, Missouri, and presented Best Hip-Hop Video to Drake for ‘Hold On, We’re Going Home’. I hoped that people would listen to what Common had to say. I lived in fear for my sons every day. I liked to believe, I had to believe, that my daughter was safer. I wasn’t too happy that Childish Gambino hadn’t won that category…I liked ‘3005’. Then it was time to see who Jay Pharoah was gonna be that round. It turned out that he was Kanye West and again he performed a short stand-up routine and spoke about Artist to Watch voting procedures. The ladies of Orange is the New Black introduced Usher and Nicki Minaj and they performed ‘She Came to Give It to You’. I liked those two when they performed together…but I preferred ‘Lil Freak’ to the newer collabo. I was on tenderhooks because I had been seeing Mercedes, Sam and Puck in the audience for most of the show but they weren’t there for the last Jay Pharoah performance which meant that they would be performing soon. Nina Dobrev and Trey Songz, it took me forever to place that girl, presented Best Rock Video statue to Lorde for “Royals”…if I was honest, and been the one voting, I’d have given that one to Linkin Park or Imagine Dragons.

Every butterfly in my stomach started to flappin’ when Jennifer Lopez threw to my babies performance. The curtain opened to a whole different world. An ivory and gold stripped carpet covered the once black stage floor. There were huge lighted panels among huge not lighted panels forming an outer ring background. In the middle of the stage there was a big ivory and gold stage thing with several levels to it. At the bottom, it was open and you could look in and see the musicians. Erica and Cassidy were in black flapper dresses with ivory sequins and piping, while Artie, David and Justin were all in black zoot suits. Further forward the six dancers, Brittany and Bianca wearing burgundy and black roaring twenties type dresses. Both of their hair and been formed into tight fingerwaved, hopefully faux, bobs and they had the Gatsby style head bands that matched their dresses. Their shoes were even perfectly matched to the period. Rainbow and Elena were done up in much the same way, though their dresses were hunter or forest green and black. Simeon and Jacks looked like speak easy bartenders in their white twenties inspired slacks and white shirts with black ties, black suspenders and black bands around slightly puffy sleeves. Damien and Adam were standing across the stage from each other dressed much like the male dancers but with black shirts and pants and white accessories. They all wore black fedoras.

Santana was next to Adam and Xena stood beside Damien. The two women were both in shorter, tighter, overall sexier, black flapper dresses with silver detailing again with headbands that matched perfectly. Santana’s heels were a little taller than everyone else’s I’d seen so far. They had done a great job. Even their makeup seemed to fit the time period. As the music started, panels on the side moved and revealed an entire orchestra playing with the band. The dancers broke into three pairs, moving to the music in all these bluesy, jazzy moves that seemed to contort their bodies into supernatual positions. Then a panel at the top pulled up and revealed KAMA. Mercedes, in an ivory speakeasy look dress with black details, which was cut more like Santana and Xena’s dresses than the dancers, stood between Sam and Puck, both of them in full zoot suits, Puck’s Black and Sam’s black with ivory pinstripes. Mercedes had a far more elaborate, though still period appropriate headband and Sam and Puck’s fedoras had an ivory band.
The performance was amazing. For the first verse the trio was together at the top, then they came down some stairs to a lower level and separated, Mercedes on a platform above the band Puck off to the left and Sam off to the right, at least six to eight feet separating each of them from Mercedes and an even greater gulf keeping the two of them apart. As the boys turned to go back to the center, the walkways retracted. The three of them stood alone on their separate platforms as they hit the song’s epic bridge and when they neared the second repeat of the choral refrain, stairs suddenly emerged from the panels and they all came down to the floor level in three different spots on the stage. They had to fight their ways through the dancers, all six of whom had been pulling off some really amazing dance moves the entire song, to find each other for the last few lines of the song. It was a moving performance and a good stage representation of the video.

The curtain closed and Jay Pharoah came out on a separate proscenium. He read off the nominees for the Artist to Watch. “The nominees for the Video Music Award for MTV’s Artist to watch are; 5 Seconds of Summer for ‘She Looks So Perfect’, Charli XCX, ‘Boom Clap’, KAMA for ‘The Fighter’, Fifth Harmony, ‘Miss Movin’ On’ and Sam Smith for ‘Stay with Me’. You all voted, your voices have been heard and the winner is” you could have heard a pin drop in the grass in my backyard that night, “KAMA, ‘The Fighter’!”

We all sucked in air and screamed so freaking loud that I’m sure Mercedes, Noah and Sam all heard us all the way out in Hollywood. The three of them were looking more than a little dazed and confused when they got handed that Moonman. Puck and Mede shoved Sam forward first. “Umm…Thank God, thank Lyr and our team at Warner Music. Thank all our fans…who knew I would ever have fans. Every kid out there who has trouble making the letters and words in front of you make sense…give music a try, try reading comic books…Keep trying anything you can until you find what works for you. Never let anyone tell you that you are dumb or stupid or worthless. I have the same problem and yet here I stand.”

He moved and Mercedes smiled at the world. “Like Sam said…Never let anyone make you feel worthless. You might be too loud and too big and too dark…but so am I. Be healthy and love who you are…never let anyone steal your shine and find what you are good at and brings you joy. Mom, Dad…all of our parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and siblings, you guys have supported us and sacrificed for us and you’ve made this possible. Thank all of you for loving us enough that we had no choice but to love ourselves. Fans, I thank each of you.” One of the fans yelled out a loving message over the din, “I love you too.”

Puck went last. “I want to thank Yawheh and Mom and George and Bubbie, Saul and Mills…and to all those kids at McKinley…You are only a Lima Loser if you let yourself become one. Shelby Cochran thanks for being the best glee teacher like ever and a great mom to Beth. Oh and thanks to Gwen, Uncle Saul, Haja, Hudson, Brantley and Darcy…You guys make KAMA run. Thanks to our band and dancers and just every fucking body.” The camera turned to Chloë Grace Moretz and Dylan O’Brien, but no one was paying any attention.

“Oh he was so close.” Becah laughed through the tears on her cheeks. She turned to George and held out her hand. We all laughed when the contractor pulled out his wallet and handed her a ten. “Sorry dear, but you know my boy curses like he breathes. You should have known better.”

We were loud and happy. I guess we should have expected that one of the neighbors would call the cops, especially since I had only invited two of them. Benton and I missed the 5 Seconds of Summer performance when we had to go answer their intrusion on the festivities. Thankfully it was Sergeant Jackson and Officer Brannagan. But it probably would have been okay, Brother and Sister Adams were there and Brother Adams had been promoted to lieutenant about six months before. The two officers who had arrested that son of a bitch that tried to hurt my daughter stayed long enough to grab something to eat and watch as Lucy Hale read off the list of the awards that weren’t sexy enough for
TV. ‘ColorBlind’ had beaten out ‘The Fighter’ for Best Direction. Beyonce’s ‘Pretty Hurts’ lost the Video with a Message award to ‘Rescue Me’ but it, in turn, beat ‘The Fighter’ for Best Cinematography. No one was surprised when Sia’s ‘Chandelier’ won for best Choreography…that video deserved that award, though it would have been nice if ‘ColorBlind’ had gotten it.

Running our mouths we also missed the Maroon 5 performance…but everyone paid attention again when Jimmy Fallon got up and read the nominees for the biggest award of the evening. “The nominees for the Video of the Year are all very different. A former child star, and Aussie with a black’cent, the first out and proud threesome in my memory, and Aussie who actually sounds Australian, and the never aging producer man… Miley Cyrus, ‘Wrecking Ball’, Iggy Azalea featuring Charli XCX, ‘Fancy’, KAMA for ‘The Fighter’, Sia, ‘Chandelier’ and Pharrell Williams ‘Happy’.” Benton and I stood there, hugged together with our fingers crossed, holding our breaths. To be honest with them having already won four awards that night, I wasn’t even sure if I was hoping they would win the last one or not. If they won it…everything would change so much more than they already had.

Out of Exile (Audioslave)
Gabby Evans PoV

Sander and I looked over, it couldn’t have been more than a breath of time between Jimmy’s voice reading the final name and when he started to read off the winner, but I managed to see Danica and Benton and Becah and George. We were all of us clustered together, hugging and hoping against hope. “And the Moon Man goes to the newest kids on the block…KAMA.” Jimmy laughed merrily.

Sam, Mercedes and Noah had changed back into their designer, red carpet arrival looks and reclaimed their seats from the fillers. The camera panned around to where they were totally gobsmacked. Jill Scott and her party were seated right behind them…and the whole world watched as she leaned forward and swatted Puck against the back of his head. It may have been embarrassing, but it was also endearing and funny as hell. It was also very effective.

Sam was seated on the outside, so he quickly stood and helped Mercedes to her feet. He, Noah and Mercy made their way to the stage moving rather quickly. Everyone was standing and clapping and a hand reached out. Kelly Freakin’ Rowland grabbed Mercedes hand and gave it a quick squeeze, almost as if she was showing her that it was really happening. It worked too. Mercedes still slightly confused mien changed to one of overwhelming happiness. Sam and Puck showed the world that they had been raised right and they helped her up the stairs. I was very happy, because those shoes were killer high. It was our girl who took the mic first. “I…I…I don’t know if you can tell but I’m really, really shocked.” The whole hall laughed. “I mean, those were some amazing videos we were up against. I hope I don’t offend anyone when I say that I thought Miley or Pharrell had this on lock.” She giggled. “Um…thanks. Thanks to all the fans, to all the KAMAleons, to all our family and friends. Thank God without his guidance, love. grace and mercy…none of us would be able to do what we do. Benton and Danica Jones. Sander and Gabrielle Evans, Rebecah and George Altman…those are our parents…they have been supporting us through this entire journey. This is for you. Mr. Lyor Cohen and the entire team at Warner. God bless all of you. Thank you. ”

Puck went next. “Beth, baby girl, Look, Abah, MeDe and Poppa did it.” His grin was huge and bright. “Artie, Blaine, Brittany, Finn, Kurt, Lauren, Mike, Quinn, Santana and Tina, thank you guys for holding us down through thick in and thin in high school and on twitter and everywhere else now. Kids real friends are freakin’ priceless you don’t have to be in the popular clique, just make you some true friend who will have your back no matter what…that’s what’s actually important. I’ve gotta say one more thing. Cops…we need to hold them to a higher standard than the average citizen not lower. They take an oath to protect and serve…not to kill and cover up. I know I’m gonna get a lotta hate for saying it. But I know some damn good cops back home, they would never allow
anyone on their force who didn’t know how to be a good cop. Good cops you guys have gotta rise up and demand the bad ones find another damn job before they drag you all down with them. Selling loosies or grabbing some black and milds…neither of those are capitol offenses. Now, I’m getting off my soapbox and sayin’ thank you to every fan we have…especially those who stick with us after the backlash hits for what I just said.”

There was enough applause there and here, that I knew his words to be truth. “Well, hell…while we have the platform, I’m gonna say that common sense gun laws work. We just need to put them in place and enforce them…it literally takes more to get a driver’s license than a gun license and cars are not specifically designed to kill people.” Sam opened up, sharing his Grandfather’s feelings on the subject. “Thank you to all the fans and to MTV and to every single soul who made this possible. God Bless.”

When they left the stage, I’m fairly sure the producers were still wondering if they should have bleeped them and just made it look like they cussed a lot. But I was happy as a clam. I know that Jay-Z and that pretty little poppet Blue Ivy introduced Beyoncé’s Michael Jackson Video Vanguard performance, but none of us saw shit. Most everybody was tweeting and texting and calling and just communicating their joy to anyone and everyone they could.

Sander and I were wrapped up in each other. I think we kissed so long and so hard that we hurt ourselves a little bit. But it was better than going at each other right then and there no matter who was watching. We didn’t break ourselves apart. Benton and Danica appeared next to me. “We all need to talk. Can you get William and meet us in the kitchen?”

I did as I was asked. Benton’s tone had brooked no objection…not that I would have raised any with the fear I heard in his deep voice. It didn’t take long for them to join us, with Becah and George and I was surprised to see Lieutenant Adams walk in with them. We all took a seat at the kitchen table.

“Guys, thanks for coming in to talk to us. I just, I wanted to get a handle on what we are looking at right now for the kids. Brother Adams, how bad do you think it is going to be?”

The police office sighed. “Man, I don’t even know. The fans are one thing. Your kids have built up a pretty good reputation among them so I don’t think they will be too crazy, maybe they will get all hopped up for a while but that should settle down after a couple of weeks. But there are plenty of bad cops in the unions who know they ain’t right and are gonna try and spin this as if your kids were talking about all cops, no matter what Puck said.”

“They need a PR person.” I muttered thoughtfully.

At the same time across the table William Anderson said, “They need bodyguards.”

Becah agreed. “Will, could you call Rangeman and get someone there to meet them at the airport tomorrow. I’ll get Hudson to shoot you their flight information. We’ll pay for the first week in advance if we need to and they can just take it over from there.”

Danica was looking around as if she was missing something. “Bent…I don’t have my phone…can you get Bryant on yours?” she asked.

Before Benton could even reach into his pocket. Devon came rushing into the kitchen. “Ma, Uncle Bryant says he has to talk to you, like now.”

“Put it on speaker.” She said quickly. Devon did so but rather than leaving, he sat down at the table too. “Bryant, tell me you are calling to help.”

“Of course, I’m calling to help. Now, I’ve been out the game too long and even then I was all political PR, not industry, but Daniel…I just got off with him, and Daniel is gonna be on the first
flight to Manhattan in the morning. Ethan and Amanda say that he can have their guest room until he can get settled. I know he only has a couple of years of experience…but Danica…you know he’ll protect Mercedes from this.” Bryant Harris’ strong, deep voice came through the line clear as a bell.

“Okay, Umm who is Daniel, what can he do to help and he will be helping Sam and Noah too right?” I asked them for clarification.

Devon answered me. “Daniel is Uncle Bryant’s oldest son. His only child from his first wife…the eldest Harris grandchild and Momma’s namesake…PR wunderkind…He lives in Seattle working for a PR firm that handles mostly tech companies.”

Benton took the last part of my question. “Daniel will make sure that Noah and Sam are taken care of too. Bryant, what about Riker? How long can Daniel conceivably stay in New York?”

Bryant sighed. “Right now he is using a few sick days and then his vacation. He wants to make sure that we aren’t all freaking out over nothing before he turns in his resignation. I don’t know about Riker. The Seattle PD has been good to her. I don’t know if she can leave easily and I know she can’t on short notice. Guys, if this had happened after the end of my term, I’d be the one handling it…I’ll help however I can, but I…”

“Aren’t you running again?” Becah asked confusedly. I just thought about how sad that he sounded that he couldn’t take it on.

“No. Look, I haven’t told anybody other than Nadia yet, but I’m done with politics. It is boring. I can’t change shit and I have to keep my nose too damn clean.” Bryant admitted.

Danica laughed. “Oh how the mighty have fallen…you giving up your path to the White House for the fetish model…that’s almost romantic.”

“You forgot ‘bisexual’…that’s very important…can’t leave it out. Hell if my constituents knew half of what I’ve been up to since April…they’d boot me out in a heartbeat…but I’ve never had more fun.”

Benton chuckled. “And that is exactly why Dani only said almost romantic.”

“Okay, so PR Daniel will be in New York tomorrow. William is going to call Rangeman to get some protection on the kids. What else do we need to try and get ahead of?” George asked just as his bride’s phone rang.

Becah exchanged greetings and then said, “I’m putting you on speaker, Mills. Can you tell the others what you just told me?”

“Hey everyone.” Mills said with a smile we could all hear. “Madeline called me. As soon as Roman heard Noah’s speech, he called his cousin Ranger. They need the kids’ flight information, but they have agreed to allow us to utilize their body guard services and they will just bill Noah, Sam and Mercedes with their invoice for their quadplex. Roman was scheduled to take the redeye back tonight, but he wants to push his flight back to get on theirs. Give them some extra help if they need it. When you call Hudson, please let her know that they are emailing her the contracts, she just needs to get them signed and emailed back and they will watch the kids back.”

I was admittedly relieved. I texted Haja and Hudson both to let them know what was going on. I looked over and saw that Lieutenant Adams was texting someone pretty furiously himself. He looked up. “Oh, sorry…It took me a minute, but I finally got my Captain to have the Lima PD PR person to put out a statement thanking KAMA for holding us as a shining example of law
enforcement. I’m hoping that having a police department acknowledge the good things he said will undercut some of the union spin.”

Sander nodded. “I’ve got my boss, Mr. Gilman, getting up with Mayor Bloomberg to get him to say something positive about Sam’s call for common sense gun laws. Victor’s father and Michael Bloomberg were in the same fraternity at John Hopkins.”

George looked up and laughed. I was a little surprised that he’d been so quiet, but when he spoke I realize he’d been thinking deep thoughts. “You know why Noah said it…Cede has been feeling some kind of way about the Gardner case in New York and about that new mess in Ferguson, but I’d bet she assumed that if she said anything the media would find it easy to ignore her as just another black celebrity speaking out…”

“But Noah is, for all intents and purposes, a white male. He says it and it isn’t necessarily expected.” Sand noted. “No offense Adams…but the kid has a point. Even if you believe that Gardner and the Brown kid really did commit the crimes they were posthumously accused of…shoplifting and getting paid for giving someone his extra smokes shouldn’t have led to their deaths.”

“No offense taken. I firmly agree. Besides…I’m one of the damn good cops that he knows from back home, remember. What the current police union climate refuses to let us say is that there are a lot of brave men and women in blue…but unfortunately we have cowards who like to hide behind the power and the badge. You know, I bet if you talk to cops in Missouri…the one that shot that kid was one that people didn’t really want to be out on a call with because he wasn’t reliable to have your back. Hell, Big Dave Karofsky was like that. It was why his contract wasn’t finalized after our probationary period back when we joined the force.”

Benton chuckled. “I can see that. Alright…is there anything else that we need to do for the kids tonight?”

Devon put his hand in the air like he was in a class. “Figure out what kind of congratulations gift you’re gonna give them for this…I mean MeDe got a pair of Louboutins for finishing her freshman year with an A average.”

“You were the one who wanted the cash…I’d have found something just as good for you.” Danica defended.

“Besides, you know your sister got those shoes because your Mama was trying to get her to change her mind about the ones she wore tonight.” Benton teased, he wasn’t wrong.

I was just hoping that Danica didn’t realize how popular Mercy’s chosen shoes were on the twitter feeds. I started to giggle and just couldn’t stop. I was so happy, despite the worries, I was just so damn happy…I couldn’t contain it. The kids were going to go further than any of us had considered probable, let alone possible. I was so happy for them. I couldn’t wait to see where they would go from their big win.

Other’s Reactions Elsewhere

Flatbush Gardens
Brooklyn, NY

Rachel Barbra Berry was seething. It had driven her mad when she had heard that Mercedes, Sam and Puck had been nominated for seven different awards for their first three music videos. She had
only tuned into the VMAs to point and laugh when ‘KAMA’ lost. But they hadn’t lost. They had won. They had won four or five awards. She screamed into her pillow tears of rage rolling down her cheeks. She was supposed to have the awards and the accolades. She was supposed to be desired and beloved around the world. She was supposed to be hailed as an amazing talent…Not Mercedes. It was not fair. She screamed.

Noah had listed the names of every one of their classmates but hers, as if he had never cared for her at all. And what did Noah Puckerman claim to know about being black in America. Why would he waste time he could have used to mention her, his former lover, of a sort, and there by adding to her cache. Instead he was advocating against police use of force. Noah was as white as she was and she certainly had never experienced anything like the supposed ‘white privilege’…Hiram faced discrimination just like Antwan. Granted he’d never been beaten when the two of them were in public together…everyone seemed to immediately know that he was her father. Back when they were still friends, she and Mercedes shopped together all the time and if the store security was following Mercedes around, it probably went back to her activities when she was under the tutelage of April Rhodes.

Rachel threw herself into her bed, wishing that she had someone to talk to that she could share her discontent as to the rewarding of the lesser talents of Mercedes ‘Wide Load’ Jones and her stupid boyfriends. She had tried to contact Mr. Schuester and see if he wanted to watch together, but he hadn’t returned her voicemails. Her fathers had told her that they were going to the Joneses home for a VMA watch party, not that they would appreciate her misery at the good fortune of KAMA. They were already discussing giving one of the babies the middle name Karma if either was a girl, and what was that but a play on the name of her nemesis’ group. They didn’t seem to understand her feelings at all. If she were a lesser individual she might think that what she was feeling was called loneliness…if she wasn’t Rachel Barbra Berry.

927 Fifth Ave
Upper East Side Manhattan, NY

April Rhodes was seriously having the best time ever. Ever since KAMA had broken onto the scene and thanked her for giving the money to save their glee club, she was rolling in invitations among the ‘patrons of the arts’ crowd. Victor French and April were having a blast. She finally picked him because the former mistress wanted to know what it felt like to be with a man who was only with her. Frenchy was a two time widower whose only child had been killed in a car accident before April was even born. Though they had only been dating for about five months, the night of the VMAs, April was sporting a custom made three carat Harry Winston platinum engagement ring. Victor had already changed his will to leave her the bulk of her fortune. He had out lived anyone with the legal standing to challenge it, so April was sure that was going to be taken care of for the rest of her life.

April was also more than a little surprised when Victor asked her to rent out her own East Village penthouse apartment and move into his Upper East Side residence with him. It was in the massive three bedroom home of her fiancé that she was viewing the VMAs to see how many moon men her little friends walked away with…there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that they were going to win at least a few. Victor was on the phone nearby. He smiled at her happily when she cheered every time the group was shown on the screen. When they watched the speeches following KAMA’s biggest win of the night, Victor shook his head. Jewish people were often very liberal in their leanings, because they all felt that by making sure human rights were protected another Holocaust became far
less likely to happen. Victor’s own grandparents and their children had escaped Poland soon after
Germany had passed the Nuremburg Laws. They had lived in the country that had given their line its
name a hundred years before for just three years before the saw that France would soon be unsafe for
them as well and they had immigrated, mostly together, to America. Victor had been born in
America. He had been instilled with the ideals of freedom from prosecution of minorities long before
he could understand the concept. But he was an old man who had lived a long life in the land of the
free. He knew there would be consequences for the young Jew who had spoken up for his ideals.
April knew it too.

Victor watched as his fiancée tried to think of a way to help her young friends. “Tygrysek, my Little
Tigress…do not worry so. I will have my people start to mitigate the damage to the dzieci.” He
assured her.

April looked into his grey blue eyes and could see that he really meant it. So she set aside her
worry…for the moment. If he hadn’t done anything by Tuesday then she would move to help them
herself. April had been disappointed by every single man in her life…she didn’t trust any of them
without a backup plan. Still she would give him time since he seemed so earnest and honest. She was
sure that it was all going to work out. After all how much could a person be punished for telling the
truth.

Toledo Correctional Institution
Toledo, OH

Shane Tinsley would have been almost unrecognizable to the women he had assaulted. When he had
attended McKinley High he’d been six foot four and four hundred and fifty two pounds. While he
had great muscle tone, his muscles had been covered by a rather thick layer of fat. But on that last
day of August, he had dropped any fat and replaced it with muscle. His ready ‘charming’ smile was
gone, replace with the scowl he’d usually worn only on the football field. He had been a resident of
the close security ward of the Toledo Correctional Institution for four hundred and eleven days when
the VMAs took place. Before that he had spent nine months in the Allen County Juvenile Detention
Center. Due to repeated fights and assaults he had been told that the warden was moving to make his
lesser sentences consecutive, pushing him to have to serve at least fifty six months of his possible
seventy-eight month sentence. Shane had lost his temper and tried to fight a guard. The resulting
beating had seen him hospitalized for two weeks and then transferred to the adult prison of which he
was currently a resident.

As soon as he was added to the general population of the older prison, a thin wiry little Latino had
begun torturing Shane. The big black young man was jumped by every La Rasa gang member in the
cell block. Most of them had just enjoyed beating the shit out of him. But the little wiry man…a man
whose previous cellmate had had the last name Lopez…had looked at the two biggest men. Shane’s
eyes had grown wide and scared as the two men had started pulling down their orange twill pants.
The cockiness had been beaten out of him, the undeserved arrogance and entitlement however had
been pervasive. By the time those two big Hispanic men had finished with him that day, Shane
swore it would never happen again. He started to work out. But physical change doesn’t come
immediately. Making the kinds of contacts he needed to be protected from one of the biggest,
cruelst gangs in the Ohio State Penal System didn’t happen immediately. The beatings happened
two or three times a week, they were bad, but never bad enough to get him put into the infirmary.
The physical assaults were hard enough to deal with even knowing when they were coming… but it
was like they were trying to keep him off his game by never establishing any rhyme or reason to the
rapes.

It took Shane seven months to get built enough, strong enough for his physicality to provide a
deterrent to the beatings. He had begun working on building the connections among the other black
prisoners but found that his educated tone and elevated background did not stand him in good stead with anyone anywhere near his age in his cellblock. Then when Christmas came and his parents visited…Shane experienced a vicious set back. One of the older men recognized Calvin Tinsley as the man his ex-wife had claimed got her drunk and took pictures of her doing some nasty things and then blackmailed her with the threat of putting those pictures online where their children could see them or be taunted for their existence. The image of the man taking a picture in the mirror of the house he and his ex-wife had shared as he sodomized her was burned into the memory of the inmate. Tinsley senior had texted Angela Johnson the picture as proof of his threat. Angela had come to her husband and confessed it all, knowing that despite his incarceration, it would mean the end of their marriage. Ringo Johnson had never before believed in making a son pay for the sins of the father…but he made an exception just for Shane Tinsley.

Eventually, Shane had even managed to overcome that setback. He had experienced several months free of the rapes and the beatings…until the guards played ‘SongBird’ for the prisoners. One of the most viscous bastards on the guard staff let it slip that the sweet little girl that reminded so many of their own daughters…the ones they had left behind when they entered prison…the ones that they saw grow up only through pictures and very few, very short visits over the years. Shane’s cover, his protection, was gone. He managed to fight off the La Rasas enough that they left him alone…but he was always alone. No one wanted anything to do with him. When KAMA’s CD hit and Mercedes and her ‘husbands’ voices were everywhere, Shane lost it. He pitched a hissy fit that landed him in solitary confinement for fourteen days.

Whenever KAMA or Mercedes did anything of import, the guards made sure to tell Tinsley. When KAMA won big at the VMAs the night shift guard couldn’t wait to get to work. The guard enjoyed watching the six foot five asshole in the sell pitch a bitch. He enjoyed it even more when he got to shove Tinsley back into solitary confinement for a month for all the damage that had been done to the cell. The guard spent the rest of his shift with a smile on his face. He freakin’ loved KAMA.

740 Park Avenue
Upper East Side Manhattan, NY

Lyor Cohen was one happy man. He had known the first time he heard Mercedes, Sam and Noah’s voice in that French restaurant two years before that they were going to make him rich. In just their first five months on the charts, KAMA had made Warner Music Group over three hundred million dollars. Lyor himself had made enough to expand his stock portfolio and invest in some real estate in New Jersey or Upstate New York. As he watched the VMAs, he also watched the numbers for downloads on all the major music sites. After their performance there was a thirty eight percent jump in their iTune sales, fifty-six percent jump at Amazon and a forty-four percent jump in their Rhapsody sales. After their first televised win, they experienced a seventy-three percent jump in their already remarkable Youtube views across the board and they experienced an even larger jump in their Spotify searches. After their rather controversial speeches following their Video of the Year win, they were trending on every social media platform and were it not for Darcy’s amazing skills, their site would have crashed like the Hindenburg.

At the end of the evening, he was on the phone with his executive assistant…despite the late hour. “I want you to send Mercedes something special…the diamond butterfly broach from Graff…I believe that she likes butterflies and can you come up with something good to get Sam and Noah too. The card should say congratulations, I knew you could do it…or you know pretty that up. Oh, and send all three of their mothers something nice too.” He said thoughtfully. “Now, Estella, I need you to do me just a few other favors. I want you to let both legal and PR know that I want Puck and Sam’s comments both backed. We can be subtle with our backing them, but they are telling the truth…tell them that they aren’t to disavow them. Then tomorrow, I want you to get TI on the phone before lunch, I want him to think about using KAMA rather than Skylar Grey for that Trayvon Martin
“You know that legal will love that, but PR is not going to be happy.” Estella said knowingly.

“They don’t have to be happy…they just have to make sure that they don’t leave those kids out to dry. We’ve made too much money off of them and we stand to make tons more. The twitter-verse is coming down primarily on their side. We should capitalize on that.” Lyor said sternly.

Estella made note of the things she would need to do before bed and the things she could do in the morning once she arrived at the office. She hadn’t been sure about those kids when her boss had come in crowing about finding the next big thing. She still felt there was something morally reprehensible about their relationship. But she didn’t have to like them to admit that she had been wrong and Mr. Cohen had been right those kids were rocketing higher and faster than even Taylor Swift had…and they seemed more genuine. Before she headed to bed, she had sent Mercedes one of Graff’s gorgeous sapphire and diamond ‘butterfly medallion’ necklaces. A girl who wasn’t even twenty would probably prefer the necklace to the broach. Instead she sent Mrs. Jones the butterfly broach, Mrs. Evans the dragonfly broach and Mrs. Altman the diamond swan broach. After dialing through all the watches on the Graff site, she finally decided to get them both, identical, MasterGraff dual time tourbillion platinum and black watches. She sent off emails to both Legal and PR from Lyor Cohen’s Warner outlook account and headed to sleep. Two days later, Estella was surprised to come back from lunch and find a Graff box containing a beautiful diamond and multicolored sapphire broach waiting for her. Mr. Cohen was a demanding boss…but since he had signed KAMA, he had really started showing his appreciation in the best of ways.

West 39th St
Hells Kitchen, Manhattan, NY

Will Schuester sat in his small Hells Kitchen and watched his former students win several VMA awards on his tablet. Looking at the feed, Will had to admit that Mercedes, while not his type, was certainly looking beautiful and all the people at on the telecast were talking about how sexy she was. Will sighed as he thought back over the last few years of his life. He’d been so sure that Rachel was the most talented, most driven individual it had ever been his pleasure to teach. He had been so sure that Rachel was the most talented, most driven individual it had ever been his pleasure to teach. He had been so sure that he was doing the right thing by helping her to develop her drive and talent…to put her high enough that she continued to strive for excellence. He hadn’t seen the madness behind her eyes. Or maybe he had but had convinced himself that it was simply ambition…as he had with Terry. But during conversations with Rachel in the months since KAMA’s drop party, William had been forced to confront a simple truth. In the words of both Shannon and Benton Jones, he had backed the wrong horse. Rachel was never going to be the next Barbra…she was too selfish and too unwilling to put in the real work of the industry. When she had learned that Will had lost the lead in Memphis due to his inability to convince audiences of his love for his leading lady, Rachel had decided that he was no longer of any use to her.

Yes, it had been weeks since Rachel had stopped returning his calls only resuming her calls to him earlier that evening when KAMA had looked and sounded so amazing on the VMAs. When Puck called Shelby Cochran the best glee coach ever, Will knew that his goose was cooked. The only reason he’d been allowed his previous role back was because the producers knew of his relationship with the rising super group and they were hopeful that the group would mention Schuester and increase their box office. That wouldn’t happen. He really had thought that the others were exaggerating when they said that the kids had moved on past any anger or hate and were completely indifferent to his existence. But they had been right…they had all been right.

While he was being paid as a lead, he’d had enough even after the garnishments that were repaying April and Emma, but with the pay cut that came with being returned to a supporting cast member,
Will was almost two months behind on his rent and when he’d returned from the theatre, he’d found that his cable was off…it was a bundle which meant that he had no internet either. If it weren’t for the fact that his upstairs neighbor had the weakest wi-fi password in history. He wouldn’t even know how fucked he actually was. Will considered his options. He could try and get a second job, but his schedule with rehearsal and acting classes was already ridiculously packed. Besides for everything he was trained to do, it would take him time to get hired. Time he didn’t have.

He knew that as soon as he stepped foot in the theatre, he was fired…totally irrevocably fired. Once he was fired, he would be homeless within days thereafter. He’d have no way to get back to Ohio, even if he wanted to go back or had anything or anyone to go back to. When the telecast ended, Will looked at a card one of the guys in the chorus had given him. The kid, Brody, swore it was easy money, just taking out some ladies in the need of some attention. Before he could reconsider it, Will sent an email with his portfolio of head shots to the email address on the card. He knew that he wasn’t looking at a Huey Lewis future…but hopefully the one he would find in the response to the email would be brighter than the one he would face if he didn’t send it. With a wry grin, Will Schuester had to admit, even though he had tried to hold them back and keep them in Rachel’s shadow, those kids were basking in a light that definitely necessitated some sunglasses.

Chapter End Notes

I know that here I usually beg for reviews...and I do like them...but I must do something more important.

If you live in a state with a governor who is both stupid and cowardly; call them, call them and call your congressional representatives. Tell them that they cannot call themselves Christians and yet turn their back on women and children and elderly people fleeing terrorist and extremists who have apparently never read the book they purport to believe in.

No matter what your religion killing in the name of God (whether you say Allah, Yahweh, Jehovah or God) is an abomination and the worst of all sins.

Like Puck I will get off my soapbox now.

TTFN,
Anni
When Mike came to me with the idea of staying in California and taking summer classes, I was shocked. He was even closer to his mother than I was to my parents so for him to want us to spend extra time away from our families was completely out of character. But when he explained that he needed to find the strength to finally have a real confrontation with his father and take control of his own life, it started to make a lot more sense. DJ was already planning to take summer classes since she was hoping to add a second major to her current course load. Besides she was pretty much local so she could do so easily. Nevil was on board before I really was. For him college had been a brand new start and every time he returned home it wasn't to peace and nostalgia it was to a stifling and restrictive set of old expectations.

When I talked things through with my mom and dad, I was kind of surprised to find that they were understanding than I could have imagined. "Tina, you are young, you are experiencing new and incredible things. That is what we want for you. I spent the summer after my sophomore year of college on a Kibbutz in Israel. Would we love it if you came home for the summer? Of course we would. Will we still love you if you don't? Of course we will. Now, if you do decide to stay and take classes, I suggest you get the rest of your science and math requirements out of the way. The professors for the summer classes are usually less hard ass."

To be honest I was still on the fence. I would need to find a summer job and take classes and I wouldn't be able to see our crew. I went to Cedes for advice, because that was what I always did when I had a problem. She reminded me that very few of our friends would be home for the entire summer most of them would just visit once or twice, including her and her hubbies. Santana, Brittany and Artie were all going on tour with Cedes and the boys. Quinn's summer was going to be spent bonding with Beth and there was no way I was going to interfere with that. Lauren would be doing some intensive wrestling camp and Finn was still doing his physical therapy. Kurt was being paid to help their talent manager decorate the KAMA offices in New York. Blaine was doing a summer internship at his dad's company's New York offices. So if my Mom and Dad were good with it, my friends wouldn't be there to hang out with, I could get a summer job anywhere since I’d decided the summer before not to go back as a counselor at Asian camp again. Mike had been on the fence about it, but he was much better at the science things than I was and very few of the kids wanted to do the arts and drama stuff I led.
So I made up my mind. When I told Cedes about it, she laughed and said she figured that that would be the choice I settled upon. I did admit to being worried that we wouldn't find an apartment we could afford given the fact that Mom and Dad had stated that I only had their permission to rent someplace as long as it was cheaper than living in the dorms. I had assumed I would have months to look not just a few weeks. She told me not to worry about it. That everything would work out. I should have translated that to mean she was going to make sure that everything worked out. Not long after I registered for my May-mester classes, a college writing program R1A class that met the first four days a week from twelve-thirty to two and satisfied one of my core curriculum classes, but that wasn't the only core requirement I was filling that summer, I also registered for a class to fill my quantitative reasoning requirement, calculus, which was a nine o'clock class plus I signed up for an acting class in between…it was a fun class and I needed it for my major anyway; I got an email from Mercedes with information about a duplex that they had bought and renovated since I talked to her at Christmas. There was a lease agreement that I just had to get signed by all four of us. They weren't charging us a deposit or anything that I knew they would be doing for the people who eventually rented the other half of the duplex. They were also charging us way less than anything like it rented for in the area.

By the time my freshman year at Berkeley officially ended I had a three point three five GPA and a place to live, basically, until graduation. Commune's Cali real estate guru had come to campus and taken the four of us on a tour of the duplex apartment that we could rent until we graduated if we wanted to for a flat monthly rent of five hundred a month for each of us. The apartment was fully furnished, we'd just have to provide things like sheets and dishes and towels and such. It was an easy commute from school and it was in a great neighborhood, not a bunch of partying students, just young couples and some very young families. We would have to handle our own utilities, but still, it was perfect.

There was a two week break between the end of the spring semester and the beginning of the May-mester, so during that time…we all made sure that we found jobs. DJ already had one she worked as a waitress at her uncle's teen club. She offered to get me in there too, but I just wasn't comfortable relying on tips to make ends meet like that. Instead, after some serious searching, I managed to get hired on at Bloomingdale's which was great. It was part time so that it fit around my class schedule. I made fifteen bucks an hour and I got a fifteen percent employee discount on clearance and sale items. I also got twenty percent off regular prices…but there was no way I could afford anything in that store that wasn't on sale. Mike got a job with a friend of Marko's, the choreographer who had done Commune's first videos. The guy was paying Mike twenty bucks an hour to teach several of his evening classes and considering that most of those were his married couples or little old ladies classes, it was bound to be a breeze. Nevil got a job at a boutique computer store that he was really happy with. People basically paid him to make them feel like shit because they lacked any technical acumen at all.

The deposits for the utilities were no joke so we each put one in our name. I took the water, sewer, trash and recycling bill. Nevil took the cable and internet bill. Mike took the electric bill and DJ was left with dealing with the gas company. We moved in around our work schedules during the days between the time after our last final and the day the dorms closed. The master suite, which Mike and I were staying in had a great king sized bed, two dressers and a good sized walk-in closet, so we had enough room for all of our stuff and one of the first things I used my discount on was buying sheets for our big bed. The master bath room was really nice, and the apartment even had a washer and dryer in place for us. At first it seemed weird to me that it was on the second floor, but the very first time it was my turn to do the laundry, I was really grateful for not having to schlep tons of clothes up and down stairs.

DJ and Nevil's bedrooms each had queen sized beds so they had to buy new bedding too. They gave me the money and I got them some really nice bedding sets from Bloomingdales. We were quickly
able to organize our budgets to get everything straight for living in a mature off campus domicile. Nevil had an Amazon Prime membership, so we let him buy a lot of our toiletries and laundry products and such through it and we just gave him the money. I invested in a Pam's Club membership and that was where we usually did our grocery shopping. We had a jar that was hidden in the pantry where everyone put fifty bucks every time we got paid to deal with our food buying needs. With both Nevil and Mike eating enough for two people each, buying our food in bulk was kind of a necessity. We got into a rhythm really quickly so slipping classes into it was unbelievably easy.

But while the economics and overall management of being roommates was easy to establish and maintain…I quickly started to really worry if this had been a good decision for me and Mike. The old saying that you never really know someone until you live with them, was more than true. Living with Mike was destroying the magic. He was slowly driving me out of my freakin' mind. At first it was little things…things I knew about from our sleep overs weekends. Like the fact that he is a serious bed hog. I woke up almost falling off of the tiniest piece of bed at two am every day for like the first two months we lived together. Eventually I gave up trying to get him to move back over and I just got up and walked around the bed and took his side. Maybe I could have lived with the bed hoggary but when combined with the damn cover thievery…it was just too much.

Those weren't even his worse traits. He squeezed the toothpaste tube from the middle and did that grody little kid full fist squeeze thing that left so much behind to get thrown away if I didn't carefully go behind him and squeeze the tube the correct way. When he cleaned the bathroom he called it clean if he cleaned the sink and toilet…never mind things like scrubbing in the shower and tub or sweeping and mopping the floor. The most serious of all his offenses was that he was a toilet seat leaver upper. It pissed me off that whenever I went to the bathroom I had to be careful to check the toilet before I could simply pee. AARRRGGGGGHHHHH!

I tried to focus my rage into getting out of the summer semester with the best grades I could. The way the summer term worked at Berkeley, there were five, intensive different terms to choose from. May-mester started not long after spring semester ended and finished up on July first. The other terms were of different durations but the way they were set up, we could technically take two of them though most people only took one. DJ and I decided to be rebels. We took each of the six week sessions which meant that by the end of the summer we had a total of six classes out of the way. I ended my May classes with a three point eight five for the term and DJ kept her perfect four point oh. Instead Mike and Nevil has a full summer quarter that went from June sixteenth through August fifteenth and it was run just like a regular term. The guys each had four classes…Mike's first class was an eight o'clock, but he was done before two. He didn't have to head to the dance studio until six and he only taught one Saturday class, whereas Nevil and I both worked all day on weekends and DJ worked really late Friday and Saturday nights so she usually stayed at home after her shift on Friday not coming back to the duplex until later Sunday afternoon. That meant that Mike had the responsibility for doing the shopping.

It took DJ, Nevil and I almost six weeks to get him to stick to the list and not buy the things his mother always brought. Maybe we could have let it go…but there wasn't exactly another option. We took turns cooking and doing most of the chores, but Mike couldn't cook. He had never learned to clean anything more than picking up behind himself. So he had to do the shopping. None of us could cook Asian food from scratch, so while it was nice to have the best duck sauce and such in the kitchen, having the right ketchup was infinitely more important. Mike was stubborn, but he was smart…so eventually he learned to get what was written on the list and only what was on the list.

Both Stanford and Berkeley made sure that there were no classes on Memorial Day or the Fourth of July. Nevil, Mike and I might have been left just hanging around the house on those days, but the Tanners were some awesome people. We went to the beach with DJ's family on Memorial Day and
had a blast. I had dragged DJ and her friend Kimmy shopping. She was adamantly against wearing a bikini, though she had a great shape…so it was up to Kimmy and I to show her the error of her ways. It was more of a battle than one would have believed just to get her to Stoneridge, the mall nearest the duplex. "I don't need a new swimsuit. I can just wear the one I bought for the swimming class I took second semester."

"You mean the one that looks like you could have been in the Olympics in the early eighties?" Kimmy asked her with a look of total disbelief. "Please even your Dad said that that one was old fashioned."

"Fine." She huffed.

I gave her a long look. "You know…if you have a moral objection to the whole two piece thing then I will back off. But Deej, if you are having body issue based fears…then I'm sorry, I can't let you hide. I mean, you've got a banging body boo."

DJ rolled her eyes. "I'm five foot two and a size eight…banging doesn't describe my body." She muttered.

My eyes rolled of their own volition. "I'm five foot four and a size ten. I have a bangin' body. I have a flat stomach, my breasts are a good handful…my hips and waist have a good ratio… no back fat… you have all of that going for you too. Don't buy into that whole 'woe is me, I'm not five foot ten and ninety pounds…I'm not shaped like a pre-pubescent boy…so I'm not hot' thing. You are very cute. If you stopped hiding behind your layers, you'd be beating guys off with s stick."

"Oh…but let the tall ones through," Kimmy proposed. "You haven't dated a tall guy since Steve."

It still took a little convincing to get her to try on some two pieces, but in the end she left Macys with a few really cute bikinis. I may have left with a couple of new ones too…but who could blame me. I was going to the beach with my boyfriend. The Fourth of July was even more fun, but it started pretty early. We got up, had breakfast and got dressed. I was seriously excited about going to the beach, so I pulled on my warm, brick red, ruched, halter bikini and a black, beaded, maxi dress cover-up. I had found a cute straw tote on sale when we got our bikinis, so the night before I had tossed in all the important things, sunscreen, a change of clothes for later, beach towels for me and Mike, a couple of magazines, and a book I needed to read for the literature class I had for the second summer session I was taking. Mike had actually gone out and gotten this huge beach blanket thing that came in a bag with sturdy metal rods to hold the blanket in place. Nevel brought a boat load of water even though DJ promised that her family would make sure that there was enough. I had built a huge salad the night before to take with us, so I grabbed that, the bad of dressings and my straw totebag and we were off.

The Tanner House was crazy when we got there. Michelle and Stephanie were arguing over something with Kimmy. Alex and Nicky were totally spastic trying to hurry the adults along. Their mom was triple checking her bags…plural. Their dad was triple checking his hair. Joey came out in the most colorful Hawaiian shirt ever. I think my eyes tried to implode it was so garish. Mr. Tanner and DJ were finishing up packing the food and stuff in the trunk of his classic car. Then there was a discussion of who was riding with whom. Kimmy and I got along fine…but she and Nevel got along as well as Berry and anyone who didn't immediately agree that she was the most talented person in any room. So we took Stephanie in our empty seat and Kimmy rode with DJ, Michelle and her dad. Joey rode with Jessie, Becky and the twins. They took us to an awesome, pretty much just locals beach that wasn't crazy crowded.

We had a lovely picnic on the beach. Mr. Tanner, he kept telling us to call him Danny, but he was way too stuffy and straight up Dad-like for me to call him by his first name, set up a portable grill and
there were hot dogs and the salad I'd made and tons of chips and drinks. After the food had been
devoured and things were cleaned up and put away, we all stripped down to our suits. I smiled to
myself when DJ shimmied out of her tank and shorts to reveal her black and white striped, halter and
hipster bikini. She looked really cute…like kind of hot and I so wasn't into blondes. Kimmy was in
bikini too, but since she had kind if boyish hips and a bubble booty, I'd talked her into a skirty one. It
also had a pushup bra to make the most of her figure. Becky put all three of us to shame. She didn't
look like she had had any kids at all, let alone twins. Her bow-front bandeau bikini top and ruched
side-tab hipster bikini bottoms were navy blue and made her pale tan freakin' glow. I wanted to be
like her when I grew up. Stephanie was pouting because she was stuck in a one piece. Michelle was
happily rocking her geo print one piece and laughing at her older sister's pain.

Little Nicky Katsopolis was going to be one hell of a charmer. The three year old was pretty
determined that I was going to be his beck and call girl all day. Which was fine because when he
brought me his sun screen and sweetly asked me to put it on him, "Pweas?" he had me wrapped
around his little finger from that moment on. Really, who could have resisted those puppy dog eyes?
Of course after I got him all protected from the sun's harmful rays from head to toe, he had to give
me a huge hug. After he finally toddled over to join his brother getting some special sun shield spray
for his hair…Jesse Katsopolis was seriously hair obsessed…Nicky still managed to come back to me
for anything else he needed that day. He always thanked me sweetly and gave me the best little boy
hugs. Mike told me latter that the sweet little lamb had given me so many hugs all day because
whenever I squatted or knelt down to give him a hug, his face ended up pressed into my boobs.
According to him the kid was starting early.

At one point Nevel looked at Becky and smirked. "Fifteen or twenty years from now when every
girl he brings home is a curvy Asian woman, remember this moment…this is where it started."

Becky shrugged. "She's beautiful. She's loyal. She's smart and she's talented…if he brings home a
girl just like Tina, I will be a happy mother." She turned to where Alex was cozing up to Kimmy
Gibbler. "Alex on the other hand…him I worry about."

"Hey!" Kimmy complained to everyone's amusement.

The rest of the day flew by. We all watched the twins, but we laid out, we played in the water, we
played volleyball and frizbee. We had a freaking blast. As we were heading back to the cars, Danny
looked around and sighed. "I have no desire to cook dinner tonight…how about I treat us all to
dinner?"

"Oh, we couldn't ask you to do that Mr. Tanner." I said sincerely.

Mike looked at me and pouted. "Pwease." It was way less cute when he did it.

"What?" I whispered. "We don't have to impose. It's my night to cook. I don't mind cooking."

"If that's what you call cooking." Mike muttered. "Let's go with them. I want something more than
salad."

I rolled my eyes. "It's summer." I said simply. In my family summer evening meals were usually
something lighter. Big salads, salmon, pasta. We didn't eat very heavy at any meals other than the big
holiday meals, but we were especially good about keeping things lighter in the summer. I even stuck
to it at Asian camp.

"Bodies still need fuel even in summer." Mike whispered back. "I'm tired of going to bed hungry
every third night. Tonight, I want some damn steak." He turned to Mr. Tanner. "We'd love to go
with you all for dinner, sir."
I rolled my eye and I guess that DJ saw the imminent meltdown, because somehow all the ladies ended up in Mr. Tanner's car, while the guys were divided between Mike's leaf, and the Katsopolis' Lincoln MKT. As soon as we were underway, Becky looked over at me. "So…high school sweethearts, dated all freshman year and now getting on each other's last nerves…what changed?"

Great even strangers could see that something was rotten in the state of Tike. I shrugged. "I don't know. It's just now that we're always together so many things are driving me insane. When we were in Lima, it was endearing that I could be his strength and help him have the backbone he needs to stand up to his dad, but now every time I watch him almost buckle under with his dad and try to throw his weight around with me all I can think is 'shut up, you daddy's boy punk bitch'. But I never say that because it would hurt his feelings and he is so freaking sensitive. Then there is the fact that he can't cook…but always feels really free with complaining about what I cook. But the absolute kicker…the other night…he almost pushed me off the bed again, so I get up and go around to sleep on the other side, but I went to pee first…sometime after I went to bed, he had gone to pee and left the freaking seat up. Oh the joys of falling into the freakin' toilet at three am."

Becky laughed. "I know you've heard it before…But you cannot really know anyone else until you live with them. You and Mike are experiencing some relationship growing pains. If you put the work in, you can make it to the other side, but you're going to have to talk it out. It sounds like you're finding him a little on the weak side in his relationship with his father and its causing you to lose some respect for him in your relationship. Relationships are a balance of respect, trust and love…you remove any one of those, and the other two are not going to be enough to fully sustain it."

"So what do I do?" I groaned. I didn't want to lose Mike. As crazy as he was making me, I knew in my heart of hearts that he was it for me.

"You are going to have to talk to him about the real root problem. Until you do, you're just going to find a million things that bother you which are symptoms but not the thing that is truly wrong." Rebecca Donaldson Katsopolis told me wisely.

We had dinner that night at a cute little local chain restaurant called Crabhouse 39. When I saw that the only steak they had on the menu was filet mignon, I was greatly amused. Mike would never get something that expensive on someone else's dime. Hell, he would barely do it when he was paying. But something must have gone on because, Mr. Tanner ordered the Filet Mignon with crab, Joey got it with shrimp, Jesse got it with the sea bass. So when Mike just got the steak all by itself, he seemed like he was being very respectful of Mr. Tanner's wallet. I shook my head and dismissed the thought of getting something as expensive just to punish the men for banding together. Instead I just ordered what looked best to me, the garlic noodles with shrimp. It was nice and light and lovely. Dinner was interesting. The Tanner, Katsopolis, Gladstone clan was hella intriguing. They seemed to love fiercely and argue just as much. Mr. Tanner, Joey and Becky may not have had Greek blood, but they'd apparently become Greek by osmosis…they were just as passionate, fiery and funny as the rest of the family. I had gotten the impression that most of them kind of suffered Kimmy for DJ's sake. But when her ex-boyfriend came into the restaurant with the chick he had cheated on her with, it was very difficult to keep all three of the 'fathers' from going over and getting in his face.

It was kind of sweet. After dinner we all separated. The Tanners went home including DJ who was spending the weekend with her family before the second summer session we were taking started on Monday. Somehow Nevel and Kimmy decided to head to a club….together. "Best way to really get over a guy is to get under a new one." She said as soon as we were all away from the adults.

So in the car on the way back to the apartment, I broached the subject of our relationship. "There are somethings that have been bothering me."
He gave me a quick side eye before returning his eyes to the road. "God, Tee, is this about the toilet seat again." He grumbled.

"It's about the disrespect you feel no problem displaying towards me." I said quietly. "I felt safe falling in love with you because I saw the respect with which you treat your parents. But for some reason you don't respect me...like at all."

"Of course I respect you. I love you." He defended.

"Mike, if you were to hear about Sam or Puck constantly leaving the seat up, no matter how much Mercedes begs them to put it down. Them always passive aggressively complaining about her cooking, the food she buys, the way she folds clothes, or a million other things that she does...what would you say." I asked him. "I know that isn't how your father treats your mother. They may not have always liked me, but the respect in their relationship is very easy to see and it goes both ways. I know that your Dad is controlling and rules his home, but your mother was the one who established the ways and why and hows."

"I...I..." he stammers.

I look over at him and speak gently. "You are trying to establish dominance in our relationship to countermand the feelings of powerlessness you're having in trying to grow a set with your dad. But all you're doing with your behavior is pissing me off and pushing me away."

"Tee, I...I..." he tried as we pulled into our driveway.

I wouldn't let him continue. "We both need some time to process...to think...and to be honest I need a good night's sleep. So tonight, I'm going to sleep in DJ's room...You think about what you are feeling and if you feel that my words have merit to you and we'll talk in the morning." I let myself out of the car and headed up to shower. When I got dressed and went to DJ's room Mike still hadn't made it upstairs. I hoped that he really was hearing me and thinking about what I said. Despite the early hour, I was tired as hell. I grabbed my pillow and my plush throw and went and slept on top of DJ's perfectly made bed. As I cried myself to sleep, I couldn't help but wonder if OCD was hereditary.

Don't Know Much (Aaron Neville & Linda Ronstadt)

I had never heard Tina sound as hurt, as unhappy as she did in my car that night. I just didn't know what to do. Reflexively, I grabbed my cell phone and called home. I think I was hoping to talk to my mother. But instead Father answered the phone. "Michael, is everything okay? You never call so late?"

"Father...I...I am sorry, I forgot about the time difference." I whispered.

My father's voice was filled with concern. "Michael, What is wrong my son?"

He had slipped into his native tongue, so I answered in the same. "Father, I have hurt Tina so bad. She...she is reconsidering our relationship. But she is my one. My heart. My soul. How could I have hurt her and not realize what I was doing to her?"

I could hear his desk chair squeak as he sat back. He must have been working on something in his office. "Michael...tell me everything that Tina has said to you in the last two months, all of it." So I did. I laid it all out. The toothpaste, the cover stealing, the bed hogging, the leaving the toilet seat up,
the criticisms…the nit picking. "You love your Tina?"

"Of course. She means the world to me." I said angrily.

"Humph." He grunted. "You treat her worse than you claim I treat you and yet you feel that I do not love you. No wonder we are both questioning how you feel." He said pointedly. "I always praise you when you work hard. Even your dancing, I don't see why you want to make a career out of it, but I tell you that you look amazing when you move. Your Tina…she doesn't have to wash your clothes, fold them, for you. She does it because she knows that you do not know how. But instead of thanks you give her criticisms because she doesn't fold them as your mother does. She doesn't have to make you meals…she could force you to learn to cook for yourself…but you complain about what she makes rather than being grateful for the care she shows you."

I dropped my head. If even my father knew that I'd messed things up…than it was worse than I thought. "Father…I know what I have done. What I don't know, is how to fix it."

"First thing you do is, get up early and go to the hardware store…they make automatic close toilet seats. You helped me change the one in your bathroom…call me if you need me to walk you through changing that one. I'll transfer two hundred dollars to your account. That should be enough to get the seat and the tools to change them. Then you are going to apologize…prostrate yourself at her feet if you need to. You love this woman, I have seen the love you have for her…I may not have always understood it, but it is there. You must do whatever you have to do to keep her. I would not survive if your mother left me. I would go on, but I would be a broken shell of a man. I would find life not worth living at all."

I nodded. "Yes sir."

My father sighed. "Michael…please tell me how else you are going to fix things with Tina. I can help you think of things, but I cannot tell you what to do. You must reason this out or else you will never be able to call yourself a man."

"Yeah, whose fault is that?" I muttered.

"My God…you really are a passive aggressive little gôupi. I have done many things wrong in our relationship, but I have never treated you or your mother with the disrespect you have shown your Tina. I have taught you to be a man the same way that my father taught me and his father before him. You have chosen to feel angry at me for doing the best I could to raise you in the traditions of our family. Fine, be angry at me. Show that anger to me. You have chosen to take your anger at me out on a young woman who has supported you and done so as well as anyone could have. If you lose her you will have no one to blame but yourself. Now stop it with the damn pity party. Think of what you can do before you are left without her even as a friend."

We talked for a few more hours and we came up with a good plan of action. I went online and signed up for a cooking class that met near the dance studio after my classes were over but while Tina, DJ and Nevel were still in classes. I looked back over the spreadsheet we'd created for the grocery store and pulled out the things I'd added that none of us knew how to use. It comforted me to have them in the house, but since I hated take out Chinese, it didn't make sense to keep them on the list. I read up on ways to control myself in my sleep…who knew that there were tricks to keep from starfishing your partner out of the bed. At least I didn't snore. I caught a nap and the next morning I was at the Home Depot before it opened. I texted Sam and Puck and made sure that they were cool with the change. While I was waiting for them to unlock the doors, a really nice guy in the toilet department named Greg helped me by showing me on the sample what to do. I must have mentioned the toothpaste thing, because he pulled me to a rounder in the center of the main aisle and gave me a two pack of things you put on the tube to make you squeeze the paste out correctly. I thanked him
profusely and checked out quickly. I was able to get the old one off and the new automatic, motorized one on before Tina woke up. I even had time to wash up and make her breakfast…it was just boiled eggs, toast and tea, but the eggs were done…so I counted it as a victory.

I groveled for well over an hour before she finally agreed to forgive me. "But I want you to understand. Without trust, respect and love, this cannot work." She told me with a trembling smile. "I want it to work, but I can't make it work without you working at it too."

From there I was a whole new man. We spent the weekend making love and talking things through. More than anything Tina felt taken for granted, underappreciated and disrespected. I had been shutting her out, trying to prove my strength to myself against the only person who didn't doubt it. I was resolved to be better. The rest of the summer flew by. We worked on our relationship in other ways too. We made time in our schedule to go for walks and runs together. We cooked together, well, once I learned how to do more than boil some eggs and put bread in the toaster. She taught me tricks that one didn't learn in a class, but in daily cooking. When she took a chemistry class, we studied together. It was great. As we worked on our relationship, the realization that I hadn't just been disrespectful, I had neglected her and taken her for granted took root and I grew to really understand what I had done wrong. I wanted to do everything I could to make sure that that would never happen again. I would put in the work and treat her, not like a princess, but as if she were my queen taking on the world at my side.

As soon as KAMA got nominated for the VMAs, we arranged a watch party…which the Tanners soon took over because their living room was bigger as was their TV. Besides they and Kimmy, our neighbors the Williams and a couple of kids from our summer classes were our only guests anyway pretty much everyone else were friends of Jesse, Joey, Danny or the girls. Plus they were cool with planning it in our absence when Puck, Sam and Cedes flew us to Ohio to record a song for their Christmas album and then again when they flew us to Chicago for the recording of the video. We both had to take our finals early to be able to go to the video shoot, but that was a small price to pay. Especially since our wonderful friends had made it possible for us to spend some time with our parents before classes were back in session.

Classes started the Thursday before the VMAs so we, with permission from Danny, Jesse and Joey were able to invite a few of our good friends who still lived on campus. When the performance was so epic, Danny asked us to see if Mercedes and the guys would at least call into his and Rebecca's morning show. It was a really awesome performance, at one point near the beginning, Puck, Cedes and Sam were on top of this cool art-deco yet futuristic looking set doing a sensual three person bachata with Sam pressed against Mercedes backside and Puck against her front as they sang. I was really mesmerized by the fact that they had made the traditionally two person sexy Latin dance into something that worked with all three of them. The music heads were starting to call KAMA's music Rock & Blues, and that fusion was definitely showcased in that performance. I couldn't help but long to be among the dancers on the stage. They incorporated jazz, ballet and modern dance into a beautiful expression of love, and longing. I watched as Brittany's entire body arched into a perfect contracted relevé. One of the male dancers mirrored the move and yet it was completely separate, I was enthralled. I listened as Jesse commented on the fact that the music and singing was all live. I wanted to open my mouth and explain that Cedes couldn't lip-sync to save her soul, but I was too busy trying to figure out how the other male dancer had just gone from a pretzel to a hitchkick in a beat and a half.

The guy who had been talking about the Artist to Watch voting all night came out and read off the nominees and I think I held my breath until they said KAMA until Mercedes, Sam and Puck were walking out onto that stage looking dazed and yet totally happy. I have no idea what anyone in the living room with us said when our friends won the Artist to Watch award, Tee and I were too busy losing our minds. We were so happy for our friends. They won five of the seven awards they were
up for. They got to show the whole world how freaking awesome they were. There was a certain level of vindication in having Puck, Sam and Cedes win a national music award. I could almost hear Rachel, wherever she was, wailing and lamenting the unfairness of it all and how the award should have been hers.

Monday morning when I went to class…I was floating on a freaking cloud. The summer had been a ton of work. I’d had to work harder than ever before. But it was all totally worth it. I had a stronger relationship than ever with Tina. My Father and I were building a relationship different from ever before and better than it ever had been. My mother was very proud of my grades. I found a great job that I could work around my class load without negatively impacting my grades in my science major classes and only helped me in my real major classes. That summer officially ranked as the best one of my life.

Chapter End Notes

French Lesson Series Timeline
April 2012---Junior Prom (Learning French)
May 2012---First Nationals Title (Learning French)
June - August 2012 Summer after Junior year(Summer Menagé & Letter 2 Babs)
August 2012-May 2013 Senior Year (Grandissions Together)
June -August 2013 Summer before College (Summer Menagé II)
September 2013---May 2014 Freshman Year of College (Les Ames Soeurs, Si Cela Est Noel)
May-September 2014 Summer before Sophomore year (Summer Menagé III)
Don't Speak (No Doubt) & Enchanted (Usher)

Chapter Summary

Warning: (I am firmly against trigger warnings…I feel that the only way to overcome emotional trauma is to work through it. Avoidance is in no way healthy.) But I will be polite and say that there is offensive language that could bother black people, gay men and the transgender community. These terms are not the acceptable and they are not anything that the author feels should be utilized in any conversation ever or even thought of but, the terms fit the characterizations of Wayne and Rick Nelson.

Chapter Notes

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Plum Soulmates by jdho2
(Again Not Glee Plum/MCU X-Over)

Isis Aurora Tomoe & Princess 976 You are the most awesome Betas ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!!!

This Chapter is Totally LATE because I watched #theWizLive so many times. Who knew that David Alan Grier could sing. Had to give him two snaps up in a circle. GOD bless Xfinity DVR ! And GOD Bless Amber Riley (and Stephanie Mills too)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Don't Speak (No Doubt)
Tessa PoV

The summer before my senior year was Dickensian; 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. My father and I were living in Lima, Ohio with the love of his life. I don't know if anyone could understand how happy I was to learn that my mother hadn't been the love of his life. Knowing that Alexandra Ripley Altman who had deserted him as soon as I was weaned had never had to power to hurt him the way that should have hurt was a very real comfort to me. For years I'd blamed myself…Alex hadn't been ready to be a mother. But the truth was that she'd only become a mother out of some lame attempt to…Okay, so I still hadn't figured out why she allowed herself to get pregnant. But the joke ended up being on her. Dad and I had done just fine without her for fifteen years. Then we'd moved to Lima and just fine became freaking awesome.

I had a mom…not just a mother…someone who had given birth to me. Rebecah may not have been the one to carry me for nine months, but she gave me her love wholly and unconditionally. She taught me the things that Dad just couldn't. Between her, Cedes, and the other moms, Dani, Gabby
and Bubbie Ruth, I was more comfortable in my own skin, in my own femininity than I ever thought possible. I was happy. I had a real, true family. For a really long time it was just Dad and me, and that was fine. At least it had been fine until I knew what it was like to have people that I could go to when I needed advice but didn't want 'parental' answers. I had Jake, Puck and Sam and Kevon and Devon when I needed 'guy' type advice and a whole bunch of friends and peers that I could actually stand.

So as the summer before my senior year of high school began and within a couple of days, I found myself in need of advice on a couple of subject that were kind of, sort of related. I went through my options Kevon and Devon would be able to help on one and Jake could help on the other, but only Puck and Sam could really help on both. I checked the calendar and when I realized that they should be back in New York, I took a chance and called Puck's cell phone. "Hey Bronte…what's up?" he asked in greeting.

I couldn't help but smirk, ever since he found out that my dream was to become a writer, Puck seemed to delight in calling me which ever female author's name slipped off his tongue as a nickname. "What do you mean, ‘what's up'? I can't just call to talk?" I hedged.

"Always, but I just talked to you on Tuesday before we headed to play the Fox. So again I ask, what's up?" Puck teased.

I let out a grumbling sigh. "Damn your insightfulness."

"I know, I'm the whole package…looks, brains, a big dick and empathy, now Dickinson, what's wrong? Aw fuck, you aren't pregnant?"

"God No!!!" I shrieked. "Not even close."

"Whooo…okay, then it can't be that bad." Puck sounded so relieved that I almost laughed. "So what is it then?"

"Okay, so good news, I got my job at Barnes and Noble back, and I'm, you know, thinking about college." I began. "I want to go to a school known for their creative writing and journalism programs." I could hear him nodding against his phone.

"Columbia is good for that, so is NYU, but I think that they are pretty far down the top ten." he acknowledged.

"Yeah, exactly. Wait, how do you know that?" I was more than shocked.

Puck laughed. "I'm your big brother now. You said that you were going to major in writing. I looked into it to see where you would probably end up so we could make sure that we put enough in your college fund."

"Umm…wow. I kind of forget that…I mean…it's weird as hell that…"

"That we are ballin' out of control and we can make it a reality that you can go to college where ever the hell you want and can get into." Puck chuckled. "It is way fucking weird. But we are and we can and will."

"So what you are saying is that you think I…" I lead wanting confirmation of my understanding of what he just said.

"I think that you should do like we did…do one of those SAT prep classes…rock the hell out of the SAT and ACT. Then you apply to all of the top ten writing schools, which ever ones you get into,
you look at where they are and if it is somewhere you can live. I mean, University of Iowa
supposedly has the best creative writing program in the country. But who wants to live in Iowa for
one winter, let alone four." He teased. "I think I saw on Modern Family that cows freeze in their
fields out there."

I rolled my eyes. "Dude, that was in Minnesota, not Iowa…and yeah, but the number two school is
the University of Texas and as much as I love Sam and Gabs and the rest of the Evans part of the
family, this New Yorker doesn't do Texas...pretty much willing to rule out the whole south in fact."

He shrugged. "Okay, first of all, Sam and them are from Tennessee, not Texas and second of all
Little Rock and Atlanta weren't so bad." He said knowledgably. "Look that's why I said apply and
see which ones take you. Then you can decide where you can live with going."

"Aidan is going to Penn." I said smoothly. "I don't want to go to Penn. I know its Ivy League and
everything but I don't...I just...if I'm going back to a city that big, I'd go back to New York. I
already know New York."

"Answer me this, when you see your future. Twenty years from now, when you've won your first
Pulitzer, or whatever, and you are ready to pop me out a niece or nephew or two...who do you see
holding your hand when you are in so much pain, you'd castrate him if you could get away with it?
Is it Aidan?"

I sighed deeply. "I've never really imagined having kids like at all. I don't really think I want them." I
said honestly.

"Well we'll come back to you never giving me nieces and nephews to spoil..." he shot back. "So
'you never you really want kids, but if someday you happen to change your mind..."

"But I don't know if Aidan is...I mean, I thought he was, but lately he's pulling back. If he was the
one, would he be pulling back? If he were the one, would I feel him pulling back and be all like
'eh'...I'm okay if he'd okay?"

Puck groaned. "I thought you two were so in love. Cedes said that you two get up to some serious
shit that she swears Sam and I are better off not even thinking about, which I totally agree with, but
why are you doing all of that with him if you don't love him? I mean, I remember you saying that
you weren't doing anything with anyone you didn't love."

My eyes rolled. "It's not that simple. I do love Aidan. Really, I love him and he is so sweet and kind
and he is always down for whatever I want to do, but I don't think I feel for him as deeply as I
thought I did. I think I loved the idea of finding the kind of love that you guys have." Plus he made
me cum so hard I saw stars with his fingers and mouth, at the time I had really been interested in
knowing how he could make me feel with the rest of him. I stand by the decision. It was totally
worth it. "I loved how he made me feel."

"Are you sure that it was hormones and not emotions?" he grumbled.

I shook my head quietly and forced myself to honestly examine the question and why Puck was
asking it. "No, I have a tendency of repressing feelings of you know sadness or grief or whatever. I
mean, it took me seventeen years to acknowledge how I felt about Alexandra walking away from me
and Dad when I was a baby."

"So what you are saying is that since you think you feel him pulling away from you, you're
preparing yourself for the hurt by trying to convince yourself that you won't be hurt at all?" he
summarized my emotions pretty succinctly.
I nodded, "yeah that about wraps it up."

Puck seemed to be thinking hard. "So again, check your emotions see how you really feel about things. If you need to take a break, then take a break. If you want to break up when he goes to college…then breakup with him. I'm your brother. You are my first priority. Aidan is good people and all but I'm always going to tell you to do what's best for you. But talk things through with him. Tell him what you are feeling before you make any decisions. He has a right to know what you're feeling."

"What if he wants to break up and I don't?" I asked quietly.

Puck sighed a little. "Then, you let him go and we'll make sure that you can get the hell out of Lima for a while. You can deal with a break up. You are strong. Maybe it will be a good thing for you. I mean, you want to be a writer; you need life experiences to be a good writer. Maybe Aidan was meant to be a piece of your life and not a part of it. Even if you feel that you do love him, like the forever love, let him go. If it is really meant to be, you two will be end game. Look at our parents… they were meant to be, so no amount of distance or time could keep them apart for good. And our generation has it much easier, as long as you stay Facebook friends, you can always reconnect later."

We talked for a little while longer, but his words stuck in my head far longer than the phone conversation. Even as I spent the rest of the summer helping the parents cart Stevie, Stacey and Sarah to different 'day camps' and the activities that all three of them were crazy excited to be able to afford to do. It had never really hit me that while Rebecah had been doing okay raising Puck and Sarah on her own, there had been a lot of little extras she couldn't afford to do for them. Aidan and I saw each other at least three times a week those first couple of weeks. But he had work and his fitness qualifications he was prepping for and I had work and Triple S and I was working with Regina, Chase and Jessica teaching the JVers who were moving up to the varsity squad the routines and per Coach Sylvester's edict, picking songs for her to create routines around. I thought that she wasn't doing singing again until after I graduated, but she was as changeable as the wind when she wanted to be.

I was crazy for trying to do so much, but to be honest, it was really, really fun. The time pretty well flew by and before I knew it, it was the weekend of Kevon and Patrice's wedding. It was all incredibly beautiful but you could see things that made it completely theirs and no one else's despite the fact that Patrice had gone for total classic elegance. Aidan had a fitness camp that week, but he returned to Lima for the weekend just to take me to the wedding, which I really appreciated. But it was also hard because I could tell that his heart wasn't in it. As we were dancing to a very romantic song, one of the last dances before the bride and groom made their getaway; I looked into Aidan's eyes and saw tears. "What's wrong?" I whispered gently.

He shook his head. "Can we talk like tomorrow? I just…I want to hold you tonight and pretend like nothing ever changes."

I wanted to pretend every much as he did, so I laid my head against his chest and nodded. We didn't sit down again, just dancing until it was time to go home. The next morning, after church…when Grandma Mae was in town, everyone went to church…hell or high water. Even Patrice and Kevon were there, it was that serious. After church, I quickly changed into some comfortable clothes and headed out to meet Aidan at the park under the big stand of trees. "Hey," I whispered as I walked up to where he was standing.

"Hey." He returned giving me a small smile.

I leaned back against the wide trunk of one of the big oaks. "So…you wanted to talk?"
He nodded. "My grandparents…my mother's parents…they are the ones paying for all of my books and everything not covered by my scholarship." He began. His voice was quiet and it was thick. I could almost hear tears in it.

"And your mom hates me and has done a go around your dad. Now your grandparents are holding their money hostage to make sure that your mother gets her way. So you are breaking up with me so that you can afford to go to the Ivy League school you've already committed to." I finished for him. He would stretch the explanation out for days if I let him. He could take days to say a single sentence if he thought it would hurt someone he cared about.

Aidan's startled eyes met mine. "Huh…yeah. I guess I should have known you would know what I was thinking."

I just nodded. "So, you've been pulling away because you were never one to just rip the band aid off."

"And you've been pulling away because the way you've always dealt with hurt and rejection is to convince both yourself and the person hurting you that you can't be hurt, because you're rejecting them just as surely as they are rejecting you." He stated proving that over the course of our almost two year long relationship, he had learned me just as well as I'd learned him.

"Why now?" I blurted out. "Why not later in the summer, right before you go to school?"

He shook his head again. "Because that wouldn't be fair to you. You'll be in New York twice this summer, you can go and see some of the country with Puck, Sam and Cede…you shouldn't be tied down to me if we're not going to stay together for the rest of the summer. Besides, I can live without making love to you…I think…but I cannot live without having you as my best friend."

"Oh you are definitely not getting rid of me as a best friend. You know more of my secrets than anyone else in the whole world. I've told you things that I have never told anyone else before and probably will never tell another soul." I couldn't explain how relieved I was that we would stay friends. As much as I loved physically being with Aidan he was more to me than just sex. He was totally that best friend that you could never call for bail because he was in the cell next to you.

"Man, we're going to be telling each other all about the boring sex we have with other people, because we can't bear to tell anyone how sick and twisted we really are." He joked.

"I know, right?" I threw back with a laugh.

"You know…when I finish college, I'm going to hunt you down and we'll spend a month hold up somewhere getting freaky." He suggested with a dirty eyebrow wiggle.

"You'll get a week or two…I'm backpacking through Europe the summer before my senior year of college." I said seriously.

"You mean you'll be working as a roadie on KAMA's European tour…that is the only way your dad is going to let you tramp around Europe without him." We both laughed because it was completely true.

"So friends…I don't suppose that we could be friends that occasionally make out until we find someone else to make out with." I hedged.

"Look, I may not like to rip the band aid off, but I'm not going to torture myself either." He returned. Somehow that made me feel tons better. We were going to be just fine. In fact, it was almost weird how easily we settled back into being friends. We texted back and forth or talked every day. I
emailed him a picture of me in the pretty blue dress Becah had chosen for me as one of her two maids of honor. He sent me back a naughty picture that he swore was just his honest reaction to seeing me looking so beautiful. When it was time for everyone to get together to record the song for Commune's Christmas/Chanukah album, Aidan joined us. He'd often practiced with me and the New Directions, though he'd never been able to join due to conflicts in his schedule, but he did love to sing and he was actually pretty good at it. It was kind of strange to go to Cheerio camp and not see him at the Titan practices, but I took that as a good sign for our friendship. Which it was. In fact, we were so cool that Aidan and I shared a room in Chicago when we went there to do the song's video. In an effort to be a good pal, I made sure that I wore appropriate pajamas—a pair of emerald green silk mens cut pajamas that were just big enough to make me feel like I had stolen them from Jake or maybe Stevie, it was ridiculous how close to being taller than me the ten year old was getting.

As soon as I came out of the bathroom in them, Aidan had looked up and breathed a sigh of relief. "God bless you Tessa Altman."

I gave him a wry smile. "You better have been as kind. If you come out of there in just some cotton shorts or whatever, I will ditch these pants." I threatened knowing his preferred summer sleepwear.

His laughter followed him out as he went in the bathroom to change. I was kind of surprised by a knock on the hotel room door. When I peeped out of the aptly named the peep hole, I was a little surprised to see Commune's PA. I opened it and greeted her. "Hello Ms. Friedman, was there something I needed to do or something?"

"Oh no. I simply forgot to give you something earlier." She smiled shyly. She held out an envelope. "Mercedes wanted me to give you this away from the watchful eyes of Puck and Sam. She said to tell you that Mrs. Mayzer is working on your prom dress already. Inside the envelope is a gift card so that you can get your accessories. She also included a sketch of the dress and a swatch of the fabric."

Oh..."Oh. Okay. Why did she want you to do it when the guys wouldn't see?" I asked.

Hudson Friedman had a mischievous side, who knew. She gave me a hint of it then. "She may have put a lot more on the gift card than her husbands know about. She said that you had to show off for real since it was your senior prom. She's also doing this earlier than Sam and Puck thought that she needed to. She thought that you might like to look around for a bit, rather than rushing around last minute."

I blushed hotly. Bubbie had made my dress the year before too. But I had put off shopping until the very last minute and had told the moms it was all done like in January. Mercedes had pulled my ass out of the fire on that one sending me the links to the things that would complement the dress and make me look amazing. She even sent me the picture of the perfect hair do.

I thanked Hudson profusely as she turned to leave. "After the video shoot, you are free until dinner tomorrow. That might be a good time to look around the Magnificent Mile. If they call it a magnificent mile, it must have the perfect things just waiting on you to find." She advised as she closed the door behind her.

Once she had left the room, I tore into the envelope. I put the gift card aside to worry about later. Despite my typical aloofness when it came to fashion, I was dying to see what Bubbie had come up with that time. The dress in the sketch looked so beautiful it didn't seem like it could be for me. She had created a slightly vintage looking dress. It was elegant and simple, yet it was gorgeous. It had a bateau color and cap sleeves and the notes said that there would be silver backed crystals and silver beading on the bodice. The ruched, empire waisted top melted into a chiffon overlay skirt with a thigh high leg slit. The back was kind of daring; a V cut would show off my back to where the ruching began. The swatches were all nude colored chiffon and silk. I couldn't wait to wear that dress.
I'd been trained by that point well enough to actually know what went with a dress like that. I grabbed a pen and the hotel note tablet and made a list. It was my senior prom and I was going...if I didn't find a new boyfriend before then, I'd go stag or with friends. It didn't matter. I was still going to look amazing in that dress. There was the lingerie; a nice strapless, low back bustier would work. Technically, I was small enough up to top and given the cut of the dress I could have easily gone without a bra at all...but something lingerie-y would probably make me fell sexy and naughty. Since my shoes the last two proms I had attended had been hella elaborate, I deduced that I would need simple ones to go with the simple-ish design of the dress, panties, shoes, earrings...I wonder if I could find a jeweled snood...did they even still make bun covers for non-Menonites? Heck could I grow my hair long enough to put it in abun. That was something to consider. My hair hadn't been longer than my shoulders since I was fourteen and Dad finally let me cut it.

In fact, did I really want to grow my hair out? I mean...maybe it was time for a change. Yeah. It was. I hadn't really changed much about myself once I got to Lima. I found it weird that I was considered popular at McKinley when I was just as sarcastic, snarky and reclusive as I'd been in my old school in New York. It was strange how just putting on a cheerleader uniform made my personality more socially acceptable. But I was entering my senior year. I was boyfriend free for pretty much the first time since I'd gotten to the school. It was certainly time to make a change. I wasn't going to change my hair color...Lamar would kill me if I even suggested it. I wasn't into the miscellaneous holes in my body kind of person. Mercedes might like her nose piercing, but it just wasn't for me. Coach Sylvester would murder me in my sleep if I tried to quit the Cheerios, so growing my hair out would be a nice, subtle change that would be acceptable to everyone whose opinions mattered to me.

I drifted back into wondering what about what the next year would be like. It was still just abnormal to think about the fact that in the next year I'd become old enough to vote. I'd graduate high school and make the single biggest decision of my life to that point. Aidan came out and looked at me quizzically. "Did I hear someone at the door?"

I looked up. "yeah, Mercedes and the guys got me a gift card to use to get my prom stuff with and Hudson brought it to me. I was just looking at the sketch and swatches that Bubbie Ruth sent me so I would know what to look for. At first I was going to get Marley, Unique and some of the girls together to go shopping tomorrow after we finish the video, but I think...I mean, I did the whole friends prom shopping for your junior prom and I slipped out and did it by myself last year. I think I'm going to wait and go with Becah this time."

He nodded. "She will love that. I know that my mom isn't your favorite person in the world right now, but last year she was all lamenting that me and Ethan were both boys because she wouldn't get to go and do things like helping with prom shopping or bridal shopping or whatever."

"Yeah, it will be fun. Me and Becah can bond." I said with a smile. Like the buddies we were, we watched a movie and kind of fell asleep talking over it and making jokes that were much better than the characters were making.

It was a good thing I changed my mind about shopping the Magnificent Mile. I never realized that filming even a simple concept video took so much time and energy. We were all exhausted by the time we finished filming. I think we were all too tired to eat, but too wired to sleep. When Puck texted me to come to their suite for a 'Family Movie Night'. I grabbed a quick shower, threw on my very covering pajamas and went to their 'Classic Suite'. Jake had brought his crew with him and I almost laughed at poor Ryder and Unique. Ryder is all about Unique, but he is still uncomfortable with the Wade of the situation. I hope that they can figure themselves out. I texted Aidan and told him to join me. He'd hung back because he wasn't sure if being 'just friends' made him eligible to join the 'family movie night'. But even with the four of them, there were still enough seats in
Commune's ‘living room/parlor’ for everyone. Mercedes had the remote and we ended up watching 'The Princess Bride'. Puck had ordered a shit load of snacks...including things like wings and sliders, so we ended up eating as we vegged. I thought we'd leave after the one movie, but then 'HairSpray' the version with Queen Latifah came on and no one wanted to miss it. Unique had sung 'I Know Where I've Been' the year before and she was epically awesome. I couldn't tell you which version I liked better. We finally dragged our asses back to our respective rooms when the movie 'Bound' with Jennifer Tilly came on. Ten minutes in and Puck and Sam were shooing us out so they could get their macks on with Mercy.

When we got back to Lima, life became a whirlwind. Sarah's birthday was the next day. Her party was really cool. She had a blast with her friends bowling, playing arcade games and eating way too much junk food. Aidan brought Ethan and he and I helped Mercedes, Puck and Sam watch over the tween-agers...okay so maybe we joined the lot of them playing the games but those games were all kinds of fun. Jake, Marley, Ryder and Unique all agreed. Finn, Lauren and Vince stopped by and I think Sarah had developed a major crush on the running back or corner back or safety or whatever position Lauren's bro played. They couldn't stay long because they were heading back to school.

There was cake and then she opened her gifts. They were exactly what you'd expect for her to get from her fellow thirteen year olds...tons of hair stuff and tech accessories. After the party Aidan and I absconded with Ethan and Stevie since Sarah and Stacey were doing a sleepover. Aidan, and the boys wanted to see 'Guardians of the Galaxy' for the fourth time. The one god thing about me and Aidan just being best friends, I could go and see 'As Above, So Below' instead. Which honestly was a damn good movie, two thumbs up and four stars.

Church the next morning was really early. I'd primarily been going to Temple on Saturday evening...get all the religion without having to wake up at the crack of dawn. But I'd missed it the night before because the whole family was going together to the Methodist church. Cede was a world class singer. When the three of them started singing together, oh my damn, I was so proud to be a part of their family. Monday was quiet, our stars and all the old hat NDs were gone, either to LA or back to their schools. Those of us who remained took the day to prep for the first day of school that next day. That year would be different. All the moms would be returning to work full time, and Beth was entering four-year-old kindergarten, so Amara, Amaea and Sloane were going to go to daycare. It wouldn't be a traditional one though. One of the ladies from the Methodist church, Mother Richardson, was a retired elementary school teacher and she, and a couple of the other church ladies, had been watching many of the church's babies in the church nursery while their parents worked since she retired from the Lima City School System. It worked because she loved the babies and they loved her. Beth was actually going to take the bus, oh that was so cute, to the church every afternoon and join them.

The first day of school was fun...actually it was completely not bad. There was the usual Cheerios performance in the lunches, and the pep rally at the end of the day. But there were some points of great joy, in homeroom I learned that I was starting the year in the top twenty of my senior class. I was so excited I almost got my phone confiscated for texting in class. Then in my English class I learned that Coach Sylvester was putting me in charge of the school newspaper, the Muckraker. After that we got the biggest surprise. She called a Cheerio meeting to let us know that she was replacing Figgins as the Principal. While there had been several complaints about his mishandling about the whole bullying situation at McKinley, especially when the media told the world that 'The Fighter' video had been based on Commune's real lives...Figgins had made enough changes in the school's rules not to get kicked out for that. Instead it had been the fact that his austerity measures only offered the Graduation test once a year which forced a City Councilman's kid to have to repeat the test over the summer and therefore not walk with his class and not get into a real college. In revenge the Councilman had busted Figgins down to a janitor. I kind of felt bad for him. Sue really enjoyed his pain. But Sylvester didn't just give me the Muckraker, and permission to turn it back into
a real newspaper rather than just a gossip rag, she also found the funds to allow me to resurrect the school's literary magazine… granted that would be totally online only, but I'd definitely take it. That was an awesome opportunity that would look great on my college applications.

The rest of the week flew by and before I could get bored, it was time for the VMAs. Danica invited all of Lima to come see her baby on TV. I wasn't really a red carpet; awards show kind of girl. The times I had watched them, it was mainly to mock. But it was entirely different when it was your people up for the awards. I was actually excited and nervous and hyped. The evening was a rousing success, they won more than one of the categories they were up for and their performance was freakin' awesome until my darling big brother managed to piss off probably every cop in the country. He wasn't wrong, everyone in that backyard that night agreed that he told a truth… but when Jack Nicholson's character from ‘A Few Good Men' yelled his famous line ‘you can't handle the truth’… he wasn't just talking about that one person he was talking about all humanity. All I could do was pray that the fallout wasn't too horrible and be there for them if it was.

Enchanted (Usher)
Jake PoV

I experienced the most surreal summer of my life the summer before my junior year of high school. Actually that wasn't entirely accurate. I think that the ridiculousness had begun shortly after spring break. I guess things hadn't gone crazy until then despite the success of ‘Who We Are' and ‘The Fighter’ because the kids at McKinley were morons. Yup, total idiots. The denizens of William McKinley High had been pretty firm in their belief that there was no way in hell the girl who had been marginalized based on the fact that she was ‘fat and ugly' according to the basic bitches that had been the senior Cheerios when she was a freshman, there was no way that she could be successful and famous. After Christmas, the masses decided that she was just a novelty act and she would have her fifteen minutes of fame and boom be ‘the fat ugly chick that used to be famous' and have to come home with her tail tucked between her legs.

Yeah, then ‘SongBird' hit HUGE, and the soundtrack was even bigger…and KAMA's first album dropped and went gold in the first couple of days and platinum with a quickness unheard of for an unknown band's debut album. Suddenly everyone was talking about how they always knew she was a star and how she was so pretty and how they were so jealous of her curves. It was like they forgot the bullshit way they had all treated her for three years and only remembered the popular Cheerio she had been when I was a freshman.

The narrative about Sam and Puck changed somewhat too. It was different for them though. Both had been popular at McKinley for their entire time there, pretty much. By a week or so after Spring Break, Puck had achieved legend status down the halls of McKinley. Though to be fair, he'd been pretty close to being a legend before he even graduated. The sheer amount of female Limans he'd sexed down and he hadn't caught anything and had only one kid…yeah, most teenage boys revered him like the second coming of Hugh Heffner. Sam was yet a different take on the reaction. See, he had been what I like to call 'Tessa Popular'. Because he was one of the two star quarterbacks that had started our State Champion streak, that Aidan had then continued after Sam and Finn had graduated, Sam was considered McKinley royalty. But for all the people who swore that they were cool with Sam… all the seniors who called themselves his friends… when Sam was interviewed and he spoke candidly about the poverty and homelessness that his family had experienced, how directly the economic downturn had impacted them and all that he'd gone through, most of the people who had claimed to know him so well hadn't known a thing about any of that. Sam was a born and bred southern man. He had maintained his pride when that was pretty much all he had left. The New Directions had known and maybe his classmates had known, but the rest of the school had remained
pretty much clueless.

Though I did find out that all the teachers had known. That kind of struck me as interesting that the gossipy teachers he’d know and kept it to themselves; so one night when I was over at Shelby's watching Beth so she and David could go to dinner in a restaurant with actual cloth napkins, I asked her about it. I was surprised at her explanation. "There are times when a teacher needs to know about the traumatic occurrences in our students lives so that we can make necessary exceptions and try to mitigate the damage to their grades and just be of help to them if they need it." She told me with a grin.

The surprise I felt from her statement must have shown on my face because David took up the explanation from there. "Yes, you see, there may be things that the student will not want to or even be able to put into words and you will want to take that into consideration when you are grading their work. If the student's family has lost everything...be it in a fire, or burglary or through a foreclosure where they were lucky to get out with their clothing and had to leave almost everything else behind, you accept the handwritten paper they turn in even if you did ask for it to be typed. You convince them that having lunch with you at your desk is fun and give them as much of your food as you can convince them to eat. You try to do what you can to help."

"Whoa, I get it. I mean that's awesome and I kind of know that you guys would do it. And I know that Coach Bieste and Coach Sylvester would help...or Sue would as long as she can do it in such a way that everyone believes that you are the one doing her the favor. But I just don't see most of those so called educators at McKinley keeping that kind of information to themselves. I really didn't think most of them could be that decent."

"I'd take you to task for your opinions of my colleagues, but you have something of a point." Shelby agreed quietly. "Besides, Sue told each of them exactly what would happen to them if they told any of the students about the Evans families hardships. She was quite thorough, amazingly efficient and each of the threats was not only unique but precisely tailored for the prospective victim."

"She is good that way." I agreed. I happened to notice the clock and rushed them on their way. There weren't many restaurants in Lima that took reservations for real and those few that did did were rigid as hell about them. I settled in, happy to spend the next four hours catering to the whims of my cute little niece.

Once every one had no choice but to admit that KAMA wasn’t going away and Mercedes Jones was the epitome of awesome, that was when things completely shifted as far as I was concerned. Life went crazy with the quickness. I had my closest friends in Marley, Ryder and Unique, then I had the rest of the New Directions and Aidan and some of the guys from the football and basketball teams that I was cool with...but every time I turned around there was a shit ton of people trying to claim me as a friend and in a few cases, they tried to claim that we were even more. It was cool in some ways. I always got the center row, center aisle seat in my classes. I never stood in the lunch line for long. Plus too since I was with Marley and me and her mom got along fine, I always had the good stuff they served the teachers, but she did that for Ryder and Unique too. On the flip side, dudes swearing they knew me, broads were always trying to push up on me even when I was with Marley, which hurt her feelings. It got to be real annoying real quick.

The worse of the culprits was a hockey player named Nelson, didn't bother to learn his first name until I had absolutely no choice, and a cheerleader named Bree. Nelson wasn't so bad a person, I pretty much just hated his ass on principle. This kid was the very proud younger brother of Rick 'the Stick' Nelson...the prick who had gone out of his way to make my brother's senior year as difficult as he could. The same asshole who had delighted in tormenting Cedes and Kurt for years. And Wayne wasn't any better...he'd been caught trying to take slushies out of the cafeteria than anyone
else since Figgins finally instituted the no food outside the cafeteria rules. The dickhead was also way to smug for anyone with as tiny a dick as that mofo had. Seriously, I wasn't checkin' for him or anything but I saw him in the locker room acting like he was god's gift when his dick was smaller than Stevie’s. And he hadn't even hit puberty yet. It was sad. On top of both of those very grievous offenses, his asshat of a big brother was still going around spreading misinformation, lies and rumors about Puck, Cedes and Sam.

The Nelson Brothers pretty much exemplified all the negatives of my brothers' and sis' sudden rise to stardom and shit, but there were plenty of perks too. I always had the freshest gear in the school. Danica was a shopper and with a lot more disposable income than she was used to having, Becah was getting in touch with her inner shopper too, Moms D was even dragging Gabby into the shopping affliction with them. All of us in Lima benefitted from the Moms' addiction as did our siblings in Michigan and New York. On top of that Cedes was a shopper, and Noah and Sam both benefited greatly from her addiction. But apparently there was some kind of shame in the whole 'being caught in the same outfit too many times' thing for rock starts. Plus, on top of that, Noah and Sam shared a closet and they just didn't have the space to keep up with all of the shopping. So after they wore something once or twice, they sent me their overflow. Then there was the fact that as one of her siblings, there were times when Mercedes would see something that she swore would look great on me, she was usually right. Then it was like boom, I had a new shirt or sweater or jeans or whatever. Then there was the whole epic Hollywood/Manhattan events thing and being in music videos and whatever thing. But hands down, the biggest perk had to be seeing my family members happy as hell. That was awesome.

Now I tend to lead towards the laid back side of the Puckerman genetics. I keep my passionate nature to the positive side of passion, desire, just enough possessiveness to make me want to take care of those I consider mine…so the shit that annoys me, I let roll off me pretty easy. I'd never once started a fight...finished a few, but never started any a fact I was proud of. In fact, my ability to compartmentalize and not let shit get me down too badly, had probably helped me deal with whole 'my momma didn't want me, no mo Mr. Clark' thing. That and the twice weekly counseling sessions with Dr. Watson. However, when my temper finally did snap, it wasn't my biological mother. It wasn’t fact that Bree couldn’t seem to understand a concept as simple as the word No. It wasn't even Wayne Nelson…it was, in fact, the combination of Wayne’s ability to piss me off like no one else I had ever known, his brother Rick and Bree that made sure that my streak died a quick death a few days into that summer.

Since I'd spent the last five or six summers helping out at the diner, Rebecah and George were both determined that I have the next couple of them to enjoy myself and just be a kid. When my birthday hit in May, the family had gotten together and bought me a brand spanking new, navy blue Nissan Rogue. I lived by myself, but I had a curfew. I knew that a lot of kids my age would have bitched and moaned about getting a curfew, but for me it was a new, almost cool thing. Other than the curfew and my job, I was to "Have as much fun as you can pack into the summer kid. That's what being a kid is for." George had counseled me as we were getting my tag...I had to get a license plate, that was freakin' cool.

I took his words to heart. So...Joe, Steven, Ryder and I ran Puckerman Pool Services, but other than that, we chilled. Depending on what we felt like doing, we either played video games, or basketball or worked out. On the day that Wayne Nelson pushed me too far, Ryder and I had spent the morning cleaning the Grammer's pool. After we loaded the supplies in the truck for the last time that day, we decided to text Marley and Unique and see if they wanted to spend the afternoon at the pool in Unique's neighborhood. They were both cool about getting a curfew, but for me it was a new, almost cool thing. Other than the curfew and my job, I was to "Have as much fun as you can pack into the summer kid. That's what being a kid is for." George had counseled me as we were getting my tag...I had to get a license plate, that was freakin' cool.
fall Joe would be gone and we'd have to bring in someone else. Since there were four of us guys we worked in teams of two and had doubled the scope of the business. Puckerman Pool Services was serving the entire Allen County area, we had an A plus rating with the Better Business Bureau and we were damn good at our jobs. It was a sweet job and it was great because it meant that I had health benefits despite the fact that my emancipation had taken me off my mother's insurance and we hadn't been able to get me on Becs.

Anyway, since the work trunks were red, it made my life tons simpler to make sure that all my regular trunks were other colors, which was easy since I preferred blue anyway. Once I showered off the baby oil that we slathered onto our chests to make the ladies come up off the tips, I replaced it with some serious sunscreen with moisturizer and pulled on my board shorts, grabbed a towel and swung back by Ryders house to pick him up. Then we grabbed Marley and made our way to the middle class subdivision Unique's Aunt Wyn lived in. I parked in the driveway and Unique came out to meet us. And we walked the block to the community clubhouse where the subdivision's tennis, basketball courts and pool were located. There were some people there, mostly house wives with smaller kids, but we easily found a couple of chaises and a table to put our stuff on. The ladies took off their coverups. Marley was looking really hot in her two piece, tankini thing. It was a great aqua color and made her skin glow. The top of it was strapless with a fluttery thingy over her breasts making them look a bit bigger. That was paired with a pair of hipster briefs that were cut high on her hips making her already long legs look even longer. I had a really hard time not imagining them wrapped around my waist as I buried myself deeply inside of her.

Whenever I was around Wade when he was fully Uniqued out, I really wanted to ask her if she had as hard a time as my uncle tucking her junk away when she wanted to wear lady swimwear. Since her aunt and uncle had allowed her to start the hormones and everything she needed to do to transition fully, Unique was almost never Wade anymore. To be honest, Unique/Wade was one of my favorite people...like ever...it was like she was my missing soul cousin or something. She was pretty much a combination of all my mother's brothers and sisters...with more than a little of my grandmother thrown in just for an added measure of sassiness. She and Ryder were close as hell. They were totally into each other. But because Ryder was pretty much straight and couldn't deal with the fact that Unique still had about eight or nine inches too much flesh and one too few orifices between her thighs, and Unique was still pretty uncomfortable with the thought of sex while she still had about eight or nine inches too much flesh and one too few orifices between her thighs, they were stuck in a flirtatious kind of platonic love that was either really heartwarming or kind of sad, I was never sure which.

That afternoon, I wasn't sure how Ry kept from deciding that dick or not she was totally worth it. Her tits weren't as big as Cede's but even though she was technically still a dude, they were bigger than two thirds of the other chicks at McKinley. Her black and white, vintage looking one piece had a V-wrappy neckline and it pulled her in at the waist before ending in one of those swim skirt type of things. She'd been rocking weaves since Cede had introduced her to her weave artist Veronica, so she had pulled it up and back into a high bun...probably because Veronica would kill her for getting it wet or something. She wasn't all done up, but even just wearing some lip gloss anyone who didn't know her would still assume that she had been born female.

We chilled out talking and playing in the water. Marley and I had an interesting relationship. She was definitely the only chick I had been with for as long as she and I had been going out. It was made even more weird by the fact that she and I hadn't had sex. Marley wasn't ready...and while I respected her decision and knew that it was her body, I hadn't gone that long without sex since I was thirteen. It was making me crazy as hell. That may have been part of the problem when the brothers Nelson showed up with Bree and a girl I recognized as one of the older former Cheerios that had been on the squad with Cedes and her class mates back in the day. Neither of them were wearing swim suits with much in the way of material. They were wearing stilettos to the freaking pool. It
would have been funny, if they hadn't both looked so fucking hot. The rest of afternoon I was
distracted. Both Bree and the other girl were flirting hardcore, but not with their dates, they were
trying to push up on me. I was so busy trying to avoid their overtures while making sure that Marley
didn't figure out that my dick was liking their overtures a little too much that I wasn't paying much
attention at all to what was going on around me. Maybe if I hadn't been, I'd have heard it when
Wayne came up behind us in the deep end and pushed U under.

When she bobbed back up, rather pissed off of course, he just laughed over at his brother. "Guess
niggers can float."

"And I guess racist punk bitches better be able to swim." I yelled back.

Suddenly Wayne and Rick were both trying to get into my face. U rolled up on my left side while
Ryder moved up to my right. Ryder looked at the brothers. "Man, Rick…didn't Jake's brother teach
you manners?"

"Naw, Ry, it wasn't Puck that knocked out his teeth, it wasn't a hockey puck either no matter what
lies he tells…it was Cede." I crowed. "Puck loves the story of how Cede knocked this fool's teeth
out and since he was at least smart enough not to dime her out, his parents paid her parents to create
his dentures." I chuckled.

"Oh that's perfect. Did you call her what your trailer trash little brother just called me?" Unique
chimed in. "Cause I've gotta say this Diva is ready, willing and able to fuck up his grill just like my
Shero, the divalicious Ms. Jones, did yours."

"Yeah right…aren't you scared that if you hit me you might break a nail, you ugly tranny freak."
Wayne shot back.

"Motherfucker, you wish that your girl was as hot as Unique." Ry argued.

Rick smirked. "You a faggot now Lynn? What you, the zebra, the tranny and the future fattie all
fucking each other right?"

"Oh please Rick, Marley and I had the same PE class last semester. You should have heard her
talking with her friends. Yeah, Marley's name might as well be Mary…she's still pure as the driven
snow. She just isn't ready for sex. Boo-hoo. It's such a big deal and the woman in her family can't
really take birth control…whah-whah, God she has so many excuses. Truth is that she's probably
smart enough to see that she just isn't hot enough to keep Jake interested once she gives it up."

I don't know which one set me off Rick's allusions and pejorative bullshit, or Bree's downing my girl
like that, and speaking to were probably her worst fears both about me and about herself…but the
next thing I knew I was jumping on Rick Nelson punching his ass with all I had in me. Fighting in a
pool was not as easy as they made it look on Telenovella. But I kept punching and throwing bows.
The second Wayne tried to jump in, he got ganked by Ry. Bree swam away only to start screaming
when Marley grabbed her by the ankle and decided that the broad should pay for spilling all of her
secrets. U scrambled out and grabbed her phone. I could hear her but she hadn't called the cops.
"Aunt Wyn, can you please come to the pool…yeah I want an adult here if somebody calls the cops.
The Nelson boys were trying to see if they could make Jake and Ryder kill them…they succeeded.
Oh you betta get back bitch. I ain't above beating the breaks off you just because I am only
technically a boy."

I would have laughed but I was too busy trying to keep Nelson's teeth out of my arm. That mofo
fought like the punk bitch I'd called his brother. He hadn't managed to connect any punches, so he'd
started fighting dirty. That was fine. I could fight just as dirty. U's aunt did get there before the cops,
but not by much. They broke up the fight and rousted us out of the pool and I was happy to see a couple of familiar faces. Officer Johnson went to church at ADA AME with the Jones and I had seen his partner there with him a couple of times. I liked their choir, even without Mercedes, so sometimes I went with the Jones too. The other two cops I recognized from the diner. They had loved my peach and blueberry crumble. They quickly established that both parties were allowed to be at the pool according to according to the community rules. Unique, Rick and Wayne were all residents of the community and they were all over sixteen. So then they asked how the fight started.

"I took offense to the derogatory language coming out of the Nelsons' mouths…that was after they put their hands on U." I admitted gesturing to a very feminine Unique. The dunking had made her weave come down so it was trailing around her shoulders softening the lines of her neck.

"They used both racist and sexist…very hateful, terms to refer to all four of us," Ryder chimed in.

"That's bullshit. We were just playing with our dates, Bree and…uh…May that's right May." Wayne started shouting. "Then Puckerman started flirting with them and making them uncomfortable. When we asked him to stop…to be respectful of them, he swung on us."

Officer Johnson and Officer Brannagan exchanged looks. But Officers Buchanan and Lorca, my buddies from the diner just started laughing. Officer Buchanan spoke up, "Boy that what just came out of your mouth was just plain bullshit. Jacob Puckerman is a flirt and he will flirt with any woman who will flirt back…hell, I've seen him flirt with more women than I can keep count of but I have never seen him be disrespectful to any female."

"Point in fact," Officer Lorca chimed in, "when he worked at his mother's diner, he tossed a couple of male customers for bothering the waitresses. So you wanna try again kid?"

"Especially since the only people who were disrespecting Boobs Out and Butt Out were themselves." Unique muttered sotto voice. When the four cops looked at her wanting more information, she was happy to provide it. "Miss Thang 1 has been trying to wreck Jacob and Marley since Puck, Mama Cedes and Sam-I-Am dropped their album. Miss Thang 2 just joined in today. I think they were either trying to make Marley dip on Jake or they were trying to give tweedledee and tweedledum over there an excuse to fight him. When neither of those happened, the Idiot Brothers got pissed and showed their true bigoted colors and the hate speech flew."

All four of the cops stepped away. We could hear them talking and soon Ms. Wyn was drawn into their conversation. Eventually the adults came back over. I guess while they were talking the gash Nelson had opened up with his porcelain mouth knives, had started bleeding more profusely. Ry noticed it and said loudly. "Shit, Jake did he stab you?"

All eyes were drawn to my arm as I lifted it to check out the damage. "Naw. He was losing so the bitch ass bit me." I gestured towards the elder Nelson.

Suddenly the cops dropped their jovial natures and were all about the law. They came over and looked at what was clearly a bite mark in my arm. Next thing I know Officer Johnson is calling Moms D and asking her if George or Momma Becah can meet me at Allen County General. "He's gotta have stitches. We're gonna take the other one in for assault. As long as it was just a fist fight we could send them home with a warning, but with this…we have to fill out a report so the insurance companies can figure out who's paying and everything." He answered her honestly.

I guess Nelson realized that shit was getting very real, very fast. While the cops were a little distracted, he took off towards the pool entrance. The only problem with his thinking was that the cops weren't that distracted and he had to go past them to make it to the gate. Officer Brannagan reached out an arm and pretty much just close lined Nelson. Fortunately for the former hockey
player, he wasn't very fast if he wasn't on the ice. Younger Nelson was so used to harassing anyone who bothered his big brother, he decided to get up in the cops faces too. He was alright until, as U had said before he let his bigot flag fly high. He didn't even get out the full first syllable of the N-word before Officer Lorca, a white looking Caribbean Hispanic guy with a dark skinned Puerto Rican wife, had him face down getting road rash as he was hand cuffed.

The brothers were both struggling and cussing as they were taken to the cruisers. George came running up. "Jake, you okay. What the hell happened to your arm?" it was almost weird to hear the concern in his voice. He sounded like he had ran all the way over. Despite the very divergent careers, he reminded me a lot of Mom's ex-boyfriend that had taken the time to teach me to shave and hell just do stuff with me period. I think he probably had wanted to break up with Moms a few months before he finally did, but he hadn't because he knew she wouldn't let him even talk to me anymore after he broke things off with her. George cared for me like that. I knew that if Moms had tried something he and Becah would have fought her tooth and nail. As it was when he heard what had gone down, it was kind of difficult keeping him from going after Rick anyway. He had to settle for just going off on him verbally. The rant started off normally but by the time he really got going he shouted, "Oh just you wait you little prick, Benton put those teeth in your mouth, I'm willing to bet he can take 'em right back out." that was all she wrote for me and U too. Next thing I know she and I were supporting each other as we almost hit the ground we were laughing so hard.

George pulled himself together and he drove me to Allen County General, where the cops had directed us. I was surprised to see Becah waiting on us when we got there. She looked me over carefully before we even made it through the doors. "Okay…it's a nasty bite…but it isn't the worst one I've ever seen." She sounded almost as if she was talking to herself, calming herself down. I guess I gave her a confused look. "Sorry, I was worried okay. I mean the last time I got a call telling me that my son was in a hospital it was because some idiot in juvie had ripped Noah's nipple ring out." she shivered. "that was a bad one."

I knew that Becah had been a nurse for a while and now she worked as a Charge Nurse over at St. Rita's. Allen County General was mostly the Lima Heights, I got shot and the cops took me there, hospital. So a lot of the better staff members, nurses and doctors really only worked there until they had enough experience and seniority to make them more desirable for the better private hospital. But she still had her connections. I went into a half full waiting room and was seen in less than thirty minutes. I would have felt bad, but my arm was starting to hurt like fire. The resident was cool. He used a whole bunch of words I didn't really understand, except for having heard them on old episodes of ER, but he was cool. He made sure that the lidocaine and T3 had kicked in before he went to work…granted that was happening while pictures were being taken for the cops, but still I liked him. Ultimately he cleaned the wound out like six different ways but he didn't put in any stitches, using simple butterfly bandages instead. “I'm not suturing the wound because the human mouth is a hot bed of bacteria and the pool you were in probably wasn't any better. With the wound being cleaned repetitively and no sutures to hold bacteria in, we have a better chance of avoiding infection.” Momma Becah nodded like she agreed with what he was doing. Once she was sure that I was in good hands, she left. She had used her break to come and check on me and make sure that I got decent care. It meant a lot to me.

I was only there for about an hour and half before I was being ushered out the door and reminded to pick up the prescription for antibiotics and how to take them. That was cool. I guess I'd gotten quiet while we were waiting at the pharmacy because as soon as we were back in George's pickup he asked me if I was sure that I was okay. "Yeah, I'm fine." I told him truthfully. "I was just thinking. How did you know that Momma Becah was your one? I mean, I know the whole story about how you guys listened to bad advice and broke up and then everything got ruined…but I also know that you said you had known that she was your perfect other half…so how did you know?"
He looked over at me and smiled. "You sure you want to know?" I nodded. "Remember, you asked. Becah and I had been friends for a while. We knew each other for even longer. We started dating in ninth grade, but the real, true ‘there is no other woman on this earth for me’ moment didn't come until we were fifteen. The first time I, well I'm not sure how to say this respectfully, but the first time I tasted her…essence, I knew that there was no way in hell that she was made for anyone other than me. Even after we broke up…I could never bring myself to do that for Alex. It would have just made it very real that I'd let the very best part of my heart walk away." I sighed. That answer was helpful, even though it didn't exactly help. George smiled a little, "Trouble in Carol-land?"

"You and Unique love the whole Christmas Carol/Jacob Marley thing a little too much." I grumbled. I was still kind of sore because it had taken them to point that out to me. "but yeah." My head fell back against the seat in exasperation. "Now I don't know how to say something. It's not that what I have to say is disrespectful but it is gonna seem really assholy."

"Just speak. No judgement…I promise." He encouraged.

"Marley and I have been dating officially since shortly after New Year's…but it's almost July and we as still barely making out. I don't want to be an asshole, but I really want to at least approach second base…third would be epic, but at least second would let me know that she does actually want me too." I finally admitted.

George nodded. "So when was the last time you've had social sexual interaction?"

"Not since November." I sighed.

"Have you ever gone this long…"

"Not since the first time."

"No wonder you're wondering if you can see it out." he acknowledged. "You and Marley need to sit down and talk about this. If she has a reason that is deep enough to bypass her hormones entirely than she may need counseling if she ever wants to have that type of relationship. But Jake, she may never want a sexual relationship…not with you and not with anyone else. If she doesn't, it may be that she truly loves you, but she could well have something in her past that makes her psychologically unable to handle sexual contact. You two may have to just go back to being friends, because kid…you're losing it after eight months. When I was your age I could do eight months standing on my head." He scoffed. "Man, if you can't handle eight months, how can you handle it if she needs counseling for a long time before she is ready, or what if she never is?"

I didn't know how to answer. "I-I-I-I don't know. I just…I want what Noah has. I want what you and Momma Becah have…what Sand and Angel Mom have. I don't want to be like my mom and like Paul." It sounded kind of childish or pathetic or something when I said it out loud.

George looked over at me and gently whispered, "I'm gonna say to you the same thing to you that I told your brother when he said something similar to me. Paul Puckerman is an idiot. He is a bastard. He is a total and complete jackass. But I am so grateful to that asshole that I cannot even begin to put it into words. Because he gave the best parts of himself to you, Noah and Sarah…and I get to watch you and Sarah grow up into incredible people. Noah too, but he already had one foot out the door before I got here. Yes, you have parts of Paul in you…but your hearts are nothing like his. Life is a series of choices. He made his. If you don't want to be like Paul or like Alicia than make different choices. But love isn't something you can chose. It isn't something you can force. Maybe Marley isn't meant to be your Mercedes…maybe she is meant to be your Lauren or your Alex. The woman who is in your life for a finite time, either to make your worthy of your forever love or to make you appreciate her. Heck, maybe she is in your life just to teach you what you don't want in a life
partner."

"So I need to talk to Marley." I summarized where he was heading with all of that even as I smiled at the sincerity of the sentiment he'd added into his advice.

George nodded sagely as he pulled up to the Adams' driveway, next to my Rogue which was on the other side of the driveway from where I’d parked it. "I hope you don't mind but I told Unique to go ahead and use your car to take Ryder and Marley on home. Tonight, I want you to stay at our house...Becah is gonna want to baby you some." I smiled at that. I wasn't sure what that entailed, my mom had been a good mom, but she didn't do sick...not at all...but Momma Becah babying me sounded kind of nice. "I probably shouldn't let you drive with that codeine still in your system, but I need to get back out to the site and the house isn't too far. But I'll swing by your place after I leave the site and get you your things for tomorrow. You don't worry about any of that. Just get home, take a shower...saran wrap the arm first like the doctor told you and get some sleep or something."

The super-Tylenol was already clearing out so I had no problem getting the six or seven blocks from Unique's house to George's. When I got there, Sarah and her bestie, Mia, were playing video games in the living room. She stopped trouncing her friend at whichever incarnation of Mortal Kombat they were playing long enough to come and give me a big hug and find out what the deal was with the bandage and Walgreens bag was about. She was at least nice enough to drop a healing kiss on my boo-boo before she left me to my own devices to go play. I headed up the stairs, grabbed my extra pajamas out of my 'Jake's Shit' drawer in Tessa's room took a quick shower and popped my meds then crashed. The next morning as we were working around each other to get ready for our jobs, Tessa and I talked about a big conversation she'd had with Noah about her Aidan problem. It was funny, that we had two different problems but the exact same solution. We may have both decided to practice avoidance. We might not have been related by blood, but some ways we were almost as alike as if we were twins.

I managed to put the conversation I desperately needed to have with Marley off until the Friday before we headed to New York to watch George and Becah as they made things official. Even then the final conversation wasn't even planned or anything. It just happened. Marley and I had gone out bowling and afterwards we were making out in my car...as much as we ever did anyway...when I went to caress the subtle swells of her tatas and she stiffened up, I couldn't take it anymore. Usually, I would just move my hand back to where she was comfortable and keep kissing her. but I was through with that...if I didn't say anything than nothing could change. So instead of continuing to kiss her, I pulled away completely and sat back in my seat.

"What's wrong?" she said quietly.

I fought to find the right words to say. I didn't want to say it wrong and hurt her...but what came out was, "Do you even want me, Marley?"

"I'm just. I'm not ready, Jake." She whispered.

"Look Marley, I really do like you...but we've been dating for eight months and I've touched Unique's breasts more than I have yours." I shot back.

She rolled her eyes. "Unique was so happy when her hormone therapy kicked in and bumped her up to a C-cup...I'm pretty sure that at this point I've touched her boobs more than I've touched mine." She snarked.

We shared a smile. It was funny because it was true. "As true as that may be...I'm serious Marley. I don't want to be that guy..."
"Then don't be."

I raised an eyebrow at her. I wasn't gonna let her deflect our problem back on me. Just like she had a right to decide what she wants for her body, I had a right to know whether we could ever be more than friends who kiss some times. "Marley, if you aren't ready for sex, I can only understand. But this is different. When I touch you, you act like you don't want me to. Since we both know that I would never force you to do anything you don't want to do, I'm having a hard time understanding why you cringe away."

She looked down at her hands. It was only then that I realized that she was wringing them worriedly. "I think you are really attractive, Jake, you know that."

"Oh my God…see that right there. You just answered me. You don't want me. I fucking know that Tessa is attractive. I know that my mother and Momma Becah are attractive. I know that Bubbie Ruth is attractive. I don't want to have sex with any of them. So what was all this, some kind of experiment? See how long you can string the man whore along? See if you can neuter the big dog?" I asked angrily.

"No, Jake…I care for you. I really do. I just…I don't know. I don't…sex scares me. Committing that intimately to anyone scares me and…" she sighed.

"And what?"

"I don't know. I don't get why everyone is in such a hurry to do something with such major consequences. I mean, my mom was going to go to culinary arts school. She had a chance and she was going to be a world famous chef like Giada De Laurentis or Ina Garten. But instead she got pregnant. Dad married her, he did love her and he wanted to take care of her and help her make her dreams come true but they couldn't make ends meet so she got a job working in a cafeteria and he joined the military. We were okay for a while then boom…Dad was killed in action a world away. Mom got depressed and when my mother is depressed she eats. Her whole life was ruined because she made the choice to have sex." She ranted. “Besides, have you really thought about what you want to do? It seems really, really gross.”

I wasn't even touching that gross bullshit. I had seen her finish a lollipop that Ryder didn’t want anymore. Both me and Unique thought that was completely nasty. It was definitely more gross than making love. "Your mother made the decision to make love with a man that she was deeply in love with. He loved her. The fact that their lives changed…life by definition is change. Your mom got depressed because the man she loved was killed in a war leaving her a widow. Do you think that she would have been any less depressed if she didn't have you and he was killed crossing a street? You're making excuses. You don't want to have sex. I get that…whether that is just sex with me or sex at all, I don't know…but don't hide behind your mom and dad. They had their love for each other and if it was real, true love then they wouldn't trade it for anything in the world." I started the car.

"Maybe we should just pull back." she said quietly. "Just go back to being friends. You can find someone that is ready for what you want."

I cut my eyes at here. "Does that thought bother you?"

Marley looked at me with pure confusion in her eyes. "what do you mean?"

"Does the thought of me having sex with someone else bother you?" I asked her, making sure to keep my tone even.

"No." she admitted as if she still didn't understand why I was asking the question.
I nodded. "Then yes. We need to go back to just being friends, and I will look for the woman who wants me as much as I want her." we were quiet the whole rest of the way back to her house. "Marley, you are my friend…and I say this as a friend. Talk to your mom…tell her what you told me. And listen, really listen to how she felt about your father and how she feels about you. Okay?"

She nodded. I walked her to the door and kissed her on the cheek. "Okay. Night, Jake."

I drove home, grateful, for a change for the solitude. Thankfully, on Monday we flew to New York for Becah and George's wedding. Even with all the wedding planning and getting things all together for the wedding, I still managed to find a nice honey to spend some time with. One of George's old New York friends who was in the wedding too, he had a daughter named Amy. Amy was a pretty little Italian/Irish minx who had a hot little body and an even hotter libido. We had a blast whenever we managed to get away from prying eyes. No one but George and Tessa knew that Marley and I had broken up. I wasn't really sure why didn't want to tell the rest of the family, but it wasn't something they knew, so I made sure not to get spotted having fun with Amy. We were in New York for another four days after the wedding. The VMA nominations came out and we were all deliriously happy that KAMA had as many nods as they received. It was epic. We spent a few days chilling out in the studio while Noah, Sam and Cedes recorded tracks for their Christmas album. We all even got to sing on some of them. On Friday, it was time to go home for Tessa and I while KAMA returned to their tour and the Jones flew down Florida for a family reunion.

I'm not gonna lie, Amy helped me be able to talk to Marley like I had before we started dating. We were back to being just good friends and I was okay with it. Tessa made me promise that no matter who I hooked up with when we went back to school I'd leave Bree and Kitty both alone. She explained the girl mentality behind the promise so I did. I did care for Marley. I didn't want to hurt her like that. So those two wouldn't be among the honeys I'd audition for my girlfriend. That still left me plenty to choose from. It was weird though watching her and Aidan chilling as if they had no problems between them, where Marley and I only hung out when RyNique or some of our other friends were available to hang too. Or at least we did after U and I got cool again. She hadn't really understood that it hadn't just been the sex thing that broke Marley and I up. We needed two different things from our relationship…or maybe it was just that the intimacy I needed scared the hell out of her. I was the man and had slept with at least twenty to thirty chicks, but she was the one who couldn't handle the intimacy of a real commitment. How fucked up was that?

The rest of the summer was a series of boring stretches tempered by small pops of excitement. We all came together with the last set of Warblers who had been any real competition in the NHSSCA and the old school NDs. That was a blast. Then we got together again in Chicago to film the video. I have no idea how Commune got the Coaches to do the Cheerios and Titans camps two weeks before the first day of school and leave that final week open, but they did, so we were all able to be there for the video shoot. Noah had made me an appointment at Brooks Brothers for me to get two new suits and a tux for prom. I dragged Ryder with me and we had too much fun pretending to be important. That weekend was Sarah's birthday, so we had a family dinner and she had her bowling party and she was one very happy thirteen-year-old. The first day of school came quickly after that and the first week of school blew by. The Titans lead by me and Ryder won our first game of the season and then that Sunday night, the whole community was in the Jones back yard to see how awesome Noah and his boos were. I knew that he'd feared for me when we went to Florida, but I hadn't realized that he was bold enough to put the dirty cops on blast on MTV. That was sincerely badass. I heard people who assumed that he did it to please Cedes…but they must have forgotten about me. I'd never had a bad experience with a cop…thankfully, but I knew that it was something that my grandmother prayed about all the time. I had never been more proud of my big brother.

The summer may not have gone exactly as I thought it would, but I was the better for it. The things I'd learned in those hundred and four days, there was so much I had come to realize. I had definitely
learned I'd found out that I could last eight months without sex if I wanted to. I learned that love was something that had to come naturally and I learned that I didn't have to be like Paul Puckerman or my mother. My choices were my own and I had plenty of time to make them.

Chapter End Notes

Whatever deity is out there, please help our nation have the backbone to move beyond rhetoric and stand tall against the gun lobbyists.

To my readers.
Reviews are the commodity fanfiction authors are paid in. Leave a review...if not for me, do it for all my starving plot bunnies.

Next Up: Vince & Finn
TTFN,
Anni
Home (Stephanie Mills) & There You'll Be (Faith Hill)

Chapter Notes

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Plum Soulmates by jdho2
(Again Not Glee Plum/MCU X-Over)

Warning: I will be polite and say that there is offensive language that could bother both black and white people. These terms are not the acceptable and they are not anything that the author feels should be utilized in any conversation ever or even thought of but, the terms fit the characterizations of certain characters.

Casting Call
Michelle Thomas (RIP) as Sasha Cooper

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Home (Stephanie Mills)
Vince PoV

I must have been smoking the best of the good shit when I decided that I should spend the summer in muthafucking Dillon, Texas. I had made it out of that town and swore that I wouldn't be back. But spending the last semester at college getting head from every silly chick who thought they could get closer to Ced's, Sam and Puck by blowing me…it had kind of made me nostalgic. Chicken heads looking for a come up, and willing to prove their worth with the entourage, were pretty thick on the ground of Dillon. Most of the town wanted out, only about half of them were willing to work their way out…of that half, only a third had the talent or intelligence or luck to actually make it out. I got lucky. I could play ball and I had Coach and Doctor Taylor.

But I did go back and I had been home for two weeks. No that was quite right…I had been back in Dillon for two weeks and those two weeks had proven to me that it sure as hell wasn't home anymore. I loved my sister but with Mom gone, I was probably pretty crazy to have bothered coming back at all. After all the Taylors had moved around the same time I did. They were settled and happy in the City of Brotherly Love. Luke was out serving the red, white and blue. Jess had gone to college in Houston and she was taking summer classes pretty much just so she had an excuse not to come back home. My sister and Pops were fighting so much that I had broken up at least one fight every single day. I really didn't understand why the hell they even tried to live in the same apartment. Pops drove Ornetta to her dealer and Ornetta drove Pops to which ever dumb broad would let him spend the night in her bed. It was a bad situation and there was nothing I could do to help it. The longer I was there the more I could tell that my sister was backsliding and she'd stopped listening to me. Eventually, my Pops pissed me off as much as he had Ornetta. I was chillin in my room, just doing some of my summer reading for my first marketing class and he came rolling in like he owned the joint. "Whatcha reading that for?"

I looked at the book in my hand. It was clearly a text book. "For my marketing class." There may have been a small bit of sarcasm underlying my words.

"Yeah, I could see that from the cover. But why are you bothering. You started in a bowl game last season. That quarterback hit you right in the sweet spot and you ran it in like butta. You can write
"Maybe I could. But that doesn't mean I should. I have a real opportunity here. I'm not gonna fuck around and miss out on an education because I didn't have to get it." I told him honestly.

"But you're good…hell kid, you're fucking great. Why you gonna waste your time studying and shit? You keep doing your do on the field; you go pro in your junior year…you make that paper." Pops just didn't understand.

"Yeah, and what happened if I fuck up my knee before graduation? Or if I make it to the pros and then get injured and can't come back from that shit? If I have a degree, I have a career…beyond just being some meathead watching over a ditzy starlet. I can get my paper and if shit don't work out, I can be a sports agent or a manager. I can do some real shit so I don't have to bring my ass back to this town and let it drain all the fucking life out of my black ass like it's doing to everyone else here." I was getting heated. I wasn't down with having the muthafucking king of bad choices try and convince me that the choices I was making had no merit.

Pops just rolled his eyes. "You've been listening to too many of them white folks. You musta forgot, you're black. The only way the white man's gonna let you get your paper is if you get it in a way they are comfortable with. You can be a ball player; if you had any musical talent, you could be a singer or you can be a rapper…they'll be cool with that. You try and get too big, try to get into their games…and they will bust you down."

"Oh please. I know that shit ain't true. The biggest house I've been in in Ohio is owned by a pair of black dentists. They got their degrees and they make mad money. They've got three kids doing the same damn thing." I defended. "I dicked around too much in high school, but I sure as hell ain't gonna make that mistake again. I just got offered more scholarship money…and half of it was because of my GPA. That gives me more free money for school that I don't have to bust my ass for years to pay back. I'm not trying to live my life on the small scale. I don't have to be rich…but I have to get my ass up out of this bullshit."

"This bullshit…" he air quoted me. "Is your home…it's your family."

"If you're so much my family…you should want nothing but the best for me. Not for me to sit on my ass and hope for the muthafucking best. Wishing and hoping didn't get Momma nothing but a twenty dollar a day weed habit, and those were the good days. I much preferred the weed days to the crank days. She'd still have been alive now if she didn't get into all that shit. And what's it gotten you…a record and recurring STDs. Naw…I'd rather work my ass off than sit on it and dream of better shit." Damn I wish I had stayed in Lima like Laura and Ben asked me to. They made me promise to call them if I wanted to come back, but I couldn't ask them to do that for me. I sure as hell hadn't found a job in my one horse home town. So I couldn't buy myself a ticket home either.

"You keep letting them white people convince you to forget where you came from…what you gonna do when they drop your ass?" he said then left without waiting for an answer.

If he'd have stayed, he'd have seen me grab my tablet, a Christmas gift from Ben, turning it on and when I logged onto my email, I found proof positive that my Pops was never fucking right. Laura and Ben were nowhere near dropping my ass. In fact, they had gotten tired of waiting on me to ask to come back to Lima.

From: Laura@zizesharleydavidson.com
Sent: Friday, May 16, 2014 11:02 AM
To: Howard.Vincent@gmail.com
Subject: Time to come HOME
Vince,

Since you got down there and decided that you were too proud to ask us to send for you; (I can hear how much you hate it in every fake ass happy text and voice mail) I made the executive decision that I was sending for you without you asking.

As you can see there are two attachments to this message…the first attachment is your airline ticket to Dayton. You leave on 24th. That gives you another entire week to wallow in misery. That should be enough time to let you feel like you've done your duty. Ben and I will pick you up in Dayton. We cannot wait to see you. We miss you kiddo.

The second is a bus ticket from Dillon to Dallas. Since we got you an afternoon flight, the greyhound leaves at nine am. That should get you to the airport by eleven thirty…giving you time for lunch before your two thirty flight.

We love you and we are ready to have you home. See you in seven days.

Love,
Lauren, Ben & Elle

I couldn't help but smile. I knew it wasn't cool or manly, but it felt really fucking awesome to have people who cared about me for real. Pops acted like he gave a damn…but he was just pulling a gold digga move. He figured I'd make it rich and he could sponge off me. That shit wasn't gonna happen. I could make Manning Brothers loot and I'd set that shit on fire before he saw a single penny. Alright…that might have been extreme…but I wouldn't piss on that man if his ass was lit aflame. I went back to studying with a smile on my face and a song in my heart. It was the next morning before I saw my sister. Ornetta had cried when I left and she had acted like I was the prodigal child returned when I got back. I didn't want to upset her, telling her I was leaving again already, but with my big sister…I had to catch her before her first blunt of the day if I wanted her to remember what the hell I'd said. "Net, umm…I'm leaving next Saturday."

She looked up from the word find puzzles she loved when she was sober. "Good." She nodded. I guess I looked hurt or something because she put the puzzle book and red pen down before patting the seat next to her. "Come're." I was curious what she wanted. Ornetta was just like Moms, she rarely tried to explain herself…ever. And no one…no body with sense anyway, crossed her when she was fully sober. It just wasn't worth the drama. So I crossed the room and sat down. "I don't say good because I don't love you and love seeing you. Vinnie…I say good because me and our father are fucking toxic for you. You have the chance to do more and be more than either of us. Did you know that Momma played basketball in high school? She was damn good too. Geema told me about it, so I asked Mom. Momma even made it to Texas College on a scholarship. Then she met Ornette Howard. According to Mom and Pops, neither one of them could tell you who chased who harder, but what they did tell me was that Mom's grades dropped. She missed too many practices and got cut from the team. She fucked up her whole future. That was her bad…but our father…she said that he was determined that he was gonna make up for it or something…hell I don't even know. But he figured that he would save her or maybe he was just feeling guilty. Still he knocked her up so they got married…or it could have been the other way around. Vinnie before she died she said that having me and you were the only things Ornette and her ever managed to do right."

"Netta…" I wanted to remind her that Mom had been a good mom when we were little.

But she cut me off…continuing as if I hadn't said a word. "He did his crime, got caught and did his time. Now he is out and he swears that is trying, Hell I guess he's even done some good…but
nothing is gonna change the fact that he has his head up his ass when it comes to hard work and doing the right thing. But I don't know what that Coach said to help you…but Baby Brother, you are the best person to come out of this tainted ass gene pool. You have the chance to do what Momma couldn't and I didn't. I was too stupid and foolish and weak. But you…you're smart. You're strong. You've got good people around you. So I want you to go and let those good people teach you to be wise. I don't give a damn if they are white, black, blue, purple or green…they are helping my baby brother in all the ways I wish I could. All the ways I wish I knew how. I am so damn thankful that you have them. So you go on up to the Zizes…you tell them that I've never even met them and I love them."

I felt my eyes fill with tears. "This sounds like Good Bye…why does this sound like Goodbye?" I croaked out.

Her thin…damn near skeletal hand came up and caressed my cheek. "It's not Goodbye unless it's Goodbye. But let's be real…you don't need to come back to this place. It's got nothing to offer you but bad memories and worse opportunities. We can talk on the phone…I even got one of those new 3G smart phones so we can email and Skype. But Vinnie…the best day of the last five years was the day you stepped out of the past and into your future. You see what this town does to people who don't get out. I ain't but three years older than you and I look damn near forty. Mom and Ornette weren't no good together, but too stubborn, too broke and too scared to do the right thing and get divorced. Mom let it run her to an early grave. This town is dying…don't let it kill you too. If you make the NFL…great; if you graduate and never touch another football, that's just fine too. But I want you to go back to Ohio and stop looking behind you. You stepped into your future…now it's time for you to walk into the light."

I looked at my sister. In that instance I realized that I had probably judged Mom too harshly without knowing the why's of what was going on. I couldn't imagine having a shot at a real future and fucking it up by dicking around and having nobody to blame but myself. That would drive me to drugs too. "Net…I promise you that I will get my degree, but I need you to get help. You aren't too young to have given up. It is not too late to turn your life around. I don't want to have to bury you before I even have kids for you to tease and torment with your evil toe pulling games." I said earnestly, referring to the weird way she'd always played the 'this little piggy' game when we were little. "It's probably your fault my feet are so big."

She chuckled. "Boy please, I remember when you were born. You already had some big feet…barely fit in the little box on the birth certificate. If I had the money, Vin, I'd hit one of those super posh rehabs and this town would never see my black ass again either. But the rehab up the road…the staff deals as much as the clients. Ain't nobody got time for that."

I thought for a long moment. "What about the counselor at the high school? I thought that he was offering free counseling for any of the folks in town who don't have the money for real therapy. You can try and see if he can help."

She looked thoughtful. "I'll make you a deal. I will go and see your counselor...as long as your report cards keep coming in with more As than Bs."

"Netta if you get off that shit, I will bring you're a four point muthafukin' oh." I said seriously.

Then I got popped softly in the mouth. "I might not be the best big sister, but you betta watch your mouth around me. You wouldn't curse like that in front of Momma."

Yes, she was right. I cursed in front of our mother one time, thinking she was too high to care. She snapped out of that high right quick…washed my mouth out with octagon soap. Ornetta had me let Laura know that she could cancel the bus ticket while they could still get that money back and she
drove me the hour and a half to the airport in Dallas. That last week flew by as fast as the two before it had crawled. Before I knew it, it was Friday and after I washed everything I'd brought with me—which filled a carry-on—then I made dinner for Netta and her best friend, cough...girlfriend...Cecily. Pops didn't show. He claimed that he wasn't happy that I was leaving so soon but probably he was laid up under one of my classmates. Idiots, them and him. I could give less than two fucks...I was happy as hell to get in Netta's beater and go back home for real. The drive went quick Net was jamming to the radio when KAMA's latest song came on. "So...be honest with your big sister...are those three really..."

"What together? Twenty-four seven and all the damn time. Puck will tell you all about it if you sit still long enough too. But, ya know what, they are real sweet together too, real loving. Thiers is that real, Mary J. Blige and Wyclef Jean, love there." I answered honestly.

She shook her head. "Naw. You can see that there is some serious emotion between those three. I want to know are they as just nice as they seem. I mean, it was all over the news that they flew out to see your roommate every weekend he was in that coma. Then last night, TMZ said that one of them is building a homeless shelter or something. Are they for real?"

I laughed. "Yep. Sam is gonna hate it that TMZ found out. He was trying to keep it quiet." I said honestly. "They are good people. They keep folks around them that are real and kind too, like their parents and Finn's family and like the Zizes."

"Like you too. I saw you on that red carpet...watched it on E! Online on my phone. I also saw a guy that could have been your double if you were ten years older."

I chuckled. "Yeah...but not ten years older...just like five. That's Cedes' older brother Kevon. He's cool. Getting married later this summer. His wifey is so prissy, you'd never expect her to as funny as she is."

"I'm glad you've got such good friends. Maybe I'll get my life right so I can meet them." She said with a shy grin.

"Oh...you've got a time limit...if you ain't straight by Christmas, I'm bringing Elle and Santana down here. Those two could scare the devil back into an angel." I teased.

"You know you ain't right." She chuckled. Me and Netta loved each other. After that week...we even understood each other. But neither of us would ever really get how much we were alike, but it still showed in a million tiny ways. Like the fact that for us the drive was goodbye. She didn't park and walk me in. She said everything we needed and wanted to say in the hour and forty minutes that we'd been sitting side by side in her old Toyota Corolla and when she pulled up the drop off line. She kissed me on the cheek, reaffirmed that she would see the counselor and I would keep my grades up, and after I got my backpack and Pullman, we waved and she went home, looking happier than I could ever remember seeing her in my life.

I headed into the airport, checked in and got through security before I grabbed something to eat. WingStop may have been a not great choice just before a flight, but the flight time was only a few hours so, thankfully, I was fine. As soon as I got back through security at Dayton, I saw Elle, Finn, Laura and Ben waiting on me. It really felt like coming home. The hugs were as plentiful as the tension had been in Dillon. We had dinner at a Chili’s on the way back to Lima and there was just so much laughter and happiness. Laura reminded me to call or text Netta so that she would know that I’d landed safely. So I did that and she hit me back that she was glad and that I had better text or call her once a week. When I assured her that I would, she told me to have a good summer. I told her I would...but right then, I had no idea how good.
Lauren had a few weeks before she was supposed to report to her summer wrestling camp so we used that time to reestablish our routines from my other times there. It felt awesome to be back. Being in Lima was like slipping back into myself, rather than being stuck in a role that everyone thought was me, but it just didn't fit anymore. For me going back to Dillon was like putting on last year's suit. It might still 'look like' you, but it just don't fit. We'd get up and have some protein before going for a run. It was on one of those runs that I noticed that the sweet old couple that had lived next door to the Zizes had moved. I asked Elle about it and she smiled a little sadly. "Mrs. Moira had a fall one day while Mr. Sean was doing the errands. She broke her arm and her leg. She was ok but it scared them since with so few people in the neighborhood being home in the day, she was stuck until he got home. So their son and daughter-in-law convinced them to sell up and move near them in Florida."

"Whoa. When was that?" I asked. I thought it took a while to sell a house.

Elle looked thoughtful. "She fell while we were all in New York. The house was sold before the end April."

"That was quick." I muttered.

She smirked. "Anything in the McKinley school cluster goes pretty fast now. Shelby is considered a goddess now. I mean we all knew that when she was at Carmel people would send their kid from half the country to have her coach their kids. Well now that Puck, Cedes and Sam are a thing… whole families who want their kids to be stars are moving here."

"Damn." I laughed. It was seriously funny to me. But I guess that it was no less strange than the fact that guys had changed schools to be coached by Coach Taylor after he won state that first time.

"Families will do whatever they have to do to make sure that their kids have a better chance at life than they did." I said thinking of my sister and her ability to send me away after only a couple of weeks together…and little of that was what one could consider quality time.

Though we talked about the new family a couple of times, it wasn't until after Lauren had gone to her camp that Finn and I actually saw one of the new neighbors. The family was a black family, which was kind of cool. It was the mother and a teen boy who looked like he would be starting either his freshman or sophomore year at high school in the fall. I noticed that they were both medium toned brown and fairly thin and on the short side. When the front door opened and a girl about our age came out. I knew that I needed to introduce myself. So I begged Finn to be my wing man. "Dude, you can't go meet her like this. You're all sweaty and stuff." He argued. "Look, let's go get cleaned up. Kurt is home right now, I can see if I can talk him into making us something that we can take over and you can try and play the whole welcome to the neighborhood thing."

Considering that we were on the return half of a five mile run…he had a point. We had an agreement that went back to the second week we'd known each other. When I had to concede a point to Finn Hudson, and his idea had at least some merit, I had to give it a try. So we went with it. The strawberry and kale summer salad Kurt whipped up got us not only in the door, but they seemed like they loved it. The Coopers were a single parent family. Ms. Cooper really had an interesting life even if she was only in her early forties. When she was in high school, she had gotten a scratch off lottery ticket for her eighteenth birthday. She'd won and used that money to put herself through a program to become a specialized type of radiological technician. She can work from almost anywhere. Her son, Zion, was positive that he was destined for greatness, and she pretty much told him so every chance she got. He dreamed of being a singer and when Ms. Cooper got the chance to help him move toward his dream she felt like she had to do it.

Her daughter Sasha was a whole different story. Sasha and Zion Cooper were as different as two siblings could get. In fact it was almost as if they were diametrically opposed in pretty much every
way. Even on something as simple as the kinds of classes they liked...Sasha was really into science and math; Zion was all about the arts. He was already taller than her, though I didn't think he was going to be very tall. They had different fathers, though they both had the same last name because they carried their mom's. When Sasha was born, Ms. Cooper was still really wild...Sasha couldn't tell you who her father was and Ms. Cooper had stopped trying to figure it out among the four guys she was 'playing with back then'. Sasha had, apparently been a beautiful baby, which made me wonder if her dad was ugly, because her mother looked like an unattractive, younger version of 'The Chief' from 'Where in the World is Carmen San Diego'. It was a well-known fact that when it came to making babies, you only got positives when both parents were seven to tens or both parents were negative numbers. Other than that, and things got iffy. Zion was a perfect example of that. His father must had looked at least okay, because he was totally a two or three...tops. But as I was talking to them, I couldn't help but think that Sasha was a dime for sure.

She was also very different from her younger brother in other ways. She was starting her freshman year at OSU in the fall. "I'm going to double major in physics and mechanical engineering. OSU has a cool program where I can get my BS, my masters and my PE in six years."

"Wow." I said in surprise. "That's cool. I mean, I'm more of a soft science and money math kind of guy, but it is awesome that you can handle that kind of stuff."

Finn gave her a friendly smile. "Oh, our friend Artie...his cousin...umm... I can't really pronounce Howard's last name. He helped me with it a few times when I met him. But it's really hard. It starts with a W though. Anyway he is a mechanical engineer at a, like, major science school out in California, even though he went to MIT, but he designs and builds stuff for NASA. He worked on the Mars rover and went to space too. His wife Bernadette is a scientist too. But I don't remember what kind. She is tiny and curvy like you though."

"Your friend is related to Howard Wolowitz. That's kind of major." She said dude's name like Finn or I would say Paton Manning or something. "Right now he is kind of a rock star in the engineering world. It isn't often one of the peons gets plucked from relative obscurity and given the chance to be so much more. He co-wrote a paper with a really good experimental physicist too...Leonard Hofesteder. It is considered the definitive paper on the practical application of physics in space travel." Sasha said happily.

I stopped and looked at her for a full minute. "You used small words and still left me behind on that one. That is really, really hot."

The smile that she gave me made my pants tight as hell. Sasha Cooper was a total Pocket Bombshell. She was even shorter than any of the girls I considered almost midgets...if she hit five foot even, I'd have been shocked. Her hourglass figure was really stacked on top and her ass was fucking sexy, nice and round and firm...a nice, round ghetto booty, though nowhere near as big as Cedes. Her hair was thick and long and so voluminous that you could tell it was the 'growing from her scalp' kind of hers. The shoulder length, black wealth framed a round face with a strong chin and adorable cheeks. Her eyes were on the smaller side of large, but opened wide when she spoke of science and got excited. Her lips were full and looked soft...but they weren't very, very big. Her smile was though, big and bright with pretty white teeth. Her nose was even really great, not too thin, not too wide, cute as a button. She was damn near perfect.

She also wanted to know everything Finn and I knew about OSU. So we spent some time answering some of her questions. There was no way we could answer all of them she had like a million. We told her what we could but there was a ton of shit we didn't know. The Student Athlete community can be pretty insular. But I did promise to show her around campus. When her mom poked her head back in to see if we were still there, I realized that we'd been talking to Sasha for almost two hours.
That threw off our usual afternoon schedule but we managed to recoup our time. We got our reading done for the day. Finn hated doing homework by himself. Probably because he was really easily distracted and if he didn't study with anyone else, there was no one there to drag him back to what he was supposed to be doing. That evening after dinner, Finn and I headed to Dayton and stayed at the hotel near the hospital. He had an early morning appointment with the occupational physical therapist to see where his fine motor skills were after having done physiotherapy in Lima for six weeks.

"Alright Mr. Hudson. You have increased your words per minute typing and texting back up to the level we expect to see in someone your age. But your handwriting is still extremely messy and rather unreadable." The therapist said once he'd completed his evaluations.

I looked at her and then looked back at Finn. "No offense meant, Finn, but Ma'am, did you check it against his handwriting before the accident. I mean, Finn's handwriting could have been an unbreakable NSA code if he wasn't careful."

She smiled. "His mother and brother were kind enough to email me some scans showing me your handwriting before the accident…and while yes, it was quite interesting looking, we've still got some work to do to get him back to at least that level of readability…though I would like to see if we can improve upon that. Another six weeks of therapy, concentrating solely on the handwriting and buttoning very small buttons."

She wrote us the ‘prescription' for his continuation of the therapy and we headed back to Lima. He dropped me off by the bike shop and I was just in time for my shift. Since I'd been back with the Zizes, I'd taken back my job at the bike shop…I could do almost all of the regular maintenance for the bikes, and I was great at upselling the customers. It was great experience, I was learning tons and I was putting money towards my own bike every paycheck. The rest of the summer was cool. The next time I saw Sasha Cooper out and about, I made sure to get her number and give her mine. For the next little while, she and I talked every day. Over the course of the conversations, I got to know her a lot better. We flirted our asses off…all the damn time. It had been over a month since Sasha and I had been talking and I was absolutely sure that she would say yes, so I asked her out. "So Miss Thang, what are you doing this weekend?"

"Oh we aren't doing anything. Though Momma is still telling me to thank you for inviting us to the Jones Fourth of July barbeque a few weeks ago. I know that we moved to Lima so that Zion could get training from the woman who trained KAMA, but the fact that we met their family and the parents of The Mercedes Jones are now our dentists…he is still freaking out." Sasha giggled loudly letting me know that Zion's antics had been hilarious.

"I'm glad you had a good time. One of the first things Mercedes and Azimio first told me when Elle and Finn started bringing me home with them was that in Lima, the black folks had to stick together." I said honestly Adams said that the only thing he really used to get in trouble for was when his parents found out that he was one of the ones tormenting Cedes and not sticking by her when people tried to make her ashamed to be herself.

"That's cool. We lived in a part of Cleveland where it was kind of the same way. There were only like three black families. But a lot of the major cities are still pretty segregated whether by design or just fact. It's sad." Sasha told me.

"It's funny, black folk in the south assume that it's so much better in the north. But I guess shit is still fucked up everywhere." I commiserated.

I could hear her nodding. "Yeah, but we aren't going to change anything this week. You were asking me about this weekend?"
"Well, the Rock's new Hercules movie is coming out this week so is that cool looking Lucy movie. You want to go see it, maybe grab something to eat?" I suggested.

"Are Elle and Finn going to be there this time…or is it a…"

"It's a date." I affirmed quickly. We had been hanging out, the four of us after Elle got back from her camp, quite a lot. It wasn't a planned thing, but I did prefer to get to know any chick I was interested in having a serious relationship with before we started dating. Elle and Finn provided a nice buffer to help me get to know Sasha and not move things along too fast because that sexy ass of hers was calling my name.

"I'm glad." Sasha said shyly.

"Me too. So can I pick you up at seven?" I asked her just for confirmation.

"I'll be ready." She told me quietly.

"Good. Where do you want to go to eat?" We talked things through and got off the line. We talked every day and before I knew it, it was Friday night. On the way home from the shop I swung by a florist and bought Sasha a big, pretty sunflower. It sat in the refrigerator while I took a long shower, shaved and lotoned. The best part about the day to day living in the Ohio was that while it was the middle of the summer, I was still comfortable wearing a pair of navy dockers and a polo. I wanted Sasha to know that I was serious about her. A spritz of Calvin Klein's Eternity for men and I was ready to go. Ben let me borrow his Tacoma and I made sure that I was a little early.

When I rang the doorbell, I still remember the one time I'd gone to pick up Jess for something and honked rather than getting out and going to the door. Suffice it to say, Jess didn't go with me. Sasha opened the door and she looked adorable. Her hair had been pulled up and back in the front. She was either not wearing much makeup, or she had done that thing where girls wear makeup but go out of their way to look like they aren't wearing any. I was impressed by how long her legs looked despite the lack of height. I loved her pink flowery sundress that showed them off by stopping half way down her thighs and lighter pink wedges. That sundress might have been cute, but the way she filled it out was sexy as hell. And with me being so much taller than her, the view was freaking awesome. "You look beautiful." I was completely sincere in that compliment as I handed her the sunflower.

"I love sunflowers." She smiled broadly. I escorted her to the car, making sure to close her front door behind her and opening the car door for her. The date couldn't have gone better. We ended up seeing Hercules and I got a lot of bonus points for not trying to out hot the Rock, or worse getting completely insecure about her finding him hot. It made no sense to me to get mad about her finding some dude she was never going to meet, a guy everyone on earth found aesthetically pleasing, attractive. The movie was okay, but talking about the movie with Sasha afterwards was pretty much the best part. We headed to Applebee's for dinner and talked until close to midnight.

I managed to get her home before her curfew and the kiss she laid on me at her front door was hot as fire. I had tried for a nice, respectful first date kiss…a pressing of my full lips to her even fuller, softer ones. But Sasha didn't let me get away with soft and chaste. She reached up and wrapped her hot little hands in my shirt pulling my face back down to hers. I froze in shock for just a second. Then she nibbled my bottom lip until my lips opened enough for her to slide her tongue inside. That was so hot and damn she tasted amazing, I moaned into her mouth and my arms went round her waist pulling her closer to me. Sasha's kiss was voracious and I loved every moment of her passion. We kissed for a long while, until breathing became a major issue and even then once we'd refilled our lungs, we went right back into our kiss. Unfortunately when kissing on your girl's front porch, there is always someone watching. After the second round of serious kissage, her mom flicked the porch
lights on and off a few times to tell us to break it up.

After that first date, Sasha and I went out whenever we could. She was working at the Lima Bean and I had my job at the bike shop, so sometimes we'd go a whole week where we really only got to talk on the phone. It was cool though. I learned to rebuild an engine and by the end of July, I'd managed to earn enough to be able to buy myself a used Victory 8-Ball. Laura and I had started rebuilding the transmission when Puck, Sam and Cedes got everyone together to make some music in Columbus. By the time they gathered everyone together to make a video in Chicago, that bike was purring like a kitten. Elle and Finn took me with them both times. Which was more than a little cool; Sam, Cedes and Puck made me get in the video even though I can't sing a lick. It was all kinds of awesome. Best of all was that I already had all of my reading done for my classes. Like seriously, I was taking fifteen credit hours, plus what basically amounted to a full time job with football…I did everything I could do ahead of time to make sure that I didn't have so much on my plate during the semester. Between the time in Texas, my job at the bike shop, football camp and all the time I spent with Sasha, it was time to head back to school before it seemed possible. The summer had flown by, but it had been one of the best ones of my life.

There You'll Be (Faith Hill)
Finn PoV

I missed football more than I thought I would. But then again, I also missed being able to write my name and the date in under five minutes. Still I was pretty grateful to be alive. While I was ‘asleep’ I had a pretty crappy dream. Lauren and Puck hadn't broken up at prom, so he didn't get together with Sam and Mercedes that night and Lauren didn't rescue me from Rachel in New York. After that everything was completely wrong. Nobody stood up to Mr. Schue about our set list so we weren't ready at all when we went to Nationals and we lost. Since they weren't together with Puck and they were trying to hide their relationship from everyone for some reason, Mercedes, Sam and Puck didn't go to that restaurant and get discovered. It just snowballed from there. I tried to stick it out with Rachel and ended up kind of miserable until I forced her to go to NYADA…which she only got into by stalking the audition dean lady until she got Kurt's spot…that sucked. I ended up going into the military, then washing out of that and back at McKinley until I went to OSU where I went to a frat party and got drunk and high enough to stop a rampaging rhino and I died Chris Farley style. I was watching the reactions of my family and friends to my death when I finally came out of my coma. Once I was finally cleared to resume normal activities, I made love to Lauren for hours just thanking her for leaving Puck at prom and allowing me to have such a much better future…all of us really.

After I got out of the hospital and was able to go back to class, Lauren, Vince and I spent tons of time getting me all caught up on my missed assignments and ready for my mid-terms. Even with physical therapy three times a week, classes and everything, I still managed to eke out high Cs or low Bs in all my classes which meant that I got to stay in school. Once we were sure that I was going to be able to at least finish the semester, Lauren and I signed back up for the campus version of couples therapy, which was really just a way for the PhD set to get some 'real world' experience, or some pro bono time. The previous guy, Dr. Greenleaf was gone back to the world, so we got a new doctor. It wasn't bad, we'd gotten all the hardest stuff out of the way before the accident, so it was kind of cool to be starting fresh. We were assigned a doctor named Emilie Schneider. Dr. Schneider was a pretty brunette in her early thirties and she was very calming and soothing. She had an accent but I didn't know if it was British or Irish or what. She was nice. But it was really, really hard to tell her all about Finnie and Ma'am. Well it was for me. Lauren was cool as a cucumber.

Of course, Lauren turned out to be smarter than me. Dr. Schneider didn't seemed fazed at all. She was pretty matter of fact and she helped a lot. By the end of the first session I felt at ease with her. She also gave good advice. She gave us several reputable websites were we could get more information about rebuilding trust in a relationship and maintaining the positive emotions in a
Domme-sub relationship. "Now first of all, ignore any and everything you may have read in that stupid novel series making the rounds that is the perfect example of utilizing the D/s lifestyle to hide a very abusive relationship. You've already set your parameters. You have no desire for this to be a twenty-four hour, seven day a week life. You prefer to slip into and out of scenes and that is okay. As with any relationship of any kind you must decide what the best thing is for you. You have discussed the limits of your fantasy very maturely. You have worked very hard to reestablish your primary relationship. Kudos to both of you for realizing that this is something that makes you happy and therefore as natural as any other relationship."

Lauren and I exchanged a long look before we both said a quiet, "Thank you."

"However, one thing that you cannot allow yourselves to do is to ever take for granted is your communication. Your first exercise is to create a schedule." She said that really funny…but I knew better than to smile. "You will block out time every day to discuss the day's events and how you feel about them. The conversation can pertain to your sexual congress or it can simply be talking about the annoying girl in your psych class. But for thirty minutes to an hour every day, you should talk to each other. Communication is the key." She gave us long measuring looks. "Now then. With that being said, I would like each of you to tell me one thing that you have never shared with each other."

I gulped I didn't want to answer that, like ever. Lauren sighed and my beautiful, bold, brave woman looked at the Doctor and admitted something I didn't realize she'd even thought about, let alone actually been bothered by. "I feel scummy, I mean, guilty for being able to continue wrestling when Finn can't play football anymore."

"But why, you love to wrestle. For me football was just the first thing that people liked me for doing. It never really mattered all that much to me. I mean, I kind of miss it, but mainly it was just cool that I had something I was good at; but it wasn't vital to my existence like wrestling is for you." I was very confused. "I didn't even want to go pro like coach wanted me to try for. If it weren't for the fact that I don't know how I'm going to afford next year, I'd be relieved that I didn't have to go out there and lead those guys anymore. A lot of them were older than me and counting on me to get them noticed by NFL scouts. That was a lot of pressure. I hate pressure."

Dr. Schneider gave us encouraging smiles. "Lauren within the guilt…what else were you feeling about the sudden halt to Finn's football playing?"

"I guess fear. Which I really am not used to feeling. I instill fear in others, I don't care for feeling it myself. But, I guess, I was scared that he would resent me for being able to continue wrestling when Finn can't play football anymore."

I reached over and took her hand. It took more effort to get my hand to clasp hers tightly enough to give her comfort, but it was totally worth it. We were close enough to hug, but sometimes being touched when you were sharing your deepest feelings felt a little weird. At least to me, so I assumed everyone else felt that way. "I get scared too, like all the time. I'm scared that you're going to realize that you can do so much better than me. I'm scared that with my hands all messed up, you're going to feel like you are always taking care of me…like we are stuck in Finnie and Ma'am. I know that is hard on you and I don't want…I mean…I'd hate it if you got sick of me, sick of us."

"I'm not gonna pretend that I know the future, but I don't see me getting sick of us anytime soon. Besides, if I was the kind of chick to leave you while you were still recovering for injuries that you got while trying to protect me…I'd be Berry…in other words, I'd be crazy and not someone you should waste your time on." Lauren chided gently.

Maybe I was a bad person, but it always made me smile when Lauren or Santana got in a really good zing at Rachel. She didn't get to hear most of them, but they were usually really, really funny.
Schneider’s timer went off. "We have reached the end of this session, I suggest that we meet every other week for an hour moving forward.” Lauren and I nodded, that seemed doable. "Very well, make sure that you make an appointment with the assistant at the outer desk."

We saw Dr. Schneider twice a month for the rest of the semester. When we started I didn’t really think that we needed couples counseling, but by the time we headed home the first of May, I could honestly say that it had helped us become stronger and more stable as a couple. Lauren, Vince and I were really tight in our friendship even beyond me and Lauren’s relationship. We worked hard on our course work and Lauren was as amazing as ever on the mat. She went to the NCAA Wrestling National Championship for her weight class, in the male division and came in second. That was almost unheard of for a freshman, let alone a woman. I was so proud of her I crowed about it to anyone who would listen. I was there when she won and I think that I was the loudest person in the entire crowd…maybe even louder than Ben and her adopted bro, Vince. When she got back to campus everyone knew her name and I was her boyfriend, rather than it being the other way around, that was such a tremendous relief.

Packing up our rooms was fun in a way that was totally not. I mean, don’t get me wrong, it wasn’t super hard, we’d kept to the organizational system we’d started with in August, but the simple truth was that we’d somehow managed to amass a lot more shit. It took us forever to get everything packed up and the room clean enough that Vince would willingly give the RA our keys back. Living with Vince I had learned that black people really take their bathroom cleanness seriously. Once a week we had to clean that bad boy. And where to me, clean meant that I cleaned the sink and toilet…maybe the shower stall every once in a while. Vince was not playing. We had to clean the sink daily, the toilet and shower stall and sweep the floor every week and mop every other week. The one time I complained he let me know that there were many things he was willing to compromise on, but a bathroom he was willing to actually use, was not one of them. So I learned to clean like black people, which actually seemed to be on par with how Ms. Pillsbury cleaned. Or at least I thought I had until it was time to clean to move out. That was seriously hardcore. But when we finished, it looked like it had when Mom had cleaned it when we moved in.

On move out day, Laura and Ben rented a bigger Uhaul than they had when they moved Lauren in, so that we could all get Lauren and Vince's things to their house. Since Vince had a lot of stuff and he was flying out of Columbus to go back to his hometown to Texas, Lauren and I took his stuff back to Lima with us and put it all in his room. Once we got unpacked, our parents got us together to talk to us about the accident and the future. "Now, since that bastard was at fault in the accident, his insurance covered both of your hospital stays and all of Finn's physical therapy. Unfortunately because Finn's truck was an older model, even though it was fully rebuilt, they still would only give him forty-five hundred for it." Mom told me gently.

I kind of pouted a little at that. I'd been looking at the new Chevy Silverados…no way was I gonna get one of those for what they had given me for the other truck. Burt probably read my mind. "Now, I've got a line on a twenty-oh-three Dodge pickup. I can look it over and make any repairs…have you good to go in a couple of weeks."

"Okay…cool." I cheered up at the thought of spending time with Burt working on a new, old, truck. Plus the full steel frame of the other old truck had saved me and Lauren, so having another older truck did appeal to me on that side. While I was mentally going over the perks of having the older Dodge over the newer Chevy, I realized that I was doing that avoidance thing the therapists at school all said was my go to mode when I got scared. I concentrated for a second on remembering the coping with fear strategies and unfortunately one of them was sharing the burden, so I asked the question that was troubling my and had been since I’d passed the midterms. "What…what about next year's tuition? I can't afford to go if I don't have my scholarship. I mean, I had a lot of loans already."
Mom and Burt exchanged a long look. "Umm...Look. Puck said that we could tell you if you asked, but only if you asked." Burt began.

"What does Puck...they paid my tuition?" I asked quietly. I don't know how I feel about that. "I don't know how to feel about that. I mean, I know if the situations were reversed, I'd do the same thing for him. But I also know that he'd punch me in the face for doing it without telling him."

Mom chuckled. "You know that Puck thinks of you as a brother, Finn. He loves you...he did this for you because you had a need and he had the means to fill it. Besides, Noah thinks we don't know that he has been funneling extra payments to our finance company for our mortgage...but we do. We also know that even if we tell him to stop he probably won't."

She sounded a little befuddled, but I just nodded. "You helped him and Sarah a lot when his mom was working. You let me stay friends with him when all the other guys' parents wouldn't let them hang with Puck anymore. He loves you as much as he loves Ms. Bekah."

Burt pulled her close, into a sideways hug. "Which means that you need to remember the same things you just told Finn." He smiled against her cheek.

That made me chuckle. "Then again, it could be Mercedes doing it, right Papa Burt."

Laura drew us back to the discussion we'd been having before I asked about school. "That is all the good news. Now, as you know Mercedes' uncle and Antwan Berry are handling the litigation of the case against Mr. Paley. They are moving forward on that, but Mr. Paley's lawyers are throwing up roadblocks whenever they can. The average wait on a case like this is twelve to eighteen months."

"Can we afford to pay our lawyers that long? I mean, I don't know about Cedes' uncle, but Rachel's black dad charges more than any other lawyer in Lima." I asked concernedly.

All four of the parents smiled. "That's not going to be a problem this time. Both Attorney Harris and Attorney Berry have agreed to handle this case on a contingency basis. They said that if they get less than a million for each of you, they will waive their fees."

I gulped. "Can they do that?"

Lauren just laughed. "Lawyers can pretty much do what they want to do when it comes to their fee schedule, Finn. I hope that they take that clown for all he is worth."

Once they had brought us up to speed on all that was going on with the wreck and its aftermath, Lauren and I headed out to go and spend some time together. Lima was pretty dead that summer. Mike and Tina were staying in California to go to summer school, which Lauren explained wasn't like what I'd had to do to pass seventh grade, it was so that they could get ahead, which made sense. They would want to get out of school as soon as they could so they could either work with Puck and Cedes and Sam or so that they could see who our super famous friends could put them in contact with. I almost wished we could have done something like that. But I could never stand to study year round like that. In fact we hung out with the younger crew for the first couple of weeks. Aidan, Justin and Kim had both graduated. Aidan was going to go to University of Pennsylvania for college. He had gotten a scholarship to play on the Quakers. He had a bunch of different camps during the summer, much like Lauren and I had had the year before. Kim was heading to UGA in the fall and Justin was going to Oberlin. Whenever we were all together the three of them picked our brains for what they should concentrate on when it came to their needs for school.

As soon as my physio therapist cleared me to use a real mouse again, I spent a whole night holed up in my room playing The Sims. It was great to get back to them. I hadn't had the time until I got...
home...and then it was kind of impossible to play with the laptop pad mouse rather than an actual mouse. Lauren and I had a pretty cool routine. She and I chilled every day, we'd make love just Finn and Lauren. I didn't want to play Finnie until I could follow every command she might give me. So we were just loving each other regular style...which was still as awesome as always. Three weeks into the summer, Vince came home, where he belonged. He made Lauren and I get back into a real routine. Soon though that routine had to be revised while Lauren was at a really major wrestling camp run by Kurt Angle, who actually had won Olympic gold in real wrestling a long time before he became a not real wrestler on TV. Then it got changed again when Vince met Sasha Cooper. She was pretty cool. She went running with us at least twice a week. She could run pretty fast considering that her legs were so short.

When Puck, Sam and Cedes were in Lima for Cedes' older brother's wedding, they had dinner with every single New Direction that was in town. They told us that they were recording a Christmas, Hanukkah...holiday...album and they wanted to do a song where all of us would sing together. "Cede had the idea to make it completely acapella." Puck told us with a proud smile. "We're going to donate the proceeds from the single we all do together to Toy for Tots...because every kid should get gifts that time of year. I know most synagogues have programs in place to make sure that kids get Chanukah presents if their parents can't afford them but this way we'll be able to help a lot of people with some shit we were doing anyway."  

"So what's in it for the rest of us?" Lauren asked with a wicked grin. No one but Lauren would ask even if some people might have been thinking it.

Cedes rolled her eyes. "Well there it the fact that you'll be in the video we'll be doing to bump up the sales so we can help more kids. You'll each have your names noted in the liner note, which will give you something that can be put on a resume if you want to do anything in the music or film industry...or if you're trying to interview at colleges or audition at performing arts schools. The juniors and seniors who had been freshmen and sophomores when we'd graduated high school were all over that. Granted we were all in from the word jump just because, who says no to doing something for a kids charity. That would be a dick move.

There was universal agreement, but the thought of going completely without musical accompaniment kind of scared me. "Maybe we should see if James and Blaine can hook us up with the Warblers. The New Directions, we almost always sang over instruments."

The triad exchanged one of their 'we're talking it over without saying a word' looks and Sam turned to me and smiled. "That's a damn good idea."

Their tiny new PA Hudson shoots off a bunch of texts and she nods. "Mr. Anderson says that he will get in touch with a Sebastian, Wes and David...just let him know when and where. I sent back the dates of the Ohio state fair, since you three noted that the day before it begins would be best. As soon as I get the location for the studio set, I will email everyone."

"Wow, she is super-efficient." Adams whispered reverently. I'd noticed that since he'd moved in with his cousin, he'd grown to appreciate the quieter more intelligent kind of woman...the kind he'd always avoided in high school.

Cedes eyes cut over and she full on growled. "If you fuck with our PA and make her quit, I will gut you like a fish and raise Robyn like she was our own."

Adams put up both his hands. "I know better than to mess with one of your people, Jones. You were evil when your people got hurt in high school...now you got money, power and respect behind you. I might be a jock, but I ain't stupid."
Which made us all laugh at him. But I did get his point. When Cedes spoke to people in that tone of voice, no one with any decent amount of good sense crossed her. Hudson was good and totally efficient. Within, like, two days, she had us all informed as to the details, she had arranged flights for those of us who were further afield. Thankfully by the time we all got together in Columbus, I was back up to my normal hand writing and they considered me to have ninety-five percent of my fine motor skills back. The actual studio time was fun. It took us a minute to get the arrangement just right, but eventually, it was awesome. There were enough voices to ensure that the sound was full enough that the instruments weren't missed. It was a complete choral piece and that made us all feel completely important and yet part of the bigger picture. Hell, I even got along with Jesse St. James. He came up to me during one of the breaks. "Finn…I guess I need to start by apologizing. I believe that you and I fell in love with two different sides of the same girl. Rachel…she brought out something good and more kind in me, she brought out the very worst in you. Unfortunately for me and I suppose fortunately for you neither side was fully Rachel, if either side was really her at all."

"You are wrong Jesse. She brought out your worse traits too. The kindness and stuff you eventually were able to show to her…you could have that with everyone. She wanted it only aimed at her. The competitiveness and overall asshole-y-ness that she built it up and she nurtured until it went from bad traits to absolutely friggin' toxic levels. The you that you were when you were with Rachel, you would never have come out here and done this. You'd have never sung as part of a chorus. You'd never have apologized to me. You're growing…we're growing up…finally. I should apologize to you too. I wasn't kind to you either. I know that a large part of how I treated you was the whole you and Rachel thing but that wasn't really the main point of jealousy for me. You are a freakin' awesome singer."

"Yes, I am…thank you for acknowledging that fact." He interrupted to say magnanimously.

I rolled my eyes. "Anyway, I love to sing and singing and football were the only things I was ever considered good at. I knew that I wasn't as good as Artie…but that didn't really make that much of a difference because I knew that Mr. Schue wouldn't put Artie in a lead. He was too biased against anything different. I was never sure if it was his chair or his 'black' singing voice, but either way, no way would he take my chance to sing…or more to be praised for my singing. You, you were a real threat to my chance to have leads and to the attention that I got from Mr. Schue. Though, I guess that I shouldn't have had all of Schue's attention like I did. His or Coach Tanaka's. My therapist said that neither of them were capable of being good teachers or role models and therefore their attention wasn't healthy.

St. James nodded. "That is a very salient point. Shelby gave me attention, but she did keep it strictly on my talent. Schuester was far too involved in your lives and relationships. Shelby was good at nurturing my competitive side too, but purely from the professional aspect. I do wish she had made me learn academically…but que sera sera…she's learned from the mistakes she made with me. Some of the baby NDs told me that she now has study sessions where she actually helped them with homework rather than just getting some nerds to do it for them and using that time as extra time to work on their vocals."

"She really did that?" I couldn't believe it. "Well, even there she was still a step above Schue. He didn't care about our grades at all. He didn't even teach us the real science behind music, like Ms. Cochran did. I only had her for a year, and my vocals were tons better. The same thing for Santana. But before she came along it was Cedes and Artie that actually taught us anything. I mean, it was Art-man and Cedes that taught most of us to read music, and I would have failed so hard sophomore year if not for those two, but God, Artie would have cut us if we'd suggested that he just do our homework for us. I don't even want to think about what Cedes would have done to us." I shivered in terror at the very thought. I'd been scared of her before I found out how ruthless she really could be. I would cut off my own hand before I would cross her after I knew.
Jesse looked at me funny. "You find Mercedes Jones dangerous. I will admit that I was completely wrong about her work ethic, but she has never truly frightened me." I know that I looked at him like he was crazy. Because he quickly explained. "While she possibly weighs more than I do, she is small in stature. I just don't believe that she could really beat me up."

"Her brothers are both tons taller than you and they are smart enough to realize that she can and will knock your legs out from under you and you're better off if she does it literally." I warned. Probably, he only didn't know the truth of that statement because he had always batted at her. He'd never come at Kurt, Sam, Puck, Artie, Tina, or Brittany. The rest of us she cared about but she knew that we could take care of ourselves if revenge was needed or whatever.

"I am, however, not a fool. I am taking great care not to allow Lopez, Puckerman or Evans to get me alone."

I could only agree that he was at least being wise on that front. Puck had finally worn Cedes down to the point that she said that he could give Jesse something Sam's cousin from the web show told him about...a Texas wedgie. I still thought he was being foolish in not realizing that Cedes was way more dangerous than her boys...but to each their own. We both agreed that we accepted the other's apology and let it go at that. I really did feel better and more mature for finally having talked things out with him, but other than music we didn't really have that much in common. When Matt came over to catch up with me, I was really happy to talk to him. We'd seen each other when OSU and UVA met on the field, but we hadn't had a chance to do more than wave and smile. Still as soon as he came over, Jesse used that as a chance to escape what had started to become a kind of awkward exchange.

The rest of the recording process went pretty smoothly, Granted, I was more positive than ever that I had no desire to make that my career. I mean, it was fun and everything, but no way did I want to do that all the time. But Cedes, Puck and Sam they loved it. They were already talking about which songs they already had written and recorded should go on their second album and how many songs they had gotten written in their 'tour bus'. That was really awesome for them. When we were done singing, Vince, Lauren and I introduced them all to RayRays. Right before it was time to go back to school, we headed to Chicago and made the video for the song we'd recorded in Columbus. The whole Hollywood industry was way weird to me. We were filming a winter wonderland type of video in the middle of the summer. We literally walked in to the soundstage in shorts and tee shirts and almost froze before we could change into the grey sweaters and black pants and the pretty grey sweater dresses and heeled boots. Man we were tired as hell by the time we finished all the different takes but Commune was happy so we were all happy for them.

Seemed to me like that summer was boring enough that it should have dragged along...but instead I found that we were moving into our new dorm room a few blinks after we'd moved out of the old one. Probably because while we only really had two exciting things happen, I was still ridiculously busy with all the physiotherapy and working with Burt to rebuild the truck. We'd all been assigned to the same dorm again. Park-Stradley Hall was pretty cool and since it wasn’t a freshman dorm, the rooms were quite a bit bigger. It even had one wing that had coed floors and the three of us in that wing on the eleventh floor. Our rooms were almost directly across the hall from each other. Vince and I were roommates again which was awesome. We didn't even have a bathroom that we'd have to clean ourselves again which was even more awesome. Lauren had her own room again, she had had to fork out extra to be in the coed wing, because the rooms in that wing were doubles. She had gotten the room though, maybe because she'd gotten the school a lot of attention. Thanks to her OSU was talked about on the regular national news and not just on ESPN for our wrestling program, they loved her and gave her even more scholarships and she already had a serious surplus...still having her so close and her making the two full beds into one huge bed well, that was awesome too. The summer had been great, but I couldn't put into words how awesome it was to be able to be back at
school with my bro and my girl.

Chapter End Notes

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.
Please drop me a quick review to let me know that you're still reading and to let me know what you are hoping to see happen.

TTFN,
Anni
Proud (Heather Small), Made in America (Jay-Z, Kanye West & Frank Ocean) & Day ‘N’ Night (Kid Cudi)

Chapter Summary

Santana, Artie & Cassidy

Chapter Notes

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Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.
Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
What’s Your Fantasy by tdminor86
(Maybe if we all read and beg in reviews, this author will give us more of this one.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Proud (Heather Small)
Santana PoV

I had had an awesome freshman year of college. It had been difficult, probably more than I had anticipated, but rewarding in a way I hadn’t expected either. The classes gave me challenging coursework, but they were pretty boring. I got through them all with some damn good grades, so I was happy as hell. There were times when the classes weren’t as boring, usually when I got to prove to some rich, entitled assholes that this chica was not some barrio baby. I knew my shit. I had been raised at the knee of my mother…who I taunted a lot about not having ever had a real job, but she’d volunteered for so many organizations and run so many campaigns, events and fundraisers than I could ever have kept track of. She had drafted me into helping her every step of the way when I was a child and I had learned a lot more about nonprofit management and fundraising that I had thought.

My favorite times in my business classes were when I got to extrapolate from what I’d learned back then to slap some sense into some idiot who swore that having a rich daddy made him somehow made him a captain of industry even though he was still in his first year of college. However, even better than making the ‘men’ in my business classes cry were the times in the music training and ear classes that I shared with Rachel ‘I’m so crazy even Ted Bundy looks at me like I’m just batshit cray-cray’ Berry that I got to go head to head with the Hobbit and slap her ass back down. Unfortunately, I got too cocky. I stopped watching for one of ManHand’s dumbass schemes. Even though I should have known that one was coming. It was bound to happen just because of the way Professor Horowitz handled his class. He explored the musical theory behind different musical genres then he’d call us up and we could hear the music, he’d give us the lyrics and boom we were expected to knock out a performance on the spot. The closest you came to applying the theory and making your vocalizations match that of the original vocalist, the closer you got to an A.

Berry hadn’t appreciated the whole ‘no time to properly practice or warm up’ thing. If I hadn’t
known better, I would have believed that she had never encountered the ‘here, sing’ method that seemed to be in the repertoire of ever vocal music teacher worth their salt. I mean, yeah they all taught us how to practice and develop our ‘instrument’ but they also knew that we needed to be able to bring our ‘instrument’ to bear at a moment’s notice as well. She did okay the first time she was called forward to handle a madrigal piece. But when I proved that I could handle a piece from a seventeenth century Italian opera, she almost lost her shit. It was alright, though because Professor Horowitz was pretty careful not to have us sing anything near the same genre or even time period. The next thing he had her sing was a ragtime piece that she absolutely slaughtered. The originators of the genre were spinning in their graves. It was bad. It was so bad, I felt bad for her. it didn’t help her at all when a few days later I got called up for the blues. That was the week before MTV Movie Awards. I guess for Crazy the positive things he had to say about ‘Retha and him having me tell them about my experiences…was just too much for her to bear.

A few days before finals, I got an email asking me to see Tisch’s dean of students. I knew that my shit was tight, so I didn’t let it bother me. Though I made sure that I was dressed well, in a nice light gray pencil skirt and a tailored fit light blue blouse. When I got there, I didn’t have to wait very long before I was being shown into Dean Janet Girardi’s office. “Ms. Lopez…I am sorry to take you away from your studies. However, I needed to speak with you on a matter of unfortunate gravity.”

I looked at her keeping my face completely blank. I hadn’t done anything on campus that could get me in trouble. So I wanted to remain noncommittal rather than getting automatically defensive. “And what matter is that Dr. Girardi?”

“We have received a complaint about Professor Horowitz. It has been brought to our attention that he shows gross favoritism in his musical theory and ear training class, your section in particular.” She continued.

I gave her a look, “I have to admit, I haven’t seen anything like that from him. He seems very fair.”

“Yes, well. I suppose that he would seem fair to you since the complaint stipulates that you are the one he shows undue attention and bias towards.” She challenged. “The complainant further states that you and Mr. Horowitz are engaging in an inappropriate relationship.”

“Dr. Girardi…you can stop right there. I have never even seen Professor Horowitz away from the classroom or his office. I have never had an inappropriate relationship with him. He is a married man who talks about his wife at least twice every class period and one can easily hear his love for her in his voice.” I returned.

She looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language. “Ms. Lopez, you are a beautiful young lady. You are very obviously intelligent, well-spoken and charming. I looked over your grades from the class in question and you have never had a graded assignment lower than an eighty-nine. Your grades for your in-class work are never below an A.”

I knew that I shouldn’t but I interrupted her, in a very Sue Sylvester manner. “Yes. That is all true. I am beautiful. I am young. I am intelligent. I am well-spoken and I am charming. I have very good grades not only in Professor Horowitz class but in the business and economics courses that I am taking in Stern. I also excel in my work as a background singer for the music group KAMA.” She looked a little startled at me biting back at her. “I will not ask you for the name of the ‘person’ who made the complaint. I’m sure that you have a system in place that assures them anonymity. She wouldn’t have made the specious claim otherwise. I know that there needs to be anonymity to protect those who are telling the truth from reprisals and revenge for doing so.”

“We do. It provides an added measure of protection and comfort. Especially for those who report wrong doings of a criminal nature and for our younger students.” She stipulated unnecessarily.
“Yes, well…you can protect the sanctity of your complaint system because I already know who lodged the complaint. She has quite the history of this kind of behavior. Rachel Barbra Berry has been throwing temper tantrums like this since at least freshman year of high school.” I explained reasonably. There was no reason to get mad at Dr. Girardi. She was being used. I just wanted to make sure that she knew who was trying to use her for their own ends. “Let me add that your complainant has pulled this before. When she was a freshman at the high school we attended in Lima, Ohio Rachel Berry got upset because the show choir director at the time gave a solo to another person. She made allegations that he had an inappropriate relationship with a student. While those allegations were ultimately false, he was found to have purchased an illicit substance from one student and shared a different illicit substance with another before Ms. Berry ever heard of him so he was fired. In that case I guess we’ll say no harm no foul since he had done wrong. But the next time she felt threatened by another student’s talent, she sent the young lady, a foreign exchange student and guest in this country, to a crack house. Had the house not been raided by police the day before, who knows what danger Sunshine would have encountered. Rachel Berry has a history of being willing to destroy anyone she feels is a rival. At McKinley she knew better than to come at me. I was protected both by the fact that I was very willing to resort to physical violence and by the fact that I was a Cheerio and imminently more popular than her. Now that those protections have been removed…if I beat her like she deserves, I’d be arrested. I’m entirely too busy to be a cheerleader or to make a massive amount of friends on campus. But I am still more talented than she would ever admit to herself. So she has to come at me through you. She also wants to punish Professor Horowitz for not prostrating himself at her feet and worshiping her. This false complaint, which she will have carefully worded so that you cannot say that she made a false claim, would accomplish both.”

“I see.” She said quietly. “I was not aware of Ms. Berry’s history of falsifying claims of this nature.”

I shrugged. “One of her fathers, Antwan, is a great attorney. Rachel knows how to make her claims in such a way that she hasn’t said anything actionable. Her most egregious actions a few more than I even mentioned were done while she was protected by an enabling choir director.” I soothed. “They wouldn’t have been added to her permanent record.”

Dr. Girardi stood officiously. “Well, I will not make that same mistake. Casting aspersions on her classmates and professors simply because she is forced to confront a few hard truths, is not something we here at Tisch School of the Performing Arts are willing to overlook.”

I simply nodded. I knew that for all her faults Rachel wasn’t actively stupid. She would have covered her ass. “I’m sure that you know how to handle it. I will give you several points that you can add to your notes on this interview to conclude your investigation. I am perfectly willing to submit copies of my coursework for an impartial third party to evaluate. Additionally, I am personally in a long term, committed, polyamourous relationship. I have only really been attracted to one man in the last several years. My primary gender preference lies with women. Artie and Brittany are more than enough for me and I would never hurt either of them by sleeping with a professor for grades I can achieve without lowering myself to that level of pitifulness. On top of that very salient point, Professor Horowitz seems to really and truly love his wife. It would be tragic if Rachel’s lies were allowed to negatively impact his career, my education or our individual relationships.”

“I will make note of your relationship status in the investigation file. I do not believe that it will be necessary for you to resubmit any of your coursework. Your songwriting workshop leader already went on record as to your vocal talents and abilities.” She stood and gestured that I should do the same. “I am sorry to bring you in to discuss this, but we cannot afford not to investigate all claims of staff or faculty wrong doing.”

After she ushered me out of her office, I had to rush to get to my last music theory and ear training class of the semester. As I walked I thought everything through. If Rachel made this play, no way
she didn’t go for the full monty. She’d have dropped innuendo and rumors among the student body too. No sooner had I completed the thought than I heard Artie’s special text notification. I looked down and chuckled at his message. ‘So do me and Britt have to worry about your prof…or did Rachet get mad at you again?”

I read it and couldn’t help but smile. I loved the fact that he hadn’t doubted me for a single minute. ‘Funny, Artman. You know that you and Britt-Brat are all I see.’ I shot back. In that moment I knew that I didn’t need a plan to push back the bull shit ManHands had spread. We weren’t dealing with Limans any more. We were dealing with people who had probably dealt with their own ‘Rachels’ and were here to get the training they needed so that they could become stars in their own rights. Best of all, I had made some good friends among my classmates. As soon as I slid into my usual seat, one of them came up to me. There were not a whole lot of students of color at Tisch, so the Hispanic and Black students pretty much banded together, not really exclusionary or anything, but we knew each other and we watched out for each other. I shared Professor Horowitz’s class with two other women of color. Marquetta was black, to be honest she reminded me of a younger, thinner Monique, no not regular Monique…but Monique’s character from the Parkers.

She slid into the seat beside mine and started right in with the gossip. “Girl, did you hear the shit done started goin’ round about you?”

I nodded. “I got dragged into the Dean of Student’s office just to make sure that there was no truth to the bullshit.”

“Of course there isn’t. The way you love up on your Artie whenever you two run into each other on campus…we all can see that. You know what it is. You’re too good for some of these trifling heifers. One of them is getting their hate on, trying to fuck you in the game because they were used to being the shit in their hometowns, now they are here seeing that they are some minnows in this big ass pond.” She stated bluntly.

That about summed Rachel Berry up, I thought to myself. “Well, whoever it is, their bullshit isn’t getting traction like they had hoped it would.” Melisandre Oroja, the only other Latina in the class said quietly as she joined us. “Horowitz is almost famous around here for being one of the good prof…not a single complaint before and this one is completely false. Good God, with your schedule, if you didn’t live with your boyfriend and girlfriend, you’d never see them. Besides, according to Bruce-the vocal department assistant- Mrs. Horowitz looks like the love child of Salma Hayek and David Duchovny. No way is he stepping out on her.”

“Damn, she sound hot.” I couldn’t help but mutter. We all shared a laugh. The three of us had talked enough that they both knew that I said just what I thought. Nothing that came out of my mouth surprised either of them.

Rachel came into the room looking way too smug. Rather than taking a seat and seeing how her grand plan played out, she just had to come over and ‘gloat’. “I am surprised to see you still here. One would think that such a reputable institution would have rid themselves of a base, talentless, slut like you when you attempted to earn your grades with your body instead of your voice.”

I just looked her dead in her face and laughed at the irony of her calling me talentless, when she only started this shit because she was intimidated by me. Marquetta D’Leecia Brooks, however, was not so amused. “Oh, so you’re the pathetic, jealous, limited talent hack of a wack job that’s been spreading the bullshit about my girl Tana. Guess we should have known it was you. Every time you get called on to sing something outside your comfort zone you drop the ball. You’re the only fool who would want to get rid of Horowitz and Santana.”

Melisandre smirked. “Oh you mad boo…so sorry. But your attempt at slander didn’t work. No one
who knows either Horowitz or Lopez believes you. Sucks to be you.”

Before Rachel could do more than sputter and try to come up with something witty to say back, Professor Horowitz came in and started the class. “I’m sure that some of you are surprised to see me teaching today…but the truth always comes to light. I have never, and will never have inappropriate contact with a student, nor will I show favoritism. That being said, we still have a hundred years of music history to go back over and only fifty-five minutes to do so. Let’s get to work.”

The study days and finals flew by. The only real break to the monotony of finals week was when we all skyped with Baby Puckerman for his birthday. Trouty told me and Artie what the family had gotten Jakey for his sixteenth birthday. The present really was kind of awesome. Each set of parents had put a grand towards his gift and then Commune finished off the rest of the cost of a brand new car. If it weren’t for the fact that I knew how much it meant to ‘Oliver’ to be able to afford to help one of his siblings like that, I’d have probably thought he was trying to do a humble brag. But Lady Lips was very much not bragging, he was just sincerely happy to have enough again. Though he was so scared of being poor again, enough might not ever be enough anymore…but he was working on that. By the end of finals week, I wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of school for as long as humanly possible. I skyped with my parents before they headed out on their cruise, but my exam schedule hadn’t left me enough time to make even a short trip home before it was time to head to Arkansas of all places for the first stop of KAMA’s tour.

The RVs were kind of boss. They didn’t have KAMA on them or anything, but they were tricked out RVs. Unfortunately, Gwen hadn’t been able to get one that was ACA compliant all the way around, but the interior was workable. ‘Retha, Trouty and Puck had the main bedroom, but the table and bench seats did some kind of miraculous transformation thing into a queen bed that was just the right height for Artie to be able to get in and out of it without help, which was great because having to have Puck and Sam get him in and out of the RVs pissed him off quite a bit. Still we had a blast. Hudson claimed the passenger seat, which was able to recline into a twin bed. We had the three RVs and an equipment trailer and the drivers kept us safe in addition to being our drivers.

By the time we’d been on the road for two weeks, we’d established something of a routine. The drivers preferred to drive at night and rest during the high traffic times of the day, which worked pretty well for the rest of us. The nighttime was usually spent in the separate RVs either making love with our respective partners or actually sleeping. Luckily for Hudson and Brock, there was a harder than curtain partition that came out of the wall and wrapped around our bed when it was down. When the area was a banquette, the partition was locked in place in the wall behind it. After we all woke, freshened up and got dressed, we stopped for breakfast and usually switched RVs until we were all pretty much divided by section and practice. The singers in one the band in another and the dancers in the third. I’m not really sure that the dancers did any real practice. I know that they played a bunch of board games and their bond became pretty much rock solid. We actually practiced. Harmonizing on different notes as Mercedes played with her range. Xena was working with me and Damien to improve our ranges. Adam’s range was almost as good as Hummel’s, it just started lower and didn’t go up as high.

After our lunch stop, or while Brock, Jacob and Van were resting we usually had a big group practice and then we did cool shit like learn to play other people’s instruments. Justin was determined that we should all know how to play piano. “You can’t call yourself a musician if you don’t play piano…even Dave can play some.” He chided when he found out that neither of the Dam brothers, Puck, Sam nor I could do more than play a scale. Trust and believe that by the end of the summer we knew at least seven songs each. Justin might seem like the new Mayor of Nerdville, Artie was his predecessor, but he was more than serious about teaching us the instrument he loved most. He, himself was learning to play the harmonica, but that was a self-study. Dave was teaching Artie to play the drums and bass. Retha was trying to relearn to play her violin and Erica was forcing her to
learn to play the bass. Trouty and Puck had tried to teach their woman to play the guitar, but that had ended up in them adjourning to their bedroom. No one learned anything at all that day except what we already knew. Mercedes was not a screamer, but Puck sure as hell was and Sam sure talked a hell of a lot.

The days and weeks flew by. I skyped with my parents at least once a week. The setting behind them going from their cruise ship’s stateroom to Papi’s office after they got back. They had had a blast on their cruise and we thinking of making it an annual thing. Apparently they considered themselves true empty nesters at that point, even if I hadn’t fully moved out. I couldn’t complain, they were discussing completely redecorating the house including the possible installation of an elevator to make things easier for their son-in-law…so I was golden with that. It was kind of weird talking to them almost like they considered me like a really real adult. As mature as I believed myself to be, I wasn’t sure that I was ready for them to consider me a grown up. Still, no matter how grown up they might consider me, they were the first people I called when the nominations for the VMAs broke. I almost felt as elated as if the it was me up for the awards. It was awesome.

The next time we had a break in the schedule, Artie, Britts and I headed home and spent a few days with our families. But almost before I knew it we were on the road again. We saw parts of the country that I would never have ventured for any other reason. But they each had their own beauty. Our last gig was the Iowa State Fair then we went to Chi-town and filmed the video for the charity single off KAMA’s Christmas album that would be coming out that November. We spent the weekend in Lima because once we left LA we’d be going straight back to the house in Harlem since classes started two days later. LA was really nice. While Cedes, Puck and Trouty were handling their business, Artie, Britts and I made love in the awesome hotel room we’d been assigned. We went sightseeing…we went back to Rodeo Drive and I had to money to shop. It was great. I bought my mother a Hermes scarf from the actual Hermes store and my father got a Cartier Tank Française from the real Cartier store too. I was determined to save up so that the next time I walked the famous shopping Mecca, I’d be able to get something for myself too.

After the first couple of days, we were all busy. It was amazing all that we learned getting ready for the awards show. The show was bigger and since the song was a stand-alone number rather than part of a medley from a soundtrack it was a much bigger deal. We were, fortunately, in very, very good hands with the set designers and the show’s producers. They didn’t mind explaining to us all the wheres and whys and hows. It was pretty epic. Sunday got there before we knew it and boom we were preforming in front of the live audience and they loved every second. It was pretty fucking awesome to look out and see people like Beyoncé and Jay-ZTaylor Swift and Katy Perry and Snoop Dogg rocking out and singing along to our song. The first one they won, I lost my damn mind. I screamed and cried. By the time the last award of the night was called and they won the Video of the Year…I was hoarse, happy but hoarse. Backstage went kind of silent when Puck made his comments about the cops. I didn’t see why it was so controversial. Since when did cops become sacrosanct? We live in America; we can say whatever we want about any government institution we want. It’s a right protected by the constitution. If cops didn’t want to be called out for bad behavior, maybe they should look at the criticism they receive and learn from it. I felt the same way about the NRA. Then again after the Gifford and Sandy Hook shootings I’d acknowledged that our congressmen were too sucktacular to ever do anything about the gun problem in America. I personally felt that there should be a dick check before a guy could purchase more than one gun. So many of the gun nuts were just over compensating for their two inch pricks…if we made it a law that a dude had to have at least eight inches to buy additional guns after the first one, it would certainly help the problem. After Puck, ROUS and Trouty finished with the post show interviews, we all went to the Warner/Atlantic Records party at Buddakan. Well, we all went, but Commune didn’t stay very long. None of us blamed them…They had some celebrating to do.

Made in America (Jay-Z, Kanye West & Frank Ocean)
We had the fucking summer to remember that summer after our freshman year of college. That summer was like the best paid, on the job training anyone could ask for. It may not have been calm, we were on the road too much to begin to call it calm, but it was still surprisingly relaxing. The RVs were alright; they would have been better if at least one of them would have had a wheelchair lift. But beggars could not be choosers. Despite the trouble I had getting in and out of the RVs they were unexpectedly spacious inside. The bed that we folded out to sleep on was a lot nicer than one would have believed and me and my dolls made love every night. It was an amazing summer for anyone and the second to best thing about it all was that where ever we went there was at least a little time built in to take in some of the local sights.

In Little Rock we got to see one of the most important schools in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It was a solemn moment and I noticed that Mercedes had cried a little. The Dam bros, Cassidy, Dave, Simeon and BaeBe were all very choked up too. But then again who could blame them. The rest of us couldn’t really understand the depth of feeling that places like that brought forth for them, but they meant a hell of a lot to anyone who understood that we really were all created equal. After that we visited the Clinton Library…which was really kind of boring. I mean, he was the president that got the blow job heard round the world. One would think that his Presidential Library would be a little different from the one on campus.

After that we were in Chicago, and we didn’t get to see anything on that trip. We were only in that city for forty-eight hours. But after that we were in Georgia and Atlanta had the High Museum of Art, Sam’s favorite stop, the College Football Hall of Fame, Puck & my favorite, the Centennial Olympic Park, where the dancers all seemed to fall in love with the play-in-able water feature, the MLK national historical site, another one of those ‘if you don’t cry you just aren’t human’ spots. Then we performed in a very historical theatre. That was pretty awesome in and of itself. No matter where we went there was something to see. I don’t know who planned the itineraries, but they made sure that we hit someplace historical, some place artistic and some place fun where ever we had the time. There was a museum in Manchester Tennessee, St. Louis Cathedral and the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans. On the way from Houston to Austin, we swung through Dallas and we visited the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza honoring JFK. We missed out on Austin’s sights, we just didn’t have the time since we went to Dallas first. But we made up for it in L.A. We finally got to see the Tar Pits. Sam and I started quoting ‘Volcano’ at each other but no one else knew what we were talking about. That was kind of sad it was a good movie, it should have gotten far more acclaim. We wanted to do a winery tour, but several of us weren’t yet twenty-one, so we had to skip that for a while. The space needle and Kurt Cobain’s home were pretty awe-inspiring, so they made up for it in its entirety. Sturgis was a hoot and a half. It was like being inside nineteen fifty-three’s ‘The Wild One’.

I had a great conversation with a vet who rode a chopper but was paraplegic too. It took him some training and the bike was specially tricked out, but the man had said that having the ultimate sign of his independence back was worth it all. I found myself inspired to finally learn how to drive myself. Working with KAMA meant that it wouldn’t take much time before I’d be able to afford one of the special vans that would allow me the freedom of not having to rely on others for transportation. It still tripped me out that my friends were paying me for helping them out. I mean, I just played when they couldn’t, got some great shots and film for their website and social media streams and helped them where I could. They were my peeps; I’d have been doing those things for them for free. But in addition to getting tons of experience in documentary and music video style filming, I was also making major bank. Mom was helping me with doing the smart thing with it, what I didn’t need for school or basic living expenses was tightly budgeted. With the way she had me saving, I’d be able to retire at thirty…if I wanted to. It was cool though, she built new camera and computer equipment into my budget since I’d need them for classes. I loved that woman.
She wasn’t just handling my affairs though. She had Tana and Britts following her money advice too. It was fun talking with them about high yield CDs and that kind of thing. It all felt very, very grown up. I had to admit, as much as I loved making love to my Dolls, there was something even more amazing about our conversations. We could and did talk about anything. Santana knew tons about old movies. Her father’s parents had loved them and when she spent time over there as a child she had watched a million of them. Brittany, despite her feelings on violence, was a repository of knowledge of action movies. Between the three of us, we had subscriptions to Hulu, Netflix and Amazon Prime, so we were always introducing each other to great movies, and discussing them until they were completely dissected. We loved sharing our favorite flicks with each other and finding new ones that we all liked.

When we weren’t practicing, or watching movies, or making love or chilling with our peeps, we talked about our ultimate dreams. I wanted to be the next Spielberg, Santana was determined to take J-Lo’s crown and Brittany was just happy to be with us every step of the way. Rainbow, however, had decided that Brittany was her protégé. I didn’t want to be the one to tell her that Brittany kind of didn’t have the focus it took to be able to work with just anyone. Of course, shortly after I had that thought, Brittany looked at me and smiled. “I won’t be working with everyone. Just our people. Commune and Tana…maybe Tina but Lord Tubbington still isn’t sure which route she wants to take.” Well that shut me up nicely. Cedes, Puck and Sam and Tina would certainly completely understand Britt-Brats unique way of thinking. Plus, I could count on all of them to watch out for her if she was touring with them without Santana or me.

But that was at least a few years in the future. After we left Lima we headed to LA for the VMAs. That was a really great experience. I managed to listen enough to learn quite a bit about set design and was even able to learn some of the subtle differences that came into play when looking at stage verses screen sets. I also found it intriguing that the warm, humid weather actually made several of my constant low level, almost so consistently there that they were just normal for me, aches go into remission. When I told Santana and Britts, they both agreed that after we finished college we’d settle in the land of sun and stars. The show itself was pretty awesome. Performing in front of that many people was one hell of a rush. Then when KAMA started getting awards…it was just too perfect. I knew that Rachel was somewhere watching and I couldn’t help but dance a mental jig at the crow that was stuck in her craw at all of Cedes success. When Puck made his comment about the cops and the way seeming surge in the number of unarmed black men they’d been shooting in recent months, I threw up a praise hand. I knew that a lot of people would assume that he was just saying it for Cedes, hoping that the words would have more meaning to white America if they came from his mouth rather than hers. I knew that he said them because he really feared that Jake could easily be the next name on the ever growing hashtag list. I couldn’t fault him for that fear either. I had tons of black friends on twitter and facebook…that was a huge and growing fear among all of them.

I looked over at the producer who controlled the beep button that kept the delayed broadcast somewhat clean and noticed that she was smirking in wry agreement. It took me just a second to get closer and over hear her answer to one of the other producers asking her why she hadn’t used the beeps. “I black out profanity, not truth.” She returned simply. I smiled. Cedes would probably quote Dumbledore saying that the woman had chosen to do what was right over what was easy. I just thought of the power that media and movies had. I wanted to be worthy of that power like that woman. I could only hope that she wouldn’t suffer for her choice. For that matter, I hoped that Puck wouldn’t either. After the interviews…which were a lot more journalistic than one really would have expected, the entire gang headed to the after party. Cedes, Sam and Puck snuch out as soon as they could. They were probably getting pretty desperate for some alone time. That had, technically, been one of their biggest performances to date. And they hadn’t been able to have some quality time after it either. That was alright. The rest of us had enough fun and made enough connections for all three of them. After all that’s what friends were for.
Growing up in the ATL as a young black woman, it was a surprise to no one that I loved music. It may have shocked a few people exactly how many different genres were present in my extensive music collection. I had everything from Bessie Smith and Ella Fitzgerald to George Jones and Patsy Cline…from Tiffany to Christina Aguilera and from LL Cool J to…well the most recent incarnation of LL Cool J, what? Dude had a long and prolific career…Still I had all of that and everything in between. My life hadn’t been a barrel of monkeys, but I always had had music. I grew up with my grandparents in a very black area of College Park, which was a suburb of Atlanta. It wasn’t a horrible place to grow up. Grandma was always singing, even if she couldn’t really sing very well. Granddaddy was a rolling stone who came home every night and pretended like he was the best husband ever. I didn’t know my mother or her parents. When I was just a few months old she showed up at my grandparents’ house, told them that as much as she loved me, she couldn’t take me with her or my father would never stop harassing her. She disappeared a few days later. If she didn’t send unmarked birthday and Christmas cards to me every year, I’m pretty sure that the cops would have busted my father for her murder.

If granddaddy was a rolling stone, then my father was a piece of work. He’d joined the military right out of high school…but was ultimately too sociopathic and basically crazy for even the Marines. It takes an extreme level of nuts to be too crazy for the Marines. Then again how crazy and abusive do you have to be to make your ex feel like she has to drop her months old daughter at your parents house and make like she was in the witness protection program just to be free to live her life free from torment and abuse. Sometimes I wonder what she was like. I knew that she was white, because I was very clearly bi-racial and my father, grandmother and Granddaddy were all very much black. My grandmother had taken a picture of the two of us together before mi Madre disappeared. It had to be carefully hidden whenever my father came around, which wasn’t really that often…he had other women to woo, wed and terrorize…but I could tell from the picture that Mom had light blonde hair and her eyes were the same shape as mine.

I suppose I could have pined for a mother, but the truth was that Grandma more than fit the bill. Don’t get me wrong, she was very much old fashioned when it came to things like dating and wearing makeup and dresses but she was a very caring and nurturing woman. Probably a little too nurturing. No matter what my father was accused of, in her eyes, he was completely innocent. He was her baby and her only son. As far as she was concerned he did no wrong. If it weren’t completely sacrilegious, she might have believed that he was the second person to walk the earth with the ability to walk on water. But she did give me all the mothering I could ever want. She wasn’t alone though. My father’s sisters were alright too. Aunt Tanisha was confused…well she was either confused or she was just plain greedy and refused to acknowledge that fact. She had two children by one guy when she was really young, but then her next relationship was with a chick with four grown sons of her own. While there is nothing wrong with being bisexual or gay, Auntie Nisha was pretty cray-cray with how she ‘was gay’. She stopped wearing women’s clothing, even bras, which would have been fine if she wasn’t a size G cup. She got a buzz cut and tried to act like a dude all the damn time. Then when she went back to men, she had a breast reduction…walking around braless for seven years had made her tatas very angry…her wardrobe went totally girly. Like the only jeans she wore anymore were skinny cut that showed off her ass and thighs. She started wearing pink for Christ’s sake. My father’s other sister, Kateria, was as girly as anyone ever hoped or dreamed to be. Take for example her career choices. She went into chemistry and graduated with a degree in chemical engineering…why? Not because she’d always dreamed of chemistry or even liked science. Nope…she majored in chemistry because she was pretty sure that there would be a lot of men in her classes. When she didn’t find ‘the one’ in her classes, she found a great job and went to
work earning more money than three out of four of her parents’ siblings combined. But when she
found her ‘Mr. Right’ and got him hooked up in a ball and chain in a lavish wedding I was forced to
be a flower girl in, she quit her extremely lucrative position to become a housewife. Did I mention
that they didn’t have kids and wouldn’t until after their fifth anniversary. Her husband believed that it
was just God’s plan…no it was Kat’s she was on the shot for the entire five years. She wanted the
housewife lifestyle, but not the kids to put a crimp in her ‘ladies who lunch’ thing she had going on.
But she made all the right connections and her husband had sailed up the corporate latter of the
Charleston area like whoa…so she was successful at what she had set out to do.

In fact, it was Aunt Kat that gave me my start. Grandma and Granddaddy were very determined that
I would live life a certain way. High school should lead to college which should lead to a nine to five
career. The thought off a nine to five office job gave me hives. The Christmas break of my junior
year of high school, I was arguing more and more with Grandma and Granddaddy about things like
picking a college and planning for the future. It all came to a head a few days after everyone got
there for Christmas. Grandma was quoting to me once again the requirements for getting into
Spelman or Clark or GSU and I lost it. Thankfully I didn’t say anything stupid like ‘you’re not my
mother’ or anything really hurtful, but everyone could tell that the excrement had hit the propulsion
device and we needed to retreat to our respective corners. Aunt Kat had a talk with my grandparents
and next thing I knew I was spending a summer in Charleston. During that summer Uncle Nadir
gave me my first turntable and mixing board when we were at a store looking into music lessons I
could take over the summer. Grandma had made sure that I learned to play the piano, as a lady
should, but I took after her in the inability to sing…like total and complete in ability to carry a tune. I
couldn’t even sing in the shower or there was a very real danger that my loofah might have come to
live and strangled me with its cord.

Uncle Nadir was pretty cool. He wasn’t very tall or even very handsome, but he was one of the most
interesting adults I’d ever met. He loved science and worked as a research developer for a
pharmaceutical company. But the think about Nadir Patel was that he was totally devoted to the
thought that every person should follow their dreams. “If you realize that the dream you reached
wasn’t all that you thought it would be, you can always pick another dream.” he told me as we
walked through the store. “I’m following my dream. Now, I know that your Aunt Kat thinks that
we’re following hers, but they actually just happen to coincide.” He said with a wicked grin.
“Besides the best relationships exist when the people involved all share similar or related dreams.
Now you want to go into the music biz…let’s find you your ticket.”

It took us an hour of walking around that store and talking through how I felt about things like being
a guitarist or a saxophonist or even a drummer…but I kept coming back to the turntables. The
thought of blending and creating new sounds that way seemed to speak to me the loudest. Poor
Uncle Nadir left Music Center almost a full grand poorer, but he swore up and down that he’d come
expecting to spend even more. It wasn’t even all that hard to find someone to work with me as I
learned how to run my gifts and mix old and new to create something that was undeniably me. DJ
Anthanio was cool people. He worked clubs, weddings, bar mitzvahs, parties…whatever, but he was
really into music on the whole. He’d didn’t mind teaching me everything I wanted to know and he
was married, so there was no skeevy behavior or even the worry of it. It was the single best summer
of my life.

When I got back to Atlanta, I was able to parlay my new found knowledge into a very lucrative side
hustle. I djed birthday parties, mostly for classmates. Then word got around and soon I was doing
school events and bigger parties like graduations and house parties. The money was pretty good and
it felt great to be able to give back to my grandparents. The three of us were also able to reach a
compromise. Since I really didn’t think I could do a four-year college and all that jazz…they agreed
that they would leave me alone if I got an associate’s degree and I could even stay at home while I
did. So that was what I did. I worked every party and event I could get booked for and by the time I
got my paper, an AA in music composition from Georgia Highlands College, I had saved up enough to move to out on my own. I moved into a nice little apartment in Decatur and was really starting to make a name for myself. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to get into the club scene at that point, but still DJ Ca$$ was a name that was getting really acknowledgement online and in the ATL party and rave scene.

It was through that scene that I met Dave Briggs. He was cool…a really nice guy and he didn’t act like he was only talking to me to get with me. It was kind of a nice change. We talked for hours sitting in a Waffle House drinking coffee until the waitress was ready to boot us out. he had been touring with a band for a while and they had gone on hiatus indefinitely. So he was moving to New York to see if he could find another band to call his own. He and I exchanged contact information and we talked and texted a lot. But I was still shocked when he called me up not five months after he left to tell me about a band he had just been offered a position in for a group that was on the lips of everyone…KAMA. I’d seen SongBird with my grandmother the day after Christmas and developed a total hetero-crush on Mercedes Jones. She was just too cute. And her voice…my GOD…the Lord sure knew what he was doing when he gave her those pipes.

“So, I’m not just calling to let you know that I’d found a nice soft landing here. KAMA wants a turntablist. I’ve told them about you and they asked if they could meet you. They are interested in finding somebody good, somebody around their age and most importantly somebody real.” Dave told me with a smile I could hear over the line.

“And since I failed kowtowing and got an absolute zero in yes man 101…you thought of me?” I shot back with a smile.

“Yeah, pretty much…so you want me to set up a facetime meet or can you get up here?” he sounded as excited as I was feeling.

I looked things over. I was scheduled to do four parties that week and if I needed to move to New York, then that money would be hella necessary. “I’m booked pretty solid every night this week. Can we Facetime or Skype and then I can come up next week if they want me too? Would they be okay with that?”

He worked it out and it turned out that they were fine with that. Sam in particular was totally understanding. “It always sucks when they make you travel for ever for an interview with no guarantees.” Ms. Jergen of Warner Music Group had her secretary, Lacey call me to schedule the FaceTime interview. When I’d asked if it was really okay that I’d selected to have the long distance interview, Lacey told me what Sam had said and that he too preferred the interview my way.

That Thursday afternoon I experienced the strangest audition/interview I’d ever encountered. First I was introduced to Mrs. Jergens. She was really pretty and quite nice but she only asked me like four questions. Then she simply said that she’d listened to my mixes on my website and felt that I was up to the job. Then she introduced me to KAMA.

From there it was kind of conversational, but still kind of an interview. It was weird. Over all though, Sam was cool, Mercedes tried to keep things somewhat professional, but she was fighting a losing battle because Puck was just funny. A story had broken overnight about a TV star and his kiddie porn collection being found and the dude was arrested and then released on twenty thousand dollars bond. Every question Puck asked me was in the vein of “if I beat the shit out of that guy …maybe with a baseball bat or ya know a blunt object of some kind…would I be arrested, or lauded for performing a public service?”

When I replied that nothing was illegal until one got caught and that I would happily drive the getaway car if he wanted to go get him, I knew that it might not be the correct answer, but it was the
one that had the benefit of being what I honestly felt. “In fact, I actually would probably go a little further. Any pedophile should be forced to endure at least three sessions of anal rape with an unlubricated baseball bat. If they can withstand that without needing either medical or psychological treatment then we can allow them to be chemically castrated and return to society. If they can’t they should be extradited to a state with the death penalty and summarily executed.” I said bluntly and honestly.

Puck looked at his partners and smirked. “I like her. Let’s give her the job now.”

Sam nodded and Mercedes smiled. “I like her too and I think that she would be a great fit…but we interviewed and auditioned everyone else for like ever…Cassidy, you are the only DJ we’ve really talked to for any length of time.”

“Yeah, but we knew all along with most of them we were just trying to do things the way you saw on that one HR manager site. Well, this time we’ve got a grand total of three days before she has to be up here to get the employment paperwork done.” Sam pointed out. “And we need to figure out her relocation stipend and you know it has be generous because first and last month’s rent is not a joke here.”

I started to remind them that I was still on the line, but figured that if I stayed silent I might just help my situation more. It really did. “That’s easy, we give her twenty grand to get up here and we’ll get Mills or Frankie to help her find a place. they can go on the same day as she is up here to sign the paperwork. Boom. Done.” Puck said determinedly. “Then when the band is all out in LA again, me and Cass…we’re gonna go and wreck shop on that Sal Markling dude, like whoa.”

Mercedes sighed. “Okay, I will agree to everything you just stipulated except the felony assault and object rape.” Her tone was stern. She glared at both of us until we agreed not to beat the shit out of the douchebag. “However, if you want you can totally hit at him him on social media all you like.”

I had already been doing that. I thought to myself wryly. We ended the call shortly thereafter and I soon received an email confirmation of the date and time of the official new employees meeting and the stipulated relocation stipend. I shot them back the one page that required my signature and took the last deep breath I got to take for a while. The rest of the weekend was a whirlwind. My grandmother was determined that I would dress like a total Buppie for the meeting and with Aunt Kat agreeing with her I was dragged shopping. It was a very, very, very rare thing that my grandmother who’s ides of high end shopping was to go to TJMAXX rather than Ross ever went to Lenox Square Mall…the toi-toiest mall I could even claim to know about…but that is exactly where we went. Aunt Kat even drove the four and a half hours from Charleston to go with us. They invited Aunt Nisha, but whether she considered herself straight or gay it would have taken a joint act of congress and God to get her to go anywhere near a mall voluntarily. I respected that about her.

By hour three at Lenox, I was wishing that I was as firm in my convictions. I was dragged to Bloomingdales and Macys and Neiman Marcus before I finally took them into a smaller fashion boutique called ZARA. It took me less time to find the perfect outfit in that store than it had to find the right department in the big department stores. I left the ‘boutique’ with a cute little black tube midi dress with a gold zipper that went from hem to neck in the back and a bright blue blazer that had the same brassy gold zippers at the pockets and which was cut lower in the front than the back. It was very cute. Best of all, even with my very firm budget of three hundred bucks, I still had enough for a new pair of shoes. I dragged the two of them back to Macy’s and there I found a great pair of royal blue suede, four inch heeled ankle booties that were perfect…they even had zipper detailing. We made one last stop by Victoria’s Secret, because no new outfit is really complete in my grandmother’s book without some new unmentionables to go under it. It only took two minutes to find a blue satin push up bra and panty set. It was days like that when I really wished that I had
inherited some of Aunt TaNisha or Aunt Kat’s boobage. But I’d been cursed, or blessed depending on who you asked, with C Cups not G, though it could have been worse. Grandma was finally pleased with my ‘go to meeting’ outfit and declared that we were done. If the shopping for all eternity wasn’t bad enough, we got caught in the very beginnings of game day ATL traffic. By the time we got back to my apartment we were all tired. Uncle Nadir was sitting in my living room with his old college roommate who had gone into law.

“Alright, now we met with your landlord and he is willing to terminate your lease without you having to pay out the rest of the agreement.” Mr. Hutchinson said with a smile. Ronald Hutchinson was a gorgeous man, tall, dark mahogany skin, a bright, winning smile. If he wasn’t old enough to be my father and completely, very happily married, he would have been my perfect guy. But I had literally known him since before I could remember. Supposedly there had been a time he had taken me out of church and changed my diaper while Grandma read the announcements because Granddaddy didn’t know how. In fact, despite the fact that Aunt Kat and Uncle Nadir had been working for the same company at the time…it was Mr. Hutchinson who introduced them. “You will owe them for next month, but not the remaining six months thereafter.”

That was a big relief. Before I could say so though, Aunt Kat looked at Uncle Nadir. “Were you able to get her a nice hotel room?”

He nodded. “Yes dear. She is staying at the same hotel near Morningside Park that we stayed in last year when I took you to see ‘A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder’. Her flight leaves Sunday afternoon and returns Wednesday morning.”

“Wait…you guys got me my plane ticket and hotel?” I asked shocked.

Uncle Nadir laughed. “You know that Kat and I see you as our oldest baby…even if technically you are Rockey’s child. I told you when you were sixteen to follow your dreams. Of course, we’re gonna help you do that.”

“Thank you.” I gave them both hugs.

Aunt Kat smiled. “No need to thank us. It is as much for our benefit as for yours. You know Momma would have been calling us fifty-leven times a day worrying about you if you weren’t somewhere safe and sound.”

We all shared a laugh. It was so funny because it was so true. Granddaddy, Aunt TaNisha and her boyfriend Bradley joined us leaving her two eldest Max and Nara to watch Aunt Kat’s two boys Felix and Franklin while we all went and celebrated my new job. Before I knew it I was in New York, meeting with my new bosses and they were honestly good people. I met my bandmates and there was an almost audible click…like I was the last piece of a puzzle that had just fallen into place. Dave and I were already cool and then I met Erika and she and I had inside jokes in the first ten minutes. Justin was adorable. He was geek hot and tall. But he was also just enough younger than me to feel like a little bro rather than a prospective love interest. The pay was more than anyone would ever expect for what we did especially since this was my first job of that kind and I wasn’t a huge name. The benefits package was pretty stellar. A hundred percent match on our 401K and IRA elections. We would have what pretty much amounted to ninety percent free medical, dental and vision care, maternity leave would be paid at eighty-five percent for three months, but we would be contractually obligated to work for them for at least six months after we got back…which seemed very fair. We had both long term and short term disability and even workers comp. But the most amazing part of everything was what wasn’t stated in the paper work. We could take other engagements as long as we were always available for our primary job. I’d still be able to build my rep as DJ Ca$$ and have the best job in the world.
That evening Dave, Erika, Justin and I all headed out together to have dinner and get to know each other. The three of them already had apartments around the city. Justin grew up in Chicago but had moved to New York when he was accepted into Juilliard. Unfortunately, he was not the high stress, high pressure kind of guy that he needed to be to thrive in one of the world’s most demanding performing arts schools. He was living in a basement apartment at his godmother’s house on Long Island, but he was really hoping that he would be able to move into the city at the soonest. Dave lived in Newark and was cool with just commuting. It wasn’t that long a drive and millions of people did it every day. Erika was currently living in a rather dangerous area of Brownsville, but Puck had found out when they were talking and he wasn’t happy.

So it was both Erika and I that were lead around by a black woman in her mid to later twenties with pretty hair that seemed to be the grow from her scalp kind of her hair. She introduced herself to us simply as Mills Mayzer and explained that she was an apartment broker and real estate agent and Puck’s aunt by marriage. The latter actually calmed me more than the first part. I would have to have been on my best behavior for her if she was a big city real estate agent…but she was the family of a person who was pretty quickly becoming a friend. That made it easier to be myself and state what I wanted. We met Mills at the café in the lobby of my hotel, since I was the one most likely to get really lost by myself in the city. Rather than taking us out the door immediately she sat us down and asked us what we were looking for.

“Are we looking for one apartment that you two would share as roommates, or one apartment for each of you?” she started with a small but bright smile.

“No offense to you, Cassidy, but I would like my own space. I grew up in a three-bedroom house with my parents and seven siblings. My current apartment is basically a shoebox with a door, but it’s still less crowded than home.” Erika answered honestly. “I would like someplace with a decent kitchen. Right now I have one of those two burner range things and a tiny fridge.”

I shook my head. “I’m not offended in the slightest. I was going to suggest separate apartments because my family will be helping me move and will probably want to visit quite often. I would actually like to see if I can afford a two-bedroom place so that there will be enough room.”

Mills made some notes. “And your budgets…what are you comfortable spending per month?”

I gave that some careful consideration. I was determined to make the most of my opportunity and good fortune, which meant that I would need to save for the future as well. “If at all possible I’d like to stay under three thousand a month. But I need it to be somewhere safe and somewhere nice.” I finally said. It seemed reasonable. That amount was a little more than double the rent I’d been paying in Decatur.

Erika weighed in that she was good with a one bedroom and was happy to stay as close to twenty-five hundred a month as she could on rent. “I need someplace with good insulation. I practice when I can’t sleep.” She admitted.

Mills smirked but she made a few notes on her iPad and soon we were heading out the door. She took us to a pre-war building on Lenox Avenue that had a two-bedroom apartment that was nice, but I just wasn’t an exposed brick kind of person. Plus too, maybe it was the southerner in my, but that place felt very haunted or something to me. After looking at a few more places, Erika became the first one of us to find her apartment. The six hundred square foot, one bed-one bath apartment had been freshly painted and the dude had refinished solid wood floors throughout. Erika fell in love with the open renovated kitchen with stainless steel appliances including a dishwasher. The fact that it was near both Morningside and Central parks and the building had a doorman and everything was all just icing. She would actually be renting a condo from a guy who was being transferred to Sweden for
three years and he wanted to keep the condo so he was renting it rather than selling it. He and Erika signed a letter of intent to lease her the apartment for exactly twenty-five hundred a month. Later she would meet with Mills to pay the deposit and sign the real lease.

When we left the twelfth floor, west hundred and tenth street apartment, we had lunch at a really cute little food truck before resuming our search in hopes of finding me the right place. It took us another two hours, but we stuck to it, after all I flew back to Atlanta the following morning, but I finally walked into an apartment and, like my place back home, I just knew that it was for me. The apartment was only seven blocks from Erika’s and was just a block over from Morningside Park. According to the super, who gave us the tour, it had just undergone a total and complete gut job renovation. The place even came with a washer and dryer and a big ass TV mounted in the living room. The rooms weren’t huge, but they would each fit a queen sized bed. There was plenty of closet space and the kitchen even had a dishwasher. It was a more traditional kind of apartment so before we left there I had to do a whole slew of paperwork including a rental application and background check agreement deally. There was a deposit and several fees to be paid, but around four that afternoon, we left that building with the keys to apartment seventeen.

If I had believed that the time between the interview and the meeting went quickly, that was nothing compared to the week I had between the Wednesday I flew home and the start of rehearsals for KAMA’s first drop party. Granddaddy picked me up at the airport and I told him all about the pay and benefits and the apartment. “So, it’s all amazing but I only have like four or five days to pack up my apartment here, rent a U-Haul or something and drive it to my new apartment in Morningside Heights, I think they said was what they called that area of Manhattan.”

He laughed a little. “CassieBean…you know that your grandmother and her church ladies always have your back. Oh…ummm you won’t need a U-Haul. Jeanine says that since all your furniture here is second or third hand anyway, you are going to get new furniture up there. She had a garage sale at the church and sold all but your bedroom suite. Well actually she sold that too…but Reverend Jacobs’ son isn’t going to pick it until after you leave.”

“What the…” I groaned.

“Yup…got your place pretty well packed and cleaned and almost ready for you to turn in the key.” He assured me.

“But…I was only gone for three and a half days.” I breathed. “How did she get all of that done in three and a half days?”

Granddaddy’s big, boisterous laughter filled the car. “Your grandmother started planning all of this from the moment you called to tell us that they offered you the job. She is the one who told Hutch to make sure that you didn’t have to use too much of your relocation budget to get out of your lease.”

“My bedroom…Grandma didn’t pack up my bedroom did she?” I choked out.

He gave me a serious side eye. “Your Auntie Nisha wouldn’t let her; Nisha did that room for Jeanine.”

I didn’t want admit how relieved I was…but I did not need my grandparents finding my assorted collection of vibes for every occasion. That would easily have been the most embarrassing thing ever. “Oh, okay. So what is there left for me to do?” I asked.

“Well, we left it to you to pack up all your techie-mixing-dj stuff. Not even Nadir knew enough about it to risk messing something up and he is the family tech head.” We shared a laugh and then I felt the air get heavier, “Rockey called. He didn’t seem to know that you had moved out on your
I shrugged. “He didn’t. It’s been almost eighteen months since he actually asked to talk to me when he called. I didn’t see any reason to tell him when I moved out.”

He nodded. “He’s living up in Virginia. We could arrange to see him when we drive you up?”

“Naw. I’m good.” I said honestly. I had no need of Rockey Carter in my life and he didn’t need me. To be honest, I think we both liked it that way. “But you and Grandma, you guys are taking me?”

He let the Rockey thing go. Granddaddy always did know exactly when to let things go with me. “Yeah. The three of us will be in one car with all your work equipment, and Nisha, her three and Bradley will be following in his Suburban with the rest of your things. Now we’ve mapped it and its gonna be a fourteen hour drive.” Which since Granddaddy was in charge meant that we’d be driving it straight through. “I figure if we leave here at eight or nine Friday night, we can get there by eleven Saturday morning…get the stuff carried up to your apartment and once your bathroom is setup you and Jeanine can go and look for furniture, while Nisha, Bradley, the kids and I start getting your place together for you.”

I knew that a lot of people wouldn’t like the thought of their family moving all their shit like that, but I found it to be a relief. When I was younger, Rockey would make me go with him during the summers to show that he was the freakin’ father of the year or something. He would move us in with whichever chick was deluded enough to believe that they could change him. On more than a few occasions that ended badly. I’d have to pack up my stuff in one hell of a hurry which would mean that I would leave something behind…usually something important to me. Some of the chick were nice enough to mail teddy bears back to me at my grandparents’ house, but I lost a few things that were pretty irreplaceable. Over time those summers had left me with a real disdain for moving and for my father. “I…Thanks Granddaddy.” I whispered.

“Anything for our girl.” He smiled gently. “You know…I’m not one to look back. But I know that if me and your Grandma had done a better job with your dad, maybe he could have really been a good dad for you.”

I knew that both he and Grandma had a lot of guilt over the way Rockey had turned out, but I couldn’t blame them or let them blame themselves. “I don’t know. You raised four kids including me. Only Rockey turned out crappy. So three out of four ain’t a bad record.” I joked. “No for real, Granddaddy, the only person that can be blamed for Rockey’s choices is Rockey.”

He nodded. I think that was the last moment of quiet I had until they left New York to return to Georgia the Sunday afternoon after we moved me into my new apartment. My furniture was delivered and set up for me. Grandma and I had gone to a place near the apartment called Fredrick Douglass Furniture. She had let me pick out what I liked, just chiming in on things like materials that would last longer and what was real wood and what was wood veneer. It was really adult. The store wasn’t super expensive, it wasn’t what a southerner or suburbanite might think of as a large furniture store, but the prices were good and the quality was quite nice. When I had the couch and accent chairs picked out, Grandma called Granddaddy and Bradley. “I need y’all to find a Lowes and get ‘Sporty Blue’ paint from the Sherwin Williams HGTV Ovations line of paints and paint that wall opposite the TV.” When I picked out my bedroom suit, sticking with my preference for black painted wood over natural wood tones, she texted them to also grab a gallon of the Alexandrite from the same line and paint the wall the bed would be going on in my bedroom. Then when I picked a more traditional wood set for the guest room she had him grab something she called Reflecting Pool for all four of the walls in there. I had gotten storage beds in both bedrooms, I was a firm believer that there was no such thing as too much storage, especially since there was no linen closet in the apartment.
There were a couple of smaller pieces that I needed like a bookshelf to go under the TV, but we finished up at that store and headed to Macys. There it was a matter of picking bedding and curtains. I don’t even know when she managed to measure the windows…but she had all the info we needed. Thankfully I had plenty of towels that I brought with me.

By the time they left I had gone grocery and sundries shopping and had a really nice air mattress to sleep on until my furniture and mattresses and everything was delivered. I missed them almost as soon as they left, but I was following my dream and it was everything Uncle Nadir had assured me it would be when I was sixteen. The fact that KAMA, Sam, Mercedes and Puck had enabled me to do so…I would walk through the fires of Hades to make sure that they were the most successful group to hit the music industry in a very, very long time. I put my all into everything I did for them from that first event, their drop party to ever stop on their tour that summer…they were such good people they made sure I had some time with my family when we were in Atlanta. By the end of the summer there was nothing I wouldn’t do for any of my band mates and definitely for my bosses. It was one of the best summers of my life and it was still only the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

We've all heard the news about Mark Salling. I firmly believe that the character of Noah Puckerman would kick the absolute crap out of the actor who portrays him. That thought is the only one that is keeping me able to like the character.

Please Review. Let me know if you would like to see/read the back stories of the other band members. Let me know whose summer you'd like to take a peek at next.

Thanks in advance for all the reviews. (No that wasn't snark or sarcasm, I'm turning over a new leaf in the new year.)

TTFN,
Anni
****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Scream My Name by amber2011

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 I hope your Laptop is better soon!!!!

RIP David Bowie, Alan Rickman & Rene Angelil.
The world is less without your talent, goodness, kindness and joi d’vivre.

Just the Two of Us (Will Smith)
Azimio PoV

There was nothing anyone could ever say to convince me that college was easy. Seriously, school was hard as hell. High school didn't prepare me at all. Rae taught me time management and how to really study. If I hadn't started rolling with the New Directions senior year, I'd have been even more fucked when it came to college classes. I had managed to test out of my foreign language requirement, but since I found languages really easy to pick up Rae talked me into taking a foreign language class every semester to pad my GPA. That shit worked too. I managed to end the year with a three point oh which got me two new academic scholarships and following the conditioning tips I got from Hudson, Evans, Puck, Howard and Zizes I ended up in what my coaches considered 'peak physical condition' and that got some funds added to my athletic scholarship too. The extra tuition money was awesome because that meant that more of what I earned during the summer could go to help Rae with the household expenses.

It also meant that I was in a better position to get all of Little Bird's needs taken care of. My parents were helping and the Jones hand me downs and Mercedes' shopping addiction all meant that she was kept in clothes, even though she grew like a weed. I got a Costco membership just to buy her diapers, wipes, formula and the other stuff that she went through a ba-dillion of every week. Babies were expensive. By the time school let out for the summer though, she was almost one. Teething had been horribly unpleasant. Robyn had started babbling at four months and making sounds that sounded like words a week or two later. I don't know if it was the fact that whenever we were in Lima and her mother didn't get her for her weekend, she spent tons of time with Amara and Amaea Jones and Beth Cochran, or what, but according to her pediatrician she was about two months ahead on all the stuff she was already doing. At ten months old she already clearly called me Dada and Rae she called Re-Re. She listens when we read to her. She loved bath time, but then she wanted to toddle around naked. At eleven months she was already walking, even when she wasn't holding on to anything. She had mastered the whole round rod/round hole toys too.

My baby girl was tall for her age too. She was taller than both of the Jones twins, but considering that Sloane Evans was already the same length as Mara and Maea and he was only six months old, those two were officially going to be about as tall as their big sister. Still, I was holding out hope that
she got her grandfather's height, like I'd gotten mine. Unfortunately, my grandfather hadn't been anywhere near as tall as my father. I'd barely gotten to six feet tall, and had been so happy when I touched the six-foot line. But my little girl was in the ninety-fifth percentile for height and only the sixty-fifth percentile for her weight. I was praying that the Lord wouldn't punish her for the ass I had been and everyone would see her as being as beautiful as I did.

When we moved back to Lima for the summer, that was when it really hit me. Alizay had talked a good game in the courtroom about how she loved Robyn already and everything, but she only picked her up when it was convenient for her. From May to August, Alizay only picked Little Bird up a grand total of four times and two of those time she brought the baby home after an hour or so. But Ms. Mo'Nique was another story. She called every weekend and asked if she could meet us at the park I took Robyn to so that Robyn could play with several of her cousins who were under two too. I always said yes. Usually it was just me, Little Bird and Karofsky…and I was pretty sure that people got tired of seeing two big ass men making fools of themselves to amuse a little girl. It was a few weeks before Little Bird's first birthday that Ms. Mo'Nique gave me some shocking news. "I'm so glad that you've got this baby." She said as we laid out the big ass blanket I always brought so the babies could rest on it rather than the ground. They weren't ready to use the equipment so I usually brought some fun things for them to play with. I liked bringing Robyn out to get some air and sunshine. Whenever I was working, she was stuck home with Mom, so I liked to get her out when I could. "Zay is already pregnant again. This time she don't even have a clue who the daddy is."

"Man…that's like whoa." I returned. "I thought the doctor told her to wait two years before she had another pregnancy?" I remember him saying that in the delivery room and acting like I was gonna have anything to do with her future pregnancies.

Ms. Mo'Nique shrugged. "She should have waited until after she graduated. She ended up repeating her junior year. I just know that she's gonna drop out this time."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry." I didn't have any clue what else to say.

"You ain't got nothing to be sorry for. You probably wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole after your Little Bird got here." One thing I loved about Ms. Mo'Nique was that she was breathtakingly honest. "I'm sorry that she ain't doing right by this little one."

"I don't know if it matters. Me and Little Bird, we're doing alright. She has my mother and my cousin and her godmother and her god-grandmother and you. She's got plenty of good female role models. Heck, over Christmas one of my female friends spent forty-five minutes telling her that she was going to help her learn to have better taste that either her momma or me. Granted, I'm pretty sure that I'll be limiting Robyn's exposure to Santana to an hour every three months in the future…but still lots of good female influences."

"Good, that's good." She nodded. "I don't know if I should be included in that or not…but I'll take it." She smiled. Alizay and Robyn both have her smile. It's a beautiful smile. We didn't talk of anything else heavy after that. Just easy things like Little Bird's birthday party, which Ms. Mo'Nique brought the cousins to as well. Momma and I planned the party and we had it at the same park I always met Ms. Mo'Nique at. There were burgers and hot dogs and chips and balloons. It was a great little party. the bakery gave me a very small one-person cake for her to blow the candle out on with the sheet cake I ordered for everyone else. Sam, Mercedes and Puck couldn't be there, but all the NDs that were in town were there for it. Which meant that Beth was leading the kids in games that she designed for them. That kid was a total Quinn some times. Of course Mercedes had gone behind my back and paid for the cakes and balloons, probably because she felt bad for not being there. Don't know why, she was working and we all understood that. The three of them had sent her a butt load of toys and three pairs of special earrings just for babies. Those earrings were real as hell
too. The first set was a pair of one carat diamond stud earrings, the second a pair of pearls, and the third were a pair of ruby, birthstone earrings. And I didn’t even mention the outfits and hair thingies.

In a turn of good and bad fortune, I had to work stocking that night. So after the party, my mom sent me home with the baby for both of us to take a nap. I didn’t feel too bad about not cleaning up after the birthday party, Karofsky and I had taken care of the set up. All the party table clothes were either Wonder Woman or Batgirl and all the balloons were either Storm or Vixen…though I did notice a few Tiana ones that I didn’t remember ordering, Jones was a determined little, sneak of a godmother. For that summer, I was working at Sprawl-Mart usually either in the sporting goods or electronics sections. It wasn’t hard, but the nights we had to all be there for stocking were always so very long. But those nights were great too, because the graveyard shift differential brought me up to almost twelve bucks an hour, so I’d work them as often as I could get them. Unfortunately, that didn’t happen all that often, they tended not to give the seasonal workers many perks. The next day Dave and I took Little Bird back to the park, but he was real subdued.

"Man, what's wrong?" I finally broke down and asked him. "You’ve been kind of quieter since you got home, but today you're just plain morose."

"I think…Shit Zi…"

"Language man. If she says that word, I'm washing out your mouth not hers." I chided.

He at least had the grace to apologize. "Sorry man, but...I've been trying all summer to come out to my dad and it's like he won't hear me."

I rolled my eyes. "Have you said the words, Dad…I like sex with men?" I drawled. "Because you are a round the bush beating mofo. It took you half an hour to tell Coach Tanaka that you didn't want to be on the offensive line."

Again he looked sheepish. "Not like that. I mean, I keep telling him that I may not be well, ya know…normal."

"Dude, being gay is perfectly normal. Did you know that there have been people who like the same sex as long as there has been written history?" I shared with him something I’d learned in my history class. "No wonder your dad is running scared. He probably thinks that you’ve gone to college and gotten deep into that Fifty Shades kinky shi---stuff."

Karofsky gave me a weird look. "For real? Because you used to torment Hummel right along with me…now you're all gay is normal."

I shrugged. "Yeah well, you're my man fifty grand. I gotta support you…especially after…man you know what I'm talking about. I figure if I'm accepting and supportive and help you with like your accepting of you then I never have to find you like that ever again."

"God, man…thank you." He muttered. "But I still can't say that have sex with a dude thing to my dad. His head would pop off."

"So just sit him down and say 'Dad, I'm gay'. Just keep it simple stupid." I told him. "Look. Why don't I come with you? You said your dad was fussing because I haven't been over with Little Bird in a while, so after we leave here, we can hit your house and Robyn and I will chill out with you until he gets home and you can tell him." I saw the look that crossed his face. "Nope. I'm not telling him. That would hurt like a son of a bitch, for his own son to fear his reaction so much that he can't even tell him the truth of his sexuality himself. Naw, your dad ain't that bad a person for me to do that to him."
When Mr. K got home, he took one look at me and Dave and sighed. Little Bird had fallen asleep on her blankey on the couch, so we were kind of just looking at the door and talking quietly. "Alright, let's get this over with and when you've said whatever you've been trying to say all summer then I'm waking the baby up and feeding her tons of sugar and playing all those hyper kiddo games and leaving her with you two knuckle heads."

I gestured to Dave to say that the floor was his. "Dad…I'm. well. I mean. You know that."

"For God's sake man, just spit it out already."

"Fine, Dad I'm gay. There Az are you happy?" Dave shot back looking first at his dad and then back at me.

"So wait, I can't use the best mechanic in town because you had a crush on his kid?" Mr. K shouted back. "Damn it Dave. You could have told me this two years ago. But wait…didn't I walk in on you and that Latina cheerleader and her dingbat friend?"

"Yeah…when you see Santana and Brittany making hot lady love and you still can't get a full on, well ya know…you must be a homosexual." Dave huffed.

I gave him a hard look. "Man, I think even Hummel would at least twitch." I was scandalized.

"I twitched." He defended. "Sort of."

"I still can't believe you didn't film it for me. I mean, if you weren't even involved…" I pouted.

He shook his head. "You know that if Abrams even though that you had that on film, your ass wouldn't have eyes or credit anymore."

I couldn't argue that point. Artie was a serious G when it came to his girls. "Can we bring it back to the fact that I had to replace my Avalon because I couldn't go to Burt's garage when the engine gave out because you had threatened to kill his son all because you wanted to do him. Why didn't you just ask the kid on a date you could have saved me thirty grand?"

"SO…what I'm getting here is that you aren't angry that Dave is gay…you're mad at the way he handled the whole realization and coming out?" I asked curiously.

"Of course I'm not angry that Dave is gay. Did he have any choice in the matter?" we both shook our heads. "Exactly. But I am mad that he wasn't just a bully, he was a borderline rapist. I can deal with him being an asshole. Hell, I'm an asshole…but I've never sexually harassed any woman. I am pretty damn proud of that fact. No means NO."

Dave looked shy. He knew that he was wrong for stealing Hummel's first kiss and had totally overreacted with his reaction to how much he had liked kissing the dude. "I've apologized and he said it was forgiven." He finally muttered.

"Yeah well, I'll forgive you when you get me back in Burt's good graces." Mr. K huffed. "I don't know why you thought you couldn't tell me. I've never laid a hand on you in anger…well except for that one time you two idiots broke out Old Lady Jorgensen's window across the street and then ran and hid like little cowards rather than just owning up to what you'd done. Now look at you, all these years later and you're still running and hiding rather than just owning up." With that last little dig at both of us, even though I had learned my lesson back then. Mr. K had kicked my butt then when I told Dad what had happened, figuring that he'd be mad and beat up Dave's dad for whupping me, he had just given me a second whupping and held back my allowance until the replacement windows had been paid off.
The next few days went by pretty quickly. Between work and taking care of Robyn time always seemed to fly by for me. On one of my days off we got together with everyone and like fifty other people and threw our vocals on a track for a charity song Commune was doing on their Christmas album. It was really fun, but having a whole day without my Little Bird was strange as hell. It only got stranger when my parents kept her while I was at football camp for a whole week. They brought her to the apartment we shared with Rae after I would have time to do more than ben gay my entire body and fall into bed in severe pain every night. Rae had happily attended the birthday party in Lima and brought a lot of that stuff back and got them all set up in Robyn's room. She had converted the crib into a toddler bed and set up the potty chair in the bathroom. I would have sworn that Little Bird was way too young for potty training, but Rae got it all handled in the three days I was in Chicago for the video shoot for Carol of the Bells and that following weekend when I was in Ann Arbor with the football team. When I got back Sunday, Little Bird was chilling on my lap telling me all about her weekend when suddenly she slid down off my lap and went to the bathroom. Without any help from me, she totally walked in there and pee-pee-ed in the potty. Rae had a whole song and dance that she did with Robyn to celebrate. It was completely awesome. I was so proud, we went to Sprawl-Mart and I got her a pack of girl superhero panties. I may have posted a picture of her holding the Storm panties with the caption ‘Potty Trained like a BAMF’ on like everywhere. I was one proud Papa.

Before I knew it, I was wrapped up in school and football and classes. Rae and I watched the VMAs which I hadn't done in years. I live tweeted my opinions of everything, making sure that the world knew that I thought that KAMA should have had a clean sweep, winning every award they had been nominated for. But when Puck made his comments about cops, I was torn. I liked to think that I understood the dichotomy black cops faced, but I’d been trained very young that if I was approached by a white cop, I needed to give them Dad's name, jurisdiction and badge number as soon and as respectfully as I could. It was a life and death matter to maintain a very severe level of respectfulness. That just wasn't right. But I was pretty sure that it had saved my ass on more than one occasion. Sam’s comments made me smile too. My dad was always saying that the whole ‘good guy with a gun' saving people was bullshit. In an active shooter situation, the best way to get shot by cops was to think you were going to pull some vigilante shit. Because when bullets are flying the cops might not be able to tell which gun welding civilian is the bad guy and which one is the good one. I started hyping black twitter up to defend Puck from the backlash. It really didn't take much, just quelling a few of the voices that said that a white boy couldn't really understand. Or that he had only done it because of his girlfriend. Once people understood that he was the real deal, they were all on his side, because hell, he was trying to hold us down.

It hadn't been the summer after my first year of college that I'd always dreamed of, that had involved me and Dave touring Floridian beaches, but I wouldn't have traded it for the world.

Loving You (Minnie Riperton)
Quinn PoV

The last part of my second semester at college went by so fast it felt as though I blinked and it was over. While finals were certainly hard, I had a secret weapon. Well, technically two of them. Kat and Topanga were study gurus. They were crazy study schedule Nazis though. Seriously, the second everyone had our finals schedules, Topanga created a spreadsheet which calculated the amount of time we should each spend studying for each of our finals. The total study time necessary to get an A was determined by the grades we had in the class' coursework and the weighted average of papers, tests and midterms. If you had a lower average in a class than you were to spend more time studying for that final. Once Topanga completed her careful planned out spreadsheet, that was when Kat came into play. She took the information from the macros in the spreadsheet and worked that into pure
organization. Schedules, study groups, group leaders determined by who was best in which subject, so forth and so on. Now one would have thought that the study time Nazis would have at least limited their fascism to just we their poor, beleaguered roommates, but nope, Corey at Pennbrook, wasn't safe, neither was Chad at the University of Albuquerque. If the long distance boyfriends didn’t escape the madness, it was to no one’s surprise that James and his roommates were besieged by the insanity too.

But considering that when all was said and done, I ended the year with a three point seven two five, I decided that I was certainly never complaining again. We had decided shortly after spring break that we were all going to remain roommates. So when it was time for the draw, we all entered the exact same information into the database, all ten of us. We managed to get exactly what we wanted. We got back into Bingham Hall, the guys in a three-bedroom suite with an ensuite bathroom. The four of us girls were right across the hall in a smaller two-bedroom suite with an ensuite bathroom. It was the perfect set up for all ten of us. It gave the guys more room and meant that we girls wouldn't have to share a bathroom with an entire floor. We also knew that the next year our chances for living on campus would be slim to none. Freshmen and sophomores were guaranteed on campus housing. Seniors had first dibs at what was left, so we had already discussed looking into the housing market in New Haven. While Kat and Topanga were on a somewhat fixed income, the rest of us actually received more than enough funds from our families every month to afford to rent a house for a year or two. Though James and Victor both felt that the better idea would be to buy a property that we could then use as income for the first few years after we graduated. It was something we should each carefully consider. I was a little leery of how much I enjoyed the thought of buying a property and using that to begin to amass more wealth. It made me feel a little too much like my father.

I shook off that thought and refocused on considering the end of my first year of college. The ten of us had pooled our funds and other resources and rented a storage unit near the University. New Haven Self Storage had climate controlled and weather proof units ranging in size from twenty-five square feet to two hundred. We were not stupid. I called for the rates and once I had a quote, Taylor, James and Drew each called for quotes too. Drew ended up getting us the best deal. While all the per month fees had been the same, Drew had been offered the first month free, and a couple of other specials that weren't mentioned to any of the rest of us. Between the ten of us, we were very smart and very organized. We purchased Tupperware totes and packed our winter and fall clothes, our linens and towels, our heavy boots…just taking home what we would actually need during the summer. We did the same for our older textbooks that we wouldn't need over the summer, again taking only what we needed for our fall classes. When finals were over, we loaded a small U-Haul we rented expressly for the purpose, carefully wrapped all of the TVs and Drew’s super-duper, special computer monitors in bubble wrap, thick mattress covers and a layer of plastic before taking everything that wasn't packed in our cars to the hundred and fifty square foot storage unit that we’d rented. We were very careful to arrange everything so that even if somebody broke through the expensive ass lock we had purchased, they wouldn't immediately see the televisions and other expensive things among our stuff.

Because of the dorm closure rules, we had gotten up really early and packed our individual cars. So once we got everything unloaded and the storage unit locked up tight, we were pretty well forced to say our goodbyes and head home immediately thereafter. The drive back to Lima was very different from the previous one. James and I were each in our individual cars. There was no need to stop for more than food. We were, quite frankly too exhausted to do more than that. We stopped and had a late lunch at a cute little pizza place that was called Mabel's. the food was incredible, but I knew better than to eat too much when I needed to drive. I don't care what Mercedes and Mama Dani said…everyone was susceptible to the “itis, and for some reason, I was more susceptible than most. We spent an hour eating, then walked around stretching our legs and talking. James was going to be spending the summer in Chicago working with his Uncle Steve's technical crew. I was actually
interning at the Patterson, Estes firm in Lima. Mr. Patterson had set the whole thing up for me and I was really grateful. Yale expected its students to do enriching activities over the summers. When I'd mentioned needing to find a summer internship or job during one of his quarterly, 'Russell wants to assuage his guilt by giving you money, do you need any' check ins, Mr. Patterson had immediately told me not to worry about anything. His firm often took in summer interns. I would be one of five that year.

The second half of the drive pretty much flew by. James didn't just make sure that I'd arrived home safely. He helped my unload my car and he had dinner with Beth, Shelby, David and me, before he made the drive up to Cleveland. I really wanted to ask him to stay the night, but I knew that I couldn't. It would be disrespectful of Shelby and Beth, or at least it felt as though it would be. Instead I walked him to his car and we made arrangements to get together the following weekend. "Peaches, I'm gonna miss seeing you every day and every night." He whispered as he allowed his forehead to rest against mine.

"I know." I sighed. "I've gotten very accustomed to your face. But you have a great opportunity with your Uncle, and you're going to forget about the skinny blond pining for you the second he introduces you to Lisa Raye or Chili."

James threw back his head in laughter. "I wish Momma had never told you about those two." He grumbled with a smile. "I'm sure that you had Justin Timberlake and Bieber posters."

I nodded. "Yes, but I got mine in the grocery store line magazines, like normal people. You had to buy yours on ebay because they weren't really in vogue any longer."

"Yeah, well…I may have had their posters, but Peaches, you are who I dream about now." He said sincerely. "When does your internship start again?"

"I have the orientation next Wednesday and then it begins for real the following Monday." I told him with a smile.

"You are going to blow them away." He assured me, easily reading the slight nervousness that I was trying to hide even from myself. "You're amazing and organized…though thankfully not as neurotically organized as your roommates." He teased.

"No one…not even Kurt is that organized." I returned.

He raised an eyebrow. "You must not have ever seen his closet. The boy organizes his clothing by season, then type then color then material…it would have been scary if it weren't really damn efficient."

"Wow." I breathed. There was nothing else I could say. Though I was sure that Santana would have made a comment about how he hadn't spent enough time in the closet for his to be that well organized. "I hate to say good bye, but you have another three hours on the road. Call me when you get home, or from the road if you need me to help you stay awake."

We exchanged more kisses and he got underway. I went inside and found that Beth wanted me to read her her bedtime story. When I saw that my lovely, beautiful three-year-old daughter had chosen me to read to her from 'A Light in the Attic', I couldn't help but smile. It had been my favorite book as a child too. I opened it and almost dropped the damn thing when I saw my father's handwriting in the inside cover. "This was your biological mother's favorite book when she was very small. I hope that it brings you as much joy and laughter as it did her." I didn't understand how the man who had for so long been my protector and my succor have become the one to hurt me the most. I shook those thoughts off and started with my favorite poem of the entire book, ‘Unscratchable Itch’. By the time I
finished the story of the 'Homework Machine' she was out like a light.

Shelby came into my room and she and I talked about how I felt I'd done on my finals while I unpacked. When we had exhausted all of my news, she looked over at me and admitted. "I think that David is working towards proposing."

A bright smile crossed my face. "That's a good thing, right?"

She shrugged. "I do love him…but I never thought that I would get married. I assumed that I would devote my all to my career."

"Rachel said something similar to me once upon a time. But Shelby, you've already turned you back on that way of thinking. You would never have adopted Beth if you hadn't and you certainly wouldn't have moved back to Ohio because it was what was best for her, not if you still considered yourself to be nothing more than your voice, your career."

"Exactly. I'm Beth's mom…being a girlfriend is entirely different from being a wife. I won't be able to put him first. Is that even fair to him? To know that he always comes behind Beth and only slightly ahead of the next show choir competition?" She returned.

"Oh please. You love winning and you love the kids, but you and I both know that you love David more than either of those. As for him coming in behind Beth, you know if you and Beth are trapped in a burning building and he only has time to save one of you…" I said pointedly.

Her smile was far more serene and happy than one would usually associate with the words that came out of her mouth. "I'd be one crispy critter. But I would die happy knowing that she was safe with him. Thanks, I needed to remember that he loves her as much as I do."

"So if he does propose…" I asked leadingly.

"If he does propose…I think I'm going to say yes." She squealed happily.

The girl talk that commenced from there was ridiculous and lasted into the wee hours. I spent the first part of the week playing with Beth and accompanying her to the Jones' home to play with the twins and Sloane. It was so nice to just bask in the love and innocence of those beautiful children. Wednesday came around before I knew it. I woke early, showered and dressed in a dove gray, three button, mélange suit with a pencil skirt that ended perfectly at my knee and a bright blue shell under the jacket for a pop of color when or if I unbuttoned the blazer. I put my hair up in a professional hairstyle utilizing a pearl comb to keep the growing bob in place. the only other jewelry I allowed myself was a pair of pearl earrings and my watch. Sensible black pumps and a matching tote completed my outfit. I had a healthy breakfast and still arrived at Attorney Patterson's familiar office at ten minutes before eight. I was shocked by the fact that I was the only one of us to show up early, one of the other interns was actively late and another was not dressed professionally.

I was also soon surprised that there was so much paper work even though it was an unpaid internship. They laid out our duties, which included filing and assisting the paralegals and legal secretaries with research. We would be responsible for helping with maintaining the clients' files and would be held to the same standard of confidentiality and privacy of everyone who worked there. The firm handled contract and business law with smatterings of cases in intellectual property, civil and criminal litigation. So for the very low price of being expected to do grunt work, make breakfast, lunch and coffee runs, we five interns would get peeks into the career paths we hoped to follow. Before I left for the afternoon, I made sure to learn the name of and begin to make friends with the firms ten paralegals and nine legal secretaries. They would be the people who actually oversaw my work. They would also be the people who would be able to provide me with the most guidance and
I also spoke with Attorney Patterson at some length before making my way to my VW and on to home.

Friday morning, after having breakfast with Beth and Shelby, I packed for a weekend away and drove to Mansfield to meet James. We spent the weekend in the town that was halfway between Lima and Cleveland. I'd made the arrangements for our hotel and got us a king size whirlpool suite at the Hampton Inn and Suites. I'd even found a beautiful smelling Bulgari Green Tea bubble bath just for the occasion. James was responsible for planning our date night for that Friday. I didn't know what he had planned but considering that the town boasted one of the most haunted places in America, I decided to make sure that I wore something that would look good with sensible shoes. When I pulled into the parking lot of Wokano Japanese Steakhouse, James was already waiting on me. Even though it had only been a few days, the way he grabbed me and kissed me told the full story of exactly how much he had missed me. "Oh, Peaches. You look good enough to eat." He murmured as he took in how I looked in the deep peach colored sundress and ivory wedges.

I chuckled. "Probably you are just hungry. Let's have lunch, then we can look around until it is time to check in to our hotel."

We headed inside and were quickly shown to two seats around a hibachi grill. The waiter was efficient. He served us water and got our drink order. They had Pepsi products so I went with a Sierra Mist. Then after giving us his recommendations, he took our appetizer order, edamame for me and Shumai, a Japanese steamed shrimp dumpling, for James. Their hibachi lunch specials were awesome. James chose to go with the filet mignon and shrimp combo while I enjoyed their hibachi salmon. Both of our entrees came with an amazing salad with the best ginger sesame dressing I'd ever tasted, and fried rice. The portions were so big even James needed a to go box. The afternoon was beautiful and we had a wonderful time exploring the new city. Around three we entered the lobby of the hotel and I checked us in with little fanfare or drama. James had to show both his chivalry and manliness by carrying both of my bags and his, so I rushed ahead and opened the door for him.

As soon as we were inside our own little haven, we fell on the bed and the love we made was both orgasmic and beautiful. As we lay spent, in each other's arms, we started talking more about our internships and what we hoped to do over the summer, what we hoped to learn. When I realized that it was already close to six, I started to scramble from the bed. He gently pulled me back. "Relax, we can chill for another thirty minutes. Our dinner reservations aren't until eight thirty and you can dress pretty casually so it shouldn't take you two hours to get all dolled up."

"So…what are we doing tonight then?" I asked with a small smile.

"I thought that we could go and have a nice dinner at a little Greek place near here, then we'll drive over and take a great tour of the place where they filmed 'The Shawshank Redemption'. It's supposed to be crazy haunted." He gave me a sweet smile. "Don't worry though, I'll protect you."

I started laughing. I didn't mean to laugh at him. I really didn't. But I knew better. "James, sell that to someone who doesn't know that even the hardest, biggest, strongest black man turns into a white woman faster than Michael Jackson did when confronted with the supernatural. If a ghost does pop up, the only way you'd protect me is by throwing me over your shoulder so that I couldn't slow you down."

"Well I'd have to. I've seen horror movies. I know that the second we start to run, you'd fall and twist your ankle and then where would we be?" he shot back with an innocent smile. Of course, I couldn't let that slight to my common sense and athleticism go unpunished, so I attempted to launch a tickle offensive. Unfortunately, I forgot a most important bit of information when launching my offensive. I
was far more ticklish than my boyfriend. His counter offensive was entirely successful, but since it culminated in more lovemaking where my orgasm count was three times greater than his, I counted that as a win for me.

The Ghost Tour was interesting. The group was fairly small the two of us and three other couples ranging from their early twenties to mid-forties. There were a few jump scares, but it always ended up that it was just one of us scaring ourselves. But I had far more fun than I ever thought I would have. One thing I'd realized since I'd begun dating James. A lot of the 'uncool things' I'd have never been caught doing when I was McKinley's Queen Que were so much fun. Man, I had missed out on far more than I realized worrying so much about popularity. I had enjoyed my popularity, don't get me wrong, but I had also hated it and wished that the Cheerio slumber parties I'd hosted could have been as much fun as relaxing with Mercedes, Tina and Kurt in the Jones family room binge watching ‘Next Top Model’ or ‘Rupaul's Drag Race’ and seeing if it was physically possible to consume our weight in popcorn. Just like making Finn go to the right movie, the Oscar bait movie that we just had to see to showcase our maturity and above-it-all-ness, wasn't as much fun as allowing James to force me to go see 'Star Trek; Into the Darkness'. Granted I probably could have lived without the two day best of Star Trek the Original Series based & The Next Generation based movies marathon that I was subjected to first…after all it was a reboot…all I really needed to see was the first movie in the new lineage. But that was still better than that blue people movie Sam insisted I 'just had to see'.

The weekend flew by. I other than sticking our heads out for dinner on Saturday night, once we returned from the ghost walk, we didn't leave our room again until check out time Sunday. It was a truly wonderful weekend, that just ended too soon. When I got home late Sunday afternoon, Beth was just getting home from having spent the night with the Jones and gone to church with them. She made Shelby, David and I take seats in the living room and act as her audience as she sang 'Jesus Loves Me' for us. Her voice was so rich and pure already. Shelby and I looked at each other and together we told her that she had done an amazing job. We needed to walk a very fine line. She was as talented as one would expect of a child with Puck and my DNA, but she was also only three and neither Shelby nor I wanted to make her feel like her talent was either the end all and be all or that it was something that made her more special than anyone else. Making the most of a talent, be it singing or painting or coding, took hard work and she would need to put in the work if she decided that she wanted to follow her god/step-mother's footsteps. Besides, as unlikely as it was since Beth and Rachel didn't actually share any DNA, neither Shelby not I wanted to create another monster.

After dinner, I gave Beth her bath that night and Shelby read her her bedtime story. Since I had to be up early the next morning, I went to bed soon thereafter. The next morning, I woke at five thirty and went for a short run. When I got home it was six and Shelby was making us egg white omelets and smoothies. While she headed to the gym to do her workout, I showered and started getting ready for the day, keeping an ear out for Beth, who was and early riser for no reason at all. I slipped on a nude lace bra and panty set and a pretty, pale pink half-slip then returned to the de-steamed bathroom to continue getting dressed. I put on my makeup with a very light hand, keeping it to a very natural look. My hair was blow dried, curled under at the ends and pulled back at the temples with small silver clips. Satisfied with that, I moved back into my bedroom and checking the time, I pulled on a simple black crepe midi, pencil skirt, an ivory drape neck top with adorable little cap sleeves. that day I again wore my watch and my pearl earrings but I also wore the antique gold crucifix I'd received from my father at my first communion. It had belonged to my grandmother. I wanted to be both fashionable and prepared for anything, so I went with a pair of deceptively simple ivory, peep-toe wedges.

I made it to the law offices of the Patterson, Estes Firm by a quarter after eight, again arriving fifteen minutes early for the time the interns had been told to report to duty. I'd even given myself enough time to stop by the Lima Bean and bring a large box of their signature coffee for the break room. The youngest admin came rushing in a few minutes later and gave me a hug. "Thank you so much. I was
running so late that I didn't have time to stop and no one really likes the Folgers that we keep in the conference room to actually make for guests."

"It's not a problem, Nora. I want to do whatever I can to help." I said with a quiet smile and I had a friend for life. The rest of the day went swimmingly. My fellow interns all arrived before nine o'clock, so we were all in place for the weekly staff meeting. It was quite enlightening to learn how much being the head Cheerio had prepared me for being a lawyer. There were plots to get the best cases. Then there was more plotting to ensure the best return for the firm's clients. Then there were social assignations plots among the junior partners all vying to become the next senior partner. It was all very thrilling to have a front row seat to view.

Despite the drama, over the course of the summer, I still learned vast amounts of information pertaining to the Ohio legal system. I learned to do legal research, one of the older paralegals even taught us to research using the vast compendiums of legal statutes and judicial rulings. I did admit that I much preferred finding the needed adjudicatory evidence online…those law books were the very embodiment of death by a thousand paper cuts. I worked very closely with Mr. Patterson's legal secretary and his paralegals. That really did allow me to gain far more insight into my father than I'd ever expected to glean. I hadn't known that after Russell finished the court mandated counseling that was part of his plea deal, he'd continued to see his psychologist to find the root cause of his disgusting and immoral behavior. I also sneaked a small peak at his newest will. He hadn't changed the root caveats, Frannie and I still jointly inherited almost everything, which was far more substantial that I had realized, but he had established a trust fund for Beth beyond the one I knew about. All the liquid assets that he had inherited from his grandparents, not the money he had inherited from his parents or made on his own or the money he had made off the investment of hid inheritance, but still almost five million dollars would be held in trust for ‘his eldest grandchild who had been placed for adoption immediately after her birth'. He listed Beth's date of birth and stipulated that anyone wanting to claim the trust would have to prove their identity by DNA testing…which made sense to me since he didn't know any further information about her.

I wasn't sure what that meant, so that evening I called Frannie. She'd stayed in Ann Arbor to do an internship with one of the area's preeminent psychiatrists. I explained to her what I'd read and sighed. "I just don't know what this all means."

"I'll tell you what this means, it means that Daddy was definitely able to afford to buy me a Porsche Carrera Turbo when I turned sixteen rather than that damn Jetta." She pouted.

"You love your Jetta…besides, you've flipped a Carrera and died in a fiery crash within a month." I pointed out. "You have a lead foot."

"True." She acknowledged with a chuckle. "All this means is exactly what you're already thinking it means. He may well be genuinely remorseful about his actions. But it isn't knowledge you are supposed to have, so therefore you can't do anything with the knowledge. So just table it. Glean as much information as you can during your time at the firm and then we can make a decision about what we want to do if he approaches us with a sincere apology that doesn't have a check, money order or credit card attached."

"What are you talking about? I've been doubting his sincerity because the amounts have been too small for me to feel that they hurt his wallet…not because he's been using money to say he is sorry. I'll know that he is really, truly sorry when he does something like throw one of us a super lavish party and not even ask to attend…or get us both a Porsche." I told her honestly.

I could literally hear her eyes roll. "Quinn, I now understand why you were always Daddy's favorite…you actually understand at least some of how Russell Fabray thinks."
I shrugged. "Yeah well, when he needed to apologize for accidentally ruining my first communion gown that Judy somehow forgot to have preserved, I got the nose job. From there it was pretty easy to figure out. The worse his guilt, the more he spends."

"So you don't think that paying all that he is paying for our educations is enough?"

"Not really…think about it he has always expected to do this. We might not have realized how much he was worth, but he knew so he would have known there was little to no chance of us getting more financial aid than the scholarships we have. No, this isn't guilt money…this is still just 'I'm doing what I am expected as their father to do' money. In fact, he probably feels a sense of pride for every dollar he spends for our education. But Beth's second trust fund, that tells me that he really does regret not just taking care of my pregnancy and making me feel like I had no choice but to give her away. We'll know when he apologizes to us." I responded honestly.

The first six weeks of the summer I spent quite a lot of time learning more about the work behind being a lawyer. The more I learned, the more I was gaining security in my decision to pursue a law degree. Then things changed around the firm. They started having weekly excursions for the interns. On International Picnic Day, the firm threw a three-hour luncheon/picnic at Lima's Veteran's Memorial Park for their staff and their families, interns and clients. It was a really fun day. The firm didn't open at all that morning, so we just had to arrive at the park by ten thirty. They wanted all of the firm's staffs and interns there early to help with setting up the games and the other things that the caterers and vendors wouldn't be in charge of setting up. I knew that I needed to look young and fresh and fashionable, but also professional and poised.

Fortunately, Mercedes Jones was in town on a break from KAMA's festival tour as they got ready for Kevon's wedding. She had some shopping to do herself, so she had no problem helping me out at the same time. It was even more fortunate for me that Bermuda shorts were on trend that summer. MeDe found me a pair in a strong, striking shade of teal and since she insisted that I was getting them, I decided that given the flattering cut of the shorts and the pretty color they fit the bill for being young and fashionable and fresh, the length would keep them in the professional realm and I would give them poise. I paired the shorts with a cowl neck, white, Calvin Klein, sleeveless top that gave the look more maturity and a bit of flair. The morning of the picnic, I slept in a little before getting up and getting ready. Given the heat, I didn't bother with much makeup, just some mascara and eyeliner and a colored gloss. I wanted to wear my hair up, but had tired of ponytails before I hung up the red and white. Instead I did a pretty French braid that started at my temple and went diagonally to the other side nape. It looked cool, young and funky. Looking in the mirror, I decided that MeDe would have approved. So I took a quick picture and sent it to her.

"You know I'm stealing that look right," was her approving reply. "Don't forget to lotion those legs, white girls get ashy too." She further chided. She had been fussing at me about using lotion since before Beth was born.

In that case I listened. I'd gotten an SPF 25 body moisturizer so I slathered that on my skin then got dressed. A simple white cotton and lace bra and thong set went on followed by my beautiful shorts the designer top and a pair of Tandy sparkle leaf sandals, my silver watch and silver knot earrings completed my look. I had originally thought to take Beth and Shelby with me since the invitation stated that I could bring up to four guests, but I was fairly sure that Daddy…Russell…would be in attendance and I just didn't want him to have contact with Beth at all. Of course, I hadn't realized that one of the firm's attorney was courting Papa Benton.

Anticipating a day of fun and awkward conversations, I arrived ten minutes early and was immediately put to work. I was given a list of vendors and how much space they would each need for their game, display or bouncey house, a measuring tape, some stakes and a rubber mallet. I was to
stake off a section for each vendor. I grabbed, Mitchell, one of my fellow interns who had been told to 'make himself useful' and made short work of my assigned task. When the vendors arrived, one of the senior legal secretaries, Sandy, greeted them, signed them in and then I lead them to their assigned area. I had lumped them together by kind as best I could, making sure that the carnival games like darts were as far as possible from the inflatables.

By eleven thirty, everything was ready and the clients and staff families started to arrive. Mr. Estes gave a speech and introduced the partners, staff and even we lowly interns to the assembly and then allowed everyone to mingle and chat for the hour until lunch was to begin being served. As soon as I came down from the stage, Papa Bent came over and gave me a big hug. "You look good up there Quinny…how are you liking the internship?"

I almost squeed. "It is so awesome. I think I have found my calling. I helped with the research on one contract litigation case and Smithers swears that the case law ruling I found exploited a loophole that had been left in the original contract and it won him the case." I said happily. "As much as I loved being the top of the pyramid, as much as I loved leading a song in competition…if you combined those both together, that was how much I loved hearing that."

He gave me another hug. "That's is wonderful. A little songbird told me that you had one hell of a GPA after all your finals came in."

I nodded happily. "Yup, it was almost high enough to get me on the dean's list…well if they still had one. And I bet I can get it up to a three point eight next semester. I fully plan to have a four point oh by the time I hit junior year. Then I will only have major courses left and those should help me keep it high."

"Good girl. Start strong, work hard and get higher." His boisterous laugh carried on the summer breeze.

I gave him a long look. "What are you even doing here? You and Mama Dani use Anwtan Berry…for everything."

He nodded. "Yeah but that young kid Jackson invited me. I think he is hoping to lure me over here and get selected for the senior partner slot."

I scoffed. "There is no way you would ever leave Mr. Berry…unless…I guess he is doing an awful lot for McDe and the boys…are you thinking about shifting to lighten his load with the babies coming?"

He looked thoughtful. "I hadn't really thought about it. I don't know. Probably not…Dani's baby brother is moving to Manhattan soon to handle the kids legal stuff full time. That will free Antwan up to take care of us little people." He joked.


Pasting a smile as false as the one Papa Benton's lips were curled into on my face, I turned and said with false warmth, "Hello Daddy, I hope that you are well."

"Russell." Benton Jones' voice lacked even feigned warmth. In fact, it was so cool I almost wanted to shiver. "You're looking fit."

"You as well, and congratulations on your daughter's success. Her voice really is quite amazing. I'm
more grateful than I can ever say to your family for saving Quinn when I should have been a better man." The sincerity was there. It almost soothed something with in me. Almost.

Benton's eyes cooled to hard black chips of ice. "Yes, well…Quinn deserved the saving. You deserved to be beaten to within half an inch of death, allowed to recuperate and then take to death's edge again."

I think we were both a little surprised when Daddy just agreed. "Probably at least half a dozen times." I guess our surprise showed on our faces. "I can acknowledge that I was very, very, very wrong. I didn't uphold my duty as a man, as a Christian or as a father. I allowed my own vanity and arrogance and competitive nature to become an internal stew of immorality and I hurt my daughters…Quinn worse than Francine, but still they were both hurt. I will spend the rest of my life trying to make amends for that." I know that Benton's facial expression was one of derision, I'm not even sure what I was feeling. "I understand that I probably never will…but I owe it to them to at least try."

"Yes, you do owe it to them to try. But you do understand that throwing money at them doesn't actually count as trying…you get that right?" Benton asked him quietly. It was so funny anyone who didn't know us, didn't hear the difference in Papa Benton's voice and the tension in his smile…they might actually believe that the three of us were have a perfectly normal and cordial conversation.

Daddy nodded. "That is true with Francine and that is true with Quinny to a certain point. But Benton, my little girls want me punished as much as you and I both do. They are doing it by hitting me in the only place I care about almost as much as I care about them…my wallet. So I will pay my penance. I will pay for Francine to become the most educated doctor or psychiatrist the world has ever known…for Quinn to get her law degree or her doctorate in political science or whatever path she finally decides upon…I will buy them stupidly expensive gifts until they finally feel that I have been hurt at least an acceptable percentage of how badly I hurt them. And I will continue to work hard and live a much more modest lifestyle than what I am used to so that I can continue to afford to pay the piper, as it were."

"And yet, I still want to punch you…a lot." Benton growled.

I sighed. "if your plan was to wait until we approached you, why did you even come today?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a long, thin velveteen box. "My mother's older sister, my Aunt Meredith passed away while I was…away. She had no children and left us her entire estate. There are several pieces of jewelry that I'm having cleaned and repaired for your sister and you…but…this. As you know the crucifix I gave you for your first communion had been given to my mother for her first communion. This is the one my grandfather gave to Aunt Meredith. I know that you have some connection with your daughter's adoptive mother. Please, I believe that Aunt Meredith would be pleased if it went to her." he handed me the case and I nodded. "I know that she may never know her biological parents, I'm not sure how your adoption was set up. But she deserves to have a piece of her family history."

I agreed. But I did like the thought of him not realizing that I was in daily contact with Beth. "I can pass it to the attorney that handled the adoption. She will make sure that the adoptive family receives and pass along their thanks. They really appreciated the Christmas gifts. I sent you the thank you card they sent for you." I really hadn't wanted to, but Shelby's mom voice was almost as good as Mama Dani's.

"The picture was lovely. Your little girl is almost as good at finger painting as you were when you were little." Daddy smiled.
I sighed yet again. "This isn't the right venue…but soon…soon I need to know how you could change from the man who read me bedtime stories…the man who acted as my buffer between me and Mother's cold disapproval of everything about me…how you could become someone who could do what you did."

"And when the time comes that you ask me that and we are somewhere that I can answer it without making your life more difficult…I will certainly answer it to the best of my ability."

"I want to hate you. I want so badly to hate you." I returned.

He shook his head and gave me a sad smile. I had his damn smile. "I don't want you to hate me. Not for my own sake. I know that I deserve your hatred. But when I awaken in Hell, I never want to see you join me there." He looked down at the box in my hand. "Now that I have accomplished what I needed to do in seeing you. I'll mingle for a while and then leave so you can enjoy your day. David said that you are doing a remarkable job in your internship. Be well, Quinn…be Happy." He didn't try to hug me. He hadn't touched me at all. I was grateful for that.

After he disappeared into the crowd, I turned to Papa Benton. "That was exhausting."

"I don't know…I'm pretty proud of both of us. You didn't kick him in the balls and I didn't beat his face into a fine pulp." He said giving me a hug, one that I desperately needed in that moment. He stayed near enough to watch over me until we were sure that Daddy had left. Then he got to go and make some contacts in the crowd. There were a lot of his patients among our firm's clients, staff and families.

The next several weeks flew by in flurries of work and gatherings that attempted to show the interns the value of the money one made from being a lawyer. It was during the second of the events that I learned that I was the only one of the interns who was an undergrad intern. The others were all already in law school. Nora loved the fact that I was the youngest of the five of us and yet I had the most 'good, common sense'. I relished her compliment. Mr. Patterson had no problem letting me off to go to either Columbus or Chicago to record the charity song with KAMA. James and I met up in a cozy little B&B in a quaint town of Hamilton Indiana every third weekend. He joined all of the New Directions and Warblers for the recording of the single and taping of the music video. He and I talked daily on the phone. He called Beth every other night. It was an amazing summer and it was over in a flash. But I gained invaluable insight, prospective, and knowledge. So I suppose that it was one for the record books.

Chapter End Notes

Here you have it another chapter in the ongoing saga of Commune.

I think this week has shown us all that we should appreciate those around us.

In lue of reviews, I'd love it if we could each do a small 'In Memorium'. Shout out your favorite Bowie & Les Baronets song & your absolute favorite Alan Rickman role.

Mine are...

Bowie- "I'm Afraid of Americans"
Les Baronets - "Je Suis Fou"
Rickman Role - Metatron (Dogma 1999)
What are yours?

BTW You can still free to comment on the chapter as well if you like.

TTFN,

Anni
**Chapter Notes**

*****PLEASE NOTE: If I am using an actor or musician as a face claim, they do not exist as their famous persona in this universe. IE: Darcy Lewis is a person so Kat Dennings doesn't exist. Or Hiram Berry is a person so Jeff Goldblum is not.*****

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.
Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Never Piss Off Mercedes by Isis Aurora Tomoe
For More Information on Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:
Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 Hope that you will be able to come back soon!!!
Warning: There is offensive language that could bother black people, women and people of Spanish descent. These terms are not the acceptable and they are not anything that the author feels should be utilized in any conversation ever or even thought of but, the terms fit the characterizations of the released piano player.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Only for One Night (Luther Vandross)
Emma Pillsbury PoV

Despite having spent the entire evening of Commune’s, I mean, KAMA’s record release party talking to and exchanged contact information with Hal, I still didn't really expect to hear from him again. He was a wonderful man. Despite his rather massive size and very well developed musculature, Hal really had a heart of pure gold. He was kind and he was caring. He was in the business he was in to protect those who were not able to protect themselves. He was handsome, if in a slightly boyish way. He was respectful and almost overly protective. Though he was shy, he had a firm resolve and confidence that was very appealing. His sense of honor and fairness was such a part of who he was it was evident in everything he said and did. It was such a wonderful change from William…to be honest, Hal seemed to be far different from any of the other men I had dated, yet he shared the best qualities of all three. I was quite happy with our evening of talking and dancing. For the first time in my life, I could honestly say that I had experienced sexual desire strong enough to make me feel willing to endure, nay, to enjoy the exchange of bodily fluids and the unsavory mingling of sweat and germs that was human sexual intercourse. It was far more than I'd expected to ever experience. I had to be grateful for that.

When Hal texted me several times during my wait for my boarding call, I was happy. Vivien Harmon gave me a lovely smile when I shared my surprise with her. "Good men, truly good men are rare and worth more than diamonds. You owe it to yourself, Emma, to see where this goes. You do deserve to be happy." The best decision I ever made was to change to her husband as my psychologist. Despite her not technically being a mental health professional herself, in our few
conversations, she had proven an invaluably capable woman at helping me to fully understand the things her husband was trying to get me to see during our sessions. 

Later, when he called to make sure that I had made it home in good health, we talked for almost an hour. Only disconnecting when he needed to go and get ready for his shift. While Hal didn't like to talk about his father, he loved telling me stories of the rest of his family. I learned that he had grown up near Lawrence, Indiana. His father had been career military often stationed any and everywhere around the globe. But he'd purchased his family a home ‘off-post’ at Fort Benjamin Harrison and his wife and their four sons had lived there while his father went all around the world on his service tours. Since Hal's mother was a teacher, they would spend the summers with Hank Gruber, Hal's father, wherever he was stationed at the time. During his childhood, Hal learned to read and speak fluent German, Korean and Japanese and now he was more than fluent in Spanish, though he had only begun learning it after he was an adult.

He told me about growing up caught in a weird place between being a local and yet being a military brat at the same time. He talked about the fact that he had been the smallest of his brothers for most of his youth despite being born second of the four. Then in eighth grade he'd hit a growth spurt that shot him up a foot in height in one summer and he didn't seem to stop growing for a very long time thereafter. He'd gotten into weight lifting in high school because it had been one of the only things to do in his town and his mother had forbidden her sons from playing football. Despite his father’s feelings on the subject of it making men out of the boys, Hal’s mother had never wavered in her refusal to allow them to play the sport. Elise Wimmer-Gruber had lost a brother when they were both high schoolers themselves…a bad block had broken his neck and severed his spine. He'd been dead before his family could reach the field from the stands. After high school, Hal had enlisted simply because he didn't really like the thought of more school. It had been the perfect choice for him. He'd loved serving his country. However, after seeing so much war, his mother had begged him to find another way to serve. So he'd joined the Army Reserve and worked at Rangeman. It alleviated the worst of her fears and allowed Hal to do what he loved.

In return, I told him more about myself than anyone other than my parents knew about me. I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in my early teens. I'd always been a very fastidious child, from a very early age. However, unlike most children who develop the symptoms so early there was no physical or sexual abuse in my background. The only trauma that I experienced when I was little was being a car accident that nearly killed my best friend and her mother and left me hospitalized with more than a few major lacerations when I was five. My earliest therapist felt that I had taken all of the warning and admonitions of the doctors and nurses for how to care for my cuts and internalized them. In my innocent mind, if I didn't maintain a perfectly aseptic environment, then I would die. Unfortunately, even with medication, I have never been able to fully grow past my compulsions. I have always been very, very grateful that I didn't develop any of the more physical symptoms typical of my disorder. I have no ticks. I have no incessant need to tap or kick or knock… just to clean.

"Well, I know it isn't really comparable. But since I got back from my last tour in Iraq, I can't sleep without a series of rituals. I mean, it's kind of stupid stuff. I have to have a weapon near to hand, but not so near that I'm able to get it when I'm coming out of a nightmare. I have to have my shoes at the edge of the bed so that I can literally just put my feet into them…stuff like that. They make me feel… I dunno…safe I guess." I could almost hear him trying to decide whether or not to say the rest of his thoughts. "It was a lot worse when I first got back, actually, but Ranger makes sure that we all have a really good PTSD therapist to take to when we need him."

"It is a credit to the man that he takes such good care of his employees. I would absolutely love it if I were able to have a work environment where my superior took an active interest in maintaining the proper professional setting." I said wistfully.
The next day, he called and we talked again. By the end of the school year, I could honestly say that only a day or two had passed without he and I talking in some form or fashion. Near the beginning of June, he called and asked me what I had planned for the Fourth of July weekend. "You know that I'm just a weekend warrior now, but my unit, we are on one of the specialty unit floats this year. I thought…that maybe you would like to come and spend the week before the holiday with me and go down to see the parade with Bomber and some of the guys. Then later I have tickets to the ‘Capital Fourth’ musical event as well."

I was surprised. I supposed I shouldn't have been. But I really was surprised. My mouth opened and closed several times before the word "yes" managed to make its way between my lips. "I think that I would really love that."

"That's great. I'll make all the arrangements. Bomber, she swears that the Wyndham Garden here has a special laundry autoclave thing that makes it the cleanest hotel in the entire state. She said that the manager was the only person in their school who was always cleaner than her sister St. Valerie…and if you knew Bomber's sister you would understand that the guy has to be pretty close to your level of clean if he is cleaner than Ms. Valerie."

I didn't even try to battle the smile that crossed my lips. It meant a lot to know that he had done all he could to ensure that there would be a hotel for me that met my rather exacting standards. He went even further though. I tried to tell him that I would make my flight arrangements and let him know when I would arrive, only to be chided and reminded that he had said he would make all the arrangements. And when he said all, he meant all. The next morning when I checked my email I found a first class ticket on American Airlines, leaving Columbus on the twenty-ninth of June and returning on the twelfth of July. I also received information about the hotel where I would be spending my vacation. He had booked me an Executive King Suite at the Wyndham Garden Hotel for my entire fourteen night stay. I called him back and said that it was far too extravagant, "Hal, you don't have to do all of this. It's too much. At least let me pay for my own tickets…and I don't need a suite. I'm just one, fairly little person."

But he would not be moved. "Ms. Valerie went and had a talk with her old classmate and he swears that the Executive suites are steam cleaned before check in every single time. So it will be the best room for you…so that's what you will have." Hal's voice clearly would brook no argument. He completely ignored the idea that I would pay for my plane tickets also.

After not getting my way at all during the course of the conversation, I made a few decisions. One was that though I liked the fact that he wanted to take care of me, I wouldn't allow myself to take advantage of that. But it was a nice change from William who tried to change me at every turn while taking complete advantage of my giving nature. My second decision was that I needed new clothing. I had never been much of a clothes horse, preferring demure styles over the more showy things others wore. But the truth was that my clothes wouldn't be weather appropriate for a summer in New Jersey. I would, as per my usual keep my choices to natural, breathable fabrics, but I would try to be at least a little daring. That decision led me to a bit of a conundrum… I had very little experience shopping alone. Even as an adult it was an activity that I'd always undertaken with my mother. I didn't want to let her in on my budding romance with Hal. She would have something negative to say. She always had something negative to say about any man I dated. I knew that she and Daddy just wanted what was best for me, but their definition of what was best for me was keeping my as their own ‘special’ little girl. I was a woman grown and I wanted a family of my own.

Rather than research from my home computer and end up who knew where on the internet, I decided to search from behind the schools very limiting firewalls. Since Sue had taken over, things were run far more efficiently. Rather than being concerned with the almighty dollar, she did what was best for the students…and dared the school board or county administration to say a word. There were
summer tutorial programs where education majors from OSU’s Lima campus could offer their services to help rising ninth graders up through rising seniors in basically every subject we taught. The lunch menu and staff was undergoing a complete revamp. Following the First Lady’s suggestions and mandates and increasing the healthy options for our students and faculty. She had also completely reworked the curriculum, schedules and added two new teachers in each subject area to decrease class sizes. I had been given the best position I’d ever had. Rather than being a guidance counselor in the traditional sense, Sue had hired two new counselors who would handle the more emotional therapy needs and I was now the head of the department and handled career and college advising. Molly, Sandy and I worked well together and I had stopped looking for another job that I felt more capable of being good at.

I spent a little over two hours looking over information on summer apparel trends and how to wear clothes well, how to be fashionable while maintaining your own sense of individuality and style. I may have also emailed Kurt Hummel for some tips, too. He had often offered me unsolicited advice when he was still a student. He proved more than happy to reiterate those suggestions and offer new ones. He was actually quite helpful. Once I was sure that I knew what I needed to do, I made myself a plan of action. I read that roughly seventy to eighty-five percent of women are wearing the wrong bra size which causes their outer clothing to look ill fitting as well. So I called Neiman Marcus in Columbus and made myself an appointment with one of their bra fitting specialists for the next morning. I always made any appointment where another person might have to touch me very early in the morning. People were usually at their cleanest soon after they arrived at work since almost ninety percent of the population showered in the morning. After doing some mild cleaning of my office, I returned home and cleaned out my suitcase before letting it air dry. There was still two weeks before I would leave, but I preferred to pack early…it soothed me to have things well in hand well in advance. When I spoke with Hal that evening, I could barely contain my excitement.

The next morning, I was up very early. The hour and a half drive flew by for the most part. I hit a little traffic near the mall, but not enough to retard my enthusiasm. I arrived a little early but was very quickly introduced to Kara who was quite clean in appearance and very proficient at her job. She measured me in several different, rather embarrassing ways and places, took note of all of the numbers and soon informed me that I really had been buying the wrong size. I had always believed myself to be a thirty-four A. However, according to Kara, the fit specialist, I would best be served by selecting thirty-two Bs instead. She even took me to the racks and helped me find bras that I both liked and were the correct size and flattering for my body. Per my own preferences we stuck with silks, cottons and lace made of either of the two natural materials. I understood that there would be elastic and spandex involved, but I didn't like having my clothing made of synthetics. Kara was able to show me a line of lingerie that Neiman offered that had antibacterial finishes to the natural textiles. The line wasn't all utilitarian either. They had some really beautiful pieces. I got a bra and panty set in each of the big three colors in each of the major styles…black, white and beige and the styles, sporty, every day, T-shirt, specialty, push-up, strapless and even sexy. For the first time I experimented in the panty styles too. I got my first thong and several pairs of boy cut, and both hi cut and low rise. By the time I checked out I had managed to spend both of the payments William had made by that point. It may have been imprudent, but I hadn't stopped with the underwear. I'd also gotten four new nightgowns and a pair of pajamas that were more in my comfort zone. I left Kara a nicely padded tip and headed to the more reasonably priced Macys to continue my shopping.

By the end of the day, I had purchased several day time outfits, a few casual evening pieces. A stunning little ivory dress, white and my fair skin didn't work well together at all, new running shoes, and quite a few pieces that could be integrated with my purchases and with what I already owned. Despite years of therapy and several attempts, I was still only rarely able to eat out, so I made my way home and had dinner there. I took great care washing my new purchases, hand washing the silks and drying them on my special hypoallergenic and antibacterial drying racks, before packing.
everything neatly away. I had started a three time a week exercise regime…mainly because Sue and
Shelby forced me to accompany them in their exercises, so I ran with them and explained that I
would be missing several of our runs.

"You're gonna climb that mountain of ‘aw shucks Ma'am' you met at Commune's little party in
Manhattan, aren't you?" Sue asked with a smirk. "Can't say as I blame you…if he were less sugary
and had a bit more bite to him, I might have had to engage him for a little rough and tumble myself."

Shelby shook her head. "Oh please…everyone knows that you and Sugar's father are a couple and
according to a little multicolored birdie, you two are very happy together."

Sue, of course, couldn't let that just go. "Speaking of little birdies, one with quite a bit of Latin ma-
cheese-mo told me an interesting tidbit. Apparently, he has an appointment with a ring designer at
that Shane's place that just opened in North Lima."

Shelby's face lit up. "Oh God, Sue…please tell me that he asked you to go with him. I'm so scared
that he asked Becah or Gabby. I love them both…but Gabby is still very, well, frugal and Becah is
pretty non-traditional when it comes to things like this and I am praying that he is still too scared of
Dani to ask her. As I understand it she finally got around to giving him the shovel speech and it was
pretty graphic."

"Shovel speech?" I asked.

Sue smirked. "It's an idiomatic phrase that is derived from an old nineties TV show about a
cheerleader who slayed vampires and demons. One of the characters…she actually looked a lot like
you, Keebler Elf…she told her friend's boyfriend that if he hurt her, she would beat him to death
with a shovel. When he said that that was a very violent and specific threat, she just smiled and told
him that a 'vague disclaimer was no one's friend'. I remember it because it made a certain amount of
sense to me and I could see the wisdom in her words. Ever since then I have made sure that any time
I had to promise to visit violence on someone, I did not leave what said violence would be up in the
air."

I couldn't think of a single thing to say in rejoinder. "Okay then." I finally stammered. "I am planning
on taking this opportunity to get to know Hal better. However, I find it doubtful that we will take
such a momentous step so quickly."

Shelby nodded. "Just remember sex really only involves the mixing of bodily fluids if you want it to.
Condoms do an amazing job of keeping most of the mess contained."

Sue snorted. "Only the mess from the man. You just know that Little Miss OCD is a total squirter.
Just to make up for all the neatness elsewhere." Thankfully I didn't understand all of her statement. I
just listened as they bickered back and forth for the rest of our run. Most days I really wished that
Shannon would join us, but when invited to join us, she admitted that her fitness goals didn't align
with ours and she much preferred exercising alone.

The rest of the time before my trip flew by. I told my parents of my trip, though I prevaricated as to
the nature of the reason for my visit. They were oppressively concerned enough without knowing
that Hal and I had every intention of pursuing a romantic relationship. Before I knew it, it was time to
go. Shannon and Marc were kind enough to take me to the airport. They were spending the day in
meetings with the athletic department at OSU so it wasn't a big hardship for them, but I was very,
very grateful none the less. I had dressed carefully. Since I would be in an unfamiliar environment, I
decided to cover as much skin as possible and yet I knew that I would still need to remain cool. A
pair of white, soft cotton leggings with some pretty lace at the hem suited me perfectly. I wore a petal
pink, three quarter length sleeved, tunic top with sliver embellishments over a white camisole top
with a built in bra with the leggings and a pair of hemp and cork, pale pink espadrilles finished off the look. The flight was amazing. I had never flown first class before. Though there wasn't a full meal for the flight, it only took a little over an hour, but there was a small continental breakfast offered. My seat was self contained, a travel pod, if you will. I felt amazingly comfortable. There was even enough room in the bin for my slightly over stuffed Pullman suitcase. I had no complaints at all, it was a delightful experience.

When I exited the flight and made my way through the terminal past all the security checkpoints, Hal was waiting on me with a smile that shone as bright as the sun. He encompassed me in a hug that made me feel safer than I could remember feeling. "I'm so glad you are here." When we left the airport, he drove me to my hotel and we conversed the whole ride, even though we'd talked for an hour the night before. Once I was all checked in and he helped me take my bag up to my room, he took m in his arms again. "My co-workers really want to meet you. Especially Bomber. She kind of adopted me after the tazer incident and now I'm pretty much her little brother."

I smiled. He'd shared that story with me and it amused me to no end. It was entirely possible that had he not been so amused by it my reaction would have been different, but he found it truly funny and he always sounded embarrassed for himself, but very proud of his Bomber. "Well after sharing an experience like that and the trauma she experienced soon thereafter, then you not blaming her for the way your fellow Rangemen teased you…of course she felt a bond with you. I will admit that I am a little nervous about meeting her. I tend not to make very good first impressions since I'm not very comfortable shaking hands or hugging those I don't know well."

"Well, you really don't have to worry so much. Ella and Brown, he's our head medic, they have kind of used your visit as an excuse to make Ranger institute some changes they have wanted to put in place for a while now. Every row of the cubicle bank has a hand sanitizer stand. There is one in the break room and at the bathroom, two in the control room, one in every fleet vehicle and maybe one in each of the offices. I'm not sure about those. I try to avoid getting called into the offices. It makes me feel like I'm back in school getting told to go see the principal."

"And yet, here you are dating a guidance counselor…you can't get away from high school can you?" I joked. We shared a laugh. As we continued into Trenton proper, I couldn't help but think that the city seemed both cleaner than and scuzzier than New York at the same time. Rather than say something mean about his city I just concentrated on the very kind thing his coworkers had done for me. "It was very nice of them to add all the sanitizer…I'm not sure why but knowing that does help."

Hal smiled at me. "We're a family at Rangeman now…Steph made that happen. You're a good enough woman to look at me and not just see me as a meat head or a thug. Of course the guys want to make you comfortable. You and Steph give most of them hope that they will be able to find someone who can see them for themselves and like them. Besides…it's already helped. Right after the stands went up, Ram got Grandma Mazur duty and one of the old ladies at the Clip 'n Curl had a nasty cold. Ram swears she sneezed right on him. When he got back in the car he slathered that stuff all over his hands and face…didn't even catch a sniffle."

Our joined laughter filled the SUV as we pulled into an underground garage. We went up to the first floor where I was given a visitor badge after they made a copy of my driver's license. It was funny their visitor protocol was very similar to the one that Sue had instituted at McKinley once she held the reigns. It was also similar to most military bases, which made sense since most of them were former military according to Hal. From the 'visitor center' we took the elevator to the fifth floor where a mass of big masculine bodies was gathered in the lobby, for want of another word. Hal just chuckled. "You guys are out of your minds if you think I'm introducing you before she meets Stephanie and Ella. Where are they?"
A tallish brunette with a head full of wild and crazy curls pushed her way through while an older, Hispanic woman moved through the sea of younger men as if she were Moses and the waters were parting before her. "We're right here." The brunette muttered throwing a mean look at the guys back over her shoulder. She gave me a bright, pretty smile but didn't offer her hand or try to hug me. I liked her a lot for that. "Hi Emma, I'm Stephanie…or Steph…please ignore anything else these yaboos call me. They all think they are witty or something. I'm so glad that you were able to come and visit Hal. He's been so happy these last couple of weeks he actually had facial expressions and everything."

I wasn't sure what she meant exactly but I knew one thing for sure… "Hal does have a beautiful smile, doesn't he?"

Several of the guys snickered. One gentleman with green eyes and blonde tipped hair that looked very striking with his deep olive complexion came out of the crowd. "If you think Hal has a nice smile. You should see mine." He gave me what I assume was supposed to be a charming smile. "You have the smile of a used car salesman." I blurted out. "You must be Lester."

The laughter of the men filled the expansive space. Until a voice that boomed even in its quietest level rang out. "Gentlemen, crowding a lady is not acceptable behavior for Rangemen. Back to your cubes." A man so tall and broad he made Hal seem average sizes came into the room. His mahogany skin gleamed and his every muscle seemed massive and yet lean and taunt at the same time. I'd met Tank briefly at the kids' party but he seemed larger than life in the office space. "Ms. Pillsbury is here to be with Hal and meet Little Girl and Ella. She doesn't need to be harassed by all of Hal's 'think they are funny friends'. Besides we have a business to run." Once the crowd dispersed, he turned to me. "Welcome to Rangeman, Ms. Pillsbury. I hope that those gentlemen didn't bother you too much."

"No, its fine. They were just curious." I assured him. "And please call me Emma." After that I met Hal's friends in a much more neat and orderly fashion. Hal introduced me to Ella and Ranger, who appeared at Stephanie's side like smoke. Then we headed through the cubical farm and I met the gentlemen one at a time. It was much less overwhelming. It was a very auspicious start to my visit. Over the next several days Hal showed me more and more of his town. I met several rather nice police officers, mainly when we had lunch Stephanie and Ranger at Pinos. That was an interesting little neighborhood eatery. The food was good and Pino himself walked me through the kitchen to make me feel comfortable with his extremely high standards of cleanliness. Apparently, there was very little that happened to the Rangemen that the entire town wasn't interested in. The area of town called the 'Burg seemed to run on gossip. I found it interesting. The phenomenon would certainly make for a very interesting case study.

All in all I met so many people that I probably forgot at least seventy-five percent of them. One person there was no forgetting was Stephanie's grandmother Edna Mazur. When I met her, she looked me up and down and then looked Hal up and down before commenting, "I would pay good money to see the two of you hook up. I bet you'd have to climb him like a tree. Well girly, you seem like a good sort, so I'll let you in on a little secret…far as I can tell the package that boy is toting would definitely be worth the climb." With that little tidbit, she turned her attention back to her granddaughter, who anyone could tell she loved very deeply. Later Hal explained that Grandma Mazur liked to grope the men of Rangeman. Since she stood up for them among the elder set of the 'Burg residents…which had made the community as a whole accept them more, thus making their jobs easier… the guys all just rolled with it.

On the third, two of Rangeman's largest SUVs set out for DC later in the afternoon. Hal, Ram, and Bones were all in the same unit, so they would be in the parade. Ranger, Stephanie, Ella, her
husband Louis and Hal's partner Zero would be watching with me. The hotel we checked into in DC was far swankier than any I'd ever been in before. The W Washington was incomparable. In an effort to maintain security, Ranger had rented a floor of the hotel's six hundred fifty square foot Fantastic Suites. We made our way up to our floor before Ranger started handing out the room cards. Ella and Louis had one suite. Ranger and Stephanie had another. Ranger handed Ram, Bones, And Zero keycards for their rooms as well. There were enough other suites on the floor that I was given three options; I could have a suite to myself, Stephanie would share a 'no boys allowed' suite with me or I could share a suite with Hal. I opened my mouth to say I'd stay alone, after all Hal and I were still in the early stages of our relationship. But when I looked over at him, I could see the hope shining behind his carefully blank face. What I said instead was, I'd like to share with Hal if he's okay with that."

His smile outshone the sun. It was simply breathtaking. Ranger simply nodded. "That is probably for the best. Rooming with Stephanie would have driven you mad in twenty minutes tops."

"What? I'm a good roommate. Just ask Rex." She countered.

"Who is Rex?" I asked quietly. I didn't think I had met a Rex.

Stephanie laughed. "Rex is my attack hamster. He's a great roommate."

Ranger gave me a mildly amused glance. "Rex's cage is the cleanest thing in Babe's apartment. The only reason he doesn't complain is because he can't talk. But if she doesn't keep his nest clean, he can, will and has bitten her."

Ella chimed in to cut the brewing argument off at the pass. "Yes, but Rex has no need to complain since he and Stephanie have moved in with you. I keep things tidy so Stephanie can concentrate on more important things."

"I haven't moved in with Ranger…" Stephanie's voice conveyed both surprise and confusion. "I still have my apartment."

Hal looked over at me. "She still has her apartment…but she moved the rat into Rangeman the day after the night we met and hasn't gone home for more than an hour since."

Stephanie looked over at Ranger and he just nodded. "It's true. I didn't want to tell you that you'd moved in with me, I just decided to let you figure it out on your own."

"So you are tricking me into a relationship with you?"

"Babe." Was all that Ranger said.

Stephanie seemed to understand a multitude from the single word. "But you are acknowledging that we are in a relationship?"

Ranger smirked. "In another week, the only thing remaining at your apartment will be your furniture and all your home goods other than your cookie jar. You don't need those anyway."

"Said a lot, didn't answer my question. Are we or are we not in a committed, monogamous relationship."

"If I say yes will it undo all the hard work I've put in tricking you into said committed, monogamous relationship?" he shot back. It was an odd yet very intimate conversation.

A pretty smile took over Stephanie's face. "If you say yes, I'll go over as soon as we get back to
Trenton, get the rest of my things and transfer the lease over to Grandma."

"You'll let me put in a security system so your crazies don't get hurt?" he negotiated.

"Are you really saying that we should be more worried about what my grandmother will do to my stalkers than what they would do to her?"

Every man there nodded. I didn't ask why they felt that way. Having had only one conversation with Mrs. Mazur I could honestly say that I believed that they were right. However, I could tell that Stephanie didn't appreciate the sentiment. "Stephanie, I can help you clean the place up…get it ready for your Grandmother. She seemed very nice."

"She is. She has always had my back." Stephanie's voice was quiet and soft. "Grandma might be a little bit crazy, but she loves me…never lets me think otherwise either."

Ella reached over and took Stephanie's hand. "Then let Emma and I help you make that apartment a nice new home for her." I saw Ranger nod over Stephanie's head and somehow I knew that he would be footing the bill for the changes. It looked for a moment like Stephanie was about to rebuff Ella and my offer, but the older woman smiled and said please.

"Do all of you know my kryptonite…okay Ella, Emma…thank you." She said earnestly.

With that finally decided, we all adjourned to our rooms. The suite boasted a foyer, living room with sleek, modern furniture and a huge TV and enough room for a rollaway bed. Hal offered to get one sent up, but I just shook my head. "No, I don't believe that we are ready to go…well, all the way, but I would like to try sleeping in your arms. I trust you."

Hal just nodded and took me into his arms. Soon our curiosity overcame the moment we were sharing and we opened the French doors that led to the bedroom. The king bed with its pewter upholstered headboard, white, black and purple bedding dominated the room, and yet there seemed to be massive amounts of room. The bathroom was just as spacious with a huge marble topped soaker tub, a glass enclosed rain shower and marble double vanities. We unpacked, and Hal sent his uniform down to be pressed while I prepared the bathroom to be able to take a long hot bath. The Bliss spa products were just lovely and when I slipped into my baby blue, cotton nighty and its matching robe, I felt truly beautiful. I hadn't realized how long I'd been in the bathroom. By the time I came out Hal's freshly pressed dress uniform had been returned to our room. After Hal's shower, he stepped into the room wearing a pair of blue plaid pajama pants, his torso and feet bare. For the first time in my life a whimper of desire escaped me completely against my will.

"Well now you know how I felt when you came out looking…so beautiful." Hal countered. "When I was looking through the channels I saw that Rocky Horror is available. Wanna watch it together?" I loved the fact that he loved my favorite movie as much as I did. I pulled back the sheets and sprayed them with the Clean Well Botanical Disinfectant that I always travelled with and as it dried, Hal called down for room service to bring us popcorn and drinks. We talked and laughed during the movie then fell asleep in each other's arms. It was one of the best days ever. The next day was more than pleasant. The parade was lovely and invoked a stronger sense of patriotism than I had ever really felt before. Hal looked so strong and handsome in his uniform. Once it was over, we all separated and Hal and I walked through some of the monuments before having a wonderful lunch. After lunch, we made our way back to our hotel room and had a nap since the concert would go on late into the evening. The concert itself was just wonderful there were classical instrumental performances and there were vocal performances. The big star of the night was Beyoncé, and I couldn't help but whisper, with pride, "Mercedes is so much better than her."

Hal looked down at me and smiled. I'd shared all of my favorite New Directions tales with him and
he'd heard Mercedes, Noah and Sam...so he knew that I was telling the truth. By the end of the concert, Hal almost had to carry me back to the hotel, even having had a nap, I was exhausted. The next morning, we were up bright and early packing and checking out so that the guys could get back to Rangeman. The next few days I spent time with Hal around his work schedule and when he was on shift, Ella and I bonded while cleaning and apparently completely redecorating Stephanie's apartment. All the work was done by off shift Rangemen. Hector and I had a nice conversation in Spanish as he installed the security system that would allow them to monitor Mrs. Mazur's safety and her health without actually invading her privacy. Stephanie's thrift store furniture was replaced with a lovely living room set Ella found at Haverty's, a dining room set that Lester brought from Bassett's…probably hoping that if Stephanie's grandmother liked him, she'd stop trying to grab his 'package'…and a bedroom set that Cal picked for his adoptive grandmother at a locally owned place called Jaron's. Apparently he was the only one of the Rangemen to have never been groped. Stephanie's theory was that he had been present at the birth of one of Stephanie's nieces, so Mrs. Mazur probably felt that made him family. Tank replaced Stephanie's 'entertainment center', one I even considered archaic, with a brand new, really, really big flat screen Smart TV with all the bells and whistles. He even got her a beautiful antique looking console cabinet and inside he placed a Wii system, a stereo and a machine that played every format of video that was currently available on the market.

Even beyond the commercial changes, every morning I returned to the apartment something fairly structural had changed as well. The windows were replaced with much more secure ones...someone said they were even bullet proof…but I was pretty sure that they were joking. The morning after we removed all the old, mismatched furniture from the apartment the carpet had been replaced with a beautiful mid tone hardwood. Chet, both Chesters, and Louis came over and in the course of a day completely refurbished the bathroom. It no longer looked like something out of a nineteen seventies horror movie. Instead it had a nice soothing color palette, a walk in tub shower combo, a higher toilet with decorative looking but fully functional safety rails where needed. They even installed Mrs. Mazur a compact washer and dryer combo so she wouldn't have to lug her laundry hither and yon. The day after that, Louis showed up with Gene, Junior, Manny and Ramon and when I returned the morning after there was a new kitchen in place with conveniently sized counters and new appliances. Mrs. Mazur would be able to reach everything easily without having to get step stools which were a fall risk for anyone but especially someone of her advanced years. While Ella and I stocked the new kitchen with new pots, dishes and basically anything a decent cook could possibly need, I asked her something that had been bothering me. "How can we make all these major changes to a rental?"

Ella looked around, even going so far as to check the other rooms. Once she was satisfied that Stephanie was nowhere in the place she answered me. "Ranger owns the building. After the second time Stephanie's apartment was firebombed, Ranger found out that her landlord was going to have her evicted. That Dillon boy, the super for the building, he is a good friend to Stephanie...he came to Haywood and let Ranger know. So Ranger bought the building. Stephanie still pays her rent...but she hasn't noticed that it hasn't gone up on her in years. Ranger takes the payments and uses them to pay down the debts that pendejo of an ex-husband left her with. Now that she has moved in with him full time, he plans on updating the other apartments too. The building is full of seniors, but it doesn't have very good security or any of the safety measures one would expect."

"He is very deeply in love with her." I couldn't help but respond.

"She brought him out of the darkness...like you are doing for young Hal." Her words made me almost glow in happiness.

The guys had all been keeping Stephanie from snooping. On the eleventh, the day before I was scheduled to return home, we finally allowed her back into the apartment. "Oh my God. What? How? When?" she breathed out as she ran a hand over the brown microfiber of the arm chair. We'd brightened up the darker upholstery with cheerful accent pillows and throws. Rather than having a
hard wooden or glass and metal coffee table, we'd chosen a storage ottoman. Hector had programmed a big display remote so that Mrs. Mazur could control the whole apartment from her seat in front of the television. By the time Stephanie saw the bedroom, bathroom and kitchen she was speechless.

Thankfully before she could reason out that there was something strange in all the changes that had been made, Tank arrived with Mrs. Mazur and two people that were very clearly Stephanie's parents. She shared physical traits with all three of her relatives present, her mother's hair color, her father's eyes and curls and her grandmother's bone structure. Mrs. Mazur had been a beautiful woman once upon a time and it showed through in her smile as she was escorted through the apartment by the 'Merry Men' each of them acting like a little boy trying to show her their contribution to her new home. "You all are such good boys." She kept whispering. "Helen, come look…I've got my own washer and dryer in my own can. No more fighting with Frank in the morning."

"Hallelujah." Frank Plum said loudly. "My Pumpkin's safe and happy and I have my own bathroom back." he looked around and whistled. Then he pulled Tank to the side and whispered quietly, "now Edna is gonna be safe here, right? She might be a crazy old battleax…but she’s my crazy old battleax. A man couldn’t have asked for a better grandmother to his girls and she is a good great grandmother to my granddaughters."

Tank showed him all the security measures that were in place and you could see that he was very relieved. It was funny. He clearly cared about his mother-in-law, but he really didn't want to admit it. "Ms. Edna can even cook. The kitchen is fully stocked. There is a smoke alarm tied into the security system and Hector has it all set up so that every month she gets her paper goods, laundry and cleaning products delivered right to her door from Amazon Prime. He is handling the packing of her things at your house so that he can add her personal hygiene things to that as well. All Ms. Edna will have to worry about is buying what she wants."

"Helen can take her grocery shopping when she does hers." Frank refuted. "We appreciate all that you guys are doing for her. But we can take care of her."

Ranger appeared from nowhere, yet again...seriously how does he do that? He calmly shook his head. "We know that you can, and you can definitely take Grandma Mazur shopping for some things, but we want to do this for her. Mr. Plum, you served in Vietnam...you know what it can be like coming home from war. All of my men have seen darkness in one form or another. Stephanie, she pushes that darkness further and further back for us every day. She accepts us for exactly who we are and cares for each of us. For many of my men, she accepts them where their own families can't or won't. In this town, of the women...there is only my Babe and her grandmother that have done that immediately. We want to repay that kindness. You know that your youngest daughter is independent and proud...she would never allow the men to do these things for her...but she will thank us for doing them for her grandmother. Please, let us do this small thing for them."

Mr. Plum nodded as Mrs. Plum's voice drew our attention to the kitchen, "Frank... Mom has those Calphalon pots I've been begging you for."

Hal and I made our escape after Stephanie thanked me profusely. I guess she realized that I had given Hector the names of all my favorite cleaning products to order and keep in stock for Mrs. Mazur. I hadn't needed to do much cleaning; everything had been redone from the floors to the walls and everything. That last night Hal and I stayed together in my hotel room. When I slept in Hal's arms I had no cares or worries. When he kissed me, I didn't wonder when the last time he brushed his teeth was. When he touched me, I didn't hope and pray that he had washed his hands first. I only wanted more of his kisses, more of his touches. Returning to Lima was actually more difficult than I had imagined it would be. I hated to leave Hal and I had made many new friends.
But return I did. I settled quickly back into my usual routine, just augmented with conversations with Hal, Stephanie and several of the Rangemen who had befriended me. Even with bing gone for two weeks, by the end of the summer I had managed to get all the CEUs I needed to maintain my certification. I helped Sue determine the budget for the Guidance department and request the dates for the graduation tests. We were hoping to get two in the fall and then a makeup in the spring. I oversaw the placement of the new sign for the school that had been the senior gift from the twenty-fourteen graduating class. Shannon and I revamped the curriculums for the freshman health, hygiene and sexual education classes. I rode down with Shannon and Mark and Shelby and Dave to see KAMA’s performance at the Ohio State Fair and I survived the fairground experience. I may have showered rather excessively thereafter, but I survived it.

Before I knew it, school was back in session. The first few days of school I was kept busy meeting with seniors to make sure that they had or would have by the last day of school all the credits they would need to graduate. My evenings were spent in more social pursuits including talking with Hal and trying to plan a good time for him to come to Lima to visit me. Saturday, Shelby cajoled, teased and basically manipulated Shannon and I into going with her to the spa for mani-pedis. Thankfully she had done her research and the spa was clean, even to me. Sunday night I went to the watch party that the Jones were throwing to celebrate KAMA’s first VMAs appearance and ultimately their first wins as well. Not long after I got home, as I was fretting over what troubles Puck's and Sam's comments could possibly cause them; I got a call from Ranger.

"We’ve been asked to provide body guard services for KAMA and their entourage when they arrive in New York tomorrow. Our New York branch doesn't have the necessary manpower for me to the men to come from that office for this assignment. You provide me with a unique opportunity to match the right men to the group in advance. You know the men and you know our clients. Can you help me?" he asked politely.

"Of course. I care very deeply for Mercedes, Sam and Noah…Artie, Brittany and Santana as well." I responded thinking about the men I'd met even as I spoke. "If you value the world as it stands I would avoid sending Hector. If he and Santana bond…they could well take it over forcing all of us to do their bidding. Manny and Junior would be good choices. They are both nearer the kids' age and could blend in with the group. Then you could send Cal and Binkie to act as their visible guards."

I could hear him speaking with someone in the background. "We would need another shift of three to four. That would provide the best coverage." He continued.

"Hmm…Ramon and Bones for the big guys and Caesar and Chet for the camouflaged guards." I answered after giving it some more thought.

Ranger was very grateful and before he hung up, he surprised me by saying, "If you and Hal get serious enough for you to move here…I'd like to offer you a position with us doing what you just did. You'd meet with the clients, talk to them, ascertain their salient personality traits and then help us match them up with the right security detail. In fact, have you got any thoughts on who I should assign to Stephanie the next time she gets a stalker."

"Actually Hector and Lester…and possibly Hal. She would be more likely to take those three into danger with her rather than ditching them. Hector because he will pretend he doesn't understand her, Lester because he is very easy for her to talk into doing almost anything…those two are another pair who could easily work together to take over the world… and Hal because she has met me and I believe she likes me and would therefore want to pump him for information about our relationship."

He laughed. I was shocked. "I would definitely like to talk to you about taking on the role we discussed if you ever decide to move here to be with Hal." I guess that qualified as goodbye for him.
He left me with a lot to think about. I emailed Mercedes, Noah and Sam to congratulate them on their achievements. Then I called Hal to tell him about my phone call with Ranger. Hal had news as well. Ranger had given him the last two weeks of September off to come and visit me. As I got into bed that night, I couldn't help but catalogue all the good things in my life. I was gaining some measure of control over my mental illness. One of my favorite students of all time was achieving success most people only dream about. I had a man who I was falling in love with and who was falling in love, real true love, right back. It was the single best summer of my life, and the fall was shaping up to be just as good.

Livin' On A Prayer (Bon Jovi)
Erika Chance (The Bassist) PoV

I grew up in one of the poorest neighborhoods in one of the biggest cities in Puerto Rico. My parents were loving and caring...good Catholic people. Like many good Catholics, they didn't use any birth control other than the rhythm method...which apparently my mother kind of sucked at because I was the eldest of eight. My mother worked in the kitchens at one of the big hotels, Bayamón Puerto Rico was kind of a tourist trap. There were lots of big hotels that catered to them. My dad worked as one of the 'butlers' aka concierges at another. Neither made tons but Dad was a charming, affable man who was deeply in love with, and therefore completely faithful to, his wife. So while he didn't make much in hourly wages, his tips were always really nice.

I grew up in a decent home in a community that made up for what it lacked in money by being a community in the truest sense of the word. But that changed when I started school. In my neighborhood, everyone was pretty much the same we were all dark skinned Puerto Ricans...or Afro Latinos as people say now. Even more than that, we all had nothing so we took care of each other. When I went to school...it was there I learned that I was wrong. That my family was poor. That I was the wrong color. That it didn't necessarily matter that I was talented and pretty and charming. Even in kindergarten the teachers seemed to only want to call on and help the traditional Latino kids. But once I realized what the deal was I was fine with the subtle, institutional racism. I did find it funny that if you asked anyone they would say that there was no racism in Puerto Rico, because we were all Latinos and thus we had to stick together. Yeah, right. By the time was in second grade I was so over it.

I decided that I was going to be a rock star. That way I could get the hell out of Bayamón and never have to come back for more than a visit. And when I visited, I'd be able to begin to make changes that were not only in demand, but all kinds of necessary. Since I was going to be a rock star, I knew that I needed to learn to play an instrument. I decided that I wanted to learn to play the drums, so I could be like Sheila E. My Mami loved Sheila E. I begged my parents for lessons. I begged for almost a year. When I turned nine, my parents decided that since they were giving me younger sibling number four, they would also give me the music lessons I'd been begging for since not long after they presented me with my little sister Dorel. Unfortunately, Papa didn't know anyone who played the drums. But one of his coworkers played the guitar and the bass. He was a young guy, single and on his own, so for the low, low price of a six pack of Medalla and dinner every time he gave me a lesson, he would teach me to play both.

By the time I graduated high school I had mastered both and was playing in a band in the lounge at the hotel my dad worked at. It wasn't a bad gig at all. The job allowed me to help my parents out and save up to move to New York. Neither of my parents really liked the thought of me moving that far from home, all on my own at such a young age, but they also knew that opportunities for me were pretty limited on the island. Plus, even with me gone they still had seven kids, four of whom weren't even teenagers at that point...they could definitely use the space. My parents were still parents and
my neighbors had had a hand in raising me too, so my going away block party was something of a fundraiser. I'd saved up a few thousand, but I left with double that.

It turned out to be a good thing that I was so loved…because the cost of living in New York was high as hell. I found a hellish little hotel and stayed there for a week while I looked for an apartment that I could afford. The place I ended up was a studio that was so small it came with a Murphy bed because there was no way you could fit a regular one in the space. Once I had a place to live for real, I started posting ads for guitar, bass and Spanish lessons. In between those, I auditioned for every band, every club…any ad I saw in the paper or on craigslist for a bassist or guitarist. It was strange because the one part of my hustle that actually kicked off into something was the Spanish lessons and tutoring, even though I had thought that it would be the least easy to get going. When people hear my name and see me they have a hard time believing that I'm Puerto Rican. But as I understand it from the other Afro Latinos I'd met since I'd moved to New York, that was often the case. I certainly didn't help things by going by my stage name all the time. It wasn't that I changed my name or anything. I just took two of the names from my legal name which, as stated on my birth certificate, was Oihane Erika Chance Calderon. But as soon as I got to New York I had started going only just by my two middle names. It kept people from butchering my name, and as Pink had pointed out in an interview, it kept a bit of myself for me and my family…or at least it would once I had managed to achieve some measure of fame.

It had been hard, but I'd managed to hang on by the skin of my teeth for three years when I responded to a slightly vague ad looking for a bassist, a pianist/keyboardist, a drummer, background vocalists and basically everything else. I sent my resume and the requested video portfolio of me playing several different songs. I went with the simple, thumpy 5-1-1 of the Temptations' ‘My Girl', followed by the Stanley Clarke's ‘School Days' and Paul Simon's ‘You Can Call Me Al' before finishing off with Metallica's ‘My Friend of Misery'. I'd done it so many times that when I got the call that they wanted me to do an in person audition; I still didn't get very happy. But when I arrived for the audition, I walked in on a short, lithe, sexy Latina cursing some racist pendejo up one side and down the other. She was slipping in an out of English and mad as hell because he had called her a Mexican and basically felt she was what was wrong with the country. Dude must have been a total idiot. She didn't have the right bone structure to be Mexican…I quickly started to laugh and converse with her in Spanish. Once she was calm again, we talked some with the trio that had broken the internet when their first single dropped. Well they didn't break it, but every platform that carried their music was slow as hell from all the people downloading the ‘SongBird' soundtrack and ‘The Fighter' single in particular.

It was more of an interview than an audition. We talked for a long while they asked me tons of questions about me and my family and growing up in Puerto Rico. I learned that Santana, the light skinned Latina I'd helped calm down was Puerto Rican, but her grandparents had moved to the continental United States before they had had any children at all and she had never been to the island. I learned that Mercedes Jones was real deal Black American Princess. She came from two good parents, had two beloved older brothers and she was quick to ‘cut a bitch’…though according to her friends she said that but in reality she was a marshmallow. Sam Evans’ family was just as traditional, nuclear American family…but to me they seemed like they were the white folk that most people don't believe exist. They were southerners, but not super conservative or racist or ignorant. They didn't harbor hatred for gays and they didn't allow others to be intolerant of others around them or influence their religious beliefs. Noah Puckerman, however, he was an enigma. Not in the usual way though. What you saw was totally what you got. But he seemed like he was such a horndog, yet he was as in love with Sam and Mercedes as my father was with my mother. For some reason it made me want the position even more.

When they offered it to me, I was in heaven. I met with them another time to jam with the guy they found to take the place of the racist pianist that Santana was going off behind the day we all first met.
It was during the jam session that I accidentally let slip the area of town I live in. Puck's head came up and he stared at me like I had lost my mind. "You are living in Brownville? Oh hell no. I cannot have any chick I know...let alone a cool, boss ass chick like you living in the rape and murder capital of the city. I will come up off ten-fifteen grand to relocate you to somewhere that I can sleep at night knowing that you are living somewhere safe." At first I kind of thought he was just blowing smoke out his add...

But the next thing I knew I had an appointment with his aunt who was a real estate broker. I found out that I would be joined by the new turntablist that the drummer, Dave Briggs, had recommended. When we met at Warner Records' office to sign our new hire packet, I almost passed out. My parents didn't make a hundred thousand a year when you added their salaries together. I'd make that plus bonuses and have basically all the insurances. It was a dream come true. The next day we met with Mills and she showed us some great places. I found my home in a one bed, one bath apartment with great acoustics and the most perfect kitchen I'd ever seen not on a home improvement show. The guy renting it to me was cool. He was being transferred to Sweden and wanted the place in good hands while he was gone. Fortunately for me he wanted a firm three-year lease, so I was set for a while. Mills handled all the paperwork for me and I was able to move in two weeks later. It was a trip to be able to leave everything but my clothes and instruments at my first Manhattan apartment and buy everything new for the nice new place.

I wasn't really comfortable with the thought of furniture shopping. I had no idea how to even start. Mami and Papa bought only what they needed, so I had been shopping for beds. Granted usually kids beds, but still, I knew how to buy those. So I started there. I was determined to only buy things that would last. Things that made me happy. I went online and researched furniture stores...there were a lot of them, but there weren't a lot that I recognized. I had felt like going to Bassett or Haverty would be really high end. But I couldn't even really find those anywhere that I knew how to get to...not really. Finally, I found a few places that I wanted to check out. Since I had what to me seemed like an unlimited budget, I went to places that had great reviews...stores that I was sure I would be able to find quality furniture that would last more than a year or two. I was shopping around our practice schedule, so since my new bosses were in classes pretty much from eight to five...I had quite a lot of day time hours to research things and shop.

I decided that since I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted in a bed, I'd get my bedroom suite and mattresses first. I went to a place called West Elm and was immediately happy. They were great because I could basically get everything I needed for a bedroom in one store. I wanted a queen bed...I'd never slept in anything bigger than a twin. I wanted more space and a king seemed too big...a queen seemed like the perfect size for me. I looked around for a while but I kept being drawn back to a sleek dark chocolate brown bed with a pretty simple frame and a headboard that looked like window panes minus the glass. The bed itself cost almost eight hundred bucks so it took me a little to wrap my head around that. But I pulled the trigger and found a sales lady. Laura, the sleek New York blonde sales person, was a god send. She didn't seem like she was wondering how I was going to pay for things or anything like Mami and Papa had run into when they bought furniture...or like I'd felt in the thrift stores I'd been to when I was furnishing my other apartment. Instead she just asked me what all I was looking for.

I was so embarrassed when I blurted out, "everything. I have a new job here and a new apartment and I don't have...anything yet."

"Alright. Then our next step should be your mattress." She said smoothly. So that's where we went. West Elm had their own special line of Simmons mattresses, so really it was just matter of me figuring out if I was plush, firm or medium kind of girl. Laura made me sit on, lie down on and literally roll around on each one of the different kind. I finally settled on the medium firmness. It felt more right than the others. "Now that that is settled, are you a reader? Do you watch a lot of movies
in bed? Will you be placing the bed in the center of a wall or in a corner?"

It took me a second to answer even one of those. "I do like to watch movies in bed." My bed had been my sofa since I moved to New York. "Can I ask why you asked those particular questions?"

"Well knowing your habits will help us determine what you will need in the way of furniture. If you have your bed in the center of a single wall then you will need two nightstands. If you put it in the corner, then you only need one. If you watch a lot of TV or movies in your bed, then you will probably prefer a dresser without a mirror. Things like that."

Laura walked me through it all. I was able to get my bed, mattress, two nightstands, a four drawer dresser and a six drawer dresser, a cool looking storage bench for the foot of my bed where I could play at night more comfortably than I could while staying in the bed. She even helped me pick out bedding. I only got one set of sheets, and covers there. I would order the rest online or something later, I wasn't able to spend that much when I still needed to do the living room and get stuff for the kitchen. The set I went with was a pretty pink organic, cotton, pintuck duvet cover and pillow sham set. I went with the down duvet insert and down pillows too. A platinum grey four hundred thread count organic cotton percale sheet set complete with both standard and king sized pillow cases finished me off. I spent three hundred dollars on bedding. Just the bedding. That was in addition to the eight hundred bucks for the bed, the furniture was another two grand. I had never spent that much money in one place in my whole life.

It took me another two days to venture back out to go look for living room stuff. I wasn't actually looking when I stumbled over a gorgeous, refurbished nineteen forties couch that was a nice neutral tan. It was really nice and it wasn't over stuffed or too firm. I liked it immediately, so I bought it and arranged for it to be delivered. Its legs were dark brown, just a hair lighter than the furniture I'd purchased for the bedroom. So I decided to go with dark wood for the living room furniture too. I found a Crate and Barrel on Broadway and got happy again. By the time I left there, I had my coffee table, end tables, two bookshelves, a media console, two armchairs and my dining room table and four chairs. I considered myself done. I waited until I moved in to actually buy pots and pans and kitchen stuff and new towels and everything. Come to find out I was actually worse off than I thought. I had furniture in place but the apartment still didn’t look or feel lived in. After the record release party, the parade of shows and press…and my first bonus, of course… I went to Wayfair and went wild getting things like lamps and rugs and art. By the time I’d lived there for two months, I’d gotten sick and tired of lugging laundry down to the basement twice a week. So I got a small washer and dryer and had them hooked up in the laundry closet that my landlord had used just as storage. It may have been a weird, little detail, but for the first time since leaving Bayamón, I really felt like I had a place to call home.

During the two months between the press junket and the start of the festival tour, I finished off my eighty-five percent of my music lessons, helping my younger students find new musicians to learn from. I kept all of my language students though. Since all my Spanish students were high school age, they would prefer to have summers and school holidays off from the tutoring anyway. It was strange; I was really enjoying helping my students again. Teaching was a lot more fun when I didn't need the money so very badly. I loved the fact that I was able to make enough of off music and Spanish lessons to keep me in food and to pay my new utility bill… I’d never had a cable bill before. I'd been mooching Wi-Fi off of a nearby coffee shop for the entire time I lived in my old place. We practiced for the tour several times a week for the first month then almost nightly for the last two or three weeks. We had meetings where we planned stage looks and it was awesome because we got reimbursed for all of our stage clothes and then we got to integrate them into our regular wardrobe. My life was pretty damn sweet. I was able to send quite a bit home for my parents and I felt much better about my siblings who were still at home. When we hit the road, it was a much different experience than I was expecting. We had a blast at every single stop. There were breaks, time for
Mercedes, Sam and Puck to do family stuff. But for the most part we traversed the continental US for three months.

By the end of the tour, there was nothing that I wouldn't do for our bosses, and I knew that every band member felt the same way. We worked together with them on the material for their next album. We helped each other learn new instruments. We went sightseeing. We became a cohesive unit. So much so that we were able to pull off one hell of an awards show performance. The more times they called KAMA’s name, the more I wanted to hear it. In that moment, celebrating back stage, the fifteen of us…the band including Artie, the backup dancers and the background singers made a vow that we would do whatever we needed to do to ensure that those three who brought us together were as successful as our first summer as a unit had been awesome.

Piano Man (Billy Joel)
Justin Alexander (The Keyboard/Pianist)

It's weird how little my life ended up like I originally thought it would. I had a textbook suburban early childhood. I grew up in Barrington, a suburb of Chicago that looked all one horse townish, but was only a train ride away from the city. As soon as I was old enough…meaning three, I was enrolled in what felt like a million enriching activities. T-ball, soccer, swim classes and finally piano lessons. I was just bad at both T-ball and soccer…like horrifically, nightmarishly bad. But as bad as I was at the team sports, that was how good I was in my other activities. I swam like a fish. It only took my swim instructor six months before I was so proficient at all the different strokes that he wanted me to start competing in a junior Olympics kind of deal. Seriously, I loved it so much that my mother had the hardest time getting me out of the pool after each lesson.

But even the amount of talent I showed in the water, it was nothing compared to how much I showed when at a piano. I played ‘Giant Steps' for my first recital six months after my very first lesson. From the very first lesson I loved playing. After the first recital, my parents invested in a baby grand for me. By five I was playing Mozart, by six, the Chopin Etudes. Over the next ten years, I learned to play not only piano, but the organ, glockenspiel, timpani, bells, and xylophone. When I decided I hated school because it cut into my time at the piano, so my parents took me out of public school and hired me a teacher/nanny named Elise to home school me. With her help, I graduated high school at sixteen. I played with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for all of their special programs since I was ten, so when I graduated I had my pick of performing arts schools.

I chose Juilliard after having a very long talk with my parents and my godmother. I didn’t like to admit it, but I was kind of worried about being sixteen on my own in New York. Hell, my parents wouldn’t let me get into Chicago by myself, but then I was supposed to go however far away to ‘college'. I originally only looked at schools that were in relatively small towns, like Oberlin and Bard Conservatory at Annandale-On-Hudson. But ultimately my father kept telling me to really look at going to either Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia or Juilliard. They were the most exclusive schools in the country and if I was going to be the best, then it made sense to say that I needed to learn from the best. Juilliard won out over the slightly more exclusive Curtis because I'd be able to go to Julie's, my godmother, whenever I wanted. It turned out to be a good thing that I did choose Juilliard rather than one of the schools where I’d have been all on my own. I played because I loved to play and I loved music. I loved all kinds of music. The high intensity and elitist environment Juilliard burnt me out. The professors for very, irritated when I went off the beaten track. Halfway through my second year, I couldn't take it anymore. I started sneaking into bars and drinking until my eyeballs hurt. It was a miracle that I didn’t get arrested or alcohol poisoning or something.

It was probably only by the grace of God that I finished the year, but by the end of the first week of that summer, my godmother figured out what I was doing and she and my parents slapped my happy ass in rehab over the summer and I never went back after that. That next year I spent playing
wherever people would pay me to play, dive bars, jazz clubs, elite lounges. It wasn't bad money but the most important part was the music. I was immersed in music all day, every day. It was amazing. I learned to play the drums from a guy in a grunge cover band in SoHo. I began learning the fingering for the soprano saxophone from a jazz musician in Red Hook. I played with a group that turned everyday items into their instruments. I soaked up music styles like a sponge.

In February, a guy I'd played with a few times at Union Hall told me about auditions for a band to back a music group that had busted onto the scene over Christmas and were already huge. Granted, I don't think he was telling me that I should try to audition, he was mainly bragging about how he had sent in his resume and he was sure to have it in the bag and all that noise. I went home and did some research into the group, read articles about how they got together and everything. I fell in love with the music they had already released and I watched the videos for their song and the pieces of the concert they had done at the Warner Halloween event. KAMA was damn good. I could easily tell that they fully loved music and didn't force themselves to stick to any one genre. That was the kind of music life I wanted to live. I became desperate to be a part of their world. I managed to find the ad the braggart had mentioned and I sent them the requested resume and some of my videos…rather than just showing one from each genre or something, I sent them videos from different stages of my life. I was ecstatic when I got the email scheduling me for an audition. And not just because the whole clandestine kind of way it was being done was cool as hell, either.

The day before I was scheduled to go in, I ran into Mr. Braggadocios at the music store we both frequented a lot and he was pissed off. "Man, I had the gig. I got along great with Evans and Puckerman, I didn't look too hard at Jones tits, even thought they were fucking huge man. Fuck, I've never wanted to bury my dick between a pair of tits so bad in my whole fucking life. They invited me back to play with the people they were auditioning for the bassist. Of course I went, that just showed that I was in, right? but then this little Spic chick came in. I knew I should have kept my mouth closed, but I thought she was there to audition or something. I thought if I let them know that Spics were not worth the trouble. They come to this country and steal all the jobs and they steal and shit man…"

I rolled my eyes. "You do realize that a…that's all bullshit and b… not ever Latin person is from Mexico right?"

"Whatever, my eldest sister hired a Spic maid and that bitch ended up stealing Gloria's husband, life and home. They are the worst." He defended his indefensible position. "But that chick today, she was Puerto Rican…and apparently she's good friends with all three of them. She's one of the background singers and I almost got my ass handed to me. The worst part is that I'm not even sure who was gonna kick it. Puckerman was pissed. Evans was mad as hell. Jones looked like she was about to kick my balls into my throat and the Spanish chick, she was reaching into her handbag. I think she was gonna shoot me or some shit."

"You'd have deserved it." I shot back. My parents were super liberals. The kind of shit that dude had been spewing was just assholish and wrong. I was glad he'd fucked up his shot. I wouldn't. when I went in there, I wasn't expecting to audition with the others, but that's what happened. After we all talked for a while, things kind of dissolved into a jam session. We played a bunch of different things, from a few of their songs to things like the Harry Potter and old Batman show's theme songs. It was pretty epic. They offered me the gig and I was so very happy I couldn't wait to get home to tell Julie and call my parents with the good news. I called them after the meeting and told them all about my salary and the benefits package. "Well son, that does sound like a wonderful opportunity. My first job out of college paid thirty thousand dollars a year and the benefits package was only about half of what you've got. I'm very happy for you." Mom chuckled.

Dad's laughter was even more boisterous. "Your benefits package is so good I'm half way tempted to
see if you can claim me as a dependent."

Julie was happy for me but at the same time she knew that I'd probably want to move out soon. I wasn't that pressed to do so. I had a lot of freedom living with her, and yet I had boundaries and rules enough to still feel my age. So I asked her if she would be okay with me waiting to move out for another year. "I'd just...it would be better for me to build up some credit in smaller ways before I try and get a lease in the city, ya know."

"That's very reasonable and responsible." Mom and Julie both sounded relieved.

I could see Dad nodding on Skype. "Yeah, and if you save up a good down payment, you could buy someplace rather than just renting."

I let them argue the benefits of buying versus renting and what parts of the city would be best for a young bachelor. It didn't really matter to me where I lived. I had barely even noticed girls...though I had realized that I wasn't gay. There had been a few moments of confusion during my first year at Juilliard, but I definitely knew guys didn't do it for me. I'd just been a bit of a late bloomer. I blamed home school. Still I felt that I was probably more confident than I would have been if I'd been concerned with girls before I got comfortable with who I was and just living in my own skin. It was with those things in mind that I undertook my new position with verve and vigor. It took no time at all before I had totally bonded with the gang. Artie and Cassidy were only a few months older than I was, and so were Mercedes, Sam and Santana. They helped me a lot in getting more confident in talking with women and learning to appreciate their perspective on things. Puck and Erika were both another year older and it was like being surrounded by cool older sisters and brothers. Though I had to get over my crush on Erika first. She was SO HOT! But eventually I got my equilibrium back. Brittany told me that her psychic cat said that it would be a bad idea to start something in the band when I wasn’t even close to being ready to settle down. It seemed a little crazy, but the advice seemed sound.

I had to admit that I learned a hell of a lot from Puck and Sam and the Dam Bros about women during the tour. Simeon and Jackson were cool too; they just weren't interested in the same things the rest of us were. Damien was bi-sexual, but he still hung with us guys when we were talking about women. He was the person who told me that limiting myself to a certain 'type' before I even had any experience was stupid. He suggested that I learn that women, even if they look similar are usually hella different. I took that to heart. The time on the tour was just epic. We played music, we joked and teased. We talked about any and everything. Artie, Sam and I had long discussions about comic books and science fiction. The only thing I could really talk to Simeon and Jacks about was music. They both really loved music as much as I did. Over the three months we were on tour, as much as I learned about girls and interpersonal relationships, I learned even more about music and composition from them though so I definitely counted that summer the best experience of my life.

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Chapter End Notes

Nothing deep...nothing funny.

Just a request that you chime in and let me know people are still reading and want me to continue this as a full series rather than kind of rushing things through and getting to the
end of the journey.

I know that I have some people who still love and still read & they are pretty much all that keeps me going, but I made a promise to a very good friend that I would take over her stories and I'm not sure that I have the time to be both of us. Not and do either of our stories right.

If there are more than two people still reading this then I will keep going even if I have to slow down the posting schedule a little bit. (Which may be what I do anyway because I really do love this verse.)

Thank you for your time and consideration.

TTFN,
Anni
Happy, It Don't Have to Change & Tom Sawyer

Chapter Notes

*****PLEASE NOTE: If I am using an actor or musician as a face claim, they do not exist as their famous persona in this universe. IE: Darcy Lewis is a person so Kat Dennings doesn't exist. Or Hiram Berry is a person so Jeff Goldblum is not.*****

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Temptation With A Southern Accent by sadhappygirl
(Oh my God the Imagery is worth the reread!)

Isis Aurora Tomoe & Princess 976 You are the most awesome Betas ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!!

OMG just read an article about a One Direction FF author who got tapped to turn her fic into a novel. WHERE do I sign up? Seriously Dear Readers, if anyone of you know anyone…start a petition, call a honcho, beg a brother in law…Hook a sister up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Happy (Pharrell Williams)
Kevon PoV

Growing up in an upper middle class black family in a city like Lima Ohio teaches you a lot of lessons. It teaches you to be careful of the motives of those who you let call yourselves your friend. It teaches you to make sure that you are upholding what you believe in and not trying to be a poster black person for all the white people you know. It teaches you to hope for the best but prepare for the worst in every situation you will encounter. It definitely teaches you how to make lemonade from the bullshitty lemons people hand you trying to bust you back down to where they think you belong. What it doesn't teach you is what to do when you are well and truly happy and the few roadblocks you had in your way are suddenly removed. MeDe was dealing with that. Her dreams were coming true and as her big brother, I couldn't have been happier. But as her big brother, I also couldn't help but be a little worried about how much she was sharing the wealth. She paid off any and all student loan debt me, Pattie, Dev and Tonya had, which admittedly was only about twenty-five grand total. But in addition to that, she managed to find out about our car payment information and paid off those loans too. Even though that triggered the early buy out fee. I understood why she wanted to do it. I would have done the same thing in her situation. But I was worried for my little sister. I didn't want her to end up like MC Hammer or Toni Braxton or something.

But no way was I stupid enough to go to MeDe with my concerns. I knew my baby sister…well little sister, she wasn't the baby any more. Still, she would cuss me up one side and down the other for acting like she couldn't manage her money. Then she would point out that she was the one who always had money in the bank. The one Dev and I had to turn to to keep our money when we
wanted to save up for something because we both got itchy when we knew we had money to burn. It was too dangerous to ask Mercedes about it, well at least too dangerous to do it alone. So about halfway through May, I grabbed Dev for lunch one day and as soon as we'd ordered, I looked him in the face and just bluntly stated, "I'm worried about MeDe...she is spending her money as fast as she can make it."

Devon looked at me like I'd grown two more heads. "Kev...two things...first of all Mercedes Antoinette Jones still has part of the very first allowance she ever received. You know how she is about saving money. Girl may like fashion, but she is crazy responsible. Second of all, do you even realize how much a pop star can make now in days? I mean...li'l sis and her boos are uniquely successful. Plus, they aren't just spending to be spending. They are buying real estate. Look at the house they are in now. It cost a lot, yeah...but since it's in New York it doubled in equity the second they nailed in the last nail. You know that the same thing can be said in Chicago and LA. Shoot, man, I thought you were calling me because you were flunking out or something."

"Hell no. You know better than that. I've gotta gets that paper so I can make some serious cheddar." I shot back. "So if you aren't worried about MeDe too...why do you look like you're losing sleep?"

"I never said I wasn't worried about Mercedes. But she got the money issue. I know she is good there. It's the fucking internet trolls that are pissing me off. I don't know which is worse the jealous bitches trying to cast shade because she is a thicker girl, or the wish they were sex sharks talking about my baby sister like she was just some meat. Them muthafuckas don't even know. They didn't just piss me off...they got Tonya calling them misogynists and sexists and every other ist under the sun. You know how she gets."

I nodded. "Pattie's worried about the trolls casting shade. She says that Mercedes experiences in high school probably gave her body issues that the internet assholes can only exacerbate."

Devon rolled his eyes. "I don't think Sam or Noah are gonna let that shit stand." He had a valid point.

"What can we do to help?" I asked him quietly. We'd always done whatever we could to protect our little sister, just because she had her hubbies, that didn't change the fact that we were still and always would be her big brothers.

He looked around and lowered his voice. "Me and Tonya did come up with a major ass idea. In fact, we were gonna invite you and Tricie over for dinner Friday. We were hoping that you could create us all shadow social media accounts so we could troll the trolls."

I smiled an evil smile. "I can get behind that. I can definitely do that. Route the IP address through a few places that'll make it damn near impossible to trace back to us...no way to link it to MeDe and the guys...we can get as rowdy as we like."

Devon's smile matched mine before looking a little worried. "You won't get into any trouble, will you?"

"Like I give two shits less than a flying fuck if I get in trouble for trolling trolls who think its fine and ducking dandy for them to hurt MeDe. As long as it can't be traced back to her...because you know that the press would twist this shit around to make her look bad." I said with all sincerity. "Besides, it's not like I'll be hacking the pentagon or something."

It took me a couple of weeks to have everything in place. I ordered each of us a special tablet from a guy I knew who changed the SIM card to make T Mobile believe that the IP signals came from half a world away. He only charged fifty bucks per tablet over the actual costs. Since we were only using
these tablets for one thing, I went cheap and just got us each an Amazon Fire. Once I had those in hand, it was kids play to get an international debit card, link that to paypal, route that through Google's new pay system…pull that from a not so closely associated with KAMA bank account. Now that last part, admittedly took a little hacking. But, I made sure to cover my ass by getting permission to do so. What can I say, Big Mama loves little MeDe. Tonya's grandmother told us that if we wanted her to, she would pay for the monthly fee. But we knew that at over two hundred bucks for the four of us, we could handle that better than she could. Though Big Mama said she hadn't had a balance on any of her utility bills since April. I just smiled…MeDe looked out for her people. She always had even when we were just upper middle, middle class dentists' kids. I guess I should have realized that having money, like insane amounts of money, wouldn't change that part of her.

Once everything was all set and ready to go, for an added level of protection, the four of us would head to Starbucks or internet cafes or the campus library and we'd troll the trolls for a while. The Yahoo Comments sections on articles about MeDe and her boys were always good for find assholes who didn't realize that just because they 'were entitled to their opinion' that everyone else had to agree with it. My personal favorites were the bible quoters who misquoted to suit their agendas. Thing was that I'd been raised in the church…a black church. A real, hard core black church where children's church was a monthly thing and we had bible knowledge jeopardy at vacation bible school. I could correctly quote the good book and use the real verses to support my cause.

Tonya had her own 'cause'. She loved to go ham on the misogynists. Those men who used the pseudo-anonymity online to talk about Mercedes body and all they wanted to do to her. They were often racists one way or another too. So they either blasted Sam and Puck for being with a woman who was black or castigated Mercedes for being with men who were white. Tonya blasted back at all of them. Her favorite method was to hold a mirror up and make them face their hypocrisy. Devon was a whole different kettle of fish. He had somehow fallen down the rabbit hole into the really dark stuff. He had me set him up secondary access so that he could keep track of all the people who made him fear for our sister. He created a spreadsheet and found out everything he could about each of them. He didn't let the girls in on what was being said, but I made him show me. After throwing up everything I'd eaten for the previous week, he showed me the logs he was keeping. "If they get any worse or start to seem like they are doing more than spouting off at the mouth…I'll send everything I've got to NYPD or the FBI or that security company that takes care of their place in New York."

I nodded. "Man, what the fuck is wrong with those people. I mean, you gotta expect crazies…but the chicks are just as bad as the men. Don't they know that anonymity on the net is actually pretty much a myth. Even if you really are good enough to hide yourself from most users, there is always someone better."

"Right." He agreed. Still we kept track of every nutjob that he ran across. Heck, we decided to be safe. The people that gave Tonya bad vibes got kept in a separate sheet. We weren't too worried about Pattie's body shamers. She ended up being more worried about some of them harming themselves than harming MeDe. She decided to go back to volunteering at the suicide help line in the afternoons between her internship and her evening class. That was all on top of the last few weeks of wedding planning. Though she didn't actually have all that much to take care of in that last month. The invitations had all gone out weeks before, the RSVPs were pretty much back in.

Patrice had probably been planning our wedding at least since our freshman year of college. She had saved for it as diligently as I had saved for her engagement and wedding rings. Unfortunately, when we started the planning, she started to feel as though the amount she had managed to save wasn’t going to be enough to get her the wedding she wanted. The next thing I knew she told me that she had contacted her father and threatened him with a lawsuit for back child support. She offered him the chance to avoid that he would just need to come up with the money she wanted for the wedding.
Landon Foster sent her a cashier's check for fifty grand. She sent him back a receipt and a signed and notarized promise not to sue him for the child support he owed Ms. Quita for her. But it also stated that the amounts he owed for each of her younger siblings. Patrice decided that since she was shocked as hell when she got a letter back from him at Christmas asking if she need anything further. She sent him a letter politely telling him that she didn't really want anything further to do with the man who had been so sporadically involved in her life. But he still sent her another ten thousand dollars. If that wasn't shocking enough he sent twenty-five hundred bucks to Ms. Quita to get Christmas gifts for Marie and Brandon. Since she hadn't gotten anything from him since the divorce…not the alimony he was supposed to pay, not the child support…she was shocked as hell. Ms. Quita proved that she was a much better woman than her ex was a man. She sent him a Christmas card that included pictures of Marie and Brandon from the previous eight years.

I couldn't imagine missing so much of my children's lives. It went against everything I had been raised to believe in. Uncle Bryant had two kids from two different ex-wives, but he'd still been completely involved in Daniel and Mellisent's lives. Like the father from Clueless said 'you divorce spouses, not kids'. I shook off those thoughts though to refocus my mind on my previous thoughts about the interesting summer it had been. My bride to be was very, very traditional when it came to planning our wedding. She had assembled her team, her mother, my mother, her sister Marie and her best friends Tonya and Candi. Candi and Patrice had been friends since they were assigned as roommates their freshman year of college. Personality wise, she was nothing at all like Pattie. Heck if she wasn't fully white, I'd have sworn she was one of my Harris cousins. Candice Manning changed boyfriends like my cousin Hannah. She had no physical preference that I could put a finger on, other than fit. While Patrice was working on her masters in civil engineering and her MBA, Candi had majored in pharmaceutical chemistry and microbiology and she was enrolled in a dual pharmacology doctorate and pharmacy doctorate at the same time. Candi was very much determined to find a pharmaceutical company to pay her large amounts of money to do what people in her hometown usually ended up in jail for. Candi was completely bold and brazen. She had pledged the same sorority as Tonya and Patrice because they were her friends and she didn't want to join any group they weren't a part of.

Once she had the cashier's check deposited in a special account that we would only use for the wedding stuff, Tricie called a meeting of all of us together. Momma, Marie and Ms. Quita Skyped in, and the rest of Pattie's minions were assembled in the living room of our apartment. We talked and went over the decisions Pattie had made like colors and location and then she turned into a straight up general. Everyone had their assignments. Ms. Quita, since she was in Lima had to go and visit the venues Pattie liked. Marie was to go online and find out when area bridal shops were having trunk sales. I was glad that she got that assignment because I had no idea what a 'trunk sale' was. Patrice had delegated a few duties to me. I, of course, had the traditional honeymoon planning duty, but I also had to get her a list of my groomsmen, which had to match her list, including having dual best men to go along with her matron and maid of honor. My other duties were to decide on and purchase the groomsmen gifts, bring her four different choices for tuxes for the groomsmen and decide on five different choices for the wedding favors that we would then make the final decision together. Really, I only had four duties, MeDe, Sam and Puck had told me that they had the honeymoon handled and we just needed to make sure that we had the time off for it.

It was nice to be involved a little. But it was really nice that Pattie didn't really want my input on other things. I wasn't asked to give any input on the flowers. I didn't have to help her decide on the colors. She knew what she wanted for the theme. She knew what kind of cake she wanted and everything. I had heard horror stories from some of the guys I knew who were engaged. But my baby had it all under control all by herself…it was great. The summer seemed to fly by and before I knew it, we were heading home for the week of the festivities. We'd each taken the summer session that started immediately after the end of the spring term which left us only my summer job and her
internship to schedule around. Since both were at corporations we'd had a very positive and long association with, it had been no problem to have the two weeks we needed free.

MeDe, Sam and Noah got there on Monday just in time for me to drag, Sam and Puck with me to meet the rest of the groomsmen for the last of the fittings for our tuxes. MeDe went to a meeting with the event coordinator at the UNOH Event Center with the girls. Their dresses and accessories had all been ready six or more weeks ago. Heck, I was pretty sure that I heard Tonya and Candi calling the other five bridesmaids to make sure that they had their shoes broken in and everything. I'd have loved if we could have worn suits we already had, but Devon, Sam, Puck, Jake and I all owned tuxes but they weren't all by the same designers so there were slight differences…Pattie was adamant that we all be in the same one. Then my boys, Nick, Greg and Tont didn't even own a tux. Men's Warehouses were everywhere, so we'd each been able to get our measurements done where we lived and we just had to make sure that everything was in order at this fitting.

Thankfully we got there and everything was exactly like we ordered it. The eight Ralph Lauren three button, super fine tuxes with the notched collar sized correctly for all eight of our different body builds. The seven petal pink satin bow ties and cummerbunds. The black satin set for me. The simple white microfiber shirts with the point collars. Two of the same looking tux in boys' sizes twenty and one in a 4T for Stevie, Brandon and the ring bearer. We were good. Everyone was providing their own socks and shoes, black socks and black round toe leather dress shoes. Pattie told me that I could go ahead and give them their gifts so they could try them on with the tuxes. "Alright, gentlemen…gather 'round. It is tradition that the groom gives his groomsmen something for their service. Now there are lots of new trends…but the traditional one is for the groom to give the groomsmen the cufflinks and shirt studs they are to wear on the big day." I handed them each a black box. "Inside each of these boxes are sterling silver and onyx shirt studs and cuff links sets. They are to be worn with your tuxes. Consider them your gift from Pattie for helping us celebrate this momentous occasion."

"Wait, if these are from Tricie…what did you get us?" Devon teased.

I rolled my eyes. "I'll give you my groomsmen gifts tomorrow at the bachelor party." I did to. It was perfect. Since we had two groomsmen under twenty and two junior groomsmen, we decided to have the bachelor party at Westgate Lanes and invite all the dads and every male who was already in town. It was great. As soon as everyone was settled at our tables, I passed out the shiny black gift bags with the petal pink tissue paper that Pattie had gotten for all of the bridal party gifts. Inside each of themI had placed a cool big beer stein monogrammed with their first initial. For the rest of the night we had a blast. It was all really epic. We bowled. We played laser tag. We played video games. Everyone used their gifts, those of us over twenty-one had beer in ours, while the under twenty-oners had sodas in theirs. It was a pretty awesome night all around. Tonya and Candi took all the girls to a spa night that included lots of wine and snacks. They were completely happy, though Pattie wasn't happy with how hungover she was the next morning.

Friday evening, we had the rehearsal at our church, then my parents hosted everyone for the rehearsal dinner at their house. But Momma did have the dinner catered rather than trying to cook herself. Instead of us giving out gifts, Pattie had given her girls their jewelry sets at the spa night, we received many of the ones our friends and family had for us. Pattie's grandmother, Nana Selma, gave her a gorgeous diamond and sapphire cross and an antique lace handkerchief to carry as she went down the aisle. Grandma Mae allowed her to borrow an antique ivory bracelet that had been in her family for generations. Bubbie Ruth gave her a diamond hair comb…it seemed to be almost something of a tradition that the grandmothers were handling the 'something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue. I learned later that it had started at Devon and Tonya's wedding and when Pattie’s grandmother heard about it, she decided to follow the new tradition. MeDe and her guys gave us the final information we needed for our honeymoon…it was a perfect
evening.

The wedding and reception were both completely beautiful. Pattie wanted ‘Elegant Passion’; that was her theme and that was exactly what she got. The church was alive with petal pink flowers and ivory candles in silver holders with trailing black satin ribbons. The reception hall was decorated in all three colors with small pops of black hidden in the lighter colors. We ate a wonderful dinner and danced a million dances. Candi caught the bouquet, which amused me greatly. Especially since my boy Greg, who had been trying to date her for three years caught the garter. It looked like they had made a love connection as they were dancing. It was cute. The cake was moist and delicious, vanilla bean with chocolate mousse filling and a chocolate ganache frosting…under the petal pink fondant.

By the time we made it to our hotel room, I'd not made love to my bride in over a week. I didn't even get her out of her dress before I was inside her once we’d closed the door behind the bell hop. We made love a couple more times, caught a nap and a shower before we met the family for breakfast and church. With all the grandmothers, except Pattie's father's parents, present and accounted for…we had no choice at all.

We flew out the next morning to Barbados. Our little siblings got us seven nights at the Sandals Resort there. It was perfect. Our room was awesome. The food was great. Other than the massage that MeDe had pre-booked, we didn't actually do any of the activities. We made it to the beach a time or two and to the pool once…but mainly we made love all the damn time. The night before we left we made it to the Carnivale Beach Party, but we didn't stay very long. Pattie was looking so beautiful in her sundress that I had to take her home and make love to her until we almost missed our return flight. Unfortunately, we had to get back to the living of life the very next day. The rest of the summer was comprised of days of normal married living punctuated with family events. Dad's Fourth of July Barbeque, Becah and George's wedding, the VMA nomination announcements…we spent some time with KAMA in the studio helping them ‘lay down tracks' for their Christmas album…all of our friends and the four of us drove to Chicago to go to Lollapalooza to see KAMA perform. Candi and Greg almost got us kicked out when their making out during ‘Rub You the Right Way' got way too heavy for a public place. The summer was pretty much capped off by Saul and Mills wedding. The only thing that came after that was Sarah's birthday weekend and the VMAs, neither of which happened until classes were back in session. Dad's Fourth of July Barbeque, Becah and George's wedding, the VMA nomination announcements…we spent some time with KAMA in the studio helping them ‘lay down tracks' for their Christmas album…all of our friends and the four of us drove to Chicago to go to Lollapalooza to see KAMA perform. Candi and Greg almost got us kicked out when their making out during ‘Rub You the Right Way' got way too heavy for a public place. The summer was pretty much capped off by Saul and Mills wedding. The only thing that came after that was Sarah's birthday weekend and the VMAs, neither of which happened until classes were back in session. The four of us had planned a watch party at Banfield's, a bar and grill we all loved, but then somehow Devon and Tonya decided to go watch it with the family in Lima, so Pattie and I and like thirty other people were watching in rapt attention. Every time KAMA won something one of our really close friends would buy the bar a round. Greg got it when they got ‘Artist to Watch', Candi bought everyone shots when they won the ‘Best Direction' award. Tont bought the bar a round when their name was called for the ‘Video with a Message' statue. Nick sent everyone a drink to celebrate the ‘Video of the Year' win. Then the world just flipped.

The crowd in the bar got quiet as hell as Puck called out cops. But then the weirdest thing happened. People started talking. They started talking about what he had said and why he'd said it. I heard Pattie telling one guy that wasn't even there with us that Puck had had a few experiences of his own with the police so he knew what he was talking about. I listened as Greg and a white dude from my programming classes started discussing white privilege. I heard a guy with a military build starting to get pissed and going into automatic defense of officers of the law mode and his girl looked at him and calmly said loudly, "with your training, if a fight broke out in here and you beat someone to death you would be put away for a long ass time because you are supposed to know better. Cops are supposed to be trained. They are supposed to know better. Why do we hold military men and women to such a high standard, but cops supposedly get a fucking pass? That Puck dude has a point. My dad was a cop for twenty-five years, he never shot anyone. He retired because he felt the new cops coming in think they are playing a video game. They consider themselves some fucked up kind of urban commando or something." She finished angrily.
From there the conversation swelled again as people started discussing their own experiences with police, be they positive or negative. It was like a live and in person version of the twitter back and forth I saw earlier, #DrivingWhileWhite vs #DrivingWhileBlack. I knew why Puck did it. In his mind his black brothers were in just as much danger as the other black men in the country. He had Jake, he had Devon, he had me. Devon and I would always felt insulated by the fact that we were more like the Cosby kids than we were like Biggie or Tupac. But lately we've both talked about whether or not that even mattered. Whether or not we should or even could allow the privilege that our parent's money gave us to blind us to what others are experiencing. We certainly knew that we couldn't. Neither of us knew what we should look like, but apparently Puck knew exactly what he should do. He should speak up and speak out. I was very proud to call him my brother. But immediately began to worry for him. I'd spent most of the summer worrying about MeDe...spending the fall worrying about Puck could be a nice change of pace.

It Don't Have to Change (John Legend)
Devon PoV

The summer of the beginning of my sister's stardom was interesting as hell. I wasn't naïve. I knew how Americans dealt with our celebrities. They loved and hated them by turns. They both worshiped and reviled them...and sometimes they stalked and/or killed them. Mercedes Jones was now a celebrity. But more importantly she was my little sister. That had been my only worry about her dream of becoming the world's next Beyoncé. Scrolling through twitter feeds for #KAMA did nothing to dispel that worry. She did have a lot of positive comments but she also had way more sexualized comments than I really liked. I mean, didn't those people realize that she was a human being. She wasn't put on earth for them to perv over. Even beyond that she was as God meant her to be. What gave them the right to try and claim that she should change to fit some stupid ideal that no real human being can reach if they aren't genetically predetermined to look like that.

But that summer wasn't just a series of changes in my sister's life. It was a time of great change in my own. Even though Tonya and I had been married for the better part of a year, we were just beginning to approach the time in our lives where we really had to step out into the real world. Kevon, Tricie, Tonya and I would all get degrees, I would be earning my PhD, while Tonya wrapped up her linguistics masters and her Pedagogy PhD. At the same time Kev and Tricie would be getting their masters. Neither of their fields called for doctorates, so we would be entering the work force at the same time. It was not necessarily scary...but it was daunting that we could end up who knew where. Me and Patrice would need to work in a major city. Tonya needed a city with a good selection of liberal arts colleges. But Kevon could conceivably work anywhere. It might seem strange to others, but I wasn't really ready to separate. Kevon was my brother. He and I had been tighter than twins since middle school. Besides, he got stupid ideas sometimes and Tricie followed him up way too easily. So Tonya and I both agreed that we'd look at the same cities those two were looking at. If I thought I could stand living in New York, we'd probably only look there so we could be close to MeDe. But that was one of those cool places to visit, but I did not want to live there full time.

Time flew by. I had classes, but nothing that I couldn't handle. But the more bullshit I saw aimed at my MeDe online the less I slept. It got to the point where I was lucky to get a couple of hours without being awakened by nightmares...especially after I followed the wrong troll down the wrong rabbit hole. I think that the people on that sight were actually the stuff of nightmares. I'd been wondering what the hell I was going to do about it. I was really driving myself pretty much crazy. Then Tonya and I came up with this awesome idea of trolling the muthafucking trolls. By the time Kevon had everything in place for us to be able to actually spend some real time retaliating against our little sister's detractors without it getting linked back to us, I'd made up my mind to catalog the dangerous assholes on that scary site I'd stumbled into.
Once I had a way to feel like I was doing something to protect my first baby sister, I slept like a baby. Between classes, spending time with my Par'Mach'kai, her internship, and life in general, days flew by quickly. Patrice had set her wedding date between summer terms, which worked for me and Tonya since we were both taking classes for all three summer terms unlike Kevon and his bride who only took classes the first and third terms. It made sense though I mean it would have sucked for them to have to rush their honeymoon. Their wedding was nice. It was very sweet. Traditional, but they made it their own just because that was who they were. One day, I was going to get my sis-in-law back for making me wear pink though. Kevon and Patrice left for their honeymoon the Monday after their Saturday wedding.

The trio had given Tonya and I a trip for our first anniversary, which was great because the whole first anniversary traditional gift being paper thing had messed me over. I assumed that the paper all the information for the trip was printed on covered us for the traditional gift, I could do something fun for her instead. So I took pictures of us from our wedding day and pictures of the traditional Klingon wedding garb to a local portrait painter, who had great reviews on every site I could find. Before we left I picked up a beautiful framed painting of the two of us in the red outfits Jadzia Dax and Worf had worn for their wedding on DS9. It was perfect. The artist had done an amazing job. I took a picture of it with my phone before I took it and had it wrapped. It stood waiting for our return for her to open it. We had two days after we got back to Ann Arbor before we flew out to the Beaches Turk and Caicos resort that had been our gift from MeDe, Noah and Sam.

When we checked in, our assigned concierge directed us to the French Village because the resort was actually divided into four villages with different entertainments for each. Our room was pretty gorgeous. We walked into a living room with a sofa, dining area, and a big ass TV. The bedroom had a big ass, mahogany, king sized bed and overlooked the Riviera pool and the formal gardens. The bathroom was nice, it wasn't huge, but the shower would definitely hold us both…so it worked well for me. The first thing Tonya and I did was to change into our swimsuits. My beautiful wife stepped out looking like an amazing earth goddess in an ocean blue bikini with a wave white sarong tied about her waist. My own plain green board shorts were nowhere near as sexy. Then again Tonya could wear a burlap sack and still be the most beautiful woman in the world. For the next six days we had a ball.

The seventh day was the first of July, our first anniversary. We started our anniversary with a long walk through the gardens before having a couple's massage. That relaxing experience was followed by an afternoon spent lounging on one of the world's most beautiful beaches. Then we had dinner at La Petite Chateau, the most expensive looking restaurant I've ever been in in my life. Thankfully, the resort was all inclusive, so we didn't have to pay for anything. Heck the menu didn't even have any prices. Tonya looked amazing in a strapless, metallic bronze cocktail dress and sky high heels. We exchanged our gifts, though the best I could do for mine to her was to show her a picture of the painting. She teared up so I was sure that she really loved it. My amazing wife presented me with blu-rays of the entire Star Trek movies series from the original eighties films through the Next Generation movies all the way to the JJ Abrams reboots. God I loved that woman. I spent the entire evening showing her exactly how awesome I knew she was.

The rest of our time at Beaches was just as awesome as the days before our anniversary. We ate a ton of wonderful food. We frolicked in the waters of the ocean, the pools. We went to an amazing water park. We made love every morning, every afternoon and every night. It almost sucked to head back to real life. But when it was time, we returned to the real world happier and even more in love with each other and so relaxed that nothing could stress us.

That turned out to be a very good thing. The rest of the month of July was packed with activity. Dad's Fourth of July Barbeque, George and Becah's wedding, the Harris Family Reunion. Some years I look forward to seeing my cousins and family, but most of the time…I dread those damn things.
Hannah and Aunt Arielle could be such bitter bitches to MeDe and because I had to treat Aunt Arielle with respect and MeDe wanted to handle them herself, there was nothing that I could do to help her. But over Christmas Mercedes and Hannah's relationship had changed completely. After Hannah got her head extracted from her ass by my cousin on my dad's side, Franklin, it was like she was a whole new person. So that year's reunion was going to be entirely different. Not only were MeDe and Hannah getting along better but Aunt Arielle had basically disowned Hannah because of who her heart chose. And I knew I wasn't unbiased, but Franklin Jones was a damn fine choice for Hannah's heart to make. The only thing about him that anyone could consider a negative was that he was technically old enough to be her father. He was strong and caring. He was from a long line of monogamous relationships. He could take care of her. Heck, he wanted to take care of her. In Franklin's field having a wife who was a stay at home mother wasn't frowned on like it could be in other industries. Granted once the twins were old enough to go to school, Hannah would probably be dying to get a job. That was just how we rolled in both sides of my family.

Since the hotel we'd been having the reunion at for years had run out of rooms the past two years in a row, the family had switched to a new one that summer. The new hotel was right on the intra-coastal waterway and almost entirely ours for the weekend. The Harris Family booked ninety percent of the suites available in the hotel. Of the remaining ten percent, KAMA had rented thirteen or fourteen rooms for the weekend since MeDe, Sam and Noah were technically working that weekend. They had a show in West Palm Beach on Saturday. The whole family was still in New York after George and Becah's wedding, so we all flew down together. Sander and Gabby took Triple S, Tessa, and Jake to Disney World while Mom and Dad brought Sloane and the twins with them to the Reunion. We decided to do things that way so we wouldn't have to subject the kids who were old enough to remember the occasion to the more annoying of the Harrises, plus Gabby and Sander would be able to have a good time without having the baby to take care of.

We didn't get there until Friday morning, since KAMA was recording their Christmas album that week. But a lot of the fam didn't come in until Friday afternoon. As long as everyone was there before the opening dinner…it didn't matter what time we got there. We got checked in and took everything up to the rooms. I was kind of relieved to find out that MeDe and her guys were in a different wing of the hotel. At least I was until I was walking back to the room with the full ice bucket and saw Hannah and Franklin letting themselves and the twins into the room right next door to us. Hart and Hawk were four months old and, according to Hannah's mommy blog, Facebook and Twitter posts, colicky. I immediately started to pray that the boys would sleep through the night, or at least not cry while me and Tonya were getting our groove on.

As soon as I had passed Tonya the bucket through the door she kindly opened for me, I went back and helped Hannah and Franklin with all the babies' stuff. They should have done like Mom and Dad had done and just gotten a bell hop for all their plus the babies' crap. It might be wrong to say, but since she showed up at Mom and Dad's for Christmas, I've finally started to like my cousin. She actually acted like a normal person when we saw her and she treated MeDe like family, not like a personal affront to her very being. Plus, the twins were four months old and Hannah wasn't freaking out about the extra fifteen pounds she was still carrying around. "Thanks a lot, Dev." Franklin's quiet voice boomed throughout the room. "They are bringing up our portable cribs, so I didn't want to make them carry everything."

"Not a problem, cuz. You're family." I said with a grin. He really was family all the way around.

I was a little surprised when he followed me back into the hall with the babies while Hannah was in the bathroom. "So be honest with me…am I gonna have to break my foot off in my mother-in-law's ass?"

"Wait, Mother in law?"
He glanced back to make sure the door was closed. "Hannah and I got married over Valentine's day. We just aren't telling anyone until after we have a real wedding on our first anniversary. I wanted to be married when the babies came; she wanted not to be waddling down the aisle. This is our compromise. So, how bad is your aunt going to be tonight?"

I shrugged. "I can't even guess. Have you even met her yet?"

"I met her way back in the day when your mom and dad got married, but I was barely eighteen. If I'd run into her somewhere before Hannah and I got together, I doubt I'd have remembered her face." He said honestly.

"She hasn't come to see the boys?" I was shocked. Grandma Mae always came to see Mom and help her out whenever she had babies…Even with the twins and Momma had plenty of help already home then.

Franklin gave me a derisive look. "Your Uncle Bryant saw them before they left the hospital. Your Uncle Ethan and his wife Amanda helped me figure out those complicated ass car seats in the hospital parking lot. Your Mom and Dad stopped in before they returned to Ohio after McDe's drop party and they have come a couple of times since then. Danica Skypes with Hannah at least once a week to see how she is handling twins the first time out the gate. Your Uncle Christophe lives in Bethesda…we see him whenever he has nothing better to do…which pretty much means we see him at least twice a month. We live in Glover Park and your Aunt Arielle lives in Georgetown…she still hasn't so much texted to see if Hannah needed anything."

I shook my head. "Aunt Arielle is a control freak. She has no clue how to interact with Hannah now that she has slipped her leash and is doing what Hannah wants to do rather than what she wants Hannah to do. It's sad but true. Eventually either Arielle will get over it or she won't all you can do is be there for Hannah and support her no matter how Arielle behaves. Leave it to Hannah or Mom and the Uncles to set her straight. If you fight her battles for her, Hannah will never grow all the way up."

Franklin might have been a man in love, but he was also a grown ass man and a pragmatist. He knew that what I was saying was the truth. Hannah had gotten herself to the point where she was happy and comfortable in her own skin and not being a bitch to every person she came across. She had real relationships including friends and, apparently, a husband. She was facing the ultimate test of adulthood…standing up for herself, even if it meant going up against her mother. She had run away at Christmas, which was right and good since she was pregnant and didn't need that stress. But she definitely needed to make her stand. It was good that it would be where she would have a lot of support, though none of us would do it for her. I kissed the babies and helped him open his door before I returned to my room. Tonya and I found that we had just enough time to enjoy some quality time together before we needed to get dressed for the Opening Dinner.

I had it easy, a pair of slacks, a button up shirt and a sports coat and I was good to go. Tonya however had to actually ‘dress’. We showered together and I watched her getting dressed while I threw on my clothes. Dressed in some sexy lace bra and panty set the color of perfectly ripe cantaloupe, my beautiful bride did her hair first. She'd trimmed her locs up to her bra-line and had had them retwisted and curled earlier that week. She pulled back and braided them into a complicated fishtail braid. Tonya was not a makeup fan. She used a little eyeliner, a couple of swipes with her mascara wand and some melony colored lip gloss and called it a day. Once her face was done, she tucked her lips together so that she wouldn't smudge them and put on her dress. She had been very proud of finding the Calvin Klein watermelon pink sheath cocktail dress on sale for more than half off. Of course, like my sister and mother, she then blew any savings on the shoes. Actually, I think maybe, she said that she got those on sale too. When she showed them to me, I may have become more obsessed with getting her under me wearing nothing but those gold sandals rather than
When she put on the last of her jewelry, which admittedly wasn't much, a couple of bangle bracelets and a pair of hoop earrings, she grabbed her purse and we headed down stairs. The hotel had room service and a room that could be rented for parties and occasions, but it didn't have a traditional restaurant. Which meant that we could and did have the Opening Dinner catered by a local gourmet grocer and caterer. The food was pretty epic. The night started off with a contemporary seafood bar and a traditional antipasto bar for what basically amounted to a cocktail party. It was nice. Got to see a lot of cousins that I hadn't seen since the summer before. It was funny because all of us who were born before Hannah, Daniel, Uncle Bryant's eldest, me, Kevon and some of the second and third cousins were all keeping an eye out for Aunt Arielle.

When she showed up, she kind of reminded me of a black Cruella DeVille. Her dress was a severe black and white cocktail dress that came up to her throat and looked like if she weighed even a pound more it would have choked the life out of her. Her heels were black, tall as hell and spiky…they were scary. She stepped into the room and looked around. Hannah and her family hadn't arrived yet, so there wasn't any real reason for everyone to be so tense as if waiting on a confrontation. I should have realized that Hannah was new meat…Arielle always had preferred a different victim. MeDe was talking to some of the younger cousins, they had all brought their KAMA CDs with them and, of course she and the guys were autographing them for them. From the one Melliscent showed me, she made sure to reference their familial relationship on them too. The kids were all hella happy.

They took one look at Aunt Arielle approaching with her air of killjoy-ocity and dispersed. MeDe just straightened her spine in her royal purple, ruched satin-looking dress and black heels. But before she could marshal her resources, Aunt Arielle sent one across her port bow. "So Mercedes, I suppose you think that because you have an album, you have everything you ever wanted. I guess next you will let one of those fast talking managers talk you into quitting college to devote yourself to your music. Next thing you know you'll be flat broke and relying on the family to get you through yet another stint in rehab."

MeDe just rolled her eyes. "Aunt Arielle…I would say it was a pleasure to see you again, but I'd either be being disrespectfully sarcastic or I'd be lying. Instead I will say congratulations on your beautiful little grandsons. Hart and Hawk are truly adorable. They have your and Hannah's eyes."

"Hart and Hawk..." she murmured with a small eye roll. "While I do applaud her for making sure to name the boys after herself rather than ‘that man’, I do wish she had gone for more traditional names. I suppose that I should say thank you for the compliment, but I honestly haven't seen the children yet. Hannah hasn't seen fit to bring them to see their grandmother as of yet."

"She hasn't…you do realize how much trouble traveling with twins is…even getting them ready for their pediatrician visits is a battle of epic proportions. Their other grandmother is significantly older than you and I know for a fact that she has traveled across the country and visited them twice in the last four months." MeDe shot back. "So if you were trying to make Hannah look bad, you totally just made yourself look like the worst mother since Joan Crawford."

Aunt Arielle looked around the room and saw that a lot of us were agreeing with MeDe. "I do not have any obligation to be civil to the man who got my young, impressionable daughter pregnant out of wedlock. A man who is closer to my own age than hers. If not being please with that old man manipulating and impregnating my darling daughter…probably against her will…makes me a bad mother than I suppose I am guilty."

"Arielle, you need to watch your mouth." Dad's voice boomed across the dining room. "Franklin is my cousin. He is a damn good man and the fact that he saw something worth falling in love with in
Hannah is the only thing that made my family rethink Hannah and realize that she was more than just your little bitter clone."

"Besides…you can't rape the willing and Hannah has slept with way too many guys who were older or darker or both for me to think she wasn't perfectly willing." A voice said snarkily from within the crowd. It sounded like my third cousin Greta. Greta had gone to Howard too. She was a year ahead of Hannah and had actually graduated.

"I was perfectly willing, Greta. Franklin is an amazingly kind and generous man and a truly amazing lover. He is as good a person as Uncle Benton and Devon and Kevon. He has treated me with more kindness and love than anyone ever has. All he asks of me is to be who I am inside…to be kind and good and to treat him with love and kindness too. He doesn't withhold his love if I do not behave exactly as he would like. He doesn't commit emotional blackmail when I don't agree with him. He would never ask me to isolate and humiliate my own flesh and blood just because her skin is dark or she is thick and curvy. Thankfully MeDe has forgiven me…but Mother, you were entirely wrong to reward me for my treatment of her for all these years." Hannah's voice was strong and she looked completely undaunted by the fact that the whole family was hanging on her drama.

Aunt Arielle looked like she had swallowed a lemon. "I'm sure that I don't know what you mean."

"Really, because when I was eight and pushed her into the sandcastle she spent an hour building, I got a new bike. And when I was eleven and I actually made MeDe cry at the Opening Dinner…I got that super expensive computer. The year I told you I made her so upset that she threw up, you bought me my breast implants." Hannah listed off without any hesitation. "I knew it was wrong, but it made you proud of me. That was about the only thing I could do that made you completely happy."

"Well, it wasn't my fault that there was so little to take pride in in your accomplishments. Your grades were mediocre no matter how many tutors I provided you with, you refused bring home As. I paid for you to have every kind of lessons available. Piano, violin, harp, flute, ballet, jazz…voice…you couldn't play, you couldn't dance, you couldn't sing. When you were thirteen you were caught with a boy in the school gym, both of you in an extreme state of undress…Mercedes was chaste and she was studious. She had more talent in her little finger than you did in your little finger. Greta had four point ohs from kindergarten all the way through. Marie-Anne could be a world class ballerina…All of my cousins and brothers and sister's daughters were more accomplished than you. What was there to be proud of?" Arielle shot back.

Hannah laughed. "I hated those lessons. The only lessons I really liked were the gymnastics classes, but just when I started getting really good, you decided that those were too unladylike and made me stop them. And I did get As…I got As in home ec and any cooking class I ever took. But that was never good enough for you. Now, I'm happy. I am truly happy. I have a husband who loves me. A man who helps me to bring forth the best parts of my personality. I have two amazing little boys who have at least one grandmother who loves them both more than she loves herself. They have great-aunts and uncles that have been there since the minute they arrived. Cousins who love them no matter how much of a bitch I'd been to them growing up. Hell, MeDe went shopping the morning after her record release party for them…tired though she probably was…that's how beloved they are. They don't need you and Mother, neither do I."

MeDe and the female cousins all encompassed her, Franklin and the twins, while Mom, and her brothers pulled Aunt Arielle to the side. Kevon sidled over to the cluster surrounding Hannah and I got as close to the grown folks as I could. Just as I got close enough to listen in, the loud, stinging report of a slap echoed throughout the entire room. My mom was shaking her hand as she started going off on Arielle who looked completely shocked as a red hand print bloomed on her high yellow
cheek. "I knew that you didn't like Benton. I knew that it was for bullshit reasons. I knew that despite growing up in the same home that the rest of us did, you somehow ended up completely color struck and just about bat crap crazy…but I never thought that you would be enough of a bitch to make your daughter torture her own family just to make you feel like less of a failure. I never thought that my own sister would or even could go out of her way to hurt my child. I can't even fathom the harm you have done. But you know what…it wasn't to Mercedes. My daughter turned out just fucking fine. No the damage you did you did to your own precious child. Hannah had a right to find her own talent. But all you could do was hold her up to other people. You destroyed herself worth. You almost made her as twisted and bitter as you are."

Uncle Christophe and Uncle Bryant were looking just as angry. "You had the benefit of having been raised to adulthood by our mother…she was kind. She was caring. She made sure that we each loved ourselves…because she knew that there would be times when no one else in the world would."

Uncle Bryant said quietly. You have done amazing things in your life. In a time when a lot of colleges were only barely allowing us in, you went to a desegregated college and got a great degree. You found a husband and you two traveled for quite a while before you had Hannah. No matter what you may claim, remember that I know Duane Tucker. I still have lunch with him four or five times a year. Even though Duane knew that Hannah wasn't his, even though he never wanted to have children, he still sent you money for her every month. Even though you refused to sign the divorce papers until he finally got a default divorce judgment, he still sent you what basically amounted to alimony. You have no reason to have done any of this. You could have had a happy marriage or, having failed at that, you could have had a reasonable divorce. You have a great career. You've got a smart, beautiful daughter who is happy and has given you two healthy grandsons. I think it might be best if you go Arielle. I can't condone your actions. I can't excuse your behavior…"

"You cannot ban me from a family reunion. This is my family. I am the eldest." Arielle defended.

I shook my head. That was bullshit. She was the eldest in my mother's branch. But Mom had more than one cousin that was older than Aunt Arielle. And there was still a few surviving members of my grandparents’ generation. But it wasn't someone older than her that spoke up. "No Arielle…it is our family. A family that you like to reap the benefits of being a member of without accepting any of the responsibilities for. Danica was ten when Momma died. You were twenty. I'll give you that you were trying to finish college…but Danica gave up her whole youth being a mother to me when to be honest that was your place…your duty. You like to call yourself the matriarch…but Dan is the one we all turn to, the one we can count on. All you did when I was young was criticize everything she or I did. Benton has outlasted every other spouse in this whole family, and yet you still go out of your way to make him feel as if he doesn't belong. Mercedes has just as much Harris blood in her as Hannah, but you have always gone out of your way to make her fell less than. Here is the truth Arielle; if you left here tonight and never came back, no one would miss you. No one would feel anything beyond relief. How sick and sad is it that if you got hit by a truck tomorrow…we'd be sad for a minute…but we'd plan your funeral out of duty and obligation…not love and care. We wouldn't mourn you like we would Ban or Dent. You can go. For all of my life I've only really had one sister…the time has come that I finally admitted it."

He turned and walked away. He was completely done with her and yet, almost as if to spit in her eye, he walked over and hugged Hannah and started talking with Franklin and playing with the babies. I looked over and noticed that Dad and Noah had gone over with Maea and Mara too. I focused back in on Aunt Arielle and saw that they had been joined by Great Uncle Woodrow. He was Granddaddy's brother and the oldest blood Harris of his generation. "Arielle…I have never been as ashamed of any of my nieces and nephews as I am today. You haven't been acting like a Harris. Your father would be ashamed. Your mother would roll over in her grave. Unlike your brothers and sister, I know exactly where you got the model for your behavior. You act just like my mama. Despite all the goodness and love your parents raised you with, you chose to listen to Mama who
knew she was wrong to convince you that giving your children conditional love to bend them to your will was a good thing. She was my mother and I loved her, but I know that the devil has her soul...so he can have yours too. The rest of us are tired of the tension and drama every year that always seems to trace back to you. Last year you raised such a fuss that Ethan's pregnant wife had her pressure run up. The year before that you made Danica so mad that she cussed you and all your cousins out. It's always something to do with you trying to control everyone else and trying to force your will on others. I'm the oldest blood member of this family and I'm bout sick and tired of not being able to enjoy my brothers' kids and grandkids because they are all up in arms over you. So like Bryant said. You can go...now. Come back next year with a better attitude or don't come back at all." he told her sternly. His eyes locked on hers until she finally backed down and swept from the room. "I'm too old for this BS." Great Uncle Woodrow sighed. "Now let's get to enjoying ourselves. Danica's boy...Devon, come on over here and stop eavesdropping." I went over and hugged my mother. Before turning to him for his instruction. "Devon, I want you to go and get little MeDe and her boys to sing for us. Tell her I like that 'You Send Me' song and the other one... 'Leave a Light On'. Ask her if she'll make an old man happy and sing those two for me. Get this dinner back on track."

Great Uncle Woodrow was a smart man. MeDe, Sam and Noah did acapella, stripped down versions of both of those songs and a couple of more and by the time we all sat down and were served our dinner, it was like a weight had been lifted and a pall was gone. The rest of the weekend flew by in joy and laughter and music. MeDe, Sam and Noah had worked it out so that all of the twenty-five to thirteen crowd had tickets to their show on Saturday night. A blast was had by all. Every one of them came back with ridiculous amounts of swag. Come to find out all of their parents gave them money to spend and most of the adult gave the kids money to buy them some things too. It was the most fun I had ever had at the reunion on that side. My poor wife seemed as relieved as Hannah and Dad. It kind of made me feel like a crap husband that I hadn't realized that Aunt Arielle had upset her too at some point.

MeDe seemed the least affected, so Sunday, after the Closing Dinner, I asked her about it. Her words shocked me. "Aunt Arielle was the worst. She was definitely way worse than anyone else, but she wasn't alone. The rest of the family never stuck up for me. They let her and Hannah get away with everything they did to me. Even this year, they stood up for Hannah. It had nothing to do with me. The younger cousins and I are cool. Great Uncle Woodrow has always been kind and encouraged me. Mom's brothers I know they love me, but the rest of these people...they are family in an extended, nominal sense. I'm fine with that." She shrugged. I guess my face showed that I hadn't realized how isolates she had felt. "Dev, chill. I'm good. I may not have felt all sunshine and rainbows at the Harris fam reunions, but I had fun most of the time. Besides, for every Harris reunion there was a Jones Gathering and you know that I was totally loved and wanted at those."

"No, I think the word you were looking for instead of loved and wanted was feared." I teased. She ruled our generation of the Jones family with an iron fist.

She gave me a Kanye shrug. "Eh, same thing." She smiled. "So, how did you and Tonya like the resort?" she changed the subject and we talked for a while longer. Before too long though, she had to get packed up and head out. KAMA had to head straight to Columbus because they were recording the last track for their Christmas album. The rest of the family flew out the next morning. By the time the family gathered for both Saul and Mills' wedding and Sarah's birthday weekend, I was ready for school to get back in session just so I could get some rest.

I was taking only three classes and working on my doctoral thesis. My dissertation was looking at the effects of the Citizens United decision on the American political system and comparing the use of big money in the US versus the much more rigid funding systems of our allies. Luckily I had been able to get my thesis topic approved quickly and easily. Unfortunately, Tonya wasn't having the same
luck. Her first topic to be shot down was examining the new moral culture of microaggressions and how the culture of dignity had given way to the culture of victimhood on college campuses and how it was getting, in Tonya's opinion, ridiculous. She had niced it up, but that was basically what she meant. The second topic to get shot down examined the roles of Rater language in background, language attitude, and training of speakers of the different versions of English spoken all around the world. Finally, her thesis committee allowed her to do her third choice of topics where she looked at the voices from the Haitian America community: linguistic and educational adaptations of adolescent and adult Haitian immigrants. Considering that my girl spoke French and both Haitian and Louisiana Creole, she knew that she could handle it with no problem at all.

We had planned to host a watch party for the VMAs with Kev and Tricie, but Tonya really needed a break from our college town and our crew, most of whom had had their thesis ideas accepted on the first try. We surprised Momma and Dad by showing up at their party and it was totally worth the drive. Momma had out done herself. She even worked it out so that the guys wouldn't have to listen to the women dissect the fashion choices of the stars. The only comment I had to hear about fashion was when Dad noticed MeDe's shoes. "Oh, Dani hated those shoes. She bought MeDe a different pair, claiming that they were her reward for her grades this semester…but really she was just hoping that your sister would wear the other pair." Instead conversation centered around current events. We were in the Midwest so a lot of us were paying close attention the Mike Brown case and that lead to discussions of the Staten Island police killing as well. Dad finally had to call a halt to the conversation since things were getting heated. "Look, black folks all know that this is just the way a lot of the cops in this country are. You read the old police reports from the eighties and nineties and you'd think every black man they encounter is crazy and drugged up and dumb ass enough to reach for their gun. The only difference is that now everybody and their momma is walking round with a video camera in their pocket. So now we're gonna table it for another time, because my baby and her husbands are on the biggest awards show they have been on yet. I don't want to miss a single minute."

The entire congregation of men dropped the subject just as Mom and the ladies came up to integrate the gathering. From there, it was a hell of a good time. Seeing my little sibs get a damn near standing ovation from that jaded ass audience was the most epic thing ever. We got so loud in our joy that somebody called the cops. But they won the first award of the night. Then I was just over the moon. By the last award I was the proudest big brother ever. Then Puck spoke realer talk than most people in Hollyweird ever utter. Actually then I was the proudest big brother ever…but I was so worried about him. Suddenly the celebrating in the backyard took on a strange feeling. The parents and Mr. Adams went in the kitchen to talk about the possible consequences of Puck's honesty. Sam's statement was real too…but the NRA could be a nuisance, but the cops…that would be an entirely different kettle of fish. More like a kettle of ravenous sharks.

I was worrying about that when I felt my phone vibrate. I answered without looking thinking it would be Kevon. But as soon as I said hello, Uncle Bryant's voice spewed forth. "Where is your mother? She isn't answering her phone and I need to talk to her. We've gotta get ahead of this and spin it in their favor." I ran the phone in and all the arrangements being made around me pretty much made my head spin. Within half an hour after the broadcast ended, everything had been set up. My cousin Daniel would be heading to New York to work PR for KAMA until either he decided to stay there with them, or they found a permanent PR person. They would have a bodyguard on them moving forward. Thankfully we already knew who to go to for that and Rangeman was cool with working with MeDe, Sam and Puck to make sure that they would be safe.

Talking to Tonya on the ride back up to our apartment, we were wondering about what the fallout would be when we saw red and blue lights go on behind us. My breath caught in my throat. My heart started to pound in my chest. I could feel my hands get sweaty and my mouth go dry. I glanced
down and saw that I was technically speeding by two miles per hour. Tonya grabbed her phone and dialed her mom and dad on speed dial while I carefully moved over a lane. I have never been so relieved when the cop kept going, not intent on stopping us but on answering whatever call had come in. The worst part was that it wasn't the first time, we'd had that happen, it probably wouldn't be the last. We'd worked out our 'being pulled over protocol our freshman year of college. We'd been pulled over later at night going back to campus from a party. The car had been full of half-drunk classmates as I was the designated driver. I doubted if any of them were old enough to drink. The cop had harassed me for almost an hour running my tags, my insurance, my name. He'd made me do every single field sobriety test there ever was. He'd leered at Tonya, but thankfully had left her alone. I don't know what would have happened if one of the guys from my floor, who'd been in the back seat hadn't called his dad on his cell phone to complain about the length of the traffic stop and how he was sure that I would refuse to DD for him ever again. Dude's dad was the state rep from the thirty-sixth district. Next thing we knew the cop was getting yelled at over his walkie talkie.

The next morning, Lund came to us. His dad had a few tips for us for dealing with future stops. A lot of them were ones I'd learned while Dad was teaching me to drive. "Look, always keep your hands on the wheel and tell him when you are moving them. Stay respectful, yes sir and yes ma'am. If you have someone in the car with you or if you have Bluetooth, call an adult and have them on the phone for the entire conversation." We've followed them and spread them to pretty much every black person we knew. It wasn't really fair, but it definitely kept us safe. There have been two occasions that the officer realized we were talking with our parents and they could hear every word they said and their attitude completely changed. Yeah, no matter what anyone could try and claim, Puck had been right to say what he was feeling. Enough was enough and we needed to see change.

Tom Sawyer (Rush)
Dave Briggs (The Drummer) PoV

When I was a kid, I had to read a Mark Twain book for a school assignment. I got totally hooked. Like Obsessed. I read every single one of his books. Every short story credited to him. Every notable quote. Then one day I was online and I stumbled across a music video for a song called Tom Sawyer. The drum beat and solo in that song had me as obsessed as the author I was searching for more information about when I found the song. It took me a minute to convince my parents to let me have drum lessons, but in Newark when a young black boy wanted to do something that would keep him off the streets and away from the gangs, most parents, mine included moved heaven and earth to make that shit happen. In middle school I joined the band, that meant I could play every day rather than just a couple of times a week. Then I played in the marching band all through high school. I wasn't studious, so I didn't have the grades or the temperament to go to college.

After I graduated; and yeah I graduated, there was no way I was disappointing my mother any more than I had when I said I wasn't even trying to go to college; I joined a rock band. It was small, just the tri-state area...but that led to me getting noticed by a bigger band one that actually went to most big cities...then when that one dissolved I found myself in Vegas auditioning for my next job. I lucked into a band that was already popular and known. They needed a drummer, and unlike a lot of rock bands they didn't care what color my skin was, just that I could jam. That was freaking epic. I spent three years in that band. Technically, we're still together, but that's really just a publicity ploy. Since I was out of work and really my money management game hadn't been all that great to begin with, I needed to find work pretty quickly. I did take a little time, went down south and visited my grandmother and a few relatives. Met an awesome DJ chick and we bonded tighter than tight. As soon as I got home to Newark, the manager for the band that I'd just finished out with called me.

"Hey Dave, I did something that you may or may not appreciate, but know that I did it out of a place of love." Channing started in as soon as I said hello.
"Well, I found out about a pop/rock/country fusion group looking for a full time back up band. I know that you don't care what genre you play for as long as they music is on point. So I sent them your resume and some vids of you playing and a link to your webpage. They want you to come for a face to face meeting and a jam session." He blurted out hurriedly.

I had to admit this one didn't sound too bad. "Are they new on the scene or are they signed?"

"All the correspondence has been with an exec at Warner…so I'm thinking that they are signed. They didn't name names, but she said that it was time sensitive." He took a deep breath. "Look man, they are right in Manhattan, you go…check them out. If you aren't feeling it…no harm no foul."

So I went. The audition was held in a loft space in the same building as one of WMG's recording studios. When I got to the the loft the first thing I saw was a table of five women, one of whom I recognized as an A&R exec at Warner. When my former band was with Fueled By Ramen, we'd hobnobbed with the WMG execs quite a few times. The other four women looked like they ranged in age from barely to just legal, a black girl that looked hella familiar, a blonde who even seated moved like a dancer, a Latina with a beautiful face but a scary smile and an efficient looking red head. Walking around the room, and probably the fillers of the empty chairs at the table were two white guys, one blonde and one with really short dark hair. Seeing them I realized that these were the new kids that had done the SongBird soundtrack and were making big news everywhere.

Deborah Jergens greeted me and introduced me to the others. Mercedes Jones was pretty…but it was a very ethnic, very real pretty. Part of me was a little surprised that they were even going mainstream with her. Mainstream tended to prefer black women to have European features. Sam Evans and Noah Puckerman, Puck, took seats on either side of her to Sam's right sat the efficient looking redhead, their PA Hudson Friedman. The blonde, their friend and dancer Brittany, sat next to Santana Lopez and they were joined by a guy in a wheelchair who was introduced as their extra guitarist and videographer Artie Abrams. I was shown to a seat across from KAMA and we had a conversation. It wasn't really an interview, it was us talking and getting to know each other. When I mentioned I'd just come from the south visiting family, Sam told me about his own southern roots and we talked about the summers I'd spent down there and how different it could be from up north. By the time we finished talking, I'd seen pictures of their daughter, Beth, their siblings, some of their friends…and they had seen a bunch of the tour pictures I had still on my phone. It was cool. I felt like I knew these guys better after an hour than I did with my last band after knowing them for a month.

Then it was time to embrace the music. They had rented a drum kit, a good one, the Gretsch Energy Series. I had brought my own sticks with me. "Alright, our friend Finn said that we should ask you for the Jojo Mayer "Sedation Deprivation" drum solo and then we should play seven-seven-seven, ninety-three eleven all together…then we can just jam out." Puck said as he, Sam, and Artie all got up and we moved over to the instruments.

Damn…the Finn dude knew his shit. The "Sedation Deprivation" solo wasn't the hardest drum solo in the world, but it was certainly in the top five. And the Prince written Morris Day and the Time drum beat was fairly complex. We did those two then Artie started in with the guitar entrance for Earth Wind and Fire's "September" and I followed. Three songs later and I was asked to join the band. I said yes. They were good people and they loved music. When they mentioned the fact that they were thinking about having a DJ tour with them to help them keep things fresh, I immediately told them I had the perfect person. I told them about the DJ chick from the ATL that I'd bonded with pretty well a few weeks before.
After that things passed in a whirlwind. We had the meeting where we got the information about our salary and benefits package. If I hadn't already been damn glad that Channing had done his do before, I would have when I read my contract. I got paid not by the gig but a yearly salary just to ensure that I was available when they needed me. I was still free to do whatever I wanted when they didn't which was great since I was technically still in my other band. That would make it easy to work things out if the old band ever did a reunion show or something. The contract gave us recognition and a percentage of the royalties for any song we helped write, the biggest of big deals in the music industry. But the real thing that pushed me from cool into actual happiness was the benefits package. I would be able to stop forking out four hundred bucks a month for my silver tier health insurance. That was pretty nice. Once all the players were in place, we practiced together in the evenings got our shit cohesive. Then there as the drop party and the press junket. We played the MTV Movie Awards…that was a freaky experience. But it also showed me that when Puck, Sam and Mercedes had said that we would be treated well and not like third world refugees, they weren't blowing smoke up our asses. The hotel rooms were nice. We were treated to a spa visit. It was strange but cool.

I quickly realized that while our three vocalists were still in school, work would happen in fits and stops. We were running nonstop for a couple of weeks, then just practicing and shit until school let out and we hit the festival circuit. The summer passed quickly as hell. We did a whole lot of tour dates, but many of them were dates I'd done with my previous band, so I knew plenty of people. I introduced the crew around and once the other bands and crews realized that Cedes, Sam and Puck were about music for real, not just a pop machine by product…they got accepted and everyone learned shit wherever we went. Since none of them had ever played the drums for real, the drum lines on their first CD were pretty simplistic. We worked on songs for their next CD on the busses in our down time, so I helped make sure no one would be able to say that about their sophomore album. By the time we hit the VMAs, I was ready to get home for a break. The performance that night was bigger than anything that had been tried by the group before but we pulled it off.

When they won we screamed our asses off. Those guys might be young but they inspired a very real loyalty. I'd never seen anything like it before in my life. I was kind of resisting, just because I tended to be an asshole like that. It was a trait I knew I possessed. I didn't let it stop me from doing my job… and doing it better than anyone else they could have found. But I was resisting drinking the kool-aid. Erika had said after just a few gigs that she was in this band for life. Cass and Justin both agreed. I managed to deflect without them thinking anything of it. I'd already had a band that I thought I was going to be with for the rest of my career. Shit didn't work out that way. I wasn't putting myself out there like that again. Then Puck had to open his mouth and speak a truth of my life for no reason other than he knew it was the right thing to do. From that moment on, I knew that there was nothing at all that would ever draw me away from being the drummer for KAMA. They had my loyalty. I would do everything in my power to make sure that they rose even higher than they had dreamed.

Chapter End Notes

Congratulations to Miz Amber Riley...our inspiration...on her new role as Effie in Dreamgirls being staged in London at the Savoy Theatre in the West End. If only I had to money to go.

Congratulations to the cast & crew of The Wiz Live! on their NAACP Image Awards win!

RIP Dave Mirra & Maurice White
I hope that you will all read, enjoy & review! Please & thank you.

Next Chapter will be Saul, Becah & Xena. (If anyone has a good idea for a back story for the tall, Amazonian looking back ground singer, leave me a review & let me know.

I love you all.

TTFN,
Anni
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
I'm Here to Clean the Pool by carlisleismybaby

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 Welcome to the LF Beta Team!!!!

AN: This author identifies as an egalitarian feminist…meaning I think that we should all be treated with 100% equality across the board no matter what gender or race or sexuality. That being said, I actually feel that when done correctly, prostitution can be a lucrative business endeavor and does not, by its nature, have to be exploitative. I explore that in the last section of the chapter a little and wanted to give a heads up for my more sensitive readers. (Though I'm still not sure if people are still reading or not so it might be a moot point). I am not advocating the practice of prostitution, just examining a bit of how I would do it if I were a pimp or hustler.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Heart Won't Lie (Reba McEntire)
Becah PoV

There are times in your life when you look back and see all the errors and see the mistakes you've made and yet find yourself grateful that you made them. The summer that I married the man who had held my heart for most of my life was one of those times. I suppose that many women whose lives turned out like mine would have lamented the ‘wasted years’…but I could only be thankful. Yes, George and I had broken up because I listened to those people who swore that we were too young to really know what love…forever love…was. But the time and experience we gained, the children we had while we were apart, those were all immeasurably worth the loneliness of his absence from my life. It was the winter break of my freshman year of college, not very long before I was to head back to school. I’d gone out with some friends and all any of them said was that we were both too young to be ‘tied down’ and that I was missing out on having the full college experience. Their parents and George’s all felt the same way. So he and I talked everything through and we agreed that we’d pull back and just be friends.

That worked fine until shortly before spring break when I learned that George was dating a ‘good catholic girl’ from his church. Alexandra Ripley had grown up in the same neighborhood with George and me though she had gone to a private catholic school rather than attending PS182 with the rest of us plebeians. She was perfect, pretty, smart. She shared his faith and his mother loved her. To be brutally honest she was my biggest fear. In a perfect storm of events I found out the same day my best friend was trying to convince me to go to a party with her at some random house party in the Bronx. It was there I met Paul Puckerman. I was feeling very vulnerable. I was mad as hell and I was drunk off my ass. I was so drunk that when I woke up next to him in his sketchy apartment, I wasn't
hungover simply because I was still drunk. There were no words to say how much trouble I got into when I got home.

Paul and I went out a couple more times, each one culminating in bed. I didn't particularly like him as a human being at first, but he was really good in bed. I allowed him to convince me that he had fallen in love with me. That he loved me more than anyone had ever loved me and that was an amazingly heady feeling. When I was home for summer break, I ran into George and Alexandra and it appeared to me....felt to me....like he was looking at Alexandra like he used to look at me. It cut me to the quick. It was like something vital, something important, broke inside me.... my behavior became particularly risky and crazy. And Paul was right there like a devil on my shoulder convincing me that every bad decision was a great idea. I think if I hadn't ended up pregnant with Noah, it would have gotten far worse. But by the time I returned to school I kind of suspected, so I immediately straightened up. I was able to finish off the semester with much better grades than I really should have and enough science and nursing classes to have my AA and be able to take the Licensed Practical Nurse boards. I let Paul convince me that we needed to get married so the baby would have his name and because he loved me so very much. So I threw together a very quickly done wedding, I didn't want to be showing when we got married so we moved really, really quickly.

I'm still not quite sure how Paul convinced me to move to Lima, Ohio. I learned later that he had been so determined to both marry me and to move because the asshole had managed to relieve a sixteen year old daughter of Dominic Rastelli of her virginity while he was working running numbers for her family. I was his attempt to convince them that he couldn't have done it since he was in a committed relationship, getting married and had a child on the way. He saved his ass, but he was still exiled from the entire five boroughs area. He found a position at the Pepsi warehouse and I went to work at a doctor's office. I was a hard worker and made friends easily. Paul managed to convince me that helping him get his CDL would be the best possible use of time and money and he started driving the Pepsi products around rather than just shifting them from one place to another in the warehouse. The seven years he was driving truck was probably the closest he came to having the same job for that long a stretch. Granted he switched companies every six months...that was usually about as long as he kept any one job. Behind his back I saved up and got a house. He was really shocked when he came home and found that Noah and I had moved. No matter how much time passed, I still found the hissy fit he threw about that hilarious.

During the course of the marriage, I dealt with the loneliness. I dealt with the other women calling. I dealt with the three different STDs. I even dealt with the constant questioning of my integrity when he was the one cheating. I, with tons of help from Mom and Saulie, also managed to get my BA in nursing so I could step up to an RN. Then later, with even more help from Saulie and Mom, I managed to get my masters in nursing administration. If it weren't for them, I'd have lost the house two times that I knew about, and I was pretty sure that it was more and they had just been sneaky enough to keep me from knowing. I had already made the decision to put Paul out when I found myself pregnant with Sarah. My daughter was one of the lights of my life...but she was completely accidental. I was on the pill and I had made Paul use condoms every single time. I could only assume that she was meant to exist. She and Noah made that marriage worth it. She also got rid of Paul for me. From the moment that I told him I was pregnant until he finally took all his stuff with him when he went on a haul, he only came home a grand total of three or four times. Sarah wasn't even two when the divorce was finalized and I worked my life away for my children.

Noah went from being Noah to being Puck while I was working as many hours as I could to keep the house over our heads and food on the table. I'd scrimp and save so that I wouldn't have to ask Mom or Saul for the money to go back east for the holidays and some time every summer. Noah may have warped into a personality that was far too much like Paul for my own well-being, but he was constantly showing me that he was still my wonderful little boy. He was Sarah's champion. Her big brother that took her anywhere and everywhere he went or that she wanted to go. They were
inseparable until he discovered sex. But even then, the whole ‘steal the ATM that's a great idea’ was partially because I hadn't been able to afford to send Sarah on a very expensive field trip and she was very upset. He spoiled her as much as he was able and if he hadn't already put all the extra money he had in her college fund...he'd have sent her on that trip as soon as she'd asked.

Everyone believed that I had refused to put my house up for his bail, but the truth was that HE refused to allow me to. The judge witnessed our argument over it and I believe that was ultimately what made the judge decide to give him just a short stay in juvie and community service. I hated seeing him so afraid in that damn juvenile detention center. When he came home, we sat on the couch and I held him as he cried in relief at the ordeal being over. There was no one more elated than I when he and Mercedes Jones dated. She was the first girl he'd brought to the house to introduce to me. I'd met a few of his other ‘girlfriends’ like Santana and Brittany and of course I'd met Quinn, but it was always accidental meetings. Mercedes, he asked me if I would be home that evening because there was someone he wanted me to meet. I was very unhappy with him when he ruined it. But Mercedes hadn't really engaged in the relationship with Puck the way I'd hoped, so at least she didn't seem to be really hurt. Lauren was an interesting girl. I really liked her. She made him work for every scrap of affection. A first for my handsome and charming boy.

I think the most life changing day of my life was the day I realized that my son was bisexual. The strangest thing was that it wasn't surprising...or shocking...it was just like a whole bunch of things slid into place that made a hundred barely noticed things slip into place. Noah really believed that he and Sam had begun their sexual relationship only after they had started dating Mercedes, but it wasn't that simple. Noah had been fascinated by Sam's mouth from the first moment they had met. It wasn't until they had formed their triad that I remembered little bits of conversations that told me that they weren't doomed to fail because they were only focused on Cedes...they would be just fine because those two were as interested in each other as they were in her. It just took them permission from Mercedes for them to allow themselves to acknowledge it.

Their relationship had changed our whole entire world. Not only had Mercedes and Sam inspired Noah to go to college, they had found for themselves a career that was impacting, changing, the entire world. I really believe that if Noah hadn't been so happy in his relationship and hadn't brought us all together as a huge expanded family, Mom wouldn't have been in that hardware store getting the hammer and screwdriver that Benton had recommended she get for little things that she really could handle herself rather than calling the super. If Mom hadn't been in that store, she wouldn't have run into George Altman. She told me later that as soon as she heard the way he said my name that he was still in love with me. She always felt horrible that she hadn't been able to convince me that listening to those people who said we couldn't make our love last was foolish. So when she had the chance to allow George and me to see if we were still made for each other, she'd jumped all over it. And she had been right all along. George and I had never stopped loving each other. We had always been made for each other. The first time we talked it was as if we'd never stopped talking. As if no time had passed at all. We talked about everything. We even talked about how we should have stayed friends, but given how much we loved our children, we wouldn't change the past other than that. Our feelings had never changed. He had grown to really care for Alexandra and until she abandoned them, he'd thought that he had grown to love her, but he knew when she disappeared, that it didn't hurt enough for it to have been love. I'd long ago been honest with myself so I knew I had never loved Paul...I'd loved the way Paul made me feel when he was interested. But that interest had always been in the fact that in his mind I came from money and was going to have more. He'd wanted to be taken care of and like a fool I'd fallen into his trap. By the time George and Tessa met the family, I was completely in love once again...but not just with George. I wanted to give Tessa the mother that she deserved. By the end of our first conversation she belonged to me as much as Noah and Sarah did. From the moment Noah and Sarah met Tessa, she was theirs too.
As I lay there completely spent...so very satisfied I could only barely breathe, my thoughts running through my mind with a speed that should have baffled me, George had been back in my life for over two years. We were finally married as we probably should have been a decade ago. We were celebrating our honeymoon in Maui of all places, thanks to our son and his loves. "I want to go back to school." I blurted out before thinking it through.

"You're finally gonna be a doctor." He panted. George and I had planned things together back when we were young and stubborn and stupid. He had become the architect as we'd planned, even if he'd ultimately decided that he preferred to work with his hands. I'd been the one who hadn't achieved my part of our dream.

"I'm gonna be a doctor." I whispered reverently. It had been so long since I had even considered the possibility.

I could feel George smiling. "So go back."

"I'd have to quit working." I warned.

George's chuckle bounced me gently. "I've got us, Baby, and even if I didn't you know that Noah, Sam and Mercedes have you. Tessa and I can both cook. Sarah's almost too independent for her age. We're going to hold you down while you finally get to make your dream come true."

We made love several more times before we talked some more. Again, the deep conversation began with me blurting something out in the midst of a post-coital haze. "I'm sorry that I can't give you a baby that is both of us." When Sarah's delivery had necessitated a caesarian, I'd asked them to do a tubal ligation while they were in there. I'd never regretted it until George came back into my life.

"I'm not going to say that it doesn't matter because it would make everything even more perfect if there was a little guy or girl walking around with the best parts of both of us. But we have three great kids. We have more nieces and nephews to spoil now that I'd have ever believed possible. And at our age if we wanted kids it would be a risky proposition for you and for the baby. Besides, there are tons of kids out there who need a soft place to land." He soothed.

I nodded. "Okay. So when we get home, I guess, I'll start by finding a MCAT class." I said into the quiet of the room.

He nodded. "Then once you're a doctor...I'll sell off my business and buy a store front and sell handmade wooden furniture." He half kidded.

"I bet the things you make will be beautiful." I said seriously. "You said it as if you were joking, but I remember the little rocking chair you made in shop class for the school toy drive. It was gorgeous and you loved making it."

"I made Tessa's crib too. It took me months. But knowing that I had made it...whenever I laid her inside...it made it even more special." He breathed.

The summer before the wedding had been hugely busy. There had been family events like Kevon and Patrice's wedding and Benton's Fourth of July barbeque. More than that both of us had been working very hard to have everything wrapped up before we left to get married because the kids had told us not to bother with planning the honeymoon. Which told me; at least, that they were planning it for us...I hadn't been shocked to find myself right. I had been shocked at the care they took in the planning. When we checked in we were shown to one of the onsite 'residences'. The kids had gotten us a week staying in an ocean front one bedroom suite that had an amazing bathroom, a kitchenette, two private lanai balconies that faced the Pacific and most importantly privacy. We had dinner that...
night on our lanai in a beautifully romantic four course meal and had service from a butler that had been assigned to us. It was lovely…as long as I didn't let myself wonder at the expense. The next day we didn't leave the plush king featherbed until well after lunch, when the concierge called the room to let us know that we had reservations at the Banyan Tree that night at seven for dinner. Noah must have clued Mom in on their plans for us since thanks to her I had the perfect dress to wear for such a nice restaurant.

It felt strange and lovely every time I needed to get dressed for a real, proper date. Paul never took me on any real dates, and none at all after those very first few. With two kids and a deadbeat ex, I'd had neither the time nor the inclination to date when the kids were younger. But George made it a priority to treat me to a date night at least once every other week. Time where we were alone, just the two of us and we could just be. Those dates, while wonderful were usually fairly casual. Our date that night was anything but. The dress Mom found for me was gorgeous. The garnet sequins covered silk spandex blend hugged my every curve. It had a bateau collar and a low V back and stopped below my knees. I paired it with Sam Edelman 'Eleanor' ankle strap sandals in shiny black 'snakeskin' that I had gotten on sale when I was in New York before the wedding. I put my hair up into a chignon that left my neck and back bare and wore just the slightest hint of makeup, some mascara and eyeliner to make my eyes look defined and a blood red lipstick that took sand blasting to remove. I threw in a pair of simple diamond studs, stuffed the necessities in my clutch and I was ready to go.

George looked very handsome in a summer weight lighter gray suit. His goatee neatly trimmed. His olive skin still barely touched by the sun despite having been in Hawaii for two days. He escorted me to dinner and we were seated quickly. Dinner itself was wonderful. Our waiter took care of us, bringing us the perfect wine and beer to go with every course. Then at the end of the meal we found out that everything had been taken care of. We left Brandon a nice tip, even though apparently that had been included in the everything, and then I carried my sandals on two fingers as we walked along the moonlit beach. We talked about anything and everything the returned to our room and made love on the sofa…so in love and so filled with desire that we didn't even make it to the bed.

The next morning, we had a late breakfast before showering and dressing in comfortable clothing. The one thing that we knew about in advance was that on Wednesday we were scheduled for a Kapalua Embrace for Couples spa afternoon. We experienced a side by side pineapple papaya body polish. Then there was the lomilomi massage that lasted for eighty minutes of absolute heaven. Finally we were taken to a Jacuzzi filled with soothing tropical oils and we soaked for a long while. When we left we decided to go to the beach. I don't care how old I get, there will never come a day when I don't think of playing in the ocean as one of the best, family friendly fun to be had. Finally returning to our room well after sunset, it was to find that there was another lovely dinner for two waiting on us. We spent Thursday making love and finally experienced the pool. Friday, we actually went on one of the available hikes and then went swimming in one of the pools. That night we had cocktails at the Alaloa Lounge while a local band covered 'The Fighter'. I was pretty sure that the people next to us thought I was drunk off my ass the way that I was giggling, but it was so surreal… and their lead singer, a pretty little Samoan girl, had nothing on Mercedes. After a lovely cocktail hour we had dinner at Kai Sushi. I was so grateful to see that they had sliders for George, he wasn't a very 'sushi' friendly guy.

George had talked to the concierge when we headed for cocktails and made arrangements for us to go to somewhere that we could dance, but wouldn't be surround by people Noah's age. The Ambrosia Martini Lounge was a pretty upscale and it gave us a great night out, and the martinis really were good enough to deserve to be called ambrosia. I may have been a few sheets to the wind when we left the club, but so was George and we had a blast making out in the back of the car like a couple of teenagers. We made it back to our room without ‘banging’ in the elevator or the hallway, but it was a very close thing. Saturday we made love all day and completely missed our dinner.
reservations. We did have a huge breakfast the next morning before we checked out and caught our flight home. It was the best honeymoon ever...so good, in fact, that we didn't even mind returning to the real world.

Once we were back in Lima, George went back to work on the kids house and his other projects. Once the nosy residents of Lima had seen for themselves the evidence of George's work, he'd been in high demand. I too returned to my job but I also signed up for a MCAT prep class at the same Kaplan center where the kids had done their SAT prep class. I couldn't lie, paying two grand for a class that might or might not make the difference between an admittance worthy grade or a flop was outside my comfort zone, but I did it to enhance my chances given my age and the competitive nature of med school admissions. I took my time and researched disciplines trying to decide which one would be the best fit for me, which one would I could practice and still maintain a family and home life and which discipline would be of the greatest benefit to Lima at large. I was reading random WebMD articles on the subject when I came across an article about how general practitioners were a dying breed since everyone wanted to make the most money possible with their MDs. That sealed it for me. I knew what I was going to do.

Once the class started, my summer flew by even faster. It seemed like the first time I really got to relax was the night of the VMAs at the Jones home. It was a great night. The kids won all the awards they needed to win to legitimize their meteoric rise to fame. Puck spoke the truth exactly as he saw it. So we set them up with protection. We did all we could for them and prayed that it would be enough. I knew that his statements weren't going to be completely popular...there would be blow back...but I was more proud of him for standing up for what was right, no matter the possible cost, than I had ever been before. My eldest son was happy, successful, and learning to be empathic and compassionate and good. My eldest daughter was entering her senior year of high school with a grade point average high enough to be on track to be her class valedictorian. My younger son, because Jake was officially mine no matter what his biological mother may have thought, was safe and thriving. He was entering his junior year as a starter on the football team, a soloist of the glee club and with a solid A GPA. My baby daughter was about to become an eighth grader, she was the captain of her cheerleading squad, and lead the student volunteerism directive at her school. Our kids were freakin' awesome. I probably needed to start being careful around stairs.

Happiness (Vanessa Williams)
Saul PoV

The summer of my wedding was a totally unbelievable time in my life. I would be honest. I was making more money than I ever had before. Noah, Sam, and Cede's investments were making returns that most investment bankers only dream of. I was handling them in addition to my usual clients and it had increased my portfolio as well. But I wasn't the only one whose financial well-being was greatly improved for the kids' success. Mills, Francesca and their friend Madeline were all having record years...primarily due to Sam's need to invest in real estate for his own comfort...but it didn't matter, they were completely happy and talking about expanding their businesses. Gwen Abrams was planning on hiring at least two junior accountants to handle Lima's regular tax needs, because KAMA's accounting needs were taking up more and more of her time. The kids' success was making it possible for Ethan Harris to walk away from a firm that was treating him abysmally and it would probably be less than five years before he was the senior partner of a large firm of his own.

To be honest, in less than five years, I'd probably cull my favorite clients from the herd and strike out on my own. I'd been considering it for a long while, but I would have needed to gamble more often which meant more risk. But with KAMA...and a few of the connections I'd made at their record
release party, it was an idea that was growing in feasibility every single day. Things were changing by leaps and bounds. Just a few years before, I'd been trying to decide where I'd take Noah for his graduation gift, if he got his shit together and managed to cross the stage. But that summer Noah and his spouses sent Mills and I on a honeymoon when we had our formal wedding. They sent us to Monte Carlo. I won so much money I wouldn't have to work for a year if I'd been so inclined. Mills only won what would amount to a couple of thousand after taxes and everything. Probably we would have both won a lot more if we'd left our suite more often.

When we returned, we decided to throw together a VMAs watch party. It started off just family, Mom, Neil and Frannie, Ethan, Amanda, EJ and their seven month old daughter, Avery. I loved that Ethan Harris, Junior. He wasn't even in kindergarten yet and the three times I'd seen him he'd fixed my iPhone…which I may have accidentally gotten myself locked out of. He'd fixed my iPad, which hated me because it knew that I preferred the current Android operating system. And he'd talked me all about a really cool, kids, educational program that I'd invested in personally and for Rick and the Kids and we were all making money hand over fist on the investment. Plus, the kid was freaking adorable, and light skinned enough that I figured if Mills and I had a son, he'd look a lot like EJ. But then, I'd mentioned it to Rick, so he and Beckett were invited along with his own Columbia student. His daughter Alexis would be starting her junior year at the prestigious university Noah, his lovers and a few of their friends attended. Then when Mills realized that all of the tenants of six and eight Covent Ave would be back that weekend we invited all of them. Before we'd realized it, Mills went into full 'Danica Jones channeling Monica from Friends' party mode. It was a pretty great party.

As the kids won their awards, I couldn't help but think that their biggest success couldn't be counted in the awards they won that night or in all the money they had earned. The biggest success they had was all the happiness they had created. My mother had been revitalized. Ruth Mayzer wasn't an old woman, but she had begun to age emotionally a lot faster than her physical body had. But within a few months after Noah introduced us to his loves, she was as vital and vigorous as she'd been a decade before. Part of that rested in the fact that both Becah and I were less than fully attentive adult children. No, not less than fully attentive…we just didn't need her. Our calls had become perfunctory. We'd share the problems we were having with her, but we didn't ask for her advice, despite the fact that on the rare occasions we did receive words of wisdom from her, they were always correct. I think that Becah's refusal to move home with Noah and Sarah had stung, even as Mom understood that Becah had no desire to return to New York with her tail stuck between her legs. That would suck for anybody, let alone someone with Mayzer level pride.

But when Noah got together with Sam and Mercedes, Mom…a mother with too few children, and Danica and Sander…children, adults though they may have been, who'd been without a mother's love for far too long, the three of them bonded so tightly that I immediately started calling them my brother and sister. Their kids bonded with Mom too. The first time Mom got a letter, a real one in the mail and everything, with little kid handwriting and she opened it to find a hand drawn picture of her, identifiable by the brown hair, and Stacey, identifiable by the yellow hair, Mom cried tears of pure, unadulterated joy for twenty minutes. Mom was in heaven. She'd gone from having two way too mature for their age and physically distant grandchildren and two emotionally distant adult children. No, not less than fully attentive…we just didn't need her. Our calls had become perfunctory. We'd share the problems we were having with her, but we didn't ask for her advice, despite the fact that on the rare occasions we did receive words of wisdom from her, they were always correct. I think that Becah's refusal to move home with Noah and Sarah had stung, even as Mom understood that Becah had no desire to return to New York with her tail stuck between her legs. That would suck for anybody, let alone someone with Mayzer level pride.

But it wasn't just Mom whose world had been changed for the better. I had begun to drift through my days, the pleasure, the rush, I'd always gotten from making my clients the most money possible while staying true to the ideals I held about the environment and warmongering and just overall fair play wasn't as fulfilling. The women I was sleeping with had become interchangeable. I was so fucking
bored that I'd gotten into online poker for Pete's sake. Then Becah told Mom that Noah was going to be in New York with his show choir. I met his friends, I even met Quinn Fabray, who I will admit, I had a lawyer friend very ready to hit with a lawsuit for the bullshit she'd pulled to get Puck to give up his daughter…it was months before I understood why I had never pulled that particular trigger. I met Sam and I met Mercedes and I saw in their eyes a love that looked exactly like the love I'd seen in my dad's eyes whenever they fell on my mom. I was happy for my nephew. I, myself, wasn't ready to be looked at like that at the time, but he saw and returned that look every single time.

As time went by, I found myself jealous…he'd already found his 'perfection' and I was still scared to look for mine. Then, through Noah and his Loves, I had my 'perfect person' dropped into my lap. Meeting Grace Abigail Mills was a defining moment in my life. I had to stop and decide if I was going to let fear live my life for me, or if I was going to accept happiness. I chose to accept happiness and there wasn't a day that went by that I wasn't happy I made the right choice. It was Mills' idea to introduce Neil and Francesca. They were happy as hell together. Mills put Mom in contact with Madeline St. Clair and Nadia Merchant…just because Mills thought that the three women would get along smashingly well, and because Mills wanted her friends to get to know her mother. The three very similar and very different women became friends of a sort too. Mom decided that Maddie would be a great person to introduce to her friend Roman. Those two had hit it off well. After one conversation, Mom had seen that April Rhodes was a loyal person who'd decided to fully embrace her mistakes and just roll around in the bed she had made for herself. She was also very lonely and so Mom had introduced the tiny blonde to a rich old man with no family who understood loneliness in all its forms better than anyone else. Those two were in the society pages a few days before; they had gotten engaged after a whirlwind romance.

Noah, Sam, and Mercedes were very successful. They had managed to directly and indirectly bring happiness into the lives of everyone they met. Benton and Danica were not ready for an empty nest. Now they wouldn't have one for years. Gabby and Sander had been scraping the bottom of the barrel and only keeping mind, body and family together by the skin of their teeth and pure force of will. Now they were happily employed in careers that they loved. They were better off financially than most people who hadn't had the setbacks they'd faced. They had Sloane and increased their already loving family with his cute little presence. Becah and George had reconnected and she had him and Tessa to love in addition to Sarah. All of them had helped Jake and given him a family that would take care of him, rather than him taking care of them, like his birth mother had constantly needed, at least that was how it seemed to me. Shelby Cochran, Beth's adoptive mother and my pseudo cousin, had told Mom that she was happier than she'd ever thought possible and she credited 'Commune' and of course Beth. Noah, Sam and Cede had made it possible for me to find Mills. That had led to Neil finding Francesca, Madeline finding Roman…and I was pretty sure that Nadia and Bryant Harris were seriously moving towards an actual relationship and not just a series of kinky, wicked threesomes. Even Cede's bitch of a cousin had been greatly improved by Noah, Sam and Mercedes' relationship. Hannah Tucker-Jones was actually a real woman and was happily married, to a man who'd spent years alone because he'd never found his perfect one, and had babies that she was in the process of protecting from her mother because they were darker than a paper bag. Their friends were all trying to make their love last because they saw that it could be real true love even if you find your other half at sixteen rather than twenty six.

The three of them seemed to improve the lives of those of us around them without even trying. It wasn't even just the family and friends. Mills and I had gone and seen 'Funny Girl' when it opened on Broadway. The female lead, Willa something or other, in her bio, credited a meeting with KAMA when they were all auditioning for Juilliard for her decision to audition for the role. "They told me that if I got in to Juilliard that was great, but the performing arts was one of the few industries in the world where I could not have a degree and still succeed. That if I saw my chance, I should take it. So when this role came up, I auditioned, despite not making it into Juilliard, I got the part as an
understudy, but when the actress they originally chose for Fannie Brice didn't work out…I took my chance." She took her chance, alright, and she ran with it. The reviews of her performance were stellar and well deserved. I heard through the grapevine that Cedes had seen the article as well and sent Willa a huge congratulatory bouquet.

I knew from Mom that both Anika Rawlins and Christophe Hamilton had gotten promotions within their departments based off their work with the kids. Lyor Cohen had managed to fend off a 'restructuring' attempt...which basically meant that a couple of the Warner board members had tried to have him replaced. The attempt had not been successful because the rest of the board saw the income potential of KAMA and the fact that those three were technically contracted to Warner through Lyor Cohen. Which meant that if they got rid of Mr. Cohen, the kids could exercise a clause in their contract and follow him rather than staying with Warner Music Group. Deborah Jergens and Mom were best friends and even with all the extra love in her life, Mom still kind of needed that. Deborah was the head of a new sector in Warner's A&R department that was aimed at the discovery and cultivation of fusion and new music styles. KAMA's success had demonstrated the fact the people were getting sick of hearing the same thing all the damn time.

There were stories popping up all around social media talking about how much seeing Mercedes loving and being loved by her guys gave women of color and women of differing body types hope that they would find love too. Their relationship was forcing discourses on non-traditional relationships and bringing awareness to some of the prejudices still in play in a world that liked to pretend they no longer existed. By the morning of Labor Day, the whole world was talking about Noah's comments on 'holding cops to higher standards'. The police unions were going hard core in on them, but at the same time the Lima PD, including the cop that had sent Noah to juvie, was speaking out on his behalf. Those kids were making sure that America was living the old Chinese curse. We were all living in very interesting times. It was really very fucking cool.

Gimme Shelter (Rolling Stones)
Xena Garrison (The Background Singer) PoV

Growing up the foster mother I was with the longest always said that when God closed a door he opened a window. I never realized that years could go by between the two events. When I was eighteen I was pretty much pushed out of the foster care system, which I had been in since I was five, and that door was slammed behind me. I had no clue what to do. I don't care what anyone thinks, unless you've been raised to know about the value of money and what things cost and how to pay bills and everything, no one is ready to just be tossed out of the nest at eighteen. I hadn't had the best of upbringings…one foster home had held a rapist who wore the face of a fifteen-year-old, the blood son of the foster parents so we were punished if we even thought of fighting or telling. Another had held a woman who wanted slaves not children. Yet another had been headed by a man who bastardized the bible with such verve that he soured ever foster child he and his wife ever had against Christianity. I learned lots of things over those thirteen years…but I didn't know how to get a job or what on earth I could do with a high school diploma only.

Luckily, I had kept in touch with an older girl who had suffered through that same rapes and punishments hell that I had. She had been the one to finally report it when she had ended up in trouble for running away. Blair had found her way into the clutches of A Pimp Named Slickback. I knew what she did to make money, but she took me in when I needed her…who was I to judge. After I had been staying in her apartment for a few weeks while I looked for a job, Slickback tried turning me out too. I explained to him that I was never being touched by any man I didn't want touching me ever again in my life.
Fortunately for me, Slickback was a smallish man, short and thin. I was a tall, broad shouldered woman with curves for days. I was young, healthy and not strung out on anything. I was stronger than him and he and I both knew it. Slickback couldn't be his size and be as successful a pimp as he was without being smarter than the average bear. He looked at my refusal and saw an opportunity.

"I've been thinking about moving a few of the girls up the ladder. Diversify my portfolio into a higher stratus of clientele. I had the idea to get a few of the girls cleaned up, have them take one of those stripper classes and bill them as private party strippers…but they would know the deal. But for that I need to find them a guard to go with them, collect my money and make sure none of the clients get too rowdy. You handle that half for Blair and two other girls and I'll take care of you the way I take care of her."

I shook my head. "No…I want to learn to take care of myself. You pay me like this is an actual job. Twenty bucks an hour for every hour I work. Help me learn how stuff like bills and utilities and stuff works. I'll guarantee that I'll hold you down for three years."

His smile was a little scary. I never realized that he took that to mean I wanted to learn to be like him. But that was what I learned. I learned how to pick the best apartments in the shadiest buildings. That allowed his girls to feel like they were living high off the hog while he was paying as little as possible for their upkeep. I learned that prepaid cell phones had all the same features as the plan ones and they could be your cable, your internet, your library. I learned that only morons spent everything they earned and that addictions and habits were almost universally wastes of money. I learned how to shop so to portray different images and yet not pay much at all. I learned to avoid stupid crimes.

"Most pimps don't go down for pimping…they go down for dumb ass shit. Like tax evasion. I pay taxes. As far as the US gove’ment knows I have a food truck. I pay my taxes. I don't get welfare or food stamps or nothing like that so the gove’ment doesn't actually look too hard at me. You'll never catch me or none of my girls shoplifting or slanging anything but ass. If Blair got a solicitation bust on record…it's all they have on her, they give her probation and time served. If she gets busted and she has a record as long as your legs…they throw the book at her." It made a lot of sense to me, so on the way to the parties, I was even careful not to speed.

I had grown up in Stillwater Oklahoma, which was a college town. There were always bachelor parties or frat parties or something going on. Once the right people knew about Slickback's private party service, and knew that the girls were clean and wouldn't jack you or anything…plus they performed services that other strippers wouldn't...he made more money in the three years I worked for him than he had in the entire decade before. Within six months he had three other bigger women doing what I did for four girls each. In a weird way, Slickback became a strange father figure to me. He made sure that by the end of the three years I worked for him I could fight. I could handle money. I could save money. He made sure that I had the tools necessary to take the next step. But I seemed to hesitate when it came time to make that next step. About six months after my twenty-first birthday, Slickback came to see me in my apartment. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sitting in my living room." I said sarcastically.

"Naw, Bae…you said you were going to work for me for three years. It's been three years and three months. You should be gone. Instead you're still working parties and slogging along. I thought you were going to move to New York or LA…make something of yourself. You ain't got shit tying you here. So why are you still here?" he challenged.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I mean…I know what I said. But I don't have a plan."

He rolled his eyes. "So make one. Take your tablet and go to a Starbucks or something. Look into how to move to New York. I don't think you'd like LA…too much sun and your pale ass burns way too easy. You know the basics. You need an apartment or you need a hotel room to stay in until you
can find one. You need a job...a real legit job. You ain't got a record. You've been filing taxes. You've never sexed nobody for money or nothing. Shit, I don't think you've sexed anybody for free either...but that is neither here nor there. You can get legit work. I've heard you singing to the girls when they start getting all tetchy and shit...you could sing in clubs or something. That'd be legit work and nobody will care that all you have is a high school diploma. Hell, that's more than I've got."

"Why do you care? I thought you'd be happy not to have to find another warrior princess." I shot back.

"Girl, you know good and damn well why I care. I haven't never had a girl I cared about without either fucking her or being related to her, mostly the second on though. You're as good as my daughter. Didn't I take care of that asshole who used to rape you and Blair. He ain't ever using that little dang-a-ling on no other broad whether they want him or not. I ain't had to do it. I did it because you're my people. Now I don't know from experience but I like to think a father wants his kid to do better than he did. I know that I want you to get the hell out of OK and do some real shit with your life."

I took it as the kick in the pants I needed. It took me a month to get everything in place. I sold everything I could rather than trying to move it. The car I drove was nine years old when I bought it for a grand. I had gotten some work done on it but it would never have survived the twelve-hundred-mile drive. So I sold that too. I helped Slickback train the new warrior princess. A photographer that Slickback knew made me some great headshots. Blair paid for them for me...she insisted that it was the least she could do since I had always taken such good care of her when she did a party. I was pretty sure that he hadn't charged her money, so I didn't feel too guilty about letting her get them for me. I found myself a studio apartment in the Jackson Heights area of Queens. I had a preliminary agreement or a contingent lease, depending on which one of us you asked, with my landlord which meant that as long as I came with first and last months' rent before the first of the month. Slickback and Blair threw me a going away party. Everyone gave me something useful...cash. Slickback, himself, gave me five grand and made me promise that I would keep in touch.

I took the train to New York and Luis, the landlord, had all the paperwork ready. I paid him with a money order and used some of the rest of the money I'd gotten at my going away party to get what I needed for my apartment. I stuck by the things I'd learned under Slickback's tutelage. I had a nice tablet so I paid for internet and streamed movies and TV shows. I didn't buy a whole bunch of unnecessary things. A single bar height dining chair sat at the small breakfast bar. A day bed from Rooms to Go served as both sofa and bed, a dresser held my clothes and pretty much everything else I owned. I lived simply. It took me two weeks to find a job. I ended up waiting tables at a restaurant a few blocks from my apartment. It wasn't fun, but I used a lot of Slickback's tips to increase my tips so I made a decent living. During the day I went on auditions for anything that looked like I'd maybe get it. To be honest, it took six months for me to get anything and then that wasn't even singing, it was a shampoo commercial. I did have great hair...I did three more hair commercials for that same company. The only other job I got in that first year in New York was playing Vampirella at a comic book convention. But that wasn't a bad job...it paid my rent for three months for three days' work.

I did keep in touch with my friends in Stillwater. I emailed and called. Every time we talked Slickback asked me if I needed money. I always said no. Still, I never knew when a Macy's gift card would show up in an envelope with a Stillwater postmark. I was shocked when shortly before my twenty-third birthday, I found out that Blair had stopped turning tricks. Instead she trained Slickback new dancer girls and played first bitch for his street level girls. There weren't many of those anymore. He couldn't charge as much and it was harder work both for the girls and for Slickback. But it was a good proving ground for his stable. I had to have a talk with one of the newer warrior princesses. She was a lesbian and she caught feelings for one of the girls. A bad idea in the best of
circumstances, but the chick she got a crush on was so hetero she was pretty much addicted to dick. I had to remind her about the caveats of her position. Slickback took care of her without her having to deal with dicks. When we found her she had been miserable turning tricks to keep herself in food and blow. We cleaned her up and found her a way to make a living without fucking dudes. After I gave her a talking to…she straightened out and flew right.

A few weeks later I was going through the trades looking for jobs that I might be able to get when I found one for a background singer that didn't specify a look or genre. Most of them only wanted a certain type or a certain style. I had made a few videos of me singing. As an Oklahoma native, I had to cover a couple of Garth Brooks and Blake Shelton songs, but I had also done some Aretha and some Bette Midler. I sent all of those along with my headshots and resume to the email address in the ad. When I got a return email asking me to come and audition, I hopped on it. I used the Macys cards Slickback had sent me to get something nice to wear for the tryout. The morning of the interview, I woke early and washed, conditioned, and used the diffuser on my blow dryer at the lowest setting to dry my curls. I put on my nicest black lace lingerie and a slip then I did my face and hair. I kept my makeup light not wanting to have to re do it when I got there or look drawn and pale either. My waist length curls were braided back from my forehead, but then allowed to waterfall down from the nape of my neck. A teal and black Nine West contrast trim sheath dress went on over my lingerie followed by a pair of Nine West black classic platform pumps covered my body. I had read somewhere that a lot of the fashion rules reverted to the older traditional rules when doing things like job interviews…so I had made sure to stick with one fashion brand for the meeting. I'd even gotten a Nine West black leather tote to carry. I chucked all my stuff neatly into it snapped a selfie and sent it to Slickback and Blair and headed to Manhattan.

When I arrived there were a total of twenty prospective background singers and one Latina who already had the job. After being introduced to KAMA…I couldn't wait to tell Blair, she had loved SongBird…they told us how things would be going down. We sang in groups of four, the Latina never leaving the stage. KAMA switched us around over and over trying different pairings, groupings and song genres. They released people as they realized that the singer was only able to sing in one key or one style or in one girl's case she clashed with Santana in the worst way. "Okay…you. You can go." The Latina said looking at the petite woman like she was a turd Santana had almost stepped in. "You just changed Sam Cooke to Sam Hunt. That is not even…just no. Sorry…besides that, we're background singers. If you're trying to over sing me now what are you gonna do in a concert."

The other woman opened her mouth and said the exact wrong thing. "you are not the group, nor are you the Warner rep. you can't just send me home."

"Oh bitch I just did." Santana shot back angrily.

I looked over and Mercedes, Sam and Puck seemed to be watching to see what happened. I'd broken up too many catfights not to see that this would get really ugly if it wasn't cut off at the pass. "Umm, not to be a wet blanket, but Ms. Lopez already has her position. You are auditioning for yours. Arguing with her when you were definitely off key, trying to force the song to fit your comfort zone rather than flowing with what you were given and trying to sing over her rather than harmonize with her, is a really, really bad idea. Especially since the band is watching you act all shady to their friend."

The small blonde huffed but while she might not have feared the Latina who was only a little taller than her…she wasn't about to take me on. At the end of the day I was offered a place among them which I accepted happily. Two young men, brothers from Kentucky filled the two remaining spots. Two weeks later we signed the contracts for our new jobs. I gave two weeks notice at Uncle Peter's Grill, the restaurant I had worked at since moving to Queens. They were happy for me and told me
that I could always eat there at a fifty percent discount. I thought that was sweet. Once I shared the
terms of the contract with Slickback and the girls, he told me that I should go and have a full physical
done and see a gynecologist. "Soon as the insurance kicks in…you go and start taking care of
yourself. I worry about you."

I took his advice and thankfully I was completely healthy. I considered finding a bigger place, but I
liked my little nest and I really didn't need anything bigger…so I tabled that thought for the future. I
really liked the way KAMA handled its shit. They took care of us almost like Slickback took care of
his girls. We didn't have to buy any of our stage gear. When we went on the road they took care of
almost everything. We took care of our own breakfast and lunch when we weren't in one of the tour
buses during those times, but other than that…they took good care of us. Whenever we were near
one of the crew's home town they got tickets for their families and they gave the person some extra
time to spend with their families whenever possible. When we were in Oakland for a tour stop, I
made my weekly call home. As we talked, I told Slickback all about the set up and how we even had
our hotel rooms in the same hotels and everything. And he chuckled. "Zee, they seem like real good
people. I've dealt with enough musicians and managers and shit when they come through here
wanting to party with my girls. A lot of those industry types are assholes and bitches. But it seems
like you got in with the right type of folks…I want you to show those three as much loyalty as you
showed me."

"You know me Slickback. I wouldn't have accepted the job offer if I wasn't going to be all in." I
returned.

I could hear him nod. "Yeah, I know. Now the million-dollar question. When your band has a tour
stop are you going to tell them about your family?"

I chuckled. "Slickback, they already know. I told them about it before I signed the contract. You
know how image conscious this industry is. I couldn't, in good conscience join their crew without
telling them about the fact that I'd been a muscle chick for a pimp and his stable for three years and
still called you guys my family."

"Damn, so what did they say?" he asked when he finished fussing at me for telling his ‘bidness'.

I chuckled. "Puck wants to meet you for serious. Mercedes and Sam both swear up and down that if
you tell him where to get a pimp cane they will have to hurt you. Sam probably gets me better than
the other two, he's got family that's done repeated bids. He and Santana think that you should move
your enterprise to Nevada so that you can do your shit without worrying about the legalities."

"Huh." Slickback said thoughtfully. "Never thought about that. Yeah, but I'd have to do shit entirely
different. Gotta have a brothel in Nevada. Can't do the parties like we do now. Can't have street level
goods like we do."

I shrugged. "Well, if you change your mind…I mean, I've got a little bit I can invest in your venture
if its legal."

"I might have to see. I hate seeing the girls get locked up.″ He said honestly. That had been the main
reason he'd shifted his business to mainly doing the stripper parties with extra for extra cash. It gave
the girls a bigger bit of protection from the cops. "And I sure as hell don't want to get locked the hell
up."

"Well that Bunny Ranch guy has owned his brothel since the seventies, I don't think he has ever
gotten busted." I pointed out. "I've watched his show on HBO…you do it up better and you could
steal his shine for real. Make it the destination brothel for the rich and the famous." He laughed and
said that he would think about it. I could really see how it could be done and done right. But it wasn't
my hustle. It wasn't my grind. That didn't stop me from looking into a few things. I found that there were four counties in Nevada where brothels were legal, but didn't have a single brothel in them. One of which was right on the border with Cali. They had land auctions every year because barely anyone lived there and hey when the county needed money, they sold land, either for agriculture or for mining or just for commercial and private use. They had sincerely favorable tax laws for businesses. I found a bit more information on what Slickback would need to do and what I thought he should do and typed it all up and sent it to him in an email. It wouldn't be cheap...he'd have to build on land that had never been owned before, which meant he would have to have shit dug up and pipes laid to connect to the city pipes and shit, but the land itself wouldn't cost much at all.

Once I sent it to him, I went on about my business. The summer was fun but hectic. We were moving about a lot and I got to see more of the country than I ever thought possible. It was near the end of the tour, in fact, we were in Chicago for the filming of the Carol of the Bells video when Blair called me out of the blue. "Why did Slickback just call me from some nowhere town called Goldfield, Nevada and say that he spent three grand and got four acres of land?"

I laughed my ass off. "It sounds like he is getting ready to take his shit legit." I outlined for her the things me and Slickback had talked about that pertained just to legitimizing his business. "You think the girls currently in his stable would be good with that?"

"All but Felicia. Her mom has her kids...they live here." Blair said honestly.

"It will take at least a year...maybe longer for Slickback to be ready to move. Tell Felicia to save up her tips and move them with her. If Slickback is moving where I looked at for him their schools are way better than the ones Felicia's kids go to."

I could literally hear Blair smirk. Felicia was very concerned about making sure that her kids didn't end up in the system. As such she hadn't gotten busted since she came to Slickback's stable. In fact, the way she came to the stable had been a fluke and a blessing for her. Slickback usually didn't bother with chicks with kids, but Felicia had been the friend of one of his other girls and he liked to do shit that earned him his girl's loyalty. Getting Miranda's life long best friend off oxy and into a job where she didn't work streets where johns were as likely as rapists had done exactly that. Miranda was the reason that Felicia was always worried about doing the best she could to keep her kids in her family. Shit as high as she used to be, she'd had enough forethought to give her mother custody before she got too fucked up. It had actually saved them from getting taken when she got too high to pick them up from day care one day. Almost all of Slickback's girls had aged out of foster care with no plan and no clue. Those were the lucky ones. A lot of chicks turned eighteen had nowhere to go and ended up with hardened pimps. Those were the ones who didn't live to see thirty.

I didn't like thinking about that. When I'd worked for Slickback, me and Blair had made a concerted effort to catch the girls we knew before they ended up in the wrong stable. Most of the time we were successful...but sometimes we weren't. I shook that thought off and Blair and I finished our conversation and she mentioned that she was going to talk to Slickback about offering rentboys too once they had the brothel built. She would make a good Madam for him. I told her that she should go to the community college and take some accounting and computer classes so she could run shit. I even offered to pay for them for her. she agreed but told me I should listen to my own advice. "Slickback said that there was tuition reimbursement in your contract. You could take online classes." She pointed out.

It wasn't a bad idea. When we were at the VMA's and I saw the set we were performing on, I got hella interested. I talked to the designers when they were giving us the walk through. I couldn't draw worth shit though. So that wouldn't be where I could increase my value to the group. But then Puck made his acceptance speech at the end of the night and I knew how I could help. They would always
need extra guards, but never more than they would while the cops were casting shade on them for telling the truth. I decided that I would get back into martial arts and offer them an extra line of defense. These were my people now as much as Slickback and the girls in Stillwater. I would keep them safe as houses and make sure that they had a damn good run at the same time.

Chapter End Notes

The first five people to hit me with a review telling me about the background of 'A Pimp Named Slickback' gets to select whose POV is used to complete chapter 13.

Kurt & Blaine took up less room than I thought they would so I have room to give quick 1-2 page backgrounds on up to 5 characters.

Those currently untouched by this summer time madness are

The Background Dancers
Simeon Drakkar
Jackson Pressley
Bianca Gorans
Elena Ramirez
Rino Nakasone Razalan

The Dam Bros
Adam Kress
Damien Forteneau

Other Possibilities
Cousin/PR Guru Daniel Harris

Let me know who you wanna know about. And that you all don’t hate me for looking at several controversial subjects.

TTFN,

Anni
Boots of Spanish Leather (The Lumineers Dylan Cover), When I Think About Cheating (Gretchen Wilson), St. Lunatics (Nelly), Hollaback Girl (Gwen Stefani), Brotha (Angie Stone)

Chapter Notes

Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Model Behavior by zeejack

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 I hope your Laptop is better soon!!!!

Sharie (Guest) You were the first to give me the right background for ‘A Pimp Named Slickback’ so The Dam Bros from Damien’s Prospective below is for you!
http://boondocks.wikia.com/wiki/A_Pimp_Named_Slickback

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Boots of Spanish Leather (The Lumineers Dylan Cover)
Kurt PoV

When Mercedes first asked me to help her new manager with decorating their office space, I was more over the moon than I had been since Blaine asked me on our first date. It would be a feather in my cap and great for the portfolio that I would need to build both for FIT and for after graduation if I chose to pursue design rather than Broadway. I had to admit, the more I classes took at both FIT and NYADA, the more I was coming to realize that I had let Rachel influence my decisions far more than I had realized. As much as I loved musical theatre and performing…the thrill I got from the standing ovations at the winter show case and other wise were nothing compared to the feelings that infused my very being when something I had helped Mercedes select ended up getting positively critiqued on Entertainment Tonight or Fashion Police.

Despite realizing that my first love was fashion making Broadway my second, I also noticed that interior design was certainly in the running for third. I was ecstatic with the thought of all the different spaces we were responsible for putting together…ten different personal offices, two different conference spaces, two large pool workrooms, a breakroom and a bunch of other community spaces, including a reception area/waiting room. It was a challenge I was looking forward to tackling. The only damper on my enthusiasm was the fact that it would mean I’d barely be able to go home over the summer. Now in an effort to maintain honesty at least with myself, I had to state that I really only cared about the limited time in Lima because of Finn and his very recent, very close brush with death. Dad had Carole and sometimes I’d felt like I was intruding in their honeymoon during my senior year of high school. I had called Finn to ask him how he felt about me staying in Manhattan for much of the summer. “Dude, you have a chance to do something that you love…get paid more than you would ever make in one summer here in Ohio and help your best friend all at the same time. That is a total win-win-win situation. You’ll still be coming home some. We’ll just make sure to spend some time together whenever you come home.”
So that was exactly what I did. Haja and I worked tirelessly with the contractor, Shelby Johnson, a friend of George’s, and a lady of a certain age with impeccable taste and style. I had expected a female building contractor to look rather like Coach Bieste at best and like Marla from a ‘League of Their Own’ at worst. Instead Ms. Johnson was fit and firm, roughly the same age as Cedes’ Uncle Christophe. Her hair was a beautiful chestnut brown and her smile was bright and lovely. She was also hella efficient. She took Sander and George’s blueprints and ran with them. She made a few changed based on the things we told her about the uses and needs of the office staff. She built in an extra server room which would allow us to give Lauren’s cousin, Darcy, more dedicated bandwidth to run the digital KAMA world. The demo had already been done in the space which saved us a ton of money. Before we ever saw it, the huge floor of the Chelsea building had been stripped all the way down to the support beams and posts. The building didn’t take as long as it would have otherwise.

The first step was laying out the space. They used long strings pre-loaded with blue chalk to rough out where all the walls and everything else would be. There were red lines that showed where electrical lines would be run and green ones showing where plumbing would be. Then things started to happen, electrical, plumbing and security was set up. The subflooring and walls went in. that was when Haja and I really got to join the process. We’d already decided on all the flooring and wall colors. It was just a matter of making sure that everything was in readiness. It was during the finish electrical and lighting stage that Haja and I did our first real walk through. The breakroom had its clean white shaker style cabinetry all in place, topped by the grey quartz countertops which complimented the Dalien grey slate eighteen inch by eighteen inch tiles that adorned the floor. The pale ivory wallpaper had already gone up and the room was waiting on the furniture and fixtures. The bathrooms all had the plumbing and anchored fixtures in place. The only things they lacked were the furniture looking vanities and sinks that Haja and I had picked out.

A couple of weeks after our first ‘we’re supposed to be there not just popping up like the couples on the Property Brothers show’ walk through, they lead us back through. The reception area was perfection. The oak gunstock flooring that went throughout the entire office suite gleamed. The back, accent wall, was incredible, just the way I had envisioned it from my and Haja’s sketches. A wooden wave in a wood stained to match the flooring rode the bottom two thirds of the wall. Behind it the wall had been papered in a charcoal gray and black geometric damask wallpaper so that the gray only showed where the wooden wave was at its lowest. The top third of the wall was papered in ‘KAMA purple’ wallpaper with the same pattern as the gray in a deeper purple rather than a black. In silver with the new font that Warner’s marketing department had created just for them the group’s name was carefully adhered to the highest crest of the wooden wave. I immediately knew that the curved two-person reception desk we’d ordered would be perfect. The three silver four light with frosted glass shades chandeliers had been hung perfectly placed equidistant along the twelve-foot ceiling. Along the accent wall nine matching drop pendant lights illuminated the KAMA sign. There would be more than enough room for the three chair and coffee table groups we’d designed.

The bathrooms wanted only a few finishing touches. We would need to purchase and install the soap dispensers, though the built in paper towel dispensers were already in place. The breakroom was completely finished. The banquette and table had been installed. Two black wall sconces lined the wall above the white microfiber banquette bench. The heavy wood twelve seat table had been assembled and stood waiting for the white microfiber chairs to be slid under it. The four oval, black metal, white drum pendant lights were hung in the ten-foot ceiling. We needed to make final decisions on the appliances. The only thing we were sure of was that we either wanted brushed stainless steel or wooden faced appliances that could match the cabinetry. We were also arguing about whether or not we should look into vending machines. But I wasn’t very keen on the idea. We did agree to have a water service installed, and the water lines for that had been run. I had also been looking at a commercial version of the beverage center we had in our kitchen at the Harlem
The offices and conference rooms were all just waiting on their furniture and décor. Their oak gunstock, hardwood floors were in place. The imported Sanderson ivory wallpaper had been applied to the walls. Due to the differing needs of the different positions each of the staff would have to have met, Haja and I had sent out, for want of a better term, questionnaires to Darcy, Hudson, Brantley and Mercedes’ Uncle Ethan to find out what we would need to order for each of their offices and for Ethan’s legal secretary’s office. Steel shelving had been anchored to the walls in the server rooms and in the room that would house all of the instruments and gear that would be kept in the offices. Haja and I would have full control of the two main administrative assistant areas. That was a great pleasure to create two different spaces that complimented each other without mirroring each other.

I was very proud of my summer of work. I enjoyed the experience. It was completely irreplaceable. Haja taught me so much about how to meet both form and function in the same piece of furniture. He taught me about how to blend patterns so that they were not only fashion forward but aesthetically pleasing. He was very willing to share with me everything he knew. It was a lovely experience. But it wasn’t the sum total of my experiences that summer. Blaine had an internship at the New York offices of Anderson Merchandizing so we had a lot of time to spend together talking and basically reconnecting after the previous semester when a lot of nights I barely made it home in time to shower sleep and start the entire cycle again the very next morning. And, to be brutally honest, I had Haja Johnston to thank for it.

In late June, Haja and I were trying to find the perfect desk for the reception area when he asked me what struck me as a weird question. “Kurt, you know studies say that there is a major difference between why gay men and straight women cheat versus why straight men and most lesbians do?”

“I would never cheat on someone I love. So, no, I do not.” I returned still very confused.

“Most of the time cheating comes down to one of two reasons. Wanting the emotional connection, the intimacy that is missing in your real relationship…or just wanting a bit of alright with a different person than your usual partner.” Haja continued as if I hadn’t said anything at all. “Now, in the second case the cheater is solely and completely at fault. But in the first case, the person who has been cheated on has to take a certain amount of responsibility. It’s still totally wrong to abuse someone’s faith and trust. But it is also very wrong for someone to take another person for granted. You understand what I am saying?’”

I shook my head, “Not really, no.”

“When is the last time you and your boyfriend have enjoyed the benefits of the fact that the only US city more accepting of seeing two men on a date is San Francisco? When is the last time you spent a Saturday morning laying in bed in his arms…or he in yours for hours talking about everything and nothing at all?” he questioned. “You are focused, Kid and that is fan-fapping-tastic, you need to be insanely focused to accomplish all that you are trying to do…but don’t let you get in your own way. If you are trying to have a forever kind of love with your Blaine…then you need to put in the work.”

After that conversation, I made sure to make at least one date night a week, even if it was just us having dinner at home and making so much love we were both sitting pretty the next day. We enjoyed things that most people associated with married couples. One Sunday after we’d spent the weekend in Lima; his parents flew back with us to spend some time seeing the city through our eyes. Cooper even came for a visit. We went to galleries and just enjoyed each other. By the end of the summer we were closer and more in love than we ever had been. And it was all because Haja decided to be my mentor, not only in interior design but also in life. I was so very grateful that I couldn’t really put it into words. I wanted to do something very kind for him. Given his personality,
it needed to be something very meaningful and yet something useful. Blaine suggested that we look out for something that he could use to decorate his office. So as we looked around a few art galleries and curio shops one Saturday, we decided to evaluate every piece with Haja in mind. It was far more fun than anyone would ever suspect.

We found several pieces, but none of them looked like anything that he would like. The cherubs were cute, but no. the African elephant mother and baby statue looked like it was made in the right style…but Haja wasn’t a very big fan of animals. Blaine finally found a black resin statuette of a muscular man fully extended filling an eight by eight square. It was absolutely perfect…it was even within our two-hundred-dollar budget. Blaine had gone half since he was very appreciative as well. During our last meeting before we all went to LA for the VMAs, I gave it to him.

“Oooh la la.” He teased. “This is lovely. What’s the occasion?”

I shrugged. “I just, I wanted to thank you for all that you’ve taught me over the course of the summer. I want to thank you for helping me see that I had begun to Blaine for granted. I want to thank you for being my interior design sensei. Just…thank you. Oh and Blaine chipped in to in thanks for the whole better love life thing.” I rushed through the very last sentence as I felt my face flame.

He looked at the statue. “You are very welcome…probably would have been more welcome if this statue had been better endowed.” He said cheekily. “Once all the furniture and finishes arrive and we get this place completely decorated, we’ll take tons of picture so you can show your professors what you accomplished over the summer.”

I couldn’t wait. During our time in LA we got to speak with one of the country’s preeminent decorators as we walked through Mercedes, Sam and Puck’s LA home. It was a fun and informative day. I learned some very interesting things from both Haja and Ms. Mann. I learned a lot from Mr. Westwood as he explained period makeup versus modern beauty makeup. It was truly enlightening. I learned quite a bit from the set designers and the show producers. The entire event was very educational. Though I didn’t have to assist with any wardrobe malfunctions, Sam decided that it was because I was a good luck charm and made Mercedes and I both promise that I would come with them to all the award shows where they had to perform. I would have done anything I could to make their triumph long lasting and even more successful. I gave them a quick check over as they stood and headed down to accept their last award of the evening, they were so out of it with shock, I was pretty certain they had no clue that I had. But it was okay because they looked picture perfect.

I knew the second I heard Puck’s speech that it would be considered controversial. But I also knew why he said it. While Puck had been a bully and an asshole, despite his use of derogatory terms for homosexuals, he was actually fairly egalitarian. It had taken him telling Finn if he cried at a movie one more time, Finn would be the Fag-queen of Gaytown, and I would be mad at him for stealing my crown to realize that he was perfectly willing to apply the pejorative tag to anyone behaving in a way he termed ‘gay’ not anything that was actually homosexual. The rest of the clique was working on him to make him less naturally offensive. It was a work in progress. Still Puck at his core held very strong views about equal rights. He also, when not being an asshole, never minded standing up for those who couldn’t stand up for themselves. I understood why he said what he said. I could only hope that the backlash wouldn’t be too severe.

When I Think About Cheating (Gretchen Wilson)
Blaine PoV

One thing no one ever said about moving to someplace like New York was that there would be an inundation of temptation for every vice known to man. Most of those temptations were easy to
ignore. Drugs held no interest for me. Alcohol had been a part of my rearing. I wasn’t old enough to purchase any, but I could easily tell someone the wine pairing for any meal, the best cocktails to accompany any hor d’oeuvres. Yet the other temptation of flesh was much harder to push aside. The summer after my first year of Columbia, I made arrangements to work at Anderson Merchandizing’s Manhattan Offices. I had actually felt trepidation at telling my parents that I wanted to spend the first summer after being away from them for the longest time span in my whole life away from home.

But they were both extremely supportive of my choice. My mother had not returned to the Philippines since she left decades before so when she attended college in America, she made a practice of spending her summers exploring her new home country. Dad had actively avoided going home in the summers since his very busy parents were very rarely able to engage in spending time with him during his breaks. Instead he had filled his summers with learning things that would better position him to take over as the head of the family company. Over the three summers before he graduated he had worked at the London, New York and Hong Kong offices. He had learned the business a million different ways. He had learned French and some rudimentary Chinese. Eventually he had met Mom and the summer after he graduated they traversed Europe together before he’d begun working full time for Anderson Merchandizing that following fall.

I hoped that Kurt and I could have those kind of rich and fulfilling summers together. Unfortunately, I had forgotten how focused Kurt could be on any project, even one that was technically outside his primary areas of interest. With both of us working regular hours, I had hoped that we’d be able to spend more time together really exploring New York in a way neither of us had time for when classes were in session. I tried inviting him to lunch with me but he was always meeting with Haja and this member of the KAMA team or that wallpaper or flooring supplier. At first, when he would apologize and tell me we would do it later in the week, I didn’t have a problem with it and I would grab lunch from a sidewalk vendor and do a little exploring on my own. But after three weeks, I decided to join the group if interns and younger managers and coordinators for lunch. I would always call and check with Kurt, but when he inevitably said no, I’d join my new friends for lunch instead.

That was how I met Claude. Claude Deauveaë was one of one of my fellow interns. His father was one of the upper level executives from the Paris office and he’d just finished his third year studying international finance at Oxford. He was, in a word, gorgeous. At six feet tall, he was taller than I with a lean build that was broader than Kurt’s but not as broad as Noah’s or Sam’s. his hair was a shade of blonde very close to Sam’s natural mid-tone color. Every time he said my name I felt shivers run down my back. I knew that I loved Kurt with all my heart, but Claude was an incorrigible flirt and he made me feel the one thing Kurt didn’t…wanted. It never went past the flirtation stage…but I found myself beginning to hope that Kurt would have something to do rather than going out to lunch with me. I was exhilarated by the flirtation…by the attention. Then suddenly everything at home changed. It was the second week in June and when Kurt came home, he asked me if I wanted to go out…go do something fun. After that he made time to go to lunch with me at least twice a week. It was perfect we got to explore the city together over lunch two or three times a week and I still got time to really get to know my fellow interns and some of the ‘members of the cubical cult’ as they called themselves. But Kurt’s change didn’t just stop at lunch. In the evenings or on weekends we went to the movies, we went and saw plays. We took an awesome cooking class where the focus was on cooking with aphrodisiacs and cooking together with your partner.

Even more than that, we were back to making love every single night. There was nothing that we’d been putting off that we didn’t try. Even the times that we visited Lima together, the magic was still in the air. We spent time with Burt and Carole and Finn, but we also made time to spend with the few of our friends who had come home for the summer. One of those times was the Fourth of July weekend and my mother and father flew back to New York with us and stayed in the guest room. Dad wanted to check in with the New York office and he was in the process of trying to decide
whether to move our office security over to Rangeman. He was very, very pleased with the system that had gone in at the house and so he and the board were actually discussing moving several of the east coast offices over to their services. While they were in town, Cooper popped up, surprising us all. We’d just settled down for dinner on the Thursday evening before their Sunday flight when the doorbell rang. When I went to answer it and it turned out to be Cooper, we were all shocked. “I got offered a meeting with the USA Characters Welcome show development team.” He almost screamed as soon as he walked into the dining room.

“That is great.” Mom enthused.

“I’m very happy for you Coop…how did it happen?” Dad asked with a big grin.

“Remember when I went out with you guys when your whole crew were in LA with KAMA?” he said happily. He didn’t really give us time to answer before he rushed on. “Well, I met this dude, Rick, there who was actually chaperoning one of the USA higher up’s kid’s birthday thing. Kid wanted to celebrate by partying like a rock star…that twenty-one and under club was the compromise. It was that one kid I got Mercedes to take a selfie with, him…that kid. Anyway…kid told his dad. Dad called Rick into his office to get more information. Rick told him all about me, put him in contact with my agent, boom I have a meeting next week. But while their studios are in LA, their offices and everything else is here. I need to look East Coast for this meeting. Kurt…you’re gonna be my brother in law…you have gotta help me out.”

I had completely forgotten how fast Cooper could talk when he was super excited about something. Before I could chime back into the conversation, Mom, Kurt and Cooper were talking a mile a minute about where the best place to go shopping for a perfect, East Coast employer meeting, suit would be, when my own beloved father threw me under the bus. “You know…Blaine could do with a couple of new suits and some actual ties. By Monday the whole office will probably realize that he is my son.”

Even with the new leaf he’d turned over, I was a little surprised when Kurt called Haja and let him know about the situation and told him that he would see him on Monday. Especially since he’d been working half days all week while my parents were there. He started calling a few of his friends from FIT, many of whom worked at the higher end retail stores and a few at several couture shops around the city. Within an hour he had Cooper and apparently me an appointment at Brooks Brother’s flagship store to be fitted for a semi-custom suit…or three according to Dad. “I might get myself a new suit too. It’s been ages since I purchased American.” That was true Dad usually came back from his trips to the London office with new suits…one time he and Mom had made a special trip to Italy and come home with a whole boatload of new clothes for each of them. It was easy to tell that the trip hadn’t been a shopping venture, though…they came back tanned and revived and totally in love. It had been very sweet.

The next morning was hell. I don’t know who was the biggest Herr Commandant…Mom and Kurt or that traitor Coop, they had Dad and I up at six so that we could have breakfast and arrive at Brooks Brothers’ Madison Avenue store in time for our eight o’clock appointment. By the time Kalvin, my salesperson, finished taking my measurements and discussing colors, patterns, styles and fits…my eyes had completely glazed over and Kurt and Dad were answering more questions than I did. My darling big brother, however, was in absolute heaven. So was Kurt when Dad had him get measured and everything so that he could treat my boyfriend to a new suit as well. Finally, we got to go to the rack and pick out one suit each that would be altered to fit us as if tailor-made. By the time we left the store, Cooper had three totally custom suits ordered and two of the will look like custom…one of which was being rushed so he could pick it up on Monday since he had his meeting on Wednesday. Dad had decided to get himself and Kurt one super custom job each. I had been bullied by my family into getting two custom jobs and two semi-custom suits, three shirts to
coordinate with each suit…and a boat load of ties Mom and Kurt picked out to go with the four suits. Heck even Mom wasn’t left out of the Brooks Brothers love. In fact, she was the only person to actually leave with her stuff. She walked out the store with four new dresses and a couple of pairs of new slacks.

I thought we were done. I would have sworn that we’d done enough shopping to satisfy even my beloved boyfriend…but as we were enjoying a slightly late lunch at Café Boulud, Mom asked where we wanted to go to find new shoes. “Wait…more shopping?” I groaned.

Dad just laughed at me. I dropped my head to the table and, to be honest, felt a little like weeping. But I pulled myself together had an amazing chocolate truffle crème brulée…and I was ready to face more shopping. Bergdorf wasn’t so bad. At least we only had to pick our favorite style and try them on then see if they come in the necessary color and then we were done. Maybe I would have hated it more had we not spent the entire morning in my shopping hell and Kurt’s heaven. But after Brooks Brothers, I really appreciated shoe shopping a lot more. By the time we finally made it back to the townhouse I needed a nap in the worst way. Mom, Kurt and Cooper all seemed to have third winds. They made dinner while Dad and I both napped. He had teased me, but he’d been as wiped out as I had.

It kind of sucked to see Mom and Dad head back to Lima, but Coop returned mostly to normal after they left that Sunday. He went out that night and didn’t make it home until after he’d picked up his suit. He did the same thing that night, but he stayed in and went to bed early Tuesday evening. He left around the same time Kurt and I headed out. we didn’t see Coop again until dinner that night. “SO remember that show idea I pitched to you when I was understandably angry at you for not getting me invited to the SongBird premiere?”

It took me a long minute to remember what Cooper had yelled at me back before Christmas. “The one where you’d play an ex-con artist helping the FBI or something like that?” I asked.

Cooper nodded emphatically. “They loved the idea. They thought that it was a perfect, character driven vehicle for their network. I have to relocate to New York for the next three months while I help to flesh everything out to be a full on show…but then it’s back out to Cali to film the pilot. Since I have to keep paying rent out there…can I stay here?”

Kurt nodded but then pulled himself back. “We’ll have to check with Cedes, Puck and Sam. They live here too.”

“Hey, that’s cool…but I do cook and I can clean and my schedule will almost certainly be less hectic and jamb packed. In fact, me being here could give them and you time to find and vet a housekeeper…because with as much as all of you are doing, there is no way that you’re going to be able to keep things up yourselves, like you did last year before everything really broke.” Cooper reasoned.

The truth of his words were really scary. It stuck with me for the rest of the summer. I emailed Mercedes to ask her and the guys about his staying with us and all five of our house mates fully agreed. But we weren’t all able to get together to talk about everything until we were in LA. Even then it was more that Santana, Artie, Brittany and I talked it through and we all agreed that with our prospective course loads, the fact that as sophomores we needed to develop at least a few activities other than our classes and the fact that the three of them and the other trio of our clique would have all their industry stuff to handle…if we didn’t want the house to actually look like we were all in college.

But in the hustle and bustle of the awards show prep and the show itself we agreed to make the ultimate decision once we were back in New York. Later that night as we lay in the bed of our hotel
room, I asked something that I had been wondering for a few days. “How did Mr. Johnston like the statue?”

“Oh, he loved it. Though he did joke that he’d have loved it more if it had a bigger endowment.” Kurt said honestly. “There is something I’ve been wondering, was there something beyond the obvious as to why you were so appreciative of Haja’s help?”

I shook my head, then I sighed, “Yes. I guess I was feeling taken for granted and there was a guy at work who was making me feel special. It was never more that some slight flirtation during lunch… and I like to think that it would never have gone any further, I can’t believe that I would ever hurt you like that…but I was so hurt that we finally had time to spend together and you never wanted to spend any time with me. So, I was very, very grateful that Mr. Johnston said whatever he said to make you realize that we needed time together.” Kurt showed his agreement by kissing me which melted into us making love before we fell asleep together.

The week flew by and it was a huge glimpse into, not just the world our friends had become a huge part of, but a world Kurt was very determined to walk in. More than that though, just watching him those six days, it told me that it was a world that he perfectly at home in. He had the talent and the drive and the ability to make it as a stylist. I didn’t want to be miss understood, he had the talent and the ability to make it on Broadway, but it wasn’t truly where his heart was. That would make our relationship a little more difficult, but it would be very workably. He could easily be Mercedes’ stylist while living in New York and traveling when he needed to. Perhaps he would even parlay working for Cedes into his own fashion line. No matter what he may have allowed himself to be convinced…that was his real dream. I’d known that very early in our relationship. The way he discussed fashion, the way he lit up when he talked about making a beautiful coat, or finding a perfect dress and shoe pairing…it was where his heart really lived. Over the course of the summer, I think he was coming to the same conclusion.

When they won the last of their four awards…they won four awards their first time being nominated, I was so happy for them…Kurt surreptitiously tweaked the fall of Cedes’ dress and Puck’s pants as they headed to the stage. The trio were very much stars on that stage. It was really awesome. Mercedes thanked the family, fans and mentors. Then Puck gave us shout outs then he slammed us with the truth…a brutal truth, a very hard one to hear, but a truth none the less. I’d ridden in James lovely, brand new, pretty expensive car with him enough to know, black guys in nice cars get stopped…a lot. Heck, half the time he left campus one of us made an excuse to go with him because even when he was in his Dalton Blazer…the unnecessary stops didn’t stop and they usually just ‘let him off with a warning’ when one of us were with him. Thad had gotten very upset about it, but James was very matter of fact. He told us that most black men just looked it as a part of life as a black man in America. I thought that was sad as hell, but like him, I couldn’t see it changing any time soon.

I was certain that there would be blow back. there usually was whenever any American spoke out against police brutality or whenever someone tried to force people to examine racism in America. People loved to pretend that racism had ended in the sixties. That it was no longer a problem. But I saw how people looked at my mother and father. I heard discussions trying to figure out ‘what I was’ when Kurt and I went out sometimes. Whether it was the systemic, broad, overwhelming racism people like James faced or the subtle, slight digs that were often cast at my mother…racism was thriving in America. Until people could finally admit it…it always would. After all, like they said in addiction group meetings…the first step to getting better was to admit you had a problem. As I partied in a LA club celebrating our friends’ joy and success, I couldn’t help but hope that I would find a way to help them be even more successful as well as finding my own way to protest and help a major social issue.
St. Lunatics (Nelly)
Simeon Drakkar (Backup Dancer) PoV

When I auditioned for KAMA I wasn’t really sure if I even wanted the job. I had grown up in a pretty conservative home in St. Louis. Even though I didn’t think I subscribed to the beliefs I’d been raised with, I mean I’d been raised to believe that homosexuality was a hell worthy sin. Even though I thought that I had totally left that uber black Christianity behind me, I still found myself thinking that KAMA was a step too far or something. My mother was a war widow, well technically not a widow since she and my Dad never officially tied the knot. She and my dad gotten pregnant with me the night of their senior prom. The way my aunt tells it, it could have been any time the week or two before because Mom and Dad were like bunnies. But my mother swears that she was a virgin the night Dad took her to the prom. Then again, my mother spent hours every week at church and the only time she wasn’t at church she was at work, so something told me that she would never, ever, ever admit otherwise. The truth was probably somewhere between the two extremes. Either way, after they graduated, Dad had joined the military so that he could take care of us.

I was born New Years Day nineteen ninety-one. My father was there in the delivery room when I was born, he named me and signed my birth certificate. He left the very next day for his deployment in Iraq. Desert Storm was winding down and it would only be a little less than two months before the war was officially over. But when the war was scheduled to end didn’t really help my dad. He was killed with four other American servicemen in a skirmish with Iraqi soldiers just four days before the official end of the conflict. Thankfully he’d done his paperwork to make sure that I got his survivor benefits and I had Tricare until I turned twenty-one.

Momma raised me in the same neighborhood they had grown up in…the same neighborhood that spawned hip hop artists Nelly and Murphy Lee. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother and my aunts as Momma went to school to become a secretary. She never bothered with dating much. She worked and she took care of me and she went to church. I was about thirteen before I realized that my mother didn’t date because she really didn’t need to. I thought she was living as a good Christian woman and she was too busy with work and church and raising me to bother with trying to date. Instead she was just happy living her life as the side chick for the pastor of our church. it was really, really hard to lose all respect for my mom in one foul swoop…but I dealt with it. Probably not in the best way. I stopped going to church. I stopped going to school for the most part. I started hanging out in the neighborhood. I lucked out and fell in with a dance crew not an actual gang. I managed to graduate…by the skin of my teeth. I was the poster boy for truancy. Our schools had a rule that said if you missed twenty or more days from school, you failed the year. Every year of high school I missed exactly nineteen days. It was pretty bad, but I knew that I didn’t need school to dance. And I was right. Two days after I graduated, I moved to New York, bankrolled by Momma’s pastor boyfriend who was desperate to keep me from telling his wife. I managed to get an agent and started working. I mainly did music videos. I did try for some stage work, but they preferred a different style of dance and a different look of dancer. I had worked with Jason Derulo, Ciara, Little John, Red Foo and LMFAO, but I almost lost my mind when I got the ‘Uptown Funk’ job. That was so freaking epic, I almost cried.

I was always on the lookout for a more permanent gig. I mean, the videos were nice, but I had bills to pay that came every single month. So when my boy Snickers called me to tell me about this call for dances, all kinds welcome, to tour with a band; I hopped all over that shit. When I got the call from the band’s rep to come in for an in person audition, I was there with bells on. It was cool. The first meet was a cattle call. I easily recognized Rainbow, formerly one of Gwen Stefani’s Harajuku Girls. Everyone knew that she was on her shit as a choreographer. Her second place win on American’s Best Dance Crew was considered by many to have been a total robbery. It would be an honor for any dancer to dance in her crew. I made the call back and got to meet the actual group we’d be dancing behind. That was when I realized who they were and started to wonder if I really
could work for them. They talked to us about the nature of what they were looking for, they wanted dancers who would tour with them and do their videos. They were hoping to create an old school, bonded, cohesive group that would be together for a long time. That appealed to me. But I was still caught up in the whole ‘three-person relationship being really sinful’ thing. It took me a second to realize that the voice in my head telling me that those three very kind and seemingly very Christian themselves people were wrong and sinful belonged to the same woman who told me that having the feelings I was having for my best friend were sinful even as she was banging a married man two-three times a week.

I decided to go back to ignoring the voice and when I was offered a spot on their crew, I took that shit and never looked back. When I went to the meeting where they outlined our salaries and benefits and the fact that we could still take other jobs as long as they didn’t interfere with KAMA’s tour and performance schedule, I knew that I had made the right choice. I mean a hundred grand a year, plus show bonuses, great benefits, retirement package…everything was really awesome. I signed that shit in a heartbeat. Over the course of the practices and the performances and the tour I got to know my bosses. They were really truly good people. They, and I included Puck in this even if he was Jewish, led me back to Christianity by being the best examples of the faith. They really followed the tenets that Christ preached. They cared for their fellow man. They helped the poor. They drew people to Christ by being good examples. On tour, when they could, they would just drop into a church near the tour stop on Sunday morning. It wasn’t something they even thought about, they just loved being in God’s house and in His presence. The first time I went with them, I felt something fill me that I hadn’t felt since I walked in to see my mother and the pastor defiling the pulpit at the church I grew up going to. I felt peace and I felt full of the Holy Spirit. I felt God’s love and knew that I was home. KAMA would have a devoted dancer until I couldn’t move a step because in that moment, those three became my brothers and sister in Christ. I decided then and there that I would help them in any and every way I could because they deserved it. When Puck gave his speech at the end of the VMAs, I was even more firmly in their camp…though I didn’t think that was possible. Yeah, KAMA was my fam…they had me for life.

Hollaback Girl (Gwen Stefani)
Rino Nakasone Razalan ‘Rainbow’ (Choreographer/Backup Dancer) PoV

I was a little surprised when I got a call from Gwen asking me to work with a young, new group that her friend Blake Shelton knew. I’d known Gwen for the better part of a decade and she had introduced me to a few artists and groups, but never before had she asked me for a favor of that nature. I was honestly intrigued, so I took the meeting with the group and their WMG reps. I was immediately able to see that Anika Rawlins, Deborah Jergens and Christopher Hamilton were extremely protective of their young charges. I wasn’t sure why. Upon seeing which group I was meeting with, I was relieved. They were actually talented. I was worried that since Gwen was asking for the favor just to get me to meet with them that they would be some talentless, A&R created group that looked good but lacked all substance. Instead, I was meeting with a group that held a young lady I was certain was going to be hailed as the voice of her generation and two gentlemen that played their own instruments and apparently helped to write their own songs. Within minutes I realized that not only were they very talented, they were fairly mature for their ages and had focus, drive and determination.

A few minutes into the meeting I understood why it was favor worthy. “So the two of you can’t dance…at all?” I blurted out looking at the two handsome young men.

“Well, it’s not that we can’t dance, we’re not as bad as our friend Finn. We can…it just takes us a lot longer than Mercy to get the steps and not look like we have metal plates where we should have
joints.” Sam defended with a pout.

“Yeah, I’ve got moves…it just…that I save my best moves for the bedroom.” Puck tried to defend.

Mercedes just shrugged. “They can learn; it just takes a certain level of patience to teach them. Our friend Brittany is very good at helping them with learning the moves, as is our friend Mike. But as we get on bigger and bigger platforms, they are going to...we are going to need more help. We’d also like it if you could help Brittany learn more about her craft as well. Anyone who has worked for Janet Jackson, Brittny Spears and Gwen Stefani has got to be comfortable with different styles of choreography and music. We are hoping that before you get bored with us and decide to move on, you can help Brittany, ours not Spears, become comfortable with designing routines herself.”

“I do like a challenge.” I muttered honestly. “Alright…but I want to have full control of dance concepts and I will be present at all auditions. I understand that you say you want a blend of personalities and hope to turn your band and troupe into friends, which is great, but I will recommend the dancers I’m willing to have under me and you can pick the best personalities from those.”

They were fine with that proposal and we moved forward from there. After speaking with them just a little longer, I started to see the vision of what would work best and look best for them. Since, no matter what certain pundits and right wing and black talking heads would claim, there was no domination or misogyny present among the triad. They firmly believed that all people were created and should be treated equally. I would play that up. Since they were a trio composed of two men orbiting the woman, we’d reverse that for the dancers, two females would orbit each male. For most shows there would only be six dancers. Two groups of three, but if they reached stadium sized concerts, then we’d need to add another trio or possibly two. KAMA themselves would be on a raised platform...I stopped that train of thought, I was getting ahead of myself.

We talked longer, I told them some about growing up in Okinawa, coming to the US, dancing for Icons. They listened with rapt attention asking pertinent questions and drawing me from my shell. I helped them understand what touring really was and how to prepare for it. We talked about picking talent over personality in their first selections and then when they had wheeled out the posers and fakes, looking to their personality. When the meeting was over, I was quite happy that I took the meeting. I was very much a part of KAMA and looked forward to helping them build real and lasting success. As we auditioned the dancers and they listened to my advice and demurred to my experience I grew to truly like my unconventional bosses. As we practiced together and became a full troupe, I quickly understood how to teach all three of them the moves. Mercedes usually just needed a tape to watch and move along with until she got it down. Sam and Noah were both much more hands on learners. I would at times have to physically move their arms, legs and hips in the way they needed to go to give them the feel of the move. It was taxing, yet watching the joy they experienced when they finally got it made me begin to develop a protective, big sisterly vibe with them.

By the time the summer rolled around, I was determined that these young people would reach the heights of all the other major label artist I had worked with. They easily deserved it more than many of the new acts in the industry. They understood loyalty and valued hard work. I found that I wanted them rewarded for that as much as humanly possible. As I watched them working with their band members on their next album, I found that they were humble and learned from those persons who were considered their subordinates. As we all stayed in the same hotels rather than sloughed off to lesser motels or far lesser rooms, I realized that they were honest and they were fair. It was so nice to see in the industry that it made me even more desirous of their sustained success. The week of the VMAs cemented my decision even further. The trio took care of their camp every step of the way. We were treated to the same hair and makeup treatments, the same spa treatments, we were
reimbursed for any apparel we purchased for the performance. It was quite a wonderful experience.

Only the truly ignorant can live in a bubble away from the news and the happenings in the world around them. Only the truly arrogant can see the happenings that were going on around us that summer and not be moved. My bosses were neither of those things, so it came as no surprise to me that Puck felt the need to speak up. That Sam did as well. I even understood why Mercedes who felt very strongly on both issues, police brutality and gun control decided not to say anything. All too often the black voices shouting against the violence being perpetrated against black people were being ignored as race baiters and women who spoke against guns were undermined as ‘not understanding the need for guns’. She let her men speak up to give more weight to the words. It would be harder for the usual characters to come back against them in the same way. They would also be able to simply say that the Faux News crowd already hated KAMA, so what did it matter if Beck or Hannity or Limbaugh hated them a little more.

As I stood in the after party, I mingled, easily deflecting those few angry voices back on themselves. American’s never learned American History as well as they think they did. More often than not I was able to quote their Founding Fathers back at them to remind them that the nation was founded on the principle of the protection of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The police officers Puck spoke of denied all three to their victims and should therefore be held accountable. It was all written in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Federalist Papers. I wondered how many of the people I said that to that night went to check. In the time following the VMAs, I knew for sure that Puck, Sam and Mercedes were now a part of the people I considered my chosen family. I would fight with them and for them like I would my sisters and brothers still in Japan. They deserved that loyalty from me…from all of us in their crew.

Brotha (Angie Stone)
Damien Forteneau (Background Singer/Dam Bro) PoV

I grew up in a house bare of a lot of the material things, but absolutely full of both music and love. My mother was a very nice, sweet woman with the voice of an angel and the vices of a minor demon. She loved men. All kinds, big men, little men, tall men, short men, black men, white men… she loved men. By the time she was thirty she’d given birth seven times to a total of eight children. The only ones of us who shared a dad were the twins, and that was actually a pretty big assumption because they were fraternal, not identical. It was fine. We knew who Momma was and she loved us and took care of all her kids and she didn’t play any disrespectful BS games either. She never brought anyone home. She never left us with anyone other than one of her family members. She never disappeared for days on end. Well, not with our setting us all down and letting us know that we were spending the weekend with our grandfather or one of our uncles. Momma was an aberration in her family…there were only two girls in the family. We weren’t sure if the women of the family had only had boys or if they had just taken their daughters with them when they got fed the fuck up with their men’s carousing. Momma’s mother had died in a car crash, before she reached the ‘through’ point so that was why Momma was raised by Grandpa and the uncles. They were all just as bad as her, she just had the good sense not to marry anyone or even try to lie and promise monogamy.

Though Momma was only forty-three the year we became full time background singers, Adam at twenty-four wasn’t the eldest. He was the third. We had two brothers older than him, but they stayed in Paducah. They were happy there and had no desire to leave. Aaron worked at TSA at the regional airport there and Ronnie was a handy man/construction worker. Though Adam was technically almost two years older than me, he was born behind the deadline and he’d gotten really sick right before pre-kindergarten, so he hadn’t started school until the same time I did. By the time we
graduated high school, we’d been working for four years with Ronnie, getting paid under the table. We’d helped Momma with the four younger brothers and saved up so we could make our dreams come true. We both could sing, hell all eight of Momma’s boys could sing, but Adam and I had joined the choir at school and learned that we had a fair amount of talent. So we decided to use the easily sharable gift God had given us, He had gifted all the men in the fam in a certain, less readily sharable way too, to get the hell out of Kentucky.

We had five grand in our pockets when we moved to NYC. That allowed us to get a really crappy, studio in Hell’s Kitchen and find jobs. We hustled our asses off that first year. Adam got a job as a bus boy in a trendy Manhattan restaurant and I went to work as a cook in a soul food restaurant not far from our apartment. We had our day jobs and when we weren’t on the clock, we busked in Central Park, outside near the Met and in Time Square. By the end of that first year we were able to afford a two-bedroom apartment in the same building. That was a lot better because bringing anyone back to the apartment had been nearly impossible and while chicks liked to be in their own space, dudes liked to be able to sneak out. Adam had it easier, since he was straight, he’d go out, go back to their place and get home by five or six. I did the same when I was looking for a broad, but whenever I brought a dude home, no matter how I tried to time that shit out, Adam always ended up catching me in the act. It didn’t bother him so much when he caught me laying the pipe, but it freaked him the hell out when he caught me catching. Life was just tons better when we each had our own room.

We transitioned from busking to actually working as background singers in the weirdest way. Some tourist took a vid of us singing Oasis’s ‘Champagne Supernova’, posted it on Youtube and when Adam was at his real job, a producer dude recognized him. He offered him work for both of us and the rest was history. We did the whole studio gigs thing whenever we could get the work. We’d been doing that for about two years when some of the musicians told us about KAMA’s auditions for a full time band. We both hopped on it. We agreed that we’d both try out separately and if one got it the other wouldn’t be all butt hurt. So we sent in separate resumes, jpegs and mp3s. When we both got called for the face to face auditions, I was a little surprised. Adam might not be as tall or quite as good looking as I was, but he could sing circles around my ass. He had a range that was kind of incredible. Especially since we were mostly self taught.

By the end of the first hour of the audition, I knew that I wanted that job so bad. The already in place background singer, Santana, and I were bonding over picking on people who had either been lied to their whole lives or they just had no actual ability to tell what was in tune versus what wasn’t. Then she and Adam spent quite a few minutes making fun of the chicks who and come looking to poach Ms. Jones men. They had no hope at all but there was one chick who was so busy trying to flirt with Sam and Puck, which anyone who was attracted to the male sex could understand, she got cut and didn’t seem to realize it for a full ten minutes. We must have sung in a thousand and five different combinations, but when it was a tall Amazon appropriately named Xena, Santana, Adam and me…it felt like everything clicked into place. We sounded right, I stood next to Xena and Adam stood next to Santana and the height differences looked perfect. Then Mercedes joined us and we did Mahalia together…it was more than perfection. Thankfully the bosses agreed. Xena, Adam and I left there with job offers and were told when to meet with everyone else to sign our paperwork.

Neither Adam nor I quit our food service jobs right away and we were way more selective about which people we worked for at the studio. We went into the meeting that Monday sure that we’d each be able to stop working one of our two jobs. We were good with that. Heck we talked it through and decided that if we were going to make enough to quit the restaurants; we’d still work the studio jobs to be able to send that money home. We still helped where we could but we didn’t have much to send back. Thankfully only two of our brothers still lived at home. Jarrod and Rodney had graduated and moved out on their own. Well, Rodney had gotten a basketball scholarship to the University of Kentucky, so he was technically gone, but he was mostly gone. That just left the twins, Jaden and Denzil with Momma and they were old enough to work after school.
When we saw those job offers that laid out not only that we individually what we’d been praying to make together but that we had benefits, damn good ones, we could start saving for our old age and we could help Momma get a better place; I damn near cried. Shoot. We signed up for everything…we even got the duck insurance. We were making twice what we needed to make to do what we wanted to do…that extra twenty bucks a month was a price we were cool with paying just in case shit. We still had six months before our lease would be up, so we had time to decide if we wanted to move and how we wanted to move. So that was what we did. We worked with the group and we got out harmonies and synchronizations on point. The choreography for the back ground dancers mimicked that of the actual dancers, but it was stripped down and simplified.

By the night of the drop party we were totally a unit. We matched the group no matter what surprises they threw at us. Then when we got to go mingle, famous people were talking to us like we really belonged there. If we were a cohesive unit the night of the drop party and through the promo tour, we became a well-oiled machine by the end of the festival tour. The summer was awesome. We didn’t have much in the way of bills or road expenditures so by the end of the tour, we’d saved enough for a down payment for a three-bedroom house for Momma in one of the better parts of Paducah. We did the paperwork from LA; working long distance with one of KAMA’s attorney, Mr. Berry gave us a great deal too. With his help we got pre-approved for a hundred and fifty-thousand-dollar mortgage…mainly thanks to the letters of recommendation or something our bosses did when they realized why we were still pinching our pennies so hard the squeaked. The real estate agent that Mr. Berry found managed to get the seller down to under a hundred and thirty thousand. It was weird, when all was said and done, the mortgage for Momma’s house was just a little bit above what we figured we would set aside individually to pay it. We didn’t have too much of a credit history, so the interest rate was a little higher than it probably could have been, but even with property taxes and home owner’s insurance built into the mortgage; the bill would end up being under nine hundred bucks a month. It was completely fantastic.

We’d been dreaming of being able to buy our momma a nice home since we were little; growing up nine people deep in a two-bedroom trailer. The fact that working with our amazingly talented, generous and awesome bosses saw it happen less than a year after we got real jobs meant that if anyone even tried to talk shit about those three in our presence, we’d have to kick some serious ass. Well, I would. It would then be Adam’s job to joke and kid them out of pressing charges. That division of duties had been keeping us out of trouble since the third grade when I beat the breaks off of Euree Jenkins for calling our Momma a hoe. Maybe she was, but we sure as hell weren’t gonna let anyone call her that. KAMA had earned the same kind of loyalty we’d only even shown family before. I didn’t know what we could do other than sing our best each and every performance and be there anyway they need us to be…but we’d do so and do it with a smile on our faces. If Adam and I had anything to say about it, KAMA was gonna be bigger than Elvis or The Beatles or Run DMC.

Chapter End Notes

Drop me a line to let me know what you think of all the new characters' backgrounds. I updated the Casting Call of We Are Family so check that out as well.

This story is entering the home stretch. This chapter and two others are all left for this portion of the Learning French Series. However, if you all can help this story reach 100 Reviews by the end, I will post a bonus chapter that looks into what happened the night of the VMAs after the awards show for Sam, Mercedes and Puck. How does our intrepid triad celebrate their wins? What do they get up to when they make it back to the room? (Just a few reviews each chapter will see you all receive the bonus
Oh and a preview of the KAMA Office Suite Decor is available on my Tumblr... annikay-samcedesshipper. The pics are also up on Flickr. I can't get the yahoo group to work for them yet, but I'm working on it.

Thanks for all the support.

TTFN,
Anni
Three Little Birds (Bob Marley), Hysteria (Muse) & Why You’d Want to Live Here (Death Cab for Cuties)

Chapter Summary

Summer for the Berrys & Meet Jackson Pressley

Chapter Notes

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
When A Badass Loves A Diva by JessiMae888

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three Little Birds (Bob Marley)
Antwan Berry PoV

For all that had gone off script in my life in the last few years, I could honestly say that the best decision I had ever made was to do what was right over what was easy when it came to how we dealt with Rachel’s bad behavior. My only wish was that we could have had her diagnosed earlier when we could have been responsible for her medication and therapy schedule. But by the time she was properly diagnosed, she was an adult. If she elected not to take her illness seriously there wasn’t a lot that her father and I could do. However, allowing her to get away with the things she had done, while easy would never have been right. With the Jones, Evenses and Altermans seeing that Hiram and I were doing everything we legally could do to help her control herself we retained friendships that meant the world to us and I was paid handsomely for my work helping with the case against certain pundits and talking heads. That case was in the middle of ‘motion war’ stage so I was having a blast inundating them with every single probative motion I could think of.

In April, as had occurred in January, KAMA paid me far more money than I really felt I had earned. Granted, when I said as much to their business manager and parents, I was laughed at and told to do something with it that made me and Hiram happy and shut the hell up. Not very long after that conversation Hiram and I were with our surrogate, Phoebe, at her monthly doctor’s appointment and we were informed that the three of the four IVF embryos that had been implanted had not only successfully implanted…all three of them were thriving and doing well. With that new information I made a decision as to what I would do with the money I had received for my work with KAMA. Hiram and I decided to fix up our home of twenty-two years and put it on the market. We would find a home that would have enough room for the three new additions to our family. As well as our eldest daughter who felt herself just so far above us.

We called Rachel with the news and her reaction was less than stellar. She threw a hissy fit that
pissed me off so bad I missed the rest of the conversation. When Hiram joined me in our bed, he was less angry…but nowhere near calm. “She had assumed that we would only have one child and that the baby would be a boy…as if we had any control over that at all. She feels as if she is being replaced and that we want to forget her all together and that is why we are selling the house.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did she not consider that even if only one child had implanted properly, we’d have still had to at the very least renovate the house to create another bedroom?”

Hiram shook his head. “No, I don’t think she did. It also didn’t occur to her that even if we only had one other child it could have been another girl. She is really quite upset with it all.”

“Do you still want to find a different home?” I asked him quietly. “We could add an addition to this one.”

“No.” Hiram sighed. “I love our daughter…you know I do…but we cannot allow her to hold us hostage. She doesn’t appreciate anything we do for her. Instead she feels as if we are all just doing her bidding and it is her due. I’m tired of feeling guilty for living our lives, Twan. Sometimes when I talk to her, I really think that she believes that we enter a state of suspended animation when she leaves the house or Lima all together. That we stay in one spot awaiting her return. I’m always going to be here for her but it is time that we put us and we put the babies first. She is an adult who is making her own choices no matter what we advise, what we say, what we suggest.”

Everything he said was true. After she returned to New York for her second semester, she had gone to the therapist Dr. Watson suggested, Dr. Seaman…an authority on NPD…a grand total of four times. She would push back or cancel appointments. She simply wouldn’t engage in any meaningful discourse in the ones she did attend. “I know.” I said sincerely. “You are right. Tomorrow, we should sign up for Zillow or Trulia and check with our friends and see if they have a real estate agent they recommend.”

After that we were completely excited. Within a week we were meeting with the real estate agent who had helped George Altman find the land on which he was building Mercedes, Sam and Noah’s Lima home. The meeting went well. We went through our wants and needs. We needed a two story house with a finished basement. We needed at least four bedrooms all on the same floor. We needed a large gourmet kitchen, but if the bones were right we could handle the remodel. We wanted the fully finished basement to be set up as an apartment or as an in-law suite for Rachel. We wanted a garage that would hold three cars. It wasn’t a difficult meeting. We had gone both gone through home purchases as singles and then again as a couple. The beautiful difference between those times and the current situation was that our only constraint was that we needed to be closed and in the new house…with any necessary renovations completed by the second week of September. The doctors had been confident that he could get the triplets to remain in utero unto at least the twenty-seventh day of the ninth month of the year, but that anything beyond that would be by the grace of God. We wanted everything to be ready when they babies came.

Elaine Sanko was a consummate professional. If she had a problem with the nature of our marriage or household she didn’t let it show in any way, shape, form or fashion. She understood that we preferred to look when we were both available, so in evening or on weekends. Our meeting was held on a Tuesday and that following Saturday she had several properties for us to view. We got up early, dressed well, had breakfast and met her at the first property around nine. The first house we saw was over on Tonkawa Trail and it was lovely. It was nestled on a large lot with plenty of mature trees for privacy…I could see little boys climbing one of them near the kitchen window in particular. The master suite with its tray ceiling was gorgeous but it was on the main floor. It had a bathroom and walk in closet both of which we in need of some work. But the beautiful eat in kitchen had been recently, completely remodeled with new white cabinetry, dark granite counters, stainless steel
appliances and beautiful hardwood floors.

The kitchen led into a large great room with a real wood burning fireplace. The main level also housed the formal dining room, study and laundry room. The second level was where the ‘triplets’ bedrooms’ and a bonus room were located. The largest bedroom one that floor had an en suite full bath, in my mind it would be the perfect room for a little girl. Especially since the second and third bedrooms shared Jack and Jill bath. The basement didn’t go the full length and breadth of the house which was fine I supposed. The partial basement had a fantastic finished living area, storage room, and an additional room that would work perfectly for bedroom for Rachel. The only problem was that we would need to convert the dingy storage room into a bathroom for her. I watched enough home decorating shows to know that creating basement bathrooms destroyed budgets. It was like a curse…made me very leery. The biggest selling point over all was that the house had an unbelievable back yard area with spectacular in-ground swimming pool, large paver patio that the current owners had just had installed and it was very private. Hiram loved the fact that the seller was including a ten thousand dollar allowance for new flooring and the master bath remodel.

“At three hundred sixty five thousand, the house is in the middle of your price point.” Elaine said with a ready smile. “There are some renovations that can be made…but there isn’t a ton of work needed.”

“It is nice”. We finally said after we talked about the numbers in the kitchen. “I love the light sandstone exterior and you really can’t beat the curb appeal.” I said contemplatively.

“I worry about the neighborhood though. I didn’t see any other nontraditional couples, or people of color.” Hiram pointed out. “That on top of the fact that we would have to climb the stairs every time the babies woke in the middle of the night…I just don’t think this is the right house.”

“You’re right…Besides we would have to fence in that pool immediately and the basement doesn’t have a separate entrance. Rachel will probably claim that we’re still treating her like a child.” I said with a grin.

“Not a problem.” Elaine said happily. “I do have more properties to show you.”

The next property was on the far other side of town near the Shawnee High School cluster. McKinley may have had its faults, but Shawnee had completely defunded its arts programs in support of their athletics. That was a major strike against the house which was an older house in good condition, but not great. So it was on to the third property. That one was entirely too small, the house would have been better at three good sized bedrooms rather than four smaller ones.

The next Saturday, we saw a few more houses without seeing anything that struck us as being perfect. Then Thursday while Hiram and I were returning to our car to return to work after our counseling session with Dr. Watson when both of our phones rang with a call back request text from Elaine. As soon as we were inside the quiet of my car, we called her back. “I know that you preferred weekend showings…but I just got a listing that I am dying to show you, and we’d need to move on it fast.”

Hiram and I looked over at each other having a whole conversation without saying a word. He quickly sent off a text to his office and nodded. “We can meet you there in fifteen minutes.” I told her happily.

Going immediately was the best choice we’d ever made. The house was an excellent reproduction of a historical home in the older part of Lima, but it was, different enough that you felt that it was a homage rather than a rank imitation. The two and half story house sat on a two acre lot with plenty of the old growth trees I had loved at the first house. The porch was amazing spacious but still cozy and
homey. The first floor held a two story foyer, a big study or home office, large living room, pretty powder room, formal dining room a fully up to date gourmet kitchen with brand new stainless steel appliances, dark wood cabinets, light ivory quartz countertops and a breakfast nook that lead into a beautiful great room with a functional and beautiful wood burning fireplace. There was a full bathroom in the back hallway off the great room that hallway culminated in the stairs down to the basement. The basement itself was setup as a basement apartment complete with separate entrance, but from the interior stairs you walked into a nice sized multifunctional bonus room type of space with French doors that opened out onto a nice sized patio and a back yard that was perfect for entertaining. We would need to create a doorway from the living room of the basement apartment into the bonus room so that Rachel would feel like part of the family, but the apartment needed a little bit of updating anyway. Both Hiram and I wanted Rachel to have a space that made her want to visit her home more often.

The second floor had four good sized, regular bedrooms each with a deep walk-in, two really nice bathrooms each with double sink vanities, a good sized laundry room and the master suite which had been completely updated. The master suite was a thing of beauty. It had a seating area off to the side that would be a beautiful little reading nook, twin walk-in closets, a beautiful bathroom with a dual sink vanity, water closet, separate shower and deep soaker tub. “The attic is divided between a guest bedroom with a three piece bath and a large finished storage space.” Elaine explained as she showed us the final stair way. “It will hit the market in the morning officially but when I saw the listing I thought it might be perfect for you.” She directed us back down to the backyard. “The pool is already safety fenced and the property has a nice high privacy fence. It is in the McKinley school cluster and the community is very culturally diverse.”

I smiled. We were three blocks from the Joneses…the neighborhood was well mixed, but it hadn’t always been that way. “What kind of numbers are we talking?” Hiram asked her as he stared at two alder trees with big thick trunks and interlocking branches that would be perfect for a tree house.

“The house is being listed at four-forty-nine-nine. That is a little low, but the sellers are motivated to sell. The mother is being transferred to California and if they can get the house sold they can move on one out there that is perfect for their family. It will let them close right after school closes so the kids can have the entire summer in their new neighborhood.” She answered readily. “It is the most expensive home you’ve seen, but it isn’t outside your price range. It needs nothing structurally any renovations would be simple redecoration. The basement is perfect for a twenty something that just comes home for visits and the master bedroom is rated as soundproof.”

Hiram and I walked over to the side to talk things through. “I want this to be our house, Twan.” He said simply. “Those two trees would be perfect for a tree house. There is room over there for a swing set. The triplets will play outside and not just go to classes for exercise. They will be close enough that the Jones twins, Beth Cochran and Sloane Evans can be their playmates.”

“I say we offer them five hundred even pending the home inspection…” Hiram pouted a little. I knew that saying we’d take it without the inspection would move things faster…but I wasn’t taking on anyone’s money pit. “Yes...with the home inspection. The extra money will convince them to take our offer over someone who offers list without one and it’s a cash offer—we’ll still get the house…but there is no point in throwing away the money.”

I had set aside seventy five percent of the money that KAMA had paid me for the last quarter; after taxes and remitting the appropriate portion of the fees to my firm; towards the purchase, renovation and redecoration of the new house. If they took our offer that would still leave us twenty-three percent of the funds I had set for the move left after the purchase price. As long as the inspection came back without any major problems and we didn’t go crazy with the furnishings…we should remain within our budget. I took my husband’s hand and walked forward to tell Elaine our decision.
“Great, I will get the paperwork started and submit it to the sellers.”

“Don’t forget to let them know that it is a cash offer. We each handle fifty percent of any closing costs.” I said with a grin. Granted since we weren’t taking out a loan, our closing costs should be negligible, but stating it like that would serve to make the seller less wary.

The next morning, Elaine called to let us know that the couple had taken our offer. “When they saw the notarized statement saying that you had cash on the barrel head. I think their eyes almost popped out of their heads.” Within two weeks, the inspection was complete. The house would need a new roof within the next four or five years, there was a problem with how the new HVAC had been installed, but it was still under warranty…so that wouldn’t fall on either us or the sellers …and they were taking their appliances with them, but other than that we were good to go. We and the Rodgers, the sellers sat down with Vivian, an attorney at my firm, and put everything into a purchase contract. She owned me one since I had done the same for her when she and her partner had purchased their dream home.

Once we had that in place, it was just a matter of letting the HVAC people fix their flub-up. We went ahead and had the roof completely repaired and upgraded the insulation and had the house repainted inside and out. All of that took about thirty days. We closed forty-five days after our offer was accepted. The Rodgers had moved as soon as the school year ended, so their real estate agent handed over the keys and we owned a new home in which to raise our youngest children. Even with the new roof and the new appliances, we were still able to hire packers and movers to make the move painless and by the end of June we were fully moved in, had made the necessary updates to our old house and put it on the market. Life was moving along quickly, our family was very happy and we would soon be complete. Rachel was still upset about the move, but she had gotten the lead in a production of ‘Funny Girl’ in a dinner theatre or something…she was being amazingly tight lipped about it for some reason… so she was as happy as I had heard her in a long while. It was as if the universe was blessing us for some reason. Hiram and I were more than grateful.

We had been exceedingly fortunate. We were closed and moved in by the time the VMAs aired. However, rather than watching them alone in our still relatively empty, new house, we accepted Danica’s invitation to her watch party. the party was awesome. Despite loving the fashion aspect of the red carpet, we elected to stay with the gentlemen who were watching one of the more musically inclined pre-shows. It was pretty nice, hanging out with other men our age who didn’t seem to care about our relationship and sexuality. Benton, Sander and George were different. They always treated us the same, but many of the others had, previously, seemed very uncomfortable around us. But that evening and night, it was a completely comfortable experience.

A good time was had by all. It was funny that one of the look based awards went to Mercedes. The beauty blogger and Becky G gave our hometown daughter, the award for best lips of the night. Hiram leaned over and whispered, “that award really couldn’t go to anyone else.” The KAMA performance was one of the very best of the night. I did like the Cat Valentine opening performance…it was everything gay men love…over the top, sparkly and futuristic…but it wasn’t meaningful and deep like the KAMA performance. They had outdone themselves. By the end of the evening everyone in that back yard was so happy that the kids were coming home with four moon men for their videos. When they reached the stage for their final time, I don’t think anyone was expecting Puck to launch a verbal diatribe against the corrupt police that were all too often allowed to run amuck.

I saw that the Jones, Altmans and Evans headed inside to start planning. I knew that technically there would be no help that I could give them that evening, but that didn’t stop me from mentally beginning to compose a cease and desist order for the National Fraternal Order of Police. There would be massive legal fallout as there always was when someone spoke out an uncomfortable truth.
on a global scene. It was my job to ensure that KAMA was not too negatively impacted for telling a hard truth. After all, I had promised myself that I would do whatever it took to earn the huge checks those kids kept sending me. This was just one way I could do so and keep them growing and getting more and more successful.

Hysteria (Muse)
Rachel PoV

It was as if the entire universe was conspiring against me and I was mad as hell. First, my fathers couldn’t have just had one child like we all agreed upon when I was home for winter break, no, they found out that of the implanted embryos, which even I knew that extras were always implanted, three of them had properly attached to the surrogate’s uterine lining. THREE. Then when offered the chance for selective termination of one or more of the fetuses, both of them and their do gooder surrogate all agreed to try and take them all to term. Of course, they were not going to bother to find out the genders of the babies beforehand, but statistically speaking at least one of them would be another girl. I was to have been their only daughter…me. A few weeks before NYU let out for the summer, we were discussing whether I should come home from the summer or stay in New York and take classes to bring my two six five GPA up to something approaching acceptable…though the most recent point zero five point dip was not my fault. Santana Lopez had caused me to get kicked out of the class we shared that semester and it was after the time period when I could withdraw with any grade other than an F. Still we’d been in the process of them asking me to come home when my fathers told me the most horrific news. With Daddy making more money thanks to his position as one of the attorneys of that bitch and her two bastard lovers, and the fact that all three of the fetuses had survived the first trimester, they were selling the house in which they had raised me to the magnificent being that I was and buying something bigger. The house they had found was only blocks from their new best friends the Jones. In fact, the only good thing I heard in the entire conversation was that the basement was setup as a complete domicile and it would be mine whenever I visited so that I wouldn’t be subject to the horrible mess and smell that babies create.

But the simple fact was that I was losing something precious to me, my home, and once again it was all the fault of Mercedes Jones and her ilk. I could barely bare to think about the night I had been summarily ejected from KAMA’s record release party before I had been able to make contact with a single record executive, let alone Lucius Lyon who would have been readily captivated by my voice…no matter what his hooligan of a son may have claimed. Then on the way home, some knife welding miscreants had had the temerity to rob me at knife point…they had only gotten my smart phone but it was just an android…my fathers had refused to get me another iPhone when mine had been damaged beyond repair upon impacting a wall outside Warner Music Group’s offices when I was refused an appointment with their head of artist development…they also got my costume jewelry and two easily canceled credit cards, but the worst part was that they had cut a hole in the beautiful, no matter what Quinn Fabray or her ilk said, Oscar de la Renta dress I had ‘borrowed’ from Vogue using Miller’s keycard, technically without his knowledge or permission. While I was at the police station making a report, so that I would be able to get a new phone, hopefully an iPhone since my fathers would have to admit that I’d had no choice but to give it up, and so that the perpetrator would be caught and severely punished, some druggie in hand cuffs had vomited all over me.

There was no way that I could return the dress to the Vogue offices before its absence had been noticed. Because it was Miller’s keycard that had been used to get the dress out of the building, he was immediately fired. Neither he nor Faye have spoken to me since and they said that they never would again…worse yet Faye remained very firm in her resolve to never feed me again. Which I truly didn’t understand nor agree with. I mean, Miller should be happy for his good fortune in that once I had incurred the extremely high dry cleaning and repair bill to fix the dress and spoken with
Isabel Wright, she had agreed not to blackball him in the entire fashion industry. When I went to share the wonderful news with them, Miller said that I was just lucky that none of the people in question had pressed charges. I had used my emergency key for their apartment to get Miller’s card. Technically that could be considered breaking and entering…at least that was what they said. It wasn’t true unless New York legal code was different from Ohio’s. however, my appropriation and illicit use of his ID card and the taking of the dress without anyone’s permission was theft, so I suppose they did have something of a point. But since I was unable to convince them to be my friends again, I was back to exhausting most of my allowance from my fathers just to feed myself. I grumbled to myself with a put upon sigh.

Since my fathers wouldn’t listen to my objections to their selling my childhood home, I refused to travel to Lima to spend my summer helping with the sale and move. Instead I got a job at a small café called Kettle and Thread and took online classes to boost my GPA…one thing my pater-s familias were right about was the fact that I was very close to losing the small bit of scholarship money I had managed to receive in the first place. I found that I had massive amounts of time to study as I was alone…a lot. I had seen Memphis once, immediately after Mr. Schuester had taken over the lead role. He was horrible. While his singing was up to the standard I expected of him, every time a scene called for amorous interactions with his costar, a thin and beautiful woman of color, he immediately became stiff and wooden. It was horrible to watch. Seeing it once allowed me to realize that William Schuester would never be the proper mentor to launch my Broadway career. He was completely worthless to me at that point.

With Fay, Miller and Mr. Schuester no longer in my life and school over for the year without my having cultivated any close relationships there I found myself without much in the way of companionship. Instead, I turned my attention to building my talents to even greater heights. In an effort to find work more in line with the consummate talent that I had been gifted with, I took out an extra loan ‘for school’ and had a series of head shots done and began auditioning for several shows that were being cast on Broadway. I even found that a gentleman named Sydney Greene was casting for a revival of “Funny Girl”. I went in and immediately made it through everything they threw at me. As soon as I had the part, I quit my job at the café and after careful consideration, I gave up my spot at Tisch. It was also with great pleasure that I sent Noah Puckerman a nice long email that told him exactly what he could do with his ‘invitation’ to join them in Columbus Ohio, at the expense of KAMA, to record a charity single with all the original New Directions. He probably had to go behind Sam and Mercedes backs to beg me to join them since my melodious voice would be the only thing that could possibly save the mess of their little charity sing-a-long.

As we sailed into July, My life was going according to my grand design. However only three weeks into rehearsals, less than two weeks from opening night, Jared Leto, who had been brought in to play opposite me as Nicky Arnstein suddenly called a halt to everything one day in rehearsal. “I can’t do this.” He shouted out to the director, standing from the table of the ‘swanky Baltimore restaurant’ in the scene. “I don’t know where you found her…but this chick is the worst. She is over acting and melodramatic.”

“I am not. I am perfectly suited to this role and this venue. Perhaps the problem lies in your less than theatre rich background. In the theatre, one must communicate the motions and emotions to the person who is in furthest seats at the back of the tallest balcony. I am not overacting…I am emoting.” I defended.

The teen star turned rocker glared over at me before turning back to the director and enunciating as clearly as he could, “Look…either she goes, or I do.” The usually mellow man was shouting by the end.

I rolled my eyes. “We are contractually bound to this play.” I said snarkily. Apparently while I was
contractually bound to the play…it was not contractually bound to me. Since Mr. Leto was the draw and my understudy; an annoyingly familiar, similarly shaped, though far less talented girl named Willa; stole my part. The worse, absolutely worse part was that the reviews of her opening night performance were absolutely stellar. She was being lauded as the second coming of Barbra. Her trades bio reminded me where I had seen her face before. Willa Hecht had been one of the troglodytes that had bonded with Mercedes and the other Limans at the Julliard auditions our senior year of high school. Mercedes had probably coached the little gonif in exactly how to steal my part. I was desperate to figure out my next move.

Thankfully I had completed my online courses with grades high enough to pull my GPA up to a two point eight…and apparently sending an email to the general registrar email was not enough to actually remove myself from the rosters of Tisch. I was so relieved when I received my class schedule and wouldn’t need to return to Lima with my tail tucked between my legs even though Mercedes, Sam and Noah had achieved platinum artist status that I almost passed out. I found another menial job to help augment the stipend my fathers sent me, which I noticed hadn’t increased since I arrived in New York despite all the extra money they seemed to have. I had looked into the costs associated with IVF and surrogacy. It was not a cheap process. Then they had bought their huge new house on top of that. It was clear that they were certainly in a higher tax bracket, and yet they were not sharing any of the wealth. Yet another reason I didn’t feel compelled to visit Lima before school went back into session.

As July blended into August, everyone was talking about KAMA everywhere I went. I couldn’t take the subway without hearing their dumb voices, seeing their stupid faces. They had three videos out and seemed to be getting constant air play on radio and on the video channels that still actually played music videos. When I heard that they were up for several VMA awards I locked myself in my apartment for my entire time off from work, only emerging to head to the big chain coffee shop in which I had been forced to seek employment for my next shift. As the night of the event approached, Mercedes, Sam and Puck were doing interviews from their tour stops. Their entourage was even getting press coverage and accolades. Santana and a tall, curvaceous brunette sang the national anthem at a nationally televised sporting event. Their band members, including Artie, were being interviewed for some musician’s blog about how things were backstage. Apparently, not a single band member had a single negative thing to say about them. Their twitter feed had over a million followers. The news was constantly buzzing about them. But were they crowing about it? Were they all over the news displaying bright shiny happiness at the fame they had achieved?

NO! When they were interviewed they talked about things like the Trevor Project or Toys for Tots or helping the homeless. They were incessantly good. It was as if to them being famous was all about making the best music they could, with their limited talents of course, and helping others with their fame and money. I didn’t understand it. Fame and money were necessary to prove how much better I was than everyone else. I wanted to achieve fame and wealth so that everyone everywhere would like me and give me more adulations and affluence. It was my due. I was the most gifted vocalist since Barbra Streisand…who they kept me from meeting in April. The more I saw them basking in the glow of the limelight which should have belonged to me…the more I grew to hate them. I wanted to hurt them the way that they had hurt me. I wanted to take from them all that they had taken from me. I would succeed. It was inevitable. I was more talented. I was more beautiful. I was smarted. Oh, vengeance would be mind and heaven help anyone who stood in my way.
that I could be called an anchor baby. Both of the parents listed on my birth certificate were undocumented. My mother named me after Michael Jackson and Elvis Pressley, the two icons that most exemplified America to her. In middle school I learned that I could be called a faggot. While all the guys I knew wanted to get with Renee Muñoz, the IT girl at David Wark Griffith Junior High School, I dreamed of getting with her twin brother Ramon. In high school I learned that I could be called a Nancy Boy, since I lived for dance classes and moved through the halls practicing my plies and my chasses.

I was the second of five children of a maid and a landscaper. Just days after I graduated high school, my father told me the horrific news that while he had raised me as if I were his child, the reason my skin was lighter, I was so much taller and my features so different from my siblings was that I wasn’t his biological child. My mother had never been unfaithful in her heart, but being a maid in rich people’s houses when she was extremely vulnerable because she wasn’t in the country legally…she had been easy prey. “Your mother had come with her uncle so that she could have your brother here, in America. She had been here for almost a year without me when I was finally able to join her. She was already pregnant with you.” I started to say something but he shook his head. “No, I didn’t say that right. She had written to me her and her Uncle Javier, about what had happened to her. She couldn’t go to the police because she had no papers. He took her to a place where they asked no questions before giving her care. They were Catholics so they never gave her the option of the morning after thingy, not that your mother would have taken it. You were her child no matter how you were conceived. You were mine the minute I read of you in your mother’s letters.”

“So why tell me at all?”

Papa shrugged. “You deserved to know. Would it be better to find out by accident in the future? No, it is best that I tell you man to man. Have I ever treated you any differently than I have treated your brothers and sisters?”

“No, never. You didn’t even get upset when I wanted to dance or when I told you I was gay.” I answered honestly.

“Why should I care? You are Latin, dancing and rhythm is in your blood. You just have more of both than most. As for the ‘maricon’, I shot him a look at the derogatory term, but his smile told me that he’d used it to make a point. “You are my son. You have brothers to pass on our name. You love who you love. My own sainted mother preferred the company of other women. She did her duty to her family and married and had children, but mi Padre knew and they became friends and they had a good marriage anyway. I just know enough to let you be you and not press you to be anything else.”

I smiled. “Well, thank God for Abuela.”

That was the last summer that I lived at home. A few weeks after that conversation I started my certificate from the International Dance Academy in Hollywood. Once I had that paper in hand, I taught dance classes to people trying to prepare for their weddings and kids whose parents were determined that they be well rounded and gain grace and older couples trying to rekindle something that either wasn’t dead in the first place or had no chance to come back to life. Then I learned of the ‘So You Think You Can Dance’ open auditions and I knew that I had to try out. I made the first round and all the way through Vegas Week. Unfortunately, I didn’t make the final eleven. But I did get a job on the strip. That lasted for six months and somehow from there I found my way to Miami. It was amazing how many jobs I was able to move between down there. My biological father’s extra height and more European facial features meant that I could easily pass as Cuban or Puerto Rican, which was a very good thing. Mexicans aren’t only looked down on by whites, but often by other people of Latin descent. I was there for three years when I decided to move to New York.
The move was a good one. It put me back in close proximity to my elder brother Javi for the first time in years. I was even in time to see him cross the stage to receive his Masters in social work. He let me crash on his couch until I found a place. Heck, he put me in contact with the lady who had helped him find his Bronx apartment. She helped me find one near his and near the dance studio where I taught some classes to make some ready cash until I found a real job. I put in my resume and vids to join a touring backup dance group and was really happy to get a call in. then I got a call back. At the callback, I was ecstatic to realize that group was KAMA. I had seen ‘SongBird’ on a date and that movie was…it had spoken to me. We had a great conversation and I found myself speaking with them about things that I’d never told anyone, including how bad the bullying in high school had really been. When I was offered the position, it was wonderful to see how completely inclusive they had been in their hiring. I think that the only broad racial group I didn’t see represented was Native Americans. There seemed to be every possible sexuality…though they didn’t seem to have anyone there who was trans so they didn’t have the full gender spectrum. But it was still pretty awesome. Pretty awesome became really fucking epic when I saw the salary and benefits package. I was getting paid to do what I loved and I would be able to teach others to love it in my off time. It was pretty epic.

It was a very fast spring. We got ready for the drop party and the promo tour at the same time. It was very different from any of my previous experiences and I loved every second of it. I taught a lot of classes between the end of the promotional tour and when we started getting ready for the festival tour. The summer tour was really fun. I saw the American south and I was able to do so without fear. It was intriguing and I learned quite a bit about the country. When I was in Seattle, I had dinner with my younger sister who was starting college at Seattle Pacific University in the fall. She was there for some summer camp in July when we were there for the Warped Tour. When Mercedes, Sam and Puck found out they insisted on treating us and sent Melia a signed copy of their CD. Melia was the hottest chick on campus when she told everyone. Amelia was the youngest and smartest of the five of us. She had always been very, very, very shy and didn’t make friends easily. The CD worked as the best ice breaker she could ever have received.

It was all so very kind of them. I couldn’t even put into words the joy that filled my heart when she called me to tell me about how several of the girls had come to her room to hang out and listen to the CD. She was really excited. She realized that she couldn’t allow them to use her, but she really did feel a sense of comradeship among the other girls at the STEM camp and they had all exchanged cell numbers and email addresses so they could keep in touch and have a ready-made social group when fall term started. Shortly after I got off with Melia, Mama called. “Jack, your sister has been in raptures since she got back. She says that she has friends…for the first time friends who like the same thing as her and who she believes won’t just want to befriend her for homework help.” She asked without asking.

So I told her about the kindness that my bosses had shown me and Melia and how it had led to my baby sister making new friends. I told her about the rumors going through the band of the million other small kindnesses they showed to us. “And when Puck found out that our bassist Erika was living in a very bad neighborhood, he paid for her to move somewhere better. He even had his aunt help her to find somewhere that she would be safe living.”

“Mijo, the children, no your bosses, they sound as if they have been well raised. I worry for you so much in your industry. So often they take advantage of young people. They use them up and when they can no longer dance, they toss them aside. But your people…they have made the contract for you. They give you the benefits. They treat you with respect…with dignity. I want you to promise me that you will be as good to them as they are being to you.”

“I will Mama.” I promised. And I meant it. I wanted to make sure that Mercedes, Sam and Puck experienced the ultimate heights of success that they possibly could attain. All too often, looking at
the industry we were all in it seemed as if the people who achieved the most success were the worst of the worst. Well, I had worked with a lot of different music artists. I been treated well by few. Those three had my loyalty and for what they had unknowingly done for my little sister…they were quickly gaining my love.

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Chapter End Notes

This story is entering the home stretch. This chapter and one other are all left for this portion of the Learning French Series. However, if you all can help this story reach 100 Reviews by the end, I will post a bonus chapter that looks into what happened the night of the VMAs after the awards show for Sam, Mercedes and Puck. How does our intrepid triad celebrate their wins? What do they get up to when they make it back to the room? These and other questions can be answered for the low low cost of 18 reviews. (Just nine reviews each chapter will see you all receive the Bowchigawowwow) Oh and a preview of the KAMA Office Suite Decor is available on my Tumblr...annikay-samcedesshipper. The pics are also up on Flickr. I can't get the yahoo group to work for them yet, but I'm working on it.

Thanks for all the support.

TTFN,

Anni
Chapter Summary

Ethan Harris, Daniel Harris & Haja Johnston's PoVs

Chapter Notes

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Our Little Secret by DreaC

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 I hope your Laptop is better soon!!!!

You are Welcome to view all of Haja & Kurt’s hard work on KAMA’s Office Suite
https://www.flickr.com/gp/60504961@N04/140R5x
or on Tumblr...look for annikay-samedesshipper

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Man in Mirror (Michael Jackson)
Ethan Harris PoV

Growing up with the knowledge that you killed your mother is a heavy load for anyone to bear. For me, that knowledge came with the imperative of proving that I had been worth the sacrifice of my mother giving her life for mine. I was very young when that knowledge was forced upon me. I was four and the only reason I learned of the true circumstances of my birth and my mother’s death was because my sister and surrogate mommy Danica had a school science fair to attend. Oh how I wished I could have gone. I loved seeing Danica be praised. She was my whole world. I loved it when others showed her how amazing she was to them too. But I’d gotten an ear infection and had to stay home. Somehow, I ended up with my eldest sister Arielle as a babysitter. Probably because she never liked seeing Danica have the spotlight. I will never forget how casually she said it. “You killed my mother, you know?” she said as she stood in my doorway watching me playing with my Legos. “Mommy should have been done with having children after Christopher…definitely after Danica. Then you came along. The doctor told her that having you wouldn’t be a good idea. It would either be bad for her, or you would probably come out with something wrong with you…but she already loved you. She read article after article about having a healthy child at her age. She followed every single old wives tale. I tried to convince her to get rid of you. She told me that she hadn’t raised me to be so heartless and selfish. But she was the one being selfish. Here you sit fine and well…but she’s gone. She died still angry with me. She would swear that you were worth it. I
just don’t see it.” She turned and walked away without ever coming near me…she might as well have hauled off and hit me. It couldn’t have impacted me any harder if she had. No matter how much time had passed since that day, I still remembered it as clearly as I remembered my name. But I still wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or just at me. But I knew that I heard and felt every word.

I never bothered Daddy or Dani with her words. Later a therapist would tell me I hadn’t said anything because I didn’t want to know if everyone felt that way. The truth of the matter was that I never bothered Daddy or Dani with Arielle’s words because I knew that they didn’t. I knew that they didn’t because my father, big brothers and Dani all called me the last and best gift Mommy had ever given them. I never wanted them to know because I knew that Arielle’s words would hurt them as much as they did me. Yet at the same time I made sure that I shoved her face in the fact that I was definitely worth it. Our mother had died to make sure I had a chance, a good start. From kindergarten through twelfth grade I made A honor roll every single report card. I played basketball and ran track, won State in both. I graduate high school second in my class. Only Danica beat me, she was valedictorian, with Benton a step or two behind her. Daddy lived to tell me how proud he was of me for getting into Northwestern…it was my dream school. I’d gotten into Howard like Danica, but I didn’t want to live in DC for four years. But he passed away before fall term started. Since Dad was gone, I spent my breaks with Danica and Benton…and Kevon and Devon and Mercedes. I tried really hard to show them as much unconditional love as Bani and Dent had shown me.

I wasn’t satisfied with just the high school accolades. I made sure that Arielle had to watch me as I graduated Summa Cum Laude with two degrees in four years from one of the top twenty schools in the nation. Then I made sure she was there again when I graduated at the top of my class at the third best law schools in the country. When other people were looking she always made sure to look like a proud big sister…but when there were no eyes on her, she looked like she swallowed a whole grove of lemons. She was really bitchy when Danica told her that I passed the Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination and four state bar exams all on the first try…though I was really being cocky with New York and California, I never thought I would practice in either state. They were just considered two of the more difficult bar exams to pass and I knew it would piss Arielle off to no end. What pissed her off even more was when I was headhunted by a national tier one commercial litigation firm, Baker and McKenzie.

I had to admit that doing things just to piss Arielle Harris-Tucker had actually worked out pretty well. I had a great college experience at Northwestern. I was in law school at the University of Chicago when I met Amanda Rochelle Walters. She and I met at a Graduate Student mixer. Amanda was there working on her MBA. She had attended Spelman for her undergraduate degree and within moments of speaking with her, I realized that she was one of the smartest women I’d ever met. She had been and was to me always was the most beautiful woman in the room. Her naturally curly, really thick, dark brown-almost black, hair flowed down her back all the way to her trim waist, kept out of her face by the tiny twists going back from her forehead to the crown of her head…each one kept tightly bound with a tiny little rose band at the end. She was wearing a long slim deep brown skirt with a sexy gold and cream, blousy, shoulder baring crop top. Her stomach made me immediately want to lick her navel. I had never wanted any woman with such fierce and fiery desire in all my life. And I had been no saint either in high school or in undergrad. I’d been a tall, good looking, well spoken, black man in a sea of young women all free from parental constraints. Even more, I was a firm believer in being discreet and safe.

It didn’t matter what kink a girl wanted to explore or what walk on the wild side she wanted to take, I didn’t mind giving it a try and most importantly I never kissed and told. No matter what the girl said about her use of birth control or how she was at the safest point in her cycle, I always used condoms that I provided myself. A fact more than one girl mentioned. Most of them praised me for realizing that birth control was the responsibility of both people in the bed. A couple of them felt a little insulted at my ‘lack of trust’…but I was very certain that I wasn’t going to be a daddy before I had
accomplished what I wanted to accomplish, and certainly not with any miscellaneous chick either. My father had shared a very real truth from a young age. Then again, not long before he passed away, he had refreshed my mind on the need for protecting myself. “Your mother and I had five children. In those five, I think we covered every single type of expectation ever. We had two planned babies. Your sister Arielle was a ‘we’ve been married for three years…I think it’s time to have a baby’ baby. Your brother Bryant was a ‘one more baby will be nice, and hopefully it will be a boy…one of each will be good’ baby. Then there were the two unplanned pregnancies. Your brother Christophe was a ‘condom only’ baby. Dani-gal was born with a birth control pill in her hand. Finally there was our gift baby…aka the ‘where the hell did that egg come from’ baby.” When I started to laugh at his turn of phrase she just shrugged unconcernedly. “Boy, you know that you were a ‘change’ baby. The reason for the big gaps between Christophe and Dani-gal and you is just because during those times we made sure to use both. Now I know you don’t like to hear about all of this, but I say that because you need to make sure that you always use a condom. You provide your own. Don’t trust anyone other than yourself.”

I smiled. “Dent told me the same thing. He swears that the only one of their babies that were planned was my baby, Benzie.” I assured my dad. He understood that I wasn’t trying to down play his role in my life; I would never have done that. But he knew that just like Danica had filled as many empty spaces as she could in my ‘mommy shaped hole’, Benton had stepped in and done any ‘dad-type’ things Dad couldn’t when I was little. Dad taught me to ride a tricycle when I was three and he was fifty-six, but when I was seven, it was Benton who ran behind me while I learned to ride without training wheels. The best thing about Dad was that he accepted Benton and how much my brother in law cared about me rather than getting jealous or angry. Dad was just awesome like that. My only regret in my life was that he hadn’t lived long enough to meet the woman who held my heart. But he’d died at the ripe old age of seventy-one and was back with Momma, so I knew it was selfish of me to complain.

Amanda and I dated casually for the first year we were together. It was my second year of law school and her first in the MBA program at the Booth School of Business. We both knew that we saw our future in each other, but neither of us was quite ready to admit that to the other. We were both very focused, very driven people. We each wanted to achieve all that we’d could in our chosen professions. But we got really quite serious over the first summer we were a couple. I’d returned to Danica and Benton’s home in Lima as usual…just in time to help them move into their dream home. So when I would talk and email Amanda about my activities, I always ended up talking a lot about my family, especially Devon, Kevon and Mercedes. Amanda has told everyone that asks about how we met or fell in love that she fell in love with a man who commuted over an hour every day for my internship with a prestigious Columbus law firm because I knew that my niece and nephews missed having me there. She swore up and down that the thing that had cinched it for her was one summer evening when I’d rushed home after working late…only not getting stopped by cops by the grace of God…because I had promised Mercedes that I would read her her favorite bedtime story that night. The story was true. The book was that lightening thief book that got made into a movie a few years later. She got deep into Greek mythology thanks to that series. It was great to see her walking around with books that weighed more than she did. Benzie had always been my favorite of the three nieces I had, but Amanda finally letting me call her mine because of how Benzie and I just naturally were, would have made it true even if it hadn’t been before. Amanda and I got married in two thousand and six after she finished her doctorate of business administration. She got a job teaching at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, so I changed my job to suit her. It took me no time at all to find a firm willing to pay me to take the Indiana bar and work for them, so that was what I did. I stayed at that firm for the next eight years until they promoted a lawyer who’d failed the bar three times and the MPREs twice, lost two fairly big cases and had three sexual harassment complaints in his file instead of me. I went home and told Amanda about it and the fallout was immediate.
“We’ll fuck them. Benz and her boys could easily make you rich all by themselves, but you know that they wouldn’t be your only clients for long. You are worth fifteen of Harold Gathers Richland the fourth…shit his momma should have done the whole world a favor and swallowed that night. I had an offer from Columbia two years ago and Stern at NYU a year or so before that. Let’s leave things up to fate. I’ll send them my CV and if one of them bites, we move.”

“But what about Adam, he has his friends here, his preschool is pretty amazing.” I hedged.

She just rolled her eyes. “Now it a perfect time to move. Next fall he starts pre-k, it’s better to move over the summer so that he can go to the same elementary school the whole way through than waiting until they do this shit one mo gain. And Avery is so little she will never even remember that we lived anywhere else.” My wife had four degrees, but when she got mad, she went right back to her College Park, Georgia roots. But she had a point. This wasn’t the first white boy that had been promoted above me when I had much better qualifications than them. I’d been considering devoting myself to KAMA’s legal needs more anyway. On top of that, Amanda’s point was quickly proven. Columbia asked her to come in for interview so quickly we had barely blinked after she hit send on the email. Things cascaded from there. By the time we got back from the family reunion from hell, it we were staging our house for sale. We rejoiced when we got significantly more than it had been worth when we purchased it. Thank God the housing market had rebounded somewhat. Then we spent weeks packing and getting ready to move.

Ethan Adam Harris, Junior was very much excited about the move, though a little sad that he couldn’t bring his entire preschool class with him. We managed to get him enrolled in ‘The Studio School’ for the fall thanks to a recommendation from Amanda’s new department chair, so he would be going to one of the best schools in Manhattan. It was private so we’d be paying an arm and a leg for his education, but that just motivated me to win every case I could so that I would be able to afford it. Especially since the school was K through twelve, so he could, conceivably spend his entire school career there. We also put Avery on the waiting list for her year. I thought that was a little bit crazy, but we were assured that doing so was really the only way to ensure her place. And we wanted her to have that place. I was determined that my children would have every possible educational advantage. Amanda and I had been saving for their college costs since six months after we got married. We budgeted for it early, even before we began trying for Adam, and well…

Avery Mircea Harris was the light of my heart. She had me every bit as wrapped around her little finger as her older cousin had at her age. She was born in the last day of January, after a hellacious pregnancy that saw her beautiful mother swearing off having any more. I was good with that a boy and a girl were all I wanted. When we got to the apartment we were renting from Mercedes and her guys, it was to find that one of the four regular bedrooms had been decorated as a perfect little girl’s nursery in soft lavender-grey and stronger royal purple and needed only the furniture in the moving van. “Ethan, you have gotta come see EJ’s room.” Amanda yelled from down the hall. She and I had argued vehemently about our son’s nickname, eventually we just each called him what we wanted to and others picked up on which ever they preferred. I headed to where she stood in the doorway across the hall. The room really showed how much attention Benzie paid to her weekly conversations with Adam. Rather than going with little boy blue, like most people probably would, Adam’s room had been done in a bold Irish green with a deep royal blue accent bar near the bottom of the crown molding…his most recent “favoritestes” of all the colors.

Amanda fell in love with the way the townhouse was laid out. The fact that the four bedrooms on the second floor had two bathrooms and that the laundry room was there as well would make laundry day tons easier, especially since putting Adam in private school meant that we wouldn’t be able to have a laundress or a cleaning lady for at least a long while. Moving in was a fairly easy process. Our moving company had been recommended by Mills and they were pretty awesome. They had us fully moved in with in the course of one afternoon. The big furniture pieces were reassembled and
they had even been kind enough to hook up our washer and dryer and the living room and family room TVs. We were in awe of their efficiency and professionalism. I knew that I was going to write them a glowing review.

We had dropped Adam and Avery off with Danica and Benton while we got the house setup, so after the movers left, Amanda and I sat on the sofa in the family room and just basked in the silence. Just as Amanda and I were getting ready to tackle unpacking, the doorbell rang. Benzie and her crew were Iowa or Chicago so we weren’t expecting any company, but when I went to see who it was, I was shocked to see Puck’s Bubbie, Uncle Saul, Mills and his cousin, Neil, and the cardiologist’s girlfriend. When I opened the door Ruth Mayzer came in wearing something similar to what Amanda was wearing, comfortable clothing for working. She directed her son towards the open door of our unit. “Saulie, go plug that up in the kitchen and leave it on warm. By the time we get everything unpacked, we’ll be starving and not feeling at all like going out to eat.” She gave me a hug and a smile. “Many hands make short work. I know that if Cede and the boys were here, they would have all their little friends here to help, but you guys will just have to make do with us.”

“What my mother in law meant to was, since the kids aren’t’ here, we thought that we would come and offer our help with getting your home ready so you can get your babies back before Danica decides that she is keeping them.” Mills teased. That was actually a valid concern. Bani loved my babies. She swore that EJ was the spitting image of me when I was his age. “At least its only one house we’re unpacking this time. We should have enough people to get this done pretty quickly.” She added with a smile.

And we were. They came in like a hurricane. At first it was a little weird. I mean, I’d met each of them I technically knew who they were and several anecdotal aspects of their lives, but I didn’t expect them to have come and lent us a hand like they did. No one would have thought anything of it if Ruth had just brought over a ‘welcome to the neighborhood’ casserole and left it at that. Even that was really more than I would have expected. An hour or so after their arrival, I was shocked again when Bryant and his new girlfriend Nadia rang the bell next. They seamlessly fit themselves into the work and before we knew it, everything was done. We could never have been able to accomplish everything in one evening. Heck the last time we moved, Amanda and I hadn’t unpacked some of the boxes of our books for six or seven months after we’d moved into the house.

Their help allowed me to be very well rested on the following Monday, so I went with Amanda and helped her get her office set up at Columbia. She would be teaching only two undergrad classes but she would also be teaching more than a few masters and DBA level classes as well as helping to research the longer lasting effects of the ‘Great Recession’ on the global economy. She was looking forward to her new job with an enthusiasm most people lost by the time they were in their thirties. But then again at IUPUI, she had been teaching freshman and sophomore level business courses for eight years…the new challenges would have excited anyone who loved their subject matter and wanted to move past teaching those just looking to fulfill a credit requirement. Amanda had a bit less than week of working with her new colleagues, they were working on a project researching business trends and how the ‘Great Recession’ had impacted long term global markets. She was really happy with the head way they made that week before we flew to Lima to pick up our children. Saul, Mills and Bubbie Ruth made it there before we got there. Saul and Adam were having a ball playing with Saul’s iPad when we arrived at Dent and Bani’s packed house.

As anticipated, we did have some trouble getting our kids back, but it wasn’t from the expected source. Adam barely wanted to leave Beth and Maea and Mara didn’t want to let us take Avery away. It was really adorable. Fortunately, the thought of school clothes shopping and picking out the best school supplies got my son away from the little cutie with the long brown pigtails. Though we would have loved to spend the weekend, especially since it was Sarah’s birthday weekend, Adam started school that Tuesday and Amanda had to work on Monday, so we only had that Saturday to
get two weeks’ worth of shopping done. My beautiful wife had thought ahead and she had a gift for the newly minted teenager…a hundred dollar gift card for Macy’s and a second fifty dollar card for Target.

As we’d expected, Adam loved his room. He also loved picking out his own backpack and clothes and school supplies. He also decided that his blue cover didn’t match the awesomeness of his new room, so he talked his Mom into helping him pick a new one. If I were a different person, Adam’s love of shopping would bother me. I couldn’t stand the sport myself, but no matter how much I liked to tease Bani and Benzie, I knew that all three of them had gotten that gene straight from Dad. He had loved to shop just as much as his grandson. Despite the fact that Dad had been gone for almost twenty years, and would have been ninety-one if he were still around, sometimes I couldn’t stop myself from imagining him taking Adam shopping. The two of them looking for the best bargains on the best looking or feeling items; it would have been a beautiful sight to behold. Still, I didn’t do so bad that morning. He and his mother were having a hard time finding something he liked that would work in his new room. They settled on a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle comforter set. TMNT was the only kiddie set that he was even willing to consider. He was kind of happy with it, but I could see that it wasn’t quite what he’d been hoping for. I knew he was hoping for something that showed he was a big boy. In his mind still having cartoon characters on his bed just didn’t say what he wanted said.

He kept a good face on, but both Amanda and I could see something there. “Hey Champ, wanna see if we can find something better and you keep the Turtles for your backup set?” I asked him before we left the home goods section. Then I found the perfect thing. It was a set from the Brady the Bear line. The comforter was reversible with youthful but not kiddie trees and woods on one side and deep green, navy blue and ivory plaid. With the memory of my little boy hugging my legs like I had just given him the moon rather than just finding him a good compromise between who he was and who he wanted to be, the rest of that shopping trip didn’t bother me at all.

Monday dawned bright and early. We were still in the process of finding a daycare center for Avery, so she ran my errands with me. One of which was visiting several different printers to view proposals to meet the needs of a legal office. I would need things like business cards and such, as would certain members of KAMA’s management team. During one of our Skype meetings, I’d told Haja I would handle finding the printer. It gave me something to do during that week of down time since the office wouldn’t officially open until the Monday following Labor Day, and the rest of KAMA’s team was in LA preparing for the VMAs. Amanda had planned to have a VMAs watch party for our housewarming party, but somehow Mills and Bubbie Ruth convinced us to let Saul and Mills do the watch party and we’d have our housewarming after Benzie and her guys got back. Since part of their argument was that Benzie had been looking forward to being there to see how we liked her gift, I caved. It wasn’t like it was a hardship; it gave us time to make a few more contacts in our new city and gave Amanda a chance to really plan the party rather than feeling like she had just thrown it together.

Avery and I took the subway down to Chelsea. Haja and I had decided that if we kept the printer close to the office, rather than wasting money on delivery, we could always run and pick the items up ourselves…or eventually send an admin or intern for the stuff. It was interesting that no one really seemed to blink at a guy with his daughter in a baby Bjorn, toting a manly looking baby bag, a man had his pride after all, and a small messenger bag on the subway. That was fairly awesome. Whenever I had taken care of Adam when he was still that small in Indianapolis, everyone had acted like I was exceptional for actually parenting my own child. People were weird as hell. I was definitely liking the non-looks over the strange looks.

Our first stop was on West Thirty-Sixth Street, about four blocks from the office. It had a five-star review rating on Google with seventeen reviewers. Their yelp rating was just as good and
supposedly they were great with tight deadlines. After meeting with their onsite designer and their Marketing Consultant, I was pretty much sold. But the decision wasn’t mine alone so I made note of their answers to the questions Haja wanted answered and left with their proposal in hand. I repeated that process four more times. Sometimes Avery asked her own questions and I did make notes on which one of the prospective vendors were kind to her and which ones were unbending and gave my happily babbling baby looks that made me want to punch them dead in their faces. When we finished the five meetings, we made our way to Columbia’s campus and had lunch with Amanda, before heading to The Studio School to pick Adam up. As he told both Avery and I all about his first day and all his new friends, the three of us made our way home together.

The rest of the week followed the pattern, Saul and Mills popped up on Wednesday, because Puck had called and asked both Saul and I if we could get together to strengthen Avery and Adam’s college funds and to diversify my and Amanda’s separate and joint stock portfolios. We quickly realized that the college funds had gained about half again the total that should have been there. Saul and Mills had a blast with Adam…though both of them preferred EJ to Adam. He had plenty of fun showing Saul all his favorite kid toys and sites and shows. I swore at one point Saul started taking notes. But then again there was a boat load of money in popular kids crap so maybe he was simply being proactive. Amanda and Mills got along great too. There were some things only another black female professional could understand. Unfortunately, Amanda hadn’t really had very many friends in Indianapolis that she could share those similar life experiences with. Her Spelman friends all lived all over the country and they really only got together once a year at best. Mills got her in a way my beautiful wife hadn’t experienced in a long time. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

Sunday evening, we headed over to Saul and Mills beautifully appointed new home. They had invited several of their friends as well as some of Bubbie Ruth’s friends, which included three of the kids’ Warner people, Saul’s friend/client Rick Castle, his wife and daughter, and a few other people. Saul made sure to introduce me to Rick Castle. The world famous author would be a huge feather in my cap if I could pull him to my new client list. Very rarely in a viewing party do people actually view the event, well except SuperBowl parties, but that night saw a rear exception. One of Saul’s friends, Ryan Hastings, was a celebrity stylist who stuck to the east coast. He had hilarious points to make for each of the red carpet walkers. So much so that I couldn’t wait to see what he had to say about Benzie and her boys. “My God…her breasts are magnificent.” He blurted, only to get growled at by both me and Saul in addition to every woman present, except Nadia who was probably thinking something very similar. “No not that way…I’m not even remotely straight. No, you see, Zac designed the gown with Christina Hendricks in mind, he is obsessed with her curves. Mercedes was blessed with an abundance that puts poor Christina to shame. Yet the way the dress has been tailored to fit her form, they swell…they fill, but they never over flow. They are, in a word, magnificent.” He was totally rapturous. “And the pairing of the Louboutin cage booties with the very formal gown…inspired. I love the play with just three colors. You barely notice that everything other than the dress is either silver or black or a combination of the two. Who styled her?”

Saul and I both shrugged. But Mills and Amanda both knew the answer. “Primarily she styled herself. She had some help from her friend Kurt and Ruth tailored the dress to fit her shape and lack of height.” Mills told him.

Amanda smirked with no small amount of pride. She knew that Benzie had amazing taste. She had met Kurt enough times to realize that the kid had talent as well. “You should meet Kurt, he’ll start his second year at both FIT and NYADA next week.”

“Yes and he and Haja Johnston are doing all the interior design for the offices for the group’s team. Once they are finished, I’m going to have a contact of mine over at Architectural Digest take a look-see, if they want a spread for the magazine…that could only be great for Noah, Cede and Sam.” Bubbie Ruth said with a grin.
“If he is working with them at this level after only his first year, I will take him on as an intern his senior year.” Hastings said decisively. “And her guys, their suits are different and yet still complimentary shades of blue. It is amazingly well done, showing them to be a cohesive unit, but one that is made of completely formed separate entities. Brilliant.”

I looked over at Saul and he was looking back at me just as confused. In fact, the only straight man in the room who seemed to understand how the hell all that had been said with some clothing and color choices was Castle. But fortunately Beckett seemed as confused as us guys…For some reason that made me feel better. The night flew by and my excitement reached theretofore unknown levels as Benzie and her boys performed and won time after time. Hell the fact that they didn’t win everything they were up for seemed to make things better in the eyes of Castle and Hastings and the other guests with fingers in the entertainment industry. “If they won everything the fans would find them less relatable.” Castle explained when I asked. “It’s a real catch twenty-two. They need to win to give credence to their critical and sales success, but if they win too much they lose touch with their fan base which then negatively impacts their sales and eventually the way the critics perceive them.”

When the last award of the night went to KAMA, they may have been struck dumb in surprise, but we made enough noise for all three of them and the rest of their entire entourage. After Puck’s speech and Sam’s follow up, you could have heard a pin drop. I think all eyes were on Beckett. She was the only police officer present after all. The Lieutenant turned to me and Bryant and said into the still and quiet room. “Get them a PR rep with nerves of steel that will care more about protecting their names than making a reputation for themselves. One Police Plaza will hit back hard. They hate it when people speak out against police violence even when it is clearly unjust. If he hadn’t mentioned the Gardner choking, which he was completely right about don’t get me wrong, but if he’d just talked about the Brown shooting, they might have kept out of it, but this…they will look at that statement as a direct assault against the NYPD.”

Bryant called Danny-boy, his son who happened to be a rising PR guru over in the tech world of the Pacific Northwest. Within ten minutes they had a strategy planned and a ticket purchased to get Danny-boy to New York the next day. “Since Benzie and her crew have a house guest already, Daniel can stay with Amanda and me.” I told my eldest brother before he started to make hotel arrangements.

“He’ll be close to the group that way. It should help out since the office isn’t set up yet.” Amanda cosigned.

“Hopefully he can move her full time. I’ll text Haja and Kurt and ask them if they will be able to rework one of the standby offices for him…they needed a PR person anyway.” Mills grabbed her phone and went to work.

Castle looked up from his phone. “The Twitter-sphere is loving them. They are trending on Facebook and while there is plenty of negative chatter, the positive is swelling. Black-Twitter and the Millennials are leading the charge on the positive side. Of course, the police unions and the supremacists are screaming for their heads, but Anonymous is on their side too, so far. Beckett, if it won’t get you in trouble…I’ll throw a little positive Castle mojo their way.” His wife just nodded. She was probably as sick of seeing bad cops get protected as the rest of the better police officers I knew.

Within an hour of the end of the broadcast, we were feeling ready for the fallout; even as we all hoped and prayed that our preparations would not be needed. Deep inside my heart was full of pride. My little Benzie had picked her men very well indeed. The next day was Labor Day, by the day after I would have cease and desist letters ready to go for whichever asshole thought he was going to try and come at my niece and her boys for speaking the truth. They were definitely going to learn why
litigators are considered the scariest kind of lawyer.

Babyfather (Sade)
Daniel Harris PoV

I always thought that growing up in the family I’d been born to was a lot like walking in a Vietnam jungle at the height of the Vietnam War. One didn’t just have to worry about landmines. There were also bullets coming in from a million different, unseen, directions. On top of all of that, there were the expectations of the higher ups. Finally, just when one really believed that they had successfully completed the campaign, there were always the flashbacks to drag them back in. Granted, we Harrisses called our flashbacks family reunions, but they served the same function…leaving us unable to forget the horrors that had been seen. Probably my family would say I was being melodramatic, but that was how it had felt to me.

I’d been born to our branch of the family’s eldest son exactly ten months, almost to the day, after he’d married my mother. Dad was a strapping young PR account specialist for a DC firm serving politicians and lobbyists alike when he met Mikayla Thorpe. They worked in the same building and had a ‘whirlwind courtship’. Mom has always sworn that she fell for an okie-doke because Dad could easily charm the panties off a nun. A family trait that he had, thankfully, passed on to me. They got married less than a year after they met. Dad later admitted that he’d not been able to maintain monogamy for a full six months after they got married. He managed to hide all his dirt until ten months after my third birthday, almost to the day. That day my mother caught him with her best friend in their master bathroom. Suffice it to say that within the next few days I had a new room in my grandparents’ house and from then on I only saw my father every other weekend, the day after major holidays and for a month every summer.

I would always give Dad his props though, he might have sucked ass as a husband, but he was a great father. He never missed one of his weekends with me. He never missed a child support or alimony payment. He never missed a little league, pee wee or school sponsored baseball game or track meet. He never forgot my birthday and I always cleaned up at his place on Boxing Day. Not just quantity though, he paid attention to my clothes sizes, styles and the things I was into. Half the time, I got more use and enjoyment out of his gifts than the ones from Mom. He also made sure that I attended every single family reunion so I could get to know his sisters and brothers and all my cousins. I suppose that they weren’t too bad, but I could have lived without the opening and closing dinners. The forced family interaction always made me have to talk to family members I didn’t know or didn’t like.

My mother remarried when I was seven. Brad was alright. He just tried too hard to replace my father. It took him most of the two years they dated to understand that while Mom was looking for a new husband, I had no need nor desire to have a new father. So he talked Mom into having a couple of kids with him. By the time I was twelve I had two siblings from my mother’s second marriage, Davis and Dietrich. Despite the fact that Dad had also remarried, it was very often just he and I on the weekends I spent with him. His marriage to his second wife, a nurse named, Denise Sheppard lasted four years. For most of those years she was on four days Thursday through Sunday, and off Monday through Wednesday. Eventually, Denise left him too…again for cheating. When she left Dad, she went full on gay…like super butch lesbian loving gay…and after their divorce was finalized. But Denise apparently had a sign on her forehead that read ‘please feel free to cheat on me, I rather enjoy the feeling’ because her lesbian lover cheated on her too. Last time I checked her Facebook profile she had sworn off romantic entanglements all together. After Denise came Ellen. Ellen Ramsay was really cool. She was only in her late twenties and taught high school so she was actually pretty awesome to talk to while they were married. Even though she had weekends off, Dad would have
preferred to keep our weekends for just the two of us. But Ellen wouldn’t let Dad keep me to himself, so I actually got to know her better than I did Denise. While that marriage only lasted a little under two years, she was the mother of my youngest, and in all honesty my favorite, sibling.

Melliscent was my father’s only other child. She was born when I was fifteen and she was my baby girl. Unlike Brad and Mom, I was allowed to babysit her. I may have coddled her a little more than was strictly healthy but where Mom and Brad made me feel crappy for wanting to do things with my brothers, Dad kind of expected me to interact with Melliscent. I guess I understood Brad had had some kind of traumatic relationship with his much older sibling. But I was a Harris; to most of us family was everything. I would never have hurt either Davis or Dietrich. Instead we’d all grown up with the most distant of sibling relationships. I maintained a watchful eye by being their friend on social media and I keep track of their friends and offered my advice on which college they should apply to when they asked, but I didn’t go out of my way to talk to them when I called home every week. I had very few pictures of them and none that could be considered recent.

After I graduated high school, since my dad was in New Jersey by then as was Mellie, I applied at and attended Boston University where I majored in Marketing and Communications. I took the train down to Jersey every weekend. Even if Dad didn’t have Mellie, Ellen would let me see her or babysit when she needed me. Ellen was definitely my favorite step-parent, even if she was the one that lasted the shortest amount of time with the title. After I graduated from BU, I got my Masters in Communications with a concentration in writing for the public from Duke University before heading to Spokane to earn my doctorate from Gonzaga. I didn’t strictly need the PhD, but I enjoyed school and I had done my undergraduate degree on scholarships not loans, which left my entire college fund available for my post graduate work, so I went for it. It was at Gonzaga that I met my Riker. Riker McGraw was four years younger than I and a senior criminal justice and political science double major. Ultimately, she was also the very only woman who made me understand how my Uncle Ethan and Aunt Danica could manage monogamy.

Though that wasn’t how our relationship began. We didn’t start out in an amorous relationship at all. Riker bumped into me in the café while I was with another chick. The girl wasn’t actually memorable; I didn’t even go back to her table, instead I followed Riker to hers and struck up a conversation. That may have backfired on me greatly. In her eyes that made me nowhere near boyfriend material at all. And she didn’t do casual, just sex, relationships. Before Rike those were the only types of relationships I’d entertained. After our inauspicious meeting, she teased and tormented me for months. I ended up with a new best friend rather than a girlfriend for the first eight or nine months we knew each other. Mellie absolutely loved hearing my stories about my new friend Riker. I didn’t realize how often those two talked on my phone until Dad brought Mellie out to see me and she and Riker knew as much about each other as I knew about them. Well maybe not as much but enough that I could see that they had become friends too. As I watched my baby sister and my best friend interacting and truly enjoying each other’s company…I felt a serious shift in my heart. I remembered exactly why I had ditched my coffee date that day months before.

It took me that entire summer to convince her to actually date me. She may have originally thought that I was joking or something. Finally, she gave me a trial run…not a date. We spent a night together. She told me that I had one night to convince her that the erotic love between us could be as good as the friendship we already shared. After a fourteen-hour marathon of lovemaking, sex and fucking, she looked over at me and in a quiet, fierce and slightly scarily possessive voice stated, “Yeah, that dick now belongs to me. You are mine, my hattak, my man…from now until the end of time.”

I had learned early in our relationship that when Riker slipped into her father’s Choctaw verbage, she was feeling things very deeply. Rather than verbally reply, I threaded my hand through hers and pulled it up to place a kiss on the soft skin of the back of her hand. “I’m yours.” I quietly agreed.
The next several years we spent together, building our careers. During my last year of my PhD program, Riker went to the police academy and got hired on by the Seattle Police Department. She patrolled for only two years, rather than the usual three, since she had a bachelor’s degree. After that she aced detective school and the tests she needed to move up. Since my Rike has Choctaw, Chickasaw and Black blood in her, she was quickly snatched up by the Gang Unit. Her first assignment had her infiltrate a Native American bike gang to break up a street racing circuit that had been responsible for three fatal car wrecks in the metro Sea-Tac area. Her next assignment saw her moving in Latino circles instead. The first time I took her to a family reunion, my Aunt Arielle blatantly asked her what she was. I was going to tell Arielle that she was mine and that was all that mattered, but Aunt Dani beat me to it. “She is Riker, a wonderful young lady who is quickly becoming the pride of the Seattle PD and she loves our nephew. That is all that matters.” Felt my face flush in the dueling emotions in pride and embarrassment. I guess Uncle Ethan had told her more about Riker than I had. I should have been the one to tell her.

I loved my Aunt Dani. There was nothing that phased her. As far as her kids and her nieces and nephews were concerned, she was always on our side. Well, unless we were wrong. If we were wrong, she got hella disappointed in us. The look she gave us when we disappointed her was something most of us tried to avoid. I’d seen it once when I was ten and I had gotten into a fight with one of the second cousins and bitten him hard enough to draw blood. When Aunt Dani broke up the fight she looked at me like I had disappointed her greatly. I felt like I had officially and single handedly made God sad. I never wanted to feel like that ever, ever again. I made sure that I kept on Aunt Dani’s good side.

Within ten minutes after the confrontation with Aunt Arielle, I’d lost Rike to Aunt Dani and Uncle Ethan’s wife Amanda. The three of them had a blast. Once they had bonded, they talked at least a couple of times a week. They emailed each other jokes and memes. They got together at every family reunion Riker made it to. Sometimes she couldn’t get away from work and those years the damn things stretched into eternity. I usually managed to get the kids table duty, watching my younger cousins to make sure that none of them went missing or drowned wasn’t tons of fun, but anything was better than getting cornered by Aunt Arielle and told all about how I was wrong for being with Riker for whichever new and even more senseless reason she came up with. Aunt Arielle was the bane of everyone’s existence. She was just one of those people who didn’t like how her life had turned out, so she tried to make everyone as miserable as she was.

I loved my family, and when I was honest, I preferred Bryant’s people to MiKayla’s…my mother’s family was all over the map and completely bat crap crazy…but I wasn’t all that close to most of my first cousins. Probably because I was closer in age to my Uncle Ethan than I was to most of them. Still, I was the oldest and I knew my responsibilities. I looked out for them and I always made it my business to cut Hannah off when I could see that she had little Mercedes in her sights. Mercedes was one of my favorite baby cousins. It wasn’t something she probably even knew. I just loved to watch her at the reunions. She had a truly sweet heart but she also had a huge case of fuck yours. A lot of people didn’t see it, but Mercedes Jones was quick to say if ‘you don’t like me…that’s your damn problem and I refuse to let you make it mine’. I loved that about her. Hannah had never realized that that was why she couldn’t break Mercedes. Hell, that was the main reason Mercedes always showed up with afro-centric hair. I followed her on Instagram, I knew that more often than not she had her hair either straightened or weaved…the afros and braids were mainly to piss in Aunt Arielle and Hannah’s cornflakes. When Mercedes showed up with her two boyfriends, I found it hilarious. I told everyone that would listen that I thought it was better than perfect. She looked happy as hell. As her relatives, that was everything we should have wanted for her.

I had been enjoying my younger cousin’s success in a weirdly detached kind of way. I took Riker to see ‘SongBird’ twice and we each owned both hard and digital copies of the soundtrack and KAMA’s debut album. We even purchased them separately to help their numbers even if it turned
out they hadn’t need the help. When they won their MTV Movie award, I strutted around the office as proud as a peacock and sent Mercedes and her guys a congratulations email. We saw them performing live when the Warped Tour came to Seattle. When they were nominated for a VMA, I once again strutted around work happy and proud in my cousin’s accomplishment. When she realized that she wouldn’t have to work, Riker decided that she wanted to invite a few friends over to watch the awards show that Sunday evening. Riker’s cop buddies and I got along alright. There were a few that I couldn’t stand, but she was very good about not inviting those few guys to our apartment.

That Sunday evening, we were watching the VMAs with her partner, Chris, which was short for Christina or something else, but no one was brave enough to ask what, Chris had brought her girlfriend, Dominique and Dom’s brother Grant. I’d invited my work friend Charlie and his girl Tracey. Tracey was an ADA who worked closely with both Riker and Chris on a couple of their cases in the past. It was a quiet intimate night with what had long since become our usual crowd of friends.

The red carpet special had been hilarious. When Mercedes had come on camera with Puck and Sam, Charlie had immediately started clowning. “Man, that dress…I thought you said she was your little cousin…that Darlin’ is all grown up. how you gonna let your little cousin get looked at like that by them two white boys. They are damn near drooling on her.”

“Oh please, Charlie…you’re the one damn near drooling. They just look like they are very much in love with her.” Tracey shot back. “Don’t feel bad dear, I’m drooling myself. Those shoes are gorgeous.”

“Damn, Daniel don’t take this the wrong way…but your cousin could definitely come between me and my girl.” Chris piled on the teasing.

“And she means that literally.” Dom laughed. “Seriously, like all the damn time. Mercedes Jones is hot.”

“Her hubbys are damn fine too.” Riker chuckled. “But they treat her like she is spun glass. A lot of people don’t understand their relationship, but you can easily see that they are very much in love.”

“I kind of get it.” I said quietly. “Mercedes as always struck me as having two different sides. She can be achingly sweet, fiercely loyal and very loving…but she can also be quick to cut a bitch or say fuck ‘em and roll on through. ‘Tween the two of them, her boys have both of those sides covered.”

That discussion was tabled as we started to talk about the ‘ask her more’ phenomenon. Then we started talking about the division of the categories and how that limited the amount of awards KAMA was eligible for. We all kind thought that blew but we still watched in rapt attention anyway. When it was time for their performance, we were all watching with baited breaths. The song was one that we’d all heard before but somehow watching the performance, it still seemed fresh and new. With the first time they got a win, I was as proud as Uncle Benton probably was. We all cheered like crazy. By the end of the night I had like no voice. As we listened to their speeches, I knew that there would be no way I wasn’t going to be on the next plane to New York.

“Shit, Hattak, call your Dad. Those three just opened a huge can of worms.” Riker said into the stunned silence that had descended on the room after Sam’s speech. “I don’t know who is going to throw a bigger bug-a-bear, the NRA or the police unions…but you can guarantee that both groups are going to go after them hard core.”

Tracey nodded. “Riker is right. Both groups have massive infrastructures in place to vilify any celebrities who speak out against them. They do it all the time.”
I grabbed my phone and in minutes my father was offering me the world to make myself available to help. “Dad, I called you to see if I could help…remember.”

His chuckle calmed me down significantly. If he could find humor in my near panicked state, then I must have been over reacting, at least a little. “I did kind of forget. I was getting ready to call you when my phone rang. I will send you your flight information. Will Riker be able to come with you, or will she need more time to get time off?”

I posed the question to my better half even though I already knew the answer. “No, I will need at least a couple of weeks to wrap up our current case and get some time off.” She answered quietly.

“By then, it may be a matter of moving to the East Coast,” I told her even as I started thinking of what that would look like.

“KAMA is already big enough to have a dedicated PR specialist. If Puck is gonna keep speaking uncomfortable truths, this could easily be a full time job.” Charlie pointed out.

Chris laughed. “Look McGraw, if you two move to NYC, I’m coming with you.” She told Riker in all seriousness. Dom nodded too. She was a beauty blogger; her work was wherever she lived. All she had to do was let the beauty world know where to send her the samples they wanted her to evaluate and she was set.

Grant chimed in, almost surprising us all. He wasn’t very much of a talker. Dominique talked enough for three or four people, so probably he just couldn’t get a word in edgewise. “Think they have any use for an executive assistant-slash-office manager?” No way was his sister leaving him behind. Dom made friends who accepted Grant. He had too much trouble making friends of his own. He was almost painfully shy. He’d been laid off from his job of four years and had moved to Seattle to stay with Dom and Chris while he looked for something here. Six months into his stay he was working for a temp firm to help with their bills…but hadn’t yet found a permanent place.

I shrugged. “Email me your resume. Don’t worry, if they don’t …because if I decide to set up shop in the great big city, I probably will.” I told him with a grin. “But don’t worry, we won’t leave you behind.” The get together broke up fairly soon after that. I think that they others could sense that Riker and I needed to talk. She walked with me into our bedroom and started to help me pack.

“Do you really think you’ll…we’ll end up moving to the East Coast?” Riker asked me as she folded my boxers into little cubes.

Thank God I’d done the laundry and picked up all the dry cleaning the day before. As I pulled several of my best suits from the closet, I shrugged. “I don’t know. Charlie was right though. They were going to have to get a PR rep sooner or later. Why can’t it be me? I mean…it wouldn’t even be like they would have to stay my only clients. You heard the stories Aunt Dani and Uncle Benton were telling at the reunion…these three seem to be going out of their way to make everyone they come in contact with better off for knowing them.”

Rike wasn’t even facing me, but I could almost hear her eyes roll. “But that isn’t why you are thinking about doing it…moving. The move would let you take care of family and at the same time put you back close to your dad and Mellie.”

I sighed. She knew me so well. “Would you be okay with moving to Manhattan?”

She sat on the bed. “I don’t want to be NYPD.” She said simply. “Their policies aren’t something I could see myself being comfortable with. I’d probably end up in IA and then quitting or eating a bullet because I hated my job so damn much.”
I took her hand and pulled her back up into a hug. “So don’t work for NYPD, there are other LEO agencies nearby. You could take the test for the FBI like you not so secretly dream about doing. You are amazing. You are smart and beautiful and you would be an amazing Special Agent.”

“Yeah, but the distance.”

“I took the train every weekend four hours to see Mellie when I was in college. All four years I did that. The FBI training isn’t even a full six months. I can come down to you and if you get more than one or two days off at a stretch, you can come and see the city. They have a New York field office. At least they did on the X-Files.”

She laughed. “And the house we were saving up to buy? We are a we, our dreams together should be just as important as the ones we have individually.”

I nodded. “We are a we…but if we make our individual dreams come true, we’ll be better off in making our shared dreams come true.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing Mellie and Amanda more often. I haven’t even seen Avery in real life yet.” She said with a smile. “Maybe Tuesday Chris and I can talk to the Captain about us applying for the feds. You’re right, now is a good time for it. I’m right in the middle of the age requirements. I’ve reached the experience requirement…”

“I love that you know all of that off the top of your head.” I teased.

She pushed me back, “get back to packing. You still have to email your boss to get some time off.”

She was right. I took a quick break from packing to go and take care of that. Thankfully, my boss totally understood. Or maybe he was hoping to capitalize on the connection with the music group… either way, I got what I needed from him so I was good. After I finished packing, Rike and I made love and then spent just a little time talking about what we wanted and needed. I made sure that she really was okay with the possibility of us changing coasts permanently. Just before we fell asleep, Riker rolled over and whispered, “I’m getting excited about the possibility of moving, of doing something new. If Mercedes and the boys want you permanently, we’ll have a grand adventure.”

When she was right, she was completely right. It was going to be one hell of an adventure no matter what…I couldn’t wait. I was going to do everything I could to make sure that Mercedes and her guys came out of this controversy smelling like roses.

Conqueror (Estelle)
Haja Johnston PoV

I grew up in a small home in the very small, very rural town of Crowder Mississippi. My mum worked her fingers to the bone to have a house in which to raise my brother and sister and I. I hated almost everything about where I grew up. Mom’s parents had moved her to London when she was twelve. After our father was killed, Mum never told us how he died…but London no longer held any allure for our family. She sold everything she could to get the money to move. It took everything she had to move to even the tiny town in the American south, but once we were there, Mum did everything she could to provide all our needs, but there was no money for any wants. It wasn’t an unhappy childhood, but it was by no stretch of the imagination a happy one either. I was loved and loved in return, though so it was probably better than many others’. By the time I finished pre-school that I wasn’t going to be a world famous football star. I wouldn’t even be a baseball pitcher. It wasn’t possible to do either of those things when you lacked all hand eye coordination like I had. However,
by the time it was time for me to move into middle school, I had made up my mind exactly how I was getting the hell out of Crowder. I could run, and I was a dab hand at studying and reading. I finished high school and managed to get a full scholarship to Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta. It took more work to get my residency status changed than it had to get accepted into the school.

Atlanta was a very new world. Even though I was still surrounded by people of color, they were very, very different from the very country Black people I’d grown up around in Crowder. I fell in love with my new home. I’d double majored in both management and design. I just knew that since I was gay and black I would be the world’s next big fashion designer. After all black people and gay people created culture and I was both. About halfway through my sophomore year, I found that while I loved tweaking fashion, creating outfits and looks, finding great vintage pieces and deals…I wasn’t that big on designing things myself, so I decided to focus on styling and making a few of my friends, who were trying to become the next big thing on the ATL rap scene, look like money. Somehow I moved from styling them, to booking their gigs and helping them grow their brand.

Unfortunately, when I went home for a visit around Christmas, two of them got caught in the cross fire of other people’s beef and only one survived, barely. He was paralyzed from the neck down and had Parkinson like tremors. They didn’t make it, but some of the news coverage of the incident somehow brought me to the attention of the managers at LAFACE records.

It was at LAFACE that I learned that working on projects or people that I didn’t like or wasn’t passionate about was counterproductive. I couldn’t effectively do my job if the music was shite or I actively wanted to see the artist crash and burn. Over the years I worked there and later with Wes Jordan, as he got his fashion house off the ground I came to the conclusion that compromise was a part of living life, but nothing good ever came from compromising my principals or my vision. I worked around my class schedule and lived on campus all four years, saving every dime I could. The summer before my senior year I was able to afford the costs involved with turning my VISA to a permanent residency. After becoming a permanent resident and earning two Bachelors and an MBA, I went to work for So So Def. That was where I realized that a big part of every job anywhere was being able to figure things out for myself. I didn’t have the option to say ‘I didn’t know’…at least not without adding ‘but give me a second and I will find out’. Sometimes that meant creating whole new ways to do something. After a while, I decided that people weren’t telling me how they usually did things because the way I came up to get the same thing accomplished streamlined the process. I learned that I loved efficiency too.

I took those lessons with me into my every endeavor after I transitioned back into artist management. I turned down more than a few artists because I didn’t feel the music they produced. I lost two clients because I got tired of catering to the insanity of their mom-agers. I was considering heading back to the fashion world when I got a call from Lyor Cohen. I’d come onto his radar when one of his A&R people were scoping out the same artist while I was at So So Def. At the time he’d been the head of A&R, not the head of all things Warner Music Group. Still, he was an incredible point of contact, so I’d maintained the relationship for no other reason than it was such a peripheral connection, it took nothing to keep it intact. When his assistant reached out to find out if I was interested in interviewing to manage a new group that was out growing the amount of time that his team could give them, I’d just kicked an artist to the curb for his refusal to listen to me even after he had requested my help or advice. He’d tanked his brand so badly I was determined to get out while the getting was good.

It took me a long conversation to get the name of the group from Lyor’s assistant. She was damn good. But once I knew that I would be in the running to manage the hottest new group on the music scene, I was all in. By the end of the first half of their concert at their record release party, I was determined to show them that I was the best man for the job. They were everything I was looking for in my next clients. I was honest and forthright with them and they decided that I was what they were looking for as well. The more I met with them the more I realized that they really did listen to the advice they had asked for. They had a definite vision for their career and we talked that through what
I hoped to accomplish with them and synced our visions up. After that it was just a matter of planning out how to get there. When I realized that Brantley was on the same page as the rest of us, we all started working together and before I could blink, synergy had been achieved.

That first summer working both remotely on their tour with Brantley and in person with Kurt on getting the office space completed was one of the very best of my life. By the time the VMAs came around I was in absolute heaven. I had never had a position that left me as fulfilled as working with KAMA. Kurt was the perfect protégé my super creative side yearned for and managing KAMA with their work ethic and common sense was happiness personified. Brantley was astounding at his job. He had connections that belied his age and where he didn’t have a finger in the music scene, I did. We were a great team. I loved Hudson and just wanted to adopt her so I could carry her around and protect her from the world. Darcy reminded me of all that was right and wrong with people her age at the same time. She was amazingly smart, had massive amounts of good sense, was informed and able and yet the grayest moral compass I had ever come across. It was rigid, but it didn’t always point to the same ‘north’ as everyone else’s…and yet somehow, when all was said and done she turned out to be bloody well right.

After the awards show, and Puck’s speech from manager hell, I headed immediately back to the hotel to start working on damage control. Hudson had returned with me, and she acted as a go between for me and Sam, Mercedes and Puck’s families. We spent the next two hours on phones and fixing a flight for one of Mrs. Mayzer’s friends, who would act as the group’s security at LAX. I didn’t go to bed until almost two, but I was fairly certain that we’d weather the storm. If we didn’t I was damn well not going down without one hell of a fight. I had artists that I wanted to see reach the pinnacle of success. They had the talent. They had the drive. And no matter what anyone said, they had the right to free speech and Puck wasn’t lying so the bobbies and the NRA could all suck my balls. I was determined that KAMA would be bigger than Madonna and have a longer lasting career than Cher. It was going to happen. As soon as we all got back to New York, I would meet with the PR guru, Mercedes’ family was sending us and I’d make sure that my vision for them was realized.

Chapter End Notes

This story of the Learning French Series has reached its technical conclusion. However, if you all can help this story reach 35 comments by the end, I will post a bonus chapter that looks into what happened the night of the VMAs after the awards show for Sam, Mercedes and Puck. How does our intrepid triad celebrate their wins? What do they get up to when they make it back to the room? These and other questions can be answered for the low low cost of 8 reviews. (Just eight reviews for this chapter will see you all receive the Bowchigawowwow)

Oh and a preview of the KAMA Office Suite Decor is available on my Tumblr...annikay-samcedesshipper. The pics are also up on Flickr. I can’t get the yahoo group to work for them yet, but I'm working on it.

Thanks for all the support.

TTFN,

Anni
Let's Go to Bed (The Cure), Like a Wrecking Ball (Eric Church) & Summer Nights (Grease/Glee Casts)

Chapter Notes

****THANKS to everyone who has taken the time to review! Your encouragement helps more than you know!****
Thank all of you for being avid readers & reviewers of my stories:
I appreciate all of you.

Boredom Busting Fic Reread Rec
Revelations by TBloves2read

Isis Aurora Tomoe You are the most awesome Beta ever. Thank you for being such a help in my time of need!!!! Princess 976 I hope your Laptop is better soon!!!!

You are Welcome to view all of Haja & Kurt’s hard work on KAMA’s Office Suite https://www.flickr.com/gp/60504961@N04/140R5x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Let's Go To Bed (The Cure)
Puck PoV

Awards shows were for the fucking birds. Don’t get it twisted, I loved the accolades and the attention and was pretty sure that we’d experience one hell of a bump for our record sales. But the fact was that I’d wanted to be buried balls deep in Cede or Sam since we’d walked off stage from our performance. There was something about performing in front of a big ass crowd, especially knowing that even more people were watching at home, just made my dick hard enough to pound nails. The waiting I had to do for the rest of the night just ensured that there was no way in hell Sammy-boy or Babygirl were going to be walking right the next day. After we won the last award of the night, while Jay-Z and Blue Ivy were introducing Beyoncé, we were ushered to a behind the scenes room filled with reporters asking us a million and three questions. Of course the main thing on everyone’s lips was my acceptance speech. I had been honest on that stage and I kept that shit up in the interview room. “I know people will think that I did it because of Cede, but the simple truth is that my younger brother is biracial and his skin is only a little bit lighter than Trayvon Martin’s. You can guarantee if a George Zimmerman type hurt him, there wouldn’t be a court case or anything else…I’m not a good Christian Black woman like Trayvon’s mother. I’m a badass Jewish guy, and ya know what, I firmly believe in an eye for an eye. I’m not a big fan of cops, any of my friends can tell you that I’ve been in handcuffs more than once and not always for fun. I understand they have a job to do and it can be a hard and scary job…but if we allow them to get away with murder what makes them any different from those they jail and kill.”

Someone else shouted out “So you hate the police?”

I shrugged. “No. According to my loves the Christian Bible says I have to love everybody…But it doesn’t say anything about liking them though. For real though, I love real police officers, the men and women who wear their uniforms with pride and honor. I love what they do for society. Hell, I love good cops who do their jobs for twenty and thirty years without ever pulling their guns. I don’t
like bad cops. I don’t like assholes that hide their bullying and cowardice behind a badge. I think that
given the nature of the job, the training they are supposed to have and all the cool gear they get to
play with…they need to be held to a higher standard than regular people. One of my fellow former
McKinley Titans, his dad is a cop. He’s a good cop too, when he isn’t taking my boy Adams’
whining to heart. Shit, I did a bid in juvie, worst six weeks of my entire life, but I don’t have
anything against Officer Brannagan…well not anymore. He was just doing his job. He didn’t harass
or shoot me, and you can bet your ass I talked mad junk to him. In fact, I think I owe him an apology
to autograph now.’”

“Naw, he said he didn’t want one unless you won a Grammy,” Cede said with a laugh.

“Sam, Puck seems unconcerned about blow back from the police organizations and unions; are you
worried about blow back from the NRA and Guns Rights activists?” another voice asked us.

“Most gun owners are perfectly happy with common sense gun control laws. No one can hunt with a
semi-automatic or automatic gun…why does anyone need those outside war zones? I’m still baffled
how this country didn’t elect a whole new congress after nothing was done to create change after
Newtown. Unless something changes more people, more children will die and we will all be partially
responsible. I had to speak out. It was my right and it was my duty. Few people have a platform to
reach millions,” My man said simply and honestly.

“Don’t you have anything politically relevant to say Mercedes?” someone asked snidely.

But Miz Mercedes Jones was unfazed. “I completely agree with both Puck and Sam on these issues.
I speak out on my other issues all the time. However, not to be funny, but while positive body image
is important. And while valuing women and making sure that they receive equal pay for equal work
is important. Making sure that all women have control of their own reproductive health and speaking
out against the misogynistic rape culture that is unfortunately present in this country’s colleges and
universities and all the way to the halls of government are important. But those pale against the
immediate importance of speaking out against the stealing of lives that is happening in greater
numbers in America than anywhere else in the industrialized world.”

Funnily enough after that they decided that they didn’t want to ask anymore deep questions. We got
a couple of the usual ‘how do you feel about your win’ and ‘what’s next for KAMA’ questions. But
soon we were released. I thought that meant that we could head back to the hotel and get our carnal
knowledge on, but Haja had other ideas in mind for what we needed to do. “You guys get changed
and go the after party.”

“Man, Haja, we were looking to have an after party of our own back in our suite.” Sam’s accent was
thick and heavy making me sure that he was as in need of boning our girl as much as I was.

“I know…Kurt and Santana told me that this would go over about as well as a fart in a church, but
the three of you need to go and make the statement that you stand by your words and aren’t worried
in the least about any consequences. You have the moral high ground. But if you disappear right
now they will turn that around and use it against you. Get changed. Go party for at least two hours.
Talk to some of the older musicians and get them on your side. I’ll have Hudson push our flight back
so that you can sleep in. Just give me two hours.”

What could we do. It was for the betterment of our career, so we changed real quick. We headed
back to the ‘dressing room’ we’d used to change before and after our performance. Again Mercedes
Jones was prepared. We had a quick baby wipe wash up after we licked our hands clean of the tasty,
thick evidence that we had finger fucked our wife to a sharp, quick medium O. She took care of us
too; Sam and I got some relief in the form of her hot little hands and pretty mouth. The last change of
the night saw Mercedes donning a pretty rose colored halter dress with a deep v neckline that made
me want to suck on the cleavage that was on display and left her shoulders and upper back bare. She wore silver and pearly jewelry and exchanged her black cagey red bottomed heels for a pair of pink floral looking pumps with the same brightly colored sole. Sam was wearing a black smedium v neck silk tee shirt and a pair of jeans that were fitted and dark wash enough not to look completely out of place next to Sexy Mama. He’d finished it off with some subtly tooled black cowboy boots that I knew had belonged to Sander originally. I was in a pair of black slacks, deep gray button down with my sleeves rolled up to show off my forearms. I threw on my Docs and a black vest and loose black tie, just to look like I was trying and we headed to Buddakan to the Warner/Atlantic Records post VMAs party.

The party was cool. We got the rest of the crew in and made sure that they were happily talking to industry types themselves and enjoying the night. Then we danced a couple of times, Cede ended up dancing with TI and they got to talking about everything that had been said at the awards show. I struck up a conversation with Michael Stipe and he was very much of the belief that those with voices should use them and he also agreed that Sam and I had chosen to use our voices for great causes. Sam about passed out when Dolly Parton talked to him and said that she was tickled pink by our group and by how we stood up and said some things that needed saying. I talked to another few people universally considered legends like Kylie Minogue, Seal, and Method Man, and they were all very supportive. Which made a lot of sense; Britain had been anti-gun for a long time. Australia had had one mass shooting and locked their shit down, and Method Man probably had better reason to speak out against police violence than half of anybody. In fact, Method Man offered to do some tweeting and he posted an Instagram pic of the two of us chilling in the VIP. He was really cool about it.

We gave it exactly two hours, then headed out to our limo. Before the poor dude had even managed to pull away from the curb, I had Cede laid out across my lap with my hand heading up her skirt. With the shaper slip still in place, I had to take extreme measure, but since the skirt of her dress was loose and breezy it worked out. I managed to get my fingers in her and help her bust another one. While I’d been completely distracted, Sammy-boy had gone from kissing the hell out of our girl, which he had begun as soon as we were hidden from prying eyes, to fucking her mouth like a champ. His moans of pleasure were going through my balls and making my dick even harder. I lost it. Seriously, I was too far gone to even care that we were in a car driving around LA. I stood as best I could, shoved that shaper and her dress up, ripped her panties off and fell on her. In seconds I had buried my dick balls deep with a couple of hard, deep thrusts. “Fuck,” I hissed as I was enveloped in the tight, wet, velvety heat that was always waiting to welcome us home. “Oh God, Babygirl. Fuck you feel so damn good. You’re so fucking wet.”

“God Baby…shit, Noah must be fucking you so good, you’re sucking my dick so good.” Sam moaned as his head fell back. I would have laughed at how he’d degenerated into porno speak, but the truth of the matter was that when Sexy Mama started going down on one of us, we were lucky to be able to speak at all. Fuck our woman had the best fucking mouth on her. When he slid his hand into her dress and bra tweaking and pinching her thick, sensitive nipples, that was all she needed to fly into an orgasm that squeezed me so tight I had a hell of a time resisting the urge to follow her into bliss…almost. But I was determined to hold off. I wanted both of them to feel as crazy as I was.

Reaching across the space separating us as we both pleasured and took pleasure from our woman, I threaded shaky fingers through his thick blond hair and dragged Sam’s head over until I could kiss him, connect with him so all three of us were one. I don’t know how long I lasted…probably not very, Sexy Mama was feeling good as hell and I had been wanting to be inside her for the better part of the night. But I did manage to hold out until my beautiful, sexy wifey got hers three times and my amazingly hot ass hubby had come down our wifey’s throat.

I don’t know if the limo driver drove around a bit to give us extra time, but we managed to get
ourselves pulled together before we got out the car at the hotel. If Cede’s and Sam’s lips were extra plump and juicy looking, well that just made them both even sexier. There were a couple of flashes, but they looked like regular cell phones and not paps, so I didn’t think too hard on their presence. Hudson was waiting on us down at the lobby with a couple of bag boys to get all the stuff that I didn’t even remember seeing loaded into the trunk, our performance and arrival gear was all present and accounted for, whether we realized that it had been put back there for us or not. Hudson efficiently and quickly tipped the driver and started to corral Sam, Cede and me up to our room followed by the bell hops that’d unloaded the limo trunk of all our clothing from the night. We had not carried much with us to the club, our IDs and a credit card each. Apparently in LA carrying more than that on any occasion when one wasn’t carrying a handbag or man purse was just asking for trouble. Thankfully, Hudson had been cool about keeping an eye out for us. It was good that she remembered, because in all the excitement, I’d totally forgotten.

Our quietly efficient PA was talking a mile a minute as we made our way to our suite. “Your parents called to say congratulations. Haja explained that you three needed to be seen since your speeches would be considered controversial in some corners. They have arranged a little surprise for you from room service. Haja and Darcy are working with the rest of your New Direction friends on social media doing damage control. Your family had been working things from their end. Mercedes, your cousin Daniel is going to meet you at the town house tomorrow to handle KAMA’s PR until this all settles down. Your Uncle Bryant said that if you need or even just want him permanently then your cousin and his girlfriend are good with changing coasts. Given that the police are a little peeved with you right now, Mr. Manoso…Ramon…has changed his flight and will meet us here tomorrow at ten to fly back with us. His cousin, Ranger, not Mr. Santos…will have a contingent ready to meet us at the airport on the other end and will escort everyone to their homes.” She handed me her iPad and a stylus. I glanced over it quickly and realized that it was a contract for Rangeman’s bodyguard services. I signed it and passed it to Mercedes.

“Damn, is all that really necessary?” Sexy Mama asked her as she signed in her spot before handing it to Sam for his John Hancock.

Hudson shrugged. “We are preparing for the worst.” She said honestly. “Much of the immediate reaction has actually been fairly positive, but it is a simple truth that the police unions won’t really begin to release statements until the morning news cycle. The fact that Puck acknowledged the good police officers is helping. Lima PD has already posted a statement thanking him for holding them up as a gold standard. Sam as far as your statement, the Brady Campaign, Moms Demand Action and Mayors Against Illegal Guns have all already released statements supporting KAMA and we are hoping for a few more statements on your behalf. But like I said…we are concentrating on being prepared for the drama to start in a few hours.”

Sam looked at me and Cede and asked one last question before we left the elevator. “So is there anything we should be doing? Anything you need from us?”

Hudson smiled. “No…and you’ve hired good people. We’re handling this for you. The only things we couldn’t do for you…your parents took care of those. You three go in there and celebrate your victories. We have to be at the airport before noon tomorrow. I’ve already arranged your wake up calls.” She turned to head to her room where the bell hops were waiting with our things. “Oh, one thing you can do…all three of you need to look happy, well rested and very put together tomorrow. There will be quite a few photogs and paps at both ends of the trip. Sam, Puck, could you two please get Mercedes approval on your outfits.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just for that, I’m gonna roll out the full K-Fed. Look like a total and complete douche canoe.”
“You have gotta stop stealing Darcy’s sayings.” Sexy Mama chided as Sam opened our door.

I laughingly replied, “I didn’t steal it, she gave it to me when she used it as me on that senator that called us degenerates on MSNBC.” It was true too. Since Darcy had been being me on social media, I try and integrate a few of her more interesting sayings into my vocabulary.

Before we could remove our shoes, there was a knock at the door. I answered it and Room Service rolled in the surprise our parents had arranged for us. In the center of the cart was a silver bucket filled with ice with a big ass bottle of Dom Perignon. But the champagne wasn’t alone. The bucket was surrounded by mounds of strawberries, whipped cream and chocolate sauce in a silver tureen designed to be high enough off the sterno not to get tarnished, but low enough to keep the rich treat properly liquid. Hell Yeah. Soon as we tipped the dude and got him out of the way, we rolled that cart on into the bedroom of the suite. The champagne and the three long stemmed crystal flutes accompanied us into the bathroom. Sam started the bath running with the Bulgari green tea bubble bath that he and I had found for when all three of us bathed together. Our beautiful woman was busy getting out of her dress and shoes and everything else that went into making her look as amazing as she always did. It took me less time than either of them the get naked…Sam might have been wearing less clothes, but his boots held him up every time…so once I was naked, I popped the cork on that Dom and poured us each a glass. The second we were all settled in the tub, I couldn’t stop my mind from going back over the entire day. It had been the best night of our careers so far…and I could only hope that it was just getting better.

Like A Wrecking Ball (Eric Church)
Sam PoV

Over the course of that late August evening, me and the two people I loved most in the world, we’d performed for millions. We’d won some pretty awesome awards. We’d had great, supportive conversations with icons in our field. We’d even managed to scratch making love in a limo off our bucket lists and that was all before the amazing moment where the three of us were sitting in a Jacuzzi with a mountain of bubbles sipping expensive champagne from crystal glasses that were probably at least as expensive as the champagne we were drinking from them. The summer had been cool, but the night had totally been one for the record books. We’d been banking on our current popularity and the truth of our statements to cushion us from the repercussions of making political statements during our awards speeches. But there was every chance that we could have been wrong. Still seeing the violence and the unnecessary death and not speaking out would have definitely been wrong.

“Guys, I know we decided that speaking out was the most important thing we could do if we won the video of the year VMA,” Puck said quietly. Sometimes it was as if he could almost read my mind. “But if the blow back is too much for us to overcome I want you two to split off and I’ll fade into the background.”

“No, you won’t.” Mercy soothed. “We made the decision to speak out as a group…all three of us agreed that with what’s been happening we couldn’t look ourselves in the mirror if we kept silent.” Puck and I both nodded. Despite how off the cuff we’d made it seem, we had talked out statements through and we’d been in full and complete agreement on the ones that we’d made.

“Mercy is right. We’re together. We’re not just a band. We’re together. We’re together for the long haul too. So there is no way that we’re going to leave you behind just because people didn’t like what we all had to say.” I cosigned.

“Exactly. Yeah, we’re making our careers together but more importantly we’re making our lives
together. So we will handle our slap downs together. The most important thing is that we stay strong, we stay together and we stay smart.” Our wonderful soulmate told him.

I reached out and gripped his shoulder to convey my feelings physically as well as verbally. “Yeah, I mean, would it completely suck if we ended up getting Dixie Chicked? Of course it will, especially this early in our career. But we’ll stick together, finish out school…finish out our Warner contract and then you and I can figure out what to do with ourselves while Mercy becomes bigger than Beyoncé.” The beautiful songstress in question poked me hard in the ribs. “Okay, okay…inappropriate humor aside, we’ll handle this. Maybe it will be bad, maybe it won’t, but we are a team, a unit, we can’t just crumble when the going gets tough.”

“I know.” Noah smiled. “It’s just that Cede, this is your dream. We both want to make sure that you make it even if me and Sam do other shit.” He took his own poke for that one. Those little manicured nails hurt a lot when used for evil. Then again they felt really fucking good when she used them for good, like when she dragged them over our scalps or down our backs.

“Yeah, well, my dream changed from a me to a we when these two knuckle headed white boys grabbed my heart and made it their own.” She pointed out. “So if this all goes balls up…we’ll just find another dream…together.”

“Together.” Noah and I agreed.

Satisfied that we were all in complete agreement, Mercy took our glasses and sat them all on the wide ledge at the back of the tub. my thick, goddess of a woman straddled my lap and threaded her fingers into my hair as she started to kiss me. I absolutely love making out with Mercedes Jones. Her lips were always warm and soft and smooth. Her breasts pushed into my chest as her tongue made its way into my mouth. Her hard, sexy nipples bored into my pecs and made me crazy. We made out for a while just enjoying kissing and caressing. My hands filled themselves with her awe inspiring ass and I pulled her closer to me as we kissed. My dick was nestled between her wet pussy and my own abs…I was getting harder and harder, leaking more and more precum as holding and caressing her beautiful body made me want her more and more. I felt the water level dropping before I even noticed that Puck had moved the stopper. Without moving our woman’s hot body off mine, I carefully stood and exited the deep, jetted tub. Puck helped the two of us dry off and he led us to the bed that was calling all our names. I never did let Mercy’s feet touch the ground or her lips leave mine. As soon as her back touched the soft sheets, I buried myself inside her, hissing in contentment and pleasure as her soft, wet heat enveloped the most sensitive part of me. She arched up into my thrust drawing me even deeper into the welcoming home that she always provided for both Puck and I.

“Oh my God, baby. Fuck. Love you so fuckin’ much.” I murmured as I licked my way to one of the twin tips of pleasure that were begging me to suck them. As soon as I latched on and sucked hard, Mercy’s beautiful body seized and her mouth opened on a silent scream. She felt so fucking good it was hard to hold onto my control. But once again baseball served me well, listing the World Series winners in reverse order helped give me staying power. Only when I felt Mercy coming down from her first or fifth, depending on if we were counting the ones in the car or not, only when she her pleasure started to ebb, did I move my mouth to her other nipple and suckle that one in a softer, more sensual rhythm that sent her skyrocketing again. Her body writhing in absolute pleasure. I loved watching Mercedes Antoinette Jones cum. Her whole body moved in undulating waves of passion. Her big, delicious titties shook and rippled. Her moans and pants and deep groans of pleasure surrounded us and oh God, her body clinched so damn tight around my cock…it was all so fucking perfect.

“That’s it Babygirl, let us see you cum again.” I heard Puck whisper. He looked so fucking sexy
with his eyes blown open in desire. His hand was wrapped around his weepingly hard dick. Fuck, he looked damn edible.

Poor Noah had been left behind in our lovemaking and that couldn’t stand. As soon as I was able to retreat from Mercy’s heat, I pulled back, flipped her over onto her stomach and pulled her up onto all fours. Puck knew exactly what to do with the new position. There was no way we could do anal let alone an anal and vaginal double pen when Mercy would be scrutinized the next morning as she walked through airports. Still, Puck wiggled into place under us, lining his pelvis up with ours. I nibbled my way down Mercy’s back and left two lovely, dark hickey’s on each of her ass cheeks. Only then did I lower our woman’s generous hips down so that as I thrust in and out of her, her slick pussy would ride the ridge of Puck’s cock. As my cock entered her again, I couldn’t bite back a loud whimper of pure, abject joy. Within moments, we both realized that it was even better than we’d imagined. Mercy’s girl juice had soaked our joining, my balls, her thighs and her pussy, so everything that was rubbing against Puck was all wet and warm and perfect.

“Hoooo God.” Mercy moaned. “Oh so…so…good.”

“What’s so good Babygirl?” Noah asked with a long groan of his own. “My dick rubbing your hard little clit while Sammy-Boy is fucking your wet little pussy…is that what’s so good?”

“Please…oh God Noah, Sammy…m…please…I need…” she begged so sweetly.

“What do you need Baby?” I teasingly asked right next to her ear. “You need me to go slower?”

She shook her head wildly. “Ngh…no…More. Go…faster…fuck me harder.” My beautiful, sexy wife knew just how to get what she wanted. Her hips started rocking between us, she lowered her head and kissed the hell out of Puck. I could tell from the wicked little gasp that escaped him she was sucking his tongue. Fuck, that felt awesome…she knew what that did to both of us. When Noah was putty in between her thick, chocolate thighs, then she struck…with a few of those sexy ass hip isolation moves of hers, she made me her bitch.

“Fuck. Oh Shit Baby, you know…” I grabbed her hips and fucked her as hard as she wanted. “How much I loved when you do that?” In less than five minutes Puck almost knocked all three of us to the floor as he roared out his completion. Mercy and I fell like dominos in the seconds or minutes or hours his pleasure lasted. Soon we three were all spent and covered in cum. Moments later exhaustion hit and we were asleep having moved only enough not to smooch each other. The next morning, or later that same really awesome morning depending on how one looked at it, the phone rang at eight fifteen. We’d managed to sleep through the regular alarms. As we lay there just basking for a minute, I couldn’t help but think that we’d just had the best summer of our lives so far. Totally, completely epic.

Summer Nights (Grease Cast/Glee Cast)
Mercedes PoV

It had been the most epic…most awesome night I’d had personally and one of the best professionally. I knew that I was wrong for how much I loved it when Sam and Noah and I made love without anything between us. But since it happened so very rarely and the connection was just so intense, I couldn’t bring myself to regret it. We had to be down to the lobby by ten and the truth was that we had a lot more than an hour and a half of work ahead of us, so we finally forced ourselves to stop making out and get out of the bed at eight thirty. I was so tired I didn’t even care that I was still naked while I got out the clothes I’d packed to wear back if we won…yes, I had a whole different outfit packed to fly back in if we hadn’t won anything. Once I had my clothes for the
flight out, I packed all the rest of everything. It didn’t take as long as it could have because most of what we’d brought was just tossed into Puck’s duffle bag to be sorted and washed when we got home. I put his clean things in the now empty spaces in Sam and my own bags. By the time I’d finished, Sam had gotten off the phone with room service. We’d eat with the crew downstairs, but we definitely needed coffee in the worst way. Puck came out of the shower, dripping wet with a towel wrapped round his waist. I quickly handed him a decent outfit that wouldn’t be all K-Fed like, but at the same time wouldn’t look like he was trying too hard, or much at all really. Guys who looked like they tried to look good for a flight never came off well. Unless they were gay then it was kind of expected.

I put Sam something together based off Puck’s look and what he happened to have available and went and took a shower myself. Given all the product that had been used the night before, I had no choice but to wash my hair, so I braided my long ass weave into a cute fishtail braid and bound the end nice and tight. I wasn’t a fan of wearing my hair back, it made my face look fat, but my choices were hella limited until I could actually fix my hair for real. I lotions carefully since I’d set aside a dress to wear home. While I was in there, I also packed up all my toiletries and sundries, as soon as I used them. By the time Sam came in for his shower, I’d revitalized my skin and smoothed on a tinted moisturizer with a good SPF, made my eyes up to look sexy and yet bright and innocent and put on lip balm. I wasn’t bothering with gloss until we were on the way to the airport. I pulled on a lacy teal bra and panty set from Soma that supported the girls, without putting them into my neck, and headed into the bedroom of the suite. Puck passed me a cup of coffee with the perfect amount of cream and sugar which I chugged like a frat boy at a kegger, and gave me a quick kiss. He was already fully dressed looking appropriate for a run or a flight or a Nike ad.

“Hudson just texted…we’re due down stairs in fifteen minutes.” He told me smiling at my grimace. “She did say to leave everything but our carry-ons up here. Apparently the checked luggage will have its own ride.”

“I guess that isn’t so bad.” I said honestly. I packed my electronics, including my iPad with all my summer reading and the essays that I’d already emailed to the appropriate professors, my personal cell phone, Hudson had the professional one, and my e-reader with my fun reading and magazine subscriptions on it into my white Michael Kors pebbled leather, large satchel. In went my passionfruit eos and a couple of glosses that would play well with the baby teal Eileen Fischer organic linen tank dress with its adorable handkerchief hem I finally slipped on before I made myself a second cup of coffee. I slid my feet into the Steve Madden pierced white leather ballet flats that I’d brought to wear with the dress. A big chunky white and clear bead necklace, white Gucci round framed sunglasses and my wallet and other usual purse contents made with way into the white bag and I was ready to go.

Puck and I double checked the room to make sure that we hadn’t forgotten anything. Good thing too, we found a pair of lacy boy cut panties that had gotten tossed onto a side table in the heat of our passion and almost over looked. Under the bed we found my extra house shoes and a strip of Magnum XXL condoms. Puck somehow talked me into letting him leave one in the bedside table drawer, only to find that the empty box we’d ripped open a few days before was already there. He decided that that was even better and wouldn’t waste any of the prophylactics that we tended to use a lot of in the first place. We really need to buy stock in Trojan or whatever their parent company was. My Noah was such a dude. Letting the maid or whoever know that he and Sam were well endowed was a little harmless fun that would have him giggling for days.

We checked to make sure that we had everything we wanted in our carry ons, my big white purse, Sam’s black Nike backbag and Puck’s red one. When we left that hotel room we had stacked all our luggage neatly right inside the door and left three nice crisp hundred-dollar bills with an autographed thank you card on the coffee table. Down in the lobby, the entire group was present and accounted
for and we were joined by Maddie and Roman Manoso. “Congratulations, I am so happy for you
guys.” Maddie St. Clair laughed as she gave Sam, Puck and me hugs. She pulled back and looked at
my outfit. “I love your outfit. The paps aren’t going to know whether they are shooting an airport or
a fashion show.”

I chuckled and thanked her. “You’re looking pretty cute too. I swear you seeing us off at LAX is
getting to be a tradition.”

“Yeah, well…you three are good kids and your commissions are making my year.” She returned
with a smile.

“Well, if we still have a career in a couple of months, you might get another one.” I heard Puck
throw out teasingly.

“Wait, what’s that?” I turned to inquire.

He shrugged. “I like the idea of us being behind the scenes real estate moguls. We could put Maddie
to work finding us a complex in a gentrification type area, we get it for cheap and lease apartments to
self-important hipsters and make a killing.”

Darcy laughed uproariously. “You just want the chance to bilk a bunch of douche canoes for a shit
ton of money while making it just a touch harder for them to post their food porn.”

Puck nodded. “Harder to buy those thick rimmed glasses their asses don’t need too.” He agreed.

The next comment came from a surprising source. “You know what would be really ironic…we
make it one of those trendy complexes where all the C and D list models and actresses just have to
live…so while they are casting shade at Mercy they are putting money in her pocket every time they
pay their rent.”

“Damn Trouty, that is deliciously devious. You guys should totally do that.” Satan chortled. She and
Puck were obviously bad influences on Sweet Sammy-Boy…but then again he did hate it when
people hurt anyone he cared about.

Hudson gathered us to the table that the hotel restaurant staff had been good enough to create for us.
She was able to get us seated fed and caffeinated quickly. Then she disappeared and when she
reappeared the car service was present and, when I looked over her shoulder, she had a list of all the
suitcases and the cases of instruments and gear that had everything checked off so I knew that the
things from our rooms had made their way into whatever vehicle would transport them to the airport.

Despite it being LA on Labor Day, the drive to the airport wasn’t too bad. I was completely
vindicated in my decision not to bother with a colored lip gloss until we arrived at the international
travel hub by the fact that Sam and Puck and I had made out pretty heavily for the better part of the
ride. Thanks to our amazing PA, however, I did have time to get myself looking right and tight
before the driver stopped and opened the door. Puck got out first and he helped me step carefully
from the limo. I was not one to show the world the goodies, so I was always very careful when
exiting a car in public. It was a good thing that I was careful, because there were a couple of paps
waiting on us already. The flashes got irritating really quick but it was their yelled out questions and
‘directions’ to look at them that really pissed me off. But unlike our arrival, somehow no police
officers said anything to them about moving along and not loitering. Thankfully, Roman Manoso
was a big dude and he appeared from nowhere, looking almost as dangerous as his cousin was
reputed to be. The photographers disappeared pretty quickly after he arrived on the scene.

We said goodbye to Maddie while Hudson got the multitude of bags and gear checked. Roman
ushered us into the airport and through the security checkpoint. The TSA agents were amazingly efficient and to be honest, almost obsequious. I was expecting them to feel some kind of way about our speeches the night before, but they were more curious about why we were still flying commercial. “When musicians die in plane crashes, it’s always in small aircraft, either private or chartered. I’ll keep flying commercial thank you very much.” I finally answered one of the ladies who’d been bold enough to ask. I didn’t like admitting to my own superstitious nature, but why borrow trouble.

“Girl, you know you’re right.” She laughed a little before her smile turned sad. “I want to thank you three…my son was killed four years ago. They said he reached for the cops gun…he was twenty years old, never been in trouble in his life. He got stopped for a bad taillight…why the hell would he have tried to go for a gun he wouldn’t have known how to use if he did manage to get it. That damn DA didn’t even try to have the cop arrested even though what he did was cold blooded murder. I haven’t paid money for music in fifteen years, but I went online and bought your CD and that movie soundtrack you all did.”

I leaned over and gave her a hug. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I know that there is nothing that can make what you have had to go through even close to okay…but I have to believe that even if man won’t apply their own laws and make him pay, the Lord will see to it that justice is done.”

“Thank you. Lord knows if not for my faith, I’d have lost my mind to grief and anger. But I didn’t have time for that. I had two more children to raise. My girls are almost grown now. Both of them love you. They think you are the best thing to happen to music since Whitney Houston, God rest her soul.” Ms. Yolanda said with a grin. I couldn’t not give her all the autographs after that. Heck, Santana took a picture with her phone of her and the three of us for her. then Ms. Yolanda and another lady escorted us through the rest of the checkpoints so we could get to our gate without any more drama.

We were all very appreciative of her help. When we were settled at our gate, rather than going into the first class lounge, we had a little meeting at an out of the way section of the waiting area. Haja immediately relayed a breakdown of the morning news shows reactions. “The good news is that for the most part the banter and commentary has all comedown on your side. Well, except Fox News…but really they already hated you more than most people hate serial killers. There are a few others, one of the commentators on Good Morning America, but Robyn Roberts shut him down pretty aggressively. Kathy Lee Gifford was quite unexpectedly harsh, but Hoda Kotb she wasn’t subtle about agreeing with the three of you. Plus too, I think she is secretly in love with Puck now.”

Sam and I threw Puck teasing grins, but he was focused on something else. “And the bad news?” he pressed our manager.

“The IUPA…the International Union of Police Associations has stated that your comments couldn’t be considered actionable because you praised good police officers who do their jobs correctly, but the Fraternal Order of Police…the second largest US police union is calling for a boycott of your albums and concerts and stating that police officers should refuse to handle security for your events. The NAPO, National Association of Police Organizations…the biggest US police union…they are somewhere in the middle. They are calling for the boycott, but not the refusal to handle KAMA events.” Haja said wryly.

“So has there been any measurable impact yet?” Sam asked reaching over and grasping my hand.

Hudson shook her head. “It could just be early days yet, but not really. There were the expected bumps to searches and downloads right after the awards show…but to be honest, there hasn’t really been as much blow back as we were expecting.”
“That’s because most of black twitter and the civil rights organizations have put out a massive all call online. They all seem to basically say that everyone with skin of any shade of brown, any member of the LGBTQ community, anyone who is not a WASP male should go out of their way to support you guys and actually buy your album.” Darcy chimed in with a wicked grin. “A few more conservative country singers’ camps tried to start some beef, but Blake Shelton, Garth Brooks, Natalie Mains and a few other names even I recognize, like Merle Haggard, all put out statements to the effect that even if people don’t agree with what we had to say, if they call themselves patriots they should be willing to fight and die for your rights to say it. Ted Nugent is being Ted Nugent. SO…I may have posted links to some old articles about things that should have seen his ass arrested and the cell mate of a big ass guy named Bubba. There hasn’t been any rebuttal from him yet.” I gave her a look. “I know, I know…high road…but dude is a misogynist, an asshole and a pedo-rapist. He pissed me off suddenly being all pro-cop…when he spent April and May sucking Cliven Bundy’s ball sack.”

I couldn’t argue with anything she said, so I decided to let it go. “Haja…I know that you’re working on the office this week, but can you please try and get us some air time…late night shows, maybe a call in on a radio show…Something where we can address the big purple elephant. I don’t want people to think that we don’t really believe what we said. If we drop it, I think we’d come across as false.”

Haja smirked. “How about a Rolling Stone interview, photo shoot and possible cover? You have the video filming for ‘Rub You the Right Way’ this Saturday, next Saturday, you’ll be meeting with an interviewer and photographer from Rolling Stone.”

“That’s great Haja…but is there any way we can do something more immediate. That article won’t hit stores for a while.” Noah pointed out.

“I’ll try to get you something setup for the next couple of days.” He agreed.

Brantley raised a point. “I heard about some organizing going on online…social media driven stuff. They are talking about hosting a rally in NYC somewhere to benefit the Garner family. I can put our feelers and see if I can get you some stage time.”

Sam and Puck looked thoughtful, but it was Santana who spoke up. “They hate doing good where people can see that its them doing it. They are old school…you’re gonna have to think old school sneak techniques.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s table that thought until we can talk things through with Daniel. I don’t want to agree and have you set something up that interferes with his plan.”

Before we could get any further into the discussion, our boarding was called. I spent the flight knocked out. I was tired as hell, but it had been one of the best weekends of my life. There was nothing I could have or would have done differently. We were flying home and the next day we would begin our sophomore year of college…stepping off of the flight was the first step into the next phase of our future. I couldn’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

Overall, you all fulfilled your end of the bargain…so here is mine.
The rest of Commune’s night and their flight home.
I hope that you love it.
This ends this portion of the French Lessons Series. I still want to hear all about what
you think of your Bonus Chapter. Like any FF author, I live off your reviews. I'm taking a month off to work on a couple of Illy's stories & I may throw in a couple of one shots of my own. When I come back to this series it will be with their sophomore year. Folle Sagesse (Foolish Wisdom) will be out before May 1st.
TTFN,
Anni

End Notes

All Kudos & reviews are appreciated.
Let me know what you think.
Let me know what you want to see happen over the course of the summer.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!