### Coming Back From Broken

**by Nan119**

**Summary**

AU Teen Skye. Philinda. Skye and Melinda are broken. Can they help heal each other.

**Notes**

Teen fic with Skye and Melinda as main characters. Philinda in an alternate universe. Will have tons of AOS characters some as adults, and some as teens.
Pieces.

She was broken. The pieces of her past had torn through her very being, forming her again, into a stoic, cold, and fearless women. That's what her outside showed everyone. She had learned to shut out hurts, pain and could mask her feelings as well as anyone. Her face never betrayed what she was thinking, or feeling. Her expressions consisting of more severe and less severe looks.

That's who people saw. People who did not know her. Who did not see beyond the surface. That's how she wanted them to see her.

Only one person ever saw that facade fade. Only when Melinda could not take it anymore, when it became too painful to hide, to hurtful to shut down, too broken to shield her heart. Only then did Phil Coulson see his wife break. And then he would come into her space, and he would hold her, and cry with her, and be there for her.

What had happened shook her world to it's very core. Shook her to pieces that Phil almost could not put her back together. But he had. She had let him take her brokenness and she had let him wrap himself around her rips and scars and she had let him pick her up.

Six years ago she had woken up one morning, happy, content, living the life she had always dreamed. Loving her husband and her career. Truly living a life full of wonder and amazement. Loving her child. Her amazing seven year old son. She'd had him later in life, already 35 years old. She was driving. It was raining and cold. It was nighttime. They had been at the movies. A Captain America movie. Her husband was a huge nerd who collected comic books. Captain America being his favorite comic hero. His geekness did not stop there though. Phil also was a Star Wars nerd, and he collected old model cars, putting them together and then naming them. He had told her when they first were dating it was the only way he'd ever own such a car, especially on his meager teacher salary. He taught social studies at the local high school.

They had met at her best friends party. Rosalind Price had her annual going back to school party and Melinda had agreed to help her with preparation and ended up staying. Roz, who had been Melinda's best friend since college was principal of the high school. Melinda had been searching the house looking for Roz to bid her goodbye, when she literally ran into Phil Coulson. He had been carrying some trash he must have gathered and tripped into Melinda. After apologizing profusely and turning a few shades of red, which Melinda found endearing, they had struck up a conversation and their relationship blossomed from there. Soon they were an item, and soon after that they were married.

What struck people about them was just how different they were. Melinda was quiet and reserved while Phil, well Phil was not. He was outgoing and smiled all the time, a quick wit, funny and full of life. He was a true geek, relishing in that identity. He was a conversationalist, a practical joker, the life of the party. His students truly loved him, as he brought history to life for them, his passion for it obvious to all.

What most people did not know was that Melinda was also keen on practical jokes, had a sarcastic wit only brought out with a few close friends, and was also a history buff. They shared a love for history, taking many trips to New England and to Virginia to walk the trails of American history. And although Melinda never admitted it, she too was a geek at heart.

They had married ten years ago, and had their son three years after that. Phil and Melinda were completely in love, with each other and their son. They named him after Phil's father, James. James
Phillip Coulson. They called him Jamey.

She was driving. They had been to the 9:00pm show which was fine since it was a Friday night. The theatre showing the movie was forty-five minutes away. They were halfway home. It was raining, cold and late. As they passed under the stop light, the car slammed into them. The last thing Melinda remembered hearing that night was screaming. It wasn't until later she realized it had been her screams.

Melinda woke up in the hospital four days later. She had been put into a medically induced coma to help her brain swelling to go down. It did. The doctors told her she would make a full recovery. Her left arm was broken. Her left ribs bruised with three cracked. Her facial lacerations and head injury would heal. Her body would heal. The doctors said with her being in top physical condition that she would heal quickly and she would have no lasting effects. She would heal. Her body would heal.

Melinda knew something was horribly wrong when her father and mother, and Roz and Phil's younger sister Bobbi were all there. The news completely shattered her world. She would never see her beautiful son's smile again. Her husband was severely injured. Severe chest injuries. He might not make it. No Melinda thought. She would never heal. She would never recover. She was broken. Her soul was shattered into a million pieces.

Skye woke up in yet another house. This one was owned by the Brody's. Jason and Anne Brody, and their two sons, JJ and Ryan. This was the fourth house she had stayed at in the last year. She sighed. She turned to look at the clock in the room. It said 5:30. She never slept well the first night in a new place. Skye thought back to the last meeting with her social worker and the psychologist at the group home. Broken. That's what they had said. She was broken. She was 14 years old and she was broken. They said she was running out of options and unless she wanted to spend the next 4 years in juvenile detention, she needed to stop being such trouble. She needed to fix what was broken and she needed to wise up. The Brody's were her last shot.

Skye sat up and pulled her knees up and put her chin on them. It wasn't her fault all the foster homes were not a fit for her. That they were either people trying to find the perfect child or using her as a paycheck. The better ones using you as a paycheck at least fed you, left you alone and collected the money. The worst ones were the psychos who didn't feed you, beat you or even worse and collected the money. The perfect child lookers usually sent her back in a few weeks. She had yet to be in one of the good homes she'd heard some of the other kids talk about. She hadn't figured out the Brody's angle yet.

Skye knew very little about where she came from. She knew she was half Chinese/half Caucasian. She knew she was 14 years old. She knew her mother had dropped her off at an orphanage when she was a baby, when she was 6 months old. She had been dressed in a pink onesie, covered in a yellow blanket with a note in Chinese from her mother saying she could not take care of her anymore. The note said she was half Chinese, and was 6 months old. She had been laying in a broken cradle. She was already broken then. All those details she had found out when she had hacked the system.

Skye was really good with computers. She was able to hack into a lot of secure feeds. She once gave herself $200. But that was traced to her and spending 3 months in Juvenile detention cured her of that. Although she did learn how to pick locks and pickpocket pretty well in Juvie. She was decent at shoplifting too. So she only hacked for information anymore preferring to not go back to Juvie. If she really needed something she would just filch it. It was safer that way.
Figuring she was not going to get more sleep, she decided to get up and take a shower, and get ready for school. Usually when she got put in a new home it was on the weekend but the group home was crowded and they pushed to get her out quickly. So here she was, on a Tuesday, going to a new school after spending the night in a virtual strangers house. Yeah her life was definitely broken.

Skye was ready by seven and made her way to the kitchen. Jason Brody was there. He turned when he saw her enter and actually smiled at her. "School starts at 8:00. JJ and Ryan can walk with you to show you the way. You should eat something. We have cereal and bagels, help yourself."

"Okay. Thanks." She moved to the cupboard to get cereal. Finding choices she picked Corn Flakes, got out a bowl, after Mr. Brody showed her where they were, and poured the cereal. She got the milk out and poured that too. Hey, he was nice so far, and she got breakfast. Score two points for the Brodys.

"Oh here. Lunch money." He handed her 3 ones. "In case they didn't set up your free lunch account yet. One of the perks of foster care. Should be set up by tomorrow." He winked at her. Skye shrugged. Yeah one of the perks. Free lunch courtesy of the state. One of the foster benefits.

After a few minutes, the two Brody sons came down and soon Skye found herself walking to school with them. The oldest JJ, a junior, actually escorted her to the school office before going to his own class. She entered the office and was soon called in by a guidance counselor to fill out paperwork and get her schedule. An hour later Skye was headed down the hall to her second period class, American History.

Melinda was doing her Tai Chi when Phil stuck his head in the room. She was in the study which she had turned into a workout room more than a study. He walked over and leaned against the desk watching her go through her routine. He smiled. She frowned at him, and raised her eyebrow. "Sorry to disturb you Mel, but I wanted to remind you about the appointment. Four o'clock. I'll meet you there, since I am coming right from school."

Melinda grimaced. "Is that today?" She knew it was. She just wasn't sure she wanted to do this anymore. After all Phil had talked her into it. She had only said yes to appease him and get him to stop bugging her.

"Come on Mel. We talked about this."

"Actually Phil, you talked and I gave in cause you wouldn't let it go."

"Mel. This will be good for us. For you. And it is a good way to see if we want to go further. Being emergency foster parents is a first step. You agreed. You agreed to at least come to the meeting."

Melinda stopped her motions and sighed. "Okay Phil. I said I'd come with you. That's all I promised. I'll be there."

He got up and walked to his wife. He reached to embrace her. They held on to each other till Melinda pulled away. "I have to shower and get ready for work. I have a 8:30 class." She reached in to kiss him. "Bye Phil. Have a good day. I'll be there."

Phil smiled as her watched her leave the room. He wanted so bad to just make her whole again. To see that smile more. To hear her laugh. He needed to fix her. He just didn't know how. Phil made his way out to his car, got in and drove the short distance to the high school. He pulled into his
parking spot and walked into the building, smiling and greeting everyone on his way. He made it to his classroom just before the bell rang. First period was his free period. He got out his lesson plan and sat down to review it before his second period class would make their way in. It was his favorite class to teach. Honors American History. He enjoyed teaching all his classes, including World History and Government but American History was by far his favorite.

The dismissal bell rang and soon students were coming into his classroom. Everyone was present as he walked over to close the door. Before he could close it, a girl he had never seen before walked in the classroom and handed him a paper. He looked at the paper and smiled. A new student.

"Welcome Mary Sue Poots to American History. I'm Mr. Coulson.

She frowned at him. "Skye. I go by Skye. If you call me that other name, I won't answer." Skye figured she'd get it out there right away. Most teachers were jerks and called her Mary Sue anyway. But at least she put them on notice.

Phil looked back at the girl. He walked forward and pointed to an open seat in the second row.

"Class, we have a new student joining us. Everyone say hi to Skye."

She froze for a second, her mask coming down. She glanced back up at the teacher who was grinning at her. She smiled and sat down. Maybe, just maybe she wasn't fully broken yet.
Interesting. That was one word that described History class. Strange would be another. Skye sat in her 3rd period English class recalling the previous class in her mind. Mr. Coulson was pretty cool. He was actually funny, not one of those teachers who thinks he's funny and is a an actual joke, but he was really funny. His anecdotes and insights were impressive. Skye couldn't remember any class she had ever taken where her mind was occupied from start to finish. She hadn't even watched the clock once. She looked forward to tomorrow's class.

Now however sitting in Honors English, she was bored to tears. The teacher was small, older, and quite monotone. Skye had tuned her out ages ago. Instead she was flipping through the syllabus and seeing how far behind she was. She was surprised to see that the book they were currently reading, and the teacher was droning on about apparently, was Catcher In the Rye. She had already read the book so that was a plus. She scanned the list of other books and was surprised to find all but one she had already read. Hey, between that good news and Coulson's class, the ok morning at the Brody's - this day was turning out to be one of her best. The bell sounded, so she worked her way out of the room with the rest of the class.

As they were in the hallway, Skye turned to go left while apparently someone else turned right at the exact same time. They collided. Skye dropped her notebook and class schedule paper, and saw the other person had dropped a few books and papers had scattered everywhere.

She bent down to pick up her stuff and nearly collided with a head. A head full of curly blond hair and an exasperated face. "Ugh, sorry. I should have looked better." The voice had an accent that sounded English, but not quite.

"No it's okay dude. Totally my fault. I was looking down trying to find my next classroom number. Here let me get that." Skye reached around in front of her and grabbed the loosed papers and handed them back to the boy. They stood up.

"I'm Skye."

"Fitz. What class you looking for?"

Skye looked at him. "You're not English, so......."

"Scottish. I'm born and bred in Glasgow. Me mom came here to the states with her company. Transfer. My second year here. And you?"

"Ah, just moved in. Yesterday. So where is the computer science lab, uh Fitz? That your real name?"

"Yah. Last name. What everyone calls me. Leopold is my first name."

"Well, Leo what say you show me where the computer lab is, eh."

Fitz dropped her off in front of the computer lab and walked the short distance up the hall to the bio/chem labs. Skye watched him go into a door, and then turned and entered hers. She was late. All eyes turned to her. The teacher motioned for her to come toward his desk. Skye showed him her schedule that she belonged here.
"You're a freshman? This class is mostly upperclassmen. You sure you belong here? It's the highest level computer class at this school." Skye felt the class stirring and watching her.

"Yeah I'm sure. Computers are like my thing. I aced all the other classes you offer at my other school, and this is the only one I haven't taken yet."

The teacher did not look convinced but was obviously done talking with her about it. He would probably check with the office later.

"Okay for now. There is an empty computer over there by the window. Take that one for today."

Yeah he was definitely gonna check her out. Skye slid her body into the computer chair and turned on the computer in front of her. The guy sitting next to her leaned over. "Go Tigers."

She looked at him raising her eyebrows. He responded to her inquiry. "Password." He smiled at her. He was tall and good looking. Also looked older. "Trip. My names' Trip". Skye grinned. So far she had met a Fitz and a Trip. She quirked her eyebrow at him.

"Trip?"

He smiled. "Antoine Triplet."

"Ah that makes sense." She smiled and went back to paying half attention to the teacher while she logged on the computer and started playing around. The teacher came over a handed her a packet after a little while and told her to start working on it. She looked around and everyone was busy with their packets working on their computers. The teacher walked away. Asshole, she thought, wouldn't even tell me where they were at. Trip picked up his packet and showed her the page. Ah, page 16.

"Thanks dude."

Trip smiled. "So you have a name?"

"Skye." She went back to work, but could feel Trip and some of the other kids staring at her from time to time. She started at the beginning of the packet and got up to page 13 before the bell rang. She looked at her schedule to see where she was going. 5th period. Lunch. She prepared herself mentally for going to the lunchroom. The dreaded place of oneupmanship, class hierarchy, cliques and drama. But she had 3 bucks and a growling stomach so ........... she put her best I don't give a crap face on and headed to the cafeteria.

She got in line and checked everything out. The line she was in was for the school lunch only. The other one to her left was the ala carte line with sandwiches, soups, salads and snacks. She knew 3 bucks wouldn't by much over there. Besides, she reasoned, she'd be going through this one for free meals anyway and might as well get used to it. As she got closer she read the board which had the choices on it. Chicken tenders with rolls or pizza, two veggie choice, two fruits, and milk. She took the chicken with rolls as her entre' and moved to the veggies choosing a salad cup that had lettuce and tomatoes, and mashed potatoes with gravy. She passed the milk cooler and grabbed a chocolate milk. Next was the fruit where she chose applesauce and a banana. She got in the cashier line. The cashier rang up her food. It cost only $2.95. She paid, got her nickel in change plus ranch dressing, and honey mustard sauce for her chicken. She made her way to the tables and found a space open at one. She sat down. She looked at her food and was amazed at how much she got. Last school she was at didn't offer this much. She took a chicken tender and dipped it in honey mustard and took a bite. Not bad. Edible. She smiled and dug in only to be interrupted a few moments later.

"Hey. That's our table." Uhoh. That was not good. Skye looked up to see an angry face staring at
her. "Um we always sit there, and we have no other place to sit. Why can't you people let us alone?" The girl's face went from angry to sad. She had an accent. What was it with accents at this school thought Skye.

Skye waved her hand apologetically pointing around. "Hey I just wanted to eat. No one was here, so I................."

"Hello Skye." Fitz had come up behind the girl and was looking at her with a smile. He turned to the girl. "She's not one of them Simmons. She's new." He turned back to Skye. "Stay. This is Simmons. You'll like each other." Fitz pulled the chair out from the table and sat down across from her.

"So Simmons, huh?" Skye looked at her expectantly and cracked a half smile. Are you Scottish too, like him."

"Bah, I'm English, from Devonshire. And it's Jemma. Fitz is the only one who calls me Simmons." Jemma sat down next to Fitz.

"Skye. Pleased to meet you Jemma. I'm half Chinese."

"Yes, okay. Why did you say that?"

Skye cocked her head. Well I don't want to be left out. You know. Being different. Ugh, never mind. So how long have you been here."

"Oh this is my third year. I live with my Aunt Vic while I'm here studying. My parents do missions work with Doctors Without Borders. So.......I stay here most of the time. For school."

"Cool." Skye smiled at Jemma who returned it with her own smile. Skye went back to eating her food, while both Fitz and Simmons did the same. A few minutes later, a boy pulled the chair out next to Skye and sat down. Skye stared at him and he looked at her. His eyes were fearful.

"Hey Thomas. This is Skye. She's new. She's sitting with us for lunch now." Skye looked at Fitz and grinned. He was so matter of fact about it as if she had already agreed. Why not? It's not like she had anywhere else to sit.


"Hey."

"So Skye, where are you from?" Jemma asked her.

"Come from St. Agnes. Staying at a foster home. The Brody's."

` Fitz nearly spit out his milk. "Theeeee........Bro..oooo..dy's. Not JJ, JJ Brody?"

"Yeah that's them. JJ and Ryan. Anne and Jason actually, you know the parents." She looked at Leo. His mouth was comically wide open staring at her aghast. She almost laughed at his expression till she saw Jemma, who was staring at her wide eyed with a look of horror across her face. Skye turned to look at Thomas, who looked back with the same look as Jemma.

"Whaaaat??"

Jemma shook her head to gather herself together. "JJ Brody is .....well....he's .........he's........the star football player, and one of the most popular kids around. He gets away with everything, the
teachers love him."

Skye looked at her trying to understand. "Yeah, so........."

"We are his main targets. Well, not just us, but all the smarter kids. The science kids. The non popular kids."

Thomas spoke up. "He's just a bully. A first class jerk."

Jemma continued. "He plays the game Skye. Teachers buy everything he says. He and his friends are royalty and the rest of us...well, we just try to stay out of their way."

Skye frowned. She tried reconciling the JJ she had seen just this morning, the one who walked her to school and talked nice to her and smiled as he dropped her at the office with the guy her new found friends had described.

"Sorry Skye. But he's a jerk. Maybe it's best you find somewhere else to sit for lunch tomorrow." Jemma looked at her sadly.

Skye nodded. Yeah. It was probably too good to be true. Thinking she might have made a couple friends here.

"Oh fiddlesticks Jemma. Just cause JJ's a jerk, doesn't mean we can't still be friends with Skye. You are just afraid."

"Yeah well last time any of us crossed JJ it wasn't pretty, Fitz. Or did you forget already?'

"What happened?" Skye wanted to know.

"JJ wanted Fitz to do a science project for him. Fitz said no."

Thomas continued. "Leo ended up with a broken arm."

"Seriously?" Skye raised her eyebrows at Leo.

He nodded. "Yah. He ordered me to do it, and never thought I wouldn't so the day it was due, he asked for it, I told him to bugger off, and after school walking home I was jumped. Never saw a face but three of them put me in the hospital, broke my arm. We all know it was JJ and his friends."

"JJ basically admitted it to me, but no one could prove anything." Thomas spoke again. "He wanted to make sure we all got his message, loud and clear."

Just then the bell rang. Skye realized she hadn't finished so she shoved in a few more mouthfuls of food. They all got up and took their trays to the return counter, and left for their next class. Skye found herself next to Leo, as Thomas and Jemma followed them.

"What's your next class Skye?" Jemma asked.

Skye checked the paper she grabbed from her pocket. "Geometry, room 205."

"That's upstairs in the new wing. Come on I'll show you, I have Trig next door." Thomas gave her a smile, so she followed him to the steps to the second floor while Jemma and Leo continued down the hallway.

"See you later Skye," said Jemma as Leo waved to her.
"Yeah thanks. See you around." She turned back and followed Thomas up the steps.

Melinda glanced at the clock in her gym. It said 3:00. She needed to get a move on if she was going to be on time for that meeting. She took a quick shower, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, and then locked up the gym. She drove to the Social Services building and parked her SUV. She saw Phil's jeep already parked and hustled into the building. Sighing outside the office of Sharon Carter, she leaned into the door. She heard voices coming from inside, recognizing Phil's. She knocked once and then opened the door.

Phil looked up as the door opened to see his wife enter. She had a smile on her face, but he knew it was forced. For a moment he felt bad about coercing her into coming. Then his resolve kicked in. His wife needed this.

"Hi honey." He stood up as she walked toward him. He kissed her on her cheek. "Sharon Carter, this is my wife Melinda."

Melinda held out her hand and they shook. Sharon Carter smiled at her. "Nice to finally meet you Mrs. Coulson. Please, both of you have a seat so we can continue. As I was just telling your husband, we are in desperate need of good foster homes. So many children and teens are looking for a place to belong. A place to call their own. Thank you both for being willing to step up for them."

Melinda raised her eyebrow at Phil. "I thought we were just going to be emergency short term foster care, Phillip."

"Oh yeah we are Mel. But Sharon thought we could extend that and apply as well for long term placement at the same time in case we ever want to do that. All the paperwork would be on file and we wouldn't have to do it again. You know. Just in case."

"Phil I do not want to be a parent. Not any more. You know that."

"Well Mrs. Coulson, we understand you just agreed to the short care program. But filing for long term care is not much different and we all could benefit from it. So we are not locked into a only 6 week period. I mean suppose we have a long term home but they cannot take the child for a week and your 6 weeks ran out. This assures that the child would not have to be moved so much and be much less stressful." Phil nodded.

Melinda looked at him skeptically. "That true? That's all?"

"Well yes it's true Mel. But I will be honest. I hope one day you change your mind and we can have another child. Since we are both older, it seems fostering would be a good way to go. And in the process we help a child looking for a home too."

"Phil." Her tone was one of warning.

"But for now Mel please let's just do this. I promise it is mostly for the reason Sharon stated. I promise to not bug you about more than that. At least for a while." He grinned at her.

She sighed clearly exasperated. But she nodded. "Okay what do I have to sign and what information do you need." She looked to Sharon Carter.

Sharon Carter helped them fill out all the remaining forms and had them sign everything. She had already cleared them with the State and they had passed with flying colors. She watched as they
signed, and hoped that whatever demons prevented Melinda Coulson from being a parent would be resolved, since they were in such desperate need of good, stable homes for these kids. She was just glad another prominent couple had decided to step up as well. She herself had placed Mary Sue Poots with the Brody's. Her thoughts went to the young girl, so broken and yet so hopeful. Skye, she reminded herself. She preferred to be called Skye. Sharon smiled as she remembered the young intelligent girl completely ignoring her until she called her by the nickname her caseworker had provided for her knowledge. Then the girl had delighted her with her wit, sarcasm, and knowledge. She prayed that the girl would find her permanent home with the Brody's.

That night Melinda laid awake, unable to sleep again. Hours later she finally fell into a restless sleep and woke up screaming. Phil held her tightly, calming her down and talking soothing words to her. He didn't have to ask. It was the same nightmare she had over and over. The same one he sometimes had as well.

Skye laid in bed typing on her computer. She was trying to hack into a secure server. She finally broke through without detection. She typed in the date and place and name. A file appeared on her screen. Except she couldn't read it. Most of the words were blacked out. The bottom of her screen read redacted. She stared at the screen for a few minutes. Redacted? What the literal hell. Who was she and why was everyone hiding it? She sighed in frustration as she tried to find the same file in an un-redacted document. Nothing worked. She frowned and tried a few more tricks. She caught a slight sound and quickly switched off the screen. Someone walked past her bedroom door. After they moved by she noticed it was 2am. She shut off her laptop, and shoved it under her bed. She turned over and tried to shut down her mind to get some sleep. She drifted off wondering why she was in a redacted file. A few hours later, Skye woke up drenched in sweat and her heart racing. She sat up and tried to calm down. She hadn't had that dream for awhile. Her mind slowly adjusted to the present as the terror of her dream faded. She hugged her arms around her legs and sat in silence waiting for the sun to rise.

Chapter End Notes

Skye meets new some friends. Melinda agrees to try something new. How will these impact their brokenness? Next chapter coming up soon.
Skye leans stuff and encounters more students. She has definitely had better days.

It was a colder day then yesterday as Skye walked to school with Ryan. JJ had left earlier to get to a team football meeting so it was just her and Ryan. He was kind of quiet and had barely spoken to her since she had arrived.

Skye decided to play spy a bit. "So Ryan, JJ is captain of the football team huh? What position does he play?"

"Yeah he is. He's the quarterback. He's good. They won the first four games. He also plays baseball."

"So you play football too?"


"So what's your thing then Ryan?"

"Uh, I don't know. I just try to get good grades. I was in chorus and band in Middle School but JJ said it was for sissies so........."

"You don't do them now that your in high school."

"Yeah I tried sports but was never very good. Everyone thought I should be, you know cause of JJ, but I always disappointed the coaches. I do run cross country and do track. Just running. I'm not a superstar or anything but I made the team. Dad says it looks good on college applications, and looks good for him and his perfect little family."

Skye raised her eyebrows. His last statement was curious but she decided to ask a safe question. "So what instrument did you play Ryan?"

"Sax. I was good too. I still play at home. So what do you do Skye?"

"Um...as little as possible." She laughed and he joined in.

"Well my dad will probably expect you to get involved in something. He likes everything to reflect well on his image."

"Seriously? Cause all I am really good at is computers. Like super good. I do okay in other classes if I like the class." She paused for a beat and then continued. "Why do you think they took me in?"

She stopped walking and turned to him.

He stopped when Skye moved in front of him. He looked at her, then he looked down at his shoes. "You are his new project Skye. His way of telling the world what a great guy he is. Taking in some stray kid makes his image better. He's running for State Senator. He's going to announce his candidacy in a few weeks."
Skye was stunned. "You are kidding?"

"I wish I was. Everything Jason Brody does has a reason. He is a manipulative son-of-a-bitch. Mom hates that you're here. JJ does too but he'll toe the line and do whatever Jason wants. Mom will just drink more. JJ will act all nice around you but behind your back....... just be careful Skye."

"What about you Ryan? How do you feel about me being in your house?"

He grinned at her. "Right now, great. My family is trying to be sort of normal. And the focus is on you. Which means my dad is not on my case about my everything, and JJ doesn't slam me about my choice of friends. Mom just ignores me in favor of the drink as usual. And apparently I now have someone to talk to." He laughed. She joined in. They continued walking to school.

"So Ryan, why doesn't JJ like your friends?"

"Cause they are nerds. Like me. He thinks I hang with the wrong crowd. He and Grant are always trying to get me and Thomas to be more cool. Problem is we like being nerds. At least Thomas stayed in the band. He stood up to everyone in his family. And Grant at least cares about him. JJ hates me."

"Whoa, hold up." Skye stopped walking again. "Thomas? Do you mean Thomas Ward?"

He also stopped and looked at her. "Yeah. How'd you know his last name?"

"I sat next to him at lunch. At the table. With Leo and Jemma."

"Of course you did." He smiled. Skye did remind him a bit of his friends. "Yeah I wish I ate first lunch, but I needed to take Bio that period. The others all took Bio back in eighth grade. I opted to take Geometry instead. Thomas, Leo and Jemma are my best friends. That's why JJ is always on my case." Ryan took a breathe and then checked his watch.

"Hey we better get a move on or we'll be late for first period." He started down the block leading into the school driveway.

"Ryan? Did your brother and his friends beat up Leo and break his arm?" Ryan came to a stop. He shook his head and turned back to face Skye.

"No. Not JJ. Just his friends. JJ doesn't like to get his hands dirty if he can help it. I've never forgiven him for it."

"So you and JJ getting along............."

"Yeah Skye. All an act. I hate him and he hates me. I gotta go. See you after school." He turned and jogged up the drive to the school entrance. Skye followed behind, slower, weaving in and out of the other students. She felt someone watching her and turned to her right to look. There was a group of kids sitting on the concrete wall lining the walkway. They were all staring at her. Not good she thought. Just keep walking Skye, just keep....

One of the girls stepped out in front of her. She had to stop. She stared back at the pretty dark haired girl in the flower dress.

"So you're JJ's new sister." Skye knew it wasn't a question, so she waited not saying anything. "You know JJ isn't happy you are in his house."

"Yeah well that's his problem."
"Actually no. It is going to be yours. You better just do what he says sweetie, or well let's just say ..........we all, " she pointed to around 15 boys and girls, "we all have his back. Don't think we don't know who you are paling around with. Believe me Skye, we'll be watching."

Skye looked at her. She couldn't help it. She started laughing. All she could see in her mind was a bad teen film. She laughed harder.

'Oh god are you going to sick your jocks and cheerleaders on me and my nerd friends?" She laughed harder doubling over holding her stomach. "Cause.... thhhhheee..... smmmmmart nerds always winnnn.... in every movie ever made." She managed to say between her laughter.

All the other kids around were paying attention. Skye straightened up and took a deep breathe. "Listen Flowers. Just stay the hell away from me and leave me and my friends alone. Go back to your teen whatever and your drama and don't ever get in my face again. Kapeesh?" A red headed girl stood up and moved to stand next to the girl in the flower dress.

"Raina, Alicia, is everything okay here?" Phil Coulson knew trouble when he saw it starting. "Hello Skye. Making new friends already I see."

Skye grinned. "Yeah Mr. C. Everyone is just so friendly."

Raina and the others started to disperse. Raina glanced back at Skye and smirked at her. "Oh Skye. Don't forget what we talked about. JJ will probably remind you later."

Skye's smile disappeared as she watched Raina walk into the building. Phil was still standing there. "You know Skye, I don't pretend to know what's going on, but that looked like potential trouble. If you need to talk or need help you can go to guidance or the principal or any of us teachers. Okay?"

She smiled at her favorite teacher. "It's all good Mr.C. Just a little misunderstanding. I'll fix it when I see JJ later at home. See you in class."

Skye walked into the building and headed to the gymnasium. She had ninth grade fitness class first period, the class she had missed yesterday. She hated freaking gym class. This day was fast turning into a crappy one.

Phil entered the building and decided to go to the teacher's lounge before heading to his classroom. He walked in and headed to the keurig machine and searched the flavor options. Settling on french vanilla, he popped the container in the machine, placed a cup under it and pressed the button.

"Gotta get your fix of coffee here or does Melinda let you drink it in her house now? "

Phil turned to see Rosalind Price sitting at one of the tables nursing her own mug of coffee.

He waved his hand. "Mel drinks coffee occasionally now Roz. You'd know that if you stopped by more often. What has it been, a few months?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I hear it enough from Mel when she calls. So how are your classes going this year Phil? Already six weeks into the new school year, can you believe it?"

Phil grabbed his cup and sat down at the same table. "Good actually. Pretty good bunch of Freshman this year. My America History classes, of course my favorite, are good. Which by the way, I sure wish........."

"Oh shut up Phil. You say the same thing every year. You have to teach at least one class of World History and one of Government. It's already bad enough I get so many parents calling to put their kids in your classes instead of my other very fine Social Studies teachers'. "
"I can't help it I'm popular Roz."

She laughed. "Sure Phil. There's always a first for everyone. I remember your nerd was strong when we both went here."

"In the dark ages you mean, right." They both laughed.

"Things sure have changed. Back then the worst thing was being worried about getting shoved into a locker by the cool kids. Now they break arms."

"Phil. We had an investigation. The police could not find evidence. And the kids all clammed up. What am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know Roz. I know it sucks. Some of these kids are bullied and won't speak up. Then we have a few teachers here, like Malick and Garrett who not only look the other way but encourage it."

"Well Phil, you need to be careful what you say too. You have no proof of that. No evidence. Just cause they are jerks doesn't make them liable for what kids do."

He raised his eyebrows at her and smirked. "Please Roz. Their attitudes and compliance in some of these matters is almost criminal. I don't care who Malick's brother is or how much power he has."

They both grew quiet as the door opened. Stepping inside was one of the school aides. "Ms. Price. Nurse Connor asked me to get you. Something happened in first period gym class."

Roz raised her eyebrow at Phil and got up to follow the aide out the door with Phil close behind, both coffees forgotten about. They walked briskly to the nurse's office. Upon entering they were greeted with two kids sitting on the cot and one in a chair next to the cot. The nurse was holding a cloth to the bleeding nose of one Thomas Ward, sitting on the cot who also appeared to have a welt on his forehead. Next to him was Jemma Simmons who was sporting a cut lip and scratches under her chin. On the chair, was Skye. She had a black and blue cheek and a sizable welt on her neck. She was also holding an ice bag on her left wrist with her right hand.

"Mrs. Connor. What happened here."

Four pair of eyes looked at the principal. Phil watched Skye and saw hers blazing with anger.

"I'm not sure. Mr. Garrett and Miss Davis walked all three in here a few minutes ago. Said they got hurt in gym class. They left and I sent Mrs. Green to get you. I need accident reports filled out for all three and we may want to call Thomas's parents and hers since her wrist may be broken." She pointed to Skye.

"Accident my ass."

Phil looked at Skye. So did Roz. She spoke to her. "Are you claiming this was done on purpose, um.........Miss.."

"Skye." Phil finished. "Her name is Skye. She started yesterday and is in my second period history class.

They continued staring at Skye. She looked at Thomas and Jemma. Thomas was smiling at her and shaking his head. Jemma would not meet her eyes.

"What exactly did you mean by that, Skye?" Rosalind Price walked closer to the girl and stood in
"Nothing."

"So tell us what happened then. How did you, all of you get injured in gym class."

"Dodge ball should be fucking banned from schools."

Roz glanced back at Phil. "Please control your language. Skye, was it? What's your last name."

Skye simply stared at her.

"Um Mrs. Price could I talk to you."

Phil motioned to go into the other room next to them. Roz nodded and followed. Phil closed the door.

"She's new Roz. Names Mary Sue Poots. Won't answer to it. Goes by Skye. She's a foster kid. I dug a little yesterday. She's staying with the Brody's."

"Jason and Anne? JJ Brody?"

"Yes. Those Brody's. She's very smart Roz. Jumped right in to what I was teaching about and answered a few questions. She's taking all Honors classes and she's even in Malick's' high computer class reserved mostly for upperclassman. I checked her grades. In computer classes and what looks like ones she cares about - she has like 100's, straight A's. The others are B's. Her discipline record is pretty interesting. Mostly marked as having a bad attitude, talking back and skipping class. No violence."

"So what do you think happened?"

"I saw Raina and Alicia giving her a hard time before school today. She shrugged it of and basically told me to mind my own business."

"So how do we proceed? If kids are being bullied or targeted Phil, we need to stop it. But the kids have to speak up."

"Well for starters call her Skye. Then let me talk to her. You talk to Thomas and Jemma. Jemma's too afraid most likely but maybe Thomas has had enough. His brother hangs with Raina and Alicia and that crowd."

She nodded her agreement and they both went back to the other room.

"Skye how about you follow me and we talk about what happened."

Phil motioned to the room he had just vacated. She looked at him, shrugged and got up. She walked into the room with Phil close behind. He left the door slightly ajar. Skye slumped into a chair and looked expectantly at Phil.

"Yeah so Mr. C. what do you want to talk about."

Her voice dripped with attitude. so much so Phil had to smile

"How about the truth? Just tell me what happened."

She smirked at him. 'Long or short version?"

"Any version would work."

Skye sighed and then took a deep breathe. She looked up at Phil who had a very calm expression and a caring one. Like he actually cared. His eyes looked compassionate. That was not common in
the teachers she knew.

"Short version then. I hate gym. Thomas and Jemma hate gym too. In fact, most high schoolers except for jocks hate gym Mr. C. It's a form of torture that should have been outlawed years ago."

Phil smiled.

Skye continued. "First period gym is especially brutal. Coming in to school, tired, not enough sleep, cause face it Mr. C - teens stay up way too late and then after dressing for school and just getting there on time, one has to undress in front of other kids, virtual strangers, put on gym type clothing and then march out to face the music."

"You make it sound like a firing squad Skye." She looked at him and pointed, nodding.

"Yep. Good analogy." Phil laughed.

"Then we get to wait to see what wonderful type of torture the gym teacher has thought up for the day. Will it be running for no damn reason? Will it be shooting baskets in that hoop thing most of us miss? Will it be lining up to count by twos to play volleyball or hockey, two games I still have no idea what the rules really are. Or maybe indoor soccer so we can limp around the remainder of the day with sore shins. Or that tried and true game of capture the flag, where only 3 kids from each team actually care and the rest of us sit by the wall thankful it isn't the dreaded dodge ball."

Phil was full on laughing now. "I thought you said this was the short version."

"Do not interrupt. It'll take longer." She grinned at him. Dodge ball. The game invented by masochists that truly only bullies and hardcore jocks love. The game where the mere mention makes stomachs queasy and knees knock. People have died playing dodgeball, Mr. C."

Skye paused, took a deep breathe and continued. "We picked teams. Of course super jock gym teacher picked his captains. Jemma, Thomas and I ended up on the same team. With a lot of other none jocks. Kids with high IQ's but not high speed or high power. The captain and his two friends got out right away. Then the other team got out all the other kids. Even though Jemma, Thomas and me were open to get hit, they didn't hit us. Until we were the only three left. Then 20 or so balls came at us at the same time. Hard. Mostly aimed at our heads. I pushed Jemma out of the way and she fell and a ball bounced off the floor onto her face, skimmed over it, hence the skid marks across her chin. I saw two balls headed for my head and threw up my arm for protection. Both hit the same spot, on my wrist." She held it up for emphasis, then continued. "As I was holding my wrist and trying to get off the playing area, another ball struck me here on my cheek." She put two fingers to the black and blue welt. The she touched her neck. "I don't even know how this one happened. Thomas saw another one coming at my face and stepped in front of me. That's how he got the bloody nose. I don't think they meant for him to get it that bad. Just me. Lucky me."

Skye stopped and looked at the teacher for his reaction. "I guess that was the long version after all."

Phil's emotions as Skye was talking went from disbelief to anger. He didn't doubt her story one bit. It flowed too easy and too full of emotion to be made up. "I'm sorry Skye."

She jerked her head up to look at him. "Why? Why are you sorry."

"Because no one should ever be bullied or targeted. Ever. Please tell me their names so it can stop."

Skye laughed. "Stop. Please. If I tell you names it will only get worse. Do you know what the gym teacher said to me when he came over after he realized I was really hurt? He said I should have
caught the ball. If I wasn't such a wuss I could have won."

Phil saw red. He had never liked John Garrett. He was a jock through and through, and favored the athletes, and he was kind of dumb but this was crossing the line.

"He had no right to say that to you. Or to let those kids do that. He should be punishing them. Hopefully Jemma and Thomas back up what you told me. We can fix this Skye."

She smiled. He was a really nice teacher but had no clue. "It'll never be fixed Mr.C. The big strong jocks always rule in high school. Wasn't it like that back when you went."

Phil nodded. "To a degree maybe. But they weren't cruel Skye. They were just jerks. I think here at our school the line into cruel has been crossed."

Just then there was a knock on the door. Roz walked in and made her way over to Phil. She looked at Skye. Phil spoke to her, "So what did Jemma and Thomas say?"

Skye watched Ms Price. She looked pissed. So they must have said nothing to her like they told her they were gonna do. She frowned.

"Nothing. They said nothing. At least nothing of value. Jemma went on and on about needing to be better at gym class, and Thomas said outright he wasn't talking. No matter how much I tried to get him to all he said was he should have been paying better attention in the game. What about you?"

Phil looked at Skye who turned away. He saw the disappointment flash before she masked it with indifference. "Skye says it was deliberate. But she knows it's her word against everyone else."

"How was it deliberate?"

Skye looked up at her. "Does it even matter? I'm the new kid. Been here one day. I also know what's in my records. Both the school one and the social service one. No one will ever pick me against them. No one will believe me. Everyone is too afraid. Hell, I'm afraid."

"I believe you Skye." Phil spoke up.

She smiled. "Thanks. Now if only you knew a good self defense teacher."

He laughed. Ms. Price laughed as well. Skye looked at them both with a puzzled expression. Phil spoke up. "I'm married to one."

Skye looked surprised. "Really?" She smiled. How weird was that?

"I really need to get back to my office. Phil your class started but while I was out there trying to talk to Thomas I sent Mrs. Green to stay with the class. Skye, the nurse is filling out your paperwork and Mrs. Brody was called. You will need x-rays for your wrist."

Skye nodded and followed them into the room. Jemma and Thomas had already gone. Ms. Price walked out the door. Phil turned to Skye as she sat down in the chair by the nurse's desk.

"You know my wife has been looking for someone to clean her gym. Couple hours a week. Maybe give you some lessons instead of paying you. She teaches all kinds of Martial Arts disciplines. I mean if you were interested."

Skye looked at his concerned face. He reached into his pocket and got out a card. He handed it to her. She read it. 'Melinda's Place - Martial Arts Instruction'. It had a phone number on it. "Give her
a call if interested. I'll mention you to her. If you are serious I mean. She is the best." Skye placed
the card in her pocket and turned her attention to the nurse who wanted to re-check her wrist. She
wondered if Mrs. Brody would be pissed off or not.
A special meeting.

Phil pulled out of the high school parking lot and headed to his wife's gym. Twenty minutes later he pulled into the small parking lot next to Melinda's SUV. It was almost 5:00 so parents would soon be picking up the kids from her last class of the day. It was Wednesday, one of her early nights. This day she taught classes for the local police and state police, except for her 4pm class which was a novice kids judo class. He had stayed later than usual at school, waiting to hear from Mrs. Brody and Skye and talking to Roz and Maria Hill, the guidance counselor. All three believed Skye was not lying and their concern over a teacher who would allow such behavior from his students was growing. Phil was certain that although he may not have instigated the behavior, by his inaction is stopping it, John Garrett condoned it. He wanted to confront Garrett but both Maria and Roz thought that wasn't a good idea yet. They needed more information and they needed strong evidence. Getting the news that Skye's wrist was only a slight sprain and bruised but not broken was at least somewhat good. She could return to school and she would not have to take gym class for a few days. Phil could just hear her saying something snarky like her injury being a blessing in disguise. He smiled. She reminded him of someone; with her sarcasm, quick wit and sense of fair play, but he just could not place who.

Phil walked into the building and worked his way to the gym area where Melinda taught her group classes. He stood in the back. He watched his wife as she went through some moves and then as she walked around the kids helping them and commenting. She looked back at him and he caught her eye. He winked at her. If she was surprised to see him, she didn't let on. She smiled back. He continued to watch her interact with the kids and his heart grew heavy. She was so good with them, patient and kind while teaching. But she also kept her distance, keeping them at arms length, never getting personal, never showing emotion. To her it was all business. He couldn't help but wonder how she would have been had Jamey not died. How different they both would have been. How whole Melinda would be instead of masking the broken pieces with temporary tape all the time.

Soon the last child was picked up and Melinda was leaning into his arms letting him hold her up. She was tired. Last night was a bad night. After her nightmare she could not fall back to sleep even with Phil holding her. After a full day of judo, karate and Tai Chi she was beat.

"So what brings you here instead of going home?"

"Ah just rough day. I thought we deserved a night out. How about we go to Salvatore's and get wasted."

Melinda giggled. "Wasted? What are you Phillip, 17?"

"Hey, I spend all day with teens. That's why I need to get wasted."

She hit him on his arm playfully. "You love those teens Phil. What happened?"

"2015 happened. I don't know Mel. Kids are nasty these days. Remember how easy it was in high school for us. Even the nerds didn't have to fear school. Or gym class."
"Hey, speak for yourself. I was one of three Asians in my entire high school. And I was a geek. Imagine what I dealt with."

"Ah but even then you could kick anyone's ass Mel. I bet no one really bothered you. They were probably afraid of you."

She smirked. "Hmmmmmmmmmmm........well yeah. My mother taught me how to take out anyone but it still wasn't easy to go there. I was pretty far down on the food chain. So glad when I graduated high school and went to college, joined the Army and after that the FBI was into diversity at the time. I think I was the only Asian woman back then in the agency. But high school sucked Phil."

He pulled back from her and looked at her intently. "You."

She looked at him questioningly. "Me?"

"She reminds me of you. Oh my gosh, why didn't I see it earlier. She's just like you. Damn, she even looks a little like you."

Now it was Melinda's turn to step back. She raised her eyebrows at her husband. "She? Who is she, Phillip?"

"Skye. She's a new student. In my history class." He grinned.

Melinda relaxed. "Skye huh?"

"Yeah well that's what she calls herself. Her real name's Mary Sue Poots."

Melinda made a face. "Ugh."

"See. You are proving my point. She's a foster kid. Started yesterday. Hates her name and told me outright if I called her Mary Sue, she would not respond. Said her name's Skye and that was that. Proceeded to answer half the questions in class without studying any of the material. This morning she and two other kids got attacked in gym class. She told me what happened but no one else spoke up. Had to get x-rays on her wrist but it is only sprained not broken. She asked, half kidding I think, if I knew any self defense teachers. I gave her your card. Told her about you needing someone to clean this place."

Melinda stopped him. "Phil? You want me to teach self defense to one of your students in exchange for her cleaning this place? You offered that to her?"

"Well........ maybe?" He looked a bit sheepish. "I told her to call, said you might be willing to make a deal like that. She's a foster kid Mel. I doubt she has any money laying around to pay for classes."

Melinda sighed. "Phil you cannot fix the world."

"No, but I can fix pieces of it. One piece at a time. Just like what we can do through the foster system. Look at Skye. She's able to live in a nice home and go to a decent school because someone stepped up to foster. Well, a mostly decent school."

"I'm gonna grab a shower." Melinda changed the subject. "How about 'La Pesa Mio'? I'm gonna need wine. Lots of wine Phil."

He laughed. "Roger that."
They ended up getting take out Italian including a bottle of Zinfandel and stayed in for the night.

Skye was in her room, trying to catch up on her school assignments when Ryan came bursting in her room.

"Is it true? Tell me Skye, is it?" He stopped as he took in her bruised face and bandaged wrist. "Son of a bitch." He started pacing between her bed and desk. "Who the hell does he think he is. Fucking asshole." He looked back at Skye. "Hey are you okay? Does it hurt? Who did it Skye?"

"Hey calm down please. And lower your voice. Your mom was not happy she had to get me and take me to the doctor. I don't want her more pissed at me."

"Too bad. She's half way drunk already. Damnit Skye, I told you to be careful. Who was it? Do you even know?

"Well, Flowers is in my gym class, along with the redhead. I'm fairly certain I didn't make friends with them before school started. If I was betting, I'd go with them rigging the whole thing."

"Flowers?"

"Dark hair, ebony skin, had on a flower dress."

"Raina? You messed with Raina?"

"Hey!" Skye was pissed now. "I messed with no one. They attacked me, remember?" She held up her wrist to make her point.

"Redhead. That means Alisha too."

Skye looked at him waiting for more.

"Freshmen hierarchy Skye. Raina and Alisha along with Miles Lydon and Seth Dormer."

"Right. Leaders. Populars. Let me guess. They are cheerleaders too?"

He laughed. "Raina and Alisha are. Miles and Seth are the poster board pretty boys of the freshman class."

Skye giggled. "Football too?"

He raised his eyebrows at her. "Of course. JV stars already in ninth grade. Seth's dad is on the school board. Miles mother is the Jr. High Principal. Everyone loves them."

"Funny, I wasn't getting that warm and fuzzy vibe from them."

Ryan laughed.

"So Miles. Is he like tall, brown hair, pretty muscular?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

She held up her wrist again. "Duh."

"Son of a bitch. He's in your gym class? What about Dormer?"
Skye shrugged her shoulders.

"He's medium build, longish black hair, nose that........."

Skye interrupted. "Yeah I think he was there. Now that I think about it the four were lined up together on the other side right before the Neanderthal coach blew the start whistle."

"It was a warning Skye. Telling you to fall in line. To toe the line. To bow down to the powers that be. Also a trap to see if you ratted anyone out."

Skye sat in silence. Yeah. A trap. "To see if I would be a good little soldier." It was all making more sense.

Ryan nodded.

"Like Thomas and Jemma are." She paused a beat. "Like you are."

"Hey. Not fair Skye. You have no idea what we have had..."

"All I know is they let me hanging. They wouldn't back me up. Not even the part about how the bastard teacher told me it was my fault. Hey at least Mr. C believed me."

Ryan's face turned a little pale. "You told Mr. Coulson? Skye we don't tell. They'll really hurt you if you tell."

"Don't worry chickenshit. They won't do anything. My word against the rest. No one will believe a foster kid with issues. Your little secret is safe."

"That's not fair. You know they broke Leo's arm just cause he stood up to their bullshit. There's a lot of them Skye. We just try to do our work and stay out of their way."

She looked at his face. He was scared. Damn, what the hell is wrong with his brother. "Ry, did JJ threaten you? To hurt you? Something worse?"

Ryan looked away. He bit his bottom lip. She gazed at him curiously. "Ryan?"

"JJ hurts my friends Skye. Leo's not the first one to get hurt. Last year JJ set some of his boys on Thomas. Thought Thomas needed some toughening up. Grant was pissed but JJ is the King. The others all supported JJ. Some of them are just nasty Skye. They take pleasure in hurting people. They feel as though since they are bigger and stronger everyone should do whatever they say."

"Well that's dumb. You all should stand up to them. Get the teachers on your side. Stick together."

"We tried that Skye. Joey's cousin got hurt."

"Who's Joey?"

"He's a junior. Used to be tight with Grant and JJ. They all grew up together playing pony league baseball and midget football. His cousin Yolanda got hurt. She lives with Joey's family. They were more like brother and sister than cousins. She was close to Jemma, only a year older. She was part of our group."

"So what happened?"

"Not sure but she is home schooled now. She spent some time in the hospital. Joey freaked out blaming JJ and beat him good. Last April. Joey is in juvie for another few months. Dad and D.A.
Malick pressed charges against him."

"So JJ hurt her and her cousin got in trouble."

"See how it works Skye. My dad backs JJ and Grants family backs Grant, and they are tight with Malick. And Seth's dad and Miles mom, and the others. Parents protect their kids Skye. Their future."

"I wouldn't know."

Before they could continue, there was a knock on the door. It opened and Jason Brody poked his head in the room. "Ah there you are Ryan. So how you feel Skye. Anne told me what happened."

"I'm good, thanks." She held up her wrist. "Just a slight sprain."

"Ah that's good." He smiled at her. "Dinner in five."

"Okay, we're coming." Skye smiled at the man. He closed the door. She looked at Ryan.

"Look whatever is going on, I'm not going just sit and be a pawn. If they mess with me again, I'm fighting back."

"Skye." He looked at her frowning.

"I'm not gonna start anything. Okay."

He nodded sure that was all he was going to get from her.

They both sat at the table. JJ was already seated. He ignored both and just covered his plate with food and started eating. Skye snuck a glance at him and then looked at Ryan. He shook his head. She stuck a piece of roast beef with her fork and put it in her mouth. As she ate, her mind wondered thinking about what exactly she had gotten herself into with this family. An eerie silence prevailed as everyone ignored each other.

After the dishes were done, which Skye had volunteered to do and Ryan had helped, Skye was sitting on her bed with her computer next to her. She was thinking about what Ryan said about people getting hurt and also thinking about what Mr. C had said about his wife. She reached into her jean pocket and pulled out the card. She had stuffed it in her pocket in the locker room after it had fallen out of her gym shorts while she was changing before Mrs. Brody had taken her to the doctor. She rolled it back and forth in her fingers. She finally made up her mind and dialed the number on the card. It rang 4 times and the answer machine picked up. Beep. She started talking.

"Yeah so this is Skye. I um...I am new here........and um Mr C, um Coulson....said you might be able to teach me self defense. Anyway, I'll maybe call back ...umm.. tomorrow.....I mean if you could teach me something ...maybe so I wouldn't be afraid of.....I mean I'm not really afraid...but...I ...so......I could defend myself....I'm not very athletic though..........or anything.......I mean I can fight ok, growing up in an orphanage and all but..........I never had to really defend.........well you know...............maybe I could clean to pay....I'm a good worker.....when I want to be...and so........um......but I have no money.....so yeah........anyway I'll just call..." Beep.

Hmmm that was real smooth. She shook her head. I sounded like an idiot. She tossed her phone on the bed and reached for her computer. She brought up the website for Melinda's Place. Not bad. She cruised the site. Decent graphics. Lots of pics. Cute pics with kids. Some shots of action, kids
and adults doing karate (or whatever it was). She paused as she got to the next picture. It was outside the building and Mr. C and who she guessed was his wife were standing under a sign saying Melinda's Place. His wife was Chinese. That was a surprise. She was also very beautiful. She was smiling but it was the woman's eyes that drew Skye in. Even though she had a smile on her face, it didn't reach her eyes. They looked haunted. Skye knew she had seen that look on someone before. Those eyes. It would be a long time till Skye figured out that the someone Melinda reminded her of was the person looking back at herself everyday in the mirror.

Skye looked at the clock which said 1:05. She had gone on to finish her homework after checking out the gym site. She shut down her computer and put it on the nightstand. She crawled under the covers and her last thought before falling asleep was of hoping the next day did not suck as much as today.

Melinda got to her gym early on Thursday. She didn't have a class until 10am but wanted to catch up on paperwork, and check her emails. She also needed to add another class since she had so many people waiting to join one. She didn't like new people coming to her classes in the middle of them unless the were transferring and could keep up. Problem was she already was teaching every day of the week except Sunday and her promise to only do Saturday mornings had been broken two years ago when she had added in two afternoon classes of teen self defense. She walked into her office throwing the stack of mail on it, sat down and switched on he computer. As she started going through the mail she switched on her phone messages. Her first two messages were sales calls. The third was from Roz asking to get together for coffer over the weekend. She made a note to call Roz back later that night. The fourth message had her stopping and just staring at the machine.

"Yeah so this is Skye. I um...I am new here........and um Mr C, um Coulson....said you might be able to teach me self defense. Anyway, I'll maybe call back ...umm.. tomorrow.......I mean if you could teach me something ...maybe so I wouldn't be afraid of.....I mean I'm not really afraid...but...I ...so......I could defend myself....I'm not very athletic though........or anything........I mean I can fight ok, growing up in an orphanage and all but...........I never had to really defend........well you know..............maybe I could clean to pay...I'm a good worker.....when I want to be...and so...........um......but I have no money.....so yeah...........anyway I'll just call..." Beep.

Melinda stared at the phone. She had really called. And sounded like she was upset. No that wasn't the word. Needy? No not quite right. Desperate? Yeah maybe a little. I mean who calls a complete stranger and tries to make a deal for a service? Well Phil did give her the idea. But honestly Melinda had shaken it off not really giving it another thought. Till now. The kid didn't leave a number, didn't even finish the message or call back to leave another. Melinda shook her head to clear her thoughts. She did need someone to help around here. But she was thinking more along the lines of another instructor and they could both clean up the place. She remembered she had received a few applications from her add last week and decided to check through them. By the time she finished them, finding one good potential candidate in the midst, it was nearly time for her first class to start arriving. She went to the locked room and quickly changed, put her hair in a pony tail and headed to the group gym room. She didn't think about the message from the girl until later that afternoon when the girl actually showed up in her gym. Of course it shouldn't have surprised her that she was escorted by her husband, who was grinning. They both stood in the back watching her teach a Tai Chi class for mostly older women. She finished the class giving instructions to them before turning and disappearing into her office. A few moments later after a knock on the door, Phil entered the small space followed by a nervous looking teenager, wearing a bandage on her left wrist and sporting a nice bruise on her cheek.

"Melinda. This is Skye. Skye, Melinda Coulson, my very beautiful wife. He smiled at her.
"Hello." Skye shuffled behind him and looked at Melinda.

She nodded. "Are you the same Skye who left an odd message on my answering machine late last night?"

Skye nodded. "Yeah I was........I mean.....I am..... I sort of ....I did...........I wanted to.....um ......he........well Mr. C said........"

Melinda laughed. Skye stopped stuttering and turned a little red. She looked down at her shoes.

"I hate talking to new people too. Talking is highly overrated."

Skye's head shot up as she saw the woman staring at her intently. The woman continued. "But talking is also necessary too so how about you and I talk about making a deal". She motioned for Skye to sit in the chair on the side of her desk while she sat down in hers. "Oh and honey?" Melinda looked at her still smiling goofball of a husband.

Phil raised his eyebrows and grinned at her. She continued. "The mats need to be wiped down, all of them and since I will be in here talking to Skye who you so kindly brought with you, you can do it." She smirked at him.

He sighed and gave in knowing this was a battle he would lose. "Of course dear." He left the room and Melinda gave him a very satisfied smile.

"So now Skye. What is it you wish to learn from me, and why do you want to do so?"

Skye sat still for a few moments. She wanted to impress this woman sitting in front of her, but she had no idea why. She wanted to say something profound and instead found herself blurting out these words. "I just want to stop being afraid." She winced. Shit. She didn't want to say that. Or did she?

Melinda looked at the girl taking in her appearance. She was small and skinny, probably too much so, and looked a little bedraggled in a pair of skinny jeans ripped in the legs, and an oversized shirt. Her bruised cheek and wrapped wrist made her look vulnerable. Melinda studied the girl's face as Skye shifted uncomfortably in the chair. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tale with some pieces of hair sticking out. But it was her eyes that Melinda focused on for a few moments, seeing something there that reminded her of a puppy that had been kicked around one too many times. Brown eyes locked onto brown eyes, and the brief glimpse of hope was not missed by Melinda. Then Skye looked down at her shoes.

"Maybe this was a stupid idea. I can just go." Skye mumbled and started dragging herself out of her chair." She stopped when Melinda quickly spoke up.

"Two lessons a week. One group/one private. You clean the gym four hours a week to pay. Mostly wiping down mats, sweeping up and cleaning the shower and baths. If you progress well enough we can revisit the deal in a month or so."

Skye slowly brought her head up to gaze at Melinda. "For real?"

"I don't say anything I don't mean Skye."

Looking at the woman Skye guessed that was true enough. Still she asked. "Why are you doing this."
"Honestly Skye I have no idea. But that idiot out there, is my idiot husband and for some reason he
thinks this is important. He thinks people are important."

Skye smirked at Melinda's word choice. "He is pretty cool. For a teacher."

Melinda's lips turned slightly. "He wants to save the world. Protect people."

Skye shrugged. "I'd just be happy to save myself from getting this again." She waved her arm
around.

Melinda glanced up at the girl again. No I think it goes far deeper than that she thought. But she let
it go. For now. "So we have a deal?" She pushed her chair back and got up. Skye stood up too.

"Deal."

"You want to start tonight? Or do you have somewhere to be?"

That threw Skye off balance. "Um tonight? I guess I could, but can I do it in this, I have no gym
clothes, or.........."

"You'll be fine for the first lesson. I'll introduce you to some Tai Chi. But next time wear some
kind of lose pants and top. You can stay an hour?"

"Just let me text the Brody's. Let them know."

"Good." Melinda got up and stood in the doorway. "Meet me back in the gym after you contact
them to find out if it's okay." Melinda walked out and made her way to where her husband was
kneeling down wiping gym mats.

Skye shot off a quick text to Ryan and then got up to follow Melinda out the door. She looked
around the gym as she made her way to stand in front of her new instructor and her teacher. Skye
grinned as Mr. C leaned in to kiss his wife's cheek and turned to wink at her. Melinda turned as
well.

She pointed to a doorway off to the right. "Over there - individual instruction room." Melinda
walked toward it as Mr. C. went back to cleaning the mats. Skye followed. Melinda turned back to
her husband before shutting the door behind them. "We'll be an hour then you can take her home."

Phil stood up looking at her and saluted. Then he grinned. "Yes, ma'am." She rolled her eyes at him
and slammed the door shut.
Skye watched as the women closed the door behind her after giving her husband a smirk. She motioned for Skye to follow onto the mat already laid out on the floor.

"Take off you sneakers and step onto the mat please."

Skye did as she was told. Melinda stood in front of her and gazed at her.

"We will start with Tai Chi. See how that goes. Then I'll walk you through some strength training in the equipment room. So watch what I do and try to follow along. I'll go slow, standing in front of you, you mimic me as I do the motions and then repeat while I watch and I'll correct you if needed."

Skye nodded. Melinda backed away a bit. She started with a simple movement and Skye did the same thing.

"Now you try it yourself."

Skye moved again trying to do what she remembered Melinda doing. Melinda smiled and moved toward her.

"You are too stiff Skye. You need to relax." Melinda reached across Skye’s to fix her left arm. "This position needs to just be natural. Like this."

As Melinda adjusted her a bit and got her to stand correctly she started explaining what Tai Chi was for. Skye listened. They continued to go over more movements and eventually Skye was doing 8 separate movements that transitioned into each previous one. She really was doing it. It was slow and tedious and Skye was surprised when she realized 45 minutes had passed.

"So okay. You need to practice these every day. A few times each day Skye."

Skye nodded. "What if I forget how to once I leave?"

"You won't. You did well. I added only enough and did enough that your body should remember. If by chance you forget one just do what you remember. Be careful of your wrist, but you should be fine with what I taught you. Put your sneakers back on." Skye did and then she followed Melinda back out of the room and into another room that held exercise equipment. Melinda looked back to assess Skye again and then led her to a treadmill.

"Two miles. Get on it and I'll show you how to set it. Then you'll do a little weight lifting with your legs. You need strong flexible muscles to do martial arts."

Thirty minutes later after running two miles, well she did walk half of one; and doing leg lifts on the machine, Skye was tired. Her legs burned and she knew Melinda saw, even though she tried to mask her discomfort. To her credit Melinda did not say anything about Skye's physical state or
rather lack of but simply walked with her out of the room to find Phil.

"How did it go?" Phil asked Skye the question when they found him in Melinda's office.

"Good." It was Melinda who answered. "She shows promise."

Melinda turned to Skye. "Phil will take you home. Can you be here Saturday at one? You can clean first while I finish my last class and then we'll do more training."

Skye nodded as she answered. "Yes. One o'clock is fine.

Skye sat on her bed mulling over what had just happened tonight. She had left that awful, confused message last night on Melinda May's phone and figured that nothing would come of it. Today in school, nothing much had happened. She got to spend gym period in the library and caught up on her computer class work. They had a quiz in English class, which she aced; and at lunch Thomas, Jemma and Leo had talked about movies and music after they had all checked that she was okay. It was while she was walking home with Ryan, that her day got interesting. Mr. Coulson had driven by them and stopped to talk. He had convinced her to get in his car, and go with him to his wife's gym or dojo or whatever it was. And then that whole thing had happened. She had come home to an empty house which was fine cause she had not wanted to really talk about anything with anyone.

Now hours later she kept thinking about Tai Chi and Melinda May. She had actually been able to do the Tai Chi moves with some helpful positioning from Melinda. She found that she had liked it. She was looking forward to the next class on Saturday. Her mind was racing as she relived the night, when there was a knock on her door.

"Skye can I come in?" It was Ryan.

"Yeah sure."

Ryan opened the door and came over to her bed. He plopped down on the side of the mattress. "So how'd it go. With Mrs. Coulson?"

He had been part of the conversation with Mr. C earlier and had actually encouraged her to go.

"Good. I think I like it. I'm going back on Saturday."

"So what's Mrs. C like. Is she like Mr. C? All warm and funny and kind?"

Skye laughed. "Not really. She's kind of badass and doesn't take his shit. But you can tell they love each other. A lot."

"How can you tell that after one meeting Skye?"

"When you grow up with that missing you tend to be able to see it when it's real. She is beautiful, and really in shape and no nonsense. Says what needs saying and that's it. Expects you to do your best, and knows her stuff. I just want to learn to defend myself and I think she is my best shot."

"Look Skye. If you don't make waves you won't need to defend yourself. Just stay low key. Out of everyone's way and just stick to your own business. Don't be looking for trouble."

"Hey. I wasn't looking Ryan. It found me. It usually does. Next time though I want to be ready. I'm not gonna let anyone push me anymore. You should try that too. You know the more of us that
stick together the stronger we can be."

Ryan sighed. "It's just not that simple. You'll see."

Skye hit his arm. "Hey Ry? You can't let others walk over you. Even if one of them is your brother."

"Look I don't want to fight about it. Just try to stay away from that crowd." He stood up. "So far it's the best easiest and best solution. Then you won't have to use self defense. Don't go looking for trouble. They'll leave you alone now since they sent their message. I don't want to see you get hurt again."

"That's sweet. But I don't plan on getting hurt. So anyway, you think your parents would be okay with me being away all Saturday afternoon? Should I tell them or ask them. Still not sure what they want from me."

"Tell them. Don't lie but you can leave out details. Dad will probably be glad you are doing something, and mom will not care as long as you get your chores done first. I'm gonna go to bed. I'll walk with you to school tomorrow, I don't need to leave early like today. Goodnight."

"Okay sounds good. Night Ryan." He closed the door behind him. Skye got up and got her backpack ready for school and slipped into her pajamas. She slid into bed under the covers and before she fell asleep, she went over in her mind each move she had learned form Melinda.

Melinda crawled into bed and cuddled up to Phil. It was getting colder and she shivered a little as she hugged him for his body heat. Soon they would have to turn the heat on in the house. He pulled her tighter and they just lay there together in a comfortable silence.

A few minutes later Phil whispered to her, "thank you."

"She turned her head up to look at him raising her eyebrows. "For what."

"Helping Skye."

"I had a choice?" A slow smirk spread across her face.

"You always have a choice Mel. You always choose compassion."

She swatted his shoulder playfully. "You think you know me so well."

He grinned. Damn she was sexy. He could feel her body flush against his and he could feel himself getting aroused. Of course, around Melinda that happened all the time when she touched him. He reached down to kiss her on her cheek and smiled. She turned her head and she winked. He crashed his lips to hers and felt her shift and swing her legs up over his pressing her body down into his. As he came up for air he stroked her back with his right hand as his left reached lower as she nuzzled her face to his neck and started peppering him with kisses. He grinned as he felt her bite his neck and his last coherent thought was how he was going to have a tough time covering that up at school tomorrow.

Melinda laid in her lover's arms and just rested in his love and safety. He was snoring quietly and she glanced at his face. Even in his sleep Phil looked content. She smiled. She loved him so much. She had never thought she could love anyone more and then she had given birth to Jamey. Every maternal instinct she had heard others talk about had kicked in and her heart had exploded at the
mere sight of seeing him for the first time. That was 13 years ago and it felt like only yesterday. So did the accident. Afterward, she had not grieved properly having to also deal with Phil's injuries and waiting to see if he would recover. Eventually he had and by that time she had pushed herself away from every thing and everyone except Phil. She had quit her job at the FBI much to the dismay of her captain and for the first year had taken care of Phil. His injuries had him in and out of the hospital for almost six months with therapy and more recovery an additional four months. He missed an entire year of school. Melinda had taken all her built up vacation and other time off and Phil as well and they had depleted their savings.

After Phil went back to work the following year, Melinda got a job as a security consultant which allowed her to pick her own hours. In a few years, they were financially back on their feet, enough so that Phil had suggested Melinda try for her dream and open the dojo/gym in town. They searched for a year until they found the old building and took out a loan against their house to pay for the building and the construction work to fix it into a place suitable for martial arts lessons. Four years after the death of her son, Melinda officially opened Melinda's Place. Phil had thrown out the idea to call the business after their son in his memory but Melinda had shot that down quickly. She did not need an external reminder of all she had lost, her internal reminders were ingrained in her entire being. Her business had built up nicely and quickly with recommendations from her former co-workers at the agency and from the local police department. In fact, it had grown so much that she really needed another instructor.

Melinda made a mental note to herself to call the applicant she had approved of to set up an interview. She also thought about the young girl that had shown up with Phil and couldn't shake the thought that there was much more to the girl then met the eye. Her answer of wanting to not be scared intrigued Melinda. It intrigued her and made her wary at the same time. The girl had shown potential. If one thing Melinda knew from teaching the kids and teens, she could tell when they were there because they wanted to be or because their parent wanted them to be. It was much easier teaching an eager learner and Skye appeared to be just that. Phil mumbled something and wrapped his arms tighter around her. She smiled and pressed in closer to his space as she drifted off to sleep.

Skye woke up as the alarm blared on her phone. She grabbed the offending thing and slammed it off. She sat up her eyes bleary and the room still dark. Gads she hated mornings. And being up in the morning when it was still dark outside sucked. She threw the blankets off her body and moved to get off the bed. Ouch. Shit. She stopped moving and glanced at her legs. Ouch. They freaking hurt and they felt tight. She flexed them and immediately regretted it as her right calf twisted into a knot. Pain shot up and down her leg as the charley horse took full hold. She squealed and tried to grab her leg as she pushed herself to the edge of the bed. She managed to get her foot to the floor and rubbing her calf she tried desperately to relax her muscle. She straightened her foot and flexed the arch up to counter the knot in her calf. After a few more moments of frantic rubbing, cursing, and stretching she finally was able to straighten her leg and limp to the bathroom. She returned to her room grabbing her clothes and toiletries and made her way back to the bathroom with only a slight limp. She got under the hot water and sighed happily as the water helped ease her sore muscles. Her previous lack of physical exertion of any kind recently was rearing its’ ugly head and biting her in her ass, metaphorically of course. She giggled, and then full out laughed at the absurdity of it all.

After drying off and dressing she moved a comb threw her wayward hair and then pulled it into a ponytail. She had put on a pair of skinny jeans, and an old sweatshirt along with pulling on her high tops. She glanced in the mirror and gave herself a thumbs up at her casual attire. She grabbed her backpack and hopped down the steps, making her way into the kitchen. She dropped her backpack on a chair noticing she was the only one there. She grabbed two bagels and popped them in the
toaster. She got out the cream cheese and orange juice. She poured 2 glasses of juice and when the bagels popped up spread a good amount of cream cheese on them. She carried the 2 plates to the table, went back to grab a banana and the two glasses and brought them over too. She sat down and took one bite of her bagel when Ryan came running into the kitchen. He stopped just short in front of the table and saw Skye with the stuff already at the table. He smiled and sat down picking up the bagel.

"Thanks."

She smiled at him and took another bite of her bagel. They scarfed everything down and Skye put the dishes in the sink as Ryan ran back upstairs for the backpack he had forgotten. They both made their way out of the house and walked side by side down the driveway, turning right to head to school.

"Damn. I am so glad it's Friday." Ryan spoke up. "Not that the weekend is gonna be anything to write home about since I have this stinking huge bio test to study for and a English paper to write."

"You start the paper yet?"

Ryan glared at her. "No. I hate English. I hate the teacher and I hate the book."

Skye laughed. "Sounds to me like someone shouldn't have waited till the last minute."

"Oh shut up. I know what I want to say, I just have a hard time putting in down on paper. Know what I mean?"

"Not really. I can usually bullshit my way through any paper. It's a gift." She grinned back at him.

"Suck up."

Skye laughed. "Yeah that's me. Actually it's just easy for me. You know like for you guys and science. I still don't know what the hell an amoeba is."

Ryan smirked. "Speaking of, how is your bio class going. It's an applied one right?"

"Stop laughing at me. Bio sucks. And cause I sucked at science last school they put me in that lower class. Only good thing is I might be the smartest one there." They both laughed. Skye quieted for a moment. "Hey Ryan help get me through Bio and I'll help you with your papers. Deal?"

"Now that is the best deal I've heard in a long time." He held out his hand waiting for hers. She shook her head at him but shook his hand anyway. They turned into the school drive and Skye saw Raina and her friends watching them. Ryan saw too and he grabbed Skye's arm and ushered her to her left to go the long way around to the entrance. She scowled at him but followed his lead. They entered the school and Skye headed off to the library while Ryan walked to his dreaded English class.

It was lunchtime and Skye was eyeing her lunch trepidly. It appeared to be a bowl of mashed potatoes with corn over them and small pieces of chicken on the top with a drizzle of gravy over everything. Thomas sat next to her, and sat his own tray down. He followed her gaze since she had not looked at him and he laughed.

"Tiger bowl."

She glanced at him warily. "Yeah I know that's what it said. Why is everything mushed together?"
"It's a copy of Kentucky Fried Chicken's bowls. But obviously much smaller."

Skye shook her head and got her fork and stabbed a piece of chicken. "I don't think the chicken likes being in there."

Thomas laughed. Just then Jemma sat down and smiled at them both. She had a packed lunch. She always packed her lunch. She started pulling her food out as Thomas and Skye watched. It was always interesting to see what Jemma had packed each day.

As she pulled things from her lunch box, she spoke to them. "Hello Skye. Thomas. Fitz is in the lab working and won't be at lunch. He said he'll grab something during his free period after Trig. What are you staring at?"

She had finally noticed her two friends watching her.

"Um Jemma, you pulled like 8 things out so far."


Skye sighed. Looks better than mine. I hate food all mixed together."

"You could have taken the pizza Skye." Jemma said as she spread the jam.

Thomas and Skye shared a look. "It's that round yucky pizza Jems." Thomas added.

"Oh yes. Fitz hates that kind as well. I suppose you can eat the other stuff that comes with Skye."

Skye smiled. "Yeah I love apricots, and brussel sprouts."

Even Jemma made a face at that. "Here Skye." Jemma offered her muffin over.

"Uh no Jemma. I didn't mean that. I'm okay."

"Please take it Skye. I have more than enough anyway." Jemma held it out to her and Skye reluctantly took it.

"Thank you."

"You are quite welcome. What else are friends for?"

Skye smiled. She bit into the muffin and sighed in contentment. It was fabulous. Both the muffin and having friends.

After lunch Skye went to her Geometry class and then to Biology and then she had Spanish class. She waited for Ryan at the end of the day at the school entrance and they walked home together.

Skye did her chores and finished her homework for something to do later on after dinner. They had all eaten dinner together and this one was actually pleasant with everyone making small talk. Anne Brody seemed relatively sober, at least to Skye, and even she was joking around a bit. All and all it had been a good day. Skye had found Ryan playing video games and talked him into watching a movie with her. They watched the first Bourne movie and Ryan even made popcorn for both. After Skye promised Ryan she'd help him with his paper Saturday after she got back home, then she simply went to bed early. She was looking forward to going to Melinda's Place the next day.
Melinda had a full day of classes on Friday, from 8am to 5pm. She was beat. She and Phil had settled down to watch the basketball game which Phil loved and Melinda put up with for him. She fell asleep before half time. Phil nudged her awake and then guided her up to bed. She collapsed into bed and fell back to sleep almost immediately. She barely noticed the bed move when Phil joined her a few hours later. She instinctively curled into his side as he put his arm around her waste. She was in that same position when she woke in the morning. She checked the clock and saw it said 5am. She pulled out from under Phil's arm and quietly got up and went into the bathroom. After, she slipped on some yoga pants and one of Phils' too large T-shirts she made her way downstairs to do her Tai Chi. She only had 4 classes today plus the girl was supposed to come at one. She had called the applicant yesterday and that interview was set up for 4pm. She knew it unusual to do interviews on Saturdays but she really needed to position filled. That she had fallen asleep exhausted by nine last night exemplified that to her. Melinda finished up her Tai Chi and went to take a shower. She had a full day ahead of her and looked forward to the end when she could relax with Phil.

Skye had gotten up at early and finished all her chores. She even did a couple loads of laundry and folded it for Anne, who seemed very grateful. When Skye told her she was going across town to take a martial arts lesson, Anne had simply nodded and stuck a ten in her hand for the bus. Skye had smiled and thanked her.

Skye was now riding her second bus. She had walked almost a mile to the bus stop and after getting dropped off at a transfer point she had hopped another bus that would drop her only two blocks from Melinda's Place. It was 12:30 and she would be early. Good. Better than late. Skye knew when people were doing kind things for you nothing pissed them off more than when you were late. The bus came to a stop and Skye got off. She looked around as she walked and realized that she was in a not that friendly feeling area of town. It had a few run down buildings, and a few guys hanging out making catcalls to her as she walked. She picked up speed and kept her head down. Soon she was standing in front of Melinda's Place. She walked in and headed to the main room. Melinda was teaching a class of younger kids and many parents were also standing in the back watching. She waited with them and soon the class was over as kids were escorted by their parents out. Melinda waved at Skye and motioned her over.

"The mats in the small individual room you were in Thursday and al the exercise equipment needs wiping off first Skye. The cleaning supplies are in the weight and equipment room, clearly marked what is for what along with rags, buckets and paper towels. Also I have gloves for you to use. I have a class coming in a few minutes so you start there. If you get done I also have garbage bags there, you can collect you trash from cleaning and the trash cans around the building and take the trash to the bin in the back of the parking lot. You okay with that?"

Skye nodded. She walked into the equipment/weight room and did what Melinda said. As she was finishing collecting the trash she walked out into the main room and was surprised to see the group was teens around her age. It as small, she counted only 7 students. One in particular, caught her eye mostly cause he was staring at her. He had dark blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Blue eyes that appeared to be twinkling at her. She stared and he broke into a grin. She smiled back. He was really cute. He winked at her.

"Lincoln you want to pay attention please. You are two moves behind." Melinda raised her eyebrows at her star pupil.

"Oh I think he's a few moves ahead of the game Miss May." This came from Trip. Not that I blame him one bit." The rest of the class broke into laughter as Skye turned red. Melinda glanced at Lincoln to follow his gaze and saw Skye looking a bit mortified at the attention.
Lincoln to his credit looked actually looked embarrassed and turned his attention back to his teacher. "Sorry Miss May but I was distracted."

Skye looked at Melinda and hurried into her office looking for trash bins. Melinda suppressed her laughter at the antics of her hormonal teenage students.

She walked in front of Lincoln. "Distractions make you lose."

He saluted her. "Copy that."

She gazed at him. He never saw her coming. He blinked rapidly at her from the floor. "Distractions and being a wise ass will allow me to do that each and every time."

Skye had returned to the room after emptying the trash bin just in time to see little Melinda May take down the over 6 foot tall cute guy. She laughed. Lincoln turned toward her as he pulled himself up and laughed along with her.

He bowed to Melinda and set himself in position. He tried to totally ignore the sound of laughter coming from the beautiful girl but his grin gave him away. He would definitely need to find out more about her.

Skye turned to walk out of the room. She walked outside and threw the bag into the trash bin. She had seen Trip from her computer class was there and figured she'd grill him on Monday on just who the cute tall guy who winked at her was. Lincoln is what Melinda had called him. She grinned. Lincoln was a cute name.
Skye checked the clock in the exercise room. It read 3:15. She was running on the treadmill to finish her lesson and she was on her last mile. Her leg muscles were screaming at her. Melinda had taken her through a Tai Chi session, and then actually taught her a few easy self defense moves. Then she had done some leg weight training and was now running the two miles Melinda told her to do, while Melinda was running next to her on the other treadmill. She glanced over quickly and saw that Melinda had barely broken a sweat and was not breathing heavy like she was. Damn the older woman was in shape. Only half a mile to go she told herself.

Melinda smiled to herself as she saw the girl sneak a glance at her. Skye was breathing pretty heavy and sweat dripping down her face. She would get there. Melinda had already run 3 miles and was on her fourth while Skye was just about to finish up her second. Melinda stopped when she saw Skye stop, and Melinda ran her through some end stretches to prevent the girl's muscles from cramping up. Skye had told her about her leg cramp on Friday morning.

"So you should run every day. Start with two miles. After a month we'll see where you are at and perhaps add another mile. That way you can skip that part the days you come here. We will still do some strength training with the defense lessons and Tai Chi."

"Okay. I can do that." Skye smiled. That Miss May was telling her that, meant she was going to continue the lessons. Skye had been worried she would tell her to come back and pay like everyone else, especially when Miss May saw how out of shape she was in.

"I did all the cleaning you asked but if you need me to do something else I can. The bus doesn't come till 4:30."

At that Melinda frowned. She hadn't know the girl had taken the bus. It did make sense though. She did hope the girl had told her foster parents what she was doing. The last thing Melinda needed was to be in the middle of some family type mess.

"Your foster parents know you're here right?" Might as well cut to the chase.

"Yeah. Mrs. Brody gave me money for the bus. I did all my chores at the house this morning first before coming."

Chores? Taking the bus. And cleaning for her. Plus the over hour long workout she had taken the girl through. Melinda grew introspective. This girl must really want this. "You have homework to do yet as well?"

Skye followed along with Miss May stretching as she did what Melinda did. "Yeah some. Reading in history mostly." She smirked at Miss May. " A little biology to study. I promised Ryan, he's the
Brody's son, that I'd help him with his English paper."

"Is he making you write it for him?"

Skye looked up in surprise. "Oh no, nothing like that. He promised to help me study for bio if I helped him with English. I suck at bio and he sucks at writing. He's my friend."

Melinda nodded. "That's good."

Skye felt a warm glow in her chest realizing that Miss May was concerned she was being taken advantage of. She smiled and continued talking. "Ry's a good guy. It's his brother JJ who is the asswipe."

Melinda looked up and raised her eyebrows. By this time they were both done stretching. "That's sounds like a story."

"Uh yeah. Anyway JJ is like the football star and everyone loves him and he and his jerk friends think they run the school and so there's that."

Skye followed Miss May's lead and sat at the bench. She passed Skye a water bottle. Skye took a big swallow and continued. "Anyway this," She held up her still bandaged wrist, "I got apparently as a warning to toe the line and be a good little nerd and I would be okay. So of course me being me, instead decided to do this." She spread her arms around for emphasis. "Get in shape and learn how to defend myself. Cause I don't like being told what to do, and even more I hate bullies. So yeah."

Melinda took a drink and digested what the young girl had just opened up to her about. She glance over at the girl who was now looking at her sneakers. She smiled.

"Well then I suppose we should step up your lessons. How about two nights a week and Saturdays? After a month maybe you can even join the teen group at one o'clock on Saturday. Think you can spare the time?"

Skye looked up and turned to Miss May. "Really?"

"Really. I told you before I don't say anything I don't mean. How about Tuesday after school and Thursday after school plus Saturday's at twelve? You come with my husband Tuesday and Thursday. Tuesday you clean till 5 and then a lesson with me, Thursday lesson at 4, Saturday at 12 you clean then you sit and watch my 1 o clock class, and then after that another lesson. Sound fair to you?"

"Yes. It sounds amazing."

"Well check with your foster parents first. Call and let me know they said it was okay. And you need to run every day."

"I will. Check I mean. And run. I promise."

Melinda smiled at her enthusiasm. She checked the time. "But right now I have a prospective employee coming for an interview. So I'll see you next week."

"Okay. Miss May could I just stay out there in the big room and wait. Cause I don't want to wait at the bus stop an hour and on the way here there were some guys who ......"

"Yes. You can wait. In fact, before you go make sure you tell me, I can drive you the few blocks to
it. It will be dusk then anyway."

"Oh that's okay I don't want to be any more trouble than......."

"That's an order Skye. You wait here and I'll take you. Okay?"

Skye slowly nodded.

"Good." Melinda got up and walked to her office. Skye wondered out after her to the large gym room and sat against the wall.

A few minutes later Skye looked up as a woman entered the main gym door. The woman saw Skye and walked toward her. "Can you tell me where Melinda May is?" She had a slight accent that Skye could not place.

Melinda must have been on the lookout, cause Skye saw her step out of her office. Skye pointed in her direction. The woman turned and saw Melinda and made her way to the office.

Melinda reached out her hand as the woman stood in front of her. "I'm Melinda May. Glad you could make it on such short notice."

The woman shook Melinda's hand and smiled. "Oh no, I thank you much for the interview. I am Natasha Romanoff."

The woman was small, shorter than Melinda even, and had bright red hair. Her smile lit up her face and she looked at Melinda with her bright green eyes.

"Oh come on in my office." As the woman entered the room Melinda looked over to Skye who smiled at her. She smiled back, entered her office and closed the door.

"So your resume was impressive. You have a black belt in karate dan level 2 and a black belt 4 dan level in judo. Your Judo level is higher than mine. And you are only 28 years old. Quite impressive actually."

"I am quick study and hard worker. Plus Russia likes to win Olympic medals yes." Her voice carried a slight Russian accent.

"So you are going to the University here as well. Studying Criminal Justice."

The redhead nodded. "Yes I am interested in joining your FBI or something. It fascinates me, the American justice system. I need a job to help pay for rent. My cousins allow me to live with them but I no longer want to be a burden."

"How long have you lived here, in America?"

"Almost four years. I first lived in Germany after leaving Russia. But I come over to here after I get an invite from my cousin. I have grown to love it here. I plan to become citizen soon."

"You are in your 3rd year at school?"

"Yes. This one and next one than I graduate. Get degree. Get citizenship. Apply to police force. Or maybe FBI."

"Your English is exceptional."

"I live in America now. I need to speak the language. Fit in. It good here." Melinda smiled.
"Well your skills appear to be what I need here. Your recommendations are excellent. As for salary - you would get $15/hour to start, if that is acceptable. When can you start?"

"Today. I could start now."

"Um well I have to fill out paperwork and you need to sign some as well. How about I get everything ready and you come in Monday at, say 3:00pm and we take care of finishing that and you can start Tuesday at 4pm. We'll work out more details on Monday. It says in your resume you can work Saturday and Sunday all hours, and after 3pm weekdays. Is that still okay?"

"Yes, that fine. I go to school in morning and early afternoon."

"Okay then. I can only offer about 25 hours a week for now. Most of that on the weekends. Still okay?"

"Yes. Thank you um... Mrs. May."

"Melinda is fine Natasha. We are not very formal here. My husband will be overjoyed. He thinks I work too much."

"Okay Miss Melinda." Melinda smiled. She looked up as she heard a knock on the door. Skye. She glanced at her clock which said 4:22.

"Come in Skye."

Skye hesitantly opened the door. "I'm sorry Miss May. But you said to let you know when I had to leave, and I kinda have to...."

"It's okay Skye. We were wrapping up anyway. Skye this is Natasha Romanoff, my new assistant instructor. Natasha - this is Skye, a new student."

Skye stuck out her hand and smiled. Natasha shook it.

"It is good to meet student. Hello Skye."

"Hi."

"So Natasha, I will see you back here at 3 on Monday. And Skye we are never going to make the bus stop till I lock up and all so I will just drive you home tonight. Get your things, as I see Natasha out, and then go turn off the bath and shower lights and exercise room lights for me okay."

"Um sure but I can still make the bus if I run down, and you can just....."

Melinda gave her an annoyed look. "Skye please just do what I said. You are not walking down there by yourself at dusk in this neighborhood. Natasha did you drive?" She started walking to the door with Natasha while Skye headed off in the opposite direction.

"Oh no I have no car yet, but my cousin, he is waiting in your lot for me."

"Okay good." They had reached the door and Melinda held out her hand again. Natasha shook it. "It was nice to meet you Natasha and I look forward to having you be a part of this place."

"Thank you so much Miss Melinda." She turned to go out the door while Melinda headed back to her office. She put her jacket on, and then grabbed the folder with Natasha's paperwork, and her backpack, turned off the light and closed and locked the door. She grabbed for her keys in her backpack and headed to the main room. Skye showed up at the same time. "You got all the lights...."
back there, right?"

Skye nodded. "Yep everything's out."

"Okay just let me set the alarm and we can head out." They both walked to the foyer area and Melinda set the alarm. The exited the building and Melinda locked the front doors.

"You don't lock the back?"

"They are always locked Skye. You can just get out but not in. Fire safety. Now they are all hooked into the alarm too." She glanced at the girl. "Where's your jacket?"

"Oh I didn't wear one. It was nice coming here."

"Well it's late October Skye. You need to wear a jacket." Melinda admonished the girl while they made their way to her vehicle. Skye rolled her eyes. Melinda unlocked the SUV and they got in, Skye sitting in the front passenger seat, Melinda in the driver's. "Buckle up." It was an order not a suggestion. Skye pulled the seatbelt around her setting her backpack at her feet on the floor.

"So where am I going?" Melinda glanced at the clock on the dashboard noting the time of 4:35.

Skye got back at 5:15. It would have been sooner except she gave Melinda wrong directions and Melinda had to backtrack a bit to get her home. She felt horrible for that. But all the landmarks looked different as it was turning dark. Melinda had shrugged it off, saying it was fine. But Skye figured she had to be a little pissed. After all, she had gone out of her way to be nice to Skye and Skye had caused her trouble by being an idiot.

Only Anne was home, and she was sitting on the couch in the living room, watching TV.

Skye paused as she stood in the doorway. "Oh hey I'm back." She walked over to hand the remaining $5.50 to the woman. "Thanks again."

Anne Brody looked at the girl with indifference. "Keep it. Use it next time." She shrugged Skye's hand away from her. "Fend for yourself for dinner. Jason and JJ are out at some sport thing, and Ryan is at Thomas's house." Anne picked up a glass as she went back to her show ignoring any more interaction with Skye.

Skye pocketed the change and headed to the kitchen. She got out a pan and made herself scrambled eggs and toast. She ate quickly, and then cleaned up both her dishes and the rest in the sink. She wiped the counters down, and then grabbed a glass of iced tea and headed to her room. She set the tea down and then went and grabbed a quick shower. After drying her hair and throwing on sweats she sat on her bed leaning back onto the propped up pillows to read her history homework. It was about an hour later when there was a knock on her door.

"Yeah come in."

Ryan opened the door and walked to her bed and plopped down on it. "Hey how long have you been home?"

"Since around five."

"I went to Thomas's to hang out and play video games. His mom fed us before I came home. Did you eat Skye?"
"I made eggs. I'm good. Did you want help with your paper now?"

"Uh yeah sounds good. Let me get my stuff and something to drink. Kay?" Skye nodded. He bolted out of her room. Skye finished the paragraph she was on and then dropped her book on the floor. She figured she'd finish reading her history assignment before she went to sleep.

The rest of the night consisted of Skye editing and rewriting practically everything Ryan wrote on the computer. At 11 o'clock Skye finally had enough and tossed him and his paper out of her room. Well not literally but she made him leave.

"I'm done. You have 3/4 done Ry, I'll help tomorrow. You need to help me with bio tomorrow too."

"Yeah okay. I'm gonna write out the rest before bed and you can check it over tomorrow,"

"Sounds like a plan. Good night." After Ryan left her room, Skye got ready for bed. She sat up and reached for her history book and tried to keep her eyes open long enough to finish the reading. After 15 minutes she gave up since nothing she read made sense. She set the book back on the floor, wiggled under her blankets and fell off to sleep.

After dropping Skye off her house, Melinda stopped for Chinese take out that she called for on her cell phone. There was a little place that served excellent, authentic Chinese food, and was a place Melinda frequented. She pulled into her driveway and sighed. It was 6:00 on a Saturday night and all she wanted to do was eat, take a hot bath and go to bed. She must be getting old she thought. She made her way to the kitchen and dropped the bag of take out on the table. As shrugged off her jacket and threw it on the back of a chair.

"Hey beautiful."

She grinned and waved to her husband. "I look like shit Phil." She ran her fingers through her dirty hair and looked down at her sweats and overlarge T-shirt covering her body.

"You look fine to me. Sexy even."

She started pulling containers out of the large bag. "I brought food."

Phil smiled and turned to the cupboard to get some plates. "Wine?"

She glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "I think I'll stick to tea. I'm so tired the wine might put me to sleep."

"Yeah about that Melinda. You remember when we decided you would not work weekends? And then when you started working weekends that you said only mornings. You do know what time it is right?"

"Skye came after my teen class."

"Oh. That's right. How'd that go?"

"Good. She's tough. A good learner. Good attitude. I also dropped her at her house so she didn't have to take the bus."

They both sat at the table putting various food on their plates. Phil gave Melinda a water bottle. He
had the kettle on for tea.

"Okay but you still work too hard Mel. Too many hours. You need to stop adding classes. People will just have to wait for spots to open. You cannot keep saying yes to everyone."

She tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. "You mean saying yes to people like Skye?"

He gave her a sheepish grin. "Well I mean.....she needed.... "

She laughed at his stuttering. "It's okay Phil. Skye is fine. Oh and by the way, I finally looked at those resumes for a part time assistant instructor."

"You did? Mel that's great! That's what I mean. Give him your Sat and Sun and late night classes."

"Him?" Melinda smirked.

"Oh, or her. I don't care Mel. A warm body so I can hold your warm body more. That's all I want."

Melinda snorted. "Selfish reasons eh?"

"Damn right. I miss my little ninja."

"Well then it's a good thing I hired someone today. That's why I was even later Phil. I found a promising resume from a woman, and interviewed her today at four."

"You hired her?"

"Yep. She had an exceptional resume. And had all the clearance paperwork up to date. She's Russian."

At the last word, Phil's eyes widened as he waited for more from his wife. She obliged.

"She's young, only 28, a college student. She can work nights and weekends. She's a higher dan level in judo than me Phil. Speaks English well, with just a hint of an accent. We talked, I was impressed, so I offered her the job. Fifteen dollars an hour for a twenty five hour week. If she can do well I will increase that after a month. She's only been here in America for four years. Oh and you will love this. She wants to be an FBI agent or something like that. She's studying Criminal Justice."

"Did you tell her you are a former agent Melinda?"

"Didn't come up."

"So she seems trustworthy? Safe? Honest?"

"Yes to all of the above."

"Okay then. You always were a good judge of character."

"Well she is coming in Monday to do her paperwork and then she starts Tuesday. You can meet her then."

"Tuesday. After school. You want me to come by then?"

Every Tuesday. And Thursday. You'll be bringing Skye for her lessons."
"I will be......what Melinda? You tell her that?"

"I did. You can bring Skye Tuesdays and Thursdays and I'll take her home. I'll have her sessions while Natasha teaches my groups. I don't want her riding the bus or standing at that bus stop alone. She's only fourteen, and in the dark, well it's not like the gym is in the best part of town. It's safe for me, but I drive to the parking lot, I don't walk four blocks."

"Well and yeah anyone who messes with you is coming out on the losing end of that fight." He smiled warmly at his ninja wife. "So Natasha's her name?"

"Yes. Natasha Romanoff. Red hair to match the fiery personality that I saw. I think she will make a nice fit Phil. I like her already."

They finished their dinner to light flirtatious banter and after cleaning up, they retired to the living room to watch a movie. Melinda did have two glasses of wine then as they watched two older James Bond movies. It was almost midnight when they went to bed, and Melinda fell asleep with Phil's arm around her, almost the moment her head connected with her pillow.

Sunday passed by quickly for Skye. She started the day by getting up at 8am and going for a run. After a quick breakfast, she finished her history reading and homework, finished editing Ryan's paper, and studied bio with Ryan's help. She called Jemma and set up Skype with her and they spent over an hour talking, mostly about Dr. Who. At four o'clock, Sharon Carter came to the house to do her weekly check on the foster home and on Skye. Skye was positive about everything, did not mention her gym class fiasco, and decided to not mention JJ and his friends either. Ms. Carter seemed very glad to get a good report from her and the Brody's. Skye worked on her Tai Chi before going to bed, even getting to bed at the decent hour of 11:00pm. She lay awake for a little with a smile, thinking that maybe, just maybe she had found a place to stay for a long time.

Sunday morning found Melinda sleeping in. She did not wake until 11am. Phil grinned as she plopped herself in the chair after making her way to the kitchen. "It's almost afternoon Phillip. Why'd you let me sleep so late."

"Do I look like the kind of person who would wake a sleeping bear."

"Are you comparing me to a bear Phillip?"

"A teddy bear? A sweet cuddly teddy bear, Melinda." He set her tea down and then ducked out of her way as she swatted at him good naturedly.

He grinned bigger. "A tired, not very coordinated sweet cuddly teddy bear."

"Oh shut up." Her lips threatened to form a smile.

"What? Is the cuddly teddy bear grumpy today?"

"Phil you are so going to...."

"I'll make waffles Melinda. In the Mickey Mouse waffle maker. Come on you cannot stay grumpy over Mickey waffles."

Her face betrayed her as a smile formed. "How old are you again?"
"Oh you love me so much. And not just for my Mickey waffles either."

"Add Strawberries and whipped cream and I might just let you have your way with me." She grinned wickedly at him.

He dropped the bag of flour, as his mouth hung open.

She looked at him and winked. "Or we could skip the waffles and just have strawberries and whipped cream." She smirked as her nerd turned red.

"Um.....I .... need........to ...shower."

She got up quickly and stood in front of him. She dropped her robe to the floor. "Oh you will Phil. But after, when you are all sticky would be better. We could do that together too." Phil's eyes widened as he gazed at his little naked ninja.

It was three in the afternoon when Phil finally made his waffles. They had to use syrup cause, well, cause the strawberries and cream were gone.

Melinda had to go into her gym at 6pm for one class. A beginner self defense class. This was one she would be turning over to Natasha. She hoped that Natasha proved to be trustworthy cause she really hated working on Sundays. Her plan was to eventually have Natasha teach from 12-7 on Sundays and add in all the new classes she had not been able to before, add in all the people on the waiting list.

Melinda found herself crawling into bed on Sunday night at 10:00pm. Phil stayed up to watch a football game. Melinda hated football. She fell asleep and did not awake when Phil climbed into bed only an hour later.

Monday morning arrived. The start of a new week. As Skye got dressed for school she decided she needed to find out just who the cute boy at Melinda's Place was. She decided that would be her mission for the day. As she walked to school her thoughts wondered to the tall boy she had seen. Who was Lincoln? She smiled remembering how his hair got mussed up when Melinda took him down. And how his laughter rang out even as he knew he was being laughed at. His twinkling blue eyes.

"Hey Skye. Hey. Yo, earth to Skye."

"Very funny."

"I thought so. Man were you out of it. Glad I was walking with you. You almost stepped out into the street without looking."

"Shut up. I did not."

"So what has you in a dream world this morning Skye."

She stopped and her face grew thoughtful. She masked her emotions and tried asking him nonchalantly. "Do you know a guy named Lincoln. Blond, tall, deep blue eyes that sparkle." Oh my god she sounded like a love sick teen age girl.

Ryan laughed. "Lincoln Campbell. Yeah I know him."

"Lincoln Campbell." She repeated. Her smile grew larger. Ryan started laughing louder as he saw Skye's face. She gave him a dirty look.
"Shut up."

He laughed even louder.

Chapter End Notes

More action coming soon. Who are Natasha's cousins? How does Lincoln fit the story? Has Skye found a home?
Skye made her way to the library for first period. She would be seeing the doctor after school and he would most likely clear her for gym class. Her wrist was fine already on Saturday when she had been at Miss May's place even though she had kept it wrapped. She just hoped that dodge ball was not on the agenda for a very long time. She walked into the library handing her pass to the librarian, Mrs. Taylor, who smiled at her. Skye sat down at a table and pulled out her laptop. She started working on her English paper which was due the end of the week. By the time the bell rang, she had almost half her rough draft done for the paper. She headed to her second period. Coulson's classroom was at the other end of the building. She was moving pretty lively down the hall, not exactly running, when she heard her name. She glanced back behind her where the voice came from. It was Trip and walking next to him was Lincoln Campbell and he was waving at her. And smiling.

"Hey wait up."

Skye slowed her pace and felt her cheeks heat up. She leaned away from the crowd of kids, waiting by the wall of lockers. Soon both Trip and Lincoln were standing in front of her. Trip had a suit and tie on and was grinning.

"So what's the occasion." Skye motioned to Trip's choice of clothing.

"Hey girl, you know I look good." He laughed good naturedly, as Lincoln smirked. "Debate Team. We have a match after school today.

Skye raised her eyebrows at him. "Debate?"

Lincoln spoke up, his eyes twinkling at her. "He's naturally persuasive." Okay maybe they weren't twinkling at her, but they were definitely twinkling. And his face was definitely cute. And he was tall. He was very tall and she had to look up to see into his eyes. His twinkling eyes. He was saying something else and Skye had no idea what it was.
"Um what?"

"I said you should join debate, I hear you are pretty persuasive yourself."

"Oh what do you mean?"

"Well I hear you don't take crap from anyone."

Skye felt herself turning red. "I think this," she held up her bandaged wrist, "might disagree with you."

Lincoln winked at her. "So what's the other guy look like?"

"The other guy was a bunch of dodge balls and apparently they and the asswipes who threw them are fine."

Lincoln frowned. "Oh I heard you took on Raina in a verbal sparring match and won. I didn't hear about the wrist thing."

Trip shook his head. "Yeah what happened Skye?"

"I guess I did win the verbal sparring match. Flowers is a sore loser."

"Flowers?" Trip looked confused.

Lincoln burst into laughter. "Flowers. Skye you nailed it."

Skye felt her chest tighten up and was momentarily speechless. Praise from Lincoln made her heart swell. And now he was looking at her again with that huge grin and his twinkling eyes. He had said something else.

"What?" She felt like an idiot.

"I said, what did you do to piss off the freshman royalty?"

"I guess I picked the wrong friends. You know, Fitz and Simmons, Thomas, Ryan."

Now Trip frowned. "JJ is an asshole. Him and his whole posse."

"Now tell me something I don't know." Lincoln's smile faded as he looked angry.

Skye tilted her head to look at Trip. "I thought you played football? I'm sure Leo mentioned that you play football. He's your quarterback, right?"

Trip and Lincoln burst into laughter. Skye looked at them annoyed.

"We do. Real football. Soccer." Trip managed to say between his bursts of laughter.

Skye smiled. "Oh yeah. Soccer is football. And Leo is Scottish and he would have........I mean......it's real football. You actually um ...... you ......use your feet, yeah .... and um I need to get to class. I'm gonna be late."

Lincoln looked at her obviously amused. "Oh hey we'll walk you." He motioned for Skye to walk between them. "Where you going?"

"History. Mr. C's room."

Skye had no argument with that statement. They walked her to the door of Coulson's classroom. Bidding her goodbye, they left and continued to their Economics classroom a few doors down. She watched them go with a goofy smile on her face. Before he went in his classroom, Lincoln turned and caught her staring. He smiled and saluted her. She laughed and was still laughing as she entered the room. His damn eyes twinkled at her again.

Phil looked up from his lesson as he heard laughter. He watched as Skye sat down in her seat laughing. She glanced up and he caught her eye. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed and she was still laughing. She quieted and turned away from his gaze, reaching for her history book in her backpack. The smile remained on her face as she glanced back at him. He smiled back at her. He was glad to see her happy.

"So everyone put your books away and take out a pencil. It's pop quiz time." There was a collective groan around the room. Phil grinned.

Skye sat next to Jemma in the lunchroom. Jemma had brought extra food and was currently trying to get Skye to take a PB&J and juice from her. Skye rolled her eyes.

"Honestly Jems, the food today isn't that bad. You should eat your own lunch."

Thomas shook his head, sitting across from them. "Just take it Skye. Jemma brought extra. She thinks you are malnourished and has gone into mom mode or something.

Jemma scowled at him. "These school lunches are not the best Skye. You don't even eat the vegetables usually. At least drink the V-eight juice. It's full of vitamins. And didn't you say you want to get in top shape? And the sandwich has carbs you need since you are running now."

Skye rolled her eyes. But took the two items. Actually her lunch today was mediocre, consisting of a Chicken patty sandwich and milk, and apple slices. She hadn't taken the nasty brussel sprouts or green beans. She bite into the sandwich and grinned. Strawberry jam. Jemma listened to everything she said apparently. She'd have to remember that. Jemma nodded satisfied that Skye wouldn't starve.

"This is good Jemma, but you don't need to bring me food daily. I get free lunch. I'm sure your aunt wouldn't want you feeding me."

"Oh psssst. My aunt insisted when I told her why I was bringing the extra food. She likes you."

That made Skye sputter. "She likes me. She never met me."

"Oh I told her about you. She likes your spunk, as she called it. Saw you when she passed by when we were skyping too. I think she knows Mr. C's wife. They worked together on something a while back. Some security thing."

"What exactly does your aunt do Jemma?" This came from Thomas.

Jemma paused and thought for a moment. "I'm not exactly sure actually. Some kind of cyber stuff. Government security I think."

"Like a programmer? Troubleshooter? Computers?" Skye was curious now.

"Yeah something like that. Cyber safety of secured files. Yeah I think that's it."
Skye's mind whirled. Whoa that was interesting. Secured government files. That might mean redacted files. Maybe she could hack into whatever Jemma's aunt worked for and find her file.

"So Jemma what are you doing after school today?" Skye tried not to sound too eager.

Jemma looked over at her. "I have drama practice right after school till 5:00 and then I need to go home and study for a chemistry test. Why?"

"Oh just wondering if you wanted to hang out. I don't have anything going on. That's cool though. Maybe another night. I didn't know you were in the school play?"

"Oh no, not in it Skye. I'm the stage manager. My parents said I needed to be in something other then academic clubs, so I joined drama. I'm a terrible actress but I excel at preparation and organization and so they made me manager."

Skye laughed. "Yes that makes total sense."

"So how about tomorrow Skye? After 5 of course."

"Huh, Oh sorry I go to Miss May's on Tuesdays. And Thursdays. Wednesday?"

Jemma shook her head. "Wednesday is Science club from 7-9."

"Uh well how about Friday? I mean I'd invite you to my place but well, JJ and..........."

"No, no Skye that's fine. Vic is always telling me to invite people other then Fitz over."

"Well we are at school till three or so, so I could come by after that."

"Yes. That's sound amazing. Why don't you stay over. I have bunks in my room. I'll just have to take my books off the top one. And change the sheets...."

"Sounds great Jems. I run it by Mrs. Brody, but I'm sure she won't care."

Jemma grinned. "Oh we could have pizza and watch TV and talk and stay up late and......"

Skye laughed. "Sure Jemma. I look forward to a sleepover at your house." Skye started putting trash on her tray and stood up when a voice behind Thomas spoke up.

"Sleepover huh? I wouldn't mind you sleeping over at my house." A tall, brown haired, square chinned guy winked at her. He looked her up and down As though she were a piece of meat, as a pleased expression came to his face. "No I wouldn't mind that at all."

Jemma turned a bit pale, as Skye saw Thomas wince.

"Shut up Grant. Skye's my friend."

"Well little buddy, she could be my friend too." He leered at her, and licked his lips. "We all know I get whatever I want."

"Well I guess there's always room for a first in your life." Skye looked at him defiantly.

He laughed. "JJ said you were a firecracker. Spunk. I like it. Right up to the moment I tame it."
Thomas got up. "Leave her alone Grant. I'm warning you."

"Sit down Tommy." Grant pushed his brother back into the seat, squeezing his shoulder hard. Do not get involved little bro. Remember how that worked out for you last time."

Thomas grimaced from the obvious pain his brother was causing. Jemma looked like she was going to faint, she was so pale. None of the kids around them did anything. They watched or went back to their own lives happy they were not involved.

"Let him go. You're hurting him." Skye tried to keep her voice from shaking.

"Hurting him. Nah, this is just me reminding him of his place. You'd be wise to remember yours as well."

"Fuck you."

Grant grinned wickedly. "Oh that you might do sweetie. If I say so. You better watch how it's done....huh.."

Grant was swung around was face to face with Lincoln. He swung at him but Lincoln stopped his punch and Lincoln's fist hit his jaw. He dropped to the ground. Lincoln towered over him. "You best stay away from her Ward. And your asshole friends too."

Grant got up slowly, eyeing Lincoln. "Sucker punch."

"You swung first Ward. You started it. I'm ending it."

Thomas had stood up again and was staring wide eyed at the two of them. The kids at the tables near them had stood up and the crowd had temporarily blocked the teacher's view. Two teachers made their way to them.

"What is going on?" Mr. Archer asked. He was a Math teacher and also the soccer coach.

Lincoln shrugged his shoulders. Grant grinned.

"Nothing. I was just getting to know the new girl." he smirked at Skye.

Mr. Branson accessed the situation quickly. "You guys have girl issues you keep it off school property. Do I make myself clear? Anyone want to tell me what happened or are we done here?"

"I don't want to cause any problems sir. I'm fine." Grant spoke up.

Lincoln nodded. "I think we're done."

"Then move on and move out. All of you. The bell is about to ring anyway."

Lincoln's eyes flashed dangerously for a few seconds, as Skye watched him. He looked over at her and the anger disappeared as concern took over. He mouthed the words 'You okay?' She nodded as she bit her lower lip. Jemma had her arm looped through Skye's and was trying to get her to leave. Lincoln turned and allowed himself to be escorted out of the cafeteria by Mr. Archer. Ward turned and smiled sweetly at his brother, as he rubbed his jaw line. He followed Mr. Branson out the aisle to the door away from the one Lincoln was exiting. Skye and Jemma and Thomas quickly deposited their trays and trash, and then headed into the hall way as the bell sounded.

"Thomas are you okay." Skye's concern evident in her voice as she stopped to check on her friend.
He nodded. "Yeah that was nothing. Believe me that was nothing."

That made Skye mad. She turned to face Thomas making him stop in front of her. "He should not be hurting you Thomas. You need to tell your parents. He's a bully."

Thomas looked at the floor. "I'm sorry."

Skye's heart stopped. He was apologizing. For someone abusing him. How often had she done the same.

"Yeah I get it. I'm sorry too."

Jemma was lost. Why were they apologizing. She looked from one to the other. Skye just shook her head at her.

"Thomas. You have to stand up to him. We have to stand up to them."

Thomas scuffed his shoes against the floor continuing to look down. Finally he spoke. "I can't Skye. I can't hang around you anymore either." At that he took off down the hall running from both of them.

Skye sighed and leaned against the wall. She felt a tear threaten to fall. She sniffled and then felt Jemma's hand close around hers. She looked up and gave her a small smile.

"He's just upset now. He'll come round. You should just let him be for a while. That's all."

Skye nodded. She adjusted her backpack on her shoulder and still holding Jemma's hand they walked down the hall together.

Ryan had cross country practice so Anne Brody picked up only Skye after school and took her to the doctor. He checked her over and cleared her for gym class. Wonderful. Mrs. Brody stopped at a burger joint to pick up take out, saying was going out to a movie. That was fine with Skye. Mrs. Brody wasn't nasty or anything, she just didn't talk to Skye more than absolutely necessary. She grabbed a glass of chocolate milk and the take out bag and headed to her room to do her homework and study for her upcoming history test. It wasn't until Thursday but she wanted to ace it. She had gotten a 100% on the pop quiz Mr. C. pulled today. She grinned to herself remembering the groans from the class. She'd have to be prepared for those. She finished her biology homework and was working on her English paper when her phone rang. She looked at the number and did not recognize it.

"Hello?"

"Hey Skye. It's me. Lincoln. Hope you don't mind but I got your cell number from Ryan. I saw him in the locker room before soccer practice."

Oh. "Um no that's okay. Is practice over?"

"Yeah. So are you okay?"

"Me? Yeah I'm fine. Thomas is still shaken."

The line was quiet for a few beats. "Yeah. Thomas is a good kid. I guess the rumors are true. Grant does bully him."

"He does more than bully, he hurts him. Thomas said he can't hang around me anymore."
"I'm sorry Skye."

"Yeah there's a lot of that going around."

Lincoln sighed. "I'm sorry for what that jerk said to you. He has no right. Him and Brody and that crew think they are above the rules. Hell maybe they are. They seem to skate off without ever paying for the shit they do. Others pay though. Like Joey."

"Joey? Oh yeah, Ryan mentioned a Joey. Wouldn't tell me what happened though."

"Joey's a good guy Skye. Don't believe what they say. He just went a bit postal after what happened to Lanie."

"Lanie?"

"Yolanda. Most everyone calls her Lanie. She's his cousin. They were more like brother and sister though. Lanie was pretty tight with that girl Simmons. The one you were with today."

"I heard that Joey is in juvie. For beating the crap out of JJ. That true?"

"Uhhuh. But there's more to it than that. Lanie was dating Grant Ward. We all thought it odd cause well Lanie would hang with the ...well ...the .."

"Geeks? Science nerds? Weirdos? Like me and my friends?"

"Actually I was going to say the smarter kids."

"No you weren't. But that's okay. You were trying to be nice."

Lincoln laughed. "Hey Trip's a nerd and he's sort of cool."

Skye laughed a little. "So what happened?"

"Well this happened last year. Spring. Lanie was a freshman and all of a sudden the freshman hierarchy started being nice to her. Inviting her to their table for lunch. Talking in classes to her. Not being mean. Then next we know she's dating Grant Ward. He actually appeared happy with her. Joey was on the football team and he had grown up with Grant and JJ. They started including him more and both he and Lanie seemed happy. They had been nasty to Joey since the beginning of the school year, since he came out, but they seemed to accept him finally."

"Since he came out? What .... oh shit, nevermind. So he's gay."

"Yep. And that did not sit well with JJ and Grant at first. They even tried to get him thrown off the football team. Garrett supported them, but the school board got wind and Garrett backed down."

"Garrett's an ass."

"Yeah no kidding. Anyway something happened. To Lanie. She was raped."

"Grant raped her?"

Lincoln paused. "Look Skye nothing was ever proven. But according to Joey, not Grant. JJ and some of the other football players. Grant dating Lanie and the kids being nice was all a set up for Lanie and Joey to let their guard down. It was all to payback cause they saw Joey's sexual orientation as a threat to them. And Lanie was the pawn they used to keep all the geeks in line."
Skye couldn't breathe for a few seconds.

"Skye? Hey you okay?"

"Why aren't they in jail?"

"No proof. Kids swore on oath that JJ and the others were with them. Not one kid would speak up. It was Lanie's word against them."

"So Joey took the law into his own hands."

"Yep. And he's the one sitting in juvie now. They couldn't prove anything Skye. Lanie is homeschooled and I don't think she talks to anyone from school anymore."

"How can they ....I mean..."

"Skye. Grant Ward's father is a State Senator. Brody, the guy whose house you are living in is a lawyer. I think he is tight with Mr. Malick's brother, some bigwig on the political spectrum, Gideon Malick. As far as I'm concerned they are all crooked. And the apples don't fall far from the trees. JJ is the golden boy. The All American. Perfect son. No one can touch him."

"What about the teachers? The parents? I mean how the hell do they let this crap happen?"

"Because a lot don't know. Some look the other way. And there is never any proof. I mean it's killing my mom to see this going on in her school and she can't stop it."

"Your mom?"

"Yeah Rosalind Price. The principal. Well she's actually my stepmom but I was 10 when she married my dad and I never knew my birth mom so.... I call her mom. Except in school." He laughed. It was very quiet. "Hey Skye, you still there?"

"Your mom's the principal?"

"Yeah weird huh."

"You think?"

"Oh come on. Principal's have kids too." He laughed loudly.

"Yeah I guess. Oh hey, Miss May is gonna let me watch your class on Saturday. Says soon as I get good enough I can join."

"Really? We are an advanced class. How long have you been doing Martial Arts?"

"Uh a week. Almost."

"Whoa. She must really like you."

"Um I'm taking classes 3 times a week. Individual ones. She says I have potential."

Lincoln whistled. "Individual. Wow. You have a stash of money somewhere? She charges like $40 an hour for individual classes. I know. When my mom started me a couple years ago I took one. She and my mom are friends. They went to college together."

Skye was dumbstruck. $40. Shit she already had two classes for 2 hours each. $160. No way that
her little bit of cleaning covered even close to that. Skye felt her throat tighten.

"Hey Skye you there?"

"Yeah. Hey I have to go. I have a paper to write and a test to study for."

"Ah okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

She smiled. "Okay. Oh Lincoln. Thanks. For protecting me. It was a nice punch."

"Anytime. But I do recommend just staying out of their way."

"Yeah so I've heard. Goodnight."

Skye tossed her phone on the bed next to her. She reached under her bed to grab her Ipod and earphones. She sat back propping a pillow against the headboard. As the music played her mind wandered to a woman who would offer to teach a complete stranger self defense, knowing damn well how much money she was losing.

Melinda waited in her office for Natasha to show up. Natasha walked into Melinda's office at 2:45. Melinda greeted her warmly. "Good afternoon Natasha. No change of heart then."

"Change of heart?" Natasha looked at her puzzled.

Melinda chuckled. "No change of mind. You still want the job?"

"Oh yes. It is perfect job for me. My cousins are so excited. They are happy you are giving me a chance. I will do good job, I make promise to you. You did not change your mind?"

"Oh no Natasha. Not at all. Why don't we get this paperwork filled out. Sit down." Melinda pointed to the chair next to her desk.

A little over a hour later, Melinda put the last paper in the folder and sighed. She handed Natasha her copies and stood up.

"Welcome to Melinda's Place. You are officially an instructor."

Natasha beamed at her. She took her hand shaking it vigorously. "Thank you so much Miss May."

"Melinda."

"Yes. Miss Melinda. I am so grateful."

Melinda smiled. Between this bright young woman and her newest student, she noticed she was doing an awful lot of that lately.

"So do you need to call for your ride or did you drive."

"Oh no he waits in parking lot. He thought time would not take too long for paperwork."

"Oh you could have invited him in Natasha."

"No is fine. He is reading. He goes to University too."
"Well I'm finished for the day. I keep my Monday nights free. So let me lock up and I'll walk out with you."

Natasha nodded. After Melinda locked up she walked to the parking lot. A young man jumped out of his car when he saw the two approaching.

"Miss Melinda. This is cousin. Pietro. Pietro, Miss Melinda May. My new boss."

"I am pleased to meet our Natasha's new employer. Thank you so much for giving her this chance." He held out his hand.

Melinda took it and smiled. "I should be thanking her for agreeing to work here. I really need the help and I believe Natasha is going to do great."

"Yes. She is good person. Some people won't hire us though. Because we are not from here. But we love this country. I am already an American. My sister and cousin soon to be."

"Well Pietro. My father and mother weren't from here either. But now we all are."

"Yes, yes. We are all now. Come Tash, we need to pick up items at grocery store on way home."

"I will see you tomorrow Miss Melinda."

"Yes. Have a nice evening."

Pietro bowed to her and Natasha waved. Melinda got in her car still smiling. She called Phil.

"Hey Mel."

"Babe, let's go out tonight."

"Um okay. What's going on."

"Celebrating. I have a new employee, and a great husband."

"Yeah okay but I'm still at school. Meeting with Roz."

"Well bring her and tell her to call Daniel. I'm going to freshen up at home and we can meet at The Providence Cafe' At 6:00."

She heard him talking to Roz.

"Roz wants to know how you are going to get a table without a reservation?"

"The owner likes me. I set up his security system. He owes me one."

Phil laughed. He relayed the info to Roz who Melinda heard laughing.

"Roz says yes, and she will drag Daniel with her. See you there."

"I love you babe."

"I'm getting laid tonight aren't I?"

"Damn straight. Roz is choking eh?"

"Oh yeah. Now she's yelling about too much info."
"Blow her a kiss for me babe. See you soon."
Puzzle Pieces

Chapter Summary

New characters. Everything is connected. Skye learns new things. Friendships.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while since I updated. This story has a lot going on. Still in the groundwork stage. More action coming soon. I have a plan. This story is fun to write. Thanks for reading.

The rest of the week flew by quickly for Skye. She avoided Raina and Grant and JJ, and the rest fairly well, while Thomas avoided her. He did not sit with them at lunch but they did gain two others, as Lincoln and Trip moved to their table. Lincoln and Trip had the same sense of humor, and lightness about them. Their friendship was to be envied as Skye found herself watching them interact with ease and humor.

She never had a friendship like theirs. Never was really close to anyone. Yes, the moving from foster home to foster home left little chance for long term friendships as a kid. Even in the orphanage she was always a loner. Never really fitting in anywhere. She wasn't athletic and didn't know much about sports. She wasn't a girly girl or cheerleader type. She wasn't big on video games or social media stuff. She found TV to be boring and never watched the current popular shows. Obviously, she was never in fashion - wearing hand me downs or rarely new clothes donated to the orphanage, with an occasional shoplifted item here and there. So when she was young, because she didn't really fit in a particular group, and moved around so much, she never had a BFF or a group of friends. It was later when she turned 11 or 12, when she purposefully pushed people away. It was just a way she coped. It was her against the world.

But now as she looked around the lunch table, she smiled. She had friends. People who purposefully sought her out. Invited her to be a part of their lives. Lincoln who was witty and charming with his twinkling eyes. Trip, who had made her feel welcome her first day in computer class, and surprised her nearly every day with his knowledge about everything. Leo, the boy she had crashed into, who she connected with immediately. Ryan who she already thought of as her brother, and finally Jemma, who was scared but had eventually let her guard down and now not only talked Skye's ear off at lunch but called and skyped her all the time.

Skye looked at Jemma who was going on and on about the sleepover tonight and what movies they would watch and what food they would eat. It was finally Friday. She was going to her new friend's house. Skye momentarily frowned remembering her ulterior motive for going to Jemmas's place. But she really did like her and wanted to spend time with her too. Just cause she might find something out about her redacted file didn't mean she was using her new friend did it?

"Right Skye?"
Hearing her name shook her from her thoughts. "What Jem. Um I was thinking of my upcoming bio test. Sorry I'm kinda worried about it." Well she was worried about it. It really was just a deflection, not a lie.

"Oh Skye. Don't worry so much. You'll do fine. Ryan said you knew everything last night when you studied with him." Jemma reached over and squeezed her arm and looked at her sympathetically. "I was just saying we could watch all the Bourne movies unless you have another suggestion."

Skye shook her head. "No that'd be fine. I love spy movies."

Jemma nodded and pushed her extra PB&J sandwich onto Skye's tray. Skye picked it up and took a bite around her grin. Jemma packed extra food everyday now for Skye and well, it tasted better than the cafeteria food so why not. Yes, she had a great group of real honest to goodness friends. She glanced next to her and her grin disappeared. Thomas. He had not sat with them since the incident, as Leo was calling it.

Lincoln saw her looking and her expression. "Hey Skye. Give the little dude some space. He's a smart kid. He'll work through it." He smiled at her. She'd have to remember to add reading minds to Lincoln's impressive list of attributes.

Skye nodded. "I just feel responsible, you know."

"Well you needn't. That's all on his brother." Leo looked at her annoyed. "You didn't invite that jerk to bother you."

She looked at them as four heads nodded in unison. She couldn't help but smile back at all of them. Her friends.

Melinda smiled at Natasha as Natasha made her way to her office. It was 2:00pm on Friday afternoon, and Melinda only had one more class to teach before she turned over the place to Natasha. It would be the second night that Natasha was going to lock up and Melinda was thrilled to be able to get home when Phil did. Natasha would be teaching three classes on Friday nights, and she had already proven to be quite capable to do so, and to clean afterwards, and lock up. The students that Natasha taught so far seemed to genuinely like her.

"Hello Miss Melinda. I will change and after be ready to go."

Melinda grinned at Natasha. She had given up trying to get the woman to call her Melinda or even May. Natasha called her Miss Melinda each and every time.

"Hi Natasha. That's fine. How was school today."

"It was disgusting. I had to dissect a sheep heart." She involuntarily shivered. "Ugh why I need biology to be an agent I have no idea."

Melinda laughed and then questioned. "An agent?"

"Yes. Once I get my degree I will apply to your FBI. I want to help stop bad people from hurting good people."

"Well when you get to that point let me know. I might know some people."
"You know FBI people?"

Melinda smiled. "Yes. I was an agent."

"You were.....agent? You were with FBI?" Natasha's eyes widened as she gazed at her boss.

"Yes, It was another part of my life and while ago. You could use me as a reference though. I left on good terms." Melinda pursed her lips and stiffened.

Natasha knew to back off seeing Melinda's posture and reading her discomfort. "Thank you I will remember later." She turned and headed to the lockers to get ready for her class.

Melinda sat back down and clicked the computer. The screen came back up as she continued her work. Her thoughts soon drifted to Skye. She had come on both Tuesday and Thursday from school with her husband. She was catching on very quickly and Melinda noticed she looked more toned and fit, even in such a brief amount of time. She could tell she was running. He breathing was better. Melinda shook her head. Both nights Skye had insisted she could take the bus home and both nights Melinda had taken her home. Tuesday, it was so quiet in the car, that Melinda had turned the radio on. The oldies rock station was on and Melinda had been surprised that Skye knew the songs that were being played. She was singing along. Skye told her that a foster home she was in when she was eight had been oldies fans. Melinda smiled as she thought of the young girl singing along to "Crocodile Rock". She had a good voice.

Thursday on the drive home, Skye had rambled on about her friend Jemma and some sleepover she was going to. Apparently Skye was getting comfortable enough around her to talk. Melinda frowned when she remembered Skye's question. She had asked what people did at sleepovers. Melinda had looked at the young girl in amazement voicing that surely Skye had been at a sleepover before, but when Skye had shaken her head and looked embarrassed, Melinda had wanted to kick herself. After that the conversation stopped with Melinda not knowing what to say.

Melinda paused in her work and sighed. She was just not good with kids. Not good with people. Not anymore. Not since that day when her world was ripped apart into pieces. Phil was good with people. That was his thing not hers.

Natasha appeared in the doorway again. "So I am teaching police next, yes?"

Melinda looked up. "Yes. Some of the local police. They all are decently trained in self-defense but they want to be prepared better. There are seven total, four men and three women. I'll introduce you and help for tonight's class, but next week, you will take over. After that you have a mid level kids group of fourteen kids ages ten and eleven, and then the last class is beginner adults, mostly over age forty."

Natasha nodded as she heard the door and looked up to watch the people entering. The first man was very large and laughing at something the shorter man behind him was saying. They were followed by three women who headed off to the lockers immediately, a tall blond woman waving and smiling at May. The two men also made their way to the men's locker room.

"The blond woman is my sister-in-law, Bobbi. The other two women work with her; Elena Rodrigues, she is new and this is her second lesson, and Captain Isabelle Hartley. The two men are Alphonso Mackenzie and Lance Hunter."

Natasha nodded. "Your sister in law is police?"

"Yes. She is actually my husband's half sister. His mother remarried and Bobbi was born when he
was already 16. She's been a detective for eight years."

Just then two more men walked in. They were both about the same height. The first one glanced
toward the office and smiled. Melinda waved.

"Hi Scott. How's your little girl? Better I hope."

He walked closer and grinned. "Yes. She is. She is totally bummed about missing your class for
the next few weeks, but I'm just glad all she got was a broken arm.

"You tell Cassie I hope she recovers quickly and I will miss her. Hello Clint."

The other man looked at Melinda and smiled. "Hey Mels."

Melinda rolled her eyes at the man. "I'd like to introduce you two clowns to my new instructor. She
will be taking over your class after tonight. This is Natasha Romanoff." Melinda paused and then
continued. "Natasha these are two people I used to work with a lot when the FBI and police
worked on cases together. Clint Barton and Scott Lang."

Scott offered his hand. "Please to meet you. Um Mel I didn't know you wouldn't be teaching us
anymore." His voice sounded like a pout. "I mean nothing personal", he glanced to Natasha, "but
you," looking back at Melinda, "are the absolute best."

"She's only one dan level below me in tae kwon do and one above me in Judo. I'm sure there is
plenty you can learn from Natasha. Anyway I'm here yet tonight, we will teach together tonight."

"So you're leaving us, Melinda?" The question came from Isabelle as the three women stood near
them apparently having heard at least part of the conversation.

"Well, I need to spend some time at home. Phil insisted."

"Of course he did. He's a bit needy. " Bobbi spoke up grinning at her. "Hi I'm Bobbi, this is Izzy
and this here is the new rookie, Elena." She held out her hand to Natasha.

Natasha took it and smiled warmly at the other woman. "Nice to meet the sister of Miss Melinda's
husband."

Bobbi laughed. Izzy and Scott smiled picking up on the Russian accent.

Two voices bantering back and forth were heard as Mack and Hunter came into sight.

"So let's get this show started shall we. I've places to be later."

"Shut up Hunter. Come meet our new teacher." Bobbi practically pushed him in front of her.

"Oh hey. Hello there," He looked her up and down. "Yah nice. But I prefer blonds myself. But
Mack here is single."

Melinda rolled her eyes at Hunter while Bobbi smacked him. Mack quickly looked at Elena
smiling shyly.

Scott spoke up. "Geez trainspotting. You don't even know what team she plays on yet."

"I'm not Scottish."

Izzy spoke up. "Definitely not my team." She nodded toward Clint and back to Natasha who were
definitely staring at each other. Intently.

Clint picked up on the attention and all of a sudden he grew quiet and found the picture of the ocean that was hanging on the wall intriguing. Natasha noticed all the others staring at her and her face turned the color of her hair. She looked down at her feet.

Melinda threw her hands up in the air. "My teen classes behave better than the lot of you. Let's go children. Class is starting."

Melinda watched as Natasha sparred with each of them. She marveled at her good fortune to have found such a treasure in her new employee. Natasha picked up quickly at what stage of training each of the class needed. Melinda herself had led the class through their warm up and basic moves before turning it over to Natasha. Natasha had already sparred one on one with Scott and Izzy proving to be a tough opponent to take down. Melinda had sparred with Bobbi and Elena. Natasha was currently showing Hunter that has swag and bravado was no match for her quickness and agility.

"Okay I'm done." Hunter rubbed his head as he lay once more on the mat with Natasha hovering over him. She offered her hand and pulled him up. He walked over to Bobbi and sulked.

Clint was the only one who had not sparred, he had shaken his head no at Melinda's invitation. He stepped onto the mat.

"Guess it's my turn." He gave Natasha a small smile. "I won't go down as easy as Hunter. Fair warning."

Natasha grinned at him. "You should probably know that I was holding back so far. Fair warning."

Melinda raised her eyebrows. Were these two flirting? She glanced at Mack who was too busy checking out Elena to notice. Melinda crossed her arms and watched. Natasha waited for Clint to make a move, then proceeded to pounce on him.

Forty minutes later, Melinda made her way from the locker room, her hair still wet from her shower. She headed to her office to grab her keys, watching the class in session. Natasha was instructing the kids class. Melinda stopped short of the door to her office, seeing Clint still in the building. He was sitting, leaning against the far wall watching the class. Actually more like watching Natasha. She walked over to him and slid down next to him.

"Um Clint stalking is against the law."

"She's something huh? Got all those moves. She took me down more times then I can count." His face held a smile.

"Yes she's very good. That's why she's working here. You on the other hand............."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Oh I offered to take her home. She said her cousin was going to have a hard time picking her up cause of his work schedule so I offered to take her home."

"So you're going to stay for the two classes? To take her home. Honestly Clint if you do anything stupid............."

He turned to look at her. "What? Oh no Mels, um ....I .......wouldn't....um........I mean I .........I .........I don't know. I like her. You know. She's ...........it's just.............um............."
Melinda laughed. "You usually are never at a loss for words. Cold and calculating. A sniper. They call you Hawkeye for a reason. But she has you a bit flustered. This is priceless."

"Shut up Mels."

"Aw it's sweet."

He glared at her.

"I mean it's been a long time since Laura..........."

"Yeah well I don't need that reminder." He frowned.

"Sorry. You know she is the loser right? Leaving you for Quinn."

"He's so dirty Mels. We just can't find substantial proof. The great and wonderful Ian Quinn. The rich Ian Quinn. The powerful and altruistic wonder boy. I was never gonna be good enough. Nor was my police salary."

"Well at least you found out before you got married."

"Yeah two weeks before. It was great."

She punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Grouch."

She sat with him for a few more minutes shoulder to shoulder watching Natasha teach the young class.

"Well I should get home to my husband. After all that's why I hired Natasha." She pulled herself up and stood in front of him.

"Tell Phil I'll give him a call soon."

"Better yet Clint, stop by and see him. It's been awhile."

He nodded. Melinda walked back to her office, grabbed her keys and headed out the door.

It was Lincoln who dropped Jemma and Skye off at Jemma's house after school. Skye had stuffed her backpack with what she needed. They were just going to walk, but Lincoln insisted on driving them. She waved goodbye as he pulled his car away from the curb. Jemma was already at the door of the house waiting for Skye.

"Come on Skye. Hurry."

Hurry? Why? Skye slowly walked to Jemma. She was worried about meeting Jemma's aunt. What if she didn't like her? What if she talked down to her like some parents did? Skye remembered once going over to a girl's house after school to work on a project. She was ten. The girl was actually very friendly to her, her name was Karen. But once at the house the mother was very much a bitch. Referring to her as the foster kid once, the orphan another time. Watching her like a hawk to make sure she didn't steal anything. After they did their project, Karen had never talked to her again. She stepped up the last step as Jemma opened the door and Jemma pulled her inside the house.
"Aunt Vic, I'm home! And Skye's with!"

Jemma pulled her into the kitchen. Standing by the counter was a woman with dark hair with red streaks. She looked angry. Skye shrank back. Then the woman smiled and her face lit up.

"Hiya Jemmy. And Skye. Good to finally meet you. Jemmy talks about you all the time."

"Only good things I hope." Skye smiled back. She then nudged the other girl and whispered, "Jemmy?"

Jemma shrugged. "She's always called me that."

"Aw that's cute."

"So what are you two up to tonight?"

"You know, the usual. Movies. Pizza. Junk food. Gossip. That's what girls do at sleepovers, right Skye?"

"Um yeah I guess."

Victoria noticed Skye's discomfort. "Well I would guess that since it's your sleepover you two can do whatever you want. I'm going to grab a shower and get ready. Here Jemmy, thirty should cover your pizza order. Call it in when you want."

"Oh, are you going out Aunt Vic?"

Victoria smiled. "Yes. I won't be too late though. Izzy and I are going to see a movie. I should be home by 10 or so. She's picking me up after her martial arts class."

That perked up Skye's ears. "Martial Arts? She's an instructor?"

"Oh no. She takes a class over at a gym in mid town, run by Melinda May."

Skye grinned. "I take lessons from Miss May too. She's awesome."

Victoria smiled. "Yes, she is. I've known Melinda for a few years. She worked with me on a few security projects over the years."

"That's Mr. Coulson's wife, isn't it." Jemma chimed in. "Do you know him too?"

"Not well. Just met him a few times in social circles. He had a rough time about 6 years back. Both of them did."

"What happened?" Skye took the juice bottle Jemma offered her as they sat at the table.

Victoria paused wondering if she should continue, and then did. "There was a car accident. Mr. Coulson was hurt badly. He missed an entire year of teaching, with recovery and therapy. Melinda was hurt but recovered okay." Victoria's voice grew quieter. "They lost their son. He was only seven."

Oh wow. Skye's eyes watered. They had lost their child. "That's horrible."

Jemma nodded. "I never knew that."

"Very sad yes." Victoria continued. "Melinda quit her job to take care of her husband. From what
Izzy tells me she has never been the same. She grew colder, more distant, smiled a lot less. Izzy knew her better than me. Also it was a hit and run too. They never did catch the guy. Izzy and the others worked on the case for a long time. So there was no closure with that. The car that hit them was unregistered, stolen from a car lot, and the person driving just disappeared.

Skye stared at her juice. "Mr. C seems okay now."

"Yeah but it still must be terrible to live with." Jemma got up and grabbed some snack bags from the cabinet. "Come on Skye, I want to show you my room."

"Yeah I need to get ready. Izzy will be here soon."

Skye followed Jemma out of the room and up the stairway.

It was a little after nine, when Skye found herself in Victoria Hand's office. It had only taken her two minutes to hack onto the computer and she was currently cross referencing her redacted file with 'secure' files on various security sites. Jemma was currently in her room setting up the next movie and was going to make popcorn. Skye had excused herself to use the bathroom. She only hoped Jemma did not come looking for her. It was taking longer than she had anticipated. If nothing hit soon she was going to have to give up and maybe try while Victoria Hand and Jemma were sleeping. She was about to close everything down when she heard a soft beep. She typed frantically and then stared.

It was two names. First names only. She typed again hoping more would appear. Nothing. She glanced at the time. She had been gone almost 20 minutes and Jemma was going to come looking for her.

She shut everything down. Maybe she'd go back on later. For now she memorized the two words that popped up. Jiaying. Daisy. Her heart was pounding and she repeated them in her brain. Jiaying. Daisy. Was one of them her mother? Jiaying was Chinese. Her mother was Chinese. Skye's heart fluttered and she smiled. Tears welled up in her eyes. She stepped out of the room and quietly made her way up the stairs. Jiaying. She wiped at her eyes before opening the door to Jemma's room. Jiaying.

The call came at 2pm. Melinda reached the phone first. Phil watched her face as she talked. After listening for a minute, she handed the phone to him.

"Hello."

"Mr. Coulson. It's Sharon Carter. We have an emergency foster care need. Are you willing to take him in,"

"What? Now? It's 2am."

"Yes and I'm sorry but I've run out of options. He needs a place to stay right now."

Phil sat up more. "Yes. Of course. We will. What do I need to do."

Melinda sighed and got out of bed. She started getting dressed, listening to her husband's side of the conversation.
"Oh okay. So you'll drop him off here in about 20 minutes. Not a problem."

Melinda raised her eyebrows at that.

"Yes fine. A room will be ready. .............Yes...............See you then."

Phil got up after placing the phone down. "I'm going to get the room ready. I'll make the bed up."

"I'll put on the coffee." Melinda already dressed walked to the door. "I take it, she is bringing a boy. How old? Did she tell you a name?"

"She did. He's 12. Donnie Gill."
Chess Pieces

Chapter Summary

Here is another chapter. It's been a while since an update, so I felt bad and made this one pretty long. As usual it contains some fluff, some angst, bonding, and some story movement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The boy stood in the doorway with Sharon Carter. He had a bandage across his right cheek and a cast on his left wrist. He held tightly to a backpack on his right shoulder. His dark brown hair was cut short and his blue eyes pierced with anger as he scowled at Phil and Melinda.

"Donnie these are the people you will stay with for a few days. Till we can reach your aunt. Mr. and Mrs. Coulson.

"Hi Donnie. You can call me Phil." He held out his hand but the boy ignored it. Phil put his hand down. "And this is Melinda. Come on, how about I take you to your room so you can sleep." Phil reached to bring his arm up to the boy's shoulder.

Sharon was shaking her head which Melinda caught but Phil did not. Donnie squirmed away from Phil's hand and slapped at it.

"Don't touch me!"

Phil immediately backed off and put his hands up in front of him in apology. "Hey, hey I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"Donnie put his head down. "Just don't touch me."

"Okay. I won't. How about you follow me up to your room. It is really late. You're probably exhausted."

The young boy shrugged his shoulders and then looked up at Sharon Carter. She gave him an encouraging smile.

"Donnie, you'll be okay here. The Coulsons are good people. They just want to help, okay. I'll call tomorrow and I'll keep trying to get a message to your aunt."

Donnie nodded and then stepped toward Phil. Phil turned and led the boy upstairs to his room. Sharon handed Melinda some papers.

"His information that you need. It's the weekend so we can figure out what to do about school later."

Melinda took the papers. "What happened. He has recent injuries."

"It's there in the paperwork. To make a long story short, his mother was beaten badly by her live in
boyfriend. Donnie tried to stop it and the boyfriend gave him a broken wrist and some scrapes and bruises. He had the forthright to call the police before he tried to stop him. Otherwise he might be in worse shape. His mother is in intensive care."

Melinda closed her eyes and grimaced. "Did they get him?"

"Yeah the police took him into custody. I talked to Detective Hunter and Officer Rodrigues. He's most likely being booked now."

"Good. What about visiting his mother. He'll want to."

"I'll call over there tomorrow and see how she is doing. Maybe I can stop by and take him?"

"Phil will take him if it's okay. I'll remind him to call you."

"Poor boy won't be going back with her anytime soon. The police found drugs in the house. Officer Rodrigues said the woman had multiple drug tracks on her arms. She has a sister, that's who we are trying to get a hold of."

Melinda sighed. "Okay. It's almost three. You should get home. He'll be fine tonight. Phil will call you tomorrow."

"Thank you. I had no one else to call. If you would have said no he would have had to go to a juvenile lock down facility. We really need more people willing to get involved in foster care. More good people. Good night. Call if you need anything." She turned and went out the door.

Melinda locked the door, and turned off the lights downstairs, heading upstairs she glanced at the papers in her hands wondering just what her husband had gotten her into.

Melinda waited for Phil sitting up in bed reading over the papers Sharon Carter had left with them. Phil came into their room twenty minutes later.

"I waited till he fell asleep."

"I figured." She waited till he climbed into bed next to her.

"You need to read these." She thrust the papers in his hands. "I need to get some sleep. I have a class at nine." She turned over and closed her eyes trying to fall to sleep.

"You're angry."

She ignored him.

"Hey come on. I thought you said you'd give this a try? We'd give this a try?"

Melinda sighed. She rolled back over and sat up.

"Look Mel, he seems angry but he's actually scared."

"That makes two of us."

Phil's eyes widened. "Hey come on. You'll do fine. I'm scared too. But right now, that boy down the hall needs us."
Melinda nodded. "I'll try Phil. His mother was beat up by her boyfriend. He stepped in between them. That's how he got hurt."

"Damn. They get him?"

"Yeah. Hunter. Sharon Carter said Detective Hunter was working the case."

"Good. Maybe you should call him. See what is his take on it."

"Yeah I just might do that. Oh that reminds me. Clint is smitten."

"Smitten? Do people even use that word anymore?"

Melinda smacked him on his arm. "Guess with who?"

"I don't know Mel. With who?"

"My new instructor."

"So he's finally over Laura? That's good right?"

Melinda nodded. "They were flirting with each other. It was actually adorable. I told him to stop by. Or at least call."

"Yeah. It's been a while."

"Or you could call him too you know. He was your first."

Phil looked at her. "Huh?"

"Stray. Your first one Phil. Since then you've picked up quite a few. Skye's just your latest in a long line."

Phil laughed. "That's one of the reasons you love me."

Melinda gave him a dirty look. "Hmmmmm. I really need to sleep though. You're going to have to handle Donnie tomorrow. I won't be home till after 4 again. Skye has a lesson."

"Roger that."

Melinda woke up at 7:00. She took a quick shower and got dressed. She made a quick breakfast of toast and tea, went upstairs to wake Phil and check in on their houseguest. The boy was sleeping, snoring quietly as she looked in on him. She closed the door and then went to wake Phil. After that she grabbed her bag and headed to her gym. First class was one of exuberant 8 and 9 year olds, and Melinda already had a slight headache from lack of sleep. She opened the gym and then downed a couple pain pills before warming up by doing Tai Chi. Soon enough the gym was overtaken by the sound of laughing children ready for their lesson.

Skye turned and hit her arm into something hard. She winced and then opened her eyes. She stared at the bar she had hit forgetting where she was. Then it came to her. Jemma's house. She was in Jemma's bunk bed on the top bunk and her arm had hit the safety bar. She yawned and turned onto her stomach reaching for her phone. The light streaming into the room from the window told Skye
it was definitely morning. Glancing at her phone she saw it was almost 10:30am. She tucked her phone back under her pillow and curled back on the bed cuddling under the warm blankets. She was halfway asleep again when her eyes shot open and she sat up in bed. 10:30? Oh crap. She moved to jump over the railing bar down to the floor and instead got her feet tangled in the blankets and smashed her leg into the railing instead. She cursed and rubbed her leg. She pulled the covers down and more carefully moved off the bed, dropping to the floor with a thud. Her thud woke Jemma in the bottom bunk and she sat up rubbing her eyes.

"Oh hey Skye. What time is it?"

"It's 10:30." Skye grabbed her backpack and started rummaging through it for her clothes. She threw off her pajamas and started putting her clothes on quickly. "I'm gonna be late."

"Late? For what?"

"I have to get to the bus stop over a mile away that comes at eleven so I can get to Miss May's place by noon."

"Oh I thought you would be staying here for awhile Skye."

"We.....stayed up...... I did want to.... I mean look it's really late. Jeez, I haven't slept that late for a long time."

"Well we didn't get to bed until almost four. Honestly wait Skye, you need breakfast. You can't just run off."

Skye was pulling the door open. "Really Jem, I have to go. I think I left my phone charger in the kitchen."

She bounded down the steps with Jemma, still in her pajamas, behind her. Skye stopped short as she entered the kitchen. A woman was sitting at the counter drinking coffee with Jemma's aunt.

"Ooof." Jemma plowed into Skye as she had suddenly stopped. Izzy and Vic looked over at the two girls.

"Hey Skye. Jemma. Good morning." Vic smiled at the girls. "We thought you were going to sleep the whole day away."

"Good morning Aunt Vic. Good morning Izzy." Jemma smiled at both. "Izzy, this is my friend, Skye."

Skye waved and then started looking for her charger. "Hey. Anyone see my phone charger? I think I left it in here when we were making cookies."

"You mean burning cookies. Jemmy what possessed you two to get up at 1am to make cookies? Sit Skye. Izzy was about to make her famous blueberry pancakes. With bacon."

"Ooooooooooo bacon." Jemma's eyes lit up. "And cause we were hungry for cookies. You said we could do anything we wanted at our sleepover. Well anything except drink or do drugs. Or have boys over. Or...."

"Sorry I've got to go. Ah there it is." Skye grabbed the charger from the plug by the toaster and stuffed it in her backpack. "Um thanks for having me Ms. Hand. Nice to meet you um......Ms. ......"

"Izzy. Call me Izzy. And what in the world is your hurry on a Saturday morning."
"I have to catch the bus. Nearest stop is over a mile away. See you Monday Jemma. Thanks again." Skye went to walk out the kitchen door.

Vic stepped in front of her. "Whoa. Hang on. You don't have to take the bus home. I'll be glad to drive you Skye."

"Oh I'm not going home. I need to get to Melinda's Place. By 12:00."

"Melinda's Place? Martial Arts? You have a lesson?" The question came from Izzy.

Jemma spoke up. "Skye cleans for her. Then Mr. C's wife gives her a lesson."

Izzy smiled. She glanced at Vic. Then she spoke up. "I can take you. You don't need to rush to a bus stop. Besides, you do not want to miss my world famous blueberry pancakes."

"That's okay. I don't want to be any trouble. Thanks anyway." Skye tried to leave again but Vic stopped her gently holding her arm.

"It's no trouble Skye. Really. Now why don't you just sit with Jemma while Izzy and I make breakfast."

Skye sighed. She looked at Jemma who just shrugged her shoulders and moved to the counter.

"Skye it's fine. Now do you want some coffee? You can pick a flavor and put it in the Keurig. Best invention ever."

Skye grinned. "The Keurig or coffee?"

"Yes." Jemma grinned at her. Vic and Izzy laughed.

"Yes I just hope that Jemma's parents do not blame me for her addiction to coffee. They will be scandalized to learn Jemmy prefers coffee over tea."

"I still like tea. It's just coffee is so much more........more."

Forty - five minutes later Skye put the last bite of pancake in her mouth and sighed in happiness. Jemma looked over and smiled.

"See. Now aren't you glad you stayed. Izzy's pancakes are great."

"Best pancakes ever." Skye mumbled around the bite of food.

Izzy smiled at her. "Thank you. Maybe next time you stay over, I can make my famous strawberry waffles."

Skye's eyes got big. "Really? Strawberry waffles?"

"Oh yes Skye they are the best. Oh Izzy I almost forgot about those."

Izzy laughed. "I sometimes almost forget how much you like to eat Jemma. It seems your friend does too."

"Yeah you kinda learn how to appreciate good food when you don't get it much. Some of the fosters I stayed at you were lucky to get three meals a day. Sometimes school was the only place I
ate anything. Most places had cereal though, but not many made breakfast. You know it was the ................." Skye stopped talking. She never said stuff like that to people. Never opened up. What was happening to her? She looked down, suddenly fascinated with the floor tiles.

Izzy and Vic shared a pained glance as Jemma looked at her friend sadly.

"I'm sorry Skye. Sometimes it's hard to remember that not everyone has what I have."

"It's cool Jemma. It is what it is. I'm good. Hey, the Brodys are decent enough anyway. " Skye got up and took her plate to the sink. She started rinsing the dishes. "Least I can do is the dishes."

Vic stepped toward her. "If you had the time. But you need to leave shortly with Izzy. So it's fine." She ushered the girl away.

"Yeah traffic is going to be heavy now." Izzy moved to Vic and they embraced and Izzy gave her a soft kiss. "See you tonight babe."

Izzy walked by Jemma who was clearing the table. "See you later too Jemmy. Keep your aunt out of trouble till I get back. Oh and I'll be bringing some steaks to grill. Is Leo coming by? I have plenty."

"No he's busy. Doing some project he said."

"That's a shame. He hasn't been round much these days. I miss our Dr. Who conversations. See you both later. Come on Skye."

"Thanks again Ms. Hand. And I'll see you Monday Jem." Skye followed Izzy out the door.

Skye grinned as she saw Izzy's car. It was an old mustang convertible. Royal blue. "Sweet ride."

Izzy laughed at Skye's reaction. "My dad and I worked on it together. I've had it for over 20 years now. I have a mechanic friend who helps keep it going."

They both got in and music blasted when Izzy turned the key. An Elton John song came on and Skye grinned again. "Miss May likes that music."

Izzy nodded as she backed out of the driveway. "Tell her to tell you about the concert she made us all go to one day."

Skye grinned. Maybe she would do that. Soon they cruising along the highway heading toward to center of town. Skye grinned the whole way. Pulling into the parking lot, Skye saw a woman standing by the back door. She jumped out of the car after Izzy came to a stop.

"Hey thanks a lot. I really appreciate the ride."

"Not a problem Skye. Anytime. You've been a good friend to Jemma. She doesn't have too many you know. She's only been here for about two years, and being well..... shy, and English and so damn smart......you know. Vic worries."

Skye smiled. "Well she's been a good friend to me. I never really had.........", Skye's smile faltered, "well moving a lot ......you know....it's hard to .....anyway thanks again for the ride. In this amazing car."

"Like I said, Anytime. Tell Melinda hello from me."

At that Izzy backed her car around and then pulled out of the lot waving to Skye. Skye started
walking around to the front entrance when she heard someone talking. She looked up and saw the woman walking toward her.

"This door not open." Skye noticed she had an accent similar to Natasha's.

"No Miss May keeps it locked. You have to use the front entrance over this way."

"Ah thank you." The woman followed Skye on the pavement. "I come to see classes. My cousin says I might be good for learning this....um....hitting people thing."

Skye laughed. "Martial Arts?"

"Yes that is English name. Sorry my talk not as good as my brother. Or cousin."

"Natasha's your cousin, right?" Skye held the door open for the woman to go through.

"Yes. You know Natasha?"

"Yeah. I'm Skye. I clean for Miss May. And take lessons."

"Wanda. My name's Wanda Maximoff."

"Well come on Wanda Maximoff, let's find Natasha."

As they walked into the gym Skye spotted Natasha and Miss May on the mats. They were sparring. She walked closer and then knelt down to watch. Wanda slowed next to her and then crouched down and sat next to her on the floor. Skye was entranced. It was like watching a choreographed dance. Both Miss May and Natasha moving gracefully while dodging kicks and hits. It was obvious to anyone they were exceptionally good. After a few minutes, both stopped and then Natasha said something Skye could not hear but had Miss May laughing out loud. She wasn't sure she had ever heard that before. A full blown laugh. Then Skye thought about what Jemma's aunt had said about Mr. C and Miss May losing their child. How sad was that. Skye shook her head in anger. Fate just sucked. I mean here were two of the best people she had even met and they lost their son in an accident. Life was so cruel. Skye looked over at Wanda as the woman touched her arm.

"Huh?"

"Sorry. I ask you question and you were million miles away."

"Oh sorry. What did you ask."

"How long you know Miss Melinda?"

"Oh not long. But she's amazing."

"Yes. That is same thing Natasha say. It is good she give Nat job. Nat was getting umm... what that word......um angry at not finding job. No not angry um....."

"Frustrated?"

"Yes that right word. Frustrated. People no like her being different."

Skye nodded. "Yeah I get that. Being different sucks sometimes."

"Sucks?"

"Ah I see."

"You see what Wanda?"

Both Skye and Wanda jumped slightly not hearing Natasha walking up to them.

"Sucks. Means frustrated. Young Skye here says so."

Natasha laughed. "Oh she did, did she."

Skye grinned and got up. "Well it sort of does. I mean if something sucks it's frustrating, right?"

Natasha smiled as Skye walked away.

"So Wanda you decided to come and see training. Good. After learning about that incident that happened to you I think you should learn self defense. The 12:00 class is just arriving. You can watch from here." Natasha led her cousin to the spectator seats.

Skye poked her head into Melinda's office. "Hi. Anything special to do or the usual."

"Hello Skye. No just the usual."

"Oh yeah Izzy said to say hi. She dropped me off."

That peaked Melinda's interest. "Isabelle Hartley?"

"Um I don't know. Maybe. Drives a sweet blue mustang?"

"Yes that's her. How do you know Izzy?"

"Oh I stayed at my friend's last night. Jemma's. Her aunt Vic?"

"Victoria Hand. I know Vic. I did hear she was taking care of her niece. So she's your age?"

"Yeah. She's one of my friends. Mr. C knows her. I better get to work."

Melinda smiled and nodded her head. She watched as Skye left and then stood up and walked out of the office. She had a paper in her hand she had just printed. It was the police file that Hunter had sent her. All about last night's late arrest of one Dominic Kebo. Melinda sat down in one of the observation chairs in the second row. She started reading. Kebo had a long arrest history having been arrested eleven times with charges sticking only on two. He'd served two years on a weapons charge recently, getting out of jail only 5 months ago. It seems that most of the time witnesses never showed for the hearings or evidence disappeared. She paused when she got to one case. His lawyer's name was familiar. Brody. Jason Brody. Melinda's head shot up as she remembered. She glanced to the equipment room and saw Skye through the window cleaning. The Brody's were Skye's foster family. Why would a respected lawyer like Jason Brody be representing a punk like Kebo? Melinda kept reading getting angrier by the second. This Kebo character was a petty violent criminal. Why would any woman let someone like that into their home especially around her kids. Melinda thought about poor Donnie trying to fight this guy to protect his mother. He's lucky the jerk didn't hurt him worse.

"Must be good?"
"Huh?" Melinda looked up to see a woman staring at her.

"What you read. Your full attention on it. Must be good?"

"Oh yeah. It's um.......for......um.....work." Melinda turned the paper on her lap. She really had no reason to be looking at it and if you wanted to get technical it was probably illegal for her to do so, but Hunter didn't see the harm and neither did she. It was good to still have friends with the police."

"I Wanda Maixmoff. I just want to thank you for giving my cousin a job. She was trying to find job for long time. It sucks."

Melinda raised her eyebrows at the last comment. "Well Natasha is more than qualified. I consider myself lucky that she agreed to work here." Melinda paused. "Um what sucks?"

"Not getting job. People not hire her. She frustrated. Sucks. The girl said that's what sucks means." The woman pointed to Skye as she walked by with the garbage bags.

Melinda laughed. "Yeah right. But I don't think the two words are completely interchangeable."

Wanda looked at Melinda confused. "Inter.........?"

"Interchangeable. Um.......Sucks is a slang word. Means to not like something. Like getting hurt sucks. Frustrated is more like an emotion."

"Oh. But still mean same thing?"

"Yeah I guess in a way. When something is frustrating it sucks." Melinda grinned. Who would have thought she'd have a conversation about the word sucks. "So Wanda, how long have you been in this country. I mean if you don't mind me asking. I thought you and your brother were here longer than Natasha."

"Oh no. Not me. Just Pietro. He came many years ago. I only came a month before Natasha. I just get job a few months ago. I clean offices. Like the girl."

Melinda glanced at Skye smiling. "So were you thinking of taking a class here? Or just visiting Natasha?"

"Oh Nat thinks I need to learn how to......how to...... do that self.....self........."

"Defense?"

"Yes. Defend the self. She worries."

"Does she have a reason to worry?"

The woman grew quiet. "She worries. I work late night. I was taking bus home and on way to bus stop, a man um........he ........threaten me. Another man came by and scare him off. But now Nat wants me learn to protect self."

"Did you report this to the police?"

"Police? Oh no. No."

"She didn't report it because she doesn't trust police. Where she comes from they are corrupt. They are sometimes no better than the criminals. I try to tell her not here. Here police are good. That's why I want to be law enforcement. Here you do good." Natasha had appeared next to them having
dismissed her class. The kids were being picked up by parents and leaving.

Natasha continued. "It happened few weeks ago. But I just learned of it on Thursday when I overheard Wanda talking to Pietro. Coming here was a compromise." Natasha gave her cousin a pointed look.

"Well we have self defense courses for adults. I have two classes during the day. You said you work nights, right?" They both nodded. "So Tuesday at 10am? Or Thursday at 2pm?"

Natasha thought for a moment and then spoke up. "Thursday. That way since I start at three to work we come together. Pietro can drop us both. I stay and Wanda take bus to work at five."

"Okay I'll put you down. You get 25% off employee discount."

"Oh no Miss Melinda we pay full price."

"Natasha you get a discount for family. Now that's that. I need to get ready for my class."

Melinda walked away as the two women started chattering in Russian. She looked up as she saw Lincoln and Trip enter. Lincoln called out a greeting to Skye who smiled and waved. Melinda watched as the young girl ran over to the boys talking excitedly about the blue mustang she had been in. She'd have to remember to tell Izzy about the impression her car made on the girl. Her light heartedness vanished quickly as she placed the papers in her office once again thinking about Donnie and Mr. Kebo.

Skye was waiting in Melinda's office as Melinda was talking on the phone pacing back and forth. She was sitting in the chair twirling back and forth waiting for Melinda to take her home. Skye noticed one of the desk drawers was half opened. Her curiosity getting the best of her she peered in the drawer. There were pictures in it and on top was a picture of Melinda and Mr. C with a young boy. Skye's eyes opened wide realizing this was their son. She picked up the picture and held it up looking at it. Mr. C had his trademark goofy grin on his face with his arm wrapped around his wife. Melinda was smiling bigger than Skye had ever seen and in between them was a little boy around 6 or 7 who was laughing. He looked so much like Melinda. Skye stared at the picture and felt tears threaten. They were so happy.

"Who told you that you could look at that?"

Skye jumped and looked up into Melinda May's angry face.

"Oh I.......I...I'm sorry. The drawer was open and I........I just........."

Melinda grabbed the picture out of Skye's hand. She threw it in the drawer and slammed it shut.

"Do you always go through my personal things?"

Skye was shocked at the coldness in her voice. "No, I didn't....I never did.......I'm sorry. The drawer was open."

"So you thought that was an invitation to go through it?" Melinda knew she sounded mean, but she didn't care at the moment.

"Miss May I'm sorry. I won't do it again."
"That's right you won't. Get out of my office. You apparently cannot be trusted."

Skye felt the tears well up in her eyes. "No I can, please ...I'm sorry."

Melinda ushered the girl out and slammed the door shut. Skye felt her hands start shaking. Melinda stomped to the back and checked the doors and then walked back to the front checking the alarms. She held the front door open. "Let's go."

Skye berated herself for being so weak but she couldn't hold back the tears. She let out a sob as tears cascaded down her cheeks. This was a side to Melinda she had not seen and she could feel her heart breaking. Why were people so........

"Skye? Oh shit. Hey Skye." Melinda walked to the girl and was overcome with guilt. This wasn't who she was. She did not cause people pain. She protected them. "Hey." Melinda was not good at this. At emotions. At calming people down. But she owed her this since she had made her upset. So Melinda swallowed hard and reached out to touch her arm and to apologize. But Skye's reaction was not what she expected. Skye twisted out of her grasp and fell to the floor, melting into a small ball hugging herself in protection.

Melinda watched in horror. Skye thought she was going to hit her. Feeling like a monster she knelt down and talked calmly to the girl.

"Skye. It's okay. Hey. Come on. I'm not going to hurt you. I would never.....ever.......Melinda's voice hitched as she struggled with her words, "I would never hit you Skye. I would never hurt you. I'm so sorry." Melinda could see the girl's breathing was erratic and she was shaking. Tears came to Melinda's eyes. The girl was having a panic attack. And it was all her fault.

Melinda sat down next to Skye. She had no idea how to talk Skye down from this, but figured she could do what Phil did for her. She just stayed next to her and kept talking. Reassuring her. Kept her voice even and calm. Did not try to touch her.

It took about fifteen minutes till Melinda saw Skye coming back to herself. Slowly she had stopped shaking and Melinda could see her heart rate even out. Her fists were closed but not clenched tightly and her tears had stopped. Melinda watched as the girl slowly uncurled her body and sat upright. She had closed her eyes as the tears had slowed, but now had opened them but was staring at the floor. She had her knees bent with her arms wrapped around them. Every once in a while her body would shudder. Melinda had stopped talking a few minutes ago and had just stayed sitting on the floor next to Skye. She had sent a few text messages to Phil, mostly about being late. The last one however, she had a meltdown of words, telling Phil what an awful person she was and that she was not fit to be a mother, or to teach kids anything. She had even typed that Donnie would be better off anywhere than with her. That's when Phil had tried to call over and over but she had the ringer on silence to not freak out Skye and she refused to answer. Which meant that Phil was probably thinking about coming there or was already on his way.

Skye looked up at Melinda who was watching her carefully. "I'm sorry." It was barely a whisper.

Melinda's heart broke again as she realized just how much she had traumatized the young girl. "No Skye. I'm sorry. I don't even know why I got so angry. It was unacceptable. You don't have to apologize. I do. Please, please forgive me."

At that Skye's eyes filled with tears. "No I shouldn't have looked at that picture. It was not my place. I just.......I just saw it and .........I'm so sorry."

"Hey. Skye. Look at me." The girl had dropped her head again. She looked back up at Melinda as
more tears fell.

"I didn't know about your son Melinda. Jemma's aunt....she......they told me what happened. When I saw the pictures I just.....I'm so sorry."

"That picture was the last one we took of Jamie. Well, Bobbi, Phil's sister, took it. I just don't.........I'm sorry Skye. I don't ever talk about him. But I am so sorry. I should never have gotten that angry. Or scared you. Skye I would never hit you. You know that right?"

Skye had once again hung her head to look at her shoes. Melinda took a chance and shuffled closer to the girl. She lifted Skye's chin up with her hand and looked her in the eyes.

"I will never hurt you Skye."

Skye nodded. "It was just a panic attack." Confirming Melinda's theory. "I used to get them a lot but not so much lately."

Melinda sighed. "I get them too."

At that revelation Skye's eyes widened and she bite her bottom lip. "You do?"

"Uhhuh. Mine are usually at night. After a nightmare."

Skye nodded. "Yeah I have nightmares too. Sometimes it's hard to tell what is real and what isn't real."

Melinda hurt so much for this young girl. She was only 14 and had experienced so much pain in her young life. And she had contributed to that pain. That guilt was not going to go away easily.

"Skye? I'm so sorry."

Skye nodded. "It's okay. You were upset. You had a right to be....."

"No Skye I did not. I had no right to take out frustration or anger on you. I had no right to yell or make you feel bad. I should have talked to you instead. I am so sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Skye nodded. "Of course. Please forgive me for snooping."

Melinda smiled. "Yes. Of course." Melinda watched as the girl seemed okay now. But Melinda noticed her hands were shaking a little yet. So Melinda fought off her inhibitions and need for her space, and moved even closer to the girl and wrapped her arms around her. Surprisingly, Skye sank into the embrace and lowered her head onto Melinda's shoulder, snaking her arms around Melinda as well. Melinda smiled as the young girl seemed content to hold on to her.

Moments later Phil came running into the gym. He stopped short as he took in the scene before him. Melinda and Skye were holding onto each other like lifelines. He smiled. Donnie spoke up behind Phil.

"What's going on?"

Skye pulled away from Melinda and stood up sheepishly grinning. Melinda stood up as well and looked at her husband, but before she could say anything Donnie spoke again.

"Skye?"

She turned her head to look at him. "Donnie. What are you doing here?"
Chapter End Notes

Yes I like Elton John. You will notice him in all my stories. More importantly I hold a headcanon that Melinda May likes Elton John is any universe. "Rocket Man" is her fav song. Coming up - more Skye with Fitz, Thomas, Lincoln, and everyone. More Melinda and Skye - their connection just got stronger. I hope to have the next chapter up by mid May. Unless the AOS Finale kills me.
Melinda looked from Skye to Donnie and back to each again. Donnie stood still looking at them both. Skye wiped her eyes on her sleeve and then smiled at the boy. Phil's face was one of curiosity.

After a few seconds, Donnie ran straight at Skye and engulfed her in a bear hug. Skye smiled hugging him back.

"Hey buddy. Long time huh?"

Donnie pulled away and stared at her again. "I can't believe you're here. What are you doing here anyway? How do you know the Coulsons?"

"Oh I take lessons here. Martial Arts. You know like we used to pretend." Skye kicked her foot and did a punch for emphasis. "Yeehah. Bam."

"You? Physical exertion? Geez Skye is the world ending?"

"Smartass."

"Goober."

Both broke into silly laughter. Skye stepped forward and encircled him in another hug. "I never thought I'd ever see you again." As she pulled away she noticed his wrist cast and bruise on his face. She reached up to touch the bandage.

"Aw shit Donnie. What the hell happened."

"Bastard was hurting my mom."

"You're back with your mom?"

Donnie hung his head. "I was. She starting using again a couple months ago."

"Shit. I'm sorry. New foster home huh?"

He nodded. He jerked his thumb over to Phil and Melinda who were standing together watching the interchange curiously.

Skye smiled. "Seriously? You're new foster parents are Mr. C and Miss May?"

"Yeah. So?"
"They are the best Donnie. You'll like them. Really. You need to stop scowling like right now. Jeez, you have cool fosters."

"Well thanks for the endorsement Skye." Phil gave her a warm smile. "How do you two know each other?"

"Foster home. Couple years ago."

Melinda did not miss the way they looked at each other when Skye responded.

"How long were you in the home together?"

Skye looked down and then back at Donnie. "I dunno. What, say maybe 7 months. One of my longer ones."

Donnie nodded. "Yeah. About that. You came only a couple weeks after me. We were a team." He smiled at Skye. "She never let the jerks at school hurt me. Even when David Hamilton......"

"Shut up Donnie." Skye admonished him and Melinda saw her face contorted into a myriad of emotions before becoming stoic.

Donnie shot her a hurt look and then understanding passed over his features. "Yeah we were in a foster home at the same time. That's all."

Phil shot Melinda a worried glance. Donnie knowing Skye was unexpected to say the least, and the conversation they just heard answered many questions but left so many more in the wake. They did manage to learn more about Donnie since he had been unwilling to talk to Phil all day except to respond to necessary questions.

Phil spoke up then. "So Mel, you want me to take Skye home and stop for some take out?"

"Um well actually, um.....Skye?" Melinda turned to talk to the girl. "Would you like to visit more with Donnie? We could grab some take out and you could spend a few hours at our place? If you want? And if it's okay with the Brody's?"

Skye looked at Donnie's pleading face and back to Melinda. "I'm already late so let me check in and see what Anne says."

Melinda smiled and nodded.

Skye walked away a few feet and dialed her phone. After a very brief conversation she walked back to Donnie.

"She said it was okay. I told her I'd be back by nine. That okay?"

"That's fine Skye. Why don't you and Donnie ride back to our place in my car and Phil can get the food. Chinese or Pizza?"

"It doesn't matter Miss May. Whatever you want."

"How bout you Donnie? Phil looked at the younger boy.

"Chinese is fine."

"I'll call it in then and swing over to the restaurant. Should be home in about 45 minutes." Phil headed out the door talking on his phone.

Melinda picked up her bag and Skye did the same. Then the three walked out to Melinda's car, with Melinda locking up behind her.

Two hours later, after eating, Skye and Donnie were in the room the Coulsons had designated as his for his stay there. Skye was sitting on his desk chair with her feet propped on his bed, while he sat on the floor leaning against the bed.

"So you just came here last night. I didn't know that the Coulsons fostered."

"Miss Carter said they just started. She kept telling me how thankful she was that there was a place for me to go."

"Yeah. Oh hey Miss Carter is my SS contact too. She placed me here, well in this town with the Brody's."

He frowned at her. "Yeah. So they okay?"

"So far it's been okay. I get plenty to eat, nice house to live in and a lot of freedom like to be here and all."

"Do they care Skye? You finally found one of them?"

"No not really. I mean it took awhile to find their angle, you know."

Yeah he knew. He nodded.

"Mrs. Brody drinks. But not in an ugly way. Least I haven't seen it. She basically ignores me. She likes when I help out though, you know chores and stuff. Nothing too demanding. Mr. Brody seems nice, you know the type. Acts like he cares. Probably doesn't actually. His son told me I was to make him look good......um........like a good image or something."

"Son? How many kids?"

"Just two. Ryan is my age and he's cool. We're friends. JJ is a couple years older. He's a jerk. I just stay away from him. He and his friends like to think they run the school."

"So image huh?"

"Yeah to look like a caring family. Giving back to the helpless and hopeless. Get more votes or something."

They sat quiet for a while.

"Donnie? What happened? You were with your mom?"

Donnie pulled his legs up and hugged his arms around them. After a few seconds he looked at Skye. "Last May. Right after I turned 12. They let me go with her. She was clean. Gone through a program. Did all the right things. Had a job. An apartment. Small, but you know, nice. It was ours." He paused to gather his thoughts. "They had me go through some tests and stuff. You know,
see a psychiatrist, and all the others. Some intelligent test thing. One of the counselors pushed it before I could go back with mom. So they pushed me up a grade to eighth, said I was smart and mom was so proud. Said I'd be the first in the family to go to college. It was great. I studied hard, even joined a youth baseball team this past summer. Can you imagine? But it was fun. Mom worked hard, sometimes 60 hours a week. But we'd do stuff together on weekends. Watch TV. Go to a cheap movie. Go to the park."

"Just being together was what counts. And you always were a smart little nerd." She nudged him with her toe.

He made a face at her. "After all her promises, she finally came through. But I guess it wasn't enough. I was not enough. Back in August she met Dominic. Called him her knight in shining armor. He was nice to her. Even me at first. I noticed it a couple weeks later after I found her stash. She started using again. Turns out good old Dominic was a dealer."

"That sucks."

"I begged her to make him leave. To stop. She wouldn't. So I stayed away more and more. Friends. Library. Sometimes outside. Like we used to do when it wasn't safe. The apartment roof. Not as dangerous as when we did it. No gangs anyway, just cold sometimes."

"I'm sorry."

"Should have just ran away. Like you did."

"They catch you Donnie. Take you back. You know that. Being out there as a kid you get used. Someone always has an angle. It's not safe, you know that."

"Nothing is safe Skye. My own house isn't. Group homes are worse. Fosters aren't safe either. You know that."

"This one is Donnie. These are good people. Caring people. You lucked out. Mr. C is my history teacher. He is really nice. He talked his wife into giving me self defense lessons. And she did. For free. Well basically. I mean I clean for her a little, but believe me, she is very generous with her time. Six plus hours of lessons and I clean for like 3 hours tops. I know what she charges and it isn't even close. These are good people Donnie. They will treat you right. Don't be a douche to them, okay?"

He nodded. "I guess. Guy talks a lot. He even showed me his comic collection."

Skye laughed. "He's a nerd Donnie. Just like you. So is it a good one? The comics?"

"Yeah. Outstanding."

"So be nice. Ask to see them. You know you are dying to. You're inner geek is so needy."

Donnie reached onto the bed and grabbed a pillow to throw at Skye. She blocked it easily, getting up quickly and grabbing a pillow and went to whack him, but stopped in mid air as she saw his cast. Which gave Donnie the advantage as he brought the third pillow across the side of Skye's head and laughed.

"Hey!" Skye looked indignant. "No fair." I can't whack you, you're injured."

Donnie grinned wickedly and went to whack her again. She dodged the pillow and jumped on the bed. "Nananana. You missed."
Donnie laughed, jumping on the bed to get to her so Skye jumped off the other side with a very loud thump. She ran over to the window, holding her pillow in front as a shield with her right hand and took a karate stance. Donnie approached slowly and just as he was about to attack the door swung open and Melinda stood there looking at them both.

Skye turned a shade of red, while Donnie dropped his pillow and stared back at Melinda in fear.

"Skye you're too tense and your feet are too close together. Carry on."

Melinda left the room and closed it behind her and both Skye and Donnie could hear her laughing as she walked down the hallway.

Skye grinned. "Told you they were cool." Donnie smiled and the tension seemed to leave his body as his face lit up.

Melinda walked back to her bedroom. She closed the door, still laughing as Phil looked over to her. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah fine. They were just playing."

"Playing?"

"Yeah. Isn't it great?"

Phil noticed his wife's relaxed demeanor and decided to push. "So you want to tell me what those text messages were all about Mel."

Melinda let out a deep breath. "Skye had a panic attack."

Phil's face washed over in concern. "How bad?"

"Bad." She paused and then her face clouded over. "It was my fault."

"How so?"

Melinda sat down on the edge of the bed. Phil joined her. She explained everything that happened.

Phil took her hand in his and squeezed. "Seems to me everything's okay now. She was doing some serious hugging of you there Melinda. And you were hugging her too."

Melinda sighed. "But I caused her pain Phil. This is exactly what I was afraid of. Why I didn't want to do this fostering. Why I never get close to my students. Why this all was a bad idea. Spending too much time with her. Hell I take Skye home three times a week and teach her for a good six hours. Plus today she watched my advanced teen class for an hour and half and she is there cleaning for another couple hours. It's too hard to not talk to her. To not get closer."

"Good."

"Good Phil? Cause I made her have a panic attack."

"You might have been the catalyst for her attack today, but you know damn well it had another cause initially. Whatever that was, was the bigger culprit. Not that you didn't do anything wrong. But your lashing out was caused by your own pain Melinda. And you apologized. The way you tell it, several times. And Skye seems okay now. Melinda she was accepting your comfort. Your
apology. Hugging you. And you were able to give comfort to her. To realize and to help her. So......maybe the end result not so bad, huh?"

"Still should have never happened. I don't hurt kids Phil. Not even with words. I should have seen it sooner too. Her face just ..........oh Phil, her face showed fear and pain. And she shrank away from me. Someone hurt her badly. You heard what Donnie started saying. That foster home. Maybe I should ask her what happened?"

"And you would lose all trust she has in you right now. She would shut down and most likely get angry. She isn't ready to talk or admit anything to anyone yet. She shut Donnie down pretty quick."

"I still don't like it."

"There'd be something wrong with you if you did."

"Did you hear what they said about food too? Who denies food to children?"

"There are bad foster homes Mel. I think Donnie is so quiet and uncooperative because he is waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting to get hurt or something."

"Skye stuck up for you."

"Us Mel. She stuck up for us."

Melinda smiled and then looked at her watch. "It's after 8:30. You should take Skye home. She told them she'd be back by nine."

"You should take her home Mel."

She shook her head. "I'd rather not Phil. Not just yet. Not tonight. I don't know what to say on the drive."

"You don't have to say anything. Just be you. Kids are pretty flexible Mel. And I've found they don't hold grudges. They forgive easily. If Skye said she forgives you, she has."

"Phil. Please."

"Mel you either drive Skye home or stay here and hang with Donnie."

Melinda sighed as she got up. "Or you can take Donnie with when you drop off Skye?"

"Or not."

Melinda gave him a dirty look. "Fine I'll take her home. Maybe you can bond with Donnie while I'm gone."

"Yeah I tried that. I don't think he's into comics. Or Star Wars. Or my robot models."

"Well you could watch TV together. Or ask him what he likes to do. You know we still have those old board games on top of the hall closet."

He smiled as she left the room.

Skye glanced shyly at Miss May as she sat in the passenger seat. The radio was softly playing
oldies and Skye tapped along to the beat of Bob Segar's Old Time Rock and Roll. She wanted to talk but she wasn't sure if Melinda wanted to. They had a pretty emotional time earlier. Skye really wasn't ready for another emotional conversation. Then she remembered what Izzy told her to ask.

"So Izzy said I should ask you about the concert you made everyone go to. So whose concert was it?"

Melinda glanced quickly at Skye then back to the road. Then she laughed. Which immediately set Skye at ease so much she smiled.

"She did huh?" She paused a moment then continued. She turned the music volume down. Then she laughed again. "And for the record I didn't make anyone go, they all wanted to come."

Now Skye's curiosity was peeked. "So what happened?"

"Long or short version."

Skye grinned. "Definitely long."

"Okay so it was all Phil's fault."

Skye laughed at that as Melinda smirked.

"I like Elton John's music. Well anything from the 70's and early 80's really, but Elton John just reminds me of fun times. It's my go to music for training and running and cleaning and just about anything else. Billy Joel too."

"Ah piano." Skye interjected.

"Yeah. It's just, I don't know. Makes me happy. So anyway it was April 2001."

"Oh my gosh, I wasn't even born yet."

"Hush you." Melinda tried to shoot her a glare that came across as a fond smile instead. "So Elton John and Billy Joel were touring. The Face to Face tour. But they weren't coming close to here. Denver, Colorado was one of the closer venues. Phil and I had just set a wedding date for September and he wanted to give me a gift, so he decided to go buy tickets for the concert and make it a road trip."

"Like a pre Honeymoon road trip."

Melinda laughed. "Oh no, not even close. Word got out what he was doing and others wanted in. So he brought along his sister and her boyfriend, Hunter, my best friend Roz, Izzy, Clint and Mike Peterson. He rented a fifteen passenger van and we set out on a Thursday morning. We made it to Ohio before stopping for the night. Then we set out on Friday morning for the remainder of the trip. We planned to get there by late Friday night. The concert was at 6 on Saturday. Well, the first leg of the trip went okay, it wasn't till we left Ohio that things got, well crazy. First we got a flat tire. So that cost us about 4 hours trying to find a tire shop or garage to replace the tire, cause the spare wasn't going to cut the miles long trip. So once we got on the way again, we stopped in mid afternoon at a diner. A diner in a little town off the highway we found after getting lost."

"Why'd you get lost."

Melinda shook her head. "The highway had come to a standstill. An accident I suppose. So Hunter got out a map and took us on these back roads around the highway."
"GPS?"

"Not on an old 1985 Dodge van. And not on any cell phones either. In fact not everyone had a cell phone."

"So maps huh."

"Yeah. And with Bobbi's boyfriend, just newly here from England......let's just say we should have all known better than to let him in charge of directions."

"How lost were you?"

"So lost that we stopped for directions at a little diner in the middle of nowhere in Missouri. A town called Humansville."

Skye snorted. "No way."

"Yep. The diner was called Humansville Diner."

"Of course it was."

"Anyway to make a long story short."

"Too late."

Melinda smiled. "I was just going to say ......you're home. So I can wrap up the story now or finish it another time."

"Home? I don't think I've ever had one of those. This place is just where I stay, for now. You could finish while we sit here."

Melinda bit her bottom lip and her eyes clouded at Skye's off handed remark about home. Then she sighed and turned toward Skye. "Don't you think the Brody's would think that is weird just sitting out here in my car?"

"Nah. No one's home. See no lights except the outside and the living room. And Ryan texted me and said his parents and JJ had some diner to go to and he was staying over at Leo's place. In fact you could come in and finish the story."

"Skye that might not be a good idea. Not if they are not home."

Skye shrugged her shoulders. "Okay. But you could tell it here."

Melinda relented. "Alright. So we are in a small town in Missouri. Lost. And starving. Well the boys were starving. So we park and get out and Izzy says she will get directions. We all agreed so long as it's not Hunter, so we walk in this little diner. And every single head turns to look at us. Granted we looked a bit weary. Dusty from the road. Clint had long hair back then pulled back in a pony tail. Bobbi, Roz. Izzy and I went straight to the restroom to clean up a bit. The boys went and found a table. Granted we looked a bit mish mashed. Roz and Phil in preppy clothes. Me and Izzy and Hunter with our leather jackets on. Clint and Mike with their tight t-shirts, unshaven. They were both working undercover, rookies on the police force."

Melinda paused and grabbed a bottle of water taking a swallow. She glanced at Skye who was giving her full attention to Melinda. She continued.
"So the four of us come out of the restroom and we went to sit down but before Bobbi could get to the table a man steps in front of her and well says something crude. Bobbi doesn't blink, she just moves to go around him and tells him to piss off. Hunter heard what he said and stood up and immediately Phil grabbed him and pulled him back down. Phil knew Bobbi could handle herself and a fight was not going to go well for anyone. Bobbi shrugged off the idiot and sat down. No one thought anything of it and we ordered out food and ate quickly. Izzy had gotten directions back to the highway from the waitress. We paid and walked out to get in the van to leave. Except gathered outside was the idiot and his friends. There were five besides him. And a few more locals lingering behind us that Izzy pointed out as we stopped. And a crowd had gathered."

"Wait. Is this really true? Or are you pulling my leg? It sounds like a bad B movie."

Melinda smiled softly. "I wish it were not true. There is still a lot of bigotry in the world Skye. People simply not liking others because they are different. Or are another race. First words out of the idiot's mouth were. 'How come a nice normal pretty white girl like you is hanging with a this riff raff.'"

Skye frowned. "That is so not cool."

So they flung a few barbs our way. Me and Mike taking the brunt. Hunter's accent was mentioned. Clint's ponytail. The usual stupidity and bigotry. Phil and Roz tried their diplomatic best to defuse the situation. We weren't worried about getting hurt. Between us were 5 police officers and an FBI agent. Phil could defend himself as well. We all knew that we needed to just leave but they weren't going to let us. We knew a full on fight, especially with the boys involved would be trouble. Might cost them a few night's in jail or even worse. Bobbi and I stepped forward as Phil and Izzy and Roz pushed the boys back. I stepped up into the idiot's face and told him to back off. Told him exactly who Bobbi and I were and what we were capable of doing to them. He laughed and called me a name. He reached to my arm and grabbed it and attempted to push me. I took him down and another who stepped in to help in seconds. Bobbi did the same with 2 others. The remaining two backed off and that's when the police arrived."

"Oh my gosh what happened? Did they arrest you?"

"No. Once they saw all our I.D.'s and heard that just two women had taken down the men after they touched one of us they just let us go. It was a stark reminder to me however, how alive racism and stupidity was still in this country."

"Just cause people are different. Hate is so stupid."

"It is."

"So after that?"

"Well it was late till we got back on the highway and we were off schedule by about 6 hours. We decided to stop at a hotel around ten and head out early to make the concert. Originally we were trying to get to Denver to stay at a hotel that night. The plan was to get to Denver on Friday night, stay at the hotel, take in some sights, see the concert and stay at the same hotel and head back home Sunday morning."

"So how was the concert?"

"Never got there Skye. Phil, Hunter, Roz, Clint and Bobbi all got food poisoning."

Skye laughed. Loudly. She pushed hand against her mouth trying to stifle the sound but it didn't
work. "I'm sorry,' she managed to get out between giggles."

"Izzy, Mike and I spent the next 24 hours cleaning up after and taking care of the others."

Skye became somber. "Wow that sucks. I really am sorry."

Melinda shrugged. "It was a long time ago. Izzy enjoys telling the story. I'm surprised she didn't tell you. She embellishes it more. The others pretty much like to pretend it didn't happen."

"So you never saw Elton John?"

"No I did. 2004. Radio City Music Hall. Phil got tickets. For everyone. Him and I, Izzy, Bobbi and Hunter, Clint, Mike and Roz. Roz brought her new boyfriend along and Izzy brought Vic. My mom and dad stayed with Jamie. It was the first time I'd left him in their ........." Melinda trailed off. She took a deep breathe. "I don't normally talk about my son."

"I'm sorry."

"No it's okay." Melinda swallowed hard and turned to Skye. "I.....I .....just.......I miss him so much." Her voice grew quieter. "You should probably go Skye. I need to get home."

"Yeah okay. So Miss May is it okay if call Donnie? Maybe even hang out sometimes?"

"Of course."

"Thanks Miss May. For the ride. Oh and the Chinese food, it was good." Skye got out then stuck her head back in the door. "Oh and the story. And for earlier......um.......when I freaked out..........and......."

"Skye that was my fault."

"Well you helped......you know.......helped and stuff." Skye smiled. "And for the lessons. I'm not dumb you know. I know how much they cost."

Melinda smiled. "You pay with your cleaning."

Skye smirked. "Yeah right. You pay your cleaning people a great wage Miss May."

"Only when they're worth it." Melinda smiled. "And please call me Melinda."

Skye grinned. "Okay Miss Melinda."

"Smartass."

Skye waved as she walked to the front door. Melinda waited till the girl entered the house before she backed around and pulled out of the driveway. She glanced back seeing Skye at the bay window watching her leave. Melinda's thoughts went to Clint and Mike and all the other strays Phil had mentored and nurtured over the years. She smiled as she realized her goof of a husband had very slowly and very subtly made her care about the strays too.

Skye woke up at six on Monday as she had started doing. She went for her run, showered, ate breakfast and was on her way to school, walking with Ryan.

"So how was your sleepover at Leo's."
"Guys don't do sleepovers Skye. Least we don't call them that."

"Well what do you call them."

"Hanging out." He smirked at her.

Skye laughed. "Well my sleepover," she emphasized the word sleepover, was awesome. And then finding out Donnie was with the Coulsons was amazing."

"So you know him from a foster home you stayed in together?"

"Yeah. When I was twelve. Donnie was ten."

"That's cool."

"Yeah he is, the home not so much."

"How come? What was wrong?"

"What was right would be a shorter answer. Nothing. It was just not good place to be. That's all I'm gonna say Ry."

"Okay. So how was it at Jemma's?"

"We watched movies, talked, and made cookies."

"That's all? Boring."

"It was great. I'd never been at a sleepover before. So you shut up."

He laughed. "I'm glad you had fun Skye. All Leo and did was work on our Physics project."

Skye shuddered. "I can't believe you actually take two science classes and like them."

"Well you'd take two computer classes if you could."

"Yeah too bad they don't offer many at school. I've taken all the others at other schools."

"Well you know you can take college classes. Online or even go to the community college here."

"While in school?"

"Sure it's a cooperative program. You should ask about them when you register for next year's classes."

"You think I'll be here next year Ryan?"

"Sure. At least through the election next year. Probably after too. Sending you back right away would look really bad."

"Unless he loses."

"He won't lose Skye. He has money, backers and plays dirty."

"So you're saying I could actually be here over a year? That's never happened Ryan. Ever."

Ryan looked at Skye. She was looking at him with such hope. "Yes. It could. Especially if you
listen to me and just stay out of JJ's line of fire."

"Come on Ryan. I never started anything."

"I know that. But to them once you rock the boat, you are the enemy. You could try to smooth that over."

"How? Should I have let Ward just do that. Should I date him?"

"Oh hell no Skye. Just stay out of their way."

"I wasn't in Ward's way Ryan. I am trying to stay out of their way. What the hell else can I do?"

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

"Well JJ's ignored me the last week so that's good I guess."

Ryan nodded. They got to the school walkway. As they got halfway, suddenly Miles and Seth stood in front of them. Four others came up behind them effectually blocking any escape.

"Hey there Ryan." Seth spoke first. Ryan said nothing.

"Look cat got his tongue Seth. How come you're being rude. Answer him." Miles smiled dangerously.

"What do you want Seth."

"What I want is what we all want. For you and your little buddies, including this one, to remember whose in charge."

"You know what I don't get Seth? Why Ryan here is not part of the plan. Why little bro is hated by big bro."

"Well let me tell you." Seth grinned at Ryan. "Does she even know Ryan. Why JJ thinks you're a weak little pussy."

Skye grabbed Ryan's arm to walk by Miles. He pushed closer to her not giving her a way around him.

"Move jerk."

"You really need to learn don't you sweetie?"

"I'm not yours or any one else's sweetie. Get the hell out of my way."

"You think anyone here is going to help you Skye? Look around. Everyone here is with us. Those others," he pointed to the crowd outside the little group, "they know not to cross us. Seems like you haven't learned that lesson yet. Ryan used to know. But hanging around you has made the pussy grow balls. Like those others you hang with. Now you have the soccer players protecting your asses too. See there is an order around here. And you need to find your place. And Skye, you are a low life foster kid. A nobody. You have an arrest record. You are on the bottom rung sweetie. You have no family. No one. Your parents left you. At an orphanage. Your parents saw what a loser you were back then. Guess what? You're still a loser."

Miles reached up and grabbed Skye's wrist. He started twisting it while sneering at her. It was the same wrist she knew without a doubt now that Miles had hurt in gym class. She twisted her
shoulder and pulled her arm back just like Melinda taught her, simultaneously getting free and
throwing Miles off balance. Then she took her other elbow and brought up into his neck. She stuck
out her foot and kicked at his ankle pulling it forward then backed up away from him. He hit the
ground hard, falling on his knees.

Seth yelled. "What the hell?"

All of a sudden Mr. Parrish and Miss Jenkins, two math teachers were there. Skye's heart sped up
as Ryan pulled her closer to him.

Seth spoke out loudly. "Mr. Parrish. She just knocked him down. He wasn't doing anything. That
karate stuff or something. She's dangerous."

"Save it Dormer. Miss Jenkins and I saw the whole thing."

Miles got up and stared angrily at Skye.

Miss Jenkins moved between them and stood in front of Skye. "Are you okay? How's your wrist?"

Skye was rubbing her wrist and looked at it. "Um I guess I'm okay. Look I'm sorry but he...."

"You only defended yourself." Mr. Parrish interrupted her. "You two." "He pointed to Miles and
Seth. Get to Ms. Price's office now. Wait there for me. Miss Jenkins can you escort Skye and Ryan
to their classes."

"Certainly."

"Okay everyone move it. It's almost time for first period anyway. Let's go."

The crowd dispersed at Mr. Parrish's command and they started entering the school.

Mr. Parrish watched as Miles and Seth stormed off. He turned to Skye and Ryan.

"Don't worry. We saw everything. Thomas came and got us when he saw what was happening. Do
you need to see the nurse for your wrist young lady."

"No I'm good. I'm Skye. This is....."

"He knows me Skye. He's my Geometry teacher. Thanks Mr. Parrish."

"It's okay. I'm going to the office. Miss Jenkins will walk you to your classes. The Principal may
call you down to her office later as witnesses."

Skye nodded and both she and Ryan followed Mr. Parrish into the building with Miss Jenkins right
behind them. Skye and Ryan were both called to talk to Ms. Price and she agreed they were victims
and assured them that Miles and Seth would be punished. Skye's day moved rather quickly and she
soon found herself at lunch.

Skye walked into the cafeteria with her tray of food. As she got closer to their table her heart started
beating faster. She set her tray down and stood looking at him. Thomas was sitting in his regular
spot. He looked up at her.

"Hey Skye."
"Hey Skye. That's what your going with?"

"Yeah well it is your name."

"Thanks Thomas."

He nodded then stood up and hugged Skye. She hugged him back.

Chapter End Notes

We are still in 2015 in this story - Autumn. Lots and lots to come. Still early stages. Most of the characters have now been introduced. Next up more truths are revealed. Thanks for reading. I love reading comments. Take a few seconds and leave one. Tell what you like, don't like, want to see, characters you want to see more of and I will do my best to see what I can do. I do have an overall plan. Hope to get a new chapter up in a few weeks. Have to work on my other 3 stories first though.
Revelations.

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay in getting a new chapter up. I've been super busy. This chapter is super long. I hope that makes up for the delay a bit. Next chapter hopefully by mid August at the latest. Thanks for reading and comments always inspire me to stay up till late hours of the morning like I did finishing this chapter.

Reminders that this is not a Ward friendly AU. There are possible trigger warnings in this story. We meet a few more people, and now have just about introduced all the major and minor players in the story. Only a couple more to be seen down the line. Enjoy the chapter, I had fun writing it even though it was on the heavy and deeper side.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skye sat in the swing at the park next to Thomas. Ryan and Leo and Jemma were all there as well. They had all walked there after school. At lunch Skye had told everyone what had happened that morning. Everyone was upset realizing they were being targeted even more now, especially Skye.

"We have to do something."

"What are we supposed to do Leo? They run the school. Those who aren't with them are just too afraid to say or do anything. Hell, some of the teachers encourage them. The rest usually look the other way."

"Lincoln's mom doesn't, Ryan. Neither does Mr. C. Mr. Parrish and Mrs. Jenkins didn't."

"It's cause no one who cares can ever catch them. And the few times they are caught, their parents smooth it over. I bet nothing happens to Lydon and Dormer. Dormer's dad will threaten to sue and Lydon's mom will promise Ms. Price that little Miles just had a misunderstanding. They will get talked to and maybe told to stay away from Skye. That's it. That's what always happens."

Skye shuffled her feet, bringing her swing to a stop. "I told them. What they said. What they did. Miss Hill and Ms. Price and Parrish were there. The assistant principal was too."

Leo moved to the swing next to Skye and sat down. "Edison Poe is a jerk. He's always sticking up for them. I swear he worships the ground Garrett and the football team walks on. He and Ms. Price are always at odds."

"He kept looking at me. Like an evil, smirking glare. I swear I almost told him to stop. It was ..........ugh........just................flipping creepy too. He said since I hit Dormer I should be punished too. Zero tolerance. Parrish said what I did fit into the area of self defense. Said I stopped when I got free of his grasp."

Jemma spoke up then. "Good thing Parrish is a decent man. He's one of the best teachers too."

Everyone nodded except Skye who didn't really know him. Thomas stood up.
"Guys. I wanted to ......just........well............Hey I'm sorry."

"For what Thomas? You didn't do anything. Hey you got help."

"Yeah this time. The other times I let my fear stop me."

Ryan stepped forward and touched his shoulder. "Hey come on Thomas. We all know what you go through with Grant being your brother."

Thomas stepped away and moved to lean on the swing poles with a frown.

Leo looked at Ryan. "No worse than JJ being yours Ryan."

Ryan looked to the ground. "Not true. JJ doesn't beat me up every other day. " His eyes grew wide after he said it realizing he said it out loud. He looked at Thomas who was glaring at him.

Skye breathed in sharply looking at Ryan and then turned to look at Thomas. "Did he hurt you because of me Thomas?"

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "He hurts me no matter what. He enjoys it."

Skye looked horrified. "What about your parents?" She stood up and moved in front of him. "Thomas?"

He shook his head. He looked at Skye. He whispered. "They hate me more than Grant does."

"Hey!"

All five turned to look. There was a group of kids headed toward them. Kids from school. All five stood up together with Leo and Skye moving in front.

The group coming toward them stopped about five feet away. One of the boys took a step forward.

"Hey. Um I mean......um....hi. I...I...mean we....um.........we just wanted to thank you Skye."

"Huh?"

A girl broke from the group and approached them. "What Will is trying to say is ...thanks. For standing up to those jerks. It was great seeing that asshole go down. Dormer and Lydon think they own the world. It was good to see them reminded that they don't. Oh I'm Darcy. Darcy Lewis." She held out her hand to Skye.

Skye took it. "Um thanks I guess."

The boy smiled. "It was outstanding. You did what most of us dream about doing. I'm Will. Will Daniels. That's Ace Peterson and Kate Bishop."

Ace smiled and Kate waved.

"Darcy? What do you guys want?" Jemma looked at them suspiciously.

"Look I know I messed up Jemma. I should have backed Leo."

Ace spoke up. "Yeah we both should have. Leo I'm sorry. They threatened us. But still no excuse. We both saw them. What they did to you. I'm sorry."
"Wait. Is this about Leo getting beat up and a broken arm by JJ and his friends." Skye's face was getting angry.

Ace looked at the ground. "Yeah."

Skye stepped up to him. "You let them get away with it? You're no better then them."

Ace refused to look up. He simply nodded. Leo moved to Skye and touched her arm.

"Hey. Come on."

Skye looked at the new group of kids none of whom would look at her. Darcy finally spoke up.

"Maybe we got too used to being stepped on. It's easier to look away, easier to stay silent. Maybe we should have done this or that. Maybe we are jerks for being scared. But we are here now."

"Yeah. We just wanted you guys to know, especially you Skye. We have your backs. From now on."

Leo stepped up to Will. "Thanks Will. He held out his hand. Will took it with a grateful expression.

Skye's expression grew softer as she watched Jemma hug Ace, and Darcy stepped to Thomas engulfing him in a big hug as well.

"So how do we take over the school." Kate stood looking at Skye.

"Take over?"

"Well you know. For the greater good. Make it a safe place for everyone. A place where the worst thing is worrying about whether that is really chicken they are serving in the cafeteria."

Skye laughed. "Really? That's all it took. Me taking down one little punk?"

"No Skye. It was realizing that you were going to keep fighting back no matter what. Something we all should have never stopped doing." Thomas joined her and Kate.

Ryan watched everything unfold. He was both proud of Skye and Thomas and terrified for them at the same time. "You guys know that JJ and Grant are not going to stop right?"

"Neither are we." Jemma's voice was firm even if her expression was a bit unsure.

Thomas nodded. "Ry we can't keep living like this. We can't let them control our actions anymore. Let them browbeat us, live in fear, be people we aren't because others tell us how we should be, what we should be. You quit band Ryan. Cause your brother and parents said it was a waste of time. Cause your brother beat you up and made you try out for football. You hate football."

Ryan's face twisted into anger. "Well I'm not on the team, am I? Didn't make it. My parents want me to be like JJ. Athletic. Strong. Popular. I had no choice Thomas. So I do track and cross country. It keeps them of my back. I had no choice."

"You hate it. We all have choices. You chose the ones you made."

"I had to!"

"No you chose to. I get it."
"No you don't. You don't."

"Okay I don't. You walked away. But I didn't walk away Ryan. I was willing to fight, hell I still am. I might lose all the time but I'm still fighting. You, you are living a lie."

"It's .........you........no Thomas. I'm doing what's expected of me. I have 3-1/2 more years and then I can leave this dump."

"And what in the mean time Ry? You gonna stand around and watch your brother hurt your friends? Maybe break Jemma's arm next time instead of Leo's. Maybe rape her like he did Lanie?"

"Whoa! Hold on there Thomas! JJ raped Lanie?" Kate's eyes were huge and angry as she glared at Ryan and Thomas.

Ryan hung his head. Thomas looked at Kate and the others facing them. "Yeah. Him and two of his football posse. Why do you think Joey's in jail."

"Juvie."

"It's fucking jail Ryan. A lock down facility for juvenile offenders. For almost killing Kyle. Even though he deserved it. Hell so did JJ. Set up the whole thing. Grant fucking told me. He told me cause he knew I couldn't do anything about it. Said JJ had him watch cause it was JJ's turn and the new guys turn. Said it was their initiation."

"I know." Ryan's voice was quiet and defeated.

Kate got in Thomas's face. "You should have told someone!"

He nodded. "I did." He rolled up the shirt on his left arm showing a nasty scar. "And this is what I got for it."

Skye gasped as she saw the 4 inch scar across his shoulder. "Who did.......how .....shit ......I'm sorry."

"He used a switchblade. Did it on orders from JJ. Said no one would believe me but called me a snitch and cut in deep, then pushed me away, and they both walked away laughing. Fifteen stitches and this scar."

Leo walked up to Thomas. "Initiation? They called rape an initiation?"

Darcy nodded. "Yeah what the hell do you mean?"

Ryan spoke up. "He means that the football team has an initiation. Someone they get drunk, slip something too and then a couple guys have their way. They invite the girls. Some participate willingly. Some know and others don't. They never take no for an answer. If the girl tells anyone they always have others vouch for them being somewhere else."

"I think I'm gonna throw up." Skye spoke the words first.

Jemma added, "Lanie thought Grant liked her. She'd known him for awhile since he and Joey grew up together playing football. She claimed he had another side no one saw. A soft side. Kind and gentle. He treated her well and I don't know .........I thought maybe she was right. That he just acted like that cause of JJ and football and stuff. Here all along he was playing Lanie. I guess they do it a lot to other girls. She was a good friend. I.....I.......haven't seen her since........she won't talk to anyone from here."
"Yeah I don't know what is really going on. Raina was a good friend till last year. She used to scoff at them and talk crap about them with us. Some of those guys are bigoted. I guess JJ doesn't have that issue?" Ace almost spit the last words out.

"Not about race with JJ. Some of the others are though. With JJ it's all about who you are and if you fit in with them. Take orders and back each other up no matter what. JJ and Grant are bigots in other ways though for sure. They hated Joey when they found out he was gay. Something about that really bothered JJ."

"How do you know that Leo?"

"Cause I told him. Others have received that type of message from JJ. Garrett backs him. Says there is no place on the football team for those people. No place at the school even. I know other guys and girls who were verbally harassed or worse for their sexuality." Thomas looked refused to look at anyone while talking.

"This is just sick. JJ and Grant and all the others belong in jail."

"Yeah good luck with that Kate. There is never any proof. Never any witnesses. Always alibis."

"Don't forget the payoffs. Money talks," Ace replied disgustedly.

Thomas nodded. "Right. Parents who look the other way. Some who even buy off victims. Some who threaten the school. Anyone who crosses them is either hurt or ostracized. Wanna play football? You keep your mouth shut and you follow their rules. Wanna be safe in your own school? Keep your mouth shut and look the other way."

"Jeez when did this shit start."

"About seven years ago when Christian Ward was the high school football captain." Tripp had walked up while the group was engrossed in their conversation.

"Tripp. Where did you come from? You know all about this?"

"I saw you guys over here when I got to my car after running through the park. I just heard the last part of the conversation Jemma. If you mean do I know about all the rumors of rape, intoxication, ruffies, cover ups and such, yeah I do. Lincoln heard his mom at a meeting talking and told me. Seven years ago Christian apparently slipped a girl something in her drink, raped her and beat her. He was arrested. He got off on a technicality, and evidence went mysteriously missing. The girl and her parents were basically run out of town because everyone sided with the Wards. Malick and Garrett both claimed Christian was with them at a football meeting with two other guys. The guys claimed he was their too. The DNA evidence went mysteriously missing. After that...."

"After that my oldest brother thought he could get away with anything. That's when he started beating the crap out of Grant and me. That's when he decided he could rule the school. Christian handed down the leadership mantle over the years and now it's JJ's and Grant's."

"He beat up Grant? Didn't know that." Tripp raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah for maybe a year. Until he told Grant to beat me up. Once Christian knew Grant would do whatever he said, he became one of their team. Then Christian went off to college, Grant got even worse than Christian ever was and here we are. That standard of getting away with everything and privilege was handed down."

"Like a good old boys club." Trip shook his head.
"You all still have our backs?" Skye crossed her arms and glared at the four newbies.

They looked at each other and nodded to Darcy. She stepped forward to Skye and stick out her hand. "Unconditionally."

She took the offered hand and smirked back. "You are probably all crazy."

Ace looked over at her. "Crazy is better than what they are."

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A while later only Skye, Ryan, Thomas, Jemma and Trip remained.

The mood was pretty somber so Trip changed the subject. "So Ryan ready for the cross country meet on Wednesday? Last one of the season, right?"

"Yeah. For me. Some will move on to compete in the all county tournament and districts later."

"Callie is doing well this season. For a freshman she is number three in the league isn't she?"

"Yeah I think."

"You don't know? I thought you guys were tight?"

That got Skye's attention. "You have a girlfriend Ryan? Geez way to tell me."

Trip and Jemma laughed.

"Nah not anymore. We broke up a couple weeks back. Still friends."

"That's all you ever were."

Skye and Tripp turned to look at Thomas who was wearing an unreadable expression.

"Shut up Thomas." The warning was quiet but the look was dangerous from Ryan.

"Yah shut up Thomas. Just pretend Ryan. Right? Lie to everyone. It's only 3-1/2 more years." His look was one of disgust now.

"Hey guys. Come on. I thought you two were best friends. What's going on?"

Skye looked at Trip who shrugged his shoulders.

"Thomas?"

"Skye let it go. In fact we should probably get going, Aunt Vic is going to send out a rescue squad." Jemma got up and gathered her things.

"Oh hey I can drop you all off at your homes."

"Actually Trip I'd like that very much." Jemma smiled as Trip picked up her backpack to carry for her.

"I'm fine but thanks Trip. Only a mile away and I like to walk and think."

"Suit yourself Thomas. The offer stands but I'm leaving now."
"We're right down the road Trip. Thanks anyway." Skye smiled at both him and Jemma. They turned and walked toward the parking lot.

Skye studied Thomas who appeared to be angry and then looked at Ryan who refused to look at either of them. She could feel the tension.

"Hey Ryan what's going on?"

"Nothing. Let's go. I have a History test tomorrow and I need to study."

Skye nodded. "Yeah me too." She got up from the ground and grabbed her backpack. "Man it's getting cold."

"Where's your jacket? It's almost six at night in upstate New York in October. Of course it's cold."

"Gee Thomas you sound like Miss May."

He grinned at her. "She sounds like a smart woman. Now you on the other hand."

"Shut up."

"Hey let's go Skye," Ryan called. He was already halfway to the parking lot.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming." She turned to Thomas. "I don't suppose you are going to tell me what's up with you and Ryan?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Ask Ryan. Maybe he'll be more honest with you then he is with himself. See you tomorrow Skye."

He headed off the other way across the grass to the road. Skye stared after him wondering what exactly that meant, then turned and ran to catch up with Ryan who was already at the parking area waiting for her. The walk to the Brody's house was quiet. Ryan was walking fast and it was all Skye could do to keep up his pace. He was almost six feet and his strides much longer then hers. She finally stopped, watching as he put distance between them and yelled to him. He turned around.

"Just go Ryan. It's obvious you don't want to be with anyone. It's only a couple more blocks."

He walked back to her. "No it's okay Skye. I'm sorry. I'm just thinking."

"About your girlfriend maybe. Or ex girlfriend. Seriously how come I never met her? Have I ever even seen her before?"

"She's in your gym class. About your height, a bit lighter hair."

"So how long were you two together? First love?" She grinned as she teased him. He just turned and started walking. Slower then before at least.

Skye fell into step next to him. "Hey I was just ........."

"No it's okay. And no not my first love. And we really weren't together. We just hung out sometimes. People thought we were together. I wanted people to think we were together."

"Oh well lots of guys and girls are just friends Ryan. Look at us. Look at Jemma, she's friends with all of you guys and so am I."
"Yeah." Ryan stopped and stood still.

"Hey Ry you okay."

"I'm fifteen Skye."

"Yeah. So?"

"I met my first love last year when I was 14. Well not met exactly. We knew each other for awhile. It was toward the end of the school year, March. We really liked each other, realized how close we were getting. I don't know, maybe even loved each other."

"Oh okay. You know I was just teasing and......."

"It was Thomas."

Skye's mouth moved but no words came out. She tried again. " Ah okay I did not see that coming."

He rolled his eyes at her. "I've know I was gay for awhile. Before Thomas and I were umm........you know..........dating."

She nodded. Okay. "Yeah?"

"My parents, they don't........they aren't........they'd never say it publicly but you know....they......they think........it's....there's something wrong with me. In their minds. They think it's a phase. Something I'll grow out of. JJ just wants to beat it out of me or something. The band and acting and stuff....yeah....JJ says it makes me look like a fag so he told me to quit. Said I needed to stop looking like a fag."

"I'm so sorry Ryan. She reached her arms out and engulfed him in a hug. "It's okay Ry. You're okay."

He wrapped his arms around her and tightened his grip. After a couple moments he pulled away.

"I hate living in that house Skye. I hate my parents. I hate JJ. I hate those guys at school. I hate track. I hate it all. I mostly hate JJ. Thomas hates me. He thinks I'm a coward for hiding who I am."

"Gonna be honest here Ryan. I didn't have a clue you were gay. Kinda figured Thomas was but it's his business so......."

"Thomas doesn't announce it. But he doesn't really hide it either. Jemma knows about us. Both of us. Leo only knows Thomas is gay. I stayed a couple nights at Jemma's over the summer when I couldn't be here. We talked. She's a good friend. No judging you know. Her aunt Vic talked to me, worries about me. I know I should be honest with everyone no matter what. I know I shouldn't hide who I am. It's just..........JJ thinks it's Thomas's fault. That he made me gay. Can you imagine? He is just sick. Grant is just a bully. He's not a leader. Not like his older brother was. That's why it's JJ who is the football captain. JJ uses that to his advantage. Uses Grant to keep Thomas in line. Or tries to anyway. I promised JJ I'd stay away from Thomas. I'd break up with him. It's so fucking messed up."

"What are you so afraid of Ryan?"

Ryan sighed. Skye felt so bad. He looked so broken.
"JJ threatened to kill Thomas. He said he could do it and get away with it. He said he's gotten away with everything so why not. He also said dad know some people that could hurt Thomas, so I better just do the right thing. He said that I needed to shape up and be a man. Said if I didn't he would make Grant beat on Thomas every day. He hates gays. Him and Grant. I have no idea why. He hated when Joey told the football team he was gay. He came home and ranted and raved about it being sick and disgusting. That was right around the time I was figuring out I was gay."

Skye put her hand on his shoulder. "Hey Ryan. You're okay. He's wrong."

"I know. I just........he gets dad all riled up about me. Says no one can know cause of the people Jason Brody wants to vote for him. Malick's been grooming my dad for the Congress position for a couple years. He already has Ward as the Senator. Gideon Malick is this bigwig in politics. Like behind the scenes. Personally I think he's dirty as hell. Got his hands in everything. Maybe even the mob. But no one can ever prove anything. Just like at school."

"Malick? Is he related to the computer teacher?"

"Yeah. Brothers. And Garrett is best drinking buds with him."

"So you are protecting Thomas by not being with him?"

Ryan looked down at the sidewalk. He nodded. "At first. JJ was happy I saw things his way. Told Grant to lay off Thomas and got the coach to let me try out for the football team. Of course I sucked. But Garrett said I had decent speed and told the track coach to put me on the cross country team. JJ wasn't thrilled but he was okay with that. Then he told me not to do band and that running would take up my time anyway."

"I'm so sorry Ryan. Living like that. It's just so wrong. You need to tell someone."

"Tell them what Skye? Go where? I'm telling you no matter who I tell, my dad or Malick or even JJ will get to them. No, what I need to do is stay low, keep out of trouble and make it through the next few years. I might even be able to get into college a year early."

"That's why you double up on Math and Science."

"Yeah. Thomas too. Plus Grant and JJ will be gone in less than two years. JJ's grooming Lydon to take over but at least at home Thomas will be safe once they graduate."

"Ryan. All you told me. All we talked about today with everyone. You need to tell someone. Even if they can't do anything now about the past stuff, they need to know everything that is going on."

He shook his head. "I don't think it will help Skye. No one can stop it. No one can stop them."

"Lincoln's mom. Mr. C. Ryan they will believe you."

"I don't know Skye."

"Even Coulson's wife, Miss May could maybe help. She used to be a cop I think. She has friends that are still cops. Or what about Jemma's Aunt Vic? Her girlfriend is a cop."

"They'll find out. They always do Skye. And now with what you did, JJ is going to send more people after you. Grant will probably beat the crap out of Thomas. JJ might corner me and let me have it."
"You're scared."

"You're not? After what everyone said today about them? Look Skye you should not be alone okay. Like ever. Not in our house. Not here in front of our house. Not near JJ. Or Grant. Or any of them. Not at school. Locker rooms and bathrooms especially. Thomas and I and even Jemma and Leo have figured out to make sure we aren't alone where they can get us anymore. You see JJ with his friends in a car or something you need to run the other way. I don't know, maybe you should tell your social worker you hate it here. Maybe she can move you."


"Stable home? Maybe for the moment. Skye JJ is not going to let it slide. He's just biding his time. And dad will back him. Mom's useless. The only way he backs off is if you stop fighting him. You back down, and let his goons do what they want and you play the game."

"Not gonna happen Ry."

"I know. And that's why you're gonna get hurt. You and all the others."

"Come on Ryan you need to stop hiding. You need to join us a fight back."

"I don't know how to fight anymore Skye." She barely heard the whisper. Ryan hung his head.

"Hey. Hey come on." Skye pulled his head up to look him in the eye. "You're not alone. I'm scared too. But I am tired of being scared Ryan. Aren't you?"

He nodded. Skye smiled at him. "Good. How much money do you have?"

"His eyes blinked rapidly back at her. "Huh?"

"Money? She lifted her hand up to his face and flipped her thumb over her fingers. "You know pesos, greenbacks, cash?"

He gave her a small laugh. "I know what money is Skye. What for?"

"Lessons. Self-defense. You, Thomas, Jemma and Leo and anyone else who wants. Miss May is starting up some classes with the new instructor. Maybe I can mention a beginner self defense class? You guys should all come with me tomorrow and talk to her."

"Skye." He started shaking his head. "We aren't all like you Skye."

"Like me? Hey I was able to get free from a jerk today. How long have I been taking lessons?"

He shrugged.

"Exactly. Even just knowing basics could be a big difference. Wouldn't hurt to see. Check it out. Hey I'm calling Jemma and Thomas now to spread the word."

Skye turned to run up the driveway to the house.

"Hey what if Mr. C's wife doesn't want us all there."

Skye stopped and waved her hand dismissively. "Ah she's good. She likes me. She'll want to help. Don't worry so much." She turned and walked into the house just as JJ pulled into the driveway. Ryan watched him get out of his car. JJ watched Skye enter the house then turned to Ryan. He pointed his finger like a gun at the place Skye had been and then pulled it back and blew over his
finger and gave Ryan a sick smile. JJ walked into the house. Ryan stayed motionless for a few seconds and then grabbed his phone from his pocket.

He started typing a text. "Hey Thomas. Whatever Skye is going to ramble on about when she calls u just say yes. I'm sorry. 4 everything. I'm fighting back."

Melinda walked in holding two pizzas and a bag. Phil had to go to school to teach so she had brought Donnie with her to work. It was lunch time. Natasha was finishing up her class and Melinda didn't have her next one till two. Phil was leaving early from the school to pick up Donnie and get him signed up at the middle school. He would start tomorrow. She nearly lost the bag of chips and sodas as she tripped over one of Natasha's students backpack in the middle of the floor. Donnie braced the bag with his left arm as his right helped to steady her. She smiled gratefully at him. His lips twitched upward a bit.

She allowed him to take the bag as she headed to the office to drop the pizzas on her desk. He followed setting the bag likewise on her desk.

"So how many slices Donnie?"

"Two's fine."

She got out paper plates and slid two on and handed it to him, grabbing a slice for herself. "Sodas and chips in the bag, help yourself."

Donnie reached for a can and then walked out sitting on the floor by her office. Ever since seeing Skye and listening to her tell him how great the Coulsons were he'd been making an effort to be civil. He was actually quite impressed as he had watched Ms Coulson teach this morning. She was mostly quiet which he respected and she didn't push him to talk. He watched the class pack up and start leaving as he ate. The other woman walked to the office and she nodded at Donnie her face grinning as she saw the food.

"Is it good?"

He nodded and smiled back. She went into the office and he heard them talk but couldn't make out what they were saying. He heard laughter and then saw they both were eating. He munched on his second slice. Mr. Coulson was coming to pick him up soon. He wasn't sure about going to a new school but would kind of be glad to be doing something. He thought way too much when he had nothing to do. He stood up and made his way to the office stepping into the doorway.

"Can I have another slice."

Melinda got up and brought the second pizza to him. "Take two more. There's plenty."

He nodded and did just that. "Thanks."

Natasha offered him the bag of Doritos. He dumped some on his plate and grabbed another can of soda, turning to go.

"You can stay Donnie. There's a beat up couch over there to sit on."

He looked at her and nodded and made his way to the couch. He sat down and took a bit of pizza. He sat comfortably eating and just listening to the two women talk. Ms. Coulson still was not pushing him to join in and maybe just maybe Skye was right about these people.
He'd eaten a fifth slice and was still sitting in the office looking at some old magazines when Phil Coulson poked his head in.

"Hey you ready to go?"

He nodded, and stood up grabbing his plate and can and throwing it in the trash. Phil opened the pizza box and grabbed one of the remaining slices. Since Melinda was teaching a class, Phil just waited to catch her eye and wave. She waved back and smiled. Phil munched down the pizza as they made their way to his car.

Phil glanced at Donnie wanting to engage him in conversation but was trying to listen to Melinda's warning. She had specifically told him not to push the boy. Several times. He grinned, as he thought of her scolding him all day yesterday for talking too much. Although she had a point, as the boy seemed to gravitate to Melinda's quiet more so than his talking. Oh the boy was nice and polite. Nodding or shaking his head, short one or two word answers but that was about it. Maybe it was men that Donnie didn't like or was afraid of. After all his mom's boyfriend had injured him. Maybe he could get Skye to tell him more about the boy. Nah that probably wouldn't be right he thought. Plus she wasn't exactly the most forthcoming kid he knew. He looked at Donnie again and decided on a safe tactic.

"You can play the radio if you want. Anything's good. I like anything."

Donnie sat still for a moment and then reached his hand up to turn on the knob. He gave a short nod to Phil and then played with the channels till he found one he liked. It was an oldies station. Phil smiled.

"Oldies? Are you sure that isn't for me?" Phil saw the boy actually smile.

"Nah it's this or rap and I'm pretty sure you aren't into rap. So this is cool."

The Rolling Stones cranked out of the speakers as Phil focused on driving and his thoughts. He was really worried about what had happened to Skye that morning. He heard about it at lunch from Rosalind. Knowing she was an apparent target was unsettling for him. He had gotten fond of the girl especially knowing how she had wormed her way into Melinda's heart. Melinda would never admit it but he saw how very quickly Skye had latched onto Melinda as a role model. He saw the caring glances Melinda sent Skye's way when she thought no one was looking. He just hoped that fostering Donnie and mentoring Skye would help heal some of those festering wounds. He pulled into the middle school parking lot and parked his car in a visitor spot. Both he and Donnie got out and headed to the front doors.

After getting Donnie registered and his classes set up, they left and Phil drove home. Donnie turned the radio back on and halfway home Phil heard the familiar intro to one of Melinda's favorite songs. He peeked at Donnie who was drumming along and mouthing the words to 'Rocket Man'. A dopey smile formed on his face as he drove the rest of the way home. Melinda was already home when they arrived, her two o'clock class was her last since she had turned Monday night classes over to Natasha. They entered the house and Phil smelled the bacon right away. She was making breakfast for dinner. Phil made his way to the kitchen with Donnie following. He saw Melinda at the stove and came up behind her. He bent down to kiss her cheek.

"Hey you. I could have made something."

"It's fine Phil. It's breakfast."

"Can I do something?"
Melinda spotted Donnie in the doorway. "Donnie can you set the table please. Everything's setting on the counter, I just didn't get a chance to put it out."

He nodded and moved to the counter to grab the plates.

"Thanks. Hey you like bacon right, and sausage, and home fries."

He nodded again.

"How do you like your eggs?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Any way is fine."

She gave him a I'm not messing with you look.

"I like over easy but my mom always broke the yokes. Scrambled is good too."

"Phil make the eggs. Everything's out already."

"Yes ma'am. What do you want?"

"Same. And don't break the yokes."

Phil grinned as he saluted his wife.

Soon enough they were all sitting at the table. Donnie smiled at Phil as he set three perfect over easy eggs on his plate. They passed the other food around and Phil took note that Donnie took large portions of everything. Phil and Melinda talked about their day, mostly their work and Donnie just ate as he listened to their banter. His attention turned to Phil as he heard his name.

"Oh yeah Melinda, I think you and Donnie have the same taste in music. He played an oldies station and on the way home Elton John came on and he was tapping his fingers and singing along. Right Donnie?"

Donnie looked up and realized that Mr. Coulson was teasing him. Melinda smiled at him. He gave Mr. Coulson a half nod and grabbed another piece of bacon.

"Who doesn't like Elton John Phil?" She glared at her husband.

"Um ... me?"

"Shut up. You like him. You took me to a concert to see him. You do so like him."

"Melinda you know I put up with it. For you."

"Phil everyone likes Elton John."

"No actually Mel, they don't."

She glared at him again. "Well Bobbi does. But she always was the smart one in your family. And Hunter. And Mike and Clint, and Izzy and Vic. Look even Skye likes Elton John."

Donnie laughed at the mention of Skye. "Yep. She does. The family we lived with, they played oldies. Well Mrs. Hamilton did anyway. Mr. Hamilton didn't like anything. She played that same station all the time at the house and in the car. Skye can sing really good too. Plays some piano but natural you know. No lessons or anything. She picks it up after hearing it. They had this old upright
in the basement. I bet half the keys needing tuning. But Skye managed to play so you knew what
the song was. She was in the chorus at the school we were at before everything went nuts. Before
Mr. Hamilton.........um.........before.........." Donnie stopped and realized what he was saying.

"Before what Donnie?" It was Phil who spoke.
Donnie stared at his plate. It was almost empty except for a half piece of toast and the bacon he
had just put there. He bite his bottom lip and refused to look up.

"Hey." Phil went to touch his arm but Melinda stopped him. She shook her head.

"So Skye can play piano huh? You ever hear her play Elton John?"

Phil gave her a strange look as she just raised her eyebrows at him.

Donnie finally looked up and swallowed hard. "It wasn't a good place after awhile. That's all I'm
saying. Skye made me swear to not say anything. Said it was just better that way. Better to forget."

"But you don't agree do you?"

"One thing I've learned being in foster care when you have a friend you do what they ask. Skye's
my friend."

"Of course. If you promised that's that. So can she play Elton John?"

"Yeah. A mean version of 'Crocodile rock."

"Good to know. So how about you and Phil do the dishes Donnie. I have some work I need to get
done."

He nodded. "Sure."

Phil got up and threw and threw a towel at him. I'll wash, you dry."

Donnie had the towel grasped in his hand. "Okay."

Melinda took some dishes to the sink and walked up to her bedroom. She sat on her bed and took
out her phone.

"Hey Izzy." She paused. "Yeah I need a favor. You know Skye, right? She waited till Izzy
responded. "I need someone to check out a family for me. Name of Hamilton. Her former foster
parents."

She listened and then spoke again. Yeah it's all I have. Maybe Vic can call in a favor from
social services."

Melinda rubbed her eyes. "Full name is Mary Sue Poots. She's 14. Currently
staying with Jason and Anne Brody. When she was with the Hamilton's a boy two years younger
named Donnie Gill was there too." Melinda waited and ran her hand thru her hair. "Yeah let me
know if you find anything. Thanks Iz. Goodnight."

Melinda stood up and took her phone to the nightstand and plugged in the charger. She frowned as
she thought about what exactly Skye and Donnie were hiding. She turned on her computer at the
desk in the bedroom but then decided she needed to move instead. She slipped out of her jeans and
threw on sweats and then moved to the middle of the room to do Tai Chi.

Phil was washing and telling Donnie where everything went as Donnie dried. He decided to take a
chance.

"So what do you think about the new school?"
The boy shrugged. Apparently he had done his talking for the night and most of that surprisingly directed at Melinda. Phil tried again.

"So you like sports? I play a little basketball. Some of the teachers have a team. We get together and play a few games for charity and stuff."

"Baseball. I like baseball."

"Oh good. Baseball. That's good." Phil was more surprised he got an answer than anything else.

"Yeah I like playing outfield. Centerfield. I hit 420 over the summer playing for a team in my neighborhood. One of the coaches gave me one of his son's old gloves. It's back at ho..........um...........my mom's apartment."

"We can see about getting more of your stuff. I can call Miss Carter tomorrow if you want."

"Yeah I'd like to have my glove. And my comics."

"Comics?" Phil's voice almost squeaked.

Donnie shot him a grin. "Yeah it's a small collection but I got some good ones you know."

"So you do like comics?"

Donnie shot him a sheepish grin. "Yeah. I was..... I was being.........well I don't know..... I was ......Skye said you guys were okay."

"Yeah I heard."

"So she doesn't say that about anybody. Ever. So you guys must be okay."

"So after we finish up here, you want to check out my comic collection?"

"Yeah. That might be cool."

A few hours later, Phil watched Donnie as he opened his bedroom door. Donnie paused and turned to face Phil.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Goodnight Donnie."

"Goodnight."

Phil opened the door in front of him and slipped in the room quietly. He saw Melinda sitting up in bed with her laptop on her lap. She was frowning. He walked over and sat down next to her on the bed.

"You look to be in deep thought."

She glanced at him and then turned her computer so he could see it.

"I asked Izzy to find out about these Hamilton's."

"Yeah? And?"
"She must have heard my concern so she asked Vic to nosey around. Look at this."

"What am I looking at Melinda?"

"There are no families named Hamilton in the system. None. Nothing close to it. She tried it spelled different ways. She cross referenced the name Hamilton with Mary Sue Poots and Donnie Gill. Nothing."

"Um Mel? Is this legal?"

"Shuush you. It's not hold up in a court of law legal but Izzy said she will work her end tomorrow too. Vic's still searching. It's just all very strange."

At that moment her phone buzzed and a new email came over. Melinda checked the caller and saw it was Izzy. "Yeah?" She listened and as she listened she also was reading the report connected in the email.

Phil was reading it too. "What the hell is that? Why is that a redacted file?"

Melinda shook her head at him still talking to Izzy. "Okay thanks. Yeah tomorrow. I'll be there."

"Mel what is going on. That is a hospital report of one Mary Sue Poots with most of the information redacted."

Melinda nodded. "I know Phil. And Vic can't get in it. And she has FBI and CIA clearances. I'm going to meet with Izzy tomorrow at lunch. She's going to try another angle at the department."

"You could call in some favors at the FBI Mel."

"I'll see what Izzy can find first. I might just give Mike a call if this leads nowhere." She shook her head. "I don't like this Phil. This is not normal."

"We'll figure it out."

"Skye was in the hospital. But why? And why would a hospital record of a foster kid be redacted? They both know the names of their foster parents and there's no record they were ever in the system. Something very fishy is going on Phil."

"I see those wheels turning. You always could work every angle of your cases. I'm sure you can figure this one out."

"I don't do that anymore Phil. I'll let Izzy and maybe Mike take care of it."

"Melinda."

"No Phil. I'm not that person anymore. I'm going to wash up for bed."

He watched as she closed the bath room door, whispering quietly after her. "Yes Melinda you are."

Chapter End Notes

Next up we get some answers. Lincoln and Skye. May and Skye. More connections. Thanks for reading. Let me know if you like the direction of this story.
Falling

Chapter Summary

I'm back. Sorry for the hiatus. Been busy with life stuff, family, school, work. I may have long stretches between but I will not abandon my stories. I did make it pretty long so there is that. This chapter has trigger warnings. Triggers for violence, talk of sexual assault and threats. Plsu do not read if you would be triggered. Lots of drama in this one. I do hope to continue a schedule of updating all my stories every 1-2 weeks now. Which means this one should have another chapter before Christmas. Maybe even around Thanksgiving. But no promises. Thanks for reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skye moved to Mr. C.'s Desk as the rest of he class made their way out of the classroom.

"Hey Mr. C."

He looked up and smiled. "What's up Skye."

"Yeah so I don't need a ride to Miss May's after school today."

"You're not going? Is something wrong? Did you get hurt yesterday? You know I meant to ask you if you were okay."

"Oh yeah, um no. I'm good. Um a couple of my friends are gonna check out classes there and I'm going with them. Lincoln and Trip are taking us."

"Oh okay. A couple of friends huh?"

"Yeah. Do you think your wife will be okay with that? I think Natasha is starting a new beginner class so ........"

"I think it's great Skye. And so will Melinda."

"Okay. Oh hey how's Donnie? He started school today right?"

"Yeah he was a little nervous I think. I'm going to pick him up after school. I'll stop by the gym so you can talk to him."

"That's cool. So things good at home then? With Donnie?"

"Better. Much better. Thanks for the endorsement."

She grinned. "Well everything I told him was true. He's real smart Mr. C. And he's a nerd. You two should get along great." She laughed loudly as she turned to leave. "See you later."

Phil smiled fondly as he watched her make her way to the door. As she got there, Miles and Raina walked in. Miles smirked at her looking her up and down.
"Hello Skye." Raina's voice was sickingly sweet. "Mr. Coulson, Seth won't be here today. He's been suspended. And I see you're not." The last comment was directed at Skye.

Phil got up and quickly moved toward the door. But Miles and Raina made a wide berth as Miles gestured for Skye to walk through the door. She glanced back at Mr. C and raised her eyebrows then continued to walk out of the class. As she almost made it out the door Miles spoke again.

"I'll see you later Skye." He smirked at her as she understood his words were a threat, she grimaced but kept going. Phil gave both Miles and Raina stern looks but sat down as he watched the two smile sweetly at each other.

Melinda was finishing up her three o'clock class of mostly 20 something women, when she saw Skye enter the building surrounded by at least 6 other teens. Phil had called her after lunch to tell her what Skye had told him. She finished the last set of exercises and then dismissed the class. She walked over to the spectator chairs where Skye and the others had gathered.

"Hey Skye." She flashed her a bright smile.

Skye grinned at her. "Hey Miss May. So um these guys here", she pointed around her, "they all want to learn self defense. I told them to stop by and check out your place and sign up."

Melinda surveyed the crowd of teens. "Any of you have any experience or training in martial arts?"

They all looked at each other shaking their heads, except for Ace who spoke up.

"I know some judo and some karate. My brother taught me."

Melinda nodded. "No belts or levels?"

"No I kinda didn't stick with it too long. Baseball takes up a lot of my time. It really helped though with balance and stuff. I'm Ace Peterson." He stuck out his hand which Melinda took.

"Melinda May. Good to know. Oh hey....... Peterson. Is your brother Mike Peterson?"

"Yeah that's right."

Melinda smiled fondly. "I worked with him on some cases back some time ago. Before he......."

"Yeah, before he was injured."

Melinda sighed. "Yes. Before. He still working for the police department?"

"Yeah, desk duty. Hates it. But he does it cause of me. Since he found out about me and took me in."

"Well good to meet you Ace." She smiled and then offered her hand to the next teen.

"I'm Kate. Kate Bishop."

"Will Daniels ma'am. Good to meet you."

"I'm Simmons and that's Fitz."

"Jemma and Leo. Skye mentioned you two."
Jemma smiled at Skye. Ryan stepped forward.

"I'm Ryan Brody. Skye's.......um........she um...we are......."

"He's my brother. Ryan's my brother." Skye gave him a pointed look.

He grinned back at her his eyes shining. "Yeah my sister. Skye's my sister."

Melinda took the offered hand. "I'm Melinda May. Students call me Miss May. Welcome. We are going to start a new class with my new instructor, Natasha. She will be here soon for her 5Pm class. You guys can stay and watch if you want. The new class will be Saturdays at 12 noon. It will be a beginner self defense and will last 12 weeks. She will teach basic defense and basic martial arts skills. After that, you can see if you want to continue with more classes and sign up for them accordingly. Cost will be $6 a class or $60 if you pay for all upfront."

Skye turned to look at Melinda. She knew that was probably half what she normally charged. Melinda winked at her. Skye felt a lump forming in her throat. She was doing all this for her. No one did nice stuff for her ever. Well least not till she walked into the Coulsons' life anyway. Tears were threatening to fall so she pushed them down and did what she does best.

"See I told you if you all looked like a bunch of bedraggled weak hopeless kids, she'd feel sorry for your asses and cut you a good deal."

Melinda laughed and everyone joined in.

"Is that price going to be a problem for any one? If so I'm sure we can work something out."

Everyone shook their heads no. Jemma leaned over to Skye. "Hell Vic will pay for everyone if she thinks I am doing something physical." Skye laughed.

"Oh hey sorry I'm late." Thomas rushed over to the group.

"Thomas. I'm so glad you are here." Skye reached to him and gave him a quick hug.

"I'm glad too." Ryan smiled. Thomas walked over to him.

"Did you mean it Ry? You are with us?"

"Yeah. I meant it. And I'm sorry it took this long to figure it out. For that, you can thank Skye. Figuring it out. I'm done hiding."

Thomas moved in front of him and Ryan made the first move, flinging himself into Thomas's arms. Melinda wasn't quite sure what was going on but she knew whatever it was monumental. She'd have to remember to ask Skye. The rest of the group gathered around the two talking while Melinda walked over to Natasha who was just coming through the door.

"Natasha. I found you a new class."

Ryan groaned again as was sprawled across Skye's bed.

Skye poked him with her foot as she sat in the chair next to the bed with her feet up on the bed. "Wuss."

"Everything hurts Skye. She's brutal. I thought cross country was hard."
"For crying out loud Ryan, she only taught you for 40 minutes to see if you wanted to join the class and show you what it was about. The real class is 90 minutes."

He groaned again. "Ugh 90 minutes. I may die Skye."

She giggled. "You are being such a drama queen."

"Did you just make a sexuality joke Skye?"

"Oh for Pete' sake. You are a drama king. And a wuss."

"Oh hey I seem to remember some girl who whined and moaned around here after her first couple of lessons. Something about not being able to lift her arms and dying."

She through a pillow at his face. "Shut up."

"Uggggg. Seriously Skye. I used muscles I don't remember studying in biology class."

"Shit. Biology. I have a test on Thursday and I need to study. It's gonna be hard too. Bio sucks."

"You just hate science Skye unless it's computer Science or tech stuff."

"Yeah I do. Bio is hard and it sucks. So get out so I can study."

"Well I can help."

"Yeah maybe tomorrow. I need to read the chapters first."

"You haven't read the chapters yet? Skye!!"

"OH shut up. I've been busy. Did I mention how boring bio is and that I hate it?"

"What chapters?"

"Three and four."

"Read them Skye. Then do the questions at the end of each chapter. I'll help you study then tomorrow." He slowly got up moaning as he did so. "I need to do chem work and History anyway. I'll bring a bowl of ice cream up later. For both of us."

Skye smiled. "Sounds like a plan." He left her room and she sighed. She reached into her backpack and prepared for a night of misery.

Melinda stuck her head into the living room. She grinned. Phil and Donnie were watching some superhero movie and bantering back and forth about who could beat who in a fight. She shook her head and proceeded up the stairs. It had been a long day and she was planning to take a hot shower and go to bed early. She made it to her room when her phone buzzed. She checked the caller id.

"Hello Skye. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good Miss May. I just wanted to thank you for what you did today."

"No problem."

"Yeah I know how much you really charge remember?"
"I do believe you hacked my computer yes."

"Ah well, um anyway thanks."

"Skye I am glad to help. What's going on at the school should not be. Least I can do is help people be able to defend themselves. Which I heard you did fine with by the way."

Skye gave a chuckle. "I surprised myself. It kind of just came naturally."

"Muscle memory. Learn the skills and you don't even have to think about what you are doing. You've worked very hard Skye. I'm proud of you."

Skye swallowed hard. "Thanks," she barely could whisper. "It's because of you I could finally stand up for myself." She didn't say the rest of what she was thinking. That it was because of Melinda that she had started thinking she was worthwhile, that she mattered. "Well I need to study for stupid biology, so I have to go. I just wanted you to know I was grateful. They both now knew it was not just about today she was talking about.

"Anytime I can help Skye. Anytime."

"Goodnight." The lump was back in Skye's throat. She hung up before Melinda would hear her sob.

Melinda smiled as she put her phone down. She walked to the bath to take a shower wondering for the hundreth time how a certain 14 year old girl was able to tear down her defenses.

The week went by very quickly. Skye was busy studying and taking tests and writing her English paper. Gym class was weird in that no one bothered any of them and no one seemed to pay any of them any mind in school at all, which is of course why Jemma and Ryan were nervous wrecks.

"I'm telling you Skye, they are doing this on purpose. Trying to get into our psyche and make us nervous." Jemma passed Skye her part of lunch that she now just made automatically for her friend. Today it was PB and Marshmallow, cheese, a blueberry muffin, and grapes.

Skye laughed. "Well if that's their plan Jemma, guess it's working for them cause you are being really, really paranoid."

Jemma frowned and held the last item, a slice of Vic's famous pumpkin roll, just out of Skye's reach. "Oh but not only are they trying to make us nervous and worried by not doing anything Skye, they are planning something. Some way to get back at you most likely for Dorner spending 3 days in detention after his one day suspension. And he can't play in tomorrow's JV football game. Goes on his permanent record too and I bet his mother was not very happy about that."

"You can say that again." Darcy pulled up a chair, set her tray down on the table and sat next to Jemma. "I heard her screaming at Ms. Price when I walked in to give a note to the secretary.

Skye stood halfway up and grabbed the pumpkin roll from Jemma. She broke off a piece and shoved it in her mouth savoring the sweet treat as she sat back down. Around her chewing she added her thoughts. "Eh, they aren't all the brightest you know. I bet they were told to just lay low for a few days. No deep dark sinister plan at all."

"Don't ever underestimate JJ. He's smart Skye. And he knows how to play the game maybe even better than Christian ever did. He's smooth and he's dangerous." Leo added as he stuffed a bite of his own piece of pumpkin roll in his mouth.

"Yes. He's dangerous and he's manipulative." Ace said. "Smooth is an understatement. Look how
he and some of the others get people like Raina to blindly follow them. To them it's all just a
game."

Skye smiled. She looked around the faces at the table of their expanding group. Besides her,
Thomas, Leo and Jemma, the original group they also had Lincoln, Trip, Darcy, and Ace, sitting
with them at this lunch. She knew Ryan sat with Kate, and Will and even Callie had joined them
for second lunch.

"What are you smiling at girl?"

Skye looked at Trip and her grin got wider. She shook her head. "Nothing. It's just cause of us. You
know." She waved her arm trying to make him understand. He smiled back at her.

He nodded. "Yeah, it's cool."

The conversation continued with everyone chiming in about what JJ and the rest might be
planning. Skye finished her dessert and then dug into the rest of the meal Jemma packed for her,
just listening to the chatter of her friends.

Lincoln had a soccer game that night and Skye had talked everyone into going. They were sitting
in the stands and Skye was shivering. She had brought only a light sweatshirt with her. Their team
was winning and Skye had screamed loudly when both Trip and Lincoln scored goals. Now it was
the beginning of the second period and Skye decided she wanted hot chocolate desperately. She
climbed over Will and Darcy and Callie to walk down to the stand. She paid for her hot chocolate
and gripped it with her cold fingers, savoring the heat pouring off the cup.

Suddenly she felt someone brush against her and pin her against the counter in front of her.

"Hey there Skye. Let me warm you up."

Skye stilled and stopped breathing. Ward. She glanced at the two people working the concession
stand but they were at the other end taking orders from......shit..........Miles, Raina, and a bunch of
their friends. Skye focused and tried to step to the side away from his body. He anticipated her
move and blocked her in and also brought his left arm around hers tightening his hold.

"Hey settle now. You aren't going to be able to blindside me like you did with Dorner. Besides I
know you like it." He pulled her closer and rubbed his body against hers. "Soon baby we will do
more than this. Count on it. But for now, just a warning. Did you really think we were going to
stand by and let you win? Let you and bunch of misfits take over?"

Skye screamed. A very loud blood curling scream which startled Ward enough that he lost his grip
on her arms and she smashed his ribs with her elbows. Raina and Miles had surprised looks as the
two concession workers practically ran to her.

"Are you okay?"

Ward backed off then and offered the women a cheeky grin. "Oh sorry I guess I scared her too
good. was just trying to be funny you know, as he winked at them.

"Oh well You should probably not do that again Grant." One of the workers smiled back at him.

"Yeah I know. Sorry babe. Didn't mean to startle you. Forgive me?" Now he looked directly at
Skye.
She was shaking her head. "No no........you are not going to get........."

JJ cut her off as he sauntered up to Ward's side. "Hey come on sis. He said he was sorry, Besides I put him up to it, so if you're angry at anyone it should be me." He turned to the women. "My sister is a bit jumpy with Halloween and stuff. Bad experiences in foster care." He shot Skye a concerned look.

"Oh that's too bad."

"Yeah so we best be going. Game's getting good. Come on guys." everyone turned away and followed him back to the stands. Skye stood there gaping after them.

"Here honey. Have another cup of cocoa. It'll calm you down some. Isn't JJ such a wonderful young man?"

Skye felt tears threatening as she took the offered cup and turned away. She glanced back at the group and saw Ward watching her. He grinned and gave her a thumbs up. She felt like she was going to be sick. Her hands began to shake and she dropped the cup on the ground. She felt her stomach lurch and her eyes blurred. She ran for the restroom in the gym. She saw the restroom filled with people and continued to run down the hall.

"Hey you can't go down there." Mr. Anderson, one of the music teachers yelled after her. Bobbi Morse was working security at the school saw the blur run by her and said to him, "I'll get her." She sprinted after the girl seeing her turn right at the end of the hallway. Bobbi slowed knowing there was a gate closed there and the girl would be going nowhere. She turned the corner expecting to find the girl waiting, instead the gate was opened and the girl no where to be seen.

"Crap. How'd she open that." The metal gate's secure lock had been hacked. Bobbi continued down the hall stopping every few steps to listen. She tried a few of the classroom doors but they were all locked. At the end of the hall she saw a custodian room with a buzz in lock. She pushed on it and it opened. She flicked on the light and glanced around. She spotted the girl sitting between the buckets and brooms, pressed into the wall, legs up with her arms wrapped around her knees. In the stillness she could hear the sobs. Bobbi sighed and moved slowly to the girl.

"Hey you can't be in here. Come on let's go back okay?"

The girls shoulders were shaking and she did not acknowledge Bobbi. Bobbi took a couple steps closer, keeping her eye on the girl. She got within 2 feet and the girl's head popped up looking right at her. Tears streaked her face and she was continuing to shake. Her breath was coming in gasps and Bobbi knew what a panic attack was when she saw one. She backed away a few steps and put up her hands.

"Hey I'm not gonna hurt you okay? I'm just gonna sit over here till you can talk to me alright?" She slid down to the floor and leaned her back against a pile of crates continuing to watch the girl. It was a few minutes before she saw the girl sniffling and looking around the room.

"Sorry."

The voice was very small. Bobbi waited patiently.

"I didn't mean to be where I'm not supposed to be. Sorry."

Bobbi allowed a small smile to form. "It's okay kid. Wanna tell me what happened."
Skye emphatically shook her head from side to side. "I just need to sit her for a couple more minutes kay?"

Bobbi looked at the small girl curled into herself. "Sure kid." She watched as the girl closed her eyes and focused, her breathing getting under control and her shaking stopping. After a few more minutes, as Bobbi watched the girl gain control, the girl stood up and then glanced back over to Bobbi.

"I didn't break the locks. Just broke into them. Sorry bout that. Are you going to arrest me?"

"Nah. I wasn't planning on it. Just want you to not be somewhere you shouldn't you know. It's my job to watch that and all."

"Yeah." Skye took a few steps toward Bobbi and then stuck out her hand. "I'm Skye. And I really am sorry."

"I'm Bobbi and I said it's cool. Let's just get out of here and back where you are supposed to be alright?"

Skye nodded. Bobbi moved to go to the door but she turned back quickly. "Wait. Skye? Your name is Skye?"

"Yeah?"

"Melinda May's Skye?"

Skye's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"Melinda May. Do you know her? And Phil?"

Skye nodded slowly. "Yeah Mr C is my history teacher and Miss May is teaching me self defense. You know them?"

Bobbi gave her a huge smile. "Yeah Phil's my brother. So you are Skye."

Skye looked at her with a smirk. "Whatever they said isn't true."

Bobbi laughed. "Oh please. They adore you."

Skye turned a bit red as she looked at her converse.

"Heard you even like Elton John. Much to Phil's dismay of course."

Skye burst into laughter. "She told me the story."

"Oh she did now?" Bobbi shook her head. Melinda must really like this kid. She held out her hand to Skye. "Come on we really need to get back. The game is probably over by now."

"Oh shit. My friends are gonna be worried." Skye's face changed as the smile disappeared and she headed out the door.

"Hey can you lock this room back up before we go?"

Skye stopped at the control panel and punched in a few numbers then motioned for Bobbi to close the door. It locked. Bobbi was impressed. They did the same at the hallway door and then ran past a few remaining people using the restroom before they left. They ended up outside in the midst of
a dispersing crowd. Bobbi stayed near Skye as the girl searched for her friends. She watched the girl freeze as a tall young man approached her. He smiled and called her name. Skye stepped backward. Not a normal thing to do. Bobbi pushed over to her.

".......so I Just want to be clear you got the message babe."

Skye was breathing faster and Bobbi could feel the anger. She placed herself in front of the guy.

"I'm not sure who you are or what game you are playing, but you better back off now and you better stay away from Skye." Bobbi practically spit the words at him.

"What... who do you think.................oh, yeah hello officer. It's fine. She and I are old friends. Just passing on a message. Right Skye. We're good." He winked and then turned and walked away blending into the crowd. Another young man came running up to Skye. This one had on a soccer uniform and was grinning. This one Bobbi knew.

"Hey hey Skye. Did you see that? We won! We made it to the semis!" He stopped short as he noticed Skye's posture and angry face. "Hey what's wrong?"

Skye looked at him, shook her head and smiled. "Nothing Lincoln. Yeah I saw. You scored. It was great."

"Hello Lincoln."

He turned to see Bobbi next to Skye. "Hey Miss Morse. How are you? Working security tonight huh? Is Hunter here."

"Actually yes. He was in the stands watching. He does like a good soccer game. You know Skye then."

He smiled. "Yeah."

Bobbi looked at Skye wanting to stay by the girl maybe even get her to talk but she was technically still on duty and was supposed to help with parking lot and traffic control. She decided to trust Lincoln to stay with the girl.

"Hey I have to get back to work. Lincoln you will make sure Skye gets with her friends right?" She gave him a pointed look.

He shot her a concerned look before nodding. "Yeah sure I will."

She moved on then walking past them. "Okay then. Hunter will probably call you later Lincoln. Bye." She walked off.

"Whose Hunter?" Skye asked.

"Oh he's my club coach. I play for a soccer club too not just the high school."

Skye smiled at him her anger and fear fading. Just then Jemma and Kate came up to them.

"Hey did you guys see Will anywhere? He went to the restroom right after you left Skye. The others are looking for him in the parking lot."

"Did you try his cellphone?"

"Yeah there is no answer." Thomas came up to them with Darcy and Ace behind him."
Thomas's phone buzzed. He fished it out his pocket and answered. His face turned grim.

He took off running to the other side of the gym building. "Come on!"

The others sprinted after him. Slowing to a stop after he rounded the corner of the building he saw Leo and Ryan standing over someone lying on ground. Skye nearly ran into him. as he stopped both seeing Will laying motionless. Skye froze as Thomas and some of the others knelt down by the still body. Thomas felt at his neck for a pulse and breathed a sigh of relief. He was alive but his face was battered and his leg was under him at an awkward position. Lincoln reached to his phone and called Hunter. Skye moved to Ryan who had a piece of paper grasped in his hand. She stood in front of him as tears fell from his eyes. He held up the paper. It was a picture of Melinda's Place with an x drawn on it. The x was red. It was Will's blood. Skye too the paper and walked over to the building wall and sank down pulling her knees up. This was all her fault.

Soon many people were there including Bobbi and other police who had security duty plus the two regular school security guards. A siren sounded in the distance. Skye just stared at the paper in silence. All around her people were talking and yelling and moving but she just sat holding the paper. Lincoln came to her and knelt down trying to talk to her but she waved him away. Next Ryan came over as they were loading Will into the ambulance. Skye said nothing even as she heard Darcy and Kate crying. She heard Ryan move away and talk to Lincoln but did not focus on the words they were saying. She just kept staring at the paper. Her fault. She caused this. Someone either JJ or Ward or someone with them hurt Will because of her.

Bobbi watched as the ambulance pulled away. She was pissed. This was on her watch and should never have happened. She glanced at the teens who were giving statements. Her eyes moved to Skye who hadn't moved since she had gotten there. She walked over to her.

"Hey Skye." She spoke softly. "What's in your hand?"

Skye slowly turned and her eyes focused on the blond woman. "My fault."

Bobbi blinked and then moved a few steps closer falling to her knees next to Skye. "No Skye. Whoever did this, it's their fault." Bobbi didn't quite understand everything but was beginning to get the gist of it after talking with Lincoln. "Can I have the paper please."

Skye let it fall to the ground. Bobbi picked it up with a gloved hand. Her eyes shot open wide when she saw it was a pic of her sister in laws gym.

"Skye? Do you know what this means? "

"It's a warning." Ryan stepped next to her. "We are all taking classes to be able to protect ourselves, to fight back and it's a warning to stop. Beating up Will is them warning the rest of us that we are not safe unless we tow the line. Follow the status quo."

"Who are they?"

"Doesn't matter. You won't be able to prove a thing. Every single one will have a alibi. Back each other up. There won't be fingerprints on that picture either."

"They are above the law. That's what they think." Thomas joined in. "They haven't been caught and they believe they can't be caught. JJ, Grant, Miles, Raina and the rest."

"Well we can question them. Especially if they were here at the game. Give me their full names."

Bobbi took down more information as slowly everyone left the area. Soon it was just Lincoln,
Skye, Thomas, Ryan and her.

"Come on guys, I'll drive you all home." Lincoln held out his hand to Skye. She ignored it.

Ryan tried. "Hey Skye. Come on. Let's go home okay?"

She shook her head. "I can't. Not if he's there. Not tonight Ryan. You shouldn't go either."

"She might be on to something there Ry." Thomas gave him a sad look. "I'd have you both stay with me but hell Grant may actually be worse than JJ."

"Well you both can stay at my house the night. Even you Skye, you could too." Lincoln gave her a small smile.

"I think I'll take you up on that Lincoln." JJ is going to be on the warpath since the police are probably knocking on his door right now to talk to him."

Thomas nodded at Ryan glad he wasn't going home. "Just drop me off at Leo's please Lincoln. I already texted him and he has a spare bunk he keeps a standing invitation on."

Lincoln nodded at the two as he offered his hand to Skye. "Come on Skye."

She ignored him and stared into space. Lincoln knelt down and touched her arm. "Hey Skye........." She pulled away from him and her expression was unfocused.

"Don't touch me."

Lincoln froze for a second. Then he tried again. "Hey look I know it's been a lot to take in but........."

Skye jumped up pulling away from him. "A lot to take.........A lot. Yeah Will is hurt bad and Grant Ward basically threatened to rape me and JJ is a psycho." Skye started pacing. "It's all my fault. I should have listened to you Ryan. I should have stopped."

"Whoa what are you talking about Skye? Rape? Grant threatened to rape you? When? What are you ..........son of a bitch. I'm going to kill that bastard."

"Hey Lincoln. calm down." Bobbi stepped up to him. "Look everyone needs to just calm down." She glanced at Skye who was pacing and was wringing her hands, muttering to herself. She appeared to be on the edge maybe heading to another panic attack. "Skye. Hey come on." Bobbi thought that Skye going to Lincoln's was perhaps not a great idea considering the state Skye was currently in. She needed someone who could calm her down, someone who could understand a panic attack. Someone like Melinda. "Hey I have an idea."

Melinda put down her cell phone and frowned. Phil saw as he was finishing up grading some of his students' papers. Donnie was in his room doing homework.

"What?"

"That was Bobbi. She is bringing Skye over. She needs a place to stay tonight."

"Why is that. And why would Bobbi know Skye?"

"She was working the soccer game. Extra security. She remembered we have a foster license."
Then Melinda filled in Phil on what Bobbi told her about what happened. She then went upstairs to make up the daybed she had in the room she used as an office. Panic attack. According to Bobbi Skye had one and was not far off from having another. She didn't know what Bobbi thought she was going to be able to do, but she wasn't going to turn the girl away if she needed a place to stay for the night. She heard the doorbell and then heard muffled voices as she went out the room and stood at the top of the stairs. Skye was standing awkwardly As Bobbi was speaking to Phil. Melinda walked back to Donnie's room and knocked on the door.

"Yeah?"

Melinda opened the door. "Skye's here and she needs to stay the night. I'd appreciate it if you would come on down as I'm sure she'd be glad to see you."

He jumped off the bed with a huge grin. "Yeah sure." All of a sudden he stopped. "Wait. She's staying the night? Did something happen?"

Melinda nodded. Then she turned and left the room. Donnie followed her down the stairs.

"Hey Skye."

She gave him a small smile and hug. Melinda looked at the young girl and her heart felt heavy. Skye looked like she had been thru a war zone. She saw Melinda looking at her.

"Hi Miss May. Um............th......thanks for um, uh.........um letting me crash."

"Not a problem Skye. You look tired. How about I show you your room."

"Yeah great."

"Okay come on then. "She turned to head back up the stairs calling out as she took the first steps. "Hey Bobbi I made coffee. Help yourself."

Melinda continued up the steps with Skye behind her and Donnie last. They got to the den and Melinda went in the door. Donnie stopped Skye.

"Skye are you okay? What happened? I mean why are you here? Did they do something to you? The Brodies?"

Skye sighed and shook her head. "Nah I'm good. Just need some space and time to clear my head."

He gave her a look. "Sure right."

""Look Donnie, I just need some space now. I'll talk to you in the morning. Okay? And I'm really tired. And still cold." She gave him a pleading look to just let it go.

"Okay. Get some sleep then. But I will see you in the morning."

She nodded and hugged him again. "Night dweeb."

"Twerp."

She smiled and entered the room as Donnie retreated back to his room two doors down the hallway. She saw Melinda adding a couple blankets to the daybed she had made up.

"I over heard you say you were cold. Just in case you need them. I have 3 blankets here. Oh and Bobbi did mention you might need something to sleep in. She held up a pair of sweatpants and
oversize T shirt. The pants are new and the shirt is clean. I mean if you want to use them."

"Thanks."

"So you need anything else? Are you hungry? Thirsty? I could get you some hot chocolate if you want."

Skye froze. Her mind shot back to earlier when all she wanted was to grab a hot chocolate to warm up. She could feel him pressing against her all over again. She blinked rapidly trying to hold the tears back, as she sank to her knees. She hugged her arms around herself and tried to regain control.

"It's okay Skye. It's going to be okay. Whatever it is you are okay. I'm right here." And she was. Somehow she had quietly just knelt next to Skye. Skye looked at her through her tear blurred eyes. Her hands started shaking.

"I'm........soooorry. I c...c...can't ......I'm just........"

Melinda took a chance and reached out a hand to touch Skye's shoulder in comfort. That did Skye in. She flung her body at Melinda's wrapping her arms around her waist and sobbed into her shoulder. Melinda put her arms around the distraught girl and rocked her back and forth talking quietly to her.

It was nearly an hour later when Melinda left Skye who was sleeping in the daybed, and made her way downstairs. Bobbi was still there.

"She sleeping?" Phil reached over to pull Melinda into a hug. She pulled back away after a few moments.

"Yeah. I got her to wash up and change in the bath and then stayed with her till she fell asleep. She was exhausted."

"Phil said she looked pretty bad when he looked in Melinda."

"Slight panic yeah."

"She had a pretty bad panic attack tonight. Ran from the concussion stand into the school and down halls where she wasn't supposed to be. I found her shaking and crying in the Janitors closet. Then later after we found the hurt boy, she sort of just shut down."

Melinda nodded. "She's sleeping now."

"Did she talk to you? About what happened. Why she had the panic attacks?"

Melinda shook her head. "Not directly. She just kept apologizing for causing the mess as she put it. Said it was her fault."

"She said that to me too."

"Something triggered her. And then with Will being beat, the emotions stayed high and volatile. I know what it's like. I've been through it."

"Yeah that's why I thought of you guys when she said she couldn't go home tonight. Something or someone scared her into a panic attack."

Melinda frowned. "This business with these kids Phil. It has to be someone with that group of kids."
"Oh I know. But proving it is another story. Tell her Bob."

"We questioned everyone that Lincoln and some of the others said they saw at the game. A Miles Lydon, Raina something, Senator ward's son, JJ Brodie. A couple other football players. No one gave anything away and everyone had an excuse."

"How is Will?"

"I talked to Hunter about 15 minutes ago. He's still unconscious, nasty bruises and cuts on his face, neck and chest and a compound fracture to his tibia. We'll go over tomorrow and get a statement. Doctor said he should be awake then."

"This is getting out of control Phil."

"It's been out of control. Bobbi and I were talking and I was filling her in on what I know about it. She wants to set up a meeting with Roz, guidance, some teachers and the school board."

"Yeah and we need some of these kids to be there too. To tell what has been going on. You think they will?"

"But it would be only hear say with no proof Mel. You know how the law works."

"Damnit Bobbi, they are getting hurt. Kids are getting hurt. And being threatened. I just held a 14 year old who was shaking and crying and blaming herself. We need to fix this."

"No one is arguing that point Mel."

"Yeah we will. I called Roz. She is going to set up an assembly to make it clear this crap is not going to be tolerated. She is going to ask the school board for permission for the police to come onto campus and patrol around more the next few weeks. Maybe hire more security guards. Also when we meet she wants to ask for teacher volunteers to spend their free period in halls and the cafeteria. She also wants to meet with Skye and Thomas and all the kids who joined the defense class."

"All those are great steps Phil. But we really need witnesses. Proof."

"Well maybe with talking to everyone, something will shake loose."

"You need to contact Skye's social worker. Tell her what happened. Tell her Skye doesn't feel safe in her foster home."

"No!!"

The three adults looked in the doorway. Donnie stood there. He was angry.

"You can't. The social worker will take her away and put her in another foster home or group home. They'll move her."

"Yes Donnie. She can't stay somewhere she is not safe." Phil got up to go to the boy.

Donnie backed away from him. "She likes it here. She has friends. She likes school. She likes your classes." He waved his arm at Melinda. "You can't take that away. She finally feels .......um ............" he looked down.

"Melinda prodded him softly. "She finally feels what Donnie?"
Hey looked up at her. "Like she matters."

Melinda nodded. "She does. To us. To me."

Chapter End Notes

So what will happen with Skye? Is Will okay? What about Thomas and the others? Tune in next time.
One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Chapter Summary

I'm back. I will not abandon my stories. Sometimes it may be a long time between chapters. I have put two of them on temporary hiatus, cause I plan to focus on the others and bring them to conclusions. This one will start moving rather fast after this chapter and I hope to put up another chapter within the month since it is started. I was going to continue but felt it best to stop this chapter where I did. It is a lot of internal stuff going on, and one big new setback. Hopefully you like where the story is going. Thanks for reading and leave a comment if you want.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Skye woke up slowly, stretching her legs and arms. She spied the blue curtains on the window. Wait. Blue. She had light tan curtains in her room. She shot up and looked around the room and then gasped. This wasn't her room at the Brody's. She was at the Coulsons. The memories of the previous night came flooding to her mind. She pulled her knees up to her and hugged them as she felt the tears well up in her eyes. She glanced at the clock on the wall, which read 8:30. It was later than she usually got up on Saturdays. Saturday mornings at the Brody's she did a couple loads of laundry and cleaned the bathrooms. That way Mrs. Brody never complained about her going to the gym. She even shoved a couple fives or a ten to her before she would leave most days. But this wasn't like most days. Last night has changed everything. Last night she had said far more than she ever intended to say. Last night she had lost another place to live. Skye felt the tears run down her cheeks and brushed them away with her hand. She heard someone walking in the hallway and stop at her door. There was a pause, then a soft knock.

"Skye, can I come in?"

Skye's eyes shot wide. What was Miss Carter doing here?

"Skye?"

Skye wiped at eyes furiously, and then got out of bed. She walked over to the door and opened it. Miss Carter was standing there with a bag.

"Hey. I brought some of your stuff. Some clean clothes in here." She held the bag out to Skye. "I went to the Brody's before coming here and just grabbed a few things I thought you would need for now. I can get the rest later today or tomorrow."

Skye took the bag and stood there looking at Miss Carter.

"So um, Melinda said you could take a shower, and change and then come on down for breakfast. She said the bathroom across the hall has fresh towels and you can use whatever soap and shampoo that's there if you want. Oh and she has a new toothbrush laying on the counter."

Skye nodded. She paused and then spoke softly. "So where are you taking me then?"
"Uh no where. Not taking you anywhere. At least not today. You are staying here for now. The Coulsons are licensed as temporary foster caregivers. That's the order we have you under right now. I informed the Brody's you would no longer be staying with them."

Skye stared at Miss Carter. "Oh. Okay. So you just came to bring my stuff?"

"Well that, and I need to talk to you. And to the Coulsons. But for now, Melinda said to let you get cleaned up and eat breakfast. She's very persuasive."

Skye snorted. "You think?"

Sharon watched closely as Skye almost grinned and seemed to relax. "So she also said her husband makes the best choc chip Pancakes so if you want some you better hurry."

Skye smiled as she watched Miss Carter walk away. She rummaged through the bag, finding clothes and then grabbed them and walked across the hall to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, Skye walked into the kitchen, the aroma of food making her stomach rumble. Donnie and Miss Carter were seated at the table. Mr C was standing at the stove flipping pancakes, and Miss May was pouring orange juice. She looked up as Skye walked in flashing her a smile.

"Orange juice okay Skye?"

Skye nodded. "Fine."

"Good. How'd you sleep?"

Skye nodded. "Good. I don't usually sleep this late."

"Hey Skye."

Skye turned to the voice and smiled. "Hey Donnie."

"Hey sit here." He patted the chair next to him. "Man you are in for a treat. Best pancakes ever."

Skye moved to the table and slid into the chair. "Yeah so I heard."

Mr. C brought over a plate of pancakes and put them on the table. He was wearing a Minnie Mouse apron. A pink Minnie Mouse apron. Skye raised her eyebrows at him. Phil grinned at her.

"Present. From my wife."

"Oh please Phil. You lost the bet. Stop lying to the girl."

"You know I lost on purpose right?"

Melinda just rolled her eyes. "Just put the bacon on the table."

Phil saluted her and went back to the stove. Melinda set down the juice glasses in front of everyone and then sat down.

"So dig in guys. There are more pancakes coming, right Phil?"

"Yes ma-am."

Skye giggled as she put two pancakes on her plate. She watched as Donnie piled his plate with five pancakes. She raised her eyebrow at him.
"What? They are amazing."

Skye dug in unaware of the fact that Sharon Carter was watching everything carefully. Sharon noted the comfort the little group seemed to have with each other. She was calculating how she could convince this amazing couple to take both these foster kids in permanently. She watched as Phil brought over the bacon and as both kids grabbed for it, playfully sword fighting each other with their forks, and watched as Melinda's face smiled with fondness as she watched the exchange. She was impressed with how happy Donnie was. He was talking and animated and seemed to be right at home in this household. Skye as well, appeared to genuinely like both Mr. and Mrs. Coulson and she already knew the close connection Skye had with Donnie. Sharon ate her breakfast, and yes they were very good pancakes; while she observed this new little family and she formed a plan just how to help make that happen.

After breakfast, Skye insisted on helping with the cleanup. Phil went upstairs to shower, while Donnie went to the living room to watch some TV. Sharon stayed at the table nursing her coffee. Skye was rinsing dishes and putting them in the dishwasher, while Melinda was putting things away and wiping off stovetops and counters. Melinda has turned on her I-pod and speaker and Elton John was cranking out of it while both Skye and Melinda sang along. Sharon tapped her foot to the music, debating how to start the unavoidable conversation she needed to have with Skye. As she saw them finishing up she spoke up.

"Skye I need to talk to you about what happened last night."

Skye froze. Melinda glanced up, her eyes meeting Sharon's and then she turned to Skye. Skye was looking at the floor and was perfectly still.

"Skye I know you may not want to do this but we have to. I need to hear from you what happened, I have the police report and everyone's statements. Except yours."

Melinda spoke up as well. "Why don't you go into the family room. You will have privacy there."

At that Skye looked at Melinda nearly panicked. "Can you please come with?" Skye looked at Sharon. "I'd like Miss May to be there."

Sharon nodded. "If she wants to I have no problem with that. But I do need to hear everything in your words Skye. You need to talk to me."

"Okay. I'll try."

Skye and Sharon followed Melinda out the door past the living room and into a large room filled with entertainment items. Three of the walls were lined with shelves filled with books, comic books, video games and DVD's. In the far right, was a pool table, while the center boasted of a huge entertainment area with a large TV. On the left was a sofa, and a few reclining chairs. Melinda sat down on the sofa and Skye sat next to her. Sharon sat on one of the comfortable chairs.

"I know this is difficult to talk about Skye, but I need to know what happened last night and I need to know what you know about the boy who was hurt. And what happened to you."

"Will Daniels."

"Yes. Will Daniels. He is expected to be okay by the way. I spoke to the police earlier today."

"I know. Mr. C's sister told us too. I'd like to see him."

"I'll call the hospital later and see if he is allowed visitors and when would be the best time to go."
Melinda smiled at Skye assuring her.

Skye nodded. "Thanks." She turned to face Sharon. "So I'm staying here for awhile?"

"Yes. As I said the Coulsons have agreed to be your temporary foster home. As your social worker, I think that is in your best interest for now. Skye. please tell us what happened last night."

"What about Ryan and Thomas? I'm afraid for them more than for me."

Sharon answered her. "I talked to Bobbi last night and this morning Skye. Ryan stayed the night at Lincoln's. And Lincoln dropped off Thomas at a friend's house. Lenny or something like that."

"Leo. Leo Fitz."

"Okay right. Leo."

"Okay. But what happens to them now? Today?"

"We aren't sure yet Skye. I asked both of them to meet at the police precinct to talk. Bobbi and Hunter are taking charge of the investigation of Will's assault. We want to talk to everyone also about what has been going on in the school."

"Why? Why now? Why not when Leo had his arm broken, or when that girl was raped, or when Thomas was injured?"

Melinda sucked in a sharp breath. She glanced at Sharon who shrugged at her.

"Honestly Skye I don't think any of us know about any of those things. Who was raped?"

"Joey Gutierrez's cousin. She named the suspects, one of them being Grant Ward, and no one believed her. Everyone at the school says there were more victims. And I saw Grant Ward hurt Thomas. And Ryan has been threatened numerous times by JJ and Grant."

"Skye if all that is true, we need to know everything. We need you kids to tell us everything. You can start by telling me exactly what happened last night. And after that tell me everything that Grant Ward and JJ Brody and the others have done to you. Tell me who has threatened you. And the others need to do the same when they talk to the police. And you will need to make a statement with the police as well."

"Maybe it would be best to just do that then Miss Carter. Take Skye to the station and have Bobbi hear Skye's statement. You could be present as well. That way Skye only needs to say it once. Bobbi could call everyone involved and have them all come to the station as soon as possible."

"I thought they gave statements last night."

"They did Skye. But only about the incident with Will. That's actually a good idea Mrs. Coulson. Skye could make her statement about last night and also about anything else that would help the case or anything else we should know.

"Skye are you okay with that?" Melinda turned to Skye waiting for her answer.

Skye was chewing on her bottom lip. "I'm not sure. Every time I say anything, someone else gets hurt or threatened."

"That's why you need to talk to them Skye. This has to stop. Before more people get hurt."
"But there's no proof Miss May. It's my word against theirs. No one ever sees anything, or is willing to say anything. Ward, JJ and Miles and the others, they can get away with anything. They protect each other. And some of the teachers protect them. And parents."

"Well looks to me like you and your friends are protecting each other now too. That you will back each other. The simplest way to protect everyone Skye, is to tell the truth."

Skye shook her head. "That's not true. Not always. Not for me. People don't believe people like me."

"I do. And I will. And so will she and so will the police."

"And JJ will say I'm lying. No one else heard or saw anything. Thomas says they never do. And if JJ knows I talked to the police, he could hurt Ryan. And if you accuse Grant of anything, he'll hurt Thomas. I've seen what Thomas's brother can do, and I've seen what he is capable of. I won't be responsible for him getting hurt again. For anyone getting hurt."

"Again?"

Skye sat back in the sofa and crossed her arms.

"You know that Thomas and Ryan are both safe right now. And I'm going to initiate investigations into both homes under these allegations that JJ and Grant are threats to them."

"Do they know that?"

"Thomas does. I still need to talk to Ryan and get him to come to the station. Thomas is already planning to come. Leo's mother is bringing Leo and Thomas there some time this morning for their statements. Thomas does not want to go home. He will most likely be put into protective custody and we will find a temporary home for him. He mentioned he could live with his older sister when I spoke to him this morning. She is apparently estranged from her parents."

"I don't know."

"Skye. I know this is hard. But you need to speak up. Set things in motion."

"I tried that Miss Carter. And look at what happened to Will. Look at what happened to Jemma and Thomas in gym class. And Thomas after the cafeteria. And Ryan. I don't want anyone else to get hurt because of me."

"Skye. It's not your fault."

"I pushed it. I pushed everyone to fight back. Now they are getting hurt. And nothing will change. The more I pushed the harder they pushed back. They could have killed Will."

"Yes they could have. And maybe next time they will kill someone. That's why you have to talk to the police. So they can put a stop to all this."

'She's right Skye. What's done is done. Now you have to push forward." Melinda got up and held out her hand. "Come on. I'll go with you. You can talk to Bobbi. Then let her figure out the next step. One step at a time."

Skye took the offered hand and let Melinda pull her up. "Okay. I'll try."
About an hour later Skye was sitting in an office at the police station. Melinda was there along with Bobbi and Isabelle Hartley, and Sharon Carter. Skye insisted Melinda remain or she said she wouldn't talk to anyone. Bobbi sat down across from Skye.

"So okay since I was actually there at the soccer field last night, I know some of what happened and saw the aftermath of what happened to Will. But I need you to tell me everything that happened that you think may be relevant to this case. How about we start with why you ran to a place in the school you were not supposed to be and why you were so upset?"

Skye looked at her sneakers as her hands locked into fists. The silence grew longer. Melinda flashed Bobbi a concerned look and was about to talk to Skye, when Skye sighed and unclenched her fists. She spoke so softly that Bobbi moved to lean in more to hear her.

"I got cold in the stands and decided to get some hot chocolate to warm up. I probably should have asked someone to go with me. We've been doing that in school and stuff. Trying not to be alone."

At that Bobbi's eyebrow raised but she kept quiet hoping the girl would continue without prompting. Skye took a deep breathe and spoke again.

"I was standing with my hot chocolate and I noticed that some kids were getting loud and causing a commotion and the ladies working the stand turned toward them. It was Rhaina and Miles and couple of their friends. That's when he stepped up behind me and spoke."

Skye stopped talking and after a few moments Bobbi spoke to her urging her to continue. "Please tell us who he was and what he said."

Skye stayed silent and Melinda noticed her fists both clenching again. She could see the impatience practically dripping off of Bobbi as she struggled to go slow.

"Ward." It was barely a whisper, but they all heard it in the quiet room. "Grant Ward."

The fists unclenched as Skye then folded her hands together tightly. She took a deep breathe and then the words came tumbling out. She relayed what Ward said to her, how he pushed his body into hers, how he threatened her. She said how JJ came up and what he said. Skye had shut her eyes and her fingers were digging into her hands. Melinda reached over to slowly pull Skye's hands apart grasping her own hands into Skye's to try and ground her. Skye was shaking and her breathing had become erratic. Izzy shut off the recorder.

"Skye. Hey you need to take a deep breath. Okay? Come on. Just like Tai Chi. Here follow along with me. Breathe in and hold, 2 and 3 and 4, let out the breathe 2, 3, 4. And again."

Melinda found Skye complying with what she said but her eyes were still shut tightly and her hands now tightly gripping Melinda's.

"Skye do you know what a coping mechanism is?"

Melinda closely watched Skye continuing to breathe deeply with her. She wasn't sure if Skye had heard her or not. She tried again.

"Skye were you ever taught techniques to cope with panic attacks?"

Skye's eyes opened as she glanced around the room, her breathing once again getting erratic. Melinda noted Skye was starting to shake and sweat pooled on her skin. Still her hands were cold to the touch. Skye's eyes darted around the room finally resting on Melinda.
"I don't feel good."

"Okay. That's okay Skye. How about we walk to the restroom?"

"I think I'm gonna throw up."

Melinda got up and then pulled Skye up as well. She pulled her gently toward the door and walked down the short hallway to the family restroom. Melinda opened the door and Skye rushed in. Skye moved to the opposite wall and sank down against it, sitting on the floor between the sink and the toilet. Melinda closed the door and simply leaned back against it, folding her arms in front of her and keeping an eye on the girl. Skye pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, resting her head against them. Her breathing was still uneven.

"Hey Skye. Breathe in deep through your nose, hold for 5 seconds and then breathe out. Follow along with me." Melinda sat on the floor, her back against the door and took in a deep breathe, exaggerating the noise. Skye lifted her head and followed along. After a few minutes, Skye had stopped shaking and her breathing back to normal. She leaned her head back against the wall, shutting her eyes. Melinda decided to try something.

"My favorite color is green."

Skye glanced at her, then closed her eyes again. But she also responded. "Blue."

"My favorite wild animal is the cheetah."

"Pandas."

"My favorite sport to watch is baseball."

"Soccer."

"My favorite type of food is Italian."

"Chinese. Sesame Chicken."

"Mushroom Ravioli or Veal Marsala." Melinda waited a beat. "Sausage and Mushroom Pizza."

"Hawaiian."

"Elton John."

Skye smiled. She opened her eyes. "Ed Sheeran."

Melinda raised her eyebrows and frowned. Skye gave her a half grin.

"Skye, didn't you see someone for your panic attacks? Someone who could help you?"

"What? Like a shrink?" Skye's small grin faded.

"Yeah. A psychiatrist."

Skye looked at the floor. She shook her head. "Don't like um."

Melinda walked over to Skye and offered her hand. "How about we head back. Someone might actually have to use the bathroom."
Skye rolled her eyes and took Melinda's hand. Melinda pulled her up. "Seriously though, I may
know a really good psychiatrist."

Skye walked through the doorway shaking her head. "Seriously I hate shrinks."

Izzy looked up from the chair she was sitting in as Melinda and Skye walked back in. Bobbi and
Sharon were not there.

"Um so where'd Bobbi and Sharon go off to?"

At that moment Bobbi flew into the room just stopping short in front of Melinda. Her expression
was close to one of panic. Which put Melinda immediately on edge since Bobbi basically never
panicked.

Izzy jumped up. "Did you find him?"

At that Skye's eyes grew wide as she turned to Melinda. Melinda tried to keep a steady voice.

"What's going on Bobbi?"

Bobbi glanced at Skye and shook her head. "Hey Skye, we are going to have to continue this
conversation later. Okay? At least we have your statement on what happened last night along with
the others. Mel you can take home back to your place."

Skye looked around at the adults. "What's going on? Why do you want me to leave so badly? I
thought you wanted me to tell you about the other stuff?"

"Um yeah well, something came up. We have to investigate a call. We'll do a rain check later. Izzy
we need to go now."

Izzy started walking toward Bobbi who had turned to leave when Hunter rushed in to the room.

"Found him. Vic tracked him down. He's at a hospital called Four Winds. It's about 40 miles from
here. A doctor signed him in and the lawyers are blocking everything."

Skye had turned her phone back on and it was going off. She checked it and there were many texts
and messages from Fitz and Ryan and Jemma.

"Thomas."

Melinda looked at her and then at Hunter and Bobbi. "What the hell is going on?"

"It's Thomas. They locked him up." Skye's voice broke as she sank to her knees.

Melinda glanced at Izzy who was talking into her phone frantically, and then looked to Bobbi who
nodded.

"Fitz's mother called right after you two left saying Thomas never came to the house last night. We
talked to Lincoln who said he dropped him off but had not seen him go in. Fitz said he got a text
saying from Thomas saying he was going to Lincoln's after all. No one thought anything till Izzy
called Fitz and reminded him and Thomas to come to the station. I guess they tried to get a hold of
him all morning figuring it was a miscommunication until the neighbor said she saw a boy being
escorted struggling to a car, and a man waved her off saying he had a court order and actually
showed it to her. She said the man said the boy was dangerous and delusional and needed
treatment."
Melinda heard the sob and rushed to Skye's side.

"This is all my fault."

Melinda put her hand on Skye's shoulder to reassure her. She looked at Bobbi. "How'd you find out where he is?"

"I called Vic and asked her to check all the records. She has some powerful friends, you know that. Her security firm reaches across the entire state and even beyond."

"So what do we do now?" Hunter looked at Izzy.

She shrugged her shoulders. "He's underage. His parents are his legal guardians. We can't do anything."

"We can make sure Thomas has an advocate." Sharon Carter walked into the room and spoke after hearing Izzy's comment. She glanced at Skye who had stood up with Melinda's arm across her shoulder. "I have already contacted the right authorities and plan to visit Four Winds. Could use some backup."

"Bloody hell yes. Count me in." Hunter nodded at Sharon.

"Yeah me too. Hunter and I will drive you out there. Meanwhile, we need to move on investigating the assault on Will Daniels. Izzy, can you take point on that and bring in a few more people. Anyone who has some free time. We need to investigate this entire thing. Skye I need you to stay and talk to Izzy and the others. I want your friends all back here and I want a run down on every single incident that involved the older Ward boy and his friends. Izzy, call Vic and have her bring her niece here. Everyone who was at the assault last night too. Hunter call Lincoln and have him come in and that boy, um, Fitz too."

"On it." Izzy walked out of the room already on her phone.

Melinda sat Skye down on the nearest chair. "Hey look. This is not your fault. Things are in motion now. We are going to fix this Skye. You are not going to need to be afraid and neither are your friends. We will protect you. All of you."

Bobbi walked over to Skye and Melinda. She knelt down and spoke to Skye. "She's right. We know something is not right. Skye, there are a few things going on here that are not making sense right now. But we will get to the bottom of it all. I need you and your friends to help by just telling the truth, okay?"

Skye nodded.

"Good girl." Bobbi squeezed her shoulder and got up. Melinda stepped in front of her.

"What else is going on Bobbi?"

"What do you mean?"

Melinda gave her a pointed look.

Bobbi sighed. "Let's just say there are other agencies really interested in the Wards and Brody's and somehow everything is always connected. You know that from your experiences. It's just.......well a lot of it is classified." She turned to Hunter. "Let's check out and then get over to that facility. You ready Miss Carter?"
"Call me Sharon, and yes I've cleared it with my superiors." She tucked her phone back in her purse and moved to leave the room. She turned to Skye. "Skye we will get to the bottom of all this. What happened to Thomas is not your fault and if you truly want to help him, tell the police everything about this, Thomas, his brother and what you know."

Skye swallowed the lump in her throat and nodded. "I will."

Izzy watched the three leave and then turned to Melinda and Skye. "So Skye tell me about the gym incident. I do believe that Jemma may have left a few things out of that story."

Skye muddled through telling Izzy about the things that had happened the last few weeks since she had moved in with the Brody's. It was tough going at times as Skye had to be encouraged and waited on patiently to speak up. Finally after talking about how she had defended herself from Seth Dormer and how the other kids had rallied behind her, it was almost noon. Izzy shut off the recorder.

"Okay that's it for now. We will take your statements and the others from everyone else and compare everything."

Melinda got up and motioned for Skye to do so as well. "Let's grab some lunch. I'll call the hospital and see if Will can have visitors. Come on Skye. See you later Izzy."

"Okay. Yeah I sent Scott and Mack to the hospital to get the boy's statement. Hopefully he saw who attacked him, or can at least give us information we can use. They should be back soon."

"Maybe Jemma could come along. I know she's here, she texted me that her aunt was bringing her a while ago."

"Okay, we can check if she is done with her statement. If she is, I'm sure Vic would okay that. The others were all supposed to be here too. I have over half the precinct set aside to take statements from everyone."

Izzy led the way as Melinda and Skye followed out the door and down the hallway. They came to the wait area where Skye saw Jemma sitting quietly while Victoria was standing in the far corner talking on her phone. Jemma got up when she saw Skye enter and practically ran to her. She looked disheveled and slightly panicked. She embraced Skye.

"I'm so glad to see you!"

"Yeah me too. To see you." Skye pulled away but grabbed for Jemma's hand. "I'm sorry. I never meant for anyone to get hurt."

"No, no this is not your fault Skye. We all agreed to step up. To speak up and to stop letting people control us."

Victoria walked slowly over to Melinda and Izzy. She looked angry. "Have you talked to Elena?"

Izzy answered. "No should we?"

"Yes. Come on. Jemma, you and Skye stay here. I'll be back soon."

Jemma nodded and she led Skye to sit on the sofa. The three women left the room.
"What was that about Jems?"

Jemma looked at her sadly. "No one else has come in to give their statements. Not Darcy, Ace, Fitz, Ryan, or Kate. Just me and you. And Vic said that Will said he didn't see anything. So no one else is talking, and Thomas is gone, and it's back to square one."

Skye rubbed her temples and than pushed her hair back, resting her hands on the back of her head. She bit her bottom lip and looked over at Jemma.

"They got to them. Somehow, someway, they made them all afraid again."

"Yes that's what I fear happened as well. I tried texting Fitz but he won't answer. Neither will Kate."

"Ryan won't either."

"I told the officer everything I know Skye. About Fitz getting beat up, the threats, what happened in gym class, what I saw in the cafeteria when Ward threatened you. She recorded it all. I told Aunt Vic too. She got kind of mad for me not saying anything sooner. I told them everything Skye."

"Yeah but it's your word against them. Yours and mine."

And we back each other up Skye. That has to mean something, The truth has to mean something. Right?"

"Skye smiled and pulled Jemma into a hug. "It does Jem. It means the world to me. Thank you."

Jemma sighed. "But they still have nothing. No proof. And no one will speak up. Again."

"Maybe Will didn't see anything Jemma."

Jemma shook her head. "You know they make it personal. They want you to know who it was while also laughing at you knowing it won't matter. Even if is was JJ who beat him, or Grant, or Miles, they will all have alibis. And they never leave evidence. I can't believe that Leo did not come."

"I know."

Melinda and Victoria entered the room. The girls looked up.

"Jemma we are going. I need to stop by my office for some files."

"Skye we are leaving as well."

Skye squeezed Jemma's hand. "Thanks Jemma. I'll call you later."

"Yeah okay. Tell Will I said high and will be over to see him ......um ..." she looked at her aunt.

"This evening. Ill take you later on."

Jemma smiled. "Tell him that okay. Don't be to mad at him Skye."

"Yeah I get it."

Victoria and Jemma left, and Melinda turned to Skye. She looked angry but Skye could tell she was trying to mask it for her.
"Come on. We’ll stop by the hospital and then head home for lunch."

"Do you know anything more about Thomas?"

"No not yet. But I told Bobbi to call with any news." Melinda's voice grew softer. "I know this all is overwhelming. But hey Skye," Melinda lifted her chin and looked her in the eye. "This is not the end of all this. This, this is just a setback. We are going to..... I, I will help this to be better. You are not alone. Okay?"

Skye's throat grew tight as she felt a tear escape. Melinda pulled her into a hug. Skye clung to her tightly allowing herself to be comforted. After a moment, she pulled away. Melinda wiped her tears away with her thumbs and gave her a weak smile.

"Come on. Let's go see your friend."

Melinda turned into the driveway of her home and shut off the car. Skye had been quiet the whole way home. When they had gotten to the hospital, Will's mother had not let Skye or Melinda in his room. She said he was resting and overwhelmed and they should wait till he was home to visit. Skye had simply walked away devastated and defeated. She had returned to the car and simply looked forlornly out the window on the drive back home. Skye just sat there still looking out the window.

"Hey Skye. We're home."

At that Skye turned to look at Melinda, and gave her a sad smile. "Not mine. I've never had one of those." She opened the door and got out, walking up the driveway and into the house leaving Melinda sitting there speechless.

Chapter End Notes

Where exactly is Thomas? What made the other kids back out? Fitz has some explaining to do. Can Skye move forward with Melinda's help? Stay tuned.
Chapter Summary

Continuing this story. Sorry it took so long. Many things happened including a death in my family, and other family obligations as well as having some writer's block for this story for a long time. Some more background. Lots of name drops. For those who have, thanks for reading and sticking with it. I have taken extensive notes now on how this story will progress. I hope to have the next chapter for you in a few weeks but no promises.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izzy was doing a computer search on the Four Winds Rehabilitation Hospital. She watched the screen for a minute and then picked up the phone and dialed.

“Mike. Yeah can you come up here. I want to pick your brain.” She listened and then spoke again. “You remember that rape case about 7 years ago you were on? That high school senior whose dad was a Senator?” She listened again. “Yeah see you soon.”

Mike hung up the phone and turned his wheelchair away from his desk. He pushed his way to the elevator and got in hitting the 5th floor button. At the 5th floor he rolled out and made his way to Izzy’s cubicle. He saw she was on the phone and waited next to her desk. She waved at him and kept talking.

“I know Vic. Do it anyway.” Izzy hung up the phone. She turned to mike with a smile. “Hi Mike. Thanks for coming up.”

“No problem Iz. What’s up.”

“Four Winds Rehab. Does it ring any bells?”

“Yeah matter of fact it does. That’s the place the witness in that rape case went to. The one who later died. After that my whole case fell apart. The evidence went missing, then the perp got a new alibi who swore she was with him, and then the only witness goes into rehab and died. What’s
“Not sure yet. But I ran the place and your name was attached as well that you had ran a search on the place.”

“Yeah we went and investigated and got all the records. The guy OD’d.”

“You sure?”

“Sure. Nah I wasn’t sure about anything with that case. We were stymied at every turn and that Senator had very deep pockets and connections. We were sure things were getting covered up but couldn’t produce any evidence. I remember that case so well cause it was the last one before, well you know.”

“Before you were shot.”

“Yeah and ended up in this chair.”

“Did the case ever go to trial?”

“No. The trial was scheduled for May of 2009. In March, the suspect gave us the name of a girl from his high school he claims he was with the night of the rape. We interviewed her, she seemed pretty shaky on her story, especially since we had his DNA on the victim’s clothes. Then the DNA evidence along with other evidence disappeared only a few days later. The witness ended up in rehab, even though we had seen no signs of him being an addict. He had seen the suspect and victim together on the football field while he was jogging. I got a call less than a week after the evidence disappeared that he had OD’d. There was no case. I was investigating the evidence disappearing, knowing we had a bad cop somewhere when I was shot. A couple months later I found out the girl and her family had left town. No one seemed to know where they went to. The suspect, one Christian Ward graduated with honors that June and went to Princeton that fall. His family threatened to sue the police and DA but I guess it was smoothed out. Later that summer, his name came up in the investigation of a prostitute being raped and beaten, but nothing ever came of it. She was found dead from a suspected overdose a few weeks later.”

“You think he was good for the rape?”
“Without a doubt. But nothing we could do. We had no case.”

“So dirty cop?”

“Yep, or cops. Never got far on that either. I was shot before I found out much of anything. All I found was a signature of someone who claimed they were from the FBI signing out the evidence. I had asked Shockley to check the sign in book and sweep for prints on the page and to bring up the CCTV. He said nothing was there. So dead end. Then I found myself laying in a hospital bed with a bullet through my spine. I was down and the others told me to forget about it and focus on my recovery and rehab. Which I did cause you know I had Ace to take care of.”

“Did you ever investigate who owns Four Winds?”

“Nah, like I said the place gave us the paperwork on the OD and that was it. No need to get any more info.”

Izzy’s computer beeped just then, and she bent to look at the screen. “Hmmm. Says the Four Winds Rehab hospital is owned by a holding company called Summit Medical Group.” Izzy typed in a command and waited. “Gideon Malick owns it. Run by a Doctor Daniel Whitehall. Wait a sec. Also owned under the same group is a medical laboratory called Momentum Labs run by Lucy Bauer and a homeless shelter called Good Samaritan Center run by Carter Lydon.” Izzy waited still watching the screen as the name Ian Quinn appeared. “Ah and all funded by Ian Quinn and his company Graviton United.”

“Those are some powerful names. Malick owns half the town, and his political clout is known up and down the east coast. Quinn stays just a finger shy of the law and there was that one explosion at that lab about 6 years ago, Momentum Labs. Remember. Lucy Bauer’s husband was injured and later died.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Yeah I do. Melinda and a couple other FBI agents were working with Clint on that case. They were sure there was something very shady about it.”

“So that was what 2010? “
“Fall of 2009. Same year I got shot. I remember Clint visiting and telling me about it while I was at rehab.”

“Did they find anything?”

“They were investigating for a few months. I don’t know. You’d have to ask Clint. You know Melinda left the FBI after the accident in October that year.”

“Yeah. Same year you were shot.”

Mike and Izzy shared a look. Mike spoke up, “You think the two cases are connected?”

“I think the people may be connected. Look at this file.” She handed a file to him. He opened, pulling out a paper and started reading.

“This is a file for a one Dominick Kebo. Pretty long arrest list but only one conviction.”

“Look at the lawyer’s name.”

“James Brody. And?”

“Brody is running for State Senator in the district. Wants to take Senator Douglas Ward’s place so he can run for Senator in next year’s election. Both have Malick and his political machine on their side. Why would a lawyer like Brody with his ties and aspirations, do a pro bono case for a guy like Kebo? Plus, why would he take in a foster kid now, when they never had before, while he is running for state office? A kid who was just harassed and potentially assaulted by a Grant Ward, and whose own son James Jr. is implicated in the assault of a minor this past April?”

“So, you are saying there are far too many connections and weird things going on to be coincidences?”

“Malick, Brody, Ward. And Quinn. Plus, a boy was beaten at the school two nights ago. The Ward and Brody names came up. The Brody’s foster kid claims it was them and she claims to have been assaulted as well by Grant Ward. And the youngest Ward son ended up at Four Winds Hospital
yesterday. His family claims he is a junkie and has mental issues. And Dominick Kebo. Turns out he beat his girlfriend and her kid, and the boy is now in foster care. At Melinda and Phil’s.

“Whoa......wait. Since when are the Coulsons foster caregivers?”

“Since a few weeks ago.” Izzy filled him in on everything that happened with Donnie Gill and his mom, and with Skye and the Wards and Brodys.

“So, this Skye and the boy are at Phil’s and Melinda’s now?”

“Yes. And your brother was supposed to come in yesterday with the others and give a statement about what has been going on at the school and what he knows about Grant Ward and JJ Brody. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t. I’ve been working double shifts and taking those classes in pre-law. Ace has been staying with his Aunt Mindy the last couple months. I mean I go see him a lot, but he’s been pretty non-communicative lately. I figured it was just him being a teen, you know?”

“Well it would be good if you could bring him in. Just to get his take on everything.”

“Not a problem. I will talk to him tonight.”

“Oh, and another thing Mike. When you were shot, some of us thought you were set up, but you shut that down quickly. Why?”

“Cause that would have meant my partner set me up. I didn’t even want to consider it then.”

“And now?”

“Now I don’t even know what to think. After I got shot, Kara only came to see me one time. Even now she seems to avoid any contact.”

“Tell me again about what happened.”
“Well Clint and I had just come off that undercover operation with Melinda and Akela. The one where we got into that weird cult. Arrested some of the top dogs, reunited some kids with parents. Then Palamas and I were working a drug ring. Clint had gone off with Bakshi to work a special case with Melinda and the FBI. Part of that included that Momentum Labs explosion. I had heard from Clint a few weeks prior that Mel was pretty close to blowing their case open. It was Kara who found the information that a huge drug deal was going down over at the warehouses by sixth street.”

“You mean the warehouses owned by Graviton United.”

“Yeah. Wow! It could have been a set up Izzy. We were circling the building and Kara yelled out ambush. The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital. Kara came in and told me it was an ambush and we had been made. But she was fine. And backup came in and must have gotten there quickly and gotten me out really fast. I was lucky to make it out alive. I was still in the hospital, about to move to the rehab center when I heard about Melinda’s accident.”

“Hit and run.”

“Yeah.” He paused and then looked up at her. “Do you think Melinda and I were targeted?”

“Four people involved in the investigation into that cult had something happen to them within a few weeks of that case being over. Melinda was in the hit and run and lost Jamey and almost her husband. You were shot and lost the use of your legs. Akela lost an eye in a random shoot out at a bank while she was not on duty. Idaho lost his life when his SUV hit that stone barrier at full speed. They called it a suicide.”

“Which he would never have done with his strong Catholic faith. Are you thinking all of these are connected? That one person is to blame?”

“No not one person. Several. And I bet you that Malick, Brody, Ward, and maybe even that Bauer woman and definitely Quinn are all messed up in all of this, and I do mean ALL of this, and the cover up is deeper than we can imagine.”

“Izzy. That’s some conspiracy story you have.”

“And?”
“Who else is working on this?”

“Right now? Me and Vic. And now you.”

Mike nodded. “We should bring in Clint. We know we can trust him, and we need more people investigating.”

“I was thinking of inviting Mack and Bobbi to the party as well?”

“Yeah. But for now, that’s it. We need some evidence before we pull in Mel or Akela or even think about going to the top brass.”

“Scott Lang. He could do some hacking for us.”

“I thought of him Mike. But do you 100% trust him?”

Mike shook his head. “You’re right. If I was right back then and we have dirty cops on the payroll, we can only trust those we’ve been through thick and thin with. That’s a short list I’m afraid.”

“Vic can do the hacking. She’s totally on board. You and me – we will head up things here. Mack and Bobbi can do the outside digging. They have plenty of connections and plenty of snitches to start making inroads with. I say we start with those two cases and the one you all were working together, the cult one. “

“Copy that.”

Skye turned over and stared at the wall. It was almost noon and she had not gotten out of bed. Donnie had knocked at her door a couple hours ago but the Coulsons had left her alone. She had told Donnie to leave her alone. She kind of felt bad about yelling at him, but not bad enough to let him in. Her mind was swirling with thoughts and she couldn’t control them. She kept thinking she needed to get up and go, just leave and hitchhike somewhere far away. The common-sense side of her rejected that, knowing she would be in danger and that the Coulsons just might chase after her.
anyway. Why she had no idea. Why they cared so much about her was a foreign concept to her. She was a fuck-up and everyone around her always ended up getting hurt. Like Sara. And Donnie. And the kids she couldn’t protect at the orphanage. And Will. And Thomas. Her mind was going to dark places and she didn’t even try to fight it. Her cell phone buzzed again. Lincoln had been texting practically non-stop since seven this morning. She sighed and checked it and yep it was him again. She dropped her phone back on the night stand and sat up. She had to pee. So that meant moving and leaving the room. She stood up from the bed and walked to the door and opened it. Donnie was sitting in the hallway. He gave her a hopeful look which she ignored as she walked past him to the bathroom. She slammed the door and took care of business. As she was washing her hands, she glanced in the mirror at herself. She was pale, her eyes were still red, even though she had stopped crying hours ago. Her face was puffy, and her hair was all over the place. She looked at her hands and then slammed her right hand onto the mirror. It hurt. Good. She deserved to hurt after all the hurt she had caused the others. She slammed her other hand into the mirror and a small hairline crack appeared where her hand had hit. She looked at her hands again. Hmmm. She had a pretty good punch now thanks to Melinda’s training.

“Skye, hey what was that? Are you okay?” Donnie’s worried voice brought her out of her musings.

No, she was not fine. Not in the slightest. She had messed up so many things. All she had to do was blend in and stay under the radar like Ryan said. I mean she’d done that at foster homes so many times before. Plenty of practice. She bet Ryan probably hated her about now. It was her fault Thomas was gone, her fault Will was hurt. Her fault she came apart every time a guy sneered at her or made any kind of threat. Her fault that David Hamilton raped Sara. Her fault that David Hamilton nearly killed Donnie. Her fault that she was so scared she couldn’t fight off the bastard. Her fault that when she finally decided to fight back, she was too weak to stop him from nearly killing her. Hell, maybe she should have let him. No one would care anyway. Her mother didn’t want her, none of the foster homes wanted her, the nuns surely didn’t care for her, and now – now she had made friends and felt like she could make something of her life, and she fucked it up again. Her fault. All her fault. She smashed both hands into the glass. Once, Twice. And again. And again. Maybe she’d bleed to death as she registered in her brain the blood dripping down her arms and into the sink. She went to hit the glass again, but a stronger force stopped her. Arms wrapped around hers as a voice cried out. She dropped then to the floor as the arms stayed wrapped around hers. Soon she felt a towel pressing into her arms as she heard scuffling and yells in the hallway. Another person appeared and he took the towels holding them tight against her and the woman’s arms snaked around her middle and held her tight. The woman was saying that she would be okay, they’d take care of her. The woman smelled like jasmine and vanilla. She smelled nice and so Skye rested her head on the woman’s shoulder and closed her eyes.

Ryan was pacing over and over in Lincoln’s living room. He had stayed the night again, not daring to go home and face the wrath of JJ and his father. Ryan had heard Ms Price arguing with someone on the phone last night and was right, it had been his father. Somehow, she had convinced him to let him stay another night. She apologized to him and said that his father told her he would have her arrested if he did not go home by five tonight. It was noon. His phone had lost it’s charge last
night already as he had tried to call everyone, especially Thomas. He now knew what had happened to Thomas and was sick over it. He knew that the Ward’s would be believed no matter what Thomas or any of them said. Lincoln was trying to text Skye, but she was not picking up her phone. Ms. Price had contacted her lawyer and was trying to talk to all the kids including Skye, but Miss May said Skye wouldn’t talk to anyone. Oh hell, everything was a complete mess. Then Lincoln’s dad had started arguing with Ms. Price and they were still yelling back and forth. He didn’t want her to get involved, and he also told Lincoln to stay out of everything. He wanted Ryan to go home and for everything to get back to normal. Normal. Like what the hell was that anyway? Lincoln put his phone in his pocket and grabbed his jacket.

“Come on Ry. I’m going to talk to Skye.”

Ryan needed no further convincing as he grabbed his jacket and followed Lincoln out the back door. They jumped in Lincoln’s car and he peeled out onto the road. They arrived at the Coulson residence about 15 minutes later. They saw the police cruiser parked in the driveway Ryan was out of the car before Lincoln came to a full stop. Lincoln parked the car haphazardly on the street and ran after Ryan. Bobbi and Hunter were there blocking the door.

“Hy guys. No. You can’t go in.” Hunter stopped them.

“Is it Skye? Is she hurt?” Ryan’s voice was panicked as he tried to see inside the house.

“He, come on you two. She’s okay. You can’t go in. She wouldn’t want you guys in there. Okay.”

Ryan had tears rolling down his checks.” What happened? Did someone hurt her?”

“No Ryan. It was Skye. Look she isn’t herself right now. She’s hurting and she tried to hurt herself. Melinda got to her quickly. The cuts are mostly superficial, and she will be okay. They aren’t even going to take her to the hospital. Melinda and Bobbi are taking care of her.”

“She cut herself?”

“Not how you are thinking. She lost control. Just hit the glass mirror a few times. Look you guys – don’t tell anyone okay. They might take it wrong and right now Skye needs to be with Melinda and Phil not in some hospital.”
“I won’t tell anyone Hunter. But please let me see her. “

“Not today Lincoln. Look buddy, I get it, I really do. But right now, that girl needs to work through some things. Not have visitors. Please both of you just go and take care of yourselves. It won’t help her to heal if she knows you guys are upset. She already thinks she caused all of this with Thomas and everyone.”

Ryan’s face filled with anger. “That’s what they do. They get you to blame yourself. So, you walk away. They get you to be afraid. I’m not afraid anymore and I am not running ever again. Fuck them. Come on Lincoln. Please take me to my house.”

“Dude, JJ is there.”

“JJ can kiss my ass. If anything happens to me now everyone knows it will be on him. He isn’t stupid enough to do anything now. He’ll wait till everything calms down. But it isn’t gonna calm down. Not anymore. I’m not running anymore. Tell Skye. Tell her I’m not running ever again. Tell her it’s because of her that I’m not running. Tell her to not run.”

Hunter got out his phone. “Here say it again. Say what you just told me. I’ll video it. I’ll give it to Melinda. You too Lincoln. I promise she will hear your messages.”

Hunter watched the two boys leave and turned to walk into the house. He had something he needed Melinda to show to Skye.

Thomas walked into the room. The guard followed him. The other staff called the guard an aide but he knew a guard when he saw one. The woman standing in the room had blond hair and was pretty. He didn’t know her.

“Hi Thomas. My name is Sharon Carter. I’m your advocate.” She held out her hand to him.

He ignored her hand and asked, “what’s an advocate?”
“I am on your side Thomas. An patient advocate makes sure that minor’s rights are being followed. How about we sit down and figure out how to get you out of here.”

For the first time in nearly 48 hours, Thomas was filled with hope

Chapter End Notes

The investigation continues. How will Skye heal? Will Ryan stay strong? Will the other kids step up? Will Thomas get out? These questions and many others will be answered soon.
Chapter Summary

The teens make decisions. Will they close ranks and stay strong or let fear win?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After soaking up the blood with bath towels, which looked far worse than it actually was, and applying pressure; Melinda had carried Skye into the bathtub and ran lukewarm water over the cuts and then applied more pressure with more clean towels. Phil had immediately called Bobbi after Melinda had screamed for him not to call an ambulance and instead to call her. It had taken Bobbi and Hunter less than ten minutes to arrive and immediately Hunter had helped corral Donnie to help Phil take him downstairs, and Bobbi flew in to help Melinda tend to Skye. Melinda and Bobbi had washed Skye’s hands and arms, rinsing them thoroughly to make sure there was no glass in her skin. Most of the wounds were superficial and not deep. There were two gashes however, on her right hand that required stitching. Melinda stitched them with Bobbi’s help. Both had experience stitching up people and both had extensive first aid skills. Hunter had gone back to his and Bobbi’s apartment for some strong antibiotic cream that Melinda did not want to know how or where he had pilfered it from. Phil had stayed downstairs with Donnie after and was trying to distract the boy to no avail after he and Hunter had to practically carry him away from the bathroom. After Melinda and Bobbi applied the antibiotic salve and bandaged Skye’s cuts, Melinda took off her wet clothes and put her in pajamas. She guided Skye back to her room and sat her on her bed and quickly shed her own wet clothes in her bathroom and put on sweats and a T-shirt while Bobbi watched over Skye. Emerging from her bath, putting her hair up in a ponytail, Melinda was near panic mode because Skye was completely silent. In fact, she had not made a noise while she and Bobbi had attended to her and was now simply staring blankly at the wall.

Bobbi caught Melinda’s gaze and shook her head. “Mel, I think she might need to go to the hospital.”

For the first time since Melinda had run into the bath after she had heard Donnie screaming, Skye focused on something. She was looking at her arms and hands, turning them over and over, with a sad and perplexed look. She than looked up at Melinda and spoke quietly. “I’m sorry.”

Melinda walked the few steps over to Skye and dropped to the floor in front of her. “Hey it’s okay. You are going to get through this. You are not alone, and we care about you. Do you want to go to the hospital?”

Skye shook her head and then she started to cry. No sound just tears flowing steadily down
her cheeks.

“Skye are you in pain? Do your arms hurt. Bobbi can you go grab some Motrin from the bath cabinet please. And a cup of water.”

Bobbi returned within moments handing the water and two pills to Melinda. Melinda held them up and Skye took the pills and then Melinda helped her hold the cup with her bandaged hand and drink the water. She also took a few tissues from her nightstand and wiped Skye’s face gently.

“Bobbi could you go grab me a bottle of Gatorade from the fridge. Skye likes the blue one.” Bobbi turned and ran out the door.

“Hey Skye. You need to talk to me or go to the hospital and talk to someone there. Okay?”

“I didn’t mean to.” Skye was talking so quietly that Melinda had to lean forward to hear her.

“Didn’t mean to what?” Melinda tried to keep her voice even and steady. Meanwhile Bobbi came running back in the room with the bottle of blue Gatorade. Melinda took it, opened it, and gave it to Skye. “Drink some of this. You have to get some fluids.” Skye wrapped both bandaged hands around the bottle and obediently started drinking. Melinda turned to Bobbi. “Please go tell Phil and Donnie everything is okay, Skye is better now, and she and I will be staying here for a while to talk. Ask Phil to make some toast and vanilla chi tea for Skye and also to bring a couple of water bottles along up.”

Bobbi nodded and turned to leave. She turned back to Skye. “Your friends stopped by a little bit ago. They were worried because you weren’t answering your texts. When you feel up to it, Melinda can show you messages they left on Hunter’s phone. I’ll send them to your cell Mel. Skye, I know everything looks impossible right now. But you have a lot of people on your side. We will protect you and help you. Melinda – if you need anything at all, I’ll be downstairs.” Bobbi knelt down and gave Melinda a quick hug and squeezed Skye’s ankle. Then she left. Skye’s eyes followed her to the door. The tears had stopped falling as she had been drinking her Gatorade.

“Skye? What didn’t you mean to do?”

Skye’s gaze moved from the door that Bobbi had just exited to Melinda’s face. “To do that. I wasn’t trying to ... don’t want to.........”, her voice trailed off as she took a deep breath and tried
again. “I don’t want people to get hurt cause of me. It’s all my fault. I should, I should......my fault. Donnie, Sara....I should have been able to stop him. I should have...........I should have told someone. I was too chicken. Now it’s happening all over again. Thomas. Will. Ryan. Everyone’s getting hurt. I just wanted the pain here...,” Skye patted her chest, “...here to stop. I didn’t mean to break it, or ......” Skye dropped her head and her body shook from her sobs.

Melinda took the bottle and placed it on her night stand and pulled herself up to sit next to Skye, pulling her into her arms. She gently rocked back and forth while the young teenager sobbed into Melinda’s shoulder.

Phil was in the kitchen making the tray for Skye while Hunter and Bobbi sat with Donnie in the living room. Bobbi had told him that Skye was okay, and that Melinda was staying with her and she needed space for now. She assured him he would be able to see and talk to her soon. Soon Hunter distracted Donnie with his tales of some of some his tamer experiences in his days serving in the Royal Air Force.

After loading up the tray and going upstairs, Phil slowly pushed open the slightly ajar door with his foot and walked into their bedroom. He saw Melinda holding Skye while the girl seemed to be sleeping. He caught her eye and nodded, as they held a brief silent conversation. Skye would be staying with her here for the night. He placed the tray on the dresser, and backed out of the room, closing the door as he left.

Ryan went back to Lincoln’s and was pacing again in the living room. It was four o’clock and he had one hour to get home before his father was going to send the police for him. He wasn’t going to back down and stop fighting but how could he do that with his father and JJ watching his every move, and dictating where he could go and who he could see? Rosalind had kept apologizing to him, saying her hands were tied at the moment, but she would try to help and look into it. On top of everything else, Skye had injured herself. How and why he didn’t know but he did know that if she stopped fighting, so would everyone else. Even Thomas. Skye had been the match that lit them all into action. The one who had stood up for herself and everyone else, defiantly taking on all of them. He hoped that the messages he and Lincoln had given to Hunter would help her. But right now, he had a more pressing issue. He couldn’t allow his father to hurt Ms. Price and Lincoln too. So, he had to go home. But he needed to make sure he was not imprisoned at home of god forbid, the same way that the Ward’s had ambushed Thomas. Lincoln had gone out and Ryan heard him calling his name from the kitchen. He must have come in the side door. Ryan walked to the kitchen and opened the door. With Lincoln was a woman Ryan had never seen before. She had short dark hair and was dressed in very expensive clothes. With her and Lincoln was Victoria Hand, Jemma’s aunt.

Lincoln spoke first. “Hey Ry. Look who drove up in the driveway just as I got home.”
“Hi Ryan How are you doing?” Vic looked him up and down, noticing the tension in his body and fear on his face.

“Hi Ms. Hand. What are you doing here?”

“Helping my niece’s friend. This is Jeri Hogarth. She’s a lawyer. She’s your lawyer and I am your advocate. If you agree that is. We are going to petition the court for me to have temporary custody of you until the police investigation is over.”

“Investigation?”

Jeri Hogarth spoke then. “Assault and battery and potential rape charges, intimidation, threats and anything else I can find. Against Grant Ward, James Brody Jr., Kyle Jenkins, Miles Lydon, Seth Dormer and anyone else I can charge. You will have to come to the police station now and make a report. Then I will file the necessary papers to have you removed from a hostile environment, your home to be exact, and grant temporary custody to Vic. How’s that sound to you?”

“Like a miracle.”

Jeri smiled. “Well then let’s go.”

“Wait. I’m going to stay with Ms. Hand and Jemma?”

“Ryan, I told you before to call me Victoria or Vic. And yes, three years ago I become a bona fide foster parent and also as your advocate, with you being a minor, I will be the one allowed to make decisions for you about where you live and other legalities. So, you in?”

“Oh god yes! Thank you so much!”

Lincoln clapped him on the back. “You should get going. Oh, here take this anyway. It’s a burner phone I got so you could call me if things got dangerous.” He handed Ryan a phone. Keep it just in case, you know.”
Ryan hugged him and took the phone. “You have been a great friend through this Lincoln. Thank you.”

“Stay safe buddy.”

“Oh, but my father said he’d have Lincoln and Ms. Price arrested.”

“Let them try. By the time anyone would be sent here, we should have the wheels moving on all this. So, let’s get going Ryan. Thank you, Lincoln for helping. I’ll be in touch.” Vic smiled at him and the three headed out the door. Lincoln went upstairs to tell his parents what had just transpired, and that Ryan was safe.

Thomas went back to his room feeling hopeful. Sharon Carter was on his side, and as soon as she got back home was going to file a court petition to be his legal advocate. He had signed the paperwork giving her that right. She had also told him they would have a lawyer just for him to fight his parents on staying at Four Winds, and that she would fight for him too. She had said they were currently looking up all his records to prove he was not an addict and that he would most likely have to go to court to prove he was not a danger to himself or anyone else. Then Sharon had told him they would find a foster home he could stay in temporarily. He told them to try and find his older half-sister Rose. That maybe he could go live with her. Sharon told him she would but also reminded him that he would probably have to stay close for awhile while they fought against his parents. That a local foster home would be best for now. Thomas sat on his bed in the small room and leaned back against the wall. Sharon had said maybe only 24 more hours. He smiled.

Will just wanted his parents to stop arguing. That’s all they had done since the moment he woke up in the hospital. Will lived with his mom but saw his dad regularly. There was a reason they had divorced 4 years earlier and it was more than apparent now as they screamed at each other concerning him. His mom wanted him to just go home and not say anything more to the police. She also wanted him to have nothing to do with Skye and Thomas and the others. He wasn’t sure what he wanted except that he wanted his parents to shut up and leave. He said just that.

“Can you guys shut up and just go. I’m tired and now my head hurts too.”
His mother came to him and wiped his head with her hand. “Sorry baby. You know how he gets.”

His father frowned and was about to say something back, when Will pushed his mother away and yelled at them both. “Just stop it. And stop yelling. Both of you just stop. Everyone knows you two hate each other cause you can’t stop for even a minute. You can’t stop even when I am lying in a hospital bed. Please just go. Both of you. I can’t take it anymore.”

“You can’t speak to us that way Will. We are still your parents.” His mom tried to take his hand but he pulled it back.

“Then act like it.”

His mother gave his father a dirty look and stomped out of the room.

His father sighed and moved to the side of the bed. “Sorry bud. You’re right. I just want you to do what is right. I know you do too.”

“I know dad. I’ve been thinking about it. I really want to. I’m afraid. They said they’d kill me if I said anything at all.”

“Son, sometimes the only way to stop being afraid is to confront bullies. It’s not tattling. It’s protecting. Protecting yourself and others. What they did to you. Imagine if they get away with this and what they could do next time to someone else. First it was a broken arm, right? Your friend Fitz. Now you with a broken leg. What’s next?”

“It’s already worse dad. Lanie was raped. Probably more girls than just her. That’s the rumors. Plus, Thomas was stabbed. It’s why we all were going to get self defense lessons from Miss May. Like Skye did. She was able to protect herself.”

“Are you telling me those guys raped someone?”

“Dad it’s all rumor and no one knows for sure. But I wouldn’t put it past most of the football team to do something like that. Not to mention, others that help them and others that protect them.”
“So, what are you going to do son.”

Will looked his dad in the eye and then grabbed the bed rails pulling himself up straighter. “Can you call the police dad and have them come back here. I’m gonna do the right thing.”

Leo Fitz had always been small for his age. He had been born weighing just five pounds and was only 18 inches long. He had to stay in the hospital for four days after he was born cause his blood sugars were low and kept fluctuating. After that, as a young child, he was in and out of more doctor’s offices than he could count for a myriad of reasons. Seemed like he caught every virus going around, and developed illness induced asthma on top of it. By the time he was in elementary school, he was always the smallest in each class, thin and small boned with blond curly hair. He was also a very sensitive child and could pick up on other’s pain and fear rather quickly. His compassion was nurtured by his mom. His stutter he developed with his social inadequacies did not help with all the teasing he received and all the bullies he endured. The only two things he had going for him was his mother’s unfailing support in everything he did, and his intellect. He was a genius and became his passion. He read voraciously, both non-fiction and fiction books. His mom was also highly intelligent and compassionate, and he assumed he got both from her. His dad could not handle such a sickly, small, skinny, and sensitive boy, so he up and left when Fitz was only eight. Fitz did not miss him or his yelling, or his threats, or his drinking. When his mom got transferred to the States for her job, he didn’t even care. He had no real friends, and he had no one but her. Once he had arrived in New York and they had moved into their little house, his mom quickly made friends and he found himself going to a new school. That was four years ago when he was in sixth grade and he found himself in a middle school a member of a gifted student program where taking high level science and math was encouraged and where he found students just like he was; a bit geeky, non-athletic, and hungering for knowledge. The first two real friends he made were Thomas and Ryan. Then a year later, Jemma moved in with her aunt while her parents joined Doctors without Borders and he found his first best friend. So, when he had literally bumped into Skye that day which seemed so long ago now, he just knew she was one of them, and she needed a friend. Now, however, he was berating himself for letting not only Skye, his new friend down, but letting down all his friends. What he had not told anyone else yet, was that he knew Thomas would not be getting dropped at his house after the soccer game. He knew that because he was paid a visit by Kyle Jenkins and JJ Brody. A visit where JJ opened his jacket and showed Fitz that he had a gun, and where Kyle slapped him around a few times, and then after his verbal warning from JJ, Kyle hit him in his right side several times. He was black and blue, and stiff and it hurt whenever he moved too quickly. He had not shown up Saturday at the police station and had ignored all his texts and messages. He was currently in his room feeling like the coward he knew he was. His mother would be so disappointed. He was startled out of his musings by a knock on his door.

“Fitz, it’s me Jemma. Can I come in?”
He shot up from his bed and looked around his room. It was a mess. ‘Just a minute.” He scrambled around the room tossing dirty clothes and books to the top bunk bed. He hastily pulled the blankets up over his unmade bed and stuffed pairs of shoes under it. He opened the door out of breath. “Hey Jemma.”

She walked in his room and looked around. “You didn’t have to clean up. I’ve seen it much worse you know.”

“Yah. Well it was hard to walk anywhere yah know.”

“Well if you cleaned up everything every few days it wouldn’t get too bad?”

“Well it’s never gonna be sparklin’ like your bedroom Jems.”

Jemma sat on the bed and patted the space next to her. He sat down.

“What’s up Jemma?”

“You know what’s up Leo. How come you didn’t come to the police station yesterday and why aren’t you answering your phone?”

Leo stared at his hands and said nothing.

Jemma reached over and took his hands in hers. “I’m scared too. But I’m more tired and angry than scared now. I told them what I know Leo. So did Skye. We would appreciate a little back up.”

“Thomas isn’t here Jemma.”

“Yeah I know that. If you would have looked at the messages that I sent you, you would know I know that and that I know where he is.”
“He’s at Four Winds Rehab Hospital.”

“Yes he is. How’d you know?”

“JJ told me.”

Jemma jumped up and stood in front of him. “He was here?”

“Not ‘here’ here. Out back. Him and Kyle. I got a message from Thomas, which I now know was actually JJ, and it said to meet him out back cause that’s where Lincoln would drop him off. In the alley by the back yard.”

Jemma sat back down and took his hands again. “Where did they hurt you?”

Leo stayed quiet for a bit and then lifted his shirt. His side was bruised with black and blue marks from his waist to his ribs. Jemma gasped. She moved her hand to gently touch his rib area.

“Nothing’s broken Jemma. I already checked.”

“But it hurts?”

“Only when I move.” He tried to laugh.

“Oh Fitz. You need to see a doctor. And go to the police. You know that, right?”

“He had a gun Jemma.”

“JJ pointed a gun at you?”

“No. He pulled open his jacket and touched it and then said he wasn’t afraid to use it. Kyle then said they all knew plenty of people who knew how to get rid of bodies. JJ said they’d say I
“was a runaway and that’d be that.”

Jemma’s face said it all. Leo looked at her and grinned. “It was actually kind of cheesy. You know like a terrible black and white B crime movie.”

“You know what was the worst thin though Jemma?” She looked at him and shook her head. “His eyes. JJ’s eyes were so evil. Like looking into he devil himself. Bastard is so sure I will comply.”

“We can’t. Not anymore.”

“I know. I was just building up the courage to go tell me mum everything.”

“I’ll go with you.”

He nodded and stood up and offered her his arm. They left the bedroom even stronger then ever.

Mike wheeled his chair up the walkway to his Aunt’s house. He let himself in with his key. He saw his little brother Ace sitting in the kitchen working on his homework.

“Hey buddy. How you doing?”

“Hey Mike. How come you’re here? I thought you worked this weekend?”

“Yeah I did. But it’s almost six. I don’t work all day and all night.”
“Sure seems like you do sometimes.”

“I know I’ve been working a lot lately Ace.”

“And always doing going to school and doing school work.”

“Yeah it’s why I asked Aunt Mindy to let you stay here for a few weeks. Cause it’s hard for me to take care of you right now.”

“I don’t need nobody taking car of me. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can Ace. It’s just you shouldn’t have to. You’re only 15.”

“Yeah and you’re only 30 and shouldn’t be saddled with a teenager. You have enough taking care of yourself.”

“Hey. You’re my brother. Family sticks together. I’m just sorry It took seven years to find you.”

“At least you looked. Our mother threw us both away. For drugs.”

“And I am so glad I found you.”

Ace smiled. “Yeah I’m glad you found me too. Living at that group home sucked. So how come you’re here tonight. I thought you were picking me up Tuesday after school cause you had off then till Friday? Spend time together with me beating you at Call of Duty and checking out a few basketball games on TV?”

“Yeah that’s still on. We’ll do pizza one night and Thai food the next.”

“Gonna hold you to that promise bro. So, what’s up?”
“Heard you were supposed to come in to the station yesterday. Wondering why you were a no show?”

Ace hung his head. “I figured you’d learn about all of it at some point. Just didn’t think it would be this soon.”

“All of what Ace?”

“It’s all pretty messed up Mike.”

“Yeah. Appears to be. What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know man. I mean it’s not like I’m really involved. I never hung out much with Thomas and Ryan. Not sure how much help I could be.”

“And Skye?”

“She’s the reason everything is changing.”

“The question remains then bud, are you going to watch it change or help it change?”

Ace nodded and looked his brother in the eye. “I’ll go down to the station tomorrow then. You gonna come with?” His eyes were hopeful.

“Where else would I be?”

Chapter End Notes

The kids all tell the truth. The adults are shocked. Melinda promises to protect them all. Some new people step up to help
Blame

Chapter Summary

Melinda and Skye talk. A lot. They also contemplate things. That's it. That's the chapter. Potential warnings for emotional trauma, self blame, and underlying themes of dark thoughts and consuming anger. Slight mention of past neglect and past probably abuse. Thanks for reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skye blinked open her eyes and looked at the window. Huh? Her eyes focused on the wall next to the lavender curtained window and saw a picture of a mountain scene with a cabin. She tried to focus, trying to figure out where she was. Then she noticed her bandaged hand on the blanket over the stomach of the person next to her. Person next to her? Huh? She was still really out of it, feeling warm and cozy all snuggled in a swirl of soft sheets and blankets with the scent of jasmine and vanilla.

She glanced over and saw Melinda's face only inches from her own. Melinda was lying on her back sleeping. Skye then noticed an arm encircling her shoulders, and Melinda’s other hand covering over hers, while her head was nestled into Melinda’s shoulder. She looked at Melinda’s face again and now her eyes were opened. Skye went to move away but Melinda stopped her with her hand, reaching over to brush the hair from her face and stroke her cheek.

“It’s okay Skye. Go back to sleep. Still early.”

Melinda's soft stroking of her cheek and the comforting words in Chinese Melinda gently spoke lulled Skye back to sleep. As she drifted off, she wondered if this is how having a mother was supposed to be? Warm and soft and safe. She rather liked it.

The next time Skye woke she was alone in the bed with the covers all tucked around her. She smiled and tried to remember her dream. It was a nice dream where she knew she was safe and on a farm with horses maybe, but her dream faded as her brain awoke more. She heard the shower running in the bathroom and saw the unfamiliar color of the walls. She jumped up and immediately cried out in pain. She glanced at her arms and slowly everything came back. Oh no, what did she do? What were they going to do? Send her away, probably. She was damaged-goods, and no one would ever want her to stay.

Melinda allowed the very hot water to wash over her body. The hot water soothed her weary muscles. The long shower was giving her time to think more clearly. When she had seen Skye with the blood running down her arms and the broken glass, she had almost panicked. A picture of Jamey had flashed through her mind, and her demons were screaming at her that this was all her fault. She should have seen it coming. She should have seen Skye’s breakdown coming. She should have seen the car coming. The urgency of the situation with Skye, however, had shaken her back into motion.
Everything had happened so quickly. One minute she and Phil had been playing monopoly with Donnie and had excused himself to use the bathroom. The next minute, she was wrapping towels around Skye’s arms. In the back of her mind she had registered Phil’s panicked look and Donnie’s screaming. Phil had been about to call 911, when she yelled for him not to. By this time, she had been next to Skye on the floor checking over her and assessing the damage. Mostly superficial wounds and a few deep cuts she could handle. Calling 911, although probably the right call in most circumstances, could be devastating for Skye. They’d have no choice but to take her for a seventy-two-hour lock down evaluation. Melinda knew instinctively that might shut down Skye forever. And she wasn’t going to let that happen. So, she had told Phil to call Bobbi and then had done what she needed to do, stemming the flow of blood and then getting Skye in the bathtub to wash out the cuts and make sure there was no glass left. Once Bobbi arrived, together, they stitched up Skye and bandaged her hands and arms. Bobbi was a rock, just doing whatever Melinda asked of her, with no questions.

Melinda finally turned the water off and toweled off. Poor, poor Skye. She knew what that look was. It was hopelessness. Melinda knew it because she still wore it at times. The anger she knew as well. How many times had Phil stopped her from hurting herself with that kind of anger? Way too many to count. She had barely gotten through it and she was an adult. Skye was just a kid. A scared, overwhelmed kid who endured far too much pain in her young life.

After Bobbi had left, Skye had fallen asleep on Melinda. The scariest thing about Skye’s demeanor, from Melinda’s perspective, was she had not made a sound. She hadn’t spoken or cried or even winced in pain the whole time that she and Bobbi had tended to her wounds, nor while Melinda had changed her, or sat her on the bed. It was only when Bobbi had brought the medicine and water, that Skye had focused her eyes on her and said she was sorry over and over. From her jumbled words, Melinda believed she was trying to tell her she wasn’t trying to hurt herself. At least not consciously.

Melinda knew how it worked though. To block out the unbearable emotional pain, sometimes the physical pain was far more appealing. She also knew about that all-consuming anger. The overwhelming knowledge that you couldn’t fix it, stop it, or change it. The many times she herself had felt those things. But she’d always had Phil. He was always there for her. Skye had no one before. Melinda quickly dressed as she then opened the door to return to the bedroom to see if Skye had awoken. She looked at the bed and saw two dark brown eyes staring at her. Those eyes still looked haunted. Melinda didn’t want to make Skye any more skittish than she already was. So, throwing a barrage of questions at the girl was probably not a good idea. Instead she simply smiled at Skye and walked to her dresser to get her phone. She picked it up and sat down on the bed.

“You sleep good?”

Skye blinked at her a few times pulling herself up better to sit with her back against the headboard. It took a bit of time to do so with her bandaged arms. She stared back at Melinda and simply nodded.

“It’s pretty early yet, only a little after five. But you did fall asleep pretty early yesterday, so I’m not surprised you’re already awake. But I’ll bet you’re hungry. I know I am."

Skye looked at her hands and bite her bottom lip. “What happens now?”

“What happens now is we go grab some breakfast after we do Tai Chi. But I want to show you something first.”

“But then what? Where are you going to take me?”
“I’m not taking you anywhere Skye. You asked that several times last night and the answer is still the same.”

“But I – I – hurt – I hurt myself.”

“Yes, you did. That’s why Bobbi and I bandaged your arms and stitched your hand.”

“Aren’t you mad?”


“Why not?”

Melinda looked at Skye and took in her fear and disbelief. She’d had the same look last night after Melinda had managed to get her to drink and eat a little bit of what Phil had brought up. The same look after she allowed Donnie to come in and see that she was okay. The same look that Melinda knew she had when Phil held her after the times she had ‘lost it’ and feared he would leave her.

“Because I want you to stay.” She said the same words Phil said to her so many times.

That answer disarmed Skye. The tears started up again as she pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around them. “No one ever wants that.”

“I do. I want you to stay and I want to help you. I care a lot about you Skye. We all do. Me, Phil, Donnie. Your friends, Lincoln and Ryan. So much so they made videos to talk to you.”

Melinda held her phone out and up for Skye to see and hit a button. Lincoln’s face appeared. Skye wiped at her eyes, took the phone, and looked at the screen.

‘So, hey Skye. It’s me, Lincoln. Oh, duh you’d already know that if you are watching my face here, right? ‘He grinned goofily. Skye snorted. ‘Anyway, me and Ry were coming to see you and Ryan wanted to talk to you, but I guess it wasn’t a good time, so anyway I just wanted you to know that I really like you Skye. I wanted to tell you at the soccer game and was going to ask you out but well, all that shit happened and then more shit happened. And so here we are.’ Skye puffed out a slight laugh. ‘I’d still like to take you out, you know a real date like a movie or dinner or something, when you are ready of course. Oh, and yeah I will listen if you want to talk about any of this crap, or you can spar with me and I’ll let you beat me up, or whatever you need.’ His face got a lot more serious as his blue eyes intensified. ‘Most important I’ve got you okay. I won’t let Ward and his moronic buddies touch you ever again. I will protect you and keep you safe. I mean if you want me to. I know you want to protect yourself and that’s cool too. But I’m here. I’m here for you. I hope you feel better soon.’

The video clicked off and Skye swiped at her eyes again. “What a nerd huh?” She looked up at Melinda.

Melinda nodded and smiled. “That boy is smitten.”

“Smitten. Oh my god you did not use the word smitten. That’s an old people word.”

Melinda rolled her eyes at the girl. “It is not an old people word. What word would you use missy?”

“Missy? Melinda that’s just as bad. I feel like I’m in a novel from the 1900’s.”
Melinda swatted her legs. “I think you are insinuating that I am old.”

“Nah not insinuating. You are old.” Skye nearly grinned.

Melinda smiled. This was the snarky, quick-witted Skye she knew. It was good to see she was still in there. “You want to watch Ryan’s now, or do you need a break?”

“No, I can watch it. I mean sure.”

“Okay. Just turn it on. I can leave if you want?”

“NO! I mean no please don’t.” Skye hit the button and Ryan’s face filled the screen.

‘Hey Skye. I hope you are okay. Me and Lincoln were scared cause Hunter said you were hurt, but he said no one hurt you. Man, I get that. There are so many times I get so damn angry I just want to beat on something. But please get better. Please don’t let them win. Yesterday all I wanted to do was pack a bag and run away. Go off somewhere where no one knows who I am or who my family is, or what I’ve done, or more precisely not done. But I kept thinking about you Skye. How your eyes flashed in anger when I told you what they had done to me and to Thomas. How you never backed down in school from anyone. How you stepped up and wound us all up to finally do the right thing, and how you got so many people to believe in you. So, no I’m not running anymore. I’m not keeping my mouth shut and I’m not backing down. I’m gonna stand with you and I’m gonna stand up for myself for once. And stand up for you and Thomas and Leo. I am still afraid, but I am far more afraid of living with myself if I don’t do something. So, whatever is going on with you right now please know this. You changed my life. You helped me so much. I love you Skye. You are the best sister I could ever hope to have. Please call me when you can.’

Melinda wiped at her eyes while Skye was full on sobbing. Melinda took the phone and set it down and climbed close to Skye and pulled her into her arms. “You are so special Skye. So many people know that. Whatever you think you can’t do anymore, I have faith that you can. I have faith that you are a lot stronger than you feel right now. Let us be strong for you till you feel that again.”

Melinda held Skye for a few more minutes and then felt the girl pull away. Melinda pulled a few tissues from the night stand and gave them to Skye. Skye wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“Yesterday – I just -I just want you to know. I wasn’t trying to – I don’t want – I wasn’t trying to – you know hurt myself on purpose.”

“Okay. I believe you.”

“I just – I just kept having these- these thoughts. You know - they wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop them.”

“What thoughts Skye?”

“Dark ones.”

Melinda sighed and tried to carefully pick her words. “I’ve had those kinds of thoughts at times too Skye.”

“You have?” The surprise quite evident on Skye’s face.

Melinda nodded. “Probably darker even Skye. Phil – Phil – he – um - he brings me back. He’s my rock. He’s always there for me. Even when I didn’t want him to be.”
That revelation threw Skye. “I thought you had it all together. You and Phil, the perfect couple, you with your own Martial Arts Studio. Mr. C with his absolute love of teaching history and all the kids love him. All your cool friends. This house. You can take down practically anyone with your hate-fu.”

Melinda paused before speaking again. She wanted to explain but she hated talking about herself. But Skye needed this. She needed to know she was not alone. “Do you remember that night when I screamed at you Skye?”

Skye nodded. “Yeah but that was my fault cause I shouldn’t have.......”

Melinda moved closer to Skye and touched her shoulder. “Don’t Skye. Don’t do that. It was not your fault that I lost control. Not your fault that I screamed and scared a kid. Not your fault that I still have issues. Dark issues.”

Skye’s eyes widened. Melinda gave her a weak smile. “I have just had a longer time to hide them then you have Skye. Plus, with a lot of practice I’ve been able to shut those dark feelings down most of the time. They still escape, usually in nightmares and sometimes panic attacks afterward. Before that night, other than the nightmares, I’d pretty much shut them down for a few years.”

“I’m sorry Melinda. About Jamey. I’m sorry for you and Mr. C. You guys are both the best people I’ve ever met. You didn’t deserve that. Good people like you guys don’t deserve pain and suffering.”

“Skye. No one deserves pain and suffering.”

Skye hung her head and refused to look at Melinda.

“Hey please look at me Skye.” Skye slowly raised her head, as Melinda continued. “You don’t deserve pain and suffering Skye. You believe that, right?”

Skye swallowed hard and bit her lip as she looked to the window where it was just beginning to get light outside.

“Hey.” Melinda’s voice got softer. “Skye?

“Some of the nuns used to tell me I was born bad. Sister Beatrice said I was a bad seed. She said it wasn’t my fault, it just was. She said some kids could have the bad beat out of them, but it didn’t work for everyone.”

Melinda closed her eyes and took a deep breath. What kind of person, let alone a nun, tells something like that to a child? “I’m sorry someone said that to you. It’s not true.”

“What about murderers and people who are insane. Aren’t some born that way?”

“Skye it’s very complicated. I don’t know that much about it. I suppose there could be a very small number of people born without an ability to tell right from wrong but that still is not an excuse for their actions. As for you – Skye, you are a good person. Kind. Compassionate.”

“All the foster homes – they – they always said I was bad, or useless, or incorrigible. That was a word they wrote in my file a lot. Incorrigible. Delinquent. Troubled. Slow. There was one when I was nine. The foster family wrote I was slow and stupid and incapable of following the rules. That was the year I was in five foster homes. Six different schools.”
Melinda’s heart was breaking. This poor girl had suffered so much in her young life. The worst part was that she thought much of it was her own fault. “Skye you know that’s simply not true. You are a genius with computers and Phil says you have one of the brightest minds he’s ever taught. Look how fast you picked up Tai Chi and self-defense from me.”

“I know now I’m not. Back then, when I hacked my file, well you read it enough times – well you know. You get told enough times you start to believe it, you know.”

“Wait. You hacked your file?”

“Yeah, I was trying to find out about my parents. Where I was from and stuff. All the files about all the fosters were in it, and all the psych reports, and the nun reports. Sister Patricia wrote a nice report once. Said I was inquisitive and bright, and she thought I had a great imagination. I liked her. She was only there though for about a year when I was seven.”

“So, you saw your file? The one from the orphanage? And it was full of many reports?”

“Yeah. The keep everything. The nuns are very meticulous.”

“How old were you when you hacked into your file Skye?”

“I dunno. Why? Am I in trouble?”

“No. I just wanted to know when. It had to have not been that long ago I would think.”

“When I was 12. When I went to live at the group home - St Thomas Moore Children’s Home. They had teachers on campus with classrooms and stuff. Computers, you know.”

“I didn’t know you possessed that particular skill.”

“Yeah well. It comes easy to me.”

“You do know hacking is against the law?”

Skye smirked at her. “Well duh. I mean it’s why I did a four- month stint at the juvie center in Bayside.”

“You did what?”

“Wait, you didn’t know that? It’s in my file. I thought they made the fosters read the files of us before we came to live with you. Didn’t Miss Carter show you? Basically, the Brodys were my last chance. That’s what they said. They said you mess this one up, you will most likely be in juvie till your turn 18.”

“Skye your files are scant. Minimal info. Basic information is all there is. No medical records or info, no psych exams, no school records, no St Agnes reports. Just a basic summary of dates when you were at St Agnes and the group home and a few foster names mostly when you were very young.”

“Oh. Well what I saw was pretty big. I mean I was in a lot of foster homes you know. Lots of reports and damaging info on me”

“That makes no sense. Oh and why were you in juvie?”

“I might have decided to transfer $400 to me from the 1st Union bank so I could buy some
stuff. Mostly school supplies. Some sneakers. Stuff I needed.”

“Transfer from where Skye?”

“I dunno. Some guy’s account. He had a lot of money. I figured he might not even miss it
and I thought it wouldn’t get traced to me. I was a bit naïve. I am a much better hacker now.”

Melinda coughed to keep from laughing. “You can’t hack into computers Skye. You could
get into real trouble.”

“Okay. I know that. I’m a quick learner remember?” Melinda rolled her eyes which had
Skye grinning again. “So, someone stole my file?”

“It appears so.”

“Who would want to steal my file Melinda? I’m a nobody. A blip on the scale.”

“Skye you are not a nobody. But it is curious as to why your file, which you claim is full of
all kinds of reports is no longer there.”

“I could check the file. Maybe it’s been....”

“Skye.”

“I mean it’s my file. Right?”

“I can have Sharon check for it again. See if it was some glitch or something.”

“Okay. You could compare it to what I have.”

“What? Compare?”

“Yeah in my room. Hidden. I have a thumb drive. I copied my file. You wanna see?”

“You copied your file?”

“Yep. Full disclosure Melinda. It seems like we are doing this honest, upfront, tell
everything thing conversation, but Skye won’t get in trouble thing right now. Right? I copied my
whole file. I wanted to find my parents. I want to know why they didn’t want me and why they
dumped me at St Agnes fourteen years ago with nothing. Not even a name. So, I hacked in and
looked through all my files. Then I found a redacted document. I thought to myself why does an
orphan have a redacted file? It seemed really weird and mysterious. So, I tried to go on a bunch
more sites to find the same document not redacted. You know the local police file, other
government files, I even tired a few high-level businesses. Nothing clicked. When I found out
Jemma’s aunt worked for a security firm, I may have accidently logged onto her computer at her
house and tried to look up the redacted file. I got into a site for a company she did their security for,
Quinn International specifically the subdivision Graviton Corporation and I was able to bring it up.
Still mostly redacted but two names weren’t redacted and appeared on the page. One name was on
the top of the paper and the other on the bottom. I think one is my first name at birth and the other
one is my mother’s first name.”

Melinda looked at her in shock. “You hacked Victoria Hand’s computer?”

“Well yeah. But I didn’t do it to commit a crime or anything. Just to find out about me. I
mean I thought I was doing this whole disclosure thing and you wouldn’t be mad.”
Melinda looked at Skye whole appeared anxious and was chewing on her bottom lip again. “Hey. I’m not mad. But you can’t do that. You could have gotten into a lot of trouble. People won’t trust you and you don’t want that. But more importantly, it’s a crime to hack into secured files. How in the world can you even do that? You’re only 14.”

“I guess it’s a gift? I mean hacking is just easy. Coding and stuff. It’s like second nature. When I found out I could find out all this information by being good with computers, I just kept working at it and playing around with stuff.”

“You need to promise me you won’t do that anymore.”

Skye paused and said in a very quiet voice. “I don’t think I can do that Melinda. I can’t stop looking for my parents. I need to know where I come from.”

“You know you may not like what you find.”

“Well it has to be better than what I’ve imagined.”

“If you promise not to illegally hack any more computers Skye. I promise you I will help you find your parents. I’ll get all my resources and help you.”

“Really?”

Melinda smiled. “I don’t say anything I don’t mean. You know that.”

Skye nodded. “Okay. I can promise to try.”

Melinda nodded. “It’s a start. So, you found two names huh?”

Skye nodded. “Yeah. Daisy and Jiaying. I think my mother named me Daisy. I think my mother’s name is Jiaying. Which kind of proves that I am half Chinese after all. The nuns thought so, but they were never totally sure even with the note left. Jiaying is a Chinese name isn’t it?”

Melinda nodded. “Yes, it is. Well, Jiaying means household flourishing. Broken down the word Jia can mean good, favorable, or excellent, and Ying can mean clever or bright. All in all the name is positive and shows favorability in Chinese culture.”

“Of which I know absolutely nothing about. I don’t know any Chinese words. My heritage and I don’t know any of it.” Skye glanced up shyly at Melinda. “Say was that Chinese you were speaking last night. You know when I was ....”

“It was.”

“I didn’t understand anything you said but it was so soothing. Like nice.”

“I was just trying to keep us both calm. I tend to speak Chinese when I am very angry or fearful.”

“Fearful?”

“I am not good at this Skye. I don’t do emotional stuff well anymore. Even before, I never was good with words and knowing the right thing to say to people. I overthink words and I worry I am doing more harm than good. The Chinese I spoke to you were song lyrics from a song my father would sing to me when I was a child.”

Skye laughed. “So like a lullaby?”
“Yeah I guess. It was the first thing that popped into my head.”

“So you can’t sing?”

“I can sing a little. But I didn’t know how you would react to that.”

“You could have sung Elton John.”

Melinda raised her eyebrows and smirked. “Crocodile Rock?”

“Could you imagine?” Skye giggled. Mr C would have come in and thought you were crazy.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time he thought that.”

Skye chuckled. “Thank you, Melinda. I don’t know what is going to happen, but thanks for caring. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Ask away.”

“How come you didn’t take me to the hospital? Or doctor?”

“I didn’t think it would be in your best interest.”

“Cause of a psych hold?”

“Yeah. Did you want to go to the hospital? I may still take you to the doctor depending on how those things look when I change the bandages later.” She pointed to Skye’s bandaged arms.

Skye shook her head.

“Okay then you need to get up and we will do Tai Chi. By the time we finish, Phil should be awake so he can make us breakfast. Then I can take a look at those wounds and change the bandages. Sound like a plan?”

“How come?”

“Huh?”

“How come you even care Melinda. We only met a couple weeks ago. I’m not related to you. Why are you doing all this? What do you get out of it?”

“Get out of..............” Melinda paused. “People don’t need to get something for helping others Skye. They just do.”

“There’s always a catch. Maybe not right away but something always is.”

“What do you think that is?”

“I dunno. I can’t figure you and Mr.C out. Like he had just met me and all of a sudden he believes me, believes what I say after I got hurt in school. He tells me about you and you drastically cut you teaching price and allow me to hang out at your gym.”

“Oh, that’s right. You hacked into my files. I almost forgot about that. Seems to be something you need to stop doing.”
“Not really. It’s pretty easy to find out how much you charge for classes. I mean private
classes are expensive for everything anyway and yours run about $35/hour. Four to five hours of
cleaning doesn’t come close to even one session and you are giving me three. Look I get the
charity angle. People see orphans and give them stuff. It’s a conscience thing right. But this. This
whole thing is personal.” Skye waved her bandaged arms around for emphasis.

“Of course it’s personal Skye.”

“But why? Why me? Why do you even care? I mean Mr. C wears his heart on his sleeve.
He’s always trying to fix something. I get he wants to change the world.”

“One person at a time.”

“Yeah. Like Donnie?”

“Like Donnie. And you. And Clint. And Mike. His sister, Bobbi. So many others through
the years. Me.”

Skye looked at her with a confused look.”

“Skye when you walked into Phil’s life, he had already made it a practice to fix people.
Many students. Clint for example. Going down the wrong path, crossed into Phil’s life and we
basically adopted him. Phil helped him get through the academy and when he graduated with
honors it was Phil who was the first to shake his hand. Then there’s his wayward younger sister
who Phil mentored while she lived here after she was arrested for possession of drugs when she
was 17. Mike Peterson, who Phil visited daily at rehab so he wouldn’t succumb to depression. Phil
also helped Mike find his younger brother.”

“Ace.”

“Yes. Ace was in the system. Mike only found out about him through an aunt after his
mother died. Phil drove him to Pennsylvania and stayed with him for two weeks hunting down
leads.”

“And you? I know you lost your son Melinda but so did Mr. C.”

“It’s more than that Skye. I was driving.”

Skye remained silent waiting.

“It was raining. It was pouring down actually. The roads were wet and slick. I should have
been more careful. I should have slowed down more at the stop light.”

“But Victoria said the car hit your car. And then drove away. Melinda that’s not your
fault.”

“Phil was injured severely. He almost died. Jamey – he – he was in the back seat, on the
right side behind Phil. That side – the right side took the brunt of the impact.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know.”

“But you still blame yourself. You still believe there was something you could have done.”

Melinda’s silence gave Skye her answer.
“You replay it over and over and try to figure out how you could have done it differently. What you missed.”

Melinda looked up at Skye. How did this kid get so damn smart? Then it struck her. Skye was no longer talking about her. Melinda reached over and placed he hand over Skye’s. She whispered, “very few get that.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not sure it ever gets better.”

“That’s not very reassuring Melinda.”

“Phil does reassuring Skye. I do reality.”

Melinda and Skye made eye contact and for the first time Skye realized the haunted eyes reflecting back at her mirrored her own.

Chapter End Notes

For the name Jiaying - I looked it all up online and if there is anything wrong please don't get angry. I don't speak any Chinese so I rely on google for stuff I don't know well or at all. I hope it is not a distraction to this story. Coming up - we learn so much about Skye's past. Things start connecting more. The teens are standing in solidarity. We will meet a few more people who take on the baddies with Melinda and Co.
Chapter Summary

Conversations. Thoughts. Melinda and Phil and Skye and Donnie try to figure stuff out.

Warnings: In the next coming chapters: Mentions of non-con rape, abuse, neglect. Scenes of panic attacks and mentions of panic attacks. Mention of suicide and dark thoughts. Mentions of violence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Skye had washed up and put on her sweat pants and a loose-fitting T-shirt. She knocked lightly on Melinda’s bedroom door and then entered. Melinda was already stretching and waved Skye over to start. There was no sound of either Donnie or Phil being awake yet. Skye started stretching her legs and soon both she and Melinda were doing Tai Chi. Skye was getting so much better at the balance thing but the bandages on her arms was throwing her off a little. She adjusted again after nearly falling on the last move. Although normally they were quiet when doing Tai Chi, today Skye found the silence unnerving. She glanced over at Melinda and spoke quietly.

“So, you put me in my pajamas huh?”

Melinda was surprised at the sound but slowly nodded back at her. “Yeah, I did.”

“I mean it’s okay. I get it. I was sort of out of it and my clothes were soaking wet.”

Melinda simply nodded again. She thought of what she’d seen while changing Skye into dry pajamas as quick as she could. It was probably not something Skye wanted to talk about, but she’d let her guard down a lot so far this morning so why not try.

“Skye, I noticed a lot of scars and ...”

“No. Don’t. Please don’t.” Skye stopped in the middle of a move.

“Skye. I used to be an FBI agent. Before that I worked as a special agent in the military. I know what a knife scar looks like. You have several. One particularly nasty one. Look I know you don’t want to talk to me about it. But maybe you should talk to a psychiatrist. You know about that and ..........”

“What happened yesterday.”

“Yeah I just need to make sure you are safe.” Melinda had also stopped her movements.

Skye took a deep breath.” “I know I messed up.” She sat down on the bed.

“Hey I’m sorry Skye. I don’t want to push you. How about we finish up our Tai Chi and I wake Phil to make breakfast and you wake Donnie and just spend a little time with him?”
Skye nodded and got back up. They started from where they had left off. Suddenly a thought occurred to Skye and she turned to Melinda, “it’s Monday. School?”

“You’re not going today. Neither is Donnie. Phil is taking a day off. I’ve cancelled my morning classes and Natasha is covering my afternoon classes for me.”

“Oh.”

“So, come on. Let’s finish up. I’m starving. After breakfast we’ll take a look at your file. Okay?”

Skye nodded and then looked at Melinda with a soft smile, “do you think Mr. C will make chocolate chip pancakes?”

Skye was sitting on the swivel desk chair in Donnie’s room. He was sitting on the bed. She had let herself in without knocking and so far, Donnie had not spoken a word to her.

“So, Melinda’s gonna get Mr. C to make chocolate chip pancakes for us. They will probably be ready soon.”

Donnie did not even look at her.

“Look I know I scared you yesterday. I’m sorry.”

He finally looked at her. “Were you trying to kill yourself?”

Skye blinked rapidly and then started shaking her head. “No. I – I – I just got so mad. These thoughts – I dunno – I couldn’t stop – couldn’t shut them down, you know. It was eating me up inside. I tried to do like Melinda taught me and breathe and think of other things, but I couldn’t. I kept hearing the voices telling me I was a fuckup, and useless.” She paused. “I kept – I – I saw Sara’s face and yours and his.”

“Tell them Skye.”

“I can’t. I’m not – I’m not sure I can.”

“Not sure what? That you can trust them? You told me that the Coulson’s were good people. You told me I was going to be safe here. You told me to trust them. Why don’t you?”

“I do. It’s just – I don’t know. Donnie it’s not that easy”

“Then I’ll tell them.”

Skye stood up and walked in front of him. “You can’t. Please Donnie.”

“Skye – if you don’t tell them – you will do something like that again. If you don’t get help you won’t get better. Dr. Garner told me that people need to talk about all their demons, get them out there and then you can deal with them.”

“Dr. Garner?”

“My Shrink. The one I had to go see before they would let me live with my mom. He’s pretty cool.”
“A psychiatrist? Come on Donnie you know those head shrinks paid by the state are lame.”

“Yeah well this one wasn’t. He teaches at some university and he has a private practice.”

“So, he does kids like us to make himself feel better so he can sleep at night while fleecing people out of their money.”

“He’s not like that, Skye. He really helped me. He made me understand what happened was not my fault. Maybe someone like that could do that for you?”

“But it is my fault Donnie. I should have known. I should have stopped it. I could have stopped it. I didn’t do anything.”

“Like what Skye? Tell? Go to the social worker? Call the cops? You know no one believes fosters.”

“But I stayed away knowing what he was capable of doing. I never even thought about her. About you. I just thought about me.”

“You were 12 years old.”

“You were 10. And Sara was barely 11. I was 12 and a half. I should have done something.”

“Damnit Skye you were only 12. They should have done something. Not you. Not us. They want to do something you know.”

“What? Who?”

Donnie rolled his eyes at her. “Who do you think?”

“They wouldn’t understand. They would – they’d – Melinda would know I’m a coward.”

Donnie sighed. “Tell her. You think it hasn’t crossed their minds?”

“What?”

“Skye – you were in foster care your whole life. You have scars. You think that Mrs. C hasn’t figured out you were abused.”

“She has.” Skye paused. “But she – she doesn’t - but – damnit Donnie. I want them to like me.”

“Geez Skye. You don’t see it? Really?”

“See what? Damn you’re cryptic this morning.”

“Mrs. C loves you. So, does Mr. C. You didn’t see their panicked faces yesterday. The worry all day yesterday that Mr. C tried to hide from me. How many times he tiptoed to the room to open the door and make sure you were okay. Mrs. C screamed at him not to call for help cause she kept saying they might lose you. She kept saying she was not going to let anyone take you away.”

Skye sat down on the bed next to Donnie. “She – she said I – that I – I would probably be taken to the hospital and she didn’t want that.”

“Yeah cause they would have immediately said you were hurting yourself and needed to stay and be evaluated. Put on suicide watch. You know how it works.”
“I wasn’t – Donnie – I - wasn’t trying – I don’t think I was tying – she said that?”

“Over and over. To Mr. C. To Bobbi.” He paused and then gathered his thoughts. “You told me
Skye. You said trust them, they’re good people. So, I say to you Skye. Trust them, they’re good
people. They care about you an awful lot.”

A knock on the door startled both. “Hey guys breakfast is ready.”

“Okay Mrs. C. Thanks. We’ll be right down.” Donnie answered as he smiled at Skye.

They listened as footsteps moved away from the door. Skye turned to Donnie. “You really think
they won’t blame me? They won’t be disgusted with me? They won’t look at me differently? That
they will let me stay?”

“I’m sure. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. For some reason, those two want to
help us. Hell they want to help everyone. We should just consider ourselves lucky that we crossed
paths with them.”

“Like fate?”

“Yeah something like that. Maybe karma caught up and decided all the bad we’d had done to us
needed to be countered with some good.”

“Sister Patricia would say that God sent us angels.”

“Yeah. I kind of like that too.”

Skye shrugged. “I’m not saying it’s not a cool way to look at it.”

“We better get downstairs. Before they think something’s wrong.”

“Yeah.”

While Skye was upstairs with Donnie, Melinda had come into the kitchen. Leaning on the door and
stood there watching her husband cook breakfast. He fluttered about and she knew he noticed her,
but he said nothing.

“Skye wants chocolate chip pancakes.”

He glanced up quickly and smiled. “I figured. And bacon too?”

“She didn’t specifically ask for bacon but why not?”

“Good. It’s halfway done.” He moved to the stove and checked the pan before moving back to the
counter to stir the pancake batter. She watched as he dumped chocolate chips in the batter, fare
more then was necessary, and stirred up the batter more. He put the griddle on the stove and turned
the two burners on and let the butter melt. She noticed the kettle on the stove as well.

“How soon for the water to boil?”

“Couple minutes. I just put it on a little bit ago.”
“Where’d you sleep?”

“Uh I was going to bunk on the sofa but decided to just use Skye’s bed. I stripped the sheets and blankets and they are already in the washer. I’ll toss them in the dryer after breakfast.

She smiled and walked over to him. “Can I help.”

He looked at her with a panicked look. “You want to help? Help cook?”

“Relax Phillip. I can set the table and pour the drinks.”

Phil visibly relaxed. “Yeah good idea.”

“Dork.” She reached up to grab a few glasses out of the cupboard.

“Hey you okay? How’s Skye?”

Melinda shook her head. “Honestly I don’t know. She goes back and forth between sharing and not sharing. Between shutting down and spilling all.”

“Oh yeah well I meant her injuries.”

“Ah yes. Of course. She will be fine. That stuff Hunter brought over is top of the line. We used it on missions.”

“Yeah. Army or FBI?”

“Both actually. What did Roz say?”

Phil paused while he poured the batter onto the griddle pan. “She said to take all the time I need. She’s keeping Lincoln home at least today as well. She’s sure that Ryan and some of the others aren’t coming in. She is going in and she wants to talk to the teachers. She’s going to ask for a School Board Meeting and require all teachers to be present. She thinks Thursday evening might work. She wants Bobbi and Hunter and maybe Izzy to attend as well. And us. And Sharon Carter. And apparently Ryan has a lawyer and for now he is staying at Vic and Izzy’s.”

“Good. That boy has been hurt enough. Lawyer you say?” Melinda kept setting the table while Phil made the pancakes.


Melinda stopped and turned to look at him. “Did you say Jeri Hogarth?”

“I did. Why.”

“I know her. She’s tough as nails and damn good. Pricey though.”

“Pro bono. A favor to Vic.”

“That lady has more favors owed to her then anyone I know.”

“Sure does. Oh, and Fury called Izzy after she asked for some records from the FBI. Something about a special investigation they are working on and said she needs to be working with his guy if she’s going to get involved. Fury said he’s sending him up here to compare notes.”

“On what exactly Phil?”
Phil put a bunch of pancakes on the pile and poured more batter into the griddle. “Apparently they’ve been looking at Quinn and Malick. Once Izzy mentioned those names to Nick – she said he went all Nick for a while, you know how he can go on and on, then told her to find a couple of motel rooms because she would have to work with the FBI on this.

“Phil. It’s a bunch of high school bullies that need to be put in their place.”

“Melinda, Izzy says that’s only the tip of the ice burg.”

“Isn’t that a bit melodramatic?”

“She’s coming over later this afternoon. She said she’s bringing a bunch of files, and Mike Peterson with her, oh and she called Clint too. She said it’ll make more sense when she can talk to you in person.” Phil drained the bacon onto paper towels and poured the last of the batter onto the hot griddle.

“Okay.”

“I’ll do something with the kids. Watch a movie and order in pizza. She said she’d be here around four. Oh, and Hunter called too. He said that Will Daniels asked him to come to the hospital and he gave a statement to the police and filed a complaint. Bobbi and Mack and he are picking up the suspects now. Grant Ward. Kyle Jennings. And Seth Dormer. The boy identified all three as assaulting him.”

“Good. I’ll have to tell Skye later. They should have been down by now.”

“I’m sure they are on their way.”

“Maybe I should go check. Breakfast looks done.”

“Yeah it is. We can talk more later,” he said as he gave her a hug.

She gave him a small smile.” Okay. Oh yeah, I almost forgot. Skye broke into social services computers online and she downloaded all her files last year. She says she has a thumb drive. We will be looking at that later. Maybe we can shed some light on a few things.”

Phil looked at her shocked. “She hacked in?”

“Apparently she’s really, really good at that yes.” With that Melinda rounded the corner and was out of sight.

“Hmmm.” Phil’s expression was nearly comical.

Donnie shoved another half a pancake into his mouth and grabbed for a piece of bacon. Melinda smiled. The boy could sure eat. She watched concerned though as Skye was basically just pushing her food around on her plate. The bandages on Skye’s arms still needed to be changed and there was a possibility she would have to go to the doctor. At which point someone outside would find out what happened. Because Melinda knew she could not lie about what occurred know matter
how much she wanted to. She had managed to get down a couple slices of bacon and one pancake along with her tea. Skye did drink both her tea and a glass of chocolate milk which was good. Melinda pushed herself out of her chair and took her plate to the sink rinsing it off.

“Come on Skye. I need to change those bandages and put more cream on the cuts. Are you finished?”

Skye glanced up at her and nodded her head. She followed Melinda out of the room. Donnie reached over and grabbed Skye’s bacon off her plate and started shoving it into his mouth. Around the chewing he spoke to Phil. “It’s okay. She’s gonna be okay now.”

Phil shook his head. “I hope so.”

“No worries. She’s gonna spill soon. She’s just anxious and afraid. But she will.”

“Spill?”

“Yah.”

“Spill what exactly?”

“Everything. She trusts you guys.”

“I hope so. We just want what’s best for her.” Phil was happy about Donnie’s talkativeness. He was trying not to spook him into shutting down.

“Yeah I figured that out. She’s still struggling a little with the concept, but she’s gonna get there. Oh and it won’t be pretty. That’s mostly what she’s scared of.”

“Scared of?”

“Yep. Terrified actually. She is terrified of trusting people and terrified of being judged. But you know. She will. Mrs. C is good for her. You know they seem to be a lot alike.”

“Yeah they are.”

“You know when me and Skye lived with the Hamilton’s, we used to talk a lot about what a good family would be like to live with. We always agreed on two things.”

“What was that.”

“Trust and being safe.”

“Yeah that’s pretty important.”

“It’s everything Mr. C. “

“You know there’s love too. A family should love each other.”

“Yeah I guess. But trust and being safe are far more important.”

“But in a way, aren’t they the same thing?”

Donnie looked up in surprise. “Hmmm...Maybe they are?”

“Hey how about you help me with the dishes and then we can check out some comics until
Melinda and Skye rejoin us?

“Sounds like a plan.”

Skye sat on the closed seat of the toilet in Melinda’s bathroom. Melinda had a basin of warm soapy water, a washcloth, some peroxide, and the antibiotic cream. She also had clean bandages on the sink next to the basin. She was un wrapping Skye’s left arm first. Most of the cuts were on the underside of her arms and hand. She looked at them now as Melinda pealed off the last bandage. There was no outright bleeding but there was some red showing on a few cuts and her arm was stained with some red splotches. Melinda worked on the other arm while Skye continued to gaze at her wounded arm. Melinda finally freed that one as well.

“Skye can you make a fist for me on you left hand?”

She did what was asked.

“Okay flex it up and down a few times at the wrist and move your fingers around.” Again, Skye did what Melinda asked. “How does that feel? Pain? Tightness?”

Skye shook her head. “No. Not really. Not at the wrist or the fingers. But my arm hurts a little.”

“Can you show me where?”

Skye pointed to the two longest gashes, without touching her skin.

“Makes sense. This arm is healing fine and looks good. Let me see the other one.”

Skye moved her arm more upright so Melinda could see it better.

“Okay moved your wrist and fingers on this one please.”

Skye moved her wrist and winced a bit. Then she moved her fingers and her hand by her pinky hurt.

“Um the wrist hurts and so does it here.” Skye pointed to her hand. The pain she pointed out was the spot Melinda had put 4 stitches in. The other place she had stitched was the anterior part of the left side of her wrist.

“Hurts a lot or just pulls?”

“Pulls and aches a little.”

“Okay that’s normal with stitches. Both of the stitched cuts look good and are healing as are all the other cuts. You can see here where some bruising is starting to form and there may be more of that today. It will definitely start to look worse before it looks better. I can take you to the doctor if you want and let them verify all this.”

Skye bit her bottom lip. “Is that what you think I should do?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think Skye. It’s what you will feel most comfortable with. I’m not a doctor. But most of the cuts are not deep, there is no tearing or ligaments or breaks and no infection. I put 4 stitches in this one and 3 in this one. The stitches can come out in couple days.”
“So, you did what a doctor would do?”

“Yes. And it would most likely be a nurse who would take care of the wounds and the doctor would assess the injuries.”

“And then ask I got them.”

“Yes. You would have to tell the doctor what happened.”

“That would go into a report and they’d have to send it to social services.”

“They would.”

“They could make me have a psych eval and take me out of here?”

Melinda remained silent. She knew the right thing to do in a perfect world was to have taken the girl to a hospital. And she knew now, that a doctor should probably check her out just to be sure although her experience with injuries told her that Skye would be fine.

Skye knew Melinda’s silence was a resounding ‘yes’ to her questions. “No doctor.” She held her arms out to Melinda.

Melinda reached for Skye’s right arm and covered the stitch areas with plastic tape and then got washcloth and dipped it into the soapy water. She very gently washed Skye’s arms and hands being careful to not get the stitched areas wet. She gently wiped both arms and hands dry with a clean towel. Then she waited a couple minutes and then used peroxide on some of the larger cuts. She watched Skye carefully but only saw a few winces and proceeded. After that she applied more of Hunter’s anti-biotic cream to her arms and hands put more plastic tape over the stitched areas and then wrapped them in bandages.

“No baths for five days and no full shower till tomorrow night. You don’t want to get the stitches wet and chance infection. I’ll do this again tonight after dinner. Okay?”

Skye nodded.

“Hey, I want you to take some ibuprofen too. Your arms and hands will probably be achy for a bit after that. Come on.”

She left the bathroom and moved into her bedroom. She shook three pills from the bottle handed them and a bottle of water to Skye who had sat down on the bed. Skye swallowed the pills with the water.

“Oh and finish that bottle of water. You need to stay hydrated. I know right now it’s hard to get up an appetite. But you also need to eat, okay?”

So she had noticed that I didn’t eat much of anything, Skye thought. She nodded again. “Okay. I’ll try. Could I have more of that tea you made? It was good.”

“Of course. Finish that water and why don’t you grab that thumb drive of yours and come downstairs. I’ll put the water on.”

“Yeah okay.” Skye got up, walked out the bedroom and down the hallway following Melinda. She stopped in front of her room and watched Melinda go down the steps. She took a swig of the water and then looked across to the bathroom. She walked over to it and opened the door. Everything was cleaned up. All the glass, all the towels, all the blood-soaked clothes. The only thing different was
the missing glass on the cabinet door. Mr. C must have cleaned everything up. Cause she knew
Melinda hadn’t left her side the whole day and night except to use the bathroom. And that thought
made her eyes sting. She swallowed hard and barely made it into her room to the bed before she
was racked with sobs. She grabbed a pillow to her face and tried to muffle the sound.

Skye was finally able to stop, and she took in a deep breath which made her cough. She finally took
a couple of swigs of the water bottle that had ended up next to her on the bed. She grabbed a few
tissues and hastily wiped at her eyes and nose. She was a mess. Again. This time not from crying
over the dark things in her life but rather because of something good. Because of Melinda May and
her husband, Mr. C. Because Melinda had the forethought to realize reporting her injuries would
cause Skye more problems. Because Mr. C. cleaned up the mess she had created and didn’t say a
word to her about it. Because not only did Melinda get her to talk but she made no judgments about
what she said. She didn’t call her stupid, or call her crazy, or yell at her, or hurt her in any way.

Instead, Melinda protected her. Helped her. Calmed her down. Gave her choices. Allowed her to
talk without interrupting. Shared her own demons to help Skye understand hers. Even made her
smile a little. Skye grabbed the pillow and held it close to her body trying to remember the feeling
she had when she had woken up cuddled into Melinda feeling so safe and warm. This woman, for
whatever reason, had stood up for her, helped her beyond what any other reasonable person would
have done, and made her feel safe. No one had ever done that before. No one. She had even
apologized to her for yelling at her. She’d apologized twice. No one ever had done that before
either. Even the nicer people made excuses or just didn’t say anything. No one had ever apologized
to her about anything. Donnie was right. She could trust Melinda and could trust Mr. C. Maybe.
She hoped. She was rocking back and forth on her bed and holding the pillow when the knock
came on the door.

“Hey yo Skye. Melinda sent me up to make sure you are okay. She said she thought you’d be
coming down soon for tea.”

Skye cleared her throat. “Yeah, I’ll be right down.”

“Okie dokie.”

“Okie dokie? You sound like Mr. C.”

“Yeah? Whatevs. Come on I think Melinda is worried about you. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She opened the door and he nearly fell in.

“Dude.”

“I am not a dude, dude. “

“Hey look. Matching arms. He held up his casted arm.”

“Dork.”

“Goober.”

“Nerd.”

“Geek”

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter is already done. This one was getting way too long so I divided it. Probably post it tomorrow. Some very heavy stuff coming up next couple chapters. Also if you follow Skye's The Limit - next chapter is almost done, Should be up soon - next couple days. Thanks so much for reading. For those who do - Thank's for commenting.
Skye followed Donnie down the steps both trying to outdo each other on name calling. Only when both entered the kitchen did they stop. They saw Melinda and Phil were sitting at the table. Phil had his laptop open in front of him and Melinda had a cup of tea. Next to Melinda was a spot with another mug and she motioned for Skye to sit. Donnie sat down at the other side next to Phil.

“So, Melinda tells me you’re a hacker?”

Skye blinked at him not sure if his words were an accusation or not.

“What Phillip means is that you found your files on the St Agnes and social services private sites and downloaded them which is actually going to be useful,” she paused and stared poignantly at him, “since they seem to have lost almost all files pertaining to you Skye.”

“Yeah that.” He grinned.

“Yeah, I guess. I was looking for info on my parents and just looked up everything I could find. I put it on this.” She produced a thumb drive from her pocket.” She looked down at it and then tossed it over to Phil. “My life.”

“Your files.”

“Yeah my files, my life.”

“Your life is more than a few files Skye.”

“You sure you want to see those.”

“Sure, why not?”

“You might not like what you see.”

You might not like me. That’s what Skye truly meant. Melinda knew that. She reached over and squeezed the top of Skye’s hand lightly.

“It’ll be okay,” she said.

Skye bit her bottom lip. She knew they probably imagined her files to contain a few bad things. But everything was not in those files. They were half stories and actually some were missing quite
a bit of information. If she elaborated on them while they brought them up, it would be far worse
then what showed on paper. She was debating whether to explain what they were going to see or
just remain quiet and let them draw their own conclusions.

Donnie kicked her leg under the table. He raised his eyebrows at her and then tilted his head
toward Melinda. She frowned back at him. He opened his eyes wide and glared at her. She sighed
and then shrugged. He kicked her again. She glared back. Meanwhile Phil had inserted the thumb
drive and turned the computer to face everyone.

“Um Skye are you okay with Donnie staying?”

She gave Donnie a semi-dirty look but then shrugged. “He can stay. He knows a lot of it anyway.”

Phil brought up the first file. It was Skye’s first report from St Agnes and contained her basic
information plus the date she was dropped off at St. Agnes and what name they gave her among
other details of her arrival and subsequently becoming a ward of the state in particular a ward of St.
Agnes.

“Ah this one we already saw.”

Skye nodded. He clicked again. The next file contained a picture of baby Skye in a pink onesie
with a yellow blanket. Next to the picture was a note which said ‘I cannot keep my daughter safe.
She is half Chinese/half Caucasian. Please find a home for her. She’s a sweet baby. Not fussy. She
is six months old.’

Melinda looked at the picture. Baby Skye was adorable. Her big, dark brown eyes already staring
right out at the world in wonder. Melinda read the note twice. She glanced at Skye who was
looking at the table. She read the words again to herself. ‘I cannot keep my daughter safe.’ Not ‘I
cannot keep my daughter’. The added word ‘safe’ was strange. Safe from what? Or from who?

“When I was older, I asked the nuns if my parents had left anything for me when they dropped me
off.” Skye’s voice was so soft that Melinda could barely hear her. “Sister Beatrice said they don’t
keep anything and that they throw everything away when babies are dropped off.”

“I’m sorry Skye.”

“Hey at least she left a note and they kept that in the file. Most babies don’t even get that. Wish
she would have told them my real name though. The name the nuns picked is stupid.”

“Yeah it is.” Melinda wholeheartedly agreed. “I do like the name Skye though.”

Skye gave her a weak smile.

Phil clicked the next file. It said that from June 23 to October 19 that Skye was with a family
named Erikson. The file said potential adoption but returned because mother got pregnant and did
not want two kids that close in age in diapers at same time. The next file after that showed that a
few weeks later Skye went to a foster home with a single older caregiver, a widow, for seven
months and then was returned to St. Agnes when another couple showed interest in adopting Skye.
Phil and Melinda read those files while Skye said nothing.

The next file had Skye going to a family in early June when she was nearly one year old. She
stayed with Mr. and Mrs. Curtis for eighteen months and they were ready to start adoption
procedures when Mr. Curtis lost his job, so they put it off. A few months later when Skye was
nearly three, he got a job across the country in Washington, but they couldn’t take Skye with them and couldn’t afford for Mrs. Curtis to stay and live in New York waiting for her to be adopted. So, Skye was returned to St Agnes.

“I don’t remember them. I don’t have any pictures or anything. I think they wanted me to forget. But hey at least they seemed to actually want me. At least for a while.”

Melinda didn’t realize her fists were clenched and her face was pinched until Phil nudged her with his foot. She looked at him and his eyes moved to Skye and she realized Skye was watching her. She willed herself to relax and she schooled her features back to neutral. Then she spoke up, “I’d say it was their loss.”

Skye bit her bottom lip and made an almost smile as she suddenly looked interested in the floor tiles of the kitchen.

Phil clicked and the next file popped up. This one showed that Skye lived with a Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins from August 14 until December 20 of 2002.

Phil spoke up. “The Jenkins. You were only there four months. Did something happen?”

“Phil she was only four years old. I doubt she remembers much.”

“There were two other kids there. Both older than me. I don’t remember much else except it was somewhere in the country I guess. Lots of grass and trees.”

“Well there’s nothing in the file about why you were removed.”

“Broken arm.” Skye looked at them all and then studied the tiles again.

Melinda asked very gently. How’d that happen?”

“I kind of remember being at the hospital and getting a cast. It was green. I was going to lie and say I fell down the steps like the lady told me to, but I told the nice nurse that I had spilled the big jug of milk trying to pour it on my cereal and it slipped out of my hands. I had little hands back then.”

“Skye what happened?” This time Phil asked.

“He got really mad. He grabbed me and pushed me into the refrigerator hard. I got scared and tried to run and he grabbed my arm and twisted it. I heard the bone break. After they put a cast on my arm, the social worker came and picked me up and I went back to St Agnes.”

Melinda saw Donnie was rocking back and forth on his chair with his arms crossed and looked horrified. No more horrified than she probably looked. She glanced at Skye who was chewing on a fingernail and refused to look at any of them.

“I guess I should have asked for help, but I was hungry, and no one was up yet. I should have just waited. The noise woke him up. It was small house, all on one floor so you had to be quiet when he was sleeping. I was just hungry.”

Skye looked up and saw the faces of the three staring at her. She started talking very fast then as she stared back down at the floor. “I stayed at St. Agnes then for almost a year. The nuns said I was a trouble maker and defiant. Check out the files – that’s what it says. I remember wondering why none of them families that visited ever wanted to take me. Sister Teresa told me I looked too Chinese, that they could tell I was a mutt, and no one wanted to adopt mutts. I didn’t know what a mutt was, so I asked one of the older girls. She told me it was when you are part one race and part
another. I still didn’t understand till I was older and some of the older kids would call me names.

Melinda pushed her chair closer and put her hand on Skye’s shoulder and was going to pull her into a hug. But Skye hesitated and Melinda did not force the issue. Instead, she just kept her hand on Skye’s shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. Skye’s attention was momentarily broken as she swallowed hard and then took a deep breath. She then continued on, speaking fast and Melinda had to focus to catch her words.

“The next foster home sucked too and so did the one after. The first one the lady only was taking in kids for the money and didn’t care at all. She had five foster kids in her apartment, so I shared a room with two other girls. The apartment was dirty, and we never got enough to eat. You can bring up that file – the only one they actually said there was a problem in, it was child neglect in the file and they stopped letting her be a foster parent. I was there for a couple months, I was around five I think.

“That’s horrible Skye.” Phil looked like he was going to be sick.

“Hey that’s just the way it is. I mean people who take in fosters have an angle. Right Donnie?”

Yep. I mean some just do it to get the money. Others because they think it’s going to help them get into heaven or something.”

“Some of the couples who can’t have their own kids are decent. I mean I almost got one of those.”

“Yeah the good ones always go for the babies and toddlers. Under fours.”

“Yeah. Those are the ones who are adopted first. Before they get damaged.”

“Some are okay with a bit older as long as you meet their criteria.”

“Yeah, pretty with no defects.”

“Or athletic. Or smart. Or if you happen to look like one of them.”

“Same eye color and hair.”

Donnie shook his head. “Sometimes you luck out and they just ignore you and collect the check.”

“Better than the ones who try to turn you into something you’re not.”

“Yeah.”

“Like the Becker’s. Or Mrs. Becker anyway. They were the next one, I went there right before I started first grade It’s in there Mr. C. I stayed with them for about eight months. They had two boys, both older than me. One was nine and the other was eleven. The lady wanted a girl, but I guess she couldn’t have any more kids or something. At first it was pretty nice. My own rom and the lady, who wanted me to call her mom, took me shopping for clothes and toys. She wanted me to dress nice and stuff. Like all girly and play with dolls, and color and be princessy. I hated it. But I put up with it. I mean I had my own room.”

“Right. How often does that happen.” Donnie interjected

“Yeah it was mostly pink and had ponies all over. She thought I’d like ponies for some reason. But her sons hated me. She spent all this money on me and spent a lot of time doing my hair and playing with dolls with me and stuff. Until she got tired of it, I guess. Her sons hated me and used
to pick on me. Then they accused me of stealing their stuff. They’d take it and hide it in my room and then tell their dad. He’d always believe them and after their mom grew tired of me, she stopped defending me. So, I was punished and after a few months of that, they sent me back to St. Agnes and said I was a thief and a liar and incorrigible. It’s all there in the file.”

Coulson was reading the files and he nodded at Melinda. She was so angry that she wanted to punch something, preferably the foster parents, but she knew showing her anger would have Skye believing she was doing something wrong. So she said nothing.

Phil did speak. “If you need some time Skye, we can take some and come back to this later,” trying to give Skye an out if she needed it.

She shook her head and gave him a weak smile. “Forge ahead Mr. C. It’s like pulling off that bandaid quickly and getting it over with.

He smiled at her and clicked to another file. “This one says you were seven and in November you stayed with a Mrs. Laubach.”

Skye’s smile got bigger. “Yeah. She took in kids that are harder to place. There were two others when I was there. She was kind of old but really nice. I liked it there. I even made friends with the other kids she was taking care of and a couple others in the apartment building. She lived close enough, so I went to the Catholic School like I did at St. Agnes.” She looked up and saw Melinda and Phil’s faces filled with relief. “Yeah it was a good home. But then she got sick and we had to leave. I went back to St. Agnes.”

Phil read the file which matched what Skye said. She had been there for almost a year. He clicked to bring up the next file and saw that Skye had remained at St. Agnes till August of the next year, when she was nine. Then she was placed with a Mr. and Mrs. Pedersen. But she was only there for four weeks. Then she was placed with Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, but she was only there for around eight weeks. There were no details on either of those homes. Next a placement with the Porrino’s, which lasted only five weeks. He glanced at Skye.

“The next few places are lacking details.”

Skye nodded.

“Why were you in so many that year? The Pedersen’s, the Mitchells and the Porrino’s. The Pedersen’s was four weeks, the Mitchells was eight weeks, the Porrino’s was five weeks. Oh, and also the Snyder’s, which was only three months. Wait. It says you ran away from the Mitchells. There are no reasons for the short stays of the other ones. That’s four places in one year.”

“Five if you count St. Agnes.”

Melinda shook her head. That was outrageous. Five homes for a nine-year-old in one year. School alone would have been a disaster.

As though she had read Melinda’s mind Skye piped up. “School sucked. Four different schools and all at different places on teaching stuff when I was there. The Snyder’s place was during summer. I ran from that one too. That’s when they almost sent me to juvie. But then Sister Patricia found a place for me with a lady who takes in kids in crisis. That’s what they called me. You can check it on the file with Mrs. Franklin. I was ten by then and stayed with her for six months only because she is a temporary place and kids shuffle in and out there. I would have liked to stay there longer. Then I went back to St. Agnes for nearly a year till they placed with another family. Paul and Kathleen Kernick.”
“Yeah I see that file. Says they have fostered twenty kids from St. Agnes over the years.”

“Yep. Four at a time. Two girls and two boys. The kind of foster parents the nuns love. Whip those kids into shape. Whip of course being the key word.”

“Skye? Did they abuse you?”

“Discipline. They call it discipline Melinda. You get up every morning and made your bed and then washed up and get dressed. Came downstairs and either help make the breakfast or clean up after. Then you did your chores. There was a list. After that was school. Home school. Three hours and then lunch. Again, help prepare or help clean up. Then another hour of school. Then you could choose one hour of down time; an educational documentary on TV, reading, play board games or puzzles. Then you were supposed to do some kind of exercise. In the back yard. Soccer, or running or walking or whatever else you wanted. One hour. Then you did more chores. Laundry, or cleaning or yard work. Two hours. Then dinner. Yeah you helped make it or helped clean up that meal too. After dinner you did your homework. If you had free time after that before bedtime which was really early at nine o’clock, you read or watched one of the few shows they allowed you. But only five hours of TV time per week allowed.”

“Holy crap Skye. Did you make it through even one day.”

Skye smirked back at Donnie. She shook her head. “Nah, I don’t think so.”

“That’s horrible. It’s like – like ...”

“Prison Phil. Prison is the word you are looking for.”

“Exactly.” Skye grinned at Melinda. “Needless to say, I was probably their most challenging case.”

At that Melinda laughed. “I bet you were.” But then she sobered at the thought of Skye being punished. The marks she had seen, the scars, other than the knife scars, could have been from a belt or whip. “Please tell me they didn’t use a whip on you daily.”

“Nah not daily. And it was really a belt. That was for defiance though mostly. The other times they took away free time or banished me to my room. Sometimes they took away meals. She even tried making me read the Bible as penance. I don’t think that’s a good way to get people to read the Bible or believe, do you?”

“No Skye probably not.”

“I called Sister Patricia and begged her to come get me and put me in juvie.”

“She called back once and said she was trying to find me another place. But nothing happened. The last time I called, Sister Margaret answered and said that Sister Patricia had been transferred. The Kernicks were nuts. So, I ran away. First chance I got. Lasted on my own for about five weeks then it started getting too cold and I ran out of options. Plus, it’s pretty dangerous out there on your own so I turned myself in.

“You lived on the streets for five weeks alone when you were only eleven?” Melinda interrupted in a shocked voice.

“Nah not always alone. Least not the whole time. I met a group of homeless younger teens and they let me hang with them. Once I proved my worth to them. I made a bet with them. They had about five bucks between them and gave it to me because I had told them I could get them all a hotel room and food for a day. So, I went into a coffee shop to use a computer, and I needed the five
bucks to buy coffee and hang out. I hacked into this hotel and used a credit card I’d pickpocketed the day before and reserved two rooms. They were impressed. The four of us went to the hotel and showered and put on clean clothes the others had shoplifted. Using the card, I ordered room service and we pigged out. We hung out for a while watching movies and eating and laughing. But we only had a couple hours of a time frame in case the credit card was reported and so we left and then I hung with them for about three weeks.

“You pick-pocked a credit card?” Phil’s face was comically incredulous.

“A couple girls at St Agnes showed me how to. I can do wallets and cell phones pretty easy. Also, there are purses that dumb woman let unattended which are easier but there are less opportunities for those.

“You’ve stolen before. A lot.” Melinda said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah. To survive. I never took more than I needed.” Skye was defiant.

“So, your needed new sneakers and clothes when you hacked and got caught and got sent to juvie.

“It was a guy who had like fifteen bank accounts all with tens of thousands of dollars. He wasn’t going to miss a couple hundred dollars, or so I thought. Yeah, I needed new sneakers. And other stuff. What do you know how it’s like anyway?” Skye got out of her seat and she backed away from them. “Huh? What do you know about any of it?” She stared icily at them. “You’ve never had nothing like me and Donnie.” Then she spoke louder. “You’ve never had to wear all hand me downs or donated clothing two sizes too big. Shoes broken in by someone else’s feet. You never slept in a park on a bench hoping to be safe from addicts and the crazy homeless peeps. You never locked your door and prayed no one would come in at two in the morning and – you – and you....” She stopped and took a deep breath.

“You never got beat with a belt for arguing about rules and religion. You never lived with kids who hated you so much that they would hit you whenever their parents weren’t looking or ruin their stuff and say you did it. You never missed two days of meals because you were being taught a lesson on respect. You never looked at yourself in the mirror and hated what you saw cause a nun told you were a mutt. You never got told over and over how worthless you were, or how stupid you were. Or how you fucked up everything. Or how much of a loser you are.” She paused as she took in Melinda’s distressed face and Phil’s anguished look, but she was on a roll and not ready to stop, she was practically yelling by now. “Look at you Melinda. You’re perfect. Your life is perfect. You have everything. I’ve lived in what, like fifteen foster homes. Of the ones I can remember, only two were okay. I grew to hate when I was called to the office at St. Agnes, because that meant I was going to another foster home. Another place that was probably going to hurt me. Another place where I would be afraid. Another place I would be sent back from and be blamed for not fitting in. Be blamed for stealing, for lying, or something worse. My file has words listed like incorrigible, and defiant, and thief, and liar, and stupid, and slow, and rebellious, and resistant. Read it Mr. C. They’re all there. All more than once. The Sisters said I would never amount to anything. So yeah, I stole some things Melinda. Why not? I was just living up to expectations.”

“Skye, stop.” Donnie had also gotten up and was horrified at her outburst. This was not what he imagined would happen.”

Phil took a step toward Skye and she backed away from him into the cabinets. But she wasn’t done yet.
“So, whatever. Just take me back. As Sister Beatrice said - I’m damaged goods. I am never going
to be the person any of you want me to be. I’m not – I don’t care. I’m not who – I can’t- I’m a
fuckup. My mother – my mother didn’t even want me. There has to be – to be – some - something
wrong with me for her to just throw me away. You told me if I ever find my parents, that I might
not like what I find. I said it had to better than I’ve imagined. I’m sure you both have imagined
how my life was, and maybe – but – you -you – never...” Skye stopped and clenched her fists. She
was full out yelling now and continued her rant.” Mine is much worse than you could imagine isn’t
it! I am not who you think I am.  I’m not even who I think I am. Not who I wanted to be.”

Melinda walked toward Skye who held her hands out as if to push her away. “I should have
stopped him. I should have and Sara would not have died. Don’t you understand? It’s all my fault.
Everything that happened was my fault. Skye crumbled and fell to the floor in a heap.”

Donnie ran over to her. “No Skye! NO! It wasn’t your fault. It was his fault. David did it to her and
he nearly killed me and you. It’s not your fault! He raped you both. He beat the crap out of all of us
that night. You were twelve Skye. You were only twelve.”

Melinda felt sick. Yes, she had imagined exactly what Skye was saying. Rape and abuse. But
someone died? Yeah that had not crossed her mind.  She pulled Donnie into her and hugged him.
He was shaking. Phil bent down to touch Skye’s shoulder and she recoiled from him. Her eyes
were wild and terrified. Phil backed away.

Skye was now sobbing uncontrollably. Melinda made eye contact with Phil and motioned for him
to get Donnie. Once he did and Donnie buried his face in Phil’s shoulder, Melinda moved to Skye
and dropped to the floor next to her.

“Skye. You need to breathe slowly. Remember what I told you the other day. Can you focus on my
voice right now and look at me please?”

Skye looked up, her chin quivering and with tears on her cheeks. “I-I wanted to be strong. To- to
be brave. Not a – not – not a – a coward. But I couldn’t stop him. I’m sorry.”

“Oh Skye.” Melinda pulled her into a hug and started rocking her gently holding her tight. “You
are the bravest person I know. You are so strong.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Skye kept repeating it over and over. Melinda just held on tighter.

Phil was pacing in the hallway, and every few minutes he checked the living room where Donnie
had fallen asleep on the couch and checked the kitchen where Melinda and Skye were still
sprawled out on the kitchen floor. He’d already called Bobbi and relayed some of the information
they had found out about Skye to her, who was aghast. Bobbi had also had to remind him over the
phone to stop yelling since his emotions were all over the place. She promised to call Izzy and tell
her what Phil told him. One thing for sure was she was going to look up a David Hamilton and see
if he was in the system. Phil also asked her to tell Izzy and everyone else to come over a couple
hours later, making it six o’clock instead of four, so Skye would have more time to calm down.
Phil opened the door to the kitchen and paused. What is ‘Rocket Man’ lyrics? Was that Melinda
singing? Huh?

Indeed, it was. Melinda was holding Skye and softly singing the lyrics of Elton John’s ‘Rocket
Man’ as she rocked Skye in her arms. It was a little less than an hour since Skye had collapsed to
the floor. He opened the door further and stared in disbelief at his wife. She must have heard the
doors and looked at him giving him a soft small and shrug of her shoulders. He closed the door,
shaking his head with a slight grin, and went back to pacing.

Melinda turned back to Skye and found two eyes staring at her. Skye shifted and Melinda pulled away slightly.

“I can’t believe you are actually singing that.”

Melinda finished singing the line and smiled and then said, “it just came to me. I figured you would find it either comforting or irritating.”

“You’re weird you know that?” Melinda grinned at the girl. Skye swallowed hard and spoke again. “I’m sorry.”

“Skye you don’t have to keep saying that.”

“But what I said to you..........”

“Was anger and fear all coming out at once.”

Skye sat up more and shuffled back against the cabinet. Melinda kept her arm wrapped around Skye and shuffled with her, so they were sitting side by side instead of Skye being in her arms. Skye seemed to want the contact yet but also needed some space.

Skye wiped her eyes and nose with a paper towel that Melinda had placed in her lap. Melinda leaned her head back and closed her eyes and just waited. If Skye wanted to talk, she would. If not, she was not going to push her.

“Donnie is probably upset. I should go talk to him.”

“Phil has him Skye. Phil told me he fell asleep on the sofa. You can talk to him later.”

Skye nodded. “He said – he said I should tell you. He even threatened to tell you himself. He said it would help.”

“He’s a very smart boy.”

“Yeah.”

Skye stayed quiet for a few minutes. Then she cleared her throat.

“Those scars – the ones you saw. Yeah, they were knife scars. It was him. The Hamilton’s son. David. What he – what he did- he- it’s why I freaked so much at the soccer game. When Ward did that all I – all those feelings – they all came back. I couldn’t move. I was suffocating. He was stronger than me. I froze. And then I ran.”

Melinda’s arm tightened around her.

After an even longer period of silence Skye started speaking in a softer voice.

“Last year in February I was placed with them. The Hamiltons. Mark and Lynn. They were in their early fifties, he was an accountant and she worked as a teacher aide. They had an older son who lived in Chicago with his family and their daughter who was living in San Diego going to college. David lived with them. He was nineteen. He was going to the local community college and worked part time at a store. But he got fired, because he drinks a lot. He did drugs too, but his parents were oblivious to both. They thought their David could do no wrong. Donnie had already been there for a few months and we got really close. Sara joined us in April. She was eleven. The Hamiltons were
okay, a bit weird sometimes, and they went out a lot. She belonged to a bunch of things and he
dowled and played poker. Normal things, you know. “

Melinda was just letting Skye talk without interrupting her. She had gotten up to get two water
bottles and handed one to Skye and sat back down next to her again. Skye took a couple gulps of
the water.

“Skye I um, I turned the recorder of the computer on. Is that okay?”

Skye shrugged. Melinda took that as a yes. Skye kept talking.

“As fosters go, it was decent. They had chores we had to do, but Lynn did some too and she did
work, so it made sense. They told us not to get in trouble at school and get passing grades.
Basically – do what you need to and not make any waves, you know?” It almost felt like they were
doing their duty, or a job. They were not too interested in us but, every once in a while Lynn would
say something nice to us about grades, or doing our chores well, and little stuff like that. Mark gave
us each $10 a week if we did all we were supposed to. They always had food in the house all the
time, and we were allowed to eat anything we wanted as long as we cleaned up after and we put
anything we ran out of on the shopping list.”

Melinda took note that Skye mentioned having food in the house as a plus which meant that some
of the places that she stayed at did not. She was contemplating if she could get away with beating
up all of Skye’s former foster parents. She was outraged that the system had allowed this to happen
over and over to these kids. How desperate they must be for foster parents that vetting is so terrible.
No wonder Sharon jumped at her and Phil. She pushed her anger down and pulled her attention
back to Skye. Skye had been talking about living at the Hamiltons and how the first few months
were nice. Then she stopped and took another gulp of water.

“I’m tired.”

“Yeah maybe a nap huh?”

“Nah I mean I’m tired of talking.”

“Yeah okay. You can stop Skye.”

“I might not be able to do this again if I stop now.” She took a deep breath and continued.” It was a
few weeks after Sara came to live with us. He was drunk or high or both. He – he – came into my
room. It was around eleven and Donnie and Sara were asleep in their rooms and his parents were
out. Afterward he apologized and said he was high and didn’t know what he was doing. Then he
threatened to kill me if I told anyone.”

Skye paused and then spoke even softer. “It happened once more. After that I took my money Mark
gave me and bought a chain lock for my door. The parents never even noticed. I also took to
staying away when I knew they’d be out a long time or getting home late. I even stayed out past
curfew and left my window open. I got pretty good at climbing up to the roof. I told Donnie. He
begged me to tell. I made him promise to keep it a secret. I told him that I was being careful, and it
wouldn’t happen again. He got mad at me but didn’t say anything. I knew no one would believe
me. They didn’t before. It’s just how it was.”

That admission that it had happened before went through Melinda’s heart like a knife. She didn’t
know what pissed her off more; that abuse was flagrant in Skye’s life, or that Skye had grown to
accept it as normal. She wanted to know more but also knew pushing could make Skye
withdrawal. She had to let all this be done on Skye’s terms. But Skye’s body language and shaking
voice was breaking Melinda’s heart. She just wanted to grab her and protect her from everything. And she wanted to pummel all those people who had hurt Skye and those who had let it happen over and over. Maybe if she were lucky, she’d be able to find them and do that. Hell, she knew most everyone on the police force, and they’d all be happy to look the other way. Skye had stopped talking and was taking sips of her water.

“Do you need a break Skye? You don’t have to do this now. Maybe you’d rather talk to someone else. Believe me I would understand.”

“Donnie said I should talk to you. He said – he thinks – I want to – it’s – it’s just... I don’t want you to – to...”

“Well Donnie is right. Talking through our traumas is cathartic. It can let us face them so we heal and can put them in a place in our minds.”

“Have you?”

“Not yet. It’s a process. It’s ongoing. We never completely are able to be free from them.”

“It’s why you still have nightmares?”

Melinda closed her eyes. “Yes.”

“And panic attacks?”

Melinda nodded. “Not so many anymore. Plus, with Phil’s help I’ve been able to work through them easier.”

“Like you’ve been teaching me. With breathing and focusing. Sort of like Tai Chi?”

“Yes. It is.”

“Donnie said a shrink helped him.”

“Yes, psychiatrists can help with trauma.” Melinda stressed the word psychiatrist.

“Yeah well my experience with shrinks,” emphasizing the word ‘shrinks’ with a smirk, “has been less then helpful.”

“Well maybe we can change that. I do know a few good ones. Had to talk to a few over the years myself.”

“Cause of the accident?”

“Actually no. Cause of my job, being in special services in the military requires a lot of psychiatric exams and follow ups after certain missions. Joining the FBI requires them as well.”

“So you haven’t seen one about – you know?”

“No. Much to Phil’s disapproval.”

“So um......”

“Yeah I know.” Melinda sighed. “It’s not easy. None of it is easy.”

“Donnie does seem better than ever though. He was always blaming himself for not being able to
help his mom.”

“Neither of you should have to be helping others Skye. You’re both children.”

“I’m 14.”

“Melinda rolled her eyes. Yes. A teenchild.”

Skye snorted. “Well to be honest I haven’t been acting very grownuppy lately.”

“Grownuppy?”

“Hey if you can make up words – so can I.”

“Seriously though Skye. I could find you a good psychiatrist. It would most likely help. Would you at least consider it?”

“Will you?”

Melinda scowled at Skye. Skye raised her eyebrows and glowered back.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Phil put you up to this.”

Skye laughed at that then answered her question. “I’ll consider it but no promises.”

“Okay me too.”

“Besides I seem to be able to talk to you pretty good. You sure you’re not a shrink in disguise?”

“I am a lot of things Skye. Shrink is not one.”

Skye laughed as Melinda used the word Shrink. “You know I liked you from the moment I saw you kicking ass at your gym that first time Mr. C. brought me there.”

“Yeah?”

Skye nodded. “But when you offered to teach me to defend myself, my opinion of you went up even more.”

Melinda looked at her confused. “Why’s that?”

“Cause I saw your discomfort right away. Your hesitancy and fear. Yet you said yes, and I still don’t understand why.”

“Because your fear was greater than my fear.”

“Huh?”

“I looked at you Skye and underneath all that bravado and cockiness, was a scared little girl who wanted someone to help her.”

“Geez. Are you sure you’re not a Shrink?”

“I’m just another broken person trying to make it through each day. Hopefully in the process, I make a difference somehow.”

“Do you think I can make a difference?”
“I’m counting on it.”

“Even after knowing all those bad things about me?”

“Skye those things should have never happened. I’m angry as hell about them.” Noticing Skye’s anguished face, she added quickly. “Not angry at you. I’m angry for you Skye. I’m sad and angry over the things you had to go through. I’m sick to think of the abuse you suffered. I want to hurt anyone who has ever hurt you. But you – you I am so proud of. I think you’re an amazing teenchild.”

Skye looked up at her with her eyes glistening with tears. “I just wanted you to like me. I think you and Mr. C. are the best people I’ve ever met and -and – I – I - I love you both so much. I just -I just – I’m just scared to lose you.” Skye’s eyes got really big as she realized the confession she had just made. She stared at her shoes waiting to be rejected yet again.

Melinda felt her own tears start and there was absolutely no way to stop them. She put her arm around Skye and pulled her close to her body. “I love you too Skye. So does Mr. C. You won’t lose me. I promise I won’t let that happen. I’ll move heaven and hell to protect you and keep you safe. And to keep you here with us.”

Skye snaked her bandaged arms around Melinda and laid her head on her shoulder and just relaxed. It was going to be okay now because she felt warm and safe, and she believed every word Melinda said

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will have more about Skye's past. The meeting with Izzy and Vic and others. More revelations. More potential connections. Hope to have the next chapter up within two weeks. No promises though. Thanks for reading and as always thanks to those who leave kudos and comments. It is very much appreciated.
Skye woke up slowly, blinking her eyes and feeling confused. She was in her room on her bed and covered with the comforter. She rolled over onto her back and locked eyes with Melinda who was sitting on her desk chair next to the bed. Melinda had her I-Pad and slowly put it down as she watched Skye. She smiled softly and nodded at Skye.

“Hey. How you feeling?”

Skye pushed herself up to lean against the headboard on her bed. In doing so she noticed she was still in her clothes and glanced at the clock on here nightstand. It read five-twenty-five. She looked back to Melinda and spoke quietly. “I don’t remember walking up the stairs or getting into bed.”

“Phil carried you up. “

“Oh.” Skye looked away then as the flood of memories and words she’d said came back. Her mind was scattering in all directions as she realized how much information she had given to them, and how raw her emotions were - taking hold again. She did not even realize how shallow her breaths were coming or how she had started rocking back and forth. But apparently Melinda had as she quickly moved to the bed and placed her hands upon Skye’s shoulders, while talking in a low steady voice. Skye took a few deep breaths as Melinda was instructing and focused in on her own heartbeat and trying to slow it down. Skye swallowed hard and then opened her tightly shut eyes and looked back into Melinda’s concerned gaze.

“I’m okay.” She gave Melinda a weak smile.

Melinda raised her eyebrows and stared back. “Just take your time. It’s okay to not be alright.”

“Yeah I know. But I’m good. See my breathing is better and I’m not freaking out.”

“Okay.” Melinda smiled. “But if you freak out, that’s okay too. I’m here and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I told you Skye – you’re not going anywhere. I’m not going anywhere. And I love you.”

Skye looked down and bit her lip. She felt her eyes watering and took another deep breath. “I so want to believe all that.”
“I know it’s not easy for you to believe the words Skye.”

“I do believe you mean the words Melinda. I just keep waiting for that - for the bad to happen- for someone to take me away. For the other shoe to drop. Cause it always does. I’m scared of losing you. And Mr. C, and Donnie. And Ryan and Jemma and Thomas and everyone. I’ve never felt like I belonged anywhere before. I can’t lose this. I don’t know how I’d recover from that.”

“Hey.” Melinda reached her hand under Skye’s chin and gently lifted her face up. “I’m terrified. I am so scared I will do something wrong here. I am scared of hurting you, of doing something to mess you up – but I’m more scared of not being here for you, of losing you.”

Skye’s tears began to fall, and Melinda wiped them away with her thumbs as she kept talking. “This is scary. I get it. But I am here for you. I had a bit of trouble believing in good winning too. But I am not going anywhere and we, you and me and Phil and all of us, we will get through all of this. That hope, that belief that good will win, I am holding onto that again.”

Skye nodded as she used the tissue Melinda handed her to wipe her eyes. “I want to have that. I want to believe that good can win. That is gets better and that someday I won’t be scared all the time.”

Melinda paused. She shuffled around so she was sitting next to Skye also leaning against the headboard. There were a few seconds of silence, and then Melinda took a deep breath and spoke. “I can’t take away your fear or your pain Skye. I can only try to help you to fight it. When Jamey died, I lost myself. I knew it and I saw myself falling and I saw what it was doing to Phil and I couldn’t stop it. After the accident at first, Phil’s injuries were really bad, and it took nearly a full year before he could work. I left my job to take care of him, fully focused on making that happen. I didn’t spiral till after that. When I had to focus on helping Phil to recover, I was able to reel in all the sadness and emotions, but once he didn’t need me to take care of him, I went to a very dark place. I had taken a year’s sabbatical from my job to take care of him. We went through all our savings and had to remortgage the house. After Phil was able to take care of himself, I made excuse after excuse to not go back to my job. Eventually I just quit. I didn’t even tell Phil until a few months later. I quit because I couldn’t help people anymore. I hadn’t been able to help my son.”

Skye started to speak. “But it wasn’t your fault. It was an accident. You weren’t....”

“To blame? Yeah that’s what everyone said. But I was driving. It was raining. The roads were wet and slippery. I played it over and over in my mind till I convinced myself it was my fault. I convinced myself that Phil hated me for killing our son. I pushed him away so much that any normal sane person would have left and never looked back.”

“But not Mr. C.”

Melinda shook her head fondly. “He just stayed. When I screamed at him, he let me. When I had a panic attack, he was there. When I had nightmares, he held me. He did not get angry. He didn’t leave. He never left even though anyone would have not blamed him for doing so, even me. After a while we got into a rhythm of getting through the days and I started acting okay. People around us thought I was better, but Phil knew I had lost pieces of myself. It’s why once we got back on our feet financially that he insisted on me opening the gym and teaching Martial Arts. It had always been something I had talked about, a dream, after I retired from the police force. I had healed enough to be able to do security related jobs for Victoria and others plus I was training the police in hand to hand as a consultant, and that brought in good money. He bought the building downtown for a low price and he and our friends fixed it up and turned it into a gym. At that point I was simply glad to through myself into work fully and have something to just occupy my mind. As the
business grew, my pain and fear became more distant. After a while, Phil stopped asking me to see a counselor and he just accepted that the Melinda he had was good enough. He still loved me.”

Skye laid her head on Melinda’s shoulder and laced her fingers through Melinda’s left hand and squeezed.

“Jamey was everything to me. I had him a bit later in life then most women. I married Phil later in life after a bunch of failed relationships. It’s hard to be an FBI agent and have a personal life. Most people outside of it don’t understand what you do, why you do it, or how you keep going back, putting yourself in danger. Even when I was in the military, I had to fight so hard to belong, to show people I belonged. There was no place or time for relationships. I met Phil and he was so different. He respected what I did, and never asked me to change for him. Even after we had Jamey – he made it work with his teaching and took a year off after I took a six months maternity leave. I was thirty -five when I had Jamey and there were complications. He was born fine and healthy, but I wasn’t okay. Jamey was going to be our only child.”

“So that’s why you fostered Donnie?” Skye asked.

“I was completely against fostering. That was all Phil’s plan and idea. I only agreed because I didn’t want to hurt Phil anymore. I wanted him to be happy even if I had trouble being happy myself. Don’t get me wrong – I love Phil to pieces. Even when I push him away, he pushes back and refuses to walk away. Melinda smiled at Skye then and reached over to her, caressing her cheek. “Skye, we won’t walk away. We are both far too stubborn to walk away from you. So, you can push us away, or scream at us, and we won’t be going anywhere.”

Skye nodded.

“When Phil brought you to the gym and then Donnie came to live with us, I was terrified. I was terrified of getting attached and afraid of all those feelings opening up and felt the rawness of living through the loss of Jamey again. I’d boxed all those feelings away years ago. Then you – you simply got under my skin. In such a short amount of time, you made me fall in love with you – with your spunk and your sass, and your tenacity.”

Skye looked at her with hopeful eyes that once again wear welling up with tears. “I think you might be the best person in the entire world Melinda.”

“She is pretty awesome, isn’t she?”

They both looked up to see Phil lingering in the doorway with a tray of mugs.

“I brought you both some tea. From Mel’s special stash. I heard you two talking when I passed by to change. Donnie and I went to the park to toss around a baseball. He’s downstairs having a snack with Hunter and Bobbi who just got here.

Skye smiled as she blinked away the remaining tears. “He’s okay?”

“Yes. He’s hanging in there.” Phil brought the tray to them and handed them each a mug of tea. Then taking his own mug he sat in the chair next to the bed. “Izzy and Vic are on their way over and will stop for pizza. They are bringing Sharon and Jeri Hogarth along with them.”

“So that means I have to talk to them, right?”

“Don’t worry Skye. They are all on your side. We are on your side.”

“I know Mr. C. What do they want to know?”
“Bobbi wants you to tell her what happened with Grant Ward at the Soccer game. She wants to charge him with assault and harassment. Sharon is going to update us on Thomas and Jeri Hogarth is there to gather all the info she can to get Thomas out of that place and to keep Ryan, you, and everyone else safe.”

“Can’t you guys just tell them? You know – what I said to you?”

“We can play them the tape recording from the computer I put on earlier. But you will still have to talk to them. Give them a statement.” Melinda patted Skye’s hand in encouragement.

Phil nodded. “Skye you need to know that Will gave a statement on what happened Friday night. He told them it was Grant Ward and two other boys who beat him up. Thomas told Sharon what happened to him when they took him to the rehab center and how he was drugged. He’s ready and will be testifying to how his brother and JJ hurt him. Ryan too. He’s going to make his statement on how JJ threatened and hurt him and Thomas and also how JJ threatened you. Leo is also going to give a statement on who broke his arm. Ace Peterson is backing him up because he saw it. Some of the other kids are speaking up as well. The police are going to go talk to Lanie and Joey Gutterriez. The school board is meeting on Thursday. The police are going to be questioning a lot of people. Grant, JJ and some of the others are going to be arrested.”

Skye stared wide-eyed at him.

Melinda spoke up. “So, when you tell Bobbi and Izzy what Grant Ward did to you, you will help to solidify a pattern of abuse, assault and harassment.”

“And they will go to jail?” Skye looked Melinda in the eye almost pleading.

“Well they will be charged and arrested. Especially for beating Will since it is a new crime. Your testimony will help with Grant Ward’s state of mind that night and how prevalent the bullying and abuse by him was. The other things Thomas and Ryan testify to will help to show a pattern, but some of the accusations will require a more in depth research and investigation.”

“So, they won’t be able to hurt anyone? Thomas or Ryan or Will? Or me?”

“Thomas will be staying in a foster home. Ryan is with Victoria and Jemma. You are here with us. All of you will be safe. We will make sure you are all safe,” Phil said emphatically while Melinda nodded.

The three finished their tea in silence, all pondering the future, especially Skye, who let both the warm tea and presence of the two people she had grown to love, comfort her.

Phil finished his tea and got up putting it on the tray. Melinda took Skye’s mug and did the same with theirs. He reached down to get the tray, kissed his wife on her cheek and gave a smile to Skye. “Hope you’re both hungry, I ordered a lot of food. Pizza, pasta and garlic bread.”

“With cheese?” Melinda raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, garlic bread with cheese and without cheese.”

“We will be down soon. I need to re dress Skye’s arms and hands first.” Phil nodded and headed down to the kitchen where the lively voices of Donnie and Hunter arguing greeted him.

After Melinda washed and re-bandaged Skye’s arms and hands, the two made their way downstairs
where everyone was settling in the kitchen to eat. Melinda led Skye to the adjacent dining room where Skye sat down while Melinda moved back to the kitchen to say her hellos and get Skye some food. She loaded one plate with pasta and garlic bread and another with 2 slices of pizza. She nodded at Donnie who grabbed his plate and moved to sit with Skye. Melinda dropped off the plates at the table in front of Skye and then went to get her own food. Phil grabbed a couple of sodas and took them to Skye and Donnie and then left to rejoin the other adults.

“So everything okay?” Donnie spoke before taking another bite of his pizza.

Skye nodded as she moved the pasta around on the plate without actually eating any of it.

“So ya neeb ta eat somsing.” Donnie tried encouraging her with a mouthful of pizza.

She nodded again and picked up a slice of pizza and took a small bite. It was her favorite - sausage and mushroom. She swallowed and took another bite while she contemplated that Phil Coulson already knew her fav pizza to order and that Melinda knew to put it on her plate. She took another bite as she looked over at the adults and saw Melinda watching her while trying to make it look like she was not watching her. Skye giggled. No one had ever cared about her enough to pretend to not be worried about her.

“What’s so funny?”

“Look at them. Both of them keep looking over here to make sure we are okay. Melinda put me here with you to give me space, but she is like a mother hen, pretending to not be checking up on me like every thirty seconds to make sure I am okay.” Skye shook her head and grew pensive. “I like it here Donnie. I like this place more than I have ever liked any place I’ve lived at before. I want to stay here forever and go to school and have Melinda care about my grades and lecture me about boys and learn Tai Chi and watch you play baseball and listen to you and Mr. C geek out over comics, and sit in the middle of the couch between Mr. C and Melinda eating popcorn while we watch Superhero movies. I want it so bad that it terrifies me. I want it so bad that I know I am setting myself up for a world of hurt to come crashing down. But I can’t stop wanting it. Maybe even needing it. I can’t stop thinking this is that forever home we used to talk about when we’d sit up on the roof and look at the stars.”

Donnie stopped shoving pizza in his mouth and swallowed. “You’re allowed to be happy Skye. You need to realize that all those people over there are good people. They are all on your side. What you are wishing for can come true. You told me that I should trust the Coulson’s and give them a chance. You said they were good people. Now it’s your turn to let them be just that. I know it sucks – what you’ve been through before. I know it’s not easy to let it go. But this – this here,” he spread his arms around for emphasis. “this is worth letting it go. To stop living in the past and to accept that happiness is allowed. That you are someone that these people care about and that this is where you belong. My mom is never going to be able to take care of me. Even when I was with her this year, I ended up taking care of her and worrying about her. I have to move on and so do you. You have always wanted to find your parents Skye. Far as I am concerned – they are sitting right over there. This is your forever home.”

Skye stared at him as tears threatened to fall once again. She swallowed hard and swiped at her eyes with a napkin. “Melinda said she loved me and that she would protect me.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Mr. C talked to me Skye. He said he wants me to stay here and he kind of got all mushy and hugged me after that episode you had in the kitchen. He said somehow, the four of us had become a family.”
“How do you feel about that?”

“Being hugged? He’s a geeky nerd, so I guess I could put up with it.” He winked at her. “As for you as a sister – I already think that way.” He smiled at her. “He took me to the park and tossed a ball around with me. Even as worried as he was about his wife and you – he paid attention to me and wanted to make sure I was okay. No one ever did that before Skye. No one has ever cared enough about me to do that. To put me first – to make sure I was – to stay with me and make sure I was okay. Gee Skye not even my own mom ever did that.”

“Yeah.” Skye nodded. “Melinda did the same. I could tell that even thinking about the stuff she was talking to me about was putting her in pain. And she did it anyway, to help me. I’m gonna tell them everything. I’ve made up my mind. I’m not gonna hide any of it Donnie. You’re gonna have to talk to them too.”

“Okay. You know how whacked it sounds though right?”

“Yeah. I know. They might think we’ve gone bonkers. But we know what we saw. The Hamilton’s might not have known their son was a drug abusing rapist. But we saw them and those others at that club. Maybe it means something as to why my file was missing and why everyone seems to have fallen off the face of the earth.”

“I’d just like to know how we are connected to all of it.”

“If we are.”

“Well, with all this crazy stuff going on, I am betting that you and me living with the Hamiltons was not random. That your missing file is not an accident. That you all of a sudden placed with the Brody’s is just a coincidence. That the drug dealer my mom hooked up with and your newest foster mom just happened to belong to the same cult that the Hamilton’s were going to. That was some crazy shit we saw before we ran the hell out of there.”

“Yeah it took a while for me to recognize her after I started living with the Brodys. Good thing no one saw us there.”

“Yeah. Which is why Mr. and Mrs. C will find it bonkers. We have no proof. Maybe we should wait on it, Skye, you know - do some looking on our own. Before we tell them.”

Skye looked at Donnie and smiled. “I have pretty good hacking skills. And I learned some pretty good lock breaking skills at juvie.”

He smiled back and grabbed her second piece of pizza from her plate and shoved it in his mouth.

Hours later after Skye talked to everyone and gave her statement on what Grant Ward did to her Friday night at the soccer game, and also told about Miles and Raina and Seth, and the threats from JJ, as well as what she knew about Ryan and Thomas, both she and Donnie wear ushered to bed. Which was one hundred percent fine with Skye cause all that talking had made her exhausted. The emotional venting, reliving the scenes again and explaining how she felt had taken its toll. Melinda had taken her upstairs, to wash and bandage her wounds again. After that she had laid down and almost immediately fallen asleep. Donnie however, was hyped up, and so Phil spent some time with him talking and reading comics. After about an hour, he too fell asleep and Phil rejoined his wife and Izzy and Vic downstairs. Everyone else had already left. Sharon had a big day in court along with Jeri the next day and Bobbi and Hunter were both working the early shift the next day.
Melinda and Vic were in conversation about how Skye had been able to hack into Vic’s private home computer and get into Quinn’s server. Vic was both impressed and angry about it. Phil poured himself a scotch and moved over to sit next to Izzy who was pouring over paperwork.

She nodded at him as he sat down, taking a moment take a sip from her own glass. “The oddest thing about all this is Skye’s missing files and the complete disappearance of the entire Hamilton family as well as no hospital or police records of any incident concerning Skye, Sara and Donnie.”

“Yeah that’s worrisome as hell. Melinda saw her scars and you heard both the words on tape from earlier and her own testimony about it as well as Donnie’s statement separately. They completely back each other up.”

“Well I completely believe them.” Melinda chimed in. “Skye is not a liar. She may be jaded, scared and angry but she doesn’t lie. Donnie neither.”

“Her hacking skills are pretty damn impressive.” Izzy spoke up with admiration. She had been looking at the files Skye had hacked about herself

“No!” She knew where her wife’s train of though was heading. Victoria was adamant. “Izzy we cannot let a 14 year illegally hack to get information.” Vic shook her head. “No matter how much help it would be, it’s still illegal and could put her in danger.”

“Not if we get approval for it. I have connections. So does Mel. You haven’t burnt all those bridges yet right Mel?”

“What is she talking about?” Phil’s worried face spoke volumes as he turned to look at his wife. Whatever else happened he wasn’t going to let Melinda get hurt again.

“I can call Akela. Ask her to check on few things.”

“Melinda. You know that means Fury will get involved,” Izzy warned.

“I was planning to call him too.”

Izzy let out a low whistle. “He won’t be happy only hearing from you just to get info.”

“I know.”

Phil watched his wife closely. Fury had been her boss. He’d been the one to pluck her from the military before the CIA got to her after she left the Air Force Special Ops. He had been her mentor in the FBI. He’d been stationed in New York leading up the state’s department. After Melinda gave her notice he was less than pleased. She had left open an important case and given no notice. Three years later he was promoted to Director and moved to Washington DC. Akela went with him. As far as he knew – Melinda had burned those bridges.

“I’ll call both tomorrow.”

“Mel. Why don’t you let Izzy call them?”

“I’ll call them tomorrow. It’ll be fine Phil. Now let’s run down where we are with all this right now.”

Where they were currently invited more questions than answers, but at least they had a plan now. Phil listened as the former FBI agent and two cops went over the information. Skye’s statements included accusing Grant Ward of simple assault and harassment, and also included potentially
charging Raina Sanders, Miles Lydon, and Seth Dormer of assault from the gym incident. Leo Fitz was going to make a statement at the station tomorrow about how he got a broken arm from Seth, Miles and Kyle Shockley last April and Ace Peterson was going to back him up. Leo was also going to make a statement about JJ and Kyle threatening him about saying anything about Thomas and how he was supposed to show up at his house. The hope was that they could get a judge to file warrants so they could search JJ’s and Grant’s lockers and homes. Specifically, they would be looking for weapons or other evidence to back up Thomas, Ryan, and Skye’s accusations.

Will had already made a statement about who beat him up and the police were going to file charges against Grant Ward, Miles and Kyle for assault and battery. Jemma was corroborating Skye’s story about the gym incident and also about many other incidents she had witnessed at school. Lincoln was going to testify to what he heard Grant say to Skye at lunch. Thomas was going to testify to the abuse and assaults he endured at the hands of his brother and his brother’s friends. Charges that were going to be filed included intimidation, stalking, assault, abuse, battery among others. Also, Jeri Hogarth was going to file restraining orders against all the named suspects on behalf of Ryan, Thomas, Jemma, Leo, Skye, Ace, and anyone else who come forward to make formal statements to the police.

Mack and rookie officer Elena were going to talk to Joey and Lanie Gutierrez. Vic was going to get some of her security people to look into the Wards and Brodys and to try and find information about the Hamiltons. Sharon and Jeri would be focusing on getting Thomas out of Four Winds Rehab and making sure Ryan and Thomas were legally safeguarded against their families. Melinda would be calling Akela Amador and Nick Fury to see if they could shed some light on the investigations and help. Bobbi and Hunter would be hunting down any other potential victims at the school and conducting interviews with students and teachers. Clint would be helping them. Mike Peterson and Scott Lang would be working the computers at the station looking for information about Four Winds and the people named thus far. Izzy would be coordinating everything. Things were definitely moving forward, and Phil knew that was good, but he also could not shake the bad feeling that was enveloping him. How could he have not seen all this happening in the school he taught at, to his students? How many people did he know that had seen it and turned a blind eye? How had he missed it?

A couple hours later Phil climbed into bed after checking on Donnie, who was sound asleep and fine. It had been a long couple days and nights and he was exhausted. Minutes later the light was shut off and he felt the bed sink down. Melinda had come from Skye’s room, checking on her. His wife curled next to him and put her arm around him as she scrunched into him laying her head on his chest.

“She asleep?”

“Yes, Is Donnie?”

“Yeah. He’s good. I’m tired.”

She snorted. “Ya think? I can’t remember being this emotionally exhausted since....” Her voice trailed off.

“I know.” His right arm around her tightened. He reached over with his other hand to stroke her face. “It’s okay.”

“She’s helped me to face things Phil. To start to come to terms with what happened. It’s like I can freely open up to her. I’m not afraid of her judging me. I talk to her, trying to help her, and somehow, she turns what I say into healing words for me too. She made me promise to think about talking to a psychiatrist. A shrink as she calls them. She said she’d think about it if I did. That girl
sleeping down the hall is special. She’s wise and kind and all kinds of snarky.” Melinda raised her head with her elbows on his chest and looked at him. “I can’t see my life anymore without her in it, and that’s all your fault.”

He laughed. “How is that my fault?”

“Cause you always find the strays Phillip J. Coulson. It’s just usually they are your strays. This one’s all mine.”

“You love it. She is so much like you and I saw that spunk the moment I met her.”

Melinda smiled. “She’s like you too Phil. Wears her heart on her sleeve. Takes in strays. Thomas and Ryan are her strays.” She sighed. “What a mess huh?”

Phil nodded. “Yeah there are a lot of broken people.”

“Not necessarily broken people—they’re just people who’ve been broken so many times they’ve forgotten what it’s like to feel put-together again.”

“How about you?”

“There are less pieces to put together then there used to be.” She smiled at him and laid her head back on his chest as she curled tightly into the man who had refused to give up on her. She felt both his arms tighten around her and just knew he had a dopey grin on his face.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a little while. Lots of life stuff to deal with. Next chapter is being written. Next chapter will see Thomas and Ryan and Lincoln and others as well as more Skye and Donnie and Melinda and Phil. More revelations upcoming.
Melinda glanced at the clock on the nightstand, seeing it was already six-thirty. Her internal alarm clock had woken her, dragging her from the best sleep she’d had in days. She laid still for a few more minutes listening to Phil’s soft snores as his arms were wrapped around her and his body pressed up to her back. Gradually she wormed her way from under him, careful not to wake him. She got up and quickly threw on her yoga pants and oversized tee, then quietly exited the room. She was startled however, when she nearly tripped over Skye who was sitting by the door in the hallway with her legs sprawled out as she texted on her phone. Skye quickly pulled her legs into her and her eyes grew wide.

“Sorry. I didn’t hear you.”

“Yeah, I was trying to be quiet, so I didn’t wake Phil.” Melinda looked closer at Skye. “You okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I guess with all the sleeping I did yesterday, I just woke up early. I’ve been texting Ryan and Jemma. They are up early too.” She didn’t say why she was sitting outside their bedroom, though Melinda figured she was waiting for her to wake up.

“Come on. Let’s do Tai Chi. Get the blood circulating. Then you can take a shower and I’ll change those bandages.”

Skye smiled and got up following Melinda downstairs.

They were enjoying breakfast which consisted of omelets with toast and fruit with a side of light banter. No heavy subjects were brought up as the conversation drifted from favorite movies to comics to shopping. Currently Phil and Melinda were discussing taking Skye and Donnie shopping to purchase items to decorate their rooms to make them their own.

“It’s not really necessary. The room I have is fine. It has a bed, a dresser, and a desk,” Skye interjected.

“It has a daybed, a desk still full of my stuff, and a stray dresser mostly filled with magazines. I say today we clean that all out, starting after breakfast and then this afternoon we head to the mall to get paint, posters, curtains, comforters and a real bedroom set for Skye. Donnie, you can pick out what you want to change around your room too, comforters, rugs, and such, as well as the color you want to paint it.”

“Really?”
“Yes really. These are your rooms and you can decorate them as you want. Within reason of course.”

Skye kicked Donnie under the table and gave him a poignant look.

Donnie read her face and responded to Phil. “Well Mr. C. the room I have is fine. Maybe just a poster or two. Baseball or comics. I mean if it’s okay to hang up posters. If not that’s fine too. I mean the room is probably one of the best I’ve ever had as it is. It has everything I need really.” He looked down at his plate hoping he sounded convincing and not disappointed. He had never been allowed to decorate his own room before. Even when living with his mom, he wasn’t allowed to cause it was a housing authority apartment rental, and they never had extra money, so it was always used pieces of furniture and cheap mattresses, sometimes just thrown on the floor. He pushed the remaining food around on his plate, no longer hungry.

Melinda had watched an animated Donnie deflate as he had locked eyes with Skye. She knew why. Neither of them felt comfortable being given things with no attachments involved. They both were scarred into thinking every time someone offered something nice there were strings attached. That they would owe the givers something.

“Yeah Donnie’s right. The room I have is fine too. Maybe a poster or something. Of course, we will help clean the rooms and if you want to take your stuff out of the desk – I can help with that. But honestly the magazines aren’t an issue. I don’t need all those drawers anyway. I don’t have much stuff to put in them.”

Melinda sighed and then smiled. “I know you think it is a bother and something you don’t deserve Skye but we are going to do it anyway and so suck it up, and both of you get your shoes on and you’ll probably need a light jacket. We are going shopping now. We will clean out the room later after we get back. In fact, we also will be buying both of you some new clothing as well and I think Phil said something about a good pair of baseball spikes and a new bat for Donnie. Oh, and later this afternoon Donnie, Phil will be running you over to sign up for some indoor baseball clinic thing he found out about. Skye since it’s Tuesday – you will come with me to the gym so I can teach my two classes that Natasha can’t cover. Later this afternoon, Roz is bringing over your schoolwork, so you can stay caught up.

“Melinda, I don’t need any new ....”

Melinda cut her off. “I told you Skye I do reality. This is reality. You need to have your own room, both of you that are yours, you both need clothing and other things, and that is that. No arguing will change it and so both of you take your dishes to the sink and scat out of here to get ready – we are leaving in ten minutes. “

Both stared at her and then looked at Phil. He simply shrugged. They looked at each other and then Skye tried to talk again.

Melinda stared her down daring her to disagree.

Skye gulped. “I don’t want to be a pain or be a bother to ......”

“If you don’t want to be a pain then go do what I said. Now!”

Donnie jumped up and took his plate and glass to the counter, and then grinned at Phil before running out of the room. They heard him clomping up the steps. Skye was still sitting and frowning. Melinda got up and walked to her.
“You can do the dishes when we get back and help me clean the whole house, along with what is now your room. Oh, and the gym still needs you to clean it up. I bet the trash cans are over heaping and the mats all need cleaning.”

“I know what you are doing.”

Melinda smiled and ruffled Skye’s hair. “Okay. So, let me. Please.”

Skye swallowed hard and bit her lip. She looked at Melinda and gave a short nod. “Okay.” Her voice was a whisper. She got up and took her plate and glass to the counter and then slowly walked out of the kitchen.

“Baby steps.” Phil put his arm around Melinda’s waist and pulled her into him hugging her.

Melinda laughed and shook her head. “No these are toddler steps. We passed the baby steps yesterday.” She snaked her arms around him and held him tightly gaining strength from him.

They were in a furniture store. Phil and Donnie were actually laying down on all the mattresses on the beds as Melinda looked annoyed at them both. The store employees had ignored them thus far. Skye was trying to appear uninterested in everything.

“You can get a feel for whether you like the mattress or not by doing this.” Phil proceeded to fall across a bed and jump his body up and down on it.

Donnie followed suit on the bed next to him. “Like this?” He started flailing around on the bed.

“Yep. Skye you should try this. It’s your bed we are getting.”

Melinda walked over to him and slapped at his arm. “Stop it. Look what you have Donnie doing.”

“What?” He looked back at her grinning.

“We are testing the beds out for Skye.”

“You are embarrassing her and me and pissing off the workers.”

“We are?” He looked around at the employees who did seem a little put out. Instead of feeling guilty he laughed and reached up to Melinda pulling her down onto the bed with him. The act surprised Melinda who could do nothing except fall into the bed and onto her husband uncharacteristically clumsily.

“Oof.” She exhaled sharply as she lay across her husband in shock.

Skye grinned and then a full-on laugh escaped her as she took in the scene. They were both so cute and dorky. She heard Donnie laughing as well and soon she was laughing so hard she bent over grabbing her stomach. She tried to say something snarky but only a bleating sound came out which made Donnie laugh even harder as he nearly fell off the bed he was on.

It was at this point that a store employee finally came over to them. “Can I help you?”

Phil kissed his wife at that moment and put his arms around her. “No thanks, we were just checking out the making out softness of the beds. This one seems to work.”

Skye laughed harder with her whole body shaking. Donnie turned red and stopped laughing and Melinda punched her dorky husband in the shoulder and turned over off him and rolled off the bed with her cat like grace that had failed her seconds before.
Melinda growled at her husband and then calmly turned to speak to the employee. “We need a full-size bed for her, pointing to the laughing girl still hunched over and giggling. Along with a at least one dresser. So, I guess we’d like to look at full bedroom suites with a bed, mattress, and matching furniture.”

The worker nodded curtly. “Follow me then so you and your daughter can pick out the style of furniture you would like.”

Melinda, completely ignoring her husband, offered her hand to Skye. Skye had calmed down and took the hand and the two followed the employee. Melinda yelled across her shoulder at Phil as he pulled himself to a sitting position. “That should have been making out hardness of the beds, dork.”

Phil nodded and grinned at her back, while Donnie turned a deeper shade of red. Skye just giggled again as she followed Melinda, reveling in the fact that these two dorky nerds wanted her to stay with them and wanted to buy her a bedroom set. And that Mr. C. was willing to embarrass himself to put her more at ease, as though this shopping stuff was a normal thing that they did as a family all the time. And that worker had assumed she was their daughter and somehow that warmed her heart through and through and she loved that Melinda had not corrected him.

She loved it. It was a platform bed with a trundle. Melinda had pointed to the platform beds when Skye had shown no interest in the frilly teen girl beds the employee was showing them. This one was a full-size bed with a pull-out twin trundle. Melinda said it would be great for the times Skye wanted a friend to sleepover. Skye couldn’t help but picture herself and Jemma at a sleepover using this furniture after Melinda said that. Not that Skye had been to many sleepovers. That time she’d stayed at Jemma’s was her one and only time. But she’d had loads of fun when she did. The bed was dark grey and styled modernly with nothing fancy, just a slatted headboard and footboard. It also came with a matching night table and dresser with a full mirror and a chest of drawers. The furniture was simplistic looking, grey like the bed, with silver handles for the drawers. The dresser had a full mirror framed with a grey outer edge. The pieces of furniture were not too big. There was also a matching desk available but not included in the price for the bedroom set. Included in the set were the two mattresses.

Skye really loved it a lot actually but was trying not to show it. She thought the $1399.00 price tag to be way too much for the Coulson’s to spend on her. The desk was an L-shaped computer desk for an additional $349.00. There was also a four-layer shelf for another $149.00 that matched the set that Melinda was at that moment looking at. Skye didn’t know why since there was no way all the furniture, plus a shelf, would all fit into the room she was currently sleeping in. Donnie’s room was larger and had been the guest room according to him. Her current room was what Melinda referred to as her home office. There was another room next to Donnie’s room, but it was always locked, and Skye assumed it was private stuff in it the Coulson’s didn’t want any snoops like her getting into. Phil and Melinda were currently talking quietly while looking at the furniture. She moseyed closer to them.

“It’s okay Melinda. You don’t have to do it. Not till you are ready. We can get just the furniture that will fit in the smaller room.”

Melinda ran her hand down the side of the shelf. “I know. But it’s time Phil. I think it is time. Jamey’s room has boy furniture. His things – we can – we can give it to a – to someone else who could use it. The furniture is not right for Skye or Donnie. But someone – someone else could use it. Another foster home maybe? We can ask Sharon.”

Oh. Oh. That locked room was her son’s room. It seemed that she hadn’t been able to move on and
clean it out or get rid of his things. The accident was 6 years ago. Skye’s mind was now in a
turmoil. She didn’t want Melinda to move on from something she wasn’t ready to do just to give
her a bigger room. She backed away and moved toward the back of the store. She nearly ran into
Donnie who was staring at the bunk beds. Staring at a particular bunk bed that was shaped with the
top bed going one way and the bottom bed going the other with a shelf thing next to the bottom
bunk. He looked up at her.

“Pretty cool huh?”

“Donnie. That room next to yours? It was her son’s room. It was Jamey’s room. Still has all his
stuff in it.”

“Oh geez.”

“Yeah and she is talking about buying this really expensive bedroom set for me and moving it in
there. Cleaning it out and getting rid of it.”

“Well that’s a good thing, right?”

“Not if she’s not ready. Not just cause she thinks I need this stuff. I don’t you know. I don’t need it.
Especially since – well you know – since I won’t...”

“Be staying?”

“Kids like me never stay Donnie. Especially me. I have way too much baggage. I am not the
staying kind. You can stay. You are smart and good at baseball and you like comics and other
geeky stuff like Phil. He likes you a lot. And you’re younger. Plus you weren’t – you – you
weren’t used up like me. Don’t look at me like that. That’s a good thing. You can be something.
You can be what they want you to be. Who they want you to be. They’ll give you a great home.
They had Jamey. Now they have you. You can help them move on. You can have a great future
ahead of you.”

“Sure Skye. Only one problem with that.”

“What’s that?”

“Mrs. C. loves you. She cares an awful lot about you. She wants you to stay and she wants to take
care of you. Don’t act so stupid. Why can’t you see how special they think you are? How special I
know you are.”

“I’m not special. I’m a kid with a shitload of issues Donnie. I slammed my hands into a mirror till it
broke until I was dripping blood all over. It didn’t even register what I was doing. I freaked out at
them cause I felt angry and backed into a corner. I’ve had at least 4 panic attacks that show how
the crapload of problems I bring are pretty huge. They lost their son. Mr. C. almost died and
Melinda has a lot of things going on that I trigger for her. But you – you are good for them. Mr. C.
and you are a lot alike. You’re smart and kind and you don’t have a crap ton of problems to work
out.”

“Maybe not a crap ton of issues like you do, but I certainly am damaged goods like you. Besides all
that, not only do the Coulsons think you are special – they are special too. They are real. The
realist people I may have ever been around. No bullshit, and no promises and no falseness. Just
honest to goodness realness.”

Skye stared back at him trying to find an argument in his words but had none. “I just can’t do it
again Donnie. I know they mean it. I know Melinda means she wants me to stay. But that’s today.
What about tomorrow? And the day after that?”

“I don’t know Skye. How about just one day at a time. Like this one. Let them buy you a bed. Let them buy you furniture and clothes and whatever else they want. They want to cause they are nice, and they don’t expect you to pay them back, or earn it. Just let them be nice, Just be grateful.”

“But what about their son’s room. I don’t want to ....”

“Let Mr. and Mrs. C worry about their son’s room. Let her give it to you if she wants to. Skye it might be what she needs to do to heal. It just might be that you helped her get there. Helped her to put the past in the past. Like she’s helping you to do.”

“You are far too smart for a snot nosed kid.”

“So listen to this smart snot nosed kid who loves you and let them do things for you. It seems to make them happy. Let them be happy.”

Skye paused and images of Melinda helping her flashed through her mind. Her soft words of encouragement. Her gentle pushing. Her putting aside her own barriers and fears to help. Her stupid singing of Elton John to comfort her. Melinda’s awkwardness at comfort that was actually endearing cause it was from the heart and so very real.

“I really want to stay with them and you.” She whispered. Almost afraid to make her wishes known out loud. Donnie grinned and looked past her. She turned around and nearly jumped seeing Melinda directly behind her. She hadn’t heard her and that was kind of creepy and she said so.

“You shouldn’t sneak up behind people.”

“Sorry. Habit from my spy days.”

“Still. How long were you there anyway?”

“Long enough. Come on. They have bedding here too, and we need to pick some out. Oh and Donnie?”

“Yeah?”

“Pick out the one you want.” She nodded toward the bunk beds. Phil will be over to help you. The stuff from your room is going downstairs to the spare room to be the new guest room. You need a bedroom set. Skye’s new furniture will be going into the room next to yours after we clean it out.”

“You don’t have to clean out...” Skye was interrupted by Melinda.

“Yes Skye, I do. Now come with me. Please?” She put her hand on Skye’s shoulder tentatively. Skye nodded and let Melinda lead her away.

Donnie high fived himself with a big smile on his face.

Skye and Donnie helped Phil carry all the bags and cans of paint and brushes into the house. The bags were full of new sheet sets and comforters and curtains and posters and a few pictures, as well as a few bags of clothes for them. It took them three trips. Melinda brought in the Chinese food they had picked up on the way home.

“Hey guys let’s take these bags all upstairs and then we can eat, okay? We’ll leave the paint and stuff here for now.”
The three got everything upstairs, dumped off the bags in Donnie’s room and hurried downstairs to eat lunch. Melinda had set the table and put out all the boxes of Chinese food. She was already eating and motioned everyone to do the same. Donnie grabbed the boxes and dished out some of everything on his plate. Skye was a little more selective opting for sesame chicken and rice, some dumplings and some of the egg drop soup with wontons. She opened the chopsticks and attempted to use them, growing frustrated and started to put them down. Just then, Melinda who was using chopsticks moved closer to Skye and reached out her hand to position the chopsticks for Skye and took her own back in her hand and showed her what to do. It took a few tries, but Skye eventually was able to get some food into her mouth and she grinned. She kept at it for a bit, using the chopsticks but then opted in favor of a fork since she was starving, and the food was so good. Plus Donnie was already on seconds and about to move to thirds.

“So what’s first Mel?”

“Well the furniture is being delivered next Monday. So we clean out the rooms first and then paint them. I’ll give Sharon a call about taking the clothes and toys and bedroom set and hope she knows someone who can use it. At least the bedroom set. Then we move out the furniture in Donnie’s room and put it in the spare room down in the basement.”

“Well first we need to clean that room out. It’s full of boxes and stuff.”

“Yeah a couple pieces of broken furniture and broken gym equipment. We start there after I call Sharon.”

“Be nice to have some more help. Maybe Roz could bring Lincoln along and they could help?”

“To clean out our house? They might not want to do that Phil.”

“Yeah I guess. I’ll give Clint a call. He owes me. Maybe Hunter could come over?”

“Let’s just work on it ourselves today. We can ask a few people to help the rest of the week and weekend. We will work on the trash to get rid of and box up clothes and figure out what needs to be done. I have to be at the gym at five tonight for my five o’clock women’s class and then for a beginner teen class. Skye’s coming with.”

“Yeah you are right. I am taking Donnie over to that baseball academy club at four. So we really only have a couple hours.”

“So let’s start with the basement spare room.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Skye was pouting. She was sitting in the gym near the mats where Melinda was teaching her friends. Most of the teens had shown up much to Melinda and Skye’s surprise. In fact, the only two missing were Will and Thomas. Darcy, Callie, Ace, Jemma, Leo, Ryan and Kate. But they had also brought friends with them who wanted to join the class. Max Davis, Priscilla (Piper) Vazquez and Deke Shaw. Max was dating Darcy and Piper was Kate’s girlfriend. Deke was a friend of Ace’s. But Melinda wouldn’t let Skye do anything cause of her arms. None of the cleaning needed to be done either, cause Natasha had done it all with Pietro and Wanda’s help. Natasha had shrugged it off when Melinda wanted to pay them, saying Melinda needed help and she had been the only one willing to give her a chance and hire her. She told Melinda it was the least she could do when her wonderful boss was in need. Just like taking over so many classes helped out Melinda. She told her
she would help her as long as she needed her to. Clint had been picking her up each night after work since Saturday and helping her to clean up and close down the gym. He had actually stopped in to pick Natasha up tonight a few minutes after Melinda and Skye had arrived. Melinda had talked to him and he promised to come over Thursday, Saturday and Sunday on his days off to help move furniture and paint and whatever else they needed him to do.

So Skye was pouting and glaring at Melinda who was simply ignoring her. So, she spoke up again. “You let me do Tai Chi this morning.”

Melinda sighed. “Tai Chi is non-contact and besides we didn’t do any moves that would put stress on your arms and hands. See how nice and quiet Leo is sitting next to you watching what I teach? That’s what you need to do too.” She went back to explaining the next move she was going to teach the group.

Leo patted her on the back. “Calm down. I can’t do it either cause of my strained ribs and shoulder. We should both be good next week.”

Skye simply shrugged off his arm and gave him a dirty look. She went back to pouting. “I don’t know why you dragged me along knowing you wouldn’t let me do anything Melinda.”

Melinda rolled her eyes, and ignored her, continuing to teach the new move to the class.

Skye was getting more annoyed watching the class, so she got up and went to the rest room. Melinda and Phil wouldn’t let her do any lifting or cleaning out of the spare room either. They didn’t really do much except get rid of a few boxes of Phil and Melinda’s old clothes and a few broken electronics. Phil and Donnie had packed the clothes in boxes and put them in the garage to take to goodwill and they had loaded up Phil’s SUV to take the electronics to the dump. Roz had dropped off both her and Donnie’s school assignments for the week and a little later Phil had taken Donnie to sign him up for classes and the indoor baseball academy in town. They’d arrived back home just in time to eat dinner and then she and Melinda had gone to Melinda’s Place. Skye got slid down the wall sitting on floor just outside the bathroom. She got out her phone and started playing Tetris.

Melinda found Skye still sitting on the floor playing with her phone. She knew Skye could hear here and nearly laughed at how well Skye ignored her. Melinda slid down the wall and sat next to Skye.

“All is over. Jemma and Ryan just left. They were the only ones left.”

“I know. They said goodbye.”

“You know you are being childish about this.”

“I know. But I’m still mad at you.”

“Okay. How long are you going to stay mad?”

Skye shrugged. “I don’t know. I never got to be mad at adults before and not be sacred they’d beat on me or worse. This is new for me.”

Melinda nearly laughed. “Okay. Can you be mad at me in the car as we drive home. I’m really tired.”

Skye nodded. “I can do that.”
Skye didn’t talk the whole ride home and once home she stomped off to her room. Donnie was doing some of his schoolwork in his room.

“What was that?” Phil watched as the angry teen didn’t even acknowledge him.

“She’s mad at me.”

Phil raised his eyebrows at her.

“I wouldn’t let her participate in the class tonight and she pouted the whole time and told me she was mad at me.”

“And so?”

“She is just mad at me. It’s stupid and childish and yet so normal for a 14-year-old.”

Phil suddenly understood. “She’s not afraid of you.”

“Yeah.” Melinda smiled. “I think we passed toddler steps today too.”

Melinda gently washed Skye’s arms and hands. Skye still hadn’t talked to her, but she also did not fight against what they both knew had to be done. Melinda dried the arms and hands and applied more cream and then the bandages. When she was finished, she turned to walk out of the bathroom.

“I’m not mad at you anymore.”

Melinda turned around and smiled at her. “I’m glad.”

Skye smiled back. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. How about a movie.”

“I’ll get Donnie.”

“I’ll make popcorn.”

Bobbi and Hunter showed up along with Lincoln on Wednesday. They all worked hard and managed to get the spare room in the basement cleaned out and cleaned up. Donnie and Phil also cleaned out all of the magazines from the dressers in the room Skye was sleeping in. Skye spent a lot of the day doing her schoolwork and catching up on readings and assignments. Lincoln stayed longer after the work was done. He was currently sitting on the sofa with Skye watching TV.

“I’m going back to school tomorrow. Grant and JJ are not allowed in school and the others being investigated were warned to not cause any trouble or they would be tossed out too. My mom said the police are on school property, at least two at all times and the security guards are patrolling outside and inside more than ever.”

“Melinda thinks it’s best if I stay away for longer. Ryan too.”

“Probably a good idea. Will is going home tomorrow to recover there. Ace and some of the others are also going back tomorrow.”
“Yeah I talked to some of them last night. Jemma and Ryan are coming over tomorrow in the afternoon just to hang out. Leo might come too.”

“That’s good. I am sure you miss all your friends.”

“Yeah. But we’ve all been texting a lot.”

“Except me.”

Skye looked up at him. “Yeah. I kind of didn’t know what to say. What to talk about with you.”

“Well, we’re talking now.”

“Yeah.” She smiled and looked into his shiny blue eyes. His kind and friendly and beautiful blue eyes. She looked away and then got very serious. “There are some things that might come out with this investigation. Stuff I never wanted anyone to know. Least of all you.”

“Whatever it is Skye, I can handle it. You aren’t going to scare me off.”

“I’m not who you think I am Lincoln.”

“Hey. I don’t know much about you or your past and we are just getting to know each other. So yeah, I would guess I don’t know all of who you are.” He grinned at her. “Yet.”

“Well you may not like everything I am. Or everything I’ve done.”

“Probably not. You won’t like everything I’ve done either. Or like everything I like. For example, I like bowling.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “I’m serious.”

“Me too. You like bowling?”

She shook her head and gave him an exasperated look. “Never bowled.”

“What?” He gave her a pretend shocked face.

“Lincoln.”

“Hey look Skye. We’ve only known each other a couple weeks. Granted they are probably the best weeks of my life.” He flashed a big smile at her. She laughed. He grew somber. “This is what I know. I know you stand up for yourself. I know you stand up for others. You hate bullies. You are a foster kid and haven’t had the best childhood, but you still care about other people. You are compassionate, caring, kind, and kind of badass. You fight for what is right, and you protect people. You like to eat, especially the desserts Jemma brings you. You like soccer a little cause when we talked about it you actually knew what a midfielder is supposed to do.”

He paused as she looked at him. He reached for her hand and she threaded her fingers in his. “You love Donnie and Ryan and think of them both as your brothers. You are a bit clumsy sometimes, but also look pretty sharp when Miss May teaches you martial arts. You love computer science but hate all other sciences. You like history cause at lunch you tell us what Mr. C taught that day. You like chocolate milk, red licorice, fruit snacks and cinnamon donuts. Your fav pizza is sausage and mushroom, which mushrooms – yuck, are gross. You don’t watch much TV cause when the other kids talk about shows you tune them out. You like to read but only stuff that interests you. You find school mostly boring and a waste of your time and you absolutely hate gym class. Oh, and you like Mr. and Mrs. C a lot. So I nailed it right?”
She laughed. “Mostly. I don’t hate school just most of the teachers and classes. I do like lunch and history and computer class. And I actually don’t know much about soccer at all. At least I didn’t. I researched it on the internet, so I looked like I knew what I was talking about when you and Trip talked about it. But I did really enjoy watching you run around on the field in your shorts.”

“Aha. If that’s your worst secret I think we are good.”

“You know it’s not.”

“Yeah I do. But until you are ready to share anything else with me, it’s not my place to know. But I do want to get to that place where you can talk to me about it. Someday. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay.”

“So you want to go bowling this weekend?”

She laughed. “I can’t. We are painting and stuff this weekend. Wanna help?”

He nodded and reached over to kiss her on her cheek. She moved her head and instead he kissed her on her lips. She smiled up at him and stared into his beautiful eyes. They were still holding hands.

“Gross.” Donnie walked into the room and turned the channel on the TV. He plopped down on the other end of the sofa., “You guys better stop that. Don’t make me call Mrs. C. in here.” Lincoln gave him a dirty look while Skye threw a pillow at his head.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is painting, new things, old things, reflections, and letting things go. Also we learn more about Thomas and his situation, and a few new faces will join the story. I put in Piper and Davis and Deke cause I am loving their characters in AOS Season 6. But there is just never enough May and Daisy on the show. It's why I write these stories.
Donnie sat on Skye’s bed next to her with his eyes closed, both were leaning against the headboard. It was late at night and Skye and Donnie were supposed to be asleep. After Lincoln had left, Melinda had seen to Skye’s arms and hands and then Skye had gone to Donnie’s room to talk. Skye had told him to pretend to be asleep and then sneak into her room after midnight. Skye checked her phone and saw it read one twenty-five. Donnie shifted and laid his head on her shoulder. Skye continued to type into the computer. She had Melinda’s laptop resting on her lap. Skye didn’t have her own computer except for the small one the school loaned out to them. And she couldn’t use that one to hack in because it had bells and whistles on it that showed what she was doing. So obviously, she had pilfered Melinda’s computer and was currently trying to find information about Mr. and Mrs. Brody. So far, she’d found out that Mrs. Anne Brody used to be named Anne Malick and was the younger half-sister of Gideon Malick, the real estate mogul and political icon in New York. Also, she was the sister of Damian Malick, her computer teacher.

“Hey look at this.” Skye spoke in a low quiet voice.

“What?” Donnie was obviously half asleep. He responded in nearly a whisper. The only light in the room besides the computer was from a small desk lamp. Skye had put a towel on the floor to block the light from the hallway.

“Looks like Malick and his real estate company own The Four Winds Rehab Center. Come on – get up. I’m gonna print the list I got from their company files. All the companies this Gideon Malick owns. Go down to Mr. C’s office and grab the copies from his printer.”

Donnie grumbled but started to do as she asked him. When he got near the door Skye spoke again.

“Ooooo wait a sec. Come here. Look at the screen.”

He stopped and went back to her, looked at the screen and then looked at Skye and shrugged.

“Donnie, it’s a picture of Gideon Malick and Damian Malick and James and Anne Brody and John Garrett, the high school gym teacher.”

“Okay. So what? Damian Malick and Garrett are friends.”

“Look closer. On the right.” She blew up the photo to make it larger.

“Holy shit Skye.”

“Yeah. That’s Mark and Lynn Hamilton. Next to Anne Brody. Wait let me see if I can bring up more pics.”
Skye typed away a bit and then sat back while her face turned pale.

“What? What is it Skye?”

“Isn’t that the guy we saw at that meeting who was talking where we saw the Hamiltons that night, and where I think I saw Anne Brody too? And isn’t that your mom with David Hamilton?”

Donnie looked at the picture that showed another group shot with a smiling man at the center dressed in a purple suit. On one side of the man were two people Donnie did not recognize, but on the other side was his mom smiling and her arm wrapped around David Hamilton’s waist. He looked up at Skye in puzzlement.

“How would she know him?”

Skye shrugged and then slapped her head in realization. “Drugs. They are both addicts Donnie.”

“Yeah. David was always high. The hell. That jerkoff knew my mom?”

“Look at the guy in the suit.”

“The purple suit. Yeah, he’s the leader of the church thing. Looks weird.”

“He reminds me of someone. His smile.”

“I dunno. Maybe he’s a drug dealer? That’s why my mom would be anywhere. Anywhere drugs are. David too. Some of those weird preachers are into weird shit.”

“Hey, go grab those copies from the printer. I don’t want to forget them. I’m gonna go further in and see if I can find more pics or lists.”

Donnie nodded and left the room quietly, careful to not make noise so he did not wake up the Coulsons. Skye typed away trying to break into another firewall. She was about to give up on trying to access the files when the encryption popped. It opened a new window with several more files she was able to access. She worked on the encrypted passwords and more pics appeared. The first one was a picture of the building she and Donnie had seen the Hamiltons enter when they lived in Lincoln Park. They had been downtown at the library and were walking home when they saw them go into a warehouse. Curious they had snuck in and witnessed a few minutes of a weird church like service. It was weird cause Skye had noticed half the people were highly classy dressed and the other half were not. In fact, the other half looked like homeless and street people. At the time they just shrugged it off as some weird spiritual thing her foster parents were into.

The next picture was a clinic that was downtown in Lincoln Park that was near the warehouse. The next picture was a laboratory of some sort. The sign on the front said Momentum Labs. The next picture was the Four Winds Rehab Clinic. Skye moved all the pics to a file and then inserted a flash drive into Melinda’s computer and copied them. She then opened a few more files that popped up and saved them on the flash drive as well, figuring she would check them out later. It was now after two, and the longer they were awake the better chance they would be caught by Melinda or Phil.

Donnie came back in the room and gave her the copies he had retrieved. “I should get to my room and go to bed.”

“Yeah you should. I’ll finish this and then put the computer back. You head out. Be quiet.”

“I know. You find something else?”
“Don’t know. I’ll look more tomorrow. Go. Good night.”

Skye waited till the last file was downloaded to the flash drive and then got out of everything and cleared her browser history. She turned off the computer and then quietly left her room. Using a small flashlight, she carefully walked downstairs and put Melinda’s computer back in the case and placed the case exactly the way she had found it on the chair in the living room. She made her way back up the stairs and back to her room.

Melinda’s eyes flashed open and she laid still. She thought she heard a noise in the hallway. She listened for a few seconds but heard nothing else. She got up and made her way to the door in the dark. She opened the door and saw a shadow by Skye’s room. She turned on the hall light and watched Skye jump in surprise.

“Oh, hey Skye. What are you doing up? It’s after two.”

“Yeah. I- I uh – needed to pee.”

Melinda nodded. “You sure you’re okay. You look a little pale.” She made her way over to Skye. She felt her forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

“I’m fine. I just must have drunk too much tea or something.”

Melinda stared at her and then smiled. “Okay. Go back to bed. See you in few hours.” She walked back to her room while Skye entered her room.

Skye closed the door and just stood there breathing a sigh of relief. That was too close. She’d have to be more careful next time, especially living in the same house with Melinda and her spy skills.

The next morning Clint came over very early at seven. Phil was already up and was making breakfast when he let himself in to the house. Clint had his own key to the Coulson’s. He made enough noise walking through the house so that Phil would know it was him. He poked his head into the kitchen and smiled as he smelled the food.

“Bacon and chocolate chip pancakes.”

“Hey Clint. Grab a cup of coffee. First set of pancakes will be up in a few minutes, and the bacon is already done.”

Clint poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. He knew this was Phil’s way of thanking him for helping them and just waited for the pancakes to be done. “So anyway, what’s the plan today?”

“Finish cleaning out the basement spare room and takin the trash to the dump. You drove your pickup truck over, right?”

“Yep. It can haul a bunch of trash or whatever else you have.”

“Good we have a couple pieces of broken gym equipment, some magazines, boxes of rags and just a bunch of other stuff to get rid of. After that we wanted to paint that room.”

“Sounds good. Haven’t painted anything for a while. Melinda not up yet?”

“She’s up. In the shower. She’s going go to the gym today and do some paperwork, and then she
Phil smiled as he plopped a plate of pancakes in front of Clint. “So - you and Natasha. That’s going well huh?” He walked to the counter to bring the bacon to the table.

“Yeah. We’ve gone out a couple times. Only time I see her lately though is to pick her up at work and drive her home.”

“Yeah Mel really appreciates all she’s done this past week, not only taking over Mel’s classes but also closing up every night. And all you’ve done helping to clean up.”

“No problem. “We are both glad to.”

Phil went back to the stove to make another batch of pancakes while Clint dug into the food. Melinda stepped into the kitchen dressed in her workout clothes. She bent down to give Clint a hug from behind.

“Hey you.”

“Hi Melinda.” He garbled around his mouthful of pancake. He swallowed and spoke again. “I’ve missed these things. No one makes them as good as Phil.”

“Careful. It will go to his head.” She moved, pecked her husband on the cheek and got a cup and proceeded to make her tea. By the time her tea was ready Phil had finished the second batch of pancakes and had joined Clint at the table. Melinda sat down as well filling her own plate with pancakes and bacon. “You going to cook for the kids too? I checked in on them and both were sound asleep.”

“Nah. They will have to fend for themselves. We have plenty of cereal and bagels. Clint and I are going to get started right after breakfast. You leaving early?”

“Yes. I’m going to get paperwork done and I have 3 classes to teach until Natasha comes in around one. I’ll be back home after I run some errands too. I need to mail some packages and stop at the drug store for a few things, and I think we need a few groceries.”

“Yeah chocolate milk and white milk, orange juice and iced tea. Donnie and Skye go through those like water. Oh, and eggs and bread and popcorn.”

“Those are all already on my list. Anything else?”

“Candy and chips. We have two kids living here now.”

Melinda smirked. “Three you mean. And that stuff is not good for you. Candy makes kids hyper and chips have too many carbs. You shouldn’t eat either.”

“You just got done eating chocolate chips.”

“In pancakes, and that’s enough for the week. For all of us.”

“I mean it’s not like Melinda doesn’t work it off Phil. You on the other hand.” Clint laughed at Phil’s hurt expression.

Melinda just smirked. “I don’t know Clint. Phil works it off pretty well. Last work out was pretty
intense. Sexercise can use up a lot of carbs, you know.

“Cripes Melinda. Did you have to go there? It’s too early in the morning.”

She just shrugged her shoulders and flashed him a grin. “Anyway, thanks for helping out, but I have to scoot. I’d bring pizza for lunch, but I won’t be home till three or later.”

“We’ll send Hunter out for some. Talked to him last night and he said he and Bobbi would be here around ten. They worked late last night and were sleeping in.” Clint got up and took his plate and glass to the sink.

“Oh yeah, Phil, you have enough beer than for Hunter? Or should I pick some up?” Melinda asked.

“Should be good. I stocked up the basement fridge last week.”

Melinda went over to Phil and kissed him and then gave Clint a peck on the cheek and a hug.

“Thank you.”

He gave her a smile as she walked out the kitchen door. “You really married up Phil.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Melinda walked down the hallway and stuck her head into the living room. Ah there it was. Her backpack with her computer and her paperwork was setting on the armchair. She retrieved it and headed out the front door.

Skye woke slowly turning over to grab her phone from the night table to check the time. As she did the bright light shining through the blinds in the room hit her eyes and she squinted. She grabbed around for the phone and finally pulled it to her face. The time was ten–forty. She blinked away the last vestiges of sleep and then sat up suddenly wide awake. Holy crap, it was ten – forty. She jumped out of bed and threw off her pajamas and quickly dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt. She sat on the bed pull and pulled on a pair of socks and her sneakers. She left the room and walked over to Donnie’s room and saw the door was opened. She peeked in and saw that Donnie was not there. She walked down the stairs and it was then that she heard music coming from the basement. She walked down the basement steps too, and the first thing she saw was a bunch of boxes piled up just outside the spare room. She looked inside and saw Mr. C. with Hunter and another man she did not recognize.

“Hey Skye. I see you finally got up.”

Skye jumped and grabbed her chest as she turned around. Seeing it was Bobbi, she took in a deep breath. “You always sneak up on people?”

“Not always. But when I do it’s always with style.”

Skye laughed. Just then Donnie came bounding down the basement steps. “Oh hey Skye. Decide to join the living, did you?”

“Shut up. It’s not that late.”

“It’s nearly eleven.”

“So? When did you get up?”
“Nine. And after I ate breakfast, I started helping clean out this room. All while you were dreaming away.”

“At least it was a good dream. You weren’t in it for one.”

“Haha. It’s like you think that was actually humorous.”

Bobbi smiled fondly as the two continued to bicker with each other in a light-hearted way. She got out her phone and texted Melinda that yes, Skye was finally up. “Skye check your phone. Melinda sent you a text.”

Skye nodded and pulled the phone from her pocket. She checked her text messages and sure enough there was one from Melinda. It simply said that she would check her arms and hands and re-bandage when she got home in the afternoon and that Skye should hold off taking a shower. She quickly texted back to Melinda. She turned to Bobbi and said, “I’m gonna go grab something to eat and then I’ll be back to help.”

“Actually Skye, Melinda said for you to not help. She doesn’t want you lifting or carrying anything yet, so she said I should tell you to work on your schoolwork today. She said you could probably help paint if we get that far today.”

“Seriously? I’m fine. It’s already been four days, and everything is healing good.”

“Yeah and you want it to keep it that way.”

“Look you don’t have to tell her. I can at least move some…”

“Nope. She said you’d try to talk me into letting your help and said you’d be really good at manipulating me so I shouldn’t listen to you. At all.”

Bobbi stared back as Skye glared at her. Skye turned and stomped up the basement steps. Donnie turned to Bobbi and gave her a sympathetic grin. “She’ll be back, you know?”

“I do. Melinda said that too.”

“Stay strong.”

“Oh, I will. I am far more afraid of pissing off Melinda than I am of hurting Skye’s feelings”

Skye came back down two more times after eating breakfast to try to convince Bobbi to let her help. Bobbi didn’t budge. Skye was currently sitting on the top basement step as she listened to the others working while old rock music blared from the spare room. She pulled out her phone and texted Melinda. ‘I’m mad at you again.’ Then she tried to text Lincoln but remembered he was in school. So, she texted Jemma. They had a good little conversation about how Will and Fitz were doing. After that she checked to see if Melinda had responded back. She hadn’t. So, she sent another text. ‘I am really mad at you.’

“Excuse me please.”

Skye got up to let the guy pass through. He turned to her and introduced himself. “I’m Clint. I’ve seen you at Mel’s gym, but I don’t think I’ve ever been properly introduced. Clint Barton.”

She took his offered hand. “I’m Skye. I’m staying here.”
“Yeah I know. That kid Donnie, talks about you a lot.”

“Nothing good I bet.”

He laughed. “Actually, all good. But hey I need to use the restroom. Nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

He headed off to the bathroom and instead of sitting back down Skye decided to go to her room. Once she got there she sat at the desk and got out the lists she had copied the previous night. She started reading through them. About fifteen minutes passed and then Skye stopped and stared.

“What the hell.” She read it again and then shuffled a few more papers. Then she got out her school computer and clicked on google maps. Aiming in on the small town of Lincoln Park, she hovered over the map and zoomed in on a few buildings. The warehouse and clinic and Momentum Labs and a bunch of low housing buildings were all on the same block. As was another building named Quinn Technical Research. She looked and cross referenced everything on her lists and found that every building on that block was owned by Malick Real Estate. She looked at the list again and checked the map and found that the next block of buildings that included a halfway house, a homeless shelter and a restaurant as well as more low housing apartment buildings were also owned by Malick Real Estate. She looked at the next paper and realized the next three blocks all the buildings were also owned by Malick Real Estate. Many were said to be owned under other company names, but all traced back to the real owner being Malick Real Estate on the files she had copied. There was even a day care in the mix.

Skye wanted to do more research but couldn’t on her school computer. She poured over the information she had making notes and trying to find more buildings in Lincoln Park owned by Malick Real Estate. She needed to get into those files she had accessed last night again. She stopped when her phone buzzed and checked to see that Melinda had finally texted her back. ‘Sorry it’s for the best and you know it. Will be home soon. Hope you got some of your schoolwork done.’ Shit. It was almost three already. Oh no, she had not gotten any school work done and had gotten really involved in this Malick stuff. She took all the papers and hid them and then got out her school stuff. She checked through her work and found an easy computer assignment which she started working on. She cranked out two computer assignments and read a short story for English and answered the questions before Melinda got home. Skye was reading another short story when Melinda knocked on the bedroom door.

“Yeah?”

“It’s me. Can I come in?”

“I’m mad at you.”

“I know. I still need to change your bandages and check your wounds.”

“I guess you can come in. But I’m not happy.”

Melinda opened the door and came into the room. She saw Skye was sitting on her bed reading and her schoolwork was spread out on her desk. “I see you are doing your work.”

“I didn’t really have a choice. It was either that or be bored silly sitting on the basement steps while everyone else had fun.”

“You think cleaning up a room is fun?”
“Um hello. The other choice was school stuff.”

Melinda laughed. “Your point is made. Come on, Let’s check those arms.” She turned to go to the bathroom.

Skye huffed and then got up and followed her. “Still mad.”

Melinda laughed.

Melinda and Skye both walked down the basement stairs and entered the completely cleaned out room. Clint and Phil had taken the trash to the dump and Hunter had gone out to get pizza. Bobbi and Donnie were sweeping and dusting the room. Bobbi looked up as they entered. “Nearly done. Room is ready to be painted.”

“I can’t thank you guys enough for helping to do this Bobbi.”

“Oh please. It’s what family does.”

Melinda smiled. “Phil tells me you have been a great help Donnie. Thank you too.”

He shrugged and smiled. “I had fun. Clint told some stories about Phil. He was his teacher when Clint was in high school.”

“Wow. So Mr. C. is ancient, “Skye said dryly.

Bobbi laughed along with Melinda. “Clint’s only thirty Skye. That was only 12 years ago.”

“Hey.” Hunter yelled down the steps. “Pizza’s here.”

“Yay!!!!!” Donnie ran out of the room and flew up the steps. The rest followed a bit slower. A few minutes later Clint and Phil got home.

Skye sat at the table eating pizza and listening to the adults tell stories and tease each other. Occasionally Donnie would join in and ask a question. The latest story was about how Phil and Melinda had met. Bobbi was telling it.

“So my geeky big brother literally spilled trash on a beautiful woman and then they got married.”

“Good thing she took pity on him. He was getting pretty old.” Clint laughed as Phil punched him in his shoulder.

“Melinda is only two years younger than me.”

“Really? Cause it looks more like a fifteen-year age difference to me mate.” Hunter smirked at Phil.

“Yeah Phil. She looks much younger. Plus she’s way prettier than you. Never could figure out how my old geeky history teacher with bad jokes hauled in such a catch.”

“What can I say. The smart pretty ladies always fall for geeks. You should know Clint. Natasha fell for you.”

“Hey. I am not a geek.”
Donnie shook his head at Clint. “Dude you talked all day about Sci Fi movies and comic books. You told me how Mr. C. took you to a comic con and how you got to meet all these comic writers. Sounds pretty geeky to me. Right Skye?”

“Definitely geeky. Nerdy even.”

“I went undercover as a geek once. I was fantastic as a geek. The coolest geek ever. Right Bobs?”

“You pretended to be a computer hacker checking on a manufactured break in that we did to gain access. You typed like an eight-year old who never saw a keyboard before. Felicity had to talk you through each peck you made, and she nearly killed me afterward for allowing you to be the hacker. So, no Hunter. You were not fantastic nor cool.”

“I remember that,” Clint said. “Wasn’t that the weird cult place that we were investigating? That place the informant said they were paying the homeless to do experiments with unapproved drugs and other chemicals?”

“Yeah the informant said they had this weird guy who oversaw some shelters and offered money and a place to stay for volunteering for the experiments.”

Donnie raised his eyebrows at Skye. He directed his question at Bobbi. “Was that in Lincoln Park?”

“No right here in Kingston. Down on Murray Street. No matter though. The informant’s info did not pan out. Turns out the place was legit and that some of our town’s most prominent folks supported the place and the guy and his work.”

“Yeah he was a bit off, but he was helping the homeless providing shelter and food and even clothes.” Hunter shrugged. “Even though his own clothes were a bit off for a preacher. A bright purple suit and shoes.”

“Well, being eccentric is not a crime Hunter. If it was, you’d be in prison.”

The whole group of adults laughed at that. Skye and Donnie meanwhile were both in deep thought.

Melinda had sent Skye and Donnie to their rooms to work on some of their school assignments. Bobbi and Hunter were still hanging around, but Clint had gone to pick up Natasha. Hunter popped open another beer while Bobbi opted for coffee with Phil, and Melinda got herself another cup of tea.

“Did you call Director Fury or touch base with Akela yet?” Bobbi’s question was directed at Melinda.

“Both actually. Akela is getting back to me tomorrow. Fury is working with Izzy and Mike trading information about The Ward family and trying to find information about the Hamilton family.”

Hunter shook his head and added. “Well that’s good. Hopefully something pops we can use. That whole Ward family seems shady. Mack and Elena said that the Guttierrez’s stories were believable. Both kids appeared to be telling the truth about Grant Ward and his friends.”

“Akela said they have a lot of information they’ve been looking at concerning Ulster County. Nothing substantial – just a lot of unconnected blips. Things popping up that seem random but since my call they’ve been wondering if there are connections. She said that Fury was considering
sending a team down here to try to put the pieces together. She wants to be part of it, and says she’d be the perfect investigator considering she lived in the area.”

Bobbie pondered the new information and then asked, “What kind of random things.”

“The whole county has an uptick of homeless deaths, as well as a few unsolved murders of prostitutes and known drug dealers. Plus, there’s been an increase in psychotic violent crimes with increased hospital admittance of people with psychotic breaks. Many are homeless or live in subsidized housing. Akela referred to the incidents and deaths as anomalies.”

“Strange indeed.”

“Yeah and you know – prostitutes and drug dealers dying isn’t a high priority of investigations. None of the other police departments in the nearby towns seem concerned at all. Anyway, I should know more tomorrow hopefully. Meanwhile, Jeri Hogarth has been working non-stop with Sharon and Vic to obtain Thomas’s release and to get protection for all the kids. Hopefully those restraining orders happen soon.”

“Well meanwhile, none of the kids should go out anywhere without an adult. I hope that was made clear to them all.”

Melinda nodded. “It was made clear to Donnie and Skye. I am sure everyone else knows that as well.”

Bobbi nodded as the four adults turned their conversation to less serious subjects.

“Skye are you nuts?”

“Oh, come on Donnie. We will be fine. It’s not like we aren’t used to being on our own.”

“Mr. and Mrs. C. gave us strict orders to not go anywhere without an adult. And now you not only want to traipse about this town looking for clues, you want to go to Kingston and look there too.”

“Yes. But I need a computer first. I have a theory that Malick has dealings here too, in Kingston and I need to get deeper into their files. What if his company owns that building that Melinda was talking about? I mean how many cult type leaders in purple suits can there be in the area?”

“Look Skye, Bobbi said the info did not pan out.”

“But there is a guy in a purple suit. Maybe he can at least lead us to the Hamiltons. To where they are and why my files where wiped and what is going on. You know my hospital records are missing too. It’s weird. It’s like someone was trying to wipe my history. But why?”

“Or maybe we tell Melinda about seeing the purple man and that we saw the Hamiltons there, and you saw Mrs. Brody there, and that somehow my mom knows him too.”

“I’m gonna check my suspicions about the place here in Kingston the police investigated, and other properties on Murray Street and see what I can find. If what I think is there, then we will need to check it out before I can tell Melinda and Bobbi. I mean we need something solid to give them or they will think we are nuts.”

“You gonna steal Mrs. C’s computer again tonight?”
“Borrow. Not steal. And yeah, I am. But you just go do your work. I’ll get it much later and see what I can find out.”

“So what do you think is the connection? To you and all this stuff?”

“I don’t know. But I have a redacted file Donnie along with many of my St Agnes files and hospital files disappearing. What if it has something to do with my parents? With Jiaying who I think is my mother? Why are we at the center of this?”

“Maybe we aren’t. At the center I mean.”

“Except look at all that’s happened. Your mom knows the purple suit guy. So do the Hamiltons. So does my new foster mom, Mrs. Brody. The Hamiltons disappeared. Files have disappeared. Not just mine but I heard Melinda talking and police files have disappeared. Evidence in cases was tampered with. People who are powerful are getting away with rapes and assaults. All those businesses that Malick owns on those blocks in Lincoln Park are not good investments. They mostly cater to the underprivileged and poor. It’s weird and somehow, I am involved. Not to mention that the rehab hospital they kidnapped Thomas and took to is also owned by Malick. Malick’s brother teaches at the school as does Garrett who seems to encourage the kids to be bullies and Mrs. Brody is Malick’s sister. It’s like I am at the center of everything and I have no clue why.”

“Or it’s all just coincidences and you are reading way too much into everything?”

“Yeah. But I’m still gonna check out Murray Street and what is there.”

“Okay. Let me know what you find. We are painting tomorrow. Ryan and Jemma are coming over and the four of us and Mr. C are gonna paint. So, don’t stay up too late cause they are coming at nine, and you sleeping in that late again would make them suspicious.”

“Okay. I won’t. Go get you schoolwork done.” He left and Skye opened her biology book trying to concentrate on reading about the skeletal system, but her mind kept going back to her past, and wondering about that redacted file that only gave two names – Jiaying and Daisy.”

Later, Melinda was checking Skye’s wounds and her stitches. “These can come out tomorrow. They healed nicely. No sign of infection at all either. Flex your arms for me.”

Skye did as she was told. “I can help paint tomorrow right?”

Melinda checked her arms. “Now move your wrists please. Up and down and back and forth.” Skye did as she asked. “Good. No pain?” Skye shook her head. “Yes, you can help paint tomorrow but no ladders. I don’t want you falling and injuring your arms in any way. I’ll take those stitches out first thing in the morning and wrap the cuts in bandages, so they don’t get dirt or paint in them. But I’m going to leave them open tonight. You are good to go.”


“You’re welcome. I guess you aren’t mad at me anymore?”

Skye gave her a grin. “I guess not. But I really was. I sat on the basement step for a while.”

Melinda raised her eyebrows. “Yeah I know. I got your texts. Did you at least get some schoolwork done?”
“Yeah I am nearly caught up on history and I finished all my computer stuff. I still need to finish a comparison paper for English class and read two more short stories and do the questions. Plus, I still have all my biology and algebra and Spanish work. Wow- yeah – not even close to catching up.”

“Well it’s a week’s worth of work plus whatever you were supposed to do last weekend. It’ll take a couple days. If you need help with history – you could ask Phil. I could help with your Spanish if you want.”

“Yeah okay. I can ask Donnie if I need help in algebra. Which is my worst subject. Well that and biology.”

Melinda smiled and gently moved a couple stray hair back from Skye’s face. “I never was very good at math and science either. Anyway, it is getting kind of late. I have a long day tomorrow so I’m going to bed. You probably should soon as well.”

“Yeah I will. I might try to read more about bones first. Are you going to work tomorrow?”

“Yes, I have to be there at nine. Natasha has a test in one of her afternoon classes, so she wants to study in the morning. I won’t be home till around four. But Phil will be here all day with you and Donnie, and Vic is coming over with Jemma and Ryan as well. So, I will have to take those stitches out and bandage you up early.”

“Okay. I’ll set my alarm for eight. Is that enough time before you go?”

“Should be. Okay then. Good night Skye.”

“Goodnight.”

Melinda exited the room and Skye sighed. She grabbed her bio book and leaned back against the headboard and started reading. Might as well accomplish something while she waited for everyone to go to sleep, she thought.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapters will be some of the kids re-connecting. More story connections. Maybe more answers but likely even more questions. Melinda faces the past. More Skye and Melinda talking and bonding. Skye and Donnie make plans. We will meet a few more characters important to the plot.
Connections

Chapter Summary

Skye and Melinda talk a lot/bonding. Painting. Jemma and Ryan come over. Lots more questions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skye had not found out any more information. She had tried more hacking into the sites but was shut out over and over, not able to penetrate any more firewalls. She’d given up at two and placed Melinda’s computer back in her bag and was heading back to her room when once again Melinda called out her name.

“Skye were you downstairs? Are you okay?”

Crap. Melinda really was a super spy. “Oh - um- I - I got hungry.”

“It’s two in the morning. Last night you were up around the same time. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s fine. Like I said I just got hungry.”

Melinda watched Skye and noticed her nervous behavior. She was rocking back and forth on her bare feet and was biting her bottom lip. “You know you can talk to me, right? If - you know - perhaps you have a nightmare or something. You can always wake me if there is something wrong.”

“Okay. But I’m good. Just a little hungry. I grabbed a piece of cheese and some pretzels.”

Melinda noticed the shift in Skye as she seemed to realize she was appearing suspicious. She smiled and stopped bouncing her feet and looked Melinda in the eye. She was lying about something. But Melinda did not feel calling her out now was a good plan. “Okay. But if you ever – you know – if you ever do.”
Skye nodded and moved to her room. “Anyway, goodnight. I’ll be up by eight, don’t worry.”

Melinda nodded back and smiled. “Goodnight.”

Skye closed her door and let out a breath. Gosh that woman was perceptive. And she heard everything. She’d have to be much more careful. Maybe do her hacking in a café or the library. She set the alarm on her phone and crawled back under the covers of her bed.

Melinda closed the door and climbed back into bed trying not to wake Phil. He mumbled anyway.

“S’okay?”

“Yeah everything’s fine. Go back to sleep.”

“Y’good.”

“I’m fine Phil. I thought I heard something. It’s good. I’m good.” But she wasn’t. Not really. She’d been awake, just laying still, when she’d heard someone in the hallway. She’d woken up from another nightmare over an hour ago, the sound of the squealing brakes and screaming still fresh in her ears. She hadn’t had that dream for a while now, at least a few weeks. But tonight, it had come back with a vengeance. She knew why. It was because it was on her mind. She was going to clean out Jamie’s room on Saturday. Sure, she and Phil had gotten rid of some things. Jamie’s school stuff, and some winter clothes she’d packed away in the basement. Some of the things in the garage. His bike. His skateboard. His bat and glove. But when Bobbi and Hunter had come over to finish cleaning out his room a few weeks after the accident, she had not been able to bare it. She simply went through all his things, cleaning his room and placing everything back where he had kept it.

A few months later, after Phil was better, she begged him to leave it the way it was. For three years she’d go into the room every few months and clean it and sit and look through his things. Phil had tried to talk to her about it several times and each time she had shut him out even more. The last three years, she has gone in less and less, and eventually Phil just put a lock on the door which only she and him know where the key was. The last time she’d gone into the room was the day after Donnie had come to live with them. She had planned on cleaning it and seeing if anything could be given to Donnie. She’d ended up laying on the bed and sobbing instead. That was around the same time she’d had her last nightmare about the accident. She shivered and Phil automatically wrapped his arms tighter around her. She cuddled closer to his embrace and closed her eyes trying to keep the horrifying images out of her head.
Skye grimaced as Melinda slowly pulled out the stitches. “So, how’d you learn how to do stitches and stuff?”

“In the field. Well we all had to pass a basic first aid course. But in the field, some of us got more practice than others. The worst is having to stitch up yourself cause no one else is trained or has the stomach for it.”

Skye’s eyes widened comically. “You’ve stitched up your own injuries?”

Melinda’s mind was racing and not really focusing on the conversation, or she probably wouldn’t have been so chatty. She was still thinking about Jamie’s room. “When they’re visible the front of the body it’s not that bad. You can see the wounds clearer. The worst was the four-inch gash from a knife on the back part of my right shoulder. Since I’m right-handed that one included a lot of pain and swearing.”

“Holy shit! Are you serious?”

Melinda startled as Skye’s voice grew louder. “Oh – um – yeah. But it didn’t happen very often.”

“Doesn’t sound that way to me. Wow so you were a cop? Like Bobbi and Hunter?”

Melinda sighed. It looked like this subject excited Skye. “FBI. I was an FBI agent. Before that I was in The Army’s Special Op Forces.”

“So you are a spy.” Skye’s tone brokered no argument.

Melinda laughed. “Not as much a spy as an agent. In Special Ops I was mostly in the air, as a pilot. I did a lot of air support once women were allowed to fly combat missions.” Melinda was now washing and rinsing Skye’s injuries.

“Oh when was that?”
“I could fly anything except combat missions my first years. Back in 1993 I went to Officer Candidate School after graduating from college at age 22 the previous year. I’d already had my pilots license for small aircraft. Started flying combat missions in 1997.”

“So were you a General or something?”

Melinda laughed. “Hardly. I made it to Captain in the eight years I served. After discharge I joined the FBI. Well I applied to the FBI and then did twenty weeks of training at Quantico. I was recruited by Nick Fury to join. I was an agent for them till – well till the accident and then I took care of Phil for almost a year. He was hurt badly; hespent nearly three months in the hospital and another four at a rehab center. When he came home, he needed a lot of help.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No it’s okay. It’s in the past. I’m not sure why I told you all that. It’s my burden and not yours.”

“I’m glad you did. So why the Army?” Skye’s attempt to change the subject was endearing. Melinda started putting antibiotic cream on her cuts and bandaging up her arms and hands.

“It was a challenge. People told me I couldn’t do it.”

Skye laughed. “Dumbasses. You can do anything. I sure hope you rubbed it in their faces.”

Melinda shrugged. “Maybe a little.” She laughed along with Skye.

“College too huh? What’d you go for? What major?”

Melinda stayed silent for a bit. Then she said, “Just a bachelor’s degree. Then I enlisted in the Army Officer Training School.”

“Wow that was a dodge if I ever saw one.”
Melinda played innocent. “What do you mean?”

“Telling me your college major. You avoided it like the plague.”

“No I didn’t. It’s just not important.”

“Why? What is it, basket weaving or something? Something even more embarrassing?” Skye was enjoying this conversation.

Melinda finished bandaging Skye’s arms. “It’s really not important.” She avoided looking at Skye.

“You know I could hack it and find out.” Skye was grinning now.

“It was a teaching degree. That’s all.”

“Oh. That’s it?” Skye sounded so disappointed.

Melinda swallowed her pride and added “Library Science.”

Skye’s eyes lit up and she started laughing. “Oh my god. You, a librarian.” She doubled over holding her stomach.

“Haha. Very funny. I’ll have you know being a librarian is not easy.”

Skye shot her head up to look at Melinda. “Wait. You actually worked as a librarian. Oh my gosh. Did you scare the kids into reading?”

Melinda tried to stop the grin from forming on her face.

“Didja make them do push-ups when they returned books late?”
The mirth on Skye’s face was worth this harassment, Melinda thought. “I know it’s hard to see me as a librarian. But I was very good at my job.”

“Of course you were. No one dared say otherwise. You would beat them up.”

“Oh hush you. I don’t beat people up.”

“But you could. With your pinkie. Just that knowledge would cower anyone.” Skye flashed her a huge smile. “But seriously Melinda, why a librarian?”

“Technically it’s Library Science Major. A lot of information tech classes and research classes with the studies. Plus, I like books. I like to read. A lot. Nothing else really held my interest. Ms. Price went to the same college. She was a declared Education Major and we were designated as roommates in my sophomore year. I was undeclared. After taking all the requisite classes I had to pick a major the middle of my sophomore year. Roz was an education major, so I went with that. My mother wanted me to major in something sciency. I picked Library Science.

Skye laughed. “Ah a rebellious streak. So you were really trying to piss her off. That’s why you picked it?”

“Maybe a little bit.” Melinda smiled. “The library was always a place I could go and feel – I don’t know – safe, I guess. So many places to go in a book. No one would tell you that you weren’t good enough.

Skye’s look of puzzlement had Melinda continuing.

“It was 1987 when I graduated High School. It was 1984 when I was your age. Back then small Chinese girls were not seen as individuals with choices. We were expected to be good at certain things. Get straight ‘As’, do well in math and science, know computers well. I sucked at all those. I grew up the only Chinese girl in my elementary classes and all the teachers wondered why I didn’t excel at math, or play the violin, or do well in spelling bees. All my friends were white and well, modern. But I lived in a house with many Chinese traditions. The two clashed a lot of the time. I always felt like I was not being a good enough Chinese girl and then when with my friends I thought I was not being modern enough. I never was a highly social person, not a party girl, nor particularly into the latest fad or fashion. I was a bit shy, I guess. I preferred my martial arts classes where I could be physical and my books where I could escape. Later on, I learned to love playing the piano but hated doing it in front of an audience. So that’s why I picked Library Science. Cause
there was no math or life sciences needed.”

Skye’s mind was going a mile a minute. “So you didn’t fit into a mold. Not one your teachers wanted you to be, nor one your parents thought was good, not even what your friends and peers expected?”

Melinda smiled. “Growing up, I honestly did not know what I wanted to do. I had dreams of being a famous Martial Artist or even a writer. I hated high level science classes and sucked at them. Math was okay if it was straightforward calculations. All the theories and properties and relative proportions and formulas though were boring, and I was simply not interested. The library was always a place I could go and feel – I don’t know – safe, I guess. So many places to go in a book. No one would tell you that you weren’t good enough or didn’t live up to the idea of who I was supposed to be. What people wanted me to be.”

“Wow. So you and your mom – not so close huh?”

“I wouldn’t say that. We just didn’t see eye to eye on certain important things. Or what we considered important anyway. My mom saw school and good grades and high-level learning as a way to be accepted, a way to be successful. It worked for her. She came over to the US when she was a child, ten years old. That was 1957. She was Chinese and back then, well let’s just say opportunities for Chinese women were very limited. Very much more limited than when I was growing up. But she got very good grades, and played chess, and played the violin, and won academic competitions. Things the school rewarded. Things that society rewarded. Her parents were very strict. It was important to them that their children conform to the US rules and fit in some way. It was important that their children became successful in the United States. It is why they moved here, to give their children more opportunity. They believed that being strict would accomplish their goals.”

Skye nodded. “So your parents are still strict?”

“In some ways yes. In others no. They eventually realized I needed to do what was best for me. To live my best life. My grandparents were very traditionalist in raising their kids. My parents were not as much and wanted me to embrace the culture and opportunities in America. But they also wanted me to hold onto traditionalist ways and they were still very old school about discipline and respect. They grew up that way. Chinese culture dictates respect for those older. My grandparents owned a Chinese Restaurant in Pittsburgh where she and her brothers grew up. My grandparents worked hard to give my mother and her siblings great opportunities. My mom ended up going to nursing school and then trained and practiced at a hospital becoming a surgical nurse. She joined the Army in 1967 due to its opportunities and lessened prejudice than the private health sector. She served in Vietnam where she met my dad who was a soldier. In 1969, they married and were stationed in Germany. My mom was a nurse and my dad was an electrical engineer. The army offered them experience and job security. A year and half later I was born. They were transferred to
Italy soon after that. I lived all over the world until age thirteen, when we moved to Pittsburgh, after both applied to be discharged from the army. Mom went back to school while working full time and graduated from med school the year I graduated High school. Mom thought I should declare as Pre-med and dad agreed unless I wanted to follow in his footsteps and become an engineer. Both thought obtaining those type degrees proved success. They brought honor. But both required tons of science and math. I held off as long as I could in college, taking only core classes.”

“I don’t get it. Why didn’t you just tell them you hated math and science. That those things didn’t interest you.”

“I did. They didn’t want to hear it, I guess. Or believe it. I’d already gone a bit rouge with my martial arts training and getting my pilot license. Not really traditionalist things for Chinese girl back then. I gravitated toward physical challenges. All kinds of challenges actually I took extra classes in college so I could obtain my degree in education in three years and then it took two more years to get a Library Science master’s degree. Once they figured out that I was serious they threw all their support my way. I worked in a local middle school the last year and half while obtaining my master’s degree as a short-term librarian substitute. But after applying everywhere after graduating for a full-time permanent position I found few takers. It was the early 90’s and well let’s just say many people still held stereotypical concepts of people.

“Then you joined the army?”

“Yes. It was my mother’s suggestion. It had worked for her.”

“So the army is looking for a few good librarians?” Skye raised her eyebrows at Melinda.

Melinda smirked. “Only those with eight black belts who are also certified pilots and sharpshooters.”

Skye laughed. “Yeah, with super spy skills.”

“I was always good at undercover. Hated it but good at it.”

“Oh my gosh seriously? Like James Bond stuff?” Skye’s mouth was hanging open.

“Nothing quite that dramatic. But yeah, sort of.”
“You have stories. Oh gosh I have to hear the stories. Please.”

Melinda glanced at her phone and was startled to find it was nearly quarter to nine. So much for getting paperwork done at the office this morning. “Sorry Skye, I have to go. I’m already late. You can paint today but remember no step stools or ladders. Stay on the ground, okay?”

Skye nodded. “But you’ll tell me later. The stories, right?”

“We’ll see. I’ll be home for dinner. I’m going to bring takeout. Any preferences?”

Skye shook her head. “Anything is fine.” Skye took Melinda’s hand. “Thanks for all that info. For telling me about you. About you and your family. I liked learning about you. You’re more kickass than I even thought. And sneaky too. A rebel even.”

Melinda grinned. “Hardly a rebel. Just stubborn. Not unlike someone else in this room.” She looked poignantly at Skye who shrugged back at her and grinned. “And you asked. I know a lot about you so...”

“Yeah more than anyone ever has. Well except for Donnie.”

“So that’s a good thing or...”

“Still deciding. It’s scary you know.”

“Yeah I do know. I also know I’d rather you hear about my life from me instead of hacking the info. But right now, I really have to get going. I have a class at ten.”

“Have fun.”

“You too. Phil will probably fix you breakfast if you hurry.”
Skye nodded as Melinda left the room. She followed her out the door and went to her room to get dressed.

Skye sat back stuffed from the waffles and watched with amazement as Donnie shoved two more down his throat before he quit. “Dude I thought I was hungry?”

“Yeah well they are so good. Strawberries and cream with waffles. It’s like heaven.”

Skye grinned back at him. “Yeah, Phil sure can cook. Like everything.”

Phil turned around from the dishes he was washing at the sink. “It was born of necessity. Since Melinda cannot cook anything.”

Skye and Donnie laughed. Skye stuck up for Melinda “Hey she does know how to bring home great take out. She knows the best pizza shop, best Chinese place, best sub shop, and best Thai restaurant.”

Donnie nodded. “Yeah that’s true.”

Skye added, “and she can kick anyone’s ass five days from Sunday without breaking a sweat.”

Phil smiled at Skye’s hero worship comment. “Yeah she can. But she’s far more than that.”

“Oh I know that Mr. C. I’m learning that more every day. So when are Jemma and Ryan gonna get here?”

“Vic is bringing them around ten-thirty. Donnie how about giving me a hand getting stuff set up. Skye you are allowed to paint only. No heavy lifting.”

Skye pouted. “I can help set up, what’s the big deal?”
“Yes, you can. We are gonna need some rags and paper towels. Grab them from the garage and take them downstairs. But first, both of you need to put on something old that you don’t care if it gets paint on or needs to be thrown away. “

Phil had excused himself to go upstairs and make lunch for everyone. Jemma and Ryan had come over with Vic earlier and they had started painting almost immediately it was now after one o’clock and Donnie had mentioned that he was hungry. Phil was mostly just pouring the paint and giving instructions, while Vic was painting and blocking the windows, doors, trim, and baseboard areas. Skye and Jemma were painting the lower parts of the walls, while Donnie had the step stool for the upper walls and Ryan was using the ladder to paint the ceiling.

“Kind of a boring color isn’t it.” Skye stopped and glanced at the half-finished room.

“I rather like it. It’s comforting and nice.” Jemma also took a break. “It’s a calming beige.”

Donnie continued painting above the door. “It’s supposed to be for a guest room, so it should be a neutral type color.”

“Oh I didn’t know that.” Vic looked over at the boy.

Skye spoke up again. “Yeah Melinda said it’s for guests. She said something about her parents visiting for the holidays.”

“Mel’s parents? Hmmm...... that’ll be interesting.”

Skye looked over at her. “Well that was ominous. Interesting in a Walton’s kind of way or an Adam’s family kind of way?”

Victoria laughed. “How do you even know those shows Skye? They are nearly older than me.”

Skye shrugged. “The nuns only let us watch a couple shows they deemed family friendly and G rated. I also watched Little House on the Prairie, Touched by an Angel and a few others. On VHS tapes.”
“Ryan was staring. “You’re kidding?”

“She’s not. Much of TV was considered impure and some was downright evil by the nuns. Same with movies. I only spent a little time at St Agnes and yeah it was not fun.” Donnie answered Ryan’s question.

Skye laughed. “I always did like Nellie from the Little House show. More than the goody two shoes Ingalls family.”

“That’s really not surprising Skye.” Vic winked at her.

“But the Adams Family was not that family friendly, was it? I think I watched the movie back a few years on TV. It was a pretty dark comedy,” Jemma spoke up.

“Yeah. Wasn’t it great? I never said I obeyed the TV watching rules Jem. So anyway, which interesting is it, Ms. Hand?”

“I told you to call me Vic or Aunt Vic like Jemma does, Skye. But Lian and William May are not like anyone I can think of. They are indeed interesting though. There is no doubt about that.”

“No doubt about what?” Phil asked as he stuck his head in the door.

“That Mel’s parents are interesting.”

Phil blanched. “That’s not the word that comes to my mind first.”

Skye noticed right away and gleefully started harassing him. “What’s the matter Mr. C? Problems with the in-laws? Do they not think you are good enough for their daughter?”

Phil looked at her. “No they don’t.”
Skye’s grin changed to a frown as she got quiet. “Oh I was just kidding around.”

“So is he. He just likes to make drama. The May’s love him.”

Phil nearly choked. “I think the word you are searching for Vic, is tolerate. Anyway, come on upstairs guys. Before everything gets cold. I made lunch.”

Skye raised her eyebrows at Donnie as they all made their way upstairs for lunch.

Vic and Phil were enjoying a salad with leftover chicken while the kids were talking around bites of mac and cheese and hot dogs. Soon they all finished and Vic shoed them all back downstairs to paint while she and Phil cleaned up and did the dishes.

Phil waited till he heard all four disappear to the lower level of the house before speaking. “So how’s Ryan? Has he talked to you at all?”

Vic nodded. “He has. He’s dealing with so much. His family is basically trying to make him something he can never be, while taking away who he is. His turmoil of wanting to be the good kid, not make waves and not get his family in trouble is battling with his understanding of right and wrong and his compassion. He’s a bit confused about his sexuality and what it means to be gay, and so I asked if he wanted to see a professional to talk. He went yesterday, and it does seem to have helped a little. He spent the night last night with Iz, watching a Star Wars movie and talking. Jemma has been great, supportive and not pushing him. He talks about Skye as though she hung the moon. He thinks she is very brave and in the short time she lived at his house, I believe he sees her as his sister. But he is very tentative as well. Izzy and Jeri were going over what Grant and JJ and the others did to him in the past, their threats and assaults and he is hesitant to give details. As I said he’s torn.”

“It’s amazing though how resilient kids can be. Skye masks her pain and fear with bravado and snark. It’s become second nature to her. Melinda has been able to reach past it.”

“That’s great and yet also unexpected.”

“Yeah. I wonder if it isn’t that Skye sees Mel’s vulnerability and fear and that helps her confront her own?”
“Could be. They are a lot alike from what I’ve seen. Bobbi told Iz and me what happened with the glass.”

“Yeah that was a helluva night. But not as bad as the complete meltdown when she told us what happened in the Hamilton home. And what she went through in some of the others. I know you guys are looking into them and making sure no other kids are being abused but damn if I didn’t think about visiting some of those places myself.”

“I can imagine Mel had already beaten some to a pulp in her mind.”

Phil snickered. “Oh yeah. Not to mention taking it out on the punching bag. Hey you hear anything about Thomas lately?”

“No. Just that Jeri is calling in favors and she and Sharon are working like hell to get him out of that place. Maybe before the end of the weekend. Fingers crossed. But we better get downstairs and supervise, before they paint each other.”

While Phil and Vic were talking upstairs Donnie and Ryan were talking ‘geek,’ as Skye put it about comics and superheroes, while she made snarky comments at both, and Jemma was sitting on the floor talking to Fitz.

Jemma hung up the phone. “Fitz says hello everyone.

“How is he Jemma?” Skye’s face looked up worried.

“He’s much better. He should be able to join us next week for self-defense class. That is if Mrs. Coulson is still teaching us?”

“Of course she is. There’d be no reason not to right Skye?” Ryan’s face also showed worry.

“Right. I’m sure I will be able to join in as well.”
“Yeah but you are already way ahead of us. Mrs. Coulson’s been teaching you for weeks now.”

Ryan nodded. “Plus living here, I’m sure she will teach you even more.”

“Maybe. I mean we do Tai Chi here which is great. Melinda is so patient and helpful when I mess up.”

“Yeah she is very nice. Quiet but nice.” Jemma smiled at Skye.

“Not that quiet. She talks to me. In fact, you guys will never, ever guess what she went to college for.”

“Do you mean what her major field of study was. Skye?”

“Yeah. Come on guess.”

“Um fighting?” Donnie smiled as he said it.

“I don’t think that’s a college major Donnie.” Jemma shook her head. “I don’t know Skye. I mean Mr. C. is a teacher and she owns her own business. Oh was she a business major?”

Skye shook her head grinning. “Nope. Ryan, you’re turn.”

“Well I don’t know her well or anything, but I did hear Izzy mention her as working together before, so something with police work?”

Jemma’s eyes lit up. “Oh criminology, Or something. Maybe pre-law?”

“Nah. It’s something you would never expect. Not in a million years.”
“Well then so tell us Skye,” Donnie was growing tired of the conversation. “What did Mr. C. study at college?”

“Library Science.” Phil smiled as he said, as he walked into the room. “A librarian.”

Skye laughed. “Correctomundo’ Mr C. I just found out this morning. How cool is that?”

Victoria wondered into the room behind Phil. “It may actually have been the most surprising thing I found out about Mel when Izzy and I first started dating. Well that and her ridiculous love for Elton John music.”

Skye’s grin grew wider. “Elton John music rocks.”

“Oh god, she got to you too. Poor kid.” Vic walked over to Skye and patted her on the head.

Skye grinned back and then walked over to her phone where music was softly playing onto the speaker she had set up. She fiddled with the buttons and then “Crocodile Rock’ started playing. Skye turned it up. “Great idea Aunt Vic.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. Phil just shrugged at her.

Hours later Melinda walked into the house, slipping off her shoes as she carried three bags of food to the kitchen. She set them down, then moved to the hallway where she opened the basement door and heard Elton John’s song ‘Rocket Man’ filtering up to her. She smiled.

Skye, Jemma and Ryan were gathered in Skye’s room. Skye had just shown them the pictures and lists of real estate that Skye had hacked, as well as notes Skye had made. Skye and Jemma had talked Vic into letting both she and Ryan stay over at the Coulson’s with Skye overnight and Vic had gone home to get them some things. Jemma had made the argument, along with Skye’s help, that since they were coming back over tomorrow to help do more painting that it made sense for them to just stay and that way as well Vic and Izzy would have their house to themselves. They had escaped to Skye’s room after dinner, with Donnie hanging out with Mr. C. tossing a baseball around. Later they were all supposed to watch movie. Melinda doing paperwork she had not had time to get to at work.
“What do you guys think? It’s gotta be connected, right? Malick owns all those buildings, including Four Winds rehab where Thomas just happens to have been kidnapped to. Quinn and Malick buying up all that real estate. And what Bobbi said about all those unsolved crimes in that area and in other towns close by. I should look all those up too. I bet anything there is something really shady going on.”

“I can’t get over that my mom is Damian Malick’s half-sister.”

“See. All that secrecy. Why? What are they all hiding?”

“It’s all so unreal Skye. But I don’t understand who these people are and what their connection is?” Jemma pointed to the picture of the man in the purple suit with Donnie’s mom and David Hamilton.”

“She is Donnie’s mother. And him. He’s the son of foster parents I lived with two years ago. They are both drug addicts.”

“Wow! Really? So is this guy a drug dealer or something?” Ryan looked at the same picture.

“We don’t know what he is. Or even who he is. But I think I know a way to find out, at least who he is. Jemma once your aunt brings your stuff, I can use your computer to do some digging. I almost forgot you have this amazing new computer.”

“Aunt Vic got it for me for my birthday. It’s state of the art, the kind her firm uses for their security set ups. But I don’t know Skye. She has all these security safeguards on it. She said it’s for my protection to make sure I don’t accidently go somewhere I shouldn’t.”

“That’s okay Jem. She’ll never know, I promise. Remember I used her own computer without her knowing.”

“Yeah she was not happy about finding out about that. I guess Mrs. C. got her to let that one go. But still, she’s very smart Skye. It’s what she does for a living.”

“Yah I know. Like I said, she’ll never know. I promise what I hack, I can cover. Okay? The best lead we have right now is this guy in this purple suit. Once we find out who he is we can go check him out. The we can go from there and figure out all the rest.”
“What? No, you mean check him out online right? Not actually go check him out?” Ryan’s voice jumped an octave higher.

“Well actually, I mean both. First online and then go down to his place where he does these services or whatever and do some recon.”

“Recon? Skye we are not spies. Maybe we should hand this over to the adults. Let them do recon.” Jemma had gotten up and was now pacing.

“They can’t do anything till we make a real connection Jemma. That’s what we have to do. It’s okay if you don’t want to go. It’s probably better the less people who do go. Donnie and I can handle it ourselves. Maybe you two can check out other stuff I find later.”

“I don’t know Skye. It sounds awfully dangerous.”

“When were you planning to go to this place Skye?” Ryan was still looking at the pictures.

“Not sure. It depends on what I find out after I use Jemma’s computer.”

“Count me in. I’m tired of sitting around and not doing anything. I’ll go.”

“Jemma?” Yeah me too. Maybe leave Donnie at home though. He’s only twelve, right?”

“No way will he stay home. But maybe it’s best if we get someone else to follow along when we go, you know like that we can talk to while we go. Someone else who is good with computers and tech.”

“That would be Fitz.”

“You think he’d help us?”
“We can ask him tomorrow. He’s wants to come over to help. Not sure he can do much helping but he wants to get out of the house. He’s bored to tears. No school all week and his injuries have his mum fussing over him. Well he’s trying to get his mum to bring him anyway. He just wants some company.”

“Good. I’ll ask him then. Show him this so he knows what’s going on. Yeah but now we should go downstairs. Before anyone gets suspicious.” She shoved all her pictures and information back in the folder and placed it back in her hiding spot. The three teens left the room.

It was late but not too late that Melinda would think something was up. After all Skye was having a sleepover and they were teenage girls. Ryan was downstairs on the pull-out sofa in the family room. Donnie was in his room. Donnie wanted Ryan to share his room, but he only had the single bed till their new bedroom sets would be delivered the following week. It was decided that Ryan would be far more comfortable on the sleeper sofa then on the floor. Jemma had told Melinda she would be fine sharing Skye’s double bed. Currently Skye was sitting cross-legged on the middle of the bed while typing on the keypad of Jemma’s computer. Jemma was sitting at the foot of the bed.

“Yes!!”

Jemma shushed her. Skye looked around the room her eyes falling to the door, looking chastised.

“Sorry. I got in this one site I had trouble with last night. Look.” Skye swung the computer around and showed Jemma. “It’s a membership list to this place called Unity Spiritual Center. The leader is our purple man. There are three of them. One right here in Kingston, one in Lincoln Park, and the other one in Hurley.”

“Does it say what the guy’s name is? The leader?”

“Yeah. It’s Zebediah Killgrave.”

“Of course it is.” Jemma shook her head. “Sounds exactly like a cult leader to me.”

Skye laughed. “You know it. Oh wait. He is normally at the one in Lincoln Park, which would explain me and Donnie seeing him there. The leader of the one here in town is named Benjamin Killgrave, son of Zebediah, and the leader of the one in Hurley is Kara Killgrave, his daughter.”
“Keeping it all in the family I see.”

“Appears so. Oh this is helpful.”

Jemma raised an eyebrow at her in question.

“Seems Preacher Zeb is the owner and leader, overall in charge of this Unity Spiritual Center. Says the place is marked as a church, and it is tax exempt. This site says the building is owned by Insight Corporation. But I cross referenced it and it’s on the list owned by Malick. Malick must own Insight Corporation.”

“Three buildings in three different towns. Three places of worship. I suppose that’s normal though Skye. I mean like other places of worship, like the catholic church, have buildings in many towns and cities.”

“Yeah but what’s the deal with all the secrecy? It’s just a lot of connections. What is the connection to me?”

“Well you are assuming there in one Skye. Everything could be a coincidence.”

“Donnie’s mom. Me and Donnie fostered with the Hamiltons. David Hamilton and Donnie’s mom in pics with this Preacher Zeb guy. The investigation Bobbi and Hunter mentioned. My disappearing files. No hospital records. The Hamilton’s disappearing. Thomas and Four Winds. Malich and the Brody and the Ward connections. Quinn and Malich. Me seeing Mrs. Brody and The Hamiltons at this Preacher Zeb’s weird service. Malich owning all that real estate in two towns. Real estate in not the nicest parts of town. There are just so many things here that are weird. What are the odds I end up fostered by the Hamiltons and the Brody’s and they both are involved in this enlightenment center, as well as Donnie’s mom? Coincidental or Connected? It’s all so weirdly secretive. What are the connections?”

“I suppose you have a point. How long are we staying up?”

“Not long. Don’t want to make Melinda any more suspicious than she already is. Anyway, here’s more. Daughter and Son are also ordained and call themselves healers just like their father. It says the goal is enlightenment of your soul to experience your hidden gifts and talents that will help your reach your ultimate destiny.”
“Sounds like new age mixed with self-help stuff. Sounds cultish. It could be perfectly harmless Skye.”

“Yeah I know. But ....”

“I know Skye. It’s all so very weird and sketchy and you won’t stop till you find connections and solve the puzzle.”

“Yeah.” Skye closed the laptop and handed it to Jemma. “No worries. I got out of your computer and no one will ever know I hacked into any of those sites.” She held up her thumb drive. “This little puppy has the info now. Maybe after we check out that place, I’ll get more clues as to what to look up next. For now, this stuff can be put to rest, and we should get to sleep.” Skye put the folders of pics and info, and the thumb drive in her hiding place. Both girls climbed into bed and Skye turned out the light.

Chapter End Notes

Next coming chapters - Melinda faces the past. Skye faces the past. Both look to the future. Story will move forward quit a bit in the next 3-4 chapters.
Chapter Summary

Well this chapter got away from me. I was going to break it in two but decided not to. The first scene was supposed to be short and sweet but Melinda and Skye would not cooperate. Lots of angst, fluff - emotional fluff galore. Thanks for reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Melinda sat on the bed and looked around the room. It was a bit dusty, and the room air was stale. Melinda took another deep breath trying to slow her speedy heart rate and calm her emotions. She’d come in the room before anyone else was up, even Phil, knowing this was the project today. They were finally going to clean out all of Jamey’s things, clean the room, paint it and let Skye use it. It was after all, with the two connected rooms, the biggest area next to their own bedroom, and ignoring its existence when they had two foster kids living with them, one who could use it, was stupid. Melinda knew that and it made sense and was the right thing to do. Especially with her parents also about to visit for the upcoming holidays, freeing up all the space they had made sense.

Bobbi and Hunter were coming over, along with Izzy and Vic, and Clint. Jemma and Ryan were already here, Leo was coming to help as well. Roz was also planning to come bringing Lincoln and Trip with her. Since they had such a large crew of volunteers, Phil was going to have them clean out Skye and Donnie’s rooms first and then paint them, planning to put Clint and Izzy in charge. He was going to clean out Jamey’s room with Melinda and Bobbi, Roz and Vic. Melinda knew that he had specifically asked Vic and Roz to be here this morning. Roz was her best friend since college and Vic always managed to know the right thing to say to her and refused to coddle her. Bobbi would always be there for her, the two had become fast friends after she had met Phil and started dating him.

They’d talked about it the other night. First, they would go through the clothing and bag anything good and worth saving. Phil had said that Melinda should keep a few special pieces as well as anything else she wanted to keep such as homework, drawings, or other keepsakes. They’d bag all the books and toys and games and were planning to drop everything that was in good shape to a charity service. The child style furniture which included a twin bed, dresser, and nightstand would be taken to the same charity service. Skye and Donnie of course, were getting the new bedroom sets they’d already ordered, hopefully coming on Monday.

Melinda sighed. She wanted to bolt from the room. She was considering doing just that, and leaving for the day, telling Phil to just clean everything out without her, when she heard a shuffle of feet and looked up. Skye was standing in the doorway watching her with a very worried expression. Melinda gave her a small smile. “You up already?”

Skye shuffled her weight from foot to foot, remaining in the doorway. She was biting her bottom lip as well as she nodded to Melinda. “Yeah, I -um – I was coming from the bathroom and heard something.”

Melinda noted Skye’s uneasiness and then felt wetness on her own cheek. She was crying. Which she had not noticed until now but realized her cheeks were wet and her tears continued to fall. How
long had that been going on she wondered? She hastily swiped her eyes and sniffled, looking back to Skye, who seemed very unsure what to do. Probably afraid of crossing a boundary and upsetting her, Melinda thought. Which was understandable considering Skye’s background.

Skye finally spoke up, “Do you want me to get Mr. C?”

“Nah but a tissue would be nice.”

Skye nearly tripped over her own feet going for the tissue box on the dresser. She grabbed a couple tissues out of it with one hand and grabbed the whole box with the other, stepping in front of Melinda and offering her both.

Melinda took the tissues and box, setting the box to the left next to her, and took the tissues and dabbed her eyes and then blew her nose. Skye started backing up toward the door, but Melinda noticed and patted the bed on her right. Skye hesitated for a few seconds and then sat down while Melinda reached for a couple more tissues.

“You saved me from bolting and running away.” She bunched up the tissues and threw them in the trash can next to the nightstand. “What time is it?”

“It was almost five when I left my room for the bathroom.”

“Phil will be up soon. He will anticipate that I will not be able to handle this and will try to leave before he gets up, so he probably set his alarm for five-thirty.”

Skye coughed and cleared her throat and then spoke. “I think you should leave if you want to. In fact, I think if you’re not ready for this, no one should make you do it.”

Melinda felt a few tears form and pursed her lips together. “But I do need to do this Skye. I’m just having trouble starting. I came in early to start because I couldn’t sleep.”

“Nightmares.”

It was more of a statement then a question, but Melinda nodded anyway. After a few seconds Skye took Melinda’s hand in hers and squeezed. “I can’t even come close to knowing how you feel Melinda, but I’m here. Please tell me what I can do to help you.”

Melinda squeezed back, and a second later she had engulfed the girl in her arms holding her tightly. “Thank you.”

Skye hugged her back, and as Melinda’s arms held her tighter, she snuggled closely into the woman’s embrace. Even when she was close to falling apart, this woman was protective, was so safe and felt so much like home. Skye had never, ever felt that kind of bond before with any adult, that kind of connection of pure trust and love.

Eventually Melinda pulled away and looked at Skye. “You are exactly what I needed. Thank you, Skye.”

Skye felt the tears building and looked up at Melinda. “I’m supposed to be helping you feel better.”

“You did. You reminded me of what I have, of why I need to push on, and why I can’t run away anymore.”

“Well as an expert runaway, gotta say it’s not really a good option. But it is easy.”
Melinda gently pushed Skye’s hair behind her ear, with her hand lingering on Skye’s face. “You’re pretty smart you know.”

“I’ve got this burying feelings thing down. Not really smart, more like necessary.”

“Not anymore.”

Skye looked at the floor and bite her lip again. “It’s getting better, yeah.”

“I’m glad.”

“And for you?” Skye looked up into Melinda’s eyes, searching.

Melinda forced herself to not look away. “To be perfectly honest, today I’m not sure.”

“Yeah, those days suck.”

Skye’s blatant declaration made Melinda smile. “Tell you what though. Having you to talk to helps. Having you not judging me helps. Having you understand that it’s not just a simple thing to trust, to forget, to stop – that helps.” Her voice got lower and softer. “The darkness can engulf you rather quickly, can’t it?”

Skye thought back to her episode in the bath recently. She nodded. “It sometimes can make all the color disappear.”

Melinda focused her eyes intently on Skye. “We need to remember it doesn’t last forever.”

Skye grinned. “Yah. See the colors clearly when we think of the people we love.”

“Like Donnie.”

“He’s blue.”

Melinda cocked her head. “Why is he blue?”

“Cause he’s so smart and cool and collected usually. Sensible. Logical. Likes when everyone gets along.”

“Makes sense. Phil?”

“Oh Mr C. is so yellow. Like bright, blinding yellow.”

Melinda giggled. “Definitely.”

“He’s so cheerful. He’s positive. He’s warm. He thinks the world is a happy place. He wants everyone to be happy. His positiveness is like a bouquet of daisies.”

“How about Jemma?”

“Oh she’s green. Calm, soothing, has the right answers. Tries to not rock the boat. Likes approval. Loyal and honest. Steady as she goes.”

“So you’ve thought about this before huh?”

Skye smiled. “We might have had an English assignment on colors and emotions and personality. Plus if you think about it, it just makes sense.”
Melinda sat back on the bed against the headboard. Skye joined her. “What color am I Skye?” She closed her eyes waiting for the response. Which did not come right away. When it did, she laughed.

Skye laid her head on Melinda’s shoulder and paused for a minute or so. “Red.”

“Angry huh?”

Skye shook her head and smiled. “Nope. Fiery. Full of life. Full of energy. Impulsive. Competitive. Bold. But also doesn’t take anyone’s shit. And yet, would step in front of those you love to protect them, willing to bleed for them.”

Skye peeked at Melinda who was looking at her in surprise. “But I’m not – I’m not – I think I am afraid of – of facing who – who – I am really. That’s not bold Skye. And for a very long time I’ve been sleepwalking through life not full of life. I think grey would fit me best. At least right now.”

“Oh bullshit Melinda. You are so red. Look what you did for me. Some unknown orphan kid comes along and you offer to train me, give me a job, worry about me, talk to me like I matter, help my friends, and now take care of me. You let me see inside your pain and that’s freaking bold. You’re fiery cause you keep fighting. For Phil. For Thomas, For Ryan. For me. For yourself. You’d freaking die to protect those you care about. That’s so red.”

“I couldn’t protect Jamey. I couldn’t protect my own son.”

“I know. I know you think that. I’m sorry. But it wasn’t your fault and sometimes the world just sucks. Sometimes life isn’t fair. Hell, most times it isn’t. But every once in a while, it provides a person who is the color red in your life. And for a while, you get to believe it will get better. For a while, you might even start to believe in yourself because she cares.” Skye’s face was down and she was staring at her feet.

Melinda pulled her chin up and smiled. “I love you too Skye. Maybe I can someday soon think I am red too.”

“You better, you stubborn ninja.”

Melinda pulled her in for another hug resting her chin on Skye’s head. She contemplated for a moment and then spoke. “Strong. Powerful. Intuitive. A good judge of character. Compassionate. Strong willed. Stubborn. What color would that be?”

Skye thought for a second and then answered. “Purple Why who is purple?”

“You are definitely purple.”

Skye pulled back and looked at Melinda. “Me? Purple?”

Melinda grinned. “For so many reasons.” Melinda sat back on the bed and laughed at Skye’s shocked expression.

Skye wasn’t sure she wanted to be purple. She kind of saw herself as a more neutral color. Purple was definitely not neutral.

Skye contemplated what Melinda was saying. She wasn’t wrong. Well except for the strong and powerful part. She knew she could be emotional and it showed when she wasn’t careful. It was always one of the things she tried to hide in the foster homes, how much she really wanted to be accepted and wanted them to care. She did like figuring people out and was pretty good at it. She knew pretty much right away when someone wanted to hurt her. And she’d judged Mr. C as a do-gooder nice guy right away. Same with Ryan and Thomas and Lincoln and who they really were. She was certainly stubborn, sometimes to a fault, and she did like to trend outside the mold. “Yeah some of those are spot on. I do tend to take things to heart and yeah I can be emotional. I judged you pretty good at first take and Mr. C. too. But I’m not at all strong and I am certainly not powerful. So maybe light purple? Like lilac.”

Melinda shook her head. “You are very strong Skye. Powerful in what you believe and who you are. A force to be reckoned with. You are all those things. But in your own way.”

“Wow. So many adjectives. I never knew.”

“Oh did I mention how much of a smartass you are?”

Skye grinned. “It’s my most endearing trait. Don’t you think?”

“It’s definitely a way you deflect Skye.”

Skye frowned. Again, Melinda wasn’t wrong. It was kind of creepy really how well Melinda knew her.

Melinda smiled as Skye shot her a dirty look. “No worries Skye. We all have our ways to cope. Mine for example is to shut people out and hide. Yours is that snark and pretending things don’t bother you when they do. Look at everyone around you. Everyone of us have coping and deflecting mechanisms. It’s just the people that love us the most don’t let us get away with that shit”

Skye looked shyly at Melinda. She spoke softly. “It’s a pretty new experience for me. Someone who actually cares enough to call out the bullshit that tumbles out of my mouth sometimes.”

Melinda smiled. “Back atcha.” She got up and moved over to the window. She sighed and looked around the room. “I made this room into a shrine of sorts.”

That’s- that’s not – a bad - I mean – a lot of people would do the same. Losing a kid has to be the hardest thing a good parent has to go through. Then there are the parents who drop their kid off at an orphanage with a yellow blanket and pink onesie, with no name, no nothing. You’d have done anything to keep your kid, and my parents threw me away.”

Melinda looked sadly at Skye. “Yeah. That sucks.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me maybe they had a good reason. Like maybe they only meant for it to be a short time, and they were planning to come back and something happened to them. Or that my mother was in danger and left me there to keep me safe?”

“Is that what you believe Skye?”

“I used to.”

“And now.”

“Now even if they came back, I’d hate them. If I find them – I want to tell them how much I hate
them. Who does that to a kid? Huh? Who has a kid and then throws her away? I used to think there must be so many things wrong with me for my own mother to just toss me away like garbage.”

Melinda walked to Skye who had stood up and was now pacing. “Well they missed out on knowing you. I am so glad you are here. I am so glad I know you. I am so glad you let me be a part of your life.”

“Look at me Melinda. I’m a screw up. An orphan with a big mouth who hates rules and being told what to do. I have panic attacks and I tried to hurt myself. Why would you even want me around? My parents were right to toss me away. I’m a screw up, I’m a nobody.”

“Stop it. Hey!” Melinda stepped in front of Skye and grabbed her shoulders. “Look at me!”

Skye slowly brought her head up and looked at Melinda expecting to see disgust in her eyes. Instead Melinda’s eyes flashed with concern and care. Skye swallowed the lump in her throat and fought back the threatening tears. “I just – I just want to know why she hated me you know? Why she didn’t keep me? What is so wrong with me that my own mother didn’t want me?”

“Oh Skye. That’s not on you. You didn’t do anything. That’s on her.”

“I can’t figure out what’s wrong with me? None of the foster homes wanted me either. There has to be something wrong with me.”

Melinda’s heart was breaking. Skye looked so small, so much more like scared little girl than the snarky together teen she tried so hard to portray. “I don’t think there is anything wrong with you Skye.”

“I cut myself on your mirror. I wanted to hurt myself. You asked before if I did it on purpose. If I was trying to harm myself. I told you I just lost it and didn’t really know what I was doing. But I did. I wanted the pain to stop. I wanted – I just wanted all the crap to go away and to stop. Do you understand? Sometimes I start thinking about everything and I – I just get pulled in. I can’t stop it. I don’t even want to stop it. It feels like I deserve it, you know. Like I shouldn’t be here.” She took a breath and paused a moment. “Sometimes I don’t want to be here.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

Melinda knew all the platitudes and feel good fluffy words were the last thing Skye needed. So she pushed back going to the jugular instead. “You know if you weren’t here, so many people wouldn’t know what to do. Thomas. Ryan. Jemma. Lincoln. Donnie. Phil. Me. We would all be less without you in our lives. No matter what the shadows are whispering, what the darkness promises – they are all lies, and you know it. I pretty much figured there was far more to what you did hurting yourself than you said. But you needed to be able to trust me enough to say it when you were ready. And here we are.”

“I don’t want to die. I just want the pain to stop. Sometimes I can’t fight it.”

“I know. Sometimes I can’t fight it either.”

Skye’s eyes grew large as she contemplated what Melinda was telling her. Melinda brushed Skye’s hair out of her eyes and gazed back at the girl. “That’s when we need to let the people who love us, take care of us. That’s when we have to put it on them and just let them get us through the darkness. Let them pull us back out of the shadows.”

“I’m so sorry Melinda. You are the one who is at that place today and I made it all about me. I wanted to help you and now it’s all turned around and you have to be the strong one while I’m a
basket case again.”

“This? This is not me being strong Skye. I’m terrified. I’m terrified of saying the wrong thing to you. Of pushing you too hard. Or too soft. Or missing something. The thought that I could hurt you or cause you more pain is unbearable. But if I run, you will run. If I don’t fight against every sense in me telling me to run away, telling me that I am too fucked up to help you – that fear is palpable that I could lose you. What is far more scary though would be watching you succumb to the darkness, letting the shadows continue to haunt you and hurt you. That somehow I missed something and that I helped send you there. This is me terrified of losing another person that I love. Another person I don’t think I can bear to live without anymore. I am a coward Skye, not able to face the fact that my son is dead, is never coming back, that all I have left are fading memories – I am so terrified of confronting that – so I am less scared to try to help you, to make you understand that you are far more precious to so many people than you realize. That you have become a stable reason in my life why I don’t live in those shadows as much, and why I am fighting the darkness. Cause Skye as much as you may need me to be there for you, I need you more to ground me and allow me to focus on something other than my pain. I am not strong cause instead of cleaning this room or making a game plan to do so, or even just going through his things, I would rather deal with your demons than my own. That’s weak Skye. But damnit it’s what I can do right now. It’s all I can do right now.” She moved to the bed and sat down, folding her arms around her body, Melinda started to softly cry.

Skye shuffled to the bed and sat down next to Melinda. She put her arms around her and hugged her tightly. At first Melinda did nothing and then she reached her arms around Skye and put her head on her shoulder continuing to cry softly. After a few minutes, Skye laughed gently. “We are so messed up. But hey – we have each other, right?”

Melinda sniggered. She let go of Skye and reached for the tissue box. She offered a couple tissues to Skye and they both wiped their faces.

“You know you don’t have to do this right?” Skye waved her hands signifying the room. “Mr. C would understand if you’re not ready. This should be on your terms and no one else’s.”

Melinda nodded. “It is. I want to do this Skye. I need to. For so many reasons. One of them is sitting next to me.”

“How? What’s that mean?”

“This is the second biggest room we have. Look over there at that door. Go check it out.” Melinda pointed to a door that Skye thought was an extra closet.

Skye got up and opened the door and gasped. “Whoa!”

Melinda had gotten up and followed. The door opened to another room that was filled with shelves of books, DVD’s and games on one wall. A huge TV was set in one corner with a vast array of game systems hooked to it. As well, off to the side was a huge desk with a desktop computer and printer. A stereo sat in the other corner with huge speakers. Skye walked in and was drawn to the two large doors. She looked out and saw a small balcony attached to the room. Melinda came up behind her.

“This room is over the garage and that balcony looks over the backyard like the one in our bedroom. Originally Phil had this built after he bought the house, so his mother could stay with him. She had retired from teaching and then had gotten sick. He moved her here from Wisconsin. She actually stayed in this room and Jamey’s room was just a storage area. Also, it was where Phil or Bobbi slept when their mother got sicker so they could take care of her better.
“She died?”

“Yes. About a year after Phil and I married. I was four months pregnant with Jamey. After, we – um- we moved her stuff out and made the other room into a nursery. We just decided to add all the entertainment stuff to this room so that as Jamey got older, he could use it. He and Phil would spend hours in here playing games. First just kid games and then video games, and I would read to him out on the patio. Soon he got involved in so many things – baseball, martial arts, and cub scouts, that he and Phil spent less and less time in here, but when they did you could hear them laughing throughout the entire house. I still read to him a couple nights a week. He could read by then but still liked when I would read the story.”

Skye looked around the room taking it all in. “This is a nice set up.” She walked over to the computer set up on the desk. “This is pretty old. But it was state of the art back in the day.”

“We do. After the accident, when Phil couldn’t work, and I stayed home to take care of him, the bills piled up. Our savings was used for the funeral expenses and some of the medical bills. All of them chipped in to make mortgage payments for those months.”

Skye contemplated that information. “Makes total sense to me. You and Mr. C are amazing. Anyway – this room is fantastic. The bookshelves are so librarian of you.” Skye started looking through the books. Did you use the Dewey Decimal System?”

Melinda couldn’t stop the grin from forming on her face.

“Oh my god, you did.” Skye chuckled loudly.

“Hush you.”

Skye knelt down and pulled out a child’s book. She blew a little dust off the top. “This was always a favorite of mine. I found a copy in one of the used books boxes donated to the orphanage. Wow this one isn’t stained or ripped though.”

Melinda looked and saw the book in question was *If You Give A Mouse a Cookie*. “You can have it if you want Skye.”

Skye shrugged her shoulders as she closed the book. “It’s just a kid’s book.”

“I kept my favorite book I had when I was in grade school.”

“Yeah? What was it?”

“*Brighty of the Grand Canyon*. My mother bought it for me when we went on vacation to visit the Grand Canyon when I was ten.”

Skye raised her eyebrows at Melinda. “Brighty?”

“Yeah. A donkey. Well they referred to him as a burro in the story. Don’t look at me like that. It was a good story. The author also wrote stories about dogs and horses. Another favorite is *Misty of*
Chincoteague. It’s there on one of these shelves. The books range from little kid level to classic novels. You like to read, don’t you Skye?”

“Yeah. Once I learned how to. I like to read cause the stories take you places.”

“Me too. I am after all a librarian.”

“Which is still the weirdest and most surprising thing about you.”

The door opened and Phil stuck his head in. “There you are Mel. I thought I heard voices in here. You okay? Oh hey Skye.”

“Hi Mr. C.”

Melinda smiled at him. “I’m better. You gonna make breakfast?”

“Yeah I was just looking for you two. Jemma woke up and couldn’t find Skye and I heard her out in the hall and noticed you were gone and I – well here you both are. It’s only a quarter to six am you know. The sun isn’t even up fully.”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“I had to pee.”

Melinda laughed at Phil’s expression hearing Skye’s comment.

“Oh, well um you guys gonna stay here or....”

“We’ll be right down.” Melinda noting Skye’s pajamas as well as her own. “We need to get dressed. Everyone will over around seven. You better get breakfast started.”

Phil nodded. “You sure you’re okay Mel?”

She gave him a slight smile.” Just go. Clint and Hunter will need a lot of food.”

Phil left the room and Melinda heard the other door open and close. She turned to Skye. “Will you help us with this room Skye? Both rooms? Clean out and help me decide what should go and what you and Donnie might want to keep?”

“Yeah sure.”

“You sure you won’t mind not being with the other kids painting? I know Lincoln is coming over to help.”

Skye looked over at Melinda. She slipped her hand into Melinda’s. “I’d rather stay here and help you.”

“Thanks.” Both Melinda and Skye knew she’d be helping her cope as much as helping her with the material items.

“Well I better go find Jemma. I hope Mr. C. makes pancakes.”

“Probably not. With such a large crew to feed, he will most likely make a huge batch of scrambled eggs with home fries and bacon.”

They both left the room and Melinda noted that Skye did indeed take the hardcover kid’s picture
Skye was stuffing a muffin that Izzy had brought along in her mouth as a few more people arrived. The kitchen was teeming with activity and people. She and Jemma were at the counter drinking tea and eating pastries, while the adults were still arriving and eating breakfast. Bobbi and Hunter, Clint, Mack and Elena, Vic and Izzy were already here. The new arrivals made their way into the room.

“Hey Skye, how are you doing. Hiya Jemma.” Trip made his way over to the two followed by Lincoln.

“Hey guys,” Skye mumbled around her mouthful of bun.

“You both should grab some food before it’s all gone. Mr. C. has eggs in the big pot there, and some home fries left warming in the oven. There’s bread and bagels and some pastries left as well. The bacon’s gone.” Jemma pointed as she mentioned the items.

Skye smiled at Lincoln who smiled back and the two moved over to the stove to fill plates with food.

“I already ate but I never say no to more food.” Trip laughed.

Lincoln nodded as he piled his plate with eggs and potatoes. Both moved to sit next to the girls in the two open counter seats.

Roz had come into the room after the boys and had sat down at the table with some of the other adults. Vic gave her a mug of coffee and she grabbed a bagel from the center of the table and put cream cheese on it.

Ryan came back in the kitchen with Ace and they grabbed a few more pastries and headed back out of the room to rejoin all the other kids in the family room. Everyone was here now with Roz and the boys the last to arrive.

Melinda looked around the controlled chaos and grinned. These were her people, her friends, her family. She’d been surprised to see Mike who had brought Ace along. Also, Mack and Elena were here, another surprise. She leaned into her husband. “Did you call all the reinforcements?”

“Nope. Pretty sure that was Izzy. I mean it’s not a bad thing.”

“No not at all. Those two seem to be getting a bit cozy.” She nodded toward Mack and Elena.

“Yeah love is in the air. Those two and Clint and Natasha. I talked to Clint and he seems very fond of your new employee.”

“Yeah I know. I watched them flirt enough. Good for him. She’s good for him. I’m glad she agreed to take my early classes as well as all her afternoon classes.”

“I’m glad you hired her. Maybe you can hire someone else and give up all you weekend classes.”

“Maybe I will. I’m just glad my two afternoon classes were all okay with me canceling today. The advanced teen class is going to come instead on Monday so I will be late getting home. I told you
“You did. You’re taking Skye along, right?”

“Yeah. The whole day. She wants to continue to clean the place for me and she can do her schoolwork in my office.”

“Speaking of Skye, you two okay? You want to talk about why you both were in Jamey’s room?”

“I was going to leave today and let you just take apart the room without me. Run away from it all. Skye reminded why I can’t do that.”

“How’d she do that?”

“She reminded me that what I choose to do was my choice and that it was okay to grieve and not be okay. Even while putting the past in the past and pushing forward. She also reminded me of who I am. She’s going to help us with Jamey’s room.”

Phil smiled. “She’s something isn’t she?”

Melinda smiled and nodded noticing Roz waving at her. She gently touched Phil’s arm and then made her way across the room to the table. Clint got up and offered his chair to her. She patted him on the shoulder and sat down as he took his coffee cup and headed over to Phil.

“Looks like a sorority party Mel.”

Melinda laughed “More like the morning after. People that stayed over packed in wall to wall trying to find the coffee maker”

Roz snorted. “Yeah, those days were a lifetime ago.” She lowered her voice. “How’s Skye. I see my son has found his way to her side.”

Melinda looked over and sure enough Lincoln was sitting in one of the counter chairs next to Skye. Next to him was Trip and Jemma was on the other side of Skye. The four were deep into a conversation about something fun apparently since Skye and Trip were currently laughing while Lincoln was grinning at Skye. “He’s a good kid. I think he’s fallen for her big time.”

“Oh yeah. But he also knows she’s dealing with stuff right now and she is only fourteen.”

“Sounds like you’ve had a conversation with him?”

“Yes. I’m not really worried. He has a good head on his shoulders. “

“He does. He has been a bit flirty with her and it makes Skye turn a bit red. I am pretty sure he may be the first boy she’s liked that way.”

“He hasn’t dated much himself. Says he’s got too many things to do and think about to be going steady with someone. But you know – the heart wants what the heart wants.”

“You’ve been watching those Hallmark movies again haven’t you?”

“Oh please Mel. You like them too.”

“I do not. They are cheesy. All with the same plot.”

Roz laughed. “So holidays are coming up. Let me know what date works good for you for our
marathon. I’ll check the list and pick the four movies I think will be the best.”

“Five. We can do five this year. Probably over Thanksgiving holiday when Bobbi can get off. She said this year she volunteered for Christmas duty. To let the families with kids have off.

“Okay. Saturday after Thanksgiving would work for me. Five cheesy movies and popcorn. Anything else? Bobbi’s gonna bring the wine and nachos.”

“I’ll bring the Chinese take-out as always. Maybe I can bring Skye.”

“You think she’d like the movies?”

“She will probably do a snarky commentary about mush and tropes and such, eat all the pot stickers, get popcorn all over your floor throwing it at me and Bobbi, and pester all of us for a glass of wine.

“So she sounds like she’d fit right in. Sure Melinda, bring her. Hey how are you? Really?

Melinda watched as the four teens jumped off their stools and went out the door, most likely to join their friends in the other room. She nodded. “I’ll be okay.”

“I mean if you don’t want to be there, Bobbi, Vic and I can handle it Mel. Just let Phil know what you want to keep and we will...”

“Roz. I’ll be okay. I may cry and get upset and need to walk away for a for minutes, but I’ll be okay. It’s time. Skye’s going to help me.”

“Roz nodded. “Okay. Just so you know .... whatever you need, I’m here for you. We all are.”

Melinda stood up. “I know.” She smiled at Roz and then motioned to Phil to get the show on the road. He whispered something to Clint who walked out of the room, appearing a few moments later with all the teens in tow. Izzy gave a sharp whistle which had everyone turning their attention to Phil. Melinda made her way out of the room to grab some fresh air while Phil gave out instructions on what everyone was to do.

Skye was watching Melinda closely. She wasn’t the only one. Phil was too. In fact. Roz and Vic and Bobbi were watching her as well, checking to see how she was handling the room clean out. So far, they’d cleared out the clothing in the closet and in the drawers. They’d bagged them all up and had placed each bag outside the room in the hallway by the wall. Bobbi and Roz were currently going through the shoes while Melinda simply watched. Having just deposited the last of the clothing bags in the hall, Phil was standing in the doorway. He was not doing much just here mostly for emotional support and was in fact moving back and forth amongst all the groups of workers making sure everyone had what they needed and checking the progress.

Clint was in charge of Donnie’s room, with Lincoln, Trip, Jemma and of course Donnie first moving all the furniture out of the room. The bed and dresser and nightstand were going to Vic’s house in her spare room where Ryan was staying. All she had was a daybed and desk in there and was glad to be getting a real bed for Ryan to use. Those items were currently in Clint’s truck to be taken to Vic’s later today. The desk was already downstairs in the spare room along with the furniture from the room Skye had been staying in. The desk in Skye’s room was going to go to Melinda’s gym for Natasha to use. That was also sitting in Clint’s truck. Clint and Hunter and the
two older boys were lining the windows and putting paper down over the rug to protect it from the paint. Jemma and Donnie were sitting in the hallway taking a small break with Leo, Ace, and Ryan.

In the other room that Skye had stayed in, Mike, Izzy, Mack and Elena were also putting paper on the floor and windows before they started painting. Skye and Donnie had already taken all their clothes, shoes and other items and put them in bins and garbage bags which were lined up in the hallway by the rooms. Phil had just been by noting the progress on both rooms was going well, and it was only ten-thirty in the morning.

What Phil was concerned with was how slow the clean up in Jamey’s old room was taking. At the rate they were going, the painting was not going to get done today. They still had the other entertainment room to go through, with books, and boardgames, and video games and movies and Melinda had mentioned that both Skye and Donnie should be there for to be able to pick out what they wanted. Right now, he was watching Melinda who was sitting on the bed watching the other ladies bag up Jamey’s shoes. This was definitely hard for her. Hell, it was hard for him, to see all of his son’s things being taken apart and bagged. He would have done it years ago if Melinda would have let him, and he would have done it quickly like pulling off a bandaid fast, knowing there’d be pain but getting it over with and not dwelling on it. This was definitely dwelling on it and he wasn’t sure that Melinda could cope with the ramifications of all the pain this was causing. He almost wished she had left for the day and that it would all be done when she returned.

He saw his wife closing and opening her fists and he knew that she was fighting her emotions as she sat on the bed watching the others. He was about to go sit next to her and suggest she leave for a while. Before he had taken a step Skye quickly moved from the doorway of the other room to sit down next to Melinda. She pushed her shoulder into Melinda’s side and snaked her right arm around Melinda’s back while taking hold of Melinda’s right hand with her left entwining their fingers together. She laid her head against Melinda’s shoulder. Phil’s eyes shot up in surprise at the ease at which Skye entered his wife’s space and was even more amazed with Melinda’s reaction. She gently pulled her right hand from Skye’s replacing it with her left hand and put her left arm across Skye’s shoulder pulling her tightly to her for a hug while resting her head against Skye’s head. Trying to appear oblivious to what Skye just did, the three ladies began to make small talk, something about Hunter doing something stupid, while they continued to bag sneakers, boots, and shoes.

Soon finished with that task, Bobbi grabbed the two bags and walked them to the hallway, raising her eyebrows at Phil as she passed him. He looked back to Melinda and spoke, “Hey Mel what should we do next?”

“Melinda took a deep breath and then lifted her head. “What do you think Skye?”

“Well what’s in that large blue storage bin there in the left corner of the closet?”

“You want me to look Mel?” Bobbi looked at Melinda and then worriedly at Phil when Melinda stayed quiet.

She finally spoke and actually offered a small smile. “I kept Jamey’s school stuff and artwork and his certificates and other papers in there.”

“Oh cool.” Skye pulled out of Melinda’s hold and stood up, walking to the dresser. “Hey how about we put this baseball trophy and this scout stuff in the bin if there’s room and we can put it in your room. When you feel you want to, you can look through it with maybe with Mr. C. sometime?”
Melinda nodded. "There should be room. You can get his build a bear panda over there on the windowsill too Phil. Put that in the bin. I remember that baseball tournament. He had moved out of T ball and into the grasshopper league and they had that end of the year tournament. His team won that last game to take second place. He was so excited."

"He was." Phil walked over to stand next to Skye and looked at the foot-high trophy. Phil turned back to look at his wife, and he gave her a pained smile. He picked up the trophy and the scout items and walked over to the closet. Skye picked up the panda from the windowsill and joined Phil by the closet. Phil opened the bin and put his items inside then he motioned for Skye to put the panda in too. She did and he closed the lid and turned to Melinda. "Anything else you want in here before I put the lid back on?"

Melinda closed her eyes and took another couple deep breathes. Phil grew concerned and started walking to her, when she sat up, opened her eyes, and then got up and moved to the toy box in the room. Someone had come into the room shortly after the accident and cleaned the entire room putting all Jamey’s toys in the box and everything else in place. Melinda had always thought it was her parents who had done so, but she had never bothered to ask. She reached down and pushed the lid up on the box and looked down at the neatly arranged toys, something that her son never did. He had always had them hanging off the side or laying next to the box, or under the bed or on the bed, or streaming out the hallway. She knelt down and started looking through the toys. She smiled when she found what she was looking for. It was a plastic backpack that held her son’s favorite characters. These particular figures were all around four inches tall. She picked it up and Skye moved to her to look.

"Power Rangers?"

"Yeah. One of his favorite shows." She handed the backpack to Skye. "Could you put this in the bin please." Melinda knelt back down and pulled out two more items and walked them over to the bin handing them to Skye. "These too." She then turned to Phil. "Give the rest to someone who will enjoy playing with them. He kept some toys in the bottom dresser drawer too. I know there is also a box we kept out in the garage. Those Star Wars Lego ships on that shelf and the windowsill can go too. The boxes are folded under the bed. Unless you want to keep them Phil, or Donnie would want them." She made her way to the doorway. "After that, I guess you can take the furniture out. Then we can work on the other room."

Skye moved next to Melinda. "Let’s go get a cup of tea and see if any of those pastries are left, okay?"

Melinda let Skye take her hand and lead her out of the room. She turned back to Phil before stepping out into the hallway and met his gaze as she turned her lips slightly upward and nodded at him. The three women watched as Phil walked to her and brushed his hand over her face. She took his hand and then the two hugged. Skye lingered outside staring at the wall while the ladies turned away trying to give them a moment. Seconds later they parted, and Phil traced his hand over her back before she left taking Skye’s offered hand.

Izzy walked into the kitchen, seeing Skye and May sitting at the table. "Hey guys. Taking a break?"

Skye nodded her head as she was stuffing a piece of cheese Danish in her mouth.
“Yes. Skye apparently needed more food even though she ate two cinnamon buns, about a half dozen muffins, two plates of eggs and homefries and half the bacon earlier this morning.”

Izzy laughed. “I do know Skye enjoys food. I seem to remember her eating a ton of food when she was over visiting Jemma a few weeks ago.”

“I can’t help my metabolism is so fast. Oh and your blueberry muffins were so good. I think I had four.”

“I only brought six of the blueberry ones Skye.”

“Oops.” She tried to look guilty, but her face morphed into a huge grin. “Jemma brought them to school for me and I might be addicted now.”

Izza laughed again and picked up her coffee cup and a plate, bringing them over with her and sat down at the table. “Are there any flavors left?”

“Yeah. See. There are two cranberry left. And two pieces of coffee cake. Oh, and a couple sugar donuts over on the counter.”

Izzy reached for the two muffins putting one on Skye’s plate and the other on hers. “Might as well finish them then. After all, you are too skinny kid.”

Skye offered the muffin to Melinda who waved her hand. She then broke off a large piece and ate it. “Yum. So good.”

Melinda smiled. It did seem like Skye was always hungry. Since she’d been living with them, Melinda had picked up on the fact that Skye could eat a lot. And feeling more comfortable the longer she was with them, she had no qualms about raiding the fridge and cabinets at any time. In fact, both Donnie and Skye seemed to have bottomless pits in their stomachs. Melinda had taken to picking up things she knew both Skye and Donnie liked, or had mentioned in passing. Or she mentioned it to Phil, when he was stopping at the store, and he also was happy to supply the goodies. Skye’s favorites included sugary cereals, red licorice, Hershey bars, cowtails, doritos and cookies and cream ice cream. Donnie’s favorites were oreos, pringles, fruit snacks, snickers bars, Jelly-beans, and Cheez-its. Both heartily enjoyed any dessert that Phil made, as well as his breakfasts. He of course found it endearing at how the kids would rant and rave over his pancakes, waffles and special omelets he enjoyed making them.

Skye got up to put her dishes in the sink and started washing all those in the sink and laying around on the counter.

“Hey Skye you don’t have to do those.”

“It’s cool. I’ve got this. Just sit and chill more.”

Melinda smiled. Izzy took another sip of her coffee and then placed her hand over Melinda’s. “You okay? Anything I can do?” She kept her voice low enough, so Skye didn’t hear.

“Vic send you down?”

Izzy grinned. “Maybe. You know we all love you right?”

“I am surely blessed yes. And no I am not that great, but I am getting through this. I have that one over there, watching my every move – so you don’t have to.”
“So she’s on the job huh?”

“She is. See how she’s pretending to not look over at us every five seconds.”

Izzy glanced over at the sink and saw Skye quickly turn her head. “I do. Vic said she stepped in and seemed to instinctually know what to say to you and how to comfort you.”

“Yeah.”

“Good. But really Melinda if you need to get out of here for a change of for a while for a change of scenery, or go scream in the car while I drive around and play Elton John at high volume, or you just need to beat someone up – I’m game.”

Melinda laughed. “You volunteering to let me beat you up?”

“Oh hell no. I’m volunteering Hunter for that job. I’ll just make him do it.”

Melinda laughed. She then grew a bit pensive. “You know with everyone so worried about me, Phil is kind of getting left to get through this on his own. It can’t be easy for him either and I’ve not been much help to him.”

“Clint.”

Melinda raised her eyebrows. “What about him?”

“He’s on it. He has Bobbi reporting how Phil is doing to him. He will take care of him Mel. You know what Phil means to him, what he did for him.”

“I do. I know what Clint has done for us too, all the things he did around the house when Phil was recovering.”

“Well you know Phil is the only one who stood up for him when he was accused back then, got him the lawyer and helped clear his name and then helped put him through the police academy.”

“I know. I used to tease him about all his strays.”

Izzy snickered. “Now you have your own,” she whispered.

“I do.” She glanced over at Skye who was slowly getting the dishes done, while also keeping an eye on her. Melinda pushed the chair back and got up. Come on Iz, let’s help Skye clean up and then figure out what to get this crew for lunch.”

Fifteen pizzas, twenty burgers and twenty-five orders of fries later, everyone was back at work. Well nearly everyone. Skye and Melinda and Phil and Donnie were sitting outside on the balcony of Jamey’s former room. Clint had ushered them all there after Phil had snapped at Hunter and Mack over something trivial. Phil just didn’t snap at people. Clint had ordered Melinda to the balcony telling Donnie and Skye to go be with them. That had been a half hour ago. Clint had ordered everyone else to the other two rooms to paint. He himself had stayed in the room simply sitting down on one of the chairs waiting.

Melinda looked over at Phil who was very uncharacteristically quiet. It was unnerving. This quiet was not a good contemplative quiet or comfortable silence. The tension in the air was thick and
Melinda felt as though she was going to drown in the despair around her. She was trying to deal with this and knew she was being completely ridiculous about so many things. She’d started crying when Phil mentioned moving all the gaming stuff to the room Skye had been staying in and making it into a true gaming and movie room. Donnie had quickly said he didn’t need any of it and Skye had offered that it was all old technology anyway, and that seemed to make it worse. Melinda had cried harder and Phil got angry as Hunter was starting to unplug wires and Mack had started organizing the games and movies. Phil had lost it and started screaming at them. That had Skye practically tripping over herself to get out of the room, and Donnie backing away into a shelf and knocking some books off it. Melinda had screamed back at Phil to stop scaring the kids and Phil just looked at her and stomped outside onto the balcony. That’s when Clint had taken charge. He’d calmly told Melinda to get her ass out to the balcony and talk with her husband and help each other and then told the kids to help them.

Skye was unsure about what to do. She had grabbed a chair and sat down next to Donnie, a good number of feet away form both Mr. C. and Melinda. She had never seen Mr. C. mad before or lash out. Although she understood keeping your emotions bottled up till you explode, cause she herself did it enough, she never thought Mr. C. would be fighting those kinds of demons too. If she were totally honest, it freaked her out far more than any crying Melinda had been doing. She knew what the pain was that Melinda was feeling and where it came from. Mr.C. was a different story. Donnie hadn’t moved and that also worried her cause he thought Mr.C. was everything. He gushed about him all the time and talked about how much he and Mr. C got along. Donnie was just staring at the backyard and the woods beyond it. Skye’s mouth was dry, and her heart was still racing as she sat and thought.

Donnie was still and had been for a long time. Probably longer than ever, he thought. Skye always teased him that he couldn’t sit still in one place for more than two minutes. Yet here he was not making a sound and not moving. For a while his eyes followed a squirrel as it moved around the edge of the woods and back and forth through the backyard. Probably looking for nuts and other food. It was getting colder and soon it would be cold enough at night to snow. He liked the snow, unlike Skye who hated it. But he also hated this uncomfortable silence that had been going on far too long as far as he was concerned. He finally moved and looked over to Skye. She was staring at Mrs. C. as though she expected her to say something. But to Donnie it looked like Mrs. C. was about to cry again. That sound had ripped his heart. The kind woman who had surpassed Skye’s positive recommendation was hurting and he had no idea how to make it better.

Phil was a mess. His mind was racing. He’d thought this would not be a problem. He hadn’t thought about it and had just forged ahead believing he’d mourned his son and was totally ready to move on. He knew he had scared Skye and Donnie and had looked like a mad man to the guys. Melinda’s sobs and tears had unnerved him and had brought all the feelings he’d tried to bury to the surface. The movies and games in that room are what he and Jamey did together. Jamey loved the Wii system and playing all the sport games with him. But the most fun they had was coming in the room after school or on a Saturday and doing the Just Dance moves or playing Guitar hero together. Melinda did not play video games and it was really the only thing that just he and Jamey had together. It was their special thing, their time together. Seeing all of it, about to get taken apart and dismantled had stabbed him in the heart. His reaction was terrible. He’d scared his two kids and his wife, and he’d scared himself. All this time he’d been so worried about Melinda putting the past in the past, and he’d been holding to it just as tightly. Worst of all, he had no idea how to fix this right now. How to explain his outburst or the pain he was feeling. He couldn’t even look at anyone.

Clint watched as the four people on the balcony did nothing. His father figure, the only man who’d ever stuck up for him when he was young, the one who called him out over and over for his bullshit, and the man he loved so much and considered his family was hurting. Melinda was too,
although he’d seen and been told that the young teen, Skye, had been helping her deal with it today. The boy, Donnie, who he’d gotten to know just the other day, thought that Phil hung the moon and could do no wrong. He had gone on and on about Phil and him playing baseball, and Phil signing him up for indoor baseball instruction, and buying him a new mitt, and sharing his comics with him. The twelve-year old was highly intelligent and Clint could imagine the conversations he had had with Phil who loved talking about history and comics and baseball. Looking out now, he saw the boy looked a bit green around the edges and the girl was pretty much zoned out. Melinda appeared to be the only one who was able to look at anyone else as she kept looking at all of them back and forth but still said nothing. Phil was completely withdrawn into himself and was totally still. That was scary. As he looked at the four of them, he wondered if perhaps he had done a dumb thing pushing them all out to the balcony to solve this. Or at least to get to a point of talking about it. Maybe he needed to go out there and say something. He was about to get up when he saw the boy stand and move over to Phil. Clint sat back down. Okay, maybe they would be okay.

Skye watched as Donnie stood up and walked over to stand next to where Mr. C was sitting. She turned and saw Melinda watching as well. Donnie simply stood there for a bit, and then he put his hand on Mr. C’s shoulder. It took a few seconds but then Mr. C’s hand moved up to grasp Donnie’s hand. Donnie leaned down and said something to Mr. C and Skye watched as Mr. C nodded and then stood up and wrapped his arms around the boy pulling him closer. Donnie was crying. Skye felt the tears trickling down her cheeks and then Melinda was in front of her kneeling down with her arms open. Skye threw herself into Melinda’s arms and held on tight. Melinda rocked her gently.

Clint sat back and smiled.

Chapter End Notes

This long chapter went off and only covers part of one day. So much emotion, I ended up crying while writing the end. Anyway the next chapter is already started and goes thru the rest of the weekend and into the next week. That will cover the kids excursion to the downtown area to investigate as well as news about Thomas and the adults ask Skye to help hack into a few things - what will she find? Thanks so much for sticking with this story.

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