

AN ENHANCED

*Wedding*  
*and other stories*



VICTORIA SUE

# **An Enhanced Wedding and other Stories**

Victoria Sue

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All about this series!

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Is that the end?

# **All about this series!**

**Six years of blood, sweat, tears, and laughter. Of zany characters. Of evil ones. And the sort of book-boyfriends you want to take home.**

This series is all about finding love when you thought you were unlovable.

About family that you made because you were rejected by the one you were born in to.

It's about kids that were thrown away by the people that should love them the most. It's about second chances, even first chances.

But mainly it's about people with visible scars and about those with hidden ones, and the people they fall for that see beneath them all.

And love them anyway.

**Please don't buy this book if you never fell in love with Finn. If you never wanted to shake Talon until he rattled, or pull Gael into a gentle hug and kiss his hurts better. If**

**you never wished that everyone deserved a Vance, or  
wanted to wrap Eli in bubble wrap.**

**And never understood that even when Sawyer was  
invisible, he still needed to be seen.**

*This book is dedicated to my Omega Crew!*



Lisa

ButtonsMom2003

Sasha

Ilona

Sarah

Debbie

Karen M.

Torhild

# A Five Minute Christmas

Talon was going to kill him...again. Finn really hadn't meant to invite anyone else. Their first Christmas Day and they'd promised each other they were going to eat turkey in bed. Just the two of them—all day.

Thanksgiving had been a complete bust. Some cop over in Gainesville had decided to arrest an enhanced fifteen-year-old for threatening a store owner that morning, except it had turned out the kid was just trying to get help. He was mute and lived alone with his elderly grandmother. She was pulling a baked ham out of the oven, and she'd had a heart attack. The kid wasn't trying to threaten anyone, but the store owner had taken one look at the mark on his face—the lightning bolt-shaped scar that all enhanced had—and assumed the worst.

But thanks to the team, they would spend Christmas back together and Hamish was now on speed dial with everyone. Obviously without needing to talk. If his number so much as butt-dialed they would be there.



So, Finn was determined Christmas was going to be perfect. He had all the recipes from Connie, Vance's mom, and she had completely understood when they'd turned down the offer of going to their house for dinner. They'd said they might stop by later, but that was when Talon had pulled Finn into his arms, kissed him stupid until his knees gave way, and gruffly told him they would be spending the day in bed. At least he'd waited until they had gotten to the car to go home before he'd decided to impart that particular news, though.

And Finn really hadn't meant to invite Gael.

They'd all been chatting as they'd gotten out of their uniforms the day before. Talon'd had to go see Gregory to decide on a possible new agent that he absolutely refused to discuss with the rest of the team, and Finn had asked Gael casually if Wyatt, his younger brother, was visiting him for the holiday.

"Nah," Gael had shrugged. "Wyatt's got a new girlfriend. He was invited there."

Finn had paused. "So, are you going to Vance's then?"

"Probably."

But Finn had known instantly that Gael was lying. Vance had a huge family, and the place would be packed. Gael had a tell when he was stressed. He pulled at the bottom of his scarred cheek with his teeth where it touched his lips. The scar his dad had given him when the drunkard had held a twelve-year-old Gael down and tried to burn his enhanced mark off with a gas lighter. Because of the looks of fear Gael got—his mark and

the way the left side of his face was scarred—he hated crowds unless he was in uniform. Finn knew damn well he'd spend the day alone in his apartment.

“We'd love it if you came to us,” the words were out of Finn's mouth before he thought twice, and the shy, hopeful, look Gael gave him made the thought of imminent death at the hands of his boyfriend worth every second.

Not that Talon was an ogre... much. He'd listened as Finn had haltingly told him an hour ago that either he was gonna have to get out of bed, or there was gonna be three of them in it. Talon had kissed Finn on the nose and told him he was a softy. Finn had just copied Talon's trademark raised eyebrow. *He* was the softy? It had been Talon who had insisted on staying with the kid at Thanksgiving. Taken him to visit his grandmother in the ER to see if she was okay, and then gotten him settled at the group foster home near where they all lived. Talon was as soft as Finn, he just hid it better.

“It smells amazing,” Gael had greeted them and held up a bottle of the expensive Dutch vodka Talon liked. Finn had waved them both out of the kitchen, flushed and mildly panicking at what now seemed an insane amount of food to have bought. They'd both offered to help, but he was relieved when he heard the game come on and stared at the mess in the kitchen. In his eagerness to impress his boyfriend, he'd gone a little overboard. Finn grinned—*understatement*.

An hour later, he was reading Connie's instructions on how to make the green bean casserole when the doorbell rang, and

he walked out of the kitchen smiling in shock when Vance stepped into the apartment.

“Hey, buddy!” Gael grinned at his friend, a little flushed as he and Talon had been experimenting with the Dutch vodka and the eggnog.

“What are you doing here?” Finn said in surprise as he nearly tripped over Olly. Talon’s black lab was ecstatic every time one of the team came over, and she’d rushed to greet Vance. Vance shrugged.

“There’s like fifteen kids at mine,” Vance grumbled and sat on the corner of the sectional. The sofa dipped alarmingly.

Talon chuckled. “You mean you’ve got no TV to watch the game on?” Vance grinned and chinked the beer bottle with Gael’s glass as Gael passed it to him. Finn immediately retreated back to the kitchen to peel more potatoes.

“Hey,” Talon followed him back into the kitchen. “This isn’t about you being in here and me being out there. I wanna help.” Talon bent to kiss the back of Finn’s neck, and turned him around gently, taking the potato peeler out of his hand.

The doorbell rang, and Talon groaned. Finn pushed him out. “Go see who it is.”

Finn came out of the kitchen a few minutes later and stopped in astonishment as their boss, Anthony Gregory, was standing there talking to Talon. Finn blinked. The man looked quite good in jeans. Coupled with the peppered gray hair and easy smile he looked about ten years younger than normal.

“Sir?” Finn squeaked in alarm. Shit, were they gonna get called out?

Gregory turned and smiled. “Don’t worry. I was on my way to my sister’s, and I was passing by so I just thought I’d say hello.” He pushed a bag awkwardly under the tree and hurriedly said his goodbyes.

“Hey, Talon?” Gael called and picked up a present from under the tiny Christmas tree. “Santa’s been and you haven’t opened your presents.” Finn flushed bright red. Oh dear God, no. He knew exactly what was in that and the last thing he wanted was to open it in front of anyone else. Gael saw his face and grinned evilly.

The doorbell rang for the third time. Talon just leveled Finn a look as he got to his feet, but Finn had no idea who it was.

*But I really should have,* he thought as Sawyer and Eli walked in. “We’re not stopping,” Sawyer said hurriedly, and Eli dug his hands into his pockets and looked at the floor.

“We were just on the way past.”

Finn gave his boyfriend kudos for not so much raising an eyebrow at the obvious lie and bolted back into the kitchen.

“Finn?” Finn looked up from stabbing the turkey as Eli came in. “Talon says we can stay, but I wanted to check with you.” He looked down at Finn as Finn poked the thing with a knife. “I think it’s dead,” he said dryly.

Finn didn’t look up. He knew Eli was looking at the disaster area that was their kitchen. He was probably going to come

out with some smart comment about Finn being as useless in the kitchen as he was at the FBI. The sound of a faucet being turned on had him looking up, though. He tried not to gape as Eli started stacking pans to wash.

“You don’t have to do that,” Finn stammered.

Eli ignored him and quietly carried on. Within five minutes of working together, they could actually see the counters. “Thanks,” Finn said.

“I never had this,” Eli replied so quietly Finn barely heard him. He flushed slightly. “I don’t mean the food.”

Yeah, Finn had sort of guessed that. “Clearing up a disaster zone?” Finn quipped.

“Can I help?” It was Sawyer. Finn made a quick decision. Trying to do everything was just pushing people away. It was dumb.

“Mash,” Finn said, nodding to the potatoes.

“With cheese?” Sawyer rubbed his hands gleefully and opened the fridge.

“You doing green bean casserole?” Vance asked from the door.

“I was thinking about it,” Finn replied cautiously. “Your mom wrote down how to do it.” His own mom had always just bought pre-prepared shop items.

Vance chuckled. “Mom *thinks* she knows the recipe, but dad has perfected it over the years. You got any bacon?”

Finn grinned as Talon and Gael walked in. The small kitchen was getting kind of full. Talon took over the turkey and Gael pushed Finn down on a chair, producing two beer bottles seemingly from nowhere. One he opened and passed to Finn, one he threw at Vance, who promptly opened it and mixed it into the sauce he was making. Gael started frying bacon under Vance's watchful eye. Talon just cleared up as people finished with things.

"Where are we eating?" Talon suddenly asked, and Finn nearly choked on his beer; their kitchen table was barely big enough for two of them, and Vance was two people all on his own.

"That's easy," Vance said. "We just put everything out on the counters, plate up what we want, and go sit in the there." He nodded to the living room. Finn smiled. He was going to do this elaborate place setting idea he'd seen on TV, but suddenly Vance's idea seemed better.

The meal was easily the best thing Finn had ever eaten in his life. He was perched on the floor with his back wedged in between Talon's legs. The game had finished, and Gael was eyeing the bag Gregory had pushed under the tree. "Hey, this one's got my name on it," and he dragged the bag out. "We've all got one," he grinned and passed everyone a present from the bag.

Talon approved of the bottle of wine he opened. Vance chuckled at the keyring with the tiny free weights attached and the card that said Vance had to try not to break these. Gregory

had been forced to get the team their own gym at the field office because Vance kept breaking all the equipment in the regular one. Sawyer got an Amazon gift voucher and Eli a book on old Harley Davidsons which he was thrilled with. Finn opened his eagerly then blushed a deep red at the T-shirt inside.

Talon grinned and held it up so everyone could see another Superman T-shirt to add to his collection. Talon cleared his throat. “Actually, Gael can you pass me that small red envelope?”

Gael pulled an envelope out from behind the tree that Finn knew for sure hadn’t been there that morning. Gael passed it to Talon, and Talon solemnly handed it to Finn. “Merry Christmas.”

Finn took it with shaking hands. His boyfriend’s blue eyes darkened. He opened the envelope, and a key slid out. Finn looked at Talon in confusion. Talon stood up. “C’mon.” All the team followed Talon as he solemnly walked Finn to the elevator and down to the parking garage. Talon came to a stop next to his monster truck and then moved Finn to the side so he could see what was next to it.

A gleaming blue Mustang coupe. Finn stared, completely unable to find words. Sawyer took the key from him and got behind the wheel and started the engine. He got back out and handed him the key. “It’s a sweet ride.”

Finn swallowed quickly. He’d bought an old Taurus three months ago, and no matter how many times Vance’s uncle

tried to fix it, it had constantly let him down. He'd wanted to be independent as usual, and instead of asking for advice, he'd bought the car straight off the lot. It had been a disaster, but Talon hadn't even once given him shit about it.

"How did it get here?" Finn asked in awe.

"Sawyer drove it here, and Eli followed in his car," Talon answered.

Finn's eyes narrowed, remembering how Talon didn't seem fazed at Gael's arrival. His eyes narrowed. "You knew everyone was coming."

Vance chuckled. "Like we were gonna miss this."

"Besides, we're family." Gael knuckle-rubbed Finn on his head. "You gotta include us."

Talon turned him around to face him. "Do you like it?" he asked, and Finn heard the catch in his breath. Finn smiled and launched himself at Talon, who caught him and wrapped him up in his big, strong arms. All these months he'd tried to be independent. Worried every minute that he wasn't strong enough, fast enough, or even capable enough around his enhanced team, and it was dumb.

They needed to be needed just like him. Every one of them was his family, from Talon, who kept his heart beating, to Eli because he'd included him.

It was the best Christmas ever.



# A Five Minute Valentine

“So, are you going with the traditional flowers and chocolates, or are you being a bit more creative?”

Talon blinked at Gael, having no earthly idea what he was talking about. “Please don’t tell me you forgot,” Gael said flatly.

Talon paused, his mind going a mile a minute. It wasn’t Finn’s birthday. “Fuck,” he swore succinctly. Fucking Valentine’s Day was tomorrow. Gael slapped him on the back, grinning.

“He’s a guy,” Talon said defensively after a few seconds.

“Who’s a guy?” They both glanced up as Vance came down the corridor toward where they were standing outside the medical bay.

“Finn, apparently,” Gael drawled.

“Huh?” Vance looked from one of them to the other in confusion.

“I mean, he’s not going to be into all that stuff, flowers and shit.” But even as Talon spoke the words, he knew it was a lie. Gael just raised an eyebrow. Vance barked out a laugh.

“You forgot Valentine’s Day.”

“You could just take him out for dinner,” Gael suggested.

“When?” Talon nearly wailed, not even attempting to disguise his *I know and freely admit I’ve fucked up* voice. It was nearly ten p.m. They had just finished up a really long day and they’d all eaten take-out earlier. “He’s doing that crime scene forensics course tomorrow, and I have no idea what time he’s gonna be done.”

“There are one or two places that will be open late in Ybor,” Gael mused. “Although, Friday and *Valentine’s Day*? It’ll be a zoo.”

Talon nearly growled in frustration. He hated eating out. Hated the stares, the whispers when they saw the mark on his face. The fear and mistrust many didn’t bother to hide. “Gianelli’s,” Vance pronounced, naming their favorite Italian restaurant. Gianelli’s had a private back room, where they had originally gone to celebrate Doctor Natalie’s engagement. The doc had gotten Gael the private help he had needed when he was diagnosed with skin cancer and had kept it away from the bureau. When she’d asked them to come, they couldn’t say no. They’d all been eating and suddenly heard the sound of raised voices in the main dining room. It had turned out there was a birthday party going on, except the boyfriend of the birthday girl had objected to her ex thinking he could turn up and it had

quickly become a fight. Talon and Vance had just grabbed each man by the collar and hauled them outside. It had been over and done with in a few seconds, and the owner was so grateful his restaurant hadn't gotten wrecked, they'd all drunk complimentary champagne. It was the only place the team ever went to eat out now, not including Betty's Diner.

Talon pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed the number. Of course, it was packed. Three restaurants later he gave up in disgust. Everywhere was slammed. The others didn't take bookings but were expecting wait periods of at least an hour and not knowing what time Finn was going to be back made the two early slots he was offered impossible to accept.

"Can't you stop and get him something on the way home?" Vance asked.

"The truck's in for service. We're both in Finn's." In fact, any second his boyfriend was going to come out of the locker room looking for him. As if Finn had heard him, the door opened at the end of the corridor and Finn came out with Sawyer. Finn was laughing, and Sawyer was shaking his head in amusement. Finn looked up, and Talon met his green eyes. Everything in him soothed instantly. He wanted to do something special. He didn't want to do just chocolates and flowers, and yeah, he'd stuffed up the chance for both anyway because he'd forgotten. Forgot Finn was normal, and he was anything but. Forgot his boyfriend was and would always be the very best thing that had ever happened to him. Forgot he

wasn't supposed to take him for granted. His lips curled upwards in the answering smile to Finn's soft one.

"You done?" Finn said softly and gasped as Talon drew him in close to his body. Finn looked around, alarmed.

"Everyone's gone home," Talon murmured, desperately wanting a kiss.

"Well, we haven't," Sawyer groaned, turning and following a chuckling Vance. Gael threw him a pointed look and then ruffled Finn's hair.

"Knock 'em dead, tomorrow, kid."

Finn's eyes sparkled, all eager. "I can't wait."

Talon smiled indulgently. He couldn't imagine anything more boring than discussing the nuances of directional blood-spatter, but he knew Finn had just bought a book by a famous forensic scientist in preparation for the course and Talon had already been lectured by his boyfriend on the value of it. Apparently, the book – *Forensics for Fiction* – had been written for authors, but Finn had raved about it and had even gotten their boss Gregory interested. Their team didn't have the experience to handle murders in any way, and to be honest, they were having enough problems with the living, but Gregory was trying as hard as he could to plug all the numerous gaps in their training.

And Finn was an asset Gregory had recognized when Talon had been too stupid to. No, he had to get Finn something special...



Talon was fairly pleased with how things were going so far. He'd deliberately turned off Finn's alarm and woken him up with breakfast in bed. Unfortunately just a little too late to have Finn worrying about anything other than ramming down his chocolate chip muffin and racing in and out of the shower. He'd arranged for Gael to pick him up as he was still without the truck. After Finn had disappeared in an eager blur, he showered and was ready for Gael when he showed. Gael had quizzed him immediately when he arrived, but Talon just said everything was in hand. Gael had grinned and called him a lucky bastard. Which he knew.

He had a dozen stops to make when he got his truck back but was waiting outside the training area next to the Tampa PD building when Finn came out of the door. Finn looked surprised when Gael took his keys from him and promised Finn his "baby" would be safe and sound in their parking garage when he needed it tomorrow. Talon steered a bemused Finn to his truck and got him settled in.

He started the truck and turned around. "You thought I'd forgotten, didn't you?"

Finn opened his mouth, then closed it, and Talon smiled at the pink flush that started in his neck. He leaned over and

pressed his lips to Finn's, satisfied when he felt Finn's hands creep around his back. He pulled back and then nearly—for a split second—thought to hell with the plan and wanted to drive Finn home and carry him to bed, but he didn't.

“I hope you're hungry.”

Fifteen minutes later they pulled up outside Betty's Diner. “What are we doing here?” Finn asked in astonishment. Talon grinned and jumped down from the truck and was at Finn's door before he'd recovered from his shock enough to open it. Betty served breakfast and lunch six days a week, closed at 3 p.m., and it was the first place Talon had ever taken Finn to. To be honest, the diner looked closed. All the shutters were down, and it looked like the usual emergency lighting was on when you glanced at the door.

Talon just smiled and clasped Finn's hand, which he almost never did. He led Finn solemnly to the door and opened it. “I screwed up and forgot to book anywhere early enough.”

Finn didn't answer. He was too busy staring at the setting inside. Betty stood beaming, but even Talon was impressed at the table. All the smaller tables that were usually in the middle had been pushed to the side against the booths. The only table left was set up in the middle of the now empty floor. Talon blinked at the snowy white tablecloth and napkins, and the two candles flickering gently. The bottle of champagne he had dropped off earlier was chilling in the ice bucket. There were rose petals sprinkled over the table, and a single rose in a vase next to the candles.

Finn's hand tightened in his, and he glanced at him quickly. The green eyes he loved shimmered as he stared, and then Finn gazed back at Talon and swallowed.

"It's beautiful, Betty. Thank you." Talon said, quietly.

"How?" Finn swallowed, and Talon guided him to the table. Talon didn't answer because Betty was busy serving the soup. Finn inhaled. "My favorite."

Betty beamed. "Of course," and then she sniffed in that *what did you expect* kind of way. Talon's belly growled as he smelled Betty's homemade tomato soup. He'd spent all day worrying about making tonight perfect and hadn't even thought about eating anything.

"How was your day?" Talon said.

Finn's face lit up, and Talon listened as Finn eagerly told him what he had learned. They finished their steak and Betty pulled over a cart with some tiny deserts for them to share, then pressed a set of keys into Talon's hand. "You just lock up when you're done." Finn stood up and threw his arms around her, and she chuckled and left them alone.

It was immediately quiet, and Talon swallowed down his suddenly dry throat. "You would be right in thinking I forgot about Valentine's Day...I did." Talon watched the green eyes he loved widen a little at his pronouncement, but then Finn's face softened, and his smile was back. Gentle, forgiving, and sexy as all hell. He was crap at sharing, but Finn deserved the truth and so much more.

“Normal life stopped for me the day I woke up with this.” Talon gestured to his face, then took Finn’s slim hands in his because he needed the touch. “Grandma and Grandad tried, but after Grandad died I stopped even attempting to fit in.” He shrugged. “I never saw anything worth celebrating.” Finn’s hand tightened in his. “No, that’s not even strictly true. It...” Talon swallowed again, searching for the right words. “It was as if normal life didn’t involve me. Other people had lives. Went to ball games, hell—even dated. So, I didn’t forget exactly. I knew it was Valentine’s Day. I had just stopped thinking anything like that applied to me.”

Finn’s eyes glittered, and Talon brought Finn’s hand up to his mouth and kissed Finn’s palm. He needed a few seconds to cover the suspicious brightness in his own eyes. Talon slid a hand into his back pocket and brought out an envelope. He squeezed Finn’s hand before he let go and straightened the envelope a little before handing it over. Finn’s lips parted soundlessly. “Yours is at home.”

Talon understood immediately. “And I bet you would never have said a word about it if I hadn’t remembered.” Finn would never try and make him feel bad. Finn’s lips curled up into the shy smile he loved. “Open it.”

Finn tore the envelope and grinned when he saw the card. He arched an eyebrow. “This is a valentine card?”

Talon chuckled. “I think it’s a birthday card, but I managed to find one with nothing written on it. He watched as Finn read



the words Talon had written and saw the lump travel down Finn's throat.

"I think this is you, not me," Finn said quietly. "You're the one with the super abilities."

"Come here," Talon ordered quietly, and Finn got up, and Talon drew him close until he was sitting on his lap. Talon gently raised Finn's chin with his finger until their eyes met and held. "Every day. Every day you make me a better person. Every day when I can't love myself, you do it for me. You have the biggest heart of anyone I know, and I don't know how the hell I ever got so lucky that you make room in it for me." Talon thumbed the moisture from under Finn's eyes and captured his lips with his own.

He had gone to five stores before he had found the card he wanted. It had a picture of Superman on it, and Talon could hear the words as he had written them.

"You are my hero. Love is your superpower, and you save me with it every day."

# A Five Minute Bowling

“**H**ow old are you, *five*?”

Finn elbowed his incredulous boyfriend, who was reacting to what Vance had said, and then promptly had to shake his arm out. He really had to learn not to do that. It was like poking concrete.

“You asked me what I wanted to do for my birthday,” Vance replied a little defensively.

“I think it’s an awesome idea,” Finn butted in staunchly, ignoring the dark look Talon sent him.

Talon shook his head as if words were failing him.

“What’s an awesome idea?” Sawyer asked as he walked into the locker room.

“Vance wants to go to a bowling alley on Friday,” Talon repeated slowly as if he still couldn’t believe it.

Sawyer grinned. “I haven’t been to one of those since I was about eight.”

“Exactly,” Talon replied.

“And then we can go get a burger or something,” Finn added, and Vance’s face brightened a little.

“And don’t let him fool you,” Gael, who had followed Sawyer in, said nodding toward Vance. “Junior Gold Champion.”

“Of what?” Finn asked.

“How did you know?” Vance asked and then groaned. “Mom.”

Gael grinned. “Yep, even saw the photos. You were very cute.”

Vance groaned again and collapsed onto the bench, which creaked alarmingly. Finn’s eyes widened. “*Gold* champion?”

Gael waggled his eyebrows. “Three years in a row.”

“Wow!” Finn said in awe.

Vance sighed. “Yeah, then when I turned up for the qualifiers after the last year, I was banned from competing.” He stood. “Was fun while it lasted, though.”

Everyone was silent for the space of a heartbeat, knowing exactly what had happened to Vance in the year between winning and being banned from the sport.

“So, what time do you guys want to meet?” Talon asked and mock-punched Vance on his shoulder.



It was packed. And Finn wasn't sure the poor girl giving shoes out wasn't going to pass out when she looked up and seen their group standing there. It was even worse when Vance stepped forward.

“Umm, I'm not sure we will have any shoes to fit you,” she whispered. Finn thought she was gonna cry.

Vance just beamed. “That's fine, ma'am. I brought my own.”

“*Who has their own bowling shoes?*” Sawyer hissed.

“Us, for starters,” Gael winked and stepped up next to Vance.

Finn was pleased. Despite it being busy, the lane next to theirs emptied quickly, and somehow no one else seemed to want it. Vance rubbed his hands and gently put down the black bag he was carrying. Finn peered over. “What's in there?”

Vance opened it and reverently got out a gleaming black and purple bowling ball. It was huge. Finn doubted he would ever be able to lift it with both hands but cradled gently in Vance's huge paws it looked like a tennis ball.

“Did you win your championships with that one?” Talon leaned over admiringly.

Vance shook his head. “No. It was a present from Mom and Dad after I won the last one. I’ve never used it.” He shrugged. “But it’s my birthday, right?”

Daniel shouted just then. “Finn, come and help me get the beers.” They both walked over to the bar. “You made his day.”

“Really?”

Daniel nodded. “They were talking world bowling championships at one point when he was a kid. Juniors, obviously.” Daniel stepped up to the bar and started ordering.

Finn sighed. Something else a mark on Vance’s face had ruined. He carried the two jugs of beer and Daniel brought the glasses. Vance was standing rubbing his hands gleefully as Gael sat and entered their names.

“Hey, dogbreath.”

Finn’s hackles rose at the derisive words, and he turned, expecting to see whoever was speaking watching their group. He was wrong, but he still didn’t like what he saw. One lane over past the empty one three teenagers plus another kid were playing. He was guessing they were all around fourteen years old. The boy they were all looking at—like he was something one of them had just wiped off their shoe—was a lot younger. Maybe ten, eleven, and seemed completely miserable.

One of the older boys sniggered as the boy looked up from where he was picking up a bowling ball just as a fourth teenager joined them.

“You don’t think you’re actually playing, do you? You haven’t got a partner.” The boy that had spoken originally informed him and bumped knuckles with the one who had just arrived.

“Yeah,” sniggered the only girl in the group. “You’d need the baby rails on.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” the younger one muttered and went to sit down at the small table. It looked like he was the only one without a soda and some chips as well.

“Hey, Matt, these shoes are too small. Go change them,” the obnoxious boy ordered and threw his bowling shoes at the kid. He fumbled the unexpected throw, and the girl rolled her eyes.

“Which is why we won’t let you anywhere near a bowling ball,” she decreed.

Finn blew a slow breath out and caught Talon’s eye. Talon had heard what had been said the same as every enhanced there. Finn only caught Matt’s reply because he was standing close. Finn really wanted to go over and tell them what he thought, but he knew the team wanted to keep their heads down and leave without any fuss. It was a huge ask just getting them all in a public place for Vance’s birthday.

“I need a partner.”

Finn saw Matt gape in astonishment before he even realized it had been Vance that had spoken. Vance stepped up to Matt, smiling encouragingly. “We can either play your buddies, or you can join us?”

Matt still sat with his mouth open, but the girl piped up again.

“Are you even *allowed* in here?”

It was Vance’s turn to roll his eyes this time. “Too chicken to take us on?”

The girl stiffened and glanced—suddenly unsure—at the two other boys. The oldest took a step toward Vance. “Set ‘em up.”

“Set ‘em up,” or *Taylor*, as he introduced himself, was apparently the self-elected leader of the group, although as far as Finn could see he was just a self-absorbed, righteous douche-bag. The girl was called D.Zee which Sawyer immediately mispronounced as Dizzy as often as he could to annoy her. In fact, when her frustration became palpable, Vance intervened with a hand on Sawyer’s shoulder.

They were just kids. Kids that needed a lesson in manners, definitely, but Sawyer was in danger of crossing a line. The quick nod Sawyer gave Vance as he backed off showed he knew that.

They suggested two games, and Talon offered to split the team to pair up with the kids but Taylor wouldn’t have that, as if he had something to prove. Since it would have been ridiculous for them all to play, Daniel took Sawyer, Eli, and Gael to the spare lane and they played a separate game.

That left Vance and Matt, Talon and Finn, Taylor and D.Zee, and C.J and the last boy to arrive—Mike—all playing in pairs. Vance, Matt, Finn, and Talon were one team and Taylor,

D.Zee, C.J., and Mike another. Finn tried not to roll his eyes as Talon went first. Talon had deliberately pulled his strength to be fair to the kids, but he had so badly misjudged it he only knocked over one pin. His second go was a little better, but he still only got five. Taylor snickered and took a ball. Of course, he got a strike on his first attempt and high-fived his team.

“Matt, do you wanna go first?”

Matt gave Vance his best *deer in the headlights* look and shook his head, so Vance took his turn and immediately knocked every pin down. The boys were silent because Vance hadn't smashed them. He hadn't hit them so hard pins had ended up one lane over like Gael had the first time. He had been careful, slow, but incredibly accurate. The smile on his face as Matt high-fived him was infectious.

Taylor bristled, and Finn sighed. He honestly thought he would unbend a little. D.Zee remained quiet, but C.J. and Mike both were soon laughing and joking with Vance. Vance even gave them tips on holding the ball, and they were really eager to learn.

Taylor was the only one who seemed to be getting more pissed off by the minute.

“It's not his fault,” Matt said quietly as he followed Finn's gaze.

Finn glanced back. “Taylor's?” Matt sighed and nodded. Not completely sure what Matt meant, he just stayed silent, convinced more information would be coming. The technique usually worked on the team, anyway.



“He’s my brother,” Matt clarified. “There’s just us now, and my mom works two jobs.” Matt took another breath and looked around to make sure he wasn’t being overheard. Finn didn’t tell him it was likely the team could hear him anyway. Matt was silent for a little longer before he said. “He hates me.”

Finn shrugged. “All big brothers hate their little brothers sometimes. He won’t really.”

Matt nodded emphatically. “He does. It’s my fault Callum got locked up.”

*Callum? Who the hell is Callum?* “And Callum is?”

“My older brother.”

Finn was getting confused. “Older than Taylor?”

Matt nodded. “But just by one year.”

“We’re just gonna get some sodas,” Finn called out to the others and practically dragged Matt with him. They stepped around the seating area and walked toward the counter. Finn paused. “Tell me from the beginning.”

“Callum is like your friends.”

Finn did a mental *oh* and started to understand why Matt was sharing. “He got his scar just before Thanksgiving, but we didn’t care.” Matt stared at the floor. “Anyway, I wanted these Nike’s like Eric Salter had. He was showing off. Saying we were trash. So, I took them.”

“Eric’s?”

“No,” Matt said like Finn was slow or something and looked up at him. “I took them from the store, but I didn’t even get past the door. I set all the alarms off.” There was a pause. “Dumb, huh?”

Finn’s smile was gentle.

“Anyway, I started crying because the security guard was holding me really tight. Taylor was with me, but Callum was waiting outside. Taylor had some money he got for his birthday,” as if that explained why they were there in the first place. “The guard was mean. He was yelling and trying to take me to the office and asking where my mom was. Taylor was trying to say she was at work, but we knew if she got called out, she wouldn’t get paid for the day. But the guard didn’t care, and he was hurting me.”

Finn could understand how it had escalated. “What happened?”

“Taylor went and got Callum.”

*Shit.* “And what did Callum do?”

“He was just going to talk, but the guy went nuts as soon as he saw Callum’s scar.” Matt raised tear-filled eyes. “He had a gun.”

Finn’s jaw dropped. “The guard pulled his gun?”

Matt nodded miserably. “Callum is fast, real fast. He had the gun off the guy before anyone blinked. But then two more guards came and then the cops showed up. They said Callum

was gonna shoot the guard, but he didn't even point it at him, he just held it so it was pointing at the floor.”

Finn hardly dared breathe. “Did Callum get shot?”

Matt shook his head. “Not with a bullet. These cops had dart things.”

Finn closed his eyes. *ENU* He could imagine.

“They took him to prison. No one would believe he hadn't done anything.”

“How long ago?”

“Last year,” Matt took a breath. “No one will listen. They let Mom visit, but it's in New York.”

So, *money*. They were stuck. She couldn't afford to go and miss work or have someone else watch the kids. Finn sat on one of the empty seats and Matt dropped down next to him. “Callum and Taylor were always tight,” Matt explained. “Now Callum's gone, which is all my fault, and what's worse is Taylor has to watch me when Mom works. Taylor won a thing at school for tonight and got free tickets for here. He had to bring me, but there was no way he was gonna let me play.”

It was such a mess. Finn took a breath. “Let's go get the soda. I need to know your full name and where you live. We have a lot of friends that are cops, including all of Vance's family.”

Matt raised hopeful eyes. “You think you can get Callum home?”

Finn tried a reassuring smile. “I don’t know if I can, but our boss knows a lot of people. I’m pretty sure he can help.”

Finn would make sure of it.



Five days later, Finn stood next to Vance waiting for the cop car to pull into the shared parking lot. Gregory had invited Matt, Taylor, and their mom to their offices to discuss getting Callum released. Gregory had called in everyone he knew to help but they hadn’t budged, so Talon had called Senator Bryan Duvall. He’d had to promise a week of his time in Washington to help his campaign, but Finn was going to go with him, and he’d never seen the capital.

He’d made a list.

The senator had even promised them a guided tour of the White House. Talon would be making history as the first enhanced human to ever set foot in there. The senator said it was a P.R. dream.

Amy, Matt’s mom, reminded him of Connie. He was determined to introduce them since Connie was putting together an unofficial support group for parents with enhanced kids. Even Taylor hadn’t said a word of complaint as they had gotten a full guided tour of the field office, and Talon had promised to show him a few hand-to-hand moves in the gym.

Vance's small grunt grabbed Finn's attention from where Amy and the kids were listening to Talon demonstrate the new database of enhanced they were setting up.

"But it's voluntary?" She frowned. "I'm not sure I'm thrilled with Callum being on police files." Then she blushed. "Not that he isn't already, of course."

Gael nodded. "I felt exactly the same, but I was recently persuaded that only greater visibility will keep the kids safe. We recently helped a little boy that was being imprisoned by his father. If Bo had been documented and in school, the situation would either never have happened in the first place or would have been harder to maintain for the ridiculous length of time it was."

Amy's eyes filled. "I can't believe Callum got locked away when he didn't do anything wrong."

"Amy?" Vance interrupted from the window. "There's something I want you all to see."

Amy, Matt, and Tayler rushed to the window just in time to see two cops get out of a patrol car. Taylor sneered but just before he turned away in disgust Finn saw his eyes widen and his breath hitch.

"Callum," Amy cried and pressed her hand to the glass. Of course, the teenager that got out of the back of the car was too far away and couldn't hear her through the glass, but because Vance's brother Chris was one of the cops and it had been arranged, he glanced up at the window, nudged the boy, and pointed for him to look up.

Callum's face broke out in a huge smile and Chris laughed as they both waived. Amy laughed, cried, hugged everyone, and fairly bounced on the spot until the door opened and Chris and Callum walked through. He was mobbed. There was shrieking and crying. Finn ducked his head and felt an arm slide up his back and give his shoulder a squeeze. "I don't think anyone's watching you, you're safe," Talon whispered as Finn drew his sleeve over his wet cheek.

Finn shook his head. "Like you're not just as bad," he whispered, and ignored the raised eyebrow. He'd seen Talon's face when they had gotten the call to say Callum was going to be released. His big tough guy was as soft as the rest of them around kids.

He sighed happily, and around *him*.

Talon accepted a hug from Amy and was dragged over to greet Callum. Vance came to stand next to him by the window. After a few moments, Taylor slid over next to Vance.

"We get bowling coupons from school when we get a high score or do something good." He shrugged. "I got another last week I've not used yet."

Finn glanced away so Taylor wouldn't see his grin.

"Yeah?" Vance replied, equally as casual.

"So, I wondered if you wanted another game? I mean," Taylor hurried on, "Callum and Matt will be going with me so I thought you could bring a team." He suddenly seemed to find

the carpet fascinating. “It would be better with four though, so you can be on our team if you like.”

Vance’s grin was ear to ear, and he nudged Taylor playfully. Of course, if Callum hadn’t chosen that second to come and talk to them, he wouldn’t have managed to catch his brother and save him from toppling over.

Vance rubbed his hands in glee and Finn chuckled. It was nice to have a Five Minute break from saving the world.

# A Five Minute Show and Tell

“**Y**ou want me to go *where*?”

“Don’t say it like you didn’t hear exactly what I just said.” Gael arched an eyebrow at Talon’s incredulous tone.

“But he’s nearly fifteen,” Talon carried on, ignoring the look.

“And?”

“Fifteen-year olds do not have show and tell,” Talon hissed. “I mean, that’s something, like, first graders do.” They were waiting outside Tampa Science Academy on the corner of North Boulevard and Waters Ave. It was a little far from Vance’s mom and dad’s where Liam lived but Liam had just transferred here after a friend of the lieutenant had recommended the school.

It was supposed to be perfect for the budding science geek that Liam now was.

Talon sighed. “Tell me again from the beginning.”

“Connie’s worried Liam’s not settling in.”



“Why?”

“Because he’s done a personality one-eighty in the space of four weeks since the semester started.”

“Meaning what?” Talon asked sharply. He hadn’t seen Vance or Sam for what seemed like ages, would, much to Talon’s disgust, Gregory had loaned them out to the DEA. They were due back very soon though.

“Meaning he’s gone from being crazy excited about everything to spending most of the time holed up in his room. Connie’s real worried.”

Talon gazed at the stream of students that had just burst out of the building. “Which I don’t like obviously, but what the hell has that got to do with show and tell, or more importantly me?”

“He’s not making friends apparently, according to Finn.”

Talon brightened. “Exactly. Finn would know what to do.” It was only because he was doing a school visit this afternoon that he wasn’t in the car.

Gael shook his head. “Nope, it needs to be you.”

Talon glanced at Gael. “Would that be because I have a mark on my face and Finn doesn’t?”

Gael beamed. “You’re getting the idea, boss.”

Talon growled. “You still didn’t explain.”

“School science project, right?”

Talon groaned. He had hated those.

“All the kids have to get together in small groups and work on a project for the *advancement of humanity*.” Gael used finger quotes. Talon scoffed.

“Not much, then.”

“I know, Connie says the teacher is quite... *earnest*.” It sounded like a complete load of crap to Talon, but what did he know.

“Anyway, most of the class has gone for things like recycling, etcetera. You know the type of thing—”

“Because if we don’t look after the planet there will be no humanity?”

“Exactly.”

“But why does that involve us?”

“Because,” Gael said, dropping his voice lower even though they were on their own, “Liam hasn’t been asked to join any groups.”

Talon shot a look at Gael. “Are you telling me he’s being deliberately excluded by the other kids?”

Gael just looked at him resignedly. “And I’m sure you can imagine why.”

“And the teacher hasn’t said anything?”

“Connie says no. Liam was put in a group, but the others made it more than obvious he isn’t welcome. Liam begged her not to tell the teacher because he thinks it will make things worse.”

“Which it may.” Talon agreed. “Are there any other enhanced kids there?”

Gael shook his head.

Talon blew out a breath, wishing Finn was here. Finn would know exactly what to say to Liam. “He’s coming.” Talon saw Liam break away from the kids heading toward the buses. Connie had told him this morning they were picking him up from school. “So, I’m guessing you want us to help Liam come up with some sort of project? When’s it due?” Talon asked, his eyes taking in the way Liam kept his head down even though he knew he’d seen the car.

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Talon said incredulously. “How the hell are we gonna come up with a project for tomorrow?”

Gael grinned just as Liam got to the car door. “Really Talon? The Advancement of Humanity?” He chuckled. “We’re not going to come up with a project. You’re actually gonna *be* the project.”



Talon had no idea whether to look intimidating toward the little shits that had given Liam hell for four weeks or to look like he even knew half of what Finn was talking about.

*Genetic Determinism.* Finn and Liam were just warming up and he had twenty-five fifteen-year olds and their teacher—Miss Kelly—completely spellbound.

It might have been the science—that was certainly impressive—but Talon personally thought it was the flames dancing from his fingertips as Talon held his hand up that was tipping the balance in Liam’s favor.

Finn was happy to answer questions but had directed the first few toward Liam, who probably knew far more about their unit than he should. No, scratch that. He *absolutely* knew far more than he should, but they all trusted Liam to keep quiet. Eli’s abilities were documented and the fact that Talon now had some of their team’s abilities had also been reported. It was impossible to hide when he had been present when some nutcase decided he was going to bring a gun to a fist fight outside a high school Finn had been visiting. Talon had been picking him up because his car was in the shop and had seen the guy pull his weapon over a stupid-ass fight about parking spaces of all things. The weapon had been metallic shavings a few seconds later but at least thirty parents and students had seen what Talon did. He was just very careful never to demonstrate Sawyer’s other ability. Being able to walk through brick walls wasn’t something he really wanted to see on Fox News.

“It’s not a project, though,” some kid sat at the back mumbled to his buddy.

The other kid nodded. “He’s a foster kid. I heard his old man was some psycho that was put away for blowing something up.”

“Liam?” Talon interrupted. “You missed the question that,” he quirked an eyebrow at Miss Kelly and pointed to the two students who were sitting at the back.

“Philip and Tomas,” she supplied as both kids sat bolt upright at hearing their names.

“That Philip and Tomas asked,” Talon carried on, not missing a beat as both their eyes grew wide at the spotlight shining on them. He glanced at Liam. “They’d heard that your dad made great discoveries with tectonic energy and wondered how that came about?”

Liam practically lit up with enthusiasm and while being careful not to mention his own ability, went to great lengths in describing how to harness the power of earth. Even Talon was impressed, despite having heard it all before. And then when they were winding down because the whole point of Talon being here was so Liam could make friends—not so Talon could score points with children, satisfying though it may be—he bent toward Liam while Finn was talking. “Go with me on this, Liam.”

He cleared his throat as Finn finished. “Liam actually asked me if he was allowed to arrange a small tour of the facilities we have at the FBI headquarters. I can allow maybe a couple of students and I suggested we make it a competition for the best question. Liam says, and I agree, that Tomas and Philip

can come and two more.” He looked at Liam, who was looking back at him with far more understanding—he thought—than any fifteen-year-old should have, and shrugged.

The teacher immediately perked up even more and suggested two more students who both smiled eagerly at Liam.

An hour later, Liam was given permission to show the class the Lenco, which obviously Talon had made sure they rocked up in. It was nearly lunchtime before everyone was done and Talon had been very satisfied to hear a few of the kids ask Liam if he would go to lunch with them. Miss Kelly directed them all back inside and gave Liam permission to say goodbye on his own.

“Thank you,” Liam whispered and flung his arms around Talon’s waist. Finn beamed and Talon rolled his eyes, pretending it was no big deal, but he hugged Liam back just as hard.

He shoved Liam back and looked at him. “So, what did we learn?”

Liam smirked. “That enhanced have exceptional hearing?”

“No!” Finn scolded, laughing.

Liam broke off from Talon and gave Finn a hug. “That if I have any problems, I should just tell you guys.” he added quietly.

“Exactly,” Finn sighed with relief and they both watched as Liam hurried to join the new friends that were waiting for him.

“You big softy,” Finn said and prodded Talon’s bicep.

“Mmm,” Talon replied noncommittally, then turned to the Lenco. “I could get on board with this school thing.”

“You could?” Finn asked, looking hopeful.

He nodded, trying not to grin. They didn’t have to be back at the office for an hour and he *definitely* had some homework he thought Finn could help him with.

# A Five Minute Proposal

It was Thursday. It wasn't *just* Thursday though, Talon thought to himself as he stared out of their bedroom window. It was also their second Valentine's Day together. Finn had loved the meal at Betty's last year, but this year he was going all out. It wasn't going to be last minute or rushed; it was planned with precision down to the finest detail.

Absolutely nothing would go wrong. Talon simply wouldn't permit it.

His fingers clenched around the small velvet box in his pocket. Sizing the ring to fit Finn's finger had been an exercise in frustration, and in the end, Marie had asked Finn to help her choose an outfit for the Valentine's dance she was attending. Finn—of course—had taken the request seriously and Marie had taken him into all the accessories shops for something to match her newly colored pink hair. And Finn being Finn needed no encouragement.

Getting Finn to wear matching pink jewelry so she could see what it looked like on a larger finger—a gift for her boyfriend



—was a piece of cake.

Talon had booked a table at Arabella's seven months earlier, and it was only because the lieutenant—Vance's dad—knew the manager that he'd been able to do that. The restaurant had Valentine's tables booked out sometimes up to two years in advance.

Finn knew they were going out, but there was no way he would expect this. He'd even arranged for Gregory to keep him a little later so Talon could get home first and make sure everything was ready. The champagne was on ice, and his brand-new suit was laid out. Talon looked at his watch. Finn would be leaving work now. Another ten minutes and he was going to run a bath.

Talon chewed his lip and took a quick glance around the apartment. He had something else to show him as well and patted his other pocket. The realtor had been working around the clock for him. Talon was sure Finn was going to like the house. Olly would definitely like the yard, but he'd have to wait and see. Of course, if Finn didn't like it, they would look at something else. Because as far as he was concerned Finn could have whatever he liked, and if that was a family home Talon was all in.

The doorbell surprised him and he checked his watch again. Then felt stupid because there was no way Finn would have rung the bell. He walked to the door and swung it open without thinking about it and gaped at the man standing in front of him in fatigues. "Richard?"

To say Talon was stunned at seeing his older brother was an understatement. He stepped back automatically to let him in, but Richard didn't move, and Talon paused, discomfort crawling up his spine. He recognized the defeat he saw in Richard's face because of the number of times he'd seen it on his own.

Richard was four years older than Talon. There was only a year between Richard and Ethan and growing up, Talon had always paired up with Sam, his younger brother by one year. Or, as much as their mother allowed it, because setting up one brother against another had been a favorite pastime of hers and obviously that was before he woke up to the worst day of his life, and...

Talon swallowed. Because no, he didn't think it was the worst day of his life. Not anymore. And the man who was on his way home had a lot to do with making a lot of days the best instead.

“Are you coming in?” he asked calmly.

Richard met his gaze. “Am I welcome?”

Talon nodded and stepped away, leaving the decision up to him. He was mildly surprised that Richard had acknowledged their general dislike for each other. A long five seconds passed before he heard Richard step inside the apartment, and Talon released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Richard dropped the bag he'd been carrying with a thud and Talon switched on the coffee machine. “It seems odd, Gran not being here,” Richard said wistfully. The apartment had been

left to Talon when his grandma died. She'd been the only one in his corner for a lot of years, and never cared about a scar on his face.

“You home on leave?”

Richard was doing the family ‘service requirement.’ Someone had to be in the military to fit in with his mother’s political aspirations. For a long time, Talon had wanted that, but obviously that door had slammed shut in his face as well. Richard had seemed to be doing well, though.

“I’m out,” Richard said, and Talon did a double take.

“What, like for good?”

He nodded.

“Does Mother know?” And Talon could have kicked himself for the question.

Richard’s smile contained no humor. “Not yet.”

Talon narrowed his eyes. “And I’m assuming that’s why you’re here, and not at a fundraiser?” His mother’s political aspirations were a given. They’d all grown up with them. Talon had thrown a wrench in them by becoming enhanced, but his dad had committed the ultimate crime by dying.

Talon got out the cream, but Richard held his hand up. “Black for me.” That was different, but Talon wasn’t surprised, he guessed. Cream and sugar weren’t a given in some of the places Richard had served. Richard would never believe it, but Talon had followed his career.

Talon nodded to the seat next to the small table. Everything was ready for Finn, and he still had a good twenty-five minutes before he was home.

Talon was still stunned Richard had chosen to come here. Of all the brothers, Richard was a momma's boy. They had tolerated each other through adolescence but when Talon got his mark, Richard had treated him like it was a personal affront. Richard had gotten dropped from the swim team, and Talon knew it had been because of the freak in the family. Of course, he hadn't known that until later. He'd been too busy being locked up in the psychiatric facility mommy dearest had put him in.

"So?" Talon prodded.

"I didn't leave so much as I was pushed."

Talon frowned and sat down at the small table. "What do you mean?" Richard was top officer material. He'd had that shoved down his throat so many times growing up, it wasn't something he was likely to forget.

"I did a tour in Syria." He shrugged. "It didn't go well."

Just then, Talon's door slammed open. It was little Sascha from next door with Olly, and she was squealing and laughing. It took Talon a second, but Richard jumped, whirled, and had his back to the kitchen wall in less time than it took Talon to even realize Sascha had run in as usual without knocking.

He stood casually and greeted Sascha, smiling and thanking the little girl. Sascha was gone ten seconds later in the same

whirlwind fashion. Olly went straight to his bowl. Talon went back to his chair. “Neighbor’s kid. They all walk Olly for me.”

Richard nodded stiffly and came back to the table, but Talon could see the pulse beating wildly in his throat. It didn’t take a genius to know more had happened to Richard than he knew, but they weren’t close anymore, if they ever were, and he wasn’t sure Richard would even tell him if he did ask. Talon looked at the clock and frowned. Finn would be home in fifteen minutes.

“Are you going out?” Richard had followed his gaze.

“Yes, I’ve got a meal booked with Finn.”

Richard blinked. “Of course, its Valentine’s Day.” He nodded to himself, stood, and bent to pick up his bag from the floor.

“Where are you staying?” Talon asked, hating to chase him out.

Richard shrugged and Talon could have bitten his tongue. He was clearly hoping to stay with Talon. “I have a spare room,” he said without missing a beat. “We’d love to have you.”

Richard arched an eyebrow in such apparent disbelief that Talon grinned. They’d never been close but that was their toxic upbringing. Their family motto should have been ‘every man for himself.’ Unless it was his mom, and then everyone danced to her tune. Talon was suddenly so sick of fighting with his brothers. “If Finn finds out I let you leave, or you stayed somewhere else, I’m gonna be in a boat load of

trouble.” He fingered the small box again and took what he hoped was a calculated risk. “I have something important to ask him tonight and I need him to say yes.”

Richard’s eyes widened when he caught Talon’s meaning, and Talon practically saw the tension draining from Richard’s shoulders. “Good for you,” he said quietly, which was the very last thing he expected Richard to say. Talon stood up.

“Come on. We’re going out at seven, but the fridge is full, or you can order anything.” He pointed to the left kitchen drawer. “All the delivery menus are in there.”

Richard hesitated again. “Sorry. I should have gone to get a room.” Talon shook his head. He wanted to ask the obvious, like why he hadn’t gone to Washington—to Mom’s—but he had a feeling that was the start of a very long conversation he didn’t have time for tonight.

“Are you sure you don’t mind us going out?”

“Are you kidding me?” Richard asked. “I turn up uninvited after barely speaking since... well, for twenty years... and you don’t throw me out?” His eyes glinted with moisture, but he dropped his gaze. Talon swallowed down his tight throat. He meant since Talon had gotten his scar and their dad died. But Richard had only been fifteen and it hadn’t just been Talon who had felt the fallout.

“Hey.” Talon put his hand out. He wasn’t a hundred percent sure Richard was doing hugs right at that moment.

Richard clasped his hand and squeezed, nodding, but he didn't reply. Talon turned and walked into the spare room, fishing his phone from his pocket when it rang, frowning when he recognized Vance's number. "Hello?"

"Talon, it's Finn."

Talon's heart stopped. He could practically feel the thing slam on the breaks. "What?" he clutched the phone and Richard paused, hearing Talon's strangled tone.

"Finn got carjacked. He's on his way to Tampa General..." But Vance's words faded. He didn't hear a thing after "Finn got carjacked." Richard took the phone off him, said a few words to Vance, and before he knew it Richard had taken his keys and was pushing him out of the door.



Finn raced out of the elevator toward the parking lot. He couldn't believe Gregory had kept him late. He loved Jacob, Vance's brother, but why Gregory needed Finn there at a meeting with Jacob's district about a group of carjackers was beyond him. It was only technically FBI because they'd started in South Carolina, moved into Georgia, and were now in Florida, but even then, the reason the team had been asked was because there was a possibility that an enhanced was involved.

The last incident had happened at a stop sign and as the driver had pulled up, a hooded man had simply opened his door. His *locked* door. The driver had been yanked from his car before the carjackers had gotten in and driven off, not realizing his three-month-old son was strapped in the back seat. The baby had been dumped at the side of the road a mile farther on, and it was only because a lady was walking her dog on what had been a pretty empty road that the baby had been found quickly and was okay.

Finn shuddered to think what might have happened.

He had so wanted to be home before Talon tonight. He had everything planned. He'd stayed at home this morning to marinate the steaks and prepare the salad, on the pretext of needing to talk to a principal he was helping with three new enhanced kids starting there next semester. He'd hidden the candles along with the wine and the all-important small velvet box. All he needed to do when he got home was put the potatoes in the oven, set the table, and run them a bath.

It was going to be perfect. And nothing—absolutely nothing—was going to go wrong. Finn, of course, had his fingers crossed the whole time he was telling himself that, and was in so much of a hurry that he didn't even pat his mustang coupe before he got in, which he always did. He'd had a professional wax done on the blue paintwork yesterday and it looked especially good.

Finn drove out of the lot, using his card to get the barrier to lift, and headed for home. Now that he was headed home,



nerves kicked in. He knew Talon loved him—absolutely loved him—but he wasn't sure that translated into actually marrying him. He'd dropped a few hints after their last case when Vance and Sam had kinda sorta promised to get married, and he knew Gael and Jake were talking about it, but Talon had simply shrugged and changed the subject.

Finn slowed at the crossing. Did that mean he didn't like the idea? Oh crap, what if he was making a huge mistake? He'd even bought the ring, and he had his eye on a nearly identical one for himself with the same beveled edging, but with two small inlaid diamonds. It was very similar to Connie's which he'd admired what seemed a hundred times lately. Even Connie had taken the hint and practically shoved it under Talon's nose, but he hadn't seemed to notice.

Really, some people were simply oblivious.

The traffic edged forward. Leaving later had meant if he didn't go the back way, he would be stuck in rush hour. In fact, he didn't come this way often. The fancy neighborhood didn't like it to be used as a short cut, and there were slow speed zones that made it a nightmare people usually avoided. He normally liked looking at the big houses and expensive cars but today he was on a mission.

Finn slowed as he entered a fifteen-mile-an-hour zone and comforted himself with the fact that fifteen miles an hour was probably faster than the line he would be stuck in right that moment on 275. A small truck pulled out of a side street just in front of him and he had to break a little.

He tapped the steering wheel as the truck slowed to a stop. What if Talon hated the ring? Although, that was easy—they could change it—and he wasn't worried about the actual jewelry, just the promise it involved. Finn frowned, slightly irritated, as the van's break lights came on again and both back doors swung open.

Of course, he was a little more than irritated at the masked gunman pointing what looked like a Beretta 92FS tactical pistol at him.

“Keep them fucking hands where I can see them.”

Masked man number two opened his door like it hadn't been locked.

Finn nearly closed his eyes in horror. If he survived this, Talon was going to kill him.

“Get out.”

Finn glanced to the side. “You really don't want to do this.”

The man reached in and yanked Finn out of the seat so fast he stumbled, making his jacket flap open to reveal his Smith and Wesson M&P M2.0 compact.

“Gun.” Man number two forced Finn's arms behind his back just as a third man got out of the van. The third one—also masked—came straight up to Finn and took his gun and his wallet.

“Shit,” he swore as it opened on Finn's badge. “Fucking feds.” He tossed Finn's wallet on the ground.

Man number one pushed the gun under Finn's chin. "Don't matter. One less fucker on the street."

Finn heard a car approach—correction, he heard Eminem being blasted loud enough to be heard in space and watched as a teenager drove a Lincoln Navigator toward them, utterly oblivious to the three masked men or the guns. If Finn could have moved to roll his eyes he would have.

"Two for one, Mikey?" man number two crowed.

"No fucking names," number one—Mikey—snarled out and Finn had a moment of *déjà vu*. Except he should have been in a bank...

Finn saw the exact moment the teenager realized what was going on as he looked up when he had to slow down for them, just as man number one raised his gun, and in a move worthy of every *Die Hard* or *Lethal Weapon*—or even *Fast and Furious* with how quick the kid threw it into reverse and accelerated backwards—the Navigator disappeared a hundred times faster than it had arrived.

"Fuck." Mikey fired. Finn was pretty sure he hit a tire, but the car was still going and disappeared around the corner. Finn just hoped the kid was both okay and right now on the phone to the cops.

"Get the car," Mikey barked out and man number three slid behind the wheel, and the engine died. Completely shut off. Finn tried not to groan audibly. Adam had done this thing to the electrics whereby the computer—Gael's handiwork—knew if an unauthorized driver got behind the wheel. As soon as the

man had touched the steering wheel it had read his partial palm print.

He pressed the start button and a fancy voice—Finn had requested Tom Hiddleston—because *of course*, calmly but authoritatively told the driver he didn't have the permission of Special Agent Finlay Mayer to drive his vehicle.

*Even after two years, being called special agent never got old.*

“Get the fuck in and start the fucking car,” Mikey ordered, and the third man got out. With his hands shaking and the gun very firmly pointed at his head, Finn did so. Of course, as soon as he got out it stopped.

“He'll have to drive,” Mikey yelled and gestured for Finn to get in again.

“Are you fucking crazy?” the third one shouted back. “I'm not kidnapping a federal agent. That shit gets you the chair.”

“Or at the very least life,” Finn supplied helpfully, knowing the longer he stalled the more chance he had of the cavalry showing up.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mikey yelled in his face again, and paused just as they all heard the distant sound of a siren.

“Fuck it,” man three snarled and ran to the van.

“What the fuck?” Mikey shouted and, unbelievably, aimed the gun away from Finn and pointed it to the other gunman. “Peach, I swear we're not leaving—”

But gunman three—Peach—took no notice and yanked the door open. The second guy decided life was getting way too complicated and elbowed Mikey just as he aimed for Peach. Mikey’s gun went flying and landed right at Finn’s feet. Finn obviously bent down to grab it, just as Mikey decided to kick it away.

Except he didn’t get the gun.

He got Finn.

His size *whatever* boots connected squarely with Finn’s temple and bang—Finn was out cold.



Talon raced into the emergency room, quite prepared to murder anyone who came between him and finding out where his boyfriend was. Jacob shot to his feet, hand outstretched. “He’s in there.” He pointed to a double door.

Talon raced to the door just as a doctor pushed it open and put up a hand out to stop Talon’s forward momentum. “You can’t—”

“FBI,” Talon interrupted and flashed his badge. “Agent Finlay—”

“Is in radiology,” the doctor finished, which gave Talon pause.

“How is he?” Talon wanted to grab him by the neck and shake him to get the words to tumble out.

“Concussion, no fractures. We’re just doing an MRI to check for bleeds as a precaution. He was out for a good ten minutes, which is a fraction too long to be comfortable.”

Talon swallowed his nausea down. MRI? *Bleeds*? “Can I see him?”

The doctor frowned. “His next-of-kin will have to be informed.”

“I’m his next-of-kin. Talon Valdez. You have me on file.”

“This encyclopedia?” The doctor waved an iPad at him and smiled. “Agent Mayer is a frequent flyer.”

Talon ground his teeth. He may have even growled. “I just want to know he’s okay.”

“My colleague Dr. Henshaw is in there. If the MRI shows a bleed, he will go straight into surgery.”

Talon practically felt the blood drain from his face, and he was grateful for Richard’s arm suddenly appearing.

“Hey, come on, let’s sit. They won’t be long.” Talon let himself be led back and Jacob and Richard introduced themselves.

“What happened?” Talon asked.

“What happened is that Agent Finlay Mayer is getting officially credited with single-handedly catching the group of

car-jackers three states worth of law enforcement have been unsuccessful at finding,” Jacob said firmly.

Talon closed his eyes, half in exasperation, half in terror.

“Talon?” Talon opened his eyes as Gael rushed in, closely followed by Vance, Sam, and Sawyer. “What the hell happened?” Gael demanded and Jacob told them. Apparently, Gary “Peach” Cressley—he came from Georgia—wanted nothing to do with kidnapping any sort of law enforcement officer and explained everything that had happened in great detail, including who Michael Davis and Thomas Richman were. Thomas Richman was the enhanced they’d never come across before with the electrical ability.

“Talon?” Talon opened his eyes to see Jeremy Hollis, the nurse at Tampa General who knew them all.

“Jeremy?” Talon leapt to his feet in relief. “How’s—”

“He’s conscious. Asking for you.” Jeremy looked at everyone. “Just Talon guys, sorry.”

“What about the scan?” Talon followed him through the double doors.

“Dr. Shaughnessy is looking at it now. He said I could get you and he’ll be in to talk to you both in a minute.” Talon more or less knew where Finn would be, but he still obediently followed Jeremy. “He’s going to have a black eye. Keep your conversation simple. He’s woozy, and not fully aware yet.”

Jeremy pulled the curtain back and nodded to the other nurse who was recording something on an iPad, but Talon barely

registered her presence. He was too busy looking at the man who had captured his heart and held it together for the last two years. It would break in a million tiny pieces if he didn't have Finn. Talon sank down in the empty chair he assumed was for him and took Finn's small hand. Slender fingers that meant Talon had bought him a special gun with a compact grip. He gazed at Finn's pale face and noted the redness forming on his cheek bone.

“Hey.”

Talon focused on the gorgeous green eyes blinking lazily at him. “Hey yourself,” he whispered.

“What happened?” Finn mumbled but his eyes were sliding shut as if the effort to keep them open was too great.

“You caught the bad guys,” Talon replied and carefully brought Finn's hand up to his lips and kissed his knuckles.

Finn smiled without opening his eyes. “Yeah? That's 'cause I'm”—he stopped—“a cop,” he finished lamely. Talon's heart threatened to claw up his throat. He hadn't said *agent*. Like he'd forgotten what he was.

Talon opened his mouth to tell him to rest and everything was going to be okay when the curtain opened, and another doctor, presumably Dr. Shaughnessy stepped through. “Good news. No sign of any damage except for the concussion. He'll be moved to a single room shortly. I want him to stay overnight as a precaution.”



“No,” Finn protested, opening his eyes and glancing at Talon. “We have to go home. It’s Valentine’s Day.” His breath caught and his eyes filled. “We have to go home,” he repeated and clasped Talon’s hand tighter.

Talon smoothed the hair away from Finn’s eyes and took a breath. “I don’t need to be at home to tell you how much I love you. How my life finally started the day we met, and how you keep my heart beating every damn day.”

Finn smiled. It was lopsided, and he could tell Finn was valiantly trying to stay awake, so Talon stood and leaned over, brushing the gentlest of kisses on his head. “Go to sleep. I’m not going anywhere.”



Finn watched Talon for quite some time before he stirred. It was ass o’clock in the morning, before even the damn birds had decided to wake up. He was okay though. Finn’s head had hurt like hell, but he’d only had the regular painkillers and it had settled to a throb he could cope with. The team had all been in individually to check that he was okay, and he loved them to death for staying. He’d also been very interested to meet Richard, Talon’s brother, and he had assured him he was glad he was staying with them.

He'd also noticed Sawyer glance at Richard surreptitiously when the man wasn't looking, and wasn't *that* interesting.

Finn absently wondered what his hospital bill would be this time, and acknowledged it was a good thing he wasn't paying. Maybe the hospital maintained some sort of reward point system, because really he was keeping the people here employed. Hell, Tampa General should be paying him by now. He chuckled silently, not wanting to wake Talon up.

He still had his ring box. Jeremy had pressed it into his hands sometime around two in the morning when he had gone off shift and Talon had been asleep. Fuck, but the man was so beautiful, with his gorgeous blue eyes that softened when he looked at him, and the blond hair that was really too long but that Talon loved Finn to take hold of and hang on to while they made love.

Finn's breath must have hitched a little and because Talon was so attuned to him his eyes shot open. "Finn?"

Finn took his hand. "This was not how I was planning to spend Valentine's Day."

Talon smiled. "You make every day of my life a Valentine's Day."

"Are you sure it wasn't you that hit your head?" Finn asked semi-seriously, and Talon shook his.

"No, and I have something I want to ask you."

"Me first," Finn blurted out, because he had an awful feeling Talon was going to suggest he left the team.

Because he seemed to get hurt a lot.

Totally *not* his fault.

“Okay,” Talon said hesitantly.

The nurse appeared to take Finn’s vitals and do head injury checks, so they were both silent while that was done.

Finn took a deep breath once they were finally alone. “I love you.” It seemed to be the most important thing. Talon’s eyes softened.

“I love you too.”

“I know you do.” Finn hesitated. Why was this so hard?

His fingers clasped the box he had held in his hand for the past four hours. “I want to stay with you for the rest of my life,” Finn rushed out. “Like, I don’t want another boyfriend ever,” he added because that was important.

Talon’s eyes crinkled in that super sexy way he had. “Good.”

“So, I was thinking...”

Talon’s eyebrow arched in that sexy ‘rip off my pants and take me to bed’ way he had. Finn had no chance when a mere facial expression made him want to get Talon naked as fast as possible. “I was going to cook you a romantic meal last night. The steaks you love.”

Talon nodded. “Well, I would have hoped it would keep because I had a table booked at Arabella’s.”

Finn’s eyes widened. “Arabella’s? Wow! How did you manage that?”

“Because I’ve had it booked for seven months and the lieutenant helped me,” Talon admitted.

“Why?” Finn asked, suddenly needing the answer more than he needed his last breath.

“Because of this,” Talon answered solemnly and brought out the small velvet box he had in his pocket. Finn gazed at it for a long time, but then he raised his head and met blue eyes that were so dazzling they could stop his heart. And then without a word, he opened his palm to show a nearly identical box. Talon stopped breathing and Finn was watching him so intently he noticed.

“T?” Finn whispered, and Talon took a breath.

“How about we open them together?”

Finn nodded. Talon gripped the box he held and Finn glanced down. With shaking fingers, he opened it and held it out. The silence terrified him, and for a long moment he thought he’d made a terrible mistake. With every scrap of courage he had, and being utterly convinced of Talon’s love, he looked at the box that Talon had opened, and tears rushed to his eyes.

It was the pair.

His was the larger one with the matching edge, and the one Talon held was the smaller one with the diamonds.

He didn’t realize he was crying until Talon wrapped him up in his strong arms and held him close. “I love you,” Talon whispered. “Will you marry me?”

Finn laughed. “It isn’t possible that anyone could love someone as much as I do you. Will you marry me?”

Talon tightened his arms. “Yes, my darling.”

Finn sighed happily. It was perfect, and he lifted his face for the gentlest sweetest kiss Talon had ever given him, and his toes curled.

“I wanted everything to be perfect,” Finn admitted. “I had the whole thing planned.”

Talon pressed another kiss on him. “Just promise me something?”

“Anything,” Finn breathed out. He couldn’t have been any happier if he tried. He would promise this man anything, anything at all.

“Then for the love of God, will you stop doing shit and ending up in here?”

And Finn hesitated. He would promise to love Talon with all his heart and soul, but maybe some things were impossible.

Even for the love of his life.

“It’s something we’ll work on together,” Finn hedged and raised his head for another kiss.

It was the best Valentine’s Day ever.

# A Five Minute Wedding

## Chapter One



Talon winced when the apartment door slammed shut as the whirlwind called Special Agent Finlay Mayer— *his fiancé*—raced out of it.

“He needs a tracker,” Richard commented idly as he added cream to his coffee.

“I tried,” Talon drawled, eyeing his brother, surprised he was adding cream, before grabbing his own coffee and sitting back down. He focused on Richard. “Well?”

Richard shrugged. “I saw Gregory yesterday. But I don’t think I needed to say it officially. I imagine Charles told him.”

Talon grinned. “I think walking in on you all in bed at Connie’s afterwards kind of confirmed it if he was in any doubt.” Richard seemed to swallow and inhale at the same time then had to stand and grab tissues for his streaming eyes.

“What did I say?” Talon asked innocently, secretly enjoying every second of filial payback.

“I’m not.” He coughed. “I don’t even know how it’s gonna work. We need a house.”

Talon arched an eyebrow—the one Finn insisted he was quite famous for. “I would have thought you just needed a big bed.”

Richard grinned. “Maybe, but there’s all the stuff with Adam. I know it’s weighing him down. And I know Sam’s dealing with it.”

“You mean his record? The fostering thing?”

Richard nodded, and Talon understood. At the moment, with Adam’s convictions, officially Kai wasn’t even allowed to stay a night while Adam was there, and even though Sam was confident he could get Adam’s convictions overturned it would still take time. “We’ve talked and decided we need at least a year to understand how our relationship is gonna work, get a house. It’s going well, and we both tell him this, but Adam still thinks he’s holding us back, and it’s not that any of us are desperate to bring a child into our relationship quite yet, it’s just Kai.”

“I thought he was good staying with Liam?”

Richard nodded. “Very much so. I think they enjoy each other’s company and even though they don’t go to the same school because Liam’s this mini-genius, it’s rubbing off on Kai, and he’s beginning not to resent school quite so much. It’d just be nice to have them both over on weekends sometimes. Maybe take them to see a game, you know?”

“The three musketeers,” Talon quipped. It’s what Vance called Kai, Liam, and Luis.

“It’s hard with work and everything. Sawyer’s still settling into his new job, and we have to navigate personal stuff.”

“Tell me about it,” Talon said quietly, and Richard immediately picked up on it.

“Wedding woes?”

“Not just.” Talon knew Finn was desperate to have a family. He always had been, and he knew Finn would make the best dad. It was just that every time they thought they were getting somewhere, something happened. If it wasn’t work, it was something else. They’d just signed on a house though, so that was a start. “Don’t tell the team, but we even talked about surrogates, but they’re ridiculously expensive.”

Richard raised his eyebrows.

“And don’t get me wrong, Finn wants every single foster-child he meets. I think as soon as we move in he’ll fill it with a football team of kids. He just wants a baby as well, and thinks if he voices it, he’s betraying every foster kid in the entire country.”



Richard put a hand out and squeezed his brother's arm, a small sign of affection they both enjoyed relearning with each other. "You know there's not one person on the team that would—"

"Oh, I know," Talon agreed, hurriedly. "It's his own guilt he's battling. Everyone wants babies. We even looked at international adoption, but"—he gestured to his face—"that's a no go because of me."

"That sucks." Talon knew Richard had seen enough orphans in third-world countries to understand.

Talon changed the subject. "Mother called yesterday." Because the new vice president-elect was a fan of the team and since his mother was a fan of the vice president-elect, she was trying to steer them into a whole shooting match of a wedding. He'd happily just go find a judge, but Finn was thick as thieves with Connie and had ignored the wedding planner his mother sent round. Finn seemed to be enjoying every moment of the planning without anyone else. And as far as he was concerned, he would agree to anything that made Finn happy. To be honest, he would love to whisk Finn away to an exotic beach somewhere, but since the enhanced still weren't allowed to fly except for work, it would be an awkward honeymoon for one. They could do the US, sure, but Talon wanted to make it something special for Finn. The laws were changing, though. Just not soon enough for a honeymoon.

And he didn't want his mother anywhere near his wedding. On the surface, he'd forgiven her for locking him up as a child

when he got his mark, but deep down? *Not a chance.* If anyone had to help organize this shindig, he would much rather it be Vance's mom. Connie was a mom to them all.

“The most important thing I guess is him actually turning up.”

For a second Talon considered setting Richard on fire but Richard grinned and said, “I meant keeping him away from car jackers or bank robbers.” Talon sighed. It was a valid point.

“I suggested that he should have one of the team accompany him every day between now and the wedding and he didn't like that idea,” Talon admitted.

“Ah,” Richard said in understanding. “You mean the door slamming wasn't because he was in a hurry?”

Talon scrubbed his face. “I think he's more angry with himself because we got engaged in the ER at Tampa Gen.”

Richard smiled in bemusement. “So, the real trick is to make sure you don't get married there?”

“Don't even joke about it,” Talon snapped, then stood and threw his coffee down the sink. His phone started buzzing and he saw it was Finn and answered immediately. “Problem?”

There was a brief two-second pause. “I just got a call from Shore Elementary. New kid seems to have transformed overnight but tried to hide it. Asa Cassidy, ten years. Came to school with a bandage on his face. Said he'd gotten burned, but the teacher didn't like it and sent him to the school nurse.

Asa said his foster-mom bandaged it this morning and just sent him.”

“What does the foster-mom say?”

“They can’t get hold of her. Can you come for back-up because apparently he’s got two brothers here as well, neither transformed, and one’s kicking off. The principal is threatening to call the cops, and Sawyer’s off on that course in Orlando.”

“Right away. Richard’s with me. I’ll bring him,” he said into his phone. Finn agreed, sounding relieved.

“Finn’s got a school situation and needs help.” Richard followed Talon out.

It was nearly another thirty minutes with school traffic before they got to Shore Elementary. Talon sighed at the three police cars and the two ambulances. Once they showed their IDs though, they were immediately allowed access.

They were met by the principal, who told them Agent Mayer was in the classroom with all three kids and had said no one else was allowed in there until his partner got there. He took Richard with him, and they were escorted to a classroom that was currently surrounded by at least seven cops, all with their guns drawn. Shore Elementary was in a district that had a new commander, and infuriatingly, it was one that didn’t seem to have any of Vance’s brothers working in it. He glanced at Richard. “Can you call the captain and get them to stand down a little?” At least until he found out what the fuck was going on.

Richard nodded and stepped away. Talon took a step toward two of the cops only for both to raise their weapons. Talon paused. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he snapped out. “Can’t you see the huge-ass badge around my neck?”

The younger of the two immediately reddened and lowered his gun, stammering apologies. The second cop didn’t move a muscle, just drawled. “I don’t work for you.”

Talon knew two things. One, this Schwarzenegger wannabe was an asshole. Two, if Talon got himself shot and missed the wedding, Finn was likely to finish off whatever the bullet didn’t achieve. He was saved from making a bad decision by footsteps. “Corporal,” a voice snapped out. “Lower your weapon. Agent Valdez has full access.” Talon didn’t look at the sergeant behind him even though he appreciated it. He wasn’t about to take his eyes off the asshole.

“Sir,” the corporal acknowledged and stood aside but his eyes burned into Talon’s. *Wonderful.*

“The bigger boy trashed the classroom,” the younger cop said. “We were called because there’s a possibility he has a weapon, but Agent Mayer invoked the enhanced regs since he was here first. We were told to wait here while they got hold of the social worker.”

Talon nodded, opened the door, and walked through, closing it behind him. He was met with what looked like the angriest little boy he’d ever seen, and considering most of the angry ones he’d seen had a scar and could do quite a lot of damage, that was saying something. The younger one, Henry, looked

tiny huddled next to his brother. Talon knew Henry was eight. Finn was sitting on the floor next to another boy with the same mark on his face that Talon had. He was immediately struck by his gorgeous black skin and hazel-green eyes. Very unusual. His tear-swollen eyes were matched by the puckered skin on his cheek. It looked red and angry. He didn't remember his hurting, but it had itched like crazy. Talon immediately bent his legs to get down on the floor, but Finn stopped him. "Asa needs to go to the bathroom. Can you stay here until we get back?"

Talon nodded and they left. The remaining boy was Asa's older brother, Elijah. They weren't twins but because there was only eight months between them, they were in the same school year. Elijah had just turned eleven, but he looked much older, bigger certainly. Apparently, they also had a baby sister who was nearly five months. Mom was an alcoholic who wasn't interested in drying out. Providing food for her kids was a theoretical concept.

She sobered up enough to go to church once in a while and get food donations, but from what was on file, one of the social workers thought she was selling the food. From the brief details Richard had read out on their way over, this cycle had been going on for years. She'd drink, the kids would get taken away, she'd find Jesus briefly enough to get them back and then it would happen all over again. No dad or dads were in the picture.

Apparently their latest foster home was one of the only private ones willing to take all four kids. Not that they'd been

able to contact either of the foster parents.

“I just wanted to see Asa,” Elijah said, defensively. “The teacher sent him to the nurse and wouldn’t let me go with him. When he got back he said the cops were coming. I won’t let them lock him up.”

Talon nodded and put his back to the wall, sliding down it. “Firstly, no one’s locking Asa up. The cops were called because you lost your temper and they’re frightened you’ll hurt him.”

Elijah scoffed. “Hurt him? I’m the only one protecting him.”

“Because of this?” He gestured to his face for the second time that day.

Elijah didn’t answer the question, but said, “Why does him getting that mean he has to go to a different place?”

*He wished he knew.*

But then again he didn’t know he would have to as they still hadn’t spoken to the foster parents. “You’re worried you’re going to be split up again?” It was true that four was a lot and the baby would practically be fought over if put up for adoption. Henry too. This little angry guy and Asa? Not so much. Talon’s jaw clenched.

“Nurse sent him back in here without the bandage on.”

Talon wanted to rage himself. He could imagine the reaction.

“I don’t want us to be split up, but I want them safe.”

Talon thought about this. Finn was far better at this than he was, and he thought Elijah was trying to tell him something, but he didn't know what.

“Do you have a weapon?” Talon asked. “I can't allow my partner to bring Asa back in here if you do.” He didn't think Elijah wanted to hurt him at all, but the fact was, he'd threatened a teacher. Whatever happened to the rest of them, Elijah wouldn't be going home with his brothers today.

“How do I know you aren't lying?”

“You don't,” Talon said simply knowing he hadn't answered the question. “But the cops out there won't let this go on indefinitely.” He was lucky they'd waited this long.

“You're a cop,” Elijah said.

“No, I'm an FBI agent. I work specifically with enhanced like your brother. All my team have people exactly like me.” Talon eyed the pair. “You do know that's what the scar on Asa's face is, right? It isn't a burn.”

Elijah nodded. “He came to me first this morning before we went to see Mother Reynolds, but Grace was fussing. But she said it didn't matter and just covered it up.”

“Grace?” Wasn't the baby called Zuri?

“Mother Reynolds renamed her.” Talon didn't comment on what he knew was a huge red flag. Marjorie Reynolds was the foster mom, but Mother Reynolds seemed an odd way of addressing her.

“Mother Reynolds? That's what you call her?”

“That’s what we have to call her,” Elijah said and shrugged like it didn’t matter.

Just then there was a knock at the door and Richard put his head around. “All sorted out here. I grabbed some juice and managed to get some cookies.”

Henry immediately looked up. Talon put his hand out to Elijah. “Give me the weapon and I’ll ask my partner to bring Asa in so he gets some as well.” Elijah stared at him while both Talon and Richard waited patiently, not hurrying things along.

Elijah reached into his pocket and pulled out a teaspoon fastened with sticky tape to a stick. “I don’t have a knife. That drawer’s always locked in the kitchen, and Father Reynolds always searches us before we’re allowed in the house after school.”

There weren’t many things that could still surprise Talon, but Elijah had managed to. And the more he heard about the foster parents the less he was impressed, but so far he had heard only one side of the story, and the social worker had given a good home report. He took the spoon from Elijah and gave it to Richard, who stood back and let Finn and Asa come in. Asa yanked his hand from Finn’s and rushed over to his brothers. Elijah caught him with a wince, which brought Asa up short. “Sorry,” he murmured.

Talon immediately picked up on the reaction and he knew Finn had as well.

“You sore, buddy?” Talon asked lightly.



Elijah shook his head vehemently. Talon knew they couldn't let it go, but right this second wasn't the time for an interrogation.

Finn smiled. "I told you my name's Finn, and this is my partner Talon. I'd like to help get this straightened out, so we can all get out of here."

Asa nodded at Finn, who had clearly already worked his magic with him, and he walked over with the tray of juice and cookies Richard had brought in and set it down on a desk near them. "Who wants a drink?" He looked at Elijah. "There's nothing in your medical records to say you can't have this, but if you might be sick do you want me to rustle up some water and fruit? An apple? Is there anything you can't eat?"

Talon glanced at Elijah consideringly as Finn helped the other two. Henry practically inhaled his cookies. They were all skinny, but that could be their natural body shape. And kids inhaling cookies was normal. It didn't necessarily mean they weren't being fed.

Elijah shook his head, glanced at the rapidly disappearing cookies, but made no attempt to take them for himself. Asa looked at his brother then back at Finn. "He won't eat until we do."

"That's very kind," Finn said mildly. "But we won't run out. We can get more."

Asa and his brother looked at each other and he knew by Finn's expression that alarm bells were pinging in his head.

“Elijah didn’t have a weapon,” Talon told Finn. “So, he’s not in any trouble for that.”

Finn grinned, helped himself to a cookie, and sat down. Elijah seemed to relax a little and sat on one of the chairs. “Asa told me this was the first foster home they’ve all been in together.”

And Talon knew the kids would want to keep it that way. “When we get hold of the Reynolds we’ll explain everything. Mrs. Reynolds wasn’t worried about Asa’s scar this morning, so maybe it’s not as big a deal as you’re expecting.” Even if it was downright weird. There wasn’t an adult alive, especially in Tampa, that didn’t recognize an enhanced scar. Something occurred to him. “Do you think she’s worried you might have to leave now that you have this?”

Asa shook his head around a mouthful of cookie. Elijah still hadn’t taken one. There was another knock at the door and Richard appeared again. “We got hold of the Reynolds. They’re on their way.”

Asa stopped eating and shot a look at Elijah, but it was hard to read. Richard met Talon’s gaze.

“I was telling Asa about the team, and where we work. *Maybe*,” Finn said, excitement in his voice, “we could meet them there? Then these guys could get the chance to look around an FBI headquarters?”

Yep, Talon thought. Especially Doc Natalie and their medical facility.

Asa gazed at Elijah, a pleading look in his eyes, so all the kids stood, Elijah a little slowly. They were guided out by the team, past all the cops, and into Finn's new minivan. The fact that Finn had just traded in his beloved sports car for a family bus hadn't escaped Talon. He'd used the excuse of wanting to take all the boys places, meaning Liam, Luis and Kai, but Talon knew there were other reasons. He was grateful for it today, though. Richard followed them driving Talon's truck, and they got to headquarters with little fuss. Finn made a great show of getting all three kids their own ID badges and then took them through the IT department and introduced them to the various personnel that worked there. He called a halt after a while because while the younger two seemed excited, Elijah looked strained. They went up to their own floor, as they termed it. Talon made a quiet call to Charles.

And he didn't mean a phone call.

Charles understood his concerns and promised he and the Doc would see them in the conference room in a little while. Florida rules on consenting to medical examinations for minors were problematic. Charles had told him they were looking into everything and seeing if the mom still had legal consent, or the state did.

They all sat around the conference table with bottles of water and chatted idly. Henry was painfully shy, but he opened up a little when Talon mentioned Olly, and explained they were hoping to get a puppy when they moved into their new house with the yard.

Talon glanced at Finn and Finn nodded slightly. He knew Talon was leaving the questions to him. “Guys, we need to ask something.” He smiled gently at Elijah. “I can tell you’re in some pain. I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t investigate that. We can wait until either your social worker, foster parents, or even your mom if you prefer, are contacted, but we need to check you over.”

Asa nudged Elijah’s arm. It was clear what he wanted. He swallowed. “I fell last night.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Talon was shocked because it had been Henry that spoke, and for the first time. Elijah shot him a look of exasperation, then looked at Finn. “He wasn’t there.”

“How did you fall?”

Elijah shrugged. “I was playing in the yard at the back and tripped. My fault.”

Just then the door opened and Charles and Doc Natalie walked in.

“*We have permission for a general checkup,*” Charles sent to both their heads. The doc and Charles were really good with both Asa and Henry. The doc explained that Charles couldn’t talk but he could hear fine, and that they just wanted to make sure they were okay. They wouldn’t be asking them to take off any clothes, because she could listen to their heartbeat through their shirts no problem. Elijah held back, but the other two seemed quite happy.

Eventually the doc turned to Elijah. “Your turn.” She smiled.

*“He’s guarding his abdomen,”* Charles commented. *“Pretty sure Natalie’s noticed.”*

*“He looks a little green as well,”* Finn said in Talon’s head. Talon knew Charles was letting them all talk to each other non-verbally. Natalie didn’t know Charles could do this, and that had to remain a secret. Although she might suspect something, she was careful not to ask.

The doc smiled at Elijah. “How about you stand up so I can see how tall you are?”

Elijah nodded and got to his feet, but maybe two heartbeats later, his face seemed to drain of all color. It was Charles who caught him.

## **Chapter Two**



Talon watched Finn take charge of keeping the other two distraught kids from rushing to their brother while the doc fired off rapid instructions for an ambulance, and Talon called one. She pulled up his shirt, even glanced at his back. Surprisingly, he seemed to be bruise free. She did her checks, and related orders to Charles. The paramedics arrived at the

same time as Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, who had actually been at a pediatrician's appointment for the baby.

The baby started crying in the middle of everything, and Finn offered to help as Henry also burst into tears and flung himself at Mrs. Reynolds. Finn swiftly took the baby and rocked her. The social worker arrived barely five minutes later, and said she would take all the kids.

The paramedics left with Mrs. Reynolds accompanying them after the social worker said she would bring the children. Talon had a brief conversation with the social worker, Helen Chivers, alone, while Finn and Mr. Reynolds calmed all the children down. She had worked with the Reynolds for the last five years and there had been no complaints. The Reynolds had always done short-term fostering up to that point, but the four kids had been there for the last three months. The state was applying to have them removed permanently from their birth mother and the Reynolds had even made noises about adoption. Even Elijah, who had proved to be a *challenge*.

Talon heard the air quotes loud and clear but could do absolutely nothing. He knew both Finn and he thought Elijah was hiding injuries, but according to Charles, he had all the classic signs of appendicitis. Even Asa and Henry had said Elijah had refused the food he had been offered in the last couple of days and been quiet.

Talon could understand that Elijah saw himself as the protector, or the older brother even of Asa, and knew he was worried about keeping them all together.

They all left at the same time, and there was nothing Talon could do to stop them. It seemed so quiet all of a sudden. He slid his arms around Finn's middle and pulled Finn's back snug against his chest. "I think we always assume the worst."

Finn nodded but he didn't reply, just sagged against him. They wrote up their reports while waiting for news.

"It explains Elijah's behavior," Talon added when the doc called as promised to say the scan had confirmed her guess and Elijah was being prepped for emergency surgery.

Finn stepped into Talon's embrace. Adam had already left with Richard. "Can we go home?"

Talon grinned, having a sudden idea. "Absolutely." Finn had already cancelled the principal's meeting he had this afternoon, and they always worked long hours. It wouldn't hurt either of them to have an early finish.

An hour later they were sitting in the yard of their new house. Finn had meant return to their apartment when he said go home, and Talon knew he'd expected that, but Finn seemed agreeable to visit their new home. Especially when Talon wiped the patio chairs that had been left with the property and produced the cheap bottle of bubbly and two plastic cups he'd run into the small store for on the way here.

"We haven't christened the house." Talon said.

Finn smirked. "We don't have a bed."

He passed Finn a cup and sat down, ignoring the alarming creak of the old wood. "You're not happy."

Finn's eyes widened. "With the house?"

"No," Talon said softly. "With me, I think." That was what he was really worried about. Talon being enhanced seemed to stop Finn from doing what he wanted. The wedding, the family, the kids. He knew how Adam felt.

Finn shook his head, a soft smile playing on his lips. He stood and pointed to the steps that led to the overgrown garden. "Sit. If I try to get on your lap on that, I'm pretty sure the chair will break." Talon eagerly complied and didn't mind the hard surface his ass perched on, especially with an armful of soft Finn. Finn lifted Talon's chin with a gentle finger and brought their lips together. They explored gently until Talon could feel other parts of Finn's anatomy becoming not quite so soft, but they didn't even have a blanket to lie on.

"I love you," Finn murmured against his lips. "I'm sorry I've been a grouch, but I swear it isn't you."

"There's a lot happening with the wedding. You want a family, specifically a baby."

Finn's eyes filled with tears, and he tried to blink furiously. "I'm such an awful person."

Talon held him tighter. "No, you're not. I think you need to give yourself some credit here. What you want is a baby *as well*." He sighed. "If you had your way we'd have every single one of the five bedrooms upstairs filled with bunkbeds. There's nothing wrong with wanting a baby as well."

Finn looked up. "But—"



Talon captured his lips to stop the protest until Finn relaxed again and he drew back. "I'm sorry."

"I guess." Finn sighed. "But it's not your fault you're so hot I can't bear to part with you."

Talon snorted rather inelegantly. "You clearly haven't looked in the mirror recently." But his heart settled. "How about we take these issues one at a time, starting with the wedding. What do you need me to do?"

Finn bit his lip. "Make it snow?"

"Huh?" Talon said, although he'd heard him. "You want to get married in some place like Colorado?"

Finn shook his head and pointed to the huge overgrown yard. "I want to get married here. At home. I've been looking everywhere and even considered asking Jacob, but I want it here. I don't want to go anywhere."

Talon gaped looking at the monstrosity of a forest in front of them. "Well, clearing it is doable, but you do know we live in Florida, right?"

Finn grinned. "Connie's been researching fake snow ever since I mentioned doing it here, but I don't want anything fake about our day. And I want all the kids there, like *all* of them." Talon nodded, his mind whirling with possibilities.

"When you say all of them you're talking about emptying two group foster homes as well as every other child you've probably met, right?" It wasn't that they didn't have the space. The reason they'd paid for an old house that had seen better

days was the huge back plot that three developers had tried and failed to get permission to build on. If that had happened, the price tag would have been in the millions. Of course, it had helped that Vance's dad had known the owner, who was moving to Europe to be near his grandchildren.

He'd known that the house would take years to remodel. He hadn't imagined the yard would be a priority. "And you definitely want it here?"

Finn nodded eagerly. "This is us, Talon. I don't want some huge hotel or country club. I don't want to fly to some exotic beach. I want to be home."

Talon heaved a relieved sigh. He could do the yard. It wasn't like he couldn't bring in help. Fuck, Vance could probably clear half the trees on his own.

"Okay, then next on the list. A baby. We looked at private adoption. Just because one pregnant woman had a fit when she found out what I am doesn't mean they all will. We can look at surrogacy as well."

"We just spent a lot of money on this," Finn said waving at the forest. "You know how much surrogacy costs."

Talon did. "Which is why I'm selling my gran's apartment."

"What?" Finn gasped. "No Talon, that is important to you. I thought you were going to rent it out to enhanced."

"Yes, I was, but now the insurance thing is better."

"And there are still landlords that won't rent to an enhanced no matter what the insurance is, or they will, but the price is

ridiculous.”

Talon nodded. He knew that, but if that’s what it took to pay for surrogacy then he wouldn’t bat an eyelash.

“Talon.” Finn placed a hand on Talon’s chest. “Don’t give up your dreams for mine.”

“I’m not. I want to be a dad as much as you do.”

“But you’d be happy to take older kids,” Finn pointed out.

“So are you, you just want a baby as well.”

“It seems so selfish, and utterly ridiculous,” Finn admitted in a small voice.

“Tell me,” Talon pressed. “If Connie wasn’t able to take Kai, or if something happened to Gael and Jake, you’re telling me you wouldn’t take Kai or Derek in a heartbeat?”

“Of course, I would.” Finn punched his arm, but there wasn’t much force behind it. “Especially as we are named as Derek’s guardians in their will.”

The adoption had been finalized and it had been the first thing Gael and Jake had asked them. The sobering fact was that although a lot of them had special gifts, they all had a dangerous job. That had been forcefully brought home to Gael a couple of years ago when a psycho tortured and nearly killed him.

“Surrogacy can cost anything up to \$170,000,” Finn said. “You know this.”

“I do,” Talon agreed, and when he’d gotten over the shock he’d decided to sell his gran’s place. He hugged Finn. “Gran and Grandad loved kids, even me,” he added. His gran had saved Talon’s life. He’d have been on the streets if not for her, because living at home had never been an option.

“Exactly.” Finn took a breath. “I want to adopt from the foster system. If you don’t mind me filling every square inch of this place then I will be ecstatically happy.”

“Finn—”

But Finn shook his head. “No, if you want to sell for you then that’s your decision, but I will never, ever agree to using the money for surrogacy.”

Talon didn’t bother arguing. He knew Finn was stubborn enough to stick to what he said. His phone rang a moment later. It was the doc confirming Elijah was in recovery after having his appendix removed. He was spending a few nights in critical care to make sure they were successfully treating the associated infection, but it looked good. Doc Natalie also added that they had likely saved Elijah’s life. If they hadn’t brought him to headquarters and had let the Reynolds simply take him home, Elijah might just have gone to bed, and it might not have been caught early enough.

They spent another hour simply making out on the steps before they left. Talon’s head was spinning with all the things he needed to do. He couldn’t give Finn a baby, but he was damn certain he was going to make every other one of Finn’s dreams come true.

He just had to work out how to make it snow in Florida.

### **Chapter Three**



Finn turned up at Shore Elementary two days later. The one thing his FBI enhanced unit powers did give him was the authority to visit any enhanced minor in any environment. Namely Asa, and at school. He didn't even have to ask for permission, even if he wanted to see him separately from his foster parents. He didn't have the authority to request to see Henry since he couldn't prove he was in any danger, and Henry wasn't enhanced.

Finn was glad of the chance to see Asa on his own. Talon knew he was going, but they'd both agreed Finn should do this. Talon had done the official background check on the Reynolds and the birth mother, and Gael had done the unofficial one. Neither had shown any red flags except one. One of their temporary foster kids had attempted suicide after the third week of living there, except he'd had a history of previous abuse and the attempt hadn't even happened in their home but after Jonas had run away. He was now out of the foster system and the team was struggling to track him down.

Finn sat down in the small office emptied for their use and looked up, smiling when Asa was shown in. Asa was happy to see Finn and told him they were going to see Elijah after school because he was being moved to a different hospital room. The critical care unit didn't allow kids like him in because the only other time it had happened the machines had all gone crazy.

Finn chuckled, glad he seemed upbeat. "You don't think you'll send the machines crazy?" Asa hadn't reported any abilities, but he'd gotten his mark only two days ago. The whole team knew that often abilities wouldn't be discovered until much later as it was often something a child couldn't do. Adam, for instance, could unlock safes. But there weren't many eleven-year-olds that would ever need to.

Asa shook his head, but for the first-time avoided Finn's gaze and looked at the floor. "You know," Finn said conversationally. "I know a boy—bit older than you—that can unlock anything. Safes, doors, padlocks. He just thinks it and ta dah!"

He glanced up, chewing his lip.

"One of our team is so strong he could lift a truck in one hand." He didn't actually know if Vance could do that, maybe not, but it had the effect of making Asa smile. "Another boy I help simply can't sleep. As in he never does at all. That kind of sucks."

Asa glanced back down and he could tell he was thinking.

“Another agent on our team can speak languages like French and Italian without ever having to learn them. He just knows.” Finn leaned forward. “But the thing is, you might not know for a lot of years what you can or can’t do, and that’s totally okay. I just want you to know that you, Henry, and Elijah will always have me or Talon to talk to, if you ever need to. Nothing you ever tell us will change that.”

“Elijah isn’t allowed.”

Finn cocked his head. “Allowed what?”

“To talk to you. I heard Father saying it last night. I thought they were asleep, and I was going to the bathroom to pee, and him and Mother were awake.” He winced. “I wasn’t spying. They hadn’t shut their door all the way. I didn’t mean to listen.”

“I know,” Finn rushed to reassure him. “What did he say?”

Asa sucked his top lip in for a moment then whispered. “That he couldn’t stop the feds from seeing the freak, but they weren’t getting anywhere near Henry or Grace.” He blinked as his eyes filled. Finn wished he could put his arm around him, but he was on his own with him and couldn’t risk it. He knew he understood he was now considered a freak.

“I’m sorry honey, but maybe they’re just a little in shock. You’ve all had a bad few days.”

He gazed at Finn and his heart broke for him. Sometimes this job was the best in the world, and sometimes it really sucked.

“Mother Reynolds said that when *Z-Grace* got older I could help look after her.” Talon had told Finn the Reynolds were calling Zuri something else and Finn had an awful suspicion as to why. The name Zuri was Swahili in origin and meant beautiful. Zuri’s skin was much lighter than Asa’s, but just as stunning. He’d noticed her eyes were brown though, not hazel like Asa’s and Elijah’s. Henry’s were brown but his skin was pale and freckled, and his hair was a reddish brown. Elijah’s skin was lighter than Asa’s.

“Did they mention Elijah?” Finn asked lightly.

Asa shook his head. “No, but they mentioned another name. John, I think. Said they didn’t want it happening again.”

Every hair on the back of Finn’s neck stood up. “Do you mean Jonas?” he asked, keeping his voice even.

“Yes, that’s it,” Asa’s smile was wobbly, but it was there. “I know they meant me. The freak.” He sighed. “I know what happens, I saw it on TV when we were in the home. It isn’t bad living with the Reynolds. They have weird rules but nothing I’m not used to. I used to share with Elijah and Henry.” He bit his lip. “They’d moved me yesterday. I get my own room now.”

Big hazel eyes met Finn’s and his heart thudded. “It’s...it’s not catching, is it?”

Finn’s heart simply broke. He shook his head and hugged the boy, even if he wasn’t supposed to. Asa clung on. He could see he was struggling with both his new reality and the fact it could suddenly change all over again. He’d been doing a lot of



research into the types of PTSD foster children experienced, and he was even considering some classes.

“I don’t think Elijah sleeps much,” Asa shared after a moment when they drew apart. “I used to wake up and Elijah was missing, but Father said because Elijah was older he could stay up later.” He shrugged and paused. “I think him and Father watch movies. I asked Elijah if he would ask Father if I could, but Elijah just said I wouldn’t like them.”

Finn’s heart landed somewhere near his boots. Okay, so all this could be innocent. They clearly had old-fashioned rules but that wasn’t a crime. But the more he heard, the more Finn worried. He asked Asa if Father had ever been into his room, and Asa shook his head. “I don’t think he likes me much.” He tapped his cheek. “Even before this.”

Finn thought carefully about the next question. He couldn’t lead Asa.

“He didn’t used to like Elijah, but I think he does now.”

“Yeah?” Finn said. “What makes you think that?”

Asa gazed at him as if he was trying to decide what to say. It was probably one of the longest minutes of his life. “He hit him.”

Finn’s heart thumped.

“Back when we first got there, he slapped his face so hard Elijah fell. But Elijah said I couldn’t tell because it was only once.”

*Sure.* But Finn had no choice. He *had* to tell. “Honey, you know that even once is wrong, don’t you?”

Asa met his gaze. He knew. He glanced at the clock. Both kids were in school until 3.30pm. Elijah was safe in the hospital. But the baby?

He promised Asa he would see him tomorrow and returned him to his classroom. He called Talon immediately and related what Asa had said. Talon moved heaven and earth. It was a team effort, but within forty minutes a different social worker, plus the cops, had removed Zuri and were waiting for Asa and Henry to finish school. Finn returned to the school himself, as they agreed he should explain what he could to Asa since they had bonded somewhat. They were safe in their classrooms, had already had their lunch, and it would be easier if Finn met the social worker to collect them. The teachers had been warned to keep Asa and Henry back until after the other kids had left the classroom. The school had been informed that Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds weren’t allowed to collect them.

Finn got to the school just as the cops arrived with the social worker and Zuri at the school. The baby was being handed off to a different social worker, but the social worker assigned to Henry and Asa, Mark, was handling it for now. Mark Lincoln looked younger than Finn, and Zuri was screaming bloody murder in the infant car seat. Finn offered to stay with the baby since he didn’t have permission to get Henry, and in a moment Zuri was in his arms and Finn realized pretty quickly that she needed a diaper change. Luckily, the social worker

had emergency supplies and Finn had her changed pretty quickly.

“You look like you’ve done that before,” one of the cops nodded to the quieter baby.

Finn couldn’t seem to find the words to reply, and tried really really hard not to adore every moment she was in his arms.

In a moment, Mark reappeared with both children. Asa looked relieved to see Finn, and Finn promised he would see him tomorrow. Mark assured them both he would text Finn the address of both temporary foster homes right now, as Zuri was going somewhere else. Mark got his phone out and did just that while Finn made sure both kids had their seat belts on, and secured Zuri in the infant carrier. Finn just stood and watched the cars drive away.



Talon was on his way to the hospital thirty seconds after he got the call from the cops. Clive Reynolds was absent when they arrived to collect Zuri. At first, Marjorie Reynolds had said her husband had gone to the store, but eventually admitted he’d gone to see Elijah as he had been moved out of critical care. When the cops asked for his cell phone number, she said they didn’t have one. They certainly didn’t have an account, but

that didn't mean he didn't have a pre-paid and she was just being difficult.

Talon raced over to Elijah's ward accompanied by hospital security. After showing his badge for entry to the unit, the nurse confirmed Clive Reynolds was there and visiting Elijah. One of the nurses had just left them. She thought they might watch some TV.

Elijah had been given a two-bed bay, but the other bed was unoccupied. Talon burst in and Clive jerked upright. The fucker was sitting on Elijah's bed leaning over him. "Get him out of here," Talon growled and both guards, ignoring Clive's protests, did just that.

Elijah was deathly pale. A tray with a beaker of water and a straw had been pushed to one side. He looked in pain, and Talon called a nurse. The nurse smiled in approval when Elijah took the pain pills he clearly needed, checked his vitals, then left to call the doctor.

Talon wondered where to start. He couldn't put words into the boy's mouth, and he couldn't ask anything without a legal guardian here. Elijah wasn't enhanced. The social worker was on her way. He felt his phone vibrate with a message and pulled it up. It was Gael.

*Got him. All on laptop, and bad. No warrant yet but boss getting one now, so official soon. Let u no.*

Talon texted back his thanks.

Gael replied again. *Seen some shit T, but this was bad. Hope it hadn't got far.*

So did Talon.

When Elijah found out his brothers and sister weren't going back to the Reynolds, the whole story came out. Clive Reynolds had been grooming him for about a month. Apparently, Clive had come into the boys' room quite a few times at first and sat on Henry's bed. Henry had been asleep, but Elijah hadn't and he saw Reynolds lift the comforter and slide his hand in. Elijah had shot out of bed and Reynolds laughed and just said he wanted to check that Henry was warm enough. But then Reynolds started hinting that Elijah was stopping them from being a family. Said his wife wanted a baby. He taunted Elijah with all the horror stories of what would happen to Asa and Henry in the sort of foster homes he'd been in himself when he was a kid. It seemed to escalate, and Elijah was terrified he was going to be sent away.

Then he asked Elijah if he wanted to stay up later than the other two and watch a movie with him.

That's how it had started.

Talon didn't know what to say. He wanted to rage. "Are you going to be okay with telling this to the cops? We need to remove him as a foster parent at the very least. I mean," Talon added, "I want his ass so far down in a prison cell he never sees the light of day, but that takes a process."

Elijah gazed at him with hopeless eyes. Another social worker, Sarah Wilkins, and a cop arrived, and Elijah explained

what he'd told Talon. Elijah just had to sit and watch movies with him, so his brothers were left alone and so they all stayed together. Except the last few times, Reynolds had put his arm around Elijah because he said it was what a father and son did. That all children needed to be loved in a special way.

Talon met the gaze of the cop, who was struggling to keep his face neutral.

Apparently, Elijah had this idea that the second he'd turned eighteen he could find somewhere to live and look after his brothers and sister himself. *Seven years*. He could cope for seven years to keep them safe.

Talon was dumbfounded. This boy was just a child himself, and what he'd put up with to protect his siblings made Talon want to get his hands around Reynolds neck. Although that would have been too good for him.

Elijah had said that was "all" he'd had to do.

All? *All*? Talon only kept a lid on his anger because of Elijah. What would have happened if Asa hadn't transformed? The other social worker had been fooled by the Reynolds.

"We found somewhere for Asa and Henry," Sarah said. "As soon as you're better you can go visit them."

"Visit, not live with?" Elijah asked with a defeated tone. One that shouldn't come out of an eleven-year-old's mouth. She shook her head regretfully, but Talon understood. Placing four kids together, including an enhanced and a baby?

The doctor arrived then and suggested politely that they leave. Talon promised Elijah he would visit tomorrow, and Sarah promised that as soon as he was feeling better, she would bring Asa and Henry to see him. He didn't answer, just closed his eyes.

They walked in silence out of the ward and then Sarah just sagged against the wall. "This never gets any easier."

Talon nodded, his throat embarrassingly thick.

"The mother has surrendered her parental rights, so at least they can all be put up for adoption."

"Sure," Talon said, knowing that they would be split up, and Elijah would blame himself.

"We do our best, and our policy is to give priority to anyone willing to take a sibling group, but with Asa that may be problematic." She flushed as soon as she realized who she was talking to, but Talon wasn't listening. Because he'd just had an incredible idea. In fact, he was nearly running as he left the hospital.

## **Chapter Four**



Talon practically burst through the door, making Finn jump and nearly drop the dish he was just putting in the oven. He grabbed Finn by the arm and sat, pulling Finn onto his lap.

“What’s wrong?” He poked Talon’s chest. “T, is it Elijah?”

Talon carefully described every harrowing detail Elijah had confessed to, including how Clive Reynolds had managed to duck the cops as there had been an emergency admission involving a four-car collision, and the exit had been jammed with family. There was an arrest warrant out for him. Marjorie was being interviewed but was denying all knowledge, and Elijah said she’d never been present while the movies were on. He also went on to say how Asa had been separated because either he was the next target or Clive was even more of a racist than even they thought was possible.

“You think the wife knew?” Finn asked after he’d been silent for a moment.

“I don’t know. She’s obsessed with getting the baby back though. Even asked the cop if she divorced Clive whether she could she apply to adopt her.”

Finn sighed, “We need to make sure they know she tried to change Zuri’s name. I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“Zuri has very light skin,” Talon agreed. “And we know the only way of adopting a baby from foster care in a lot of states is by taking on a sibling group.” He added, casually. “The social worker thinks that may be problematic with Asa getting his mark. We know it doesn’t always follow, but many people will wonder if that means the others might transform.”



He felt Finn still in his arms, saw the fluttering of his pulse in his neck. “Talon,” Finn breathed out. Talon nodded, answering the unspoken question.

“We would have to go through everything, checks, a course maybe, but Sarah, the social worker, told me how hard it would be to keep them together, and priority is always given for an approved family willing to take them all. Of course, she didn’t know we would take them in a heartbeat.”

Finn blinked. “You would?” His voice was a barely heard whisper.

Talon kissed him as his answer. “I know Elijah has just demonstrated he’s willing to put up with just about anything to keep them protected and together, but I think he’s starting to trust me a little. Same with you and Asa.”

Finn bit his lip. “Marjorie promised Asa that when Zuri was older he would be allowed to help look after her, but that was before he overheard Clive call him a freak.” Finn was silent for a moment and Talon knew he was trying to process his thoughts. “What if they need help with their reading?”

Talon knew this was a fear. That Finn’s dyslexia would become a problem again. “What if they take one look at the house and laugh us out of the office? What if we get a judge that hates enhanced?” He didn’t wait for an answer, just kissed Finn gently until Finn had relaxed again. “What if one of them has medical or learning difficulties we don’t yet know about?”

Finn looked at him blankly. “What has that got to do with anything?”

“Exactly,” Talon chuckled.

“I think the idea of helping to look after Zuri made Asa happy,” Finn said. “I think it was a symbol. That he had a sister, a family. That he belonged.”

“See?” Talon murmured. “You’re much smarter than I am.”

An hour later, both Talon’s and Finn’s cell phones buzzed at the same time. As the on-call enhanced team for that evening, they were out of the door in twenty minutes and on their way to Tampa Correctional. The state prison had over five hundred inmates, but the inmate they were going to see was only seventeen years old. He had been due to transfer to Hillsborough Juvenile, a 100-bed state-of-the-art facility specifically for juveniles and one that accepted enhanced. Sutton Cormack had been in and out of foster care, then detention because of petty theft, then finally Tampa correctional after being convicted of assault and burglary.

Jacob had been involved in the last case and reported that the assault charge in his opinion wasn’t valid, but because of the scar on his face, the judge had thrown out all objections. He’d been stealing, but it had been simple shoplifting and he’d never hurt anyone before, until the store manager’s wife had gotten beaten badly.

Thanks to their unit, he was supposed to be transferred tomorrow, and Talon couldn’t believe that he’d apparently assaulted a CNA, or certified nursing assistant, because he was putting that move in jeopardy. He was three months away from

being eighteen and a serious assault charge changed everything.

It wasn't easy to get in even with their ID and permission. Finn had been allowed in immediately, but they had taken one look at Talon and despite his credentials, had insisted on extra screening. Talon put up with it because he really wanted to see this kid and find out what had gone on.

They both stared at the kid that walked in. He looked fourteen, maybe fifteen at an absolute stretch. Talon doubted there was an inch of skin he could see that wasn't bruised. He felt Finn stiffen up, ready to go into battle mode, and Talon nudged his knee with his own. For the moment, they needed cooperation.

His cuffs were clamped to the table, and then both guards went to stand by the wall. Finn coolly quoted the law that meant that so long as the prisoner had no objections, since he was enhanced and so was Talon, they could interview him without cuffs and without the guards present.

The guards, reluctantly, uncuffed him and then left the room.

Finn smiled. "Hi, I'm Agent Finn Mayer from the enhanced unit and this is my partner Talon Valdez. What would you like us to call you? Is Sutton okay?"

Sutton shook his head.

Finn didn't miss a beat. "Okay then Mr. Cormack, how about \_\_\_"

But he was shaking his head even more violently and made a scribbling motion with his hand, like he wanted to write something down. Talon frowned, wondering if the kid had hurt his throat or something, but he watched as Finn drew a small pad and a pencil out of his pocket, pushing them forward. Sutton took them and wrote carefully. He turned the pad around so it was clear.

*“Evan, please. Sutton was my dad.”*

Finn smiled. “Of course, Evan.” He glanced at Talon. There was nothing in the notes they’d been given about an inability to speak. “I’m pretty sure you can see from Talon that our unit’s a little different from—”

Talon reacted before Evan could touch Finn’s face. He had Evan’s outstretched hand in a vise-grip before he even realized he was doing it. Evan never reacted. He didn’t seem angry. He didn’t try and pull away. He just accepted it. Talon let go after another second, ashamed he had held the boy so tightly. But the scar on his face might mean Evan could hurt Finn, even though he had no documented abilities.

Finn was quiet when Evan drew his hand back and cradled it. Talon burned in shame. The kid was covered in bruises. “Should we get a doctor?” Finn asked. He didn’t look up.

Finn stretched his hand out, not touching Evan, but Evan saw it and jerked his head up. Finn met his gaze and clearly said. “Do you need a doctor?”

Evan shook his head.

Finn smiled again. “Are you reading my lips?”

Evan nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on Finn like he was a lifeline. Talon nearly closed his eyes in shame. Finn had been looking at Talon as he had been speaking, and Evan was trying to tell him he needed to see his face. He hadn’t tried to hurt Finn.

“That’s great,” Finn said and reached his hand across the table, palm up. Talon knew he shouldn’t. Fuck, Finn knew he shouldn’t, but when Evan reached over tentatively and clasped Finn’s hand, Talon excused himself and left the room. Someone, either by ignorance or plain cruelty, had screwed up.

And so had he.

He was met by the guards. “Why doesn’t it say in the case file that Sutton is deaf and mute?”

The older of the two scoffed. “Because he isn’t. He’s fooling you. He can hear just fine.”

Talon nodded. “I’d like to see his medical notes.” He didn’t bother quoting the addendum that said he had the right. He knew full well both these assholes knew. A few minutes later, after water had been delivered to the room, Talon was reading Evan’s full file. A nervous-looking admin assistant was hopping from one leg to the other. Talon looked up. “Why does the file not have any recent test results on his hearing ability?”

The assistant looked anywhere but at Talon. “I don’t believe he’s had any. We were told by Lincoln that he was faking. That

he knew the boy from Chapel Hill Correctional, and he could hear and speak fine. He's always in trouble. Lincoln said he just wanted attention."

"Lincoln?"

The assistant shuffled even more, "Our certified nursing assistant. Lincoln Bright."

"I need to make a call." Before he lost his temper. Because *Lincoln Bright* had been the one to report Evan for assault and the more he found out about this, the less he liked. "You are?"

"Alix Patterson." He gestured to the desk and the telephone. Talon had left his cell in the car, knowing he'd have to leave it at the gate as it wasn't allowed in anyway.

"Are you aware of what happened earlier?" Talon asked, heading to the desk. He knew Bright had been taken to urgent care.

Patterson didn't answer and Talon glanced back at him. He seemed to find his shoes fascinating.

"It says in the incident report you were there," Talon pushed.

Patterson nodded but still didn't look up.

"But you weren't, were you?" Talon glanced at the cameras.

"I came in just as the tray tipped over. Lincoln had just asked me to get a spare flashlight from the supply closet."

"And what did you see?" He needed Gael to get into those cameras.

“Lincoln bent over Sutton. Then Sutton pushed at him, and he overbalanced, knocking the tray over.” Patterson hesitated. “I believe he needed his wrist x-rayed.”

*He'd just bet he did.*

Even though it was approaching eight at night, both Doc Natalie and Charles responded. Within two hours they'd completed what assessment they could in this environment, and Charles had spent a long time signing with Evan. Apparently Evan had never learned sign language, but Charles said Evan was concentrating so hard, he was spelling it out in his head so everything Evan tried to say using a mixture of hand signals and writing it down, Charles heard.

*“For the first time, I desperately want to reply.”*

Because they could all hear him except Natalie, Talon squeezed his shoulder in sympathy. Shamelessly using her dad's renowned credentials, Natalie insisted on admitting Evan to Tampa Gen for tests. She hinted at possible tumor discovery, and Talon basically promised they were all fucked for ignoring it.

This time Finn didn't even bother smoothing things over like he normally did.

Charles told them that Evan had started struggling with his hearing when he was around eleven but as he was in and out of the foster system no one picked it up. His words had started sounding funny well over a year ago, and he'd stopped trying to speak since he got bullied for it. He had trouble swallowing.

For the first time ever, he thought he was going to see Doc Natalie cry. They'd gotten Evan settled in his bed and Natalie had promised she would be back in the morning. Apparently, all the signs pointed to a possible central nervous system tumor.

That had just sat there and grown for years. And because of a scar on his cheek, it had been ignored.

“And the bruises?” It said in the file that Evan picked fights, but either Evan was the best actor in the world, or he was getting assaulted.

Charles hesitated. *“He’s scared of telling me in case he has to go back there.”*

Talon nodded and they didn't press him any further. He was safe for the moment, and the doc had insisted on photographing every single mark on him.

Charles shooed them all home after a while and told them he was staying with Evan until he was asleep. Natalie had even personally briefed all the nurses on his care. Talon had spoken to the guard that had accompanied them and had to stay with Evan all night. He'd made it clear that if anything happened to Evan he'd be looking for a new job tomorrow, and then because he still didn't trust him, he had Jacob send a cop over as well. One that knew the team and he could trust.

Talon had held Finn very tightly that night and struggled to sleep. He'd seen over and over in his head the complete acceptance on Evan's face as Talon had been rough with him, and there wasn't an excuse in the world for it.



In fact, the next morning Talon was at Target when it opened and bought an assortment of clothes, toiletries, and books. He would have happily bought Evan a Kindle or something like that, but it was by no means certain the boy wouldn't end up back in some sort of detention facility, so electronics were pointless as they would be stolen. He knew Hillsborough Juvenile allowed them to wear their own clothes if they wished, and whatever happened, if that was where Evan had to go, he wasn't on his own anymore. Between the whole team, he would always have a visitor, and that would make it clear to everyone that he wasn't without friends and unprotected.

If that had happened before, the Lincoln Brights of this world wouldn't have the influence they did. Talon smiled a self-satisfied smile. Lincoln had been suspended and was currently under investigation after Evan admitted Lincoln had many scams going, the biggest being selling drugs prescribed for prisoners. Apparently, once the other men knew there wouldn't be any retaliation, it had opened the floodgates. Lincoln Bright was likely going down, but more importantly the nursing assistant was about to get a taste of his own much-deserved medicine.

Four of the guards were also being investigated, because there was no way Bright had gotten away with this without help.

Talon always made sure either Charles or Finn was present when he went to visit Evan. But today he wanted to address the assault charge. He'd done his own investigation and was almost certain he knew what had happened, but he needed to

record Evan's version. He'd deliberately arranged to see him with the state-appointed attorney so everything was official.

Luckily, his appointed attorney looked barely old enough to graduate law school, which Talon really liked. Young meant hungry to win cases. Less likely to be jaded and let things slide.

It didn't take long for Evan to confirm what Talon suspected, even considering the time for Evan to answer most questions by writing the answers down. From the couple of incident reports Gael had unearthed for him concerning the store's owner, Bennie Simpson had likely been beating his wife for years. Simpson had panicked when another customer had seen him grab Evan by the throat when he'd caught him slipping a doughnut into his pocket, and the customer had called the cops. Bennie had said Evan had assaulted his wife and he'd come into the store from the back room just in time to see it happen. He had to cover up his violent reaction and his wife's fresh bruises were very convenient.

The story was so full of holes, it should have been laughed at and investigated, but Evan had a record and a scar.

So that was it.

Evan had emergency surgery scheduled for the next day as soon as the surgical team confirmed the presence of the tumor. The whole team was in the waiting room to hear the doc report they had gotten the whole tumor. Evan would need speech therapy, and he might remain deaf in one ear, but he was going to be okay. It took one hearing for a judge to reduce Evan's

sentence to time served and he was allowed to move into foster care.

And become family.

Talon visited him often, and so did Charles. Pete Docherty had promised him a bed as soon as the new wing was finished, but at the moment he was in a group foster home nearby. It wasn't ideal since he was the only enhanced child, but he was managing.

## Chapter Five



Three weeks after Elijah came home from the hospital, Talon and Finn were allowed to take all three older kids out for the day. Talon and Finn had both agreed they needed to concentrate on them first, and despite what Finn worried about, he wanted them to be a family, and never wanted the older ones to think they were just a means to an end. Asa had seemed ecstatic when he'd found out they had applied to be their foster parents. Henry hadn't really commented, and Elijah had been silent other than agreeing when he'd been asked officially.

Finn completely understood. You couldn't put a band-aid on years of disappointment and while Elijah seemed to cautiously trust them, he knew it was something that could take years. They had their fourth visit with Zuri scheduled for tomorrow, Sunday, so it would be a busy weekend.

They picked Elijah up from the group home first and Finn groaned when he saw his black eye. "What happened?"

"This fuckwit I know from school called Asa a—never mind," Elijah muttered and nearly threw himself into the back of the car.

Finn didn't ask for specifics, but knew it would have hurt. He also knew the conversation about Elijah using his fists to settle an argument was going to have to happen, but he gleefully decided Talon could handle that one. After all, co-parenting, right? He would do the night feeds with Zuri because that had suddenly become a thing again. Apparently, Zuri had decided she didn't need anything other than an hour's nap, her slightly frazzled foster-mom had told them last week.

Finn had already decided to ask for some leave if, *when*, they brought the kids home. They would need some time together in the first few days. Finn wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans. This was their first unsupervised visit. They'd also had to take a first-aid course supplemental to their regular one, because they'd found out Henry occasionally had seizures. It didn't seem to happen often, and the doctors were investigating, but it meant no unsupervised bath time, for starters. Conscious of what Elijah had gone through, and while

they didn't think Clive had tried anything with Henry, they made sure there was going to be a shower for the boys to use. They couldn't know for sure how much Henry had been affected yet, because Henry barely spoke, even to Elijah and Asa. It was hardly surprising, even without the threat of possible abuse, so that was another reason they were all treading very carefully.

Talon and Finn had talked about this day out a million times and changed their minds just as many, but in the end, they'd decided to go to Tampa Zoo, and meet Vance, Sam, Luis, Kai and Liam there. If their three showed any signs of getting overwhelmed they'd agreed on a code word with Vance for leaving.

Vance being Vance had called it Operation Rhinoceros since there was a new baby Rhino at the zoo, and they were all hoping to catch a glimpse.

The introduction with the boys didn't go as smoothly as Finn had hoped because despite Liam being the peacekeeper, Kai and Elijah seemed to instantly dislike each other.

Vance and Finn sat on the grass with Elijah and Kai while the others went to get ice-cream. The two hadn't stopped trying to one-up each other and Finn had told them if they didn't stop it, the others would get ice-cream and they wouldn't. Too late, Finn remembered that denying food to Elijah didn't work. In fact, it might be a trigger, and he could have kicked himself. Vance took one look and lay back, closing his eyes, clearly leaving it to Finn.

Kai announced he was going to pee and since the restrooms were literally in front of them, Finn could hardly insist on accompanying him.

Vance opened his eyes though and kept watch. Finn could see the entrance and exit from where he was and told himself to calm down. After a moment, Elijah got up and followed him in. Finn practically wrung his hands. “Do you think I should follow him?” He didn’t want them to fight, and despite all the police forces doing their best, Clive Reynolds still hadn’t been caught. Finn kept waiting for him to appear. Something told him they hadn’t heard the last of him.

“Give it a minute,” Vance said evenly. Finn counted seconds in his head and just when he couldn’t stand it any longer, a boy Finn hadn’t seen before ran out of the entrance screaming for his dad, saying another boy had hit him.

Finn and Vance were on their feet instantly and running to the entrance. Elijah was standing protectively over Kai while a man was talking to them. He looked up as they walked in, and smiled, even though he took a long, assessing look at Vance. “This your son?”

“Yes,” Finn said distinctly and went to stand next to Elijah, giving him all his attention. “Are you okay?” Elijah didn’t reply but Finn’s heart sank at the defeated look in his eyes. The look that told Finn things were going to go south.

Vance looked Kai over and examined the red mark on his cheek. The man coughed and held out his hand—rather gutsily, in Finn’s opinion—to Vance. “I was in the stall and

heard the boy that ran out call your son,” he nodded to Kai, “something rather unpleasant.”

“Retard,” Kai mumbled. Finn winced, knowing Kai’s lack of schooling was a very sore subject.

“Your son stayed remarkably calm and tried to ignore them.” Finn’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Liam must be having a greater effect on him than he’d realized. “But at the same time, as I came out I saw the bully push your son into the mirror.” He gestured to Elijah. “His brother saw what happened and naturally defended him.” The man smiled at Elijah. “I teach boxing. You showed remarkable restraint even though you could have wiped the floor with him, and you’re light on your feet. You ever want to pay a visit to Ike’s Gym, we’re on Martin Luther King and North 26<sup>th</sup> street. Ask for Jacko.”

Kai shuffled his feet and glanced at Elijah. It was clear they both wanted to go. It was also quite telling that neither boy had corrected the man about them being brothers, even though they looked nothing like each other. Elijah took the card that the man offered him, glanced at Kai, then back at Jacko. “Can Kai come?”

Finn could have burst into tears right that moment. Who knew all it took was a common enemy for Elijah’s protective instincts to kick in?

When they’d all seen what they wanted to at the zoo, Finn called a halt because he didn’t want them getting overtired, Henry especially. When they were all in the car and driving

home, Elijah leaned forward. He had his seatbelt on but clearly wanted to ask a question. Talon turned the radio down.

“Are we going back now?”

Finn glanced at the clock. Technically, they had them for a couple of hours more, and the adoption attorney had said providing that all the kids agreed, he didn't see any reason why the adoption wouldn't go through. They had fantastic professional and personal references and had passed all the checks. The icing on the cake as far as children services went was Asa.

Talon glanced at Finn. “The house?”

Finn nodded eagerly. “Who wants to see where we're all gonna live?”

Even Henry seemed interested.

Thirty minutes later all three kids gaped at the tangle of trees and bushes at the backyard. They'd rushed to get the inside ready for inspections and hadn't tackled the back yet.

“Wow,” Elijah said.

“Is it a forest?” Asa asked.

Henry pulled his thumb out. “Like a magic one?”

Finn had to laugh. “Actually, you know Vance and Sam who you met this morning? Well, they and some of our other friends are having a yard-taming session next weekend.”

Elijah turned, excitement shining in his eyes. “Can we come? Please?”



Asa nodded and Henry just slipped his hand into Finn's. Talon had to answer for Finn after that because he had trouble speaking.

"We can absolutely ask for permission," Talon agreed instantly and returned Elijah's fist-bump. Asa squealed and wanted to see the bedrooms again. Talon and Elijah stayed outside and discussed important things like if they were to have a grill where it would go, and the possible location of a basketball hoop. Finn led the other two inside and let them generally run around upstairs and scope out the rooms. After a few minutes, Henry simply climbed on Finn's lap and shut his eyes. Asa came and sat down next to him on the top step.

"You don't have one of these." He gestured to his face, and Finn understood how important this was to him.

"If I did and you didn't, would you still want to come and live here with us?"

He seemed to think about that, then nodded, leaning his head against Finn's shoulder. Jesus, they were all killing him today. "I might be able to do a thing."

Finn stayed very still, knowing exactly what he was telling him.

"But I'm worried Mr. Richards might think I cheat." Finn remained silent a minute. Mr. Richards was his new fifth grade teacher and so far had seemed okay. "Does that mean because you can do something now that you couldn't before?"

Asa nodded.

“Well, I can talk to him for you, or get your foster-mom Angie to, or Mark.” He named the social worker.

Asa was quiet. “I can remember stuff easily.” He looked at Finn. “You’re coming on Thursday, right?”

“Of course,” Finn hugged him. Asa’s class was doing a play. He had three lines and was very proud of them. “But you’ve been practicing your lines really hard. You know how proud we are of you.”

He was quiet another moment but then wrinkled his nose like the jury was still out. “I can remember everyone else’s too. Even what Mr. Richards says. We had to read a little bit of the book and I know that too.”

Finn grinned. Photographic memory, maybe? Things were going to get interesting at school. He chuckled and shoulder-nudged him. “Nothing to worry about. We’ve got this.”

“Can we stay over tonight?” Asa asked.

Finn shook his head regretfully. He wished. But they could ask permission for next weekend. Finn and Talon were taking Thursday and Friday off next week to get moved in. “No beds,” he added, trying to make it a joke, even though he desperately wanted to say yes.

Asa sat quietly for a few minutes while they both listened to Henry snoring. “Where’s Grace, I mean *Zuri* gonna sleep?”

He chuckled. “It’s confusing isn’t it?”

He nodded and smiled.

“Well,” Finn said. “I don’t know. You’re her big brother. Where do you think?”

“Maybe she could come in with me, just at the start? I mean, she’s little and might be scared.”

Finn nodded sagely. “I think that’s a good idea. The only problem is if she has a bad night and keeps you awake.”

Asa seemed to think about that. “Can we try?”

“Absolutely,” Finn agreed. “And I could get you some ear plugs.”

“Ear plugs?” Asa repeated in wonder.

Finn passed Asa his phone, told him the password, knowing full well he wouldn’t forget it, and he went on Amazon at his direction and ordered some squishy purple sponge ones. Which led to a serious debate about the fact that he hated blue, but boys seemed to have to like it. Finn, of course, quickly disabused him of that idea. Henry woke up while they were looking at comforters, and he wanted to see the zoo animal bedding. Then Talon and Elijah joined them, and they had an impromptu picnic on the floor with the leftovers, before reluctantly agreeing they all had to go home. Asa started crying as soon as they pulled up to his foster-mom’s and Henry didn’t look much better. It absolutely killed Finn to let them go, and be all upbeat and not drag it out, but he managed it.

Elijah was quiet, but Talon promised he would be in touch about going to the gym, and then they drove home.

“I got asked the question,” Finn said after a moment.

Talon huffed. “So did I, well one of the ones we talked about.”

Finn glanced over. “Asa couched it in ‘where did I think Zuri should sleep?’” Zuri had been in Marjorie and Clive’s room at the Reynolds. They knew the kids would want to be reassured they were all wanted, and not just as an excuse to get Zuri, which Finn had agonized over until Talon had insisted he go see Jonathan Rakeem, their team therapist. Talon had stressed the need to set up therapy for the kids, but had every confidence Jonathan would wheedle Finn’s worries out of him, especially after the phone call he’d shared with Jonathan. Jonathan had, of course, listened without commenting, patient confidentiality and all that, but Finn had seemed much brighter afterwards.

“What did you say?”

Finn repeated the conversation about ear plugs. “It might be he’s nervous as well. They all slept together at their mom’s.” Talon nodded. Finn glanced over at him. Talon was driving. Finn was too wrung out. “What question did you get?”

Talon was quiet for a second. “He asked me if he was supposed to call me Father.”

Finn’s lips parted in surprise. “What did you say?”

Talon grinned. “I said he could call me anything he liked, but that I didn’t answer to fuckwit.”

## Chapter Six



The next weekend was a disaster. Yard clearing was deemed an unsafe activity. Despite at least fifteen members of law enforcement being there, and the fact that they wouldn't let the kids actually clear anything, Elijah's social worker, Helen Chivers, had refused permission. She'd refused to listen to any safety argument Talon or Finn made, which had resulted in Elijah throwing a fit, mouthing off at a teacher, and getting a two-day school suspension. Finn and Talon had arranged to take them out Friday night instead for burgers, and Elijah had refused to go. He'd even refused to see them to even talk about it.

Finn didn't have a clue what to do. Henry and Asa had permission to come for the day, and while they didn't want to disappoint them, they also didn't want to exclude Elijah.

It was Connie and Vance who solved the problem. Vance immediately said he would go with Talon, Jacob, Daniel, and his dad and clear the dangerous stuff from the yard. The things they wouldn't have let the kids anywhere near anyway.

Connie invited Finn to bring the two younger ones around to meet Bo's younger brother and sister. Liam was going to a sleepover at Bo's anyway. Connie had a large inflatable pool

already set up and between them, Finn knew they could corral the four kids. Peter was around the same age as Henry, and while Ruth was a couple of years younger than that, she was very mature for her age and Finn thought it was a good mix. And as Bo was enhanced neither of the kids would even blink at Asa's scar.

“Which social worker is it?” Connie asked, sitting down next to Finn and watching the kids splash. Finn was relieved to see Connie had insisted on flotation jackets for all four kids because he was worried about Henry having a seizure in the water. They'd talked about it before, and Connie had assured him she had every size when he'd asked what to buy.

He sighed. “For Elijah, it's Helen Chivers.” Finn didn't really like her and was pretty sure the feeling was mutual. She'd been on vacation the day everything had kicked off with the Reynolds, and while technically she'd done her job beforehand, Finn imagined it had been difficult to admit that this had been going on under her nose. Not that Finn blamed her for one second. Social workers on the whole did an incredibly hard job while being underpaid and overworked. He looked over at Connie when she didn't reply and saw the set of her jaw.

*Crap.* “You know her.” Being a foster mom for over twenty years, there weren't many people in children and family services she didn't know.

Connie sighed. “She's very...*rigid*. To be honest, that's not always a bad thing, but we both know you can't always follow

a rule book with these kids. She also seems to think all foster parents work for her,” Connie added dryly.

Finn’s heart started beating rapidly. “We’ve had the home study approved, completed the course, as you know. Obviously passed all the background checks because of our jobs. We were waiting for final permission to have them for the full weekend after this, and if that went okay they could stay full time. We know the adoption hearing will take another three months after that, but—” Finn’s throat closed. He wasn’t sure how much more he could put their kids through. *Their*. Yes, they were definitely *theirs*.

Connie just squeezed his hand. “Let me see what I can find out.” She pursed her lips then smiled. “Actually, her supervisor is coming to my enhanced foster parent meeting on Wednesday. Sheena Wright. Lovely woman.” She looked pointedly at Finn. “I don’t care what you have to do to make it, but you need to be at that meeting.”

Finn nodded eagerly. He’d been to the last one. “Talon too?”

Connie seemed to consider it. “No. Talon can be a little intimidating.” They both smiled. “Now, have you chosen a cake?”

They talked weddings for the rest of the afternoon, and when Finn took two happy kids back to the foster home, they both flung their arms around him and asked when they were going to see him again. Finn was sick and tired of saying “it depends.”



Talon looked over as Elijah practically stomped down the stairs. Adele, the group home manager, sent Talon a sympathetic smile. He promised Elijah would be back by 9pm as it was a school night. Elijah threw himself in Talon's truck, but he nodded a greeting at Kai.

They were going to the gym. Kai was beside himself with excitement. Richard was sitting in the front next to Talon and Kai had been overjoyed to see him.

“Just us?” Elijah asked.

Talon glanced at him in the mirror. “You two were the ones that got invited.”

Elijah didn't reply and Talon couldn't work out whether he was pleased or angry at something. Finn had stayed late at the department catching up on work to leave himself free for Thursday and Friday. They were moving in officially. Friday all the new furniture the kids had picked out was being delivered. They'd decided to throw a furniture-building barbeque Friday night after they collected the kids from school, and of course everyone was invited.

“It'll be cool to see Luis next weekend,” Kai said after Talon had finished explaining the plans for Friday.



“Didn’t you see him last weekend?” Elijah almost snapped the question out and Talon just about held his breath. He knew what Elijah was asking. Kai shook his head. “Course not,” Kai said as if it was obvious. “The guys went to get rid of the big stuff. We were saving the party for Friday, so you guys could be there.” He glanced at Richard. “That’s what you said we were doing, right?”

Richard nodded, turning to Elijah. “Vance, Jacob, Talon and I went down on our own to clear the really big stuff so Finn wouldn’t get into trouble.”

Elijah gazed at them both, obviously absorbing the fact that the party had been cancelled. Talon would have explained if Elijah had either seen him or taken his phone calls. He’d done neither. “Why would Finn get into trouble?” Elijah asked after a moment.

Richard coughed and muttered “strangulation” under his breath. Talon shot him a glare because he was pretty sure both boys had heard the not-so-quiet whisper.

Kai grinned and piped up. “Liam told me Finn’s going to the foster parents’ meeting at our house on Wednesday because he was really upset you couldn’t go last weekend, and Connie said he wasn’t allowed to strangle anyone.”

Talon knew Liam had overheard this, and normally wouldn’t condone eavesdropping, but this might just be what Elijah needed to hear. In fact, for a foster mom of her experience, she’d been remarkably careless talking where kids might hear her. Talon smirked, knowing Connie had been anything but

careless. Next time they met, he owed that woman a big-ass glass of wine.

And funnily enough, Elijah cheered right up.

Jack Silver, or Jacko as he told the kids—with their dad’s permission—to call him was great, and no-one corrected Jacko’s assumption they were brothers. Talon liked that Jacko hadn’t let the fact that Elijah and Kai looked nothing like each other alter that either.

Jacko was the exact opposite of what Talon imagined a boxer to be. He was *small*, for starters. But then again, he’d never followed the sport at all, and was pretty sure that apart from the greats he wouldn’t be able to name any. He had no idea of any rules or equipment and watched in awe as Jacko practically had Elijah and Kai eating out of his hand.

He showed them how to hit a bag, on the solemn promise that unless they thought their lives, or the lives of their friends, were in immediate danger, they wouldn’t use any of the tips he taught against anyone. Bullies, he added simply, weren’t welcome in his gym.

They both fervently promised, and Talon had to hand it to the guy, Elijah might have just learned a very valuable lesson, and actually taken notice of it.

“I hear they’ve had a couple of sightings,” Richard murmured when both boys went to get showered. Talon had already checked the locker area out to confirm that as promised, Jacko had closed early to ensure the boys had a safe environment.

Talon sighed. “Supposedly, but at the same time as he was seen in Georgia, he was spotted in Miami.”

“Let’s hope he’s dead,” Richard said flatly, giving Talon the distinct impression that if Richard ever caught up with Clive Reynolds, he soon would be.

He smirked. “Sawyer’s bringing out your violent tendencies, huh?”

Richard flushed. It had been pretty obvious to everyone that Sawyer completely doted on both Richard and Adam. “So, wedding at home, huh?”

Talon nodded. “I just need some realistic fake snow.”

Richard laughed. “I’m not even gonna ask.”

“Why do you want fake snow?” Elijah asked as both boys appeared, obviously having heard his last comment.

“It’s a long story,” Talon grinned, stood, and looked at his watch. “We just have time to go through the drive through for a milkshake if we hustle.” Both boys hustled.

If Talon could have seen the speculative gleam in Kai’s eyes he might have worried.



Finn gazed at Zuri as she stopped sucking on the bottle. Her lips parted and she looked dead to the world.

“Such a bonnie wee baby,” Maureen commented, her Scottish accent obvious.

Finn sighed happily. He agreed, not that it would have mattered. She could have had horns growing out of her temples and he wouldn’t have cared. He lifted her over his shoulder and rubbed her back. She’d just started on solids but didn’t like them, so they were recommending another month on milk to get her settled. “I can feel she’s put on weight.” He sounded proud even to his own ears, which was a little ridiculous.

“I hear the mum officially surrendered rights.” Maureen leaned over and squeezed Finn’s hand. He nodded.

“You’ve done this a lot, yeah?”

Maureen chuckled. “If you mean here, I got my green card twenty-three years ago and was a social worker in Edinburgh before that, so you could say I’ve seen my share of bairns go to their new homes.”

Finn glanced at her. He meant to make some joke about Scotland, America, kids even, but all that came out was, “I’m scared.”

“Of course, you are,” Maureen agreed, like he hadn’t just admitted this huge thing. He stared at her.

Maureen smiled. She didn’t smile lightly. It was a full-face effort involving every wrinkle of a life well lived. “I was given

up by my sixteen-year-old birth mother who had me in a Salvation Army mother and baby unit.”

Finn didn't know what to say.

“And I even tracked her down when I was around twenty-five. Just had my first daughter and wanted her to know.” Maureen shrugged. “She wasn't interested.”

“That's awful,” Finn whispered.

“Not really. I did find out that she gave birth in the unit because her parents threw her out. Putting a baby up for adoption isn't the coward's way out as many think, it's one of the very bravest things someone can do. And after that maybe she didn't have any more courage left in her to talk to me. Maybe she still had guilt for some insane reason. Maybe she didn't want the reminder.”

Finn glanced down at Zuri's face. When the time came, what should he tell her?

“Up to you, but my two-penneth is, don't brush it off until they're older,” Maureen offered, correctly guessing his thoughts from his expression. “Just make it a normal part of her childhood, and whatever happens, whatever she decides, don't make her feel like she can't ask. Half the bairns I see in here never ever felt they could talk to their parents. Don't be that father. If your child screws up, you want them to know absolutely they can come to you. Come to you *first*. And nothing they ever do will make you stop loving them.”

Finn wiped his cheek. “I'm such a sap.”

“Saps make the best dads,” Maureen pronounced. Finn glanced at the clock, knowing he should have been out of there twenty minutes ago, but no one seemed to be in a hurry to make him leave.

“So, tell me while we’re at it, is it the whole adoption thing that scares you, or something in particular?”

Finn huffed out a laugh. “Yes and Yes.”

She waved a hand. “Let me have it then.”

Finn said what he could. “They went through an awful time with their previous foster family because the mom wanted a baby, and the only way was adopting a sibling group.”

“And you want a baby?”

Finn nodded, shame heating his skin. He was such a bad person. How could anyone trust their kids with him?

Maureen beamed. “Well thank the Lord, because I have a feeling you’re going to have your work cut out. Never mind the fact that she isn’t sleeping.” She leaned forward. “With those looks? You’re going to be beating the boys off in droves.” She cackled. “Girls as well.”

Finn laughed, even if it might have sounded suspiciously like a sob.

Maureen patted his hand. “I’ve never met her brothers, but I know Elijah thinks they’re all his responsibility, and would kill to protect them. He’s quite taken with boxing now, apparently. His relationship with Kai was a bit rocky, but they seem to be past that.”

Just as Finn was wondering how the hell she knew, she chuckled again, clearly not finished. “Asa doesn’t like blue anything. He’s worried that people only want them because of Zuri. He’s scared for both his brothers and convinced a mark on his face means you don’t love him. Oh, and he likes pineapple on pizzas which I’m pretty sure someone made a law against.

“Henry loves animals, and you’re thinking he’s going to come out of his shell when you get the new puppy. Olly, Talon’s rescue dog, adores Henry and lies on his feet. You think Henry might be a musician in the making and you have a friend called Sebastian who’s going to arrange concert tickets and see if he can help Henry. Incidentally, you’ve already started them all in therapy with a very interesting man who seems to have an obsession with coffee.

“And then there’s Zuri. Zuri who’s probably, as I said, going to give you the most sleepless nights because...well, just because.” Maureen smiled. “And Talon, who utterly adores you and will be with you every step of the way.” Finn was speechless. How the hell could she possibly know all that?

She leaned forward. “I’ve met you three times, Finn. *Three times*. I nearly know more about those bairns than I do my own, because you never shut up about them. That isn’t because you’re obsessed with a *baby*. It’s because you’re obsessed with a *family*.”

Finn knew he was crying.

“And obsessed in a good way.” She let Finn absorb her words for a moment and arched an eyebrow. “Although, I get the feeling your stalker tendencies will manifest themselves on Zuri’s first date. Always assuming Tampa PD isn’t following her en-masse,” she added.

Finn gaped. He knew his mouth was open, but he couldn’t seem to get his jaw to function to close it.

“I changed my shift because of you,” Maureen confided. “I wouldn’t miss seeing you take her home on Friday for all the whisky in Scotland.”

## **Chapter Seven**



Finn was summoned into Gregory’s office first thing Tuesday morning. He hoped it wouldn’t take long because he had a foster-families’ meeting starting at ten. He grinned when he saw Sawyer already sitting down in front of Gregory’s desk. “How was the course?”

Sawyer nodded. “I’ve got loads to tell you when you’re back.”



Finn looked at him, non-plussed, then at Gregory. “Oh, you mean Thursday? Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Finn and Sawyer were splitting up today.

Gregory steepled his fingers together, a sure sign he was going to make a pronouncement and both Sawyer and Finn turned to him obediently. He smiled and addressed Sawyer first. “Sawyer, you are Finn.”

Sawyer’s eyes didn’t even blink. “Yes, sir.”

He turned to Finn. “Finn, you are on special leave as of right this minute up to your booked leave that starts in just over a week.” He leaned back, clearly pleased with himself. He waved a hand in the direction of his office door. “Go home. I will see you officially in nearly three weeks.”

Finn couldn’t seem to grasp what he was being told, until Sawyer nudged him. “Go. I got this. You’ve got a new house, a soon to be new hubby and four crazy rugrats that I’m going to be very honored to help be an uncle for.” Now it was time for Sawyer to wave his hand at the door. “Go do things.”

Finn jumped up, nearly knocking over his chair. “Thank you!” He pinned his boss with a stern look. “We will see you on Friday.” It wasn’t a question. Gregory dutifully made the sign of a cross on his chest.

And then Finn was out of there.



By Thursday night, Finn couldn't have moved a muscle if he'd been on fire. "Where's all the rest of them?"

"Huh?" Talon mumbled, not really listening. They were both lying on their bed. Technically, it was a bare mattress, but at least it was upstairs.

"The rest of the people that our movers brought shit in today for." He blinked open an eye. "You have an apartment. There's no way all this stuff was ours." He shook his head. "There's gonna be some mad twenty-person family banging on the door any moment saying we stole their shit."

Talon chuckled, then he couldn't seem to stop. He dragged Finn over until he was lying on top of him.

"No. No, absolutely not," Finn whined. "You're never having sex again. Besides which, we have kids now. You're officially entering a twenty-year drought. We're going to have to wear pajamas."

"Uh-huh," Talon mumbled and fastened his mouth on Finn's, then broke off and nibbled at the shell of his ear. "Twenty years, huh? I'd better make this one good, then."

Finn didn't get the chance to answer because Talon's clever fingers were finding all Finn's hot spots. The way Talon

lightly circled his nipples sent shivers through his body. The tiny scrape of a nail which sent shivers specifically somewhere else. The murmured words that Talon knew Finn liked to hear and made him burn just as much as his touch.

Talon's arms slid around Finn's back, and then lower to smooth over his now bare ass, since Talon had somehow managed to strip him without him noticing. Finn could feel Talon's cock, thick and heavy, against his hip. Talon reached down between them and moved against him, one strong arm holding Finn up a little so he could slide his other between them.

Finn's cock jerked in anticipation, and he trembled when pure need shot through him as Talon wrapped his hand around both their lengths, pre-cum adding to the slide. He loved this. He adored his man. He—but all thought disappeared in a haze of lust when Talon let go and slid down the bed. He wouldn't last, but he didn't care. Not when he knew how good it felt to be inside Talon's warm, wet mouth. Talon sucked and licked, swirling his tongue over the crown and dipping his tongue into the tip just inside his slit.

“T, baby, let me.” Finn wanted to be all over Talon, to do the same.

Talon lifted up and gently blew cool air on Finn's cock, chuckling with evil glee when Finn writhed and thrust at him for friction. He even trapped both of Finn's hands in one of his so he couldn't move. Finn might just die if Talon didn't touch

his aching cock. He needed to come. Talon had wound him up so quickly, he was going to explode.

“I swear to God, T, if you don’t get your mouth back down there right this instant I’ll move another hundred kids in.”

Talon grinned. “Like you’re not going to do that anyway.” But he didn’t give Finn a chance to answer because he bent and nearly swallowed him down. Finn came in such a sudden rush of pleasure it robbed him of every sound, every sight, and every thought for a few seconds. But before he’d even come down from the high, Talon flipped him over.

Sometime later—fuck, it might have been years for all Finn knew—he was sprawled in a boneless heap over Talon, and somehow magically the bed had sheets on. He knew he must have moved at some point. Although, Finn wasn’t certain he was still in his actual body. He wasn’t even sure he still had a body.

“Go to sleep, baby.” Talon murmured and Finn felt the chest underneath him rumble. He had a random thought that if they did get a hundred kids they would run out of beds. Not that it mattered. He didn’t need a mattress. He was quite happy just lying here on top of Talon.



Geographically, it made sense to get Zuri before the kids, but they both agreed for many reasons today that they would do it the other way around. They had permission to get the kids from school, but the previous afternoon Finn had gotten a call from Mr. Dwyer, the new principal as of two weeks ago. He'd immediately worried there was something wrong even though professionally Finn had met Eric Dwyer on a few occasions. Mr. Dwyer was new to the school and his predecessor hadn't welcomed anyone who thought they might have more insight into "challenging" students as she referred to the four enhanced kids they had in their school, so it had been one of the schools Finn hadn't especially been welcome at.

Although, it was only with Sawyer shouldering some of his workload that Finn was able to visit the elementary schools more anyway, as most days he was dealing with high school students.

Interestingly enough, he'd had two colleges approach him regarding their enhanced students and he had arranged an initial meeting after his time off.

"Agent Mayer? It's Eric Dwyer from Shore Elementary."

Finn had clutched his cell phone tightly, convinced he was going to say there was something wrong with their kids. "Are they all okay?"

Dwyer had chuckled. "Apart from bouncing off the walls with excitement, yes. I'm not sure what you've said to Elijah, but he's been much more receptive in lessons this week."

Finn had to reach out for the back of the chair as his knees wobbled in relief.

“I know you’re due to collect them tomorrow after school, but you have my permission to sign all three out at lunchtime. I think stretching nerves and possible tempers won’t do anyone any favors. Elijah has an individual assessment in the morning then P.E., but the afternoon involves regular lessons which I think might be asking a little too much of all of them to be honest.”

Finn was stunned. “I don’t know what to say. I’m so grateful. And yes, of course we can be there at twelve.” It was going to make tomorrow so much easier. It meant they would have some quiet time to settle the kids before the rest of the family arrived.

They’d actually gone back and forth on this very issue anyway. Talon and Finn had thought a quiet evening might be a good idea, but both Elijah and Henry had seemed really upset not to see the others after the disappointment of the yard clearing weekend. Asa had confided to Finn that he would help with Zuri, and didn’t mind tackling diapers. Finn had been delighted because he knew Asa wanted to be trusted and valued. He also wanted them all to bond, and while Zuri was their sister, they had spent barely any time with her.

So here they were, standing in the yard chatting to Mr. Dwyer waiting for the lunch bell to ring. Their teachers had been notified.

“I know we haven’t had a chance to speak much, Agent Mayer, but I would be very interested in any and all educational collaborations for enhanced children.”

Finn smiled, genuinely delighted. “When we started this, the age of transformation was usually older, but we’ve found an increasing incidence of younger children developing the mark.”

Dwyer nodded. “So I understand. I’ve been keeping abreast of whatever information I can access. That wasn’t sensationalized by some reporter,” he added dryly.

“I actually have a development group that addresses education for enhanced children,” Finn said.

Dwyer smiled. “So I understand.”

“We meet on the last Thursday of every month, so that’s three weeks away. I can send—”

“I’m great friends with Amy Sullivan.”

Finn chuckled. Amy Sullivan was the rep from the Florida Department of Education. She also had applied to become a foster parent, specifically for an enhanced teenager her husband—a heating and cooling engineer—had found sleeping rough in an abandoned warehouse he was working in before it was demolished for a new road.

He loved how it seemed to be coming together.

“I’d also like to add, on a personal and confidential note, that I was a foster-child from the age of seven, until I aged out of the system,” Dwyer said quietly.

“We need people like you,” Finn said sincerely.

His rather thick moustache twitched. “Likewise.”

Then they heard the bell ring and kids streamed from the doors to the play areas.

“Shall we?” Mr. Dwyer waved a hand and Talon and Finn strode forward to collect their new family.

## Chapter Eight



In the middle of the barbeque, Kai set the yard on fire.

Despite at least thirty different people from various branches of law enforcement being present, Kai *somehow* had not only managed to acquire but had successfully smuggled an assortment of fireworks into the party.

Because it would be so cool to impress his new cousins.

He'd also decided, when the captain's back was turned for maybe 0.0000003 seconds, that he didn't think the burgers were cooking fast enough because he was likely to die of starvation, and he squirted some of the barbeque lighter fuel at the flame.



The flame roared and caught the fat from the sausages and spat sparks everywhere. Suitably chastised, Kai decided he'd better practice being a good cousin out of the way of the uncles. So, he picked Henry to practice on. Henry would love some sparklers, and Henry understood they had to play with the first one out of sight, just to test it. But he had to promise to be careful while Kai found something to light it with.

And that, as Kai protested afterwards, wasn't his fault. If Henry had done what he was told, he wouldn't have decided to suddenly run to the grill while Uncle Vance was marinating something that had once been in a cow with his secret sauce. Henry had been quick and silent and shoved his sparkler into the coals.

Kai had seen it happen in slow motion, funnily enough in exactly the same way it had been described to the Tampa fire department afterwards.

The sparkler had lit, Vance had yelled in shock, Henry had panicked, Vance had tried to grab him to keep him from being burned, and the grill had tipped over.

Now, because all those responsible law enforcement guys had been there in the first place, the grill wasn't somewhere silly like in the middle of the trees where it could catch fire or anything like that. Unfortunately, and that was where Kai got a little muddled in the retelling, he'd hidden the bag that he'd told Connie contained art supplies for him to play with his new cousins, but that really contained fireworks because they were so much better. Out of sight. Under the grill.

And that set off three more sparklers, two roman candles, a Catherine wheel—which was a real disappointment—a bottle rocket, which was astonishing, and finally something called a skyrocket which Kai had been assured by Neil, who had swapped it for Kai’s lunch, was awesome.

At the time, Kai remembered thinking it was strange that Neil could get a firework easily but didn’t seem to have anything to eat.

Kai genuinely thought it would be a perfect finishing touch to end the impromptu fireworks display.

Except the skyrocket wasn’t fixed as it should be to go vertical and wow everyone. It exploded the same as all the others. Except it went horizontal.

Straight at Connie and Asa.

And Finn seemed to react before anyone else and threw himself at them, saving everyone from being burned, but he managed to get his arm caught as it flew past.

Kai didn’t quite understand how it had all gone so wrong, or why Talon seemed so cross. Or, in fact, who called the fire department anyway. Because they could have handled it.

Then he saw the bad burn on Finn’s shoulder, and all the good thoughts he’d had, all the excitement, *his new family*, everything, seemed to vanish.

He stood frozen as the firefighters made sure everything was out, and then Talon lifted Finn in his arms and walked to the

ambulance, and Kai knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was all his fault.

He'd hurt Finn.

He knew Liam loved Finn almost as much as he loved Connie. Liam would hate him. Everyone would hate him. He turned and ran.



Talon scrubbed a hand over his face. Finn had accepted first aid, but on their first night with the kids? He wouldn't have gotten in that ambulance if his life depended on it.

And to be honest, once everyone had calmed down, they'd realized Finn's shoulder wasn't that bad. His jacket had gotten the worst of it. They'd been so damn lucky.

And that was the moment they discovered Kai was missing.

They had a quick confab over who would do what. Gael took Derek home. Connie insisted she'd stay with Finn to get the kids settled, and Sam elected to take Luis and Liam back to his. Jacob had to leave with his brood. Which left nearly the whole team minus Finn, Gael, and Sam but plus Matthew to look for Kai. Gregory stood quietly listening. Christopher was upstairs with Finn and Connie.

"He can't have gotten far," Adam pointed out.

Talon sighed. They had originally agreed among all the adults to make it an early night. They'd had a great afternoon with their kids unpacking suitcases, admiring treasures, and generally settling in. Talon had promised some net time tomorrow with the new hoop, and Finn had said on Sunday they needed to do a school inventory.

He'd had four pairs of eyes gaze at him while he was feeding Zuri. "I have no idea what your clothes or school supplies situation is like."

"I need some new sneakers," Asa confessed, which seemed to open the floodgates. It was pretty easy to sort what was essential from what would be really cool if money was no object.

Talon had felt really good about their Friday until the first firework had gone off. And as Richard had pointed out, it was exactly the sort of shit Talon himself would have pulled.

Except it was different. Children and family services wouldn't dream of turning up at someone's home just because the fire department got called out for an isolated incident. But the first time vulnerable foster kids stayed over? Talon knew Finn was expecting a knock on the door and all four kids to be hauled back to foster care and to be honest, he kind of expected the same.

It was like waiting for a bomb to drop.



It had been Matthew and Richard who found Kai in the end. Matthew had watched while a grid search was organized, and then he'd told Richard they were going back to his place to find him.

Richard had gazed at him. "But he's run away." Stressed the "away" part.

Matthew nodded. "Except he's running from guilt, not home."

Richard left the others still trying to work out the physics of how far he could get. Time versus speed etcetera. Connie appeared just as they were leaving. Matthew kissed his wife. "We'll be back, or I'll call. Get you a ride when you're done. Depends on what he wants to do."

Connie didn't seem the least surprised. "Just like old times," she said.

Matthew grunted and fished out his car keys.

Richard watched this exchange in amazement. Were they insane? Matthew and Connie lived over ten minutes away but that was least an hour away on foot if Kai ran all the way, which wouldn't happen. Richard mentioned this and Matthew

nodded. “If he was going the same route as a car and not through yards and over fences.”

“You really think he’ll just go home?”

Matthew considered the question while he signaled and waited to turn. “Some of the kids we had we couldn’t help. Maybe the second year in, this eleven-year-old girl—Francine—nearly finished us both off. No matter what we did, short of tying her to the bed, we couldn’t keep that kid inside. If it wasn’t for the fourteen-year-old we had at the same time, I think we’d have called it quits.”

“What happened?” Richard asked.

“She just didn’t come home one day,” Matthew admitted. “Most of the times she took nothing with her, so we knew it was just because she wasn’t the sort to be kept caged up.”

“*What?*” Richard gasped.

Matthew nodded. “There had been two of them. Mother was an addict and she used to lock them in dog crates while she went out.” Matthew tightened his hands on the steering wheel. “Then she might forget or just be too stoned to let them out when she got home. The boy was a diabetic and was dead by the time the school reported them missing. Francine simply decided nothing we could offer was worth the risk of being caged again.” He turned again. “I check the logs and incidents, every so often. She’s been a miss-per for years.” He was silent for a few minutes while he navigated the parked cars leading to their house. “In my head I hope she made it. That’s she’s

living in some commune in Africa, or Europe or hell, the middle of Kentucky even.”

Richard’s chest was so tight he struggled to inhale. Sawyer desperately wanted kids. Would this be them in twenty years? Wondering what had happened to the ones that never came home?

“We got a postcard about seven years ago.”

Richard stared at Matthew. “From Francine you mean?”

He smiled. “It wasn’t signed. I even had to pay the excess postage. It was mailed in Giza.”

“But you think it was from her?”

Matthew chuckled. “It had a picture of the pyramids on it.”

Richard frowned. “How—”

“Because the night before she left, I woke and heard the TV on downstairs. I went to investigate, and sure enough Francine was sitting there. She’d helped herself to juice and was crunching an apple. I asked her what she thought she was doing.”

Talon waited, but Matthew shook his head. “She told me she was learning about the pharaohs because Egypt was number one on her list of places to visit. Like that was a reasonable thing at two in the morning when you’re eleven.”

“What did you do?”

Matthew shrugged but pulled up outside his house. “Helped myself to coffee and watched it with her. She took off from

school the next day. She'd left all her clothes but taken all the apples, some other bits and pieces, and we never saw her again."

Richard gazed at him, not moving despite Matthew getting out. "I can't do that."

Matthew grinned. "Yeah, you can, because for every Francine there'll be a Kai."

"Who isn't here," Richard muttered and got out.

Matthew gestured to the backyard. "I'll put the coffee on."

Richard walked around the back the same he had with Sawyer and Adam all those weeks ago. He heard the sniffles before he made out the little boy perched on the wall. Without saying a word, Richard sat down next to him and looked over the yard. It was nice. The pool that was currently covered and padlocked took up most of it. There was a nice, paved area with a barbecue. A swing set and a dozen different-sized bicycles all leaned against each other under some sort of cover that might have been temporary ten years ago but had never been replaced. He compared that to the wilderness they'd just left and decided suddenly he wanted something next to the beach. Not too far away because the kids, when they eventually came along, would need to visit other family, and there was the availability of babysitters to take into consideration.

But he wanted to wake up and have his coffee overlooking the sea.



And it wasn't like he couldn't afford it. All his brothers and his sister had been left something by their other grandparents, and his share had been sitting in the same account his pay had gone into every month for nearly twenty years. The bike had been the single most expensive purchase of his life.

He made up his mind to get the realtor's number from Finn tomorrow.

"When are the cops coming?" Kai asked eventually.

Richard accepted the mug of coffee from Matthew, who had just appeared. Matthew also put a steaming mug of what smelled like hot chocolate down next to Kai and settled into one of the chairs.

"So, when you say *cops*," Richard said after taking a sip. "What you gotta realize now that you're one of us, is you're going to have to be a little more specific."

Kai gulped. Richard knew if it was light enough to make out his features he might be crying.

"I nearly killed Finn," he whispered.

Richard nodded sagely, ignoring the quiet snort from Matthew. "From what I understand it's a regular occurrence."

"I didn't mean to."

"Well, that's a relief," Richard agreed. "I'm kind of fond of my soon to be brother-in-law." He glanced over at Matthew, wondering—as the boy's official foster-father—if he was going to chip in any time soon, but Matthew just sipped his coffee and looked unconcerned.

“Will I be punished?”

Richard thought about that. “Have you heard of something called PTSD?”

Kai frowned at what he thought was an odd question. “Is it a disease?”

Richard sighed. He knew a lot of people who thought so. “It’s a response people have to a really bad situation. Most people have heard it happens to soldiers who return from war. They experienced things in battle that made it so every time they hear a loud bang it reminds them of an explosion or a gunshot. They could associate that sound with people dying, often their friends.” It was so much more complicated, but for Kai he had to keep it simple.

“That’s why some people don’t like fireworks,” Kai said slowly as if figuring it out.

Richard nodded. “Not that fireworks aren’t cool, I’m just saying they have to be safe as well. I’m pretty sure you realize that, but you also need to be aware of your audience. If there had been someone at the barbeque like that, it could have really upset them, so putting someone in that sort of situation might have caused serious problems. I hate fireworks personally—well, at home, but I’ll make you a deal.”

“What?”

“I want you to start volunteering once a week at a local VA center. That’s where people that have served go to get help and advice when they come home.”

“What would I have to do?” Kai sounded nervous but curious.

“Can you play dominoes?”

Kai shook his head. Richard grunted. “I’ll teach you.” He glanced over at Matthew for approval and saw the man nod. “Right, I’ll pick you up on Sunday and we’ll go check things out.”

Kai stared at him, then at Matthew. “I’ll still be here?” His voice was so full of hope.

Richard didn’t need to check with Matthew this time. “Are you going to do something like that again?” Kai shook his head quite violently.

“Okay then,” Richard agreed and stood up. “See you Sunday, and don’t be surprised if Elijah wants to come.”

The beam from Kai was so bright he reckoned they could see it from space.

## Chapter Nine



“It’s so pretty.”

Talon smiled his agreement at the yard and hugged Asa, before slipping both the rings they had bought what seemed a lifetime ago into the pocket of his suit. He eyed his official foster son. He wondered when nerves and, *yes*, the fear that it could all go wrong, would settle enough for him to take that qualification away. He just wanted him to be his *son*. But it had only been a week, and he'd spent a long time talking to both the captain, *Matthew*, he had to remind himself to call him, and Richard after the chaos of last weekend. He had confessed to Matthew how damn scared he was of screwing up.

"Oh, you will," he'd said a little too confidently for Talon's liking.

"Please don't try and spare my feelings," he responded dryly. "Tell it how it is." Vance, at least, had thought that hilarious.

He smiled at Asa as he pirouetted for approval, and he told him he was stunning in the purple waistcoat he'd insisted upon as he ran outside, and he followed him.

Connie was the official dresser and Sam had made himself available for general *styling*. Talon had shut him down when he'd suggested a *smidgen of eye-liner would make those baby blues pop*, so Sam had gone to see Finn. Asa had eagerly asked for some to match his waistcoat.

Talon stood at the doors leading to their yard and grinned. Molly Landring had practically stolen Zuri when she saw her, and there was a large group of kids, moms, dads, and hell, everyone else, all mingling. The last time he'd gone outside to

make sure everything was okay, Daniel was very gallantly escorting Elspeth Vine to a shaded corner, and she was loudly telling anyone that would listen Vance should still come and work for her.

There were also seven dogs.

And nobody seemed to give a damn.

Finn had been right. He usually was, but having their wedding here with all the family, and what seemed like fifty kids—some with obvious scars on their faces, and some with hidden ones—was exactly the right thing to do. Pete Docherty slapped him on the shoulder and passed him a beer. They clinked bottles and Pete looked at the house. “When’s the opening day? I hear you’re going into my line of business.”

“You’re not funny,” Talon deadpanned, knowing he was partially correct. They’d even found a huge attic space that could very easily be converted to more bedrooms.

He was so fucked.

He couldn’t seem to keep the smile off his face though. He watched as Liam wrangled all the kids—actually now that he looked, he’d bet he wasn’t far off that original number—into teams. He gazed in quiet pride as every kid was included in the game, even Michael Ramsay’s three. Derek was clutching his electronic pad but seemed to be watching intently as Christopher spelled out a conversation to him on his hand. Talon was as shocked as everyone else when Eli went to help Liam referee the game.

Gael was sharing a joke with Jacob, and Gregory, Jake, Vance, Adam, and Daniel were on bar and waiter duty. Betty arrived from their favorite diner with even more side dishes.

He grinned as his brother Sam raised a bottle at him in a toast. His mother wasn't here. She was accompanying the senator on a fundraising trip to Denver. Once she'd found out that they weren't going to have the fancy wedding and that Sawyer was now indulging in a passion for photography, she'd abandoned the idea of being mother of one of the grooms.

Which was perfect.

He'd casually but dutifully asked Finn if he wanted to invite his mom and brother and Finn had smiled a little, but then told him Connie and the team had already been invited and Talon must have forgotten.

Talon had kissed Finn for quite a long time after that.

He'd heard the expression "found family" before and he wasn't stupid. He'd known it was about choice. But he liked Finn's explanation better. "Found" didn't mean a discovery according to Finn, it just meant no longer lost. It didn't matter if he'd never met that brother before, or they had grown up in the same house as virtual strangers. Talon was lucky enough to have both.

A cheer went up when the entertainment for the evening arrived. Few people could get teen heart-throb and singing sensation Sebastian Armitage to sing at their wedding, but *they* could. Talon smirked as Gray stood like a sentinel as his boyfriend warmed up for his performance.

He turned when Connie appeared on the patio with Asa and Henry and nodded to him. He glanced over at Gael and caught his eye. Gael stood up and walked over to him. He knew none of his brothers resented him asking Gael to be his best man. He loved every one of them, but Gael would have his back today just as he always had. He knew Elijah was waiting upstairs for them as they'd both agreed. Finn was going all in with his family, just as Talon had expected, and once he'd gotten over the shock of being asked, Elijah had stepped up to be Finn's best-man.

Not to be left out, Asa was to walk up the aisle first and throw rose petals. He'd watched a lot of You Tube video weddings and said while it was usually what girls seemed to do, Zuri was too young, so he was going to take that job on for her. He'd also wisely added, it was a bit like not liking blue when other people thought he was supposed to.

Henry had the very important job of looking after both rings from the time Talon handed them over to when he took them back. He reckoned Henry could be trusted for the thirty or so yards.

He looked up at the sky. The only thing Finn had wanted for some insane reason was snow. A white wedding except it wasn't even Thanksgiving yet. At least it wasn't raining. Talon turned to head upstairs, remembering their first Christmas. How Finn had cooked for just them, but one by one the team had shown up and everyone had pitched in. He knew this would be just as perfect, but loved the thought of adding in

excited kids opening presents. He grinned to himself as he reached the bedroom, pushing the door wide open.

The gunshot was loud and when Talon looked down, he expected to see a hole in his chest. What he didn't expect to see was Clive Reynolds holding Finn against him, one arm around his throat and the other waving the gun he had just fired into the ceiling.

Without being conscious of the decision, he blocked Gael from walking in behind him and slammed the door closed. He needed Gael to get his ass downstairs and tell everyone so they could come up with a plan to sort this out. He glanced over at Elijah who, complete with split lip and swollen cheek, was sitting on the floor with his back to the dresser. Elijah met Talon's eyes, and Talon read him in an instant. Fury, most definitely, but no panic. Talon took a second to wonder how this kid was only eleven, before he focused on his man.

"What are you doing?" he asked Clive evenly, unhurried, even though he was trying to feel for Sawyer's power. Because of another freaky DNA thing his clever boyfriend had tried to explain, Talon was able to mimic the team's abilities. The trouble was, of all Sawyer's abilities he'd mimicked before, he'd had the most practice at walking through solid objects. He hadn't practiced dissolving metal recently. Eli's fire ability? Talon could do that, but Clive was pressing the gun against Finn's temple, and he couldn't rely on being fast enough, and besides Clive was too close to Finn. He couldn't even slow Clive's body down without him being aware and



there was a tiny chance he might be able to pull the trigger if he sensed there was something wrong.

*“Talon?”*

He heard Charles’s voice in his head and told everyone to stay back. Anyone coming through that door...Sawyer! *“Get Sawyer to come through the door and stay hidden. Clive’s got a gun against Finn’s neck.”* Sawyer would know what to do.

“Clive?” Talon prompted. He needed to keep Clive calm, talking. Give Sawyer a chance.

“You stole my family,” Clive screamed and tightened his hold on Finn. Finn’s arms came up automatically, but Clive was crazed, vitriol spitting from his mouth, his face contorted in fury, and his arm tightening.

Talon met Finn’s eyes, willing him to relax. *“I love you. Sawyer’s on his way.”* He knew Charles would let him “talk” to Finn, but Finn was struggling to breathe. Clive’s hold was tightening, and Finn was in trouble.

“Clive, *easy,*” Talon tried to soothe. “You can’t get your family back if you don’t calm down.” But Clive just ranted and backed up to the wall.

He met Finn’s desperate, tear-laden eyes, and in an instant he was back at work the day they’d met all those years ago. He’d done the same to Finn. Cut off his air. Slowed his systems so he couldn’t move. Not more than ten minutes later Finn had stood up to the bullies trying to beat him up. Unarmed and half their size, but Finn hadn’t cared. Talon might have fought it,

but he was sure he'd fallen in love with his little warrior right at that moment.

“Clive,” Elijah said, “I’ll come with you. Let him go. I’ll come.”

*“Sawyer’s on his way.”*

Talon heard Christopher just as Clive turned to Elijah and screamed at him. “How dare you call me by my name? I’m your *father*.”

And then everything happened at once. Elijah seemed to lose it, ran at Clive, yelling, “You’re not my father, *he is*.” Clive swung the gun at Elijah and a shot fired a millisecond before the gun dissolved and Talon lunged for Clive, and they all seemed to go down in a tangle of bodies. The door burst open and for an agonized second Talon didn’t know where Finn was.

But then a smaller, familiar hand reached for him at the same time as Elijah was lifted out of the pile and Vance and Daniel pinned Clive to the floor.

“Are you hurt?” Talon demanded, his eyes scanning Finn for blood, for bullet holes. A second later Elijah slammed into them both. Talon held on tightly to them and looked up as Sawyer appeared in front of them. Grinning, he opened his palm, tilted it, and a tiny stream of shavings trickled onto the floor.

He’d caught the bullet and dissolved it. He’d caught the *bullet*.

Joseph had immediately summoned more cops to take Clive away, which they all seemed delighted to do, and were promptly invited back for burgers after their shift finished.

Talon listened to everything, but he couldn't seem to let go of Finn for even a second. Elijah was also tightly pressed against him. Then as people cleared out, Sam sauntered in and gazed at Finn and the bruises around his neck which were reddening as they sat. "Good thing I brought concealer," he muttered. Finn chuckled then winced. Charles had taken a look and said he would be sore, but it wasn't life-threatening.

Talon breathed out and gazed at the man he loved more than his next breath. "We can do this next week. I—" But Finn leaned forward and pressed the lightest of kisses to his lips.

"No," he croaked. "I can't wait for even another second."

"Besides," Sam drawled. "With Finn's track record, if you wait another week, we all know you'll be saying your vows in an ER somewhere."

Talon was pretty sure the whole team laughed.

He didn't think it was at all funny.

## Chapter Ten



Finn watched everyone leave, and then it was just him, Talon, and Elijah as they had planned. Finn eyed the boy. He'd been through far too much in his short life, and he'd hoped they were going to provide stability. Finn had failed him at the first hurdle.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. He could at least whisper without it hurting his throat.

Elijah looked up and met Finn's gaze warily. "What are you sorry for?"

He felt Talon's arm tighten around him but knew Talon would stay quiet for the moment.

"Because I wanted to be a safe space for you, for all of you," Finn admitted. "And you nearly got killed."

Elijah eyed him. "Does that mean you've changed your mind?" He glanced at Talon, then back at Finn.

"Changed my mind about what?" Finn asked, confused.

"Us staying here, living with you," Elijah mumbled and glanced down at the floor.

Finn pressed his lips together, his throat hurting for an entirely different reason. "Never," he whispered and held his arm out. Elijah looked up and rushed over. Finn hugged him tight, and Talon wrapped them both up in his arms.

"I heard what you said," Finn whispered after a moment, thinking Elijah's grief should be acknowledged. He'd screamed at Clive. He was going to need to unpack all that with Jonathan. Finn would send him armed with a Starbucks.

“I hate the word father,” Elijah agreed. He glanced between them both. “I was thinking dad.”

Finn’s heart just about stopped.

“And I ain’t gonna choose,” he carried on. “Up to the others what they call you, but I’m just gonna go with dad for the both of you.” He shrugged. “You guys can work it out which one I want.” He nodded to himself as if that was decided then stepped away and turned. “Think we should get on with this before Kai decides to go set something on fire.” And with that, he walked out and headed for the garden to go stand at the front across from Gael.

Finn struggled again. His throat burned even more until he took a few deep breaths and turned to Talon whose own eyes seemed a little more sparkly than usual. Talon held out a hand. They’d agreed they were walking out together.

They both left the bedroom then Finn came to an abrupt stop and started patting the pockets of the dove -gray suit. “Shit!”

Talon didn’t laugh, but Finn could see it was a struggle. “What?”

Finn continued searching. “I lost my vows. I had them written down. I mean I learned them obviously, but they’ve gone completely out of my head now.”

Talon nodded seriously and kept Finn heading for the yard. “That’s okay. I think you just have to promise to obey me.” He oofed at the harder hit than he’d expected from Finn, but then they were outside, and Sebastian’s band was playing.

Everyone stood, and Finn looked around at all the friends that were there. That had come for him, for them. He was going to cry some more, and everyone might laugh...and to be honest Finn didn't care. This was their day. One he'd never dreamed would happen. There had been quite a few moments he never thought he'd be alive to get there. So, he smiled big and clasped Talon's hand firmly as they walked behind a very solemn-looking Henry clutching the two rings like his life depended on it, and a beaming Asa who was very serious about his rose petal distribution.

Apparently Liam had offered to help him with the math, but Asa had shut him down so fast the guy had gotten whiplash. He was going to be a very strong person and Finn would be his biggest cheer-leader. Asa had also spent quite a bit of time with Liam afterwards to make sure Liam hadn't been upset. Finn fancied Liam had been in awe.

He couldn't smile at everyone without crying and hoped they would understand, but he smiled at every single child that was there. When they got to the front, Asa emptied his basket with a flourish and ran to Connie. Matthew high-fived him as he sat down. Finn felt a hand slip into his, and Henry stayed there through the whole service. It was a little like three of them got married.

Finn clutched his son's hand tightly and turned to look at Gregory, who of course, was a notary. Florida, apparently, was one of the few states that allowed notaries to perform weddings. He didn't think things could get any more perfect.

Talon said his vows first. Finn listened as Talon simply promised him his forever. “I can’t possibly guess at how long that might be,” Talon added. “But I want to promise it.” He paused. “Whether that’s at home, at work, or in any random ER.”

Everyone laughed.

Finn looked at Talon when Gregory said it was his turn. “I had all these fancy vows written out, but I lost them.” Another round of chuckles was heard. Finn grinned and patted his throat. “But it doesn’t matter because we’ve been tearing up the rule book since we met.”

Gregory coughed and clearly muttered. “*Quantico.*”

The whole team laughed. Now that the teams were established they’d gotten suggestions that new enhanced members should go to Quantico to start their FBI training. Talon had treated that with the contempt it deserved.

One day when no one cared about a scar, Finn knew Talon would revisit it. But they weren’t quite there yet. The enhanced needed training they would never get at Quantico. They needed acceptance first above everything else.

“I want to say one last thing, T.” Finn never took his eyes from the blue ones. “You didn’t just give me your love and your forever, you gave me a family. Not sure anything could top that.” Finn whispered the words, but he didn’t care if everyone else could hear them or not. So long as Talon did. Finn pressed his palm against Talon’s chest, right where he

knew that big strong heart would be beating. “I think we’ve got this.”

Talon laid his own hand over Finn’s and drew him in. He bent his head down but just before they kissed, he whispered. “Yeah, I think we do.”

The happy couple remained mostly oblivious to the rest of the words Gregory said, but no one, least of all the man himself, minded very much. And when Talon and Finn finally heard all their friends cheering, they came up for air and realized that somehow, despite there not being any “I do’s,” they were finally married.

“I tried my best to give you everything you wanted today.”

Finn gazed at his husband and mentally went through their day. “Well,” he said quietly. “I didn’t ask for a guest appearance from a homicidal maniac so I suppose in terms of surprises you could say you were in front.”

Talon joined in the laughter, but as if they had agreed beforehand, all the kids stood up. Liam took Derek’s chair and wheeled it into the aisle.

And every adult stared at them.

Kai stepped up with Elijah. They looked at each other and Kai shrugged at Finn. “You wanted a white wedding. We know you don’t mean the color of your suit. We both know you meant the weather.”

Finn took both their hands. “It was more important to marry where you could all join us.” And it had been. A million



percent.

Elijah nodded. “This was Kai’s idea, but it’s from us all. We know our future is up to us, but we also know you gave us the chance to start one.”

Finn gazed at him silently acknowledged he clearly wasn’t done with tears, and brushed his cheek idly at the sudden cold spot. He looked up, then stilled. The whole garden fell completely quiet as clouds that hadn’t been there a moment ago quickly formed. He turned his puzzled look on Talon, but out of the corner of his eye saw someone else.

It was Marie.

The talented enhanced girl could control barometric pressure and make the weather do pretty much what she wanted. Marie was standing, eyes closed, a look of utter concentration on her face.

Finn looked back at the sky and felt the second damp touch of something on his face.

“Well, damn me,” Vance said in awe. “It’s snowing.”

And it was.

Finn pressed a shaky hand to his mouth. He didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, so he decided to just stand in the circle of Talon’s arms while the snow fell all around them.

After a few minutes, Marie’s mom put her arm around her daughter and said, “That’s enough darling or not even Eli will be able to get that barbeque lit.”



Talon didn't have words, but he guessed he really didn't need them. One by one all his family had left. His four children were all safely tucked up in their beds, and he was finally lying with Finn in his arms. "I feel like I should say something profound," he admitted.

Finn grinned sleepily. "Pretty sure you can think of something soon."

Talon turned and kissed Finn until they were both breathless. "Maybe," Talon admitted and cuddled Finn in close. "But I might just need *another five minutes.*"

# A Five Minute Second Chance

**A**nthony Roland Gregory—named for his grandfather—blew out a tired breath as he eyed the stairs leading up to the medical bay. He shouldn't take the elevator. He'd gotten his latest numbers from his doctor last week and they weren't great. Okay, they weren't exactly *bad* either, but his blood pressure was a smidgen too high, his cholesterol was up there with it, and he needed to lose a couple of pounds.

Make that twenty.

*At least*, apparently.

And he wasn't here to see Dr. Natalie, as she only saw the team and he technically didn't count. He was here for a much more frivolous reason. An insane one that probably was another indication of approaching senility. He clutched the birthday card in his hand, knowing the team were taking Christopher out next week to their favorite restaurant, and that they would give him their cards and gifts then.

But he wanted to give Christopher the card from him *today*.

Christopher was fascinating: gentle, yet assertive without saying one word. They talked. Anthony didn't even bother articulating the words when he was talking to Christopher, except now the last team debacle was over, they'd barely seen each other.

After much persuasion, and only because *technically* Christopher worked for the medical unit and Anthony wasn't *technically* his boss, he'd agreed to drinks. Or a drink, anyway. They'd both sipped a light beer extremely slowly and Anthony had listened as Christopher told him what it had been like growing up with two utterly fascinating parents and how he missed them. Anthony had been astounded to find out that Christopher had five degrees, including a Master's in Advanced Physics. Apparently, he received his Associate's at fifteen.

Anthony had managed to complete his criminal justice degree—without flying colors, but it had been enough. He'd enlisted straight after college and scraped his college degree, and it was only after working as a beat cop when he came out of the service, he'd decided to study part time for a Bachelor's. His original plan had been to become a lawyer, but that never seemed to be a good fit. Then his dad had died of a sudden heart attack, and he'd met his half-brother for the first time. Kurt worked for the FBI, and the rest, as they say, was history.

“Did you need something, Sir?”

He looked up as Natalie jogged down the stairs. She was clearly leaving, her purse slung over her shoulder and a light

jacket in her hand. He hesitated, feeling foolish, He knew she'd seen the envelope he carried. He smiled. "Just had a question for Christopher." He tried to appear nonchalant.

She nodded. "He's just finishing up. Don't let him stay too late," she scolded and carried on past him.

His heart beat faster, but this time it had nothing to do with climbing the stairs.

They'd met a few times outside of work. Anthony wouldn't have classed them as dates, exactly. Hell, he didn't know for sure if Christopher was gay. He himself was Bi, he supposed, taking into account how he felt about him. He'd had a fraught and turbulent marriage for eight years and when Clara had an affair with an insurance agent and left for sunnier climes—well for better underwritten ones anyway—he'd opened the bottle of Booker's the guys had gifted him when he left to go to Quantico. He'd had to hide it in the garage. According to Clara, drinking led to all sorts of things.

Not sex though. And not kids. He'd always wanted kids, and now he'd missed his chance of kids and grandchildren.

But back to the puzzle that was Christopher. Their second non-date had been amazing, and even led him to tease Christopher. The infamous sexting conversation, as he called it in his head. And it had been. He'd offered to give Christopher a ride to the hospital when Bo had surgery, and they'd even babysat the youngsters together which had been fun, and then nothing. *Zilch.*

Okay, so he'd been busy in the aftermath of the last case with the new assignments and partnerships, but he could easily have made time.

All that deliberation brought him to the clinic. He felt utterly ridiculous. How old was he? Standing here with a birthday card like some preschooler.

*"Is that for me?"*

He didn't even register the voice speaking in his head until he looked up and saw Christopher, coat on, clearly leaving for the night. He thrust it at him and Christopher twinkled. Yes, goddamit, his eyes lit up and the creases in the corners of his eyes deepened. There was almost a flash of silver in them. Anthony relaxed. "Yes."

Then he realized he'd relaxed, and stiffened before he surrendered the card. "That wasn't you, was it?" Christopher did this thing. He could ease even the most fractious patient, and without a word, vocally or telepathically.

Christopher shook his head but stepped back, visibly upset at Anthony's thoughtless comment. Well, *crap*. "Sorry, I'm making an utter mess of this as usual." He scraped his hair back, palm meeting skin in quite a few places. What was he even doing? "Sorry." He turned, letting go of the card.

*"I'm babysitting tonight."*

Anthony paused. "On your birthday?" He was astounded.

Christopher shrugged. *"I'm celebrating next week. It's Connie's birthday tonight and Matthew's surprising her."*

“But she has sons,” he protested.

Christopher just stared at him. “*And I don’t.*”

Anthony gazed at Christopher for a long time, too long. But he understood loneliness. It was an old friend.

Christopher smiled. “*Wanna come? Monopoly marathon?*”

Anthony beamed. “Absolutely.”

He followed Christopher’s neat Prius all the way to Matthew’s and wondered what the captain would think. Matthew’s star was on the rise after being held back for so many years simply because he had an enhanced son. The current deputy-chief was retiring in a few months and he’d heard on the grapevine it might be Matthew’s if he wanted it, as the Major had taken a lot of time off to be with his sick wife. She was thankfully on the mend, but he’d made it clear he wasn’t interested in promotion. Anthony supposed it was Matthew’s if he wanted it, and it would be interesting to see what the team made of it. It had taken them months to get used to calling him Captain and not Lieutenant. Matthew could retire whenever he wanted, technically, so he supposed it might depend on what Connie wanted. It was interesting to watch, especially as he himself had just turned down a promotion.

He wanted to stay where he was. What little family he counted as his could be found sitting around his large conference table. He was immensely proud of his unit. There had been a few agencies watching the enhanced development with interest, but he’d been the one that started the team.

And he liked to think they needed him. Pathetic much? He'd made sure to keep a semi-professional relationship with them. He regularly got invited to things and if he was honest, he ached to go, but he'd always held back, thinking the team would have a better time if their boss wasn't there.

Until he'd gotten a visit from one Finlay Mayer earlier today.

"We want you to come to Christopher's birthday next week. He wants you to come." Anthony had smiled, remembering a scared, exhausted, but defiant young man that had spent 36 hours traveling against all odds just to be an FBI agent. If he'd had a son, he would have wanted him just to be like Finn.

If he'd had a son?

His wife had lamented the fact that she couldn't get pregnant—even if it would have likely taken an immaculate conception because he was barely allowed near her—only to discover her birth control pills hidden under a drawer she had missed when she'd cleared the rest of her things out.

Anthony had really been tempted to cry that day. Not for his wife, but for a life lost. He'd have thrown everything into being the best dad he could be, but he'd never even been asked. Or maybe that was all on him? Maybe he should have instigated the deep conversations. Too late now, though, and he had a monopoly game to win.

The first time they'd played, obviously he and Christopher had offered to split, partner with each boy. Liam had just scoffed and said they were good with the kids taking on the adults. *And they'd wiped the floor with them.* As in Kai and



Liam had beaten their asses, *twice*. The Captain had tried to warn him, said Liam was clever, and that Kai was like some monopoly ninja.

Clearly, he hadn't been exaggerating.

They'd even improved on the existing rules. Added a couple of side hustles, if you could believe that. The first time Liam had casually suggested it, the captain had shaken his head in warning. Anthony wished he'd taken notice, but it was too late now. They were five games down and the entire reputation of the FBI—so it seemed—rested on the next game.

Christopher stopped him as he locked his car and went to follow him inside. *“Don't forget Liam can see what you're doing.”*

“What?” That brought him up short. He hadn't gotten some freaky x-ray vision. Liam—for the non-science geeks amongst them—could basically see through living things. Something to do with oxygen and carbon, which Anthony didn't get. “He can't see through plastic, can he?”

*“No he can't, but he can see your blood flow, your heart rate.”*

“But doesn't that just mean I shouldn't play him at poker?”

Christopher laughed. It was silent, but Anthony could see the joy on his face and wished he could always put it there.

Anthony considered what Christopher had said as they walked to the door. He bent down and whispered. “Can you make me calm?”

Christopher's eyes widened, then crinkled in amusement. *"That would be cheating."*

Anthony shrugged. If Liam was using his abilities, then as far as he was concerned, he needed an edge. "All's fair in love and monopoly," he murmured just as Kai opened the door. He didn't think about any other meaning of that phrase until they were inside.

They still lost.

The kids went to bed eventually and Christopher went to the kitchen, offering to make coffee. He returned with two steaming mugs and two slices of Connie's birthday cake. Anthony groaned. "I'm fat enough."

Christopher's eyebrows rose. *"You're no such thing."*

Anthony tried and probably failed to hide his pleasure. "Doc says I have to lose twenty pounds."

Christopher grinned and patted his middle. *"I'm hardly svelte myself."*

Anthony looked him up and down, but he struggled to see past his gentleness, caring nature, and ready smile. "You're perfect," he blurted out, then reddened. Damn, why did he behave like such a complete dork, as Kai would say, every time he spoke to the man?

*No fool like an old fool* was another saying that might also apply. They ate their cake and, knowing he could expect Matthew and Connie to return at any moment, Anthony was going to ask Christopher if he'd like to go out for supper,

possibly tomorrow after work, or even later in the week, when Christopher's cell phone buzzed.

Anthony averted his face from the screen to give Christopher privacy just as he heard Matthew's car pull up outside. Connie came in and hugged them both, laughing when he admitted they'd been beaten once again. Matthew grunted and told them Kai's return to school had only been possible because Kai had met one of his sergeants when he'd visited and there'd been a news segment on TV in the background about illegal trading.

Apparently, his sergeant had a brother that worked in the city and knew the man. Kai had grilled him for nearly half an hour while Dan Crispin had patiently explained about stocks and shares and bitcoins.

Kai had been fascinated. And Dan Crispin, because he was a good guy and knew they were struggling to get Kai to agree to any sort of schooling because he thought it was boring, made Kai a deal. Promised a special guided tour of the New York stock exchange escorted by him and his brother when Kai completed one semester.

Apparently, Kai was now saving hard because he wanted to have his own brokerage account next. It had to be custodial until he was eighteen, but Connie and Matthew had no doubt Kai would probably be the first enhanced trader ever.

Matthew had confided that he was considering letting Kai invest some of his pension when the time came, because now that Connie had developed a taste for cruises, he wanted to be able to take her in luxury.

When they left, Anthony could tell whatever text he'd gotten had upset Christopher, as he was furiously replying without even bothering to unlock his car. "None of my business," Anthony said, "but you look worried."

Christopher looked up. *"It was from Evan. There's been a water pipe burst at his foster home; it flooded the first floor and all the kids are having to be moved as an emergency. They're being bussed everywhere and apparently the only foster home that is willing to take an enhanced, and one with his record, is in Tallahassee."* Christopher shook his head. *"He knows it would only be temporary until Pete's place was opened, but one of the other kids just told him the place is awful. He was in another home with a kid that had been there, and he says the foster parents have a biological son who makes all the foster kids' lives hell. He's going to run, Tony, I know he will. He's seventeen for another seven months and I'm not allowed to have him."*

Anthony took a moment to savor Christopher's shortening of his name before he processed the second thing he said.

"You've applied to become a foster parent?"

Christopher nodded. *"But it could take months for me to do everything, and because I can't explain to children and families that I can communicate, they're very leery of allowing it. Apparently sign language is a bonus if they have a deaf child but add in my enhanced status and it becomes complicated."*

“And Talon and Finn have taken the kids on a trip,” Anthony said. They were the only other approved foster parents on their team, apart from Gael and Jake and they had their hands full.

Then he smiled. Because they actually weren't. “Text him back right now and tell him you've found someone approved and that's on the team, then follow me to my house to drop off your car. I have some calls to make, and it will be better if you come with me to collect him.”

Christopher stared at him. *“But who is the foster family he's going to?”*

Anthony grinned. “I am.”

He left Christopher texting and drove home, calling Alison Mulgrave. She answered the phone on the second ring. “Uncle Tony, is everything okay?”

He chuckled. Alison wasn't really his niece, but the daughter of one of his service buddies that had died in action a long time ago. He'd kept his eye on Mac's widow and two young kids ever since. It just so happened she was the newly appointed secretary for the Florida Department of Children and Family Services. He quickly explained Evan's situation.

“Do you know the name of the family in Tallahassee?” She immediately assumed he was calling to report that.

“Not yet, but it was the only home that was willing to take an enhanced with his history.”

“I will call and find out, but it doesn't solve the immediate problem of where to place Evan.”

“No, but I can take him, can’t I?”

She paused, clearly surprised. “On paper, yes. You are approved, but I thought you—”

“I know,” Anthony said. He took a deep breath. “Because of my age and my job. I work long hours and I felt I couldn’t give a teenager the attention he would deserve.” He’d told himself when the team was established that he’d cut back, but if he was honest it was because he was a bit of a coward. Not even Finn and Talon knew he was an approved foster parent.

“But this is a special situation,” Alison agreed. “Very well. Let me make some calls. I’ll cancel the transport and inform the home you are on your way. His local case worker will need to make a visit tomorrow, though.”

Anthony thanked her and hung up. By the time he’d quickly made sure his briefcase that contained what he considered sensitive papers was locked away, he heard Christopher’s car pull in alongside his. He’d had to text Christopher his address because not one of the team had ever been to his house in Tampa Heights. To be honest he spent little time there. But it was adequate, a little far out for Evan’s school, but they’d manage.

And he supposed it was only temporary until Peter Docherty opened their new wing.

Christopher smiled shyly and got into Anthony’s car with him. It would take a good thirty minutes to reach the home. “I’ve been registered for a little under a year,” Anthony explained, knowing Christopher would ask.

*“This is amazing,”* he said. *“I can’t thank you enough.”*

Anthony warmed under his praise. “I’m able to take older teenagers, but I was planning to wait until the team was more established so I could cut back a little. My hours are ridiculous, or at least they have been.”

Christopher stayed silent for a moment, but Anthony could feel his steady gaze on him. He sighed. “Plus, I’m a coward.”

*“I seriously doubt that. I understand how disruptive it could be, but I’ll help all I can. My hours are shorter than yours.”*

Because Christopher didn’t need to work. His parents had left him a lot of money. Not that financially at this point Anthony needed to work either. Anthony knew Christopher wanted to help people, which had led him to the medical field. Brilliant enough to be a doctor in whatever field he chose, the scar on his face had put paid to all those plans. This was going to make him look foolish, but he wanted to make Christopher understand. He knew he was waiting for an answer, and while Christopher could speak to him telepathically, he wasn’t a mind reader.

“It’s not what you think.” He took a breath for courage as he slowed for a stop sign. “I wanted a family when I was younger, but my wife convinced me that she didn’t seem to be able to get pregnant, despite us trying for years. After she left me for someone else, I found some birth control pills in the back of her nightstand.” He shrugged, even though it still hurt. “I just threw myself into the job. I suppose you could say that became my family. The issue isn’t that I’m scared to take a

child.” He squirmed. “It’s the thought of finally becoming a father but knowing it’s going to be temporary.” If he got close to a teenager and had to let him go again for whatever reason, such as his birth parents getting them back, it would kill Anthony. He would wish all the happy endings in the world for kids, it was just sometimes he’d like one of his own.

*“I’ve worried about the same thing,”* Christopher confessed. *“I worried that I was wanting to foster a child simply because I was lonely. That’s a really bad reason to look after a child. It’s like putting the responsibility of your feelings onto them, instead of making a safe space for them to express their own.”*

Before he even realized what he was doing, he reached over and covered Christopher’s hand, then snatched it back. “Sorry, I—”

*“You’re a kind man, Tony. Don’t apologize.”* He was silent for a while but then asked. *“You’ve never been tempted to remarry?”*

*“Every day.”*

Panic hit Anthony when he realized he’d said those words clearly in his mind, and judging from Christopher’s surprised expression, he’d heard them.

“I mean,” he continued hurriedly. “I’ve dated men and women on and off. I’m not sure what that means, no I guess they call it Bi.” He felt heat rise up his neck. He knew they did. He wasn’t incompetent, so why was he behaving like he was? “Sorry, too much information.” And had it been way too obvious?



Christopher gazed out of the window. *“Well, if we’re being honest, I’m not only gay but the nearest I ever got to a date was when I went out with you.”* Anthony was so glad he had stopped at a red light because the car would be in a ditch if not.

*“I mean,”* Christopher sounded panicked. *“I mean, not that we were on a date or I thought you considered...”* He groaned and covered his face with both his hands. It was a good thing there were no cars behind him, because Anthony had let the lights run through an entire cycle and they were red again. Cautiously, his belly a bag of nerves, he reached out and covered Christopher’s hand again.

This time Christopher lowered one of his and pressed it on top. Anthony drove. Doing his best to concentrate on the road and not the fingers touching his, after a few minutes he confessed, “I thought I’d blown it.”

*“Why?”*

“Teasing you in front of the team.” The infamous sexting comment during their last case. “I’ve regretted it every day since. I don’t blame you for refusing to speak to me. It’s grounds for harassment. It’s—”

*“Hush,”* Christopher urged and squeezed his hand. *“I thought you regretted it for a different reason. I thought you were worried you’d given me the idea you were interested when you weren’t.”*

And because Anthony couldn’t quite believe their conversation, he threw caution to the winds. “I’ve been

attracted to you since the day we met, but as your boss—”

*“Which you aren’t.”*

“A technical definition,” Anthony agreed. “But it still made me worry you might feel pressured into dating me.”

*“When I wanted nothing more,”* Christopher admitted.

Anthony smiled so hard he thought his face might crack. Their hands remained joined until they drew up outside an end townhouse and gazed at the mixture of fire trucks, EMT vehicles, and cops all milling about. “It’s a circus. Those kids must be scared out of their minds.” Then all of a sudden it wasn’t about him anymore, and he got out of the car and showed his ID to anyone who challenged him, and some that didn’t even bother. Christopher had to hurry to keep up.

They found Evan perched on a garden bench, huddled under a blanket next to an EMT, sipping from a bottle of water. Anthony immediately introduced them both while Christopher hurried to be next to Evan. Evan turned to Christopher and started crying silently. He looked like he was at the end of his rope. A sergeant strode over accompanied by a social worker who immediately checked Anthony’s ID and confirmed they had permission for Evan to go with him.

“No stuff,” Evan croaked.

“Because it’s unsafe for you to go back inside,” the sergeant explained. “But I promise all belongings will be secured and you can get them if not tomorrow then the day after.”

Anthony nodded. He knew they couldn't let kids go tramping about when water could have easily gotten into the electrical systems, and that was just for starters. "I have spare shorts and tee-shirts for tonight. We can always go to the store tomorrow."

Evan looked at Anthony for probably the first time, then back at Christopher. He started signing with his hands. Anthony knew Christopher was teaching him sign language. Anthony needed to learn.

*"He resorts to this when he's upset and can't vocalize the words fast enough,"* Christopher explained. *"He's always spelled out in his head what he tries to say so I can hear him. I was going to explain when he got to Pete's what I can do. I trust him, but it's a big responsibility to keep my secret."*

Christopher signed then, but spoke the words in Anthony's head so he knew what Christopher was saying. *"This is Anthony Gregory. Talon and Finn's boss, and a friend of Pete's. He also happens to be a registered foster parent but he doesn't have any other children living with him at the moment. You can stay with him as long as you need to."* Christopher shoulder bumped Evan. *"I trust him. He's a good guy."*

Evan signed something else.

*"He wants to know if I will be there."* Christopher carefully wrote the question out on the little pad Evan generally kept in his pocket so Evan could see Christopher asking the question.

"Absolutely," Anthony said. "I know it will be approved for communication and I have another spare room."

Christopher's eyes met his and for a wild moment Anthony imagined him in a different bed, but tonight at the very least and for some weeks, Evan was the priority. Evan nodded, even sending him a shy smile.

When they got home, Anthony showed both his guests their rooms and where the spare sheets were, handed out spare shorts, sweats, and tee-shirts, and busied himself making a huge mound of buttered toast and hot tea.

"Sorry," he apologized as they both came into the kitchen. "We can go to the store tomorrow for supplies, but I drink so much coffee at work I don't have it at home. I'm out of hot chocolate as well. I have cold milk I can heat up, or water obviously."

"Thank you," Evan whispered and sat, wrapping his hands around his tea, seeming content to sip at it. He even ate three slices of toast. Christopher kept gazing at him and smiling, and then including Anthony in whatever they signed, using a pad because they couldn't let Evan know at the moment what Christopher could do.

Anthony got up from the table and opened a cupboard, taking out a small box. He passed it to Evan. "I don't think you have a phone. It has a minimal charge but the cord's in there." He drew his own out and copied the number from the instructions and sent a text confirming his. Christopher did the same. "That means you can get hold of either of us during the night." He hesitated. "I hope you sleep okay but if there's anything you need, don't be afraid to ask. I can set up a TV in

there tomorrow, and if you can't sleep, I'm happy for you to come downstairs either to make yourself some food, a drink, or to watch TV." He gazed at Evan. "Just do me a favor and if you feel panicky or worried, please shout out. Nothing you feel tonight is wrong, and don't worry that anything you say will upset me, including if you decide you're not happy and you need to be somewhere else."

Evan sent him another shy smile and whispered his thanks. Anthony hoped he'd said the right thing.



The next morning Anthony woke early and arranged for a grocery delivery, paying premium for a quick delivery, and had already stored most of it away and was prepping for their breakfast before eight. He actually loved cooking, but cooking for one took the shine off it a little, so he threw himself into making a breakfast with all the works.

*"How many people are you planning on feeding?"*

Anthony looked up when he heard Christopher's voice in his head and grinned. "I love cooking. Don't get to do it enough. Anything you don't like?"

Christopher paused, then shut the door behind him and walked toward Anthony. Anthony froze. It would be a shame if he died of a heart attack before he got a chance to respond to

the look in Christopher's eyes. Slowly, he watched as Christopher stopped in front of him, then reached up. When their lips touched, Anthony was convinced he'd died and gone to heaven. But he didn't even get a chance to react before Christopher drew back as the door opened and Evan came in.

Breakfast was a success. Anthony remembered to text Gael as Talon's deputy team leader to say he wasn't available today unless there was an emergency. He chuckled at the immediate concerned response from Gael asking if he was okay, and reassured him without giving him specifics.

In case Evan didn't get his belongings today Anthony quickly washed and dried Evan's clothes from yesterday and they left to go to the closest Target superstore for basics, and then stopped at Christopher's on the way home for his things.

Anthony should have been surprised at Christopher's modest house, but decided it suited him. They were examining Christopher's huge library and Christopher was fielding spoken words from Anthony, a few from Evan, and then translating his sign language as well.

"Wow," Evan enthused picking up a book. "Gran read this."

Christopher grinned. "*My mom was crazy about books, it's where I got it from, I suppose.*"

"You need to see my collection," Anthony agreed. "Nothing as stunning as this, but—"

He stopped as all three realized the same thing at the same exact moment, and Evan, who had his back to both of them,

turned around.

For a second, they were all frozen but then Christopher started laughing silently and grinned. “*Brat,*” he said to Evan. “*How long have you known?*”

Evan bit his lip and thought the answer. “*A while?*”

Anthony’s gaze went from one to another, until he caught Christopher doing his best not to laugh and it set him off.

“*You always knew what I was trying to say even when I was sure it was nonsense,*” Evan explained. He glanced at Anthony. “*I didn’t know you could do this, though.*”

“That’s all Christopher,” Anthony said out loud. “But we share certain abilities only with the team. We don’t want, for example, the military knowing some of our secrets.”

“*So, Anthony pretends he hasn’t seen us do certain things so he’s not forced to lie, but the rest of the team know,*” Christopher explained. “*Because I trust you, I’d decided to tell you when you transferred to Pete’s. I thought it was unfair of me to saddle you with that big of a secret before then.*”

Evan nodded. “*I would never tell.*” He paused then looked right at Anthony. “*How come you’ve never had any other foster kids?*”

Well, *crap*. Couldn’t they have even gotten through one day without this conversation?

“I’m old.” Anthony shrugged, trying to laugh it off, but he had a feeling Evan completely saw through his bullshit.

*“Does that mean you prefer a temporary foster agreement?”*

Anthony swallowed. He was killing him. “Honestly, no. But the very worst thing you could do is make a decision for yourself just because you think that someone else likes it.”

Evan seemed to absorb that as they went to Target and bought what seemed to be the entire store. Anthony enjoyed every single second.



Anthony was convinced Evan had some sort of innate language ability. He’d missed an awful lot of school, but his foreign language skills were incredible. Anthony mentioned this to Gael and arranged for them to talk socially either at Connie’s or Talon’s. Anthony loved that Evan got to meet Liam as well, even though Evan still didn’t vocalize much. Liam seemed to get on well with him and they were close in age, although Anthony would have classed Evan as a very young seventeen, which, considering what he’d gone through, was incredible. He would have thought the experience would have aged him. Kai—being quite loud—seemed a little too energetic for Evan, but all the adults were happy to let friendships develop at their own pace.

The friendship that had stunned them all had happened between Evan and Derrick after Connie had invited them to



supper to meet Gael, Jake, and Derrick so that Gael and Evan could talk. Evan was coming out of his shell and could cope with casual chats. He just reverted to sign language if he got overwhelmed. Gael, of course, could sign, and would have learned even without his enhanced ability of knowing every single language. Derrick was Gael and Jake's adopted son, and enhanced, but due to complications with fetal alcohol syndrome, was partially deaf and blind. His method of communication was an e-tablet. To ask him questions, sign language was spelled out on his palm. There was never a guarantee that Derek would reply, but after they'd finished eating and the kids were outside, Evan walked into the kitchen where most of the adults were, carrying Derrick's cup. "He wants lemonade," Evan whispered.

Jake grabbed the cup. "Thanks, Evan." He poured fresh orange juice into it and handed it back with a smile. Evan took it but glanced at Anthony. *"Isn't he allowed lemonade?"*

Anthony relayed the question to Jake.

There was a moment's silence then Gael leaned forward. "Evan, what did Derrick actually write?"

Evan gazed at Gael then looked at Christopher. *"I don't understand."*

Christopher relayed his answer and warned Evan he would let them all hear him.

Jake smiled and tried to explain. "Derrick communicates through his tablet. Whatever he wants to say appears on the screen, but he only does that with a few people."

Evan looked confused and sidled up to Anthony. Anthony shoulder-nudged him. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, of course not,” Jake said. “We just wondered how you knew he wanted lemonade. He always wants juice.”

Evan nodded. “*He told me.*” He tapped his head. “*In here, like Christopher does.*”

Jake nodded like that was perfectly reasonable, poured out the juice, rinsed Derrick’s cup, then filled it with lemonade and solemnly handed it to Evan, thanking him for watching out for Derrick. Evan grinned and jogged outside.

Gael spoke first into the stunned silence. “Did that really just happen?”

One by one they all smiled, especially Anthony. Life was getting very interesting.



Evan had been offered and turned down a place with Finn and Talon. He’d been clear with the social worker that he was happy where he was.

And yet it always seemed like Anthony had a ticking clock in his head. They had a meeting on Monday with family services following the opening of the new rooms at the home Pete Docherty ran, where the man had promised Evan a bed.

He knew Evan would be gone in less than a week and it was killing him. He'd taken Evan to the office twice. They'd even learned how to play chess together, and Evan had taught him some video games. *Him.*

And he loved having Christopher there. Wished every single day that Christopher was in his bed and not just down the hall, but he never thought he could ever ask that with Evan there.

It had been way too easy not to fall into a routine. Three weeks on and Evan went to bed one night, leaving Christopher and Anthony watching a show.

*"I think I should go home tomorrow."*

Shock ripped through Anthony, and he gazed at the man curled up next to him on the sofa. They'd been careful, both very conscious of PDA with a vulnerable teenager in the house, but at the same time, Anthony had loved taking it slow. They'd become comfortable around each other. Anthony touched him casually, and Christopher returned it. They all ate together every night, and Christopher had become a very insightful sounding board for the numerous cases that came across Anthony's desk every day. Evan had also been interested and while Anthony was careful to protect confidentiality, they could argue what ifs back and forth for hours.

*"Whatever happens in the morning, you two don't need a babysitter anymore."*

"Is that what you think?" Anthony asked and drew Christopher close. "You do know I've been holding back

because of Evan?” He breathed carefully. “But to make sure there’s no misunderstanding, whatever does happen tomorrow I want you in my life. You make me very happy, and I want nothing more than to have you stay. With me. In my bed,” he added in case Christopher doubted what he meant.

Christopher gulped but then almost threw himself at Anthony. “*I want to stay. I want to explore this.*” He smiled. “*I prefer my house, but that really doesn’t matter.*”

Anthony chuckled, loving the way Christopher pressed in tight. He could feel his arousal rubbing up against his own. “Honestly? I prefer your house too.” And they kissed for what seemed like hours but really wasn’t long enough. They were both ready for so much more.

*“I hate thinking we can only go to my house if Evan leaves.”*

Anthony nodded. “Me too.” Because they were both well aware that it was Anthony’s home that was approved by DCFS. Christopher was going through the application and approval process, but it would take weeks because it hadn’t been classed as an emergency like Talon and Finn’s initial situation. And tomorrow, they would meet with Evan’s social worker along with Pete Docherty to arrange Evan’s move.

Anthony would miss that kid so damn much. He was bright. They’d had so much fun. He’d been so humbled the first time Evan had asked him for help first with his homework instead of Christopher. Not that they ever approached things separately, but the thought that Evan trusted him a little was the best feeling in the world.



The next morning, they all sat in an office conference room. Christopher was there in case Evan needed help with communication, but he was getting better at standardized sign language. Evan, his case manager Sherri Blakely, Pete Docherty, Christopher, and Anthony were all sitting with bottles of water, as most of them couldn't abide the office coffee. Sawyer was also present since representing enhanced children in foster care was now his job. It even looked like he was going to need an assistant soon. There was an ASL-proficient translator watching a live video and they all wore earpieces if needed. Evan had been assured he could use sign language whenever he preferred.

“This is your show, Evan,” Sherri Blakely said. “We know you want to move into the group home Mr. Docherty manages, and as promised, there is a bed there for you. You can move in as soon as tomorrow.”

Evan looked scared to death, and Anthony leaned over. “If it would make you feel better to have fewer of us here, I can wait outside.” But Evan shook his head then took a breath.

“I want to stay.”

Anthony wasn't sure he'd heard properly, but of course he had to ask. “You mean with me?” He added quickly, “Just so

we're clear, are you saying you want to stay with me and not move to Pete's? I wouldn't be upset if you do want to move," he said. "I want you to be happy. Hope you can still meet me to beat me at chess wherever you live."

Evan started signing carefully. He was getting quite good and the ASL expert repeated what Evan said even though thanks to Christopher Anthony heard it loud and clear in his head. "*Do you want me to stay?*"

It was odd when the same sentence was repeated back to him through his earpiece.

"It's not about what I want," Anthony said. "Whatever your answer, it isn't a right or a wrong one, but if you're asking for an honest reply then the answer is yes, *hell yes.*"

Pete snorted and Sawyer tried to hide a smile.

"But Mr. Gregory doesn't want to influence you," Sherri Blakely hurriedly added. "We don't want you to feel pressured in any way. In fact," she looked at Sawyer. "I think it might be appropriate to interview Evan alone."

"It won't matter," Evan said loudly and clearly though he started signing again. "*Do you remember two weeks ago when Christopher was late home from work, and I got upset because Taven O'Connell had called me dumb?*"

"Of course," Anthony replied after waiting a moment to give the translator a chance to ask the question. He'd been ready to arrest the little snot. Possibly give him life without parole.

*“And instead of waiting while Christopher came home to translate for us, you got out your sign language book and we spent an hour talking.”*

Anthony signed really slowly. “I made a lot of mis-t-a-k-e.”

*“But you tried. You didn’t wait for it to be easy.”* He looked at Sherri and said aloud. “I want that. I want someone who doesn’t expect easy.” He looked at Pete. “Sorry,” he added.

Pete grinned. “Always like a man who knows what he wants. No offense taken, and I know I’ll see you hanging around with the team.” He stood and shook everyone’s hand, then let himself out.

“Well,” Sherri Blakely said smiling. “Do you have my number?”

Evan showed her his new phone, now on contract. It clearly displayed her name. She nodded. “I’m going to call you tomorrow and visit in a few days.” She also stood and shook everyone’s hand then she was gone as well.

Her assistant waited to show them out. Sawyer nudged Evan. “You got mine and Finn’s number in there?”

Evan nodded. *“I’ve got everyone’s.”* Sawyer chuckled when he heard the answer in his head.

Anthony was sorry to have to go to work, but Christopher took Evan home. Anthony got caught up in some problems that a colleague from Georgia needed advice on, and when he eventually walked into their kitchen later and spotted Christopher stirring something that smelled heavenly, he

dropped his briefcase and swept Christopher in his arms, ignoring his surprised squeak, and simply kissed the stuffing out of him.

He pulled back reluctantly and nuzzled Christopher's neck. "Missed you. Where's Evan?"

"Right here."

Anthony was so shocked he nearly dropped Christopher, and swung around to see Evan standing in the opposite corner, a wide grin on his face.

"*Oops,*" Christopher said in his head.

Evan rolled his eyes, showing he'd heard it too. "*Does that mean you can stop pretending now?*"

Anthony thought his skin might have caught fire. "You, err, know?"

"*Know?*" Evan repeated in disbelief. "Everyone knows."

Anthony just stared at him. Evan walked forward and flung his arms around them both. Anthony had a moment to realize Evan was just about the same height as him and seemed to have grown four inches in as many weeks, and then he processed what he'd said and hugged both of them back.

After a moment they both heard Evan in their heads. "*So, I never have to leave, right? This is it?*"

Anthony nodded. "And this doesn't have an expiration date. I want vacations, college, first dates, grandchildren. At least three."



Evan gaped.

Anthony shrugged. "I'm giving you fair warning. I can also get a lawyer tomorrow and start making us all official."

Christopher sniggered. "*You're adopting me too?*"

Anthony grinned and fished out the small velvet box he had in his pocket that he'd carried around with him all week. "Not quite," he said.

He met Christopher's wide-eyed stare, and despite his knees not being as supple as they used to be, he still managed to get down on one of them and ask the most important question of his life.

And if Evan had to help them both up after Christopher had flung his arms around him, then no one seemed to mind.

He wanted to be married. He wanted to have a family.

And he wasn't going to wait another *five minutes* more to make that happen.

# Is that the end?

*Yes.*

**And no.**

It is for my boys in Florida. They all got their very much deserved happy ever after... But, guess what?

I'm starting a brand new series based in Atlanta! This will have new characters you love, and these bad-boys won't be in the FBI, but they'll still be fighting for justice. All the characters you know will appear occasionally and I will still write short-stories featuring them.

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