

A New Door Opens

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Chapter 1

The worst day of my life. Ha!

If anyone would have asked me yesterday, I would have said that the worst day of my life was the day I was diagnosed with this damned unpronounceable disease... condition... whatever.

I always thought that nothing in my life could ever be worse than that day when my mom took me to the doctor for the results of the tests to tell us why I was having muscle twitches and getting weak.

Everything else that's gone wrong in my life traces back to that day.

I was normal.

Not cute. Not ugly. Not super smart. But not super dumb either.

My friends Ritchie and Ryan would hang out and talk about, well, nothing really. We'd just talk.

Everyone who knew us knew that if you saw one of us, you'd see the other two following a second later.

The three R's. Ritchie, Ryan and Rory...

I haven't seen Ritchie since last year, when mom took me out of public school.

I guess watching me get sicker and sicker was freaking them out pretty bad.

It's best to stick me in a little room where no one has to think about me or deal with the fact that things like this happen.

No, God is in his heaven and all's right with the world.

Anyway, Ritchie emailed me a few times but... it just wasn't the same. I could tell he was doing it because he felt like he had to.

Last spring he finally stopped.

Ryan came by about five months ago.

He said he's got a girlfriend...

I'll never have a girlfriend, well, not like that was going to happen anyway, but I'll never have a boyfriend either.

Who would want to have anything to do with a hideous, twisted monster like what I've become.

A few days after Ryan visited, mom came in and told me that he wouldn't be back.

Ryan's mom wouldn't let him visit anymore because it upset him so much... I guess he had nightmares and even missed some school because of it.

That day, everything traces back to that day. If the test result had been anything else I would have had a future... but now...

My body is shutting down around me.

The first thing to go was my legs.

I never really thought about my legs before, I mean, who would?

I wasn't a runner or an athlete so I didn't really think it would be that big of a deal...

God, I was so wrong.

When I sat down in that wheelchair, it was the first day of the end of my life.

It was like my world got smaller that day.

Now there were so many places I couldn't go and so many things I couldn't do.

Little, unimportant things that I never thought of before.

Mom tried to take me places to make up for it but I think that might have made it worse.

We used to be able to decide to go somewhere and just hop in the car and go...

Now... well, until a few months ago anyway, we would have to plan ahead to make sure the place we were going had ramps and stuff. Then mom would have to help me get into the car and pack the wheelchair in the trunk.

More often than not, all the handicapped parking would be full and she'd have to park out in BFE so she'd have enough room to get the wheelchair beside the car to get me out.

Then she'd have to push me all over the place the whole time we were there.

For a while I could move the wheelchair myself but eventually, that was taken away from me too.

I lost my freedom.

I couldn't go anywhere by myself anymore.

That was why I decided that I'd be better off in my room...

The family room is what it really is. It became my room the day I couldn't make it upstairs anymore....

It wasn't so bad. I had my computer and the whole world of the Internet to entertain me.

Finally that was taken away from me too when my hands were so twitchy and twisted that I couldn't write an email in under a day.

Mom got me some special things to make it possible for me to use the computer, but...

I couldn't.

I just couldn't go out into the world again, only to have it taken away from me.

I'd settled into the routine fairly well, Mom would load the CD player for the day and leave me alone to think and listen.

For a little while I could lose myself in the dreams of the singers, telling me about their loves and lives and joys and pains.

It wasn't much of a life, but it had some peaceful moments in it.

Mom would sometimes slip some other music in to try and put me in a better mood.

Hah!

As if she can even understand what that is.

She used to have moods.

She used to cry and mourn the loss of my health and freedom right along with me.

She doesn't have moods anymore. She takes a pill for that.

Now I have the ever-cheerful zombie hyper-mom.

Nothing ever gets her down or makes her mad.

All she does all day, every day, is zip around and try to make everything just 'perfect'.

I miss my real mom...

I miss my dad too...

When it first happened he tried to cope.

He took me camping and when we got to the parking lot he just picked me up and wore me like a backpack all the way to the campsite.

It was one of the best weekends I can remember since this curse fell on me.

But I just kept getting sicker and every day I would see him less and less.

Now dad is a ghost in my life.

I can't remember exactly when was the last time I saw him.

He even looks like a ghost.

It's like all the life is gone from his eyes and he doesn't see the world around him anymore.

It's like he's dead.

Walking around and still going through the motions, but dead inside.

I guess it doesn't matter now.

This morning I went back to the doctors for the latest test results...

I never imagined this could happen, not in my deepest, darkest nightmares.

We went into the office, just like always.

We sat in the waiting room and all the other people there tried to pretend that they weren't staring at me.

Mom was her hyper-cheerful self reading the out-of-date magazines at warp speed.

There was a little kid there who was pointing at me and asking his mother what was wrong with me.

Do you know what the bitch had the nerve to tell him?

'Don't look at him. You'll make him feel bad.'

I want the kid to look at me damn it! Take a good long look because I'm a person and I don't want to be ignored.

Talk to me! Ask me questions! Hell, point at me and call me names if you want to! BUT DON'T IGNORE ME!

Sorry... sore spot.

Where was I?

Oh yeah, the waiting room.

You'd think they would put a TV with HBO or something in there wouldn't you. I mean you go in and pay them how many hundred dollars every single time you visit? Then they make you wait with two-year old National Geographic's and crying babies?

What? Oh, the point. Yeah, I'm getting there.

We went into the doctor's office for a 'consultation', I think that's French for 'I could have told you over the phone but I'd rather drag you across town, make you fight traffic, make you try to find parking somewhere in this zip code, and then keep you waiting for half an hour so I can charge you a few hundred bucks and see the look on your face when I tell you.'

Anyway, Dr. All-Knowing finally comes in and has to look at my file to remember my name.

Remember me? The twitching little lump of flesh that drools on himself? The thing that used to be a normal kid three years ago? The monster that you said you could help? Ring any bells? Apparently not.

Zombie Hyper-mom was on the edge of her seat, listening to his every word as if he were about to impart the secrets of the universe.

As if.

So Dr. Know-it-all goes all the way back to the beginning of my file to recount my treatment and the 'progress' of my condition.

You call this progress?

Going from Playstation to PS-2, that's progress.

This is decomposition.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure Dr. Look-At-How-Smart-I-Am is getting paid by the hour.

He drones on and on, throwing in some twenty-two syllable words now and then just to prove that he's smarter than everyone else and finally he said the word.

He said the word that made today the single worst day of my entire life.

"Mrs. Teeter..."

Yeah, that's right, Teeter, I'm having a bad enough day, don't start with me.

"...your son's condition has..."

here it comes, the one word that I never expected. The nightmare made reality.

"...stabilized."

* * * * *

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!?

!!!

!?!?

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WHAT THE FUCK!?!?

Not gotten worse or better, NO.

If there was a merciful God in heaven the word would have been 'deteriorated' or 'improved'. Either one, I don't care!

But STABILIZED!?!?

Sweet Jesus no!

Cure me or kill me! Don't leave me like this!

"Since we're between treatments, I'm at a loss to explain..."

Stabilized!

"...need a sample of his spinal fluid..."

Stabilized.

"...come back next week for a complete work-up..."

stabilized...

* * * * *

I just endured one of the Zombie Hyper-Mom's whole-grain, organic, free-range creations.

Yuk!

Somewhere she got the idea that if we eat this way we'll live longer... you call that living? I'll gladly trade one year off my life for a Big Mac right now.

I guess I shouldn't complain, it's not like I can pick and choose since I can't even feed myself but... damn. That stuff was just nasty!

Oh well, I was telling you about my exciting morning...

Stabilized...

Not that it was a great day to begin with.

First of all my sister, Corina comes in and wakes me up to tell me about how she's got this horrible zit and how lucky I am that I don't have to go to school.

Um, yeah. That's me... the lucky one.

Then I find out that my dog, Possum, ran away last night.

He's supposed to be like my best friend or something.

He's okay. I mean, he doesn't try to feed me organic things or complain about zits, so that automatically moves him to the top of my friends list.

Possum doesn't do much, he just kind of lays around and listens to music with me, licks his nuts for half an hour or so, then goes to sleep.

As entertainment goes, it ranks right up there with afternoon television.

So to recap, I woke up to the zit story, found out my dog ran away, then went to the doctor to find out that I'm stuck like this.

Maybe I should get Zombie Hyper-Mom to load up a good book on CD for me next time she zips through here.

It takes my mind off things for a while at least.

But last time she loaded it, she got the CD's out of order. I can't even tell you how weird that was.

What am I going to do?

Up to now I've been facing the fact that this disease was eventually going to get to my heart or lungs or something else vital to life and then it would all end.

But now...

Stabilized.

* * * * *

"Rory honey, how would you like to go outside for a while? It's such a beautiful day!"

I guess every day is beautiful in her world.

"No."

Hey, it's not great exposition, but I can't talk very well anymore.

I'm pretty sure she doesn't understand what I'm saying most of the time, she just pretends so I'll feel better.

It's not like it's that hard to figure out what my answers will be.

"I've got a batch of brownies in the oven. I know how much you love them!"

Oh God. Not brownies!

Don't get me wrong, I love brownies, real 'chocolate' brownies. But the things that she makes are some kind of chocolate substitute from the health food store. No sugar, that is soooo unhealthy. So she uses concentrated mango juice or something. And we mustn't use any refined flour, no no no. Only whole grain flour... or maybe she just uses dirt. I really can't tell.

"When they're ready I'll bring you one with a tall glass of milk!"

No, not cow's milk. For some reason cows have been exiled from the realm of nature in Zombie Hyper-Mom's world. No, I get to enjoy a tall glass of soy milk.

Have you ever tasted soy milk?

I bet baby soybeans won't even drink it.

Okay, two years, one Big Mac, that's my final offer.

Stabilized...

The way the disease was going, I was looking at one more year, tops.

It didn't matter that I wasn't going to school because I'd never be old enough to need an education.

Years... I'm looking at living like this for years now.

When some people see me, they speak loudly and slowly because they think my brain is as messed up as my body.

It used to bug me... but it beats being ignored.

I guess it doesn't matter now... I can barely communicate anymore.

It would have been better if it was the other way around. If my mind was paralyzed and twisted and my body had been left untouched. At least that way I wouldn't have to endure the torture of watching the world continue around me without anyway to effect it.

Stabilized.

'Dear God! I know I stopped praying a long time ago, but... you can't let this happen. Please... I'm begging you... Please don't make me have to live for fifty or sixty years without being able to talk or feed myself. I can't...'

I just can't...

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"Rory honey, I've got good news!" Zombie Hyper-Mom said in her ever-cheerful voice through the door.

Good news. What a surprise. To her, the oven timer dinging is good news.

"These boys found Possum over at their house."

Boys?

I looked up to see a skinny blond kid, I guess he was a little older than me standing in my doorway.

"Hey, I'm Jake. How you doing?" The boy asked with a genuine smile.

"K" I forced out through my uncooperative mouth.

"This is my brother... Ken, where are you?" Jake asked as he looked behind him.

And in he walked, the most beautiful guy I think I've ever seen.

Eyes like pools of chocolate, brown hair spiked up and looking wild. He was fit and tan and just gorgeous.

"Um, hi." The boy, Ken, said shyly.

"Hi." I forced out.

"We found your dog. It's a good thing the address is on his collar or we wouldn't have known where he belonged." Jake said in a friendly and casual voice.

"Thanks." I said, making the single word mostly understandable.

"I've just made some brownies. How would you boys like some?" Hyper-Mom asked with a too-big smile.

"No thank you, we're about to have lunch." Jake said softly.

"Yeah. I'll have one. I love brownies." Ken said with a smile.

Oh God, he's going to eat one of mom's brownies!

This could be the end of any chance of friendship with these guys.

"Jake." I forced out.

"Yeah?" Jake asked and leaned closer to hear me.

"Mom's brownies suck." I said, working as hard as I could to make myself understood.

"I won't tell if you don't." Jake said with a conspiratorial whisper and a wink.

I looked at Jake curiously and saw the mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Here you go, and a tall glass of milk to wash it down." Hyper-Mom said extra-cheerfully.

"Thank you." Ken said with a huge smile and took a big bite of the brownie.

The look on his face was priceless. I thought for a second he was just going to spit it out right there.

Come to think of it, that would have been the winning option.

Instead, he tried to hide his horror and disgust by taking a long drink of milk.

I didn't think his eyes could get any wider, but they did.

There he was, standing in the middle of my bedroom with a mouth full of nasty-ass chocolate-substitute brownie and soy milk.

I raised my twisted hand and gestured in the general direction of the side door and said as loud and clear as I could, "Bathroom."

Ken nodded with tears in his eyes and ran toward the indicated door.

"Is something wrong?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked in puzzlement.

"I think it went down the wrong way." Jake said, barely restraining his laughter.

I couldn't help it. That had to be the funniest thing I'd seen in years.

I began to laugh and laugh hard.

"That'll teach Ken to take food from strangers." Jake said through his chuckles.

"His face..." I said, trying to calm myself.

"Yeah. After seeing that, I'm glad I'm saving my appetite for lunch." Jake said happily.

Still laughing, I did my best estimation of a nod of agreement.

"Would you like to come over to our house and hang out for a while?" Jake asked casually.

This guy is asking if I want to go to his house like I'm just a normal kid. It's like he doesn't even notice that I'm all twisted and gross.

"Yeah." I forced out, trying harder than I ever have to make myself understood.

"Mrs. Teeter? Would it be okay if Rory came over to our house for a while?" Jake asked Zombie Hyper-Mom with a smile.

"Oh, I don't know Jake. Rory is very sick. I don't think it's such a good idea." Hyper-Mom said, and an almost human expression of concern came over her face.

"We'll just be three houses away. If he starts feeling bad or anything we can bring him right back or call you." Jake said seriously.

"Well, I'll need to talk to your mother to make sure it's okay." Hyper-Mom said in the state of mind that passed for thought.

Jake looked at the bathroom door and said, "Ken, stop washing your mouth out and tell me the phone number. Mrs. Teeter needs to call Dad."

A second later Ken walked out of the bathroom with an embarrassed look on his face.

"Here, just hit 2 on the speed dial." Ken said as he handed Jake his phone.

Jake took the phone and hit the button.

After a second of waiting, Jake said, "Hola Mamacita. Por favor, yo necesito hablar con Papa... Si, gracias."

I looked at Zombie Hyper-Mom and saw the surprised look on her face.

"Hey Dad. We brought the dog over here and made a new friend. I asked if he could come and visit and his Mom wants to make sure it'll be okay." Jake said, then waited a second before handing the phone to Zombie Mom.

"I just wanted to be sure that it wouldn't be any trouble... But someone will need to be with Rory all the time... Oh, a housekeeper? And your neighbor too? And your Mother? Well, I guess that's okay then. Let me give you my phone number in case anything happens." Hyper-Mom said with confusion, then rattled off our phone number.

"Oh yes. Five o'clock would be fine. Thank you very much Mr. ? Thompson. Allen... Okay, and you can call me Doris. I'll see you at five o'clock." Zombie Hyper-Mom said, then handed the phone back to Jake.

"He said that there will be four adults there and that he'll bring you back home at five. Where did I put your coat?" Hyper-Mom asked suddenly and dashed out of the room.

"It's warm out, why would you need a coat?" Ken asked with confusion.

I didn't know how to explain with my extremely limited ability to speak.

"I guess Mrs. Teeter is worried that we're overdue for another ice age. Just smile and nod until we can get out of here." Jake said with a knowing look at me.

"Okay. Rory, do you have a swim suit? We have a pool and we were planning on swimming after lunch." Ken asked.

"In the gym bag." I tried to say, but it came out sounding like, "I ieee gee gah."

"In the gym bag." Jake said and I looked at him with disbelieving eyes.

Jake smiled and said, "I used to have a friend named Lewis in Chicago who was in about the same shape as you. I got pretty good at understanding him."

All I could do was respond with what, I'm sure, was a completely dorky smile.

"Here is his coat, an umbrella and some galoshes." Hyper-Mom said as she zipped into the room.

Jake and Ken just smiled and nodded as they took the gear from her.

"Can you get it yourself or would you like me to push?" Jake asked me casually.

"Push." I tried to say. I don't even know what the sound was that I made, but Jake apparently understood, because he unlocked my wheels and pushed me out of the room.

"Which one is your house again?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked, sounding like she was about to panic.

"Three houses that way." Ken said as he pointed.

"The Dodds house?" Mom asked carefully.

"Yeah, Uncle Chip sold it to my Dad." Ken said with a smile.

"Oh, well you make sure and call me right away if anything at all happens. Do you promise?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked in an almost lucid voice.

Ken smiled and nodded.

"We'll see you at five. Don't worry, we'll take good care of Rory." Jake said with a smile.

Zombie Hyper-Mom stood at the doorway and watched as Jake pushed me down the walkway to the sidewalk.

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"Rory, your mom's kind of..." Ken trailed off, searching for the right word.

"She's just really really happy Ken." Jake said seriously, then after a moment of consideration, he continued, "Probably lithium... That or maybe a mood enhancer and a pharmaceutical grade amphetamine."

"She's sad and takes drugs because of me." I said, but somewhere between my brain and my mouth the message must have got mixed up.

"Jake, you can understand Rory better than I can. Let me push for a while." Ken said seriously.

"Sure Ken." Jake said and traded places with him.

"What were you saying Rory?" Jake asked in a friendly voice.

"Mom's sad and takes drugs because of me." I said, and it sounded a little more like what I meant to say this time.

"Oh. So when you got sick she got all drugged up to deal with it." Jake said as more of a statement than a question.

"It's not your fault buddy. You didn't choose to get sick and you didn't choose for her to deal with it like this. Some people just can't cope. It's not your fault at all." Jake said with assurance.

Wow. That made total and complete sense! It's not my fault. It wasn't my choice.

"Um, I'm going to ask you to do something that might seem a little strange when we get to the house, but please just trust me, okay?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"K" I forced out.

"My boyfriend is going to meet us at the back door where we'll be going in and he's going to give me some candy. If it's okay with you, I'm going to put it in your pocket." Jake said in thought.

"Why?" I asked. It sounded more like a sigh than a word, but he got it.

Then it hit me. He said boyfriend. Jake is gay. He's like me. Not only did I find some new friends, but one of them is gay!

"That's the part where you're going to have to trust me. If it works, it'll be totally cool, I promise." Jake finished with a smile.

"K" I forced out again.

Hell, he wants to put candy in my pocket. That's no big deal... just a little strange.

"This is our house. What do you think?" Ken asked from behind me.

"Nice." I said.

I'd been by here a lot of times before. Ryan and Richie and I used to make up reasons to walk by here, hoping to get a look at JC from *N Sync. We never got to see him, but it was worth a try.

"Here are the items you requested." A boy said as he approached us.

The kid was a Vulcan. I'd read about Vulcans back before I stopped going to school.

I never, ever thought I'd ever see a real live Vulcan.

"Thanks T'hy'la." Jake said so softly that I almost couldn't hear.

"Rory, this is Xain, my boyfriend. Xain, this is Rory. He owns the dog we found this morning." Jake said with a friendly smile.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Rory." Xain said formally.

"Let me stash the candy, then we'll go inside and meet the family." Jake said with a smile.

"K" I said. Hey, it's the one thing I can say that sounds like what I want it to.

Jake carefully put some wrapped butterscotch candies in my right hip pocket, then stepped back.

"Come on Ken. Let's take Rory into the living room to meet everyone." Jake said with a smile.

* * * * *

Ken pushed me through a utility room and into a really big kitchen. A lot nicer than ours.

We passed by a big curved staircase with a really cool mural on the wall and then went into a huge living room.

"Hey everyone, this is Rory." Jake said to the room full of people.

"Rory, this is Billy and his brothers Deacon and Lawrence." Jake said and indicated three of the most gorgeous guys I'd ever seen.

I looked at the oldest one, then realized that I'd seen him before.

OHMYGOD!!! IT'S THE UNDERWEAR GUY! I have his pictures cut out and stuck under my mattress at home!

"Nice to meet you Rory. We live across the street, so I hope we'll be seeing a lot of you." Billy said with a warm smile.

I felt a prickly feeling, then realized that I was blushing.

This guy who I'd been... Um... thinking about... for a couple years was saying he wanted to 'see a lot' of me! Hell, I wanted to see a lot of him too!

"This is my brother Kevin, he's Kenny's twin." Jake said and gestured to a skinny, pale kid with the same haircut as Ken.

"Hi." I said, looking at the kid carefully. He seemed so small and fragile.

"Hi. Are you going to get to go swimming with us today?" Kevin asked with excitement.

"Yeah." I said with a smile.

I noticed Xain approaching and turned my attention to him.

"Thy'la, I must call Father. Depending on Father's advice, I may need Rory in the family room." Xain said seriously.

"Just give a yell when you need us and we'll be there." Jake said, then kissed Xain on the lips.

I mean, right there, in front of everyone.

"Um, where was I. Oh, Reuben, come over here and meet Rory." Jake said and motioned to a shy boy.

The kid was Cuban or Mexican or something like that, but he had the same haircut as Ken and Kevin.

"What happened to you?" Reuben asked quietly.

"I got sick." I said, but it didn't come out very good.

"He got sick. Sometimes things like this just happen." Jake said slowly, obviously trying to make Reuben understand.

"Is he going to be okay?" Reuben asked timidly.

"I don't know. Why don't you ask him?" Jake asked seriously.

"Are you going to be okay?" Reuben asked even more quietly.

"Yeah. Stabilized." I said, hoping that made some kind of sense.

"That means he's not getting better or worse." Jake said seriously.

To my absolute surprise, Reuben climbed up into my lap and hugged me.

"I hope you get better. You're nice." Reuben said with an honest expression.

There wasn't much I could do but let the little boy hug me.

When was the last time anyone hugged me? I can't remember.

"Next is Reuben's brother Ricardo." Jake said with a smile and pointed to a tiny boy standing beside my wheelchair.

Reuben let loose of me and climbed out of my lap.

Just as soon as Reuben was gone, Ricardo climbed right up and took his brother's place.

"Is he like Loose?" Ricardo asked Jake with such an innocent expression that I couldn't help but be amazed by it.

"Why don't you check?" Jake asked with a smile.

"Can I have a candy?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

I remembered the candies Jake had put in my pocket and nodded.

"Remember, just one." Jake said in a fatherly tone.

"Uh huh." Ricardo said as he started patting my pockets.

When he found the one with the candy, he reached in and pulled out one wrapped butterscotch candy.

"Save that for after lunch." Jake said seriously.

"Uh huh." Ricardo said and put the candy in his own pocket.

"Now what do you say?" Jake prompted.

"*Domo arigato gozaimasu.*" Ricardo said seriously.

Hang on. I know what Spanish sounds like, and that wasn't it. I think it might have been Japanese.

"Ricardo, Rory speaks English, so it would be best to thank him in a language he understands so he knows you mean it." Jake explained carefully.

Ricardo nodded, then looked me in the eyes and said, "Thank you Roaree."

Then he gave me a big hug the way only a little kid can do it.

When he finished the hug, he kissed me on the cheek.

"Over here we have my Dad, Allen." Jake said and walked to the guy and put his arm around him.

"Nice to meet you Rory. I hope you can visit us often." Allen said warmly.

Wow. This guy was almost as cute as Billy. I mean, he's a little older, but... wow.

Jake walked to a woman and said, "This is Mamacita, but you'll probably want to call her Juana. She's my daughter's grandmother."

I looked at Jake with wide eyes.

Daughter?

Jake has a daughter?

Before I knew what had happened, Jake was placing a baby in my arms.

I mean, I can't make them do anything. But Jake just nestled her in there as if they were that way just for her.

"Hurt her." I whispered in panic.

"Just relax. I'm right here. You won't do anything to hurt her. Rory, I'd like you to meet my daughter Edovina." He said with pride.

I looked at the little girl and couldn't believe what I saw.

The baby had Jake's eyes. They were beautiful, dark green and looking up at me curiously.

"Beautiful." I whispered, not wanting to disturb the baby.

"Yeah, she is, isn't she." Jake said with a smile.

I'd never really been around babies before, but... well, I can't even describe what I felt.

"Finally I'd like you to meet my grandmother, Mona." Jake said as a tall woman approached.

Okay, tall is an understatement. The woman looked like she could kick the shit out of every guy in the room without breaking a sweat.

But when she spoke I knew it didn't matter what she looked like. This woman, Mona, was a real grandmother.

"It's nice to meet you Rory. You look very good holding my great-granddaughter." She said in such a gentle loving voice that it made me want to cuddle up to her.

"Thanks." I forced out.

"And I insist that you call me Grandma. Every child in my son's house is automatically one of my grandkids." Mona said firmly.

"Grandma." I forced out. And believe it or not, it sounded right.

Mona smiled her approval at me and nodded happily.

"Now that you've met everyone, would you like to join us for lunch?" Allen asked gently.

I didn't know how to respond to that.

I mean, this was a chance for me to get some real food, but to do that I'd have to explain that I can't feed myself.

But real food...

"I'm not going to eat. So if you don't want to, we can just talk." Kevin said quietly.

I finally figured that I'd better just let them know. I mean, they can see how bad off I am and they don't seem worried about it.

"Can't use fork." I said, only half-heartedly trying to make myself understood.

"No problem. Kev, Rory can't make his hands work right to use a fork. Would you mind helping him eat?" Jake asked casually.

"Really? Yeah!" Kevin said with excitement.

Okay. I didn't think it was going to be that big of a deal. You'd think I was the prize at the bottom of the cereal box from his reaction.

"Cool. Then let's go. Ken's the only one who's had anything to eat, the rest of us are starving." Jake said with a mischievous smile directed behind me.

I started to laugh, remembering the look on Ken's face when he bit into the brownie.

"What's so funny?" Allen asked cautiously.

"Rory's mom offered us some brownies when we were at his house." Jake said as he tried to fight down his chuckles.

"Come in the dining room and tell us. I'm starved." Allen said with a smile of anticipation.

"Will you get the door for me Kev?" Ken asked from behind me as he turned my wheelchair.

"I got it." Kevin said as he rushed ahead of us.

"After lunch I want you to come up and see my room." Ken said from behind me.

"Can't. Stairs." I said as clearly as I could.

"Pop, would you carry Rory upstairs after lunch so he can see my room?" Ken asked hopefully.

"Sure thing Cute Stuff." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"Oh Pop." Ken said from behind me, and I swear to God, I could *hear* him blushing.

As soon as we entered the dining room, Kevin rushed ahead of us and started moving chairs.

"Reuben, would you bring me Vina's stroller?" Jake asked as he took the baby from my arms.

A few seconds later, Jake had the baby settled into her stroller beside him at the table.

"You can sit between me and Kenny." Kevin said as he worked to get everything settled to his liking.

"So now tell me what happened with the brownies." Allen said with anticipation as he took his seat.

"Ken, you tell him. I don't think I can." Jake said as he broke down laughing.

"Well, Mrs. Teeter offered us some brownies and I said I'd like one. I've never tasted anything so horrible... I mean, like, ever!" Ken said with a screwed up look of disgust on his face.

"Then... then he took a drink of milk." Jake fought to say through his laughter.

"It was spoiled or something." Ken said with a shiver of revulsion at the memory.

"Soy." I said, trying to explain.

"Oh. That makes sense." Allen said with genuine laughter.

"What?" Ken asked in confusion.

"It was soy milk." Allen said with a chuckle.

"Whatever it was, I couldn't swallow it, I couldn't spit it out, and I was standing in Rory's bedroom." Ken said, finally giving in and smiling at everyone's laughter.

"Then Rory points and says, 'Bathroom.' And Ken takes off like his ass is on fire." Jake said before breaking down into laughter again.

"And I kept washing out my mouth and I couldn't get rid of the taste." Ken said and broke out in laughter.

"Look on his face." I said, getting into the spirit of the story telling.

"Yeah. I wish Billy had been there with his camera. It was so funny." Jake said with laughter.

Juana came into the room carrying a big platter loaded with sandwiches.

"Rory, is there anything you can't eat?" Allen asked with concern.

"No." I said, and I think everyone actually understood it.

Jake got a curious look on his face, then looked at me with question.

"Dad, will you save us some sandwiches? Xain needs Rory in the family room." Jake said seriously.

"Can't it wait till after lunch?" Allen asked curiously.

"No. It really can't. We shouldn't be gone long." Jake said with apology.

"Okay. We'll try to save you something." Allen said with a teasing smile.

I guess since Xain's an alien, he can let Jake know what he wants from the next room. That's kinda cool.

Ken immediately stood to get behind my chair.

"I can take him Ken." Jake said softly.

"I want to. I can't understand Rory like you do, but I can do this. Please let me?" Ken asked hopefully.

"You got it. Come on." Jake said with a big smile.

* * * * *

"Father, this is Rory Teeter." Xain said as we entered the room.

"Greetings." A Vulcan man said from the terminal screen.

"Hi." I said, trying my best to sound formal. Hey, give me a break, I don't have much to work with here.

"With your permission, he who is my son would like to try some nerve adjustments to circumvent some of the symptoms of your condition." The man said seriously.

"He's going to try and untwist you a little." Jake whispered beside me.

"Doctors say can't." I forced out.

"Vulcan healers have other tools at their disposal. I assure you that if this does not work, no injury will befall you. This treatment will either relieve your symptoms or it will not. There is no risk." The man said firmly.

"You got that didn't you?" Jake asked from beside me.

"Yeah." I forced out.

"You want to give it a try?" Jake asked in an almost casual voice.

"Yeah." I said, wondering if I was making a mistake.

"Kenny, please turn his chair 90 degrees so I may observe." The man said seriously.

"Yes Uncle Solak." Ken said from behind me and turned my chair.

"Xain, begin at the nerve plexus of the neck. Go slowly and begin to redirect the neural impulses." The guy, Solak said in a voice that sounded like a teachers.

"There are many nerve pathways. How am I to identify the correct one?" Xain asked in concentration.

"Place your other hand in the area you wish to effect, then identify the nerve impulses that are common to both points." Solak said in a slow, instructive tone.

"I will first attempt to establish contact with his facial muscles." Xain said carefully as he moved his hand to rest on my face.

"If it is necessary to do so, withdraw and view the nerve pathways of your brother as a comparison." Solak said very slowly.

"Yes. I believe I will do that. I would not wish to redirect the nerve impulses incorrectly." Xain said and removed his hands from my face and neck.

"The technique you are employing will cause fatigue with prolonged use. Prioritize which functions are most desirable and restore those." Solak said in his teaching voice again.

"Yes Father. It is my intention to restore Rory's ability to communicate and control of one hand. Is that a reasonable expectation in the allotted time?" Xain asked as he looked at the terminal.

"It is not possible to predict, since I have no first hand knowledge of his condition. Do not over-tax your abilities or you risk damage to yourself. It is preferable to have many small sessions with lesser risk to you." Solak said seriously.

"I will heed your warning Father. Jake can observe through our bond in the event that I become so focused that I am unaware of my own condition." Xain said in thought.

"It is acceptable." Solak said, then glanced at Jake.

Jake nodded and said, "Let's do it before Deacon and Lawrence eat all the sandwiches."

"Kenny, may I use your nerve pathways as an example?" Xain asked Ken, who was beside me now.

"If it'll help Rory, you can do whatever you want." Ken said firmly.

How sweet. I hope he's not just feeling pity. That would suck.

He's so cute and he really seems to like me.

"I have found the first nerve path I wish to redirect." Xain said from beside me.

"Proceed." Solak said from the terminal.

Chapter 2

"What happened?" I asked as I opened my eyes.

"You fell asleep. Solak says that it sometimes happens when the muscles are relaxed after being tense for a long time. Don't worry, you're fine." Jake said from beside me.

I felt weird, still half asleep and somehow like I was dreaming.

"How do you feel?" Ken asked with concern.

"Okay I guess... Wait. I'm talking!" I said in astonishment.

"Yeah. Xain got the nerves in your face all straightened out." Ken said happily.

OhmyGod! OhmyGod! I've got to be dreaming, this can't be happening.

"I'm... I'm talking..." I said slowly, feeling my mouth form the sounds, hearing the words coming out of my mouth.

"Yeah cool, huh?" Jake said with a beaming smile.

"How? I mean, I remember that Xain was going to try something... Where is Xain? I want to thank him." I said as I looked around.

"He went up to our room to take a nap. Are you ready for some lunch?" Jake asked with a smile.

This can't be real. This has to be a dream. I must have fallen asleep when I got home from the doctors office and this is all a dream.

"Are you really okay?" Ken asked with concern.

I looked up to see the worry in Ken's eyes and realized that if this is a dream, I don't want to wake up.

"Um, yeah. I guess. Wow. You guys really fixed me?" I asked in disbelief.

"Well, not completely. But you can talk and you should be able to use your right hand... are you right handed?" Jake asked hesitantly.

"Yeah." I said and looked down at my hand to find it resting in my lap in a relaxed position.

Experimentally, I made a fist. My hand did exactly what I wanted it to do. I relaxed my hand again and it laid out flat, just like a normal hand.

It wasn't twisted and curled and looking like it was trying to snap the bones.

"It's... guys, I can't believe this... It's... it's like the best thing that's happened to me in years." I said as I reached up and felt my face and found tears on my cheeks.

I was able to move my arm. It lifted and moved just like I wanted it to.

I don't ever want to wake up....

"Um, it's not all good news." Jake said hesitantly.

I knew it was too good to be true... nothing good ever happens to me. But... whatever it is... it has to be worth it... to be able to talk again, to be able to move my hand...

"What's wrong?" I finally asked cautiously.

"Well, from the way I understood it, this isn't going to stay like this. You'll slowly go back to the way you were if Xain doesn't go back every so often and remind your nerves and muscles how they're supposed to behave. This will probably last for three or four days before it starts to wear off." Jake said seriously.

Okay... three or four days... I can deal with that. Three or four days... wait... he said they can do this again?

"Uncle Solak said this isn't a cure. It's just a way to work around the symptoms." Ken threw in, looking apologetic.

"Well, a cure would have been nice. But this is still the best thing that's happened to me, like, ever. Even if I go back to like I was before, just being able to talk and touch stuff again for a while..." I trailed off, not knowing what to say next.

"You don't have to worry about that. We'll make sure you don't ever have to go back to the way it was before." Ken said, and I swear that it sounded like a promise.

"Let's get into the dining room and see if they left us anything. I'm hungry enough to gnaw the leg off the table right now." Jake said as he walked toward the door.

"Yeah, me too." I said, still unable to believe that I was able to say it.

* * * * *

"Did you guys leave us anything?" Jake asked as he led the way into the dining room.

"We waited for you. Juana is in the kitchen reheating the soup." Allen said gently.

"You didn't have to. I know you were all hungry." I said, stunned at their thoughtfulness.

The entire family was sitting around the table with the platter of sandwiches in the middle... waiting for me.

A lot of people have done a lot of things for me since I got sick, but not like this. Most of the stuff that was done for me was because it had to be done.

They didn't have to wait, I didn't expect them to wait... It's like I'm... special or something.

"First of all, what kind of host would I be if I ate before my guest? Second... you look and sound great." Allen finished as he broke into a joyful smile.

"Thanks. I feel great." I said in return and couldn't help but smile back at him just as joyfully.

Once Ken had me in my place at the table and locked my wheels, I looked around to see if everyone was waiting for me to do something.

"Where is Xain?" Allen asked with concern.

"He went up to our room to lay down for a few minutes. Helping Rory tired him out." Jake said to his father.

"Is he really okay? I mean, I think I remember that Solak guy saying that helping me could hurt him." I asked as I realized that there was nothing I could ever do to repay Xain for what he did for me.

"He's fine. I made sure to keep a close eye on him while he was working on you. He's just tired, I promise." Jake said to me with a warm smile.

God! Why can't I find a nice guy like Jake for me?

Yeah, right. Like anyone would want a crippled little peanut like me for a boyfriend.

"Dad, would you mind if I take him up some food? I know he was hungry." Jake asked hopefully.

Jake deserves someone like Xain. Someone who's healthy and as good a person as he is.

"That's fine, why don't you take up enough for both of you. I think he'd like it better if you ate with him." Allen said tenderly.

Jake's dad is pretty cool too. I mean, he saw them kiss in the living room and didn't say anything...

"Thanks Dad. Would you mind watching Vina for a while?" Jake asked as he started pulling sandwiches off the platter in the middle of the table onto his plate.

"It would be my pleasure." Allen said with a smile.

And he watches Jake's daughter... I wish... wait, I learned that lesson too many times over the past three years. Don't wish. Never wish.

"We'll be back down in a little while Rory." Jake said as he picked up the plate.

He's going to take food to his boyfriend who is all tired out from helping me...

"Thank you for all your help, and thank Xain for me too." I said, trying to let him know how much I really meant it.

"Sure thing buddy." Jake said with a smile before hurrying out the door.

Oh, that smile. No one has smiled at me like that in so long... It's like I'm his friend or something.

* * * * *

"What would you like to drink Rory? We have apple juice, orange juice, milk, sweet tea and Kool-Aid, it's um... blue." Ken said in thought.

Wow. Kool-Aid! I don't care what color it is. It sounds like paradise.

"I'd really love some Kool-Aid" I said, and was again struck with wonder at my ability to speak.

"I'll be right back." Ken said with a huge smile and ran out of the room.

His smile is even cuter than Jakes. What a handsome guy...

"Do you feel better?" Reuben asked cautiously from a few places down the table.

I looked at the boy and saw his honest concern for me. I guess kids care for everyone, even people they don't know.

"Yeah, I don't even have words big enough to tell you how much better I feel." I said honestly.

Maybe it is a dream... except that in my dreams, it's back before I got sick. In my dreams, I'm with my old friends and my family is all like they used to be.

"Can you reach the sandwiches or would you like me to get some for you?" Kevin asked from my side.

I looked at Kevin and saw the same look of concern that Reuben was wearing. He just wanted to help me...

"I think I can get them, but thanks for asking." I said, amazed at how nice these strangers were being.

I reached out and marveled at my hand doing exactly what I wanted it to. I grabbed a sandwich and moved it to my plate, then on impulse, I grabbed another.

"So why don't you tell us a little about you Rory?" Billy asked from his chair across from me as he also helped himself to the sandwiches.

What you see is what you get. Cripple on wheels. End of story...

"There's not much to tell. I got sick about three years ago. It got worse and worse until this morning when the doctors said that I had stabilized." I said in thought.

"Well, that's good news. But what about you? What kind of things do you enjoy doing?" Billy asked with interest.

What? Hold on... time for a reality check here... for the past three years all anyone has wanted to know about me is about how my condition is progressing. I stopped being me about the time they put me in my first wheelchair. I haven't been me since I left school. I've just been a disease with a kid to cart it around...

"Well... I don't know. I haven't been able to do much for the last year or so. I just kind of sit around and listen to music." I said, trying to think of what I used to like doing.

It's been so long since anyone asked anything about me the kid, instead of me the disease, that I don't know anymore.

"What kind of music do you like?" Deacon asked, and for the first time I noticed just how much he looked like Billy.

What the hell am I doing here? I'm in a house full of beautiful people! Every single one of these guys could be a fashion model... in fact, I know that

Billy IS a fashion model. They should just roll me out into the street so my ugliness doesn't rub off on them. Oh, they're waiting on me to answer...

"Um, the usual stuff I guess. Backstreet, *N Sync... stuff like that. Aaron Carter is my favorite because he's close to my age." I said, then took a bite of one of the sandwiches.

Heaven.

Now I'm sorry about all the bad things I've thought and said over the past three years.

There is a God. He is wonderful and loving and kind... and he just provided me the perfect tuna fish sandwich.

Absolute heaven.

"Are you okay Rory?" Allen asked with concern.

I quickly swallowed my bite of food and noticed that Ken was placing a glass of blue Kool-Aid beside my plate.

"Yeah. It's just... I can't remember when I've had anything that tasted this good." I said, still blissing out on the wonderful flavor.

"It's just a tuna sandwich." Ken said carefully.

Did I mention that Ken is cute? I wish... Stop! Stop, stop stop. No wishing! I'd better answer him.

"You tasted my mom's brownies. All her food is like that. All natural, whole grain, free range, organic, sugar-free, salt-free, high-fiber and steamed or baked, never boiled or fried." I said from memory, having heard it from Zombie Hyper-Mom many many times.

"Do you think that's grounds for Aunt Teri to invoke 'Safe Haven'?" Ken asked his dad seriously.

Aunt Teri? You mean there's more of them? Well, to be honest, there are more of my family too. There are grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins... but when I got sick they just kind of said how sorry they were and ::pooft!:: they were gone. Now it's just us.

Allen smiled and said, "I don't think so. But we'll see what we can do to help Rory out."

Did I mention how cute Allen is? I did? Well, it's worth repeating.

"The soup is ready." Juana said as she walked into the room carrying a big bowl with a lid and a ladle.

I took a deep inhale and smelled the most wonderful smell ever.

"It smells great." I said as I watched her place the bowl beside the platter of sandwiches.

"Thank you Rory. I made it myself, would you like some?" Juana asked me gently.

More than you know. Oh, if it tastes anything like it smells...

"Yes Ma'am, thank you." I answered, then watched as she ladled the chunky beef soup into a bowl.

"There is more in the kitchen, so everyone have all that you want." Juana said, then walked to take her seat.

As other people were getting soup, I slowly dipped a spoon of soup, then blew on it to cool it enough to eat.

Just a small sip.

Pepper. I can't remember the last time I tasted pepper. It's so wonderful...

Now a bite...

The meat is so tender...

"Rory has been on a health food diet for a while." Allen said quietly to Juana.

I looked over to see her look of concern directed at me.

"The soup is wonderful. Even before I got sick, I don't think I ever had soup this good before." I said to Juana, hoping that would be enough to keep her from worrying.

"I am glad you like it." Juana said with a gentle smile.

I looked beside me to see Ken looking at me happily.

"I really like your family." I said to Ken with a timid smile.

"Yeah, they're pretty cool aren't they?" Ken said shyly, looking absolutely... Oh, if I were a beautiful person like them and I could get out of this wheelchair, mmmm... down boy...

Finally, the food drew my attention again and I took another, larger bite of the tuna fish sandwich.

"Guys, if you don't have anything else going on, I'd like to take Deacon and Lawrence back to my place for a while after lunch..." Billy said into the silence that had fallen over the room.

"You guys have some big plans today?" Allen asked curiously.

Good soup. Maybe Juana could adopt me. I can be packed in a half an hour. I already have my coat, umbrella and galoshes.

"Billy said that he wants to do some test shots of me today." Lawrence said with a timid smile.

"That sounds great. You too Deacon?" Allen asked curiously.

"Yeah. He's gonna do some shots of each of us, then some shots of us together." Deacon said happily.

"I'm glad, I bet the pictures will be wonderful." Allen said warmly.

Pictures? Why didn't I think of that? I guess this is what beautiful people do at home when they're alone. They take pictures of each other... It makes sense...

"Could you take a picture of Rory too?" Ken asked from beside me.

Oh Ken, now you've put Billy on the spot and he's going to have to explain to you why he can't without coming out and saying that I'm ugly.

Billy looked at me and seemed to be thinking about it carefully before he said, "Yes... Rory, if you wouldn't mind changing shirts, I think Deacon's teal shirt would look perfect..."

I looked at Billy with question, then around the table, hoping that someone would explain what was going on.

"Billy is a professional photographer. If you'd be willing, he'll take a few pictures of you." Allen finally said at my bewildered look.

Really? Take pictures of me? Why? No one wants to see me... I don't even want to see me...

"What do you say Rory? Billy's pictures all look really great and I think it would be fun. Besides, it'd be, y'know, kinda cool if you'd let me have one." Ken finished shyly.

Ken wants a picture of me? Ooooookay. Well, when opportunity knocks...

"I will if you will." I finally said.

"Would you take a picture of me too Billy?" Ken asked hopefully.

Gotcha! My picture won't be good for anything but scaring rats away. But I'll keep Ken's picture... with my pictures of Billy...

"Sure, in fact, why don't I do like I'm doing with Deke and Lawrence? I'll do a few shots of each of you and a few of you together?" Billy asked, and it was as if I could see the wheels turning in his mind.

From his look, I bet Billy is almost finished planning the whole shoot. He's really serious about this. A professional photographer wants to take pictures of me...

"You want to do it after lunch?" Billy asked, breaking me out of my momentary mental wandering.

"Sure. Sounds good to me." I said, not knowing what else to say.

"Don't worry guys. This won't be like a regular photo shoot. I'll just take a few minutes to set up, then pose you and take a few pictures." Billy said in thought.

"How long are we talking about?" Allen asked curiously.

"Half an hour maybe... not more than an hour for sure." Billy said carefully.

"That's perfect. By the time you get back from Billy's, your lunch will have settled and you'll be able to go swimming." Allen said with a smile.

Swimming? I forgot about that. Swimming, as in me being almost naked in the water...

...as in Ken being almost naked in the water...

"Okay Ken, I've just got to tell you that you've got the coolest family, like, ever." I said seriously.

"Yeah, I'm figuring that out." Ken said with a big smile.

* * * * *

"So what's your school like Rory?" Mona asked curiously before taking another spoon of soup.

"I don't go to school. When the doctors said I was terminal I didn't have to go anymore." I said as I reach for my third sandwich.

Silence fell over the room and I looked around to see what had happened.

Everyone was looking at me with these really sad looks, like they were about to cry or something.

"The doctors said I was stabilized so I guess they were wrong." I said quietly, hoping that would make them feel better.

"How long have you been thinking that you're about to die?" Allen asked in almost a whisper.

I thought about it and remembered when Dr. Look-At-How-Smart-I-Am called us in for a consultation to tell us that there was no cure for what was wrong with me.

"Um, I guess it's been over a year. Maybe a year and a half." I said in thought.

"You're such a brave boy." Juana whispered as tears filled her eyes.

"Not really." I said and noticed a shocked look on her face.

I felt like I had to explain, "It's not like I chose to get sick. I didn't do anything."

"I think what Juana means is that you're brave for the way you've faced everything that's happened." Allen said gently.

"Oh. Um, I guess. I mean, at first I cried and stuff. Then for a little while I tried to figure out why me? What had I ever done that was so bad to deserve this... All I could come up with was the time when my parents gave me a rabbit for Easter and I shaved it... I don't think that was really that bad. I mean, I was really careful and didn't hurt it. Did you know their skin is pink underneath the fur?" I babbled, then took a drink of my Kool-Aid.

"What then?" Allen asked quietly.

"Then mom knitted this really neat little sweater for it... Oh, you mean when I thought I was dying... Um, next I guess I got mad." I said as I tried to remember clearly what I had been feeling during those days.

"I was mad because it was unfair." I said more quietly.

"And then?" Allen asked in a soft, caring voice.

"Then I kinda just said, 'Okay'. I mean, I don't want to die, but if it's going to happen, it's going to happen." I said with a shrug of my one working shoulder.

"Rory, I'm going to be honest with you about something. From what you just told me, I think you'll be grown-up enough to understand what I'm going to tell you." Allen said carefully.

Well, that doesn't sound like it's leading to anything good...

"You mentioned that Solak was telling Xain what to do to help you overcome your symptoms. Well, Solak is a doctor and might either be able to help you himself or know of someone who can help you." Allen said carefully.

"Okay..." I said hesitantly, waiting for the part that I was going to have to be grown-up for.

"There is also the possibility that he won't be able to do anything at all for you." Allen continued.

"Okay..." I said again, waiting for him to get to it.

"If it's okay with you, I'm going to call Solak while you're at Billy's and find out what we need to do next." Allen said carefully.

"And..." I prompted, waiting for the awful thing that I was going to have to be grown-up for.

"That's it. I just don't want to give you false hope. I want you to understand that this is just something else to try." Allen said as he looked me in the eyes.

I felt a smile of relief come over my face as I said, "I thought you were going to tell me I had to do something horrible like bone marrow samples or a spinal tap. Don't worry about getting my hopes up. Every time someone comes up with a new way to try and fight neuro-muscular disorders, I'm first on their list to be their guinea pig. Some of them even said they could cure me... those were the biggest jerks. They acted like it was my fault when I didn't get better."

"If you say it's okay, I'll make the call after lunch." Allen said again.

"Yeah, thanks for asking... I think you're the first person in a long time who asked me before doing something to me." I said in thought.

Well, that's not necessarily true. The physical therapists are usually pretty good about asking for my cooperation. But as far as doctors, they tend to talk about me like I'm not even in the room.

Allen smiled and said, "I can imagine how dehumanizing that is, being thought of as a case number or a disease instead of a person."

I looked at Allen with surprise, no one had ever said it so clearly before. That was exactly how I felt.

"Um... yeah." I said in astonishment.

"Well you don't have to worry about that here. We all see you as a person." Mona said in a voice that was so sincere, that I couldn't help but believe it.

They see me as a person... I think I've forgotten how to be a person...

* * * * *

"Why did you have a gym bag if you don't, um, go to the gym?" Ken asked from beside me, sounding kind of shy.

I turned to look at him and found him looking timid and apologetic and just gorgeous. If this is really heaven, then maybe I've got a chance...

"Mom takes me to this hydro-therapy thing twice a week. They put me in a pool and try to stretch out my arms and legs so the muscles don't atrophy too much." I said, and I'm pretty sure I didn't sound too happy about it.

"Does it hurt?" Lawrence asked cautiously.

Oh God. Another beautiful person. This guy has the most amazingly beautiful hair I've ever seen. Light shimmering blond hair that's down to his shoulders. And his face... like an elf. Mythical beauty. And those eyes... light blue like the sky... Oh, he's waiting for an answer...

"Um, yeah. It hurts a lot. The therapists really try to be gentle, but I guess there's no way to work the muscles without it being painful." I said in thought.

"That sounds horrible." Lawrence said with a look of concern, and I swear, it looked like he was about to cry.

This beautiful guy looked like he was about to cry for my pain... Imagine that.

Deacon leaned over in his chair and gave Lawrence a gentle hug.

I guess the surprise showed on my face, because Allen smiled at me and said, "I hope that doesn't bother you Rory. Lawrence and Deacon are... Are you guys an official couple now?"

"Yeah." Deacon said happily, still holding Lawrence gently.

They look so beautiful together. Dark and light. Why do I have to be so ugly?

My red hair makes me look like a clown and my freckles make me look like someone spray painted right across the middle of my face.

Lawrence and Deacon are both flawless... I know men are supposed to be handsome, but these guys are beautiful, there's no other way to put it.

"That doesn't make you uncomfortable does it Rory?" Allen asked with concern.

That snapped me out of my thoughts and I automatically answered, "Uh, No. I'm just not used to seeing guys, you know... hugging and stuff."

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Now they're going to think I'm some kind of homophobic asshole!

I don't know how to be around people anymore... I didn't even realize how hard it was to say and do the right things around people.

"Good. I'm glad it doesn't bother you. I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable around us." Allen said gently.

Whew! I guess he understood what I meant. This has got to be heaven. That's the only explanation. There's no one on Earth that would be that beautiful and understanding.

* * * * *

As I reached for my fourth sandwich, Juana said, "Rory, I have made some dessert for after the meal. Be sure to leave room."

Dessert? OhMyGod! Anything! Bring it on!

I withdrew my hand and looked at her expectantly.

Juana smiled a radiant smile at me and asked, "Is everyone ready for the dessert?"

Ricardo nodded so hard I thought he was going to throw himself out of his chair.

"Yes Juana, I think we're all ready." Allen said with a loving smile directed at the young boy.

Juana smiled, then asked, Kenny, would you see who wants milk with dessert?

I looked at Kenny immediately and nodded.

Kenny smiled and looked around the table before hurrying out of the room, followed by Juana.

"Since I met Allen and Juana, I don't think I've had a meal at my house." Billy said happily.

"Yeah, Juana and Xain are really good cooks. It was like I never really ate before I came here." Deacon said with a big smile.

I thought about the words and had to agree.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one. Everything was really great. I really appreciate it, thank you." I said to the people around the table.

"Seeing you enjoy the meal is all the thanks we need." Allen said gently.

God! I never would have imagined such wonderful people. They're happy, beautiful, loving and they cook the best food I've ever had... maybe I *am* dreaming... or dead. Yeah, this could be heaven.

Maybe when I went to sleep last night I died or something and I didn't wake up...

If this is heaven, I love it and I don't think I'll ever miss being alive...

* * * * *

"Which do you prefer? Apple, cherry, or blackberry?" Juana asked from beside me.

I looked at her, then down to the large wooden bowl she was holding filled with pastries.

"Um, I kind of like them all." I said helplessly as the scent of freshly baked pastries washed over me.

"I will give you apple to begin with. Apple is my favorite." Juana said and put one on my plate.

"Thank you." I said as I looked at the puffy little thing that looked kind of like a folded over pie.

Ken walked in with a tray of small glasses of milk.

He sat the tray on the little cabinet thing beside the table, then started handing glasses of milk to everyone.

"You made these the other night. What are they called?" Allen asked as he took a pastry from the bowl.

"Empanadas. Most things I cook are things I learned to make as a child, but I did not have empanadas until I moved to Chicago." Juana said as she walked around the table to give everyone a chance to get some.

"They're really wonderful." Allen said with a smile before taking a bite.

I picked up the pastry and carefully took a bite of it.

Flaky, crunchy crust, sweet, gooey apple filling... Oh dear sweet Jesus, I have to be dead because if I were alive and tasted something this good, it would kill me.

Then I took a drink of my milk and nearly passed out with pleasure.

Cold, smooth, sweet... perfect... better than I ever remembered.

"From the look on your face, I'm guessing you approve of Juana's dessert." Mona said with a tender smile.

"Yes Ma'am... Grandma. I think this is the best thing I've tasted in my whole life." I said honestly.

Juana smiled as she took her seat and said, "I believe that is the best compliment I have ever received. Thank you Rory."

I smiled at Juana, then took another bite of the outrageously good dessert.

* * * * *

"Are you guys ready to go to my house now?" Billy asked as people started getting up from the dining room table.

"Sure, but you may need to use a wide angle lens on your camera after that meal." Deacon said as he rubbed his belly.

Billy laughed and said, "I'll just make sure to shoot you from the chest up."

I felt something behind me and turned in time to see Ken unlocking my wheels.

"You ready to go Rory?" Ken asked happily.

With you? Anywhere...

"Um... Yeah." I said unsteadily, like the total dork that I am.

"I'm going to take Rory out the back way so we don't have to mess with the front steps." Ken said from behind me.

"We'll go with you." Billy said as he changed direction and joined me and Ken as we passed through the kitchen.

I looked around to see that Lawrence and Deacon had joined us too.

I don't know why this seemed so odd. It's not the fact that they were walking with me the longer way because of my wheelchair, that happens all the time...

I guess it's because it's like, they're going this way because they want to spend time with me or something...

How weird...

"This is going to be sooooo cool." Deacon said with a big smile.

I looked at Deacon with question.

"Billy's pictures are really great. I just know this is going to be awesome." Deacon said happily.

"Hang on bro. That's a lot to live up to. But I'll do my best not to disappoint you." Billy said with a smile.

"I'm not worried. I just know it's going to be cool." Deacon said with a giggle as we walked past the garage and out into the driveway.

"Mr. Pierce! Mr. Pierce!" A woman's voice called out from the street.

"Mrs. Plimpton. How are you today?" Billy asked in a friendly voice that was somehow very different from the one he had just been using.

Happiness. That's what was missing. This voice was polite, but it wasn't happy.

"I haven't seen you in months. How are you doing?" The middle-aged woman asked with a surprised look as she held tightly to a leash with a perfectly groomed little poodle on it.

I remember the woman. She's one of the nosey old bitties that was always coming over to get my mom to join some garden club or some other snobby thing.

"I'm doing fine. Mrs. Plimpton, I'd like you to meet my brothers Deacon and Lawrence and our friends Kenny and Rory." Billy said in his artificial, pleasant voice.

"It's very nice to meet you." The old bat said as she looked at Deacon and Lawrence and completely ignored me and Ken.

All of a sudden I felt something and looked down to see that her dog was tugging at my pants leg.

"I hope you can stop by sometime for a chat. I know my son Davis would be delighted to meet your brothers and Kenny." The evil hag said in a delighted voice.

What a bitch... the old woman I mean, not the dog. Then again, the poodle was really starting to piss me off by pulling at my pants leg like she was playing tug-of-war.

Billy looked uncomfortable, almost in pain...

He glanced at me and I saw such a sorrowful look and suddenly understood.

He was feeling bad on my behalf. Her being rude to me was really making him feel bad.

Well, I honestly don't care what she thinks of me, but when she's hurting someone as sweet and gentle as Billy, she's crossed the line.

"Mrs. Plimpton." I said firmly, gaining her attention as she turned her surprised look on me.

I swear to God, I don't know where it came from. My mouth just opened and the words began to fall out.

"I realize that in your Nazi way of thinking, someone who is as imperfect as me shouldn't be allowed to live. But that doesn't give you the right to behave as if you don't have ANY social class by ignoring me. If you don't want to invite me to your house or to meet your son, then don't. But at least have the good grace to invite Billy and his brothers when I'm not around." I said as I looked up at her seriously.

She stared down at me, still looking surprised.

"And get your damned dog off my leg. I'm not a chew toy." I said in my most commanding voice.

"Oh... yes." Mrs. Plimpton said in shock, then began to tug on the dog's leash.

"Come on Pookie, we have to be going..." Mrs. Plimpton said weakly.

Billy motioned for us to 'come on' and hurried ahead of us to his house.

I guess I screwed up.

Now Billy will be mad at me for making him look bad in the neighborhood.

I really like Billy. He's not just beautiful, but he's really nice and talks to me like a person. I hope he doesn't scream at me too much. Well, he probably won't scream. He'll probably just try and explain why it's wrong to talk to old ladies like that.

...I was just trying to help...

Billy fumbled with the key to the side door of his house and finally got the door opened.

When all five of us were inside the house, I looked at Billy with concern, waiting for the lecture that I knew I deserved.

I had to let Billy know that I can't help it. Mom used to say that it's my red hair that makes me do stuff like that.

"You see, I've got red hair..." I began to say.

All of a sudden, Billy started laughing, and I mean hard.

Deacon, Lawrence and Ken all broke into broad smiles, then joined into the laughter, but Billy was the one who was laughing so hard that I was afraid he was going to hurt himself.

"Rory..." Billy gasped, then was lost in laughter again.

Ken was laughing almost as hard as Billy and he leaned in and gave me a firm hug as he continued to laugh.

OhMyGod! Ken is a good hugger.

I mean, it was warm, firm, safe, comfortable... everything a hug should be.

"Rory..." Billy gasped again and I looked down to see him laying in the floor clutching his sides.

That did it. I couldn't help it. I had to laugh too.

The sight of Billy collapsed in laughter was too much and I started laughing myself silly.

Lawrence and Deacon were holding on to each other they were laughing so hard.

I'm pretty sure if they weren't holding on to each other, they'd be in the floor with Billy.

"Dude! That was so awesome..." Billy gasped out as he tried to get his breathing under control.

"Yeah..." Lawrence was barely able to say as I could see tears of laughter streaking down his face.

"That was so cool." Ken said from beside me where he was crouched to be at my eye level.

"Thanks." I said, still feeling bubbles of laughter welling up inside me.

"That old broad has been terrorizing me ever since I moved in here. I've tried to politely refuse her invitations because... well, because I don't like her and I don't want to have anything to do with her. But she's so pushy that it's almost impossible to dodge her." Billy said as he sat up in the kitchen floor.

"Well, if she tries to corner you again, just sic Rory on her. He knows how to put her in her place." Ken said from beside me and I swear that I heard pride in his voice.

Ken's proud of me...

"Deke, would you grab the teal shirt you got for your birthday? I want to get Ken and Rory's shoot done first so they can go swimming." Billy said as he got up off the floor, still chuckling.

Deacon didn't answer, he just ran out of the room.

"If you guys will go in the living room and take off Rory's shirt, I'll start getting set up." Billy said, looking like he was about to break into laughter again.

"Come on guys, it's this way." Lawrence said with a delighted smile and led the way out of the kitchen.

Chapter 3

"Rory, can you raise your left arm?" Ken asked as he and Lawrence worked to get my blue button up shirt off me.

"No, well, not much. Just pick it up and move it however you want." I said, not wanting Ken to feel funny about it.

"Okay, but you have to tell me if I'm hurting you." Ken said cautiously, then started lifting my left arm.

Oh God! I hope Ken and Lawrence don't notice that I'm... Um... getting excited by all the personal attention.

I can't help it, I can feel Ken touching me, I can smell his hair, I mean... I don't know what I mean...

I'm just all kinds of horny.

"I brought the jacket too, just in case." Deacon said as he hurried into the room.

"We're just about ready for the shirt." Ken said with effort as he tried to work the long sleeve off my uncooperative arm.

"You're in pretty good shape for not being able to work out." Deacon said in a considering voice as he looked at me.

I thought about the statement, and finally said, "I guess my mom's cooking makes it so I don't eat too much."

Deacon smiled and said, "My own cooking did the same thing for me."

"Okay, we're ready for the shirt." Ken said as he folded my shirt neatly and sat it aside.

"If you'll do my right arm, I can help you with everything else." I said, hoping they wouldn't feel too funny about helping me to dress.

Billy walked into the room with a laptop case and opened it up on the coffee table.

"I'm going to do test shots with the digital camera, then when I'm happy with the poses, I'll use the 35mm for the 'real' pictures." Billy said in concentration.

Within a minute, Billy was out of the room to gather more supplies.

"Billy looks like he really knows what he's doing." Lawrence said as he looked at the laptop.

"I guess so. We've never really talked too much about his work. I know he's a photographer and I've seen some of his pictures. But this will be the first time I've ever seen him working." Deacon said seriously.

"Rory, can you help me now?" Ken asked quietly.

I turned my attention to him and saw that he had the new shirt on my arm.

"Sure, just bring it around my back and I can get the other side." I said as I noticed again how absolutely cute Ken was.

"Deke, would you open the blinds? I think some natural light would be good." Billy said as he walked into the room carrying two leather cases.

Deacon ran to the window and opened the curtains to allow the sunlight to flood the room.

"Rory? I thought your eyes were blue." Billy said with surprise.

Oh, that.

"Well, they are when I'm wearing a blue shirt." I said shyly.

"They're green now. That's so cool." Billy said with a huge smile.

Everyone else in the world gets one eye color, me. I get kaleidoscope eyes.

"What color are they really?" Ken asked as he looked deeply into my eyes.

"Kind of gray. But there's blue and green both in there too." I said as I looked deeply into Ken's beautiful chocolaty brown eyes.

"That's really awesome." Billy said, then went back to setting up his equipment.

Ken is just so beautiful. Leaning over me, helping me dress... and it's like he's really happy to do it.

"Are you guys about done getting changed?" Billy asked as he opened the second case.

"I'm just buttoning Rory's shirt." Ken said from in front of me.

"Good. When you're done, I need you to move Rory's chair over beside the love seat." Billy said professionally.

Ken finished with the last button, then efficiently moved my chair to the indicated position.

"Like this?" Ken asked as he stood behind me.

"A little more to your left. Leave enough room so that you can stand beside him." Billy said as he mounted a little camera on a tripod.

Ken moved me over slightly.

"Good. Rory, it won't be any problem if we move you out of the wheelchair for a while will it?" Billy asked as he stopped his activity for a moment.

"No, I've been in the wheelchair all morning. I'm past ready to get out of it for a while." I said honestly.

If we hadn't gone to the doctor's office this morning, the guys probably would have found me in bed wearing my sweats.

"Good. I want to do the shots with you and Ken on the love seat." Billy said as he squatted down to look through the camera.

"Would you mind taking a picture of all four of us? I think I'd really like to have a group picture to remember today." Deacon asked hopefully.

"Sure thing Deke, the 35mm even has a timer so I could take a picture of all five of us if you wouldn't mind an old geezer like me in your picture."

"That would be great. Do you want us to change or anything?" Deacon asked with increasing excitement.

Billy looked at all of us and said, "Deke, do you remember that football jersey that we bought for your birthday? I think that would look good on Ken. Lawrence, get the white long sleeved shirt and the burgundy vest. And Deke..."

I noticed a devilish smile come across Billy's face that made me glad that it wasn't directed at me.

"What?" Deacon asked hesitantly.

"Oh, nothing, I like the shirt you're wearing now. I just had an idea for when we do your shots with Lawrence." Billy finished with a smile, then started arranging some lights with shades that looked like umbrellas.

"I think I should be worried." Deacon said to me and Ken with a playful look of concern.

"Go over to that bookshelf and get the third book on the second shelf down." Billy said as he pointed to the bookcase by the door.

Deacon hesitantly walked over to the bookcase and got the requested book, then brought it to Billy with a puzzled look on his face.

"Look at the cover, that's kind of what I have in mind for you and Lawrence." Billy said with a devilish grin.

Deacon looked closely at the cover, then he broke into a big smile.

"What is it?" Ken asked curiously.

Deacon brought the book over and held it so Ken and I could see.

It was a romance novel with the typical shirtless studly guy and dainty swooning woman on the cover.

"You and Lawrence?" I asked with a smile of delight.

"Yeah... in fact... Ken, depending on how you look without a shirt, I could even do that for you and Rory." Billy said with an impish grin.

Ken looked at me with question, obviously wanting to do it.

"Sure, it sounds like fun." I heard myself say.

"Take off your shirt and I'll let you know if it will work." Billy said as he seemed to have run out of things to do.

Ken peeled the blue-gray T-shirt off over his head to reveal a very nice, toned body.

Something caught my eye, a shadow or something, I couldn't really see it the way Ken was standing.

"What's that?" I asked, wanting to see what it was.

Ken glanced at me and saw where I was pointing, then turned to show me his full back.

Just below his right shoulder blade was a large bruise. It was black and blue and purple and even a little bit yellow and green in spots.

"What happened to you?" I asked, knowing that whatever it was must have really hurt from the size and color of the bruise.

"Oh, that's where that guy hit me the other night." Ken said, apparently just remembering it.

"Someone hit you?" I asked with concern.

"Yeah... Um, I think Billy's about ready. I'll tell you about it later, okay?" Ken asked hopefully.

"Okay." I said quietly, hating the thought of someone hitting Ken.

"Let's go ahead and get started. Deke, will you go get that Jersey for Kenny now?" Billy asked as he looked through the little camera again.

"Yeah. I'll be right back." Deacon said quickly and hurried out of the room.

"If either of you guys feel funny about anything I ask you to do. Just tell me. We're just doing this for fun. I'll come up with some different ideas for how to pose you, but that doesn't mean you have to do them." Billy said frankly.

"Are you going to ask us to do anything weird?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Not really. I save the weird stuff for the professional models. All I'm going to do is pose you guys in a few different themes. We can get a few quick shots in before Deke gets back." Billy said with a smile.

"Where do you want me?" Ken asked curiously.

"Just squat down beside Rory on his right side." Billy said and looked through the little camera again.

Ken took his place and waited expectantly.

"Okay. When I say 'go', I want Ken to look at Rory and say 'Peas and carrots'. Rory, when Ken is finished, I want you to say 'Carrots and peas'. Keep repeating that to each other a little faster each time until I say stop." Billy said seriously.

I looked at Ken with question to see a bewildered look staring back at me.

"Ready... Set... Go!" Billy said

Ken looked into my eyes and seriously said, "Peas and carrots."

In my most serious voice I responded, "Carrots and peas."

I saw the beginning of humor start to dance in Ken's eyes as he said just a little faster, "Peas and carrots."

I felt a smile trying to break out on my face as I said, "Carrots and peas."

"Peas and carrots." Ken said as I heard a giggle in his voice.

"Carrots and Peas." I said and almost let a chuckle escape.

There was a blinding flash of light that surprised us both.

"You can stop now. That was perfect." Billy said with a smile.

Ken and I both looked at Billy with question.

"Here's the shirt for Kenny." Deacon said from just inside the door.

"Thanks Deke, we're ready for it now." Billy said with a smile.

Deacon handed the shirt to Ken while Billy punched a few keys on his laptop.

"Okay guys, do you want to see why I had you saying silly things to each other?" Billy asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Ken and I both said at once.

"Come over here and I'll show you." Billy said and turned the laptop around so we could see the picture on it.

And there it was. A picture of me and Ken talking. Both of us had big smiles and it looked like we were old friends just chatting and having fun.

"That's really something. This looks like a picture out of a magazine." Ken said with surprise.

"Well, this is how magazines get their pictures. Photographers like me take pictures of guys like you." Billy said frankly.

Not guys like me, but... there it was. There's no denying the picture in front of me. Ken and I talking to each other, him without a shirt and me wearing this green shirt of Deacon's.

By the way it looked, you'd think that my wheelchair was just a prop that a photographer brought in to make an interesting picture.

* * * * *

After that Billy just had the guys help me out of my wheelchair and we sat on the love seat.

What we did was about half modeling and half horsing around.

It was really a lot of fun. Billy even had a couple pictures with all four of us and one with him in it too.

There was this one picture of me and Ken that was really amazing. It started out when Billy told Ken to act like he was going to give me a noogie... you know? That thing where someone holds you by the neck and rubs your head real hard with his knuckles... Well anyway, I was laying back on Ken and he had his arm around my chest, but really loose, kinda like he was hugging me from behind. His other hand was kind of playing with my hair.

When we were doing it, Billy was telling Ken to 'fluff' my hair and make it 'poofy', but then he started saying 'slower... slower... I think you missed one...'

The next thing I know there was the flash.

When we saw the picture on Billy's laptop, I couldn't believe my eyes.

It was like looking at a stranger. The guy in the picture was happy and loved and in love and it was the most incredible, beautiful thing I've ever seen... and it was me... Me and Ken.

"You should think about getting a shirt like this one. It looks really good on you." Ken said from beside me.

"Yeah. It really does. And you should think about getting a football jersey. That looked really great on you." I said with distraction as Ken pulled the green shirt off my right arm.

"I have a couple that my dad bought me, but I don't wear them much. Usually just when my teams are playing." Ken said as he started to put my blue shirt back on me.

"Thanks for helping me Ken. I hate feeling so helpless." I said, then took the edge of the shirt as Ken handed it to me.

"Everyone in my family helps each other all the time." Ken said dismissively.

I looked at Ken with question, wanting to know more.

"Mamacita helps us all by taking care of us. Pop helps us by making sure we're all happy and stuff. It's the same for all of us, we all take care of each other however we can. Xain, Jake, Kevin, Reuben... even Ricardo does stuff to help us out." Ken said seriously.

"What does Ricardo do?" I asked, I just couldn't imagine what the little boy could do to help out.

"He holds the book for Kevin when he reads. Whenever he sees someone sad or worried, he'll hug them and try to make them feel better." Ken said in thought.

"Okay... I just don't know what I could do to help someone else. I feel like I'm the one who's always needing help." I said, then realized that I was probably saying too much.

"Guys, I'm going to process the prints as soon as I'm done with Lawrence and Deacon's shoot. I'll bring them over to the house as soon as they're done." Billy said seriously.

"Thanks Billy. I just thought you were going to snap a few pictures, but this was really great." Ken said with a smile.

I nodded my agreement.

I couldn't have dreamed that something like taking pictures would be this much fun.

"You guys go on. You don't want to miss any of your swimming time do you?" Billy asked playfully.

"Are you going to be over in time to swim?" Ken asked with a smile.

"Probably not this time. I have a few rolls of film from my trip to Belgium to process while I'm in the dark room. But I bet Lawrence and Deacon will be able to join you." Billy finished with a smile.

"We'll see you guys in a while then. Are you ready to go Rory?" Ken asked from beside me.

He's the one who pushes me. He could just have wheeled me over to his house and I wouldn't have thought anything of it. But Ken asked my

permission... It seems like such a small thing but... he's the only one who asks.

"Yeah." I squeaked out, feeling choked up by his kindness.

* * * * *

"Billy's house is really nice. This is the first time I've seen it." Ken said conversationally as he pushed me through the kitchen to the side door of the house.

"Yeah. It's kind of like our house, but the furniture is a lot nicer." I said as I looked around.

"It's nicer than ours too. But I like our house. It's just right for us." Ken said in thought.

"I think so too. Your house seems really comfortable. I think Billy's house would feel too formal... well, except that Billy is living there." I finished with a smile.

Ken nodded and said, "Billy is great. I hope that him and my Pop can get together. I know they like each other, it just seems like there's always something going on to keep them apart. They're going on a date tonight, so maybe they'll be able to make it official."

"Really? Billy and Allen?" I asked with disbelief.

They're both really nice and cute, I guess I can see it.

"Yeah... The gay stuff doesn't bother you does it? Because if you don't want to talk about it, I won't." Ken said as he stopped my chair on the sidewalk to look at me seriously.

I want to talk about it. I want to talk about it a lot. I want to tell you about me...

"No. It doesn't bother me. I'm just not used to it. We don't talk about stuff like that at my house." I said as Ken continued to push me toward his house.

But not yet. I know Ken is cool with gay guys... but I don't know if he's gay... and even if he is... I don't know if he'd be interested in me...

"I'm glad. It's easy to talk to you. It'd be tough to try and think about what I'm going to say before I say it all the time." Ken said as we moved up his driveway.

"Thanks. It's easy to talk to you too... especially since I can really talk now." I said, and broke into a smile.

"Let's find Pop. Then we can get ready to swim." Ken said as he pushed me through the utility room.

As we entered the kitchen, I saw Juana cleaning up.

"Hi Mamacita, do you know where Pop is?" Ken asked as we stopped in the kitchen for a moment.

"Yes. I believe he is in the family room." Juana said in thought.

"Thanks." Ken said and started pushing me again.

"And thank you again for the wonderful lunch." I said as we moved out of the room.

"It was my pleasure to see you enjoy it." Juana said with a tender smile as she watched us go.

* * * * *

"Hey guys. How was the photo shoot?" Allen asked gently as he looked away from the terminal.

"It was really great. Billy is a fantastic photographer." I said, remembering the incredible images that Billy had captured.

"Yeah, it was a lot of fun. I can't wait till you get to see the pictures. Rory really looks great." Ken said with a cheerful smile.

"Guys, I think you both know Solak." Allen said as he scooted back from the terminal to reveal Solak and someone else in a split view on the terminal screen.

"Hi Uncle Solak." Ken said happily.

"Greetings Kenny. Rory, are the adjustments my son made adequate?" Solak asked curiously.

I was about to explode an answer about how great it was to be able to talk and do stuff again, when I remembered what I had studied about Vulcans.

Logical. No emotion. If I bubbled and gushed about how great all this is, it would be like I was being disrespectful of him.

I pushed down my emotions and said, "Yes. And I want to thank you and Xain for helping me."

"It was logical to do so." Solak said, and I think I even saw a hint of a smile in his expression.

"I was just talking to Solak and Doctor Michaels to see if there is anything they can do to help you." Allen said seriously.

"What have you decided?" I asked cautiously.

Solak spoke before anyone else could get the chance, "K'war'ma'khon Allen has offered to speak with your parents regarding the options. Pending their agreement, I will make arrangements to travel to Florida tomorrow and evaluate your condition. Doctor Michaels has volunteered the use of his medical facility for the examination..."

"Provided that I get to observe the exam. I don't think I'm likely to have another chance to see a Vulcan healer who specializes in genetic disorders." The Doctor said frankly.

Solak inclined his head in a half nod of agreement to the terms.

"So that's about all we can do for now. What time does your dad get home from work Rory? I want to talk to both your parents at once." Allen asked seriously.

"He usually pulls in around five-fifteen." I said, feeling a little overwhelmed by everything that was happening.

"Then it's a plan. At five I'll take you home and talk to your parents. If they agree, I can take you to the Short Compound in the morning and Solak can evaluate you." Allen said in thought.

"Are you going to have to do a spinal tap or bone marrow sample?" I asked hesitantly.

I don't want to sound like a whiney baby, but those things really hurt.

"No. I anticipate no need for any invasive procedures. Vulcan medical techniques are somewhat different from conventional Earth medicine." Solak said in a careful tone.

Dr. Michaels laughed and said, "That's one way of putting it."

Allen smiled at the pair on the screen and said, "Hopefully I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"Yeah. Good luck with your talk." Dr. Michaels said then gave a small wave before signing off his terminal.

"I will begin to make preparations to transport the equipment I will need." Solak said formally.

"Thank you for doing all this for me." I said quietly, trying to keep any emotion out of my voice.

"Vulcan society operates differently from your Earth societies. I do not seek profit from my profession. I am a healer. You are in need of healing. It is logical for me to aid in your recovery if it is possible for me to do so." Solak said seriously.

He's a healer. He's trained to do this. He doesn't want money or praise or to prove that he's smart. He wants to help me because... that's just what he does.

"I see the logic." I said in deep thought.

Okay, that time I know I saw a little, itty bitty, tiny smile on Solak's face. Just for a second.

"Either Xain or I will contact you as soon as I've talked to Rory's parents." Allen said with a delighted smile.

"That will be acceptable." Solak said in a peaceful voice.

"Live long and prosper Solak." Allen said happily.

"Live long and prosper K'war'ma'khon Allen." Solak said peacefully.

Allen reached up and signed off the terminal.

"So, how does this sound? Why don't I carry Rory upstairs so he can see your room, then we'll get changed." Allen said as he turned to face us.

"Then I'll carry Rory back down and we can go swimming." Allen said happily.

"That sounds great." Ken said with enthusiasm.

"Grab Rory's trunks and we'll get started." Allen said as he stood.

* * * * *

"Here you go Rory. I'll leave you guys alone for a minute while I check on Xain and Jake." Allen said as he put me gently into a chair.

"Thanks Pop." Ken said with a big smile as he watched his father walk out of the room.

"Your room is really big. Do you share it with Kevin?" I asked as I looked at the two beds.

"Yeah. That's his side with all the pictures. Mine has all the models and the video game." Ken said with pride.

"You sure do have a bunch of models." I said as I looked at the large shelf on one wall.

"My Uncle Brady and I made this shelf all by ourselves." Ken said with excitement.

"That's really something, I've never made anything like that." I said as I looked more carefully at the shelf.

"Maybe if Uncle Solak can make you better, we can build something together. It was really fun." Ken said happily.

"That'd be great." I said past the lump in my throat.

I felt something on my face and lifted my hand to find a tear on my cheek.

"Is something wrong?" Ken asked with concern as he hurried to my side.

"No. Nothing's wrong. I guess I'm just so happy that it's making me cry." I said, feeling really stupid for saying it. I turned slightly away from Ken and tried to hide my face.

"Rory, please don't hide what you're feeling. If you're crying because you're happy, then I think it's great. It's a whole lot better than crying from being sad." Ken said seriously.

"Yeah, I guess." I said as I put my hand down and turned to face him.

"Do you think I should be embarrassed and hide it when I'm feeling stuff?" Ken asked me curiously.

"No. But that's how you are. I guess I'm used to hiding what I'm feeling." I said shyly.

"You don't have to hide it from me... I promise." Ken said as he moved closer to look deeply into my eyes.

I felt a tremble of fear deep inside me at what I wanted to do.

"I... I'm..." I said, then leaned closer.

Kiss him. I'm going to kiss him.

"Are you guys ready to get changed?" Allen asked as he walked into the bedroom.

Ken pulled back slowly, then looked at his father and nodded.

"Did I interrupt something?" Allen asked with a curious look.

A few more seconds and you might have....

"No. We were just talking." Ken said in his cheerful voice again.

Oh God! I was so close! I almost kissed Ken. I was right there, just an inch or two away!

"So Rory, how do you want to do this? I'm guessing that you'll need help to get changed." Allen asked curiously.

"Oh yeah." I said hesitantly.

I can't dress myself. I can't believe I didn't think about that before.

"Well, Jake already said that he'd help you. He says he knows what to do. But if you feel funny about that, Kenny or I can help you." Allen said seriously.

After what just about happened with Ken, it'd probably be weird between us. Even though I want Ken to be the one...

"Well, I guess since Jake knows how to do it, he could help me." I said hesitantly.

"Okay, I'll let him know. He'll be in in a few minutes to help you." Allen said as he walked back out the door.

I looked over at Ken to see if he was hurt by me not choosing him.

Whew. He's fine. He's just looking like the friendly, happy guy that he is.

"I'll try not to hide my feelings from you Ken. I don't know if I can show you everything yet, but I'll show you what I can." I said, hoping it was enough.

"Just show me what you feel like sharing. I don't want you to feel like I'm demanding anything. I just want you to know that you don't have to hide it when you're feeling something. If you'll share it with me, maybe I can feel it with you." Ken said softly.

Mmmm. That sounds so great. Someone to share what I'm feeling. Even if the kissing thing never happens, that would be enough...

"Thanks Ken, I understand." I said, matching his tone.

"Rory, why don't I take you over to my room to change so Ken can change in here?" Jake asked from the doorway.

"If you're willing to carry me in there, I'm willing to go." I said frankly.

Jake walked over to me and leaned down so his chin was almost on my shoulder.

"Go ahead and put your arm around my neck and hold on." Jake said as he put his arms around my back.

I put my one working arm around his neck and held on tight as he lifted me.

"Light as a feather." Jake said with a smile in his voice.

"Here are Rory's swimming trunks." Ken said from behind me.

"Thanks Ken, we'll be back in a few minutes."

* * * * *

"How are you doing buddy?" Jake asked as he carried me across the hall.

"I'm great, thanks to you and Xain." I said, holding on tightly.

"Me? I didn't do anything." Jake said as he nudged the door open with his toe.

I looked around the room to see that we were in a little dressing room or something.

Jake toed open another door and we were in a really big bathroom.

"You talked to me and listened when no one else did. If it wasn't for you, I'd still be sitting in my room." I said as he sat me down on a chair inside the door.

Jake looked at me in thought for a second, then said, "Okay, maybe you're right. But all I really did was talk to you just the same as I would anyone else."

I couldn't help but smile. I think that if anyone else said that, I'd think they were just being modest. Jake means it. He was being friendly to me just the same as he would anyone else.

"Do you need to use the bathroom before we do the swimsuit thing?" Jake asked curiously.

"Um, yeah." I said shyly.

Well, at least it's not Ken in here with me.

"You don't need to be embarrassed Rory." Jake said as he unfastened my pants.

"That's easy for you to say." I mumbled as I felt the prickly blush rising up my face.

"Yeah, I guess. I just wanted you to know that it's no big deal. I've done this before." Jake said as he picked me up and moved me over to the toilet.

He kinda propped me up on the edge, then with one tug, had my pants down.

"Hold onto me for a sec." Jake said and guided my hand to his neck.

I held on and he lifted me slightly as he worked my briefs off.

"There you go. I'll be back in a couple minutes, then we'll get you changed into your swim suit." Jake said as he moved me back onto the toilet.

"Thanks." I said in almost a whisper, not from embarrassment, but from wonder.

Jake walked out of the room as I thought about how wonderful Jake really was.

I mean, he just did something that no one else had ever done for me.

He made helping me go to the bathroom totally not embarrassing.

When mom helps me, she just lays me out on the bed and yanks off my pants and underwear, then hauls me to the toilet.

It's so humiliating. I know that's the only way she can do it without my cooperation, but it's just such a horrible feeling to have my mother see me naked like that.

I guess in reality what Jake did just now wasn't that different, except that he gave me the illusion of privacy. He did it so I never felt like he was looking at me.

Dignity. I think that's what I'm feeling. I think that's what Jake just did for me. He gave me dignity by treating me so thoughtfully.

"You done in there?" Jake asked through the door.

"Yeah, just finished." I said as I awkwardly reached behind me and flushed the toilet.

"Cool." Jake said as he walked in carrying my swim trunks.

"Tell me about this Lewis guy you used to know. You must have been really good friends with him if you helped dress him." I said, trying to make some kind of conversation to mask the fact that Jake was kneeling in front of me, taking off my pants.

"Yeah, I guess so. He lived with his brother and sister-in-law and their kids. They really took care of him, I just kind of helped him out with the things they couldn't." Jake said, then glanced up at me with an uncomfortable look of question. Like he didn't really know if he should tell me.

"Like what?" I asked hesitantly. I could see that Jake was uncomfortable talking about it, but somehow I needed to know.

"Well, to be honest... I had sex with him." Jake said timidly as he worked my briefs off my legs.

"Really?" I asked, looking at Jake with total disbelief.

"Really. Lewis was a guy, just like any other guy. I guess because he was in the wheelchair and stuff, people thought he wasn't interested in sex or didn't need it or something." Jake said in thought as he worked the swimming trunks up my thighs.

"Yeah. People think that I'm like a little kid because I'm helpless." I said, completely understanding what he was saying.

Jake stood up and guided my arm around his neck.

I held on and he lifted me up, then guided my swim trunks up over my butt.

"So I'd visit with Lewis and help him out when he needed it. We talked a lot and became friends." Jake said as he started working on my shirt.

"That's really nice. I mean, I don't think I know anyone else who would even think of doing something like that." I said honestly.

Jake gave me a shy look and said, "He paid me."

I looked at Jake with complete surprise.

"Yeah. I used to have sex for money. Lewis is probably the only one I would even think about doing it with for free, but I couldn't even suggest it to him. It would be too much like pity." Jake said timidly.

"Does your dad know you used to do that?" I asked with wonder at this new information.

"Yeah. Dad knows everything I used to do. I mean, he doesn't know about Lewis, but he knows I used to be a whore." Jake said as he worked the shirt off my uncooperative arm.

"But... how? I mean... how could your dad let that happen?" I asked in disbelief.

"Dad's only been my dad for less than a week. Before that I was on my own, living on the streets and doing what I had to so I could survive." Jake said distantly.

"I thought he was your real dad. You... I don't know... you just seem like a real family." I said in wonder.

"We *are* a real family. Dad adopted all of us. Family isn't about blood or marriage or anything, it's about how you feel about each other." Jake said as he folded my shirt.

"I guess it's lucky for me that you went through all that, or you wouldn't have been able to understand me and help me." I said as I looked Jake in the eyes.

"Yeah. Even though I went through some messed up stuff, good things like this happen because of it." Jake said with a smile, then leaned in and guided my arm around his neck again.

"I'm going to take you into Ken's room for a few minutes while I get changed." Jake said as he carried me to the door.

"Thanks for helping me Jake. You and Xain completely changed my life today." I said as I held on to him tightly.

"I'm just glad I was able to help." Jake said softly, and I could feel his grip on me change from that of just carrying me into more of a hug.

I hugged him in return as he carried me out into the hall.

"And thanks for telling me Jake. I promise I won't spread it around." I whispered into Jake's ear.

Jake stopped and turned his head to look me in the eyes as he said, "I told you all that so you'll know that I'll understand if you ever need to talk about sex or feelings or other stuff that someone else might think you're too young or whatever to think about."

I thought about the words and marveled at what Jake was offering me. Someone to talk to about all the stuff that bothers me. Someone who sees

me as a real person. Someone whose been there and done that and can really give me advice.

"Thanks Jake. I think there's some stuff I'd like to talk to you about, but later... when I've got it all sorted out in my head." I said as I held his gaze.

Jake broke into a gentle smile and said, "I'm here whenever you need me buddy. Now I need to get changed so we don't miss out on too much swimming time."

"Yeah." I said in a relaxed voice as I cuddled into Jake's embrace.

* * * * *

"There you are. I was about to come and check on you." Allen said with a smile.

Oh MY God! There was Allen, Ken and Kevin all lined up wearing only swim suits.

Ken is even more gorgeous than I imagined.

"I'm going to get changed now. I'll see you down at the pool." Jake said as he handed me to Allen.

"Thanks for helping me Jake." I said as I held tightly to Allen's neck.

"Sure thing buddy." Jake said as he walked out of the room.

"I got you a towel." Kevin said in a voice filled with accomplishment.

"Thanks Kevin." I said as I turned my head to see him.

I was shocked when I saw him. I thought he was pale and skinny before but to see him wearing the little Speedo swimsuit... It's like someone just wrapped some skin around a skeleton.

I don't know what happened to Kevin, but he looks like he hasn't eaten in a month. Then I remembered that at lunch, he didn't eat anything...

I was about to ask, I really wanted to know what was wrong with him, but before I could open my mouth and ask the questions I stopped.

I don't want every single person I meet to ask me about my condition, so I'll just let it go unless someone else brings it up.

"Do you have the sun-block Kenny?" Allen asked quietly.

"Right here." Ken said and held it up.

"Then let's go." Allen said and carried me toward the door.

Usually when someone has to pick me up and carry me somewhere, I feel like I'm being a burden. But for some reason, being here in Allen's arms, I just feel loved.

Chapter 4

"Take a deep breath Rory, I'm going to jump in." Allen said in a playful voice.

I glanced at him quickly and understood what he meant. I took a deep breath and held it.

Allen started running toward the pool, then jumped with me still in his arms.

We landed in the water with a huge splash and then went under.

Maybe it's because I was surprised or maybe it's just because I trust Allen, but for whatever reason, I wasn't scared a bit. It was exciting and fun and the perfect way to start a day of swimming.

When we surfaced, I heard Kevin's voice asking, "Poppa, what's in here?"

"You know, I don't think I ever looked in there. Can you open it?" Allen asked as he guided us to the edge of the pool.

"Lookit!" Kevin said with excitement.

"What did you find 'Little One'?" Allen asked in a loving tone.

"All kinds of stuff." Kevin said as he started looking through things in the small cabinet.

"Kenny, do you think you can give me a better description of what your brother found?" Allen asked with a chuckle.

"It's all kinds of pool stuff. There's beach balls and inner tubes and all kinds of stuff like that." Ken said happily.

"I guess Chip must have forgotten that he left them here." Allen said, sounding uncertain.

"Rory, which would you like better? A raft or an inner tube?" Ken asked with excitement.

I felt an involuntary smile come over my face. His first thought was of me. I mean, it's not pity, it's really not. I can tell.

"I think an inner tube would be fun." I finally said.

"I'll blow it up for you." Ken said happily and carried the deflated inner tube to the side of the pool right by where Allen and I were.

I noticed that Kevin was still looking in the cabinet and asked, "What are you going to get Kevin?"

"I don't know. I have to unfold some of them to see what they are." Kevin said happily as he unfolded an inflatable raft.

I don't know if Kevin is sick or what, but he sure isn't unhappy. Watching his excitement at his discovery as he is going through the pool toys is amazing to me... It feels like forever since I was... carefree, I guess. I don't know the right word to describe it. It's something only a kid has, and when he loses it, it's gone forever...

* * * * *

"It'll be... ready... in just... a minute." Ken said as he held the nozzle of the inner tube away from his mouth to speak.

"Do you want me to help you with that Kenny?" Allen asked as he adjusted his hold on me.

"No... I want to... do it... for Rory." Ken said as firmly as he could in his breathless state.

"Alright, but take a break if you need to. We're not in any rush." Allen said, and I could tell from the sound of his voice that he was smiling.

"In fact," Allen said in a quieter voice as he started swimming us to the other side of the pool, "While Kenny is busy, maybe you could help me with something?"

"Sure. What can I do?" I asked as I turned to look at Allen's face.

"Well, it's a two part plan. When Jake and Xain get out here, I'd like your help keeping them out here. Juana and I are planning a surprise for them, but we need to keep them outside for it to work." Allen said with a mischievous smile.

"Yeah, I'll help." I said immediately. I don't know what surprise he's planning, but whatever it is, I know it's going to be something great.

"Part two is going to be up to you. Juana is going to let me know when it's set up. I'll get everyone out of the pool to go inside. That's when I want you to ask Jake to show you his room." Allen said with a smile.

"Okay, I can do that... will you tell me what you're doing?" I asked in a whisper.

"Only if you promise not to tell anyone else... not even Kenny. Do you promise?" Allen asked seriously.

I nodded firmly and even gave him my serious 'I mean it' look.

"Good. I arranged last night to get Jake and Xain a new bed. It's going to be delivered soon. I think the boys will be surprised." Allen said with excitement.

"So... you're buying one bed for both of them?" I asked cautiously, wanting to be sure I was understanding him correctly.

"Yes. Right now they each have a twin bed, but they've been sharing Jake's. With the new queen size bed, they'll be able to sleep more comfortably." Allen said with a smile.

I think this adds to my 'Heaven' theory.

"Jake and Xain are lucky to have a dad like you." I said before I could even think about it.

"I'm the lucky one Rory. My life was empty before the boys came along. I hope you'll have lots of kids someday and be able to have this feeling." Allen said as his hold on me transformed into a hug.

"I probably won't ever have kids. But I think I understand what you mean." I said in a distant voice as I remembered some of my darker thoughts from the past few months.

"Why do you think you won't have kids?" Allen asked curiously as he turned me to face him.

"Well, the disease or whatever you want to call it that's wrong with me, it's hereditary. If I had kids, I'd probably pass it on to them." I said in thought.

"Maybe you'll meet someone with kids or you can adopt." Allen said seriously.

"I guess... I'm just afraid I'll never be well enough or strong enough to do something like being a father. I've been sick and getting worse for so long that I finally stopped dreaming about getting better. I don't see a future for me except of being helpless and depending on everyone around me to take care of me... I guess I've forgotten how to dream..." I said before I could think. The words were just spilling out and I was helpless to stop them.

"It's okay Rory. With any luck, Solak will be able to do something to help you tomorrow. You don't have to hope or dream or wish or do anything else. I'm sure that the boys and I will be doing enough hoping and dreaming on your behalf."

I snuggled into Allen's embrace and soaked in the warmth and comfort.

Heaven, definitely heaven.

* * * * *

"Hey Ken, are you okay?" Jake asked as he led Xain out of the house.

Jake was wearing a speedo swimsuit like Kevin's, but red instead of blue. I guess with the baggy type of clothes Jake wears I didn't notice how skinny he was before.

"All... most... done." Ken said in little gasps.

"Really Kenny, you should take a break." Allen said with concern in his voice.

"Yeah Ken, I can finish that for you." Jake said as he sat beside Ken.

I don't think Jake looks 'sick' skinny, but he's really thin.

"No!" Ken said in a gasp, then hurried to continue blowing up the inner tube before anyone could stop him.

Xain on the other hand is... normal. His beige swim trunks make his naturally tan skin look even darker. He isn't fat, he isn't skinny, he's not muscled, but he's not flabby, he's just... normal.

"Poppa?" Kevin called quietly from the cabinet.

"Just a second Kevin. Kenny, take a break." Allen said firmly.

"Done." Ken said with a whisper of accomplishment and scooted the inner tube toward me.

"Thanks Ken." I said, barely able to believe Ken's thoughtful gesture.

"Uh huh." Ken said semi-coherently, then laid back and closed his eyes as he tried to catch his breath.

"Poppa, what's this?" Kevin asked from the cabinet.

I looked at Allen curiously as I felt him shaking, then realized that it was laughter.

"That's an air compressor to blow up the pool toys." Allen said with a chuckle.

Ken turned his head slightly and looked at me with one eye.

"Allen, Ken went to a lot of trouble to blow this up for me. Would you help me get on the inner tube?" I asked seriously, hoping Allen could understand how much it meant to me.

Allen stopped laughing and said, "You're right. Xain will you put the inner tube in the water and hold it steady? Jake, jump in the pool and help me get Rory onto the tube."

A moment later, Jake, Xain and Allen were working together to get me up onto the inner tube.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ken watching us with a peaceful smile.

After a lot of horsing around and splashing, I was finally sat in a relaxed position with my legs draped over one side of the tube and my butt sunk down in the water.

"Are you comfortable Rory?" Jake asked me in a friendly tone as he made sure I wasn't about to slip through the middle of the tube.

"I'm fine. This is great, thanks for helping me." I said, unable to keep from looking at Ken as I said it.

"Poppa, can you help me?" Kevin asked from beside the cabinet where he looked like he was trying to figure out how to work the compressor.

"I'll be right there." Allen said as he walked toward the ladder to get out of the pool.

* * * * *

I glanced away from Ken and noticed that Jake was watching me.

"You like him don't you." Jake said in a low voice, so only I could hear.

"I like all you guys." I said quickly.

Jake looked at me with a 'yeah, right' expression and waited. He wasn't going to let me get away with it.

"Yeah, I like him a lot." I whispered to Jake, feeling a tingle in my stomach at making the admission.

"Take it slow Rory, I don't know if Ken feels that way about you." Jake said seriously.

"I don't know either..." I whispered in thought.

Jake got a distant look, then started looking around the pool area with panic in his eyes.

"Dad, where's Vina?" Jake asked suddenly.

Allen looked up from the inflatable raft that he and Kevin were blowing up and said, "Juana and Mona took Edovina and the boys to the store while we were changing. They should be back anytime now."

Jake let out a sigh of relief, then looked at me shyly.

Jake loves his daughter so much. I've never loved anyone like that, not even close.

"I don't even know why I was scared. I know Dad wouldn't put her down and forget her somewhere... I just..."

"You can't help it. Jake, you're just worried about your daughter." I said gently.

"Yeah." Jake said shyly, then looked at Xain who was sitting on the edge of the pool with his feet in the water.

"Will you be okay if I leave you here for a minute? Xain doesn't know how to swim and I want to show him the basics." Jake asked casually.

"Yeah, I'll yell if I start slipping through the middle of this thing." I said as I looked into his eyes.

"I bet you will."

* * * * *

As I floated on the water, I watched the family enjoying the pool.

Allen and Kevin were blowing up pool toys, all of them I think.

Jake was showing Xain how to tread water and some basic swimming strokes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement and watched as Ken sat up, then slipped into the water.

"You all better now?" I asked as he approached.

"Yeah, it was like the whole world tilted for a few minutes." Ken said with a genuine smile.

"Thanks for blowing this up for me. I just thought someone was going to have to carry me the whole time we were in the pool." I said as I looked deeply into his eyes.

"If you want, I could go ahead and put some sun block on you. Your skin is really light, I don't want you to get a sunburn." Ken said in a soft voice.

"Thanks Ken, I burn really easy." I said, matching his soft tone.

In one swift graceful movement, Ken took off swimming for the other side of the pool.

A moment later, Ken was back at my side with a bottle of sun screen.

"Um, I guess I should start with your face..." Ken said hesitantly.

"Okay." I said as I started to smile.

I flinched at the first touch of the sunscreen on my skin. The stuff was cold, but after Ken started rubbing it in, it felt really REALLY nice.

His touch was gentle, like he was afraid of hurting me.

After coating my face and ears, Ken started working down my neck and to my chest.

"Um... Ken..." I said hesitantly as I looked down to see a tent starting to form in my swim trunks.

Ken followed my gaze, then said, "It's okay Rory." then in a whisper he continued, "I've got one too."

I tilted my head back and tried to focus on something else as his hands worked down my sides, then started to coat my belly.

"Rory... um, if you'll keep look-out, I could um..." Ken said, then dragged one finger just under the edge of the waist band of my trunks.

"Kay." I said, temporarily back in the wordless state that I had arrived in.

I watched as Kevin and Allen were working as a team to blow up the last of the pool toys. Jake had his back to us, he was holding Xain up in the water while Xain tried to get his swimming stroke just right.

Ken's hand slipped under the waist of my swim trunks and I felt the cool sunscreen come in contact with some very hot skin.

"Is that okay?" Ken asked with concern as his hand explored.

"Very okay. But I'd like to do it to you too." I said seriously, before glancing around again to make sure no one was watching.

"I've never done this before..." Ken said, then his eyes locked with mine.

Ken's hand slowly slipped out of my swim trunks as he moved in closer to me, almost as if he were going to climb on top of me.

"I really like you Ken." I said in a whisper.

"I really like you too Rory." Ken said as he moved within inches of my face.

"Kenny? Is Rory okay?" Allen asked with concern from the edge of the pool.

DAMMIT! Not again!

I looked away from Ken's eyes to find everyone at the pool watching us.

Ken glanced around, then said, "I'm about to find out."

I looked at Ken with question, and was surprised when he moved in for a kiss.

Heaven. This absolutely, positively has to be heaven.

Ken's kiss was gentle, barely a touch against my lips.

Without thought, I put my hand on the back of his head and guided him to make the kiss more forceful.

I don't know if we were like that for a second or for half an hour. I guess it doesn't matter.

All I know is that for an instant, everything was right.

My condition, being gay, looking like a spray-painted clown... it was all gone. For that moment taken out of time, I was completely happy.

Finally the kiss broke and Ken pulled back enough to look in my eyes.

"I think I love you." I said in a whisper.

"I think I love you too." Ken said with relief, wonder and joy.

"Kenny?" Allen asked hesitantly.

"He's fine... great in fact." Ken said with a playful glance at me.

I couldn't help but giggle at the statement.

Peace. Joy. Freedom.

* * * * *

"Kenny, I need to talk to Rory for a minute." Allen said in a firm tone that worried me a little.

"Okay Pop." Ken said reluctantly.

Allen swam to my side as Ken swam to the other side of the pool to watch us.

"Rory, I'm responsible for you while you're here. It's my job to make sure that you don't get hurt." Allen said with concern.

"He didn't kiss me *that* hard." I said honestly.

Allen smiled and said, "That's not what I mean. I'm talking about emotionally. It's hard for me to explain, but... since there aren't any girls here and we're all here in the pool, I can see how a boy your age could get confused..."

Okay, I've seen it in the cartoons and heard it described in stories and stuff. But I don't remember ever having the feeling like a light bulb just lit up over my head before. But that was the best way to describe what happened. It really felt like a light came on and I went from being oblivious to completely understanding what he meant in an instant.

"Allen, I've known that I'm gay for about two and a half years." I said seriously.

A smile came across Allen's face as he said, "I'm really glad to hear that."

"I know I'm kind of small, and the wheelchair makes people think of me as a little kid, but I'm fourteen. I've had months alone in my room to think about this stuff and I'm not confused about it at all." I said in almost a pleading voice, hoping that I was explaining it so Allen could understand.

"Okay. I can accept that. Just be careful, I'd hate for you to get your heart broken." Allen said with concern.

I smiled up at Allen and said, "I'd hate for you to get your heart broken too. But if we aren't willing to take chances, what's the point?"

Allen smiled and spun the inner tube half-way round in the water, then gave me a quick hug.

Before the hug had lasted a second, Ken swam up to us and said, "Pop, get your own. Rory's mine."

"I am?" I asked playfully.

"If you want to be." Ken said, now looking shy... By the way. Shy looks REALLY good on Ken.

"I will if you will." I said and couldn't help but let out a mischievous grin.

Ken moved in and gave me another kiss, this one a lot longer and more confident.

Allen must have swam away, or drowned, or been abducted by aliens or something.

Don't know.

Don't care.

All I know is that it was just me and Ken in that side of the pool.

We were kissing, hugging and saying more with our eyes than we did with our voices.

"I *do* love you." Ken said firmly as he looked into my eyes.

"I love you too Ken." I said, lost in wonder at the joy I was feeling.

* * * * *

"Well Rory, good for you." Mona said as she walked out to the pool area dressed in a one piece bathing suit.

"Thanks." I said as I squeezed one of Ken's arms that was wrapped around me.

Mona walked around the pool to the deep end, then dived in.

A few seconds later she surfaced beside us and gave Ken and I each a firm hug.

"So you guys are 'official', right?" Mona asked with excitement.

"That's right, we're boyfriends." Ken said proudly.

"I'm glad. I thought I was getting that vibe from you two earlier, but I didn't know if you'd connect. Has Allen had the safe sex talk with you two yet?" Mona asked seriously.

"No..." I said hesitantly.

Mona shook her head and rolled her eyes as she muttered, "You'd think a gay man would have better sense..."

"Grandma, I've never been with anyone before..." I said, then glanced at Ken with question.

Ken quickly said, "Me neither."

"So there's like, zero chance of getting anything... right?" I asked, knowing I was right, but wanting to assure Mona.

"Not exactly." Mona said in thought.

I looked at Mona with genuine surprise.

"Kenny's father had AIDS. I know from what Allen told me that he was very careful to protect Kenny, but that's something to think about." Mona said seriously.

I looked at Ken with question.

"Grandma is right. Even though I'm sure I don't have it... I can't say the chance is zero." Ken said with regret and a little fear in his eyes as he looked at me, obviously fearing rejection.

I looked up at Ken with love and admiration.

"Ken, I love you. It doesn't matter to me at all." I said, trying to be assuring.

"Kenny, I think you should talk to your Pop about getting a blood test, just to be on the safe side. As I understand the process, you have to have a series of tests that all come back negative before they can say you are absolutely virus free. There may be a faster way now with the new technology. Either way, it would probably be best to save the 'unsafe' things until you know 100% for sure." Mona said with concern.

"We will Grandma. I promise." Ken said with a smile.

"Do you know about safe sex?" Mona asked cautiously.

"Yeah, Dad and Pop both had the talk with me a long time ago." Ken said seriously.

"Good. Too many people are afraid to talk to their children about the reality of sexually transmitted diseases. In our modern times we don't have the luxury of letting kids discover sex on their own because there are things going around out there that are incurable and deadly." Mona said firmly.

"You sounded just like my dad when you said that." Ken said with a chuckle at Mona.

"Oh Lord, I could have gone all year without hearing that." Mona said dramatically.

Ken giggled and hugged me from behind.

"You two should probably be exploring each other's tonsils right now. I'm going to go talk with Allen and Kevin." Mona said with a smile before gracefully swimming away.

"Ricardo, no running." Juana said firmly as she walked out of the house at a slow pace with Edovina in her arms.

The little boy slowed down, but walked quickly with Reuben to the pool.

"I like your swimming trunks Ricardo." Ken said with a smile from behind me.

"Gamma got'm for me." Ricardo said happily as he slipped into the shallow end of the pool.

"Momma and Grandma took us to the store to get swimming suits for all of us." Reuben said as he climbed down the ladder into the pool.

"Jake, if you will take Edovina, I have some things to do in the house." Juana said from the poolside.

"Thank you Mamacita." Jake said as he accepted his daughter into his arms.

"Thy'la, come look." Jake said with amusement.

I tried to see, but Jake was turned about half away from me and I couldn't see her.

"Wanna go see?" Ken asked with a smile.

I nodded and smiled in return.

In just a few seconds, Ken had floated me over to everyone else in the water.

"Isn't that just the cutest thing you've ever seen?" Allen asked happily.

I looked at the baby and saw that she was wearing a teeny tiny, itty bitty one piece bathing suit that was exactly the same color as Mona's. Her little pair of sunglasses made the look complete.

Jake cautiously lowered the baby into the water, watching for her reaction.

Edovina got a strange look on her face, like she was about to cry, then confusion, as if she were trying to decide if she like the feeling of being wet or not.

Finally she let out a giggle and slapped her hands on the water's surface causing a splash.

"Now that she's accepted the water, no mud-puddle in Florida will be safe." Mona said with a chuckle.

"It's okay Vina. You can play in the mud puddles anytime you want." Jake said as he gently bobbed her in the water.

"Kenny, give me ride?" Ricardo asked hopefully.

Ken looked at me with indecision, like he didn't want to leave me even for a minute, but he didn't want to disappoint Ricardo.

"Go ahead." I said to Ken gently.

He smiled at me, then turned so Ricardo could climb on his back.

"You look different." I heard a voice say from nearly behind me.

I paddled with my one hand and turned my inner tube so I could see Reuben looking at me consideringly.

"Maybe because I'm wet and dressed different." I said as I looked into Reuben's eyes.

Reuben tilted his head slightly in thought, then said, "You're not sick anymore."

I looked down at my skinny little legs that weren't really good for anything and said, "Xain helped me a lot, but I'm still a long way from being all better."

Reuben moved closer to look deeply into my eyes and said, "You're all better inside where you were really hurt."

I looked at Reuben curiously and was surprised when he broke into a smile and hugged me.

"You're my cousin now Rory." Reuben said happily.

"Kay." I said hesitantly as I accepted the hug.

"Do you want to go over to Xain and Jake?" Reuben asked with a smile as he pulled back to look at my face.

"Um, sure." I said uncertainly, trying to understand the young boy.

I mean, one minute he's a normal little kid, the next minute he's like Yoda or something.

I glanced over to see that Ken was at the far end of the pool, pushing off from the side with Ricardo on his back.

The smile and giggles of delight from Ricardo was fun to watch, but the joyful smile on Ken's face...

Yeah, okay. Allen was right... Someday...

* * * * *

"Can Rory and I watch Edovina for a while?" Reuben asked Jake hopefully.

Jake looked at Xain and received an almost imperceptible nod.

"Would you mind Rory?" Jake asked cautiously.

"No, not as long as I have Reuben to help me." I said as I glanced at Reuben at my side.

Reuben's chest puffed out a little in pride at my statement.

Jake noticed and smiled as he placed Edovina on my chest.

"I'm gonna push Rory and Edovina over there and back. Is that okay?" Reuben asked Jake hopefully.

"That's fine. Just be careful not to tip them over." Jake said in a fatherly tone.

Reuben carefully took hold of the inner tube and began to kick slowly, gently moving the three of us through the water.

I looked over at Ken to see him watching us.

I waved at him and he waved back with a loving smile.

Ricardo noticed and started waving wildly.

"Reuben, wave to your brother." I said as I watched the little boy waving frantically.

Reuben looked at Ricardo and started chuckling before he returned the wave.

"He loves you a lot." I said as I turned to look at Reuben.

"I love him too. Manny and Lupe are gone so I'm the only one who can take care of him." Reuben said as he put his finger out for Edovina to grab.

"Was that your brother and sister?" I asked softly, sensing that Reuben mentioned them, hoping I would ask.

"Yeah. Manny was my big brother. He always took care of me like I do for Ricardo now. He was killed. Lupe is my big sister... she's Edovina's momma." Reuben said as he played something like tug-of-war with Edovina. He would pull his hand away a little, then allow her to pull his hand back to her.

"What happened to Lupe?" I asked quietly, not knowing if I really wanted to know, but feeling that Reuben needed to talk about it.

"When Lupe was pregnant with Edovina, Momma made Lupe stay home and stop smoking and drinking and all the other stuff she liked doing until Edovina was born." Reuben said in thought.

"Okay." I whispered, prompting him to continue as I sort of played with Edovina's peach-fuzz hair.

"Lupe got out a couple times, but when she sobered up, she came back and said she was wrong and she was sorry and she didn't want to hurt her baby." Reuben rambled, just speaking his thoughts as they came.

"After Edovina was born, Lupe was gone for about two weeks. And when she came back she was really sick and smelled bad." Reuben continued in a distant voice.

"She kept going out and using and came back home when she used too much and got sick."

"She started getting red bumps and sores all over her body and she had a couple teeth fall out. That was right before we moved here. Momma said Lupe could come with us and get help so she didn't have to be sick no more, but then Lupe ran away and... and that's all. I don't know if she's okay or not." Reuben said in a desperate voice.

"Come here." I said and held out my one working arm.

Reuben moved to my side and I pulled him into a hug as well as I could.

"I have an older sister too. Her name is Corina. If Corina did what your sister did, I'd be worried and scared for her too. There's not much you can do but... hope... and dream." I said, nearly choking on the words.

"Ricardo says I should pray..." Reuben trailed off.

"You probably should." I said in a low voice.

"But it doesn't work. When Manny was shot, I prayed a lot and he still died." Reuben said as he looked at me with helplessness and question in his eyes.

"No, it doesn't always work, but sometimes it does. And I think that sometimes you don't get help unless you ask for it." I said as I finally released Reuben from the hug.

"Really?" Reuben asked cautiously.

"Yeah. This morning I prayed and asked for help. Now I'm here, and you said it yourself, I'm not sick anymore." I said softly.

"Thank you Rory. I think before we go to bed tonight, I'm going to pray with Ricardo." Reuben said as he hugged me again.

"That sounds good Reuben, but for right now, why don't you swim me over to Ken and Ricardo. They look like they're taking a break over there." I said as I pointed.

Reuben got behind me and started moving us across the pool.

* * * * *

"I believe it is proper at this time to voice my approval of my brother's choice of mate." Xain said as Reuben pushed me to the shallow end of the pool where everyone was gathered.

"Thank you Xain, I was thinking that you and Jake are a perfect match too." I said as I glanced at Ken who was trying to convince Ricardo to get off his back.

"Reuben, do you think Ricardo would like to play with some of those pool toys?" I asked as I pointed over to the pile of inflatable toys beside the pool.

"Those are Kevin's. I saw him blowing them up with Uncle Allen." Reuben said cautiously.

I saw Kevin a few feet away and asked, "Kevin, are all those floaty toys yours or can anyone play with them?"

"They're not mine, Uncle Chip left them here for all of us." Kevin said seriously.

"See Reuben. They're for all of us. Why don't you take Ricardo to pick out which toys he'd like to play with?" I asked, hoping it sounded like a good idea.

"Yeah, thanks Rory." Reuben said quickly and hurried to Ricardo.

"Thy'la, Edovina has fallen asleep. Perhaps we should take her indoors to prevent injury from overexposure to the sun." Xain said seriously.

"If you'll hand me the sun screen, I could just put some on her. That way she can stay out here with us." I said, hoping I was convincing in my argument.

After a moment of consideration, Xain said, "Edovina's natural darker pigmentation in combination with sunscreen should be sufficient protection."

I accepted the sunscreen from Xain and squirted a line of it down my bad arm, then handed the bottle back to him.

"I wish to thank you for attending to the needs of my daughter." Xain said seriously while I rubbed sunscreen into the baby's back.

"It makes sense for me to watch her since I can't get up and move around. Besides, I really like having her with me. She's a good baby." I said as I rubbed sunscreen onto Edovina's legs.

"From the research I have done on the subject, I believe Edovina possesses a naturally contented demeanor. I believe it to be a hereditary trait passed to her by Jake." Xain said in thought.

I looked over Edovina to see that I hadn't missed any spots, then said, "You might be right, or maybe she's just happy because she knows that she's loved."

"That is a possibility." Xain said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks for sending Reuben to get Ricardo. I don't think I could have told him 'no', and what's worse, I think he knows it." Ken said as he swam to my side and put an arm around me.

"Someday you're going to spoil our kids rotten." I said before I could even think about it.

Ken looked at me with shock, then smiled.

"I mean..." I began to say when Ken interrupted.

"You mean that you've already decided that you want for us to have kids." Ken said, obviously thrilled with the idea.

"Yeah, that's what I mean." I said with relief at Ken's reaction.

"Was your meeting an instance of the Human peculiarity known as 'love at first sight'?" Xain asked curiously as Jake and Mona swam over to join us.

"More like 'Lust at first sight' for me, I took one look at Ken and couldn't get over how cute he was." I said with a glance at Ken.

"I think it was 'Like at first sight' for me. I took one look into Rory's eyes and felt like he was someone I could talk to and listen to and really care about." Kenny said with a smile.

"But you couldn't understand me." I said carefully.

"I would have found a way." Ken said sheepishly.

"I bet you would have." I said, as I remembered how Ken took every opportunity to be with me and try to understand me after we met.

"Xain, you said that 'love at first sight' is a human peculiarity. How does it work on Vulcan?" Ken asked as he reluctantly looked away from me.

"Typically, the eldest members of the family arrange for the logical pairings of the younger members with other families while they are still children. The children typically attain their education and become installed in their professions, then the union is consummated at the onset of pon'farr." Xain said without emotion.

"Does that mean that you have a fiancée waiting for you to be old enough back on Vulcan?" Ken asked with concern.

"No. He who is my grandfather believed that for one of mixed parentage to marry was illogical. He holds the belief that for those of differing species to intermarry disrupts the genetic progress achieved by millennia of logical matings." Xain said, and there was no missing the pain in his voice.

"Good. He did us a favor then. I can't imagine anyone else who I'd want to be my Thy'la." Jake said as he pulled Xain into a firm hug.

"I concur." Xain said as he hugged Jake in return.

Ken moved behind me and hugged me gently, careful not to jiggle me around too much and wake Edovina.

I noticed movement at the house and saw Allen talking to Juana by the utility room door.

After a moment of talking, Allen walked to the pool and said, "It's time for Kevin's milkshake. Juana and I were talking and decided that it sounded like a good idea for everyone. What do you think?"

"Sounds good." I said happily, knowing the greater reason for getting us out of the pool.

"Well, everyone get out of the pool and come inside out of the sun for a while. Juana should have the milkshakes ready in a few minutes." Allen said happily.

"Pop, could you help me get Rory out of the pool?" Ken asked from beside me.

"Sure, Xain, grab Edovina. Jake, help me sit Rory on the edge of the pool." Allen said in thought.

"No need for that." Mona said and lifted me up and sat me down on the edge.

"Allen, you have a phone call." Juana said from the utility room doorway.

"I'll be right there. Jake, would you mind taking Rory inside?" Allen asked hopefully as he walked toward the house.

"Sure Dad." Jake said as he climbed out of the pool.

"Do you think we could go up and see your room before we have our milkshakes? I only got to see your bathroom." I said, hoping it didn't sound too stupid.

"Sure buddy. I love to show off my room." Jake said happily as he picked me up.

I put my arm around Jake's neck and smiled to myself, knowing that it was going to be great.

* * * * *

"It will be a few minutes before the milkshakes are ready. You have time to put on dry clothes." Juana said as she worked on scooping ice cream out of a large container into a blender.

"Okay Mamacita. Do Reuben and Ricardo have dry clothes down here?" Jake asked as he slowly walked us through the kitchen.

"Yes, they will change while you are upstairs." Juana said, trying to restrain a smile.

"Okay, we'll be right back." Jake said and walked toward the stairway.

I looked over Jake's shoulder to see Ken watching me.

I crooked my finger at him to 'come here'.

Ken looked at me curiously and followed us up the stairs.

"You're really gonna like my stereo. Dad said it's even nicer than his." Jake said proudly as we reached the top of the stairs.

I crooked my finger at Ken again, I wanted him to see the surprise.

As Kevin turned to walk to his own room, Ken stopped him and silently indicated for him to follow us into Jake's room.

"This is..." Jake said, then trailed off in wonder.

I twisted my neck to see what the new bed was like.

It was huge. A big, beautiful bed with a comforter that had a viney pattern on it that fit perfectly with all the plants in the room.

"How do you like it?" Allen asked as he walked into the room behind us.

"It's great! Thanks Dad!" Jake said as he hugged Allen with me between them.

"I had a lot of help. Teri arranged for it to be delivered today, Juana saw to making sure the delivery men took down the old beds and set up the new one, and Rory helped get you up here." Allen said with accomplishment.

"Thank you Father." Xain said with Edovina in his arms.

"Come here Rory." Allen said gently.

Jake handed me to Allen, then pulled Xain and Edovina into a hug.

"Well, aren't you going to try it out?" Mona asked from the doorway.

Jake gave Mona an embarrassed look, then started to laugh as she rolled her eyes.

"I mean lay down on it to see if it's comfortable." Mona said with exasperation.

Jake smiled and nodded, then broke out of the hug and threw himself on the bed.

"Do you think you'll be able to get a good night's sleep on it?" Allen asked hopefully.

"It's perfect Dad. Come on T'hy'la, you need to try this out." Jake said as he scooted up the bed to rest his head on the pillow.

"You can lay her down between us." Jake said peacefully as he watched Xain approach the bed.

I cautiously took my arm from around Allen's neck and held out my arm to Ken.

Within a second, I was hugging Ken as I watched Xain, Jake and Edovina all on the bed.

"Let's get changed and get downstairs. The milkshakes are probably ready." Allen said happily.

"Is it okay if I help you?" Ken asked me hopefully.

"If I get to help you too." I said with a smile.

"Come on guys." Allen said with a chuckle and carried me to the door.

"Just put on some short pants. We may swim some more in a little while." Allen said as we walked out into the hall.

"Then why are we changing?" Kevin asked seriously as he walked with us.

"Because I don't want your wet butt prints on all the chairs and the couch. Just change into some dry shorts and come down. After we've had our milkshakes and some time out of the sun, we can decide what to do next." Allen said as he walked us into Ken's room.

"If you'll put me on Ken's bed, it'll be easiest." I said, thinking about how to do this.

"Kevin, will you grab a towel?" Allen asked as he walked me to Ken's bed.

A moment later, Ken laid out the towel so I wouldn't get his bed wet.

"I'll be back in about five minutes, have fun." Allen said into my ear as he sat me down.

"Okay, thanks." I said in a whisper.

I watched from my spot on the bed as Allen walked out of the room.

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" Kevin asked as he pulled a pair of short pants out of a dresser drawer.

"Kevin, I want to kiss your brother for a minute or two... naked if possible. I don't know how you feel about that, but this is your room and I won't ask you to leave. If it bothers you, just tell us and we'll find someplace else to do it." I said as I looked at Kevin seriously.

"That's okay. There's a guy that I'd like to be kissing too... But I can't. I'll just go change downstairs." Kevin said frankly and walked toward the door.

"I hope you get the chance to kiss your guy really soon." I said quickly.

"His husband won't let me." Kevin said simply before walking out of the room.

"What..." I began to say, but my words were swallowed by Ken's firm kiss.

"Long story, ask me later." Ken said, then grabbed my swim trunks and tugged them down and off my legs.

"Nice." Ken said with a whisper as he looked at me, then pulled off his own swim trunks.

I looked at Ken's naked body before me and couldn't believe how right it felt to be here.

"I love you." Ken whispered as he climbed on top of me and slowly eased me to lay back on the bed.

"I love you too." I whispered in return, and felt his skin against my own, all the way down my body.

Ken began to kiss me as I felt his hand slowly drifting down...

Chapter 5

Heaven. Absolutely, positively heaven.

Ken's kisses on my neck and gentle touching were driving me crazy.

I never felt so loved.

"Rory, is this okay?" Ken asked as he pulled back enough to look in my eyes.

"It's perfect." I said, in awe of his loving expression.

"Good. I want to do all kinds of stuff, but I want to stay just like this too. Does that make any sense?" He asked, then moved in to nuzzle my neck.

"Yeah. I know just what you mean." I said in a whisper as I enjoyed the feeling of Ken's naked body pressed against mine.

I moved my hand down Ken's body to explore, and enjoyed the feeling of the soft firm skin down his side and finally stopped my exploration by taking a firm hold of his butt.

All of a sudden, Ken moved away from my neck and gave me the most mind blowing kiss ever. I mean, it was pure passion.

Before I knew what happened, I had my hand on the back of his head, holding him tightly to me. I didn't want the feeling to ever end.

Finally the kiss broke and Ken pulled back to look me in the eyes.

His face was flushed and he was panting. The sight was so hot that I just wanted... everything.

Without thinking, I put my hand on the back of his neck and half pulled him down and half lifted myself up to initiate another kiss.

The feeling of his tongue inside my mouth was the most erotic thing I could ever imagine... at least until I felt his erection rubbing against mine.

Okay, let's be real here. I've been doing without for a verrrrrrrrrry long time. I'm surprised that the kiss alone wasn't enough to set me off, but there was no holding back the floodgates when I felt the incredible sensation of Ken pressing into me.

I felt an energy that seemed to tingle from every part of my body as my excitement built to a peak. I broke our kiss and let out a gasp as I passed the point of no return and felt myself begin to erupt.

I felt Ken arch his body and press impossibly tighter against me, then felt the warm sensation as he too found release.

Well beyond thought, I pulled him back into the kiss and expressed my joy and love the only way I could. I didn't have words to express half of what I was feeling.

Ken's body relaxed against me as he once again eased me back onto the bed without breaking the kiss.

The kiss seemed to last for an instant... or maybe forever... I don't know how to say it. The feeling was incredible and it's like we shared our own little private world where time had no meaning.

Finally Ken pulled away and I could see a look of amazement in his eyes.

"Rory... that was..." Ken said in a whisper filled with wonder.

"Pretty good huh?" I asked, falling in love with Ken all over again just from the beauty of his expression.

"I never..." Ken said with wide eyes as he searched for words.

"I've never been with anyone before either." I said, trying to assure him that I understood.

"No, I mean, I never..." Ken trailed off, obviously lost as to what words should follow.

OH MY GOD! He can't mean...

"Was that your first orgasm?" I asked in amazement.

Ken shyly nodded, looking puzzled and flushed and...

I pulled Ken down to kiss me again for a moment, then whispered, "It wasn't my first, but it was my best."

"I've never felt anything even close..." Ken trailed off in amazement as he rolled his body to one side and snuggled against me.

"Neither have I Ken." I said, then turned my head to give him a kiss on the cheek.

All of a sudden I heard a tapping on the bedroom door.

"Guys, finish getting dressed, the milkshakes should be ready and waiting." Allen's voice said through the door.

Ken seemed to be lost in his thoughts, so I quickly said, "Give us two minutes."

"Okay. I'll be right back." Allen said, and I could tell from the sound of his voice that he was smiling.

I looked at Ken to find an expression of love and wonder still on his face.

Slowly Ken pulled away from me and looked down between us.

"I've seen it in pictures, but I've never seen it for real before." Ken said as he hesitantly reached down to feel the cooling semen on my belly.

"Well, I have a feeling that you'll be seeing a lot more." I said softly, enjoying Ken's look of wonder as he explored the new substance.

Ken looked at me with question for a second, then his expression changed into a smile filled with love and happiness.

"We need to get cleaned up before your dad comes back." I said as gently as I could.

Ken nodded, still wearing the smile. Then got up off the bed and hurried to the bathroom.

He came back a few seconds later with a damp hand towel and started cleaning us both up.

I think that even if Ken weren't so cute, I'd still love him. He's so gentle and caring.

After cleaning us, Ken ran to his dresser and pulled out two identical pairs of short pants.

"Is this okay?" Ken asked as he held up a pair of shorts for my inspection.

"Yeah." I said with a whisper.

Ken quickly pulled the shorts up my legs, then with just a little bit of a wiggle and tug, brought them up over my hips.

He quickly stepped into his own shorts and pulled them up, then laid down beside me.

Before either of us could say a word, there was another knock on the door.

"Come in." Ken said in a peaceful voice.

Allen hesitantly walked into the room and stopped to look at us.

"I guess we're ready." Ken said as he looked up at his father.

"Do you guys have anything you want to talk about first?" Allen asked as he took a seat on the edge of Kevin's bed.

I glanced at Ken to find a look of deep concentration on his face.

"You don't need to be embarrassed. I just want you to know that I'm here if you have any questions." Allen said in nearly a whisper.

"I don't think I have any questions yet... Maybe later." Ken said in thought.

"I'm here whenever you need me." Allen said with a gentle smile, then looked at me with question.

"I'm good." I said, not really knowing what else to say.

"Is he ever." Ken muttered with a chuckle.

A giggle escaped before I could stop it, and next thing I knew we were both laughing ourselves silly.

Allen had a glorious smile as he stood and walked over to us.

"Come on, the rest of the guys are probably finished with their milkshakes by now." Allen said with a chuckle in his voice.

I leaned up on my one good arm and was expecting to be picked up.

Instead Allen pulled both me and Ken into a hug.

Ken and I hugged Allen tightly for a moment, then finally, Allen shifted to pick me up.

"Thanks Pop." Ken whispered in a tone of voice that was complete joy.

"Yeah, thanks." I said as I was lifted into Allen's arms.

* * * * *

"Where are Xain and Jake?" Allen asked as he looked around the living room.

Kevin was sitting on the couch with Reuben and Ricardo sitting in the floor at the coffee table. All three were happily drinking their milkshakes.

"Trying out the new bed, I think." Mona said with a smile as she had Edovina cradled in one arm and held a milkshake in her free hand.

Allen sat me on the couch and Ken quickly took the seat by my side.

Juana looked into the living room and said, "I will start your milkshakes now. I did not want them to melt."

"Good thinking." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Mona looked at us consideringly before saying, "I think you two had better work things out with Rory's parents so you'll be able to spend a lot of time together. Otherwise you'll both be miserable."

I looked at Ken to find him nodding.

"Do you think they'll have any problem with it?" Allen asked as he took a seat.

Kevin quickly got up off the couch and climbed up on Allen's lap, still carrying his milkshake.

My parents... I don't think mom will have a problem. Hell, she barely knows what planet she's on. But dad... I just don't know.

"I can talk to them if you'll let me know how much you want me to tell them." Allen said with a look of concern as he absently cuddled Kevin.

I thought about his offer... it's tempting. But deep inside me I know that I have to be the one to do it. I have to let people do a lot of things for me, but this I can do for myself.

Finally I shook my head and said, "I need to be the one to tell them. I should have told them about me a long time ago."

Allen nodded, and asked, "Do you want me to be there when you tell them?"

I tried to imagine my parent's reaction to the news that their only son is gay... Nothing. There is no way I can even guess what they're going to do or say.

"Yeah. I think that would be good. Thank you Allen." I said softly.

"Can I be there too?" Ken asked hopefully.

I looked at Ken and saw the love and concern in his eyes.

"I don't know how they're going to react. I don't want them to say something that might hurt you." I said honestly.

"I don't want them to say something that might hurt you either. Please let me be there." Ken said in a begging whisper.

'Please let me'... After being out of control of my life and my body for so long, Ken is willing to let me make this decision and will follow whatever I decide. I feel something that's been missing from my life for a very long time... Trust? Control? Respect? I don't know, but whatever it is, I love Ken that much more for giving it to me.

"Okay Ken. But just remember that no matter what they say or do, I still love you." I said sincerely.

"Well that's just not fair." Mona said in a grumble.

For just a minute I had forgotten that there were other people in the room. I'm sure I was blushing as I looked at Mona in question.

"I've been looking for that for decades and they find it right out of the gate." Mona said with an exasperated expression on her face.

"You're not the only one." Allen said with a tender smile directed at us.

"Come off it Allen. You're just as much in love as those two, so don't even try to pretend with me." Mona said firmly.

Allen gave Mona a bashful smile and said, "You're right. I am."

Mona nodded once firmly, then turned her attention to the living room door.

Deacon entered wearing swim trunks and looked around with question.

"I thought you guys were going to be swimming." Deacon said with confusion.

"We were. We just decided to take a break." Allen said with a smile.

"Where's Lawrence?" Kevin asked curiously from Allen's lap.

"He's with his Dad and his brother. They came over while Billy was taking our pictures. Lawrence wanted me to go with them but I thought they should have some time with just the family." Deacon said as he took a seat on the couch beside Ken.

"That's probably a good idea." Allen said with a smile.

Juana walked into the living room carrying a tray of milkshakes.

"Wow. Those look good." Ken said happily.

The milkshakes were huge! Each one was topped with a pile of whipped cream and a cherry on top.

Juana sat the tray on the coffee table and handed the first one to Deacon.

"Thank you." Deacon said with surprise.

Juana smiled and said, "I saw you come in. I thought you would like one."

Deacon nodded as he took a drink of his milkshake.

Juana handed Ken a milkshake, then handed one to me.

Oh my God! It's been... years. Literally years since I had a milkshake.

I brought the straw to my lips and took a small taste, trying not to be overwhelmed by the flavor.

Sweet... creamy... cold... fluffy... heaven.

"Rory's doing it again." Mona said with a chuckle.

I looked at her in question.

"Blissing out." Mona said in explanation.

I nodded and said, "I haven't had a milkshake in years."

"Well, then I'm glad you're getting to have one of Juana's milkshakes. The last time I had one this good was when I visited an ice cream parlor." Mona said, then took another drink of her own milkshake.

Jake and Xain walked into the living room and took a seat on the couch where Kevin had been sitting.

"Well, how did your bed do on it's maiden voyage?" Mona asked with a waggle of her eyebrows.

Jake blushed as Xain impassively said, "I originally did not see the logic in replacing the previous beds due to the fact that Jake and I sleep... entwined. They were adequate."

Allen smiled at the serious statement.

"But Jake demonstrated one of the benefits of having a greater surface area and I now share his sense of gratitude for the thoughtful gift." Xain said seriously.

"I'm glad you like it." Allen said happily.

"What did he demonstrate?" Mona asked curiously with mischief dancing in her eyes.

Xain glanced at Jake for a moment before saying, "It is my understanding that this is a topic that should not be discussed in the presence of the younger members of the family."

"We'll talk later." Mona said with a smile.

Xain gave a single nod in confirmation as Jake ducked his head and chuckled.

I felt Ken give me a nudge and turned my attention to him.

There he was with a seductive look in his eyes, as he held the cherry from his milkshake. Slowly, he started moving it toward my mouth.

I opened my mouth and let him place the cherry just inside, then I quickly closed my lips around his fingers, just for a second.

"If Joe doesn't survive our date tonight, you two are to blame." Mona said frankly.

I shyly looked at Mona to find her and everyone else in the room looking at us.

"I just wanted to give Rory my cherry." Ken said innocently, obviously not realizing the double meaning.

Mona, Allen, Jake and Deacon broke into laughter at the statement. I smiled at Ken and leaned in to give him a quick, gentle kiss.

Juana came back into the room with milkshakes for Jake and Xain.

"Thank you Mamacita." Jake said happily as he accepted his milkshake.

"Yes, thank you." Xain said respectfully.

"So have you guys decided what you'd like to do the rest of the afternoon?" Allen asked into the ensuing silence.

"I'd like to do some more swimming." Kevin said immediately.

Allen gave him a squeeze and said, "I think we'll do that in a little while, after the milkshakes have settled. But I just thought of something we could do right now that I think everyone would enjoy."

All of us looked at Allen with question, willing him to continue.

"If Kevin wouldn't mind, I think all of us would enjoy hearing a story." Allen said with a smile.

"Really?" Kevin asked in wonder and excitement.

"Really. As soon as you finish your milkshake, go get a book to read to us. As soon as the story is done, we can go out and swim again." Allen said with a gentle smile.

"Thanks Poppa." Kevin said happily and hugged Allen tightly.

I took another drink of my milkshake, and noticed the cherry on top of the whipped cream.

I leaned over to whisper to Ken, "You can have my cherry too."

I heard Deacon start to choke from Ken's other side.

Ken looked at Deacon for a second, to make sure that he was going to be okay, then he took the cherry from my milkshake and slowly brought it to his mouth.

I watched as his lips slowly parted and he slipped the cherry inside.

"Allen, did your air conditioner stop working?" Mona asked in a slow, breathy voice.

"It might have." Allen said in a tone of voice that was the same as Mona's.

"I'm finished." Kevin said in triumph and held out his empty milkshake glass for Allen's inspection.

"Put your glass in the sink, then go get your book." Allen said with a gentle smile.

Kevin hopped off Allen's lap and ran out of the room.

"Rory, Kevin just started learning to read a few days ago. So if he gets stuck or something while he's reading, that's why." Ken said quietly to me.

"Okay." I said, then took another drink of my milkshake.

Juana walked into the room and looked around to see if anyone needed anything.

"Kevin is about to read to us. Would you like to join us?" Allen asked with a gentle smile.

"It would be my pleasure." Juana said and took a seat on the couch behind her sons.

A few minutes later, Kevin ran back into the living room.

He was just about to climb back into Allen's lap, when he stopped and instead went to the coffee table.

"Will you help me read Ricardo?" Kevin asked seriously.

The little boy nodded enthusiastically.

Kevin opened the book and moved it half-way between him and Ricardo so Ricardo could turn the pages for him.

"The boy from town sat in the tree.."

* * * * *

I never could have imagined this feeling.

The whole family was sitting around the living room listening to Kevin read.

I was snuggled into Ken's side, occasionally taking a drink of my milkshake and enjoying this new sensation.

The only word I have to describe it is 'Family'.

I can't remember if my family ever sat down together and did something like this.

I guess other families do this all the time, but it was my first time and it was just the most peaceful and satisfying feeling that I think I've ever had.

When Kevin finally finished, everyone, including me, told him what a terrific job he did at reading the book.

Seeing the expression of pride on Kevin's face was so awesome. I mean, it was his accomplishment, but I had a part in letting him know what a good job he did.

"Are we ready to swim now?" Allen asked with a contented smile.

"Yeah. That sounds great." Jake said happily.

"I think someone needs to be changed." Mona said with a loving expression at the baby in her arms.

"We can take care of that." Jake said immediately and walked to Mona.

Gently, Mona handed the baby to Jake.

"Are you up to some more swimming Rory?" Allen asked as he got up from his chair.

"Yes. That sounds like fun." I said peacefully.

He picked me up and carried me upstairs with Ken following close behind.

* * * * *

Kevin walked into the room with his swim trunks in his hand.

"Jake and Xain are changing Edovina downstairs. It'll just take me a minute." Kevin said as he walked toward the bathroom.

"We're just going to change. You don't have to leave." Ken said seriously.

Kevin looked at me with question.

"It's okay if you want to stay. It'll just take a minute." I said, trying to convey that I really meant it.

"Okay." Kevin said quietly.

Ken pulled down his shorts quickly.

He stepped out of them, then stopped and looked at me with a shy smile.

I smiled back at him and looked over his beautiful body. When I met his eyes again, he bent down and quickly slipped on his swim trunks.

The whole process took only a few seconds, yet I appreciated the show.

When I looked at Kevin again, he was already changed.

"Ready?" Ken asked me with a smile.

I nodded and watched as he pulled the short pants down and off my legs.

Ken took a second to look over my naked body, before reluctantly picking up my swim trunks and putting them over my feet.

I glanced over at Kevin and found him watching me shyly. As soon as he noticed that I was looking at him, he turned away.

"It's okay Kevin, I don't mind if you look at me." I said softly, not wanting him to feel any more embarrassed than he already did.

"I just... you got red hair down there too." He said in a whisper but didn't turn back around.

"Yeah. That's probably a good thing. If it was blue, I'd be worried." I said, hoping to make Kevin feel better.

Ken let out a loud laugh and pulled me into a hug.

I hugged him back, then noticed that Kevin was watching us with a timid expression.

After releasing Ken, I motioned for Kevin to 'come here'.

Kevin reluctantly walked to stand in front of me.

"Would it be okay if I gave you a hug too Kevin?" I asked hopefully.

"Why?" Kevin asked in a timid voice.

"I don't know. You just look like you need a hug." I said honestly.

Kevin hesitantly leaned in close enough that I could get my good arm around him.

Before our hug finished, there was a gentle knock on the bedroom door.

"Come in." Ken said absently as he watched Kevin and I hugging.

Allen walked in and looked at us curiously.

I finally released Kevin and said, "He looked like he needed a hug."

Allen smiled and said, "That's good. I was afraid that you'd decided that one boyfriend wasn't enough."

"No, Ken is all I need." I said with a loving smile at Ken.

"Besides, Rory is too young for me." Kevin said with a mischievous grin.

Allen laughed and picked Kevin up into a joyful hug.

I looked at Ken with question, but he just mouthed the word, 'later'.

A moment later Allen put Kevin down, then picked me up and carried me downstairs.

My life this morning when I woke up seems unreal to me now. Like it was just a long nightmare that I finally woke up from. I guess maybe this is what happens when you die and go to heaven. That way you don't miss your life on Earth... I don't miss it at all.

* * * * *

"Ready?" Allen asked me with an expectant voice.

I nodded and took a deep breath.

Allen ran full out and cannon-balled us right into the middle of the pool.

I'll never get enough of that. The excitement of flying and falling... this is living.

When we came up for air, Ken was right there with the inner tube, waiting for me.

"Hold it still." Allen said as he worked me over the edge and got me firmly seated.

I looked around and saw that Ricardo had a smaller inner tube and was sitting in it just like I was.

I waved at him and he waved back.

Deacon swam over to us and asked, "So are you two like a couple?"

"Yeah." Ken said happily.

"That's cool. I'm glad you found someone. Now if we can just get Kevin hooked up, everyone can be happy." Deacon said as he glanced at Kevin happily playing with Reuben and Ricardo.

"Just give Kev some time to find the right person." Ken said to Deacon, then turned to me and explained, "The last one he found was, um... kind of too old for him... and married." Ken said reluctantly.

"How old?" I asked hesitantly.

"Our friend Justy's dad." Ken said frankly.

I know the look on my face had to be complete surprise.

Little tiny Kevin was in love with someone's father?

"Kevin's not trying to get him now, but he still loves him." Kenny said seriously.

"How did Uncle Josh take the news?" Deacon asked as he glanced over at Kevin.

"Kevin didn't really tell me a lot, but I don't think it was too bad. Uncle Josh was still being nice to him after they talked." Ken said in thought.

"That's good." Deacon said seriously.

"I'm just telling you so you'll give Kevin some space about finding someone else. It hurt him pretty bad when he figured out that Uncle Chip was really in love with Uncle Josh. I just think he needs some time." Ken said, then glanced at me and smiled.

"I won't mess with him. Thanks for telling me or I might have said something stupid to him." Deacon said in thought.

"Yeah. I know you'd do the same thing for Lawrence or even Vincent." Ken said with a smile.

"Yeah, I would... Pop is looking kind of alone over there, I'm going to go see if he wants to race or something." Deacon said with a smile.

"Cool. We're going to float over to the deep end for a while. I think Rory needs another coat of sun block." Ken finished with a smile.

Deacon looked at Ken curiously, then got a look of realization. Finally he chuckled and said, "Go for it."

* * * * *

After a long and satisfying application of sunscreen, Ken and I floated around the pool and visited with the family.

Ken raced Deacon a couple times the length of the pool and won every time. Deacon claims that Ken had an unfair advantage because he had a cheering section.

Finally Ken got a raft and decided to lay down and float with me for while. All we were doing was holding hands to make sure we didn't float apart... but it was nice. Just right.

"Rory, it's about time to get out of the pool." Allen said quietly, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"What time is it?" I asked as I squinted over at him.

"Four-Thirty." Allen said with a sympathetic voice.

"I hate for this day to end. It's been so great here." I said as I felt a sense of dread creeping over me.

"And it's been great having you. Hopefully when I take you home we can work it out with your parents so you can come visit often." Allen said, sounding uncertain.

"Yeah." I said, knowing that it wouldn't be that easy.

"Come on. We need to get you changed back into your clothes and get you ready to go." Allen said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Okay." I responded, trying to keep the complete misery out of my voice.

With Ken and Deacon's help, Allen was able to get me off the inner tube and sat me on the side of the pool until he got out and could pick me up.

* * * * *

"I'm guessing that you want Kenny to help you change." Allen said as he sat me on the towel on Ken's bed.

"Yeah." I said reluctantly.

"I'll leave you to change, but remember. We don't have a lot of time. Okay?" Allen asked as he walked to the doorway.

"Yeah. And thanks." I said, knowing that he was purposely giving us some time to be alone.

After the door closed, Ken laid down beside me on the bed and held me gently.

I reached over and pulled him into a tight hug and felt myself starting to cry.

"What's wrong?" Ken asked in a gentle voice as he held me tightly.

"I'm scared." I said as I tried to get my tears under control.

"We'll be there when you tell them. We'll make sure that you'll be okay." Ken said as he rubbed my back.

"It's not that. It's... I feel like when I go back there, the dream is going to end. As soon as you leave, I won't be able to talk or do anything for myself and I'll be all alone." I said past the lump in my throat.

"You'll be fine. I promise that you'll never have to live like that again." Ken said softly as he continued to hold me.

"I know. But... it's so wonderful here... I don't want to go back there. It's like hell." I said desperately.

"I'll do whatever I can to make sure that you're okay. I swear." Ken said with anguish in his voice.

On impulse, I pulled him into a kiss born more of desperation than love.

Ken willingly went along and returned the kiss with enthusiasm.

When the kiss finally broke, I continued to hold him close to me.

"I need to dress you." Ken said with regret in his voice.

"I know." I said reluctantly.

After a long silent minute, Ken said, "You need to let go."

"I know." I said again.

Another long silent minute passed, until Ken said, "I guess you won't have to explain too much to your parents if you won't let go. When they see you stuck to my side, they'll probably begin to figure it out."

I started to laugh, but continued to hold on tight.

Ken moved in and gave me the most tender, mind-blowing kiss to date.

I finally relaxed my hold on him and he moved slowly away.

"Before you go, I'm going to give you my cell phone number. That way you can call me anytime you want to talk." Ken said seriously as he pulled off my swim trunks.

"Yeah, I'll give you my phone number too. Now that my sister has her own line, there shouldn't be any problem." I said, as I thought about how Corina always seems to have a phone in her ear.

"And you'll be going to see Solak tomorrow, so we'll be together then." Ken said as he worked my underwear up my legs.

I looked at Ken carefully and saw that he was trying to fight back his own tears.

In a moment of insight, I realized that I had been selfish, thinking about how I was going to feel when I had to leave and not even considering how Ken was going to feel.

I took a deep breath and said as firmly as I was able, "I'm going to be fine. As long as I know I'll get to see you again tomorrow, I'll be fine."

Ken looked at me with a watery smile and said, "Me too."

There was a knock on the door that startled us both.

Ken looked down at me in only my underwear with a questioning look.

I nodded that it was okay.

"Come in." Ken called as he picked up my pants from beside us on the bed.

"Hey guys. I just wanted to bring you the prints before Rory had to go home." Billy said as he hurried into the room.

"Thanks Billy. We'll be ready in just a minute." Ken said as he fought my pants, trying to get them over my butt.

"Mind if I help?" Billy asked casually.

"Sure." I said as I looked up at him.

"How about I lift while you pull up his pants?" Billy asked as he moved to stand beside Ken.

"Yeah." Ken said with a look of relief.

"Ready?" Billy asked as he grabbed my waist.

"Yeah." Ken said as he took hold of my pants.

Billy lifted me a little and Ken slipped the pants into place.

"Cool. If you want, I can go ahead and carry you downstairs now and we can take care of the shirt and shoes in the living room." Billy said with a smile.

"Yeah, thanks Billy." I said with a smile of appreciation.

"Ken, Allen said something about you going to Rory's house... you might be a little underdressed." Billy said with a smile as he picked me up.

Ken looked down at himself, still wearing the swimming trunks and nodded.

"I'll see you downstairs." I said as Billy carried me toward the door.

As we were just about to the door, Ken mouthed 'love you'.

I hurried to mouth 'love you' back to him before we were out of the room.

* * * * *

"They turned out better than I thought." Billy said as he picked up a photo album.

"See what you think." Billy said and sat the album in my lap.

I opened the book and the first picture I saw was the one of me laying back against Ken while he played with my hair.

"That's my favorite." Billy said with a smile.

"Mine too." I said, then noticed that Allen and Mona were behind my wheelchair, looking over my shoulder.

"What do you think?" I asked as I lifted the book for them to see.

"It's really beautiful." Allen said in a whisper.

"At least." Mona said from his side.

I brought the pictures down to my lap again and turned the next page.

Each picture was it's own story... and every story was a love story.

"You really outdid yourself Billy." Allen said in a voice of wonder.

"It was Rory. The camera loves him." Billy said modestly.

Ken walked into the room to Mona's side to see the pictures.

"Wow, those look great." Ken said as he looked at the album in my lap.

"I've got one for you too." Billy said and handed an identical album to Ken.

"Thanks Billy." Ken said and opened the album.

There was a long moment of silence as Ken examined the first picture in the album.

"Pretty good huh?" Allen asked with a smile.

Ken moved the album down where I could see it and pointed to the picture as he said, "That's how I love you."

I looked up at Ken and said, "Me too."

"If we're going to make it to your house by five, we'd better go now." Allen said quickly.

"I'm going too." Jake said seriously as he hurried into the room.

I looked at Jake curiously.

"Xain is calling his father right now. So if Rory's parents have any questions about what Solak wants to do, he can get us the answers." Jake said seriously.

"Good thinking son. We'd better get moving, we're almost late." Allen said insistently.

Jake paused for a second, then said, "The Vulcans have an ancient expression for that."

"For what?" Allen asked in confusion as he led the way out of the living room.

"Almost late." Jake said, barely containing a smile.

"Really? What is it?" Allen asked curiously, not knowing which Vulcan phrase he could be referring to.

"Fi'pon." Jake said with a grin.

Allen chuckled and said, "On time."

Chapter 6

As we left the house, I felt a wave of panic wash over me.

"Ken?" I asked in nearly a whisper.

"Right here." Ken said from behind me where he was pushing my wheelchair.

I struggled to turn and see him. The position was awkward, but I was finally able to see him out of the corner of my eye.

"Jake, will you drive? Rory needs me up front." Ken asked seriously.

"Sure Ken, go on." Jake said and moved to take Ken's place.

A moment later Ken was beside me.

Without me having to say a word, he offered his hand to me.

I took hold of his hand desperately and gripped it with force.

"It's going to be okay Rory. We'll make sure of it." Ken said assuringly.

I couldn't find words, all I could do is hold tightly to Ken's hand.

'Dear God, I believe you heard me this morning and sent help to me when I asked for it. I thank you for today and everything you've given me. Now that I've been reminded what it's like to live, I promise that I will fill each day with joy and love... if you'll let me... Please let me.'

"Which one is Rory's house?" Allen asked, drawing my attention.

I looked up and saw Ken pointing at my house with his other hand.

I followed his pointing finger and felt a fresh wave of dread wash over me as I saw my house in the distance.

"Rory, do you want to hear about how I got the bruise on my back?" Ken asked me quietly.

I looked at Ken with confusion for a moment, I mean... where the hell did that come from?

But before I could say something to that effect, my curiosity got the better of me and I nodded.

"We were all having dinner the other night at Pizza Hut and I kind of, um, noticed that there was a problem in the alley and went to see if I could help." Ken said shyly.

"It's more like he screamed 'Guys, come on!' then took off running like his life depended on it." Jake said seriously.

Ken looked back at Jake for an instant, then continued, "There was this big guy beating up a... little guy, and I mean he was really hurting him."

Ken glanced at Jake, then back to me and said, "I was the first one there so I tried to stop him..."

"...You tackled him Ken. This guy had to be six-two and over two hundred pounds and you plowed into him and knocked that sucker flat." Jake said with pride.

Ken flashed a look at Jake, as if to ask 'Are you finished?'

A moment later, Ken said, "Me and Kevin and Jake and Xain all jumped on the guy. I got that bruise on my back during the fight."

"Bullshit." Jake said firmly.

Ken looked back at Jake in surprise.

"That giant asshole was about to hit Kevin and you threw yourself on top of Kevin to protect him." Jake said seriously.

Ken seemed to be thinking about the statement for a moment, before he shyly nodded.

"And the little guy you've been so careful not to name was Lawrence. That's how we met him." Jake said in a more gentle voice.

I looked at Ken with surprise and question to receive a nod in response.

"I just wanted to tell you about that so you'll know we're not just saying the words. When we see someone in trouble, we do whatever we can to help them." Ken said with concern in his voice.

Ken stopped someone from beating up Lawrence. Ken took a punch that was aimed at Kevin. If he can do all that then maybe...

"We're here." Allen said from my other side.

I looked around in surprise. The story had distracted me to the point that I didn't even realize where we were.

Before we could get to the door, Zombie Hyper-Mom was standing there with a panicked expression on her face.

"Hello Mrs. Teeter. This is my dad Allen Thompson." Jake said quickly.

Zombie Hyper-Mom didn't even answer, she just ran to me and started looking at me for... something.

"Thank God you're alright. Oh, it looks like you've been out in the sun. We'd better get you inside." Zombie Hyper-Mom said quickly.

"It's okay Mom, I'm wearing sunscreen." I said, hoping to stop her fussing.

Zombie Hyper-Mom froze for an instant... then exploded, "WHAT DID THEY DO TO YOU?"

I shrank back a little, not so much in fear of her as a natural reaction to that level of volume... The Zombie Hyper-Mom's got some lung power... I never knew.

"Mrs. Teeter, if you wouldn't mind too much I'd like to explain what happened when your husband gets home." Allen said cautiously.

In an icy, predatory voice Zombie Hyper-Mom said, "Either you tell me what you did to my baby right this minute, or I'm going to call the police."

"MOM!" I screamed, hoping to get her attention.

Zombie Hyper-Mom looked at me with her ever present look of confusion.

Well, my red headedness took over before I could stop and think and the words spilled out, "Why are you so mad? Do you want to keep me helpless and silent so you can pretend that I'm still a little baby? Do you get such a charge out of being needed that you don't want me to get better?"

Zombie Hyper-Mom looked at me with wide eyes for a long moment before she whispered, "Baby..."

I interrupted with a buzzer sound, then said, "Wrong answer. I'm not a baby. I'm a *teenager*, I'm *fourteen*. Allen and his family gave me a wonderful gift today, they gave me my voice back. If you try to hurt them in any way, I'll use that voice to tell everyone how you're trying to keep me sick and helpless."

Zombie Hyper-Mom looked at me with wide eyes as her mouth dropped open.

Jake moved to my side and quietly said, "Xain told me to tell you that such emotionalism is more appropriate for a four year old than a fourteen year old."

I snapped a quick glare at Jake to find him looking at me without any anger or accusation in his expression.

I looked again at Zombie Hyper-Mom to find her staring at me with confusion.

After taking a deep breath to help me get my anger under control, I quietly said, "Mom. I'm sorry I yelled at you. These people have been very nice to me and helped me a lot. Can we please go inside and wait for dad to get home? That way Allen can explain everything."

Zombie Hyper-Mom looked around at us, as if just noticing that the guys were there, then said in a rush, "Yes. Yes, please come in. Can I get you something... would you boys like some brownies and milk?"

"NO!" Ken yelled, then in a quieter voice continued, "I mean, no thank you Mrs. Teeter."

* * * * *

Jake pushed me into the living room where Zombie Hyper-Mom led us and positioned me next to the couch.

Ken automatically took a seat on the couch right beside me and I looked at him warmly.

"Mr. Thompson, can I get you anything?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked a little too quickly.

"Some coffee if you have it. And please call me Allen." He said casually.

"Oh no. I don't have any coffee, but I could make you some tea. Let's see... I have dandelion root and willow bark." Zombie Hyper-Mom said in a considering voice.

"No... thank you." Allen said hesitantly.

"How about you Jake? Would you like a brownie now?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked hopefully.

"No thank you Mrs. Teeter. I'm going on a date later and don't want to spoil my appetite." Jake said carefully.

"I need to check on dinner, I'll be right back." Zombie Hyper-Mom said quickly and rushed out of the room.

"Dandelion root?" Allen asked me with an incredulous look.

"It tastes like mud." I said with a queasy look in return.

Allen nodded, then looked around the room.

I felt something and turned to see Ken with his hand laying on the back of my arm.

I looked in his eyes and mouthed the words 'Love you'.

He mouthed 'Love you' in return.

Just then I heard the front door open.

I saw dad walking past the living room door toward the kitchen and called out, "Dad! We're in the living room."

Dad turned with a look of surprise and walked cautiously into the living room.

"Dad, this is Allen Thompson..." I began to say.

"Rory!" Dad said joyfully as he dropped his briefcase and ran across the room to me.

Before I could say another word, Dad had picked me up out of my wheelchair and pulled me into a tight hug.

I rested my chin on his shoulder and returned the hug as best I could with my one good arm.

After a long moment of hugging, Dad leaned back enough to look in my face and asked, "How are you doing son?"

"I'm great." I said, feeling more joy at that moment than I knew was possible.

Dad hugged me again, then suddenly stopped all movement.

"Oh. Excuse me..." Dad trailed off in a quiet voice as he looked around the room.

"It's okay dad. They're my friends." I said quietly.

Dad leaned toward the wheelchair as if to put me down and I quickly asked, "Could you put me on the couch next to Ken?"

"Ken?" Dad asked as he looked at Jake and Ken sitting on opposite ends of the couch.

Ken raised his hand and said, "I'm Kenny Thompson."

Dad took a few steps over and sat me beside Ken.

"Will you sit with me Dad?" I asked and patted the cushion beside me, the other side from Ken.

Dad smiled at me and took the offered seat.

"Dad, this is Ken, Jake is sitting on the other side of you and Allen is sitting in the chair. Guys, this is my dad, Marcus Teeter." I said in introduction.

"Nice to meet all of you." Dad said as he draped an arm around me and hugged me.

"Mr. Teeter..." Allen began to say.

"Marcus." Dad interrupted.

"Okay Marcus, I wanted to talk to you and your wife about Rory's condition." Allen said seriously.

"Are you the one who helped Rory?" Dad asked carefully.

"My son Xain is the one who helped him. But what he did has only temporarily relieved some of the symptoms of Rory's condition." Allen said in thought.

"Sorry I was gone so long, I had to turn the eggplant filets so they would cook evenly." Mom said as she walked into the living room.

"Honey, please sit down so Mr. Thompson..."

"Allen."

"...so Allen can tell us what he did to help Rory." Dad said seriously.

Zombie Hyper-Mom took a seat in the other armchair beside Allen and waited expectantly.

After a moment of thought, Allen said, "My son Xain is my adoptive son. His biological father is a Vulcan healer who specializes in neurological conditions like Rory's."

I tried to look casual as I laid my arm across my lap and held my hand open where Ken could reach it.

As I had hoped, Ken took my hand and gave it a squeeze.

"If you would agree to it, Solak, Xain's father, would like to examine Rory tomorrow to see if there is anything he can do to reverse Rory's condition." Allen said seriously.

Dad looked at me, and I swear, it looked like someone just kicked him in the gut.

"Allen. I can tell that you really care about Rory and you want to do what's best for him. But... well, the truth of the matter is that I'm broke." Dad said and sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

"The medical bills have been coming and coming and... My health insurance hit the cap. I've gone through all our savings, mortgaged the house... hell, I even sold Rory's electric wheelchair." Dad said and I saw a tear starting to trail down his cheek.

"What I'm trying to say is, whatever it is that you think you can do to help Rory... I can't afford it." Dad said with misery in his voice.

"Marcus. All that I'm asking you to do is allow Solak to examine Rory. Solak is a Vulcan healer, he doesn't charge for his services. If Solak says that there's something he can do to help Rory, then we'll deal with that when we know what it is." Allen said seriously.

"If you can answer right now, Solak can make the arrangements to be here by 10:00 in the morning... local time." Jake said distantly.

"So this doctor is going to look at Rory and... what?" Dad asked with a flicker of hope.

"Jake?" Allen asked curiously.

Jake closed his eyes in thought for a moment, then said, "If Solak finds Rory to be an acceptable candidate for his genetic modification therapy, then he will need to take Rory to Vulcan where he can have access to everything he needs."

"And if he isn't an acceptable candidate?" Mom asked suspiciously.

"Then arrangements will be made to give Rory regular neural alignment treatments to relieve the worst of his symptoms." Jake said distantly.

"That's what Xain did so I could talk and move my hand." I explained quickly, hoping they would understand.

"And how much does that cost?" Dad asked quietly.

"There will be no charge either now or in future for any treatment given to Rory by a representative of Vulcan." Jake said firmly.

"Just because you said so?" Mom asked sarcastically.

Jake turned to look at Zombie Hyper-Mom and said, "Mrs. Teeter. I am Jake Thompson, a member of Clan Short of the House of Surak of Vulcan. It is the mission of our Clan to help children in need. Therefore, it would be

logical for me to offer any and all aid for the purpose of restoring Rory to full health or at the very least, to the best possible quality of life."

He paused for a second, then said in a lower voice, "When I speak as a representative of Clan Short, I can make such promises because I know my patriarch will see the logic of my decisions and support me."

I looked at the Zombie Hyper-Mom to find a 'lost and confused' expression on her face.

I turned in time to see Jake smile as he slowly said, "Yeah, because I said so."

What the hell happened to Jake? One minute he's like a Vulcan and the next minute he's like himself... and what was that stuff he said about helping kids... like that story Ken told me...

"Ken?" I asked in a whisper.

"Yeah?" Ken responded as he leaned close to me.

"Are you a member of that Clan thing too?" I asked curiously.

"Yeah. All us kids are." He whispered back to me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, not sure I really wanted to hear the answer.

"I didn't think about it." Ken said with an expression that couldn't be anything but complete honesty.

Silence had fallen over the room and I looked around to find everyone looking at Dad.

"Okay. What do I have to do?" Dad finally asked.

"Solak is making the arrangements for travel as we speak. All you need to do is bring Rory to the Short Compound at 10:00 tomorrow morning." Jake said seriously.

"Short Compound? Where's that?" Dad asked in confusion.

"Do you know where the Southcrest Ranch is?" Allen asked seriously.

"Yes. I've never been there, but I know where it is." Dad said carefully.

"The Short Compound is right next door." Allen said with a smile.

"And when you pull up to the gate just have your ID ready, they'll be expecting you." Jake said with a distant look.

"If you wouldn't mind I'll stop by about 9:30 and drive over with you. I'm pretty sure all the boys will want to be there for Rory." Allen said with a gentle smile.

I turned to look at Dad and found him looking at me with love. Without warning, he pulled me into a hug and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm so glad to have you back 'Skeeter'." Dad said in a loving voice.

I heard a giggle from behind me and could imagine the expression on Ken's face.

I turned my head slightly and said, "Cute Stuff."

Yup. That shut him up.

* * * * *

"I would invite you to stay for dinner.." Dad began to say, when Zombie Hyper-Mom jumped up and ran out of the room.

"That's okay Marcus, Jake and I both have dinner dates tonight." Allen said with a dreamy expression.

"What about you Ken? No date tonight?" Dad asked with a teasing smile.

I looked at Ken and raised an eyebrow.

Ken looked back at me and... okay, don't ask me how he did it because I don't even know. But somehow, just with his facial expression he asked me if I was going to go ahead and 'come out' to my parents now. Maybe we're learning to talk with each other like Jake and Xain do.

"Dad..." I said hesitantly, not even knowing how to lead up to the subject.

"Okay Skeeter, I won't tease your company." Dad said as he hugged me again.

"Oh, that's not it. You can tease Ken whenever you want." I said, then glanced at Ken to find him sticking his tongue out at me.

That made me smile, and made me feel a little better about what I had to do.

"Dad..." I started again, this time sounding a little more sure of myself.

"I'm..."

"I forgot the eggplant filets in the oven and they're ruined. Burnt to cinders." Zombie Hyper-Mom said with disappointment.

I took a deep breath to brace myself and decided to try again.

"Dad..." I said, this time hearing the tremble in my voice.

"Go ahead." Dad said softly, paying me his full attention.

I decided to do it quick, you know, like pulling off a band-aid.

"I'm gay."

Time froze in a long silent moment as I waited for their reactions.

There was a high pitched squeak, then the next thing I knew, Zombie Hyper-Mom was racing out of the room.

I felt Dad's arms close in around me as he said, "It's okay. I love you."

Peace... I never, ever expected Dad to be so totally cool.

I snuggled against my Dad and felt like I was really home for the first time in years.

"Marcus, if you need to talk about anything, just let me know... I have some experience with this." Allen finished with a shy smile.

Before Dad could answer, Zombie Hyper-Mom raced into the room with a small cardboard box.

"It's in this one." She muttered to herself as she sat the box on the coffee table and started pulling out the contents.

There were a bunch of small books and pamphlets. If Dad weren't still holding on to me, I think I would have fallen over when I saw the titles.

"Dealing With Your Homosexuality", "Coming Out: A Guide To Gay Lifestyles", "So I'm Gay, Now What?", "Homosexuality: A Way Of Life"...

"Here it is!" Zombie Hyper-Mom said in triumph and opened "Accepting Your Gay or Lesbian Child" to a bookmarked page.

In a serious voice, Zombie Hyper-Mom read aloud, "I just want to tell you that I love you... and support you... and there is nothing wrong with you... You're just the way nature made you."

I looked around to see Jake and Allen fighting to hold in their laughter, then looked at Ken to find him looking back at me lovingly.

Finally Allen said, "I'm guessing that you had a clue."

"You could say that. But we weren't going to say anything until Rory came to us and told us." Dad said, then hugged me again.

Allen was all smiles as he looked at my father holding me.

"So Rory, is there anyone special?" Dad asked and I could tell from his look from me to Ken that I didn't really have to tell him.

I looked at Ken with question and got a nod in return.

"Ken and I are boyfriends." I said quietly as I looked my Dad in the eyes.

"Way to go Skeeter." Dad said and gave me a quick squeeze.

"I've got to go to the store..." Zombie Hyper-Mom said suddenly and hurried out of the room.

"I'm sorry I haven't been there for you lately. When you started getting sicker and sicker, I started working harder and harder to make enough money to get you the help you needed... and to keep the house." Dad finished off quietly.

"I missed you Dad." I said as I snuggled against him.

"I missed you too Skeeter." Dad said gently.

"Do condoms come in sizes?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked as she raced back into the room and looked at my crotch with question.

All of us looked at her with disbelief as I noticed that now she was 'sizing-up' Ken with her eyes.

"Well I'm sure they must have a variety pack." Zombie Hyper-Mom finally said then started looking through the booklets on the table in a rush.

"Do you have a favorite lubricant?" She asked as she looked at a check list in the back of a book.

"Um. No." I said, wanting to crawl under the couch cushion and hide.

"Oh, well I'll just ask the clerk what he recommends." She said with a smile.

I felt Ken's hand on my bad arm and turned to look at him. He gave me a full warm smile of love and suddenly... it was all okay.

"Ken, will you be able to sleep over tonight?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked in her manic way.

I looked at Ken hopefully.

"Pop, can I please stay over here tonight?" Ken asked in a pleading tone.

Allen smiled and said, "Of course you can. I'll stop by a little later with some clothes for you when Billy and I leave for our date."

I looked up at Dad in time to see his look of surprise change into a smile.

"Ken, is there anything you especially do or don't like to eat?" Zombie Hyper-Mom asked, and I swear to god, her eyes were vibrating.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't really like health food." Ken said with an apologetic look.

"Not everyone does. I'll get you some drive-thru on the way back from the store. Is KFC okay?" She asked in a delighted tone.

"Yeah, great." Ken said happily.

"Can I have some too?" I asked suddenly.

"Are you sure? Oh, of course you are. You want to eat with your boyfriend. I'll be back before the tofu casserole in the oven is done." Hyper-Mom said in a rush as she hurried out of the room.

After we heard the front door slam, Dad said, "That's not fair. You get KFC and I get tofu casserole."

I looked at Dad with a smile and said, "Sometimes life's not fair."

He looked at me with amusement and nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

"We really need to be going." Allen said as he stood.

Dad stood and walked to Allen to shake his hand.

"It was nice to meet you Allen. Thank you for everything you and your family have done for Rory." Dad said seriously.

Okay, that's just freaky. I mean, I always knew that dad wasn't very tall, but seeing them shaking hands... Allen must be six or eight inches taller than Dad.

"It was very nice to meet you too. Please feel free to call me if you need anything, even if it's just to talk..." Allen trailed off, then looked at Ken and I before continuing, "We appear to have a lot in common."

"I'll do that." Dad said shyly.

As Jake was standing to leave, Corina barreled down the stairs and into the living room.

"Daddy..." She began to say, then stopped short and stared at Jake.

"Hi Pumpkin, I'd like you to meet Allen and his sons Jake and Ken, this is my daughter Corina." Dad said with a smile.

"Nice to meet you." Corina said in a distant voice as she looked into Jake's eyes.

"We really have to be going." Allen said quietly, then turned to Ken and said, "If you need anything, Juana will be in her apartment."

"I'll be fine." Ken said and I felt him put an arm around me.

"I'm Corina." My sister said to Jake in a dreamy whisper.

Jake looked away from her and I could see the 'trapped' expression in his eyes.

Jake has been so cool and done so much to help me, there was only one thing I could think to do to help him in return.

"Hey Corina! How's the zit?" I called across the room.

She got a wide eyed look of horror, then ran out of the room and up the stairs.

"That was mean." Dad said to me with a disapproving look.

"I had to do it before she started writing 'Corina Thompson' all over her notebooks. Besides, I'm her little brother, it's my job." I said, hoping Dad wasn't too mad at me.

Allen walked over to Ken and pulled him into a quick hug and said, "You behave for the Teeters and don't terrorize Corina too much."

"Okay Pop." Ken said as he hugged Allen in return.

Allen shifted over to hug me and said, "And I'll see you in the morning Rory. Try to get 'some' sleep tonight."

"I will, I promise." I said with a smile.

"Thanks Rory." Jake said gratefully to me as he followed Allen toward the door.

"Anytime Jake." I said, glad to see that he appreciated the help. Even if Dad is mad, it was worth it.

* * * * *

When Dad got back from walking Allen and Jake to the door, he stood in the living room doorway and asked, "So what would you boys like to do now?"

I glanced at Ken and received a look of question in response.

"I'd like to sit in here with you and talk for a while unless you've got something else you need to do." I said honestly.

Dad quickly looked at his watch, then said, "I just have to make a quick call, hang on."

He walked to the phone between the two armchairs and quickly dialed a number.

After a moment of waiting, Dad quickly asked, "Is Howard still there?"

"Can I talk to him for a minute?"

"Sure." Dad said quickly, then glanced at us with a smile.

"Howard, I'm glad I caught you, this is Marcus. You know how you've been telling me to take my personal time or I'm going to lose it? Well, I need to take a couple days off..."

"No, he's fine. In fact, I'd classify it as a miracle. He can talk again..." Dad said and when he looked at us on the couch, I could see the tears in his eyes.

"I'll tell you the whole story when I come back in to work. We're going to take Rory to see a Vulcan healer tomorrow to find out if there might be a way to completely cure him."

Dad laughed and it was such a wonderful sound to hear... I haven't heard it in so long.

"Thanks Howard. If you could just do the paperwork so I can get paid for tomorrow and Saturday I'd appreciate it." Dad said happily.

"Thanks. All my accounts are up to date so I don't think you'll have any problems, but if any of my clients need anything, Susan knows where everything is." Dad said in a professional tone.

"Well, you're the boss. If you tell me not to worry about work, then I have no choice but to obey." Dad said with a happy smile.

"I'll see you next week. Thanks again. Bye." Dad said with contentment, then hung up the phone.

Dad walked over to take his seat beside me again and said, "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too." I said as I looked up at him.

"So tell me how all this happened. What did Allen's son do to help you?" Dad asked as he looked at me with an expression of joy and wonder.

"Well, I kind of fell asleep while they were doing it. Ken could probably explain better." I said shyly.

Dad looked at Ken with question.

"From the way Xain explained it, what he did was kind of like a Vulcan back rub. But instead of relaxing the muscles he relaxed the nerve paths or something like that... at least that's how I understood it." Ken said with difficulty.

"And Xain is your brother?" Dad asked slowly.

"Yeah, he's really cool." Ken said with a smile.

Dad shook his head in disbelief and said, "After spending tens of thousands of dollars on quack doctors you get helped by your boyfriend's Vulcan brother... for free."

I shifted to hug my Dad again and said, "Thanks for not giving up."

Dad began to hug me tightly as I heard a knock at the front door.

"I can get that if you want." Ken said and looked at Dad with question.

Dad nodded at Ken with an expression of gratitude as he continued to hug me.

"Your boyfriend seems nice." Dad said in a quiet voice.

"He's really great." I said as I pulled back enough to look into Dad's eyes.

"How did you meet?" Dad asked as he released me from the hug and rested back into the couch.

"Ken and Jake found Possum over at their house this morning and brought him back to us." I said, barely believing that it was still the same day.

Ken walked into the living room leading an older boy and said, "This is Davis Plimpton, he's here to talk to Rory."

"Grey." Davis corrected.

"What?" Ken asked in confusion.

"My name is Davis Grey, Plimpton is my mom's name." Davis said, then looked around the room.

I looked at the guy curiously. He was close to six feet tall with wavy brown hair and... kinda cute, I guess. Not as cute as Ken, but okay.

He focused on me and said, "I heard that you met my mom today and I just came over to see if you're okay."

"Come in and sit down. I'd offer to get you something, but I'm not sure what we have." Dad said in thought.

"Dandelion root or willow bark tea." Ken said from beside me with a giggle.

I couldn't help but smile at Ken's laughter.

"Really? Some dandelion root tea would be great if it's not too much trouble!" Davis said with excitement.

I looked at Davis with disbelief, then noticed that Dad and Ken had the same expressions.

"It's no trouble at all. Would anyone else like some?" Dad asked as he stood.

Ken and I immediately shook our heads in a definite 'no'.

"Thanks Mr. Teeter." Davis said with a happy smile.

Ken and I turned our attention to Davis as Dad walked out of the room.

"So you're Mrs. Plimpton's son?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But please don't hold that against me." Davis said with a casual smile.

"Are you here to beat me up for yelling at your mom?" I asked, not really believing that he would, but trying to find out why he was here.

Davis gave a chuckle and said, "No way. I just wanted to be sure that my mom didn't upset you too much. She has a natural talent for saying the wrong thing and hurting people's feelings... she's oblivious."

I couldn't help but smile at Davis. His casual and friendly attitude made him easy to like.

"Well, I'm okay. I felt kinda bad for yelling at her like I did... I can't help it. I have red hair like my dad." I finished with a one shouldered shrug.

Davis laughed and said, "Good for you. More people need to tell her off when she's doing the snob thing. The part that gets me is that she doesn't have a clue that she's doing it."

"How's your mom doing? She really looked surprised when I told her off." I asked cautiously.

"Oh, don't worry about that. She's looked like that since her last plastic surgery. The plastic surgeon said that one more facelift and she'll need to bikini wax her chin." Davis said with an impish grin.

Dad's laugh announced his arrival in the room as he carefully sat a cup of tea beside Davis and said, "Watch out, it's hot."

"Thanks. I keep asking Mom to get some 'real' herbal tea, but she keeps getting the 'flavored' teas... she just doesn't get it." Davis said, then carefully picked up the cup.

"You really like that stuff?" I asked cautiously.

"Sure, it's great. I guess since I'm a vegan, I appreciate different flavors. Dandelion root is just so... Earthy." Davis said, then took a cautious sip.

"That's one word for it." I muttered and saw Dad's nod of agreement.

"I'm glad to see that there are other kids on this block. I moved in with mom a few weeks ago so I could go to school here and you guys are the first people I've met that are under sixty." Davis said casually.

"Where did you move from." Dad asked with interest.

"Portland, Oregon. My dad lives there. It's a nice place but the schools suck so I came here for my senior year of high school. It'll look a lot better on a college transcript." Davis said, then took another drink.

"Well, we're not the only kids on the block. Ken has three brothers and... did Reuben say he was your cousin?" I asked Ken with distraction.

"Yeah, it's kind of complicated. My brother Jake's daughter is Reuben and Ricardo's niece. I'm not sure exactly how it all works out, but we just decided to call each other cousins and not worry about it." Ken said in thought.

"I thought I was the only one who had a family like that." Davis said with a delighted smile.

Dad, Ken and I all looked at Davis with question.

"Well, I guess what it comes down to is that my parents like 'getting' married, but they don't like 'being' married." Davis said seriously.

I could see Dad nodding that he understood what Davis was talking about.

"If you count all the steps and halves, I have fourteen brothers and sisters, and one on the way." Davis said carefully.

I know the look of surprise had to have shown clearly on my face.

"It's not that many when you consider that Mom's been married six times and Dad's been married five." Davis said seriously.

"It must be difficult to keep up with them all." Dad said in thought.

"Yeah. My sister Jenny and I have been trying to work out a diagram of the family, but... well the genealogy charts weren't designed with a family like ours in mind. Jenny is my dad's first daughter from his third marriage." Davis said, then took another sip of tea.

"So is your mom married now?" Ken asked, sounding really interested.

"No, she unloaded Daddy-six last spring and is on the prowl for Daddy-seven... She's got her eye on someone named Billy." Davis said as he rested back in his chair.

"She'll have to fight my Pop for him." Ken said frankly, then got an 'Oh Shit!' expression.

Davis looked at Ken with surprise for a moment, then laughed and said, "Don't worry about it. Your choice of coffee table books kind of tipped me off."

I looked down at the collection of booklets and pamphlets and felt the blush rising up my face.

"Okay." Ken said shyly, then continued, "My Pop and Billy are really in love so your mom doesn't have a chance."

"On top of that, Billy is like, twenty years old." I said carefully.

Davis shook his head with amusement as he said, "Mom thinks that every plastic surgery makes her twenty years old again. I don't know what she sees when she looks in the mirror, but it has nothing to do with reality as we know it."

Ken quietly asked, "Do you think we should tell her that Billy's taken?"

"And gay?" I interjected.

"It probably wouldn't do any good. She doesn't hear what she doesn't want to hear." Davis said and took another drink of tea.

The sound of the front door opening drew everyone's attention.

We all looked up to see mom race past the living room door with her arms loaded with shopping bags.

"I'd better get going. Thanks for the tea, it was wonderful." Davis said as he sat his cup on the side table and stood.

"It was nice meeting you Davis. Please feel free to come over anytime, we have plenty of herbal tea and would enjoy your company." Dad said in a friendly voice.

"Thank you Mr. Teeter. I might do that." Davis said, then looked at Ken and I and said, "It was nice to meet you guys. You're both welcomed to come over anytime and hang out. I have just about every game ever made for Play station." Davis said with a smile.

"Yeah. Thanks." I said in wonder, realizing that I had just made another friend.

As Davis and Dad started walking toward the door I quickly said, "Good luck with your mom."

Davis smiled back at me and said, "Maybe when I tell her that you're okay, she'll get down off the cross and make dinner."

Dad and I both chuckled at the statement as Ken looked at Davis with confusion.

Oh God, 'Confused Ken' is even cuter than 'Shy Ken'...

Chapter 7

The phone rang and was picked up before dad could get off the couch.

A minute later mom walked into the room carrying the cordless phone and said, "Bunghole wants to talk to you. Should I hang up on him?"

Dad put out his hand and accepted the phone from mom as he said, "I have a few things I've been wanting to say to him and it's finally time."

After taking a deep breath and settling back in the couch with his arm around me, Dad casually said, "Mr. Buckholtz, how are you this evening?"

After a moment of listening, Dad said, "Oh really, hmmm... that's quite a deal..."

I could feel the tension increase in my Dad's posture as he listened. I reached across to Ken and took hold of his hand as I somehow recognized that Dad's 'red headedness' was rising.

"Listen up Buckholtz, the answer is no. I'm not sending Rory to your facility now or ever. I've put up with your harassing calls in case the time ever came when I had no other choice..." Dad said firmly.

I looked over at Ken to see him looking back at me with wide, questioning eyes.

There was a long minute of Dad listening, then he said in an icy voice, "My wife has done an excellent job taking care of Rory. As I'm sure you somehow know, his condition has stabilized. I have to believe that it was my wife's care techniques and natural remedies that have accomplished what the doctors said couldn't be done."

I felt Dad stiffen even more as he listened, then in almost a growl he said, "You don't know Doris; you don't know what she's gone through in the past two years. She's one of the strongest people I know. She's made some difficult decisions at a great personal cost. And my faith in her has proved to be well placed. She did it. Rory is getting better. You will NEVER take our son away from us. Don't ever call here again."

Dad turned off the phone and dropped it on the couch cushion beside him, then stood and pulled mom into a tight hug.

"Thank you." Dad said in a whisper, then gave mom a 'real' kiss.

When the kiss broke, Mom looked Dad deeply in the eyes and said, "I've got to get the casserole out of the oven before it burns."

Dad started chuckling and gave Mom another quick peck of a kiss before releasing her from the hug and whispering, "Go on."

"What was that call all about?" I asked Dad cautiously as he took his seat beside me again.

"I'm not sure if it was one of your doctors or the insurance company that told Buckholtz about us. Sometimes he knows about your test results before we do. Regardless of how he gets his information, he's been calling once or twice a week for the past two years trying to convince us to put you into his 'care facility'." Dad said as he put a casual arm around me.

"Why didn't you?" I asked before I could think better of it.

"Because it would have been like giving up on you. It doesn't matter. There's no way your mom would have allowed me to send you away to that place. She was convinced that she could find a way to help you... and she did." Dad said and emphasized his statement with a squeeze.

"So you think that the health food is what stabilized me?" I asked incredulously.

"I don't know if it was the health food or being here at home where you belong or even getting you that big dopey dog that helped you. Whatever did it doesn't matter, we've beaten the odds. The doctors said that there was no reason to hope for even this much improvement, and we've proved them wrong." Dad said happily.

"Um... can I ask you something?" I asked timidly and squeezed Ken's hand that I was still holding.

"Anything Skeeter." Dad said in a contented voice.

"What you said about mom being strong... I really don't understand why she's..." I trailed off searching for the right words, not wanting to make dad angry.

"...doped out of her mind?" Dad asked quietly.

"Yeah." I whispered.

"About the same time that the doctors told us about your condition being terminal, your grandfather Wayne had a stroke. So in the same week your mom had to deal with the news about her father and her son... it was too much. She had a nervous breakdown. She fell into a deep depression and wouldn't stop crying no matter what I did." Dad said in a distant voice.

"I took her to a psychiatrist to get help. He wanted her to go away for a while and take some time to deal with everything. She wouldn't hear of it. She was determined to take care of you and finally convinced the doctor to give her something to keep her going..." Dad said in thought.

"So she really is this way because of me?" I asked as I felt tears welling up in my eyes.

Dad gave me a squeeze and said, "She made a choice. I respected her choice and have supported her decisions since... even to the point of eating health food."

I gave a watery chuckle at the statement.

"Rory, you don't have anything to feel guilty about. Now that your condition has stabilized and you can talk again, we can get your mom the help she needs. I don't have a single regret about the decisions we've made and I'm sure your mom doesn't either." Dad said softly.

"I didn't know that Mom 'chose' to be this way..." I trailed off, feeling bad about some of the things I thought about her.

"She didn't just choose it, she fought to be this way. She was so determined that she could help you that she was finally able to convince her psychiatrist to give her the drugs that would allow her to keep going and help you. We decided not to tell you all this because you already had so much to deal with. Dealing with your own condition seemed to be all you could handle, worrying about your mother and grandfather's condition on top of that might have been too much for you." Dad said gently.

"It probably would have been, but thanks for telling me now." I said quietly, then thought to ask, "How's grandpa Wayne?"

Dad smiled and gave me a gentle hug as he said, "He's fine now. He's moved into an assisted living center and has lots of friends his own age to do things with. I don't think he's been this happy since your grandmother passed away."

"Do you think I could go see him?" I asked carefully.

"Sure Skeeter. I've been keeping him up to date on your condition, we'll go this weekend and have a long visit with him." Dad said peacefully.

"Marcus? Will you call Corina down? Dinner is ready." Mom said from the doorway.

"I'll go up and get her. Between the music and the phone, there's no way she'll hear me." Dad said as he got up. Then before walking away he turned and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

* * * * *

"Wow, your family has really been through a lot of stuff." Ken said from beside me.

"Yeah. I can't believe I didn't know about all of it. I guess I've been so wrapped up in my own problems that I wasn't paying attention to what was going on around me." I said in thought.

"I know how that feels." Ken said quietly.

I looked at Ken with question.

"Before my Dad died I never really thought about other people the way I do now. It was like everything that happened was about how it effected me. The morning of my Dad's funeral Pop sat down with me and we had a long talk..." Ken said in a distant voice.

"He talked to me like I was his friend, like I was another adult. He asked me about what I was feeling and told me what he was feeling. It's like my world got so much bigger after that." Ken said softly.

"That's kind of what I'm feeling. It's like I'm seeing my mom and dad for the first time. They're not just my parents anymore, they're people too." I said in thought.

"Yeah, that's it. Kinda weird huh?" Ken said with a playful smile.

I grinned back at him and said, "Totally weird."

"Your mom said dinner is ready. I can help you into your wheelchair if you want." Ken said quietly.

I thought about it for a second, then realized that if Ken and I could work out how to move me around it would make our lives a lot easier.

"Sure Ken. If you'll scoot me down a little and move the wheelchair around here, we should be able to get me moved without too much trouble." I said in thought.

Ken did as I asked and then looked at me with question.

"I'm going to put my arm around your neck and let you lift me. All you'll have to do is turn and set me down in the wheelchair." I said seriously.

"Okay." Ken said and leaned down over me.

I carefully put my arm around his neck and held on tight as he slowly lifted me.

Within a few seconds, I'd been relocated to my wheelchair without any trouble at all.

"That was easy." Ken said as he looked into my eyes.

"Yeah." I said as I realized all over again just how beautiful he was.

"Love you." Ken whispered as I gently pulled him down to me again.

Our lips met briefly, then I heard the sound of a clearing throat.

"Dinner time boys." Dad said with a smile from the living room doorway.

"We're coming." I said with a smile.

"You'd better not be." Ken whispered with a giggle.

Dad gave a laugh, indicating that he'd heard Ken, then turned and walked out of the room.

Ken and I both chuckled as Ken got behind me to push.

* * * * *

As we entered the dining room Mom immediately said, "If you'll park Rory at the far end, you can sit to his right Kenny."

"Okay." Ken said shyly from behind me and proceeded to move me across the dining room.

"You brought out the good china. What's the occasion?" Dad asked as he took his seat at the other end of the table from me.

"Our first meal as a family in... it's been over a year!" Mom said in realization.

Dad considered the statement for a second, then said, "I guess you're right... It really looks great."

I looked at all the food sat on the table in serving dishes and realized all the work mom put into making this a special meal for us.

Ken and I had our food already set out on our plates, and it looked really good.

Corina stomped into the dining room and threw herself into her chair, then crossed her arms across her chest and turned her 'death glare' on me.

Dad rolled his eyes but didn't say anything.

"Ken is going to be staying the night, isn't that nice?" Mom said to Corina as she took her seat.

"Why does Rory get to have his creepy little friends stay over on a school night?" Corina asked in a snarl.

"Corina Louise Teeter! That isn't the way we behave in front of company. Apologize right now." Dad said to Corina in a warning tone.

A look of defiance came over Corina's face as she turned her death glare on Dad.

"It's okay, I wasn't paying attention." Ken said quietly, then continued, "Did you notice how her zit moves when she talks?"

Corina's death glare shifted to Ken.

"Go ahead. Say something." Ken said, focused completely on her chin.

Corina opened her mouth to say something, then snapped it shut.

I glanced at Dad to see him fighting back a laugh.

"Let's eat before the food gets cold." Mom said in her oblivious way.

I reached out to pick up a piece of chicken, then glanced at dad serving himself a portion of the tofu casserole.

I thought about what dad had said about how mom had been feeding us all health food to try and make me better and came to a decision.

"Dad, would you like to trade me? I think I'd rather have Mom's tofu casserole." I asked carefully.

"Sure Skeeter. Pass it down." Dad said with a smile.

I'm pretty sure he understood why I was wanting to trade.

I glanced at mom to see her smile of accomplishment because I'd chosen her cooking over the fast food.

"That's not fair!" Corina exclaimed as she watched the chicken being passed up the table.

I glanced over at Corina and said, "You're right Ken. It moves when she talks."

Corina glared at me again, but didn't say another word.

"You can have one of my pieces of chicken if you want." Ken offered quietly.

Corina looked at him cautiously, and finally reluctantly nodded.

Ken held his plate out to her and she took one of the three pieces of chicken that was there.

I looked down at the plate that my dad had prepared for himself and chuckled at what I saw.

"What's so funny?" Dad asked curiously as he picked up a piece of chicken.

"Peas and carrots." I said with a smile at Ken.

"Carrots and peas." Ken said back automatically.

We both chuckled, then I noticed that everyone was looking at us like we were crazy.

Ken finished his bite of food and said, "My neighbor Billy is a photographer and he had us saying silly things to each other while he was taking pictures of us."

"Pictures?" Dad asked cautiously.

I reached awkwardly behind me and pulled the photo album out of the pouch on the back of my wheelchair.

"Yeah, they turned out pretty good." I said and handed the album to Ken.

Ken passed it to Mom who opened it so she and Dad could look at it together.

There was a long moment of silence as Mom and Dad looked at the first picture.

"What is it?" Corina asked suspiciously as she watched.

"Rory... it's..." Mom said in wonder as her eyes began to fill with tears.

"...Beautiful." My Dad finished with a gasp.

Corina got up from her chair and walked to stand between them to see the picture.

Ken and I waited to see her reaction.

Corina looked at the picture, then at us, then at the picture again.

Dad turned the page and all three of them looked at the next page of pictures in silence.

Corina looked at us again and got a look of realization.

"Our little boy is becoming a man." Mom said in a voice of joy and wonder.

Corina let out a little 'eep' as tears started welling up in her eyes.

"What's wrong pumpkin?" Dad asked with concern as he stood and put an arm around her.

"Rory's gay?" Corina asked in a slow, speculative voice.

I met Corina's questioning gaze and nodded.

There was a long moment of silence, then Corina got a look of wide eyed realization as she said, "My *gay, handicapped, baby* brother has a boyfriend... and I **don't!**"

She looked around the table with an expression that was a mix between humiliation and panic, then suddenly broke out of Dad's hug and ran out of the room.

Dad looked over at me and Ken and hesitantly said, "I think she took that well."

"Sorry about messing up the family meal. I guess I should have waited till later to show you the pictures." I said apologetically.

"Don't worry about it. I'll give her a few minutes, then go up and talk to her." Dad said as he sat down in his seat again.

"I'll take care of it honey." Mom said gently.

"Are you sure?" Dad asked with concern.

"I think this is a girl thing. It's best if I handle it." Mom said quietly.

"You're probably right. Just let me know if there's anything I can do." Dad said with a gentle, loving smile at mom.

"I'll be right back." Mom said assuringly and left the table.

* * * * *

"So what else did you boys do today?" Dad asked as he turned his attention back to his food.

Ken and I shared a look, then I quietly said, "We went swimming."

"Really? So your family has a pool?" Dad asked Ken curiously.

"Yeah. We just moved here this week so it's only the second time we've used it." Ken said with a smile.

"Oh? Where do you live?" Dad asked with interest.

"Three houses that way." Ken said as he pointed.

"The Dodds House?" Dad asked in thought.

"Yeah. I guess I should just call it that. Everyone seems to know Uncle Chip." Ken said with a smile.

"I met Commander Dodds a couple times when he lived here. He's a very nice man." Dad said in thought.

"Yeah. We just met him last Saturday, but it feels like he's been my Uncle Chip forever." Ken said with a smile.

"It's that way with some people. Tell me about your family." Dad said between bites of food.

"Well, you know about Pop, Jake and Xain. I also have a twin brother named Kevin, two cousins named Reuben and Ricardo and a niece named Edovina." Ken said happily.

"That's quite a family." Dad said in an impressed voice.

"There's a lot more. My Uncle Brady, my grandma Mona, uncle Solak..." Ken trailed off before taking another bite of his food.

"They're all really nice. I had a great time over there." I said with a smile at Ken.

"It sounds like you two had a full day. Swimming, photography... falling in love." Dad finished with a teasing smile.

"Yeah." I said with a chuckle.

"Sorry." Corina said in a whisper as she walked back into the dining room, followed by Mom.

"Ken and Rory were just telling me about their day." Dad said as he watched Mom and Corina take their seats.

Corina was looking really gloomy, like she'd just lost her last friend.

"I was surprised when I found out they moved into the Dodds house." Mom said casually as she started to eat again.

"Really? Did you get to meet JC?" Corina asked with excitement as she quickly turned her attention toward us.

I looked on with wonder at Corina's ability to shift from despondent to exuberant in less than a second.

"Um, yeah. We were over at Uncle Chip's house yesterday. I spent most of the day with JC, but me and my brothers call him Uncle Josh." Ken said carefully.

"Oh my God! You really know JC? He's your uncle?" Corina asked in amazement.

"Yeah. He's really nice and he's a really good cook too. He made some homemade lasagna last Sunday that was the best I ever had." Ken said to Corina with a smile.

"No way! That is so cool. Do you think there's any way I could meet him?" Corina asked in star struck wonder.

"Sure. Next time Uncle Josh comes over to visit I'll call you and let you know. You can come over and meet him." Ken said simply.

"Oh wow. That would be so incredible!" Corina said joyfully.

There was a knock on the door that drew our attention.

"No one visits us for over a year, then all of a sudden..." Dad said as he got up to answer the door.

"So is JC really as cute as he is in his pictures?" Corina asked breathlessly.

Ken thought about it for a second, then said, "I guess so. I mean, he's just one of my uncles so I don't really think about how he looks, I think about how nice him and Uncle Chip are when we visit them and how they treat me and my brothers... they're family."

I thought about what Ken was saying and began to realize what he meant.

"I think Ken means that his Uncle Josh is a real person just like you. He has friends and family that he loves and does normal things like everyone else does." I said carefully.

"I bet Josh would be glad to hear you say that." Billy said from the dining room doorway.

"Billy?" Ken asked with surprise.

"Hey guys." Billy said as he walked into the dining room with Dad.

"Hey Billy, what are you doing here?" I asked with a smile.

"I just brought Kenny his things." Billy said as he carried a backpack around the table and handed it to Ken.

"Thanks Billy." Ken said with a smile as he accepted the backpack.

"No problem. And Kevin wanted me to give you this, you forgot it." Billy said and reached into his pocket.

Ken accepted something from Billy and looked at it, then said, "Oh yeah. I've got to remember to carry this with me now. Thanks."

"What is it?" I asked curiously.

"My communicator." Ken said with a smile and held it out for me to see.

"Billy Pierce, I'd like you to meet my wife Doris and my daughter Corina." Dad said to Billy carefully.

"Nice to meet you." Billy said in a friendly voice.

"It's you!" Corina said in a gasp.

Billy looked at her with question.

"Billy lives here in the neighborhood. He's the photographer who took my picture this afternoon." I said cautiously, not quite understanding Corina's reaction.

Corina was standing there with wide eyes. Her mouth was hanging slightly open looking like she was trying to figure out what to say.

I looked up at Billy in time to see a look of understanding come over his face.

"What is it?" I asked him in confusion.

Billy smiled at me and said, "If you ever decide to model, think really seriously before you do any underwear ads. They'll haunt you for the rest of your life."

I realized what he meant and chuckled as I said, "I'll remember that."

Billy turned to face my parents and said, "That reminds me, the reason I brought Kenny his things instead of Allen is because I need to ask you both something."

Mom and Dad looked at Billy with question.

"I'm sure you've noticed that Rory is very photogenic. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to sit down with you and Rory sometime tomorrow and discuss the possibility of Rory doing a professional photo shoot." Billy said frankly.

"Really?" Dad asked in wonder.

"Yeah. I'll give you the details tomorrow. I just wanted to mention it tonight so I didn't catch you totally off guard." Billy said with a smile.

"Thanks." Dad said in astonishment.

"It was really nice to meet all of you, but I have to go, Allen's waiting in the car." Billy said with a smile as he leaned in and gave Ken a hug.

"Thanks again Billy. I hope you have fun tonight." Ken said as he returned the hug.

"Yeah. You two have a good night too." Billy said as he turned and pulled me into a hug.

"We will." I said as I hugged Billy tightly.

"Sorry I interrupted your meal. I'll see you tomorrow at the Short compound." Billy said as he walked toward the door.

"I'll walk you out." Dad said as he fell into step at Billy's side.

* * * * *

"The food's all cold now. Would anyone like for me to microwave their plate?" Mom asked as she looked around the table.

"No thanks Mrs. Teeter. I'm full now, thank you for getting the chicken for me." Ken said with a smile at Mom.

I looked at my plate and decided that I'd had enough and said, "I'm okay too Mom. It was really good."

Mom gave me such a happy smile of pride that I felt it in my heart.

"Give me your plate Pumpkin and I'll warm it up for you." Mom said as she stood.

Corina absently handed her plate to Mom, then turned her attention back to me and Ken.

"I wonder what kind of photo shoot Billy wants me to do." I said to Ken in thought.

"Knowing Billy, it's probably going to be something awesome." Ken said with a smile.

"You know JC from *N Sync AND 'The Underwear Guy'..." Corina said in wonder.

Before Ken could answer, I quickly said, "Cor, you should really try to see past people's looks. Billy may be 'The Underwear Guy' when you look at him, but inside he's one of the nicest people I think I've ever met. You're really missing out on getting to know a great person if you only look at the person on the outside."

"That's right." Ken said with a smile as he reached over and squeezed my arm.

Dad walked back into the dining room and looked curiously at his empty place setting.

"Mom took your plate to heat it up." I said with a smile at his confused expression.

"Oh." Dad said as he took his seat again.

"So do you know any other famous people Ken?" Corina asked, sounding only slightly less star struck.

"Well, yeah. I guess." Ken said uncomfortably.

Mom came into the dining room and sat a plate before Corina and Dad.

"Ken, if you wouldn't mind telling us, who is the most incredible person that you've met?" Dad asked gently.

Without a second's hesitation, Ken said, "David Gallagher."

"I don't know who that is." Dad said in thought.

"From Seventh Heaven, Daddy." Corina said with a roll of her eyes.

"David rescued me and my brother when we were in some really bad trouble. I wouldn't be here right now... I might not even be alive if it wasn't for him." Ken said seriously.

"Wow. Really?" Corina asked in wonder.

Ken nodded at Corina and continued, "I know a lot of people look up to celebrities as being better than everyone else and want to be like them. But all the celebrities I've met are just regular people who've got jobs and stuff that make them famous. David is the only one I think of as a hero and he's the only one that I'd like to grow up to be like."

"From what I've heard about how you met Lawrence, I think you already are like David." I said to Ken quietly.

Ken looked at me with surprise for an instant which turned into a loving smile.

"Ewww, they're getting mushy." Corina said with a wrinkled nose.

"And you would NEVER do that, would you?" Mom asked Corina with a teasing smile.

Dad, Ken and I broke into laughter at the statement, all of us as surprised at the accuracy of it as much as Mom thinking to say it.

Finally even Corina couldn't resist and joined into the laughter.

* * * * *

"If everyone is finished, I've made a special dessert for all of us." Mom announced happily, then hurried out of the room.

I glanced at Ken to find him looking back at me with dread. I could tell from his expression that he still remembered 'the brownie incident'.

"Thank you for sharing your chicken Ken. It was really good." Corina said shyly.

"Maybe some of your brother's creepy little friends aren't so bad." Ken said with a teasing smile.

Corina giggled at the statement and said, "Well, Billy's okay."

Ken and I shared a look and broke into laughter.

"Here you go Ken. I hope you like raspberries." Mom said as she placed a bowl of raspberries and ice cream before Ken.

"Wow, this looks good. Thanks Mrs. Teeter." Ken said with a smile.

Mom placed a bowl in front of me as she said, "It's not as unhealthy as it looks. The raspberries are organic and the frozen yogurt is naturally sweetened. Just give it a try."

Ken took a bite and considered the flavor before saying, "Perfect. If all health food tasted like this I'd eat it all the time."

Mom smiled and retreated to the kitchen to get bowls for everyone else.

"So do you boys have anything planned for the rest of the night?" Dad asked us as he settled back into his chair.

"Not really. I figured we'd go to my room and maybe play with Possum for a while. I haven't seen him all day." I said in thought.

Mom came back into the dining room with three bowls of dessert and handed them out.

"That sounds like a good plan. I'm sure you've had enough of hanging around with your old dad for one day." Dad said with an understanding smile.

"No way. You're welcomed to stop in and hang out with us as much as you want... you're not THAT old." I said honestly.

Dad got a look of surprise which melted into a loving smile.

"I tell you what Skeeter, I'll give you two some time alone, then stop in to check on you later. How's that?" Dad asked happily.

"Sounds great Dad." I said as I finished up the last of my dessert.

"Can we do anything to help with the dishes Mrs. Teeter?" Ken asked casually.

Mom looked at Ken with complete surprise.

"I mean, at our house I'm used to helping clean up after dinner..." Ken said timidly into the silence.

"No thank you Ken, I'll take care of it myself tonight. But next time I'm sure I'll have something for you to do." Mom finally said past her astonishment.

"Okay." Ken said with a shy smile.

"I'll go get Possum and bring him to your room." Dad said as he got up from his place.

"Thanks Dad." I said as I felt Ken unlocking my wheels.

"Don't forget this." Mom said as she handed the album of pictures to me.

"Thanks Mom." I said as I accepted the book from her.

* * * * *

As Ken pushed me out of the dining room, I felt the realization wash over me again of how my life had completely changed in one day.

Yesterday at this time I was in my room and Mom came in after everyone else had their dinner and fed me.

It seems like a hundred years ago, like another person's life.

"Are you okay?" Ken asked as he pushed me into my bedroom.

"Yeah, I'm just freaking out a little on how much everything has changed." I said honestly.

"Where do you want me to park you?" Ken asked as he looked around.

"How about beside the bed? If you wouldn't mind you could help me onto the bed and we could sit together... like we did this afternoon on your bed." I said shyly.

"Yeah. That sounds nice." Ken said happily as he maneuvered the chair into place and locked the wheels.

"Just like before, right?" Ken asked as he leaned down over me.

"Yeah." I said quietly. I put my arm around his neck, and in a few seconds, I was sitting on the edge of my bed.

Ken and I looked deeply into each other's eyes, communicating without speaking.

He seemed to instinctively know what I wanted next and gently eased me to lie back on the bed.

After laying beside me, he pulled me into a gentle hug and gave me a kiss that was so sweet and gentle that it was barely even a touching of lips.

I leaned forward for more but Ken pulled away and looked into my eyes.

"What is it Ken?" I asked with concern.

Ken looked timidly at me and said in a whisper, "I just don't want you to feel like you have to... do stuff."

"I don't understand." I said as I looked into his eyes curiously.

"Well, since we left my house I've been thinking... and I, well I don't want you to think that you have to do stuff to make me like you." Ken said with a pleading expression.

"I don't feel that way." I said honestly.

He searched my eyes, I guess trying to see if I was being honest, then he seemed to wilt with relief.

"What was that all about?" I asked cautiously.

"I guess I just got the idea that because I liked the stuff we did this afternoon that you might think that that's why I like you and if you don't do

that stuff I won't like you as much or something like that... I'm sorry." Ken finished with a frightened look in his eyes.

I took hold of Ken's hand and looked him in the eyes as I said, "You don't need to be sorry. It's alright to be scared, I am too. We just met and became boyfriends in one day. I think we'd be crazy if we weren't a little bit scared of that. Whenever you're worried about something like this... just tell me. I'll tell you how I feel about it and then we don't have to worry about it anymore."

Ken broke our gaze and seemed to drift off into thought.

"What else has you worried?" I asked in a whisper.

He timidly looked me in the eyes again and said, "I'm afraid that you'll find someone older that you want more than me."

I felt such a swell of love for Ken at that moment that I couldn't contain the expression.

"What?" Ken asked, puzzled by my expression.

"I want to tell you something, but you have to swear to me that you won't tease me about it or tell anyone." I said as seriously as I could manage.

"Okay." Ken said cautiously.

"I need you to swear it to me, or I can't tell you." I said even more seriously.

"I swear that I won't make fun of you." Ken said sincerely.

"Or tell anyone, ever." I said firmly.

"Or tell anyone ever." He repeated.

"Will you reach under the mattress at the head of the bed and get the envelope that's there?" I asked quietly.

Ken looked at me curiously, then got off the bed and reached under the mattress.

"A little bit lower." I said as I watched him searching.

Ken finally pulled the yellow 8x10 envelope out and held it out to me.

"Go ahead and look at what's inside." I said quietly.

Ken looked at me curiously, then opened the envelope.

He poured the contents out on the bed between us.

"It's Billy." Ken said in surprise as he looked at the collection of every picture I'd ever found in any magazine of Billy.

"Yeah." I whispered.

Ken worked his way through the pile of pictures, then looked at me with question.

"Billy was my fantasy. He's what I thought I wanted in a boyfriend before today." I said, hoping to make Ken understand.

Ken looked at me with complete confusion.

"I'm messing this all up... Ken, you don't have to worry about me looking for someone older or better looking or anything else because I've already gotten past that. If I was still interested in Billy, I wouldn't have fallen in love with you because Billy was right there. I would have been trying to, get him to notice me or something. The only one I wanted to spend time with today was you. I didn't even think about Billy like that." I said, hoping that Ken was getting it.

After a long moment of contemplation, Ken finally said, "Okay. I think I understand. Before today you were kind of like your sister, looking at the outside and wanting someone who was just beautiful."

"Yeah. It's kind of creepy to admit that me and my sister have the same taste in guys." I said with a queasy look.

Ken chuckled and said, "Maybe you should give her your picture collection now."

I looked down at the pile of magazine clippings and said, "No. You can just throw those away. It seems wrong to look at Billy that way now."

Ken nodded and scooped the pictures back into the envelope, then threw it all in the trash beside the bed.

"So now you know that I'm not looking for anyone older than you. I came face-to-face with my fantasy and realized that I'd rather have someone who loves me and wants to spend time with me." I said as I took hold of his hand again.

"I *do* love you." Ken said with assurance.

"I love you too." I said to him with a gentle smile.

There was a knock on the door that startled both of us.

"Come in." I said in a relaxed voice.

Mom rushed into the room and looked around.

"Oh good, you haven't started yet." She said with relief.

Ken and I shared a look of question.

Mom carried a shopping bag to the side of the bed, then named each item as she pulled it out and laid it on the bed between us.

"I've got the water based lubricant, condoms, two sizes of vibrators..." She said cheerfully.

"Mom! Wait!" I said, desperately wanting to get her attention.

Mom turned her bewildered gaze on me.

"Please just leave the bag here and we'll go through it. I promise that we'll ask if there's anything you missed." I said as I somehow knew that my face was redder than my hair.

"Oh? Okay. That would be fine." Mom said simply and sat the bag down.

"Thank you for thinking of all this Mrs. Teeter. That was very nice of you." Ken said and 'beet red' doesn't even begin to describe the color of his face.

"I just want you boys to know that we approve of your relationship." Mom said cheerfully.

"Got it Mom. Thanks for getting this stuff." I said, hoping that just this once, she would take the hint.

"It wasn't any problem at all. Oh, and I put the booklets from the living room in there too in case you two need some instructions." Mom said cheerfully.

"Thanks." I said weakly.

"I've got to get back to your sister, I've got some natural remedies I'd like to try out on her blemish." Mom said as she hurried to the door.

Ken and I sat in silence as Mom rushed out of the room.

I was the one who lost it first and started laughing.

But it only took Ken a few seconds to catch up to me.

It's a good thing we were laying on the bed to begin with because we were laughing so hard that we would have fallen over otherwise.

As soon as one of us stopped laughing for a few seconds, all we'd have to do is look at each other and it would start all over again.

When both of us finally calmed down, I noticed a movement out of the corner of my eye.

Dad was standing in the doorway with a big smile on his face and Possum at his side.

Chapter 8

I looked at the peaceful expression in Dad's eyes and wanted nothing more than to hold him again.

"Do you want to come in and sit with us?" I asked Dad hopefully.

Dad looked at us with surprise, then his gaze shifted to the bag of items between us.

"I wouldn't want to interrupt anything..." Dad said hesitantly.

I looked over at Ken to find him completely red faced and putting everything back in the bag.

"You're not interrupting anything, I promise. Please come in and talk with us." I said hopefully.

Dad smiled and led Possum into the room.

As soon as Possum was off his leash, he went immediately to the big pillow in the corner of the room and... well... got comfortable.

As the licking progressed, I noticed that Dad and Ken were both staring.

"Does he do this often?" Dad finally asked.

"Every single day." I answered, amused by their shocked expressions.

Finally Dad tore his attention away from Possum and began to look around the room.

"Do you want to sit on the bed with us? There's plenty of room." I said, trying not to sound too desperate.

Dad smiled at me and took a seat on the bed beside me, the other side from Ken.

As I had hoped, Dad helped me sit up and pulled me to rest with my back against his chest and his arms wrapped around me.

Ken got a tender look that was somehow sad.

"What's wrong Ken?" I asked cautiously.

"My Dad used to hold me like that." Ken said distantly.

The hollow sound in his voice tore into my heart.

"Does Allen think you're too old to be hugged?" Dad asked with concern from behind me.

Ken looked at Dad with momentary confusion, then shook his head and said, "No. Allen's my Pop. My Dad's name was Carl. He died almost two weeks ago..."

At that moment I would have given anything to be able to crawl over to Ken and pull him into my arms.

Nothing in my life had ever hurt as much as the sight of Ken in pain. The tears were welling up in his eyes and there was nothing I could do to help him.

My Dad picked me up and shifted us both over on the bed, then pulled Ken into a hug with me sandwiched between them.

I shifted a little and was able to get my good arm around Ken and guide his face into my shoulder.

After a moment of the three-way hug, Ken hesitantly said, "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to... I mean... when I saw you like that..."

"Shhh. It's okay Ken. There's nothing for you to be sorry about." Dad said in a soothing voice.

I felt some relief as Ken snuggled into my shoulder, like it was a safe and comfortable place.

"Ken, if you ever need a hug, you don't even have to ask." Dad said and I could tell from his voice that he was about to cry.

"What's wrong Dad?" I asked quietly.

"I feel so ashamed. I feel like I let you down." Dad said, and I knew that if I looked at him right now I'd see tears in his eyes.

"I should have been in here with you every single day talking with you and holding you like this." Dad said and I could tell that he was really crying now.

"It's okay. I understand why you didn't visit." I said in a small voice, wanting to somehow make him feel better.

There was a long moment of silence before Dad hesitantly asked, "What did you understand?"

"I could see it in your eyes that you were afraid that if you loved me that I'd die and it would hurt so much you couldn't stand it. So you stayed away so when it happened it wouldn't hurt as bad." I said quietly.

Dad's hug on both of us tightened as he said, "I never stopped loving you. And if anything would have happened to you part of me would have died too."

I thought about Dad's words and from the way he said them, I couldn't help but believe him.

"Then why did you stay away?" I asked. I mean, I probably shouldn't have, but sometimes my mouth doesn't pay attention to what it *should* do.

There was another long minute of silence that was finally broken by Ken.

"When he saw you getting sicker and more helpless, he felt like a failure as a father. He would have traded places with you without a second thought to make you better, but that wasn't an option. Every time he saw you it just proved to him some more that no matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, he was never a good enough father to protect you and make it all better." Ken said in a distant voice.

I felt Dad's arms go slack around us as I puzzled over Ken's words.

"He started working long hours, doing the only thing he could think of to make you better. He focused all his attention on earning enough money to get you every treatment that might possibly help you." Ken continued in a voice of deep thought.

"How?" Dad gasped from behind me.

Ken sat up suddenly and pulled out of our arms.

"How did you know all that?" Dad asked in a voice of wonder.

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean for that to happen. You were touching me and I could just see it." Ken said in a frightened voice.

I reached out my hand to Ken, silently begging him to rest on my chest and feel safe again.

Ken looked at my hand, then behind me at my Dad in question.

"It's okay Ken. But how did you do that?" Dad asked in a voice that clearly said that he wasn't mad at all.

Ken wilted with relief and gave a timid smile before saying, "I can just know stuff when I touch things. When I touch people I can see parts of their lives. It doesn't always work and I don't always understand what I'm seeing."

I thought about what Ken had said and once again my mouth took off before my brain could stop it.

"Did you see stuff when you touched me?" I asked cautiously.

Ken looked at me and seemed to drift off in thought for a moment before answering, "No. I don't remember seeing anything. Like I said, it doesn't always work. I guess that's a good thing. It'd be really bad if it was always on."

"Why's that?" Dad asked curiously.

"Well, if it was always on, every time I touched a doorknob I could see everyone who ever touched it before. It'd be like that for everything. I'd go nuts." Ken said in thought.

I thought about that and had to agree.

Before Ken could go any further with his explanation, I held out my hand to him again and gave him an urging look, silently asking him to snuggle against me again.

Ken smiled and took his place nestled into my chest.

"I'm glad you boys found each other. I hope things will work out for you two to be together for a long time." Dad said in a peaceful voice from behind me as he pulled us into a loose hug.

Ken started shifting around, obviously avoiding direct contact with Dad.

I guess Dad realized what he was doing because he quietly said, "Ken, I won't hug you if it bothers you. But I'm not worried about what you might see. I'm sure I don't have anything in my past that's much different from anyone else."

I felt Ken relax against me again as he said, "No. It's okay. I like to be hugged. It's just that I have a couple friends who are telepaths and I've seen how hard they try not to look at people's private stuff. I guess seeing that made me realize how important it is."

I thought about Ken's words and realized how lucky I am. This wonderful, loving, cute guy who knows all kinds of famous and talented people wants to be with me.

"I love you Ken." I whispered as I held him tight.

"I love you too Rory." Ken mumbled into my chest.

"I think it's time that I leave you two alone." Dad said quietly from behind me.

My mouth took off again before I had time to think.

"You don't have to leave for us. It just feels right for me to tell Ken that I love him while you're here holding us like this. It's like, I don't know, like it's more real when I say it in front of you." I said with difficulty.

I thought about it for a second, then realized that sometimes my mouth can say the right thing when stopping and thinking about it would mess it all up.

Ken lifted his head from my chest and moved up so he could give me a tender kiss.

Heaven. Absolute, pure heaven.

After the kiss, Ken turned slightly and rested his cheek on my shoulder, just holding me gently.

"Um, what was that one for?" I asked quietly, hating to destroy the moment, but curious to know what he was thinking.

"Because you just said that you're proud to be my boyfriend." Ken said happily.

"I did?" I asked and thought about the words.

"Yeah. When you said that it feels right to tell me you love me in front of your Dad, you were kind of saying that you don't just want us to be boyfriends when we're alone and no one else can see." Ken said in a warm, gentle voice.

I hugged Ken a little more tightly and said, "Yeah, that's exactly what I meant."

* * * * *

A sound drew all our attention and we looked as one to see Possum nosing through the bag that Mom had left.

"There's stuff in there he probably shouldn't get into." Dad said with concern as he released his hug.

"I'll get it." Ken said quickly as he got off the bed.

"Be careful. Possum doesn't know you." I warned.

As Ken knelt beside Possum he said, "We became friends this morning."

I was impressed to see how easily Ken was able to get the bag away from Possum and set it on the computer desk.

"I guess he likes you." Dad said from behind me.

"Yeah. He's a good dog. We're old friends now." Ken said as he began to scratch Possum behind the ear.

I felt Dad chuckling behind me and craned my neck to try and see his face.

"I guess it's official now, Ken's a keeper. Possum's vote made it unanimous." Dad said with a smile.

I began to chuckle with Dad.

Ken looked up at us and smiled as he said, "I'm not sure about unanimous, Corina would probably vote against me."

I could feel it as Dad shook his head, then said, "I wouldn't be so sure. I think you won her over with a piece of chicken."

Ken smiled and nodded, then went back to petting Possum.

I had an odd thought and decided that now would be a good time to find something out that was bothering me.

"How did you know I was gay?" I asked as I turned and tried to look into Dad's eyes.

"Well, while you were at school, your mother used to clean your room." Dad said in thought.

"Yeah." I said hesitantly.

"And change your sheets." Dad said as if that should have some significance.

"Uh huh." I said, prompting him to continue.

"She found the pictures under your mattress." Ken said from beside Possum.

I glanced down at the trash can, then up at Dad with question.

"That's right. That night she told me about it and we had a long discussion. We finally decided that we love you and just want you to be happy." Dad said in a reflective tone.

"Did you look at the pictures?" I asked Dad carefully.

"No. Your mother told me about the pictures, but I didn't look at them." Dad said quietly.

I looked at Ken to find him looking back at me uncertainly.

"I've had too many secrets already. I want him to know." I said seriously.

"You mean there's more?" Dad asked in a pained voice.

I hugged Dad's arm that was around my chest and said, "It's nothing bad. It's kind of funny when you think about it."

Dad looked at me and I could tell that he wasn't buying it.

"Here." Ken said and held out the envelope for Dad to take.

Dad released me from the hug and took the envelope.

He opened the flap at the top, then stopped and asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"It's okay Dad. I bet it's not half as bad as what you're imagining." I said, trying to sound sure of myself.

Slowly, Dad opened the top of the envelope and pulled out the first picture.

I held my breath as I waited for his reaction.

"It's Billy." Dad said in astonishment.

"Yeah." I whispered.

Dad pulled out a few more pictures, then turned me in his lap to look me in the eyes.

I felt a tingle of fear wash over me at his expression.

"Did he give these to you? Did he do anything to you?" Dad asked in a firm voice and I could tell that his red-headedness was rising quick.

"NO! No. I never met Billy before today. I just got those pictures out of a magazine." I said quickly, hoping to stop Dad before he did something.

Dad looked me in the eyes and it was as if he was looking directly into my soul.

"Then why did you show me the pictures?" Dad asked cautiously.

I know my Dad was just worried about me, but it scared me to see him like this.

I pulled together all the courage I could manage and said, "I've kept too many secrets from you. If I didn't tell you, I'd feel like I was keeping another secret and that would be like lying to you. I never want to lie to you again."

Dad froze in thought for what seemed like a week as I continued to look into his eyes.

Finally he said, "Okay. But if he did something, you'd tell me, right?"

I let out a gust of breath as I felt the crisis had passed, then said, "Yes. I promise."

Dad got a look of relief and pulled me back into a much needed hug.

"Thanks for telling me Skeeter." Dad whispered into my hair.

"I love you Dad." I whispered in return.

A beeping noise interrupted the moment.

Dad and I turned simultaneously to look at Ken.

"Um, sorry." Ken said shyly as he fished the communicator out of his pocket.

Ken opened the communicator and hesitantly said, "Kenny Thompson."

"Kenny? Oh good. I wasn't sure I could get this thing to work." A voice said from the other side.

"Kevin? Is that you?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I need you to come over to Mamacita's real quick. I just drew a picture and... just hurry." Kevin said in a panicked voice.

I could see by the look in Ken's eyes that he knew what Kevin was talking about.

Ken looked at me and Dad and quickly said, "This is really important. If you want to come with me I'll explain it to you along the way."

I twisted to look at Dad to see what he was going to say.

"Let's go." Dad said decisively and picked me up.

A second later I was in my wheelchair and dad was unlocking the wheels.

"We're on our way Kev. Meet us at the bottom of the stairs, Rory's coming with me." Ken said firmly.

"Hurry." Kevin said and the communicator went silent.

* * * * *

"Does this have something to do with the Clan thing Jake was telling us about earlier?" Dad asked as he quickly pushed me, trying to keep up with Ken.

"Yeah. From the sound of Kevin's voice, there's a kid in trouble. But Kevin needs me to touch his picture so I know what kind of trouble it is." Ken said in deep thought.

"Like when you touched me?" Dad asked carefully.

"Yeah. Exactly like that. When I touch one of Kevin's pictures I can feel what that person is feeling and know where they are and what's happened to them... stuff like that." Ken said quickly as he ran into their driveway.

Before Dad and I had made the turn into the driveway, Kevin was running up to Ken and holding out a picture to him.

Dad and I slowed down as we arrived beside Ken and Kevin.

Ken was holding the picture in his hands and had his eyes closed in deep concentration.

Ken's eyes snapped open and he suddenly said, "I've got to go help him."

"Where is he?" Kevin asked quickly.

"South Carolina... Kevin, there's no time to call Cory and do this the right way. Stay here and keep your communicator handy. If Cory calls, tell him that I'll explain it all when I get back." Ken said with a look of deep worry.

"Yeah." Kevin said firmly.

Ken looked at me and Dad for a second, then seemed to be lost in thought.

I glanced up at Dad to see if he understood what was going on any better than I did.

"Mr. Teeter, if you'll allow it, I'd really like to take Rory with me. I think he'll probably be able to talk more sense to this guy than I can." Ken said seriously.

"Is it going to be safe?" Dad asked with concern.

"Yeah. I promise. I've really got to go right now. Can Rory come with me?" Ken asked desperately.

Dad looked down at me and I gave him my most hopeful and begging expression (I've been perfecting it for years).

"Yes. Do you need me to drive you somewhere?" Dad asked cautiously.

"No time." Ken said as he moved behind my wheelchair and pushed me into the middle of the driveway.

"What..." Dad began to say when Ken opened his communicator.

"Terra Main, this is Kenny Thompson of Clan Short requesting an emergency beam out for two people... and a wheelchair." Ken stammered on the last part.

All of a sudden I felt a tingle and everything seemed to sparkle around me.

The next thing I knew I was sitting in a big room with a guy in a Starfleet uniform looking at me.

"Can you pull up a map of Charleston, South Carolina, a place called 'The Battery'?" Ken asked as he ran to the guy in the uniform.

"You said it was an emergency." The guy said carefully.

"IT IS! If I don't get to this guy before the sun sets, he's gonna kill himself. Can you pull up the map so I can show you where I need to beam down to?" Ken asked in a mix of panic and anger.

"Yes. I'm sorry." The guy said as he started doing something on the console in front of him.

"That's it. Zoom in on that part." Ken said and pointed to the console.

The guy in the uniform did some more stuff and I could see Ken looking at the console in deep concentration.

"Here. I have the satellite scanners focused now. We can get real time data." The man said and did something else.

"That's him, that red dot. Can you put us down as close to him as possible without him seeing us?" Ken asked seriously.

"How about behind that rock? Is that close enough?" The man asked carefully.

"Yeah. Do it now. And be ready to beam all three of us out if we can't talk him out of it." Ken said as he ran to my side.

"Keep the channel open and just say the word 'Energize' and you're out of there." The guy said firmly.

"Yeah. Okay." Ken said as he adjusted his communicator.

"Here you go." The man said, then the tingle started again.

* * * * *

I think that before the sparkles even stopped, Ken was pushing my wheelchair from the spot behind the rock where we had appeared.

I looked around and the only person I could see in the diminishing daylight was a boy leaning on the sea wall, looking out at the ocean.

Ken slowed down as he pushed me closer to the boy. The ride started to get bumpy as we went off the path and started across the grass.

As the boy looked like he was about to climb up on the wall, Ken called out, "Hey."

The boy turned with surprise at the sound and looked at us curiously.

"Hey." He said in a cautious voice as he watched us approach.

"How you doing?" Ken asked in a friendly voice.

"Honestly? I've been better." The boy said, and now we were close enough that I could tell that he'd been crying.

"I know that feeling. I'm Ken and this is Rory." Ken said as we came to a stop.

"I'm JR." The boy said slowly.

"JR? It seems like half the people I know just use initials. Maybe I should start going by KT." Ken said in a considering voice.

JR got a strange look on his face, then carefully said, "You might want to think about it before you do that."

"Why? It works for my friends TJ, CD, DJ and JJ." Ken said frankly.

"Okay. If that's the way ya want it... Katie." JR said seriously, then broke into a smile.

Ken froze at the statement, then broke into a smile as he said, "Kenny will be fine."

"Thought so." JR said with a chuckle.

I couldn't help but give a little chuckle at Ken's expression.

"So what's there to do around here?" Ken asked conversationally.

"Right now? Leave. It's curfew in a few minutes." JR said as he looked at the sky.

"Oh. Um, I didn't know that." Ken said shyly.

"Y'all ain't from around here are ya?" JR asked curiously.

"No. We're from Orlando, Florida. We just came up here to check on a friend that we're worried about." Ken said with concern showing in his voice.

"What's wrong with your friend?" JR asked, drawn into Ken's concern.

"He lost someone close to him and... well, he's been having some dark days... I just wanted to tell him to hang on... it gets better." Ken said quietly.

"Does it?" JR asked in a hollow voice.

"Yeah. It does. I lost someone a few weeks ago... the most important person in my life. It left such an empty hole in me that I didn't think anything could ever make it better." Ken said distantly.

"Yeah. I know how that feels." JR mumbled.

"I had some dark days. And when things were at their darkest, I thought about doing some stupid things... things that couldn't be undone." Ken said quietly.

"Yeah." JR said in a whisper.

"But here I am. I made it through to the other side, and it really DOES get better." Ken said honestly.

JR nodded at the statement.

I looked at his expression and got the feeling that the words weren't really sinking in.

"JR." I said to get his attention.

He looked down at me with question.

"I didn't wake up one day in this wheelchair. I've been getting sicker and sicker for three years. I'm not going to tell you all the details, but trust me, I've seen some seriously dark days. I'm here to tell you, Ken's right. It gets better. This morning I was thinking that this was the single worst day of my life. Now... I think I'll look back on this day as the beginning of my new life." I said, hoping that I was getting through.

JR looked at me in thought but said nothing.

Ken nodded and said, "You know the old saying, 'When One Door Closes, A New Door Opens'. It's true. When my Dad died, a door closed in my life

forever. But a new door opened and now I have a new life that's pretty good."

JR looked up at the sky again and said, "I hope wherever you're staying is close by. The cops will pick y'all up if you're out after dark."

"Yeah. We'd better go." Ken said seriously, then started patting his pockets.

"Rory? You don't happen to have a pen do you?" Ken asked hopefully.

"Check my pouch. There might be one in there." I said and reached behind me to pat the pouch on the back of my wheelchair.

Ken dug around in there for a second and found a pencil.

After a few seconds of writing, Ken held out a piece of paper to JR and said, "This is my cell phone number. If you're ever having a dark day and need to talk to someone who understands, call me."

JR took the paper, then said, "Yeah, I will. By the way, what happened with your friend?"

Ken smiled and looked at me with question.

"We just talked to him and let him know that he wasn't alone. I think he's going to be okay." I said quietly.

JR nodded, and said, "Good. It's good to know that there's someone who understands."

I felt Ken starting to move my wheelchair and looked up at him in question.

I glanced back at JR to see a look of shock on his face as he looked at the paper.

Ken moved us quickly behind the rock and quietly said, "Two to beam up."

Sparkles and tingles washed over us a heartbeat later.

* * * * *

JR looked at the phone number, then on impulse, unfolded the paper it was written on.

His eyes went wide in astonishment at the sight before him.

In his hands he held a hand drawn image of Jeremy.

The look in Jeremy's eyes was just like he remembered, love and life and just a touch of mischief.

"Hey JR, do you need a ride home?" Corporal Jackson asked in a quiet voice of concern as he approached.

JR looked up suddenly and said, "Yeah, maybe these guys..."

JR looked around and the two boys he had been talking with were nowhere to be seen.

Corporal Jackson looked around and didn't see anyone but JR in the park.

"Come on, it's not good for you to be alone out here after dark." Corporal Jackson said with concern at JR's sullen mood.

JR looked back at the picture in his hands, then quietly said, "Yeah. I don't need to be alone."

* * * * *

As the sparkles of the transporter faded, I noticed that there were about ten people in the room looking at us.

"Thanks. He's going to be fine." Ken said shyly from beside me.

"I know. I was listening. I knew what Clan Short did but this is the first time I've ever heard one of you at work... I'm impressed." The transporter technician said frankly.

"Thanks." Ken said shyly, then looked at the group of people who were all still looking at us with question.

"Oh, I've been holding transporter traffic in case I needed to get you out of there quickly. Are you ready to go back to Orlando now?" The technician asked in a professional tone.

"Yeah. Thanks." Ken said, and I could tell from the sound of his voice that he wanted to duck down behind me and hide to get away from everyone's attention.

"On your command Mr. Thompson." The technician said respectfully.

Ken straightened his posture, and in a clear voice he said, "Energize."

* * * * *

The tingles and sparkles fizzled out and we were standing in Ken's driveway, exactly where we had left from.

"How did it go?" Kevin asked immediately.

"Good. I think he's going to be okay." Ken said with relief in his voice.

I thought about JR and nodded my agreement.

Even though I don't know everything that Ken saw in the picture, I think I understand enough of what JR was feeling to make sense of what just happened.

"Cory called, he wants to know what's going on." Kevin said seriously.

"I'll call him when we get back to Rory's house. Thanks for calling me Kev, I think you might have saved JR's life." Ken said as he looked his brother in the eyes.

"So he was really gonna do it?" Kevin asked with a wide eyed expression.

"I don't know for sure. He could have still changed his mind at the last second." Ken said in thought.

"Do you think he's going to try again?" Kevin asked with worry.

"I don't think so. Now he knows that he has someone that he can talk to who will understand if he's feeling like that again." Ken said in thought.

"I think what we did was let him know that he's not alone and that if he can just hang in there for a while, it'll get better." I said in a considering voice.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up to see Dad looking down at me with a loving twinkle in his eyes.

I smiled at Dad, then looked over to Ken to see what he was going to do next.

"I'll see you tomorrow Kev. Thanks again for calling me." Ken said, then pulled his brother into a hug.

"Are you sure JR's going to be okay?" Kevin asked with concern.

"I think so. He wasn't really wanting to die, he just wanted an end to the loneliness and confusion." Ken said quietly.

"Thanks for helping him." Kevin said quietly as he pulled out of the hug.

"That's what we do." Ken said with a smile at his brother, then turned to look at me and Dad, obviously ready to leave.

* * * * *

"So how was it Skeeter?" Dad asked as he pushed me at a leisurely pace back toward our house.

"It was really cool. Besides getting to transport four times, I got to watch while Ken helped a guy in trouble." I said happily.

"You helped him too." Ken said immediately.

I thought about it for a second. I don't think I really did much of anything.

"I don't know if it's what you were saying or the wheelchair or those cute freckles of yours, but something got him to listen to you when he wouldn't listen to me." Ken said seriously.

Ken sounded so definite, like there was no doubt in his mind. If he was so sure about it, then maybe I really did do something to help JR.

"Way to go Skeeter." Dad said from behind me and I could hear the pride in his voice.

"Hey guys!" A voice called from out of nowhere.

I looked around and finally spotted Davis sitting on the front porch of the house catty-cornered across the street from ours.

"Hi Davis, how are you doing?" Dad asked as he stopped pushing me and waved.

Davis hopped up from where he'd been sitting and ran across the street before he answered.

"I'm kind of bored out of my mind right now. What are you guys up to?" Davis asked as he approached.

I looked at Ken with question, not knowing if we were supposed to talk about it.

"We were just talking with a friend of ours who was feeling down. Now... I guess we're walking around for a little bit." Ken said and glanced at Dad to see if he minded continuing the walk.

"We need to stop at the house for a minute so Ken can make a call. But then I think a walk around the neighborhood would be a great idea. Would you like to walk with us?" Dad asked in a friendly tone.

Davis' eyes lighted up as he said, "Yeah, I get so totally bored sitting around the house all day. There's nothing to do here."

"Do you need to let your mom know where you'll be? I wouldn't want her to be worried." Dad said seriously.

Davis looked at Dad with surprise, then said, "I don't think mom would notice if I left for the weekend without telling her. What's funny is, if her

little rat-dog is out of her sight for more than two minutes she has a panic attack."

"Would you go tell her anyway? I'd just feel better about it." Dad asked in a quieter voice.

"Okay." Davis said reluctantly.

"Ken, do you need to go in and use the phone?" Dad asked as he watched Davis walk away.

"No, it's easier to use the communicator... besides, I don't have Cory's phone number." Ken said and pulled his communicator out.

There was a little chirp of the communicator coming on, then Ken said, "Kenny Thompson to Clan Short Headquarters."

A second later a voice answered, "This is Cory. I got a call from Terra Main saying that you called for an emergency transport. Is there something going on that I can help with?"

"No. Everything is fine. Kevin just drew a picture of someone who was thinking about suicide and I had to get to him before he did it." Ken said seriously.

"How did it work out?" Cory asked with concern.

"He's fine now. He was just having a really crappy dark day and it was kind of an impulse thing. Rory and I talked to him and made him stop and think about it. And I gave him my phone number in case he needs to talk some more." Ken said in thought.

"Rory?" Cory asked curiously.

"Oh yeah. Rory Teeter, Jake and I met him today and we became friends... really good friends." Ken said with a big smile and winked at me.

"Daddy? Mom was looking for you. What are you all doing out here?" Corina asked as she walked toward us.

"Really good friends, huh? I'm guessing you're talking about the kind of friends who swap spit." Cory said in a teasing voice.

Ken glanced at Corina, then said, "I'm over at Rory's house right now. Rory and his father and sister can hear you."

"Sorry Kenny. Hey, I want to meet this guy of yours. Maybe we can set something up for this weekend?" Cory asked and sounded like he was smiling.

"Yeah, I'll call you as soon as I know what we're doing for sure." Ken said quickly.

"Y'all have fun. Short out." Cory said in a relaxed tone.

"Thompson out." Kenny said quickly and closed the communicator.

"Is that real?" A voice said.

I turned to see that Davis had joined us again.

Ken looked at his communicator and said, "Yeah. Pretty cool huh?"

"I'm Corina." My dorky big sister said in a dreamy whispered voice.

I looked up at Davis to see his reaction and he was staring at her.

"This is Davis Gray. Davis, this is my daughter Corina." Dad said hesitantly as he looked from Corina to Davis and back.

"I'm Corina." She whispered again.

I rolled my eyes then looked at Dad and Ken

Dad was shaking his head in exasperation and Ken looked like he was about to bust out laughing.

"I'm Davis." He finally said and he was using the same whispered voice that Cor was using.

Dad gave a little snicker, then said to me and Ken, "I'm going to tell Doris that we're going for a walk. I'll be back in a second."

I nodded at Dad, then reached out and took Ken's hand to watch the show in front of us.

"What grade are you in?" Corina shyly asked as she stared into Davis' eyes.

"I'm a senior, what about you?" Davis asked quietly.

"I'm a junior. You're new here aren't you." Corina said breathlessly, and I'm kind of impressed that she was able to put that many words in a row.

"Yeah, I just moved here a couple weeks ago. I live right there." Davis said and pointed to his house.

"That's great." Corina said, then gave a nervous, kind of maniacal and scary, giggle.

I felt Ken squeeze my hand and looked up.

Ken swooped in and gave me a quick kiss.

"Oh gross! Why don't you two get a room?" Corina barked, totally destroying the image of dainty femininity that she had been constructing.

Ken looked at Corina with mischief dancing in his eyes as he said, "We will if you will."

Corina's eyes went wide in panic and she looked as if she were about to do the whole running off and hiding thing again.

"I don't mind if they kiss. It's kind of nice." Davis said as he looked deeply into Corina's eyes.

Corina gave another of those nervous scary giggles, you know, like the kind the insane bad guy in a cheesy movie gives right before he starts killing people... like that.

I saw Dad and Mom approaching with Possum and felt a slight sense of relief.

If I had to watch Davis and Corina much longer, I might just have to puke.

"Are we ready to walk?" Dad asked as he and Mom joined our group on the sidewalk.

I nodded enthusiastically.

Dad gave a knowing smile and handed me Possum's leash. Dad and Mom started walking up the sidewalk. Ken got behind me and began pushing me as Possum walked along side me.

I leaned over to look behind us and could see that Davis and Corina were following a little ways behind us, kind of lost in their own little world.

"I hope you guys weren't counting on spending any time with Davis. He seems to have his mind on other things right now." Dad said in a teasing voice.

"I'd try to warn him but I think it's too late. I guess she finally got that feminine thing she's been perfecting to work on someone." I said to Dad with a chuckle.

We came to the corner of our block and Dad looked both ways before crossing the street.

Fortunately when they built this gated community, someone had thought to build ramps into the corners of each block. Ken didn't have any problem following Mom and Dad across the street.

All of us watched from the opposite corner as Corina and Davis crossed the street without once glancing to see if there was any oncoming traffic.

"They'll make a cute couple if they don't get themselves killed." Dad said with a shake of his head.

I looked again at Davis and Corina and had to reluctantly admit that they did look cute together. But I'd never tell Corina, I'd be disgracing little brothers everywhere if I did something like that.

* * * * *

Dad had put his arm around Mom and they were just walking slowly ahead of us.

Corina and Davis were walking behind us.

They'd walk in silence for a few minutes, then both of them would start to say something at the same time.

Then both of them would break into nervous laughter and start talking a mile a minute, trying to talk over each other.

Whenever Possum would want to stop and sniff something or do whatever, Ken would reach up to play with my hair or might lean in and give me a quick kiss.

What a beautiful wonderful night.

I don't know what's going to happen with Xain's father tomorrow, but right this minute I'm just so incredibly happy with everything in my life that I can't help but believe that everything is going to be okay.

Chapter 9

"Yoo-hoo! Davis!" A voice called from behind us.

I leaned over in my wheelchair to look around Ken to see who was approaching.

There she was, Mrs. Plimpton.

She was trying to run in her stiletto heels and polyester pink pedal pushers.

"Oh God!" Davis groaned as he saw his mother approaching.

"Everyone, wait up." Dad said from in front of us as he stopped.

We stood and watched as Mrs. Plimpton bounced and jiggled toward us at her best possible speed.

Something looked wrong about her but I couldn't really tell what it was.

"Mom, what are you doing here?" Davis asked in a pained voice.

"I needed to take Pookie out for a walk. Aren't you going to introduce me to everyone?" She asked hopefully.

"Um, yeah. Everyone, this is my mom, Hildie Plimpton. Mom, this is Marcus Teeter and his wife..." Davis trailed off.

"Doris, we've met." Mom said cheerfully as she stepped away from dad's side with a delighted smile.

"Okay. And this is Corina, Ken and Rory." Davis said in a quieter voice since it was obvious that he no longer had his mother's attention.

"Oh Doris, you're looking absolutely radiant this evening." Mrs. Plimpton said in a gushing, fake voice.

"Thank you Hildie, I love your hair. That is just soooo cute." Mom said with a grand smile.

"Well thank you for saying so dear. I found this lovely little place downtown that is such a treasure. Maybe we could go there together sometime next week, you know, for a girls day out?" Mrs. Plimpton asked hopefully.

Mom looked stunned for a moment, then broke into an even bigger smile as she said, "Now that Rory's getting better, I don't see why not. I'd love to."

Mrs. Plimpton looked down at me and I noticed a brief look of embarrassment.

Although it might have been fun to torment her about what happened earlier, one look at Mom's happiness convinced me that I should just leave it be.

I gave Mrs. Plimpton a little smile to let her know that everything was okay.

"Mom." Davis whispered in an aggravated tone.

"What is it dear?" Mrs. Plimpton asked happily.

"I think you're wearing that thing wrong." Davis said as he glanced at his mother's chest.

Mrs. Plimpton smiled and said, "'That thing' is a push up bra and I'm just trying to undo the unfortunate effects of gravity."

Davis shook his head and quietly said, "You've got it set too high. You could put an eye out with those things."

Mrs. Plimpton looked down for a moment, then back up at Davis with question.

"Davis, why don't you and Corina come over here with me. There's something I need to explain." Dad said as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

Davis glanced at his mother's chest again, then reluctantly walked over to Dad.

"So, have you heard what happened to Marsha?" Mrs. Plimpton asked Mom quickly.

"No, I've been staying in the house for quite a while, I don't know what's going on with anyone... who's Marsha?" Mom asked in confusion.

I felt movement and craned my neck to look up at Ken who had started moving me away from Mom and Mrs. Plimpton.

"I think Possum want's to check out those bushes." Ken said quietly.

I looked over at Possum and saw that he was pulling at his leash.

"Okay, I didn't need to get drawn into the old lady talk anyway." I said with a grin up at Ken.

Ken chuckled and nodded as he moved me off the sidewalk.

I glanced back at Mom and Mrs. Plimpton talking and said, "It's nice to see Mom doing something so normal."

Possum was sniffing around the bushes, then did his part to keep the local shrubbery from drying out.

"I love you." Ken whispered into my ear.

A shiver went down my spine at the sensation of Ken's warm breath.

I reached up with my good hand and pulled him down just a little bit further to give him a quick kiss.

"Boys?" Dad called out from ahead of us.

I looked over at Dad with question.

"Are you coming with us?" He asked, and I noticed that everyone was walking again.

"Sure." I said as I felt a blush rising up my cheeks.

"Busted." Davis said with a teasing grin at us.

* * * * *

"There's our house." Ken said to everyone as we continued to walk.

"Did you get a chance to meet JC when your parents bought the house?" Mrs. Plimpton asked with interest.

"Yeah. Uncle Chip and Uncle Josh are friends with my Pop. We visit each other all the time." Ken said happily.

"When they lived here I had the pleasure of speaking with JC while he was washing his car in the driveway one day... there was an instant chemistry between us." Mrs. Plimpton said with a dreamy look.

I looked up at Ken to find him trying to restrain his laughter.

I couldn't help but smile at his expression.

"Who's that guy?" Corina asked from ahead of us.

I looked over to see who she was pointing at.

"That's Deacon. That's his brother's house." Ken said before I could answer.

The next thing I knew, Ken was pushing my wheelchair up the sidewalk to where Deacon was sitting on his front porch.

"What's up Deacon?" Ken asked with concern.

"Lawrence threw me out." Deacon said sourly.

"Did you do something to make him mad?" I asked cautiously.

"No. It's nothing like that. We're having a date tonight and he wants to do something special so he made me come out here to wait while he gets it ready." Deacon said, sounding completely bored.

"Well, it sounds like it's probably going to be worth the wait." I said, trying to sound encouraging.

"Yeah, I just wish I'd brought my video game. He's taking forever." Deacon said, then propped his chin on the heels of his hands.

"Deke?" Lawrence called from just inside the door.

Deacon quickly stood and turned around.

"Oh, hi guys." Lawrence said shyly as he opened the door just a little bit more.

My eyes opened so wide I'm pretty sure they were about to fall out of my head.

Lawrence was wearing a long silk evening dress and had his hair... up.

The freakiest thing was that he was absolutely beautiful. I mean, I've seen a few pictures of cross-dressers and they always just looked wrong to me but Lawrence looked incredible.

"Was it worth the wait?" Ken asked from behind me.

"Oh yeah." Deacon said with a dreamy smile, then walked to Lawrence in the doorway.

"I'll see you guys in the morning." Lawrence said peacefully, then took Deacon's hand as he walked into the house.

"Yeah." I said in wonder.

The door closed and I just sat there and stared for a moment until Corina called out, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah Cor. Everything's fine." I said as Ken turned me around and we started down the sidewalk again.

* * * * *

When the walk was finally over, we went back into my house and Ken took me to my room.

"Where to?" Ken asked as we walked in.

"Would you help me get ready for bed?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah. What do we need to do first." Ken asked with a smile that didn't hide the desire that he was feeling.

"Well, if you wanted to, maybe you could help me take a bath?" I asked hopefully.

"Sounds good so far." Ken said as he started moving me toward the bathroom.

"I was thinking that it might be fun if you took a bath with me." I said with a grin.

"Okay, it's sounding even better. Tell me what to do first." Ken said as he locked my wheels and moved in front of me.

"Before we start, I just need to remind you of one very important thing." I said as I looked into his eyes.

"What's that?" Ken asked cautiously.

"We have *all* night." I said with my best mischievous smile.

Ken leaned in and gave me the slowest, most mind blowing kiss ever.

* * * * *

I woke to the most wonderful feeling that I could ever have imagined.

Ken was snuggled up to my side, fast asleep.

I felt so safe, so warm, so loved.

When Ken and I started to take a bath together last night I just kind of figured that we would end up having sex before the night was over.

I didn't expect, I couldn't have imagined, what was about to happen.

We made love.

The whole evening was like a perfect dance.

Every touch, every word, every look was part of the experience.

I thought I knew what it would be like to love someone but I was so wrong.

Nothing in my life prepared me for what it was really like.

Ken snuffled against my side and the sight of him awakened the love in me all over again.

I don't really believe in karma and things like that, but if there is some balance in the universe, going through the last three years was completely worth it to end up with Ken.

A quiet knocking at the door caught my attention.

"You boys had better get up so we can have breakfast before we go to the doctor's." Dad said gently from the doorway.

I looked over at the clock and was surprised to see that it was after nine o'clock.

"I'll take Possum outside while you guys get ready." Dad said with a contented smile at us.

"Thanks Dad. We'll be out in a few minutes." I said peacefully.

Dad snapped his fingers and said, "Come on Possum. It's time to go outside."

Possum raised his head at the sound of his name, then slowly made his way to the door.

Dad looked over at us again and his warm smile told me more than words how happy he was and that he completely accepted us as a couple.

* * * * *

"Good morning. You look like you had a good sleep." Mom said cheerfully as she placed plates of food on the dining room table.

"Um, what is it?" Ken asked while he was locking my wheels.

"Tofu scrambled eggs and bacon, whole grain toast and fresh squeezed organic orange juice." Mom said happily.

"Oh... do you have any *real* eggs?" Ken asked hesitantly.

"Yes I do. They're from free range chickens fed pesticide free organic food." Mom said as she stopped to look at Ken seriously.

"Would it be okay if I had a real egg? I don't mind the fake bacon but I don't think I can handle fake eggs." Ken said hesitantly.

Mom chuckled and said, "It took a few weeks for us to get used to them. Give me your plate and I'll be back in a minute."

"Why do you have fake tofu eggs if she has real eggs?" Ken asked me with confusion.

"She thinks that too many eggs are bad for us. I'm not sure why. She uses the real eggs for cooking but doesn't cook us real eggs for a meal." I said carefully.

"I don't really understand about that health food stuff. I've always just eaten whatever was there." Ken said frankly.

"I used to do that too. But when I got sick, Mom thought that all the artificial flavors and colors and preservatives and growth hormones and other stuff that they put in food were making my condition worse. She figured that it was like my body knew what it needed to do to get better, but all the crap that I was eating was keeping my body from doing it... or something like that. Since no one that I've heard about with my condition ever got better, the weird health food might be why my condition stabilized." I said in thought.

I looked away from Ken and saw that Mom was standing there with a plate and a shocked look frozen on her face.

"Mom?" I asked cautiously.

She blinked, then carefully sat the plate of food on the table in front of Ken.

"You... you really think my cooking might be what helped you?" Mom asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Well, yeah. Everyone who got sick like me has had just about the same treatments that I have and none of them ever got better. If it wasn't the health food, then I don't know what it was... Possum?" I finished with a one armed shrug.

Mom had tears gliding down her cheeks, then she swooped in and gave me a tight hug.

I glanced over her shoulder at Ken who was smiling at us.

"I didn't know what else I could do to help you but try to give you the best, most nutritious food I could find. That way your body had everything it needed to make you better." Mom said as she continued to hold me.

I brought my good arm up to give her a hug and said, "Thanks Mom. I think all the stuff you did worked."

Mom sniffed back her tears, then said, "I need to get your father's food."

I let go of Mom and watched her hurry out of the room.

Dad walked in a second later and broke into a smile as he looked at me and Ken.

"Did you boys have a good sleep last night?" Dad asked happily.

"Yeah we did. How about you?" Ken asked with a grin.

Dad looked surprised by the reply, then broke into a grin as he said, "Oh yes, the best sleep in years."

Mom rushed into the room carrying two plates and put one of them in front of Dad.

She put the other one down at the place beside his and took her seat.

"Ken, have you ever been to the Short Compound before?" Dad asked, then took a bite of his tofu scrambled eggs.

"No. I've been to Southcrest next door and I've been to Camp Little Eagle across the street." Ken said seriously, then took a drink of his juice.

"I was just trying to get an idea of what to expect." Dad said in thought.

"I don't know what it's like, but I bet it's going to be nice. Southcrest and the camp are both really awesome. Besides, Aunt Teri lives there and she's totally kewl." Ken said with a big smile.

"Aunt Teri?" Mom asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Teri Short, the director of Federation Youth Services." Ken said, then took another bite of his food.

"I've heard of her. She sounds like an amazing woman." Dad said frankly.

"Yeah. I guess so. I just know that she's really nice and that she's a good mom." Ken said simply.

"That's all I need to know. I like her already." Mom said with a smile.

As I was finishing up my breakfast, I looked over at Ken and asked, "How did you like the food?"

Ken considered for a moment, then said, "Everything was good. I like the whole grain toast and the orange juice. It's funny, I didn't know if I'd like the fake bacon, but I think I like it better than real bacon. It doesn't taste as... strong, I guess."

"I can let your mom know where to get some if you want." Mom said happily.

"I don't have a mom, but you can tell Juana if you want, she's the one who does the shopping." Ken said quietly.

"You told me about your dad, but what happened to your mom?" Dad asked Ken with concern.

Ken must have noticed Dad's expression too because he started by saying, "Don't worry about it. I grew up without my mom, I never knew her. My parents got divorced when Kev and I were just babies. Each of them took one of us and we grew up in different parts of the country. When my dad died, I went to Chicago to live with my mom. But when I got there she ran off because she didn't want to take care of two of us. In fact, from the looks of Kev, she didn't want to take care of one of us."

"Is that why he's so small?" Dad asked with concern.

"Yeah. She didn't feed him or pay much attention to him. Because of her, he's little and skinny and he never learned to read or write." Ken said with anger in his voice.

"Then it's good that you're both here now." Dad said quietly.

"Yeah. Things really worked out great." Ken said as his anger transformed into a gentle smile.

Mom started gathering our empty breakfast dishes and Ken hopped up out of his chair to help her.

"It's alright Ken, I don't mind doing it." Mom said with a smile at him.

"Please let Rory and I take care of the dishes. It's wrong for you to do everything by yourself." Ken said seriously.

"Alright. If you really want to." Mom said as she handed Ken the stack of plates.

"Rory, you take these and I'll get the glasses." Ken said and placed the stack of dishes in my lap.

I put my good hand on the dishes to steady them, then watched as Ken gathered the glasses and hurried out of the room.

"In case I didn't mention it before, I really think your boyfriend is great." Dad said with a gentle smile at me.

"You didn't need to say it, I could see it in your expression when you woke us up." I said honestly.

Ken walked back into the dining room, then unlocked my wheels and moved me into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"How do you want to do this?" I asked him curiously as he parked my wheelchair in front of the sink.

Ken took the stack of dishes from me, then opened the dishwasher that was right beside me.

"I'm going to scrape the stuff off the plates, then I'm going to hand you the dishes so you can load them into the dishwasher." Ken said seriously.

"Sounds good. Thanks for letting me help." I said, feeling so much love for him that I couldn't contain it.

He leaned in and gave me a quick kiss, then went to work.

While we were working, I heard movement from behind me and glanced to see Mom and Dad standing in the doorway watching us with big smiles.

I turned my attention back to my work, feeling a little self-conscious but also proud of my ability to help out.

As Ken was wiping down the stove and kitchen counters, there was a knock at the door.

I glanced back in time to see Dad walking away, toward the front door.

"Did I miss anything?" Ken asked as he looked around.

"I don't think so." I said with a gentle smile at Ken.

* * * * *

"Hi Pop." Ken said happily and gave Allen a big hug.

"How are you doing cute stuff?" Allen asked gently as he hugged Ken.

"Great. How was your date?" Ken asked quickly.

Allen smiled and said, "Perfect."

"Come on. Tell me all about it." Ken asked impatiently.

"We went out to dinner, then went to see a stage play. After that we spent the night at a hotel and that's all you need to know." Allen said, then kissed Ken on the top of the head.

"Okay Pop. Are we ready to go?" Ken asked quickly.

"Yes. Billy is probably already on his way. The guys are waiting out in the car." Allen said as he turned his attention to the rest of us.

I looked down at myself and realized that I was still wearing the sweat pants and t-shirt that I had slept in.

Ken must have noticed because he said, "I can help you to get ready."

"How about I help too? I have a feeling it will be faster." Dad said with a smile.

"Um, yeah." I said shyly.

* * * * *

I looked out the window curiously as the scenery passed us by.

"I don't know how much you know about Vulcans but Uncle Solak is really okay, isn't he Rory?" Ken asked from my side.

"Yeah. He's just... I don't know, kind of like a principal, you know, no sense of humor or anything." I said in thought.

Ken giggled and said, "Well, he's not *that* bad."

I nodded my agreement, then looked up as we approached a large metal gate.

Dad waited as Allen stopped at the guard station by the gate and talked to the security officer.

A minute later Dad pulled up and rolled down his window.

"May I see your ID Mr. Teeter?" the security officer asked professionally.

After looking at Dad's ID, the man looked at his data padd, then at each of us in the car.

After punching in some stuff on the padd, he said, "Welcome to the Short Compound. You can follow this drive and park in the first parking lot on the right."

"Thank you." Dad said, then started driving slowly.

"There's a Camp Little Eagle van." Ken said as he pointed behind us.

It was kind of difficult for me to turn around with the seat belt on, but I managed to catch a glimpse of the van.

"You mentioned Camp Little Eagle before. What is it?" Dad asked curiously as he continued to drive.

"It's the camp that my clan started to help kids who need it." Ken said casually.

"Here we are." Dad said as he pulled the car into the handicapped parking place.

Ken hopped out of the car and ran around to my side to help me.

By the time Dad had gotten the wheelchair out of the trunk, Ken was leaning over me, ready to lift me and help me into the chair.

"It looks like you guys have this all worked out." Dad said as he stood behind the wheelchair and watched Ken move me.

"Yeah. Come on Rory, I want to introduce you to the camp guys." Ken said with a gentle smile, then rushed around behind me.

It's been years since I wanted to be introduced to anyone. I just wanted to hide away from people so I wouldn't have to put up with their stares.

But as we approached the 'camp guys' I felt nothing but peace because I knew that Ken was proud of me and wanted to introduce me to his friends.

"Hey, what are you guys doing here?" Ken asked with a big smile.

"Dylan is going to find out what they can do to fix his face today and we came with him because he's our friend." A young boy said before anyone else could answer.

Ken smiled and said, "Rory, this is Obie. The guy that he won't let go of is Dylan. The other two guys are Jerico and Paul."

"Hi." I said shyly as I looked at the group of people curiously.

When I saw Dylan's shy expression I understood exactly what he was thinking.

He was feeling self-conscious and thought that everyone was staring at his face.

"Are your legs hurt or something?" Obie asked as he looked at my wheelchair.

Silence fell over our group as everyone seemed to be shocked by Obie asking the blunt question.

"Yeah. Something like that. They stopped working a few years ago." I said, and was surprised that I didn't feel the least bit uncomfortable talking about it.

"So is that why you're here?" Obie asked curiously.

"Yeah. There's a Vulcan doctor here that's going to look at me to see if he can fix them." I said with a smile at the boy.

I looked around and noticed that Kevin, Jake, Xain and Reuben had joined us.

Reuben walked up to me and hugged me from the side.

"Hi Reuben, how are you doing today?" I asked gently.

"I'm good. Kevin stayed at my house last night." Reuben said happily.

"Did you have fun?" I asked as I returned the hug with my good arm.

"Uh huh. We read lots of books and Kevin drew a picture." Reuben said happily.

Everyone got quiet and I turned in time to see another car pull into the parking lot.

"It's Uncle Chip!" Kevin said happily and broke away from the group.

"Hey Rory, how are you doing today?" Jake asked from my other side.

I released Reuben and said, "I'm doing great. It's really great to have all of you here." I said with a smile at him.

"We wouldn't miss it. And this gives Xain a chance to visit with his dad." Jake said as he put a casual arm around Xain.

I smiled at the gesture and reached up to take hold of Ken's hand.

"Rory, I want you to meet my dad." Lawrence said as he led a man toward us.

The man had blond hair and light blue eyes just like Lawrence.

"Rory Teeter, this is my dad, Joe Bowers." Lawrence said happily.

"Hi. It's nice to meet you." I said as I looked at him.

"It's nice to meet you too Rory." Joe said, then started looking around for someone.

Lawrence followed his father's gaze and called out, "Vince, come over here, I want you to meet Rory."

A younger boy walked over with a distinctly unhappy expression on his face.

"Rory, this is my brother Vincent. Vince, this is Rory Teeter, he's a friend of mine." Lawrence said as the boy approached.

"Hi." Vincent said, looking completely disinterested.

"Vince is unhappy because he has to see the doctor this morning." Lawrence said in an apologetic tone.

"I'm seeing the doctor too." I said, not sure if it would make Vincent be more at ease.

"Yeah. Sucks, don't it." Vincent said in a grumble.

"Not for me, but that's because the doctor might be able to make it so I can walk again." I said frankly.

Vincent looked down at my wheelchair, then reluctantly said, "Yeah. I guess that would make it not so bad."

A man approached us and it took me a moment to recognize him.

He was one of the doctors that I had seen on the terminal yesterday.

"Everyone, when I scheduled these appointments I didn't consider how much moral support these guys would be bringing with them. Since I have a waiting room instead of a convention center I'll need for my patients to come with me. Everyone else can go with Teri and Helen." Doc Austin said seriously.

"Right this way." A woman called from the other side of the large group of people.

As people started milling around, she added, "Come on everyone. Doctor's orders."

Doc Austin smiled at the statement, then said, "Right then. Rory, Dylan and Vincent, follow me."

"Can Ken come with me to push my wheelchair?" I asked quietly.

"That will be fine. Come on so we can get started." Doc Austin said and began to walk.

* * * * *

"Wait in here for a minute while I check to see if Solak is ready." Doc Austin said and left us in his waiting room.

"What happened to your face?" Vincent asked as he looked at Dylan curiously.

"I got shot." Dylan said frankly.

"With a gun?" Vincent asked in surprise.

Dylan flashed the 'Duh' look at him, then said, "Yeah."

After a long moment of silence, Vincent quietly asked, "Can I see?"

"Why?" Dylan asked with irritation.

"I guess because I don't like things being hidden from me. Even if it's really gross, I'd rather see than not know." Vincent said seriously.

Dylan considered for a moment, then reached up and pulled back the edge of the bandage.

I turned away before I could get more than a glimpse of the raw flesh that the bandage was hiding.

"Wow. That's really gross... kewl!" Vincent said in fascination.

I felt Ken's hand on my shoulder and looked up to find him looking down at me with concern.

I smiled up at Ken and took hold of his hand.

"Are you guys fags?" Vincent asked frankly.

I was so shocked by the question that I couldn't answer.

"Wait, wait. I said that wrong..." Vincent said quickly, then said, "I mean, are you guys gay?"

"Yeah." Ken said from above me and didn't sound very happy.

"I'm sorry I said it that way. I'm trying not to say stuff like that, I just... forget." Vincent said, then gave a little shrug.

Before Ken could answer I said, "As long as you're trying, it's okay."

I glanced up to see Ken nod his agreement.

"What about you? Are you gay too?" Vincent asked as he looked at Dylan seriously.

"Why do you want to know?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"Just because I want to know." Vincent said as he held Dylan's gaze.

I looked back and forth between the two as they seemed to be locked into a staring contest.

Finally Vincent said, "I guess if I know someone is gay, then I can be careful about how I talk and what I do and stuff like that. If I know someone isn't gay then I can just be me."

"Why don't you just be yourself all the time?" Dylan asked curiously.

"Because I say stuff like 'queer' and 'fag' sometimes. I don't mean to, it's just that that's the way my dad talked so..." Vincent trailed off uncomfortably.

"So you figured out that it's wrong but it's a habit so you do it without thinking?" Ken asked cautiously as he moved from behind me to take the seat next to Dylan.

"Yeah. I don't try to be like that. It just happens." Vincent said quietly.

"I understand. Well, if you say something wrong while you're talking to me, I won't jump on you about it. How's that?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Thanks. It's funny, I lived my whole life one way, then in one day everything changed and I have to learn how to be another way." Vincent said absently.

"That happened to me too." Dylan said in thought.

"What happened?" Vincent asked curiously.

"It's a really long story and I don't feel like talking about most of it. The important part is that the guys I hung around with shot some people so the people they hung around with shot me." Dylan said uncomfortably.

"Maybe you shouldn't be hanging around with people like that." Vincent said quietly.

Dylan nodded and said, "I didn't have a lot of choices back then, but I'm in a lot better place now and I think everything is going to be better."

"So why are you here Vincent?" I asked curiously.

"I got a bump on my head a few days ago and had to go to the hospital. Doc Austin looked at it on Wednesday, but wants to see me again today to make sure it's all better. And I think from what Commander Dodds said on the way over here, I'm going to be getting a complete physical too." Vincent said without enthusiasm.

The door to the waiting room opened, then Doc Austin said, "Ken, would you please take Rory to room one so Solak can prepare him for the exam. Vincent and Dylan, you can both come with me."

Vincent looked at me as he stood and I got the feeling that he was still feeling bad about what he had said.

"Hold on Ken, I need to say one more thing to Vincent." I said over my shoulder.

Vincent stopped and looked at me curiously.

"I really understand Vincent. I promise that you can be yourself with me and I won't get mad if you say something that sounds wrong." I said with assurance.

"Okay. Thanks. I'm working on it and I'm really trying to be better." Vincent said shyly.

"Just keep trying. You've already figured out that saying those things is wrong. That was the hardest part." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

Vincent nodded, then walked to Doc Austin and Dylan who were waiting on him at the door.

* * * * *

Ken pushed me into examination room one where Solak was fussing with some weird looking electronic stuff.

Before we got completely into the room he turned to face us and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you in person Mr. Teeter and it is good to see you again nephew."

I couldn't help but giggle at being called 'Mr. Teeter' and said, "Please call me Rory."

"As you like." Solak said as he walked to my side.

"I will now relocate you to the biobed so we can take some preliminary readings." Solak said seriously as he reached down to pick me up.

"Would you like me to help?" Ken asked quickly.

"No nephew, that will not be necessary." Solak said as he picked me up.

From the way he did it, you'd think I was light as a feather.

"Wow. You're really strong." I said with amazement.

"Vulcans are typically stronger than Humans." Solak said without inflection as he gently placed me on the bed.

"How are you feeling Rory? Have you been having any discomfort?" Solak asked curiously as he worked the controls at the head of the biobed.

"No, not really. Since Xain did his relaxation thing on me, I've been really comfortable." I said in thought.

"That is good. These preliminary readings show you to be in acceptable health..." Solak trailed off as he started keying in different instructions.

"Is something wrong?" Ken asked from my side.

After a moment of looking at the readings, Solak said, "No. On the contrary, certain of your readings far exceed the norms of what is considered to be 'healthy' in Humans."

"I bet it's your mom's cooking." Ken said with a grin.

I smiled back at him and nodded.

"Please explain." Solak said as he turned his complete attention to us.

"Um, well. Since Rory got sick his mom has been getting health food for him to try to make him better." Ken said with difficulty.

"Health food?" Solak asked curiously.

"Yeah, it's food that's been grown without any chemical fertilizers or growth hormones or anything like that. She thinks that all the artificial junk that they put in food was making me get worse." I said with difficulty.

"Fascinating." Solak said, then started running another set of scans.

"Does that mean that the health food actually helped?" Ken asked curiously.

"I cannot say at this point, but my preliminary readings suggest that your exceptional level of overall health may have allowed your body to stop the progression of the neural degradation." Solak said carefully.

"So mom's cooking might have stabilized me." I said to Ken in case he didn't get what Solak was saying.

"Perhaps." Solak said as he looked at the new readings on the biobed intently.

"So does that mean that you're going to be able to help Rory?" Ken asked hopefully.

"I cannot say at this point. Currently I am running the standard diagnostic tests to assess Rory's overall condition. When Doctor Michaels has joined us, I will begin my examination of Rory's DNA patterns to positively identify the

cause of his condition and then determine if the genetic replacement therapy I have developed will be of any benefit to him." Solak said as he started another set of scans.

"Um, okay." Ken said quietly.

Solak stopped his work and looked at us appraisingly for a moment, then said, "While we wait for Doctor Michaels to join us, perhaps I could perform another neural alignment treatment?"

I thought for a moment, then realized that he was offering to do what Xain did yesterday.

"Sure, if you think we have time." I said hopefully.

"I will be able to stop the therapy at any time without adverse consequence." Solak said as he placed his fingertips gently on my neck, then picked up my bad arm with his other hand.

"So you can stop when Doc Austin gets here and start back up when you're done with your exam?" Ken asked in confirmation.

"That is correct nephew." Solak said casually.

"Do we need to be quiet so you can concentrate?" I asked cautiously.

"That will not be necessary. I am accustomed to talking during neural alignment treatments." Solak said in a somewhat distant voice.

"So you do this a lot?" Ken asked curiously.

"No. But she who was my wife had a condition similar to Rory's. We would typically have a conversation during her neural alignment treatments." Solak said without emotion.

"So she had what I've got and now she's dead?" I asked as a tingle of fear ran through my entire body.

"No. I do not believe that you have the same condition. The symptomology is not the same. But her condition did lead to the eventual failure of each of her internal organs and finally her brain." Solak said distantly.

I felt Ken take hold of my good hand and give it a firm squeeze.

"Rory, would you please attempt to make a fist with your left hand?" Solak asked quietly.

I looked down at my left hand and was surprised to see that it was laying out flat.

After a moment of concentration, I was able to get it to make a fist.

"Very good. Please relax again so I can complete this phase of the therapy."
Solak said calmly as he placed his hands on my neck and arm again.

I looked over at Ken to see him smiling at me happily.

I couldn't help but smile in return. I have two hands... my world just got even bigger.

Chapter 10

"Sorry to keep you waiting Solak. I just wanted to get the others settled. Once you've started the scan on Rory, perhaps you could take a look at another patient with me. I'd really like a second opinion." Doc Austin said in a rushed tone.

"That would be acceptable. Before we begin the genetic sequencing scan, could you perhaps look at Rory's cellular viability? I have not been in practice for some time and would not wish to misinterpret the data." Solak said, as he stepped to the monitor at the head of my bed.

"Well, would you look at that." Doc Austin said in wonder.

"So, I am not mistaken in my assumption that these readings are not typical?" Solak confirmed.

"I should say not... let's look at his muscle tissue. I would be interested to see his pyridoxine and glutamine absorption rates." Doc Austin said in a voice of deep concentration.

Solak pressed a few keys, then both doctors looked at the readings intently.

"Amazing." Doc Austin finally said.

"Rory has stated that his mother has been feeding him 'health food'." Solak said slowly.

"We need to talk to her. From the look of this, she may have actually stumbled onto an effective treatment." Doc Austin said intently.

"I concur. Perhaps we should begin the genetic sequencing, then contact Mrs. Teeter?" Solak asked speculatively.

"Rory, did your mom come with you today?" Doc Austin asked, hopefully.

"Yeah. She's with the other adults." I said, not entirely sure what they were talking about.

"Very well. The biobed is equipped for the required level of precision for the preliminary genetic sequencing. The process is somewhat time consuming, but the result is a complete genetic map which includes the protein linkages." Solak said, as he began programming the controls of the biobed.

"Do you think you could show me how to set it to do that? I can program a genetic scan, but I haven't had much luck getting that level of precision." Doc Austin asked, as he watched Solak's every move.

"Certainly, Doctor. It is not common to need such a level of precision, therefore the process is somewhat convoluted." Solak said, as he continued to work.

Doc Austin took a step back from Solak and quietly said, "Kenny, you're going to need to let go of Rory while the genetic sequencing runs. You can stay in the room, but the bed is going to be doing some very precise work and it would make it run slower if it had to compensate for you holding his hand."

"Okay. I can do that." Ken said shyly from my side.

"Rory. All you need to do is remain in place while the biobed scans you. When the sequencing is complete, we will return to begin the next phase of the examination." Solak said impassively as he stepped away from the controls.

"Yeah. No problem." I said and noticed that I felt a little sleepy.

I guess Solak doing his relaxing thing on my left arm probably did that.

"Let's stop by the reception desk and call the main house, then I'd like for you to look at Dylan."

* * * * *

"How are you doing?" Ken asked me as soon as we were alone.

The love in his eyes filled me with so much joy that I just wanted to cry with happiness.

"I'm fine. I have two hands again Ken." I said as I smiled up at him.

"Yeah. I'm really glad you're getting better... I love you." Ken finished in a whisper.

I smiled at the quiet declaration and immediately responded just as quietly, "I love you too."

"Hey guys!"

Ken and I were both startled and turned at the same time to see a blond kid standing in the doorway.

"Hi Cory! You haven't met Rory yet have you?" Ken asked happily.

"No. So far, I've only heard the stories." Cory said with an impish grin.

Cute.

There was no other word I could think of to describe him.

"It's nice to meet you Rory." Cory said as he walked farther into the room.

"It's nice to meet you too. I'd shake your hand but I'm being scanned right now." I said, a little bit shyly.

At first glance, I might have thought he was handsome but I would have been wrong. This guy was the textbook definition of cute.

"So, what stories have you been hearing?" Ken asked curiously.

"Well, after I received the report about your emergency beam out last night, I did a little checking around to make sure that there weren't any loose ends to tie up. I ended up talking with a very impressed transporter tech. If you guys ever set up a fan club, I've got your first member lined up." Cory finished with a smile.

"It wasn't really that much. We just helped a guy who was trying to handle something that was a little too big for him." Ken said quietly.

"It may not have been that much to you. But from what I've heard about the incident, I think you probably saved that guy's life last night." Cory said frankly.

Ken glanced over at me and was obviously as speechless as I was at the declaration.

"We're going to have a Clan meeting tonight. I thought that if Rory isn't busy, maybe he could attend?" Cory said in a hesitant tone.

"Really? That would be so awesome!" Ken said quickly, then turned to me and asked, "Do you think your folks will let you?"

I thought for a moment, then said, "I don't know. Maybe."

There's just no way I can predict what their reaction might be. They've been protecting me for so long and always knowing where I am and what I'm doing, I just don't know how they would feel about me doing something like this.

"I'll talk to my mom and get her to work on them. If you want to go, I'm pretty sure we'll be able to get them to go along with it." Cory said with his impish grin back in place.

With his golden hair and pixie smile, this guy could probably charm a leprechaun out of his gold.

"Do you want to Rory? I promise that it'll be great!" Ken said quickly and was nearly bouncing with his excitement.

I couldn't help but laugh at his hopeful expression and finally said, "Yes. I'd love to attend your meeting."

"Awesome. I'm going to go now and talk to mom so she can get to work on your parents." Cory said quickly.

Before I could say 'thanks' or 'bye' or anything like that, he was rushing out of the room.

Ken turned back to me and his happy smile said it all.

I have no idea what goes on at a 'clan meeting' but from the look of happiness on Ken's face... it doesn't really matter. Whatever it is, we'll be there together.

* * * * *

"Can I come in?" A small voice asked from the doorway.

"Sure Vincent, come on in. What's up?" Ken asked happily.

"The doctors are still in with Dylan and I got bored. I asked them if I could come in here and wait until they're done." He said timidly.

"Well, there's not much going on here. Rory has to stay in the bed while it scans him, but you're welcome to sit here with us and watch the buttons blink." Ken said with a warm smile.

"Thanks." Vincent said quietly.

"What's going on Vincent? You seem kinda down." Ken asked with concern.

"Oh. I guess that since my mom and dad are dead, and now my brother has a home with Billy and Deacon... I'm feeling kind of... alone." Vincent said quietly.

"Is it okay if I hug you?" Ken asked quietly.

Vincent looked at him uncertainly and didn't seem to know what to say.

"Vincent, hugging isn't a gay thing or a straight thing. It's a human thing. It's a way for one person to show another that he cares." Ken said seriously.

"But you can't care about me. You don't know me." Vincent said, and he looked as if he was being held back from hugging Ken by the slightest thread of self control.

Ken seemed to be at a loss for what to say next, so I said, "Your brother is Lawrence, right?"

"Yeah." Vincent said quietly.

"Do you think he's feeling alone right now?" I asked in a leading tone.

Vincent thought for a moment, then said, "No. He's got Billy and Deacon... They're like his family now."

"So maybe that's what you need." I said carefully.

Vincent looked at me with a helpless and lost expression that broke my heart.

"We don't know you yet, but maybe if we get to know each other we could be kind of like that for you too." I said quietly.

Vincent's eyes filled with tears as he said, "When you got to know me, you wouldn't want to be my friends. You'd probably hate me."

Ken didn't wait any longer for Vincent to agree. He took one step and pulled Vincent into a hug.

"I don't think I could ever hate you Vincent. If you ever need us, we'll be here for you. We can be your friends or family or even brothers if that's what you want." I said quietly.

"That's right. Just decide what you need us to be and we'll be that for you." Ken said as he brought up a hand and gently guided Vincent's head to his chest.

I watched silently as Ken hugged Vincent gently.

Finally, in a voice so low I could barely hear it, I heard Vincent mutter, "Thanks."

Ken turned his head and smiled at me.

All I could do is smile in return.

* * * * *

Footsteps in the hallway alerted us that someone was coming.

Vincent slowly pulled away from Ken's chest and wiped the tears from his eyes.

Doc Austin and Solak walked into the room and went directly to the head of the biobed without a word.

After a moment of looking over the readings, Solak said, "The scan is fifty-seven percent complete."

"Good. That should give us plenty of time." Doc Austin said happily.

Ken, Vincent and I were looking at the doctors with matching expressions of question.

"If you guys wouldn't mind, we're going to take Vincent in for his exam while your scan completes." Doc Austin said with a casual smile.

"Can I go too?" Ken asked quietly.

Doc Austin looked at Ken with an expression of mild surprise.

"If it's okay with Vincent, I'd like to go with him for his exam... you know. Just so he won't be alone." Ken finished timidly.

"Is that okay with you Vincent?" Doc Austin asked cautiously.

Vincent looked up at Ken for a moment, then turned to Doc Austin and shyly nodded.

"Then you two come with me. We should be able to get this over with before Rory's scan completes." Doc Austin said cheerfully.

"Perhaps Mr. Chang would like to visit with Rory while we wait for the call from your colleague in Austria?" Solak suggested from beside my bed.

Doc Austin paused for a moment, then said, "That sounds like a good idea. Would you get him while I get started with Vincent?"

Solak gave a half bow, half nod of agreement, then started for the door.

"Who is Mr. Chang?" I asked quickly before Solak was completely out of the room.

"I believe you know him as Dylan."

* * * * *

"If you wait here, I will return shortly." Solak said as he guided Dylan into the room.

"Hey Dylan. How are you doing?" I asked timidly.

Dylan wasn't that much older than me but... somehow from the short time that we had talked in the waiting room, he just seemed a lot more grown up.

"I'm okay I guess." Dylan said, as he took a seat in one of the chairs by the door.

"You sound a little depressed. Do you want to talk about it?" I asked cautiously.

Dylan smiled and maybe even chuckled a little bit before he answered.

"There's so much going on right now that I wouldn't know where to start. I don't even know what I'm feeling." Dylan said in a desperate voice.

"Well, I guess it's like that for me too. My stuff is a whole lot different from yours, but my life completely changed since two days ago." I said honestly.

Dylan nodded silently.

"Is it anything I can help with?" I asked cautiously.

After a moment, Dylan shook his head.

Conversation usually works best when two people participate, but Dylan didn't seem to be in the mood for that.

As uncomfortable as it was, I decided that it would be better for me to go ahead and talk than for the two of us to sit in silence.

"You don't have to tell me about what's wrong if you don't want to. But Ken and I were just telling Vincent that he doesn't have to be alone if he doesn't want to be." I said carefully.

Dylan hesitantly raised his gaze from the floor before him and looked at me with mild interest.

"I guess both his parents were killed and now he doesn't have a home and to top it off, his brother has kind of been adopted into a new family." I rambled.

Dylan continued to stare at me, but his expression didn't change.

"So Ken and I said that if he wanted, we could be there for him if he needs us. We could be his friends or family or even brothers. All he has to do is decide what he needs us to be for him." I said quietly.

Dylan nodded a little, then his gaze seemed to become distant.

He seems to be a nice enough guy, but he really sucks at the conversation thing.

Finally, after a long silence, Dylan quietly said, "I guess I'm going to have to do that too."

I thought about the vague statement, but finally had to ask, "Do what?"

He looked at me as if he just remembered I was in the room, then quietly said, "The place where I'm staying now, over at Camp Little Eagle... all the guys have been really nice and have been trying to get me to... I don't know... join them or accept them or something. I just don't really know how."

I nodded that I understood.

"I didn't know how to... I don't know... It's like they want me to be something and I don't know how to be that. But what you said makes sense. If I can decide what I need them to be for me, then maybe we can pull it all together and I'll really be able to become a part of their family. It's all just so new to me." Dylan said distantly.

"If you ever need someone outside the camp to talk to about stuff, you can always come over to my house or call me. Sometimes it's good to have someone to talk to who's not a part of what's going on." I said cautiously.

Dylan seemed to think about that for a moment, then his expression broke into a small smile.

"Yeah. I think maybe you're right. Talking to someone who doesn't have a stake in what's going to happen might be a good thing."

"I'm here right now if you've got anything you'd like to talk about." I said carefully.

Dylan sat silently for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

"Yeah. When we got here you remember meeting Obie don't you?" Dylan asked quietly.

"The hyper kid?" I asked carefully.

Dylan chuckled and said, "Yeah, that's Obie."

I nodded and waited to see what his problem was.

"I've gotten by this far by not letting anyone get too close to me. That way when they leave or die or whatever, it doesn't hurt as much. But I share a room with Obie and he's been working his little heart out trying to be my friend... it scares me." Dylan finished in a whisper.

"Dylan. I know it's scary to let someone get close to you. You may have different reasons than I do, but I think everyone is scared of being hurt...." I trailed off in thought.

A moment later, when I'd gotten my thoughts together I continued, "... that's probably the main reason most lonely people are alone. I guess it comes down to a choice. Do you want to be happy, even if it may only be for a little while, or do you want to go through your life being alone?"

"I don't want to be alone." Dylan said in a whisper as he looked at the floor.

"Then don't be." I said quietly.

"It's easy to say, but it's not that easy to do." Dylan countered.

"You'll get no argument from me on that one." I said seriously.

A moment of silence fell between us as we both considered what had been said.

Finally I whispered, "Can I tell you something kind of personal?"

Dylan looked at me consideringly for a moment, then finally nodded.

"I've been sick for a long time. My arms and legs didn't work, and I couldn't really even talk. I couldn't feed myself or go to the bathroom by myself or anything. I was like that for over a year. I was completely alone." I said quietly.

Dylan reluctantly nodded.

"Yesterday I met some guys and... well, it's a long story, but you can see how I am now. I can talk and I have two hands that work." I said carefully.

Dylan nodded again to indicate that he was following.

"Ken and his brothers have all become my friends and I couldn't feel closer to them if they were my own family. What I'm trying to get at is that I've been as alone as any person can possibly be. I know how it feels and I would do anything to keep from feeling that way again. I would rather die than feel like that." I said intensely.

Dylan's eye went wide at the statement.

"So even if it's hard to let someone get close to you. I promise, it's worth it. Anything you have to do is worth it. If you don't have people in your life who care for you and that you care about in return, then what's the point of anything? If your life doesn't touch anyone else, then you could have never existed and it wouldn't matter, you're just going through the motions of living." I said with some difficulty as I tried to put my feelings into words.

"So you think that there is no point to even existing without other people?" Dylan asked cautiously.

"I think that you can make a difference in other peoples lives just by being there and letting them know you. Once you've been able to do that, your existence matters." I said honestly.

Before Dylan could respond, Ken walked back into the room with Vincent held close to his side.

"You gay guys sure give great hugs." Vincent said with a chuckle.

I smiled at the statement and nodded my agreement.

"Dylan, Doc Austin wanted me to tell you that he'll meet you in your examination room in a minute. He's talking to another doctor about your face right now." Ken said casually.

"Thanks." Dylan said shyly, then started walking toward the door.

When Dylan reached the door, he paused to look at me, then gave me a brief ghost of a smile.

I smiled in return, as I watched him go.

Ken guided Vincent to sit with him in the chairs by the door.

"So Vincent, how was your exam?" I asked casually.

"I passed." Vincent said happily.

"Doc Austin checked out his head, then did a physical. Vincent checked out as one hundred percent fine." Ken said as he gave Vincent a quick one armed hug.

"That's good to hear. Do you have any idea when Solak and Doc Austin will be coming back in here?" I asked curiously.

"Well, I think they're going to be talking with that doctor on the comm and doing stuff with Dylan for a few minutes, but I don't think that will take too long, from the way it sounded." Ken said cheerfully.

"Good, I didn't think the exam was going to take this long." I said as I rested back.

"You'll probably be wishing you could come back and get in this bed again before the weekend is over." Ken said with a chuckle.

"Why is that?" I asked curiously.

"Because we're probably going to be roaming around Orlando the whole weekend sightseeing. Lawrence and I are the only ones who live here so we'll be conducting the tour." Ken said happily.

"Hey! What about me?" Vincent groused.

"Sorry Vincent. Of course you're from here too. But remember, you said that you probably couldn't go on much sightseeing with us. I was just thinking that Lawrence and I would kind of be the guides for everyone else." Ken said, still looking cheerful.

From the look on Vincent's face, I could tell that he wasn't completely buying the explanation and somehow he felt that he was being excluded from his rightful place.

"How about this, Vincent? When you're with us and we're visiting someplace you've been before, you can be the tour guide." Ken asked carefully.

"That'll work." Vincent said happily.

I smiled at Vincent's immediate change in mood and at the skillful way that Ken handled the situation.

Ken is really good with kids.

Watching Ken with Ricardo had been a wonderful experience, and now to see him work his magic on Vincent...

We're going to have lots of kids, we have to...

... and someday may not be as far a way as I had originally thought.

* * * * *

"Sorry that took so long, but I promise that it was worth the wait." Doc Austin said with a smile.

"Yeah. That Australian doctor said he could fix my face." Dylan said happily.

"He's Austrian." Doc Austin corrected quietly.

Dylan turned to look at Doc Austin and asked, "Is there a difference?"

Doc Austin smiled and said, "Yes. Actually, there is."

Dylan shrugged and said, "Whatever. I never was very good at geology."

Doc Austin appeared to be ready to say something when he seemed to think better of it and instead said, "It's only a possibility at this point. My

colleague said that he will have to examine you himself before he can make any promises about the outcome."

Dylan rolled his eye dismissively then continued, "So anyway, this German sounding doctor who does this micro surgery thing says he can do a skin graft that doesn't leave any scars. He said that it might take a long time to get all the surgeries done, but when he's finished I'll look just like I used to."

"Um... Where is he going to get the skin?" Vincent asked curiously.

Dylan stared at Vincent for a moment, then quietly said, "He didn't say."

"The skin for the grafts will probably be taken from your thighs and buttocks." Doc Austin said seriously.

There was a moment of silence before Vincent burst out laughing.

Dylan stared at Vincent with his one good eye, waiting for him to calm down.

Finally Vincent noticed Dylan's stare and said, "Just don't tell anyone... then... then get them to kiss you on the cheek!"

Everyone in the room watched as Vincent crumbled to the floor in laughter.

After a moment, Doc Austin said, "Come on you guys. You're both done. Why don't you go on up to the house where everyone else is waiting?"

"Can we stay here and wait for Rory to be finished?" Vincent asked hopefully.

Doc Austin seemed surprised at the question.

"Yeah. We'd really like to wait if that'd be okay." Dylan said quietly.

After a moment of consideration, Doc Austin said, "Yes. I don't think this will take very long now that the sequencing is done. You can wait in the outer office if you like."

"We'll see you when you're done." Vincent said happily as he walked toward the door..

Dylan flashed me another one of those quick 'stealth' smiles, then walked out of the room with Vincent at his side.

* * * * *

Solak walked into the room briskly and began to examine the readings at the head of my biobed.

"Yes. It is as I suspected." Solak said as he looked at the screen carefully.

"I'm sorry, but I don't read genetic codes often enough to be able to interpret them in their raw form like this." Doc Austin said timidly.

"It is a specialized skill." Solak said without concern as he moved to a computer terminal set up beside the bed.

He keyed in some commands, then something that I recognized came on the screen.

A 3D representation of a double helix appeared, then a moment later, the picture zoomed in on one segment.

"This is the genetic sequence of concern to us." Solak said as he pointed at the screen.

"So are you proposing that we replace that genetic sequence with one that would function properly?" Doc Austin asked cautiously.

"That would be the Human way of correcting the problem. However, it would not work in this instance. Such a treatment would radically alter the patient's neural physiology and, assuming that the patient survived, he would require almost constant replacement therapy for the duration of his life." Solak said instructively.

"Let's not do that." I said quietly, understanding enough of what they were saying to know that it was something really horrible.

Doc Austin looked at me with an expression of surprise, apparently having forgotten that I was in the room.

"Do not be concerned Rory. My genetic therapy operates on a more fundamental scale. Rather than replace the offending sequence, we will simply modify the existing sequence so it will behave properly." Solak said carefully, and I swear that he almost sounded assuring.

"I don't understand how you can do that. I've never heard of anything that could effect DNA on that scale." Doc Austin said cautiously.

"It would be unlikely that you would be familiar with the technique, since it is my own creation and is in the process of being refined. Once all the permutations have been charted, I will publish my findings and make the technique publicly available." Solak said slowly.

"If it's in such an early stage of development, how safe will it be for Rory?" Doc Austin asked with concern.

"There are of course risks, as there are with any experimental treatment, but allow me to pose the question, what would be the consequence of withholding the treatment?" Solak asked, then turned to Doc Austin to wait for an answer.

After a moment of thought, Doc Austin quietly said, "Right."

"What is it?" I asked, barely understanding what they were talking about.

"Hold on a second Rory, then I'll tell you." Doc Austin said absently.

"Rory is at a point where the neural tissue is not degrading. This is necessary if the treatment is to be effective. Time is of the essence." Solak said firmly.

"I think I understand. If you can begin to alter his existing genetic sequences while he's stable, the natural process of cellular replacement will work in your favor and eventually you will have done away with all the defective sequences." Doc Austin said speculatively.

"Yes. That is the underlying principle of the therapy." Solak said cautiously.

Doc Austin shook his head and said, "I would have to work non-stop for years to develop a treatment on this scale."

"The process has been in development for nine years and all reasonable precautions have been taken. I am at a point in the development process where a clinical trial is warranted." Solak said in a neutral tone.

There was a long moment of silence, then Doc Austin said, "I think we should get Rory's parents in here and explain your findings."

"Perhaps it would be most advantageous to explain to Rory first so he can begin to process the new information." Solak said, as he looked at Doc Austin curiously.

"Right." Doc Austin said reluctantly.

"Rory... Kenny, why don't you get on the bed beside Rory before we begin?" Doc Austin said in a distracted voice.

Ken hopped up on the table beside me, then helped me to sit up.

Once we were sitting side by side, Ken leaned over and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Okay. I guess it's really pretty simple." Doc Austin began.

Solak quirked an eyebrow at the statement.

Ken and I both started to chuckle at his surprised expression.

Doc Austin smiled, then continued, "From what we can see here, the condition that caused Rory's legs to stop working is an extremely small genetic defect. It's so small that regular genetic therapy wouldn't work to correct it. I suppose I could compare it to treating a broken toe by amputating the entire leg."

Solak gave Doc Austin an incredulous look, but didn't interrupt.

"Since regular gene therapy won't work, Solak developed a technique that can go in and fix only what is wrong... probably. But it has to be started immediately. Rory is currently stable, but if his condition begins to progress again, then the therapy might not be able to keep up with the degradation and could fail completely."

"So you're saying that you can probably fix me and that I have to start the treatment right away?" I asked speculatively.

"Yes." Solak responded before Doc Austin could answer.

"Is it something you can do here or would Rory have to go to Vulcan?" Ken asked quietly as he tightened his arm around me.

"The equipment that I would require is on Vulcan. There is no practical way that we could perform the process here in the allotted time." Solak said simply.

"For how long?" Ken asked in a quieter voice.

There was silence in the room as Solak considered his response.

"There are too many unknown variables for me to be able to answer that question with any degree of accuracy. However, I can safely say that the treatment will require no less than one standard year." Solak said slowly.

Ken's arm tightened again and I shifted a little so I could put my arm around him too.

Solak looked at us clutching each other desperately for a moment, then said, "The treatment is not such that Rory would be required to remain on Vulcan until he is completely recovered. It would be possible for him to return to Earth for short visits from time to time."

"And my pop goes to Vulcan a couple of times a year so I could probably visit you too." Ken said in a whisper.

"Yes. I am certain that K'war'ma'khon Allen would be agreeable to such an arrangement." Solak said impassively.

After another long moment of silence, Ken asked, "Is that it? Either Rory goes to Vulcan to get cured, or he doesn't?"

Doc Austin glanced at Solak with question at the very basic summary of the situation.

"Correct." Solak said seriously.

Ken turned to face me and said, "Then I guess that's it. Even though I hate that you're going to have to leave for a while, there's no way you're going to pass this up. I need for you to get all better so we can spend the rest of our lives together."

I stared wide eyed at the statement and I think my mouth might have fallen open.

"I love you Rory." Ken said, then moved in to give me a full, deep kiss.

"Guys... I think we'll go talk to Rory's parents now..." Doc Austin said hesitantly.

I felt Ken's arm move behind me and imagined that he must have given them a thumbs up or gestured 'OK'... hell, he might have flipped them off, for all I know. The important thing is that they left and Ken continued to kiss me.

When we broke apart, tears were streaming down Ken's cheeks.

"Marry me." Ken whispered.

I was stunned again, and this time I'm sure that my mouth fell open.

"I love you. I will always love you. I want to grow old with you beside me." Ken said seriously.

I was still in a daze at the intensity of the moment, but somehow I was able to make my mouth say, "Yes."

Ken smiled a full, beaming smile, then pulled me into another deep kiss.

I became lost in the sensation. Nothing else existed. Nothing else mattered.

Before I met Ken, I would have described my one true love to be someone older, someone that I could feel safe with... probably someone like Billy.

I never even thought that I could love someone like Ken.

He's younger than me. Hell, he's barely more than a child, but... it doesn't really matter.

I can't dismiss the feelings he says he has for me as being the fantasies of a child, because I have exactly the same feelings for him.

I'll go to Vulcan and go through this treatment because when it's all finished, I'll have forever with Ken waiting for me on the other side of it.

Forever.

* * * * *

As was common when Ken and I kissed, I lost all track of time.

But eventually, the kiss finally did break and we sat staring into each other's eyes.

A hesitant expression came over Ken's face when he asked, "When do you want to do it?"

"Get married?" I asked quietly.

Yeah. It was a stupid question. I know. It's just one of those things you say when the emotions are running so high.

Ken nodded slowly.

I thought about the question carefully.

What would my parents think? Would there even be a legal way we could do it?

The loving look in Ken's eyes brought everything back into perspective.

Nothing else mattered. Even if the law didn't recognize it, we would be married as soon as we said we were. My parents could just deal with it. It's not about them.

So what did matter? When did I want to get married?

I closed my eyes and tried to picture the moment of our wedding.

The two of us walking down an aisle, hand in hand, ready to swear before God and everyone we love, that we would share the rest of our lives.

Something about the scene in my mind's eye caught my attention and my eyes snapped open.

Ken was looking at me anxiously, still waiting for an answer.

"I'll marry you as soon as I can walk down the aisle on my own two feet." I said quietly.

Ken's anxious look turned to shock at my declaration.

From his expression, you'd think I'd just slapped him in the face.

I hurried to explain, "I love you Ken, and I want to marry you more than anything. But if we got married right now, it would be partly because we hurried to get it done before I had to leave. I'm going to go to Vulcan with Solak and work as hard as I possibly can to get better, so I can come home and marry you. I know that it might take years before I'm completely cured, so I'm not asking you to wait until my treatments are over. But the wheelchair means helplessness and dependence to me. It would really mean a lot to me if we could wait until I can stand beside you on my own two feet to declare my eternal love for you."

"Okay." Ken whispered, as he looked deeply into my eyes.

"Really?" I asked hesitantly, not quite sure how to interpret his expression.

Ken smiled and said, "Yeah, really. I don't want you to ever feel like I'm marrying you just so I can take care of you."

"I didn't mean..." I began to say.

"Rory. You never said it, but I could see it in your eyes. You're afraid that I only love you because you need me and that if you get better, I won't love you anymore." Ken said quietly.

Tears welled up in my eyes at the statement.

Even if I hadn't ever said those words, he was right... I was afraid of that.

"So we'll get married when you can walk down the aisle and stand beside me on your own two feet. That way, you'll know that the only reason that I'm there is because I love you." Ken said gently.

"I'm sorry Ken. I know you love me, I'm sorry..." I said as I hugged tightly to him.

"You don't have to be sorry for being scared or for worrying about things that seem too good to be true." He whispered into my ear.

"You *are* too good to be true." I whispered in return.

Ken began to chuckle, and after a moment I pulled away and looked at him with question.

"I'm a long way from being 'too good to be true'." he said with a smile.

"Name one thing that's wrong with you." I said, playfully.

"I'm a kid who grew up sheltered from the real world. I don't know anything about anything outside the walls of my house. I don't understand how people can allow greed to justify hurting other people who are poor or helpless. I don't understand how one person can hate another just because they're black or white or gay or whatever. I don't understand how people who have everything in the universe available to them can throw away their futures on things like drugs and alcohol... I guess what I'm saying is that I'm still just a little kid." Ken finished shyly.

I chuckled as I said, "If that's what it means to be a kid, then I hope you never grow up."

Ken put his arms around me and laid his head on my shoulder.

No one ever needed me before.

I never had to be the strong one.

I never had anyone trust me to make the decisions.

If Ken needs to do some growing up, then so do I, so I can be worthy of his trust and love.

Chapter 11

"Dylan's being a butthole!" Vincent exclaimed as Ken pushed me into the room.

I couldn't help but smile at the statement.

I looked Dylan in the eye and mock seriously asked, "Are you being a butthole Dylan?"

After rolling his eye at me, Dylan said, "Vincent wants to look under my bandage again, and I don't feel like showing it to him."

"See? He's being a butthole." Vincent said, as if Dylan had just proven his case for him.

"Why don't we go see if we can find the adults? They're probably wondering where we are by now." Ken said from behind me.

Vincent gave Dylan one final indignant glare, before standing and leading the way to the door.

Dylan looked at Ken and me, then gave a helpless shrug as if to say, 'kids!'.

* * * * *

"Does anyone know where we're going?" Ken asked as we stopped outside.

"Over there." Vincent said as he pointed then started walking.

The rest of us fell into line behind him.

"Have you been here before?" Ken asked Vincent curiously.

"No, but just look at that house. People live there. That's gotta be where they are." Vincent said with certainty.

I looked around at the other buildings in the Short Compound and realized that Vincent was actually right. The building we were walking toward was the only one that could easily be thought of as a 'home'.

* * * * *

"There they are! We were just about to send out a search party." Doc Austin said as we entered a large room.

"It would have helped if you had told us where you were going to be." Dylan said frankly.

Doc Austin stared at Dylan with surprise for a moment, then said in a considering voice, "You know, I probably should have thought of that. I'm

just not used to working out of this temporary office. I'll be glad when I'm moved into my permanent office at Camp Little Eagle, next week."

"How are you doing, Dylan? Is everything okay? Are they going to be able to fix your face to like it was before?" Obie asked in one continuous verbal barrage.

"Anyone got a phaser?" Dylan asked as he looked around the gathering.

Obie got a confused look, then it turned to shyness as he said, "I'm sorry Dylan. I didn't mean to do that."

Dylan gave Obie a warm smile and said, "It's fine, Obie. Lets go find Jerico and Paul and I'll tell you what the doctor said."

"They're right over there, talking to Jake and Xain, come on!" Obie said with excitement as he tugged on Dylan's hand.

"It was nice to meet you guys. I've got to go." Dylan said over his shoulder to us.

"I can see that." I said with a chuckle as I watched Obie pulling him away.

"We'd better get going Champ. Commander Dodds and I have been talking about everything that needs to be done before Sunday and we don't have a minute to waste." A man said quickly as he approached us.

For a moment, I didn't remember who he was, but one look at his pale blue eyes was all it took for me to be sure. It was Lawrence's father.

"What do we have to do?" Vincent asked curiously from beside me.

"I'll tell you on the way. I'm serious, we have *no* time." Joe said firmly.

"We're ready." Lawrence said, as he walked up to us with Deacon at his side.

"Bye guys." Vincent said quickly, then was whisked away as they all but ran out of the room.

"Bye." I said in the direction of the door.

"Come on over here, Skeeter. We're just getting the last few things worked out." My dad called from across the room.

"Last chance to run." Ken whispered from behind me.

"Let's go find out what they've decided." I said as I craned my neck to look up at Ken.

"Just a second." My dad said to the other adults, then walked over to me and Ken.

Without a word, he leaned in to give me a tight hug, then lifted me out of my wheelchair.

"Would you park that out of the way somewhere Ken? I don't think we'll be needing it for a little while." Dad said as he half hugged, half carried me over to the other adults.

I glanced back to see Ken push my wheelchair against the nearest wall, then he hurried to join us.

I quickly mouthed the words, 'Love you.' to him.

Ken gave me a bright smile, then mouthed, 'Love you.' in return.

"You're going to Vulcan." Dad said, drawing my full attention.

"When?" I asked quietly.

"Sunday night. Commander Dodds has already made all the arrangements and Solak will be traveling with you." Dad said seriously.

I glanced at Ken helplessly, not even wanting to think about having to leave him so soon after meeting him.

"My Pop goes to Vulcan all the time. I'll be able to visit you a lot." Ken said seriously.

"And, if Allen will allow it, Ken could also visit when your mother has to go to Vulcan." Dad said with a secretive smile.

I puzzled over that for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "Why would Mom need to go to Vulcan?"

"Preliminary evidence suggests that some ingredient or combination of ingredients in the diet 'she who is your mother' prepared for you has had the effect of stabilizing your condition. With the aid of 'she who is your mother', we are going to attempt to isolate the ingredient or ingredients, so the effect may be duplicated for the benefit of others." Solak said seriously.

I thought about what he was saying, then in my most emotionless tone I said, "I see the logic."

"And Dr. Solak says that you won't have to stay on Vulcan all the time when he's treating you. You'll be able to come back to Earth to visit us too." Dad said frankly.

"Kenny, we need to be going now. They'll be delivering Juana's things from Chicago sometime this afternoon." Allen said slowly.

"Is there any way I can stay with Rory?" Ken asked hopefully.

"He'd be welcomed. And they've only got this weekend left." Dad said to Allen, gently.

Allen smiled and said, "If you're sure it won't be a problem. I can imagine that you'll want to have some time alone with your family before Rory has to leave."

"That's true, but it's no problem since Ken is part of our family now." Dad said as he looked at Ken warmly.

"We'll be at the house all day if you need anything." Allen said, directing his statement toward Ken.

"I'll be fine." Ken said with assurance.

"Actually, we should be going too. Tell Billy we'll talk to him more about the photo shoot tonight." Dad said cheerfully.

"I'll tell him." Allen said, then motioned to Jake to come to him.

"I just need to say something to Commander Dodds, then we should be going." Dad said in thought.

"What do we need to do?" I asked curiously.

"Pack." Dad said frankly as he walked us across the room.

* * * * *

"Commander Dodds, I just wanted to be sure to stop by and offer my best wishes. I hope that you and your husband have a wonderful time on your second honeymoon." Dad said warmly.

"Who told you?" Commander Dodds asked curiously.

"Allen and Billy mentioned it while we were talking." Dad said seriously.

"Did they happen to tell you where I'm going on my second honeymoon?" Commander Dodds asked hopefully.

"You know, as a matter of fact they did." Dad said with a smile.

"Where?"

"I was told that if I told you, I would face the full wrath of someone named Mona. Even though I haven't met her, seeing Allen and Billy's reactions made me take the threat seriously." Dad said frankly.

"I suppose I'll find out in a few hours." Commander Dodds said with resignation.

"They told me what they've planned and I think that if you give it a chance, you'll really enjoy it." Dad said in a more gentle voice.

"I'll do my best." Commander Dodds said in a voice that was somewhere between a grumble and a growl.

"There's your mother, let's go get her so we can go." Dad said to me, then hurried away.

I looked over Dad's shoulder to see Ken following only a step behind.

* * * * *

"Doris, are you ready to go?" Dad asked as we approached a small gathering.

"Yes. I need to get home so I can start cooking." Mom said quickly.

"Really, you don't need to go to all that trouble." A woman said with concern.

"It would be more trouble for me to try to describe the differences in taste and texture. I'll cook up a few things and bring them with me when we bring the boys over." Mom said seriously.

"Whatever you say, Doris. I have to admit, I'm really anxious to taste test some of your recipes."

I glanced over at Ken in time to see him get a queasy look.

I smiled at him and blew him a small kiss.

Ken broke into a big smile and... well, everything seemed alright.

* * * * *

"So are we coming back here tonight?" I asked once we were all settled into the car.

"Oh, no one told you about that?" Dad asked with surprise.

"About what?" I asked cautiously.

"There's going to be something called a Clan Meeting tonight." Dad said, as he started the engine.

"Oh yeah. Cory said something about that. I forgot." I said in thought.

"So it's okay if Rory comes to the Clan meeting?" Ken asked hopefully.

Dad chuckled as he said, "Of course it is. I had a chance to talk to the other parents and from what they said, it would be a good thing for him. Besides, I think it would be good for Rory to have the chance to make some new friends."

"My Clan brothers are all really great. I know Rory will fit in just fine." Ken said with assurance.

"I need dandelion greens." Mom said absently.

Ken and I shared an amused look at the totally off-topic statement.

"What was that dear?" Dad asked with a loving smile.

"I told Teri and Helen that I'd bring them a few of my better dishes so they can try them out on their boys. But I really need fresh dandelion greens or it won't be right." Mom said in thought.

"Oh, you mean that mushroom thing with the crunchy, cheesy crust?" I asked cautiously.

"That's right. You like that one, don't you?" Mom asked hopefully.

After all my bitching about Mom's cooking, I felt a little funny saying something nice about it in front of Ken.

"Yeah. It is one of your better ones." I reluctantly admitted.

"Good. Marcus, turn left here. Let's go down to Mrs. Johnson's store and see if she has any good greens today." Mom said firmly.

Dad turned the car at the next intersection and waited for Mom to tell him where to turn next.

"Rory?" Ken asked quietly from beside me.

I looked into his eyes and fell in love all over again at the sight of his smile.

"I love you." He whispered.

"I love you too Ken." I said in a low voice.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" I heard my dad ask from the front seat.

"No. Just pull in. I'll only be a minute." Mom said, then hurried into the small market.

"I guess while we have a few minutes, I can go over what we planned while you were having your examination." Dad said seriously.

Ken and I reluctantly looked away from each other and tried to devote our full attention to Dad.

"Well, this afternoon, I thought you could go through your things and pack what you're going to want to take with you on the trip. Try to keep in mind if there's anything you'll be needing from the store and we'll take care of that later." Dad said slowly.

"Then tonight, you'll be at the Clan meeting. The other parents said that the Friday meeting is a sleepover." Dad said slowly, as he watched for my reaction.

"It's really a lot of fun. I thought it was kinda strange when I first heard about it, but I know you'll love it." Ken said happily.

I smiled as I nodded at Ken.

"Then tomorrow morning, Billy is going to pick you up from the Short Compound and take you over to Southcrest for a photo shoot. Your mother or I can be there if you want us to be." Dad said seriously.

"Is Ken going too?" I asked hopefully.

Dad smiled and said, "Allen has already given his permission. Billy will be picking you both up."

Ken smiled at me and I could tell that he was thrilled with the plan.

The car door opened and Mom got in, carrying two grocery bags.

"Mrs. Johnson had some beautiful greens today. This is going to be wonderful." Mom said happily.

"Good. Then let's go home."

* * * * *

"What about this?" Ken asked me as he held up a red and black shirt with a twisted pattern.

"Do you like it?" I asked cautiously.

"I think this is probably what a blood clot looks like." Ken said frankly.

I smiled as I reached out my hand, then made a 'thumbs down' motion.

Ken dropped the shirt on the floor, then began working his way through my closet again.

"Rory honey, Davis is here." Mom said from the doorway.

I glanced at the door in time to see Davis looking into the room, unsure of his welcome.

"Come on in and have a seat. I thought you'd be with Corina." I said casually.

"We're going to go out and do stuff later. I just thought I'd come in and visit with you guys for a while." Davis said shyly.

Ken turned away from the closet, then looked at Davis speculatively.

I wondered what had caught Ken's attention, then considered what Davis had said.

"She's changing clothes, isn't she?" I asked in realization.

Davis looked at me and shyly nodded.

Corina changing clothes... Oh yeah. This could take a while.

"So what are you guys up to?" Davis asked quietly.

"Ken's going through my clothes to help me pick out the things I'm going to take to Vulcan with me." I said casually.

"Whoa. Hold on. You're going to Vulcan?" Davis asked in wonder.

"Yeah. There's a Vulcan healer who's got this new treatment that he wants to try on me. He seems to think that he can actually cure me." I said, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"So you're, like, going to this whole other planet? For how long?" Davis asked curiously.

"The treatment is supposed to take more than a year, but I get to come back to Earth for visits." I said, then looked at Ken to see if my words were hurting him.

Davis followed my gaze to Ken and seemed to realize the unspoken pain that was in the air.

"Yeah. Well, it'll be good if he can help you get better." Davis said, trying to sound optimistic.

"Do you like this one?" Ken asked quietly.

I looked up and smiled at the shirt he was holding.

"Only if I join a bowling team." I said with a smirk.

Ken turned the shirt to look at it, then nodded and threw it onto the floor with the others.

"It kinda sucks that you're going to be leaving. I was starting to think maybe it wouldn't be so bad here." Davis said quietly.

"You can come over and hang out at my place. I just live three houses that way." Ken said as he pointed.

"Thanks. I may do that." Davis said uncertainly.

"Davis. I've got three brothers and two cousins who would enjoy hanging out with you. Plus there's Deacon and Lawrence across the street. The only reason you'll ever be bored or alone here is if you decide that you want to be." Ken said frankly.

I looked at Ken with surprise at his sudden boldness.

Ken could obviously tell what I was thinking.

He smiled at me shyly and said, "I guess Kevin's starting to rub off on me."

"Kevin?" Davis asked curiously.

"My twin brother. I just met him for the first time last week... in fact, it was one week ago today." Ken said in a disbelieving voice.

"Wow. That must've been really freaky." Davis said in amazement.

"Yeah. Well, not too bad. For my whole life, my dad was talking about how great it was going to be when my brother got to live with us. I think it was a lot weirder for Kevin because his mom told him that our dad was dead and never told him that he even had a brother." Ken finished bitterly.

"Sounds like some of the moms I've had." Davis said frankly.

Ken smiled at the statement, then said, "It doesn't matter now. Kevin's here and everything else is settled."

"I'm glad to hear it. At least you'll have your brother around when you need him." Davis said darkly.

"What's wrong? It sounds like you're feeling lonely." I said before I could stop and think if it was the 'tactful' thing to say.

"As weird as it sounds, I think I am. When I moved here I thought it was going to be so great because I'd be getting away from my brothers Steve and Danny. Well, actually half brothers but we never really cared about that. They're a little younger than you guys and they're major pests... But right now I don't think I'd mind it if they were here too." Davis said distantly.

"You definitely need to hang out over at our house. We have older kids, younger kids... even a two month old baby." Ken said seriously.

"Ken's right. It's great over there. And you've already been invited." I added with an urging expression.

"Well, Corina and I are going to go out and do stuff tonight. But maybe if you and your brothers are going to be around tomorrow we could do something." Davis said hopefully.

"I'll need to check with my Pop and see what we've got planned. Can I have your phone number so I can just call you and let you know?" Ken asked as he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

"Sure. That'll work." Davis said happily.

Ken pushed the buttons on his phone for a few seconds, then handed his phone to Davis and said, "If you'll just punch in your number, I'll call you as soon as I know what we'll be doing."

"Thanks Ken." Davis said as he concentrated on punching in his phone number.

* * * * *

"Rory honey, you have a phone call." Mom said from the doorway.

I was surprised because, well, no one had called me on the phone in over a year.

"Hello?" I asked hesitantly.

"Is this Rory?" A man's voice asked cautiously.

"Yes. Who is this?" I asked curiously.

"This is Joe Bowers, I saw you just a little while ago at the Short Compound." He said seriously.

"Lawrence's father. I remember." I said in a more relaxed voice.

"Right. I just wanted to call to invite you to, well, a funeral." Joe said uncomfortably.

"A funeral?" I asked with surprise, then noticed that Davis and Ken were listening intently to my side of the conversation.

"Vincent's parents both died Wednesday and we're going to have a simple grave side ceremony. Vincent asked that you, Ken and Dylan be invited to stand with him." Joe said quietly.

"Why me? I just met him in the doctors office this morning." I asked before I could think better of it.

"I don't really know. When I asked Vincent if he had any friends that he wanted to invite, he asked for you." Joe said frankly.

I thought about what little I knew of Vincent from our brief conversations.

The only reason I could think of that he would consider us his friends is because maybe he didn't have any friends and we were nice to him.

"I'll have to talk to my parents about it. They've kind of got my whole weekend planned out." I said reluctantly.

"I've already talked to them and they said that if you want to go, they'll work it in." Joe said frankly.

I nodded in thought, then said, "Sure. And Ken's right here if you want to talk to him too."

"Yes. I called and talked to Allen and he said that it's fine. All I'll need to do is make sure that Ken wants to go." Joe said seriously.

"Okay, here he is." I said into the phone, then held it to my chest as I said to Ken, "Ken, it's Joe Bowers, Lawrence's father. He wants to talk to you."

"Okay." Ken said uncertainly as he accepted the phone.

"Did you say funeral?" Davis asked cautiously from beside me.

"Yeah. This guy named Vincent invited us to his parent's funeral on Sunday." I said in a distracted voice.

The fact that I was being invited to a funeral for people who I'd never met seemed somehow wrong to me.

"Is he a close friend of yours?" Davis asked with concern.

"I just met him for the first time today." I said honestly.

"Then why is he inviting you?" Davis asked curiously.

I noticed that Ken had already hung up the phone and was waiting for the answer to Davis' question with expectation.

"I'm not sure. But I think it's possible that Vincent may not have any friends. Ken and I, and this other guy named Dylan, met him this morning and I guess we were nice to him. I think maybe he just needs someone to care about him and... we're all he's got." I said quietly.

"Oh wow. That's got to be a really horrible lonely feeling, going to your parent's funeral and knowing that you don't have anyone who cares enough about you to help you through it." Davis said distantly.

"He's got a lot of people who care. And by the time Sunday is over, he's going to know it." Ken said firmly.

I looked at Ken with question at the statement.

"I'll tell Cory and Sean about it tonight." Ken said seriously.

I nodded at Ken, trusting him to do the right thing.

"Here you are Davis. I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long." Corina said from my bedroom doorway.

Davis turned to look at her and smiled.

"Nope. It worked out just fine. I had a chance to talk with your brother and Ken for a while." Davis said as he stood.

I looked at Corina and was a little bit surprised at how nice she looked.

It seems that she was able to get her frizzy mess of hair somehow sprayed, clipped, pinned and gelled into something resembling a decent hair style.

"You look nice." Davis said quietly as he approached her.

"Thanks." Corina said with a demure giggle.

Yep. She's really getting better at that 'feminine' thing she's been working on.

"I'll see you guys later. Don't forget to call if we can do something tomorrow." Davis said as he tore his gaze from Corina for an instant.

"I'll call you as soon as I know something." Ken said, and looked as though he were trying to restrain a giggle.

As soon as Davis and Corina were out of the room, Ken started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked Ken curiously.

"Those two dressing up, acting shy and being scared that they'll say the wrong thing all the time. I'm really glad we don't have to do that." Ken said as he walked across the room and sat at my side.

"Yeah, it's really nice that we can just be ourselves with each other." I said as I pulled him into a gentle hug.

* * * * *

"I've got a visitor for you." Dad said from my doorway.

As I looked toward the door, I saw Possum lope into the room and settle into his spot by the bathroom door.

Dad walked into the room and took a seat beside me on the bed, the other side from Ken.

"Have you thought about what you want to do with Possum when you go to Vulcan?" Dad asked me quietly.

I looked at Dad with surprise and said, "I didn't think of that."

"He could go with you. It might be nice to have a companion when things are quiet there." Dad said gently.

Possum would need to go on walks and be fed and bathed... as nice as it would be to have him there with me, it wouldn't be fair to him.

Finally, I shook my head and said, "I couldn't take care of him."

"I'm sure that Solak can arrange for someone to take care of him for you until you're able to do it for yourself." Dad said with assurance.

"Maybe. But it's going to be bad enough having people doing things for me that I should be able to do for myself. It wouldn't be right to ask them to do more. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to Possum either. I don't know what my life is going to be like on Vulcan, but there's a chance that I won't be able to spend a lot of time with him. I'd hate for Possum to spend his days being alone just so I could have him around now and then when I need company." I said in thought.

"He could stay with me." Ken said quietly.

I looked at Ken with question.

"Everyone at my house loves Possum... especially Ricardo. I could keep him over at my house and bring him with me when I come to visit you." Ken said hopefully.

"Would that be okay with you Dad?" I asked as I turned.

"That would be fine. As long as you can talk Allen into it, I don't see any problem." Dad said with a gentle smile.

"Pop won't have a problem. I think he wanted for us to keep Possum as much as Ricardo did." Ken said happily.

"I think Possum will be really happy at your house." I said honestly.

"If you like, I'll talk to Allen about it tonight. The adults are going to socialize while you're having your Clan meeting." Dad said with a smile.

"So that's why Mom's cooking?" I asked curiously.

"That's right. When Solak and Dr. Michaels started talking to her about how she helped you, she started telling everyone about her theories on nutrition. Helen and Teri seemed very interested and asked about a few of her recipes." Dad said with a touch of pride in his voice.

"The guys in the Clan are never going to forgive me if they have to start eating health food because of me." I said weakly.

"Don't worry about that Skeeter. I'm sure Teri and Helen won't force their kids to switch entirely over to health food. But with your mom's help, they might introduce a few new items into their families' diets." Dad said seriously.

"Okay. I just don't want Cory and Sean to have a reason to be mad at me before I have a chance to really get to know them." I said reluctantly.

"I'll make sure that they know it's not your fault." Ken said with assurance as he gave me a quick squeeze of a hug.

"Thanks Ken." I whispered as I hugged him in return.

* * * * *

"Well, here we are again." Dad said happily as he drove us into the Short Compound.

"I hope you boys will have a good time tonight. I made sure to bring plenty of treats for both of you." Mom said cheerfully.

"Thanks Mrs. Teeter." Ken said as he tried to act happy about the announcement.

"Are you sure that Corina is going to be alright with Davis? I'm worried that if their date doesn't go well that she'll come home to an empty house." Dad said as he pulled into a parking place.

"I already talked to Hildy and she promised that she'd keep an eye on them. I just think it's wonderful that Corina has met such a nice boy." Mom said happily.

I glanced at Ken with question to receive a shrug in return.

I didn't really know much about Davis. He seemed to be nice, but I hadn't known him long enough to be sure of it.

"Do you want to help me with the wheelchair Ken?" Dad asked as he got out of the car.

Ken flashed me a beaming smile before hurrying to help my dad.

"I had a long talk with Helen and Teri this morning and they both said that if there's any problem at all, they'll call us to come and get you." Mom said seriously from the front seat.

"I'm sure everything will be fine." I said quietly.

"It probably will. But if you need to come home for some reason, just tell Helen or Teri and we'll be right over." Mom said as she looked me in the eyes.

"Okay Mom. I promise." I said quietly.

My car door opened and Ken leaned in so I could take hold of him.

On impulse, I stretched up and gave him a quick kiss before putting my arms around him so he could shift me out of the car and into my wheelchair.

"Now I owe you one." Ken said with a devilish smile as he made sure that my legs were positioned correctly.

"Guys, the Clan meeting is just about to start, so I'm here to show you the way." A boy said from a few feet away.

I looked at him curiously, feeling that I had met him somewhere before.

"Thanks Aaron." Ken said as he moved behind my wheelchair.

I looked at the boy more carefully, then my eyes went wide as I realized who it was.

NO FREAKIN WAY!

AARON CARTER!

"Hi Rory. I'm Aaron, it's nice to meet you." He said in a casual voice.

"I... um, it's nice... Are you really Aaron Carter?" I asked in amazement.

He chuckled at my reaction and said, "Yeah. Last time I checked. Come on, we don't want to keep the guys waiting."

* * * * *

As Ken was pushing my wheelchair toward the house, he quietly said, "Ask Jake about Aaron sometime, he'll tell you about how great Aaron really is."

"I can hear you." Aaron said from ahead of us with a grin. "David's snoring hasn't deafened me yet!"

"Oh, um... well, you already know how much Jake likes you, so I guess that's okay." Ken said shyly.

"It goes both ways Kenny. We may have lived completely different lives, but Jake and I knew the same pain. That's how I was able to help him." Aaron said frankly.

I craned my neck to look at Ken with question.

"You'll be hearing all about that in the meeting." Ken said as we approached large double doors.

"It's time to meet the Clan." Aaron said, as he opened both doors and stood aside.

* * * * *

There were no less than thirty guys all sitting around the room in little groups.

As soon as Ken pushed me into the room, everyone got quiet.

"Everyone, I'd like for you to meet Rory. Rory, this is everyone." Cory said with a teasing smile.

"Hi." I said weakly as I waved at the room in general.

"Rory, come over here! I saved you a seat!" Kevin called from one of the couches.

Ken immediately started pushing me across the room to where Kevin was waiting.

There were people sitting on the floor, so it seemed wrong for me to take a seat on the couch. I mean, I had my own chair.

But there was just no way I could refuse Kevin's thoughtful gesture of saving me a seat.

"Ready?" Ken asked as he leaned over me.

"Yeah." I whispered as I reached up to hold on to him.

He quickly moved me into position on the couch and I released my grip on him.

Rather than move away, Ken leaned in and proceeded to give me a firm kiss.

I moved my hands back up so I could pull him closer and maybe prolong the kiss a moment longer.

A few snickers sounded around the room and made me remember that we weren't alone.

"That was the one I owed you." Ken whispered as he pulled back enough to look me in the eyes.

"It looks like you didn't have to wait too long to figure out if you liked boys or girls." Someone said from across the room.

"Yeah Kyle, I just had to meet the right guy before I figured it out." Ken said happily as he pushed my wheelchair out of the way.

"Go ahead and sit down Kenny so we can get started." Cory called from the front of the room.

"You can squeeze in here between us." Kevin said hopefully from beside me.

Ken looked from me to Kevin, then sat down in the small space.

After a moment of shifting around, Ken whispered, "I think I have a better idea."

Before I could ask what he had in mind, he picked up my legs and draped them across his lap.

He put his arms around me, then shifted me up onto his legs.

When I was in place, Ken wiggled over a little on the couch.

"Comfy?" Cory asked with a smile at us.

"Perfect." Ken said as he put his arms around me and snuggled me close to him.

I glanced around the room to see if anyone had a problem with Ken being so open about our relationship.

Movement caught my eye and I saw two or three people switch their seating so they were snuggled like we were.

"It looks like everyone has found a good seat, so let's get started. Sean?" Cory asked as he sat down.

Sean shrugged, then moved from his chair to sit in Cory's lap and said, "I was wondering when you'd get around to it."

Chuckles spread around the room at the action.

"I meant that it was time for you to give the Clan history." Cory said with playful aggravation. "Not that I'm complaining!"

"I know what you meant. I can do it just fine from right here." Sean said, then leaned in to give Cory a quick kiss.

"Go ahead." Cory said in a contented voice as he wrapped his arms around Sean.

* * * * *

Sean started telling this long story about all the people in the room and how they got to be members of the Clan.

As each person's name was mentioned, Ken would point them out to me.

A few of the guys noticed and waved at me when I looked at them.

I couldn't believe some of what I was hearing about the things they went through.

Neglect.

Abuse.

Some of the things were so horrible that I couldn't have imagined that anyone could be so completely evil as to do them to another living creature, much less an innocent child.

I was horrified by some of the things that I heard, and I was relieved to know that the guys were rescued and living happy lives now. But somehow it wasn't personal. These people were strangers to me so it didn't really hit home until Sean came to Ken's name.

"Kenny had the type of life that a lot of us have only dreamed about. He had a father who loved him very much. He was never abused and never

knew a day of neglect in his whole life. But what happened to Kenny was worse in some ways. His father came down sick and Kenny had to stand by and watch as his big strong father who loved him so much became weak and frail. I can't imagine... I don't want to imagine what a living hell that must have been for him." Sean said sadly.

I looked at Ken to see that he was crying.

I adjusted my sitting position a little, then put my hand on the back of Ken's head and guided him to place his head on my chest so I could comfort him.

"After Kenny's father died, Kenny was sent to live with his mother in Chicago. That's where he met his twin brother Kevin for the first time. Kevin was neglected by his mother all his life. He basically raised himself on the streets of Chicago and did what he had to do to survive. When Kenny arrived, their mother abandoned them." Sean said with a heartbroken look at Kevin.

I glanced at Kevin and he seemed so small and alone even though he was sitting right beside us.

I held an arm out to him to invite him to share my hug with Ken.

Kevin shifted over in his seat and hugged both of us.

"After that, things went from bad to worse. Fortunately, Kenny called a friend for help and was put in touch with Clan Short. David took a team to see if we could help and while he was there he met someone else who was trying to protect Kevin. Jake was a street hustler and a drug addict who was willing to do whatever he could to be sure that Kevin would be kept safe." Sean said with admiration.

I looked at the floor where Jake and Xain were sitting side by side with Edovina laying on a blanket in front of them.

"After a few delays, we got them out of there and brought them here to Orlando. Kenny, Kevin and Jake have all been adopted by the same man and are now legally brothers. At our next Clan meeting, we invited the three of them to join us. At that meeting Kevin was showing us his pictures and we found out that someone named Xain was in trouble and needed our help. Kenny felt the picture and told us what was wrong and where to find him. Xain is half Human. He couldn't master Vulcan logic, but he also couldn't express emotions like a Human. He felt that he was a failure and didn't belong in either society. With a little help from Grandfather Sarek, Xain was brought to Orlando and was also adopted into the Thompson family where he belongs." Sean finished with a smile.

I looked at Xain with surprise. I never would have guessed that he had gone through any kind of pain like that.

"Deacon wasn't physically neglected, but his parents got so involved with their own lives that they began to ignore him. It finally got so bad that he could go weeks at a time without seeing them or talking to them. When his thirteenth birthday arrived and they completely forgot, he knew it was time for him to leave. He came to Orlando to ask his brother Billy if he could live with him. While he was waiting for his brother to come home, Deacon met the Thompson family. It ended up that not only did Deacon end up being able to live with his brother, but he has a whole family who care about him now." Sean said happily.

"And that includes all of us." Cory interjected. "Every single person in this room."

I glanced at Deacon to find him smiling with tears of happiness gliding down his cheeks.

Sean nodded with agreement at Cory's statement, then continued, "Lawrence was adopted. In the past few years his adoptive father became abusive. He would hit Lawrence, but what hurt the most were the cruel insults. He would call Lawrence prissy and feminine. We may never know if that's what caused Lawrence to start dressing in girl's clothes, but that's really not important. Lawrence's adoptive father threw him out of their house. Lawrence had no one to turn to and nowhere to go. He did what he had to do to survive. Lawrence was getting beaten up in an alley when Deacon, Kenny, Kevin, Jake and Xain found him. Lawrence, who they knew as Laura at the time, was hurt and frightened. They helped Lawrence find a safe home where he is accepted no matter which way he chooses to dress."

I glanced at Lawrence and smiled as I remembered just how pretty he had been last night when we stopped by their house.

"Reuben and Ricardo lost their older brother Manny when he was gunned down in the street. They lived in the same building that Kevin and Jake lived in. When they first arrived in Orlando, I don't think anyone considered that they would become members of the Clan. But if you get to know them, you'll understand that they are an example to all of us of what it really means to be brothers." Sean said with a smile at the pair.

"Love, get up. My legs are going to sleep." Cory whispered just loud enough that everyone could hear.

"I think you're getting old Cor." Sean said with a smirk as he stood.

"No. You're just getting a big butt." Cory said as he stretched his legs out in front of him.

Sean twisted around to try and see his butt as he asked, "Do you really think so?"

Cory glanced at Sean, then down to his butt before saying, "No. I don't. It's not big... it's perfect."

"Guys. You're not alone." Justy said in a mock whisper; giving a sudden 'squeak' when Dean reached down and goosed him.

Cory reluctantly tore his gaze away from Sean's butt and said, "Oh, right. One more thing before we get down to business. Yesterday Kevin drew a picture and found a guy who was seriously thinking about committing suicide. Kevin called Kenny to feel the picture so they would know where this guy was and how to help him. Kenny took Rory with him and, from all accounts, Rory was quite a bit of help in bringing this guy to his senses."

I looked at Cory with surprise.

Even though I was happy to go with Ken to help JR, I didn't think I really did that much.

"So Rory. You've heard our stories so you know what we're all about. We invited you to be here tonight so we can invite you to join Clan Short." Cory said frankly.

I was about to answer when something occurred to me.

"I'd like to, but I'm going to be leaving for Vulcan on Sunday." I said reluctantly.

"I already know about that and it doesn't affect this. You've heard about what we've all been through and about what we do. I'm asking if you want to join us." Cory said frankly.

I glanced at Ken, but his expression was no help to me.

He was looking at me, waiting for me to answer.

"I don't know how I could help anyone else... I can't even walk." My mouth said before my brain had fully considered the words.

"That's one of the reasons we need you." Cory said simply.

I looked at Cory with confusion at the statement.

"Let me try." Sean said quietly from Cory's side.

Cory nodded and turned his attention to Sean.

"What would you do if you met someone who was a real mess because their father was dying of AIDS?" Sean asked seriously.

I thought for a second before saying, "I guess I'd have them talk to Ken because he knows what it's like to go through that and he could probably help."

Sean nodded, then asked, "What about someone who was all freaked out because they want to dress in girls clothes, but they're afraid someone will find out."

"I'd have them talk to Lawrence." I said, then glanced at Lawrence to find him looking at me with a smile.

"Okay. Then what if you met someone who was hurt and was going to have to be in a wheelchair, maybe for the rest of his life?" Sean asked seriously.

I nodded that I understood what he was trying to say.

"Thanks babe." Cory said to Sean gently, then continued, "So do you see why we need you Rory? No matter how much research we did on the subject or how hard we tried to imagine, there's just no way any of us could know what it feels like to deal with having a major disability. Even if you weren't in a wheelchair, I think you'd be a great addition to the Clan, but because of everything you've been through you might be able to help people that we couldn't reach otherwise."

"I could have used some help when I was in the hospital... I was just starting to feel sorry for myself." Eli said hesitantly.

"Just starting? You were up to your ears, drowning in self pity." Justy said frankly.

Sammy and Sebastian both nodded from their seats on Benji and Eli's laps. "Both of you were;" Sammy said seriously. "You had us worried; I wondered if you'd ever open up!"

Eli shrugged dismissively, then said, "I just know it would have been easier if we'd had someone there who knew what it felt like."

I saw the honesty in Eli's expression and quietly said, "I wish I had been there for you."

"Me too. But you can be there for the next person who needs you." Eli said seriously.

"So Rory, what do you say? Are you ready to join?" Cory asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'll join you." I said and immediately felt like a ton of weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

"Good. Then I've got a job for you." Cory said seriously.

I looked at him with question, feeling like I might have been set up.

"You're going to Vulcan, right?" Cory asked as he looked me in the eyes, the twinkle in his proving he was having fun with whatever he was doing.

"Right." I said reluctantly.

"Then what would you think if, after you get settled in, you become the Clan's representative on Vulcan?" Cory asked in a professional voice.

"But, isn't Ambassador Sarek already there?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes. Grandfather Sarek is on Vulcan... well, not at the moment, but usually. That's actually part of the problem. Clan Short is a Vulcan clan. When people who don't really know much about us need to contact Clan Short, they try to contact us on Vulcan. Grandfather ends up having to deal with a lot of stuff that he shouldn't be bothered with. It would make things a lot easier for everyone if we had a Clan representative on Vulcan that people could talk to and get some answers." Cory said seriously.

"But I don't have any answers." I said helplessly.

"You'll learn the answers as you go. But the important thing is that you'll be there, on Vulcan, where they can find you and talk to you." Cory said frankly. "None of us know all the answers either; we just ask until we find someone who does."

Me? People from all over the universe will be coming to talk to me?

"I'll do it." My mouth answered before I could even begin to wrap my brain around the entire concept.

"I'm glad because I didn't have a backup plan if you said no." Cory said with a smile.

* * * * *

The rest of the Clan were talking about taking some guys from Camp Little Eagle to go clothes shopping this weekend.

I took the chance to devote a little more of my attention to Ken.

After a moment of looking at Ken I quietly asked, "Are you okay? Do I need to move off your legs for a while?"

"No. I'm fine for right now, but maybe in a little bit we could switch places. I think I'd like for you to hold me." Ken said hopefully.

"I'd like that too. Just let me know when you're ready." I said, then placed a kiss on the top of his head.

* * * * *

"...good. That's settled. Does anyone have anything else that they need to discuss right now?" Cory asked as he looked around the room.

"I do." Ken said quickly.

I looked down at Ken with question.

"Vincent invited Rory and I to his parents' funeral on Sunday." Ken said seriously.

Cory nodded and said, "I'm glad that someone thought to do that."

"Vincent just met us this morning. I think that he's got the idea that no one cares about him, or if they do, it's only because they feel like they have to." Ken said firmly.

"From what I saw of him the day we met... I can kind of understand that." Cory said reluctantly.

"What do you think Lawrence?" Sean asked curiously.

"I think Kenny may be right. Vince always kind of stayed to himself. I've never seen him hanging around with any friends. I guess I didn't think about it too much because he seemed pretty happy with things being that way." Lawrence said uncertainly.

"Vincent's going to be staying at Southcrest for the rest of the weekend, so that'll give us time to do this right. Guys, this is going to be completely voluntary. But try to keep in mind that a funeral isn't something you do for the dead. It's something that you do to help the living deal with the loss. When we told Vincent that we'd be his guardians and be there for him... well, it's all just words unless we back it up with actions." Cory said as he looked around the gathering.

"Maybe we could talk to some of the camp guys about attending too." Kyle said thoughtfully.

Before I could even think about being shy about it, I spoke up and said, "Dylan was already invited. I bet if you explained all this to him, he might be able to bring some people."

"I was going to call Dylan tomorrow anyway so I can talk to him about it." Jake said as he held Edovina in his arms.

"Make sure you tell Dylan that all of the Clan are Vincent's guardians. That means that Vincent is just like everyone at Camp Little Eagle. From a certain point of view, they're brothers." Sean said carefully.

"Yeah. I'll tell him." Jake said seriously.

"Let me know if Dylan has any questions or needs any kind of help." Cory said in thought.

Jake nodded that he would.

A knock at the door drew everyone's attention.

"Sorry to interrupt. But dinner will be ready in just a minute." A woman said quietly from the doorway.

"Thanks Helen, we're just about done." Cory said quickly.

Ken nudged me to get my attention.

"Do you think we should warn them about your mom's cooking?" Ken asked with concern.

"Nah. Now that I've met everyone, I'm pretty sure that they can handle it." I said, then moved in to give Ken a quick kiss.

"Everyone, since Rory is our newest member, I think he should have the honor of going first." Cory said in an authoritative voice.

I looked at Cory with surprise at the declaration.

"I'll get his wheelchair." Justy said as he hopped up from his seat.

"I'll get Rory." Eli said, then I felt myself starting to float up out of Ken's lap.

I would have been totally shocked if I hadn't heard about Eli's ability during the Clan Short history.

"Here, put him in the chair." Justy said in a rush as he pushed the wheelchair in front of us.

"I'll help push." Timmy said as he raced around to the back of the wheelchair.

"Me too!" Ricky said as he ran to Timmy's side.

"I wanna." Ricardo said and he hurried behind my wheelchair followed immediately by Reuben.

"I think that means that they're ready for dinner." Ken said with a chuckle as he stood.

I reached out my hand to Ken and he accepted it.

I held Ken's hand and felt contentment as the two of us led the procession out of the room.

Chapter 12

As we entered the dining room, I felt nothing but peace at the wonderful feeling of being included and wanted and a part of something so big that I couldn't imagine all of it.

I jerked slightly as I felt myself being levitated again and looked around to see what was happening.

One of the guys... Travis, I think, was pulling a chair out from the table and holding it for me as I floated into place.

I don't know why it seemed like such a significant thing to me, maybe it's because before this, no one thought that I might want to sit in a regular chair, like a regular person at dinner... but for whatever reason, I felt tears welling up in my eyes at these guys, the Clan, my new brothers, automatically including me and treating me just like any of the rest of them.

"Are you okay?" Ken asked me quietly.

"I'm fine." I choked out, then noticed the look of genuine concern in Ken's eyes.

I love him.

Such simple words, and yet they seem like such a revelation at times like this.

"Okay everyone. Dig in." Cory said from the head of the table.

I looked around the table at the selections of food and noticed a few of the Zombie Hypermom's creations among the offerings.

I thought about warning everyone, but then decided that it didn't matter.

If they got something that they didn't like, they just wouldn't eat it.

"Want some?" Ken asked as he nudged me.

I turned to see him offering me a serving bowl of mashed potatoes.

I awkwardly accepted the bowl, once again marveling at my ability to use my hands.

After dishing out a decent sized helping of the mashed potatoes on my plate, I turned and handed the bowl to Kevin at my other side.

I noticed that he didn't even consider taking any, and just passed it on to the next person.

I really need to talk to Ken about whatever is wrong with Kevin.

Not only does he refuse to eat, but at times like this, when he thinks no one is watching, he looks so sad.

I guess I must have been staring too long because Kevin turned and said, "What?"

My mouth took off and did its thing before my brain could tell me it was impolite or none of my damned business.

"You look so sad." I said quietly.

Kevin seemed surprised by the words, then gave me a little shrug before saying, "Yeah, but I'll be fine."

"What's wrong?" I asked with concern.

Kevin searched my eyes, I'm not sure what he was looking for, but I guess he found it because he whispered, "I just wish I had someone to love... I mean, someone like me... my age."

My heart broke at the hopelessness under his words.

I don't know all that much about Kevin's life, but the contrast was easy enough to see.

I have a mom and dad who love me like crazy and now I have Ken who loves me in a way I couldn't have imagined before yesterday.

Then here is Kevin. In a room full of people and feeling so completely alone.

I jerked when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Sean had one hand on my shoulder and was looking at Kevin with concern.

He leaned down a little and whispered so only Kevin and I could hear, "Don't worry Dude. You'll find someone soon, and I bet that when you do, he's gonna be out of this world."

Kevin looked up at Sean dubiously and gave an unconvincing smile.

"Yeah," he sighed, a bit helplessly, before he turned to look down at the table. "I hope so."

"I brought your milkshake." Sean said with a grin, as he placed a milkshake with a huge pile of whipped cream before Kevin.

"Poppa made this, didn't he?" Kevin asked as he turned more in his chair to look at Sean.

"He sure did. How can you tell?" Sean asked with amusement.

"Cause it's extra special." Kevin said, then turned his full attention to his milkshake.

Sean leaned a little more in my direction and whispered, "Rory, you're holding up the line."

I puzzled over his words for a moment, then turned and saw that Ken had about six different serving dishes lined up, waiting for me to take them and pass them on.

"Sorry." I giggled and took the first dish that Ken offered to me.

* * * * *

"This tastes like poop!" Timmy exclaimed with a disgusted look.

I glanced over at his plate, already knowing what I was going to see there.

Yep.

There was one of my mom's creations on Timmy's plate.

"And how much poop have you eaten, to know what it tastes like?" Cory asked seriously.

Timmy looked confused by the question as chuckles spread around the table.

"Don't worry Gizmo. You don't have to eat it if you don't like it. That's just something different for you to try." Sean assured.

Timmy looked down at his plate, then made a show of turning it so that the offending food selection was pointed away from him.

* * * * *

As all of us were finishing our meals, Dad walked over to me and leaned in to talk quietly.

"We're going to be leaving now. Remember to call us if you need anything at all."

"I'll be fine, Dad. All these guys will make sure of it." I said seriously.

Dad looked around the table, then back at me and said, "Have a good night, Skeeter. I'll see you in the morning."

Then he did it... right there in front of everyone... he kissed me.

My dad...

Kissed me...

In front of everyone.

Did I already mention that I'm 14?

I mean... Oh My God!

Dad must have noticed my immediate blush, because I could hear him snickering as he moved away.

"Rory." Ken whispered from beside me.

I looked over at him reluctantly. I felt like everyone in the room was staring at me now, and thinking how much of a big baby I was.

"Think about the stories you heard in the Clan meeting." Ken said, in a whisper.

I looked at him curiously, not able to see how that had anything to do with anything.

"There are guys here who would give anything to have their real dad be here and love them the way yours does." Ken said honestly.

I was about to respond when I saw the pain in his eyes.

He was missing his father.

Now Ken had an empty place in his heart and even though Allen was a wonderful father... it wasn't the same.

In that instant, I knew, without a doubt, that Ken would be carrying that pain with him forever.

Nothing would ever take it completely away.

My body responded before my mind could decide what was the right thing to do.

I pulled Ken into a hug and gave him a small kiss behind the ear.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I'm really in the mood to play the Starfleet sim." Someone said into the silence that had fallen over the room.

I didn't recognize the voice and I guess it really didn't matter.

"I'm there." Someone else said, and I heard the shuffling of chairs as people started to get up and go their separate ways.

"What do you want to do, Rory?" Ken asked me quietly.

I began to chuckle as I thought about what I'd *really* like to do.

"Besides that." Ken said, and I could hear a smile in his voice.

I pulled out of the hug enough to look him in the eyes and said, "I really don't care what we do now, as long as I can do it with you."

"Good answer." Ken said with a gentle smile.

"Are you guys ready to go?" a voice asked from beside us.

I turned to Eli looking at us with question.

I realized that he stayed behind so he could levitate me back into my wheelchair.

"Yeah. I'm ready when you are." I said quietly.

Since I was ready for it, I didn't even jerk when I felt myself begin to rise up out of the chair.

"Thanks for doing this. I really appreciate it." I said to Eli, hoping he understood how much it meant to me to do something so everyday and ordinary as sit in a real chair at the table.

"I'm glad to do it. You and me, we're alike in a lot of ways." Eli said seriously.

I struggled to remember Eli's story from all those that I'd heard in the Clan meeting earlier.

Besides the fact of Eli being 'differently abled', I couldn't think of any way that he and I were alike.

Eli casually inclined his head to one side, indicating that we should walk with him.

As Ken started to push my chair, Eli said, "It's funny, but when I look at you it's kind of like looking into a mirror."

I puzzled over the statement, still not able to see any similarity between us.

I guess Eli noticed my bewildered expression because he began to chuckle.

"Don't worry if you don't see it now. I bet that sooner or later you will." Eli said as he led us into a large room where most, if not all the clan members were gathered into small groups chattering happily.

As Eli turned and seemed to be about to leave, I quickly asked, "Please tell me, what do you mean?"

Eli turned to face me again, then said, "It's kind of hard to put into words, but when I look at you and see how you are with the people around you... It's kind of how I see myself."

I thought about the words for a moment and tried to wrap my mind around what he was saying.

I can't say that I entirely grasped all of what he was saying, but I think I understood enough to make sense of it.

"Thank you." I said as I looked up into his eyes.

Eli raised his eyebrows in question, obviously wanting to know what I was thanking him for.

"If that's really how you see me, then thanks. I'll try not to disappoint you." I said sincerely.

Eli blinked, then broke into a smile.

"I don't think that'll be a problem. Benji needs me, I'll talk to you guys later." Eli said happily.

I nodded as I watched him go.

"Okay Rory. I don't think I understood a single thing you guys were talking about." Ken said frankly.

I chuckled at the statement and said, "I don't know if I really do either. How about we just not worry about it?"

"Works for me... Let's go see what Kev's up to."

* * * * *

"Hey guys. I was wondering if bath time is going to be a problem for you two?" Cory asked quietly.

"Like how?" Ken asked curiously.

"I mean, I kind of figured that you and Rory would want to take your showers together, but I don't know how... I mean, are you going to need any kind of help?" Cory asked uncomfortably.

"Oh. If you've got a bath tub instead of a shower, that'd be nice." Ken said thoughtfully.

"Now that my arms are working again I can use a shower. You can sit me in the shower floor and I can prop myself up." I said quickly.

Ken leaned down and quietly said, "I'd really like to take a bath with you."

I smiled up at Ken and nodded.

"A bath it is Kenny. Come with me and I'll show you where it is." Cory said with a knowing smile.

I never even imagined that my life could be so completely wonderful.

* * * * *

The experience of bathing with Ken was even more wonderful than last night.

This time I didn't have to tell him what to do.

It was as if everything that happened was spontaneous and the two of us were just lovers without a care in the world.

I know that we probably took a lot longer than we should have in the bathroom, but no one made any comment when we finally returned to the main room.

The most we got were a few secretive smiles and knowing looks.

"Good bath?" Kevin asked, as he walked over to us.

"Really good." Ken said with a joyful smile.

Kevin giggled at the response and gave his brother a quick hug.

"How about you?" Ken asked quietly.

"Yeah. I showered with Jake and Xain and Timmy." Kevin said happily.

"CD didn't shower with you this time?" Ken asked curiously.

"Nuh uh. He showered with Reuben and Ricardo. Besides, Timmy said it was his turn." Kevin said with a shy smile.

Ken chuckled, then noticed that I was looking up at him curiously.

"The little guys like to take turns showering with the new guys." Ken explained happily.

"Really? Then I'm surprised that we didn't have any company in our bathtub." I said with a smile.

"CD wanted to, but Cory told him that you and Kenny needed to have some private time." Kevin said with a grin.

Ken chuckled and said, "I'll have to thank Cory for that. I think we both needed the private time tonight."

"So what do you want to do now? It's still a little bit before we have to go to bed." Kevin asked hopefully.

"I really don't know what the choices are." I said honestly.

"Do you like to play video games?" Ken asked speculatively.

"Not really. I mean, I used to play some. But since I got sick I stopped playing and... I really don't think I want to try and play again here in front of everyone after I haven't played for so long." I said quietly, not wanting to disappoint Ken.

"I don't want to play either. I'm not really good at playing since I can't read very good." Kevin said frankly.

"How about that? Maybe you could read to us?" Ken asked hopefully.

I could tell that Kevin was shy about it and could understand why he might not want to read in front of other people.

"We could get Timmy, CD, Harley and Reuben and Ricardo over here and you could read to all of us." Ken said happily.

Kevin looked at Ken with indecision.

"I think we'd all enjoy it." I said quietly, not wanting to push Kevin into doing something he didn't want to, but at the same time letting him know that we really would like for him to read.

"Okay, but only if we can find some books that aren't too hard for me to read." Kevin said firmly.

"Go talk to Timmy. I bet he's got all kinds of books that you could read without any trouble at all." Ken said seriously.

"Okay. I'll be right back." Kevin said happily, then looked around the room to find where Timmy was playing.

When Kevin was out of earshot, I quietly said, "I'm glad you thought of that."

"I love listening to Kevin read. It's like watching him accomplish something he always thought was impossible." Ken said as he leaned down to put an arm around me.

"Would you mind helping me onto the couch? I know squatting down like that can't be comfortable for you." I said quietly.

"Sure." Ken said, then leaned in and gave me a quick kiss.

* * * * *

As Ken was pushing me over to the couch, it dawned on me just how special everything was tonight.

I was here, able to use my arms, with my boyfriend, with my new brothers, in a place where we could kiss or hold hands without anyone being bothered by it at all.

"You've got that look again." Ken said as he leaned down to lock my wheels.

"What look?" I asked curiously.

"The 'I can't believe it's real' look." Ken said with a chuckle.

I smiled and said, "I can believe it's real, but after feeling like I'm unlucky for so long, I'm realizing how lucky I am to have found you and the Clan and... all this. It's better than my best dream."

"It is for me too." Ken said, then leaned down over me so I could grab onto his neck and shift over to the couch.

After being moved, I watched as Ken pushed my wheelchair out of the way.

I felt myself smiling and realized that it wasn't for any particular reason, but just because I was happy.

* * * * *

"Is this one okay?" Kevin asked as he presented a book to Ken.

After a moment of looking it over, Ken said, "Yeah. I think so. But it looks like it may have a few words that you haven't learned yet. If you get stuck, Rory or I will help you out."

"That's okay. This is one of Timmy's books and he already said that if I get stuck he'll tell me what the word is." Kevin said seriously.

"It sounds like we've got a plan then." Ken said warmly.

A group of boys began to gather around us, and a few of them were looking at me curiously.

I glanced at Ken to see if he knew what they were looking at.

"You ask him." I heard one of the boys whisper.

Finally Timmy stepped forward and said, "Would it hurt you or anything if CD sat on your lap?"

I smiled at the question, then said, "No. It wouldn't hurt me at all. Which one of you is CD?"

A boy who was obviously older than the rest stepped forward and looked at me shyly.

At first I thought that he was just shy, and that's why he wanted Timmy to talk to me, but when I looked into his eyes I somehow knew that this little boy had been through some incredible pain in his life and, in many ways, wasn't as strong as Timmy.

"Come on over here CD and you can sit with me while Kevin reads." I said gently.

CD broke into a beaming smile and immediately hopped up on my lap.

"Come on." I heard Ken say from my side and turned in time to see Timmy climb into his lap.

"We was gonna let Ricardo sit in your lap, but I need him to turn pages for me." Kevin said, as he knelt down and placed the book on the floor in front of him.

I glanced at Ricardo and noticed how proud he looked that he was needed.

* * * * *

By the time Kevin had finished reading the book, nearly half the Clan had joined us.

Most of the adoptive parents of the boys were either sitting behind them or holding them.

About half-way through the story, Timmy and CD went over to be with Cory and Sean.

Within a minute, a small boy named Johnny had taken his place on Ken's lap and Reuben had hesitantly taken a seat on mine.

I could tell by his reluctance that Reuben felt that he was too old to be held like one of the younger kids, but at the same time, he really wanted to be held.

During the course of the story, I gradually went from simply holding Reuben on my lap to fully hugging him.

When the story was over, Reuben whispered, "Thank you." into my ear and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

I smiled at him, not wanting to embarrass him by saying anything in return.

"That was a great story, Kevin." Cory said with an appreciative smile.

"Thanks." Kevin mumbled shyly as he made his way up onto the couch on the other side of Ken.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I think I'm in the mood for some nest building." Sean said from Cory's side.

Several looks flashed around the younger members of the group, then kids started scurrying in every direction.

"What's going on?" I asked cautiously.

"We're all going to sleep in here tonight. They're going to build our nest." Ken said, and I noticed that he had one arm around me and the other around Kevin.

"I don't really understand what you mean." I said hesitantly.

Of course I know what a nest is. But I didn't quite see how the concept translated into providing a sleeping place for this many people.

Ken didn't even try to explain further. He just held Kevin and me and watched the nest building progress.

* * * * *

"Naked?" I asked apprehensively.

"Yep." Ken said frankly.

I was stunned by the statement. Me, Ken, all of us were going to be sleeping naked... together.

"Nuh uh. Rory, you don't have to be naked if you don't want to." Kevin said firmly.

I looked at Kevin cautiously.

"I don't like to sleep naked, so I don't. That means you don't have to either." Kevin said seriously.

After a moment, Ken said, "Yeah, he's right. You don't have to if you don't want to. No one will be mad at you if you want to wear something to sleep in."

I thought about it for a few seconds, then asked, "Do you sleep naked?"

"Yeah. But it's no big deal for me because I always sleep that way." Ken said frankly.

I thought about what he was saying and tried to decide how I felt about it.

"It's really okay if you don't want to. I won't mind, I promise." Ken said to me quietly.

I smiled at Ken as I said, "It's okay. I think it'll probably be weird for a few minutes, but I don't see it being a problem."

"Are you sure?" Ken asked with concern.

"Yeah. Totally sure." I said with a smile.

Ken seemed willing enough to accept my answer, but Kevin looked like he wasn't sure that I was really okay with everything.

"I think I'll be okay, but if it gets too weird for me, I'll just put something on." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

Kevin seemed to consider that for a moment, then nodded.

"Is there anyone in here who would like some brownies?" One of the ladies, Helen I think, said into the room.

A cheer went up throughout the room.

When everyone had quieted and she was about to leave, Ken called out, "Who made them?"

"Teri and I did." Helen said with a knowing smile.

Ken grinned at me, then went to get my wheelchair.

* * * * *

"You can stay here and we can bring you some back if you want." A boy said gently, he seemed to be close to my age, maybe a little older.

"That's alright. I'll go with everyone else." I said as Ken started moving my wheelchair.

"Oh... alright." The boy mumbled.

Okay, it's been a while since I've had to deal with one of these, but it has happened before.

When some people see a person in a wheelchair, they automatically think the person is helpless and needs someone to baby them.

At first, when I was feeling really sorry for myself, people like this guy would kinda make me feel better. Like they understood that I needed help.

But after a while it gets to be really annoying.

I know that I could probably tell this guy that I needed him to cut up my brownie and feed it to me piece by piece and he'd do it.

It doesn't matter that my hands and mouth work perfectly fine and that I could do it for myself, he'd just believe whatever I told him, thinking that he was helping me and making me feel better.

At least he didn't ask Ken if I needed help. If he had asked Ken instead of me... well, there would have been no stopping me.

"What's your name?" I asked the boy seriously.

"Alec." the boy said timidly.

I went back through the Clan Short history that I'd been told, but I couldn't remember which of the dozens of stories was Alec's. Finally I decided that it didn't matter and said, "Alec, would you come down here?"

As he leaned down, I reached up and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Thanks for offering to help me Alec, but I'm really okay. My legs don't work, but aside from that I'm just like you." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

"Okay." Alec said hesitantly and still looked like he wanted to wrap me in cotton wool and protect me from the world.

As I tried to think of another way to show Alec that I wasn't helpless, I saw one of the younger boys running into the room.

After a moment, he spotted Alec and ran immediately to his side.

"Excuse me." Alec whispered to me, then picked up the young boy and went about the business of finding out what was wrong and how to fix it.

"Do you want to go to the kitchen now?" Ken asked me quietly.

"In just a minute, I'm not finished talking to Alec yet." I said over my shoulder to Ken.

When I turned my attention back to Alec, I saw that he was putting the younger boy down.

"Sorry about that... now what were you saying?" Alec asked curiously.

I smiled at him and said, "I was just saying thank you for offering to help me. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, um. Sure. Just let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Alec said with mild confusion.

"I will." I said, then looked behind me at Ken to indicate that I was ready to go.

* * * * *

"What was that all about?" Ken asked me curiously.

"Oh, that was just me, being a jerk and being about two seconds away from being really rude to a very nice guy." I said honestly.

I didn't even need to turn around to know that Ken was giving me that confused look.

"Sometimes people see the wheelchair and think that because I can't do some things that I can't do anything. They treat me like a helpless little baby and it really pisses me off." I said frankly.

I heard a little snicker from behind me and turned to glance at Ken.

"But how do you really feel?" Ken asked with a smile.

I chuckled in return, then continued, "I thought Alec was being that way, like he saw the wheelchair and totally missed that I was in the room. And I was about to go 'red headed' on him but... it looks like that's just the kind of guy he is."

"I don't get it." Ken said cautiously.

"He helps people. He wasn't treating me different because I'm in a wheelchair, he was just treating me the same way he treats everyone else." I said quietly.

"Oh, okay. I get it. So you thought he was feeling sorry for you but it turns out that he's a nice guy who likes to help people." Ken said frankly.

"Yeah. I feel kinda bad for thinking that way about him. It's hard to explain... I guess you'd have to spend some time in a wheelchair to understand." I said shyly.

"I think I know what you're saying. Back when my dad was sick, before he got really sick, I saw how some people treated him. Some of them ignored him, some were afraid of him and there were a few who did like you're saying and made him feel really uncomfortable by making such a big deal about it." Ken said distantly.

"Yeah. That's it exactly." I said as I looked back at Ken with a smile.

"Rory?" A woman's voice said, as we entered the kitchen.

I turned to see a woman that I hadn't met before.

I guess she noticed, because she went on to say, "I'm Kayla."

"Hi. It's nice to meet you." I said quietly.

"It's nice to meet you too, Rory. I just wanted to catch you before you got any brownies. Solak believes that it would be best if you didn't have any. He's concerned that it might destabilize your condition." Kayla said quietly.

I thought about it for a moment, then quietly said, "I guess I can understand that."

"So Teri and I made up some fruit salad that you can have instead. But it's entirely up to you." Kayla said seriously.

I smiled up at her and said, "Thank you for giving me a choice. I'll have the fruit salad."

"I made up two plates just in case that's what you wanted." Kayla said as she glanced at Ken.

"Yours has a brownie and ice cream on it too." She said to Ken with a wink.

"Thanks." Ken said shyly from behind me.

"Find a spot and I'll have it for you in just a minute." Kayla said happily before hurrying away.

"I'll share mine with you if you want." Ken said as he moved me to the table.

"That's okay Ken. I understand why they're worried and besides, I like fruit salad. I don't mind too much." I said quietly.

"Maybe a few brownie and ice cream flavored kisses would make up for it." Ken said with a grin as he squatted beside me.

"Yeah. That'll make it all better." I said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Hey Rory, how are things going?" Jake asked as he and Xain approached.

"Pretty good. Everyone's been really nice to me so far." I said with a smile at him.

"Yeah, they're all good guys." Jake said cheerfully, but I noticed something in his expression, like he was holding something back.

"How are you two doing?" I asked curiously as I watched his eyes carefully.

"We're fine. We're both having a good time." Jake said with a smile, and now I was certain that there was something he wasn't saying.

"But..." I said cautiously.

"But what?" Jake asked innocently.

"You're having a good time but..." I said, not willing to let it go.

After a moment of indecision, Jake shyly looked me in the eyes and said, "I was kinda thinking that, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to go to that funeral with you."

"Sure." I said automatically, not even having to think about it.

"You see. I, um... well, I've never been to a funeral before and... I don't know..." Jake drifted off uncomfortably.

"When your mom died, you couldn't go to the funeral because the police or the CPS might find you if you did. Now you want to go to this one, to kind of make up for not going to that one." Ken said in a speculative voice from beside me.

I looked at Ken with question at the statement. It seemed like Ken was assuming a whole lot more than I would have.

"Yeah Ken. That's pretty much it." Jake said quietly.

"It's okay Jake. Pop helped me through Dad's funeral so I know he'll be able to help you get through this one." Ken said frankly.

"And we'll be right there with you, so no matter how it goes for you, we'll take care of you." I said quietly.

"You know, for the past few years, I've been taking care of myself and now and then I'd be able to help someone else. It's kind of hard for me to let someone else do things for me." Jake said, then put out his arm to invite Xain into a casual hug.

"It sounds so stupid when I say it but... I don't think I can do it by myself." Jake said distantly.

"I think most people have something like that, Jake, something that we can't do by ourselves." I said frankly.

Jake nodded absently.

"What's yours?" Ken asked casually.

I looked at him and was surprised to find that he was talking to me.

"You mean besides walking?" I asked, not to be a smart ass, but to stall for time.

"Yeah." Ken said, and gave me a 'duh' look that would have been more at home on Kevin.

I couldn't help but smile at the expression, then quietly said, "Bugs."

"Bugs?" Ken asked uncertainly.

"Yeah, like wasps and bees and especially spiders." I said shyly.

"How bad?" Ken asked with concern.

"Okay. You guys are my friends, so I can tell you this." I said in a low voice.

Ken and Jake moved in a little closer, then Jake urged Xain to lean in too.

"Back a few months ago, there was a spider in my room." I said, and felt a crawly sensation at the memory.

Ken squatted down so he was at my eye level.

"You guys saw how I was. I couldn't really do much of anything for myself. I never liked bugs too much to begin with, but I saw that spider crawl onto my bed... then I couldn't see it anymore." I said, and noticed that my voice was getting shaky.

"I screamed. I screamed for my mom and I guess I had something like a panic attack." I said as I remembered the feeling of complete and overwhelming hysteria that had come over me.

"It probably took half an hour before I calmed down enough to tell her what was wrong. She couldn't find the spider, but she shook out my blanket and changed the sheets and made sure the spider wasn't there anymore." I said quietly.

"I can understand that." Jake said in a considering voice.

"For the next week and a half, I felt like spiders were crawling on me. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't relax, I couldn't think about anything else." I said as I remembered that horrible feeling.

"My mom took me to her psychiatrist and he gave me these pills..."

I reluctantly looked up, expecting to see disapproval or disappointment.

Instead I saw concern in Jake's eyes and Ken looked like he wanted to pick me up and hold me.

Xain, well he looked pretty much like he always does, but there was something hidden somewhere behind his eyes that I could barely detect. I'm not sure if it was sympathy or understanding, but it was there and it was at least as strong as Jake's concern.

"What happened?" Jake reluctantly asked.

"I took the pills. And I guess they helped. It's kind of like I was stuck on that one feeling and they helped to unstuck me." I said cautiously.

"So you just took them for a little while?" Jake asked carefully.

"Yeah. For a couple weeks. They made me feel druggy and sleepy and stuff that I didn't like, but they did what they were supposed to do." I said carefully.

Jake seemed to be considering the words as Ken hugged me firmly.

"But now, when I see a bug, I'm not only scared of the bug, but I'm scared about how scared I might get. I don't want to be like that again. It was probably the worst thing I've ever felt." I said quietly.

"Rory." Ken said softly.

I looked into his beautiful chocolaty brown eyes and fell in love with him all over again.

"If you see a bug, call me and I'll take care of it for you." Ken said seriously.

I smiled at him as the image of a knight in shining armor sprang to mind.

"And if Mrs. Plimpton shows up, I'll call you to take care of her." Ken finished with an impish grin.

On some level it might have been a joke, but I knew what Ken was really saying. In his own way he was saying that I am strong, but I don't have to be strong all the time about everything.

I smiled at Ken and quietly said, "You've got a deal."

"What about you Ken, do you have anything that you wouldn't want to face alone?" Jake asked curiously.

"Your old home." Ken said frankly.

Jake looked at Ken with question, not quite sure if he understood.

"Going with Kevin to the place where you two used to live is the scariest thing I've ever done in my life. Since I met you and Kev I feel a lot stronger than I used to be, but I don't think I could face going someplace like that by myself." Ken said seriously.

"It takes a little getting used to." Jake said, then shrugged.

I didn't want Xain to feel left out of the conversation, so I decided to at least acknowledge what we all knew.

"So Xain, I'm guessing you don't have any fears like the rest of us." I said casually.

"I do not have a fear, as such, but I do experience a sense of disquiet when I encounter clowns." Xain said seriously.

"Clowns?" I asked dubiously.

I mean, Xain is a Vulcan with way superior emotional control and stuff... and of all the things in the universe to be afraid of...

"Yes. They are creepy." Xain said, not revealing any emotion in either his voice or expression.

"Y'know, I've always thought so too." Jake said speculatively.

"So Jake, I think this means that all of us will understand if you have problems at the funeral. And you can count on us to help you through it." I said seriously.

"Thanks Rory. I kinda already knew that you would, but I felt like I should.. I don't know, warn you or something." Jake said shyly.

"We've got you covered Jake." Ken said from beside me.

"Thanks guys." Jake said, then casually hugged Xain to his side again.

* * * * *

A naked boy walked past me and drew my attention.

There's a chance that I would have known who it was if I had been able to make myself look at his face.

"Do you want to get ready for bed now?" Ken asked casually.

"Yeah, sure... I, um..." I said before stopping to stare at a beautifully tanned, perfectly toned naked body walking toward me.

"Would you guys like some help getting ready for bed?"

I forced myself to look up and was shocked to see that it was Aaron Carter.

Naked.

I've had some pretty good fantasies in the past few years. I mean, considering the shape I was in, I didn't have much else.

But even in my best, wildest fantasy, I never even thought about being in a situation like this.

Aaron Carter...

...offering to help me...

...get naked.

"That's okay Aaron, we can get it." Ken said casually from beside me.

"I'm sure you can, but I thought it might be easier with some help." Aaron said reasonably.

Before Ken could refuse, I quickly said, "You're right Aaron. Let's do it the easy way."

Ken shrugged, then moved around to my other side to allow Aaron easier access to me.

"If you'll lift Rory up a little, this will just take a second." Ken said seriously.

"No problem." Aaron said as he moved to my side.

"Before we start, are you okay with everything?" Aaron asked as he looked me in the eyes.

His honest concern for my feelings really took me by surprise.

I guess I always thought he'd be nice, but I never imagined that he'd actually care about me.

"Yeah, it's still a little weird, but I'm fine." I said quietly.

Aaron broke into a happy smile, then moved a little bit to lift me up so Ken could get my pants off.

I felt like I should be doing something to help them. I mean, since I've got both of my hands working now, I'm not helpless anymore, I could probably manage to do it all by myself if I really tried.

But seeing these guys, Ken who really loves me and Aaron, who's just a really nice guy and could easily become a close friend... letting them do this for me makes them happy. And seeing them happy makes me happy.

"Do you want me to move this wheelchair out of the way?" Aaron asked as he sat me down on the floor, propped up against the couch.

"Sure, thanks Aaron." Ken said in a slightly hoarse voice.

I looked at him curiously and found him looking down at my naked body with wonder.

For a very long time I felt like a hideous, twisted freak.

I would close my eyes or turn away in the bathroom so I wouldn't have to see myself in the mirror.

I've looked at myself in the mirror a couple times since yesterday, but... I don't know. I guess after feeling ugly for so long, it's still kind of a reflex to think of myself that way now.

But the look of love and plain old fashioned horn-dog lust in Ken's eyes made me feel wonderful and special and beautiful.

If we weren't in a room full of other guys, I'm pretty sure I know what we'd be doing... in fact, from the expression on his face, he might not even remember that there are other people here.

"I'd better get back to David now. Give me a yell if you need anything." Aaron said as he stood.

"Sure. Thanks." I said, then glanced around the room and spotted David.

Nice.

That's all I'm saying, David... naked... nice.

* * * * *

"Look Daddy! Rory's got red hair on his wee-wee! When I get old like you am I gonna have red hair on my wee-wee too?"

Before I even turned to look, I knew it was Timmy.

Of course I had noticed that he was red headed like me, so I felt a little bit closer to him than some of the other boys.

In some ways Timmy is like I used to be before I got sick.

"Yeah Gizmo, you probably will." Sean said with a chuckle.

The realization suddenly came over me... everyone was naked.

I looked around to confirm it and found that most of the other guys were already naked.

Kevin and Jake were both wearing boxer shorts, but other than those two, everyone else was bare-butt naked.

Them being naked wasn't what was surprising me, it was that for a few minutes while I was talking with Ken and Aaron, I didn't notice.

Well, of course I noticed, but I wasn't feeling like I should be hiding myself or uncomfortable in any way.

I wasn't sure about what it would be like to be naked with all the guys.

But now that I'm here... it's probably the most comfortable place I've ever been.

I guess that there's this sense that everyone here is free and relaxed.

No one has anything to hide.

"Can I sleep with you guys?" Kevin asked quietly as he approached.

Looking at him wearing only his boxer shorts was a painful sight.

He was so horribly thin that I felt a lump form in my throat and I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes.

I never imagined that anyone could be so thin.

"Sure Kev. We're just about ready. Rory's just got to scoot over a little." Ken said from beside me.

"What do I need to do?" I asked, tearing my gaze away from Kevin.

"Just scoot over a little so I can snuggle in behind you... I mean, if that's okay?" Ken finished uncertainly.

"Okay? Try perfect." I said with a grin, then started to scoot myself away from the couch.

"That's great. Kev, can you grab us a pillow?" Ken asked as he snuggled in behind me.

"Sure." Kevin said, then reached over to one of the many pillows stacked in the floor and selected one.

Rather than hand the pillow to Ken, he laid down in front of me and placed the pillow in the floor.

I carefully lowered myself and my head came to rest on the pillow.

As soon as I was in place, Kevin automatically snuggled back into my chest.

Without hesitation, my arms went around him and pulled him into a casual hug.

"Thanks Rory." Kevin said in a small, contented voice.

I felt Ken's arms come around me from behind, then felt a small kiss on my neck.

As I lay there and enjoyed the feeling of hugging and being hugged, Jake, Xain, Reuben and Ricardo all made their way over to us and gathered into our little formation.

Ricardo was snuggled against Kevin, Reuben snuggled Ricardo.

Xain was lying on his side with Reuben at his back and had his head resting on Jake's chest.

I leaned up a little to look around and all I could see was a sea of naked boys all snuggled together, each and every one of them holding and being held by someone they loved.

Chapter 13

The first thing I noticed when I started to wake up, even before I opened my eyes, was the arms around me.

I opened my eyes to find Kevin right in front of me, facing me.

He was smiling.

This little boy who had been so neglected all of his life was now in a place where he was happy and loved. Even as he slept, he felt it and the joy could clearly be seen in his sleeping face.

As I came more awake, I noticed Ken snuggled against my back.

Even while he's fast asleep he can make me feel completely loved.

Before I could dwell on those thoughts anymore, I noticed a slight discomfort.

My bladder was letting me know that I needed to get up... right now.

I turned myself a little to look at Ken, to wake him to help me when I noticed my wheelchair beside the wall, just a few feet away.

I turned a little more and saw the angelic beauty of Ken as he slept.

'Am I worthy of his love?' I asked myself as I looked at him.

The answer to that question came a lot easier than I would have expected. I'm worthy in Ken's eyes, and that's all that matters.

I looked again at the wheelchair and knew what I had to do.

Maybe I don't have a 'logical' reason that I can explain, but regardless of that, I still knew.

I had to go to the bathroom by myself.

This wasn't something I needed to do for Ken to make him proud of me or to make me worthy in his eyes. This was something I needed to do for myself.

With slow and deliberate movements, I wriggled and scooted so that I could get out of Ken's embrace without waking him.

I don't know how long that took because I was so focused on my task.

I was finally able to scoot myself down enough that my head was by his legs.

Okay, I guess I can't deny that I was tempted to give Ken a 'good morning' while I was down there, but my bladder reminded me that I had more urgent business that needed to be attended to.

Using my hands to pull me, I was able to pivot myself on my hip and ended up about a foot away from my wheelchair.

It had been a little over a year since I had needed to do this for myself. I wasn't entirely sure that my arms were strong enough to handle it.

After dragging myself a little bit closer, I made sure that both the wheels were locked, then I lifted the foot pads to clear the way for me.

As I started to lift myself, I heard movement from behind me.

I froze in place and looked at the sea of naked, sleeping boys.

A pair of eyes was watching me from across the room.

It was Kyle.

There was a part of me that was wishing that he would come over and help me do this because lifting myself with my arms was difficult.

But there was a bigger part that was resolved to do it myself, to prove that I wasn't completely helpless and dependent.

Kyle gave me a slight nod, then put his head back down and closed his eyes.

I smiled at the action, then went back to work, trying to lift myself into the wheelchair.

There were a few times when I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to do it.

My arms weren't used to having to lift my weight anymore and were barely up to the challenge.

It was everything I could do not to grunt and groan at the effort, but I didn't want to take the chance of waking any of the others and ruining my chance to prove that I could do it all by myself.

Finally, with a last burst of effort, I was able to pull myself up to the point that I could just roll a little and my butt would be on the seat.

Once I reached that point there was no stopping me.

I guess I can't call it a habit because I haven't done it for so long, but the process of turning and getting myself settled properly into the chair was almost automatic.

After unlocking my wheels, I turned the wheelchair and made my way out of the room.

* * * * *

"Good morning Rory. Did you sleep well?" Helen asked as I entered the kitchen.

"Yeah. I slept great. Um... where is the bathroom?" I asked shyly, then realized that I was still naked.

Helen didn't even seem to notice that I wasn't wearing any clothes. I guess with all the naked boys in the other room, that she was probably used to it.

"Right over there. Do you need any help?" Helen asked casually.

"I think I can do it myself, but I'll call if I get stuck." I said quietly, trying to sound just as casual as she did.

Helen nodded that she heard as she went back to her breakfast preparations.

* * * * *

I hope whoever designed their bathroom was appreciated for the excellent job that he or she did.

Ever since I've been sick, I've had problems going to the bathroom by myself because the fixtures are usually packed into the bathroom so tightly that I can't get the wheelchair near the toilet.

Whoever designed this bathroom obviously took 'special needs' into account because I had enough room to maneuver. But at the same time, it looked like a normal bathroom, just a little more spacious.

Moving from the wheelchair to the toilet was a little bit tricky. Then again, I suppose moving from the wheelchair to anywhere is.

A knock on the door broke me out of my thoughts.

"Rory?"

It was Ken's voice.

Busted.

I guess I wasn't as sneaky as I thought.

"I'm fine Ken." I said, loving the fact that he came to check on me.

"Um, that's nice, but are you about done? I need to use the bathroom too." Ken said quietly.

"Oh, yeah. Sure." I said quickly as I reached behind me and flushed the toilet.

Ken opened the door and had a beaming smile.

"Just a second." I said as I shifted myself quickly back to my wheelchair.

"Okay. Sorry to interrupt, but I really gotta go." Ken said shyly.

"We bathed together Ken, so it's really no problem." I said as I unlocked the wheels of my wheelchair.

"If you'll hang on for a minute I'll go with you." Ken said as he moved in front of the toilet.

"Sounds good." I said as I rolled over to the sink, then stretched up to turn on the faucet.

As I was washing my hands, I noticed that Ken had finished with his business.

I turned and saw him watching me with such a look of love in his eyes that it nearly made me cry.

'Love you.' He mouthed at me, but I could clearly see his pride for me burning in his eyes.

He must have realized that I had been trying to prove something to myself.

I didn't want to spoil the moment by giving voice to what we both knew, so I quietly asked, "Would you hand me a towel?"

Ken smiled and took a hand towel from beside the sink and handed it to me.

As I dried my hands, Ken quickly washed his.

When he was finished, I held out the hand towel to him.

"Thanks." Ken whispered, then dried his hands and put the towel away.

Ken opened the door, then looked at me with question.

It took me a moment to realize what he was silently asking.

He wanted to know if I wanted him to push my wheelchair.

If it were just about anyone else, I would have decided to do it myself.

"Since we're going the same place, you can drive if you want to." I said quietly, hoping I was interpreting his question correctly.

"Sounds good." Ken said with a smile, then moved behind me to push.

Given my nature, it would be very easy to push Ken away and not let him help me do anything that I could do for myself... and then resent him for the things that I actually did need help with.

It's an ugly thought, but I know that after being out of control of everything in my life for so long, that it would be easy for me to go to the other extreme... except for Ken.

Seeing the joy that he feels from doing such simple things for me keeps me from trying to do everything for myself.

And considering what I just saw, I have no doubt that Ken will completely support me in anything that I do choose to do alone.

He'll be right there with me, cheering me on... being proud of me.

* * * * *

"Would you boys like some juice to get you by until breakfast? It's still going to be a while." Helen asked cheerfully.

"Be right back." Ken whispered from behind me, then rushed away.

Helen looked at me curiously, obviously waiting for an answer.

"Sure. I think we'll both have some juice." I said, then realized that I was still naked.

I was sitting in the kitchen... naked... with a woman I barely knew.

"Here." Ken whispered as he dropped a pair of shorts into my lap.

"Thanks." I said and realized from the prickly sensation on my skin that my face was probably as red as my hair.

"Need any help?" Ken asked as I started to pull the shorts up my legs.

"I think I can get it." I said as I worked the shorts up and up with pulls and tugs.

As soon as I was finished, Ken swooped in and gave me a big kiss.

It lasted longer than I expected and if Helen hadn't placed the glasses of juice on the counter beside us, there's no telling how long or how far it might have gone.

"Good morning." Ken said as he pulled back to look at me.

"Yeah. Good morning." I said as I was lost in his chocolaty brown eyes.

"Since you're up so early, how would you like to help me with breakfast?" Helen asked curiously.

Ken looked at me with question, obviously letting me decide for both of us.

"Yeah. I think we'd both like to help." I said happily.

* * * * *

All I did was mix pancake batter. I don't know if it was that much help, but I really felt good knowing that I was able to do something to contribute to the meal.

When the breakfast was nearly ready, Helen sent us in to start waking up boys and telling them to come and eat.

I don't think she really needed for us to do that. The smell of cooking food obviously reached them before we did and over half of the guys were ready to eat before we entered the room.

What happened next was a blur.

People were coming and going so quickly that it was impossible to keep up with who was doing what.

Kevin, Reuben and Ricardo joined Ken and me as we ate our breakfast.

"Give it a try. I took some of your mother's recommendations and added a few of my own touches." Helen said gently as she placed a plate of food in front of me.

I looked down and noticed that I was getting something different from everyone else.

At first I was disappointed at not being able to eat the same food as the others, but after a few bites, I had completely forgotten.

It was delicious.

My next surprise was when I took a drink of milk.

It wasn't really milk, but it also wasn't the putrid swill that mom usually served me.

The next time Helen walked into the room to resupply the banquet of food in the center of the table I asked her, "What did you give me to drink?"

"That's soy milk." Helen said, and waited for my reaction.

"This is great! It doesn't taste anything like the soy milk that my mom gets me." I said honestly.

"I'm glad you like it. I added a little bit of vanilla so it was a little bit more palatable." Helen said with a happy smile.

A little vanilla? Is that all mom would have had to do to make that hideous glop that I've been drinking taste like this?

Helen really needs to give mom some tips on how to cook.

"How is your food?" Ken asked quietly from beside me.

"It's all great. Even though I know this is health food, it doesn't taste like it. Even the fake eggs are awesome." I said happily.

"Good. Mine is good too." Ken said with a contented smile.

"So Rory, now that you've had some time to think about being the Clan representative on Vulcan, are you feeling a little better about it?" Cory asked casually as he took a seat across the table from me.

I thought for a moment, then said, "Sure. As long as I can call you if I have any questions, I don't think I'll have any problems."

"That's what I had hoped. In the beginning there probably won't be much for you to do. But as people begin to realize that the Clan has someone on Vulcan that they can talk to, you'll start to get busier." Cory said between bites of food.

I nodded, unable to speak around my own mouthful.

"Hey guys. How is everyone doing this morning?" A familiar voice asked cheerfully.

I turned and smiled when I saw Billy standing in the doorway.

"Hey Billy! Everything is great!" Ken answered before I could begin to formulate a response.

Since Ken had said what I would have said if I had been quicker, I just nodded my agreement with his statement.

"Good. I'm glad you had a good time. If you guys don't already have plans this morning, I'd like to go ahead and get the photo shoot started." Billy said cautiously as he looked around the room.

"Well, normally the whole Clan will spend Saturday morning doing something together. It's kind of our time to be together as brothers, but since we really don't have anything planned, I don't see any problem." Sean said, then looked at Cory with question.

Cory smiled and said, "That's right. I have some idea of all the things that Rory needs to do before he leaves for Vulcan, so it would probably be a good idea to get started."

"Thanks guys. Whenever you're ready, we'll go." Billy said casually.

"I think we're almost done. We just need to get dressed." I said as I looked at my nearly empty plate.

"You really don't need to dress too much. The photo shoot is for a clothing company, so you'll be changing clothes all morning." Billy said frankly.

"That sounds kinda fun." Eli said speculatively.

"I'll let you know." I said to him with a grin.

"You finished?" Ken asked quietly from my side.

"Yeah. Let's take our dishes to the kitchen, then we can go get dressed." I said as I picked up my plate.

"We can get that for you." Reuben said from my other side.

"Thanks Reuben, but it will only take me a minute." I said as I stacked mine and Ken's plates in my lap, then gathered our silverware.

"Ready?" Ken asked as he handed me his glass.

I made sure that I had a firm grip on everything, then said, "Yeah."

Ken unlocked my wheels, then pushed me out of the dining room and to the kitchen.

* * * * *

"So did you guys have fun last night?" Billy asked casually as Ken pushed me out to the parking lot.

"Yeah. It was lots of fun. Not only was Rory made a member of the Clan, but Cory asked him to be the Clan's representative on Vulcan." Ken said proudly.

"That's great. I bet that it'll be good for you to have something to do besides just thinking about your treatments." Billy said, then opened the back door of his car.

"Is your trunk big enough for Rory's wheelchair?" Ken asked as he looked at Billy's car curiously.

"I was planning to bungee it to the boot rack. We're just going next door." Billy said as he opened the trunk and pulled out a small canvas bag.

"That's a boot rack? Why do you need a rack for your boots on the back of your car? Do your feet stink that bad?" Ken asked cautiously.

Billy gave a hearty laugh and said, "No Kenny, the boot rack is a rack that is placed on the boot of the car. Boot is another name for trunk."

"Oh. Okay." Ken said shyly as he moved me to the passenger side of the car. He obviously felt that he had just made a fool of himself.

"He never did answer your question about his stinky feet." I whispered into Ken's ear as he helped me into the back seat of the car.

Ken giggled, and I was glad to see that my little joke was enough to get his mind off his misunderstanding.

I turned in my seat and watched as Ken took the wheelchair to the back of the car and helped Billy strap it down.

* * * * *

When Billy got into the car, he had his cell phone out and was dialing.

After a moment of listening, he quickly said, "Marsha? Were you able to get everything lined up?"

I glanced over at Ken to see if he had any idea of who Marsha was.

His puzzled expression was all the answer that I needed.

"Are you serious? I don't ask her to help me for over a month, then just when I need her she goes and gives birth. How inconsiderate." Billy said playfully, then looked over at me and winked.

"Well, is he any good?" Billy asked more seriously, then waited.

"Good point... Well, if he sucks I guess we'll find some way to manage... How long before you get here?" Billy asked, now in a completely 'business' tone of voice.

"That works fine for me. I'll need a few minutes to scout the locations."

"See ya then." Billy said with a smile, then a moment later closed his phone.

"Problems?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Not really. The woman I wanted for make-up is out of action for a month or so. Marsha is going to bring someone with her to do the job. But since I haven't worked with him before, I don't know how he'll work out." Billy said in a distant voice. I got the feeling from his expression that he was plotting out about a dozen different scenarios in his head as he started the car.

"Make-up?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Don't worry about it Rory. Basically all we'll need to do is make sure that you're skin isn't too shiny under the lights. Since you're so photogenic, I doubt that we'll need to do much more than that." Billy said casually.

I looked at Billy uncertainly, not feeling particularly assured by his statement.

"It comes with the job, Rory. Trust me, I know." Billy said frankly.

Of course. Billy was a model before he was a photographer. So he knows exactly what I'm worried about. I may not be able to get over my nervousness completely, but knowing that Billy understands will help me to deal with it.

"Oh, there's one other thing that might make you uncomfortable." Billy said as he glanced over at me.

"What's that?" I asked cautiously.

"Well, since this layout is basically a fashion shoot, you're going to have to change clothes a lot. I don't know how shy you are about your body, but some of the wardrobe changes may be made in the open." Billy said cautiously.

"You mean I'm going to be getting naked in front of a room full of people?" I asked in shock.

"No, no. Not naked, and not a room full. But I may decide to do the same shot with two or three different outfits. It will just make sense for you to change on the spot, you know, change into a different shirt or pants then do the shot again." Billy hurried to explain.

"But I don't have to get naked." I said slowly, wanting to be sure of that one point.

"Not in this shoot. If they were promoting a line of underwear or swim suits, then it might be a different story." Billy said frankly.

"Did you have to get naked in front of people like that?" Ken asked Billy curiously.

"Yeah, a few times. But by the time that I did those shoots, I knew all the crew and felt comfortable enough with them that it wasn't a big problem." Billy said as he pulled up to a huge, beautiful house.

I was so caught up in our conversation that I didn't even notice us approaching this house which could only be described as a mansion.

"You guys might want to stay here for a minute while I make sure that everything is alright for us to set up. I know Chip and Josh said it would be okay, but I don't know if they passed the message along." Billy said before getting out of the car.

"This place is huge." I whispered to Ken as I pressed my face against the window to see all of it.

"Yeah, and it's really pretty inside. This is where Justy, Jamie and Jacob live." Ken said happily.

"Wow. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to live in a place like this." I said in wonder.

You've got to realize, I've spent most of the past year in my bedroom. I would only get to leave to visit the doctor or to do my hydrotherapy.

Being at the Short Compound didn't give me this feeling because I never really felt like it was someone's home. It was more like... I don't know, like it was a lot of people's homes and there was a doctor's office and Federation Youth Services building. It was a compound, just like the name said.

But Southcrest was a home.

A big, huge beautiful home.

The sight of Billy walking around the corner caught my attention and snapped me out of my mental wandering.

He hurried to the car and opened my door before saying, "Chip made sure everyone knew what was going on before he left. So if you guys want, you can go around the house with me and we can pick out a few locations before Kai gets here with the equipment."

"Who's Kai?" Ken asked before getting out of the car.

Billy stood so Ken could hear him and said, "He's a college student who works as my assistant when I shoot locally. He's probably loading up the equipment now."

"Wow, so we've got a make-up person, an assistant... who is Marsha?" Ken asked as he brought my wheelchair around the side of the car.

"She's my agent. She scouts out photography and modeling jobs for me and contacts me if she finds something I might be interested in. She came to me with this fashion shoot about a month ago, but I refused it because I didn't have a decent location or a model with a fresh look." Billy said as Ken helped me into my wheelchair.

I just have to take a moment to mention again how totally cool Billy is.

The way he talked about his work while Ken was helping me into my wheelchair made me feel like I was just a normal, everyday person. Billy doesn't stare or do the wide eyed 'poor little guy' thing that some people do.

He makes me feel normal.

"What kind of a name is Kai?" Ken asked casually as he moved me a few feet from the car, then went back and closed the car door.

"He's Hawaiian." Billy said casually, then looked toward the road and continued, "Here he is now."

Ken turned my wheelchair and we watched as a van pulled up beside Billy's car.

"Did you have any trouble finding the place?" Billy asked with a smile as he walked to the side of the van.

Kai stepped out and I got a good look at him. He was a stout guy, but sort of handsome in an exotic way. His hair was black and sort of long and wavy.

"Are you kidding? I could have found this house the first week that I moved to Orlando. I can't wait to see inside!" Kai said with boyish enthusiasm.

"Then let's go and do a walk through. They're already expecting us." Billy said, then gestured toward the back of the house.

"Hazel suggested that it might be easier for Rory to go in through the patio entrance with his wheelchair." Billy said casually as he started walking.

Kai looked at me and Ken, then timidly said, "Hey guys, I'm Kai. I'll be helping Billy today."

Billy stopped and said, "Sorry about that. Kai, this is Rory and Ken. Rory is going to be the model today... although Ken might be able to step into a shot or two if he wants."

"Cool." Kai said with a warm smile at us both.

* * * * *

"First of all, I'd like to do a few of the main shots in the living room. You know, the more formal stuff. Do you think the piano will be any problem for lighting?" Billy asked as he walked slowly through the room.

"I don't think so. We may need to go indirect to keep the glare down, but we won't know for sure until we set up the shot." Kai said seriously.

Billy nodded, then gestured toward the huge picture window at the front.

"I was thinking that if we can catch a few shots in front of the window before it gets too bright out, it would make a great background." Billy said frankly.

"Yeah. It's a beautiful view. Are you planning to do any outdoor pictures?" Kai asked with interest.

"I'll have to see the clothes before I can decide that. I know generally what the styles will be, but I don't remember each thing. There may be something that needs to be displayed in an outdoor setting." Billy said in slow, careful thought.

"Right... by the way, is JC here?" Kai asked, trying to sound casual.

"No. He and his husband are out of town on their second honeymoon right now." Billy said, then gestured toward the door.

I glanced at Kai in time to see a fleeting look of disappointment ghost across his face.

* * * * *

As we entered the family room, Billy suddenly stopped in front of us.

"Sorry guys. I didn't know anyone but Hazel was here right now." Billy said quickly.

I was surprised to see that one of the people in the room was Vincent.

He seemed to be too busy on the computer to notice that we had entered the room.

"No problem. Joe is walking Vincent through some of the training sims on the Starfleet Simulator. Ethan and I are sort of providing moral support." A young man said casually.

"That's Keith. Commander Dodds is his father." Ken whispered over my shoulder.

Billy glanced around the room, then said, "If it won't be too much of a distraction, we'll probably be doing a quick shoot in here later. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

"We probably won't be here that long. Keith is going to take us over to the Starfleet Complex so that Vincent can do some more tests." Joe said cautiously, watching for Vincent's reaction.

"I don't know what else they're going to test. They've already poked and scanned everything that I got." Vincent grumbled without looking away from the computer before him.

"Today they'll be looking at that winning personality of yours." Joe said with a barely restrained smile.

Vincent looked away from the computer long enough to glare at Joe and convey the message that he didn't appreciate the joke made at his expense.

"Come on guys, I want to look at the study, then the dining room before we start hauling stuff in." Billy said with a fond smile directed at Joe and Vincent.

"Good luck on your tests." I said to Vincent quickly as Ken turned my wheelchair.

"Good luck on your pictures." Vincent said in return, then flashed me a quick smile.

I blinked with surprise as Ken pushed me out of the room.

That smile.

It was the smile of a friend.

The smile only lasted an instant, and yet I seemed to feel it in my heart.

By the time I had come back to my senses, we were in a completely different room.

"Nice room, but I don't know. We'll just have to see if any of the clothes would fit into such a... 'formal' setting." Billy said speculatively.

"We might be able to get kind of a classroom feel over by the computer." Kai said as he moved further into the room.

Billy slowly nodded, then said, "I'll keep it in mind."

* * * * *

As we entered the hall again, a small elderly woman approached and said, "Good morning, Mr. Pierce, was it?"

"Yes Ma'am... I'm sorry but I don't think anyone ever told me your name except to call you 'Aunt Jackie'." Billy said shyly.

Just so you know, Billy looking shy... nice.

The elderly woman chuckled and said, "That's what I expect everyone in my nephew's house to call me. All of you are to call me 'Aunt Jackie'. Do you understand?"

"Yes Aunt Jackie." All of us said obediently.

"Good." She said with satisfaction, then continued, "Chip told me that you were going to be taking some pictures around the house today."

"Yes Aunt Jackie. We were just looking around the different rooms to plan out the shots." Billy said frankly.

"Oh, well have you been up on the balcony yet? It has a lovely view, that might be a good location." Aunt Jackie suggested enthusiastically.

"No, I don't think I've seen that. It'd be worth a look." Billy said frankly.

"Come on, it's right up these stairs." Aunt Jackie said as she began to lead the way.

Argh! Stairs!

The bane of my existence.

You don't even know how much easier my life would have been the past few years if I didn't have to put up with stairs... hell, I could have kept my old bedroom.

"Would you mind if I carry you?" Kai asked cautiously.

"Um, yeah. Thanks." I said reluctantly.

God! At times like this I absolutely HATE not being able to walk.

Just when I'm starting to feel good about myself, reality has to show up and kick me in the balls!

I glanced over at Ken with aggravation as Kai carried me up the stairs. He didn't seem to notice because his eyes were focused on something else. I followed his gaze and, even though I fought it a little, I began to smile. Ken was *totally* checking out my butt.

The expression on his face gave away every single thought that was going through his head.

I'd have to say that it would be completely impossible for me to feel anything less than beautiful with Ken looking at me like that.

As we were walking down the hallway, Aunt Jackie was telling Billy about how this house caught on fire back in 1999.

When we came to the end of the hall, there were double doors that opened out onto a HUGE balcony.

My breath caught in my throat at the expansive view.

"I see what you mean." Billy said as he looked around.

"Would you like to sit down?" Kai asked me gently.

From the stability of his grip and the tone of his voice, I would guess that Kai could have continued carrying me for the next few hours without being bothered by it.

He was simply asking my preference, not hinting at anything.

"No thanks. I don't think Billy will take that long." I said quietly.

After another moment of looking around, Billy finally said, "It's a beautiful view, but I don't think it'll work for this shoot. If the balcony faced to the North, then... maybe."

Jackie was looking at Billy inquiringly.

"The background would be too busy and detract from the point of the picture, which is to display and promote the clothing." Billy said frankly.

Jackie smiled and said, "I like your style Mr. Pierce. I think that if I have need of a photographer, I'll be giving you a call."

Billy chuckled and said, "Please call me Billy, and if you like my work, I'd be happy to do a photo shoot for you sometime."

"I might just take you up on that Billy." Aunt Jackie said as she led the way through the double doors, back into the house.

* * * * *

"Mr. Pierce. There is someone to see you. She is in the living room." Hazel said from the bottom of the stairs.

"Thank you, Hazel." Billy said casually.

"Billy, how long is this going to take? We've been here over 15 minutes and you still haven't taken a picture." Ken asked curiously as we finally reached the bottom of the stairs.

I looked at Billy with question as Kai placed me in my wheelchair.

"Somewhere between one and sixteen hours." Billy said seriously.

Ken's eyes went wide with surprise.

Billy broke into a smile and said, "We've finished scouting the locations, so once everyone gets here we can get started and things will really start to get moving."

Ken automatically moved behind me to push my wheelchair.

"He didn't really give you an answer." I whispered over my shoulder.

"Yeah. Just like with his stinky feet." Ken said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

* * * * *

"Latisha? God! I haven't seen you for... it must have been a couple years! Where have you been?" Billy asked as he ran to a woman and hugged her.

"My husband got a promotion and transfer to San Antonio so I decided to do the housewife thing for a while." The woman said as she happily returned the hug.

"Since you're back, does this mean you didn't like it?" Billy asked as he released her from the hug.

"I think I made a pretty good go of it. I wasn't miserable or anything. But my husband and I discussed it and decided that it wasn't the type of lifestyle that we wanted. We both missed being able to compare our days and brainstorm over each other's problems. It's like we were losing the ability to relate to each other as equals because the most exciting thing that happened in my day had to do with the size and texture of the lint ball that was clogging the vacuum cleaner hose." Latisha said frankly.

Billy chuckled and seemed to be about to say something when Latisha said, "We may have a problem. Someone must have gotten their lines crossed because there is NO WAY you're going to fit into the clothes I brought."

"I'm not the model, Latisha, I'm the photographer." Billy said with a timid smile.

"Wait. Seriously? Oh, that's wonderful!" Latisha said happily.

"Yeah. And this young man is Rory. He is going to be our model today." Billy said as he gestured toward me.

Latisha looked me over with an appraising eye.

It's funny, in a way I'm kind of used to people staring at me. Or pretending not to look at me. I guess after a while you start to get numb to it.

But the way Latisha looked at me was completely different. It wasn't anything bad, I just wasn't sure how I felt about it.

"His green eyes might be a problem with the b-line and the k-line. It looks like you may have to do some re-touch work." Latisha said professionally.

"It won't be a problem, Tish. His eyes have at least three different colors in them. They change to match just about anything that he's wearing." Billy said happily.

Latisha gave an inelegant snort of amusement, then said, "That's handy."

"That's only the beginning. Just wait until you see the test shots. You won't believe your eyes." Billy said seriously.

"You've got my attention." Latisha said frankly.

"Then I think we can get started. Marsha should be here with the makeup guy by the time we're finished setting up. We're going to do our first few shots in this room." Billy said as he looked around.

That sounded like they were going to start bringing in cameras and stuff, so before they could leave I hurried to ask, "Do you need us to do anything?"

"Yes." Billy said as he looked at me, then broke into a smile as he said, "Sit there and look cute."

I glanced to Ken at my side when I heard his giggle.

"Kenny, you help him. Everyone else, let's get to it."

* * * * *

"Excuse me?" A woman asked from the doorway.

"Hi Grandma Karen." Ken said happily as he unlocked my wheels.

"Hello Kenny. How are you doing this morning?" The elderly woman asked as she moved in to give Ken a warm hug.

"I'm good." Ken said happily, then when she released him from the hug, he continued, "Grandma Karen, this is Rory... my boyfriend."

I smiled at Ken's shyness.

He's just so cute.

"It's nice to meet you, Rory. I'm Karen Chasez, but you can call me Grandma Karen." She said, then swooped in to give me a quick hug.

It was a little weird to have this complete stranger hugging me, but at the same time, it was kind of nice.

"I see that you're in a wheelchair. I hope it's nothing serious." She said as she straightened.

Wow.

That was blunt.

I can't remember anyone just blurting it out like that, so I couldn't think of what to say to answer her.

Thankfully, my knight in shining armor came to my rescue.

"Rory has a nerve disease thing that makes it so he can't walk, but he'll be going to Vulcan next week and they're going to take care of it." Ken said seriously.

It's hard for me to believe how Ken can make my condition sound no more serious than a broken leg.

It's kind of shocking, actually.

But the most wonderful thing is that I know, without a doubt, that Ken really does see it that way.

He doesn't see the poor little crippled boy in the wheelchair. He just sees me, his boyfriend, who has a condition that will soon be healed.

It's going to take me a while to get used to that.

"Josh was telling me that they were going to be doing a photo shoot here this morning. Are you two here to see that?" Karen asked me with interest.

"Yeah." I said as I looked away.

I couldn't think of any way to explain what was really happening without it sounding like I was bragging.

"Rory is the model for the photo shoot." Ken said proudly.

I love him.

When I hear him say something like that and sounding so proud of me, I absolutely love him.

"Isn't that wonderful. Well, I hope that Billy will allow me to stay and watch for a while. I think watching a professional photo shoot should be interesting." Karen said cheerfully.

Before Ken or I could answer, Kai walked into the room carrying a stack of boxes.

Immediately following him was Latisha carrying a bunch of suit bags. Right on her heels was Billy, loaded down with a bunch of suitcases and laptop bags.

"Tish, I want to do the first shot in front of this magnificent window before we lose the light." Billy said professionally.

"I like it. I have just the outfit for that." Latisha said as she looked out the window.

"Then if you want to start on getting Rory dressed, we'll concentrate on the setup." Billy said quickly as he started opening up his cases.

Latisha looked at me for a moment, then said, "Right. What do you want to do about his wheelchair?"

"It'll be in the shot." Billy said frankly.

Latisha looked at me and it seemed that she had a million things running through her mind at once.

"Can you take that pouch off the back of the wheelchair?" Latisha asked cautiously.

"Sure, it's just held on by snaps." I said quickly.

"I can take it off if you want." Ken offered gently.

"Yes, go ahead. We don't need any clutter in the shot." Latisha said as she opened one of the suit bags, then another, obviously looking for one particular outfit.

"Sorry I'm late. I hope I haven't held you up." A woman said as she hurried into the room.

"No, you're right on time. I was just about to get started." Latisha said with a smile.

"Troy! Front and center! It's time for you to earn it." The woman called out into the hallway.

"Oh Marsha, you haven't changed a bit." Latisha said with a giggle as she walked over to me, carrying clothes on a hanger.

"Why should I change what works?" Marsha said happily, then turned to the door and called, "Troy! Get your bony butt in here!"

A guy rushed into the room carrying something that looked like a tackle box. I was surprised at how young he looked.

"Who am I doing?" The young man asked frantically.

"Him." Latisha said as she gestured toward me, then continued, "Get yourself organized and be ready to jump in as soon as he's dressed."

"Right." Troy said nervously.

"You're not ready yet? We're going to lose the light at this rate." Billy said as he rushed back into the room.

With everything going on, I didn't see him leave.

"Can you get that shirt off while I get this ready?" Latisha asked me, drawing my attention away from Billy.

"Do you need any help?" Ken asked quietly.

Before I could answer, Latisha said, "Pants too."

"I'll get the shirt if you'll get the pants." I said as I started to take off my shirt.

"I like the sound of that." Ken said as he knelt down in front of me.

After pulling off my shirt, I looked down at Ken who was unbuttoning my pants and said, "Maybe I should have you do the shirt next time. Seeing you down there might give us both some ideas that we shouldn't be having."

I heard a chuckle from behind me and began to blush when I saw Grandma Karen smiling at me.

"There'll be time for that later. Let Latisha help you dress." Billy said quickly as he set up a tripod.

As soon as Ken had the pants off my legs, Latisha nudged him out of the way and started putting a pair of khaki pants on me.

"Do you need me to help?" Ken asked quickly.

"No." Latisha said as she somehow seemed to put my pants on without even lifting me. She was moving so fast that I couldn't keep up with what was going on.

"Not bad." She muttered under her breath.

I glanced at Ken with question, only to receive a shrug in reply.

"Hold your legs still while I do this." Latisha said absently as she pulled a box of pins out of her pocket.

"No problem." I said, trying to keep the chuckle out of my voice.

"I'm ready here." Billy said as he did something quickly on his laptop.

"One minute." Latisha said, then I felt a jab in my leg.

"Ouch!" I said automatically.

"I told you to hold still." Latisha said harshly.

"I'm paralyzed. I couldn't move it if I wanted to." I said, not very nicely, as I felt my 'red headedness' rising.

Latisha froze, and from the expression on her face, she was mortified at the mistake she had made.

Up to now I suppose she had been treating me like any other model, but now that I've pointed out my condition, she was probably going to treat me like some 'poor little thing' and be awkward around me.

I don't want to be pitied. I think you know that about me by now.

I'm just not used to censoring what I say before I say it. I don't know if it's because I'm not that used to being around people, or maybe it's my red hair.

For whatever reason, now that I've slipped up, I've made it so that I'll be treated like a crippled 'non-person' by her for the rest of the day.

"I finally have proof that it isn't the model's fault. You stuck me enough times and always blamed it on me." Billy said with triumph.

Latisha blinked at the words, then her horrified expression reluctantly gave way to an amused smile.

"In your case, it always was your fault, you hyper little shit." Latisha said with a chuckle as she began buttoning my shirt, back to full speed.

"I can do that if you want." I offered uncertainly, feeling bad for putting her in the awkward position to begin with.

"It'll be faster if I do it." Latisha said without slowing down.

Billy's little joke had diffused the situation and she was back to her former attitude.

Although he may act like he's carefree and just living in the moment, I think that he's a lot deeper than he lets on.

In an instant, he determined the problem and found exactly what to say to put things back to right.

"She's right, Rory. Just let her get the clothes on you and pinned the way she wants them so we can get this shot." Billy said professionally while fussing over his equipment.

Hearing Billy use such a professional tone brought me back to the right frame of mind.

"Just let me know if you need me to do anything." I said quietly.

"Hold on..." Latisha said in concentration as she took a step back.

After a moment to look me over, she continued, "I think that's it."

* * * * *

"Do you want me to do something about those freckles?" Troy asked with a nervous tone in his voice.

"Just keep him from getting shiny under the lights. If I need you to do something more, I'll tell you." Billy said as he seemed to be checking to see that he had everything that he needed.

"I think you're going to need a gel on the lighting." Kai said, seemingly oblivious to what anyone else was doing.

"Do you think so?" Billy asked with surprise.

"Just a little yellow to bring out the golden hue of his hair." Kai said in a considering tone.

Billy looked at me for a moment, then said, "Go get it. I'll do some shots with and some without and we'll decide which is better when we look at the prints."

Kai nodded, then rushed out of the room.

"Are you alright?" Troy whispered as he started to apply powder to my face.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I said as I looked up into his eyes, then cautiously asked, "How about you?"

Troy gave me a timid smile, then whispered, "This is my first real job since I got out of cosmetology school. Aunt Marsha said I only get this one chance so I'm kinda scared to death."

I couldn't help but smile at the nervous admission.

"Billy is really cool. Just listen to what he says and you shouldn't have any problems." Ken said from over my shoulder.

Troy nodded that he heard, then backed away to look at my face critically.

"I think we're ready to do it. Rory, move over to the window and face me." Billy said with intense concentration.

As I reached down to release my brakes, I encountered Ken's hand doing the same.

"Sorry." Ken whispered.

I smiled up at him and said, "I'll let you drive if you want. I'm probably going to need to focus on holding poses and stuff."

"Sure. I got it." Ken said warmly, then moved my wheelchair over to the window.

"How are you going to deal with the wheelchair?" Marsha asked as she walked to Billy's side.

"I'm not." Billy said frankly, then stepped over to me and held up a little gizmo, just over my head.

I don't know much of anything about photography, but I think what he was doing was checking the light level with a light meter.

"You ready for the gel?" Kai asked as he rushed back into the room.

"Not yet, I'm going to get a few shots without, then you can set it up." Billy said, then squatted down a little to look through his digital camera.

"Tish, are the clothes to your liking?" Billy asked without looking away from the camera display.

Latisha took a moment to look me over, then said, "Yes. Having a model who will stay in the position you put him makes my job a lot easier."

"Enjoy it while you've got the chance." Billy said with a chuckle, then in a more serious tone he continued, "Everyone stand back. It's time."

* * * * *

Hours.

We went through that same routine, over and over again for hours.

I have no idea how many rolls of film Billy used, but it had to be over a dozen.

Change the clothes, change the lights, chin up, look right... I guess you just had to be there to get an idea of how mind numbingly boring it could be.

Billy must have noticed because just when it seemed like I couldn't stand it anymore, he'd take a break and let me and Ken have a few minutes to relax.

The freakiest thing that I discovered after going through all of this was... modeling is work!

I've gained so much respect for the people who do this for a living.

It's not like I'm saying that I regret doing this or anything like that, but I don't know if I could do this all the time... you know, as a job.

But as boring as it was for me, I know it must have been even worse for Ken.

He was right there with me every step of the way, but all the attention was directed at me.

I'm so glad he was there with me. I don't know if I could have held my 'red headedness' back without him.

But if Latisha sticks me with one more pin, I *am* going to run over her toes.

* * * * *

"Mister Billy, I have prepared a buffet style lunch on the patio for you and your guests." Hazel said from the study doorway.

"You what?" Billy asked as he looked up from his camera, then looked down at his watch.

"Crap! I didn't realize it was so late." Billy said with aggravation, then looked over at Hazel with apology.

"That was very kind of you, Hazel. I really didn't expect for you to feed us. Thank you." Billy said quietly, then looked around at everyone in the room.

Hazel smiled at the sincere thanks, then rushed out.

"That's it, folks. Let's go have lunch and we'll pack this up when we get back." Billy said as he started turning off his electronics.

"That's all of it?" Latisha asked cautiously.

"We've done the whole clothing line, haven't we?" Billy asked frankly, then gestured toward the door.

Latisha considered for a moment, then reluctantly said, "Twice, I think."

"Right. So we can go through and cherry pick the best shots for each style." Billy said frankly.

Ken automatically moved my wheelchair so we were following Billy and Latisha out of the room.

"Besides, I have another appointment in just over an hour. I don't think taking more pictures would produce anything better than what we've already got." Billy said casually.

Latisha nodded slowly as she considered his words.

"And Billy's model isn't going to look 'morning fresh' if the shoot goes much longer. Troy did a great job, but I wouldn't want to put him to the test of trying to make an exhausted model look rested." Marsha said as she moved to Billy's other side.

Billy glanced around and found Troy tagging along behind us.

"Good job, Troy." Billy said and gave him a thumbs up.

I twisted around to see his reaction and saw Troy break into a proud smile.

As we approached the patio door, Hazel ran up to our group and said, "Mister Billy, there is a phone call for you. It is Mister Chip."

Billy seemed to be surprised for a moment, then he broke into a smile.

"Come on, guys. this might be good." Billy said to me and Ken, then followed Hazel out of the room.

* * * * *

We ended up in the study.

I knew it was the study because we had spent some time in here earlier, taking a few dozen pictures.

Billy picked up the phone and pressed the button to take it off 'hold'.

"Chip. Is it okay if I put you on speaker phone? I've got Rory and Kenny here with me." Billy asked as he glanced at us with a smile.

He must have said 'yes' because Billy hit a button on the phone, then hung up the handset.

"So Chip, what do you think of the vacation spot that we picked out for you two?" Billy asked with a big smile.

"If you would have asked me that when we found out that we were going to Branson, Missouri, I would have said that all of you were nuts." Chip said frankly.

"And now?" Billy asked knowingly.

There was a moment of silence, then Chip responded in a quieter voice, "There are special moments that are of such importance that we carry them with us for the rest of our lives."

Ken and I looked at each other with surprise at the serious statement.

"Last night, I had one of those moments and it was thanks to you, Mona, Allen and Brady." Chip continued.

"We found the tickets to the show when we arrived at the hotel room, but we didn't look to see exactly what it was. After sightseeing and dinner and what-not, we remembered the tickets just in time to make it to the show."

"We were having a great time, relaxing and enjoying the music and the atmosphere when they announced the next band... an *N Sync tribute band." Chip said distantly.

"I thought Josh was going to fall out of his seat from the shock of it." Chip said in a chuckle, then continued more seriously, "The tribute band did a great job. It really was a 'tribute' and I don't think I've ever seen Josh so moved by anything. He couldn't have been more proud if he had been receiving an award."

"I'm glad. That show was what made us finally decide on Branson as your honeymoon destination." Billy said warmly.

"It's perfect. After the show, Josh and I spent some time backstage with the tribute band. I could tell that it meant the world to them that Josh appreciated their performance." Chip said thoughtfully.

"I hope the rest of your weekend is just as enjoyable." Billy said with a smile.

"I think it will be. I remembered that you'd be at Southcrest doing the photo shoot this morning, so while I had a minute, I wanted to be sure to call and thank you... and please pass on my thanks to your co-conspirators." Chip said with a smile evident in his voice.

"Sure thing." Billy said with a chuckle.

"Josh is ready, gotta go. Bye." Chip said in a rush.

"Bye." Billy said, then looked at Ken and me.

We both said 'bye', then Billy hit the button to disconnect the call.

Ken and I looked at Billy with question.

"I'll explain after lunch." Billy said with a grin at us, then gestured toward the door.

* * * * *

I'm glad Hazel had a buffet style meal for us because that let me pick out some 'healthy' things to eat.

Okay. I admit that I was tempted.

But the price that I would have to pay for 'being bad' was too high. One stupid choice could end up destabilizing my condition so that Solak couldn't treat me when I got to Vulcan.

The chocolate cake didn't look quite as good after I thought about that.

Ken and I both made our selections from the buffet, then I carried our plates while Ken pushed me over to the patio tables.

Before we could choose one, Kai was motioning for us to join him.

"Kai, do you think you can handle breaking everything down by yourself?" Billy asked casually as he also joined us at Kai's table.

"Sure, no problem." Kai answered quickly.

"Good. I'm a little behind schedule so I won't be able to hang around for the break down." Billy said seriously, then seemed to remember something.

"Excuse me guys. I'll be right back." Billy said, then fished a cell phone out of his pocket.

As Billy hurried away, Ken and I looked at Kai.

None of us really had any idea of what to say.

Finally Kai hesitantly said, "I think your photo shoot went really well."

"Do you really think so?" I asked hopefully, then hurried to explain, "It was my first one, so I didn't know if it was going right or not."

Kai smiled and said, "You did great, the clothes looked good, Billy is a fantastic photographer, and this house... I can't believe that Billy got permission to shoot here. It's like the perfect backdrop. Elegant and stylish without being stuffy. It's exactly the right mood to promote the quality and style of the clothing."

I considered Kai's words carefully.

There was a lot more to this than just taking pretty pictures.

Before the conversation could continue, Billy hurried back to the table.

"I think I've got everything worked out now." Billy said in a rush as he took his seat.

After taking a bite of his food, he noticed that all of us were looking at him with question.

Billy smiled, then hurried to swallow his bite of food before saying, "The limo should be here to pick us up in about... ten minutes."

I didn't know anything about a limo, and from the surprised look on Ken's face, neither did he.

"We're going to the airport to pick up some people, then we're going to Kenny's old house." Billy said as he glanced at Ken.

"My old house?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Allen sold it to me so my friends will have a place of their own. It's being remodeled." Billy said to Ken, then looked at me and said, "Deacon and Lawrence will be coming with him."

"Okay." I said, not knowing what to think about this new development.

"So basically, Allen will pick you up at the house and take you back over to his place, or back to Rory's house... you can decide what you want to do after that."

I thought about it, then nodded.

My parents had a lot of things planned for me to do, so this would work out fine.

And Ken and I would get the chance to ride in a limo... how kewl is that?

"So you guys had better finish up so we can get Rory changed back into his own clothes." Billy said frankly.

I looked down at myself and was surprised to see that I was still wearing one of the outfits that Latisha had dressed me in.

"I'll see that everything here is taken care of. JC won't even know that we were here." Kai said seriously, breaking me out of my thoughts.

Billy smiled and said, "Thanks, Kai. And when JC gets back to Orlando, I'll see if I can arrange for you to meet him."

"That'd be great." Kai said timidly as he looked down at his plate.

I felt movement on my arm, then saw that Ken was holding his hand out to me.

I took hold of his hand and held it firmly as I looked into his eyes.

'Love you', he mouthed silently.

I mouthed, 'Love you' in return and reveled in the peace and tranquility of the moment.

Chapter 14

We went out to the parking lot and Ken stopped my wheelchair when we saw the limousine.

It wasn't just a limousine, it was a stretched limo.

"We're going to ride in that?" Ken asked with surprise from behind me.

"That's the plan." Billy said cheerfully, as he passed us, then continued, "You'd better hurry. Their flight will arrive soon and I wouldn't want the guys to have to wait for us."

"This is gonna be great." Ken said, and I could tell by the sound of his voice, that he was probably bouncing with anticipation.

Even with all the exciting and new experiences of the past few days, getting to ride in a limo was its own special thrill.

* * * * *

"Please, sir. Allow me to help you." The driver said as he approached us.

"If you'll pop the trunk, I think we can get the rest." Billy said frankly.

"As you like." The driver said, then walked back to the front of the car.

You know how I've been telling you about how people react to me when they see me in my wheelchair. Usually they either stare at me, or try too hard not to look at me.

Well, the limo driver didn't do either. He was completely professional and I have no doubt that the expression on his face was exactly the same as it would have been if I'd walked up to the car on my own two feet.

"Ready?" Ken asked me, and I noticed that he seemed to have a devilish grin.

"Yeah." I said as I waited for him to lean down.

As expected, instead of leaning down to help me, he swooped in to give me a kiss.

Since I had some sense of what he was about to do, I began to kiss him with all the love and passion that I felt for him.

"Guys? Do you think that maybe you could wait until we're on the road to do that?" Billy asked cautiously.

Ken reluctantly pulled back enough to say, "Yeah. We can do that."

"Do I need to get a bucket of cold water for you two?" Billy asked, obviously trying to restrain a smile.

"Sorry." Ken said shyly, then leaned down to honestly try to help me into the car.

I put my arms around his neck and nuzzled his neck a little as he lifted me.

"That's nice." Ken whispered as he finally sat me down in the seat.

"Get in, Ken. I've got the chair." Billy said from just outside the door.

"Come here." I said and opened my arms to him.

Even though the back of the stretched limo looked big enough for an entire soccer team, having Ken snuggled up against me seemed to be absolutely perfect.

* * * * *

As soon as the car had started moving, Billy turned to us and asked, "So how are you guys doing?"

I smiled at the question.

I was riding in the back of a limousine, I had Ken snuggled tight against me, and... what more could I want?

"Perfect." I said as I squeezed Ken to emphasize the point.

Billy smiled at my answer, then said, "I just thought that since we're going to have a few minutes alone, it might be a good time to talk if you have anything that's bothering you."

"I can't think of anything." I said honestly, then looked at Ken with question.

"Well, this doesn't have anything to do with anything, but there was something that I was sort of wondering." Ken said reluctantly.

"Go ahead, Ken. You can ask me anything." Billy said with assurance.

"I was just wondering about your body... I mean, I've seen pictures of you... and I was just wondering if you work out or eat special foods, or what?" Ken asked hesitantly.

Billy seemed surprised by the question, but recovered quickly and answered, "Actually, I don't do anything special. I guess I've got good genes or something."

"Oh." Ken said, sounding to be disappointed by the answer.

"Are you worried about something?" Billy asked cautiously.

"No. I just... I like the way you look and I thought that if I knew what you did, maybe I could do that too so that someday I could have a body like yours." Ken said awkwardly.

"Then I'm glad I answered you the way I did." Billy said seriously.

"Why?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Because you don't need to try to have a body like mine. You need to have a body like yours." Billy said frankly. "Trying to sculpt yourself into something that you're not can only cause problems in the long run."

Ken slowly nodded as Billy continued, "Be happy. Be healthy. Be the best you that you can be and don't compare your body with anyone else because you can never be them and they can never be you."

"I think you're sexy just the way you are." I said to Ken in a whisper.

"But I thought you loved me for my mind." Ken said to me with a cheeky grin.

"Yeah. Of course it's the you inside that I love." I said seriously, then broke into a grin as I continued, "But I don't fantasize about throwing your mind down on my bed and making slow, passionate love to it."

"Guys, I'm still here." Billy said with a little wave at us.

"Hey. It's because of you that the subject came up." I said with a grin. "Deal with it."

Billy looked surprised, but not at all offended.

"That's not all that came up." Ken whispered into my ear.

"Do you think Billy would mind too much if I took care of that?" I whispered in reply.

"Whatever you just said to Ken just made him blush beet red." Billy said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. He's cute when he does that." I said, then moved in to nuzzle Ken's neck.

Ken seemed to be a little bit tense and resistant, so I pulled back to look and see if maybe I had gone too far and embarrassed him too much.

As soon as my eyes met his, he broke into the most devilish, evil grin that I've ever seen on him and said, "I will if you will."

Billy broke into laughter as I could feel the flaming, prickling burn of a MAJOR blush flood my face.

"You know, Ken, I thought that maybe you and Rory might have problems because he's a little older. But it looks like you can handle yourself just fine." Billy said with delight.

"I'd rather handle Rory." Ken said with a shy smile.

"Promises, promises." I said as I finally felt my blush starting to subside.

"Billy, I need to prove something to Rory right now. You might want to look out the window or something for a minute." Ken said as he got out of his seat.

"What are you going to do?" I asked as my heart seemed to skip a beat.

"Something that I wouldn't have been able to do before I met Kevin." Ken said as he knelt in front of me and put his hands on my knees.

I looked at Billy with panic, not knowing what he was going to say or do.

"It looks like he's calling your bluff." Billy said with a grin at me.

"Aren't you supposed to be looking away?" I said nervously as Ken spread my knees apart.

"Nah. I don't think Ken will go as far if he knows I'm watching." Billy said frankly.

"Wanna bet?" Ken said with a look that sent a tingle through my entire body.

I glanced at Billy and noticed that he was as surprised as I was at Ken's new found assertiveness.

"I said something about handling you. Wasn't that it?" Ken asked as he moved up my body and seemed to be climbing on top of me.

I'm sure there was probably something clever I should have said right then, but I'm pretty sure that every spare blood cell in my body had evacuated my brain at that moment and was moving for parts more Southern.

"I..." I began to say, but to tell you the truth, I have no idea what the next word was supposed to be.

I felt his hand work its way into my pants at the same moment his lips met mine.

His kiss was... amazing.

Ken may be a sweet, gentle guy. But there's definitely another side to him.

If he's right and Kevin is somehow responsible for Ken acting this way, then all I've got to say is 'God bless you, Kevin. I hope everything good and wonderful in the universe comes to you'.

Ken began stroking me as he finally pulled out of the kiss.

"Billy's watching." I whispered, feeling a fluttering tremble through my body as my breath became shallow.

"Yeah? So?" Ken said before moving in for another, even more forceful kiss.

"Ken, I think you proved your point." Billy said seriously.

Slowly, Ken pulled out of the kiss and looked me in the eyes.

"Kevin taught me what it means to have strength." Ken said, then as he released my engorged shaft he continued, "But my dad taught me to say what I mean and to mean what I say."

"Ken? We're almost at the airport." Billy said in warning.

"I love you, Rory." Ken said firmly as he looked me in the eyes.

"I love you too, Ken." I said with amazement and new found respect.

"I believe you." Ken said with a grin, then moved back to his own seat.

As Ken got settled, I felt my heart still racing about a mile a minute.

"Rory, you might want to do something about that." Billy said with a glance at my pants.

I followed his gaze and saw that I was pitching a tent like I'd never done before.

"If you would've let me finish, he wouldn't have to worry about it." Ken said frankly.

"I think I let you go a little too far as it is, Ken. That stuff should be kept between the two of you." Billy said seriously.

"Yeah. Thanks for being cool about it, Billy. I really didn't mean for that to happen." Ken said with a shy smile.

"I know you didn't. And I bet it's going to be a while before Rory challenges you like that again." Billy said with a chuckle.

There was no way to be discreet about it, so I put my hand down my pants and tried to shift my erection around to make it a little less obvious.

Ken was watching me with an obvious leer.

The ringing of a phone drew our attention.

Billy looked around and finally found the phone secured beside the door.

"Yes?" Billy asked cautiously.

After a moment of consideration, Billy smiled and said, "Yes. I think that would be very helpful. Thank you."

I glanced at Ken to find him looking back at me with question.

I shrugged, then turned back to Billy as he said, "Yes. Thank you again."

As Billy hung up the phone, Ken and I looked at him with question.

"The driver said that he would let us know when Pete and Jono's flight arrives so we won't have to stand around in the airport and wait." Billy said with a happy smile.

"I think I could get used to this VIP treatment." I said with a chuckle in my voice.

"I'd rather not." Billy said seriously.

At my curious look, he continued, "Limousines and the VIP treatment are really nice on special occasions like this, but if you do it often enough to get used to it, it stops being special. I hope the day never comes when I can't appreciate something like this."

Billy obviously has enough money that he could live a lot more extravagantly than he does. I really have to respect him for staying grounded and not losing himself.

"How are things going for your trip to Vulcan? Do you have everything taken care of?" Billy asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

It took me a moment to gather my thoughts, but I finally answered, "Things are going okay, I guess. My parents are really taking care of pretty much everything. I'm just going where I'm supposed to go and doing what I'm supposed to do. I trust them."

"That's good, Rory." Billy said with a chuckle, "I don't know if I could trust anyone enough to do that for me."

"Even my Pop?" Ken asked curiously.

Billy considered for a moment, then said, "If there was anyone that I'd trust, it would be Allen."

"Me too." Ken said shyly.

"Yeah. Allen's great." I said as I reached beside me to put my arm around Ken.

"Last week I couldn't have imagined being here, doing this." Billy said distantly. "My life was all about... you know, I can't even remember what was so important that I worked all the time."

"I'm glad you found Allen then." I said honestly. "I'd hate to think of you running around, working for the sake of working. It sounds like such an empty life."

Billy gave an ironic chuckle, then said, "I suppose it was. I just couldn't see that while I was in the middle of it."

"Well, don't beat yourself up about it, Billy. While you were running around in little circles keeping busy, I was wallowing in self pity, just thinking about 'poor little me'." I said frankly.

"Rory, you had every right to feel what you were feeling. You don't need to feel one bit guilty for the way you dealt with your situation." Billy said as he met my gaze.

"You snapped out of it when you were ready." Ken said gently.

"Thanks to you and your family." I said honestly.

Ken leaned in to give me a wonderful, gentle, tender kiss.

"What about you, Ken? Any regrets?" Billy asked curiously.

Ken finished the kiss, then looked at Billy and said, "Not really. I guess I could have handled it better when my dad died, but... I don't know."

"From the way Allen talks about it, you did just fine. In fact, he said that seeing how well you were dealing with it helped him through it." Billy said gently.

"I just wish you could have known my dad, Billy. He was such a great person. I know you would have been good friends." Ken said quietly.

"Well, seeing how much you and Allen loved him tells me that he was someone very special. So I'm sure that you're right." Billy said with a tender smile at Ken.

"I'm glad you and Pop found each other. I know it's what Dad would have wanted to happen." Ken said honestly.

"Thank you..." Billy said with astonishment.

The phone rang again before we could get any deeper into that conversation.

Just as well.

"Yes. Thank you." Billy said with a grand smile before hanging up the phone.

Ken and I shared an amused grin at Billy's expression of boyish delight.

"Do you guys want to come with me or stay here?" Billy asked casually.

"I think it's better if we stay. I'd rather not have to deal with the wheelchair when we'd only be going in for a few minutes." I said frankly.

"I could carry you..." Billy said thoughtfully, then broke into a grin as he asked, "Do you like piggy back rides?"

I chuckled at his expression and said, "Yeah. Actually, I do. But I think I'd rather stay here. Ken and I could use a few minutes alone."

Billy's eyes went wide with an 'oh' expression, then he seemed to drift into thought.

"Don't worry about us, Billy. We'll behave." Ken said seriously.

"Fair enough." Billy said with a touch of a wistful smile, then continued, "Just keep in mind that I'll be bringing the guys back in a few minutes."

"Yeah. Okay." I said, then broke into a grin as I asked, "Besides, how much could we possibly do in a few minutes?"

Billy shook his head as he got out of the car, not even dignifying my question with an answer.

* * * * *

As soon as Billy was away from the car, I turned to look at Ken and found him looking back at me with a worried expression.

"What's wrong?" I asked immediately.

It seems that when Ken has something on his mind, he needs for me to ask him about it before he'll tell me. I don't know if that's better or worse than how it would be if he just automatically spoke to me about whatever was on his mind.

"What are we going to do when you have to leave?" Ken asked quietly, then added in a whisper, "Will we still be boyfriends?"

"More than boyfriends." I said immediately.

It's not like the thought hadn't occurred to me. But deep inside myself I knew that no matter what happened, we'd find a way to make it work.

"Ken, there's something you need to understand." I said as I looked deeply into his chocolate brown eyes. "I'm going to go through these treatments for us more than for me."

A curious look was the only indication that Ken heard my words.

"If it ever looks like I'm going to lose you because we're apart, I'll stop having the treatments and move back to Earth." I said honestly. "I love you that much."

"Don't do that." Ken whispered. "I wouldn't ever ask you to do that for me."

"I know, Ken. But you need to understand that 'we' come first. If we lose us, then whatever's left won't matter. What good will it be if I can walk again if I lose the love of my life?"

"I think I see what you're saying. I guess I was still thinking about 'you' and 'me'. But I agree with you. It's 'us' that's most important." Ken said thoughtfully, then confidently added, "And you getting better will be the best thing for 'us'."

"I think so too." I said honestly. "But it's going to be hard."

Ken chuckled, then sheepishly said, "Yeah, constantly hard."

"So hard it hurts." I said with a weary chuckle.

"I love you." Ken said as he shifted from my side and started to climb on top of me.

"Remember that Billy will be back in just a minute."

Ken grinned, then whispered, "Yeah. Like he doesn't already know what he's going to find when he gets back."

"Right." I gasped just before Ken's mouth claimed mine in a desperate kiss.

* * * * *

The car door opening somewhat registered in the back of my mind through the lustful haze that I found myself in.

For being so young, Ken was surprisingly good at kissing. And whatever he might be lacking in experience, he more than made up for with enthusiasm.

Also, the fact that he was laying on top of me, grinding his pelvis into mine, didn't detract from the kiss one little bit.

"Guys!" Billy barked, and from the tone of his voice, I would guess it wasn't the first time that he had tried to gain our attention.

"Yeah?" I muttered against Ken's mouth.

"Would you two stop humping long enough to meet my friends?" Billy asked in an exasperated tone.

"Yeah." I said in a sigh.

"But you'd better be quick." Ken said with a barely restrained chuckle as he slowly pulled away from me.

The look of regret in his eyes forced me to lean forward and give him another kiss.

I couldn't help it.

"Ready or not, here they come." Billy said in a voice of resignation.

Ken scrambled to get off me and move to my side.

The tent in my pants was pretty obvious and I worked quickly to adjust myself so it wasn't quite so bad.

A sandy haired guy poked his head in the door and looked around curiously.

"This is Pete." Billy said from behind him.

"I'm Rory and this is Ken. It's nice to meet you." I said quickly.

"Um. Yeah." Pete said uncertainly, more to my not so well hidden boner than to me.

As Pete continued into the car, Billy said, "And this is Jono."

A skinny guy with long brown hair climbed into the car and looked around excitedly.

"I'm Rory and this is Ken. It's nice to meet you." I said more quietly than before.

Jono paused as he looked at me and Ken curiously for a moment, then continued on into the car and took a seat beside Pete.

Billy got into the car and glanced at us anxiously, apparently looking to see if we were presentable, before also taking his seat.

The driver closed the door of the limo, and that seemed to be the signal for Jono to speak.

"This is so fucking awesome and a fucking STRETCHED LIMOUSINE and that fucking PLANE and i don't know who they thought we were but it was so fucking INCREDIBLE and they treated us like we were like fucking ROYALTY or something and that waitress on the plane was being REALLY nice to us and getting us stuff and treating us like we were her friends and now we get here and there's a fucking STRETCHED LIMOUSINE with a fucking DRIVER waiting for us and this is so fucking AWESOME!"

"Jono is pleased to meet you too." Billy said to me and Ken with a grin.

Jono blinked at the statement, then looked at Ken and I and muttered, "Yeah."

"So Pete, did you enjoy your flight?" Billy asked with a smile at his friend.

Pete seemed to consider the question carefully before he answered, "Yeah. It was good."

"So where are we going now are we going to go to a hotel or to your house or what because no matter where we're going it can't be half as incredibly fucking awesome as it was getting here and that flight was so fucking incredible and they treated us so great i can't believe that there's people who actually get to do stuff like this all the fucking time it's like a dream and i just never ever even dreamed about being treated so nice or doing so much fucking awesome stuff."

"Jono enjoyed it too." Pete said as he looked askance at his traveling companion.

"Really? It doesn't show." Billy said as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

"Where's Deke? I thought he'd come to meet us at the airport." Pete asked seriously.

"I was doing a job right before I came to pick you up so I went directly from there to the airport. Deke is going to meet us at the house." Billy said peacefully.

"How's Deacon doing i mean Petey said he was a real fucking mess before he left on the bus and then we couldn't get in touch with you to let you know that he was coming and we got all fucking worried about it and shit and Petey even talked about trying to scrape together enough money to go down to Orlando to try and find Deacon because he didn't want him to be here alone and not have you or anyone to take care of him."

"Billy wasn't home when Deacon got into town, but he stayed over at our house until Billy got back, so he was safe." Ken said carefully.

"Who the hell are you?" Pete asked cautiously.

"This is Kenny Thompson. Him and his family live across the street from me." Billy said with a smile at his friend, then shyly added, "And I'm dating his father."

Pete and Jono both looked at Billy with surprise.

Finally Pete said, "Wait! Wait. You mean that after years, and I *do* mean years, of you telling me and Jono that you're not interested, you end up doin a dude?"

"I wasn't interested in screwing around." Billy said frankly, "I wanted to find someone to love."

"But I thought you loved us." Jono said quietly.

I was surprised to hear that Jono could actually speak in a normal tone of voice when he had calmed down. And he didn't even say the 'F' word.

"I do, Jono, and I always will." Billy said with a tender look at Jono, then looked at Pete and continued, "But I'm finally 'in love'. I found the guy that I want to be with for the rest of my life."

"Well, so have I." Pete said as if it were a given fact. "But just because I love Jono doesn't mean that we can't love other people too. We might still find a couple of nice girls and decide to get married."

"Maybe we shouldn't be talkin about this shit in front of the k-i-d-s." Jono said cautiously.

"I think they can handle it, Jono." Billy said with a chuckle. "They're a couple."

Pete and Jono looked at us with identical expressions of shock.

"Really?" Pete asked in surprise. "When I was their age, I thought a dick was only for peeing."

"I guess kids grow up faster these days." Billy said with a chuckle, then seriously asked, "So Pete, how are your folks and Frankie?"

"The 'rents are same as always. They made me promise that I'd tell 'em how you're doing." Pete said in a slightly grudging tone, then added even more irritably, "I think they like you better than me."

Billy chuckled at the statement, then asked, "And how about Frankie?"

"He's got a girlfriend." Jono said quickly.

"Really?" Billy asked with surprise. "What kind of a girl would be willing to put up with Frankie?"

"Do you remember Chubby Carol from homeroom?" Pete asked seriously.

"Yeah." Billy said hesitantly.

"Her little sister." Pete said in a tone of voice that indicated that he barely believed it himself.

Billy seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then suddenly looked up and said, "You can't mean Clawhammer!"

Ken and I exchanged an incredulous look at the name, then turned simultaneously to watch the exchange.

"Yep." Pete said in a resigned tone.

Billy stared for a moment, then shook his head and said, "I never thought there'd be a day when I felt sorry for Frankie."

"She's got 'im by the balls, that's for sure." Pete said simply.

The phone ringing drew our attention and Billy immediately answered it.

"You can put them outside the side door. The house is being remodeled, so I don't know if we can bring anything inside yet." Billy said seriously.

"Yes. Thank you." Billy said a moment later, then hung up the phone.

As Billy gestured toward the passenger side of the car, he said, "We're here."

* * * * *

"Fuck! Come on, guys!" Jono said as he bounded out of the limousine as soon as the door opened.

Jono is probably the only person I've ever seen who is more hyper than the Zombie Hyper-Mom.

Billy and Pete got out of the car next, but Jono was just outside the door impatiently waiting on us.

"Go on. We'll be there in a minute." I said with a chuckle.

"Come on! Get your asses out of the car already!" Jono said from just outside the door and was bouncing like a little kid who was about to wet his pants.

I was about to try to explain why we weren't getting out when I saw him look away and his eyes went wide.

A second later I saw the limo driver move my wheelchair beside the door.

"You need to scoot a little." Ken said quietly as he leaned down over me.

I put my arms around his neck and held on as he helped me scoot over so I was closer to the door.

I let go of Ken so he could get out of the car, but just a few seconds later he was standing over me and helping me out of the car and into my wheelchair.

"I'm... I'm sorry." Jono gasped in a mortified whisper from a few feet away.

"For what?" I asked, even though I was pretty sure I knew.

"I... I said stupid stuff..." Jono sputtered.

"You didn't know." I said simply. "Don't worry about it."

I really don't know if Jono heard my words as he continued to stare at me.

* * * * *

We walked as a group up to the front of the house.

I was about to suggest to Billy that Ken and I go to the side door so we wouldn't have to deal with the steps.

But before I could say anything, Billy said, "Come on, Petey, give me a hand."

Pete and Billy lifted me and my wheelchair up the three steps like I was light as a feather.

As Billy walked up to the door, it opened suddenly and a small, slender man stepped out quickly.

"Are you Billy?" the man asked cautiously.

"Yes. Are you Damon?" Billy asked in return.

"That's me!" The man said happily, then quickly added, "I was expecting Allen."

"He should be here any minute. Is the house ready?" Billy asked hopefully.

"Yeah. It was close, but I was just checking it over and I think everything's done." Damon said with accomplishment, then stood away from the door and made a sweeping gesture, inviting us inside.

* * * * *

The climbing wall with a sand pit at the bottom just inside the door was the first thing that caught my attention.

It seemed so freaky and out of place that I couldn't help but stare at it.

When I finally got over the shock of that, I noticed a staircase, then past it... a fire pole. I mean, a real brass fire pole right there in the living room.

"I... It's..." Billy stammered from beside us.

I turned to look at him, then noticed a HUGE plasma TV nearly filling one wall.

I looked at the walls and had to blink to be sure that I was seeing right.

There were framed posters of women in nearly non-existent bikinis on every wall of the room. Each woman had a tiny waist and enormous breasts.

"Allen said 'masculine'... You straight guys like these things, right?" Damon asked uncertainly as he pointed at one of the posters.

Pete was staring with wide eyes as he slowly nodded.

"If you don't want to use the stairs, you have the climbing wall to go up and the fire pole to come down." Damon said in a more relaxed voice, sounding like one of his major worries had been laid to rest.

"Come on, let me show you around." Damon said cheerfully, then led us across the living room, past a pair of huge, overstuffed recliners.

When we arrived at what had probably once been a dining room, I saw that it had a foosball table and an air hockey table in the middle of the room and free standing arcade games lining one wall.

I looked down at something curious, then realized that instead of carpet, the entire room had artificial grass... AstroTurf.

"The kitchen is pretty much unchanged." Damon said with a dismissive wave at a doorway at the side of the room.

"If you guys want to follow me, I'll show you the upstairs." Damon said with excitement. "We really got creative up there."

I noticed a distant, disturbed look in Ken's eyes and quickly said to Billy, "We'll stay down here."

"Are you sure? I wouldn't mind carrying you." Billy asked carefully.

"I'm sure." I said with a smile at his consideration. "Go on."

* * * * *

As soon as we were alone, Ken quietly said, "It doesn't even look like our house."

"Are you okay Ken?" I asked as I leaned over to put an arm around his waist.

"Yeah. It's just weird. I grew up in this house and now, it's like it's all gone." Ken said distantly.

"It's okay to be sad. But I think Pete and Jono need a place that they can call home and you've got another home now." I said gently.

"Yeah. It just feels like I lost something." Ken said, then leaned down to give me a hug.

"Maybe you did. But you couldn't ever go back to the way things were anyway." I said softly. "Now that you've moved on, Pete and Jono can live here and make a bunch of new memories in this place."

"I guess so." Ken whispered into my ear as he held me tightly.

As I was about to give Ken a kiss, I heard a noise and turned in time to see Jono slide down the fire pole.

"It's so fucking awesome up there i can't believe that the bathroom is like a locker room and it has urinals and lockers and a jacuzzi and a sauna and the bedrooms are so fucking incredible with all kinds of awesome pictures and great big huge beds big enough for four people to sleep in and my bedroom even has a trapeze and Petey's room has two whole walls that are all like glass and shit and looks out over the lake."

Before Ken or I could say a word or react in any way, Jono was running off down the hallway to explore the other rooms.

Billy walked down the stairs with Damon following a step behind.

"How is it?" I asked cautiously, not knowing how to interpret Billy's expression.

"The decorating is... different." Billy said in a puzzled voice.

"How different?" I asked curiously.

"There's an electric train that runs through all the rooms up there." Billy said slowly.

"But do you like it?" Damon asked cautiously.

"Those posters..." Billy said in a diminishing voice.

"You DID say masculine, right?" Damon asked seriously.

"Well, yeah. But I never expected..." Billy said with a dazed expression.

"It's perfect!" Pete said with cheer as he bounded down the stairs.

"Really?" Billy asked incredulously as he stared at Pete.

"Oh yeah! I love this place. It's like... I couldn't even dream of someplace as cool as this!" Pete said with absolute glee.

From the few minutes that I had spent in Pete's company, I got the feeling that 'happy' wasn't something he did often or at all well.

"Well then, I'm glad you like it. Because this is your house. Welcome home." Billy said with a smile.

"Thanks Billy. I would have been happy just crashing on your couch. This is incredible." Pete said with excitement.

Damon smiled then picked up the remote control from between the recliners and said, "This remote controls the television, cable, DVD, home theater, stereo, lights and even the door locks. Don't lose it."

Pete snatched the remote out of Damon's hand and began exploring all the wonders that it held.

Damon smiled at his excitement and said, "The cupboards are stocked with microwave popcorn, pork rinds, pretzels and peanuts."

"Thanks for all your hard work, Damon. You did an excellent job. The guys love it." Billy said with a smile at Pete's happiness.

"Hey, there's a room back here that's like a real bar. It's got a pool table and dart boards." Jono said as he dashed into the living room.

"From the way Allen described them, I didn't think they would need a 'study'." Damon said to Billy with a shrug.

Billy watched with a smile as Jono guided Pete to go with him to explore the 'bar'.

"It looks like you're right." Billy said with a contented smile.

A moment later, we all smiled when we heard Jono's excited voice call out, "AWESOME!"

* * * * *

"That must be Allen." Billy said as he went to answer the knock at the front door.

"I'm sorry I'm late." Allen said in a rush as he walked in, leading Deacon and Lawrence.

"Whoa!" Deacon said as he looked around.

"What the hell?" Allen gasped.

"Hey Cupcake. What do you think?" Damon said with a grand smile of accomplishment.

Allen blinked with surprise, then looked around the room again, apparently verifying that his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

"The guys love it." Billy said carefully.

Allen turned his attention to Billy then seemed to break out of his shock as he smiled and whispered, "Good."

"Damon, have you met Billy Pierce?" Allen said quickly.

"Not formally, although I feel as if I already know him from his modeling." Damon said with a leer.

"Well, Damon. This is Billy. My boyfriend." Allen said firmly, not leaving any room for doubt or misunderstanding of what he meant.

Damon seemed to be unfazed by the comment as he continued, "You owe me big time for this job, Allen. I may be losing one of my best designers, thanks to you."

"What did I do?" Allen asked with concern, temporarily diverted from his protectiveness.

"You asked me to do a very big job in a very short time. Marty is being a little prima donna and has decided that being rushed is disruptive to his creative process." Damon said cattily, then absently added, "Prissy bitch."

"I'm sorry, Damon. I thought that if it was going to be a problem, you would have told me." Allen said honestly.

"I would have." Damon said frankly. "Marty needs to realize that being artsy and creative is wonderful, but at the end of the day, this is a business and

our job is to serve our clients. Don't worry about it, Cupcake, he'll probably get over it just as soon as the check clears."

"Well, you've done an amazing job here." Billy said with a smile as he put an arm around Allen to hold him gently.

"Then it was all worth it." Damon said happily.

"It really *is* amazing, Damon. It hardly looks anything like the house I used to live in." Allen said frankly.

"You're good for my ego, Cupcake." Damon said with a chuckle.

"Well, now that I'm over the initial shock, I think I'd like to have another look around. Do you want to join me?" Billy asked gently.

"I'd like to talk to Kenny for a minute. I'll catch up." Allen said, then looked at Ken and me with concern.

"See ya in a few." Billy said, then leaned in to give Allen a quick peck of a kiss on the cheek.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Cute Stuff?" Allen asked gently.

"I'm better than I was." Ken said slowly.

Allen pulled Ken into a firm hug as he quietly said, "Change is difficult for all of us, but I know that this was the right thing to do."

"I know." Ken said slowly, then with a slight smile he added, "If someone else had to live in our house, I'm glad it's going to be someone who will enjoy it."

"What do you guys think about going on the grand tour with us, then I'll take you home?" Allen asked gently.

"Yeah." Ken said as he renewed his hug with Allen.

I nodded my agreement to the plan, and enjoyed watching Ken being held so gently and lovingly by his Pop.

"Come on, Rory. Piggyback." Allen said with a grin, then squatted down in front of me.

I guess if he had asked, I probably would have said that I'd be happy to stay downstairs. But somehow he made it seem like I was doing him a favor and letting him have fun by allowing him to give me a piggy back ride.

However he did it, I eagerly leaned forward and put my arms around his neck and held on tightly so he could lift me out of the wheelchair.

He hoisted me up a little bit, then stood.

Ken was watching me with a delighted smile, and I was glad to see that his dark mood about losing his childhood home wasn't going to linger.

* * * * *

"There's this machine down in the bar that's called a love tester and it said that I'm a stud!" Jono said as he rushed into the bedroom that we were exploring.

"I'm sorry... I thought you were Billy." Jono said hesitantly.

"Jono, this is Allen, he's Billy's boyfriend." I said with as much formality as any guy riding piggyback could.

"And he's my pop." Ken added from beside us.

"Nice to meet you." Jono said hesitantly.

"It's nice to meet you too." Allen said formally, then in a more playful tone he added, "And congratulations on being a stud."

"Thanks." Jono said timidly, then asked, "Do you know where Billy is?"

"We left them in the other bedroom to talk about payment details." Allen said frankly.

"There you are!" Deacon said as he and Lawrence hurried into the bedroom.

"Hey, Deke!" Jono said as he rushed to Deacon to give him a quick hug.

"Hi, Jono!" Deacon said with surprise at the greeting.

"Me and Petey were really worried about you. I'm glad that you're okay." Jono said seriously.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Jono." Deacon said happily, then added, "I'd like for you to meet my boyfriend, Lawrence."

Jono released Deacon from the hug, then froze when he saw Lawrence standing shyly before him.

"You're beautiful." Jono gasped.

"Thanks." Lawrence said hesitantly.

"No. I mean... really..." Jono stammered.

"Yeah. He is." Deacon said proudly as he put an arm around Lawrence.

"That kinda makes me feel like a pile of chopped liver." I said to Ken and Allen frankly.

"And what have you been doing since the last time I saw you?" Lawrence asked seriously.

It took me a second to realize what he was asking, then I smiled as I said, "Oh, yeah."

"What was he doing?" Jono asked curiously.

"Rory was doing a professional fashion photo shoot." Deacon said frankly.

Jono looked at me appraisingly for a moment, then to my surprise, he said, "Yeah. I can see that."

"You can?" I asked in wonder.

"You're cute." Jono said simply, as if he were stating an obvious fact.

"Come on, guys. I think we'd better get you home. I know that Rory's parents have some things planned for him to do today. And, as I recall, we have a few plans of our own." Allen finished with a significant look at Ken.

"Oh yeah." Ken said shyly, then continued, "But I think I'd rather spend time with Rory than do the sightseeing thing with everyone else." Ken said shyly as he walked with us out of the room.

"I thought you'd feel that way. So I took the liberty of planning something with Rory's parents that all of us can do later today." Allen said happily.

"What's that?" I asked with excitement, knowing that if Allen planned it, it was probably something wonderful.

"I was thinking about taking all the kids to the mall for a little shopping spree." Allen said as he started walking slowly down the stairs.

"But we just got stuff last weekend." Ken said hesitantly.

"That's right. But now that we're more settled into our house, we can buy the things we didn't know that we needed last week." Allen said carefully as he squatted just in front of my wheelchair to let me down.

"And besides, Rory is going to need to stock up on the things he'll want to take to Vulcan with him. I bet you and your brothers will be able to come up with all kinds of things that he might need." Allen said frankly.

"Yeah." Ken said thoughtfully, then broke into a smile as he said, "It sounds like fun."

"I'm going to go up and let Billy know that we're leaving. I'll be back in just a minute." Allen said as he turned to leave.

"I'll take Rory out through the kitchen and meet you at the car." Ken said seriously.

"I'll meet you there." Allen said with a smile, then hurried up the stairs.

* * * * *

We had been out at the car for a couple minutes, when a sound from the house drew our attention.

To our surprise, it wasn't Allen coming out of the house, but Lawrence.

"I think you guys might be here for a little bit." Lawrence said quickly as he ran up to us.

"Is something wrong?" Ken asked with concern.

"Yeah." Lawrence said frankly, but instead of telling us what it was, he immediately ran back toward the house.

"Do you want to go back in?" Ken asked me cautiously.

"Yeah. If whatever it was bothered Lawrence that bad, I think I'd like to know as much as I can about it." I told him honestly.

I reached down and unlocked my wheels, and Ken started pushing me as quickly as he could back toward the side door of the house.

* * * * *

We went back in through the side door and found everyone gathered around Billy, in the living room.

"What's going on?" Ken asked Pete, quietly.

"I don't know for sure, but it's something to do with his dad." Pete said seriously.

Ken looked down at me and I could see that he was as concerned as I was.

Billy has to be one of the nicest people I know and I'd do just about anything to shield him from whatever might hurt him.

"Yeah. I'm still here." Billy said nervously, into the cell phone.

Everyone else in the room was silent, waiting to hear his side of the conversation.

"I understand." Billy said seriously, then took the phone away from his face and said, "Teri set up a conference call with Cory and John."

Well, I knew who two out of three of those people were; considering that I've been a Clan member for less than 24 hours, that's not really too bad, I figure.

Billy held the phone to his ear again and after a moment, said, "Right. The basics... My dad just called and he was PISSED. I don't think I've ever heard him that mad before. He started going off on me about how me having custody of Deacon screwed up his chances of getting a big contract or something. I don't really know what that's all about. Me and Deke haven't done anything, or talked to anyone about my parents since the custody thing got settled."

I was so engrossed in listening to Billy's conversation and trying to figure out what was going on, that it didn't even register what I was seeing right in front of me.

While Billy was talking on the phone, Deacon and Lawrence were at his right side and Allen was on his left. Pete and Jono were standing behind him, one over each shoulder.

I guess I don't need to worry too much about Billy being hurt, he's got his protectors in place and ready to defend him.

"Well, the reason I called, Teri, is because my dad was screaming about how he's going to drag me into court and fight for custody of Deacon. He also said stuff about going to the national news and saying that I'd abducted Deke, I guess, to get public opinion on his side." Billy said nervously.

The cluster surrounding Billy tightened as everyone understood what had upset him so much.

Lawrence and Billy were both hugging Deacon from opposite sides. In turn, Allen was hugging Billy from his other side. Pete and Jono were right there, hovering.

"You've got to understand, my dad knows some important people..." Billy said seriously, then trailed off.

"Well, no... Not quite THAT important..." Billy said hesitantly.

"Wait! Seriously?" Billy asked as his eyes went wide.

After a moment of listening, Billy absently said, "I'll tell Deke... thanks..."

All of us waited expectantly as Billy hung up the phone.

I waited as long as I could, but Billy didn't show any sign that he was about to let us in on what was going to happen.

"What's going on, Billy? What are they going to do?" I asked, impatiently.

I can be as patient as the next guy, but unfortunately, my red hair wanted to know, *now*.

"They're going to send a detachment of Starfleet Security to talk to him." Billy said in a stunned voice.

"Teri permanently terminated all parental rights, and Cory said he was convicting them of child neglect, based on what Kyle, Jamie, and Jacob found out when Deke showed up here. He sounded cold and emotionless when he pronounced sentence. And John said that the men he sends will make sure they don't make any trouble for us, legally or in the news, or else the suspended sentence that Cory pronounced will go into effect, and they'll both be sent to Federation prison." Billy looked like he didn't believe it.

"I'm sorry," Deacon said, looking like he was ready to burst into tears. "Just me being around seems to screw people's lives up."

Lawrence pulled Deacon to himself and gave him a tight one-armed hug.

That seemed to bring Billy out of the daze he'd been in from the shock of the phone calls. "Don't ever say that, Deke! You deserve to be happy and cared about."

Allen smiled at Deacon. "Believe it, Deacon! Even Starfleet says so."

Deacon seemed to consider that, then reluctantly grinned at the statement.

"Actually, I think that's what set your father off, you know. I was trying to find a way to tell Billy about it when he called." Allen said frankly.

"Starfleet let your father know he was out of the running for the contract he's been trying so hard to land, leaving Deacon home alone so he could wine and dine the procurement officers. It turns out that they have a really low view of people who have the Safe Haven Act invoked against them for child neglect." Allen smiled mirthlessly.

"I guess that's what they call 'poetic justice'." Ken said, thoughtfully.

I glanced up at Ken, full of pride at his very accurate observation.

Then I realized something that hadn't occurred to me before.

Looking around, I could see that everyone here is special in their own way. Each of them is someone to be admired.

They're all kind, loving, smart, strong and fiercely loyal.

But that's not the thing that blew me away.

Part of what makes them all special is the special bond of caring that they all share. But the freaky thing that I still can't quite wrap my brain around is... I'm part of it.

I know it sounds really obvious, but it just now hit me.

I look at this group and admire them. But there's no way that I can deny that I'm part of them.

That means that all the fantastic things that I think about them, I have to apply to myself, too.

Imagine that. I'm special!

Chapter 15

When Ken helped me into the back seat of the car, it surprised me a little that he automatically climbed in next to me, leaving Allen up front alone.

"How are you doing, Cute Stuff?" Allen asked with concern as he pulled the car out of the driveway.

When Ken didn't answer him immediately, I looked at him and noticed that he seemed to be lost in thought.

Although I wanted to say something to make him feel better, I had no words. I mean, it was the house that he was raised in, and now other people are going to be living there.

I know, I know. It's not even a blip on the radar compared to what other people have gone through... but, come on! It's Ken. I want him to feel better.

"I'm fine." Ken finally responded halfheartedly, almost as if he didn't hear the question and was speaking out of reflex.

Even though I wanted to do something to help Ken to feel better, I got this feeling that it might be better to not... Sometimes a guy needs some time and space to feel what he's feeling and deal with it. Ken knows I'm here when he needs me.

Allen glanced at Ken, then at me and asked, "What did you think of Pete and Jono?"

Ken was pretty much out of it, so I went ahead and answered the question, "They seem nice. In fact, I really like Jono."

"I do too. From the way Billy described him to me, I thought I might." Allen said with a slight smile.

"He was so excited about everything that I thought he was going to bounce off the walls." I chuckled, remembering Jono's enthusiasm.

"Just don't expect him to be much calmer the next time you see him." Allen said frankly.

"Why not?" I asked curiously.

"Billy says that that's just the way he is. He's always been that way."

"Wow. I can't imagine being that energetic all the time. I'd go crazy." I said honestly.

Allen seemed to be debating on whether to say something, then reluctantly said, "It seems that some people think that he is crazy."

I looked at Allen with surprise at the statement.

Allen was watching the road and didn't seem to notice my expression as he continued, "Being so energetic and 'up' all the time falls outside some people's idea of what is 'normal'. For most of Jono's life, he and his parents have been dealing with various good intentioned people who have wanted to 'fix' him."

"Fix him?" I asked cautiously, "Like how?"

"From what Billy's told me, Jono's parents have had to go to court more than a few times to fight to keep Jono from being drugged... 'for his own good'." Allen finished with a rueful smile.

"Who was trying to drug him?" I asked as my mind raced over what Allen was saying.

"Mostly, the schools, or people representing the schools. It seems that where Billy and Jono are from, it's not uncommon for the school to recommend that an energetic child be taken to a psychiatrist to be evaluated. Of course, nearly all of those children are diagnosed with some form of ADHD and put on mind altering drugs to calm them down." Allen said distantly.

"But wouldn't a psychiatrist know that some of them are just kids being kids? I know that I've been in a few classes that were so mind numbingly boring that it was nearly impossible to sit still." I said cautiously.

"I suppose that depends on their motives." Allen said thoughtfully. "The doctors that are really interested in what is best for the child might ask questions, or do some investigating. But the rest... whether they're in a rush or just trying to make the most profit, they'll do basically the same thing. They'll try to see as many patients as quickly as possible and deal with their supposed problems in the easiest and most profitable way they can."

"By prescribing them drugs." I said with a nod.

"As long as they're being drugged, they'll have to keep coming back for follow-ups and to get their medications adjusted. Think about it, the doctor doesn't make any money if you're well." Allen said with a pained glance at me.

"Wow!" I said with astonishment. I've had a ton of experience with doctors, and there have been quite a few of them who looked at my condition and

didn't see me, the person. And, looking back, I guess some of them were pretty mercenary, looking at Dad as a cash cow for them. But I never even considered that any doctor would think about treating a person who didn't need it or keep someone sick as a way to keep making money off of them.

"Jono's family has had to move once because of it. Jono's father believed that the only way for Jono to grow up and have anything resembling a normal and productive life was for him to 'deal' with his unique nature and learn how to behave properly. Medicating his problems away wouldn't teach him anything... except maybe that drugs are the answer to all of life's problems." Allen said quietly.

"I'm glad his parents watched out for him like that. I hate to imagine what he'd be like if they'd listened to the school and drugged him to calm him down." I said in wonder.

"Yeah. If things had worked out differently for him, we might not have had the chance to get to know an energetic and interesting person." Allen said with a grin.

"I'm glad that Pete and Jono are going to be living in our old house." Ken said from beside me.

I looked at him curiously, hoping that he was feeling better.

"I was always happy when I lived there. I hope they will be too." Ken said thoughtfully.

"I think that when they've settled in and realize that they have that house because they're welcomed and wanted here, that they'll be happy." Allen said gently.

I thought about Allen's words for a moment, then ventured to say, "Maybe that's the difference between a house and a home."

Ken slowly nodded his agreement.

"Do you guys want me to drop you off at Rory's?" Allen asked casually, and I suddenly realized that we were almost home.

"No, why don't you just take us home, then I'll take Rory over to his house from there?" Ken asked seriously.

"That okay with you, Rory?" Allen asked me gently.

"Sounds good." I said to Allen, then looked at Ken with a loving smile.

Ken returned the smile, and I felt the echo of it in my heart.

"What happened here?" I asked as Ken pushed me into the living room of my home.

"We've been packing." Dad said as he stood away from the collection of suitcases.

"Where are you going?" I asked cautiously.

Dad rolled his eyes at me and chuckled, "We're packing for you, Skeeter."

"I don't think I own this much stuff." I said disbelievingly.

"Rory, you're not going to Vulcan for a weekend, you're moving there. So your mom and I have been packing all your things, so you won't be without the things you need when you get there." Dad said frankly.

"All I need are some clothes." I said in a small voice as I looked at my father with question.

"Men!" My mom huffed as she walked into the room carrying my coat, an umbrella and my galoshes.

"What are you going to do with those?" I asked cautiously.

"If you're going to be away from home for over a year, you'll need to take some things with you, so you'll be prepared." Mom said as she started packing everything in a duffel bag.

"Um, Mom, Vulcan is a desert planet. I don't think I'll be needing those." I said reluctantly, not wanting to upset her.

"You'll have them if you need them. And if you don't, then you'll bring them back when you're all better." Mom said simply, as she started to cram a heavy blanket into the bag.

"Rory, I had the same reaction as you when we started packing, but I think your mom is right." Dad said as he stopped to look me in the eyes.

"You're going to be on an alien world. Even though you may not see the need for these things now, I'm willing to bet that you'll be thankful before it's all over." Dad said honestly.

"Okay." I said reluctantly, then thought to ask, "What do you need for me and Ken to do to help you?"

Dad looked at the clock, then back at me in consideration.

I shared a glance with Ken to see if he was as uncertain as I was about all of this.

He was.

"We've scheduled things so that we can do everything that needs to be done before you have to leave." Dad said seriously.

I waited, feeling a little bit apprehensive about what we might have to do next. None of the things I could think of sounded like they were going to be fun.

"For the next hour and a half, you and Ken have time to relax, get something to eat, and go through your room to see if there's anything that we've missed that needs to be taken to the spaceport tonight." Dad said thoughtfully.

"Tonight?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes. We'll be dropping the majority of these things off at the spaceport and they'll be sent ahead and loaded as cargo on whatever ship you'll be taking to Vulcan. When you leave, you'll just have one or two bags. You know, just the things you might need while you're in transit." Dad said frankly.

I slowly nodded that I understood.

"In an hour and a half, we'll be going to the mall, so that you can pick up clothes, posters, maybe some new music. You know, just the general things you might not have a chance to get for a while when you're on Vulcan." Dad said carefully, and it looked as if he was holding something back.

"Can Ken go with us?" I asked cautiously.

"I think we can manage that." Dad said with a smile at Ken, then looked at me and continued, "Allen and his family are all going to the mall with us."

"Oh yeah. Pop said something to us about that." Ken said suddenly.

I thought for a moment, then realized he was right. I guess with all the things that have happened today, it's no wonder that I'm forgetting things.

Apparently, my mouth has its own memory and it remembered something before my brain did, because I suddenly said, "Maybe Davis could go with us."

Dad looked at me curiously.

"Yesterday we told him that if we were going to go and do something this weekend that we'd call and invite him." Ken explained quickly.

"I don't see any problem with that." Dad said thoughtfully, then turned to Mom and said, "Davis is a vegan. Do you think we'll be having anything he could eat for dinner?"

Mom considered for a moment, then happily replied, "Yes. Everything. I was going to top the zucchini ragout with some cheese, but it's completely optional. I'll just put a bowl of cheese on the table and let everyone put on their own."

"That's great." My dad said with a smile, then turned to us and said, "Why don't you boys invite Davis over for dinner, then we'll leave for the mall, right after."

"Thanks dad." I said immediately.

I don't know how anybody else's parents are, but I'm starting to think that I really lucked out.

"It's going to be about forty five minutes until dinner. Are you boys going to be able to hold out that long?" Mom asked curiously.

"Yeah. We had a good lunch after the photo shoot. We'll make it." I said with a grin.

"I'd love to hear all about how that went, but I need to get dinner started." Mom said anxiously.

"Then we'll wait and tell you all about it at dinner." I said gently.

Mom looked surprised, then dashed across the room and pulled me into a quick hug and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Before I could react or even think about it, she was gone into the kitchen.

"Why don't you guys call Davis, then go into your room and see if there's anything you want packed in with this stuff." Dad asked as he looked at me with a loving smile.

"Yeah. Sure." I said slowly, feeling that something had just happened and I missed it completely.

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"May I please speak to Davis? This is Kenny Thompson from down the street." Ken asked carefully into his cell phone.

I saw him wince and could easily imagine the sound of Mrs. Plimpton screeching for Davis to come to the phone.

After a moment, Ken smiled and said, "Hi Davis. This is Kenny. I'm over at Rory's house. We're planning to go to the mall a little bit later and wondered if you'd like to go with us."

Ken chuckled, then said, "Good. And Rory's father wanted for us to invite you over for dinner."

"Yeah. Rory's dad made sure of that before he told us to invite you. From the sound of it, they were going to be having a mostly vegan meal anyway so it's no extra trouble at all." Ken said with a grin at me.

"Well, dinner will be in about forty-five minutes, but you can come over whenever you want and hang out with us." Ken said frankly.

"Okay. We'll see you then." Ken said happily, then rang off.

"When is he coming?" I asked curiously.

"He's not sure. He has to talk to his mom. He said that as soon as the drama subsides, he'll be over." Ken said with a chuckle.

"Let's go see what's left to pack." I said as I led the way toward my room.

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"Were you wanting to pack the dust on the lightbulbs?" Ken asked as he looked around my barren room.

"I think mom already got it." I chuckled.

"Oh. Yeah. It looks like she did." Ken said as he made a show of going up on his toes to look at the overhead light.

"She packed my sheets and pillows." I said as I looked at the bare bed.

"I guess you'll have to find someplace else to sleep tonight." Ken said casually, then looked at me with an absolutely wicked grin.

"Hmm. I guess I don't have a choice, do I?" I asked as I smiled at him.

"But I'm surprised that they didn't pack your computer." Ken said as he walked to my desk.

"I doubt that it would be much good for anything if I did take it. It's so old that it can't run any decent software." I said frankly.

"Pop's really good with computers, maybe you could get him to look at it for you." Ken said casually.

"I'm pretty sure that I'll be able to use a terminal for email and stuff when I get there. That's all I really need." I said slowly.

"You'll have your own terminal. Cory will see to that." Ken said with certainty.

At my look of question, he continued, "You'll need it to do your stuff for the Clan."

Logical. What more can I say?

"I don't see anything else here to go through. It looks like they already packed everything." Ken said as he looked in the closet and dresser drawers.

"I feel like I've been living here in this room forever." I said as I looked around.

Ken looked deeply into my eyes for a moment, then moved in to give me a long, slow kiss.

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A gentle tapping sound intruded on my enjoyment of the kiss that had gone on for who knows how long.

When it became apparent that it wasn't going away, I reluctantly broke the kiss with Ken and looked up.

"Hi guys." Davis said shyly from my doorway.

"Hi Davis." I said timidly.

I had actually expected it to be my mom or dad.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but your dad said that it would be okay if I came back here." Davis said hesitantly.

"It's no problem." I said casually.

Ken started to move away, but I caught him.

"I don't think Davis will mind if you come down here and sit with me." I said gently.

Ken smiled, then carefully climbed onto my lap.

"Come on in and have a seat." I said as I gestured toward the bed.

While Davis was making his way to the bed, I turned the wheelchair so we would be facing him.

"I thought it would take longer for you and your mom to talk." I said as Davis got settled.

"So did I, actually. But she was watching this documentary or infomercial about some kind of new cosmetic thing, so I told her I was going and she said 'fine'." Davis said happily.

I didn't know if I was happy or sad for him after hearing that story.

"Here in about two hours it'll probably occur to her that I'm being awfully quiet, then she'll start looking for me." Davis said with a grin.

"What's she going to do when she doesn't find you?" Ken asked cautiously.

"Probably nothing, but there's a chance that she'll suddenly kick into overprotective uber-mommy mode." Davis admitted reluctantly. "Either way, there's nothing to worry about. I left her a note."

"Good." Ken said, sounding sort of relieved.

"It looks like you guys really cleaned this place out." Davis said as he looked around.

"Not us. My parents." I said immediately. "You saw how it was yesterday. When we got back this afternoon, it was like this."

"It really sucks that you're leaving." Davis said irritably.

"Yeah. But I've got the choice to stay here and maybe get sicker or go there and maybe get cured." I said frankly.

"I know." Davis said quietly, then added, "But it still sucks."

"I think Ken agrees with you." I said as I hugged Ken gently.

"It's going to suck. But maybe with us being able to talk on our terminals and being able to visit each other, it won't be that bad." Ken said quietly.

"Yes, it **will** be that bad. But I still have to do it." I said with resignation.

"But once you're better, we're getting married and I don't care what it takes, we're going to be together." Ken said firmly.

I wasn't used to hearing that level of determination in his voice. But since I agreed with the sentiment, all I could do was smile.

"Whoa, Married?" Davis asked hesitantly.

"Yeah. As soon as Rory can walk again." Ken said seriously.

Davis seemed to be considering it for a moment, before he finally said, "I'm really happy for you."

"Thanks." I said immediately.

I still don't feel like I really know Davis all that well, but I think I've been around him enough to know that he's a person with strong personal beliefs, and he wouldn't offer his congratulations insincerely or frivolously.

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After just sitting and talking with Davis for a while, Mom finally called us in to dinner.

"I just got a call from Allen. He said that Billy and the boys aren't going to be able to go with us. They're going to be spending the evening with some friends of theirs from out of town." My dad said casually as we were all getting settled in around the table.

"Pete and Jono." Ken said with a smile, "I hope you get to meet them, they're really a lot of fun."

I nodded my agreement as Ken pushed me to the end of the table.

"Would you like to sit in a chair?" He asked me casually.

It hadn't even occurred to me before, but I suddenly realized that I would. And it meant even more to me that Ken thought to ask, anticipating my desires before I even had them.

I couldn't hold back my smile as I nodded at him.

The loving look in his eyes told me more than words that he understood exactly what I was feeling.

Ken leaned over me and I held onto him as he shifted me up and onto the chair.

I glanced over in time to see my dad with the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

"I hope everyone's hungry." the Zombie Hyper-Mom said in her ever oblivious way as she raced into the room, totally breaking the mood.

It used to annoy me. I don't even know why I was so bitter about it. But now I look at her zipping around the house, at warp speed, and feel nothing but love and admiration for her.

"Where is Corina?" Dad asked as he looked around.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" Mom asked ebulliently, "She's found herself a stunningly handsome, 'older' man. So she has to spend time passing on all the details to 'the pack'."

Davis looked at the Zombie Hyper-mom with surprise, then broke into a smile once he was sure that she was talking about him.

"Ah yes." Dad said knowingly, "One must share all knowledge within the teenage girl collective."

Davis and I chuckled as Ken seemed to be trying to understand what Dad was meaning.

"Dig in!" Mom said as she finally stopped flitting around and took her seat.

"It looks good." Davis said as he looked over the food selections.

"Everything here is vegan, well, except for the bowl of shredded cheese, obviously." Mom said with a grin. "Please, help yourself to as much as you want."

"Thank you." Davis said with a smile and seemed to be a little bit overwhelmed.

"Do you want some orange stuff?" Ken asked as he offered me a bowl of... something.

"Sure. Why not?" I said casually.

You know, what the hell. I'm feeling adventurous.

I plopped a few big globs of the fluffy dark orange stuff onto my plate, then offered the bowl to Davis.

"Thanks!" He said happily, and I noticed that he was taking large portions of everything.

It made me feel good to know that he was honestly enjoying the meal.

"Green beans?" Ken asked from beside me, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah." I said quickly.

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"Mrs. Teeter, this sweet potato puree is fantastic. Is it hard to make?" Davis asked with interest.

Mom seemed surprised by the question, but quickly answered, "No. It's really very simple. And like most of my recipes, it adheres to the five item rule."

"Five item rule?" Davis parroted curiously.

"Yes. Each dish has no more than five ingredients. Of course, there are some exceptions, but for the most part, five items is the most you need to make a flavorful and healthy dish. More than that muddles the flavor and doesn't improve anything."

"Hey, that makes a lot of sense. And it sounds a lot easier than the cookbooks that I've been using." Davis said frankly.

"Oh? Do you cook?" Mom asked with interest.

"I have to if I want to eat." Davis said with a chuckle. "I'm not, like, a chef or anything. But I try to eat a healthy diet and this is the only way I'm going to get it."

"So your mother doesn't cook for you?" Mom asked with concern.

"She does. And she really tries... I guess. She just doesn't get the whole 'vegan' concept. She usually starts off okay, but somewhere along the way she decides that whatever she's cooking needs bacon grease or some cheese for flavor. What she doesn't seem to get is that she's actually 'hiding' the real flavor by doing that and adding a lot of unnecessary fat besides." Davis said passionately, then noticed that everyone was listening.

"Sorry. I don't mean to get preachy about it." Davis said shyly.

"Don't worry about it." Dad said assuringly. "We're interested in getting to know you and this is a part of who you are."

Davis seemed uncertain, then glanced down the table at Ken and me.

We immediately nodded that we agreed with what Dad was saying.

"No one ever wanted me to talk about it before." Davis said in an awestruck voice.

Dad chuckled at the comment, then asked, "So, I'm assuming that you chose a vegan diet at some point, how did that happen?"

"My dad, my real dad was having problems with his health. His doctor jerked him around for a year or two doing tests and prescribing medicine and stuff and the whole time my dad was just getting sicker and sicker. His wife at that time was sort of into the health food thing, but not really. She

did some checking around and convinced my dad to give the healthy way a chance."

"How do you mean?" Dad asked curiously.

"Detox diet, colon cleanse... you know, that kind of stuff. And after doing some investigating, they realized that none of the eight prescriptions he was taking actually did anything but mask symptoms, and some of what he was suffering from was side effects from the medicine." Davis finished gravely.

"Did he get better?" My dad asked with interest.

"From the way he tells it, he feels better than he's ever felt in his life. All his fatigue, cloudy thinking, depression and general aches and pains just went away. Since I was living with him, I got put on a vegan diet, too. After a while, I realized that I really felt good... like, all the time. So I've been eating this way ever since."

"It sounds like you and your father might have been suffering from some sort of food allergy." Mom said thoughtfully. "A series of allergy tests could probably tell you which specific foods you should avoid."

"Maybe. But since I know that eating healthy food will make me feel good, I don't really want to know that if I avoid one certain thing that I can go back to eating all the other crap that I used to eat. I think I'm a lot better off this way." Davis finished happily.

"It does sound like that." My dad said with a smile. "We started eating healthier food because Doris thought it might help Rory..."

"It did help." I interrupted. I didn't want there to be any confusion on that point.

Mom beamed at my words.

Dad nodded at me in agreement, then continued, "But I think all of us have benefited from the healthier diet. I think that when Rory leaves for Vulcan, that we'll probably continue to eat this way."

"Do you think, maybe, I could come over sometime when you're cooking? Your food is a lot better than mine and I'd really like to learn how to cook like you do." Davis asked Mom timidly.

"I'd be proud to share my recipes with you." Mom said happily.

"And you'll always be welcome to join us for dinner. That way your poor mother won't have to try to make 'special' food for you every night." Dad

said with an inviting smile, then added, "And I'm sure that Corina won't have any objections, either."

"Yeah! That'd be great!" Davis said happily.

"If we're just about finished, I suppose we should get ready to go to the mall." Dad said frankly.

"We have time for dessert, don't we?" Mom asked hopefully.

"Yes. I think we have time." Dad said with a loving smile at her.

Mom raced out of the room and I noticed the contented look on Davis' face.

It looked to me like he had found a place where he belonged.

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"Apple crumble!" Mom said triumphantly as she placed a baking dish on the table.

"That looks great!" Davis said with a smile.

To me it looked like a pan of toasted oats with puddles of slime oozing up here and there, but what do I know?

Mom scooped some out and passed plates to each of us.

"This is good!" Ken said with surprise.

I smiled at him as I remembered his encounter with Mom's fake chocolate brownies.

"How did you get it this sweet?" Davis asked curiously.

"I juiced some apples, then cooked down the juice." Mom said simply.

"Brilliant!" Davis said happily before taking another bite.

Mom beamed at the praise and I felt a smile on my own face, knowing that she felt happy and appreciated.

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"Okay guys. Stay in the mall. Call on the cell phone if you run into any trouble. And if nothing else comes up, meet us in the food court at 8pm." Allen said firmly, then asked, "Any questions?"

I think everyone else was as surprised as I was that the adults were going to turn us loose without us even having to ask.

"Good. Have fun!" Allen finished with a smile.

"Rory, we're going to be shopping for things for you to take on your trip. If you find anything that you want to buy, just have Ken call and let us know and we'll meet you at that store." Dad said seriously.

"Okay. Thanks Dad." I said, then reached up to pull him into a quick hug.

Yeah. I know. I'm a teenager and it's absolutely uncool to hug your parents in the mall. But, you know what? I don't care. Besides, I've been alone in my room for over a year and I'm leaving for Vulcan tomorrow. What reputation do I have to be worried about ruining?

"Guys, this is Davis." Ken said as the parents walked away.

Jake and Kevin gave casual waves and Xain inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Davis, these are my brothers Jake and Xain, and my twin brother Kevin." Ken said happily, then curiously asked, "Where are Reuben and Ricardo?"

"Mamacita wanted for them and Edovina to have a quiet night at home." Jake said casually to Ken, then asked more loudly, to the group, "Is there a certain store that anyone wants to visit?"

No one answered him, so after a moment he started walking, seemingly with no particular destination in mind.

The rest of us followed along behind, apparently not having any better ideas.

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We followed along, until Kevin said, "I want to go in there."

I looked at the store and realized that it specialized in craft and art supplies.

Even at my best, I never made it much beyond the finger-painting stage of art.

"I'll go with you." Ken said quickly, then looked at me, silently asking if I wanted to come along.

I love Ken.

I do.

And I really like Kevin.

But there's just no way I'm going to roam around a craft store for God only knows how long, looking at crap that doesn't interest me.

"I'll wait here. Go have fun." I said with what I hoped was a convincing smile.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up to see that it was Davis. "I'll stay and keep him company."

Before Ken could ask, Jake and Xain had taken seats on a bench that faced the craft store.

"You guys want to sneak off and spark one up?" Davis asked quietly. "I've got some pretty good weed."

I looked up at Davis with surprise at the question.

Before I could say anything, I was stopped cold by the expression on Jake's face.

"That shit will ruin your life. If you decide to go ahead and do it anyway, I can't stop you. But I don't want it and I don't want you offering it to any of my brothers." Jake said in a low voice that sounded like he was using every bit of self control that he had, not to scream.

"Come on, Jake, it just relaxes you a little, it's no big deal." Davis said quietly.

"It is a big deal. It doesn't take as much as you think to make you into an addict and ruin your life. The weed isn't the problem, but it's the first step. Each step after that is easier to take until you're somewhere you can't get out of. I don't want any of my brothers to take that first step." Jake said in a distressed voice, then walked away, apparently to calm himself.

I could tell that Davis was shaken. I wanted to say something, but before I could think of what to say, Xain stepped up to him and looked him right in the eyes.

"In Jake's earlier life, he was addicted to many illegal substances, therefore he cannot process his emotions on this subject logically." Xain said in a clear, serious voice.

Davis nodded, then looked with concern in the direction Jake had gone.

"I, however, can see past the emotions." Xain added firmly, drawing Davis' attention back to him. "If at any future time, I find that you have offered any sort of illegal substance to Jake or any of my brothers, I will kill you."

Davis' eyes went wide at the seriousness of Xain's expression and the tone of voice that said it was simply a statement of fact. I think my own mouth might have dropped open in shock for a second or two.

"I would gladly sacrifice my future freedom to protect my family from going through the experiences that Jake has endured." Xain said firmly, then walked off in the direction Jake had gone.

After a moment to get over the shock, I was finally able to find my voice and quietly said, "Davis."

It took him a moment, but he finally tore his gaze away from Jake and Xain, who were now standing together about forty feet further down.

"Please think about what they've just said. You're my friend and I don't want to see you hurt." I said to him honestly.

I mean, I really don't know Davis... at all. But I know that I trust my instincts, and my instincts tell me that Davis is a really good person.

After a moment of thought, Davis quietly said, "Okay. Yeah. I'll think about it."

I suppose I could have let it go at that, but his wishy-washy answer didn't sit right with me and... I guess it's the red hair. That's got to be what did it. I couldn't just leave it lay.

"By the way..." I said, drawing his attention back to me. "If I ever find out that you've given Corina drugs, you'll wish that Xain had gotten to you first."

Davis looked at me with surprise, then quickly stammered, "I wouldn't...."

"Good." I interrupted, letting him know with that one word that I believed him.

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As we wandered around the mall, I actually did find a few things that I wanted to buy to take to Vulcan with me.

Xain helped me pick out a few nature posters, telling me that the desert landscape on Vulcan can become a bit depressing over time.

I found some nice sports gloves and bought 6 pairs. Now that I could use my arms again, I was going to have to get used to driving myself. And let me tell you, moving a wheelchair around may 'look' easy, but it's serious work and it'll tear up your hands.

As we were wandering down yet another leg of the mall, I noticed a sign out of the corner of my eye and reached up to pat Ken's hand.

"Did you see something you needed?" Ken asked curiously as he moved up where he could see me.

"Yeah." I said, then timidly admitted, "The bathroom."

Ken glanced at the sign, then asked, "Do you want me to go with you?"

"I can do it myself." I said, trying not to sound offended by his offer.

"I know you can." Ken said dismissively, and from the way he said it, I knew he was being completely honest with me. "I just know that I don't feel comfortable going anywhere in the mall alone."

I thought about it for a second, then said, "Yeah. Company would be good."

"Guys! We're taking a bathroom break. We'll be right back." Ken called to the others, who were ahead of us.

Jake nodded as he stopped.

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"Standing room only." Ken said frankly when he noticed that all the stalls were in use and only a few of the urinals were available.

"It's the mall." I said by way of explanation.

"Do you need..." Ken trailed off as he pointed to the handicapped stall.

I regretfully nodded.

"Great." A weary voice said from behind us.

I turned and saw that an older man in a wheelchair had just entered the bathroom.

"Yeah. Mall traffic." I said, trying to lighten the mood.

"I just had to park half-way between here and Georgia because someone decided that the handicapped spaces were just too good to pass up." The man said with frustration.

"I know how that is." I said sympathetically. "I think they should have their cars towed away... and crushed."

"That might make them think twice." the man chuckled.

"It would stop repeat offenders." Ken added thoughtfully.

The man and I both chuckled at Ken's statement.

"I'm Rory and this is Ken." I said as I offered my hand.

"Robert." the man said as he shook my hand, then Ken's.

The door to the handicapped stall opened and a perfectly healthy teenage guy stepped out.

Robert and I gave him 'the glare of death' as he hurried out of the bathroom.

"I can wait for a minute if you really need to go." I offered quietly.

"God bless you." Robert said gratefully.

As he started toward the stall, a teenage girl poked her head out and looked around nervously.

Robert, Ken and I all watched with wide eyes as she made a mad dash for the restroom door, mumbling "Excuse me" along the way.

After a moment to get over the shock, Robert grinned at us, then went on into the stall.

"Are there any more in there?" Ken called out playfully.

"I'm not telling." Robert called back.

There were a series of chuckles from other guys in the restroom who had apparently noticed what had happened.

* * * * *

Business taken care of, we joined the rest of the guys to continue our shopping adventure.

I noticed that Davis seemed to be keeping himself separate from the rest of the group. So I decided to try to put him at ease.

"Davis?" I called quietly.

He responded by lagging a little and falling into step at my side.

"Are we okay?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah. We're fine." he said assuringly.

"Good. Because..."

"You don't need to explain." Davis interrupted. "If I thought someone was going to hurt one of my brothers or sisters, I'd react the same way... probably worse."

I nodded, believing that he really did understand.

"The Vulcan kid, he said that Jake used to be an addict." Davis said slowly.

I nodded, then said, "I really don't know much about Jake's past, and I wouldn't feel comfortable telling you what I do know. But, I think that if you have questions, it would be a really good idea to talk to him about it."

"I doubt that he'll want to talk to me." Davis said quietly.

I shook my head, then said, "Jake obviously has strong feelings on the subject. I know him well enough to be able to tell you that, if you're really interested, he'll want to talk to you about it."

"Why?" Davis asked cautiously.

"To keep you from making the same mistakes that he made." I said frankly.

"But he seems okay." Davis said slowly.

"Yeah. Now he is. But just because he got help when he needed it, doesn't mean that other people will." I said seriously as I looked him in the eyes. "You need to talk to him. Listen to what he has to say and ask him questions."

"You guys about done?" Jake asked from ahead of us.

I didn't realize it before, but we were stopped.

I looked behind me and saw that Ken was a few feet away with one arm draped around Kevin.

"What's wrong?" I asked him curiously.

"You guys looked like you were having a serious talk, so I left you alone for a minute." Ken said frankly, then added, "Besides, Kev looked like he could use some attention."

"Thanks." I said shyly. "Sorry about that."

"You don't have to explain to us. We all know how it is." Jake said frankly as he approached.

"Yeah. I guess you would." I said timidly.

"Is it anything we can help with?" Jake asked, now standing right before me.

I looked up at Davis with question. It wasn't my decision to make or my place to say anything about it.

"Sometime, you know, if you want to..." Davis said to Jake nervously, then trailed off.

Jake slowly nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"Could we talk... you know, about... stuff?" Davis asked nervously.

Jake looked at Davis cautiously for a moment, maybe waiting to see if he was going to say more. Finally he looked at me with question.

"Davis has some questions, and I think you probably have the answers he needs." I said honestly, hopefully not revealing too much in front of everyone.

"Sure." Jake said slowly as he looked back at Davis. "If you have questions, I'll help you however I can. And if I don't have the answers you need, I have a whole lot of people that I can ask for help. All you have to do is ask."

Davis was watching Jake carefully, finally he said, "Yeah. Sometime when we both have time, I think I'd really like to talk with you."

"We're going to a funeral, tomorrow afternoon, but I'll be free the rest of the day after that." Jake said frankly.

"You'd be welcome to go to the funeral with us." I added quickly.

"It seems wrong, since I don't know the people who died." Davis said quietly.

"None of us do." Ken said simply.

"That's right. We're going for Vincent, and none of us even knew him before this week." I said honestly.

"I remember you telling me about him." Davis said thoughtfully, then nodded.

"You'll come?" I asked hopefully.

"Yeah. But I don't think I have anything to wear. I mean, you know, like, nice stuff."

"Have you noticed where we are?" Jake asked with an impish grin.

Davis made a show of looking around, then said, "Oh yeah!"

"Let's go get you some 'going-to-funeral' clothes." Jake said with a smile.

"Yeah." Davis happily agreed.

I was relieved to see that Jake and Davis seemed to be getting along.

With me leaving, Jake was going to be the best person to help Davis find the right path.

"I love you." Ken whispered, right next to my ear.

I looked up at him and whispered, "I love you, too."

He smiled at me, then started pushing my chair so we could catch up to the others.

* * * * *

It was only a few minutes before we were supposed to meet the parents and we were heading toward the food court.

Suddenly, I saw someone familiar.

"Ryan?" I called out.

He stopped and looked around curiously.

"Ryan! It's me, Rory!" I said as I waved.

I saw the recognition light up on his face. Then it was replaced by something else... embarrassment?

"Ryan, who's your friend?" The girl with Ryan asked curiously.

I was barely able to hear him say, "Nobody. Just someone I used to know."

That hurt.

That hurt bad.

We had been best friends.

I might be a teenager now, more mature, a member of the clan... but at that moment I just wanted to hurt him back.

Ryan tried to usher her away, but she hesitated and looked back at me.

"Remember today, because next time, you might be someone he 'used to know'." I called out to her.

She looked at me with surprise, then was tugged away by Ryan.

"Are you okay?" Ken asked me with concern.

I looked up at him, then quietly asked, "Will there ever be a day when you 'used to know' me?"

"Never, not in a million million years." Ken said with certainty.

That's my Ken. He knows EXACTLY the right thing to say to make me feel better.

"What about after that?" I asked playfully.

"After that I want for us to start over and do every single bit of it again." Ken said gently.

"Sounds like a plan." I said as I looked up at him.

To my surprise, Ken leaned in and gave me a full, deep kiss.

I mean, not that I have anything against that, but we're in the middle of the freakin mall!

"The parents are waiting." Jake called out, not sounding the least bit bothered by our public display of affection, just reminding us.

When the kiss ended, Ken backed away slightly and I could see straight into his soul.

I could tell that he was feeling our impending separation and needed desperately to imprint every loving moment that he could, to hold him through the days ahead.

There was no way I could resist the urge to pull him into a firm hug. It was all I could do not to burst into tears.

"Ken, climb on up there. We need to get going." Jake said firmly.

I smiled as I guided Ken to sit on my lap.

Jake got behind us and pushed us through the mall as we snuggled.

Were people staring?

Yes.

Did I care?

No.

After the mall, we went back to my house and packed all the things I had bought so they could be taken to the spaceport.

When that was done, Ken and I went over to his house to spend some time with the family.

I guess we must have spent, maybe half an hour with them when Ken went and talked to Allen.

The next thing I knew, Allen was carrying me upstairs and Jake even brought up my wheelchair.

When we arrived in Ken's bedroom, Kevin was there, drawing something.

"I'm almost done." He said quietly as he worked.

"You don't need to hurry for us, as long as you don't mind if we cuddle." I said honestly as Ken helped me onto his bed.

"I like it when you cuddle." Kevin said quietly.

"You know, when you're done with that, maybe you could read something to us." I said as I snuggled into Ken's embrace.

"You don't have to pretend." Kevin said more to his pad of paper than to us.

"Pretend about what?" Ken asked before I could form the question.

Kevin turned to look at us, then said, "You don't have to pretend that you want to hear me read. I don't need your pity."

Well, that felt about like a slap in the face.

And you can guess what happened next.

Yeah.

The red hair.

I swear, it has a mind of its own sometimes.

"Kevin! Look at this!" I demanded as I raised my hands and wiggled my fingers. "Last week I couldn't do this, now I can. Are you happy for me?"

"Yeah!" Kevin said immediately.

"Well, you couldn't read last week. Now you can. And I'm happy for you." I said in a voice that, I'll admit, was angry.

Kevin stared at me with wide eyes, but I think he got the message.

"Now, will you read something for us or not?" I asked firmly, then waited.

"Well, since you asked so nicely." Kevin was able to say before breaking into giggles.

It turns out that Kevin's giggles are the antidote to my red hair. Within a few seconds, I was giggling right along with him.

After putting down his sketching pencil, Kevin walked to the bookcase and picked out a book.

I snuggled into Ken's warm embrace as I relaxed and listened to Kevin read.

* * * * *

After reading us a story, Kevin went downstairs to spend time with the rest of the family for a while.

"This is our last night together." Ken said with regret.

"Only for a while. I won't be staying on Vulcan forever, I'll get to come home for visits." I said, fighting down my tears.

"Yeah. And I'll come to Vulcan with Pop when he has to go for his job." Ken said quietly, and I knew that he was about to cry, too.

"Ken. I love you." I whispered, and felt the last of my self control slip away.

"I love you, too, Rory." Ken managed to choke out before he, also, broke down into sobbing.

I know our last night together should have just been spent loving each other, and I suppose that's what we were doing.

But we were also grieving at what we were losing.

Then something changed.

We were silent and still, and yet, I felt the fire ignite between us.

Ken and I started moving at the same time.

Our gentle caresses became more desperate and feverish.

Our kisses were almost violent in their intensity, like we were trying to devour each other.

Suddenly it became clear to me. I knew what I wanted. I knew it was time.

What I didn't know was if Ken was ready or even interested.

We had never really talked about it. And for some reason, until just now, I had always felt like we could wait. I knew without a doubt that eventually we would be ready. But there was always time.

Now the reality was setting in. Whatever we did tonight would have to carry us through the lonely times ahead.

I don't know if it was my feeling of powerlessness that gave me a need to feel in control or maybe it was just the age thing, but for whatever reason, I had always envisioned myself making love to Ken. I hadn't ever considered otherwise.

Now that the moment was upon us, everything was different.

I wanted to feel Ken inside me.

No, I needed to feel him.

"Make love to me." I whispered to him, and my voice was hoarse to my own ears.

"That's what I'm doing." Ken responded in a low growl.

That was sweet... and true... and totally not what I meant.

"I want you to stick it in me." I said bluntly, so there would be no misunderstanding.

Ken stopped all movement for a moment, and I was afraid that I might have asked for too much. Maybe he wasn't ready, or if he was, maybe he was only interested in being the bottom.

Finally Ken reluctantly said, "We don't have any... supplies."

"In my pouch." I said with relief, understanding his momentary hesitation.

I was glad that we were going to be able to put the Zombie Hyper-Mom's gifts to good use.

"Huh? You have a..." Ken slowly said in a bewildered voice, then perked up with sudden comprehension, "Oh! On your wheelchair!"

Okay. I'm pretty sure a laughing fit would be a real mood killer, so I used every bit of self control at my disposal to keep from just laying out on the bed and laughing myself silly.

Ken found the supplies that I had squirreled away for just such an emergency and returned to the bed.

"Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you." Ken asked gently as he moved up to look me in the eyes.

"Yeah. I'm sure. Do you need for me to tell you what to do?" I asked seriously.

"I've never done this before, but I've heard and seen stuff..." Ken said cautiously.

"Go ahead. And if I have any suggestions along the way, I promise to speak up." I said, then moved in for a slow, deep kiss.

When the kiss finally ended, Ken pulled back and looked at me appraisingly.

"Having second thoughts?" I asked, not sure what his thoughtful expression meant.

"I just don't know how you want to do it... I mean, you know, like what position." Ken said cautiously.

I had to think about that one for a minute. Since I had always assumed that I would be on top, I never considered the best position for me on the bottom.

Finally I said, "Why don't we try this? We can put the pillows in the middle of the bed then roll me on top of them."

"Yeah. Okay." Ken said with a smile.

* * * * *

There were a few awkward moments getting me positioned and comfortable, but when we were finished, it was all worth it.

I had to give Ken a few basic instructions to get him going, but once he understood what he was doing, he seemed to have a natural talent.

I was lovingly stretched with aggravating slowness that built pleasure upon passion.

In fact, I was almost to the point of telling him to 'just stick the damned thing in already!'.

When I thought that I couldn't possibly wait a moment longer, I felt it, I felt him, nudging his way slowly and carefully.

I took in a deep breath and braced myself for a pain that never came.

Thanks to his diligent preparation, all I felt was a stretching and a wonderful sense of fullness.

Of course, it also didn't hurt that Ken was still pretty young. I mean, he's still got a lot of growth left in him.

"Are you okay?" Ken asked with concern.

"I'm perfect. Go ahead." I whispered back to him.

The first thrust was a surprise.

As timid and gentle as Ken naturally is, I expected him to go slow and take his time.

Um, no.

The little bugger got in there and started going to town.

I mean... damn!

Here, I was all prepared for 'slow and easy' and what I got was 'fast and furious'... not that I'm complaining!

Not at all!

Talk about perfect!

It was just what I needed right at that moment.

I knew that Ken loved me. In the short time that we'd been together, I'd completely accepted that.

But with him back there, ravaging me, I couldn't deny that not only did he love me, but he WANTED me.

I know it sounds like a simple thing, but when you spend years thinking of yourself as goofy looking, it's a revelation to find someone that's really, honestly attracted to you.

My straining erection was begging for attention, but I wasn't really in a position to do much about it at the moment.

As it turns out, I didn't need to worry about it.

When Ken's movements started becoming jerky, I felt my own passion raise to another level.

Ken seemed to have given up any control over himself and was just going for the gold.

The animalistic thrusting, skin slapping on skin, was exactly the stimulation that I needed to push me to the edge.

When Ken finally thrust hard and held it, that was all I needed.

I could feel him spasm within me and my own seed released in response.

I don't think I've ever had an orgasm before without having my cock touched at all.

Let's just say... I highly recommend it.

Ken pounded again and again, digging his fingers into my hips.

I had my hands balled in the sheets as I rode my own orgasm, feeling wave after wave of pleasure.

Ken and I both stopped suddenly at the sound of the bedroom door opening.

We looked up in unison as Kevin walked in the door.

He stopped and looked at us for a second, then backed out of the room.

Before I could react in any way, I heard Kevin call out, "Poppa! They're making puppies!"

As I buried my face into the bed and started laughing uncontrollably, I felt Ken collapse on my back doing the same.

Chapter 16

Let's be real. There is absolutely no better way to wake up than to feel someone you love, snuggled up against you, before you even open your eyes.

For years, I couldn't bring myself to even dream about ever finding someone for me. I mean, I'm broken. I'm not 'normal'. I don't meet the minimum requirement to be a boyfriend.

Of course, yeah, I fantasized about 'The Underwear Guy', (I still can't get over that) but to be honest, even in my most erotic dreams, I never imagined myself doing anything with him. It was totally inconceivable that anyone could want me.

Now, here I am, beside one of the cutest guys I've ever seen and even better, he's a great guy. Not only that, he wants me! He thinks *I'm* attractive. I mean, wow! I never saw that coming!

When I open my eyes, I was surprised to see that Ken's already awake, and that he's watching me. The goopy sappy expression on his face tells me more clearly than words that he's been thinking along the same lines that I have.

Remember, Ken's younger than I am. Because of that, I'd sort of understand it if he was unsure about what he wanted, or was hesitant to express himself.

Um, no.

The first thing he does is jump right in there and give me a throw-you-up-against-the-wall, drag-you-down-the-stairs style kiss. You know how the old movies have people seeing fireworks when they kiss?

::Pssh:: Amateurs.

Ken's 'first thing in the morning' kiss ranks more along the lines of aircraft carriers and bombers and torpedos, ending up with something being completely blown out of the water.

About three seconds or two hours later (same difference) there was a gentle knock on the bedroom door, then Allen peeked in.

"Juana's already started breakfast. Go ahead and get cleaned up and I'll be back up to get you in a few minutes." Allen said with a gentle smile at us.

"Okay, Pop." Ken said lovingly.

Allen glanced at the other bed, then added, "And wake up your brother."

"I will." Ken promised, then we watched as Allen withdrew from the room.

"Good morning." I said slowly.

"Yeah." Ken responded, then there he went, kissing again.

"We've got to wake up Kevin and get ready for breakfast." I muttered against his lips.

Yeah, I know. What was I thinking?

Well, in my defense, I *am* the older one, so it's up to me to do the responsible, mature thing.

Actually, about two more seconds of Ken kissing me and I would have been ready to agree to anything. But fortunately (I suppose), Ken listened to me and got out of bed.

After helping me into my wheelchair, he woke up Kevin, then we went about the business of getting ready to start our day.

* * * * *

I know that I've said it before, but I still can't get over it.

The whole time I've been sick, I've always felt bad because people had to do extra things to make up for me not being able to take care of myself. I've always felt like I was being a burden.

But for some strange reason, it's not that way with Allen. I don't get what the difference is, but it's like he sees me as being something precious.

I think that when Ken hugs me, I feel loved. But when Allen hugs me, I feel cherished. I feel so safe and secure while I'm in his arms that for those few minutes, nothing else in the world matters.

"I hope you like pancakes." Allen said as he placed me in a chair at the kitchen table.

"Oh yeah!" I said with a smile.

I'm not going to go on another rant about the Zombie Hyper-mom's philosophy of cooking, but let me just say that real honest to goodness *flour* pancakes haven't been on the menu recently.

I glanced over to the door that leads outside and saw Possum laying beside an empty food dish, looking back at me. It sort of hurt me to realize that I wouldn't be seeing him for a while, but at the same time, I couldn't think of a better home for him while I'm gone.

As soon as Possum saw me looking at him, he threw one hind leg in the air and started a licking frenzy. I'm getting to be more and more convinced that he does that just to put on a show.

"Is over here okay?" Ken asked from behind me.

I turned to see that he had managed to carry my wheelchair down from upstairs, all by himself.

"Yeah. Thanks." I said immediately.

"I hope all of you are hungry this morning." Juana said as she placed a platter with bacon and eggs in the middle of the table.

"Thank you. This looks wonderful, but this is supposed to be your day off." Allen said frankly.

"This is what I want to be doing before I go and get ready for church. This makes me happy." Juana explained before hurrying back to the stove.

Even though we had a platter full of breakfast foods, none of us had plates, so all we could really do is sit there and look at the delicious looking food.

"Do you need any help with anything?" Allen asked curiously.

"Get your coffee, everything else is ready." Juana said as she raced back to the table, carrying two plates full of pancakes. Since she was carrying them with oven mitts, I'm guessing that she made them earlier and kept them warm in the oven until she had enough made for everyone.

I suppose it's because I'm Ken's guest that she served us first. I should probably take a moment to acknowledge one thing. The theory as to why my condition has stabilized is that my mom has been eliminating certain 'unhealthy' foods from my diet, allowing my body to achieve some sort of a balance.

That being said, I don't know what's waiting for me on Vulcan. Today might be my last chance to get to eat 'actual' food for at least a year. Is it stupid and wrong of me to indulge in food that could possibly destabilize my condition? Yes. Without a doubt. Am I going to do it anyway? If you could smell Juana's pancakes and bacon, you wouldn't even have to ask.

"Do you want for me to do your pancakes for you?" Ken asked me curiously.

I don't think of myself as being dimwitted, but I do have moments.

I had one right then.

I sat there in puzzled silence, trying to figure out what Ken meant, until he held up the little pitcher thing of syrup and looked at me with question.

"Oh, yeah. If you want to." I stammered.

I mean, I could have done it myself. But it would have involved a lot of stretching and reaching and a very real possibility of me spilling something and making a mess. It's just a lot easier to let Ken do it, since he asked, and all.

I couldn't help but smile warmly as I watched the amount of care Ken took to add butter and syrup to my pancakes. You know that cliché about 'a labor of love', that's what it was.

"Do you want some eggs or bacon?" Ken asked when he had finished dressing the pancakes.

"Both." I said immediately. Remember what I've been eating the past few years. Yeah, there's no way I'm passing up bacon and eggs.

When Juana placed a plate with a single pancake on it in front of Kevin, he quietly said, "No, thank you. I'm not hungry."

"I ask that you take a bite. That is all." Juana said as she continued on and placed a plate in front of Xain.

I watched to see what Kevin was going to do.

He seemed to think about it for a moment then, just about move for move, he went through the same butter and syrup ritual that Ken had done.

I absently took a bite of my food as I continued to watch Kevin. I guess it's because I know that he doesn't eat much that I'm curious to see what his reaction will be.

That's when it hit me. The flavor! It was so incredible!

After taking a small bite, Kevin quietly said, "This is really good. Thank you, Mamacita."

"This is wonderful!" I said to Juana as she approached the table, carrying plates for Allen and Jake.

"Thank you, Rory. I am glad that you are enjoying it." Juana said warmly, then walked past the kitchen and out of the room.

"I'd better start working out or I'm going to get fat. Juana's food is just TOO good." Allen chuckled.

Reuben and Ricardo ran into the kitchen with a man that I'd met briefly the night before.

"Unca Brady! Eat breakfast with us!" Ricardo insisted.

Brady picked up the boy and gave him a cuddly snuggle before placing him on one of the bar stools at the breakfast bar. Reuben climbed onto another barstool, leaving one open between him and his brother, for their 'Unca' Brady.

While he was doing that, Juana returned to the kitchen pushing a stroller.

I took another bite, then thought to ask, "Where's Grandma Mona?"

"Good question. She went on a date last night, it must have gone into extra innings." Allen said with a shy smile.

My eyes went wide in surprise.

The sound of Juana putting plates of food out on the breakfast bar for Reuben, Ricardo and Brady distracted me for a moment, but not so much that I couldn't snag another bite to eat.

"When Mona decided to let her people run the bar without her this weekend, I thought she was doing it so she could spend some time with us." Allen said with a smirk.

I'm sure that there's something really snarky that I could have said right then, but my mouth was too full anyway.

"Rory, I don't know if your dad told you about the plan for today, but here in about twenty minutes, he's going to be stopping by to pick you up so you can go and visit with your grandfather." Allen said casually.

I'm pretty sure that the incredible, wonderful flavor of the food was short circuiting my ability to think. I couldn't remember if my dad had told me that or not. But it didn't matter, I was all dressed and ready to go, so twenty minutes was plenty of time.

"Am I going with you or staying here?" Ken asked me quietly.

"I don't know. I mean, I guess you can go with me if you want to. But it might be kind of boring and depressing." I said honestly.

"You're leaving tonight, I don't want to waste any of the time that we have left." Ken said honestly, then seemed to deflate a little as he continued, "Unless you don't want for your grandfather to meet me."

"It's okay if you want to go. I just don't want you to be too bored." I said frankly.

Ken gave me the cutest little 'duh' look and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Then you guys need to finish up and get washed up before you leave." Allen said decisively.

Eat more of this wonderful food? No problem.

* * * * *

As it turned out, I had time to finish my food, wash my face, kiss Ken, wash my face again (syrup), and hold Edovina for a few minutes before my dad arrived to pick me up.

As Allen led him into the room, I quickly asked, "Is it okay if Ken goes with us?"

"That's no problem." Dad assured me, then turned to Ken and said, "I hope you won't get too bored."

"Rory can keep me entertained." Ken said with a grin at me.

I know it's stupid, but I felt the blush rise up my cheeks.

My dad smiled at me warmly, then told us, "Come on. Everyone's waiting in the car."

* * * * *

Ken and I have gotten really good at moving me from the wheelchair into the car.

It wasn't until I was seated and Ken was taking the wheelchair around to the trunk so Dad could stow it, that I realized that the ride might end up being a little bit tight.

Although the back seat might 'technically' be rated to seat three people, those three people would probably have to be below the age of five and a bit malnourished.

When Ken showed up at my door again, he didn't even suggest that I scoot over. Let's face it, no one wants to sit on 'the hump', including me.

But Ken just automatically scrambled over top of me, swooping in to give me a quick kiss along the way, then settled in just as comfy as you please into the supposed middle seat.

"Dad! There's not enough room for all of us back here." Corina complained.

I know it doesn't sound that bad, but there's just no way I can project the amount of venom she had in her voice. Trust me, no one would want to have to hear *that* for any length of time.

After a moment, Ken perked up and said, "I've got it!"

I looked at him curiously as he shifted out of his seat.

I actually thought that he was going to climb over me and scoot me to be in the middle, but instead, he settled in on my lap.

"Much better." Ken said happily.

Before I could say or do anything... before I could even think anything, Ken swooped in and gave me a kiss that was a work of art.

I mean, we're talking pharmaceutical grade.

The kiss went on and on and on.

Okay, I have to be honest, I don't know how long it lasted. I kind of blanked out there for a little bit.

But when Ken finally came up for air, he turned to Corina and asked, "Happy now?"

Before she could answer, he got that irresistible, devilish grin on his face, and said, "I know I am."

By the way, did I ever mention that my sister can give world class scowls?

* * * * *

We finally arrived at the nursing home. Honestly, I would have been just as happy to stay out in the car with Ken. Happier, in fact. But, since we were already there and I hadn't seen Grandpa Wayne since I got sick and since I was leaving for Vulcan... I sorta had to.

I suppose that Sunday must be the day that everyone fulfills their obligation to their throw-away elderly relatives, because the reception desk was really busy.

We had to wait in line. I guess it's good that I brought my own chair (sorry, I couldn't resist). Anyway, Ken was there, so it wasn't horrible or anything.

Once Dad made his way up to the desk, he signed us all in, then we went down one of many identical hallways. I mean, seriously, the place is built like a rat maze. How do they expect anyone, much less someone who's about a hundred years old to find their way around in a place like that?

Sorry, where was I? Oh, yeah. Left, left, right, left, to the end of the hall on the right... I think. Whatever. I guess my mom and dad have been here enough times that they don't even notice it anymore.

So Dad knocks on the door and about a minute later, some guy answers it.

I know I haven't seen my Grandpa Wayne for quite a while, but I'm, like, ninety-five percent sure that that isn't him.

"Wayne, look who's here! Looks like you hit the jackpot!" The old man chuckled as he tottered back into the room.

After Mom and Dad went in, Ken and I followed. Corina must have come in behind me. All I know is that the next time I saw her, she was standing just inside the door, leaning against the wall with her arms folded.

"We've got a surprise for you, Dad!" Mom said with excitement.

Yeah, that's a good idea, let's spring surprises on the old guy who's already had a stroke. Good thinking, Mom.

When Grandpa Wayne spotted me, I could see the surprise and excitement fill his eyes.

"How are you doing, Skeeter?" Grandpa Wayne asked happily.

It wasn't until he reached down and unlocked the wheels that I noticed that he was in a wheelchair.

"I'm fine, Grandpa." I said as I absorbed that fact, then I quickly added, "This is my friend, Ken."

As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. I mean, what kind of a chicken shit am I? Out and proud? I could have called Ken my boyfriend, at least. Calling him my fiance would have been even better. But no. I introduced Ken as my friend... I suck.

Grandpa looked at me curiously for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "It's nice to meet you, Ken. Rory, I'd like for you to meet *my* 'friend', Clint."

Wait.

What?

Then Grandpa broke into this classic 'shiteating grin' and gave me a wink.

Um, okay.

If that don't give you the willies, I don't know what will.

Then, maybe to break the tension, Clint stepped to Grandpa's side and made a show of looking at me in my wheelchair, then at Grandpa in his before saying, "I can see the family resemblance."

It wasn't that funny.

I know that.

But for some reason that struck me as being the funniest thing that anyone had ever said.

It's a good thing that I was in a place with lots of nurses, because I was about two seconds away from needing one before it was over.

I don't remember ever laughing so hard before.

* * * * *

When I finally calmed down, Grandpa quietly said to me, "I've heard quite a few stories around this place about how worried people are about their grandkids struggling to discover who they are."

"I think Ken and I have figured it out pretty well, and if we haven't, I can't wait to discover the rest." I told him sincerely.

"I've also heard other stories about how people rejected their kids or grandkids for some of the most nonsensical reasons. So if you two need help figuring anything out, come and see me." Grandpa Wayne said seriously.

"We will." I promised.

From there, the conversation shifted to my expected travel plans, treatment options and so on.

The funny thing is, I wasn't the least bit bored the entire time we were there.

The funnier thing is, Corina was.

* * * * *

As we left the Assisted Living Center (I was informed by Grandpa that 'Nursing Home' is looked upon as a slur by the residents), I was actually feeling fairly upbeat. That is, until Ken took out his phone and called Davis to see if he was ready to go to the funeral.

Right.

The funeral.

How could I forget about that?

Maybe deep down inside I'm just a horrible person.

Oh well, Ken loves me in spite of that.

Anyway, so Dad was driving us home so that I could slip into something more depressing and uncomfortable, or so I thought.

I had sort of assumed that I'd be riding to the funeral with Allen and his family, but I guess Dad and Allen had talked about stuff, and it ended up that we're all going.

Under other circumstances, that'd seem really weird to me. But since I didn't know the people who had died and I'd only met Vincent two days before, having Mom and Dad along didn't make it any more strange or awkward than it would have been already.

Of course, Corina didn't want to go.

That was just a bonus.

* * * * *

Mom had my clothes all laid out for me when I got home. With Ken's help, it really didn't take me very long at all to be ready.

Of course, Corina had barricaded herself in the bathroom and probably wouldn't be ready for another half hour or so. Sorry, I just don't get it. She spends all that time in there and comes out looking the same as when she went in.

Anyway, since Corina was obviously going to be a while, we decided to walk down to Ken's house so that he could change... well actually, Ken would walk and I would roll. You know what I mean.

As we were walking, Davis joined us. I have to say that he looked pretty good all dressed up in his new clothes. Davis is a laid back kind of a guy, but he dresses up well.

When we got to Allen's house, everyone went upstairs so they could all get changed. While they were doing that, Davis and I hung out in the living room for a little while.

Although we talked about a variety of subjects, we both seemed willing to avoid any that had the potential to be emotionally charged. With everything going on the past few days and looking forward at what was to come, I appreciated it.

Jake and Xain were the first ones to finish dressing, so they came down and talked with us while the others finished. After being alone for so long, it's kind of remarkable to me that I could feel so comfortable in a group of people, especially with two of them being older than I am.

* * * * *

You know how something sometimes happens that makes your heart skip a beat and you're in such shock that you don't know what to say?

Okay. Maybe it's just me.

When Ken and Kevin walked into the living room, I was beyond amazed.

I mean, Ken is a hot looking guy anyway, so it's no surprise that he cleans up well. But... I don't know how to explain it. I just saw him dressed like that and the first thing I thought of was that that's how I want him to look at our wedding.

Is that sappy or what?

Oh, there was one other surprising thing. Kevin was looking pretty good, too. But the really strange thing about it was that with Ken and Kevin being dressed in matching suits and Kevin's skinny little body being hidden under the suit jacket, for the first time I could really see them as identical twins.

When I said something to that effect, Kevin grabbed onto Ken's arm and dragged him over to the mirror so that they could see.

It makes me happy to see Kevin happy.

Right at that exact moment, all I really wanted to do was have some time alone with Ken so I could properly express what I was feeling. Unfortunately, that was not an option.

Just as we were about to leave, Mona walked into the room, looking better than any grandmother has a right to.

As much as I would have liked to have stayed around there for a while longer, chances were that my parents were about ready to leave.

As Ken and I left Allen's house, Deacon saw us and ran over to catch us before we left.

"We're not going to be able to go with you guys." Deacon said quickly.

"Why? Is something wrong?" I asked with concern.

"Besides Lawrence, no." Deacon said honestly.

"What's wrong with Lawrence?" I asked slowly.

"It's *his* parents' funeral we're going to." Deacon said slowly.

Woah. Talk about something that hits you like a ton of bricks!

I can't believe that I was that stupid.

"I'm sorry. I knew that, I guess it just didn't register. I was only thinking about Vincent." I stammered.

"Lawrence is a real mess, but he's going to be okay. Billy and I will see to that. You keep on thinking about Vincent. He needs it most." Deacon said frankly.

The honk of a horn caused us to look over at Billy's house.

"We're going to pick up Pete and Jono, we'll meet you at Camp Little Eagle." Deacon said as quickly as he could before running across the street.

"Camp Little Eagle?" I asked Ken cautiously.

"Yeah, that's where the funeral's being held." Ken said frankly.

"Oh. I didn't really think about where it would be. I just figured at some church somewhere." I said honestly.

"I overheard some stuff at the Clan meeting about it. I guess they want to be sure that the reporters or the CPS or maybe some of the relatives of the people Mr. Winters killed don't show up at the funeral. And they also said something about it being better so no one would des-i-crate Mr. Winters' grave. I guess that means they'd mess it up or something." Ken finished with a shrug.

"Yeah. Vincent and Lawrence don't need that." I said thoughtfully.

As we approached my house, I could see Mom and Dad waiting outside the car.

"I'm sorry if we took too long." I hurried to say.

"It's no problem. We've still got a few minutes." Dad said as he leaned against the car door then flashed an aggravated look at Mom.

"I'll go get her." Mom said in resignation, then added more loudly, "I swear, that girl is NEVER on time for ANYTHING!"

"We might as well get your wheelchair stowed while we've got the chance." Dad said, then walked around to the back of the car.

Ken took me to the rear driver's side door and helped me out of my wheelchair before taking it back to Dad.

* * * * *

When Corina saw Ken and I in the back seat of the car, she huffed, "Not again!"

Ken smiled, then started to climb onto my lap.

"No. Don't do that. Watching you two is more uncomfortable than being a little bit crushed." Corina said quickly.

Ken settled back into his place on 'the hump', but I could tell from the look in his eyes that he was thinking the same thing that I was. We were going to be doing our very best to disgust Corina for the entire trip.

* * * * *

I guess time flies when you're having, um... yeah.

Let's just say that Ken and I kept ourselves entertained on our trip to Camp Little Eagle.

The first clue either of us had that we had arrived was when the car stopped at the front gate.

After showing his ID, Dad was instructed where to park the car, and then where we should go for the ceremony.

As I've said, I haven't been to any funerals before, so I really don't know how it usually works.

But once we got out of the car and I was in my wheelchair, we started this long walk down a really beautiful path in the woods.

It looked completely natural, but I'm guessing that it was 'made' to look that way. The path was just too perfect and level to be something that occurred by accident.

Either way, it was beautiful. None of us said anything as we continued to walk.

* * * * *

By the time we finally reached the gravesite there were nearly fifty people gathered.

I recognized most of them, although I probably couldn't tell you more than about ten of their names.

There were a bunch of guys around Ken and my age all wearing Camp Little Eagle T-shirts. It was actually surprising how many of them there were.

Of course, there were quite a few of the Clan guys and a few of the adults that I remember seeing when I was at the Short Compound.

Off to one side was a little tent thing, I mean, it was really just a tent roof on some poles. I don't know what you call it. But under the tent thing were the two coffins.

I wasn't very close, but I was close enough to see that the coffins were closed and that they were sitting on some cargo strap things that I'm guessing would lower them into the ground.

As I was trying to figure out how the lowering mechanism worked, I heard Ken whisper, "They're here."

I looked over to see Allen, Grandma Mona, Brady, Jake, Xain, Davis and Kevin entering the large clearing.

When I saw the look in Jake's eyes, I could tell that he was nearly overwhelmed with anxiety.

Kevin ran to Ken and gave him a quick hug as the rest of them automatically walked over to me and my family.

Allen, Brady and Grandma Mona started talking with Mom and Dad, so I motioned to Jake to lean down, so I could talk to him quietly.

"You got this?" I asked in a whisper.

"Yeah. I'm going to try to do it myself. But Xain's going to jump in and help me if it gets too bad." Jake said shakily.

"Okay. If you need me for anything, let me know." I offered sincerely.

"Thanks, Rory." Jake said with a forced smile.

I noticed that Davis and Corina were talking together. It occurred to me that they might do that thing where they forget that they're not alone. Wouldn't that go over well. But as I continued to watch, I could see that, at the moment, they just seemed to be talking quietly in a manner which was perfectly acceptable.

* * * * *

Ken and I were there for a while, talking quietly with whoever wandered by, but no one was particularly chatty. We were all there for a somber occasion and everyone was feeling it.

Silence started to wash over the field and I turned to see Vincent, Joe Bowers, and Lawrence walking on the path.

There were two elderly men dressed in some sort of Native American attire walking with them, but I didn't know who they were.

By the time they reached us, everyone else, nearly a hundred people, were silent.

* * * * *

Joe led Lawrence and Vincent over in front of the tent thing, then stopped.

I guess someone must have motioned to Ken or something, because before I knew what was happening, he was wheeling me through the crowd and up to the front.

Just as we were approaching, Dylan came from another direction and joined us.

When Joe said that we were supposed to stand with Vincent, I really thought that he was speaking a little bit more figuratively.

Joe was standing front and center with Lawrence on one side and Vincent on the other.

I was parked right next to Vincent. Ken was beside me and Dylan was beside him.

On Lawrence's other side were Deacon, Billy and Allen.

We were facing the tent thing where the coffins were kept, and had our backs to the rest of the people.

I glanced to Vincent at my side and it seemed that he had only limited comprehension of his surroundings. I can't say that he was emotionless. I could almost sense something boiling just below the surface, but his expression was neutral.

The other thing that I noticed was that there were no tears. His eyes looked cold and dull, but they didn't reveal even the slightest excess moisture.

"Thank you all for coming on this somber occasion. I am Chief Hawkeye Tecumseh." The man said, then gave a slight smile when he looked to one side. I followed his gaze and saw Sean and Cory taking their places in line, on the other side of Dylan.

As I turned to look forward again, it suddenly hit me like a fresh slap of reality. Sean and Cory, Dylan, Ken and I, we were all standing there, at that moment, because we were the closest thing that Vincent had to friends. None of us had even known who he was this time last week, and now we were here, helping him through what very well might be the most horrible thing that would ever happen in his life.

And the worst thing was, I couldn't tell if our being there was providing Vincent any comfort at all. It's not like I expected Vincent to scream and cry or to throw his arms around me. But I felt like there should be something more that I could do for him. I felt so helpless.

"The deceased weren't active members of an organized religion, so the surviving members of the family have agreed to allow us to perform this ceremony in accordance with our traditions. It is my hope that it will bring peace to the departed and consolation to their family. For those of you who haven't met him, this is Aubrey Foote, he is a local Shaman as well as being my long time friend. He will conduct the ceremony." Chief Tecumseh said, then stepped off to one side.

Okay. First of all, I don't know anything at all about Native American ceremonies. I also don't know anything about their language. And don't even ask me about what that stuff is that they burn and fan around. No clue.

That said, it was actually kind of beautiful. I don't know how much of this was getting through to Vincent, but listening to the chanting wasn't nearly as weird and boring as I would have thought.

By the time he was done, I felt better. Don't ask me to explain why. I really don't know.

When he was done, he set the feather fan and the little bowl of burning stuff aside and spoke to us.

"In our tradition, possessions aren't passed down as remembrances. Such things are believed to hinder the spirit on it's journey. Rather, prized possessions are sent with the departed, in hopes that these things will bring them peace and comfort as they make the transition. Please come forward and say farewell before we send them on their voyage to what is next." Aubrey said reverently, then stepped aside.

Joe urged Vincent and Lawrence to step forward with him. They stood together in silence for a long moment, then stepped away.

Billy and Deacon stepped forward next and waited a few seconds before following.

Ken pushed me forward and Dylan walked up with us.

It was only then, from this new vantage point, that I noticed that there were pieces of jewelry placed on top of one of the caskets, and various other items, seemingly randomly placed on both.

We might have been there ten seconds, but the experience was so weird, that I couldn't tell you for sure.

All that I know is that soon we were moving away from the caskets. When I looked back I could see that everyone else in attendance had fallen into line.

"What do we do now?" Ken asked me in a whisper.

"No idea." I whispered in return.

"Chief Tecumseh told me that after the ceremony part is done, then people are free to do as the spirit leads them. You can stay and visit with people or you can leave." Dylan said frankly.

"Thanks, Dylan. Part of me wants to stay, in case Vincent needs me for something, but I'm going to be leaving for Vulcan in a few hours." I said anxiously.

"I'll keep an eye on Vincent. And if I can think of anything you can do to help him, I'll be sure to let you know." Dylan said seriously.

"Thanks, Dylan." I said appreciatively.

"Yeah, thanks." Ken echoed.

"Good luck on Vulcan." Dylan said with a smile.

I nodded as Ken started pushing my wheelchair away.

* * * * *

"Your family's almost to the front of the line. Let's wait over there." Ken said to me quietly.

I nodded, but kept my eye on Vincent. He seemed to be slightly more aware, but still not quite all there. The good thing was, I could see that he was surrounded by people who would see to it that he was going to be alright.

"Would you feel better about this if we went over there and said goodbye to him?" Ken asked me quietly.

I hadn't been considering it, but when Ken asked, it actually sounded like a very good idea.

"Yeah. Thanks." I said as I looked up at him gratefully.

* * * * *

At first I thought we might have to wait in line or something to get to talk to Vincent, but as we approached, people parted and allowed us easy access.

"I'm sorry, Vincent, but we're going to have to go soon." I said quietly.

Vincent's cold dead gaze turned toward me and the slightest expression began to cross his face, almost a smile. He leaned in and pulled me into a firm hug as he whispered, "Thank you."

"Sure. I'm glad I was here." I said honestly as I returned the hug.

When the hug was done, Vincent leaned in and hugged Ken, too.

I expected to see tears running down his cheeks, or a mask of grief or relief or something on his face. But when he backed away from us, he was once again wearing that neutral blank expression and staring out of cold dead eyes.

"If you'll excuse us for a few minutes, Cory and I have a few serious things that we need to discuss with Vincent." Sean said quietly.

I simply nodded. That look in Vincent's eyes was haunting me.

Fortunately, Ken wasn't effected the same way and moved my wheelchair so that we could meet up with my parents.

As we were waiting, I saw Jake and Xain approaching.

"How are you doing?" I asked Jake with concern.

"It wasn't as bad as I expected." Jake said honestly, then looked around before whispering, "But I'm glad it's over."

I nodded my agreement as my parents approached.

As you might expect, getting Corina away from Davis so we could leave took a few extra minutes, but all-in-all it wasn't as bad as it could have been.

* * * * *

The ride home was uneventful. Ken and I even toned down our behavior around Corina, mostly out of respect for the event we had just attended.

There was only one big thing left for me to do before I had to worry about leaving.

Solak wanted to examine me one last time before we left for the spaceport. The majority of my stuff had already been sent ahead, so there wasn't much more that I could do but wait for him to arrive.

Ken and I seemed to be almost phobic about being separated for even a moment. We were desperate to make every single bit of time we still had together count.

When Solak arrived, he did a quick tricorder exam. It took about nine seconds. After that, he did his Vulcan nerve massage thing on me for a few minutes, and I guess he was checking something out while he was doing that. I really don't know.

But when he was finished, he declared that I was in acceptable health. I guess he brought all his stuff with him, so he would be leaving for the spaceport when we did.

Mom made dinner. Dirt and weeds. Okay, not really. But close enough.

The time for us to leave for the spaceport was approaching fast. Mom seemed to have gotten the idea that I was in danger of starving because she was been doing nothing but making ziplock bags of snacks ever since dinner.

As I thought back on how helpless I felt when I was with Vincent, I could sympathize with what she was feeling. She was doing 'something' to make things better. There's no way I could fault her for that.

"Can we go outside for a few minutes? I've got something that I need to talk to you about." Ken said seriously.

Okay, yeah. That's one of those 'red flags' that you're always hearing about.

Chances are, something really really horrible is about to happen.

"Sure." I said, trying not to sound as anxious as I suddenly felt.

* * * * *

Once we were alone, Ken quietly asked, "Do you remember when we talked about us someday having kids?"

"Yeah" I said cautiously. I don't know what I was expecting, but whatever it was didn't start with that question.

"Do you still feel that way?" Ken asked and I could see a glimmer of hope as he waited for my answer.

I had to think about it for just a second to really be sure. But I finally said, "Yeah."

"What would you think if someday wasn't years and years away?" Ken asked more quietly.

"How soon are you talking about?" I asked cautiously. This was looking to be less and less about our plans for the future and more and more like some radical idea that Ken was going to spring on me.

"How about, as soon as you've had a few treatments and know for sure that you're going to get better?" Ken asked hopefully.

"You mean, like maybe within a year?" I asked as I watched carefully for his reaction.

"Yeah. That's what I mean." Ken said as he maintained eye contact with me to verify his resolve.

"Why? I mean, I'm not saying 'no', but why do you want for us to have kids so soon?" I had to ask.

"Not kids, just one kid." Ken said frankly.

"One particular kid?" I asked cautiously, wondering what Ken was trying to get me into.

"Vincent." Ken said seriously.

That floored me. I didn't have the words to say anything even if I knew what I wanted to say.

"He's nine years old. He's lost both his parents and now he's alone in the world. I know the Clan will take good care of him, but I really think he needs to have parents who will love him and pay special attention to only him." Ken pleaded for me to understand.

I was about to tell him that we were only a few years older than Vincent, but I already knew what he would say. Sean and Cory weren't that much older than their adopted kids either. This was actually a real possibility.

The memory of the cold dead expression in Vincent's eyes haunted me, and so did the fact that he didn't acknowledge anyone else at the funeral, but

he hugged me and Ken. Finally, I looked Ken in the eyes and quietly said, "When do you want to do it?"

"You're saying 'Yes?'" Ken asked with excitement.

"I am. When do you want to do it?" I asked as a smile found its way onto my face.

"Go to Vulcan and get your treatments started and see how things go with that. I can stay here and keep an eye on how Vincent's doing. Then, when you have an idea of how it's all going to work, we'll talk and decide what to do next." Ken said happily.

"Wait, yesterday I think Vincent was saying something about leaving on a starship." I said suddenly.

"Yeah, he'll be gone for about a week. I'm glad someone thought of that. After the funeral, I'm sure he needs a break." Ken said honestly.

I nodded, then quietly said, "You keep an eye on him and make sure he's doing okay. As soon as I know how the treatments are going, we'll figure things out, then I guess we should ask him if he even wants to be our son."

"Our son." Ken said with a smile as his eyes filled with tears.

"It's settled. We're doing this. All that's left is to take the steps to make it happen." I said confidently.

"Rory, it's almost that time." Dad called out the back door.

"Let's get you to the spaceport so we can get this started." Ken said tenderly.

"Yeah."

* * * * *

It's a good thing Solak had a rental car because there's no way he would have fit into the car with us.

I think Ken and I spent about most of the trip to the spaceport packing the hundred or so little plastic bags of snacks into every nook and cranny in my carry-on luggage, my wheelchair pouch and the last few bags went into my jacket pockets.

Although I doubt that we would have actually said much if we'd been given the chance, it still felt like we were cheated out of our 'goodbye'.

As Ken helped me out of the car and into my wheelchair, a familiar voice called out, "Rory? Is that you? What are you doing here? Are you going with us?"

It was Vincent, and he was getting his luggage together just like we were.

"Yeah. Are you going to Vulcan, too?" I asked in surprise, then remembered that Ken had said that he was only going to be gone for a week.

"No. We're going to Alpha Centauri." Vincent said with a grand smile. The difference in his attitude from a few hours ago was like day and night.

"Wow. That's really cool." I said as I thought about how good it would be for Vincent to get away for a while. I heard someone behind me and turned to see Solak.

"Our transport will depart shortly." Solak said seriously.

"I suppose it's that time." Dad said as he moved in and gave me a firm hug, then to my surprise, he gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Usually my dad's not a kisser. I guess this just showed how big a deal this really was for him.

Not to be outdone, Mom swooped in and tried to kiss my face off.

I'm not complaining. Not really. I have a feeling that by the next time I see her, I'll be needing a lot more of those.

When Dad was finally able to get Mom off of me, Ken moved in to say his goodbye.

Oh God, why do things have to be this way?

I can't even get a full week of happiness before it's all taken away?

My self pity washed away as Ken's kiss worked it's magic.

* * * * *

As you might guess, I'm not an accomplished interplanetary traveler. So even though my heart was breaking, I couldn't help but be drawn in by all the activity of the spaceport.

Honestly, if it weren't for Solak, I probably would have gotten so involved in one thing or another that I would have missed my shuttle.

The hustle and bustle of the spaceport was kind of overwhelming. But I guess a Vulcan pushing a wheelchair kinda makes people want to move out of the way.

Anyway, we finally made it aboard the shuttle and Solak put me into a regular seat, then went to stow my wheelchair.

As I sat and watched, I saw Vincent, Joe and Brady get onto the shuttle and take seats right in line with ours.

"Is this seat taken?" A young woman asked me, drawing my attention.

"Yes. I'm sorry." I told her apologetically.

She didn't seem to be too bothered, and passed Solak as he returned.

When everyone seemed to be just about settled in, I leaned forward a little so I could see Vincent and asked, "So what are you going to do on Alpha Centauri?"

Vincent leaned forward to see past Joe and Solak before saying, "We're just hauling some cargo and exchanging some personnel."

"We? It sounds like you're going to be a part of the crew." I said cautiously. I had the idea that he was just going to get away from things for a little while.

Vincent smiled at me and proudly said, "I am."

Vincent sounded so happy about it, I couldn't help but be drawn in by it. "Oh wow. That sounds like it's going to be great!"

"Yeah. I think it will be. What are you going to Vulcan for?" Vincent asked me curiously.

I think I had told him before, but maybe not. But either way, considering what he had been through the past few days, I could really understand it if he forgot. "Solak is going to try out a new treatment on me and maybe he can make me better."

"You mean you'll be able to get out of the wheelchair?" Vincent asked me with surprise.

I wanted to say 'yes', but it's better if I'm realistic. "Maybe. We won't know until we've tried it."

"You need to let me know how it's going. You know, send me messages and stuff." Vincent said to me with excitement.

"Yeah, that sounds good. The easiest way to get in touch with me is through Clan Short. But I want to know how you're doing too. How can I get a message to you?" I asked as I remembered what Ken and I had been talking about.

Vincent seemed to think about it, then looked at Joe with question.

"Well, since Clan Short is collectively Vincent's guardian, I'm sure you could get a message to Vincent through them, but the most direct way would be to send your message to Starfleet directed to Crewman Vincent Winters on the USS Yorktown." Joe said loudly enough for both of us to hear.

"Crewman?" Vincent and I asked at the same time.

Joe chuckled at our stereo effect and said, "I wasn't going to tell you until we were onboard because it isn't official until you've reported in with Captain Byrne. But you will be listed as a crewman on the crew roster and have all the rights and responsibilities of any other crew member."

"I didn't think I'd be listed like a real member of the crew." Vincent said in shock. But it was a happy shock, nothing like a few hours before.

"At first your duties will be the same as any other crewman, but once you've learned the basics, you'll be receiving a module of your course studies that will include leadership training. If everything goes to plan, you'll eventually be given the responsibility to lead others and be offered a commission as a junior grade Ensign." Joe said to him seriously.

"But aren't the adults going to have a problem with taking orders from a kid?" I asked with concern. I didn't want for him to have to face something like that. He's just a little kid.

Joe turned to me, to answer my question and said, "Probably. I'm hoping that with the proper training, Vincent will be able to deal with that situation when the time comes."

I could see Vincent's look of fear and question.

"Vincent, you're not the first one to have to deal with something like this. Cory and Sean both had to overcome this when they received their commissions. When the time comes, get in touch with them and they can tell you how best to deal with it." Brady said seriously.

Vincent looked at Brady and gave a nod of relief.

"Thank you Lieutenant Thompson. That's very good advice." Joe said with a smile at Brady.

I rested back in my seat as Vincent carried on a conversation with Joe and Brady. My concern for Vincent was somewhat tempered by the fact that he was with them. They were two experienced Starfleet officers and they obviously cared about him.

"Are you feeling well?" Solak asked from my side.

"Yeah. I'm just worried about stuff. It's a Human thing." I said dismissively.

* * * * *

The shuttle flight was incredible. I'd never done anything even close to that... well, unless you want to count that transporter trip I took with Ken.

I'm sure that I looked like the biggest tourist that anyone had ever seen as I sat there and stared out the viewport.

I knew that when we landed that we'd have to turn around and catch another shuttle right away. What I didn't expect was for Vincent, Joe and Brady to wait for Solak to get my wheelchair.

"I guess this is goodbye Brady. I hope we'll run into each other again sometime soon." Joe said as he and Vincent gathered their belongings.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we do, the Enterprise seems to cross paths with the Yorktown every few months. Besides that, Lawrence lives right across the street from my brother so we'll probably end up seeing each other here on Earth." Brady said with a smile as he picked up his flight bag.

Okay. I was somehow expecting Brady to be going with Joe and Vincent. I didn't realize that he was assigned to the Enterprise and would be going with us.

"It was nice to meet you Solak. Peace and long life." Joe said respectfully.

"It was a pleasure for me as well. Live long and prosper." Solak said formally.

"I hope Solak can make you all better. Send me a message when you get there and tell me what Vulcan is like." Vincent said to me with a smile.

"Yeah. I will. Remember to call me if you need anything. Since I'm a member of Clan Short, I'm one of your guardians. It's my job to take care of you." I said with a grin.

"Okay, but only if you'll call me if you need something, too." Vincent said to me seriously.

I glanced at the large clock at the information center and blurted out, "It's a deal. Oh, we've got to go. Our shuttle's about to leave."

"Enjoy your trip to Vulcan." Joe said as he lifted one small bag in sort of a wave at us.

"You two enjoy your trip to Alpha Centauri." I said with a smile at them and waved as Solak began to push my wheelchair the other way.

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I guess the approach to the Enterprise is kind of a majestic sight.

I really couldn't tell you. I saw it, but I didn't really see it.

The only thing that I could see was a beautiful fantasy image in my mind's eye.

The future image of me and Ken, and our son-to-be, Vincent.