

# Daydreamer

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**MultiMapper**

## Chapter 1

*Sunlight was sparkling down through the canopy of leaves as the softest kiss of a breeze ghosted over my skin. I leaned forward and I could feel the water gurgling up between my toes from the mossy ground. The feeling made me smile and reminded me just how wonderful it is to be alive. I slowly inhaled and enjoyed the scent of moist earth and wet leaves thick in the air. It was the smell of life. The source of everything.*

*A rustling of leaves drew my attention and I watched as a young bear cub ambled into the clearing. Just as always, he was trying to reach the bee hive in the branches of the massive tree we were under. I stood silently and watched the scene a little sadly. There was a time when I would have laughed at his antics, but now I feel sad that he has never once been able to reach his goal and taste the honey that he craves. The wind moved the branches of the tree and the bee hive began to dance as if taunting him...*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doug? Will you answer my question?" Ms. Burney asked me impatiently.

I blinked as I came back to myself.

Ugh. Ms. Burney.

She tells us to call her Ms. Burney because she says that it's sexist to call a woman Miss or Mrs. I think the real reason she wants us to call her that is so we aren't always reminding her that she's a middle aged woman who's single.

If we called her Miss Burney, then it'd be like us all saying every day that we know that she's old and alone and that no man would want her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear the question." I said reluctantly.

I heard a few snickers and one faint 'busted'.

"I'm sure you didn't. If you're not going to pay attention, you might as well leave. I believe you know where the office is?" Ms. Burney said with an irritating smirk.

"Yes Ms. Burney." I said, as I put my text book back into my backpack.

Yeah. I know where the office is. I've been sent there at least twice a week for the month that I've been going to this school.

I never even thought that my life could be this crappy. One day I'm chugging along, minding my own business, hanging around with my friends;

the next day my parents are telling me that we're moving across town. Now I'm going to a new school where I'm surrounded by strangers... Well, except for Todd. If there was only going to be one person from my old school here, why did it have to be Todd Lawrence? Why couldn't it be someone who might actually want to be my friend? Just when I think he's kinda okay, he gets all rude and insulting.

Whatever.

I was having a hard enough time dealing with 'high school', now I've got this to deal with too. I'm a freshman, which means I'm at the bottom of the high school food chain AND I'm a new kid.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I see you made it three days this time." The school secretary said with sympathy.

"I thought I was doing better." I answered, feeling ashamed.

She nodded, then said, "It looks like you're going to get to be the first to try out our new counselor, Mr. Le Plant."

"What happened to Mr. Higgins?" I asked curiously.

Every time I'd talked to Mr. Higgins, he always complained about something being wrong. Arthritis, hemorrhoids, varicose veins, bleeding gums... and that's after only knowing him for one month.

"He had another one of his migraines, and apparently he was so out of it that he picked up his dog's worm medicine instead of... It doesn't matter, he's going to be fine. He just won't be in for a few days. Give me a moment to let Mr. Le Plant know you're here." She said, then dialed the phone.

"Mr. Le Plant? I have a student, Doug Lawson, here to speak with you." She said in a pleasant voice.

"You already have his file on your desk, he's one of our frequent flyers." She said with a chuckle, then gave me a slight look of apology.

"Of course. He'll be right there." She said, with a gentle smile and hung up the phone.

"Just go to the next room past Mr. Higgins office. He'll be waiting for you." She said gently.

I reluctantly nodded, then started walking down the familiar hall to the counselor's office.

I could almost hear Todd's mocking voice calling out, "Dead man walking."

\* \* \* \* \*

All this time I thought the next room past Mr. Higgins office was a closet.

I walked into the uncomfortably small dingy office, to find a young blond haired man about twenty-five years old sitting behind a ratty old desk that was probably older than me.

There was enough room for him, that desk and one chair. The dim little room smelled like the disinfectant they use in the bathrooms.

The room was silent except for a faint buzz overhead.

I took a seat and waited quietly while Mr. Le Plant read through my file. I looked up toward the source of the buzzing sound and saw that one of the bare fluorescent bulbs was burnt out and the other one seemed to be slightly strobing. Waves of light were coursing down the length of the long white glass tube with almost hypnotic slowness.

"Well Doug. It looks like you've made quite an impression during your short stay at this school." Mr. Le Plant finally said.

"I guess so." I mumbled quietly.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" Mr. Le Plant asked, as he closed the file and devoted his full attention to me.

"It's just like the papers say. I can't pay attention." I said, as I felt a fresh wave of shame wash over me.

Why can't I just do like they say and concentrate? What's wrong with me?

"Please Doug, if you'll tell me what happened to get you sent to the office, maybe it's something I can help with." Mr. Le Plant said, and he sounded like he really cared.

"I was just sitting there in class. Ms. Burney was talking about... something, and I guess I spaced out for a while. When she noticed, she asked me a question and I didn't hear what it was, so she sent me to the office... again." I said in a diminishing voice.

"I'm going to ask you something and I need for you to be honest with me. Can you do that?" Mr. Le Plant asked me seriously.

I hesitantly nodded.

"While you were sitting there in Ms. Burney's class, were you spacing out or were you daydreaming?" Mr. Le Plant asked carefully.

"Daydreaming, I guess." I said reluctantly.

"Doug, I want to try something. It may seem a little strange, but I have my reasons." Mr. Le Plant said quietly.

There was a moment of silence, then I slowly looked up at him and saw that he was waiting for me to agree.

I hesitantly nodded.

"Close your eyes and listen to what I'm saying." Mr. Le Plant said in a soft voice.

I closed my eyes and waited.

"It's morning. The air is crisp and cool. You're standing on the black-top pavement in a parking lot. You can faintly smell oil and exhaust fumes and in the distance you can hear the occasional car driving by. To your right there is a path that leads up the side of a small hill... you take it from there, tell me what you see."

I saw it clearly in my mind. I saw the image as clearly as something I'd seen this morning with my own eyes. It was so familiar.

I focused on the image in my mind and quietly said, "The path is white, made of white rocks. There's some grass, but not a lot. It's scraggly and spotty, I can see the dirt... maybe it's sand. And I can see a picnic table on the other side of the parking lot."

"Go on." Mr. Le Plant said gently.

"I'm trying to go to the path, but I can't... it's not for me. Other people can walk there, but I can't." I said, not understanding what it was that I was seeing.

"Look around some more, try a little bit to the right, past the picnic table. What do you see there?" Mr. Le Plant asked seriously.

"Another path. It's not like the white path, this one is just dirt and not too many people take it. If you didn't look for it, you wouldn't even know it was there. The dirt path doesn't go over the hill, it leads off in a different direction." I said, now more certain than ever that I'd seen this place before.

"Can you walk that path?" Mr. Le Plant asked in a gentle voice and it sounded like he was smiling.

"If I want to. I don't feel anything stopping me." I said, as I concentrated on the feeling.

"Open your eyes." Mr. Le Plant said in a peaceful voice.

"What was that all about?" I asked, as I looked at him curiously.

"Before I answer, let me show you this." Mr. Le Plant said and held out a framed photograph to me.

I took the picture and nearly dropped it when I saw what it was.

"This is what I saw... I mean, this is EXACTLY what I saw." I said with disbelief, as I stared at the picture of the hill, white path and all.

"I know. This place is in the Davis Mountains in West Texas. And just so you know, I couldn't walk the white path either." Mr. Le Plant said with a smile.

I looked at Mr. Le Plant then back to the picture with wonder, not even knowing what questions I wanted to ask.

"This isn't the right environment to try to... Just give me a second to clear the rest of our day, then I'll do my best to explain as much as I know." Mr. Le Plant said as he picked up the phone.

"Mrs. Hawk. I'm going to be taking Doug to the library for a while. Will you excuse him from his last two classes?" Mr. Le Plant said seriously.

"That's right. Just a second..." Mr. Le Plant said, then put his hand over the mouthpiece and asked, "Do you have a study hall tomorrow?"

"Yeah, third period." I said, still completely overwhelmed by what had just happened.

Mr. Le Plant took his hand off the phone and said, "Also excuse Doug from his third period study hall tomorrow, so he can meet with me."

"That's right. Thank you Mrs. Hawk. Just call me in the library if anything comes up." Mr. Le Plant said seriously.

After a moment, Mr. Le Plant smiled and hung up the phone.

"Good. Now that we've got that out of the way, let's go." Mr. Le Plant said happily and picked up a backpack from beside his desk.

I put the picture on the desk, then grabbed my backpack to follow him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think I dreamed of that place in the picture." I said in a distant voice as we walked slowly down the hallway.

"So did I. I've been dreaming about it since I was about two years old. That's why it bothered me so much when I actually saw it." Mr. Le Plant said casually.

"But how? I mean, how could I dream it? I've never been to Texas." I said, as I looked at him in confusion.

"I had never been to Texas before I was in college. I went with my family on a road trip for our summer vacation that year. When we pulled into that little roadside park I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I'm sure my parents thought I was nuts when I took a full roll of pictures of that hill." Mr. Le Plant said with a chuckle as we entered the library.

Mr. Le Plant led us to the back of the library to one of the study rooms then closed the door.

"What was on the other side of the hill?" I asked carefully, not really sure that I wanted to know.

"Nothing. Or at least that's what my sister told me. I couldn't make myself go up there." Mr. Le Plant said as he sat down his backpack and took a seat.

I took the seat across from Mr. Le Plant and waited to see what he was going to do next.

"I want you to daydream for me."

"What?" I asked with surprise.

"Just relax and let it go. Don't try to think about anything, just let the daydream take you wherever it wants to."

"Um, it doesn't work like that. It just happens." I said, as I considered how the daydreams worked.

"If I'm right, you can \*make\* it work like that. Go ahead and give it a try, please. I'll sit here and be quiet."

"Um, okay." I said, and tried to concentrate on what it felt like when a daydream started.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I can't take this anymore. One failing report card after another and now a report from one of your teachers that you were sleeping in class. Well it's over. I've taken away your television, your video games, you've been grounded for nearly a solid year and you've only gotten worse. Tomorrow your mother is taking you to the doctor that your school counselor

suggested, and we're going to get you fixed." My father said in an angry voice. But not *my* father...

Feelings of failure and fear washed over me at the pronouncement.

Then, all of a sudden I'm in a different place. An office.

"This should fix him right up. I think with the problems he's been having, three doses a day should do the trick. In fact, I'll prescribe an extra bottle of pills for you to give to the school nurse so she can give him his dose at lunchtime." The doctor said with cheer.

"Then he'll be able to pay attention in school?" A woman who I somehow knew was my mother asked hopefully.

"Absolutely. By the end of the week he should be on the track to the honor roll." The doctor said happily.

"Thank you doctor. We should have done this sooner." The woman who was supposed to be my mother said in a small voice.

"Not to worry. This is just a bump in the road. From now on everything is going to be fine." The doctor said with assurance.

A hazy fog of random images filled my mind.

Walking from one place to the next without emotion or purpose. Read the book, do the work, pass the test, take the pill, repeat...

All of a sudden, it's dark.

I'm sitting in a small dark bedroom holding my father's handgun in my lap, trying to work up the courage to make it end. I can hear myself praying that when it's all over, I'll be able to dream again.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doug?" Mr. Le Plant called quietly.

I jolted out of my daydream with a gasp.

"Will you write down your daydream for me? I promise that I won't judge you or hold anything against you. Please be honest and write down exactly what you just dreamed."

"Mr. Le Plant, that was... I've never had one like that before." I said in amazement. I felt shaky and a little weak.

"Please Doug, call me Chris. Right now, I need you to write down everything that you just dreamed before it fades; just write down every detail you can



remember. I'll answer your questions when you're done, I promise." Mr. Le Plant said with assurance.

I pulled a spiral bound notebook and pencil out of my backpack and started writing.

I stopped for a moment and looked up to think about the right way to put what I saw into words when I noticed that Mr. Le Plant was also writing.

"How's it going?" He asked a moment later.

I looked up from my writing and said, "Um, I think that's everything."

Mr. Le Plant held his hand out and waited until I gave him the notebook.

He started reading and I watched carefully for any reaction.

When the silence seemed to have gone on too long, I said, "I'm not thinking about... you know, doing that."

Mr. Le Plant looked up from the paper and quietly said, "Don't worry about it. I understand. In fact, read this."

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Honey, why can't you just concentrate? You're a smart boy, I can't understand why you're having so much trouble." -Mom*

*"I know." -Me*

*"Doug. Mr. Higgins is suggesting that we take you to a psychiatrist for an evaluation." -Dad*

*"I... I don't want to." -Me*

*"Don't worry. We're not going to do that Doug. I just wanted to let you know what's going on in case he asks you about it." -Dad*

*"I'm sorry. I'm really trying." -Me*

*"I know. We're going to start looking around to see if there are any special programs for kids with ADHD... programs that don't use drugs. Maybe we can get you some help that way." -Dad*

*"I'm sorry." -Me*

*"You might as well start trying to get along here because the way you're going, there's no way you're going to pass this class so we'll be seeing each other again next year." -MISS Burney ;)*

*"Isn't there some extra credit or something I can do to make up for it?" -Me*

*"Extra credit is for those who are trying, not to bail out slackers." -MISS Burney*

*"I'll try to do better." -Me*

*"Take your seat, we're about to begin." -MISS Burney*

\* \* \* \* \*

"How? How did you know?" I asked Mr. Le Plant shakily. I went to Ms. Burney's classroom early today to talk with her before class. No one else was there. No one else knew I was going.

"The same way you did." Mr. Le Plant said quietly.

"I don't understand."

"I'm a daydreamer too. That's probably the main reason that I became a high school counselor. I wanted to find others like me so I can help them."

"You're a... I still don't understand."

"I know. And I will explain everything. But there's something more important that we have to do right now." Mr. Le Plant said as he opened his backpack and took out a CD Player and set it on the table between us.

"What's that for?" I asked slowly.

"Like I said, I'm like you, Doug. You're failing your classes just like I was. Things can't keep up the way they're going. I'm going to show you a few tricks to help you control the daydreams. They won't take your daydreams away, but they'll allow you to get your work done and focus enough to pass your classes."

"Really? You can really help me?" I asked in wonder. For the first time in... I can't even remember how long. I felt hope. Like maybe at last I could be normal.

"Yes. I really can." He said with a smile, then scooted my notebook back to me.

"Write this down." He said seriously and waited for me to be ready.

"First, you must ALWAYS study with music playing. The more discordant the better. I can loan you a few CDs until you can get your own collection built up." He said firmly.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing, but went ahead and wrote it down.

"You are going to have to allow yourself time for daydreaming. If you don't, they'll creep in and take over when you don't want them to. Set some time aside every single day."

I nodded as I added it to my list.

"Sleep. If you go to school tired, you're asking for trouble. Make sure to get a good night's sleep every single night." He said firmly.

"Take time to have fun. It doesn't matter what it is, but it has to be something you enjoy. Building models, drawing cartoons, reading comics, even if it's something that other people think a boy your age shouldn't be doing, if you enjoy it, it's important that you take time to do it."

This seemed to be getting crazier with each thing on the list, but I kept writing.

"Write down your daydreams." He said seriously.

"Why do I have to write down my daydreams?" I asked before I could think better of it.

"Because they mean something. When you're dreaming around others, your dreams can see into hidden places. If we can figure out what you're seeing in your daydreams, then we might be able to find a way to make the dreams a blessing for you rather than a curse." Mr. Le Plant said so seriously that I decided to just go with it.

"That's it for now. Keep your list handy, I may think of other things that you need to add to it later." He said in thought.

I nodded and put my pencil down, then asked, "What do I have to do now?"

"When will your parents have some time when I can talk to them? I need to discuss things with them so they'll allow you to do the things you have to."

"Um, you could do that tonight. Mom's off today and Dad should be home around four or four-thirty."

"Good. I'm going to come over and smooth things over with them. Do you have a test or anything coming up that you really need to study for?"

"Yeah. I have a big American history test second period tomorrow." I said with a feeling of dread.

"Do you have your textbook with you?" He asked hopefully.

I nodded and pulled my American History book out of my backpack.

"Good. We're going to do a quick study session right now, so I can show you how it works." Mr. Le Plant said as he reached into his backpack.

He set a pack of index cards on the table between us and said, "Take these index cards. Each paragraph should have a point. Try to find that point in as few words as you can, then move to the next paragraph as fast as you can. It's like a race. I need to see how fast you can get finished. You don't have to try to remember anything at this point, that's why you're writing it down. Oh yeah, I forgot. Here's some chewing gum. You need to be chewing on something when you study. That's essential."

"No food or gum in the library." I said cautiously.

"If this works for you, I'll take care of getting you exempted from that rule. Start chewing your gum, put on the headphones and write me some note cards as fast as you can do it."

"Okay." I said uncertainly and got to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

I can't even describe the music or whatever it was that I was listening to. It sounded like the singer was singing a totally different song from the background music. And she was singing in German... kind of screaming. But from the moment it started, I felt... peace. It's like something that was tense and cramped up in my mind just relaxed as it listened to the cacophony. Oh, and the gum was a complete surprise. I didn't know when he handed it to me that Black Jack meant that it was licorice flavored. It was just freaky... I think I'm going to have to find out where I can buy some.

"Doug?"

I took off the headphones and looked at him with question.

"You're taking too long. Skim, scan, write the point and move on." He said seriously.

I nodded and put the headphones on again, then went to work writing two or three word phrases as fast as I could.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now, turn off the CD player, spit out the gum and take out a piece of paper. I'm going to have you take the practice quiz at the back of the chapter." Mr. Le Plant said seriously.

"Okay..." I said and did as I was told.

"Tell me when you're ready to start, you'll have three minutes." He said as he rested back in his chair.

"What?"

"Just do it." He said firmly.

I got a clean sheet of paper ready and took a deep breath to brace myself before saying, "Okay, I'm ready."

"Go!"

Three minutes.

Normally I'd be doing good to answer the first question in three minutes, but I kicked it into high gear and answered the multiple choice questions as quickly as I could.

I would skim over the question long enough to determine what it was asking, then pick whichever answer seemed to fit, then move on.

"Time's up. Put down your pencil." Mr. Le Plant said, as I was writing the answer to the last question.

I put down my pencil and waited for his next instructions.

"The answers to the chapter quizzes are in the back of the book aren't they?" Mr. Le Plant asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah." I said and began to flip through the last few pages of the book to find the answer key.

As I compared the key to my answer sheet I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"I only missed one!" I said, probably a little too loud, but... it's the first time I've gotten *anything* right at this school.

"Which one?" Mr. Le Plant asked curiously.

I found the one I missed, then turned back to the chapter test to read the question.

"Um, number four, it asked who the Hessians worked for. I chose 'A: The British, the book says the answer is C: Both."

"The book is wrong." Mr. Le Plant said without inflection.

"What?"

"Go back and look it up. The answer key in the back is wrong." He said in a voice of certainty.

I went back into the chapter and somehow I went immediately to the exact paragraph that I needed.

"You're right. It says right here that the Hessians worked for the British. The answer key is wrong!" I said as I looked up in wonder.

"Now do you see what you've just been able to accomplish? You were able to distract your mind with all the noise and gum-chewing so that the part of your brain that processes new information was free to do its job. Forcing yourself to rush keeps you from getting bogged down in details and becoming bored. The more you use this technique, the more comfortable it will become." Mr. Le Plant said with a voice of accomplishment.

My mind raced and I quickly asked, "Will this work for algebra too?"

"Like a charm. For a good algebra session I find salt-water taffy and Sex Pistols are my best study buddies." Mr. Le Plant said happily.

"Can I try it now?" I asked hopefully.

"No. I'm afraid it's time for us to call it a day. It's almost time for the final bell." He said with a glance at his watch.

"Really? I can't wait to try this on Algebra. I bet I can be caught up with the rest of the class by the end of the night." I said with excitement.

"You do and you won't get the sleep you need. I have a few more tricks to show you, don't forget to come to my office at third period tomorrow." Mr. Le Plant said as he gathered the CD player and unused index cards back into his backpack.

"Yeah, I'll be there!" I said happily, feeling better than I had in months... maybe years.

"Good. Go ahead and get your things together." He said with a gentle smile at me.

I hurried to gather my stuff when Mr. Le Plant said, "Would you give me your address and phone number so I can stop by around four thirty?"

I pulled out a sheet of paper and quickly wrote them down for him.

He took the paper and looked it over, then said, "Thank you Doug. Please let your mom know that I'm going to be stopping by."

"Yeah. I'll see you at four thirty." I said happily as I stood.

He smiled at me and we walked out of the study room together as the final bell rang.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was in kind of a daze as I walked to my locker to get the things I'd need to study... which was pretty much everything.

"I heard you were stoned out of your mind in Burney's class today. Are they gonna boot you outta here?" A voice asked from behind me.

I didn't have to look to see who it was. There's only one person who would talk to me at this school... whether I wanted him to or not.

"No. And I wasn't stoned, I was just thinking about something." I said as I tried to jam all the books into my backpack.

"Was it Melanie Hart?" Todd asked and followed with kissy noises.

"No." I said as I finally got everything I needed to fit.

"I bet you were thinking about Levi Gibson weren't you? I bet you're a total homo." Todd said in a sneer.

"No Todd, I was thinking of you." I said and batted my eyelashes at him.

Todd looked stunned for a moment, then finally realized that it was a joke.

I rolled my eyes at him and said, "Seriously, I wasn't thinking about anyone. I just kind of drifted off for a while. I gotta go."

"So if they didn't boot you, where did you go for two hours?"

"Counselor's office. I'll tell you about it later. I really have to go." I said as I hefted my pack onto my back.

"Yeah. Later." Todd muttered as I walked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

I walked home in silence.

My mind was going over and over the things that had happened to me.

In just two hours Mr. Le Plant had changed my life.

I went from feeling like a hopeless failure to a... normal person.

Well, as normal as anyone else who listens to screaming German singers and chews licorice flavored gum.

As I approached our yard, I saw that Mom was kneeling by a flower bed, planting what looked like a military formation of colorful little flowers.

When I opened the gate, she looked up at me and smiled.

"Hi honey. Did you have a good day at school?" She asked me cheerfully.

You'd think she'd know better by now. I haven't had a good day at school in years and they've been progressively worse since we moved.

But today, I've got a surprise for her.

Unable to restrain my smile, I answered, "Yeah. I had a good day."

Mom looked at me with surprise and stood, leaving her next little flower sitting on it's side beside the hole she was digging for it.

"Really?" She asked hopefully.

I chuckled to myself at her expression and happily said, "Yeah, really."

Mom walked over to me and pulled me into a joyful hug.

"So, tell me all about it. What happened today?" Mom asked as she released me.

I walked over to where she had been working so she could get that poor little flower into the ground where it belonged.

Mom moved along with me and went back to work on the flower bed as I said, "Well, I guess the first thing was that I was sent to the counselor's office."

"Oh no. Not again." Mom said in a disappointed voice.

"It's okay. Really." I said with assurance.

Mom looked at me with question.

I thought about how to tell her what happened to me today and decided that I'd better just hold back on the information and give her the basics.

"Mr. Le Plant is coming over to talk to you and Dad tonight." I said cautiously.



"Who is that?" Mom asked, as she turned her attention to me, this time leaving that poor little flower in the hole, but without any dirt filled in around it.

"He's the new Counselor at the school." I said, as I looked at the flower.

She followed my gaze and started to scoop dirt into the space around the flower's roots as she said, "Oh no. Not again."

I could feel her disappointment and said, "Mr. Le Plant showed me some stuff to do today that really helped. I think that if I do the stuff he says, I might be able to pay attention and study."

"Really? What did he tell you?" Mom asked me with hope.

I thought about what it would sound like if I tried to tell her what happened, then decided to say, "It'll be better if he tells you. You'd probably just think I was making it up."

Mom looked stunned by the statement, but finally said, "I made some snickerdoodles today. They're on the cooling rack in the kitchen. You can have one to get you by until dinner if you're hungry."

"Yeah, thanks mom. I want to go clean my room before Mr. Le Plant gets here in case he wants to see where I study." I said, glad that she didn't press for any details.

"You? Study?" Mom said with surprise, as I walked into the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mr. Le Plant, this is my mom, Gina and my dad, Jeff, this is Chris Le Plant." I said in my best estimation of a proper introduction.

"It's nice to meet you. Please come in, would you like some coffee?" Mom asked courteously.

"Yes, thank you." Mr. Le Plant said with a smile, as Dad led us into the living room.

"How do you take it?" Mom asked from the doorway.

"Just black." Mr. Le Plant said quietly as he took a seat.

"Doug hasn't told us much more than you may know of a way to help him get over his concentration problem." Dad said seriously.

Way to go Dad. No need to make him feel welcomed or anything, just get right to the point.

"Yes. I can't make any guarantees because everyone is different. But from what I saw today, we have good reason to hope." Mr. Le Plant said, as he looked my dad in the eyes.

"There isn't any drug therapy involved in this is there?" Dad asked in a cautious, kind of threatening voice.

"Absolutely not." Mr. Le Plant said immediately.

"Good. I know Doug has some problems. But I believe it's important for him to learn how to deal with them, not try to medicate them away." Dad said seriously, as Mom walked back into the living room with a tray of filled coffee cups.

Mr. Le Plant nodded and said, "I'm glad we agree on that point. I can tell you from personal experience, that the cure can be far worse than the condition."

Mr. Le Plant accepted a cup of coffee from Mom, then noticed that Dad was looking at him with question.

"I was a lot like your son. In fact, I still am. Eventually I learned how to deal with it. If you'd agree to it, I'd like to pass the things I've learned on to him. Some of the things may seem counterintuitive, but I'm asking you to trust me and let Doug try it out. If he hasn't improved after a couple weeks, then we can sit down and talk about the things that worked and the things that didn't." Mr. Le Plant said seriously, then took a sip of his coffee.

"It sounds like you're preparing us for something really strange." Mom said cautiously from beside me.

Mr. Le Plant smiled and said, "Nothing too bad, I promise."

"Okay, we're ready." Dad said seriously.

Him doing the protective father thing is cool and everything, but I wish he'd lighten up a little before he makes Mr. Le Plant feel unwelcome.

"Doug, do you have a television in your room?" Mr. Le Plant asked me in a gentle voice.

"I used to, Mom and Dad took it away when my grades started falling." I admitted shyly.

"He'll need the TV. Doug can't study in quiet. He needs distractions. Whenever he's trying to study, he should have his headphones on and the television going." Mr. Le Plant said as he looked from Mom to Dad.

"But how can he study with all that going on around him?" Mom asked with concern.

"That's been his problem. His brain needs to be processing those distractions so the part of his mind that learns can focus on his lessons. I know it sounds a little crazy, but I'm asking you to give it a try for a few weeks." Mr. Le Plant said in an imploring voice.

"Okay, I think we can do that. What else?" Dad asked hesitantly.

"He should have some incense or something like that in his room to give it an interesting fragrance. Patchouli always works well for me." Mr. Le Plant said in thought.

Mom nodded that she would take care of it.

"He'll need a good supply of chewing gum, taffy, licorice and peanut brittle if he likes it. Chewy foods are the best, but popcorn and potato chips will do." Mr. Le Plant said in a thoughtful tone.

Dad nodded without expression.

"As far as drinks, he should have coffee or soft drinks with caffeine up until about two hours before bedtime. As much as he wants. When he gets into the groove of studying this way, the caffeine will help to keep him focused." Mr. Le Plant said distantly, like he was reading a checklist in his mind.

"Won't that keep him awake half the night?" Dad asked with concern.

Mr. Le Plant focused on Dad and said, "It shouldn't."

Then he turned to me and continued, "Doug, if you have trouble sleeping, set your cut-off time for caffeine a little earlier."

I nodded that I would.

"I brought a few CDs with me for him to listen to until he can build up his collection. These are mixes of some of my best study music." Mr. Le Plant said and handed the CDs across the coffee table to me.

I thought about what he had said, then turned to Mom and asked, "Can I have some coffee now? I'd like to study when we're done here."

"There's a fresh pot just made." Mom said uncertainly.

I hopped up and went to the kitchen to pour myself a cup of coffee as quickly as I could. I didn't want to miss anything that Mr. Le Plant had to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The only other thing I can think of at the moment is that Doug needs to do something that he enjoys." Mr. Le Plant was saying as I walked back into the room.

"Like what?" Dad asked curiously.

"That's up to him. Just whatever he decides to do, try to encourage and accept it." Mr. Le Plant said as I sat down beside Mom again.

"What do you mean?" Dad asked more slowly, sounding apprehensive.

"If Doug were to take up needlepoint, then I would recommend that you take him to buy supplies, maybe suggest patterns to him and praise his work when he finishes a piece." Mr. Le Plant said carefully as he looked my father in the eyes.

I nearly choked on my coffee when he said it. I mean... needlepoint? Where the hell did he come up with that?

"Doug wants to do needlepoint?" Dad asked before I could say anything.

"No, that was just an example. Whatever he decides to do as a hobby or for fun should be encouraged, even if it seems to be inappropriate for some reason. Given his unique... perspective, it can be a challenge for him to find things to hold his interest. If he finds something, he should pursue it. Having some fun each day will bring a sort of harmony to everything else." Mr. Le Plant said with certainty.

"I think we can do that." Mom said with an imploring look at Dad.

After a moment of thought, Dad nodded his agreement.

"That's all I can think of at the moment." Mr. Le Plant said in a considering voice.

The mood seemed to be a little more tense than I liked and I felt like Mr. Le Plant might like to get away from it as much as I would.

"Would you like to see my room?" I asked him hopefully.

"Sure Doug. Lead the way." Mr. Le Plant said with a relieved smile as he stood.

I hopped up and hurried to the doorway to lead the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you think?" I asked hopefully as I stood aside.

Mr. Le Plant looked around the room carefully, then his gaze stopped on one of my posters.

"Do you like Star Wars?" He asked curiously then he turned to look at me.

"Yeah. Well, I used to." I said reluctantly, knowing that it was kind of a kiddie thing to be into.

"Did you collect the action figures and books?" He asked me with interest.

"Yeah. I think I still have them in a box in the garage." I said in thought, not really remembering what happened to all that stuff when we moved.

"Well, if you enjoy your Star Wars things, then you should find it and go through it. Build display cases and add to your collection... just do whatever makes you happy." Mr. Le Plant said seriously.

"Why?" I asked in confusion.

"Because people like us have trouble finding things that make us happy and it's essential that we have some happiness every day." He said in an imploring voice as he looked me in the eyes.

"What makes you happy?" I asked carefully. It seemed wrong to ask, but at the same time, I wanted to know.

Mr. Le Plant thought about it for a second before he quietly said, "I'll tell you if you'll promise not to tell anyone else."

I nodded quickly.

"Autobots. You know, Transformers." Mr. Le Plant said shyly.

No, not Mr. Le Plant, Chris.

This guy I was talking to was revealing something very personal to me and trusting me not to tease him about it or tell other people.

I smiled and said, "I used to love that show. Optimus Prime was awesome."

"Yeah. I have all the episodes recorded, all the action figures, I have posters and have even drawn and painted a few of my own posters." Chris said with a shy smile.

Something occurred to me and I got serious for a moment.

Before I could think about what I was going to say, it just kind of slipped out.

"So I'm going to be doing kids stuff like playing with Star Wars toys from now on?" I asked in a small voice.

"Just for as long as you enjoy it. You might find something you like better than Star Wars and start doing that. Try thinking about it this way. How many people do you know that have fun every single day? If other people can't understand, let them go on and live their serious 'fun-free' lives. Once you get into this, look at how they live and how you live, then decide if you'd really want to be like them... normal." Chris finished with a crinkled nose.

"I always thought I wanted to be normal, but when you put it that way... this might not be so bad." I said, just beginning to realize that he might be right.

I guess being like me isn't the worst thing that could happen to a person.

"Actually, I think we're some of the luckiest people in the world. Daydreamers get to take voyages into the unreal every single day and see things that regular people can't even imagine. There are people who pollute themselves with drugs and alcohol just to get a taste of what we were born with. Some of them sit in front of a television set or a movie screen and try to feel, for a short time, what it's like to dream because they aren't able to." Chris said with a distant look.

"Can I come in?" Dad asked hesitantly, carrying a small television.

"Sure Dad." I said, as I stood out of the way so Dad could walk into the room.

"I'd better get going. I'm overdue for my dream time." Chris said with a smile at me.

"What's that?" I asked quickly, it sounded like something that I should be doing too.

"Remember when I told you that you need to allow yourself time to daydream? I give myself about an hour and a half each evening after work to daydream. Then I can focus on the serious things that need to be done." Chris said frankly.

"When do you do your fun stuff?" I asked, wanting to get into a routine as soon as possible.

"Usually right before bed. It's like my reward for getting all my work done." Chris said with a happy smile.

"I think I'll do it that way too." I said as I thought about it.

"Try it out. You may find that things work differently for you." Chris said as he turned to leave.

"Thanks for everything Chris. I really appreciate it." I said quickly, hoping that he could tell that I really meant it.

"Just do well on that test tomorrow and that will be all the thanks I need." Chris said with a gentle smile at me. And I could tell by the look in his eyes that he understood just how much I really did appreciate him.

"I'll let you know how I did as soon as I find out." I said as I walked with him past the living room and to the front door.

"After what I saw today, I'm sure you'll do fine... but some studying tonight and a quick review of the index cards before the test wouldn't hurt." Chris said and gave me a playful wink.

"I'll remember that." I said as we stopped at the front door.

"It was a pleasure meeting you both. Please feel free to get in touch with me if you have any questions or concerns." Chris said to my parents who were now standing behind me.

"We will. I really hope you're right about this helping Doug." Dad said seriously.

"Well, just don't worry if there are some rough patches along the way until he can get into a routine. It might take a few weeks to get everything completely settled, but you should see improvement in his grades almost immediately." Chris said with a smile at me, then opened the door to leave.

"Thank you so much for everything." Mom said from behind me as Chris walked away.

"There's no need to thank me. This is why I became a counselor." Chris said with a smile, then continued on to his car.

## Chapter 2

"What do you think about the stuff he was saying?" My dad asked, in a distant voice.

"I think I'd like to try it. I studied the way he told me to today, and I was able to ace the quiz at the end of the chapter." I said, as I turned to look him in the eyes.

My dad studied my expression for a moment, then slowly started to smile.

"This is the first time I've seen you excited about anything in a very long time. That alone would be reason enough for you to continue with this. But to top it off, you may even be able to overcome your concentration problem.

I thought about what he was saying and realized that, in his own way, he was telling me how important my happiness was to him.

The realization came over me that as my daydreaming had become more frequent, I was enjoying less and less of each day.

I couldn't find the words to express the joy I was feeling, so I did the only thing I could think of to let my dad know just how happy I was.

I know he was surprised by the move, since I hadn't hugged him, or really had any type of physical contact with him for years.

When I finally felt his arms engulf me, I found myself in a place of safety and security that I hadn't visited since I was a child.

"Is everything okay?" My mom asked hesitantly from the kitchen doorway.

I felt an automatic, almost instinctive, urge to pull away from my father, to hide the fact that I was showing affection for him.

But before I could retreat from his embrace, another part of my mind seemed to awaken and question the logic of my intended response.

"We're fine. I think we're both relieved that we may be seeing an end to a very difficult time in Doug's life." My dad said, as he continued to hold me.

I pondered my dad's choice of words.

Even though I agreed with the sentiment of what he was saying, there was a part of me that reeled against it.

Every fiber of my being seemed to be screaming at me, saying that this wasn't an end, it was a beginning.



"Dinner is almost ready. Why don't you two go get washed up?" Mom said with a gentle smile, then retreated into the kitchen.

"You heard the boss." My dad said, as he guided me to his side, then started to walk with one arm draped around my shoulders.

\* \* \* \* \*

As we reached the bathroom door, I was unsure of what he intended me to do.

I mean, I know that we were there to wash our hands before dinner, but somehow it seemed wrong to go into the bathroom with him.

I suppose it could be because the last time I could remember us being in the bathroom at the same time was when I was four or five years old.

I didn't realize I was hesitating until I felt my father's arm around my shoulders, urging me forward.

As I walked into the bathroom, I felt my father's arm drop away from my shoulders.

"Do you remember when you were little and we used to do this?" My dad asked quietly.

"Yeah. I'd hold my hands over the sink and you'd wash them for me... I always loved that." I said with a smile as I turned on the water.

"You depended on me to do everything for you back then. I kind of miss those days." Dad said distantly.

"Do you want to? For old time's sake?" I asked, as I held my hands over the sink.

"That's just silly." My dad said dismissively.

"So what's wrong with being silly sometimes? I think we could both stand a little more silliness in our lives. Come on, Mom's waiting." I said, as I continued to hold my hands over the sink.

Without another word, my dad took my hands into his, then moved our hands under the water.

Happy memories of my childhood rushed back into my mind for the first time in years.

I felt the gentle touch of my father lathering my hands and the sensation was coupled with such beautiful feelings that I could barely believe it.

"You've grown." My father said under his breath, as he moved our hands under the running water to rinse them off.

"I'm sorry." I said, then puzzled over my automatic response.

My dad turned off the water, then took the hand towel from beside the sink and started to dry my hands.

I thought that he might not have heard me, but then he whispered, "Don't be sorry."

I looked into his eyes in time to see him look away, then down to his own hands as he dried them.

When he finished, he reluctantly looked up to find me watching him.

"I'm not sorry that you grew up." My dad said as I searched his eyes.

"I'm just sorry that we lost the closeness that we used to have. I didn't even realize it, but for the past few years, every time I've talked to you, it was to put more pressure on you to improve your grades." My dad said distantly, then hung the hand towel back beside the sink.

He looked me in the eyes and quietly said, "I don't know how you turned out to be such a great kid with me behind you, trying to force you into a mold that obviously wasn't designed for you."

I considered his words for a moment, then said, "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying."

My dad put one arm around my shoulders and guided me out of the bathroom as he said, "All this time I've been pushing you to do more and work harder. I tried to force you to change yourself into something that you're not."

He took hold of my shoulders and turned me to face him as he continued, "I really thought I was encouraging you to go in the right direction, when in truth, I was telling you that you weren't good enough and unless you change to become what I want you to be, you'll never be good enough in my eyes."

I stared in disbelief at my dad, who had never talked to me about his thoughts or feelings before.

I guess I never considered what his motives were when he was pushing me to do better in school.

It wasn't until I felt a tear running down my cheek that I realized that I was crying.

"Doug, that's all over now. If the things that Mr. Le Plant suggested work for you the way they're supposed to, then maybe you'll be able to get a good education and have a better chance to create the type of future you want for yourself." Dad said quietly.

I nodded absently, still overwhelmed by these new revelations, hitting me out of the blue.

"But even if it doesn't work for some reason, I'm not going to push you anymore. I'll still want the same thing for you I always did, I want you to be a success. The difference is going to be how we define success." Dad said more firmly.

"How do you want to define it now?" I asked in a daze.

"I'm not sure yet. How about we think about it and decide together?" Dad asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I'd like that." I whispered as a knot of tension deep inside me seemed to release.

"Will you two get in here? Your dinner is getting cold!" Mom said harshly, as she poked her head out the kitchen door.

Dad smiled at me, then guided me to walk into the kitchen at his side.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So Doug, why don't you tell us what went on at school today?" Mom asked, as we all started to fill our plates.

"You already know most of it. I drifted off in class. Miss Burney caught me and sent me to the office. Then I met Mr. Le Plant and he figured out how to help me." I said frankly.

"Would you like some dressing for your salad?" Mom asked as she looked at my plate.

"No, I think I'll have it plain." I said absently, then continued, "I thought the way Mr. Le Plant was telling me to study was really strange until I tried it. It ended up working so well that I can't wait to try it again."

"So is that what you're planning to do after dinner?" Dad asked curiously.

"No. I thought I'd look through the boxes in the garage to see if I could find my Star Wars stuff first. After that, I'll take some time to study." I said in a considering voice.

"Wouldn't it be better to study first?" Mom asked in a leading tone.

Before I could answer, Dad jumped in and said, "Let's let him do it his own way. Maybe after a long day of school, Doug needs a little downtime before he dives into the books."

Mom seemed to be dubious about the suggestion, but finally agreed.

"If you'd like some help looking through the boxes, I don't have anything planned after dinner." My dad offered with a slight smile.

"Yeah. That'd be great." I said, then took a large bite of meatloaf.

As I chewed the meatloaf, the flavor registered and I thought I was going to choke.

"Is there something wrong?" My mom asked with concern.

I grabbed a paper napkin from the middle of the table, then spit the meatloaf into the napkin as discretely as possible.

"I don't know what it is, does the meatloaf taste right to you?" I asked as I continued to taste a sourness in my mouth.

"Perfect as always." My dad said frankly.

Mom took a small bite of her meatloaf and considered it carefully before saying, "It tastes fine to me."

It seemed strange, but finally I shrugged and said, "I guess my taster is off today. Do you mind if I just have salad?"

"Go ahead. I made plenty." Mom said hesitantly.

"If you start feeling sick or anything, let me know, Okay?" Dad asked seriously.

I was surprised by Dad's request and hesitantly said, "Sure, but why?"

"Sometimes food tastes wrong to me right as I'm getting the flu. Just be on the lookout so we can catch it early if that's what it is." Dad said seriously.

"I'll keep that in mind... but I really feel fine." I said, as I looked into his concerned eyes.

"Does the salad taste alright to you?" Mom asked curiously.

"Yeah. It tastes great." I said, then to emphasize the point, I helped myself to another serving.

Mom and Dad shared a concerned look, but didn't say any more before returning to their meals.

"I found some Star Wars books over here." My dad said from a few boxes away.

"Oh good. Would you set that box aside for me? I think I'll probably want to read all of them again." I said as I continued to look in one box after another.

"You've read all of these?" My dad asked with surprise.

"Yeah. At least twice." I said, as I dug past some crumpled up newspaper to see what was inside the next box.

"I never noticed that you enjoyed reading..." My father said as he stared off into space.

"That's what I was doing most of the time when I was hanging out in my room... what did you think I was doing?" I asked.

I really wasn't implying anything, I was just kind of curious to know.

"I guess I never really thought about it." Dad said quietly.

I could see that my dad was really bothered by the fact that he didn't know that I like to read.

It made me uncomfortable to see him so torn up about it, so I said, "I guess I've never really thought about what you like to do to relax either."

After a moment to consider my words, Dad looked over at me and smiled.

"Maybe it's time we did something about that." He said with a grin that made me a little bit uncomfortable.

I looked at my dad cautiously, not sure what I had just opened myself up for.

Dad started to laugh and I looked at him quizzically.

"I could see it written all over your face... 'Oh God! What did I just do?'" Dad struggled to say past his laughter.

I couldn't help but smile at his accurate interpretation of what had been going through my mind.

"Once we get all the boxes dealt with, maybe I'll show you what I enjoy doing for fun." Dad said warmly.

"Okay." I said in a low voice that ended up coming out as more of a whisper.

Even if it turned out to be something horrible and boring, it'd still be worth it because he was sharing it with me.

When I opened the next box, I had to dig past some ribbon tied bundles of old Christmas cards before I found out what was really inside.

"Were you still wanting your CDs in the living room?" I asked casually.

"Yes. Did you find them?" Dad asked hopefully.

"Yeah. All of them, I think." I said as I dug deeper into the box.

"What was the box labeled? I've been looking for them for a month."

"It just says 'Christmas'." I said hesitantly.

"If we have to move again, your mother will \*not\* be allowed to label the boxes." Dad said firmly.

"It's not her handwriting, it's yours." I said with a chuckle.

"No..." My dad said disbelievingly as he moved to my side.

After a moment of looking at the label, my dad finally said, "Well, it's probably for the best. Whenever I tell your mother that she's not allowed to do something, I usually end up sleeping on the couch."

I chuckled to myself as I moved to the next box.

"Here it is." I said with triumph.

"What is it labeled?" Dad asked curiously.

"Star Wars Stuff." I said simply.

"And it took you a month to find it? I guess maybe it runs in the family." Dad said with a teasing smile at me.

"Actually, I just started looking for it about half an hour ago. You've been looking for those CDs for a month. I don't think it runs in the family, it just runs with you." I said with a chuckle.

"That does it!" Dad said, then grabbed me and started to tickle me under my arms.

Within a few seconds, my knees gave way and I was convulsed with laughter.

"What in the world are you two doing in here?" Mom bellowed into the garage.

"He did it." My dad said as he backed away from me.

I was still trying to catch my breath, so I was unable to say anything in my defense.

Mom shook her head as she said, "I have one who hasn't finished his first childhood and another one starting his second."

Dad winked at me, then picked up the box of CDs and followed her out of the garage.

I picked up my 'Star Wars Stuff' box and made sure I knew where the box of books was before I also left the garage.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I walked into my room, I sat the box of 'Star Wars Stuff' on the floor at the foot of my bed, then took a seat in the chair at my desk.

I had originally planned to go through the Star Wars things, then take a little time to daydream before I studied, but I could feel my mind wanting to wander, almost 'craving' a daydream.

After a moment to make sure that I was seated comfortably, I let out a slow exhale of breath and concentrated as I had done with Mr. Le Plant.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The orange light was the first thing that I noticed as I walked out the front door of my house. I shifted my backpack full of books as I looked up at the sky. I was surprised to see that it was hazy and endlessly orange. No clouds, no sun. Just infinite orange in every direction. There was a sort of metallic tang in the air that I couldn't quite define. There was no wind at all, not even the hint of a breeze.*

*As I began to walk down the sidewalk, just like I had done every day since we moved to this house, an icy shiver started to work it's way up my spine. I stopped suddenly and looked around, trying to see what was so horribly wrong. Then I realized, it was silent.*

*There were no cars.*

*No birds.*

*No kids playing.*

*The sound of my own breathing was the only interruption to endless silence. I felt my heart begin to race as I realized that I was alone. Completely alone.*

*Panic overtook my ability to reason and I began to run. A small voice in the back of my mind was telling me that I should go back to the house and check to see if my parents were there. But I continued to run, certain that I wouldn't want to verify what I was already suspecting.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*As I walked up to the school, a fresh chill ran through my body. There it stood, still and silent. The school seemed to look somehow clean and fresh without the presence of people to detract from it's architectural majesty.*

*I slowed my pace, but continued into the school. The main hallway was dark, the sounds of my footsteps being the only thing to break the silence. Orange light was filtering in from all the classrooms. I felt myself trying not to breathe, afraid that I would miss the sound of another being in the seemingly deserted school. As I came to my first period classroom I walked into the room, just to verify what I already knew. The sound of a door closing in the distance drew my attention.*

*I ran to the hallway, then froze in place and held my breath to try and hear something, anything that would tell me where the sound came from. After a moment, the sound of another door closing came from further down the hall. Without thought, I began to run toward the sound.*

*As I ran, it occurred to me that I might be running toward something dangerous, but that didn't cause me to slow my pace. Whatever I was about to face was at least something.*

*I don't know why, but I think I could handle facing just about anything better than facing the nothing that surrounded me.*

*As I reached the end of the hall, I stopped and considered. Right would take me to the gym and left would take me to the offices. I can't say I really had a reason, I just turned left and started walking at a hurried pace. I reached the office door and as I was reaching for the handle, the door opened. I looked up with surprise into the eyes of Mr. Le Plant.*

*"Doug?" He asked, seemingly as surprised as I was.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Doug? Are you alright?" My mom asked from my doorway.*



I blinked then looked around the room for a moment before answering, "Yeah. I'm fine. What's up?"

"I just wanted to know if you needed anything washed. I'm going to do a load of laundry tonight." Mom said as she looked at me cautiously.

"Um, no. I'm fine." I said with distraction.

Mom stood in the doorway watching me with concern for a moment longer before she slowly turned and walked away.

The disturbing 'dreamy' feeling was finally beginning to dissolve and my thoughts started to clear.

I remembered what Mr. Le Plant had told me in the library and began to write down my daydream.

The details were foggy in my mind and seemed like they were becoming more distant with each passing minute.

"Doug?" My dad asked from the doorway.

I sure seemed to have become popular.

When I was in my room, my parents usually left me alone.

"Your mom is worried about you. She says that you were up here asleep with your eyes open." My dad said as he walked into my room and casually took a seat on the edge of my bed.

I smiled at my dad's willingness to be frank with me instead of trying to dance around the subject.

"Yeah. I guess I was. Do you remember the 'dream time' Mr. Le Plant was talking about. That's what I was doing... daydreaming." I said as I looked him in the eyes.

"Dream time." My dad parroted with concern, seemingly not knowing how he felt about it.

"If I'm understanding it right, I'm going to have the daydreams either way. But if I have 'dream time', then I'm not as likely to drift away and have a daydream in class when I'm not wanting to." I said slowly, hoping that I was making sense.

"When you put it that way, it sounds almost reasonable. Let me know how it's working out for you." My dad said, then began to stand.

"Do you daydream?" I asked quickly.

I didn't even think about the question before I asked.

I hadn't considered the possibility before, but now it seemed to be a perfectly logical question.

My dad slowly sat back down on the bed and seemed to be considering the question.

"I think I used to." My dad said in a disturbed tone.

"What happened?" I asked quietly, having the feeling that it might have been something bad.

"I stopped." My dad said distantly.

I continued to look at my dad, silently asking for more of an explanation.

There was a long moment of silence that seemed to hang in the air between us.

Finally he said, "I can't really say when it happened or how... I can just remember when I was young... probably not even old enough to go to school yet... my grandmother would sit me in her lap and we would take these wonderful 'pretend' trips.

I'm sure my expression was enough to tell my dad that I didn't know what he meant.

"We would find a picture in a magazine or a book and we would imagine that we were there... in fact, come down to the living room and I can show you." Dad said as he quickly stood.

I was puzzled by his abrupt change in mood, but was curious about what he was talking about and hurried to follow him out of the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

We walked into the living room where dad had CDs stacked in little towers all over the floor.

"This painting belonged to my grandmother." Dad said, as he indicated the picture that hung on the wall behind the couch.

I looked at the picture curiously.

Ever since I could remember, the big framed painting had been hanging in our living room everywhere we lived.

It wasn't anything spectacular. It was just a painting of a stream and some trees.

The brightly colored leaves made it evident that the scene was in autumn.

"Sit down with me and I'll see if I can remember how we used to do it." My dad said as he sat down in the wing backed chair, then patted his leg.

I smiled at the gesture and thought for an instant about refusing.

But my dad was about to share something very personal and meaningful to him.

Even though it might go against my teenage sensibilities to sit on my daddy's knee, it would be worth it for the chance to reestablish the connection with my father that we had lost so many years ago.

I sat on his leg carefully, not wanting to hurt him.

He put an arm around me, then with his other hand he pointed at the picture and said, "What we used to do is look into that picture and pretend that we were there, floating down that river."

I looked into the picture and smiled at the feeling of contentment that washed over me.

"I remember that my grandmother used to ask me what I saw after we went past that bend." My dad said with a gentle smile.

I felt the daydream wash over me as I imagined moving down that river in the sunlight that sparkled down through the leaves.

I continued to stare deeply into the painting as I felt the daydream come into being.

*The sound of the water of the river flowing and lapping at the bank of the river obscured the sounds of everything else.*

*The taste of the air was so clean and pure that I had to marvel at it.*

*As I drifted around the bend, I could see an inlet, sort of a small bay.*

My dad chuckled as he absently said, "I imagined that there was a big house there, filled with dozens of rooms to explore."

*I moved further into the bay and as I approached the shore, I could see the house.*

*It was something like one of the plantation houses from back in the civil war days.*

*The place looked a little run down with overgrown vines and a little bit of peeling paint, but all it needed was some care.*

"We used to imagine that we would go into the house and explore. Each new room we went in to held another adventure." My dad said fondly.

*I moved closer to the house, but stopped just outside.*

*Even though my dad had felt free to explore, I felt like I might be intruding into a place where I shouldn't.*

*Suddenly, the door opened.*

*I almost expected to see Mr. Le Plant, but instead there was a woman standing there.*

*"Jeffy?" She asked cautiously.*

*I was surprised by the question, then realized what she might mean.*

*"No ma'am, I'm not Jeffy, I'm his son Doug." I said hesitantly.*

*"His son..." She said with a delighted smile, then continued, "My little Jeffy has a son."*

*"Um, yeah. He's actually with me right now, showing me your picture." I said cautiously.*

*"Why didn't he come here himself? I brought him here enough times, he should know the way." She said seriously.*

*"I think he forgot how." I said honestly, not wanting to hurt her feelings.*

*"Jeffy's father wasn't blessed with the gift, so he could never understand. I suppose that after I crossed over, Lyndon did everything in his power to suppress Jeffy's gift so he would be firmly grounded in the 'real' world." She said with regret.*

*"Yeah. It looks that way. But he remembers you and he told me how to get here. Maybe the gift isn't gone, it just got forgotten for a while." I said hopefully.*

*"I hope you're right. I miss my little buttercup." She said with a loving smile.*

*"Buttercup?" I asked as I tried to keep from laughing.*

*"That's right. The most glorious flowers in the spring with their heads held high, declaring their joy for all the world." She said with amusement.*

*"I wish I could have known him when he was like that." I said with a smile.*

*"You can. You can do anything. You've been blessed with the gift." She said sweetly.*

*"Who are you ma'am?" I asked cautiously.*

*"Oh, goodness me." She said with a chuckle, then continued, "I suppose that if you are Jeffy's son, that would make me your great-grandmother Loistine."*

*"It was so long ago. I can barely remember. I just know that it used to be so vivid and real to me." My dad said as his hug around my shoulders increased.*

*"I think I need to talk to my dad. It was nice to meet you grandma Loistine." I said respectfully.*

*"No grandchild of mine is getting away without a hug." She said firmly as she opened her arms.*

*I hugged her tightly for a moment, then thought to ask, "How do I go back? Do I have to go back the river?"*

*She chuckled and said, "No my little dewdrop. You don't have to do anything except want to be back there and you will be."*

*"Thanks grandma Loistine. I'll come and visit again real soon." I said as I started to move away.*

*"I'll always be happy to see you dewdrop." My great-grandmother said peacefully.*

*I wasn't quite sure how to make the shift, but I tried to do as Grandma Loistine said and concentrated on being back in the living room with my father.*

*"I really missed her when she passed away. It hurt for a very long time." My dad said distantly.*

*I nodded that I understood.*

*"So I guess that means you come by your daydreaming honestly. I used to do it, and I'm pretty sure my grandmother did too." My dad said with a bit of cheer in his voice.*

*"I think that you could probably do it again if you tried." I said cautiously.*

*My dad shifted me slightly away from his side so he could look at me with question.*

"I mean, you used to do it. You'd travel to the house in the woods with Grandma Loistine. So that proves that you can. All you need to do is remember how." I said carefully.

"I didn't say it was my grandmother Loistine. I could have been talking about my grandma Claire." Dad said suspiciously.

I didn't feel like playing games with my dad, so I shook my head and said, "Grandma Loistine is in there, waiting for you to visit her."

My dad looked at me with indecision, a part of him obviously wanting to believe and another part saying that it was completely irrational.

"She misses her buttercup." I said in a whisper, then got up off my father's knee.

I stopped before leaving the room and saw my dad sitting there, staring at the painting with disbelief.

## Chapter 3

As soon as I walked into my room, I immediately got some chewing gum, then went to the stereo to load up one of the CDs that Mr. LePlant had given me.

Within a minute, the cacophony was assaulting my ears as I began to study.

The feeling was amazing.

It was like flying.

My mind felt released... unchained.

I glided through the chapter of algebra problems faster than I ever imagined possible.

Every single thing that I came to made perfect sense to me as I made quick notes on the index cards.

When I finally finished the chapter, I looked up from my book and was shocked to see that twenty-five minutes had passed.

I had lost all track of time and it felt like just a minute.

For a moment I considered moving on to the next chapter, but then remembered Chris's warning about trying to do too much.

I closed the algebra book and put it away, then took out my history book to do a quick review of the chapter.

Not only did I remember the text that I was scanning through, but the story of the American Revolution came alive as I was reading.

I began to visualize the story behind the text and felt an urge, a craving, to know more.

It took me a minute or two to understand what I was feeling, but once it was clear to me, I signed onto the Internet and started searching for more detailed stories.

The lack of fully detailed articles was frustrating and it was more than a little disturbing to me that most of the sites contained the exact same copied and pasted paragraphs summarizing such pivotal events in history.

My searches finally led me to a local library listing and I began going through the online catalog to find books that might satisfy my craving.

"Doug?" My mom asked from the doorway.

I just barely heard her through the music playing in my headphones.

"Yeah?" I asked as I shifted the headphones off my head.

"How are you feeling?" Mom asked me with concern.

"Fine." I said honestly, then considered just how I felt. "Actually, great."

"Good. I wanted to be sure that you weren't coming down with something after the way you were feeling at dinner." Mom said gently.

"I think I'm okay." I said as I turned to devote my full attention to her.

Mom was standing in the doorway looking at me with concern.

"Is something wrong?" I asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I'm just worried about you." Mom said quietly.

I smiled at her as I said, "I think things are going to be a lot better now. All the stuff that Mr. LePlant told me about how to study is really working."

Mom looked at me dubiously, looking like she didn't trust what I was saying. She finally said, "I suppose it's worth a try."

"Here." I said as I handed my American History book to her.

She took the book and looked at me curiously.

"Chapter four. Ask me anything." I said seriously.

Mom looked at me with surprise and looked like she was about to refuse, but I guess either she was curious or maybe she wanted to give me the chance to prove myself. For whatever reason, she flipped through the pages, then asked me, "The British and Hessian's crossed the Hudson River in flatboats landing in a district called Tenafly, then onto New Bridge and then to Fort Lee capturing the fort. Who led the attack?"

"Lord Cornwallis." I said immediately, then added, "That was November 20th, 1776."

Mom blinked with surprise, then looked down at the book to confirm my answer.

"The stuff that Mr. LePlant was showing me really works. Just give it a few days and you'll see." I said hopefully.

"Okay Doug." Mom said as she handed the book back to me, then continued, "I guess I was just a little bit nervous about it since everything he was



saying goes against what I was taught."

"Maybe this just means that I'm special." I said to her with a grin.

Mom smiled at the statement, then moved to my side and leaned down to give me a quick hug.

"Yes you are." She said quietly.

I enjoyed the hug and was overwhelmed by the feeling of peace.

Everything in my life was coming together.

Everything was right.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Everything was wrong.*

*I looked around and even though it was the same street that I walked down every single day, it was totally wrong.*

*The hazy stinging orange sunlight was giving everything a menacing glow. The metallic twang in the air made it seem foreign and wrong, like it was trying to stain or taint me with it's stench.*

*"Doug?" a voice called from behind me, causing me to jump.*

*I turned and I was surprised to see Mr. LePlant standing in my driveway. Or, more accurately, Chris. In that time and place, he wasn't the counselor from school, he was a person who cared enough to try and help me.*

*"Hi Chris, isn't this weird?" I asked him as I looked around again.*

*"Are you doing this?" He asked me hesitantly.*

*"No. At least, I don't think I am." I told him, honestly, then added, "Since this just started today when I began daydreaming on purpose, it's possible that I could be doing it without knowing it."*

*"Did you see me earlier?"*

*"Yeah. At the school. I almost walked right into you, then I snapped out of it." I said as I noticed that there seemed to be a strange tinny quality to the sound of our voices.*

*"That's what I saw, too. Except, I suppose that it's possible that I'm dreaming all of this." The chuckle in his voice made me feel strangely assured.*

*"Me too, but it feels too real to be nothing but a daydream." I told him honestly.*

*"It does to me, too."*

*"Do you think we're supposed to be seeing something or doing something?" I asked him, feeling that something so strange really should have a purpose.*

*"No. At least, I don't feel drawn to any specific place."*

*"Can I touch you?" I asked him, then I realized just how creepy that sounded.*

*"How do you mean?" Chris asked me cautiously.*

*"I mean, I want to know if you feel real to me or if you're as unreal and out of whack as this entire world seems." I explained, hoping that I didn't sound too dopey.*

*Chris held out a hand toward me.*

*I carefully took his hand into mine and it felt 'real'. So far he was the only thing in this freaky dreamplace that didn't feel completely wrong to me.*

*"You're warm." Chris said to me with a grin.*

*"So are you." I said as I realize that, right there and then, I felt like everything would be okay.*

*"Are you at home in your room now?" Chris asked me, as he continued to hold my hand.*

*"Yeah. I just finished studying and I thought I'd take a daydream break before I decided what I wanted to do about my fun time. I don't know if the Star Wars thing is going to be as cool as I used to think it was."*

*"That's how it is sometimes. You might try a trip to a comic book store. I can usually get good ideas in there." Chris said, then gave my hand a slight squeeze of encouragement.*

*"Do you think maybe I could go with you sometime?" I asked him hopefully.*

*"Do you think your parents won't let you go by yourself?"*

*I chuckled and told him honestly, "No. That's not it. I just think it'd be more fun with you."*

*Chris considered for a moment, then said, "It does sound like fun. Check with your parents and maybe we can do that after school tomorrow."*

"Yeah. I'll do that."

\* \* \* \* \*

I emerged from the daydream feeling strange. Not bad, really, just not quite right.

As I looked around my room, searching for something to dispel the strangeness of what I'd just endured, I spotted the Star Wars box.

I opened it and I was soon lost in my memories of happier times and the joy I used to feel as I admired my collection.

However, by the time I reached the bottom of the box, I also reached the regrettable conclusion that even though going through the box had lifted my spirits somewhat, it had become clear to me that I was revisiting something that had already passed. That time of my life was over.

As I started repacking my childhood memories back into the box, I kept all the books out, just in case I might have the desire to read them again. But the mementos weren't the cherished prizes of my collection that they used to be. Now they were only reminders of a simpler, happier time in my life. So I chose a few simple things, more for decoration than anything, to place around my room.

\* \* \* \* \*

After I had taken the box back to the garage, I found myself without anything to do. I had already done all the studying that I needed to do for the next day and there wasn't enough time to really start doing anything productive. Finally I decided that it might be the perfect time for a little, unscheduled daydream.

I went to my bed and made myself comfortable before slowly and deliberately falling into a half-conscious dream state.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I recognized the place immediately. The soft breeze, the dappled sunlight through the canopy of leaves and the water squishing up between my toes. The thick earthy scent invigorated me while, at the same time, the tranquility of my surroundings soothed me.*

*I took the few steps up the path to the clearing that I was so familiar with. Once again, I saw the bear cub, struggling with all it's might, trying desperately to reach the beehive. Where before, I had regretted not helping, this time I stepped out of my seclusion and walked to the tree. I was just tall enough to be able to reach the branch and pull it down*

*slightly.*

*As my weight caused the branch to dip, the bear cub was finally able to grab the beehive in it's front paws and begin to crush it open.*

*An angry swarm of bees suddenly appeared as a vicious buzzing cloud. The bear cub took no notice, but I let loose of the branch and retreated to my place of safety and seclusion on the path, ready to run, should the bees decide to follow me.*

*But they didn't follow. The swarm of bees insistently fought against the cub, defending their home, but the cub seemed blissfully unaware. He kept the beehive firmly in his paws as he licked and suckled the honey that he was slowly crushing out.*

*I stood and watched the scene unfold and slightly smiled at the joy the cub was feeling, finally able to attain what he had been seeking for so long. Although I knew that I hadn't made any sound or movement to draw attention to myself, the cub suddenly turned its head and looked at me. For just a moment I was lost in those soft brown animal eyes, then the realization came over me.*

*I knew him!*

\* \* \* \* \*

*My realization startled me into full wakefulness.*

*This daydream or vision or whatever it was, wasn't nearly as disturbing as the hazy orange dream with Chris, but it was still kinda weird and spooky.*

*Remembering what Chris had said earlier in the day, I got out a notebook and began to write down the details of my daydream before it all faded away. That's how it is, for me anyway, after a few minutes, all I can remember about the daydream is how it made me feel and maybe just a little bit of what it was about.*

*Somehow, writing down the details that I remembered seemed to cause me to remember even more, including points from other daydreams, that I'd already forgotten about.*

*Not that I had ever done it before, but if you would have asked me how much I could remember about a daydream, I probably would have said something like 'a sentence or two'. By the time I finished writing down everything I remembered about the little bear, I was over halfway through my third page.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Although it was early evening, I felt drained.

Some automatic pilot seemed to have kicked in to take me through my bedtime routine and I showered and got ready for bed.

Without any further thought about Chris, the little bear or the daydreams, I crawled into bed and fell asleep within minutes.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke feeling unusually good.

I had slept deeply and didn't recall having any dreams. I suppose that I do enough dreaming during the course of any given day that I don't really need to dream at night.

As with the night before, I went through my routine mindlessly, getting myself ready for school.

The first unpleasant thing in my otherwise good morning was when I walked into the kitchen and smelled whatever it was that my mom was making for breakfast. It smelled revolting.

I didn't run out of the kitchen, choking and gagging, but the smell was really offputting.

"Good morning, honey. Are you feeling better today?" My mom asked casually as she tended to whatever foul thing she was cooking in the skillet.

"I feel fine." I said honestly, wondering if she were going to make a big deal of it when I refused to eat whatever rancid horror she was cooking.

She didn't respond, and my attention was drawn to the news report on the small television, in the corner, between the stove and the sink.

*"The syndrome known as CCD or Colony Collapse Disorder, seems to have escalated to a new level. It will take some time to confirm, but preliminary reports suggest that the species Apis mellifica, also known as the European Honey Bee may now be extinct."* The news reader cheerfully announced.

My thoughts flashed back to my daydream and for a long, horrifying moment, I wondered if I had somehow been aware or even worse, had been the cause, of the extinction.

"How do you want your eggs?" Mom asked, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"I'm just going to have some fruit." I said as I grabbed an apple from the ever present bowl in the middle of the table.

She turned from the stove to look at me with concern as I was munching on the apple.

"I'm really feeling okay. I'm just not hungry for something heavy." I said as I thought to myself, 'or something smelly, greasy, and disgusting.'

"Be sure and let me know if you start feeling sick." Mom said hesitantly.

"I will. I promise." I said quickly, relieved that she wasn't going to make a bigger deal of it. Then a sudden thought caused me to add, "I'm going to take some fruit to school with me, in case I'm not hungry for what they're serving in the cafeteria."

"Fine. I was going to go to the market before work, anyway. I'll be sure to pick up some extra." She said as she returned her attention back to her noxious skillet.

I quickly dumped the bowl of fruit into my backpack as I said, "I'm going in early, so I can review again before my test today."

"I know you'll do fine." Mom said to the skillet. I'm about half sure that she was talking to me, and not the vile mess of animal flesh she was incinerating.

\* \* \* \* \*

Had I bothered to look out the window at any point during the morning, I would have known that it was raining. But in Oregon, in the springtime, I suppose that's to be expected.

Although there were signs that it had rained heavily earlier, it was just a mist of rain as I left the house. An umbrella wouldn't have made much difference at this point, so I just pulled up the hood of my hoodie and didn't worry much about it.

The sound of talking drew my attention and I noticed three girls on the other side of the street, walking toward the school. They seemed to be completely unaware of the misty rain and were totally enthralled in their giggly conversation.

Traffic was light on our residential street, but it wasn't the sound of an approaching car that drew my attention so much as it was the sound of the car accelerating.

I looked across the street in time to see the car go out of it's way, nearly to the curb, just so that it could hit the puddle in front of the storm drain and send a wall of water toward the three girls.

The car swerved back into it's proper lane and drove away as though it were an everyday occurrence. Shrieks of outrage and a string of rather impressive obscenities from the girls caused me to stop and stare for a moment.

In my experience, when such things sometimes happened, they were usually accidental or from a situation when the driver really had no other choice. I was shocked that someone would go out of their way to deliberately do such a horrible thing to another person.

Since I really didn't know the girls or the driver, I finally supposed that it must be something personal.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You said you went to the counsellor's office. You nuts?" Todd asked as I approached my locker.

"Yeah. Completely." I responded as I nudged him so that I could open my locker door.

"Come on. Give. What's up?" Todd asked me curiously.

My limited experience with Todd had proven to me that anything I said to him would later be used against me, usually in the most public and humiliating way.

As I was putting my afternoon books into my locker, I said, "I was just having a problem concentrating in class. I've got to go study for that history test."

"We all have problems concentrating on that boring shit. What makes you so special?" Todd demanded to know.

"I guess I'm just better at it." I said with a grin at him before hurrying away to the library.

\* \* \* \* \*

Since I'd left so early for school (mostly to get away from the horrendous stench of breakfast), I had some spare time to review.

This early in the morning, I could easily have studied at a table in the library, but just to be on the safe side, I went through the stacks and back to the secluded study rooms where I could be alone.

As soon as I sat down, I wished that I had taken the time to think things through. I didn't have any chewing gum. I didn't have a portable CD player. I didn't have any of the distractions that Chris said that I would need to be able to study effectively.

Be that as it may, I still had to review for the test.

I took out my index cards and started skimming and scanning the chapter. Although it wasn't as good of an experience as I'd had with Chris the previous day, I still felt that I got something out of it.

By the time I was done with my review, I had just enough time to make it to my homeroom class.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour of finger painting would have been more productive than listening to Mr. Albowitz going on and on about nouns and verbs. I mean, we're high school freshmen. If someone in the class hasn't figured that stuff out by now, they probably need a tutor or something. But it seems like for the rest of the year all of us are going to be stuck, going at the pace of the slowest person in the class. Well, it could be worse. If I were the slowest person in the class, then I'd really feel bad.

Walking in to history class, I was feeling equal parts apprehension and excitement. I felt sure within myself that I was more prepared than I had ever been to take a test.

As usual, Todd and I were in the row against the right wall, sort of separated from the rest of the class. Everyone else was either gathered around Melanie Hart who was holding court over the girls, talking about God only knows what. And Levi Gibson had his own entourage gathered around him, no doubt regaling them about one or another of his sports triumphs.

When Mrs. Danner finally looked up from her desk, it was as though she hadn't noticed the cacophonous noise until just that moment.

"Clear your desks. Take one and pass it back." She said sternly as she walked from row to row, thrusting stacks of test papers at the first person in each.

I wasn't sure if the look of disgust she gave me when she handed me the papers was directed at me, or a glimpse of the contempt she felt for all of us.

Remembering what Chris had told me the day before, I cleared my mind, then started skimming and scanning the test as I answered the questions as



quickly as I possibly could.

While I was doing that, I was completely unaware of what anyone else in the class was doing, so I didn't realize until later that I was the first one to finish. Without knowing that it was anything out of the ordinary, I carried my test up to Mrs. Danner's desk and placed it face down on the corner.

I returned to my seat and waited, mostly patiently, for her to do her grading. She usually took quite a while to grade tests, not that I ever really paid that much attention. But, looking back, I should have guessed that she would have mine graded quickly, since mine was first.

"Doug Lawson. Come up here." She said sternly.

She really bore no resemblance at all to Adolf Hitler, either in appearance or in her tone of voice, but something about her attitude made me automatically think of him.

I'm not the kind of person who likes to be singled out. And I certainly don't like to get up in front of the class. So I was understandably nervous as I walked to her desk.

"Explain this." She said as she slammed my test paper on her desk.

After looking at the paper and seeing no red marked corrections or any of her infamous soul-destroying comments, I asked her, "Explain what?"

"Day after day, you sit in my class with your head in the clouds, not listening to a single word that I say. Now you expect me to believe that all of a sudden, you know all the answers?" She demanded.

"I studied the chapter last night." I stammered.

"You cheated." She countered.

"Ask me anything about the chapter. Or give me the test again. I'll prove it to you." I said quickly.

After a moment to consider (probably trying to decide which would be more humiliating for me), she took out a fresh copy of the test paper and placed a pencil on top.

Although it might have been easy for me to freeze up under so much pressure, I guess Chris having me do the test as quickly as I could kinda worked in my favor.

Right there in front of her, hunched over the corner of her desk, I went through the test and answered every question in about three minutes. I suppose that I was able to shave off one or two minutes because I'd taken

the test before... or maybe it was the pressure.

When I was finished, she took out her answer key and went over my answers, one by one.

Finally she looked at me and said, "I don't know how you did it, but I'll catch you at it. I promise you."

Well, as far as congratulations go, I can't say that it was the most inspiring speech that I had ever been given. But considering that I just passed my history test with a perfect score, I wasn't as bothered as I could have been.

I went back to my seat and waited for everyone else to finish their tests. Yeah, that's my reward for finishing early, I get to sit and wait in silence for the rest of the class.

Every now and then I'd glance over to see Mrs. Danner shooting me a venomous glare.

Have I mentioned how much I *love* my new school?

Sarcasm is not beneath my dignity.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I walked into the administration office, Mrs. Hawk looked up at me and said, "Mr. LePlant said to go right in when you arrive."

It was funny, even though I had all that time to sit and think while I was waiting for the test to be finished, I didn't even consider what I'd tell Chris about my achievement. I guess I was just too freaked out about being accused of cheating to really be thinking about much of anything else.

When I stepped into Chris's office, any thoughts about my history test flew immediately out of my mind. He looked like hell.

"Are you alright?" I asked by way of greeting.

"I've got a little headache. I'll be fine." Chris said miserably.

"Come on, you've got to get out of here. If I had to sit in here all day with that smell and that strobing fluorescent light, I'd have a headache, too." I said seriously.

"Yeah. Okay." Chris said wearily.

"Didn't you sleep well last night?" I asked as I led the way out of his office.

"I slept fine, but I couldn't eat dinner last night, and when I woke up this morning, my sister had made breakfast for us..." He trailed off.

"Yeah. Same here. I'm not sure what my mom was cooking but the stink of it made me leave the house almost half an hour early." I said as I held the administration office door open, so we could walk into the main hallway.

"So you're not feeling well either?" Chris asked with concern.

"Actually, I'm feeling fine. I guess maybe my mom's using some different spice or new kind of meat that smells chemically and rotten to me." I said as we walked toward the door leading outside.

"I suppose that's possible. Whatever it is, Livvy's using it, too." Chris said as he opened the door and held it for me.

"Livvy? Is that your sister?" I asked curiously.

"Yes. That's short for Olivia. She's a year older than I am. We live together and share expenses." Chris said as he walked down the steps.

"So you haven't eaten anything since last night?" I asked him as we reached the bottom of the steps.

"Not since lunch, yesterday." Chris said tiredly, then asked, "Do you think it might be your mother's coffee?"

Since both of us were effected the same way and both of us drank her coffee, it seemed like a reasonable question.

I opened my backpack and found an apple.

"Here. I was able to eat salad last night and some fruit this morning." I said as I handed it to him.

Chris took the apple from my hand and bit into it like a starving man, which, I suppose, he actually was.

"Oh, that's good!" Chris said in relief.

"Yeah. I brought extra in case I wouldn't be able to eat lunch in the cafeteria today." I said honestly.

When Chris had finished his next bite, he said, "Thank you for this, Doug. I didn't know how much longer I was going to be able to go on, without food."

"If you need more, I've got oranges and bananas in here, too. I brought plenty." I said, happy to know that I was able to do something to help him.

"Can you spare an orange?" He asked hopefully.

I was about to answer when a group of people approached from the street. I gestured for Chris to walk with me, so we weren't standing directly in front of the front door of the school.

As I handed him an orange, he asked me, "So how did you do on the test today?"

"I aced it. But the teacher thought I was cheating and made me take the test again in front of her, right on the corner of her desk." I said frankly.

"But you were able to do it, weren't you?" Chris asked me with concern.

"Yeah. But it was kind of embarrassing, standing in front of the whole class." I said honestly.

"Once you've aced a few more tests, no one will think twice about it. They'll just think you're some big nerdy brain." Chris said with a smile.

It made me feel good to see that Chris was feeling better. Him taking pleasure in my accomplishment was just icing on the cake.

"I had a question about daydreaming." I said abruptly. I don't know where that came from, but I suppose that the question had been boiling within me and just decided that it was time to come out.

"I'll answer it if I can." Chris said casually.

"When I was daydreaming yesterday, I thought I saw you." I said cautiously.

"Yes. Twice, actually. One time was here at the school, and the other was in front of your house." Chris said simply.

"Then you saw it, too?" I asked, confirming that I really understood what was going on.

"Yes. You wanted to touch me to verify that I was real." Chris said slowly.

"I guess the thing about seeing your dreams is one thing, but to really be able to talk to you in my daydreams is something else. What's going on?" I asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know, Doug. I've encountered a few other daydreamers over the years, and two other times, I've experienced what happened yesterday, when we shared our pasts. But I've never been able to talk to anyone in my daydreams before. I've never even heard of it being done." Chris said seriously.

"I think I remember you saying that sometimes the daydreams mean something in the real world. Could that be something like this?" I asked

cautiously.

"Maybe. Maybe not. We're in uncharted territory." Chris said frankly.

"I also had a regular daydream last night, like the ones I've always had. Except, this time, I didn't just watch it. I did something." I said slowly.

"Tell me about it." Chris said with interest.

"There was this little bear, trying to get a beehive. I've seen him before. But this time I helped him so he finally got the beehive. And then he looked at me and I knew who he was." I said hesitantly.

"So, if I'm getting what you're saying, the bear represents a person that you know and the beehive represents something that he's been desiring. In your daydream, you helped him get what he's been seeking." Chris said slowly.

"Like what?" I asked in confusion. It was like I could almost understand what he was saying, but just not quite.

"It's hard to say. Probably something like trust, respect, affection... maybe even love." Chris said honestly.

I thought about the little bear, and the relief that had shown in his eyes... Todd's eyes.

"I'll have to think on that for a while. I don't know him too well, so I don't know what he's been looking for." I said thoughtfully.

"Sometimes it takes a while to figure it out. And, honestly, sometimes you never really know what a daydream represents." Chris said frankly.

I nodded that I had heard, then quietly asked, "What about the orange sky?"

"I don't know, Doug. But even now, in the waking world, I can still feel it, stinging my skin."

"Me, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

After our talk, I had one more class to endure before it was time for lunch.

Before I could even reach the cafeteria, I already knew that I wouldn't be eating any of their food. The stink was phenomenal.

I thought about going back outside and enjoying the cool breeze from the morning's rain, but then decided that I'd rather catch up with Todd and see if I could put any more pieces together about my daydream.

He was easy enough to find, eating by himself, away from the 'popular' kids.

Although I suppose that I could have joined him for lunch at any time, I didn't ever really want to. The guy was pretty much a jerk, even on his best day.

"Okay if I sit here?" I asked him as I approached.

He was startled by the question, but in all fairness, I would have been, too, if anyone had ever bothered to ask to sit with me.

"Go ahead." He finally said.

I took the seat opposite him and was at a loss for what to say.

"You put on a good show in history class. I thought Danner was gonna have a stroke there, for a minute." Todd said with a grin.

"I don't know what else I could have done. I studied and passed the test. What more does she want?" I asked simply.

"Your head on a pike, if that look she was giving you meant anything." Todd laughed.

"Yeah. I guess she already had me labeled in the 'losers' category and it made her whole little filing system crumble when I did something outside her expectations of me." I said frankly.

"So, you studied, huh? I may have to try that someday." Todd said in mock consideration.

I gave him a dubious look as my reply.

He broke into a smile and said, "Nah!"

Although I expected the response, I laughed, nonetheless.

"Do you hate it here as much as I do?" Todd asked suddenly.

I didn't even have to think about my answer. "Yes."

"It's not fair that we have to go through all this shit just so our dads can be a few miles closer to their work." Todd said irritably.

I couldn't help but nod my agreement to his accurate assessment. When my dad got his promotion, we moved from the other side of town so he could be closer to the district office. I got uprooted from the neighborhood that I had grown up in and the class group that I'd been with since kindergarten just so he could shave fifteen minutes off his commute.

"And there's nothing to do here. I mean, nothing fun." He added sourly.

"I guess not. But I haven't really tried to find anything, either. If you're not doing anything tomorrow, maybe we could see if we can find someplace to hang out." I suggested carefully. I mean, this could really go one of two ways. Todd could accept the invitation and implied offer of friendship or he could mock and ridicule me like a big jerk. And given his history, that wouldn't be entirely out of character for him.

"My dad's got this big 'family' thing at his company tomorrow that we all have to go to. It's going to be boring as hell. But I can't get out of it." Todd said regretfully.

As it turns out, there was a third option, 'prior commitment'.

"Then what about Sunday? We could hang out and maybe do some stuff." I asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Sounds good." Todd said with what seemed to be mild interest.

"Where do you live?" I asked curiously.

Todd took out his spiral bound notebook and wrote down his address.

When I accepted the slip of paper from him, I was surprised to find that he only lived two blocks from me.

"Around noon okay?" I asked as I slipped the paper into my pocket.

"Yeah. Dad should have some pants on by then. But it might be best to brace yourself, just in case he doesn't." Todd said almost apologetically.

"How bad?" I asked with a slight cringe.

"Tighty whities." Todd said sourly.

"Better than bare assed." I responded.

"I guess. Just remember, you've been warned." Todd said seriously.

Before I could say more, our attention was drawn by a loud argument at the next table.

Although I couldn't make out exactly what they were fighting over, it seemed that Levi Gibson had made some decision that was contrary to the wishes of his loyal subjects.

The disruption increased as the taunts and jeers became louder, drawing more people in.

Finally, Levi gathered his things and stormed out of the cafeteria, with most of his classmates laughing and cheering in his wake.

As I turned my attention back to Todd, he said, "Yeah. It must be tough being the center of the universe."

I smiled at the comment. I could definitely appreciate dry sarcasm.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the day passed without much notice. I suppose the fact that it was Friday cast its air of anticipation on all of us, teachers and students alike. All of us just wanted it to be over with so we could get on with more enjoyable, more important or at least less boring things.

When I got home I wasn't surprised to find that both Mom and Dad were at work. Mom worked late hours on weekends. But Dad would be home soon, and would be off work until Monday.

Although I was disappointed to see that the fruit bowl was empty when I walked past the kitchen table, I was happy to see several reusable cloth shopping bags, lined up on the kitchen counter, filled with the organic produce that my mom always bought. I quickly helped myself to a red pear and a banana. They were delicious and helped raise me out of the weary little funk that I'd gotten into during my last few boring hours of school.

After my little snack, I went up to my room to offload my backpack and found that Mom had gotten me nearly everything that Chris had mentioned the night before.

I thought about having a little daydreaming time, but then remembered that Chris and I had planned to go to the comic books store after school. I quickly changed clothes and made sure that my room was presentable, in case Chris might stop in for some reason, then I heard the front door open.

I hurried downstairs in time to see Dad drop heavily onto the couch.

"Bad day?" I guessed as I walked in.

"Miserable." Dad confirmed as he turned on the TV with the remote.

"I'm going to the comic book store for a while, is that okay?" I asked hesitantly. I really couldn't think of any reason that he'd refuse, but you never know.

"Stay out of trouble." He said absently as he surfed through the channels.

I don't know why that struck me wrong. But it did. I guess that maybe all that father/son bonding that we went through yesterday was just another



daydream.

No.

Actually, it wasn't.

Chris says that the daydreams mean something.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had only been waiting for two or three minutes before Chris pulled up in front of the house.

I think he could tell that something was bothering me, but maybe he could also tell that it wasn't something that I wanted to talk about.

It turned out that the visit to the comic book store was just what I needed. Within a few minutes of us arriving, all my worries about school and home were forgotten. Hanging out and spending time with Chris was fun in itself. But that along with the comic book store made everything incredible.

I don't know how long we were in there, but before we were even halfway through the store, both Chris and I decided that we were hungry and needed to take a meal break.

There was a restaurant not far from the comic book store. I'd never been there before, but that wasn't unusual. I'd only lived in this part of town for a little over a month. I hadn't been much of anywhere. Be that as it may, it was kind of a mom and pop joint. The smell of the cooking food made both of us cringe at first, but we went in and ordered a dinner salad each, with no dressing.

The food was satisfying and the conversation was pleasant.

I got the feeling that we were both needing something to distract us from our daily lives. I don't know how long we sat there, chatting about everything and nothing. When we were finally finished, we mutually decided that we should continue the comic store exploration on the following day. There was just too much to see and it was too much fun to be rushed.

When I arrived home, Dad was sitting on the couch, still watching television.

I waited for a moment to see if he were going to ask about how I was, or what I'd been doing, or if I'd eaten, but he said nothing. He certainly didn't look happy, but neither did he look like he was particularly upset about anything. He was just staring vacantly, wearing no expression at all. Since I

didn't sense any sort of anger toward me, I went on up to my room to get cleaned up before bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I woke up the next morning, Mom and Dad appeared not to be up yet. It wasn't especially early, but I supposed that after mom's late shift, she probably needed to sleep in a little.

It was almost an hour before Chris was supposed to pick me up, so I went back to my room and settled in for a little daydream. Strangely, the only thing I saw in my daydream was the black asphalt parking lot and the white stone path. There was no action of any kind, just that one vivid image, like it was caught in my mind's eye.

When I came back from my daydream I still had plenty of time before Chris was supposed to arrive, so I unloaded my school things from my backpack and loaded it with some fruit. I didn't know that I'd need it, but it was best to be prepared.

As soon as I stepped out the front door of the house, the memory of the orange sky immediately returned to me. It was just like Chris had said, even here in the waking world, I could almost feel it on my skin.

When Chris pulled up in front of my house I was relieved. I don't have any real reason to be anxious, but some strange things seem to be going on all around me and I just can't quite make sense of it.

"Ready for a day of comic book shopping?" Chris asked with a tranquil smile.

"Yeah. Really ready." I said as I got into his big silver SUV.

"Did your parents give you too much grief about going out last night?" Chris asked with concern.

"No. They didn't even mention it." I said honestly.

"You know, the strangest thing happened to me this morning. As I was about to leave, I went into the living room to ask Livvy something, and for just a moment, it was like she didn't recognize me." Chris said thoughtfully.

"Did you scare her?" I asked curiously.

"No. It wasn't like that. Like I said, it was only for a moment, but for that instant, she didn't seem to be able to place who I was and why I was there."

"My mom was still at work when I got in, but the weird thing is that my dad didn't speak a single word to me. I walked in and he was sitting on the couch. I think I said, 'I'm home', or something like that, and he didn't

answer. He didn't ask me about where I went, who I was with, if I was feeling alright, or even if I'd eaten anything." I said as I looked at him anxiously.

"I don't know what to tell you. I suppose all that we can do is just keep an eye on things and compare notes until we can figure out what's going on." Chris said frankly.

"Yeah. But the thing I don't get is about the food. Does it mean there's something wrong with us, or something wrong with them?" I asked curiously.

"I really don't know." Chris said as he pulled his SUV into the comic book store parking lot.

It seemed as if we should be doing something or talking to someone to try and sort all of this out. But what would we tell them? My parents don't care if I'm out late and his sister had a brain fart?

Once I resigned myself to the fact that there really wasn't anything more that we could do, I set all my worries aside for a few hours and enjoyed looking through an amazing supply of comic books.

At some point, we discussed our plans for the next day. I told him about my plan to visit Todd. And he told me about him and his sister going to visit their parents. Neither of us seemed overly excited about the coming day. But we were resigned to fulfill our obligations.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, when I got home there was no interrogation or even a question about where I'd been or what I'd been doing. My parents seemed to be annoyed about something, but whatever it was, they didn't seem to feel like sharing. Mom was rushing around, getting ready for work and my dad was on the couch, doing his best to reach a vegetative state.

I didn't really give it too much thought. I was kind of excited to get up to my room and hang up the two new posters that I'd bought.

I don't know what possessed me to do it, but for some reason the one thing at the comic book store that caught my attention above all else was Thundercats. After hanging the posters, I stood back to take a look and they made me smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

Considering Mom's work schedule, it isn't surprising that Sunday morning isn't typically a big deal at our house. Everyone kind of wakes up and does their own thing, trying to keep as quiet as possible until the last person

wakes up. So it wasn't any surprise when I, once again, found myself alone in the kitchen, gathering some fruit for breakfast. The first indication that anyone else was even alive in the house came when I heard the television start playing in the living room.

I peeked my head through the doorway long enough to confirm that my dad had installed himself into his dent in the couch cushion. Our interactions the previous day (or lack thereof) made it a little bit easier to accept that he didn't want to know where I was going, what I'd be doing or who I was going to be with. I simply shouldered my backpack and walked past him to the front door.

I was more than a little bit ahead of schedule. Even though I'd taken the time to tidy my room, briefly study some of my schoolwork and even had one little uneventful daydream, I was still almost an hour early.

I took my time walking to Todd's house, appreciating the quiet chill of the morning. I still had the sensation of the orange sunlight tingling on my skin, but I suppose it was beginning to register as something that was, if not 'normal', then at least 'expected'.

When I got to Todd's house, I quietly knocked on the door. I didn't want to knock too loudly and disrupt the entire household.

I shouldn't have worried, they had a dog who went into convulsions when I knocked.

"Shut up, Buster! Go lay down on your bed!" I heard Todd snarl.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal Todd, looking half awake and only wearing some very old, very worn out, sweat pants.

"You're early." Todd grunted, then stood aside to allow me entry.

"A little." I confirmed.

That was the extent of the conversation for the first few minutes. Todd led me through the living room, where his father was in much the same state as my own. Thankfully, despite Todd's warning, he was wearing something more than 'tighty whities'.

We passed a few closed bedroom doors and ended up in Todd's room, which looked like a combination between a storage locker and a laundry hamper. Don't get me wrong, it was a nice big room; bigger than mine. But it seemed that since moving in, Todd had only unpacked what was absolutely essential and left everything else in boxes. His clothes seemed to be strewn everywhere, some folded, some wadded, some draped, in no discernible pattern.

"Figure out what you want to do today?" Todd asked, then pulled down his sweat pants, exposing himself completely.

"What are you doing?" I gasped.

"Getting dressed." He answered simply as he rummaged through one of the piles of clothes and came up with a pair of underwear.

Just for the record, I never, ever, in a million years, would even consider getting naked in front of someone I barely know without a very good reason. But Todd seemed to have no problem at all with it. He didn't even seem to notice me gawking at him as he continued dressing.

"So, did you think of anything?" Todd asked curiously as he pulled on his socks.

Although I was a little bit rattled by the floor show, I was somehow able to say, "Not really. Anything really interesting is too far away to walk to, and I hate trying to ride the bus on Sunday, you have to wait forever."

"Yeah. On the other side of town, it seemed like there was always something to do." Todd said regretfully.

I looked around his room at the stacks of boxes for a moment, then absently said, "I could help you unpack."

Todd seemed surprised by the answer, then said, "You've got a really messed up idea of what's fun."

I laughed at the comment, then said, "Yeah. I guess I do. But it looks like you've been putting it off for a while. Maybe it'll be more fun if someone's helping you."

"It beats doing nothing, I guess." Todd finally relented.

I looked around again, then quietly asked, "Where do we start?"

"I guess we'll have to go through the clothes before we can do anything with the boxes." Todd said resignedly.

"I don't know how you can tell what's clean and what's dirty." I said honestly.

"By the smell." Todd said frankly.

I flashed him a wide eyed look of surprise.

He chuckled, then said, "If it's on the floor, it's dirty. If it's on a box, it's clean."

"Oh. Okay, that's easy enough." I said, relieved that I wouldn't have to be sniffing Todd's funky clothes to determine their ripeness.

"There are hangers in the closet and you can stuff the rest in the dresser... it's over there somewhere." Todd pointed across the room.

As I started going through the clothes on top of the boxes, he added, "I'll go get a clothes basket."

I nodded that I had heard, then went to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fun?

Not by any definition of the word that I'm familiar with. But it was something to do to pass the time on an otherwise boring Sunday.

We dug through a phenomenal amount of crap and found places for everything. I guess I don't really have room to talk. I have different crap but it's the same general concept.

Todd got a little bit embarrassed when I opened a box and found some old 'action figures'. I dismissed it as no big deal and moved on to the next box.

He invited me to stay for dinner, but I was wiped out by the time we were finished, and besides, I didn't want to field a bunch of questions about why I only ate fruit and salads.

On top of that, at some point during the day, his dog, Buster, seemed to have taken a romantic interest in my right leg. Todd thought it was hilarious, but I really didn't feel like hanging around there so Buster would have a chance to consummate the relationship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back at home, it was more of the same. Mom was already gone, working the last of her three late shifts, and Dad was still in front of the television. I thought about trying to talk to him about whatever was going on with him, but in the end I decided to leave it be.

When I rummaged around the refrigerator, I found the fixings for salad and threw one together. Actually, it wasn't much more than a bowl of lettuce, but it seemed to be just what I needed.

After that, I went up to my room and did another quick study session with the freaky German music and television playing while I zipped through the chapters that I knew I'd be needing in the coming week.

I took a little time to daydream, but even my daydream seemed to realize that it was a boring Sunday and nothing really happened. I didn't see Todd or Chris or anything really interesting, just the parking lot and the path.

When bedtime finally came, I was ready for it. It's strange how such a boring day could make me so tired.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back to school.

I can't say that I was really excited to go, but with the way things had been at the house the past few days, it didn't seem quite as miserable as usual.

After getting myself up and ready, I walked into the kitchen to find pretty much what I'd find any other morning.

Dad was dressed for work, sitting at the kitchen table, waiting for Mom to place breakfast in front of him.

The little television was in the corner between the stove and the sink, chattering away with annoying cheer. I guess Dad wanted to see what was going on with the weather and the traffic, or maybe Mom wanted something making noise so she wouldn't have to participate in conversation with us.

Whatever works.

The next news story to come on caught my interest. The newsreader made some lame joke about global warming, then started showing a video of a full on blizzard on the east coast. According to the report, the springtime blizzard conditions were unlike anything recorded in the history books.

"How many sausages do you want?" Mom asked me from the stove.

My stomach flipped as much from the thought as the smell.

"I'm just going to have an apple or something." I said hesitantly, bracing myself for a fight. But, to my surprise, she seemed to accept the answer without any problem.

I glanced over to my dad to see his reaction and found him absorbed in the news broadcast.

Rather than worry about it, I quickly ate an apple, then put a few pieces of fruit into my backpack for lunch.

"Have a good day." I said as I got up to leave.

Neither of my parents responded. In fact, they acted like they didn't hear me.

As far as screwed up, dysfunctional families go, I suppose mine isn't that bad. But I'm sensing some real room for improvement.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, I was walking to school a lot earlier than I needed to. It was becoming a habit. As habits go, it probably isn't one of the worst, but I can't say that I'm particularly happy about it.

As I rounded the corner, I froze in my tracks at the sound of a man screaming, "I told you to keep your goddamned dog quiet! I told you!"

When I looked toward the source of the voice, I saw a man throwing something toward the front window of a house. I only saw it for an instant, but the sight was so shocking and vivid that I don't think I'll ever be able to forget it.

What the man had thrown looked to be a piece of plywood, and there was a small dog nailed to it.

I just stood there in shock, not moving, not thinking about moving, as my mind tried to process what I'd just seen.

I don't know if I stood there for ten seconds or five minutes. But what snapped me out of it was the sound of police sirens. Some part of my brain kicked on at that and I realized that I might be in for some new problems. What if the cops thought I did it? What if they thought I knew something about it?

Even though my thoughts were racing, for some reason my legs weren't. I just stood there like a big goon as half the police force of Portland pulled onto the street.

But as the police swarmed the neighborhood, I noticed that none of them seemed to notice that I was there.

It took every bit of courage that I had to do it, but I finally convinced myself to take the first step. Nothing happened. None of the police noticed me. No one told me to stop. So I took another.

Shaking like a leaf, I did my best to appear normal as I walked past the crime scene and continued on to the next block.

The further I got away, the more relaxed I felt.



I never thought the day would come when I'd say something like this, but I actually felt relieved when I saw the school come into view.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey Todd! How are you doing today? You're never going to believe what happened to me this morning." I said quickly as I saw him approaching.

He gave me a brief, curious look, then continued on to his locker and gathered his books.

"Todd?" I asked cautiously.

"What? Oh, Doug." He said in realization.

If Chris hadn't told me about what had happened with his sister, I probably wouldn't have thought twice about Todd's reaction. But now I had seen for myself what Chris had been talking about. I could see it in Todd's eyes. For that brief instant, he had no idea who I was.

"I saw the craziest thing on the way to school this morning. Some crazy guy nailed a dog to a board and threw it through these people's window." I said quickly.

"So that's what all the noise was about. That's really messed up. Anyone tried something like that with Buster, they'd get torn to shreds." Todd said frankly.

"I don't know. Buster's a little gruff at first, but once you get to know him, he's just a big old lovable dog." I said with a smile.

"If he can't fuck it or eat it, he'll kill it. You just happened not to have ended up on his kill list. You're on his *other* list." Todd chuckled.

Fortunately, right then, we reached the classroom. I definitely didn't want to delve deeper into that subject.

\* \* \* \* \*

We walked into the classroom to find most of the class engaged in a rather heated discussion that seemed to be centered around Levi Gibson.

I couldn't help but overhear what they were saying. Apparently, everyone in the group was excited about the prospect of going to a party at Melanie Hart's house Tuesday night, since her parents weren't going to be home. Although it seems that they were anticipating a 'massive orgy' I doubted that it would end up being much more than a few of the more courageous ones making out while everyone else looked on enviously.

But, for some reason, the entire group seemed to be fixated on the fact that Levi Gibson had refused to attend. They were coaxing and taunting him, trying to get him to agree.

Much to my surprise, Todd left his backpack at his desk and crossed the room to join in on the taunting. I suppose, given his obnoxious nature, that it was right up his alley. But he was an outsider, like I was and it seemed unlikely that they would include him.

As with so many other things recently, I was totally wrong.

Todd jumped right in there and was ridiculing Levi with the best of them. Within just a few minutes, it seemed as though he was part of the 'in crowd'.

Fortunately, before it could go too much further, Mr. Albowitz called the class to order and everyone took their seats. Even though Todd once again took his place in the 'outcast' row with me, he might just as well have been sitting across the room with 'them'. He was one of them now.

\* \* \* \* \*

The only thing on my mind after that was the need to talk to Chris and see if he could help me sort things out. But since I didn't have a study hall scheduled on Monday, there wasn't a chance for me to get away until lunchtime.

When I walked into the office, Mrs. Hawk looked at me vacantly for a moment, then asked, "May I help you?"

She had that same expression of nonrecognition that I had seen in Todd's eyes earlier. I didn't feel like going to the trouble of trying to remind her who I was, so I simply asked, "May I speak to Mr. LePlant?"

"Who?" She asked curiously.

"The counselor." I said slowly.

She thought for a moment, then suddenly said, "Oh, him. Mr. Higgens is back, so he wasn't needed anymore."

"Oh." I said quietly.

"Would you like to speak to Mr. Higgens?" She asked pleasantly.

"No. Thank you." I said before leaving the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I walked down the hall, toward the cafeteria, I felt particularly uneasy. Chris had been such an incredible source of support when things weren't making sense to me. Now, with him gone, I didn't know how I was going to be able to handle it.

The stench coming from the cafeteria made me stop.

There wasn't any reason for me to go in there and put myself through that. Also, Todd would probably be in there, and after witnessing his cruel taunting, directed at Levi Gibson, I really didn't have any desire to talk with him.

So, instead, I doubled back and went out the back door, so I could eat my lunch on the back steps.

\* \* \* \* \*

My feelings of concern for Chris, disappointment in Todd and the general bleakness of my life consumed my thoughts for the remainder of the day.

Being Monday, I didn't expect anyone to be at home when I arrived. Not that I would have expected an enthusiastic greeting if both my parents were home.

I ate some fruit, went up to my room, and immediately settled in for a daydream.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Instead of the parking lot, this time, I was back in the empty city with the orange haze.*

*There wasn't much that I could do but wander the quiet streets, looking for signs of life.*

*Suddenly, much to my relief, I saw Chris approaching.*

*"How are you doing? I was worried when you weren't at school." I asked as I walk up to him.*

*"I'm fine... Did you just pull me in to your daydream?" Chris asked me cautiously.*

*"I was worried about you, so I tried daydreaming as soon as I got home from school." I tried to explain.*

*"I was sitting at the kitchen table, trying to figure out what I'm going to do about work, when all of a sudden, I was here with you." Chris said to me frankly.*

*"Oh, that's weird. I didn't know you could do that." I said thoughtfully.*

*"I don't know that 'I' can do that." Chris said to me seriously.*

*"Sorry. I was just worried." I said repentantly.*

*Chris then smiled at me, and said, "It's okay, Doug. It's just a little disconcerting to know that you can pull me out of the waking world into your daydream, whenever you want."*

*"I'll be careful not to do it too much." I promised.*

*"How are you doing?" Chris asked me with concern.*

*"I don't know. Things are getting really weird for me. It seems that more and more people are forgetting who I am." I said honestly.*

*"The same thing's happening to me. Mrs. Hawk didn't remember me when I arrived at the school for work this morning. And since Mr. Higgs was back, the principal decided that I wasn't needed there anymore. When I went to the district office to get reassigned, they didn't know who I was and didn't reassign me. I don't know if I've been fired, but I haven't been rescheduled to work." Chris told me regretfully.*

*"Why's everything going so wrong?" I asked quietly.*

*"I don't know, Doug. None of this makes any sense to me." Chris said frankly.*

*"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked cautiously, not being able to think of a single thing.*

*"I'm going to need a little time to sort through my finances and decide what I'm going to do next. I suppose it's possible that I might be scheduled to go back to work as soon as tomorrow, but I need to know where I stand if that isn't the case." Chris explained quietly.*

*"You have my phone number, call me if you need anything." I said sincerely.*

*"That goes both ways, call me... or dream to me, if you need anything at all." Chris finished with a smile.*

*I nod, then consciously pulled myself out of the daydream.*

*\* \* \* \* \**

*The rest of the night I pretty much stayed to myself, not that I had any real choice in that.*

My parents never checked to see if I were there, if I had eaten or anything else. Given the happenings of the past few days, it was very likely that they had forgotten that I'd ever existed at all.

I wished more than anything that I could go and visit with Chris, not just for an end to the loneliness, but because I really enjoyed his company. But Chris had his own set of worries that he needed to deal with. He didn't need me distracting him.

It's funny, less than a week ago everything was so simple. I was just some goof-up kid who couldn't keep his head out of the clouds. Everything was simple and easily explainable and made sense. Now, I don't know what's going on.

Am I going crazy?

That's a distinct possibility, but from my point of view, it seems like it's the rest of the world that's got the problem.

## Chapter 4

After getting ready for school, I braced myself for what I was going to find in the kitchen.

Mom and Dad were there, going through their typical morning routine.

The morning news was playing on the television, as was usual, but something seemed off about it. It wasn't the news itself, but the newsreader that caught my attention. He was talking in a bored, sing-song voice about one of the bloodiest days in the middle east in modern history. His attitude seemed totally inappropriate for the news he was reporting. Then, much to my surprise, he stopped and shook his head. Finally he said, "*Blah, blah, blah... whatever. They should just hurry up and kill each other already. How about this for an idea? The last person standing wins! Go!*"

I picked up some fruit from the bowl in the center of the table and left the kitchen. So far as I could tell, my parents hadn't been aware that I had ever been in the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, I was walking to school way ahead of schedule.

As I rounded the corner, I remembered the incident from the day before and glanced over to find a sheet of plywood covering the broken plate glass window.

As I continued to walk, I noticed that at a house across the street, there was a car with four flat tires, all the windows broken out, and every painted surface was scratched with deep gouges.

Now I'm certain of it. It's not me that has the problem. Something's wrong with the world.

\* \* \* \* \*

A feeling of dread washed over me as I saw Todd waiting in the hallway, leaning back against his locker.

Mine was only a few down from his, so there was no avoiding him.

As it turned out, I didn't need to worry. I walked to my locker, switched out my books, and the one time when Todd looked in my general direction, he seemed to look right through me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I took my seat in my homeroom class a little bit early. Mr. Albowitz was at his desk, reading something, and didn't seem to notice that I had entered. But, in all fairness, I would have expected the same non reaction from him last week, before any of this craziness had started.

Although I was tempted to pass the time in a daydream, I didn't want to take the chance of pulling Chris away from something important.

As I was sitting there, I heard an increasing number of voices approaching the room.

It seemed that Levi Gibson hadn't yet given in to the peer pressure to attend the party tonight. While the actual question to attend or not seemed to be a frivolous thing, the way they were hounding Levi made me feel bad for him.

When Todd entered the room, he joined in to the taunting and teasing as though he had been included since the beginning.

"I'm not going. That's final." I heard Levi say firmly.

That only stopped the barrage for a moment, but I had to admit that I felt a little admiration for Levi for taking a stand against his peers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not one person talked to me the entire day.

No teachers, none of my classmates, not even my parents.

I was sitting there, in my bedroom, trying to predict what might happen next if things continued as they were, when I felt myself being pulled into a daydream.

Since I wasn't really doing anything, I just relocated myself from the desk chair to the bed and let it take me.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Good. It worked." Chris said with satisfaction.*

*"Did you just pull me in?" I asked to confirm.*

*"That's right. I took a chance that you'd be available. I hope I didn't interrupt anything important."*

*"No. Not at all." I quickly answered.*

*"Listen. We're not the only ones who can do this. I've just been in contact with another daydreamer, his name is Adam Warfield." Chris said frankly.*

*"So, while you were daydreaming, he wandered into your dream?" I asked uncertainly.*

*"Exactly. It was a lot like when we met at the school. It scared both of us half to death." Chris said with a grin.*

*I smiled. For the first time all day, I felt good. Being in Chris's company helped to make everything else going on seem less important.*

*Chris's expression changed and he gravely said, "Doug, he's in trouble."*

*"What's wrong?"*

*"It seems that his family forgot about him and went away for the weekend. And that would have been fine, except that it's Tuesday and they still aren't back. He's fourteen, alone and frightened. It's about a half hour drive to his apartment and I was wondering if you'd like to come along?" Chris asked me hopefully.*

*"Yeah. I'd love to." I answered immediately.*

*"I'll be there in about five minutes."*

*"I'll be ready."*

\* \* \* \* \*

As I walked downstairs, I found Mom and Dad in the living room, once again entranced in the mindless babble on the television.

For a moment I actually considered telling them where I was going, but thought better of it. If they were aware of my existence at all, they weren't the least bit interested.

As I was about to leave, I changed my mind and went to the kitchen to gather some fruit. If Adam had been on his own for the past four days, he might not have eaten much, if at all.

I noticed that the fruit supply was dwindling and didn't know if Mom would be restocking it.

Chris was pulling up in front of the house just as I was leaving.

"How are you doing?" He asked me as he pulled away from the curb.

"I don't know." I said honestly.

"I tried to talk to Livvy today. She keeps forgetting me." Chris said frankly.

"Mom and Dad, too." I said quietly.



"I don't know what to tell you." Chris said helplessly.

"I know." I whispered.

"But for right now, I think we should focus on Adam. I'm really worried about him." Chris said gravely.

"Yeah." I confirmed, then quietly added, "I hope we can help him."

"Why don't you try to contact him while I'm driving? I told him about you, so it shouldn't freak him out too badly if you pull him into a daydream." Chris said frankly.

"Do you think I'll be able to do it without pulling you in, too?" I asked cautiously.

"You know what it felt like to be pulled in. You can feel it, calling to you, but you don't have to give in to it." He said honestly.

I nodded that I understood.

"But if it gets too bad, I'll just ask you to stop." Chris reassured me.

"Okay." I said quietly, then relaxed myself.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"Adam? Are you there?" I called into the hazy orange nothingness.*

*"Who are you?" A quiet voice called back to me from nowhere.*

*"My name is Doug. Chris said that he told you about me." I said in as reassuring a voice as I could manage.*

*"I just heard gunshots." I heard Adam say as he started to resolve into being before me.*

*He looked younger than I would have expected. He was a skinny little black kid with wide, frightened eyes.*

*"We'll be there in just a few minutes. Chris is driving us there, right now." I said as I tried to sound confident.*

*"Why is this happening?" He asked me in a trembling voice.*

*"I don't know. None of this makes sense." I said honestly.*

*"Be careful, the people outside are really loud right now. It gets worse every night." Adam said to me fearfully, and I could see the truth of the feelings in his eyes.*

*"We'll be as careful as we can, I promise." I told him, hoping that it was a promise that I could keep.*

*"Hurry." Adam whispered.*

*"I'm going to go back now, so that I can tell Chris to be careful. Don't worry, we'll be there in just a few minutes."*

*"Okay. Just be careful. It's bad out there." Adam said nervously, and I could almost feel the concern radiating off of him in waves.*

\* \* \* \* \*

As we pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex, it was easy to see what Adam was frightened of. There was loud music playing and people milling around, in almost a festival atmosphere, except that it's darker.

I had no idea what was motivating the people, but whatever it was, it was dark.

"Remember that for whatever reason, people don't seem to notice us unless we force them to." Chris said seriously, but I could feel his nervousness as clearly as my own.

Chris was driving through the parking lot at about two miles per hour, amongst the partying people.

No one seemed to take notice of us, but they did seem to slowly drift out of our way, as we approached.

"It's the second one, on the bottom floor." Chris said as he spotted the building.

I looked at it, then around at the other apartments.

From the outward appearance, it seemed to be a fairly nice place. The buildings and grounds looked to be well maintained. You wouldn't expect to find such a group of loud belligerent people in a place like this.

"Just stay here. I'll be back in a minute." Chris said as he shifted the car into 'park'.

"I'm going with you." I said immediately.

"It might be safer for you out here." Chris said frankly.

"And it might not. I'm going with you." I said firmly. There was no freakin way in hell that I was going to be left sitting in the parking lot with the party crazed lunatics.

Just as we were getting out of the car, some screaming sounded from nearby.

We turned as one to find that a group of about twelve people had gotten into a fight, all of them piling in, hitting anyone who was in their way.

No one seemed to be aware of us, so we carefully made our way to the closed door.

Chris gently knocked, then quietly said, "Adam, it's Chris and Doug. Are you alright?"

The door opened to reveal the younger boy, who looked too young to be a teenager, with tears running down his cheeks.

"Do you have your things?" Chris asked cautiously.

Adam picked up two backpacks, and I automatically reached out a hand and accepted one of the backpacks from him.

"Thanks." He whispered, and I could still see the fear in his eyes.

"Come on. We need to get out of here." Chris urged him, then we walked, close together, until we got to the car.

"Get in." Chris hissed nervously.

Although I had intended for Adam to get the 'seat of honor', riding beside Chris up front, he immediately jumped into side door.

In a spur of the moment decision, I got into the back seat on the other side as quickly as I could, so Chris could get us the hell out of there.

When I looked back, the pile of people fighting seemed to have grown to well over twenty people.

"We're going to be fine. We're going to be fine." Chris said slowly, as much to himself as to us as he slowly backed the car out of the space.

"Are you alright?" I asked the terrified boy beside me.

Adam immediately hugged close to me and I could feel his body trembling.

Chris drove slowly, waiting for people to drift out of the way.

"We're almost out. Everything's fine." Chris said in an assuring voice.

I'm not sure if he were talking to us or not. Finally, I supposed that it didn't matter.

Suddenly, we heard the sound of gunshots right behind us.

I instinctively pulled Adam closer as I pulled us down to lay across the seats.

"Hang on!" Chris called out as he floored it.

Adam and I were holding tightly to each other as we listened to the engine racing.

We were bumped and jostled as Chris ran through an intersection a little bit faster than was probably intended.

"Are you guys alright?" Chris asked as he gradually allowed the car to slow.

"Is it safe?" I asked before I would even consider sitting up again.

"Yes. No one followed us. Everything's fine." Chris assured us.

I released my hold on Adam and quietly asked, "Are you alright?"

"I think so." Adam said shakily.

"Don't worry, Adam. We won't let anything happen to you if we can help it." Chris said soothingly.

"What if you can't help it?" Adam asked cautiously.

"Then whatever it is will happen to all of us."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here we are." Chris announced as he pulled into a driveway.

"This is your house?" I asked in surprise. It was a lot bigger and nicer than I was expecting.

"Yes and no. My sister and I rent it." Chris said as he opened his car door.

"Do they even let black people into a neighborhood like this?" Adam asked cautiously.

"Don't worry about it, Adam. This is a nice neighborhood." Chris said warmly, then told us, "Come on in and take a look at the place."

I walked with Adam, probably as nervous as he was.

I don't think that it was that the house was so spectacular, I mean, it was nice. But the neighborhood looked so sculpted and picture perfect that it was kind of intimidating. I wasn't sure if I were dressed well enough to be there.

Once we were inside the house, all those feelings were forgotten. It was so warm and inviting, I couldn't help but feel welcomed.

"Livvy? We've got company!" Chris called out.

"Where can I put this?" Adam asked timidly, indicating the backpack he was still carrying.

"You'll be sleeping on the couch, so you can put your stuff somewhere over there." Chris said as he motioned toward the living room.

Before Adam could say anything in response, Chris called out, "Livvy! I'm home! Are you here?"

We were all silent for a few seconds, waiting for her to respond. Finally, Chris said, "She must have gone out."

I gave Chris a knowing look, which from his expression was unnecessary, he was already thinking the same thing.

"Do you have anything to eat?" Adam asked in a timid, trembling voice.

"Oh, man! I'm sorry. I didn't even think of that. Come with me into the kitchen. I just stocked up on edible food today, so there's plenty." Chris said quickly as he hurried into the next room.

As I walked with Adam toward the kitchen, I quietly said, "We've figured out that there's a lot of stuff we can't eat. We haven't figured out why, yet, but at least we were able to find some things we *can* eat before we starved to death."

"Everything my parents left in the house tasted like they'd covered it in bug spray or like it was spoiled." Adam said quietly.

"I think that's just the way that regular food tastes to us. But don't worry about it. Once we got it figured out, Chris and I have been able to eat pretty well." I said happily.

"Have a seat at the table and I'll have dinner ready in just a minute." Chris said from the counter beside the refrigerator.

Adam didn't need any second bidding.

"You too, Doug. I'm making enough for three." Chris said with a grin at me.

"I probably won't eat much, but I'll have some. Thanks." I said as I took the seat next to Adam.

"There's going to be plenty, so be sure to eat your fill." Chris said as he moved to the sink to start washing vegetables.

"I thought I was going to starve." Adam shyly admitted to me.

"Yeah. I think Chris felt the same way. It was just lucky that my mom made some stuff that I could eat, so I could figure it out." I said frankly.

"What can we eat?" Adam asked curiously.

"Most organic fruits and vegetables seem to be okay. As far as drinks, I've been able to choke down the tap water, but it doesn't taste right. But so far, I haven't really found anything that tastes better." I said honestly.

"For a while, I suspected that Doug's mom's coffee was what caused all of this." Chris chuckled from beside the sink.

"Coffee so bad that it changed the world, that's my mom!" I said with a laugh.

"Here you go, guys. Dig in." Chris said as he placed a large bowl of salad and three plates on the table.

I motioned for Adam to go ahead and serve himself, since he was in the most need.

Once he had filled his plate, Chris and I took more modest portions.

"This is fantastic! I've never tasted anything this good!" Adam said between hurried bites.

I smiled at Chris, remembering his reaction to the apple I'd given him.

Just then, a woman walked through the kitchen door. She had long blond hair and she was wearing some worn gray sweat pants and a t shirt that was a size or two too small. Oh yeah, and no bra... real obvious.

All three of us watched, frozen in place as she walked to the refrigerator, took out a bottle of wine, then poured herself a tall glass.

As she leaned down to put the wine bottle back on the bottom shelf, she let rip a fart that shocked all of us.

Let me step back for a moment. Disregarding all the weirdness of the past few days, and all of that, and just speaking strictly as a guy. *That* was impressive.

Anyway, after that, she picked up her wine glass and walked casually out of the room.

After a long silent moment, Chris quietly said, "That was my sister, Olivia."

Adam looked at Chris helplessly, obviously at a loss for words.

Before I could think better of it, I felt as though I should jump in and try to explain. "I don't know how much Chris has told you about what we've been able to figure out about what's going on, but the way it seems is that people who aren't like us, aren't daydreamers, are getting to where they can't see or hear us."

Adam looked at me uncertainly, then looked to Chris for a better explanation.

"From what you told me about your family, I don't think they meant to leave you at home alone. I think they honestly forgot that you ever existed." Chris said gently.

Adam looked back to me and asked, "Is it the same for you?"

"Yes. At least, it's getting that way. But something else is going on, I just haven't figured out what." I said slowly.

"What have you noticed? Maybe we can help." Chris encouraged.

"It's nothing solid, just a bunch of little things. It's like that party at Adam's apartment. That's not normal. People don't usually do that." I said thoughtfully.

"It's not really that uncommon." Chris said slowly.

"No. It's not uncommon for people to have a party now and then, but the number of people, the kind of people, and how hard they're partying is what's different." I said with difficulty.

"I don't know. Maybe." Chris said in consideration.

"They were like that last night, too. At the apartment. But I think tonight was a lot worse." Adam said quietly.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that now. This is a safe place." Chris said with a smile of encouragement.

"Yeah. Thanks." Adam said quietly.

"How about I show you where everything is, so you can get a shower if you want? While you're doing that, I can take Doug home." Chris asked as he carried what was left of the salad toward the refrigerator.

"Would it be okay if I went with you? I don't want to be here alone." Adam asked hopefully.

"You won't be alone. My sister..." Chris trailed off, then continued, "...you can come with us."

\* \* \* \* \*

The ride back to my house was mostly quiet.

None of us were in much of a mood to talk. I think we all just wanted to get some well earned and much needed rest.

As I got out of Chris's car, I made sure to tell both of them to call me if there's anything at all I can do to help.

Chris promised that he would and Adam gave me a timid nod, which I suppose was good enough.

When I went in to the house, everything was dark and quiet.

I peeked in the driveway to verify that the cars were there, so my parents hadn't gone out.

After making sure that everything was closed up and secure, I quietly made my way up to my room.

I thought back to the days when I was worried about studying for tests. Things were so simple back then. I knew, without a doubt, what was real. But now, it seemed that reality had taken a holiday. Nothing made sense. Welcome to the new normal.

\* \* \* \* \*

I walked into the kitchen the next morning without any hope of things being different.

Mom and dad were there, both more or less paying attention to the television.

I went ahead and took a seat at the table, maybe out of some mild interest in the news. Or maybe out of some deep seated desire to be a part of the family. For whatever reason, I sat there and listened as the newsreader started talking about what they were calling the 'Darwinian Bill'. The long and short of it was that if the bill were signed into law, localities would have the freedom to choose whether or not they wanted their police and firefighters to respond to emergency calls if it was determined that the cost outweighed the benefit. Also, in the case of a catastrophic natural disaster, relief efforts would only be undertaken if the Federal Government determined that it was 'worth it'.

"It's about time someone in Washington showed that they've got some common sense." My mom said from the stove.



"It'll cut the dead weight. It sounds like someone's about to take this country in the right direction." My dad agreed.

I carefully gathered up my things and grabbed the last few pieces of fruit from the bowl on the table before I hurried out of there as fast as I could.

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as I rounded the corner, I remembered the trouble on the previous days.

The house with the plywood window and the one with the destroyed car were both still and silent.

I walked faster to get past them. The calm quiet somehow made me more nervous than the screaming and the police.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I was walking to my locker, it struck me how quiet the school seemed. Being as early as it was, I wouldn't expect it to be loud, but normally, you could hear evidence of other people in the building.

I didn't feel like going to the library or the study room. Somehow, I got the feeling that I wouldn't need to go in there if I wanted to spend some quiet time alone.

Mr. Albowitz's classroom was unlocked, but no one was in there. I went to my regular desk, but I didn't take out any study materials. Something about the ominous silence made me feel that the time for studying was over. I didn't have any real inkling of what was about to happen, but I felt certain that it wouldn't be another, run-of-the-mill day.

About ten minutes after my arrival, I saw Levi Gibson hesitantly enter the room.

I almost said something to him, but then realized that he probably couldn't hear me, anyway.

After about five minutes of sitting in near silence, Levi quietly asked, "What's happening?"

I couldn't tell if he were asking me, or if he thought he was speaking to himself. But, either way, I felt that I needed to answer him.

"The world is changing." I responded.

Levi turned and looked at me with surprise.

"How are you doing, Levi?" I asked cautiously.

"I'm pretty freaked out, to tell you the truth. What was your name again?" He asked cautiously.

"Doug. Doug Lawson." I said, matching his tone.

"I don't know what happened. It's like everything's slipping away." Levi said tragically.

"I know." I said softly.

"Isn't there something we can do?" He asked desperately.

"The world is changing, and I think, so are we. But it appears that we're not changing the same way." I said regretfully.

"But why is this happening?" Levi asked helplessly.

"I don't know." I said honestly.

"So you're like me now? Invisible?" Levi asked cautiously.

"We're invisible to them, but not to each other." I said slowly.

"I don't understand." Levi said in a small, defeated voice.

"Neither do I, at least, not all of it." I said frankly.

"But what's really going on?" Levi asked plaintively.

"Listen. I don't know what's been happening to you. All I know about what you've been going through is what I've seen in this class. But from the look of it, it's not exactly the same thing that's been happening to me." I said seriously.

"All my friends, the people I've known all my life, all of a sudden, they stopped seeing me. They don't remember who I am." Levi said honestly.

"That's happened to me, too. But it's been happening to me for a long time. Yesterday, I saw everyone trying to convince you to go to a party." I said frankly.

"Yeah. I kept telling them that I wouldn't, but I ended up going." Levi said regretfully.

"What happened?" I asked curiously.

"Nothing. When I got there, nobody could see or hear me. It's like I didn't exist anymore." Levi said in a pained voice.

"So it happened all of a sudden for you? For me, it happened a little at a time, for almost a week." I said quietly.

"Well, last week, I came down with some bug. Nothing tasted right, but besides that, I felt fine. Then, this week, everyone started being really pushy with me. Melanie Hart kept trying to corner me and make me..." He trailed off for a moment, then quietly continued, "...do stuff that I don't want to."

I felt my eyes go wide with surprise at that little revelation.

"She cornered me a couple times, and yesterday after lunch, I thought her and some of the others were going to... make me." He choked on the last words.

"But you went to her party anyway?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah. But not for that. I'm not ready for that, you know?" Levi asked with an anguished look in his eyes.

"Yeah, Levi. I know. I'm not either." I said quietly.

For the first time since we'd been talking, Levi smiled at me.

I couldn't help but smile in return.

We sat there, looking stupidly at each other for a moment before Levi continued his story, "Things have been so strange lately, I just wanted to go back to what I was used to."

"I don't think we can go back." I said honestly.

"After what I saw at the party, I don't think I want to." Levi muttered.

A part of me wanted to know, in case it provided a valuable piece to the puzzle. Another part of me was sure that I didn't want to know, "What did you see?"

"I saw my friends, the people I grew up with, being cruel to each other and taking delight in it. I saw people that I care about doing destructive things to themselves and each other. And the thing is, they thought it was all some kind of a game." Levi said regretfully.

"I'm sorry, Levi. I'm new here, so I don't have the same attachment to them that you do. I've been seeing them working up to this point ever since I've been here." I said gently.

After a moment to consider, Levi hesitantly said, "I suppose I just haven't wanted to see it."

The first bell ringing jolted us out of our quiet conversation.

We both looked around curiously.

On any other day, nearly half the class would already be in the classroom before the first bell.

I looked at Levi and he looked back at me. We were both obviously bothered by the development, but neither of us had anything to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not a word was spoken as the second bell rang, and still, no one else had arrived, not even the teacher.

"Should we tell someone?" Levi finally asked.

"Who can we tell? If you walk into the office, Mrs. Hawk won't even know who you are, that is, if she notices that you're there at all." I said honestly.

"I guess you're right." Levi reluctantly agreed.

A moment later, the murmur of voices in the hallway heralded the arrival of most of our class group.

They were all carefree and laughing as they ambled in.

Levi and I shared a look of uncertainty. Neither of us knew what to expect next.

One of the voices caught my attention and I turned to see Todd as he was loudly trying to catch Melanie Hart's attention. It took a few minutes, but finally she glanced in his direction, giving a demure giggle.

The act was so obviously fake that it made me want to go over there and try to talk some sense into him. Not that it would do any good. He was seeing only what he wanted to see.

Feeling encouraged, Todd worked his way closer to Melanie, only to be put off by her. She was teasing him, and enjoying every minute of it.

"Sit down." Mr. Albowitz growled as he walked into the room and directly to his desk.

"What if I don't want to." Todd said defiantly, showing off for his would-be girlfriend.

"I don't need this." Mr. Albowitz huffed, then added, "I need more coffee."

"What are we supposed to do while you're gone?" Todd asked in a mocking voice.

"Go fuck yourselves, or each other. Like I give a shit." Mr. Albowitz said before leaving the room, coffee cup in hand.

Todd turned to Melanie and said, "You heard the teacher."

What followed was... a bit surprising, to say the least.

I don't think Todd ever got to even cop a feel with Melanie, but just about everyone else got in on the action at some point. Several people were making out, I saw a few slide into second base. At one point, two of the football players were getting so into it that I expected them to just whip it out right then and there.

When the bell rang, I turned toward the door and saw Mr. Albowitz standing there, sipping his coffee.

\* \* \* \* \*

At some point during English class I had lost track of Levi, I mean, can you blame me? But as we walked into Social Studies class, he fell into line at my side, and took the seat along the wall, where Todd had been sitting before.

Second period seemed to start up right where first period left off. With everyone horny and frustrated. Somehow I got the sense that not much classwork was going to be accomplished today.

When the second bell rang, Ms. Burney looked up from her desk, as if only just noticing that anyone had come in.

"That'll be enough of that. Take your seats." Ms. Burney said sternly.

None of them gave any reaction to indicate that they'd heard her.

I braced myself for the coming confrontation as she walked around her desk and directly to the largest concentration of students.

Todd had been trying to gain Melanie's attention and was poised to move in for a kiss, oblivious to who was coming up behind him.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Ms. Burney asked as she pulled Todd away.

Before he could answer, she continued, "You do it like this."

Todd's eyes went wide with shock as Ms. Burney began to kiss him deeply.

Sure, I've written off Todd as a lost cause. And he's been a pain in my ass every day that I've known him except for that one. Even so, I wouldn't wish something like this on my worst enemy.

I was just about ready to run to the office and force them to see me so I could get Todd some kind of help, when I saw Todd wrap his arms around

Ms. Burney and deepen the kiss.

When I saw her hand work its way into the front of Todd's pants, I realized that I had to get out of there. I mean, what I've already seen, cannot be unseen. There's no way I want to see more.

As I hurried toward the door, I noticed that Levi was doing the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We can't just leave, can we?" Levi whispered as we walked down the hallway.

"We're practically invisible. No one remembers who we are or that we were ever here. I had no problem coming back here, as long as it was safe, but there's no real reason for us to endanger ourselves." I said reasonably.

We continued walking down the hall in silence for a moment before Levi quietly said, "I guess that's right."

"Will you be able to get home alright?" I asked curiously.

"I guess I could take a bus." Levi said hesitantly.

"You can come over to my place if you like. It's my mom's day off, so she'll probably be home, but she won't even know that we're there." I said honestly.

"I'm not really sure..." Levi began to say.

"Or we can go over to your place, or anywhere else you want." I quickly added.

Levi blinked in surprise, then said, "Your place will be fine. I guess the last few days has made me a little bit nervous. After having so many people trying to get me to do things that I don't want to, I feel like I need to be a little extra careful."

"Yeah. That makes sense to me. I don't think I'm pushy, so it shouldn't be a problem. But if I do anything that makes you feel like I'm pressuring you to do something, just let me know and I'll stop. How about that?" I asked simply.

"Thanks, Doug. That sounds great." Levi said with relief.

"Come on. Let's get out of here." I said with a smile as I pushed open the front door of the school.

\* \* \* \* \*

Levi and I were both quiet as we walked.

Maybe it had something to do with the noise and chaos we were leaving behind, but I think it also had something to do with the stillness all around us.

There wasn't any traffic.

There weren't any other pedestrians.

I glanced at the sky, half expecting to see that it had turned orange.

It wasn't until we had reached my house that Levi finally said, "Something's wrong."

Talk about an understatement!

I turned and nodded my agreement to him, then took out my key and unlocked the front door.

\* \* \* \* \*

I didn't really notice it when we walked up, but my mom's car was gone, so that meant that we had the house to ourselves.

"Are you hungry?" I asked as I led the way into the kitchen.

"Always." Levi said with a slight smile, then added in a regretful voice, "But I haven't been able to eat much, lately. Everything tastes wrong."

"I know what you mean." I said as I noticed that the fruit bowl hadn't been restocked.

I went to the refrigerator and was happy to find that there was enough salad left to feed both of us.

"If you're like the rest of us, this will taste pretty good to you." I said as I put half the salad on each of our plates.

"Who are the rest of us?" Levi asked curiously as I set a plate in front of him.

"So far, I've only met two others. One was the temporary counselor at our school for a few days. His name is Chris. The other one is a kid named Adam from the other side of town." I said before taking my first bite.

Levi looked around, then cautiously asked, "You don't have any dressing for this?"

"Try it without, first. Then, if you still want some dressing, I'll get it for you." I said before taking another bite.

Levi's eyes went wide when the flavor registered.

"Good, huh?" I asked with a smile.

"This is the first thing that's tasted right to me for about a week." Levi said quickly before taking another bite.

"This is so good." Levi said past a mouthful of salad.

Seeing his enjoyment made me enjoy my own salad that much more.

The sound of the back door opening caused us both to freeze in mid motion.

My mom walked in, carrying reusable cloth shopping bags, filled to capacity. She quickly placed them on the kitchen counter, then hurried out of the kitchen, toward the bathroom.

"That was my mom." I said quietly.

"She can't see us, can she?" Levi asked cautiously.

"No. Not if we sit here quietly. A few days ago, I could talk to her and she'd eventually realize I was here and remember who I was. But I kind of doubt that that will work now." I said regretfully.

"I thought I was going crazy when my parents stopped noticing me." Levi admitted quietly.

"Yeah. I know that feeling. But we've pretty much decided that it's the rest of the world that's gone crazy." I said frankly, then watched as Mom raced back through the kitchen and outside.

"How are we going to be able to live like this?" Levi asked in sudden realization.

The question surprised me. So far, I'd been taking everything as it comes. But Levi was right. The violence was escalating. The people we trust no longer remember that we exist. We've been making due so far, but the way things were shaping up, a bright and sunny future didn't seem to be in the cards for us.

As Mom walked in with more shopping bags, I quietly admitted, "I don't know, Levi."

\* \* \* \* \*



When Levi saw the Thundercats posters in my room, they made him smile. It wasn't a smirk or a mocking shake of the head, but a real, honest to goodness, smile.

"If you want to stay here tonight, it wouldn't be any problem. I only have the one bed, but we have sleeping bags down in the garage." I said seriously.

Levi thought about it for a moment, then quietly said, "Yeah. Except, there are some things I'd like to get from my house. I have the feeling that I won't be going back there very much."

'...or ever again.' wasn't spoken, but it hung in the air as though it had been. I couldn't disagree. I had the very same feeling. Whatever was happening didn't show any sign of stopping. And as it progressed, leading anything like a normal life would become less and less possible.

"If you want, we can go get your stuff now. And, if you wouldn't mind helping me when we get back, we can get some of my stuff packed up, too." I said hesitantly.

"Where are we going?" Levi asked cautiously.

"I don't know. But I've got the same feeling that you do. If things continue as they are, we *will* be going somewhere." I said quietly.

"Why is this happening?" Levi asked quietly.

"I have no idea." I said honestly, then started walking toward the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

We had to walk a few blocks to get to the bus stop, then a few more after we got off. But getting to Levi's house didn't take all that long.

The house itself was big and very nice, but the yard was amazing. The landscaping was perfect and there were blooming flowers everywhere.

"This place is beautiful." I said as we slowly walked on perfectly placed stepping stones.

"Yeah. My dad pays lots of money to keep it that way." Levi said frankly.

"You have a gardner?" I asked in surprise.

"A landscaping company. They swing by a couple times a week and make sure everything's kept perfect." Levi said as he opened the front door.

The inside of Levi's house was just as immaculate as the outside. It looked like a showroom.

"Nice place." I said in wonder.

"Yeah. My dad pays lots of money to keep it that way." Levi said as he walked directly to the grand staircase.

"Housekeeper?" I asked cautiously.

"Yeah, and a maid service. Twice a week." Levi said resignedly.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked curiously.

"I've never lived like normal people do. I don't know how." Levi said frankly.

"Just because you have people take care of your lawn and clean your house doesn't mean that you don't live like everyone else." I said honestly.

"You don't understand. That's just the beginning of it. But it doesn't matter, now." Levi said as he opened the door to his bedroom.

Another showplace. There wasn't a single thing out of place.

Levi turned and looked at me with a serious expression as he said, "Listen, Doug. I do my best not to come across to people as a spoiled rich kid, but theres some stuff I really don't know."

I could see that it was really bothering him. And that bothered me.

I had spoken to Levi for the very first time today, but for whatever reason, his happiness and well being had become really important to me.

"I'll help you." I said simply.

He looked at me uncertainly, like he wasn't sure that I understood what he was trying to say.

"I can see that it bothers you. So I won't tell anyone. If you don't understand something, just ask me and I'll explain it you. And when we're around the others, if you slip up, I'll cover for you as much as I can. How's that?" I asked him seriously.

"Thanks." Levi said quietly.

"Now, lets get your things and get out of here."

\* \* \* \* \*

The ride back to my house was a little bit troublesome. Nothing bad happened. The bus was just crowded and stuffy. It's funny, being invisible doesn't change the public transportation experience one bit.

"That's my dad." I said to Levi as we carried his stuff through the living room.

He looked at my father, who was sitting, motionless, on the couch, staring at the television.

"Were you close?" Levi asked in a concerned whisper.

"Not most of the time. But we had one really good day last week. It's enough." I said frankly, then continued on to my room.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks for doing all of this for me." Levi said quietly as he sat in my desk chair.

As I sat on the bed, I could feel the urge to daydream pulling at me.

"It's no problem, but there's something else I haven't told you, yet." I said cautiously.

The immediate look of concern on his face made me regret that I had chosen to begin that way.

"When all of this started for me, it was because I was having trouble concentrating in class." I said as I watched carefully for his reaction.

"I remember you being sent to the office a few times." Levi said quietly.

"Yeah. Quite a few times." I confirmed, then continued, "The last time I was sent to the office, there was a different counselor and he was able to help me figure a few things out."

Levi nodded slowly.

"The reason I couldn't concentrate is because I'm a daydreamer." I said carefully.

"Everyone daydreams, don't they?" He asked curiously.

"Not like me. I kind of take it to the next level." I said with a smile.

"I don't understand." Levi said honestly.

"I know. And I'm not sure if I'll be able to explain it. But the main reason I'm talking to you about this right now is because I'm going to have to daydream for a few minutes. I don't want for you to worry about me or anything. It's just something that I do." I said seriously.

"So... what? Do I need to do something?" Levi asked curiously.

"No. You can get on my computer and check your email or surf the Net for a little bit if you want to. I just didn't want for you to worry if I got quiet for five or ten minutes." I said frankly.

"Okay."

"Just call my name if you need for me to come back. I'll be able to hear you." I said as I rested back and prepared myself to relax.

"Yeah." He said, still looking concerned. But I could feel the daydream pulling at me again.

"Back in a few." I said, then drifted away.

\* \* \* \* \*

*As my eyes are opened, I could hear Adam asking me, "Are you alright?"*

*It was funny, we were in a place that I didn't recognize. It was obviously the playground of a park, somewhere. But I knew that I'd never seen it before. If the daydreams were created from our conscious thoughts, then we must have been someplace that Adam was familiar with.*

*"Yes. I've just been running around, helping out a guy from my class at school. Is everything alright there?" I asked him cautiously.*

*"No. Chris tried to talk to his sister and it messed her up somehow. He's in with her now, trying to calm her down."*

*"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked, but I couldn't imagine that there was much I could do.*

*"He told me to tell you that, whatever you do, don't try to get your parents to see you. It could really hurt them."*

*"Okay. I'll be careful. Would you please let Chris know that I've got one of my classmates over here at my house, so I might not answer if he calls to me." I said seriously.*

*"Is he like us?" Adam asked me curiously.*

*"He's invisible, like us. But as far as I know, he isn't a daydreamer."*

*"How does that work?" Adam asked in confusion.*

*"I don't know. But he needs our help. That's all we need to know."*

*"Don't worry, Doug. We'll help your friend." Adam said with a reassuring smile at me.*

"Thanks, Adam." I said in return, happy to know that Levi would be accepted.

"Yes. Thank you, Adam." Another voice said from behind me.

I turned to see Levi standing there, looking uncertain.

I stared for a minute in shock, then remembered my manners and quickly said, "Adam, I'd like for you to meet Levi. I guess I was wrong. He is one of us, after all."

"I never thought that there was anyone else like me. If my father ever found out, I know he'd pay someone lots of money to fix me and make me fit perfectly into his perfect home." Levi said to me regretfully.

"It's fine, Levi. You're with other people who understand." I said assuringly.

"Yeah. We're all in this together." Adam chimed in.

I smiled at him, silently thanking him for his encouragement.

"Chris says that we need to get out of here. Because of what happened to Livvy, he figures that any of us could hurt the people we care about if we stick around." Adam said seriously.

I looked at Levi, then turned back to Adam and quietly said, "We just got Levi's stuff from his house and we were about to start packing my stuff. We didn't know why, but we both got the feeling that it was about time for us to go."

"Go where?" Levi asked in confusion.

Suddenly, the dreamscape changed all around us. Instead of standing in a playground, we were all standing on the blacktop in the roadside park, looking at the white path going up and over the rise of a hill.

"Are you seeing this, too?" Levi asked me in a gasp.

"If you're seeing the white path, then yes." I said back to him frankly.

"What does it mean? I've been here a thousand times in my dreams." Levi said in wonder as he was looking around.

"We all have, Levi." I said as I moved close to give him a brief hug of reassurance.

"Is this where we're going?" Adam asked cautiously.

"Yes. At least, until we get a better idea." I said decisively.

"Okay. I'll tell Chris. I'll come back and let you know what he says." Adam said quickly, then faded from before us.

"Do you still want to help me pack?" I asked Levi at my side.

"Yeah. I don't think we've got a lot of time."

\* \* \* \* \*

Levi and I came back to reality at the same time.

"Did that really just happen?" Levi asked in wonder.

"Yeah. I wasn't going to tell you about that, just yet. I didn't want you to think that I was crazy." I admitted shyly.

"You already said it, the rest of the world's gone crazy." Levi said frankly.

"Yeah. You wanna help me get my stuff? I really feel like we need to get moving." I said as I got up off the bed.

"Yeah. Just tell me what you want to take with you." Levi said as he looked around.

"I'm going to start getting some clothes. Would you mind taking down the Thundercats posters? There's a tube to put them in beside the desk." I asked as I reached under my bed for my suitcase.

"You're taking the Thundercats?" Levi asked with a chuckle.

"They make me happy. Is there anything wrong with that?" I asked as I moved across the room to my closet.

"No. In fact, they kinda make me happy, too." Levi said as he moved my desk chair to the wall, so he could reach the top of the posters to take them down.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's wrong?" Levi asked when he noticed that I'd stopped moving.

"Incoming daydream. It's probably Chris." I said as I sat on the edge of the bed and let the daydream pull me in.

"You've got to show me how to do that." I heard Levi say as I drifted away.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Can you be ready to go in about five minutes? Chris asked me to let you know that we're on our way." Adam said quickly.

*"We're just packing the last few things. We'll be ready when you get here. How's his sister?" I asked with concern.*

*"We think she's going to be alright. But if she realizes that we're there again, it might be too much for her to handle. She really freaked out." Adam said seriously.*

*"Let me go so I can finish packing. We'll be ready when you get here." I said in a rush, then let the dream go.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"They're on their way." I said to Levi as soon as I snapped out of it.

"I don't know what else you want to take." Levi said as he looked around.

"Will you grab my shoes from beside the door. There's just one thing I need from downstairs, then I'll be ready to go." I said as I picked up my suitcase and my backpack.

Levi picked up his two suitcases and stopped by the door for my good tennis shoes, before hurrying out of the room.

When we got to the living room, my mom and dad were there, both with their entranced gazes fixed on the television.

"Just a second." I said, then pulled my small digital camera from my pocket.

"I never even thought of that." Levi said regretfully.

"What?" I asked as I snapped a picture of the large picture on the wall.

"Oh. I thought... you were going to take a picture of your parents." Levi stammered to explain.

It surprised me that I hadn't thought about doing that. So I quickly moved to the other side of the room and snapped a picture of them before putting the camera back into my pocket.

"Is that it?" He asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Let's go." I said as I went back to retrieve my suitcase and backpack.

\* \* \* \* \*

We had been waiting for less than a minute when Chris's SUV raced up in front of my house.

"Let me pop the trunk." Chris said through the open window.

"Chris, this is Levi." I said as I carried my things over and deposited them in the cargo area of Chris's SUV.

"Nice to meet you, Levi. We'll talk on the road." Chris said before slamming the trunk and running back to the driver's side.

"What's the rush?" Levi asked curiously.

"I don't know. But I can feel it, too. We need to get moving." I said as I hurried to the passenger side and opened the sliding door.

Levi got in behind me.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's going on?" I asked Chris as he pulled away from the curb a little faster than I would have thought necessary.

"We've got to get out of Portland." Chris said bluntly.

"Why?" I asked cautiously.

Chris seemed to think about it for a moment, then I felt us decelerating slightly.

I let out a sigh of relief, then asked, "How are you doing, Adam?"

"A lot better, now." Adam said with a grateful smile at me.

"Do we have a plan of some kind, or are we just driving?" I asked curiously.

"Right now, I just want to get us out of Portland. The further away we can get from any cities, the better." Chris said frankly.

"Yeah. That sounds good to me." I agreed.

"After that, I guess we'll look at the road atlas and figure out where to go next." Chris said seriously.

"Do you have one? We can look while you're driving." I asked hopefully.

"Hold on. I think my navigator may be getting something." Chris said anxiously.

It took me a moment to realize what he meant, but when I leaned forward, I could see that Adam was lost with a far away vacant look in his eyes.

I nodded and sat back to wait and see what he had come up with.

"What's wrong?" Levi whispered to me.



"Adam's having a daydream. He may be getting a message from someone." I whispered in return.

"I thought it was just the four of us." Levi said slowly.

"There's only four of us that we know of. There could be hundreds, thousands, even millions." I said honestly.

"We need to go east." Adam said suddenly.

"We *are* going east." Chris responded.

"Good. Her name's Emily. She's really scared. I told her we'd come and get her." Adam said frankly.

"Should we do that?" Levi asked cautiously.

"She's scared and alone, just like I was. She needs us." Adam said seriously.

After a long moment, Chris finally said, "You're my navigator. Plot me a course."

"Huh?" Adam asked in confusion.

"Look around up there and see if you can find a map or something. We'll figure out where your friend is and find out how to get us there." I explained with a smile.

"Thanks, Doug." Adam said in relief.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Would one of you guys mind talking to Emily for a little bit? She's really scared and she's thinking that maybe I'm just a dream." Adam asked hopefully.

"Hang on. I'm still trying to find that state park where she is." I said as I searched through the seemingly endless pages of the atlas.

"I'll talk to her, if you'll help me. The only time I've ever done it before is today when I talked to you and Doug." Levi told Adam quietly.

"Yeah. I'm getting good at it. I'll show you. Just sit back and let yourself start to float and I'll pull you in." Adam said quickly, then sat back into his seat.

I watched as a calm, peaceful expression fell over Levi's face as he drifted away, then I remembered that I had a job to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do you have any directions for me?" Chris called from the front seat.

"Just stay on this road. I'll let you know if you need to turn." I told him.

"I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep this up. I'm going to have to stop and sleep at some point." Chris said frankly.

"I know, but I think that if you can just stick with it for another few hours, that we'll be able to get to Emily and then we can stop." I said seriously.

"I know. There's no way I can stop before we reach her. But I'm really tired." Chris said honestly.

"While Levi and Adam are keeping Emily calmed down, I'll stay up and keep you company." I said with a smile.

"Thanks, Doug. If the world were destined to go crazy, I'm glad that I've got good company like you guys to go through it with."

"I'm just scared about what's going to happen next." I told him frankly.

"None of us knows. But whatever it is, we'll face it together." Chris said encouragingly.

"Why don't you try the radio again? Maybe you can find something besides radio preachers, this time." I said with a smile.

"Or the top forty station." Chris suggested with a grin, knowing what my reaction would be.

"More like top fourteen. They keep playing the same songs over and over. I'd rather ride the rest of the way in silence." I said sourly.

"Let's see what stations are on before we decide that, agreed?" Chris asked with a smile.

"Okay, but if it's too bad, Emily's just going to have to be on her own for a few minutes, because I'm going to need the guys to outvote your choice of radio stations." I said firmly.

"No need for that. If we can't agree, we'll just turn it off." Chris said with a grin, then reached over and turned the radio on and hit the button for it to scan.

When the first station tuned in, I'm not sure if it were the trumpets or the Spanish lyrics that did it, but Chris immediately hit the button to scan for the next station.

I laughed a little, then waited to see what would be next.

We encountered a radio preacher that seemed very certain that we should send him our money. Chris left it on that one for about a minute, I'm sure just to tease me, before I had to firmly tell him, "No."

On the next station that we came to, there were people talking. From the sound of them, they weren't news broadcasters. It was more likely that they were DJs, going off script to have some fun.

The guys were laughing and joking, but it didn't seem right. As we continued to listen, it became apparent that the things they were laughing about were the murder and brutality that seemed to be sweeping the nation.

A policeman in Minneapolis had gunned down an unarmed man at a bus stop and then said that he did it because he felt threatened. A teenage girl murdered her siblings and her parents, then took her parents' car and drove across town and killed her grandparents. As the DJs were laughing themselves silly and making crude jokes, I reached forward and put my hand on Chris's shoulder as I quietly asked, "Will you just turn it off?"

"Yeah." He said as he reached over and hit the button.

We rode in silence for a few minutes before I quietly said, "It's everywhere, isn't it?"

"I think so." Chris said regretfully.

I sat back in my chair as I felt my tears starting to fall.

"It's okay." Levi said softly, causing me to jump.

"Emily is feeling better, so I left Adam there to talk with her." Levi explained.

"I'm glad she's feeling better." I said as I tried to wipe the tears from my eyes.

"It's okay. Whatever it is, we'll face it together." Levi said assuringly.

"Yeah. We just heard some stuff on the radio and it was kind of horrible." I told him honestly.

"It'll be okay. You'll see." Levi assured me. And even though I knew that they were empty words of assurance, they somehow made me feel better.

## Chapter 5

Although we didn't say much to each other, it was nice just sitting with Levi and knowing that, when it came to it, that he would be there for me to lean on. And I guess the same could be said for Chris. And looking at it another way, I also knew without a doubt that both of them could depend on me in the same way. I'd never been close to someone like that before.

"Doug? You might want to get out your map. I think we're getting close." Chris called out suddenly.

I snapped out of my thoughts and looked around to see if there were any signs to tell us where we were.

Once I spotted a mile marker, I turned on the dome light so that I could see the map.

Levi leaned over and I showed him where I thought we were.

"You should be seeing a sign to enter the Ontario State Park pretty soon. I don't think anyone said where she is in the park, so we may have to look around after that. This place looks massive." I said as I looked up from the map.

"One of you guys go in and ask her where we're supposed to meet her. It'll be a lot faster than me driving around not knowing where I'm going." Chris said seriously.

"I'll go. I think I've seen enough of the map that I'll be able to figure out where we need to go." Levi said quickly.

"Thanks, Levi. That'll help a lot." Chris said gratefully.

I smiled at him and watched as the expression in his eyes went from warm to vacant.

"How long have you two been friends?" Chris asked quietly.

"Oh, let me see..." I said as I sat forward and tried to sound like an old man remembering his childhood. "...Me and Levi, we must go back near on to fourteen hours, now."

Chris laughed at my poor acting job, then said, "I just got the feeling from the way you guys get along that you're old friends."

"Nope. New friends. But Levi's really easy to like." I said simply.

"You're not so bad, yourself." Levi said, once again making me jump.

"You've got to stop doing that. You're going to give me a heart attack." I said as I threw myself back into my seat.

"Listen. Emily said that she's near the second entrance. They close the park at night, so if you'll pull in there and stop, she'll walk to meet us."

"Thanks, Levi. We just passed a sign. We should be there in a minute or two." Chris said seriously.

"Thanks for doing this, Chris. Emily really appreciates it." Adam said as he spoke to us for the first time in hours.

"I'm just glad you were there to help her deal with things." Chris said warmly.

"It's really okay that she's coming with us, isn't it?" Adam asked anxiously.

"It's fine. But when we stop, I'll need everyone to get out so I can reconfigure the seating." Chris said seriously.

"What does that mean?" Adam asked hesitantly.

"There are two more seats, folded down in the back. Right now we have luggage stacked on top of them, but everything should be able to be shifted so we'll have a place for Emily to sit." Chris explained carefully.

"Do you mind if I sit with her? She may still be afraid." Adam asked hopefully.

"As soon as we've got her, I'm going to be looking for a place for us to stay for the night. That is, if we can get anyone to rent us a motel room. Chances are that they won't even know that we're there." Chris finished anxiously.

"Levi and I rode the bus a few times today and it wasn't any problem." I said quickly.

"Yeah. I didn't even think about that." Levi said in surprise.

"It looked to me like when it's a situation where they wouldn't notice us or think about us anyway, their 'habit' kicks in and they don't treat us different from anyone else." I said carefully, hoping that I wasn't making too many assumptions.

"We'll give it a try. Is this the right entrance?" Chris asked suddenly.

I looked up at the sign, then said, "I think this is the first one. Adam said it was the second."

"Yeah. There should be a little house, like a guard shack, right by the road as you pull in." Adam confirmed.

We were all quiet as we watched for the next sign.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chris had done just as Adam had suggested and pulled up in front of the little guard shack house thing. We all got out and helped Chris take our luggage out of the cargo area and put the rear seats up before carefully restacking the luggage into the much smaller cargo space.

Once that was done, Chris shut off the engine and we all sat in silence for long minutes, waiting for something to happen.

Although there was a street light by the little cabin, that only seemed to make the darkness that much deeper around us.

The sound of a knocking on the passenger side door made all of us jump.

Images from all those slasher movies that I wasn't supposed to have watched filled my mind in that instant.

"Open the door." Adam called out from the seat behind us.

When we had all gotten back into the SUV, Chris had locked the doors. And considering the graphic violent images that were flashing through my mind, I didn't have any problem with that.

Chris quickly fumbled to release the electronic lock, and a moment later Adam was climbing over Levi to get out the door.

"It's you! I was afraid it was all a dream!" Emily cried in relief as she pulled Adam into her arms.

The rest of us held back and waited until she had calmed down.

I don't know how long that took. I suppose it doesn't matter. The rest of us were waiting there, watching in the dim light as the girl held Adam close and soaked in the sense of safety and security.

Finally, Adam released her slightly and said, "Emily, I'd like for you to meet my new friends, Chris, Doug and Levi."

Emily let loose of Adam just enough so that she could wipe the tears from her eyes, then shyly said, "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for coming to get me."

"It's no problem, Emily. It's nice to finally meet you." Chris said gently, then quietly added, "Why don't you get in, and we can talk on the road."

"If you want, you can sit in the back with me. We made a place for you." Adam said as he pointed to the back seats.

"Thanks." She said in a whisper, then started to climb in.

"Do you have any luggage or anything you need to put in the back?" Chris asked as he watched her.

"No. I was so scared that I didn't think about taking anything with me. I just had to get out of there." Emily said quietly.

"That's fine. You're safe now. I just wanted to know if I needed to open the trunk." Chris assured her.

As soon as Emily was in her seat, Adam was following right behind, climbing over us to make his way into the back.

"Is everyone belted in?" Chris asked as Levi was closing the side door.

"Give us a second." Adam said as he tried to find the catch for his seatbelt.

Chris started the engine and waited until he could tell that Adam was ready.

I glanced into the back seat to see how Emily was doing to find that she was leaning into Adam and being held by him.

"Guys, keep an eye out for a motel or something. I'm not going to last much longer." Chris said frankly.

"I don't have any money." Emily said suddenly.

"Don't worry about it, Emily. As long as you're not planning to order room service or watch pay-per-view movies, I think I can cover it. At least for a night or two." Chris said assuringly.

"I won't order room service, but I'm really hungry." Emily admitted shyly.

"Adam and I brought some food. We'll get you something as soon as we've gotten some rooms." Chris said seriously.

"I brought some money, so I can help out with paying for things. But... you said 'rooms'. I don't know about any of the rest of you, but I really don't want to be in a room by myself." Levi said cautiously.

"Me either." I immediately assured him.

"What about the rest of you? We need to know how many rooms we'll be getting before we stop." Chris asked, slightly louder, to be sure that Adam and Emily could hear him in the back.

"I'm staying with Emily. Someone else can stay in the room with us if you're worried about what we'll do, but there's no way I'm making her spend the night alone." Adam said firmly.

"Is that okay with you, Emily?" Chris asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I think that sounds great." Emily said as she hugged Adam a little more tightly to her side.

"So, how many rooms do we need?" Chris asked no one in particular.

No one else seemed to have an answer, so I carefully said, "If we've got enough places to sleep, just one."

"If you don't mind doubling up, I think we can manage that. Does anyone have a problem with that plan?" Chris asked curiously.

"I've never slept with anyone else." Levi admitted shyly, then hurried to add, "I don't have a problem with the idea, but I just don't know if I'll be able to sleep."

"It's the same for me, Levi." I said quietly, to assure him.

"Me too." Adam and Emily said at the same time.

"Just remember to be considerate of each other, and I think we'll get through this just fine." Chris said confidently.

"I think we can do that." I said with a grin at Levi.

"Well, I'm glad that's decided, because there's a motel. You guys hang tight and I'll get us a room." Chris said as he pulled up to the office.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thanks, Doug." Levi said quietly, breaking the silence.

"For what?" I asked curiously. It's not like we'd been having a conversation or anything.

"I remember when the school year started and you were in our class for the first time. I could see how nervous you were. I should have talked to you then and tried to make it easier for you. But I was afraid of what my friends would say, so I didn't." Levi said regretfully.

"I was never angry at you for that. I didn't expect you to try and get to know me. I guess I just saw you as someone who was popular and I'd never even try talking to you because you were way out of my league." I said honestly.



"Well, I'm just sorry that we didn't get to know each other sooner." Levi said sincerely.

"Yeah. I am, too." I said quietly.

Just then, the driver's side door opened and Chris quickly said, "We're in luck. I was able to get us a room with two regular beds and a fold out sofa."

"Did you have any trouble with the desk clerk?" I asked cautiously.

"No. It was just like you said. He's used to dealing with people that he doesn't pay any attention to, so we went through the motions of what he does all day long and I doubt that he remembers that I was ever there." Chris said as he started the engine.

"Just like every other person that's stopped in here tonight." I said with a nod.

"It's right over here. Room J-12." Chris said as he pulled into the parking place.

"I'm going to pop the trunk. You guys grab whatever you're going to need. Because once I hit that bed, I don't plan on getting up again for at least eight hours." Chris said as he hit the automatic release on the cargo hatch.

Levi and I piled out first, slowly followed by Adam and Emily.

"Does one of you guys have something that Emily can wear to bed? All she's got is what she's wearing." Adam asked seriously.

"I've got some sweats. They're not new, but they're not that bad, and they'll probably fit you." I said cautiously.

"If you'd rather, I have some pajamas that you can borrow." Levi said simply.

"Thanks, guys. I'll see what fits best when we get to the room." Emily said gratefully, then followed Adam to the back of the SUV, to gather his things.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm not an expert on motel rooms, so I can't really say if this one was normal. It looked kind of run down to me, but at least it was clean.

Once the door was opened, Emily was the first in, and went directly to the bathroom.

She may have had the most urgent need, but she wasn't the only one who needed to go. One by one, we all took our turns.

When Adam walked out of the bathroom, Chris looked around, then asked, "Who wants to sleep where?"

"You want to double up with me?" I asked Levi casually.

"Yeah. That'll work." Levi immediately agreed.

"Do you want to?" Adam asked Emily cautiously.

"How about you and I double up, Adam. That way Emily can have a bed to herself." Chris suggested gently.

"I don't want to be alone." Emily said as though she were fighting to get the words out.

"It's okay. You don't have to be." Chris said with an understanding smile at her, then turned to Adam and asked, "You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"No problem here." Adam said with a relieved smile.

If I were going to guess, I would say that Adam didn't want to sleep alone any more than Emily did.

"Okay. Then I've got the couch. I'm going to be out as soon as my head hits the pillow, so you guys work it out." Chris said as he started picking up cushions.

"I'm going to get some food out for Emily." Adam said softly.

"Go for it." Chris replied absently, then turned and said, "He said this had a pull out bed."

I looked over at the couch, devoid of cushions, then said, "He lied."

"You can bunk in with us if you want. I think these beds are big enough to fit three." Levi offered quickly.

"First, let me see if I can manage to sleep on this couch. If it turns out to be too uncomfortable, I may take you up on that." Chris said as he started putting the cushions back on the couch.

I thought about going over to Adam and Emily and getting some food, but then thought better of it. Although I was at a point where I could eat, I wasn't really what you would call 'hungry'.

"I'm going to take a shower, does anyone need in before I go?" Levi asked as he dug through his suitcases.

"Were you going to loan me something to wear?" Emily asked shyly.

"Sure. See if that will work." Levi said as he handed her a pair of pajamas.

"These are nice." Emily said with a smile.

"Do you want to go in and change before I take my shower?" Levi asked her curiously.

"No. Go ahead. I'll get mine when you're finished." Emily said as she petted the soft fabric.

"I won't be long." Levi said simply, then carried his things to the bathroom.

I slowly went through my things to gather something to wear to bed.

I don't think I own any 'official' pajamas, I haven't since I was about six. What I usually wear is sweat pants and a T shirt, unless it's too warm out. Then I wear some gym shorts or something like that.

I didn't even realize it, but as I sat down on the bed to await my turn in the bathroom, I started slipping into a daydream.

\* \* \* \* \*

*It was no surprise when I looked around and saw the parking lot and the white stone path. I've been seeing it all my life, and since I've been seeing so much lately, it's as familiar to me as home.*

*The one difference this time was that I wasn't alone.*

*I don't mean that the others came with me. So far as I know, none of them were daydreaming at the moment. But as I looked around, there were dozens of other people there with me.*

*Some of them looked as solid and 'real' as anyone you'd meet on the street. But others of them were blurry or ill-defined.*

*I felt drawn to go to them and strike up a conversation, but I held myself back.*

*Whatever I was seeing and experiencing, was probably something that the others should be involved in.*

*Although I really didn't want to, I forced myself to go back to the waking world.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Guys." I said as I came back to myself.

Adam and Emily turned to look at me curiously.

"Hang on." I said, then walked to the couch and gently placed a hand on Chris's shoulder.

"Are you asleep?" I asked softly.

"Not even close." Chris said as he remained perfectly still with his eyes closed.

"I just had a daydream and if you're up to it, I'd like for you to go back there with me." I said gently.

"Yeah. I might as well. What's wrong?" Chris asked with concern.

"I don't think anything's wrong. But it's different. It'd be faster if you could see it for yourself." I said seriously.

"Okay. Just give me a minute." Chris said as he wearily pulled himself into a sitting position.

"You guys up for a little daydream?" I asked Adam and Emily curiously.

"Is it someone else in trouble?" Adam asked with concern.

"No. At least, I don't think so." I said honestly.

"I'm ready. Do you want to take us in?" Chris asked as he walked to my side.

"Yeah." I responded, then sat on the edge of my bed and easily returned to my daydream state.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Just as before, I found myself in the parking lot, looking at the white path.*

*I thought about Emily, Adam, and Chris and sort of willed them to join me. It's hard for me to explain, and I guess it really doesn't matter. But all I did was give one little mental 'tug' and there they were.*

*I was surprised to see that Levi was there, too. I could tell from the expression in his eyes that he wasn't sure about what was going on.*

*Then I noticed something curious. I could see Chris and Adam clearly. Levi and Emily were there with us, but somehow, not entirely. They appeared to be transparent and less substantial than the rest of us.*

*As I looked around at the twenty or so other figures standing around the parking lot, I notice that they also seemed to exist in varying states of 'realness'.*

*Some of them were looking around in confusion, others in wonder and a few seem to be in absolute bliss. I made eye contact with a girl about the same age as Emily. She gave me a joyful smile, then turned her attention back toward the path.*

*I found it curious that with so many people gathered around, that no one was speaking, then again, I didn't feel any desire to say anything either.*

*It's not like I couldn't talk if I want to, it's just that I didn't feel any desire to break the silence.*

*I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Chris looking back at me.*

*He gave a tilt of his head, which indicated to me that he was ready to go.*

*With no effort at all, I let go of the daydream and let it all silently slip away.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"What do you think that's all about?" Emily asked curiously.

"I don't know, but I don't think it was something bad." Adam said slowly.

"I think those were other people like us." Chris said consideringly.

The bathroom door opened and Levi walked out, barefoot and dressed in his pajamas.

"The next time you guys are going to do that, would you mind telling me first?" Levi asked as he tried to restrain a grin.

"No promises." I said with a smile.

"Emily, I hope there's enough hot water left for you. Thanks to that little trip, I was standing there for however long we were gone, spacing out with the water running."

"I'll make it work. Thanks for trying, though." Emily said as she walked to the bathroom.

"I'll take my shower in the morning. I'm wiped out." I said as I started to undress.

"Same here." Chris said as he went back to the couch.

"Then I think I'll use whatever hot water's left when Emily's done." Adam said shyly.

"Sounds like a plan." I said as I stepped out of my jeans.

"So, what was going on in the parking lot?" Levi asked curiously as he watched me pulling on my sweats.

I glanced over to see if Chris wanted to answer, but he was snuggled under a blanket with his eyes closed.

"If I were going to guess, I'd say that what we just saw were other daydreamers being drawn to the same place that we're going." I said frankly, then finished dressing for bed by pulling on a t shirt.

"This is just crazy." Levi said with a weary chuckle.

"The world is crazy. Let's get some sleep." I said as I closed my suitcase and moved it off the bed.

"Yeah." He said with a grin, then pulled back the covers on his side of the bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I curled on my side and tried to let myself drift into sleep, I felt the bed shift, then felt Levi's hand on my side.

"Sorry." He whispered as he pulled away.

"No problem." I whispered in return.

A little bit later, I felt him shift, and then one of his feet was pressed against one of mine.

"Sorry." He whispered again.

I decided that we were going to have to work something out, or neither of us were going to get any sleep tonight.

It didn't help that the light by the other bed was still on, probably so Emily or Adam could find their way to bed when they were done showering. I hadn't kept track of who was showering at the moment.

I turned over on to my other side, so that I was facing Levi.

"Sorry." He whispered regretfully.

"Just tell me what's wrong." I said simply.

"I don't know. I'm not used to sleeping with anyone else, and I'm trying to keep my hands and feet over on my side, but everytime I move around to try and get comfortable, I end up touching you again." Levi said with aggravation.

"Just try not to worry about it. Once we're both asleep, one or both of us might end up cuddling up against the other. If that happens, I won't freak out or anything. And if you want, I'll promise never to talk about it." I said softly.

"Yeah. Thanks." Levi said with relief.

"Good. But you need to do one thing for me first." I said seriously.

"What?" Levi asked cautiously.

"Put on some socks. Your feet are like ice." I said with a smile.

"Yeah. Okay." Levi chuckled, then got out of bed to put on some socks.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I woke up the next morning, I found Levi using my shoulder as a pillow.

It wasn't weird or anything. It was kind of nice.

Well, except that I needed to go pee.

Regretfully, I scooted Levi's head off my shoulder and onto the pillow.

Then, as quietly as I could, I made my way to the bathroom.

When I walked out of the bathroom, I could see that Chris was not only awake, but his hair was damp. He must have been up for a while.

"If you're wanting to take a shower before we go, you should probably do it now." Chris said to me quietly.

I nodded, then went back to my side of the bed and gathered what I would need.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shower was nice. The sandpapery towels, not so much.

By the time I was out of the shower, everyone else was awake.

Adam slipped in past me before I could even clear the doorway.

"I thought we could stop by a store for something to eat once we get on the road." Chris said casually.

"Yeah. I'm seriously ready for some breakfast." I said as I carried my sleep clothes to my side of the bed.

"I think we all are." Chris agreed with a smile.

As Adam walked out of the bathroom, Emily rushed in next.

"Check around and make sure you don't leave anything behind." Chris warned as he zipped up his suitcase.

"Just let me get my shoes on and I'll be ready to go." I said as I closed my suitcase.

"I'm going to need a few minutes." Levi said quietly.

I looked over at him curiously and realized that he was still in bed, under the covers.

The way he had the blankets gathered around him and the strategic way he was keeping his hands folded in his lap gave me a pretty good idea of why.

I walked around to his side of the bed and picked up his suitcase.

He watched me cautiously, not knowing what I was up to.

"When you go to the bathroom to get ready, you might need this." I said as I handed it to him.

He looked at the suitcase curiously, then down to his lap before I saw the realization light in his eyes.

I smiled as I went back to my side of the bed and gathered up my things.

\* \* \* \* \*

It seemed to take longer than necessary for all of us to be ready. But we finally did get everything together and made our way out to the SUV.

I can't speak for the others, but I wasn't at all concerned by the three people gathered at the car next to Chris's SUV. But what nearly freaked me out is when they turned in unison and looked at us. They looked at us and SAW us.

I froze in shock, I'm sure, looking like a deer caught in the headlights. Then one of the three, a girl, walked up to us and looked directly at me as she said, "You're the guy we saw last night, aren't you?"

It took a second for the words to sink in, but finally I got what she was saying and realized that she was the girl I saw in my daydream last night (technically, this morning).

"Yeah. In the parking lot." I cautiously said.



"Wasn't that incredible? I've never felt anything like it." She said happily.

"Yeah." I said quietly.

"My name is Michelle, the guys call me Mitch." She said cheerfully, then motioned for the two boys to join her.

"I'm Doug. This is Chris, Levi, Adam and Emily." I said as I indicated each one in turn.

"Nice to meet you." She said as she looked around, then continued, "This is Rabbit and Augie."

"Rabbit?" I said with a grin as I looked at the slightly older teenager. If I had to guess at his nationality, I'd guess Japanese, but I really suck at things like that. Just, from the look of him, I'm betting he wasn't Irish.

"Yeah, his name's really Thomas, but we call him Rabbit because he's always hopping around with his never-ending supply of nervous energy." Mitch said with a giggle.

"Nice to meet you." I said with a smile at him. Even though he was standing still at the moment, something about the way that he carried himself made me believe that Mitch's explanation of his name was probably right on the mark.

"What about Augie? Is that short for Augustus?" Chris asked curiously.

Mitch and Rabbit laughed as Augie patiently said, "My real name is Winston, but my parents called me Augie almost from the day I was born... something about beach party movies... I really don't get it."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Augie." Chris said with a genuine smile.

"So, are you guys headed for that place, too?" Mitch asked hopefully.

Before anyone could answer, Rabbit ran to the other side of the car and quickly got something out of the back seat.

None of us responded to Mitch's question, waiting to see what Rabbit was doing.

"Here." He said as he thrust a sketch pad at Mitch.

"This place." She said as she held up a hand drawn sketch of the parking lot.

"Hold on." Chris said as he walked to the back of the SUV and opened the cargo area.

He got something out of one of the bags and it took me a few seconds to recognize it.

"It's really real." Mitch gasped, then held out the picture for Rabbit and Augie to see.

"I've been there." Chris said quietly.

"So you guys are going?" Mitch asked hopefully.

"Yes." I answered immediately.

"We don't know where it is, we just know it's kinda that way." Rabbit interjected quickly.

Yeah. Rabbit was a good name for him. His nervous energy clearly came out in his voice.

"I can point it out on a map for you, if you like. But you're welcome to travel with us." Chris said simply.

"Yeah. Strength in numbers." Rabbit said quickly.

"If everything goes well, it should take about two days of driving to get there. And traveling together would seem to make sense, just in case one of us has car trouble." Chris said seriously.

"I'm sold." Mitch said then glanced at Rabbit and Augie to see if they had any opinion.

Rabbit nodded his wholehearted agreement as Augie seemed to be carefully considering.

Everyone held their collective breath as they waited for his decision.

Finally, Augie slowly nodded and said, "Yeah. I guess."

"Awesome! Are you guys ready to go?" Mitch asked happily.

"Almost. We need to get gas and stop at a grocery store for some food for the trip." Chris said frankly.

"What do you eat?" Mitch asked carefully.

"Organic produce. Nothing else tastes right." Chris said slowly.

"That's what we thought, too. But Rabbit figured it out. The organic thing works because pesticides is one of the things we're sensitive to. But other things are artificial growth hormones, antibiotics, additives, preservatives, artificial colors and genetically modified ingredients." Mitch said seriously.

"That explains a few things." Chris said with a nod.

"We've found out that the trick is to get the food that's closest to nature. The more processed it is, the worse it tastes to us." Mitch said seriously.

"Which means organic produce." I said regretfully.

"No. It means free range chickens and eggs, grass fed beef and milk, and... well, you get the idea." Mitch said cheerfully.

"Would you guys have time to go shopping with us?" Chris asked hopefully.

"Hey, we need to pick up some road trip snacks, too." Rabbit chattered happily.

Augie slowly nodded his agreement.

Chris looked back to us and said, "It sounds like we've got a plan. Let's get our stuff in the car so we can go."

All of us jumped into action, with renewed energy and purpose.

\* \* \* \* \*

I don't think anyone planned for things to work out the way they did. Or, at least I didn't. But the way it worked out was that Emily and Adam automatically got into the back seat, just like the night before. Levi and I got into the middle seats, and Chris was left to ride up front by himself, without anyone in the front passenger seat.

We rode to the store that way, then automatically did the same when we were done shopping.

I didn't realize it until we were out on the open road, and it was really too late for us to trade places... not that I really wanted to. But I felt bad for Chris.

I quietly told Levi about my concerns, and he agreed to help me make Chris feel included in whatever conversation came up.

At one point, Adam asked if there were any way that we could turn on the radio. It was left to me to explain why that probably wasn't such a good idea.

Even though conversation was sparse at times, I still didn't have the urge to go into a daydream until sometime after noon.

When I mentioned it to Levi, he said that he'd stay behind and keep Chris company and go when I got back.

Although it might have been nice to go with Levi, I supposed that we would have plenty of chances, and that it was good that he was being considerate of Chris.

\* \* \* \* \*

*As I looked around the parking lot, I was surprised to see even more people gathered. Like the night before, everyone was silent and staring toward the white path. We were waiting. For what, I don't know, but all of us were being drawn here and we were all waiting for the same unknown thing.*

*As I stood there, I realized that I was also being energized.*

*There was an underlying sense that I was doing the right thing. I was going the right direction. That as long as I kept going, everything was going to work out alright.*

*I felt like I was being reasonable, not like there was something controlling me or influencing my actions. But there was still a doubt lingering in the back of my mind.*

*Did the world really go crazy, or did my perception of the world suddenly change?*

*As I was pondering that, I saw a woman and a small girl appear out of nothingness in front of me. Two more people had just joined the collective daydream.*

*I looked around in time to see another person wink out, returning to reality.*

*But with each passing day, reality seems less and less real to me.*

*What's been happening this past week has shown me what a flimsy construct reality is.*

*I suppose it doesn't matter at this point.*

*Deep inside, I've made a choice. I've chosen to go to the unreal and accept it. While I fear the consequence of my choice, I don't regret having chosen.*

*Although painful at times, the journey has been necessary, to make me let go.*

*And now, I have.*

*What I was, who I was, how I was, it's all gone. I can let it go.*

*What I'm faced with now is what I can be.*

*I have no idea what that is, but I can't wait to find out.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good daydream?" Levi asked when he noticed that I had returned.

"Yeah. Good one." I confirmed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Levi asked curiously.

"No. Why don't you go, now. I'll stay and keep Chris company." I asked with a smile.

"Thanks." Levi said quietly, then rested back in his seat.

I watched as the awareness left his eyes, then turned to see Chris watching in the rear view mirror.

"How are things going here?" I asked curiously.

"I know that I should be tired, but I'm really feeling okay." Chris said frankly.

"Good. I don't think I ever thanked you for everything you've done to help me." I said quietly.

"You've thanked me plenty of times. And besides that, it's my job. It's what I do." Chris said with a smile.

"What you've done to help me goes way beyond your job." I said honestly.

"If you mean driving a group of minors across state lines without permission, then I'd have to agree with you." Chris said frankly.

"You know as well as I do that with the world the way it is right now, no one cares about that." I said seriously.

"I know. But it still bothers me. I've put myself into a really bad position." Chris said honestly.

"I know. Thank you for that, too." I said sincerely.

Chris smiled briefly, then quietly asked, "What's up with you and Levi?"

"We're becoming friends." I said simply.

"Friends? In what sense of the word?" Chris asked cautiously.

"Just the same way that you and I are friends." I said carefully.

He seemed to think about that for a moment, then slowly said, "I didn't mean to imply anything. I guess I'm so used to everything being so sexualized that I automatically assigned motives to your actions that weren't really there."

"I know. And I can't say that I haven't thought about that. But I don't have those feelings for Levi, and I don't think he has them for me, either. It's hard for me to explain. I don't have words for what I'm feeling." I said with difficulty.

"I think that maybe the words that you want to use have been corrupted to mean things that you don't feel." Chris said consideringly.

"Yeah. But it doesn't matter, because I'm pretty sure that Levi feels the same. And as long as we understand it, I think it'll all work out." I said carefully, hoping that I was right.

"I think you're on the right track." Chris said with a smile, then thought to ask, "How are Adam and Emily doing?"

I glanced into the back seat to confirm, then said, "They're asleep."

"Good. I think both of them can use a little extra sleep." Chris said honestly.

I nodded my agreement.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you going to need to stop soon? It's getting dark." I asked with concern.

"I think I'll be good for a few more hours." Chris said tiredly.

"I've noticed that Rabbit, Augie and Mitch have been taking turns, switching drivers every time we stop. Maybe we could ask if one of them could trade out with you to give you a break." Levi said hopefully.

"I may talk to them when we stop for the night, to see if they might want to do that tomorrow. But I'm still good for a few more hours." Chris assured us.

I shared a look with Levi and we silently agreed that we'd be combining our efforts to keep Chris awake.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Do we have anymore of that plastic juice?" Adam asked as he leaned forward, between our seats.

I smiled as I realized what he was talking about. The bottled water that we'd bought back in Ontario had a definite plastic taste to it that was hard to overlook. Even though Adam might be the youngest of us by a year or so, he was sometimes a little ahead of us when it came to wit.

"I'll get you one, but you'd better make it last. We can't be stopping for pee breaks every fifteen minutes." I said in a mock serious tone.

Adam rolled his eyes as he said, "Yes, DAD!"

"And do your homework." Levi said in a screechy, falsetto voice.

"Yes, MOM!" Adam said with another eyeroll.

I released my seatbelt and climbed up between the front seats to fish a bottle of water out of the ice chest.

"How you doing?" I asked Chris, while I was up there.

"I think it's about time to start looking for a motel." Chris said in a low voice.

"Got it. Hang in there." I said, then moved back and handed the bottle of water to Adam.

"Thanks." Adam said quickly, then withdrew into the back seat.

"Chris says it's time to look for a motel. I think he's really starting to feel it." I said quietly.

"You're better at the daydream thing than I am. If you'll tell someone in the other car that we need to stop, I'll keep Chris awake." Levi said seriously.

"I'm on it." I said immediately.

My plan had been to keep watch for the next motel. It's good to have someone you can count on.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's funny how when you don't need a motel, there seems to be one every mile or so. But as soon as you decide to stop for the night, they all go into hiding or something.

Anyway, we finally *did* find a place to stop.

Even though Rabbit, Augie and Mitch had taken turns driving, all of them looked every bit as exhausted as Chris.

None of us seemed to be in much of a mood to chat.

Chris and Mitch went in to get rooms while the rest of us got out of the cars to stretch our legs.

Levi and I took the opportunity to talk with Rabbit and Augie about the possibility of one of them switching off with Chris, so he wouldn't have to drive the entire distance himself.

Rabbit immediately volunteered to do it and Augie seemed perfectly willing to let him.

\* \* \* \* \*

When we got to our room, I was happy to find that it had three beds. At least Chris wouldn't end up trying to sleep on a couch.

The exhaustion was apparent as everyone went through their nighttime routines in a weary haze.

Just like with the seating arrangement in the cars, there was no discussion about the sleeping arrangements. Emily and Adam ended up together, Levi and I were in the next bed, and Chris was on his own.

I felt bad for Chris. I mean, I know we weren't doing anything but sleeping. But it still seemed wrong that after giving so much to help us, Chris didn't have anyone beside him at night to let him know that he wasn't alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

While we were getting ready to leave the next morning, Chris asked me to go next door and tell Mitch and let her know that we were about ready to leave.

Rather than do that, I thought I'd try to do it the easy way, first. I found all three of them already in a silent daydream, staring at the white path. There must have been over fifty people gathered around, and they all seemed so tranquil. A few of the people nearby noticed my arrival. They didn't do much more than glance in my direction, but at least it showed that they were aware of me, unlike much of the waking world.

When Mitch, Augie and Rabbit were looking at me, I tilted my head, indicating that it was time to go. All three of them nodded, and we vanished together.

\* \* \* \* \*

When we left the motel room, I was surprised. Not that Mitch and the guys were outside waiting for us, but that there were six other people talking with them.



As we cautiously walked up to them, Mitch started introducing us to them. Mitch and the guys had apparently been daydreaming for quite a while when I found them. And just as had happened with us, they had met these people for the first time in the daydream, and 'for real' when they left their motel room this morning.

Chris seemed surprised when Rabbit walked up to us and announced that he was going to be driving us. It took a few minutes, but Chris finally seemed to be at ease with the idea. At least until Rabbit was in the driver's seat and ready to pull out. That was when he happily announced that it had only taken him three tries at the driving test to get his license.

I was riding shotgun and Chris had taken my place, sitting next to Levi. I looked back to find a look of resigned anxiety in Chris's eyes, but to his credit, he didn't say anything aloud.

So, after a stop at the nearest store and a few minutes to quickly eat, we were on the road and heading south, now with four vehicles in our caravan.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have never, at any time in my life, been around someone who could talk as much as Rabbit.

It's not that I'm saying that it wasn't sort of fun and entertaining. But for the entire seven hours that he was driving, I didn't get to say a single word. I don't think he even took a breath.

Every now and then I'd look into the seats behind me to find Levi and Chris talking quietly. When they'd noticed, one or the other of them would give me a sympathetic smile. But then Rabbit would say or do something to draw my attention back to him. He didn't just talk constantly, he also demanded my undivided attention the entire time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime after noon, we eventually stopped for gas, bathrooms, and more food. In the past hour or so, I had noticed an unusual number of abandoned cars along the road. While we were stopped, some of our new friends had struck up conversations with some other people and it seemed that they had invited them to join our caravan.

By the time our rest break had ended, there were seven cars in our caravan with a few extra people in each, who they'd picked up while we were stopped.

Of course, we didn't get anyone extra. With Rabbit, the SUV was filled to its seating capacity.

Chris was now driving, and I was still riding shotgun. Rabbit had taken Chris's seat beside Levi. As Chris drove, I realized that it was unusually quiet in the back seat and found Rabbit and Levi both lost in their daydreams.

"How are you doing?" I asked Chris quietly.

"We're almost there." Chris said with a smile of anticipation.

"How long do you think it will be?" I asked curiously.

"Five hours, maybe. I guess it depends on the roads." Chris said seriously.

I nodded, then quietly asked, "How are you feeling about what we're doing?"

"I was feeling really afraid and uncertain as we were leaving Portland, but now I'm just excited. It's like, that decision's been made and the door is closed behind us. We're committed to what's next, no matter what it is." Chris said peacefully.

"Yeah. I got to that point yesterday. I'm glad that you're not feeling nervous." I said with a smile.

"I'm still a little nervous about the details, but not about going and doing this." Chris said frankly.

"Yeah. Me, too." I agreed.

"Levi and I had a chance to talk this morning." Chris said as he spared me a glance.

"About what?" I asked curiously.

"You." Chris said simply.

"What about me?" I asked slowly.

Chris smiled to reassure me, then said, "I talked to him, in very general terms, about what you said to me yesterday. I hope you're not mad at me for talking to him about it, but I thought he needed to know."

"What did I say?" I asked in confusion.

"He's been struggling with the feelings he's been having, especially toward you." Chris said carefully,

I nodded that I understood what he was saying.

"So I basically told him that you had said that you felt for him something like what you feel for me. I assured him that you weren't trying to seduce him into your bed, but that you really enjoy his company and want to spend time with him."

I nodded as I thought about my feelings.

"There are some things that I think you also need to know. After I talked with Levi, I asked and he said that I could tell you." Chris said carefully.

"Okay." I hesitantly prompted him to continue.

"As I'm sure you've noticed, Levi's an extremely attractive young man." Chris said slowly.

"Yeah." I confirmed.

"Because of that, for years now, there have been people who have 'wanted' him."

I remembered the few times that Levi and I had brushed up against that subject and he had told me that he had felt pressured to do things that he didn't want to.

"Unfortunately, there have been a few cases, when people weren't willing to take 'no' for an answer." Chris said even more slowly, glancing at me to be sure that I understood what he was saying.

I looked at Chris in surprise, hoping that he wasn't saying what I thought he was saying.

"He'll have to tell you about that if he wants you to know. But I thought it was important for you to understand that he's had his trust broken multiple times. Based on what's happened to him in the past, I would understand it if he became frightened and started to pull away from you." Chris said carefully.

"I guess so." I mumbled, hating the idea that Levi might not want to spend time with me anymore.

"What I'm really saying is, just be patient with him. Try to understand that something that may appear to be rejection on the surface, may just be him taking a step back to protect himself. I don't know that it will happen, but I wanted to warn you so you wouldn't get the wrong idea and give up on what might end up being a wonderful friendship."

I glanced into the back seat to find that Rabbit and Levi were both still out of it.

It was true, Levi was a beautiful sight to behold. But what I had told Chris before was also true. All I really wanted from him was his companionship. Understanding what Chris had told me made me more determined than ever that I would be there for Levi, to listen if he needed to talk and to talk if he needed to be 'the strong one' sometimes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Night had fallen, but all of us were so excited about nearing our destination, that no one even suggested that we should stop.

Chris slowed the car drastically as he spotted people up ahead, standing in the road.

I quickly looked around and saw that there were cars parked along both sides of the road and that people were walking, taking whatever they could carry with them.

"I guess we're here." Chris said frankly.

Once we were stopped and out of the car, Mitch walked up to us and said, "If there's anymore driving, you get Augie. At least with Rabbit I have someone to keep me awake."

"That sounds fair to me." Chris said with a smile, then glanced curiously at the younger girl at Mitch's side.

"This is Karen. She joined us at the last gas station." Mitch said simply.

Introductions were made all around, then it was decided that we should gather what was most dear to us and start walking.

None of us knew how long of a walk it would be, but I also don't think that any of us really cared that much.

"Have you noticed that no one has a cell phone or GPS?" Mitch asked curiously as we walked.

"They probably wouldn't work this far out in the mountains, anyway." Chris said frankly.

"No. You don't get what I'm saying. Statistically speaking, how likely is it that a group of this many people would gather and that none of them would have a cell phone?" Mitch asked seriously.

Chris didn't seem to have an answer, so I interjected my own question, "How statistically likely do you think it is that in a group of this many people, every single one of them would be upbeat and have a positive attitude?"

"That's just because we're finally here." Mitch said dismissively.

"I don't think so. I can only go by what's been going on in our car, but I think that maybe it applies to everyone. These are all good people, I mean, like, the best people you'll ever meet." I said carefully.

Mitch looked around at the other small groups of people walking, including the groups that had joined us along the way, then said, "I don't know about gathering statistics about something that's more a matter of judgement, but I can see what you're saying. They're all so... joyful."

"We're joyful." Chris corrected.

Mitch smiled at him, then confirmed, "Yeah. We are."

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm not much of one for judging distance while I'm walking. I'll admit that upfront. But I'm guessing that our walk was probably over half a mile. Of course, although we were all excited and anxious about finally arriving, none of us seemed to be in any particular hurry.

We walked mostly at a steady, casual pace, sometimes we'd slow down a little when conversation picked up, but we weren't overly chatty along the way... Well, except for Rabbit. He was talking a mile a minute every single step of the way.

I suppose that carrying my suitcase and backpack should have been cumbersome with such a long walk, but it didn't really bother me at all. I looked around to see that no one else seemed to be bothered by it either.

I suppose that when I'm not the entire focus of Rabbit's incessant chatter, I don't mind it so much. He's kind of entertaining to listen to.

"There it is." Chris whispered to me, then I saw the entrance to the park.

\* \* \* \* \*

I guess either the first people to arrive had the foresight not to park in the parking lot, or maybe they realized later that people would need a place to stand, and they moved their cars. However it worked out, there weren't any cars at all parked on the blacktop.

I can't begin to estimate how many people were there. Hundreds, at least.

Unlike the daydreams, it wasn't silent. There was a low murmur of quiet conversations being carried out all around us. All of that was in the background, however. The most notable thing was the sense of joy and anticipation. It seemed to radiate out from everyone in attendance.

I don't know what we were waiting for. But no one else seemed to be any more bothered about it than I was. We're all just gathered around in our small groups, talking quietly, and sharing our joy and anticipation about the incredible thing that we're all participating in.

\* \* \* \* \*

The murmurs of conversation suddenly stopped as silence seemed to sweep over the gathering like an icy blanket. Automatically, we all turned toward the white path and watched as a lone figure started walking.

The air of anticipation increased as we all watched the person in the street lights of the park crest the hill and disappear from view.

Three more people, walking abreast, began walking up the path.

Fighting not to take my eyes off the path, I awkwardly reached down to pick up my suitcase, to await our turn.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have no idea how long it took, and there's no rhyme or reason to how it was decided who would go next. Hundreds of people were just standing and waiting. Then, all of a sudden, a person or a group of people would start walking the path.

I think I was moving before I even realized it.

Chris was at my side, and Levi was walking beside him.

I diverted my gaze from the path just long enough to glance behind me. Adam and Emily were walking, hand in hand, directly behind us. Mitch, Augie and Rabbit were behind them.

I felt my heart racing with excitement and anticipation as I took my first step onto the white path. Even in my dreams, I had never dared to go there before.

I don't know if I was even breathing as I finally reached the top of the small hill. I glanced to my right to find Chris and Levi still with me, and felt assured that no matter what happened next, everything would be alright.

**The End**

## Chapter 6 - Epilogue

It was dark.

The streetlights in the parking area didn't illuminate anything past the rise.

Walking in darkness isn't something that I usually do. But for some strange reason, I wasn't afraid. Or, maybe it would be more accurate to say that I was so filled with excitement and anticipation that my fear wasn't able to work its way to the surface.

As I continued to walk, I felt Chris move closer to my side, so that his arm was brushing against mine. I imagined that Levi was probably doing the same thing on Chris's other side.

There was some soft electricity in the air ahead of us, but since we were in total darkness, I didn't have any sense of what it might be.

Regardless of the darkness, I continued to walk, trusting that whatever had brought us this far wouldn't let me fall and break my fool neck.

With another step, I felt that we had arrived at the threshold. If there were any doubt left in my mind, this would be my last chance to turn back.

Very aware of Chris and Levi with me, I made the final choice and stepped into the unknown.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sunlight startled me.

I woke up and looked around in confusion. Was that the weirdest dream ever, or what?

I slowly got out of bed and realized that my room was exactly as it had been a week or so before. Nothing seemed to be out of place, but somehow it wasn't right.

Deciding to put that out of my mind for the moment, I quickly changed out of my sleep clothes and into something more presentable.

As I stepped out of my bedroom, I was surprised to find myself not in the hallway, but in the living room of Chris's house. I looked back into my bedroom to find it looking just as normal as it had been when I'd first awakened.

I looked around and saw Adam, asleep on Chris's couch, so I was careful to be quiet as I walked to the hallway to see if I could discover which bedroom belonged to Chris.

\* \* \* \* \*

I opened the door to find him fast asleep.

To see him there, obviously having a pleasant dream, made me happy.

I stood and watched for a few minutes. The sight of the autobot posters on his walls made me smile. Finally, I decided that I needed to wake him up, so that we could discover what had happened.

"Good morning." I said softly, not wanting to startle him.

"Good morning, Doug... I had the weirdest dream." Chris murmured.

"I think you may still be having it. I don't think we're really awake." I said carefully.

Chris looked around his room, then back at me uncertainly.

"I mean, unless my bedroom was somehow suddenly moved into your house." I said frankly.

"Where are the others?" Chris asked with concern as he sat up.

"Adam's asleep on your couch. I haven't seen Emily or Levi, yet." I said frankly, then tried to consciously pull myself out of my daydream.

Needless to say, it didn't work. If this were a dream, I was stuck in it. And if this were reality, well, it couldn't be, could it? I mean, whatever this is seems to be the exact opposite of reality.

As I was trying to sort things out in my own mind, Chris had gotten out of bed and was dressing before I noticed what he was doing.

"Let's go find them." Chris said as he pulled on a t shirt.

I nodded, then followed him out of his room.

\* \* \* \* \*

When we arrived in the living room, we found Emily and Adam sitting on the couch, holding each other.

"How are you, this morning?" I asked them gently.

"I don't know. I woke up back in my bedroom at home, then when I stepped out the door, I was here." Emily said confusedly.

"Yeah. Basically the same thing happened to me." I said simply.

"Where are we?" Emily asked cautiously.



"This is Chris's house, back in Portland." I said simply.

"Where's Levi?" Adam asked as he looked around with concern.

"Probably asleep in his bedroom. Let's go find him." I suggested with a smile.

Chris nodded his agreement as Adam and Emily stood to join us.

"We can try in there." Chris said as he indicated the door across the room.

"Unless things have been shuffled around since I woke up, that was my room." I said seriously.

"My room was over there." Emily said as she pointed through the kitchen.

"Then let's try my sister's room." Chris said as he led the way back to the hallway.

When the door opened, I had expected to find Levi's immaculately clean bedroom in his house. But instead, Levi was fast asleep in one of two beds in a dingy little motel room. It was the room we had stayed in the first night.

"Okay." Chris said quietly.

I took the initiative, and walked to Levi's bedside.

"Good morning, Levi." I said softly.

"Mornin'." Levi said into his pillow, not opening his eyes.

"Chris, Emily and Adam are here, if you're ready to wake up." I said with a smile.

"Okay. But it's nice here." Levi said as he slowly opened his eyes.

"Once we've figured out what's going on, you can come back here if you want to." I promised.

Levi looked around, then seemed to notice that he was the center of attention.

"Why don't we give Levi a few minutes to dress." Chris suggested quietly as he ushered Adam and Emily out of the room.

"We'll be right outside when you're ready." I told him quietly.

"You don't have to go." Levi hurried to say.

"Okay. I just didn't want you to think that you couldn't have a few minutes alone if you wanted to." I said simply.

"Okay. But right now, I don't want to be alone." Levi said seriously.

"Then you don't have to be." I said as I walked to the couch and took a seat.

"What's going on?" Levi asked as he looked around curiously.

"Chris, Emily and I woke up in our own bedrooms. You and Adam woke up different places. I don't know what it means, or if it means anything at all. But all the rooms seem to be in Chris's house in Portland." I said slowly.

"Are we really awake?" Levi asked as he quickly pulled on his clothes.

"I don't know. But if we aren't I haven't found a way to wake up, yet." I said honestly.

Levi glanced at himself in the mirror, then looked at me expectantly, letting it be known that he was ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

We walked into the living room, and I quietly asked, "Do we know what we're doing?"

"I don't know, but whatever it is, it looks like we're all doing it, together." Chris said as he started walking toward the front door.

Levi and I fell into line behind him. Adam and Emily took their places behind us as we stepped through the door to see what was going to happen next.

\* \* \* \* \*

So, there we were, all of a sudden, standing in a grassy field with nothing but trees and tall grass for miles in any direction.

"What the hell?" Mitch asked, making all of us turn in unison.

"You got me." I said to her honestly.

"We all woke up in Augie's basement, and when we went upstairs, we were here." Mitch said in confusion.

"We all woke up in different rooms, but when we went through our bedroom doors, we were all in Chris's house. And when we left his house, we were here." I said seriously.

"I know it's confusing for you. Please allow me to explain." A man said from nearby.

He was dressed strangely. It was sort of a toga thing, or maybe he just wrapped himself in a blanket. Either way, I'm guessing that he wasn't with us in the parking lot last night.

"First, children, I would like to welcome you to what is next." He said warmly.

I looked more closely at him. He seemed to be a little bit older than Chris. Maybe thirty. He had brown hair and eyes and seemed to be tanned or maybe he had a lighter shade of dark skin.

"Huh?" Levi asked cautiously.

"In short, you have ascended." He said simply.

"Are we dead?" Rabbit asked with a tremor of fear in his voice.

The man laughed, then said, "Quite the opposite, I assure you. At this moment you are more alive than you have ever been."

"What *exactly* does that mean?" Mitch asked nervously.

"In this place, death is unknown." The man said simply.

"Who are you?" Adam asked curiously.

"Lee-i." He answered, then continued, "Please sit and be comfortable, so I may explain."

I immediately dropped where I was standing to sit in the tall grass. I was beyond ready to understand what was going on.

"As I said, death is unknown here, but so is the possibility of new life. In millennia past, we felt an enormous desire to increase our number. So your world was seeded with life from this place, in hopes that procreation would be possible there. It was. But unfortunately, our offspring born in your world couldn't return here. They were barbaric and vindictive by nature. They were driven only by their lusts. It would be impossible for us to bring them here. The very fabric of this realm would not accept them. Therefore, we waited until your people had matured to a point where persons of pure spirit were being born." Lee-i said as he looked into the distance.

"Is that why we're here?" Augie asked slowly.

"When it was determined that you, our children, had matured to the point that you could join us here, we began to open the gateway. When the gateway was beginning to open, the essence of our world began to flow into yours, just a bit. That caused your ascended natures to become more pronounced but, unfortunately, so did the true natures of the primitives." Lee-i said regretfully.

"I don't get why we've all been having the same dreams all our lives." Mitch said frankly.

"When we recognized that our children were finally emerging, we established the beacons to call to you. When it was time, the gateway would open, and you would be drawn to join us." Lee-i said seriously.

"So, are we in a different reality?" Levi asked curiously.

"From your perspective, reality might not be the best word to describe it. State of being, might be closer." Lee-i said carefully.

"I woke up in my own bed this morning. How did that happen?" I asked thoughtfully.

Lee-i smiled at me and seemed to be on the verge of laughing. He finally said, "You, all of you, have been developing your ability to alter the fabric of what you would call a 'dream'. In many ways, this place operates as a dream. If you desire to be comfortable, a place of comfort will surround you."

"But if life is just a dream, then what's the point of living? Especially forever?" Chris asked with concern.

"You will have to discover your point for existing for yourself. All of us do. But I can assure you that as you adapt to your new state of being, you will have incredible challenges to overcome and a multitude of opportunities to grow beyond anything you can now imagine." Lee-i said happily.

"What about our families?" I asked quietly.

"Certain things cause us regret. Opening the gateway into your world had a most unfortunate effect on the primitives. But now that the gateway is once again closed, they should return to their normal selves. Although it's not a perfect solution, and it by no means makes everything right, you can be somewhat comforted in knowing that your loved ones aren't worrying about you. To them, if they remember you at all, it will only be as a distant, half-forgotten dream." Lee-i said softly.

"But if this is a place where daydreams and desires can become real, can't I visit my family whenever I want?" I asked carefully. I wasn't quite sure

about the logic of this place, and I really wanted to understand how it works.

Lee-i smiled at me broadly, then said, "There are many things that I know, but countless things that I do not, because I've never thought to investigate and try them. My best suggestion is that if you want to find out, try it and see what happens."

I looked around the gathering and felt nothing but excitement and encouragement.

I patted my pocket and was happy to find my digital camera. I turned it on and clicked a few times, then found the picture of my parents. Then I smiled as I clicked one picture back and began to concentrate.

The change was so subtle that I didn't realize it right away. One minute, we were all sitting crosslegged on the grass, the next, we were in a long boat, traveling up the stream in the painting on my parents' wall.

"Where are we?" Levi whispered in awe as he looked around.

"I'll explain in a minute. Right now, there's someone I want all of you to meet." I said as I guided the rudder to take us to the worn and weathered boat dock.

We helped each other off the boat and were soon walking the path toward the dilapidated plantation house.

A naked little five year old came zipping down the path as Grandmother Loistine approached us more slowly.

"She's a bitch and I hate her! I'm not going back! You can't make me!" The naked little boy screamed at her, from behind us.

Grandmother Loistine looked at us and gently said, "That's alright, Buttercup. I have a feeling that since our visitors are here, there won't be any need for you to return there."

**And They All Lived Happily Ever After...**

**Breaking News:** According to recent reports, at twelve locations around the globe, large numbers of abandoned vehicles have been found surrounding various gathering points. So far, none of the vehicle owners can be located and no one has been able to determine exactly who any of them were. Certain of the more vocal religious leaders have proclaimed this to be the rapture and the beginning of the end of days. Which begs the question, why are **THEY** still here? Regardless, preliminary estimates based on what was found at each of the locations puts the number of missing unknown people worldwide at an estimated one hundred forty-four thousand.